Creativity on the Spectrum: Perspectives from Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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Abstract

An autism diagnosis is accompanied by several assumptions about the person being diagnosed. Their behaviour, understanding of the world, capacity for creative thinking and social interaction all come under increasing scrutiny, explained as major pathological deficiencies. This project aims to illustrate, instead, that people on the autism spectrum possess a capacity for creative expression and are able to develop their social competencies. The project uses the medium of tabletop role-playing games (tabletop RPGs) to illustrate the concept of distributed creativity, and uses the groups that form around tabletop RPGs as examples of social frameworks in which people on the autism spectrum are capable of more complex social interaction than they may be capable of in their everyday lives. The data consists of an autoethnographic account of the author's own experiences with tabletop RPGs, supplemented by two interviews conducted in a participatory action research framework. This data is then discussed alongside other research contributions from the study of tabletop RPGs to discuss potential ways in which tabletop RPGs can contribute to the creative and social development of people on the autism spectrum.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION ... 1

PROBLEMFORMULATION ... 4

THEORY ... 5

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER - THE BIOMEDICAL PERSPECTIVE ... 5

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: BEYOND ASSUMPTIONS OF DEFECT ... 7

CREATIVITY - FROM PERSONS TO DISTRIBUTION ... 10

CREATIVITY IN AN AUTISM SPECTRUM PERSPECTIVE - LABORATORY MYTHS AND PRACTICAL REALITY ... 12

VYGOTSKY AND DISABILITY - THE FUNDAMENTALS OF DEFECTOLOGY ... 14

VYGOTSKY AND THEORY OF MIND - MIND IN SOCIETY ... 15

VYGOTSKY AND THE SUBJECT OF PLAY - VYGOTSKY AT WORK & PLAY ... 16

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY ... 17

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY - INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY ... 18

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN PRACTICE ... 20

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND KNOWLEDGE ... 22

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ETHICS IN PRACTICE ... 23

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN PRACTICE ... 27

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ... 28

Strengths and Weaknesses ... 31

ETHICS IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ... 32

PRACTICAL RESEARCH STRUCTURE ... 33

DATA ... 35

ANALYSIS ... 37

DISCUSSION ... 53

TABLETOP RPG'S AS EMOTIONAL RESILIENCY FACTOR. ... 53

GAMIFICATION ... 54

DANIAU AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES ... 57

DATA ANALYSIS, SHORTCOMINGS, AND POTENTIAL FOR EXPANSION ... 58

CONCLUSION ... 60

LIST OF REFERENCES ... 61

DEDICATIONS ... 64

Introduction

I never thought I'd see the day when my work felt like an escape.

That seems like a pithy statement to make, particularly for a work which has taken as long to pen as this one has and deals with escapist entertainment, but it nonetheless remains true. I, like most people, enjoy my work a moderate amount, but I can't claim that I can muster as much enthusiasm about my profession and my work as I could when I was a fresh-faced undergraduate still finding my feet in the university system. A combination of personal and professional challenges knocked the wind out of my sails enough that I had to take a break, and even when I returned to the bench, my drive was still much diminished.

Still, it puts my perception of events in stark relief when I consider that as I have been writing a thesis about the appeal of tabletop roleplaying games, a recreational activity, the world's been on fire from one end to the other. Pandemics, mass protests, attempted coups, politicians violating their constitutional oaths left, right and center, the largest conflict on European soil since the Second World War… Suddenly it's an awfully big, scary world out there, and here I am writing about improv theater for turbonerds. And that's how I felt about it at first. Almost guilty, in a way, that I didn't feel like I was doing enough to help the world. Like I was wasting all my training on something that seemed almost frivolous.

I have since revised that. It's almost something I look forward to, a way to occupy my mind in a world that feels more and more like it's gone off its rocker and I'm just along for the ride. Just because something seems frivolous or engages with a frivolous subject does not make it unimportant. It's getting out of the ivory tower and touching some grass every now and again. Understanding the tools we use to escape the world around us and find some measure of solitude and solidarity with other humans, real or imagined, is a worthwhile thing to pursue. I let my need to be the one who helps everyone fade a little into the background and remind myself that I am, at the end of the day, only a human being.

I guess in some way I embraced the escapist nature of it all in the recognition that I am doing it to try to give a voice to a group of people I don't believe are being heard or understood when we talk about creativity. Our creative endeavors are often judged by those who have, historically, not represented us very well. So, here I am, on the shoulders of giants, holding my weedy arms up for someone else to take up my torch. But before I return this over into proper academic language again, I thought I would give a very quick primer on this thesis' topic.

I'll be the first to admit I have a bit of skin in the game with this research topic. I was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder in October of 2018, meaning by the time this is being read, I will have been diagnosed for four years. And that's a difficult thing to talk about, because to be diagnosed is often to be characterized as an individual who is "dependent, feminized, impotent, yet unpredictable and potentially dangerous, with no or limited sense of the future […]" (Jenkins, 2014). Some researchers equate the negotiations of identity and disclosure to those experienced by the queer community (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). It casts a shadow over everything I do and puts a different light on anything I produce. The assumptions that people bring when they talk to me have a measurable impact on my life. At the same time, there are a lot of assumptions baked into this absolutist read on autism. Assumptions about creativity, about the ability to collaborate and communicate with others, about our ability to develop, change, and evolve based on the context around us. And so, to attempt to add another voice to the chorus of criticism of these reads on creativity, I bring up a topic near and dear to my heart in tabletop RPG's. This hobby has kept me and my friends going through some dark times. Through this medium, I hope to illustrate creative processes, creative development, and the collaborative nature of creative effort. I will look at the ways in which various formats within the tabletop gaming space reflect or contest other recent research insights into the ways people on the autism spectrum prefer to communicate. Knowing that I am also presenting this to an audience not familiar with tabletop RPG's, though, I thought I would present a primer on some of the tabletop roleplaying game terminology employed in this thesis:

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG's for short) is, at its core, almost like a kind of improvisational theater. They generally involve somewhere between five and seven people sitting around a table and telling a story in collaboration. There are a great many types of tabletop games, generally organized around a particular theme, such as a group of fantasy adventurers diving into the depths of a dungeon, vampire politics in an urban fantasy version of a contemporary city, or even adventures in the far future. The players come up with a character to represent themselves in the game world while the Game Master is responsible for coming up with the setting and playing all the other characters involved in the players' adventures. While there are many types of roleplaying games, most of them will involve dice and some manner to represent the character's strengths and weaknesses in the game by manipulating these dice, represented by the player's statistics (Taylor, 2018).

In addition, while games may share a genre, there is an added layer of complexity introduced by the game's *mechanics*, the types of play that the game as a tool unto itself attempts to facilitate. Some games are more *narrative-focused,* attempting to immerse the players in the world through mechanics that facilitate collaborative storytelling. Others are more *mechanics-focused,* making the granularity and depth of their systems part of the overall appeal. While it is by no means an absolute certainty, narrative-focused games tend to devolve some of the narrative responsibility from the GM to the players, encouraging them to create supporting casts and interact more directly with the course of the story, while mechanics-focused games put the onus on the GM to tell the story and facilitate mechanically challenging encounters, putting a lot more emphasis on the GM's role as primary storyteller.

While traditionally played in a physical space around something like a gaming table, in recent years, there has been something of a boom in the virtual tabletop (or VTT) space, allowing people to play online with people they may be very far away from, using computers to simulate the effects of dice rolling. Additionally, they allow for participation in tabletop roleplaying games without the physical or even verbal presence of others by often including a text box that can be used to write out a character's actions or a GM's description. The difference between these ways of playing games will be discussed more in the analysis.

Problemformulation

"What role can role-playing games play in helping adults on the autism spectrum express themselves creatively and participate in communities?"

Theory

In a typical research project, the method and methodology particular to the project would precede the review of the underpinning theory. However, in the context of this project, the decision was made early on to put the theory section first. This decision was made to best illustrate how the project's theoretical assumptions about autism spectrum disorder and collaborative creative effort help to support the methodological framework.

Autism Spectrum Disorder - The Biomedical Perspective

Before this project can meaningfully begin to define its approach to understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder, it's perhaps appropriate to understand the biomedical definition of ASD that it often critically engages with, since it still serves as a baseline for treatment and understanding in the psychiatric system.

Contemporary understanding of autism is largely informed by the work of Lorna Wing and her successors, who started moving away from the work of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger by moving from an understanding of autism spectrum disorders as several distinct diagnoses, as seen in the ICD-10, towards an understanding of people placing differently on a spectrum of typical autistic impairments. The three impairments most often cited are in communication, social interaction and restricted interests (Ryhl, 2012). They are accompanied by 'non-spectrum traits' also identified by researchers, including a resistance to change, atypical reactions to certain stimuli, and unusually good mechanical memory (Ryhl, 2012).

Furthermore, it is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder, which are characterized as persistent deficits in certain motor functions, cognitive functions or social functions (ICD-11). The word 'persistent' is key. Whereas affective psychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety can, with effective intervention, be 'cured,' autism spectrum disorder is thought to be a lifelong disability (Smith & Bryson 1994). Because of this, and because of the lack of evidence that any medication in the psychiatric system can alleviate these deficits, treatment of autistic people is often limited to managing the many comorbid psychiatric conditions that they are at risk of developing, such as depression and social anxiety (Ryhl, 2012). While they're not part of the overall etiology, many observations of autistic people also often associate the repetitive behaviors and language patterns of autistic people as an overall lack of creativity (American Psychological Association, 2013, if. Roth, 2018). Other researchers have argued that while autistic people have a high mechanical memory and general good pattern recognition, this means they might excel in natural scientific fields while the 'softer sciences' that deal primarily with human empathy might elude them (Baron-Cohen, 2009 if. Roth, 2018).

Today, one of the predominant frameworks for explaining these perceived deficits is that of the 'Theory of Mind,' which describes the ability to imagine someone else's thoughts and feelings (Baron-Cohen, 1997 if. Duffy & Dorner 2011). Theory of Mind advocates argue that it is an innate cognitive mechanism that allows us to 'see' the minds of others. By extension, these advocates also tend to argue that autistic people are either delayed or deviant in their development of theory of mind, becoming 'mindblind' and thus impaired social and communicative skills (Baron-Cohen, 1997 if. Duffy & Dorner 2011). Some researchers, such as Simon Baron-Cohen, go as far as to argue that this delayed or deviant development is the primary driving force in the development of autism spectrum disorder.

A perceived lack of creativity and a concern about autistic peoples' ability to empathize with others, are the subject of this project. However, before this project can begin to present the theories of creativity and communication that form the underpinnings of its analysis, an alternative view of developmental disorders, challenging the narrative of mindblindness and inherent deficiency, will be presented.

Autism Spectrum Disorder: Beyond Assumptions of Defect

The section above forms a general overview of the biomedical understanding of autism. However, this biomedical understanding of the autistic person as ‘deficient’ and the potential search for a cure that has been adopted by groups such as Autism Speaks has been met with significant pushback from the autistic community, supported by scholars critical of the biomedical understanding of developmental disorder.

A lot of these are informed by a disability studies framework, an interdisciplinary field of study that emerged as a field of study, as opposed to a series of vaguely interconnected research in various disciplines, in 1990, with the formulation of a social theory of disability (Oliver, 1990 if. Molloy & Vasil, 2002). This model challenged the medical model’s assumption of disability as being caused by physical differences that exist in the world. While still acknowledging that there may be physical entities that separate certain people from others, the core of the social theory of disability is that our classification, treatment and interpretation of certain illness and impairments are socially constructed rather than based on biological facts, and that some of the impairments faced by disabled people have more to do with these constructed categories than with any defects on their part (Molloy & Vasil, 2002).

Nancy Bagatell tries to trace the historical development of autistic self-advocacy in a 2010 article, where she looks at three distinct phenomena responsible for its development. Firstly, she looks at how the inclusion of what is medically referred to as ‘high-functioning autism’ and Asperger’s Syndrome in the broader category of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the rise of disability self-advocacy movements in general, and the proliferation of the Internet as a means of communication (Bagatell, 2010).

The first of these developments, the inclusion of more ‘high-functioning’ autistic people in the broader pool of ASD, meant that there was suddenly a larger volume of people who had otherwise gone undiagnosed, who were simply treated as ‘odd' or ‘different,’ that ended up being given a clinical diagnosis. This occurred most often when they had social difficulties that exceeded their ability to cope (Bagatell, 2010).

