

Using Group Role-Playing Games with Gifted Children and Adolescents: A Psychosocial  
Intervention Model

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### Abstract

Gifted children develop asynchronously, often advanced for their age cognitively, but at or between their chronological and mental ages socially and emotionally (Robinson, 2008). In order to help gifted children and adolescents develop and practice social and emotional self-regulation skills, we investigated the use of an Adlerian play therapy approach during pen-and-paper role-playing games. Additionally, we used Goffman's (1961, 1974) social role identification and distance to encourage participants to experiment with new identities. Herein, we propose a psychosocial model of interactions during role-playing games based on Goffman's theory and Adlerian play therapy techniques, and suggest that role-playing games are an effective way of intervening with gifted children and adolescents to improve their intra- and interpersonal skills. We specifically targeted intrapersonal skills of exercising creativity, becoming self-aware, and setting individual goals by raising participants' awareness of their privately logical reasons for making decisions and their levels of social interest. We also targeted their needs and means of seeking significance in the group to promote collaboration and interaction skills with other gifted peers through role analysis, embracement, and distancing. We report results from a case study and conclude that role-playing games deserve more attention, both from researchers and clinical practitioners, because they encourage change while improving young clients' social and emotional development.

*Keywords:* role-playing games, group counseling, Adlerian play therapy, gifted children and adolescents, Goffman

## Using Group Role-Playing Games with Gifted Children and Adolescents: A Psychosocial Intervention Model

“The game is a distorted (but recognizable) mirror of reality, just as reality is a distorted mirror of fantasy” (Fine, 1983, p. 153) Role-playing games offer players, and especially older children and adolescents, opportunities to work on their self-concept and to further develop their personal identity and awareness of social rules and functions. Gifted children and adolescents are no exception, and have special emotional and social needs that, once met, would improve their overall self-concept and identity development. The use of semi-directive play therapy techniques during a group role-playing intervention that specifically targets and addresses those needs may be helpful for furthering these goals therapeutically.

Trained play therapists are well-positioned to provide the support necessary for gifted children and adolescents to improve their social and emotional functioning and their interaction skills with others within the role-playing game setting and to help those clients reflect on how to transfer these skills outside of the role-playing game (RPG) setting. Herein, we explore the specific social and emotional needs of gifted children and adolescents, the importance of fantasy and play to social and emotional development, the social opportunities that RPGs provide for fostering intra- and interpersonal growth and development from Goffman's (1961, 1974) sociological perspective, and how Adlerian play therapy (Kottman, 2001, 2011) can be used to help gifted adolescents in a group RPG setting. We illustrate this framework with a description of our intervention and a case analysis.

### **Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children and Adolescents**

Gallagher (2008) asserted that gifted students may have more positive physical, social, and personality factors than people in the general population. Notwithstanding, Neihart, Reis,

Robinson, and Moon (2002) found that although gifted children are at least as well-adjusted as their “normal” peers, certain contexts of being gifted may still present social and emotional developmental risks, notably, developing asynchronously. Such uneven development entails gifted children being cognitively advanced in one or more domains for their chronological age, but exhibiting social skills and emotional regulation capabilities corresponding to or between their chronological age and their mental age (Robinson, 2008). Being intellectually advanced, yet having average capabilities to cope with such advancements could be exasperating for gifted individuals because, as Robinson (2008) argued, “their social environments are poorly calibrated to their interests, language, and personal maturity” (p. 34), and “the brighter the child is, the more acute the mismatch and its ensuing consequences” (p. 35).