The second development that contributed to the rise of self-advocacy movements came as a result of autistic people attending conferences primarily addressed either to healthcare workers, social workers or family members to people ‘affected' with autism. Feeling that their own concerns were not met at these conferences, autistic people began to form self-advocacy groups like the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network in the United States, which emerged in the 1990’s (Bagatell, 2010). This complex interrelationship between caregivers and autistic people, and the danger of infantilizing and degrading autistic people that comes with a perceived need by caregivers to be the ‘saviors’ of an autistic person, is something Mitzi Waltz examines in closer detail in her paper *Metaphors of Autism and Autism as Metaphor: An Exploration of Representation*. In this paper, she looks at prominent metaphors used to describe autistic people over the years. Amongst these metaphors, there was a persistent metaphor of emptiness or even outright feralness that often required a heroic caregiver to ‘mitigate,’ at the expense of seeing the autistic person as a complete human being (Waltz, 2003). These self-advocacy groups were also the beginning of the neurodiversity movement, seeing autism and other ‘neurodevelopmental disorders’ not as defects in certain cognitive functions, but instead as a different way of thinking that clash with certain expected behaviors and functions that require attention and help (Bagatell, 2010).

Finally, the proliferation of the Internet introduced a means of communicating nonverbally and over vast distances, which allowed a kind of community to be formed without the need for a physical space. For people who often face discomfort in social situations and in places that deal with sharing emotions in such a space, the Internet and instantaneous written communication with a built in ‘opt out’ clause in the form of disconnecting from the digital space helped autistic people communicate in a new way (Bagatell, 2010). It both helped to enable autistic people to find others who shared their experiences, but also to share their narratives without the strong emotions that can often be associated with face-to-face conversation (Bagatell, 2010).

These three developments are what Bagatell argues were the catalyst for creating the autistic part of the broader ‘umbrella’ of the neurodiverse community, which also includes people with other developmental disorders, such as ADHD (Bagatell, 2010). However, this does not mean that some symptoms do not need to be managed. As Svend Brinkmann pointed out in a 2016 paper about ADHD, whether the conditions that make up developmental disorders are a result of biological differences or are socially constructed, the associated suffering is still very real and must be understood and managed (Brinkmann, 2016).

In the same paper, Brinkmann somewhat distances himself from a fully social constructionist perspective of mental illness, however, and instead looks at the way in which certain impairments become performative, a means of communicating certain difficulties that may or may not have a biological basis but are mediated through culture. In other words, while retaining a social constructionist outlook, he attempts to frame the suffering of people who do receive a diagnosis in a way that does not simply make it a result of social construction (Brinkmann, 2016). In this way, Brinkmann is very much in touch with many modern autism advocates, who argue that while the condition might have a biological basis, our social practices, expectations and norms interpret a certain set of behaviors as being problematic and group them in as autism (Nadesan, 2005 if. Leveto, 2018).

These insights from disability studies have made their way into psychology as well and have caused some researchers to examine the ways in which school systems in particular have helped to construct and uphold certain social categories like Asperger Syndrome and presenting them as defects of the mind (Molloy & Vasil, 2002).

Finally, we return to addressing the question of Theory of Mind and the narrative of mindblindness. As with Waltz above, critics of Theory of Mind point to the way in which the theory lacks a theoretical underpinning, instead relying largely on the pathos of its narrative, that of a frightened, defective child living a tragic existence in order to give itself scientific legitimacy (Duffy & Corner 2011). While it has aspersions towards being a branch of cognitive psychology, it lacks any kind of evidence to support its claims, relying instead on the language of tragedy and deficiency to give it a narrative weight that can compensate for its lack of empirical weight (Duffy & Corner 2011).

Creativity - From Persons to Distribution

In order to establish exactly how the project deals with creativity, it’s important to clarify how, exactly, the term is used. Creativity and imagination are frequently studied topics in psychology. However, that does not necessarily mean everyone involved in the conversation is referring to the same thing. Presented here is a version of the social-cognitive approach to creativity that this project will be employing, followed by a couple of examples of creativity research done on or with people diagnosed with autism. This is done in order to contrast different ideas and conceptions of autism and creativity.

In his book *Distributed Creativity: Thinking Outside the Box of the Creative Individual*, psychologist Vlad Glaveneau makes an argument that the idea of a social cognitive understanding of creativity mirrors certain developments in the understanding of social cognitive theory, namely that of distributed cognition (Glaveneau, 2014). This theory is part of the third ‘wave' of social cognition theories that aim to challenge the orthodox view of cognition as being limited by ‘the skin and the skull’ (Glaveneau, 2014). Meanwhile, the theory of distributed cognition points to the ways in which human beings both collaborate with one another and shape the material world in order to distribute the cognitive load of a given task (Hutchins, 1995a if. Glaveneau, 2014). Distributed creativity theorists integrate this social cognition theory with insights from cultural psychology, namely the idea that we cannot meaningfully separate the human being from its environment. It thus follows that trying to study mind and culture as two separate phenomena is pointless, because ‘a human being is an incomplete, unfinished animal’ in need of a cultural environment to complete itself (Geertz 1973, if. Glaveneau, 2014). In that sense, all human development is dependent on culture, which occupies a kind of in-between space between the person and their world, neither wholly internal nor wholly external (Glaveneau, 2014). This perspective focuses on mediational models, ways in which people relate to others and material and symbolic artefacts in their environment, our actions always mediated by our interactions with a dynamic system of social, material and institutional relations in society (Glaveneau, 2014). These interactions, the ways in which we assimilate and change culture through acts of meaning-making and co-creation, are the ‘outcome and engine’ of cognitive distribution (Glaveneau, 2014).

In this conception, the object of study also changes from decontextualized laboratory experiments to the everyday actions of people, grounded in practical social activities within an organic context (Glaveneau, 2014). Rather than looking at behavior, as psychology often has before, which can be somewhat decontextualized from a social and cultural context, cultural psychology instead focuses on action because it “captures better the symbolic and goal-directed nature of our relation with ourselves, others and objects” (Glaveneau 2014). Even those acts which we take for granted as being wholly internal, the classic cognitive ideas of remembering or thinking, are not wholly internal. They are still mediated by cultural systems, like the semiotic system of language. There is no such thing as a purely internal or ‘private' language, and so even those cognitive processes we see as being wholly internal are thus mediated by culture (Glaveneau, 2014).

But then, what does it mean that creativity is distributed, and in which dimensions do these distributions take place? Glaveneau identifies three types of distributions, borrowed from Hutchins’ (2000) theory of cognitive distribution: Distribution between members of a social group, distribution between internal and external (i.e material) structure, and distribution across time, letting products of earlier events influence future events (Hutchins, 2000 if. Glaveneau, 2014).

The individual does matter to the creative act, because their perspectives and experiences also inform the act of creation, but they are not the only person who is involved in the process of creation in various ways. Even something that is created in seeming-isolation is still often seen or judged by others. Creators are sensitive to social judgment and opinion, whether it be physical, by presenting the creative work to others, or mental, by framing oneself as the other and trying to imagine what this imagined other would make of the work (Glaveneau, 2014). The standards to which a creative product, whether physical or not, are held, are always grounded in a social dimension and can never be wholly attributed to the artist’s individual creative attributes. However, that does not mean that the producer (the person engaged in and sustaining a creative action) is not important to the work. The ways in which they navigate the ideas and demands of their ‘audience,’ and the interaction and communication between creator and audience, is also a dimension of the creative process (Glaveneau, 2014). Culture is not a monolith that is uncritically internalized by the producer, but something to be engaged with.

Of this theory of distributed creativity, the project's primary focus is going to be on the distribution across persons, but also the idea of creativity not as something normative, but rather as a concept determined by one's society, culture and personal experiences. Finally, this theory gives a useful framework for examining creative endeavors not in the abstract - through decontextualized laboratory experiments and attempted quantification of 'creativity' - but instead placed contextually as an everyday facet of human activity.

Creativity in an Autism Spectrum Perspective - Laboratory Myths and Practical Reality

So, what do the above conversations about creativity mean in the context of the subject of autism spectrum disorder? Work has been produced on this subject by various figures, some of whom the project has already discussed.

A study by Craig & Baron-Cohen in 1999 present a trio of experiments that attempt to argue in favor of a supposed impoverished creativity in people on the autism spectrum, presenting two hypotheses. The first of these, the executive dysfunction hypothesis, has gained much traction in recent years as an explanation for the behaviors associated with autism, noting how many of them are tied to executive function. Executive function is an umbrella term for the 'planning, working memory, impulse control, inhibition, and shifting set, as well as the initiation and monitoring of action' (Hill, 2004). The hypothesis is that impairment in executive function, which is connected to the prefrontal cortex, is the likely culprit in the behavioral and cognitive deficits in autism.

The second theory, the ‘imagination deficit hypothesis,’ instead divides creativity and creative action into two types: imaginative creavitity and reality-based creativity. The former is a novel but real-world event, like a new move in a game of chess, a novel sequence of notes in a musical composition, or similar. Meanwhile, the latter involves the production of novel, but purely imaginary events, such as being asked to draw an object that could not possibly exist (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999).

The difference between the two hypotheses, as the text describes it, is that if executive dysfunction was to blame for the lack of creativity, then the autistic children would score equally poorly on imaginative vs. reality-based creativity, whereas if the imagination deficit theory was the culprit, then they would score similarly to neurotypical children on reality-based creativity exercises while scoring poorly on imaginative creativity exercises (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999). The trio of tests first began with a standardized creativity test called the Torrance Test, comparing the participants’ results with the mean scores of neurotypical children to establish whether or not there was creative deficit between autistic children and neurotypical children at all. The second test was administered to test both imaginative and reality-based creativity to see if the results supported the executive dysfunction hypothesis or the imagination deficit hypothesis, with the results supporting both hypotheses (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999). The final test, designed to measure imaginative fluency seemingly proved a ‘disproportionate deficit on imaginative creativity.’

While ultimately supporting neither argument fully, Craig & Baron-Cohen nonetheless reached the conclusion that the tests seemed to veer more in the direction of a lack of imaginative creativity than one of reality-based creativity.

Of course, this article and those like it often fail to account for a simple question: What about people who have been diagnosed with autism and yet still perform creative work? British psychologist Ilona Roth, in a 2018 essay based on research she presented at a conference on autism and imagination, points to the idea of ‘savant talent,’ explicitly linking autistic creative expression to other cognitive processes than creativity (Roth, 2018). In this way, it becomes about some extraordinary mental trick rather than simply being a result of an autistic person having creative agency of their own. Her argument is that savant theory, along with the idea that autistic art by design is somehow ‘repetitive’ or ‘mechanical’ and thus conforming to existing ideas about autistic people having an inherent preference for the mechanical over the aesthetic, serves to form a sort of self-reinforcing assumption about artistic expression in autism (Roth, 2018). It deflects from any kind of question of artistic flair in favor of engaging purely with the idea that an autistic person’s different cognition must lead to a different, and often diminished, artistic output (Roth, 2018). Yet, Roth’s own research did not find any kind of common artistic themes or an overreliance on strict adherence to artistic rules or repetitiveness, instead finding a breadth of artistic expression very similar to neurotypical artists. Instead, she points to the way in which creativity is constructed, including the value of novelty over craft, as well as the way in which the belief that autistic people are somehow artistically hampered can be harmful, citing examples where artistic development helped autistic people gain vital communication tools (Roth, 2018).

If we look to our example above, addressing the distribution of creativity and the notion that creative acts are distributed and social and is dependent on the context of the creator, then their results sound much less impressive: autistic people perform less well at an artificial and largely arbitrary form of creativity, labeled ‘imaginative creativity,’ when they are put in an artifical and largely arbitrary testing environment that may in fact be highly uncomfortable for them to be in.

A test of visuospatial creativity developed specifically to test autistic people in an authentic environment, meanwhile, seemed to have much more positive results (Diener, Wright, Smith & Wright, 2014).

Vygotsky and Disability - The Fundamentals of Defectology

Thus far, this examination of disability in the context of autism has come mostly from a position of looking at the field of disability studies, but this idea of the social construction of disability is not unique to that field of study. Indeed, it is illustrated quite well by the writings of Lev Vygotsky about ‘defectology,’ a science roughly equivalent to the Western science of special education, formulated in the Soviet Union in the 1920’s (Gindis, 1995). As Vygotsky understood it, while many disabilities were physical, they were not thought of as a handicap or an abnormality until they were brought into the social context (Gindis, 1995). About what were called ‘developmental disabilities’ or ‘developmental delays' in children, he argued that these were not children whose development was stunted, but merely ones whose development had taken a different trajectory that was not being acknowledged or understood. Development, in a Vygotskian sense, is also not a linear development quantitative accumulation of knowledge and skills, the way it’s so often conceived as in a contemporary education system, but rather a series of qualitative, dialectic transformations, of internalizing culture and social relationships through a process of integration and disintegration, gaining and losing, mediated by material tools and human symbology (Gindis, 1995).

Furthermore, Vygotsky identified what he called the ‘primary disability’ and the ‘secondary disability.’ While the primary disability was a consequence of whatever physical or mental handicap a person might possess such as deafness, blindness, or a different developmental trajectory, the accompanying secondary disability emerged from the social reaction to the primary disability. This secondary disability produced an internalized stigma that could also serve as a driving force behind the development of compensatory functions to make up for the primary disability (Vygotsky, 1993). These feelings of inadequacy or awareness of one’s own difficulties, emerging from the social context, can thus both be a help and a hindrance as a source of stigma, but also motivation for compensatory development.

Vygotsky and Theory of Mind - Mind in Society

Vygotsky’s most extensively studied theory is probably that of the ‘theory of mind.’ This theory asks a very important question to those who swear by theory of mind as the developmental answer to the question of autism spectrum disorder. In its most elegant formulation by Vygotsky himself, the zone of proximal development is the distance between a person’s capacity for problem-solving when they are working on a problem alone versus the potential development they can achieve when they are able to collaborate with more experienced people, whether peers or informed guides such as teachers (Vygotsky 1978).

In other words, while Theory of Mind may be able to determine a child’s capacity for what we might call ‘social problem-solving,’ the act of successfully communicating one’s desires to another human being, in the vacuum of the laboratory test, it does not account for how an autistic child may develop these social problem-solving skills if they are able to receive active, helpful guidance from their peers.

That said, some of the findings of the theory of mind advocates, particularly those surrounding the idea of having trouble ‘imagining the other’ is an interesting question with the theory of distributed creativity. If this difficulty with putting oneself in the mind of the audience is a common thread among people with an autism diagnosis, it may prove a useful data point for a discussion about collaborative creative projects like role-playing games.

Vygotsky and the subject of play - Vygotsky at Work & Play

While the introduction already provides some elaboration on the reasons for choosing tabletop RPG’s, this section will expand a little on the theory behind play as a form of social development.

It’d be easy to dismiss role-playing games as just being recreation, the same way that many other acts of play have been perceived as being a sign of immaturity, or a curiosity of childhood that disappears as one leaves adolescence. Vygotsky instead identified play as a leading factor in a child’s development, and the child’s complex relationship with enacting the ‘rules’ of play become part of the development of abstract thought - the ability to think beyond the immediate situation and separate action from meaning (Vygotsky 1978).

One possible extension of this line of thought as it applies specifically to autism comes courtesy of Nicola Shaughnessy's essay *Curious Incidents: Pretend Play, Presence, and Performance Pedagogies in Encounters with Autism*. The essay references a previous study which found that autistic people can solve complex social reasoning tasks within a structure that is designed to help them 'solve' the problem, but that they struggle to apply these same principles in their everyday, naturalistic social interactions (Volkmar, 2003 if. Shaughnessy, 2016). In attempting to answer the question of how to transfer this ability to contexts outside the research laboratory, Shaughnessy argues that drama may be a way to help translate this 'artificial' understanding into practice in social interaction with others (Shaughnessy, 2016). Furthermore, since theatre deals largely in bombast and exaggerated physical expressions that are easier for autistic individuals to catch on to and 'read,' it provides an easier-to-read range of emotional expressions that may 'ease' autistic individuals into social interaction (Shaughnessy, 2016).

While the medium is slightly different, tabletop RPG's do have the same focus on the immediate, on the exaggerated expressions and emotions, and on a range of emotional expressions contained within the genre of the game. This may likewise help to ease social communication outside of the immediate context of the game.

Method and Methodology

For this section, the first thing that will be provided is a review of the methodological disciplines employed, their strengths and weaknesses, key points in their practice, the kinds of knowledge that can be generated through their practice, and the ethical considerations they raise. These will be presented one methodological theory at a time, beginning with autoethnography, then Participatory Action Research, before finally explaining the synthesis of methods employed in this project.

Autoethnography - Introduction and History

Before embarking on an attempt to explain a history of autoethnography, it's necessary to define the term. Put simply, autoethnography is a qualitative method in which the researcher attempts to write about and critique their own cultural context, using existing research to explore themselves and their own place in culture. Unlike traditional ethnographic work, in which the author is an outsider, in autoethnography, they are an insider looking to their own (Adams et. al, 2015). While it takes many different forms, one of the key characteristics is an attempt to avoid conventional scientific language and instead taking cues from literature and art in order to communicate scientific ideas to a broader audience even as it seeks to contribute to existing scientific knowledge (Adams et. al, 2015).

It should be noted that this is *a* history of autoethnography, rather than *the* history of autoethnography. To do anything else would be to not address one of the more meaningful tenents of autoethnography. History, like any other story, depends on the teller, and so, it is subject to revision, alteration and change (Douglas & Carless, 2013).

This does not mean that this is a personal account of the researcher's history with autoethnography, but rather an attempt to give a general overview of the genesis and development of the principles that define autoethnography in practice. This story begins in the 1970's and 1980's with the emergence of the crisis of representation in the social sciences (Adams et. al, 2015). This crisis was prompted by a backlash against the social research of the day, particularly focusing on ethnographers. Critics focused in particular on the "standard use of colonialist and invasive ethnographic practices - going into and studying a culture, leaving to write about (represent) this culture, and disregarding member concerns, relational ethics, and what the representation might do to the culture" (Adams et. al, 2015). Ethnographers started to oppose what had previously been the ethnographic ideal to be a distant, detached observer. They argued that by their very presence, ethnographers altered the way people around them reacted. These new ethnographers instead wished to be able to actively situate themselves in the field, to show how they, as people, affected their own fieldwork, rather than pretend as though their observations were neutral (Adams et. al 2015).

These questions of representation were accompanied by further questions about the privileging of certain voices in ethnographic research, particularly in the way the researchers (usually white, male and heteroxexual) had their experiences of a ‘foreign’ or ‘primitive’ culture, especially majority non-white cultures, privileged over the people whose culture they studied, often taking advantage of vulnerable populations in order to advance their own careers (Adams et. al, 2015). Ethnography became a question of who has the right to study whom. Who gets to be the storyteller, and who gets to be the subject? Who gets to have the assumption of objectivity and detachment as a default?

A renewed focus on identity politics in the United States in the 1960’s and 1970’s also added to the problematization of traditional ethnographic work by highlighting the fact that identity matters, not only to your past and present, but also to your future, opening and closing doors depending on your ethnic, sexual or economic circumstances (Adams et. al 2015). This opened questions not only towards the standardized academic practices mentioned above, such as the assumption of objectivity, but also the format of scientific work and the privileging of certain kinds of language and structure, often prose heavily laden with academic jargon that was overwhelmingly produced by white, middle-class or upper middle-class men.

These three circumstances, changing research ideals, concerns about the ethics and politics of social research, and a renewed focus on identity politics and the way in which we produce knowledge, were all key to the development of autoethnography. This discipline seeks to use the researcher’s own personal experiences to describe and critique cultural assumptions and beliefs, and center the researcher’s own identity and experiences in a dialogical relationship with their surroundings. In doing so, it also often seeks to break with academic traditions surrounding both the assumption of objectivity and the assumed structure in favor of attempting to strike a balance between methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity (Adams et. al 2015). The next section will talk more about autoethnography as a distinct practice on a general level, while the section on methodology will contain the particulars of this thesis’ autoethnographic work.

Autoethnography in Practice

Talking about autoethnography in practice is something of a complex undertaking, because there are as many ways of doing autoethnography as there are autoethnographers. However, pioneers in the field generally choose to focus on a set of core ideals and practices that help to inform autoethnographic practice. These core ideals are:

Recognizing the limits of scientific knowledge (what can be known or explained), particularly regarding identities, lives, and relationships, and creating nuanced, complex, and specific accounts of personal/cultural experience

Connecting personal (insider) experience, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts, and conventions

Answering the call to narrative and storytelling and placing equal importance on intellect/knowledge and aesthetics/artistic craft

Attending to the ethical implications of their work for themselves, their participants, and their readers/ audiences. (Adams et. al 2015).

The way that these core ideals are expressed varies from autoethnographer to autoethnographer. However, they encourage a certain kind of practice that tries to give a seat at the scientific table to artistically expressive work grounded in the writer's personal experience. This is used this as a jumping-off point to discuss culture, politics and society in a way that traditional scientific methods, particularly those who privilege the objective, detached scientist, may struggle to illustrate.

The biggest difference, of course, is in the very name. Autoethnography, as opposed to traditional ethnography, does not look to The Other as an object of study, but rather the Self, attempting to illustrate the writer's own sociocultural context (Adams et. al 2015). It does so at least in part in response to some of the ethical concerns outlined above about who gets to represent whom. It chooses to focus on the personal in order to highlight the fact that scientists are part of the process of knowledge-making and cannot be completely detached from their work. It does not mean that it is an 'ethics-free' method of inquiry, of course. In fact, as illustrated later, autoethnography comes with its own set of ethical challenges no less thorny than those experienced by traditional ethnographers.

The call to narrative and storytelling is another key component of autoethnography, and one that is embraced by the field for a multitude of reasons. The first is a desire to break away with traditional academic writing that the field often criticizes for being insular and restrictive, a particular kind of upper middle class prose that has pushed all other forms of communication out of the sciences. By doing this, it has given a disproportionate voice to those with the social resources and available time to produce it (Adams et. al 2015). The second is a concern about accessibility in general, wanting to proliferate scientific work by making it accessible to people who might not be trained to read scientific journals. People may not be familiar with this style but they are often very familiar with the structure of prose essays, poetry or film. Autoethnography can thus present research in a way that is eye-level with the audience that autoethnography attempts to engage, while still being able to convey an argument grounded in current research. Rather than being an abandonment of the scientific, it instead attempts to recontextualize it into a different form.

However, perhaps most importantly, autoethnography calls to storytelling because of its power as a tool of communication and reflection. Fundamentally, we humans are still "homo narrans, driven by the very roots of our co-being in telling our stories" (Poulus, 2008 if. Giorgio, 2013). If qualitative research is ultimately an act of meaning-making, as Willig (2017) argues, then why stray away from narrative storytelling, one of the most powerful meaning-making tools we have, in scientific inquiry? Of course, this does not come without some risks, both ethical and methodological, both of which will be discussed later.

Returning to the subject of research material, this can be collected and presented in different ways depending on the autoethnographer in question. Margot Duncan, a more conservative autoethnographer who wrote a critical assessment of the practice, calls for the need to present ‘hard’ evidence to support a ‘soft’ understanding through personal experience and memory (Duncan, 2004 if. Wall, 2008). Sarah Wall, in her autoethnographic work *Easier Said Than Done*, tells an anecdote from a fellow researcher that highlights the double standards of academic assumptions. It does this by asking what the functional difference between her writing a diary and drawing conclusions based on it versus someone interviewing her, collecting that diary and its data, and writing an analysis based on it is (Wall, 2008). She also highlights the importance of memory to the process of writing research notes in the first place, citing sociologist Margaret Mead. Mead talks about how the memory of lived experience is inextricably tied up with the research notes, reflecting the contextual experience even through the seemingly-decontextualized notes (Wall, 2008). Memory, aided by field notes and meticulous qualitative work, can help to keep autoethnographic work focused on the research topic at hand.

Finally, the project returns to a point mentioned above, specifically the one about reflexivity. Reflexivity sits at the heart of autoethnography. It is defined as the act of ‘troubling’ the relationship between researcher and research, about selves and others, and “taking seriously the self’s location(s) in culture and scholarship” (Adams et. al 2015). It’s looking inward on the researcher’s own identity, experiences and relationships to see how that informs the researcher’s work, including the assumptions of power and privilege within these.

Autoethnography and Knowledge

This then begs the question: If autoethnography is primarily concerned with the researcher’s own identity, what types of knowledge - what kinds of research outcomes - can it generate? What is its existential purpose as a methodology, and how is it different from traditional ethnography?