Gifted children and adolescents often have fears and concerns that reach far beyond those of their same-age peers; they think and worry about global issues and conflicts, injustice and fairness, and may be preoccupied with death. They are likely to be more sensitive than their peers to social comparison due to their high cognitive abilities and the disconnect they feel in relation to their peers (Robinson, 2008). Many researchers have asserted that all gifted persons (children, adolescents, and adults) demonstrate high levels of emotional overexcitability (OE), or a heightened sense of feelings and awareness (Levy & Plucker, 2003). Whether this emotional OE is deemed (dys)functional depends on the multiple cultural contexts in which the person lives and is viewed (Levy & Plucker, 2003). Therefore, Levy and Plucker (2003) advocated for counselors to better understand the sub-culture of giftedness and its implications.

Levy and Plucker (2003) argued that gifted children may face complex intra- and interpersonal challenges, such as depression, perfectionism, multipotentiality, eccentricity, and deviant behaviors, and they argued that gifted individuals “are likely to experience the world

differently than other individuals” (p. 242). Cornell (2004) cited poor self-concept as a primary concern for gifted students that are unpopular among their gifted peers and suggested that interventions target the social arena. Kaiser and Berndt (2004) found that gifted adolescents’ self-reported degree of loneliness varied as a function of anger, depression, and stressful life changes. In their study, stress, helplessness, social introversion, and low self-esteem significantly contributed to depressive symptoms, and they recommended that educators pay special attention to the emotional problems that some gifted students exhibit.

Education should not only encompass cognitive and intellectual stimulation, but also gifted students’ social and emotional needs to overcome the introversion, OE (sensitivity), and perfectionism that stems from internal and external factors in order to “correct the mismatch” (Robinson, 2008, p. 37) between gifted children’s asynchronous development and environmental fit. Dramatic arts stimulate gifted children’s foci on higher-level thinking, feeling, and creativity (Van Tassel-Baska, Buckingham, & Baska, 2009). We argue that play may fulfill this function, as well.

### **Using Play to Meet Children and Adolescents’ Developmental Needs**

Gaussot (2002) recognized play as an activity integrating both interactive and social dimensions. Children experiment in the social world through their interactions with others in conjunction with their values systems. Play is a metaphor of true social interaction because children endorse different roles, understand them, and integrate them into their concepts of *self*. Children organize their experiences through play in order to feel secure and in control of their lives, and to manage their unmanageable realities through symbolic representation (Landreth, 2012). Children and adolescents, alike, may freely express feelings and attitudes through play that may be too threatening for them to express directly, thereby distancing themselves from

painful experiences (Landreth, 2012; Milgrom, 2005). Through the medium of play, the “total child” is present, as aspects of his or her physical, mental, and emotional self may be expressed creatively and through social interaction (Landreth, 2012).

Social interaction is important in adolescence, as well, because adolescents self-construct their identities through taking various social roles. This is especially salient because identification shifts from parents to peers during adolescence (Cohen, 2001). Because the primary tasks of adolescence include individuation, separation, and preparation for adulthood, some adolescents may be reticent to engage in play activities in therapy (Milgrom, 2005). However, Milgrom (2005) argued that play is a good means of assessing how adolescents function in the world and employ their social skills, exert power and control issues, and express their own feelings of self-esteem. Allison, von Wahlde, Shockley, and Gabbard (2006) considered the impact of RPGs particularly important during adolescence, since the evolution of a coherent sense of self is a fundamental maturational task.

Play therapists may address all aspects of the child or adolescent’s behavior, not just the verbal ones (Landreth, 2012), and we feel this is especially true in role-playing games. In RPGs, the play therapist can respond not only to the client, but also to the actions and decisions taken by the client’s character. The character represents an extension of the person within the fantasy of the game (Fine, 1983). The opportunity to address both verbal and nonverbal behaviors with children and adolescents who can more fully engage on cognitive levels with the fantasy of RPGs is an advantage.

RPGs offer adolescents the opportunity to engage in play while saving face, because the use of toys, per se, is not involved (Enfield, 2007). Furthermore, they can immerse themselves in the metaphor and practice new skills without being perceived by others as immature (Enfield,

2007). Because gifted children and adolescents have cognitive strengths and also tend to be very creative, using fantasy in play provides a safe distance from their real-world challenges while simultaneously offering opportunities to address these challenges metaphorically.