Firstly, of course, is the fact that while autoethnography sets different standards for its aesthetic and subject matter, it is fundamentally still a discipline that seeks to use contemporary scholarship to elevate these changes into something that is still scientific. It seeks to contribute to existing knowledge and extend it, while acknowledging that knowledge is both situated and contested, and that the insider knowledge of the researcher and their particular insights are what differentiates autoethnography from regular ethnographic work (Adams et. al. 2015)

Like all qualitative methodology, however, it is necessary to rely on interpretation, as it concerns itself primarily with meaning and the process of meaning-making (Willig 2017). However, autoethnography also desires to show, very particularly, the act of making sense of something. The narrative element of autoethnography, although at least partially inspired by questions of access to scientific knowledge, is also about using the power of narrative storytelling in order to demonstrate understanding and reflexivity on complex subjects, and thus invite the audience to witness the act of meaning-making very directly (Adams et. al 2015). It rejects positivist assumptions about absolute truth in favor of attempting to discover how people make meaning out of their own lives, and how they experience the world (Adams et. al 2015). The autoethnographic ideals is to use this to generate a personal, engaging narrative that can both contribute to scientific knowledge but also break the barrier between academia and the world outside it.

Autoethnographic Ethics in Practice

It may seem from the overview presented so far that autoethnography has a somewhat lackadaisical approach to ethics. After all, if you’re writing primarily from an autobiographical perspective, a lot of commonplace ethical consideration about the subjects of your writing aren’t applicable, or at least not conventionally applicable.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. Autoethnography has a set of ethical considerations somewhat unique to it, stemming both from its existential calling as a space for alternative voices and from its methodology. However, these questions of autoethnographic ethics are also very intimately tied in with the autoethnographic process, and so this section will discuss the ethics of autoethnographic inquiry, particularly as they apply to this project.

Ellis (2007) separates autoethnographic ethics into three dimensions.
The first is "procedural ethics," the sort that a review board would insist were followed for a project to be considered ethically viable. Proper consent forms, making sure you're asking for informed consent, the sort of formal processes of making sure your research complies with existing ethical standards.
The second is "ethics in practice" or "situational ethics." This is exactly what it sounds like - the researcher making ethical calls in a given situation, like what to do with a question that an informant finds uncomfortable.
The third dimension is a "relational ethics," which deals with what to do about the relationship between researcher and research participants, and how to meaningfully perform ethical research that involves one's intimate others. After all, as human beings, we're seldom alone, and you can't write the story of a person without involving the people around them. This third one specifically has been of great importance to this project.

These three dimensions are not the only questions relevant to autoethnographic ethics, however. There are a number of other questions raised by these three concerns. Those relevant to this project are outlined in this section.

Firstly, there is the question of power imbalance. After all, while autoethnography may be concerned with the self, there are always other people involved in the situations that we sketch out and analyze, and are not able to directly represent themselves. Inevitably, the autoethnographer's own biases will show, and as Lovell said: "There is a power relation in place in writing a biography, and history accords the balance of power quite emphatically to the biographer" (Lovell, 2005, if. Wall, 2008). As this autoethnography is the story of the researcher's development through the lens of interacting with a gaming group, the other participants cannot help but be involved. While there may not be any intent of painting them in an unflattering light, they're the ultimate judge of that. In order to resolve this dilemma, the subject was discussed with the gaming group upon whose game the research diary was based.

They were informed of how they would retain their confidentiality and right to privacy, and an offer was made to send them a copy of the finished analysis once it was concluded to make sure that they wouldn't feel misrepresented. This received a very positive initial response, and a couple were outright thrilled to be "research subjects" or just happy to assist with the project. There were many recurring attempts to follow up with them along the research process to make sure they were still happy with the analysis - something that Adams et. al refer to as *process consent* (Adams et al. 2015).

However, another concern is that while traditional research subjects often approach a situation considering their personal safety and concerns about research when they do offer their consent, the people who appear in this autoethnographic work are personal friends. They know how much this research project has meant, even as it's taken an eternity to put it together. There remains a question of whether they're just doing this in order to help a friend. This ethical question has been raised before in autoethnographic research (Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2018 is a good example), and they argue that in this situation, a binary concept of ethical and unethical is difficult to apply to human relationships, which are inherently messy, complicated, and subject to change. Instead, these researchers often follow Ellis' call to "situational ethics," relying on the judgement calls of the researcher in dialogue with the subject to determine what is and isn't ethical in the moment (Ellis, 2007 if. Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2018). Much more important than 'checkbox ethics' is the deliberation of ourselves as researchers, and what perspectives we might assume as a result that could become problematic for the ethical concerns we make. In this case, that might be more literal than others, given that the researcher is on the spectrum and thus often finds social cues somewhat complicated and may have trouble understanding if a sentence is too strongly worded or misunderstood. On the other hand, such awareness is also a call to moderation through both reflexive understanding of oneself and a call to externalize these worries by showing the work to others.

Another concern, somewhere between an ethical question and a legitimate criticism of autoethnographic inquiry is the question of whether this project, and autoethnography in general, is a genuine contribution to science or merely self-indulgent self-therapy, a criticism most readily brought to forward by Atkinson (1997). Atkinson's criticism of narrative methodology, of which autoethnography is one component, criticizes the method for placing the narrative method in the center of the world as a unique tool of emancipation, with an over-generalized focus on the self and the dismissal of expertise in favor of privileging the experience of the individual writer (Atkinson 1997).

Broadly, this is a valid criticism. However, the narrative method can, and should, be more than simply navel-gazing therapeutics and can be used to augment existing research methods. As autoethnographers like Wall (2008) have said, while these criticisms are useful and necessary, they are best addressed by putting front-and-center the aims and methods of the autoethnographic account in order to ensure that while there is room for experimentation and self-expression, it still retains a purpose as a piece of scientific literature. In this specific project, to also meet Duncan’s demand for ‘harder’ evidence, attempts have been made to contextualize the autoethnography with two interviews. These were conducted in order to compare the autoethnographic experiences of the researcher with those of others.

Another criticism comes from within autoethnographic practice itself, which is often concerned with the reclamation of the voices of those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized in scientific spaces.. The researcher is a young, white, able-bodied middle-class man in an able-bodied middle class white peoples’ world, and outside of a condition that is, for all intents and purposes, invisible in daily life, the researcher belongs to the majority as far as the distribution of power in the university system is concerned. However, as will be discussed later, and as has been argued by others in the section on theory, although autism is invisible and self-disclosure is a personal matter, there is still a legitimate fear of discovery and stigma that is associated with all forms of psychological disability (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). However, in keeping with the autoethnographic spirit of reflexivity, it is still worth attempting to contextualize this in the writing itself, and to reflect on where the observations may have been different for others more visibly “on the spectrum.”

One more thing that is particularly important to autoethnographic ethics is the question of the self. Tapping into past experiences involves reliving them again, and while internal reviews are generally very good about asking questions of confidentiality and protection of research subjects, they are less used to having to review how much harm these experiences may harm the researcher (Tullis, 2013). Disclosure of personal history, traumas, experiences and preferences can be harmful from both a personal and professional perspective, through re-living complicated times in one's life or by exposing personal details. The fact that, in writing this, the research touches on the researcher's my own autism, even if it is a known fact to the university and supervisor, could have potential harmful side effects. The worry about stigma is a reason why many neurodivergent people choose to keep their identities a secret (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). Likewise, this autoethnography would not be the same without touching on the events that were ongoing as the field notes were written and recalled. Even as this thesis attempts to focus mostly on affirming, positive memories of a quirky gaming group and a challenge to some of the pathologizing and absolutist perspectives on autism that exist in the psychological debate, these observations are a product of a present moment that is quite extraordinary.

Autoethnography in Practice

As for methodology itself, this project adopts a rather straightforward autoethnographic approach, writing an essay of findings based on three data points.

The first of these is a diary written during the author's still-ongoing weekly games, using these as research notes that can be analyzed for the basis of the essay's text. To augment this, two informal interviews with two other people the researcher has personal experience with while are conducted. Both are diagnosed with autism, yet reflect very differently on their diagnosis, but the interviews primarily concern their perspective on some of the ideas of collaborative creative effort. It also encourages them to reflect on their creative process, and how that fits into the broader narrative surrounding creativity and people on the autism spectrum.

For the third data point, memory must once again take center stage. While this project has research notes to rely on, the aforementioned tabletop group has played games together for eight years, and thus contains eight years' worth of strong memories and shared experiences that would feel amiss not to include in a piece of autoethnographic work on the subject. Some researchers, like the previously-mentioned Duncan, have attempted to reconcile autoethnographic reliance on memory by stressing the need to contrast it with ‘hard’ evidence (Duncan 2004, if. Wall, 2008), while others have rejected this dichotomy, arguing that even in traditional ethnography, fieldwork and any resulting texts from it cannot be separated by the memory that shaped them in the first place (Coffey, 1999 if. Wall, 2008). These memories form a necessary backdrop to the existing field notes and the comfort with which the researcher can speak to the players about their creative process and experiences - one is nothing without the other. As such, the project will be using memories about particularly strong or important experiences. Without them, the field note observations would lack crucial context. The interviews thus act as supplemental evidence and act as a tool with which the researcher can reflect on their own experiences and assumptions.

Participatory Action Research

The second methodological underpinning of this project is Participatory Action Research, which will be referred to as PAR from this point onward.

Put very simply and eloquently by Johnson & Guzman (2012), PAR aims to “articulate knowledge production and transformative action, and assumes interdependence between action and research (knowledge)” (Lewin, 1946; Fals Borda, 1993 if. Johnson & Guzman, 2012).

More than anything, PAR is defined by its malleability. As Alice McIntyre notes, PAR is not defined by an overriding theoretical framework, but rather a series of underlying tenets that underpin the PAR process:

a) A collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem.

b) A desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation.

c) A joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved.

d) The building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation and dissemination of the research process (McIntyre, 2008.)

One could also define PAR as Vio Grossi does it, as ‘an approach to exploring the processes by which participants engage in collaborative, action-based projects that reflect their knowledge and mobilize their desires’ (Grossi, 1980 if. McIntyre, 2008). In this type of project, knowledge is co-constructed and co-learned by the researcher and the participants, who are constantly engaged in a reflexive process of questioning, reflecting, developing plans, enacting them, analyzing the result, and starting the process anew in light of new information (McIntyre, 2008).

Thus, more than anything, PAR is an iterative and recursive process - each cycle builds on the previous one, and each cycle’s knowledge can provide opportunities for reflection on where the participants started, taking stock of what they’ve learned and understanding what they’ve produced along the way (Lawson, 2015). This involves an iterative research cycle of first identifying the key characteristics of the problem they have set out to solve, then attempting to find efficient and effective methods of solving the problem, implementing a replicable solution, and then determining any special conditions or local contexts which may have altered the results of steps 1-3 from what may have been initially expected (Lawson, 2015).

PAR projects come from many different fields and research approaches, but they all follow this broad outline, and much like autoethnography, which we have already discussed, places a lot of emphasis on insider knowledge and the leveling of the conversational playing field between ‘expert’ and ‘subject’ (McIntyre 2014). In doing so, it also attempts to break with a commonplace assumption about the role of research, whereby research is conceived as impartial, unbiased observation whose only way of meaningfully changing the world it attempts to study is to pass the research on to policymakers or other powers-that-be (Lawson, 2015). Furthermore, it attempts to problematize this tripartite division of policymaker, researcher and research subject by integrating all three groups into a more directly collaborative partnership.

One way to conceive of this, which seems very appropriate for the project at hand, is to describe PAR as a game, with a set of *constitutive* rules, and a series of *regulative* rules. The constitutive rules are the ones that provide its boundaries, indicating what a method is and what it is not (Lawson, 2015). The constitutive rules of PAR include things like the close integration of different groups as co-researchers, practicing in naturalistic settings, on working in recursive, reflexive research and analysis patterns, careful documentation of any possible generalizable aspects of the research project and the use of the active voice to describe one's research (Lawson, 2015). The regulative rules, meanwhile, are the guidelines for how to play the game for the results to merit the status of valid, reliable and useful knowledge (Lawson, 2015). In the case of PAR, the regulative rules both involve communicating properly with research authorities to make sure that the PAR experiment is done in accordance with extant research norms and ethics, but also the responsibility to be the facilitator of communication between different groups, to retain focus on the research problem at hand, but also have the flexibility to change aims based on the data you receive from participants (Lawson, 2015).

But of course, this relatively loose structure means that PAR must establish other criteria for what it constitutes as research, as well as address some of the potential problems with the method. Finally, this project has its own practical limitations which must also be addressed.