### **The Importance of Fantasy in Play and in RPGs**

The aspect of fantasy in play allows children to experiment with "competencies and understandings beyond the constraints of their intellect and experience" (Rubin, 2007, p. 5). Additionally, fantasy may be a great source of promoting self-understanding, growth, and healing in therapy, as well as reducing anxiety (Rubin, 2007). As Rubin (2007) eloquently described:

[Fantasy is] the metaphoric place where problems of the past and present meet the possibilities of the future, in conflicts both minor and epic. It is the place in which children and adults escape from but also make sense of their worlds by creating and then living their stories – their own personal mythologies. (p. 3-4)

The scenes played in RPGs are imaginary, which allows a lot of freedom in the interpretation of one's self. This kind of gaming can facilitate the identity exploration process in adolescents in a non-threatening way (Blackmon, 1994), because the role-playing process is very similar in RPGs and everyday life (Fine, 1983). Additionally, the forces restraining people in their roles are weaker in RPGs than in everyday life. Goffman (1961) emphasized the importance of fun in such interventions, stating that engrossing activities may become more real for participants. Thus, using RPGs in a counseling/play therapy intervention may be a means of observing and noting the client's current competences and development and of furthering this development in specific ways. For gifted children and adolescents, RPGs may provide

appropriate contexts for directly working on emotion regulation and social skill building to meet their developmental needs.

### **The Structure of Role-Playing Games**

According to Hitchens and Drachen (2009), there is not a widely-accepted definition used to describe role-playing games. This is partially due to the various forms this activity has taken over the years. Briefly, a RPG is a leisure activity where participants assume the roles of imaginary characters and act in a make-believe world. RPGs are also known as fantasy role-play gaming, pen-and-paper role-playing games (PnP RPGs) or tabletop role-playing games, and they were derived from war games created in the late 1970s. Participants of a PnP RPG do not physically enact the character they play. They use verbal interactions to describe the actions of their character, as they play within the same room, as opposed to interacting “anonymously” online. Although Hitchens and Drachen (2009) offered an interesting general discussion concerning the definition of role-playing games, they disregarded an important specificity of PnP RPGs: The story of the game is co-constructed through the verbal interactions of the participants. Such games promote collaboration instead of competition, unlike many Western board games (Rick & Hsi, 2006).

PnP RPGs are role-playing games that bring people together in the same place to take on the role of fictional characters that freely interact in an imaginary environment (Rosselet, 2009; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2010). Co-construction of the game between game master and players is accomplished through the actions, reactions, and interactions of all involved parties (Fine, 1983), including the counselor/play therapist, in our case (Bersier, 2006). The game master (who is not the counselor) arranges the environment and acts as a referee, structuring rules and guidelines; chance adventures are usually represented by dice. Players exercise the freedom to act, react, and

take into account the actions of others through dialogue more so than through a psychodrama-type or theatrical incarnation of the roles, which is further facilitated in the imaginary environment. The “end” of the game is never pre-set and success is measured by the success of the group (Lizé, 2004).

There are several key elements germane to RPGs that will help the reader unfamiliar with conducting them to better understand how RPGs are structured and how they may be used in counseling. First and foremost, a *common set of rules* is established by the *game master* (or referee), who leads the action and describes the *imaginary universe* in which *players* will interact (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2006). These rules provide a structure for using limit-setting techniques by the game master or by the counselor, if the particular “infraction” speaks to the therapeutic goals of intervention (Rosselet, 2009). The perceived realism and logic that the game master and players use allows them to make sense of their imaginary story through a *common representation*, or what Hitchens and Drachen (2009) referred to as *narrative backing*. This common representation provides a context and social milieu for the role-playing experience from which players’ questions and explanations provide means of exploring communication skills (Rosselet, 2009; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2010).

Players create and play the role of a *character*, deciding how they would like to represent their character’s physical and mental attributes, traits, skills, and powers, as well as their advantages and disadvantages (Bersier, 2006; Enfield, 2007; Hitchens & Drachen, 2009). Their characters serve as transitional objects between their person and the space of the game, helping them to establish a sense of self-representation and control (Krout Tabin, 2005) within the scenario. The game master and counselor ask more experienced players to play out both the

strengths and weaknesses of their characters during the game to work on specific social or emotional competences (Bersier, 2006; Rosselet, 2009).

Players record this information on a *character sheet* and track their character's evolution by recording pertinent *statistics* throughout the game. *Rule books*, *dice*, and *figurines* are used to represent complex game situations and to help concretize the *scenario*, which is the storyline or set of adventures experienced by players (Tychsen et al., 2006) that provides them with the motivation to set and achieve group and individual goals over the course of the experience. These group and individual goals are periodically revisited during the game when the game master and/or counselor see an opportune moment to stimulate insight in a particular player or in the group, as a whole (Bersier, 2006; Rosselet, 2009).

### **Social Roles, Role Distance, and Frame Analysis**

According to Fine (1983), RPGs are universes of discourse, since the imaginary world and characters are built through verbal interactions. This co-construction of an imaginary story makes RPGs a dynamic social system. PnP RPGs have many similarities with social processes that take place in everyday interactions and contribute to people's social construction of reality (Fine, 1983). Several key concepts from Goffman's (1961, 1974) sociological perspective illustrate how RPGs can be used therapeutically with gifted adolescents, notably, the embracement of social roles, role distance, and frame analysis.

Goffman (1961) asserted that playing a social role is very similar to portraying an imaginary character. When playing a social role, one engages in activities according to the social demands linked to his or her position. To perform that role, the individual has to act according to his or her representation of the role (Goffman, 1961). Likewise, the PnP RPG player has to play

his or her character in a way that seems most appropriate, given the character's profile, the scenario, and the parameters of the fantasy universe.

People usually play one social role at a time unconsciously. But because RPGs "can be described, explained, and understood as an activity that exists in the unique interstices between [the imaginary character], player, and person" (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 337), each individual will be involved in multiple systems and hence engaged in multiple roles (Goffman, 1961). Involvement in multiple roles within complex and overlapping systems impels people to create a common framework and to delineate these different roles.

### **Role Embrace<sup>m</sup>nt, Distance, and Identity in Everyday Life**

*Embrace<sup>m</sup>nt* occurs when one is totally involved in his or her role. "To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it" (Goffman, 1961, p. 106). In everyday life, a person may fully embody his or her role as a parent by leaving work (temporarily or permanently) in order to care for children. The change in how the person identifies as a parent more than as a worker would confirm his or her embracement of the role.

Conversely, Goffman (1961) developed the concept of *role distance* to explain the freedom the individual may take with regard to the role s/he is playing. In doing so, s/he refuses total identification with the role and acceptation of the meanings attached by the social system to that role. Thus, role distance is the individual's ability to adopt an intermediary position, between identification with and opposition to the socially established role definition, and to be ready to react to social pressure to modify one's behavior in order to find balance again. In the example above, it may mean a mother taking her full maternity leave, then returning to work on a full or part-time basis in order to balance both roles as mother and worker.

The individual, who plays diverse roles defined by the social system, still conceives of himself or herself as a unique and independent entity or, put differently, a self. Goffman (1974) noted that personal freedom can be found in the undefined margins left between different social role definitions. The self starts to exist for itself when the individual accesses a larger and larger range of roles, until one reaches a diversified social life. To achieve this, the individual has to accept playing roles according to the socially established role definition attributed to him or her and s/he has to take some distance from the roles s/he is playing. The person has to balance his or her role embracement and role distance (see Figure 1), on penalty of social sanctions if the role is played too freely.