Firstly, there arises a fundamental question of how to design a research project. In PAR, there is an absence of a codified set of methods in favor of a methodological pluralism with a focus on action and change. The question of design, then, goes from being one of a formal adherence to a set of regulative rules associated with a singular research method to one of structuring a research project around the broader regulative rules of participatory action research. One must also do so while identifying which research methods work for a given project, and be willing to change course if it turns out some of these methods prove to be problematic, or end up requiring readjustment.

That is not to say, however, that PAR has no evaluative criteria for its research designs at all, simply that they require a little reframing. Part of it, of course, is evaluating based on the outcome. As an action-based research method, the question of impact becomes central to evaluating the research design (McIntyre, 2008). However, there are other evaluations to consider. One of these is democratization of the research process.

The idea of incorporating different groups (researchers, policymakers and laypersons) into a unified research team has already been discussed. These different groups all contribute different kinds of knowledge to a project that may be difficult for a researcher to assess (Lawson, 2015). The empowerment of laypeople, allowing them to contribute their more specific local knowledge that may otherwise be inaccessible to a researcher, is a key concept in PAR. However, it must be handled with concern in order to not develop from an earnest attempt at community empowerment into a savior complex. Rather, the researcher's role is as a facilitator, a mediator, and a communicator, but all these steps must involve the earnest participation of the other groups involved in the research project in order for the project to be considered valid PAR research (Lawson, 2015).

While the methodological plurality is an important aspect of PAR, and scholars have used everything from interviews to focus groups to participant observation to interviews to photovoice, due to some of the limitations in terms of scope that this project faces, it will be somewhat more limited in its application of these methods - this will be revisited later.

Strengths and Weaknesses

One of PAR's tremendous strengths is the ability to directly impact the communities being researched. It is a fine balancing act to find a research outcome that is both specific to the community being researched *and* generalizable enough to be effective in communities facing similar problems since the local context may be different. However, when done well the result of PAR is a process that can "help rebuild individuals' capacity to be creative actors in the world, while being active participants in meaningful decision-making" (Maguire, 1987 if. MacDonald, 2012). As already talked about, the idea is to democratize the research process and let the people who engage in the research process from outside academic circles reach further with their local knowledge, thus helping them in transforming their environment for the better (MacDonald, 2012).

Of course, this is not entirely without its risks. Johnson & Guzman, in a 2012 paper about several PAR projects involving the mental health of LGBT individuals, particularly trans people, raised some interesting questions about their work: In action research based around improving the well-being of others, what implicit values are at play, and how do they decide what's best for whom? Part of this risk is also the co-opting of the language of participatory action research and community action being used by governments to slash public services, expecting these volunteer community groups to "pick up the slack" and leaving them worse off than they were before the project started (Johnson & Guzman, 2012). Furthermore, they found that researchers often came in with certain preconceptions based on the adopted cultural narratives of the groups they were working with. Oftentimes, for a PAR project to be considered in the first place, there must be a 'need,' often based on the perception of a particular group as being particularly vulnerable. In those cases, leaning on assumptions about those identities in their work, PAR workers can often end up calcifying these social assumptions, making them even more 'real,' rather than allowing co-researchers to express dissent against the narrative role assigned to them (Johnson & Guzman, 2012).

Another observation that may not qualify as a 'weakness,' but that is nonetheless important to consider, is the idea of PAR as co-producing cultural artifacts that have a temporal and contextual 'shelf life.' Rather than being *the* stories of a particular group, they are *some* stories, co-produced at a particular time and place in a group's life, and the context of where they are presented. As such, they are not fixed representations, but continue to mutate, creating new forms of meaning and action (Johnson & Guzman, 2012).

Ethics in Participatory Action Research

Once again, the project returns to the question of ethics. While questions of informed participant consent, including process consent as mentioned earlier, can be helpful in addressing some of these questions, other ethical considerations are unique to PAR, and must be addressed separately.

One oft-overlooked aspect of PAR research design is exactly how much to involve co-researchers, particularly when doing data collection in the forms of interviews or surveys - how much should they know about the process, and how much should they know about what you intend to do with the data? MacDonald raises the issue that a lack of clarity surrounding what is being asked about may lead to generation of irrelevant data, and advocates for a reciprocal interview style, asking questions and generating new ones based on the response, with the utmost respect for the participant (MacDonald, 2012). She even goes as far as suggesting that all participants create the interview guide together, in order to make sure the interview guide is carefully formulated and tailored to generate useful data for the project (MacDonald, 2012).

Another thing to consider is the idea of doing a positive cost-benefit analysis on the research project itself. Since PAR is action-driven, it can also often have very real consequences for participants, who are often already people who are socially marginalized. As such, it can potentially leave them more marginalized and isolated than they were when the project started if an improper cost-benefit analysis has been made (Khanlou & Peter, 2005).

Another practical suggestion given by O’Brien is for the researcher to be as explicit as possible about the nature of the research project as well as their own biases and interests. Furthermore, he encourages researchers to ensure there is equal access to the information generated by the research process, and that this process is as transparent and easy to participate in as possible for all involved (O’Brien, 2001, if. MacDonald, 2012).

Practical Research Structure

The PAR component of this project will consist of two interviews, conducted with inspiration taken from Helle Nielsen and Ivar Lyhne’s ideas for incorporating participatory action research concepts into a more ‘traditional’ interview in the hermeneutic tradition (Nielsen & Lyhne, 2016).

What this means in practice is conducting a semi-structured interview in line with the hermeneutics-inspired style of authors like Brinkmann & Kvale (2008) but incorporating elements of action research inspired by the ideas of Nielsen & Lyhne. Before addressing these changes, however, it is helpful to look at exactly what this method entails and how it connects to PAR.

In broad strokes, a phenomenological semi-structured interview is a technique whereby a researcher through an interview attempts to “understand social phenomena from the perspective of its actors and describe the world as it is experienced by informants under the assumption that the ‘real world’ is the one that people perceive” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). This is achieved through a method whereby the researcher prepares a set of open questions which serve as a foundation for an interview that is then guided by the informant’s response to these open questions. In one method within the broader umbrella of the semi-structured interview, researcher is encouraged to act as a traveler, letting the process of the interview itself give space for reflection and the creation of new knowledge. This knowledge focuses on the ‘life-worlds’ of the research participants and the interviewer’s understanding of it, and the interview itself becomes a part of an interwoven dialogue with the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). This method and metaphorical journey fits well with the continuous process of reflection in autoethnography, and with a bit of adaptation, can fit into an action research framework as well.

Nielsen & Lyhne highlight several changes to the phenomenological interview that they have made in order to adopt more of an action research framework. Most of their article focuses on inspiration from utopian action research which is somewhat outside of the scope of a project which does not contain such an element. Instead, three points have been identified to move the interview more in an action research context and expand more on the co-construction of knowledge already extant in the phenomenological interview:

Starting with reflection. The process of constructing the interview begins by reviewing the interviewer's own interests in pursuing these research goals, where they align with the people being interviewed and, perhaps crucially, where they do not. The process involves examining the consequences of the interviewer's normativity, the risk of manipulating the situation in undesirable ways, etc.

Articulating the idea of a free space for reflection. Part of constructing the interviewing 'space' is to explain the interview's theme and encourage reflection on it, even utopian or aspirational reflection.

Validation through interview follow-up. In a traditional hermeneutic interview, the persons involved in the interviewing process are usually 'let go' after the process is concluded and the researchers begin working on analysis. In Nielsen & Lyhne's framework, the researcher is instead encouraged to reach out to the interviewees as the research process continues in order to engage in a dialogue about the themes identified by the researcher so they can confirm, deny or supplement these identified themes.

There are other themes identified within the action research interview. However, given that the text deals primarily with direct organizational change where this project instead engages with more abstract power structures, these would be quite difficult to implement directly. The themes presented here have been chosen for their compatibility with the structure of this thesis while retaining the action research elements.

Data

The data for this thesis came from a variety of sources. The first is a pair of interviews conducted with two members of a roleplaying game community who both have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, as well as supplemental conversations with them that occurred throughout the analysis process. Throughout the analysis, they will be referred to as CSI and AK. These two interviews were transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis pertaining to the questions of creativity and communication outlined in the theory section, and these perspectives were contrasted and discussed alongside an autoethnographic account.

The data pertaining to the autoethnographic section came from a research diary, the author’s personal memory, and a deep log of personal conversations dating back to 2015. The participants in these conversations gave their initial consent when the project started and were given access to the analysis as it was being made in order to ensure transparency and their continued willing participation.

Analysis

As best as possible, I have attempted to intertwine the autoethnographic account with the relevant themes presented by the interviews. This best reflects the nature of the analysis itself in which sometimes the answers provided by the participants caused an interesting reflection in the autoethnographic account, while other times the autoethnographic account spurred an otherwise-unremarkable section of the interviews to take on a new character. To that end, it begins with an autoethnographic account and from there attempts to weave in the participants as their testimonies become thematically relevant.

Rather than attempt to structure the autoethnographic account around these identified themes, however, the themes were identified and then later embedded into the format of the autoethnographic account. This does not mean that they were not identified but rather that there was a deliberate priority given to the immersion into the autoethnographic narrative. However, to guide the reader through identifying these themes, they are presented here before the main body of the account itself. The first theme is the processing around diagnoses itself and the different reactions people have to receiving them, from acceptance to rejection to the complex acceptance process itself. Tied in with this theme is one of addressing common stereotypes or misconception about people on the autism spectrum and contrasting them with the participants' lived experiences. The second theme concerns creative development, learning the structure and rules of tabletop RPG's, identifying the games who fit a particular, appealing creative style and translating personal limitations and preferences into a positive creative outcome. The third theme concerns the changing dynamics between individual creative acts and those of a collective and how the explicit presence of others influences the creative dynamic and fosters engagement. The fourth theme is the appeal of tabletop RPG's, looking at them as an outlet with certain restrictions that facilitate a certain kind of creativity, and as social microcosms that build their own rules which might make them more comfortable for people on the spectrum. It also examines what happens when encountering a new playgroup and the friction that may result. The sixth theme deals with communication, addressing some observations about the communication preferences of people on the spectrum and contrasting them with the experiences of the participants. Finally, the project looks at roleplaying games themselves as a creative tool and attempts to apply various theories of creative development to the tabletop gaming experience.

To the people who are reading and critiquing this, this is going to be a leap of faith. By its nature and disposition, autoethnography is different in both aesthetic and composition to traditional ethnographic study, and compared to the rest of this thesis, which has a more traditional academic description, this is going to stick out. For one thing, I'm talking about myself, in the first person, about my vulnerabilities and experiences, about my ups and downs, about discovering myself, my strengths and weaknesses.

But it is what I've chosen. I enjoy the challenge of it. It tickles my brain in a way that very few other methodologies within the broad spectrum of psychology does, and so, for better or worse, here you are with me on this journey. I hope it's a good one.

The second component of this analysis, which I will attempt to factor in when it is relevant, is a pair of interviews conducted with two people I encountered through the roleplaying game community. AK is assigned female at birth but identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns, while CSI is assigned male at birth and identifies as a man, using he/him pronouns. Both have a long history with roleplaying games and their testimonies will serve as a contrast to my own opinions and ideas, as well as an insight into the player perspective of things, since it's a perspective I have not really engaged with much.

Before we begin, however, I would like to properly introduce my two participants and their approaches to diagnosis and their perception of it, and then discuss my own narrative of autism:

AK (they/them), of the three of us, expressed the most ambivalence about their diagnosis, having received a wealth of other diagnoses that they believed could just as easily explain the behaviours attributed to an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. They received that diagnosis in their mid-20's after having been diagnosed with various disabilities ranging from learning disabilities like dysgraphia to other developmental disorders such as OCD and ADHD:

> "Okay, so here's the background. I know I'm neurodivergent. I've had the diagnosis of OCD, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, other learning disabilities including *dysgraphia,* which is kind of…basically a sibling to dyslexia. […] Everything you can attribute to autism is stuff that I can attribute and have attributed to other disorders that I've had and had a diagnosis for since I was much younger. […] So it's…the way I joke is that I'm a cousin, and then I'm a pedantic fuckwit anyway."

Since the interview took place, they've become more comfortable with the diagnosis through conversations with friends in the support community around people on the autism spectrum.

CSI (he/him) expressed a much more cavalier attitude towards the diagnosis, acknowledging it as a good explanation for some of his behaviour, but not considering it particularly debilitating:

> "I'm about the only person I know who was pretty prepared for the, ah…COVID shutdown thing [the interview was conducted in the summer of 2021] by way of 'I almost never leave the apartment anyway.' […]
> I don't personally consider it disabling, but I can certainly understand how it would be. In a sense I would say it is, but not in a way that I find particularly aggravating, I suppose."