During a RPG session, however, the situation becomes more complex because the simultaneous management of the roles of player and character demands further clarifications. Indeed, the other participants in the game (players and referee) need to differentiate which events or actions need to be interpreted in the light of which role. Goffman's (1974) explanations of frame analysis help to understand these dynamics.

### **Goffman's Frame Analysis and RPGs**

Goffman (1974) developed frame analysis, which is the process through which people build a common understanding of events, thus, sharing a common frame of reference. In order to make sense of everyday life events, people develop a socially built and shared understanding, called a primary framework. By interpreting a particular event through one's schemata and responding in turn, a primary framework makes otherwise meaningless aspects meaningful and coherent (Goffman, 1974), a phenomenon that RPGs render visible.

Games are based in the primary framework, but another layer of meaning is added. Players, through their interactions, contribute to building a common interpretation of events,

which is called the secondary framework (Fine, 1983). This happens in almost any everyday life situation, but in the case of role-playing gaming a third layer is added as the player manipulates his or her character in the imaginary universe (Fine, 1983). However, players are still seated together in the same room, thus the “blurred margins” of the shared game space allow for real-world influence to occur in the gaming situation (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2006, p. 268).

Goffman (1974) explained how one can understand and differentiate these different layers of meaning through what he termed “keying” (p. 44). *Keying* is the process by which one transforms a preconceived meaning from a primary framework into a new understanding of the act or event. *Keying* reveals this new meaning and is implicit in everyday life. However, in RPGs it must be rendered explicit through verbal or nonverbal communication for a new common understanding to be reached. To achieve this, players use cues found in the actions taken or in the words spoken. Usually, this is easily done, but sometimes ambiguities may appear and clarifications become necessary (see Figure 2). For example, a player may say, “I’m hungry.” The other participants might be wondering if the person sitting around the table or the imaginary character is hungry, until – the key is revealed – the person goes to get some food. Sometimes, RPGs players even joke about these confusions.

This is when the social construction of the game becomes most important and visible: The RPG participant constantly juggles his or her multiple selves within the game context, making framing dynamics important to understanding the framework in question (Fine, 1983). When the meaning of an event is ambiguous, the question of the framework of reference becomes primordial because different frameworks can vary greatly from one another (Goffman, 1974). Players juggling these multiple roles must let their co-players know to which role they are

referring and, consequentially, to which framework to refer. This allows others to make sense of the players' actions. Reciprocally, participants have to pay attention to understand the events in light of the appropriate framework. Frame shifting occurs generally quickly and easily, but sometimes, it needs to be expressed literally. Counselors can be helpful in clarifying these frames, in guiding the dialogue towards individual or group insights, and in addressing participants' social and emotional needs and competences within the context of the game.

### **RPGs in Counseling Interventions**

Generally speaking, RPGs create a space where participants may experiment with various emotional states and behaviors, through the role of imaginary characters they create. Moreover, the participant may adjust his or her level of involvement in the role to fit his or her psychological needs through identification or role distance processes (Goffman, 1974). The fact that players explore and live different identities through RPGs allows them to build and assert their *self*, which can be done without risks for themselves or others. Finally, their inclusion in a group of players is usually the opportunity for individuals to create and maintain positive social interactions with peers (Fine, 1983; Lizé, 2004). This may help individuals develop and practice certain social skills, notably collaboration and communication skills (Enfield, 2007).

The counselor's intervention in RPGs fosters change, familiarizes clients with new ways of regulating their emotions and social interactions, and facilitates the transfer of these skills to real-world settings through the safety of rules and limit setting and the clinical investigation of what happens in the game. Many authors have suggested and illustrated how RPGs could be used either directly (e.g., Bersier, 2006; Enfield, 2007; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2010) or indirectly (e.g., Allison et al., 2006; Blackmon, 1994; Raghuraman, 2000) in counseling. *Indirect* interventions involve using the content of the game during the sessions to help the client, even though the

games are practiced outside the counseling setting and often not under counselor supervision.

Using the self-reported analogies of the game with clients could provide rich context for processing clients' emotions and social interactions in session. However, herein we concentrate on how the counselor/play therapist can intervene directly during the game in order to facilitate social and emotional skill building that transfers outside of counseling sessions.

*Direct* interventions include situations where the game is played during group sessions under the supervision of a counselor. After a thorough review of the literature, Enfield (2007) provided the only English-speaking report of the use of RPGs during psychotherapy sessions under the supervision of a therapist. Bersier (2006) also described the use of RPGs in a counseling intervention. We should note that the RPG counseling interventions we describe are based on the assumption that the players play their characters in a way corresponding, at least a little, to their general behavioral tendencies. This is consistent with Krout Tabin's (2005) assertion that the use of transitional objects in play therapy helps provide continuity and control over one's self-representation. Indeed, even if "the game is purely fantasy, players must act, interact, and react by imagining how they would handle the same circumstances if they were their fantasy persona and the situations were genuine" (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 349).

Enfield (2007) described several advantages of using RPGs in counseling: 1) the use of metaphor may evoke real-world challenges clients currently face; 2) the opportunity to engage in play without using toys, *per se*, removes potential embarrassment for older children and adolescents in front of their peers; 3) the incarnation of a hero is attractive, and exploring a character's strengths and issues provides opportunities for the client to work on his or her own; and 4) the opportunity to play with an alternative identity can be liberating and formative. The incarnation of a "hero" (as the main character of a fiction) in RPGs provides challenges,

obstacles, and opportunities for players to work on several important intra- and interpersonal competences, such as self-esteem, self-regulation, interpersonal communication, and boundaries (Enfield, 2007).

### **Our RPG Intervention**

This intervention (Bersier, 2006) employed a *Dungeons and Dragons*-like format very similar to that described in Enfield's (2007) RPG intervention. The purpose of these weekend RPG workshops was to promote social interaction and provide emotional psychoeducation and training to gifted children, preadolescents, and adolescents, regardless of whether they were currently or previously had been clients in a counseling setting. Therefore, the only true criterion for inclusion in the weekend RPG groups was an IQ score of 130 or more, as measured on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV (WISC-IV-France; Wechsler, 2005), which is one criterion for giftedness.

Participants often learned of the RPG workshops through their involvement in or referral to counseling under a trained psychologist familiar with the treatment of psychological and social issues in gifted children and adolescents; some were siblings of former participants. Those referred for counseling often were seen for behavioral issues at school or emotional and/or social adjustment issues; however, being a regular client was not a criterion for inclusion in the weekends. The RPG weekends were not advertised to the general public. The first author worked in this psychologist's private practice and served as the intervention counselor in RPG workshops for two years.

RPG weekend workshops were held once a semester, though two or three groups were organized according to the number of participants enrolled. Groups were limited to six to twelve participants of 8 to 16 years of age. Members were screened in based on personal interview and

developmental appropriateness (Jacobs, Masson, Harvill, & Schimmel, 2012; Smead, 1995) as well as RPG experience. Older children (8 to 10 years old) were often grouped with preadolescents (11 to 13 years old) if those preadolescents had few to no role playing experiences. Preadolescents (12 to 13 years old) with role playing experience and/or those who were more socially sophisticated were grouped with adolescents (14 to 16 years old). During the screening process several weeks prior to the RPG weekend, the counselor met individually with members to develop their character profiles, set individual counseling goals to work on during the game, and finalize RPG group composition.

Participants arrived for the weekend workshop on Friday night, where they met other players, the game master, and counselor; finalized their characters; received an orientation to the weekend and rules of the game; and ate and played together before retiring to dormitories. On Saturday, game play of about 2-hour sessions was interspersed with processing times, mealtimes, and breaks. On Sunday, game play terminated after breakfast with the resolution of the scenario; participants completed self-evaluations based on their goals and interactions, and gave oral and written feedback about what they learned and what they thought about the weekend (e.g., organization, game play, etc.) to both the referee and the counselor before departing at noon.