While he admitted to having moments where he may have wanted to understand people on a level that is difficult due to his diagnosis, these feelings are usually transient. He identifies very strongly with a more logical perspective on society that's afforded by an autism spectrum diagnosis in a way that, in his own words, makes him feel "kind of smugly superior about some of the observations I've made that turn out to be completely accurate".

That leaves me as the awkward third wheel in all of this, and my story is very different. CSI was diagnosed at a very young age, while AK received the autism diagnosis as a perceived 'tertiary' diagnosis, the last in a long line of encounters with the psychiatric system. I got my diagnosis well into my twenties through an act of random happenstance. My dad happened to be seeing a therapist who had previously worked with autistic children. His conversations happened to raise some questions about my behaviour, and the therapist recognized some of these behaviours as possibly being indicative of autism. Later that day, he raised the question of whether I wanted to be tested, and I agreed. The psychologist assigned to assess me was initially sceptical based on my own self-reported behaviour, but my dad's testimony, building much more on my behaviour when I was younger, convinced them. Their assessment was that what had happened was that I had found a set of comfortable (if draining) coping mechanisms that had allowed me to pass as neurotypical until university life made it too difficult to maintain. When I sought out help after receiving my diagnosis, I remember a kind municipal social worker who looked at me and said "oh, let me guess. Excellent grades throughout your entire school life until you made it to university, now you're starting to get anxiety and missing exams?" I nodded in agreement. That was, in fact, my exact experience, albeit my experience had also been coloured by the death in the family before my formal diagnosis. He nodded. "Yep. We get a lot of those these days."

In that sense, I'm still finding my way through it all. I'm four years out from that diagnosis now, but I still haven't quite come to terms with what it means *to me* to be on the spectrum. I've tried to make peace with it as simply being "who I am," but that feels wrong. Hollow. Like I'm putting off asking the questions about what it means to me by simply accepting that it's "the way things are." This project is, to an extent, another link in a long chain of questions about who I am, both as a person who has become part of a social category that is frequently othered, but also as a person within that with my own agency and understanding of the world. Someone who can accept that I may share some limitations with others, particularly in the social domain, but refuses to be defined by assumptions imposed on me by others. I'm not a particularly mathematically inclined person, but I enjoy the challenge of writing, of engaging others through words, of finding the right ones to invoke the right emotion. I enjoy inviting others into my headspace and show off all the nonsense that's in here. When I sit down and write, truly write, I lose track of time and place, put off eating or sleeping, narrow down the world only to the words on a page in front of me. If Roth (2018) is to be believed, I'm hardly alone in this, but it is a recurring stereotype about people like me that we're all math nerds at heart. At least for my part, this has never been the case. Instead, I am fascinated by narratives – how they are constructed, reinforced and re-interpreted, what they say about the human condition, and how they allow us to imagine a different past, present and future through asking the questions of what kind of world we want to build. It's that same drive that led me to tabletop RPG's, too.

My very first encounter with roleplaying games was nearly a decade ago now. Me and a few friends I'd met over the internet got together over a voice call in those bygone days when Skype was still king of the online communications castle even for the young, and started up a game every Sunday evening. I was the GM. Once upon a time I had audio recordings of these sessions, but they're, sadly, all lost to the mists of time. It was fun, trying to coordinate four people from across the continental United States, me in Denmark, a Norwegian and a guy from Australia and try to make us all stick to the somewhat rigid schedule my parents had set up in order to allow me to stay up as late as the game required.

And the game wasn't great. We all had fun at the time, but we were all somewhere between 17 and 20, and most of us had never played a roleplaying game before, of course it wasn't very good. In a distributed creativity framework, we were just now, for the first time, starting to learn this particular form of creative expression, and while the audience in attendance may have just been me and my friends, we had at least a limited understanding of what this medium was *supposed* to be. The expectations were not living up to reality. And things were nagging at me at the time. I had seen other people run games before, and I didn't understand how I couldn't just do it the way they did. Why did every twist I tried to lay out hit with such a dull thud? Why were people not as interested in the characters I'd created to interact with them? Why did it seem like every challenge I set up was overcome in minutes? And why did people get upset when I deviated from the rules as written to try and do something different?

Obviously, I had a lot to learn. A person doesn't pick up an instrument and then go straight to playing a concert flawlessly. I was faced with a creative model that I was only just getting used to. I had a normative paradigm I was following, a set of standards for *how* to tell a roleplaying game story, but neither I nor the people I was playing with had quite reached the point where our experiments, fun as they were, had quite matched up with our aesthetic expectations. While our internal consensus at the time was that the game was fun enough to continue, in terms of continued participation in this creative art form, we all still had a lot to learn.

I am what the tabletop role-playing community affectionately calls the “forever GM.” There’s an expectation of skill and an intimidation factor associated with being a Game Master that scares a lot of people off from trying it before they’ve even had a go. There’s an expectation that the GM must be a supremely creative individual, able to come up with a story for four to six other people to play through, managing everything that the players interact with beyond their own characters. The reality is, honestly, you can pick it up pretty quickly and do alright. I certainly did. As with any other creative pursuit, it has its own discreet skillset, incorporating elements of both long-term planning and improvisation, as well as creating and enforcing the rules of a given space, both within the game itself and around the table. It’s a lot of responsibility, but I enjoy the challenge of it. I am never more comfortable than when I feel like I’m slightly out of my depth, a challenge hovering just outside of my reach, when I feel like I’m having to balance multiple things all at once. As a player, I often get listless and distracted, and while I enjoy playing a single character for a length of time, the ability to come up with new ones and insert them into a story is just a lot more interesting to me. It feels like channelling that listlessness and impatience that’s always been a part of me into something positive, into a space where those traits are good improvisational tools rather than lead weights around my being.

Roleplaying game communities distinguish between GM’s who are ‘plotters’ and ‘pantsers.’ Plotters are people who often plan out extensively beforehand, who do a lot of preparation and almost act like stage directors for the players, foreshadowing and setting up challenges early in order to have them pay off later. ‘Pantsers,’ from the English proverb about ‘writing on the seat of your pants’ are the opposite, preferring the spontaneous and in-the-moment feeling, trying to respond to player enthusiasm and engagement rather than an overall narrative, and tend to pay more attention to where players are trying to take the story. As with most things, these are not absolute categories, but a continuum on which various Game Masters might find themselves. I’m very much a pantser. I thrive on a minimum of prep time and being attentive to my players, and I tend to favor systems that makes pantsing easier by having rules that allow me to create challenges on-the-fly and give players more tools to affect the narrative.

I asked a question much like this to my participants, asking them what they liked about role-playing games or what about new systems seemed appealing to them. Their feelings about what makes an appealing roleplaying experience are markedly different from mine, but both fall within the general parameters of what's called "special interests" or could be interpreted as ways to appeal to an autistic mind. AK expressed an interest in more games with lots of attention to detail and meticulous research. As they put it in the beginning of the interview, "[AK], you put this in…You wrote an extremely smutty fiction and the second chapter is practically nothing but them doing laundry afterwards, and you put in detailed referenced information about how to treat silk." Likewise, the games they gravitate towards tend to be ones with a narrower scope, more concrete settings and defined utility rather than more 'universal' systems with more vaguely defined systems and settings with a deliberate lack of detail. And while the ability for the setting or narrative to appeal is a part of the core appeal, systems keep them talking. The exploration and unravelling a system, what sorts of behaviour it encourages, is a core part of the appeal to them. CSI expressed a current interest in story-driven games:

> "I found myself leaning much more towards narrative games, at least more recently, while options are somewhat limited due to social circumstances[…] Though, as I mentioned in my sort of…introduction to games, and for the longest time, the only ones I knew were basically the D&D [Dungeons and Dragons] type where it's very much 'the numbers are moving' and I can still enjoy that, you know, within its own context […] and it's just that I find the narrative ones have more versatility. They can do more things that I want to do and I'm often less stymied by, well, 'you don't have this skill or this ability.'"

Interestingly, neither participant expressed much difficulty with improvisation, which otherwise remains a discursive sticking point around autism, a pillar of the assumption of 'lacking' creativity expressed by Theory of Mind advocates (Baron-Cohen, 1997 if. Duffy & Dorner, 2011.) This echoes my own experience as well. I am violently allergic to routine, and it has taken several very patient and kind social workers a lot of time to help me even set up the beginnings of a weekly schedule. I am not an especially great organizer, and most of my planning for tabletop sessions involve doing a lot of “high level” planning, followed by working out the execution in an ongoing dialogue with my players. The pre-planned structure and common rules that affect both me as the GM and my players means that there’s already an existing frame on which I can hang those ideas, and a set of responses I can more-or-less plan for from my players. Saying that, they consistently find ways to surprise me when the game actually gets going with the ways in which they apply this framework. Likewise, AK highlighted improvisation as one of the core appeals of roleplaying games, both in the unpredictability of the dice and in the unpredictability and instant feedback afforded to them by other players.

> “Me: So moving back a little bit to the general subject of roleplaying games, what do you like about them?
> AK: Stories and the ability to collaborate and like they’re…I’ve gotten better about, like, moments of talking back and forth and figuring out really dumb details and taking inspiration from one place and borrowing and placing it in another […] and it adds a different dimension like things you can’t really predict because you can’t predict other peoples’ minds.”

I tell this story in part because it illustrates something important about the discourse surrounding autism spectrum disorders. While these games involve an element of routine in the sense that they are fixed points throughout my week (a point I will return to later), they are also predicated on my ability to improvise and adapt. I’m a poor planner, and so I compensate for that by selecting systems that allow me to improvise on the fly, and I have honed these skills through the game. I pride myself on bringing the same level of flexibility to my everyday life. It’s not a panacea for my everyday social difficulties, but it has nonetheless served to teach me a very valuable communicative tool. It contradicts the very linear assumption of autism as presented by Theory of Mind, of autistic people as a kind of empty vessels onto which neurotypical people (especially researchers) can project their own assumptions of difference (Duffy & Corner, 2011.)

However, while I talk up my tendency towards improvisation, I shouldn't neglect to mention the instances when I fail. During a recent session after which I'd felt particularly tired and nervous due to ongoing events beyond my control, my players ended up requesting I call the game early because of some issues they felt they were having. We discussed the fact that I was leaning too heavily on what they called my 'stock tropes' and becoming too heavily mired in exposition and setup while they felt their ability to meaningfully change what was going on in the scene had been reduced. That is ultimately on me – I had failed to account for the audience of more than myself and indulging too much in my own self-knowledge without accounting for the fact that, as the GM, I have a responsibility in terms of facilitating co-creation (Glaveneau, 2014). I wouldn't have a game without my players, but my players also want to be active agents in creating. They want to be part of the creative distribution of labour, and in this instance, I'd failed in my responsibility to provide that. I was relying too much on an existing fallback routine whose playbook they all knew too well, and which limited their range of creative expression.

Part of the solution, as it turned out, lay in another group I ran a game for. I will not go too in-depth with this group because I did not receive consent from the players to relay individual stories or experiences, but in crafting the story I ended up writing for them, I took bits and pieces of the same idea and applied it to the other group. While some of the basic premises remained the same, the outcomes of either game, and the way in which my groups interacted with variations of the same character, were nonetheless very different. After all, while both games may have had the same 'primary' storyteller, it did not contain the same creative *actors*. Different players with different characters will react differently to the same situation. What may on the surface seem like repetition became a way to highlight the difference between the two groups and generated two distinct narratives. I suppose in a classic analysis of autistic art, such as the ones referenced by Roth, this might have been seen as indicative of "repetition," a frequently occurring phrase when it comes to creative expression by people on the autism spectrum (Roth, 2018.) However, as she argues it, this has more to do with the way in which creativity is framed in a very relativist sense, with repetition often considered the opposite of 'true' creative expression. And since repetitive behaviour is already associated with people on the autism spectrum, it receives a disproportionate amount of focus in discussions of creative endeavours pursued by those on the spectrum (Roth, 2018). However, looking outside the lens of the creative individual, we can see how the creative output changed because of the participation of different actors. The same tools (down to the same game system), but with different players produced a completely different experience. The back-and-forth of improvisation and interaction, of having something to respond to rather than engaging with passive media such as books, films or theatre (even if elements of all three can be part of a roleplaying game session), is something both interview participants reported as being a major component of their enjoyment of roleplaying games as well.