The counselor kept observation notes for each player during the game, and used processing times after play to check in with players and give individual and group feedback pertaining to players' social interactions and collaboration skills, leadership roles and opportunities, communication styles, problem-solving skills, action choices and solutions offered during play, and the management of their role-playing skills (as player and character; see Table 1). This feedback was carefully aligned to players' individual and group goals, and discussions directed players to think of their interactions during and outside of game play. A final written

report, summarizing participants' strengths and weaknesses during the weekend was issued after completion of the weekend and mailed to participants and their parents.

The use of Goffman's (1961, 1974) concepts of social roles and frames and Adlerian play therapy theory and techniques were indispensable in structuring the observations made and the oral and written feedback given to participants based on their individual and group goals. Important events were recorded during the game, and the counselor reviewed forms for each participant at least four times during the weekend. Specific Adlerian concepts, such as encouragement, social interest, and belonging were highlighted in these observations. Individuals' private logic and mistaken goals of behavior were noted on the side with the context in which they were observed.

### **Using Adlerian Play Therapy Theory and Techniques in RPGs**

Kottman (2011) described Adlerian play therapy as one of several play therapy approaches that may incorporate varying levels of directivity progressively from non-directive to more directive as the therapeutic relationship develops. Because of this flexibility in the approach, along with several concepts key to the foundation of Adlerian theory and play therapy, Adlerian play therapy was the best choice for meeting the emotional and social goals of the participants who received this intervention. To do so, understanding and taking the individual's *private logic* (Eckstein & Kern, 2002) into account was primordial for planning and implementing counseling strategies.

Private logic is the subjective worldview unique to each individual through which the person "filters" his or her reality (Eckstein & Kern, 2002, p. 8). Adler (1956) posited that people were socially embedded, meaning that people seek belonging and significance in their respective familial or cultural groups. Modern Adlerians further described how all behavior is purposeful

and goal-directed (e.g., Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997; Dreikurs, 1964). When people are encouraged, they seek belonging and significance through social-interested actions, which is a mark of good mental health (Adler, 1956). When people are discouraged, knowing how to seek belonging and significance in socially appropriate ways may be confusing, so they may use one of four *mistaken goals* to do so: attention (to keep others occupied with them), power (to exert control over a situation), revenge (to hurt others before they are hurt, or to hurt back when hurt first), or displaying inadequacy (to give up trying to belong when the effort seems futile so others will leave them alone; Dinkmeyer et al., 1997; Dreikurs, 1964).

In RPGs, a person's private logic and mistaken goals may be revealed through the players' and his or her characters' words and actions, and may provide the counselor with ideas about which aspects of social or emotional development to target when intervening. For developing emotional skills, the mistaken goal(s) underlying the players' behaviors are critical to identify and reveal, bringing awareness to the person and to the group so that changes can be made. Furthermore, the importance of being courageous (Adler, 1956), of taking risks, and having the "courage to be imperfect" (Dreikurs, 1964, p. 38) are essential considerations for emotional development. For developing individual and group social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and collaboration, the concepts of belonging and social interest (Adler, 1956) are employed to better understand and elucidate player decisions and interactions in the RPG problem-solving context.

*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, more specifically translated from German as "social interest" or community feeling, is a defining characteristic of Adler's individual psychology (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). According to Eckstein and Kern (2002), social interest encompasses belonging, cooperation, and responsibility towards others. Adler emphasized the counselor's role in

bolstering clients' social interest in order to become more cooperative members of society (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). Consequently, the notions of belonging, cooperation, and taking actions for the good of the group, sometimes at a personal sacrifice, were all important social skills promoted and encouraged during game play among group members in this intervention.