During the process of writing this thesis, I ended up taking a hiatus from running the game that served as a data source for this project to focus on writing. This, as it turns out, would turn out to be a terrible mistake. Returning to the game after a long absence, I remember sitting down with everyone to play, and four hours later, I went to bed and had the best night of sleep I had in months. For the first time in months when I went to bed I felt totally emotionally and intellectually drained, like I had exhausted all my cognitive resources at once. There was an unexpected sense of fulfilment, not just in the emotional sense, but in something like a cognitive sense, an exhaustion born of having expended all my faculties. On rare occasions, I feel a sort of ‘click’ in my brain, like someone flicked an on-switch, and I just feel wired up. At that point, my focus narrows right down to what’s immediately in front of me and my otherwise flagging ability to concentrate on a single thing at any given time immediately *snaps* to attention, and before I know it, hours have flown by where I have managed to stay completely on point, responding to everyone, giving advice, looking up rules and making quick snap judgements to keep the pace going. And suddenly, I had much more of an appreciation for some of CSI’ words talking about roleplaying games as a cognitive exercise: “It’s like there’s two parts of my brain that both need to be doing something and some stuff like video games can and effectively engage both of those together, which is ideal.” Previously, I hadn’t given much thought to it in that sense, but maybe there is something to the combination of cognitive and interpersonal tasks that lends itself to that feeling of fulfilment. To my surprise, this has also been relatively understudied in studies of autism. While a study like Elizabeth Fein’s *Making Meaningful Worlds: Role-Playing Subcultures and the Autism Spectrum* provides a refreshing view of the social makeup of Live Action Roleplaying groups and the ways in which the semi-structure might provide a useful social ‘structure’ for people on the spectrum to learn through, it does not touch on this subject of emotional tiredness.

At the same time, perhaps I underestimated that element of routine. One of the things Fein touches on is the idea of the need for external structures to assist in establishing social ‘rules’ amongst people on the spectrum, allowing for more explicit cues for social interaction, and the necessity of establishing these structures to process complex social experiences (Fein, 2015). Or perhaps, as she argued, what I found so peaceful and meaningful about it, especially in my own little group of oddballs, was the set of cultural resources we assembled that allowed something that might otherwise be difficult and alienating to become a source of solidarity and mutual recognition rather an instinctive rejection (Fein, 2015). Fein makes the case that this very structure and rigidity, a sense of mutual understanding of the social “rules,” allows the live-action roleplaying experience to be meaningful for people on the autism spectrum. Many of these same points can be attributed to tabletop roleplaying games, albeit on a smaller and not always physical scale. The ability to communicate over text or via voice systems over the internet is a different variable, one that I asked the participants about.

What I found quite fascinating was the way in which both my interview subjects and myself broke with an otherwise very commonly observed communication habit of people on the spectrum. When Bagatell wrote about the internet as a preferred communication tool, she wrote about it in the context of text chat and non-verbal communication over long distances being a game-changer for people on the spectrum (Bagatell, 2010). While I don’t doubt her accounts, particularly for those people on the spectrum who are non-verbal, I find it interesting that my participants all had very different responses to that, and nobody said text-only was their preferred medium. AK liked the ‘buffer’ of being able to shut off their microphone in a game played over voice because they felt their social presence could sometimes become overbearing for other people:

> “[AK emulating a friend’s voice]: ‘Hey [AK] you’re being loud.’ I have a volume control issue, you may have not noticed it while I’m doing this because I can vaguely modulate, but I get very excited and then I get loud. […] Um, I’ve discussed it with people and I’ve also told them outright, ‘you can mute me if needed or one-on-one with the GM – if I get one of those sneezing fits that we started off with I actually have to try my best to have the withdrawal to mute myself.”

CSI preferred games played around a physical space because it allowed him to observe others and more closely read their social cues and this would generally speed the game up:

> “I suppose I might go with voice [as my preferred method] just because I like getting things done. […]
> And text moves very slowly, as we’ve said, so in voice I find I can just keep that rolling.[…]
> The thing about text taking a long time is that very little is actually done, like, a relatively brief conversation can take up to half an hour or more and, well, we only have so much time to actually *keep playing.*”

For myself, the most experience I’ve ever had running a game in person was running one for a group of university friends who had never played a game before, and I found it to be one of the more awkward situations in which I’ve ever run a game. This was just after I’d been formally diagnosed, and I knew these people okay, but I’d known most of them for barely six months. I found the experience to be very different and awkward compared to the games I’d been running with friends I’d known longer. While we were playing the same game, the experiential distinction between an in-person game with people I’d known for six months and still felt like I barely knew versus a game played over a voice call that had been part of my weekly routine for five years at that point was stark. I found myself falling into familiar habits that must have seemed quite strange to my participants – while I would answer any questions they had about the game system in Danish, whenever I stepped into a character, I switched to speaking English almost instinctively. It added another layer of abstraction between my voice and the voice of the character, another tool I'd learned to assist in putting myself in the shoes of the character I was voicing.

It may simply be that this was a consequence of lacking a firmly rooted sense of community. One of the things Fein discusses in the context of her study of LARPs is that what draws out the communicative and creative abilities of the "Journeyfolk" campers is a strong sense of community, of common understanding and a network of interpersonal relationships (Fein, 2015). With one group, I had seven years of interpersonal experience to draw on. With the other, I had six months, and this was the first time we sat down around a gaming table together. While on the surface, I had a great many things in common with the latter, all of us being psychology students at the same point in our lives, I felt much more secure in my self-expression with my established group in which, to quote one of my friends: "nobody is neurotypical and nobody is okay."

Perhaps it was simply that I did not have quite as firm a grasp of my audience. While the most interesting aspect of Glaveneau's work on the creative *audience* mostly expands the word's definition. In this framework, the audience includes not only people who directly receive your work based on pre-existing cultural interpretations of creative work, but the audience is also represented by internalized beliefs about 'the other' as the audience even before a creative work has been shown. Framing roleplaying as an act of co-creation in line with distributed creativity theory might help offer some interesting insights (Glaveneau, 2014). Using co-creation as a framework, my familiarity with my existing group means that even if some of the circumstances of the creative action may change, like a change of game system or a player choosing to portray a different character with different capabilities, I nonetheless have seven years' worth of dialogue, understanding of the division of creative labour and appreciation to draw on. That does not mean I am never surprised by what my players choose to do, or how to act, simply that I am much more comfortable in a creative environment with which I am familiar. We may all have consumed different media, like the very popular phenomenon of 'Actual Play' series, in which people film themselves playing tabletop roleplaying games. Ultimately, however, our standards are negotiated as much between each other as they are in an ongoing dialogue with external expectations of what a roleplaying game is. With a newer group, I am navigating between my very calcified understandings of what makes a good roleplaying game, the expectations my new players are bringing in from other peoples' tabletop stories, recorded or personal, and attempting to find a new 'middle ground' from which we can engage in that creative action.

One particularly noteworthy detail I noticed in my conversation with CSI was the notion of there being a certain amount of "bleeding" between himself and the character that can occur in different situations. While I didn't, at the time, ask him to elaborate on this, it forms an interesting comparison with a common joke in the tabletop gaming space around the idea that characters are often exaggerated versions of the player, or dealing with issues that are particular to that player. While I'm not going to address the idea of tabletop gaming groups or creative outlets as a therapeutic, or at least emotionally cathartic, space before the discussion, it does nicely illustrate Vygotsky's concept of dissociation as an element of the creative process (Vygotsky, 2004). The character becomes a segment of something that is already known, taken out of context, and reframed for a different creative environment. Elements of the segment are exaggerated or downplayed to fit with the needs of the story being told. Separate from the person in the moment, it becomes an element of a separate construct from the self and recontextualized for a new circumstance.

Here, in Vygotsky's theory, we might also have an answer to why both I and the two subjects of my interview seem to prefer games with a strong narrative theme. While we all expressed ambivalence towards very systems-heavy games and games with an emphasis on storytelling but without a specific narrative 'hook', we all expressed a preference towards games with a strong thematic throughline. In other words, a game that offered a mechanical way to "be everything" was generally not as well-liked as one that offered a way to play a specific theme, such as focusing on a particular genre like supernatural crime dramas, fairytales, or similar. While there's an element of self-selection involved given where I recruited my two informants, I think a Vygotskyan lens might offer another potential explanation, particularly the mediation between tools and symbols (Vygotsky, 1978). Looking at the roleplaying game as a tool meant to facilitate and enable particular creative outcomes, we can see how the intent of their design may lead to different outcomes. Math, or "crunchy"-heavy systems, as they are often known in the parlance of tabletop games, often rely heavily on immersion in the system and finding the most ‘optimal’ way to play a given character, with the expression often being based more on the mechanical problems the character can solve. Meanwhile, a system with total freedom in character creation, setting and atmosphere offers very little in terms of structure or direction through which to develop a character, and too few explicit cues about what these characters might look like. The onus is thus on the group to create a common thematic throughline. Meanwhile, games with a strong rooting in a particular setting or mood will guide the process of character creation more organically, often telegraph what kinds of characters will best fit with their tone and offer helpful guidelines for self-expression. If we assume that the games-as-systems can affect a kind of zone of proximal development of their own, they may in fact be tools for facilitating this kind of creative expression (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the aversion to the very loose narrative games, rather than being rooted in a fundamental incuriosity or inability to engage with freeform creative expression may simply reflect a lack of interest in engaging with something that offers no interesting creative constraint (Glaveneau, 2014). Some of this could no doubt be overcome with a group that is aware of each other’s quirks and interest in particular characters or settings, but this is a much more difficult proposition with strangers who do not yet have an established rapport. As with Fein’s findings, the medium itself providing a ‘guard rail’ for particular social actions seems to embolden people on the spectrum to engage more deeply with social interaction with others compared to the social interaction expected of someone in their everyday life.

Finally, returning to the subject of the zone of proximal development, I wanted to look at the responses to the question of whether the participants felt a meaningful difference in their creative approach in a group vs. doing other types of creative work. Knowing that AK also does creative writing on their own, I asked if they felt a difference between the two, and they responded that they both felt that it was nice to have other people from whom they could get immediate feedback, but also that it was important for them to feel like they were collaborating with the story being told and not attempting to derail the stories of others:

> “Me: Do you feel like there’s a difference in your creative process? Whenever you’re like – yeah you mentioned in the beginning – you also write just by

> yourself. Is there a difference in kind of…your creative process when you know there are other people present who are engaging with the same story as you are?
> AK: Yeah, because I will often ask and try to get permission to do something so that I don’t end up completely ruining someone’s experience because I don’t think ahead or I end up killing their antagonists that they wanted to engage with[…]
> Me: Okay, so part of it is asking for permission, but is there also a difference in, like, how you approach things or like…do you feel like it’s more interesting to be kind of engaging with the creative process when you know there are people here to respond.
> AK: Yeah, because you can kind of get that immediate feedback on what you’re doing.”

At the same time, it helped keep them engaged to know that there was a double uncertainty factor: from the dice and the reactions of other players. CSI likewise emphasized the latter part, bringing up a game he participated in with a hyper-empathic player. In this game, he tried to avoid playing a character who might end up with a graphic injury as that would be very uncomfortable for that player. At the same time, he compared the process of writing alone vs. writing with others like such:

> “You know when things are purely in my head, it’s a bit like a laboratory environment. Most things are fairly controlled, but whereas with other people it’s more like field testing, where new situations arise and I need to consider ‘what would the character’s reaction to this be?’ ‘What questions does this open that I haven’t answered yet?’ And that can be very interesting in terms of character development.”

Once again, other players act as both creative constraints, but also as immediate responders to artistic output, which is something desirable. If we take one of the common theories of autism spectrum disorder, that it represents a difficulty in considering the other in the abstract, then perhaps having the other there, in a very concrete sense, can compensate for a weaker ability to consider a neurotypical conception of the creative self-as-other, as defined by Glaveneau (2014). The other participants, whether they are neurotypical or not, may act as participants in such a zone of proximal development, acting as creative assistants for each other in order to achieve stronger creative outcomes.

Wrapping up this section, I have attempted to highlight examples of how, despite the narratives of theory of mind advocates, people on the autism spectrum do exhibit creative spontaneity and improvisation. Furthermore, I have pointed a light on the potential benefits of roleplaying games from a distributed creativity perspective and the means by which they can create a social environment that allows people on the spectrum to communicate more openly than in their everyday lives. Finally, I have speculated a little on the nature of what types of creative expression different game systems might facilitate.

Discussion

This discussion will contain a series of components. The first is the introduction of another perspective on roleplaying games in a therapeutic context and the need to look at tabletop RPGs as systems that can be modified for particular outcomes. Following this will be a discussion of gamification, its nature, ethical challenges and relevance to the project. After this will be a discussion of the idea of the transformative roleplaying game as another potential solution to the question of designing bespoke systems for development of human skills. Finally, some limitations of the data in the analysis itself are presented and the knowledge generated by the analysis assessed.

Tabletop RPG’s as Emotional Resiliency Factor.

This first contribution from another researcher in the form of a PhD dissertation. In it, a survey was created to attempt to determine whether or not tabletop roleplaying games, purely as a recreational activity, are a factor in an individual’s emotional resiliency factor (Taylor, 2018).

In this dissertation, *Tabletop Roleplaying Games as Emotional Resiliency Factor,* Taylor tested the hypothesis that the act of engaging with tabletop roleplaying games ‘constituted a factor of emotional resiliency’ (Taylor, 2018). Conducting both a correlation and factor analysis, he ultimately determined that engagement with tabletop RPGs did not constitute a factor of emotional resiliency, nor did the study demonstrate that playing tabletop RPGs protected against emotional distress. In the discussion of his findings, he concludes that tabletop roleplaying games are not a factor in the emotional resiliency of those who play them, and thus do not in and of themselves have a therapeutic effect. However, he also argues this does not preclude bespoke, more hand-crafted games designed to improve emotional resiliency factor from providing different results (Taylor, 2018).

Taylor’s findings are useful for contextualizing this project in two ways. The first is that it provides very systematic evidence that tabletop RPGs, like many other recreational activities, are not ‘silver bullets.’ They cannot be treated as an intervention tool without looking more systematically at their effects to determine if they are fit for purpose. The second is that it produces a framework for examining other developmental goals. It may not be a great fit for creativity, given that, as previously discussed in this project, creativity is a distributed concept that exists within a fundamentally social framework and it is thus very difficult to quantify development in individuals. However, it may prove useful for other measurements, such as could include the transferability of the social competence components described by Fein (2015) and others to other spheres of daily life.

Gamification

In light of Taylor’s findings that, at the very least, playing tabletop RPGs seems to have very little impact on emotional resilience when engaged with purely for recreational purposes, it is useful to look at one of the means by which researchers have attempted to use the *structure* of games in order to achieve certain ends. Gamification refers to the practice of “using game design elements in non-game contexts (Sanchez, Young & Jouneau-Sion, 2017). Often, this means using elements of game play, particularly those of video games, in everyday context such as work or education. Examples include badges, achievement points and competition structures. Many popular fitness apps, education systems, appointment trackers and to-do list apps use gamification as part of their appeal (Szabo, 2018). Broadly, many of these gamification systems purport to improve memory, learning, engagement with work or education and, by extension, productivity (Szabo, 2018). Techniques associated with gamification have been used by Google since 2013 (Schwabel, 2013. if Tulloch & Randall-Moon, 2018) and even the Swedish National Society for Road Safety at one point experimented with the gamification space through a randomized lottery paying out a portion of fines extracted from speeding drivers (Sorrel, 2010 if. Tulloch & Randall-Moon, 2018).

Gamification, then, might provide a solution to the presented problem. If tabletop RPGs are going to become a force for greater good, then they simply need to be designed with elements in mind that put creativity or communication skills forward, to more explicitly reward creative or prosocial behaviour that can be quantified in some kind of educational outcome.

However, gamification also has its fair share of critics. Some interrogate its inherent assumptions, arguing that it represents the way in which neoliberalism values education and exemplifies neoliberal logic of educational reforms, bringing the market logic of the neoliberal world into the classroom (Tulloch & Randall-Moon, 2018). In setting things up with measurable outcomes in the form of productivity and rote memorization and driving it with a logic of individual achievement through competition, it presents a neoliberal pedagogical paradigm that can be used as an excuse to replace existing education systems who fail to meet the same metrics. While more relevant to video games than tabletop roleplaying games, many of these gamified systems have also remained prohibitively expensive, remaining in the hands of institutions with the spare cash to fund bespoke games for their own employee training (Tulloch & Randall-Moon, 2018). Furthermore, concerns are raised about the surveillance aspect of gamified learning, how the act of engaging with the system provides data points that may enable further exploitation of the individuals engaged with it, in line with Gilles Deleuze’s notion of “control societies,” where data is collected on everyday citizens simply for the purpose of collecting data whether they succeed or fail (Deleuze, 1992 if. Tulloch & Randall-Moon, 2018). Gamification then becomes a ‘friendly’ surveillance apparatus, one that promises to be a teacher and a helper even as it provides metrics for educators or employers to judge you on. In this framework, it is designed to provide meaningless data for employers and schools to squeeze added productivity out of their employees or students, offering no meaningful training in anything but the conformity to existing expectations, with very little room for nuance, improvisation, or failure, generating only additional anxiety and scrutiny when faced with the latter.

There have been attempts to find a middle ground between the proponents of gamification and its detractors, most notably those who argue that gamified systems themselves are value-neutral, and that the outcome is ultimately determined by a multiplicity of factors that must be considered from an ethics perspective to ensure that gamified systems are not used to cause harm (Wan Kim & Werbach, 2016). The outcomes can cause physical and psychological harm, and concerns like those cannot be dismissed, but these occur in the disconnect between provider and players and can take on different forms. They also often emerge in a disconnect between the desired outcomes. While a system designed to help employees stay fit may be implemented in a bid to improve their health, it can also be used to identify those with conditions that health insurance may have to cover in the future and could be terminated to save costs for the company (Wan Kim & Webachk, 2016). In light of these conversations, particularly around the potential for exploitation, gamification does not seem like a very good tool to implement. People on the autism spectrum are already part of a socially vulnerable demographic, and given these criticisms, gamification seems too likely to become a tool for abuse. Tabletop RPGs are, as has hopefully been demonstrated by now, about collaboration and self-expression in close contact with others. The competitive and stats-driven nature of gamification, on top of the risk of data being used for exploitative purposes, raises some questions over its efficacy in this context.

But if these more explicitly gamified systems of competition, points-ladders and independent verification might not be the right tool for developing the skills this project has been looking at, what other answers might present themselves?

Daniau and the Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games

The findings of Stéphane Daniau in his 2016 article *The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games: From Play Skills to Human Skills* are interesting in the way they contextualize some of this project's aims while also providing an interesting comment to Taylor's findings about purely recreational roleplaying games. In the article, Daniau distinguishes between forms of tabletop RPGs. There are recreational tabletop RPGs as well as Edu-RPGs, what he calls 'a structured collaborative effort focused on specific educational goals,' and the so called *transformative role-playing game* (TF-RPG). This last type of game attempts to elevate the roleplaying game beyond a recreational activity, but remains more focused on "the play experience rather than predefined educational goals" (Daniau, 2016).

Daniau's findings, using a combination of a literature review, action research conducted with several TF-RPG groups and a data cross-analysis, are used to outline four 'levels of reality' with which the participant experiences a TF-RPG: the level of the *character,* the level of the *player*, the level of the *person,* and the level of the *human being,* which he associates with four dimensions of learning: *knowing, doing, being* and *relating* (Daniau, 2016). The level of the *character* allows a player to absorb knowledge specific to the setting of the game and its circumstances, its geography, history and culture. The level of the *player* focuses on the ability to engage with the RPG's properties. Through this level of engagement, the player develops skills relating to reading, presenting, analysis and decision-making. The level of the *person* involves the development of soft skills such as teamwork, small-group dynamics, role taking, critical thinking and collaborative creation. Finally, the level of the *human being* involves the development of self-actualization in a classic Maslowian sense, as well as "maturation through awareness, emancipation, empowerment, and linkedness" (Daniau, 2016). Daniau, then, in contrast, looks more directly at games as a system and the ways in which they can be changed to meet a particular end.

Many of the ideas presented in the article are intriguing. Focusing on the development 'in the moment' and encouraging reflexivity among participants puts it much closer to the aims of this project, presents a welcome alternative to completely systematized learning and provides a useful framework in low barrier to entry games with less complicated rules systems. Identifying the different modes of learning and focusing on strengthening each one makes the process more explicit and allows for individual research into each granular aspect, which may provide answers to some of the questions sought by Taylor as well.

It also highlights the importance of intersubjectivity and understanding the development of tabletop RPG groups as a collective rather than individual process (Daniau, 2016). Finally, it touches on some of the same notions of community-building, seeing each tabletop group as a community in the making that can persist outside the context of the game, which may become a relevant object of study in terms of its reception among people on the autism spectrum. What the paper does not touch on is the question of transferability of these skills into different contexts and how to approach the knowledge-gathering aspect of the learning quartet. In other words, how does one manage to make the information relevant to the game also relevant to a different context?

Data Analysis, Shortcomings, and Potential for Expansion

This, finally, leads us to a discussion of the data presented in this project. This section will begin by addressing some of the limitations of the collected data, and then conclude with a discussion of the general applicability of the data to other contexts and potential ways to use this project in future projects with similar themes.

The first of these limitations in the data goes back to the point about both the diversity of expression among people on the autism spectrum. Both of the people interviewed for this thesis could communicate verbally in their everyday lives without experiencing distress as a result, something which is not universal among people on the spectrum. The difference between these groups causes a certain amount of internal friction in autistic communities (Bagatell, 2010). The recruitment of verbal autists was necessary to conduct the interview, but it is an important discussion in light of both participants' observations on communication forms and how they preferred to format their own games. Non-verbal people on the autism spectrum would likely find it significantly more comfortable to communicate over text than over voice. There may need to be additional study done to find if this makes a difference in terms of the creative response in these mediums. In addition, both participants and the author have diagnoses that fall within the broader category of what is called high-functioning autism and may previously have been termed Asperger syndrome. Thus, their experiences are thus not necessarily representative of all people on the spectrum. Both participants' preference for narrative games may not be more broadly transferable since both were recruited from a forum for a narrative-focused roleplaying game, which shapes the findings of this project. A broader survey of participants might be helpful in terms of determining if this is a general find or one that's more specific to this participant group.

In terms of assessing the methodology itself, the interview structure allowed for a great deal more access to the personal lives of the participants than may otherwise have been available. Having an established familiarity with the researcher and continued trust through an ongoing dialogue helped them be more comfortable sharing aspects of their personal lives and communicate in a way more organic to their everyday lives. Research involving people on the spectrum can be difficult due to the premium placed on familiarity, both of which were fostered by the way PAR encourages ongoing dialogue and horizontal communication. The autoethnographic approach, likewise, allowed for a more organic representation of a person on the autism spectrum, letting the writing output itself allow for a kind of exploration of the creative inclinations of people on the spectrum as an argument against the notion of creative limitations.

How, then, might this thesis be used in a context like the studies of Taylor and Daniau above? Firstly, it does seem, to some extent, to support some of the same findings as the latter, namely that tabletop roleplaying games can indeed be a tool for creative development. What it offers as a supplement is an experiential account of what that process might look like and some of the ways a tabletop RPG can foster a deeper engagement with the creative process. It also contrasts the methodology of both, studying tabletop RPG’s purely in a recreational rather than transformative or educational context and attempting to uncover the organic ways in which they can foster creativity. It forms another useful point of discussion in the ongoing debate over the capacity for creative thinking among people on the autism spectrum, attempting to go a little beyond the realm of developing creative *individuals* to instead embrace a more systemic way of thinking about the creative process.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that tabletop roleplaying games as a recreational activity can play a role in forwarding creative expression among people on the autism spectrum in a number of ways, from providing a closed environment with more accessible mutual social rules to facilitate communication, to acting as a medium for creative action. In addition, the collaborative and improvisational structure lends itself to a different level of engagement and these findings further problematize the notion of people on the autism spectrum being inherently uncomfortable with the idea of improvisation. Some cautious attempts are made to extrapolate potential reasons for this deeper engagement, and whether the explicit presence of others helps compensate for a possible weaker ability to imagine the experiences of a neurotypical ‘other.’ Comparisons with other findings shed further light on the inability of tabletop RPG’s on their own to serve as a therapeutic tool, critiqued gamification as a tool for the aims presented in this project, and highlighted one possible way to analyze tabletop RPG’s in an action research context.

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Dedications

To my mother, who may not be with us in body but whom I'm sure is looking on with pride.
Rest in peace.
To my dad and my brother, whose moral strength remains immeasurable.
To Poodle, Doc, Keiran, Three, Kos and rik. Here's to eight more years of our nonsense.
To my supervisor and her fathomless well of patience as I struggled with all this.
To Midi, who helped carry me across the finish line.
I owe all of you more than I could ever express in words.