Enfield (2007) highlighted that super hero play through RPGs may reveal issues of "power, control, popularity, and perceived importance" (p. 230). Adlerian play therapists can explore these issues and foster mature interactions between players by highlighting moments when characters exhibit social interest in others and the four "crucial Cs": *connecting* with others, demonstrating *capabilities*, believing they *count* and gaining significance through appropriate means, and exhibiting the *courage* to take risks and try new things (Lew & Bettner, 1996; Kottman, 2001, 2011). Limit setting may be useful in promoting awareness of infringed social or emotional boundaries and to further explore the purpose and impact of these infringements (Kottman, 2001) on other players' or their characters' feelings.

To do this, play therapists can use tracking skills to "notice" statements made in character in order to encourage players' awareness of their characters' strengths and areas for improvement, thereby indirectly commenting on the players' own. By "wondering" about a character's intentions or how an individual or group decision will play out, counselors may either non-directively invite or semi-directively suggest that players experiment with their characters' advantages or disadvantages to affect the scenario. Choosing which wonderings to express involves the counselor using his or her clinical judgment to carefully invite new dialogue or steer the current dialogue or role-play in therapeutic directions.

Play therapists can further promote social and emotional skill development during intermediary processing times after a game sequence has been played when it is easier to

“separate the deed from the doer” (Dreikurs, 1964, p. 38). By remarking how players have used their characters’ identities to try new things and to discuss how they felt about the outcomes, counselors can encourage healthy risk-taking behaviors and highlight the positive consequences that may ensue. Where players feel uncomfortable, counselors can allay and reify their concerns into concrete suggestions for improving players’ social interactions during and outside of the game context, as we did with Matthew over the course of several RPG weekend interventions.

### The Case of Matthew

Matthew (pseudonym), a long-term client of the psychologist mentioned above, was 15 years old at the time of his fourth RPG weekend. Matthew tested with an IQ within the gifted range, though several inconsistencies in his profile indicated autistic or psychotic tendencies. He was being treated at his parents’ request for symptoms resulting from low self-esteem, behavior problems at school, bullying, and academic failure (retained one year). As a “*provocative victim*, who [is] characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns” (Olweus, 1993, p. 33, italics in original), Matthew often had difficulty adequately regulating his emotions and appropriately measuring his responses to others. He reacted in extremes, either completely shutting down or making impulsive and irrational decisions inappropriate for the situations he faced. In Adlerian terms, Matthew had privately logical reasons for how he perceived others’ behaviors, which were at the root of his extreme reactions. These patterns played out during RPG weekends, allowing the counselor multiple opportunities to identify his mistaken goals of behavior and to work with Matthew on the emotional and social issues underlying his responses.

In his first RPG weekend, Matthew was one of twelve players. He role-played very little throughout the scenario. However, when he played, he displayed low social interest and

frequently disturbed the rhythm of the game by disproportionately reacting to events. Matthew showed a complete embracement of his character's role; he played his character as he, himself, would react. He also changed decisions without a specific goal in mind in ways that confused other players, the referee, and the counselor. For example, in entering a tavern with the group, Matthew wanted to start a fight with patrons there and kill them all. This decision went against the group's common understanding of their purpose in the tavern, which was to lie low and gather information discretely before moving on with their mission. After the counselor reality-tested the feasibility of this plan, Matthew realized that this was unrealistic and against the goals of the adventure. He put out the fire burning in the chimney, instead, without explaining his actions.

The lack of social interest he displayed affected Matthew's sense of belonging in the group and among the other members. In seeing the extreme behaviors he exhibited, other players began suggesting outlandish actions to Matthew to see if he would actually carry through with them, which he did. This illustrated the blurred margins (Tychsen et al., 2006) between the game and reality, because the ideas discussed around the table were carried out by characters in the game. Again, Matthew played his character as he would have reacted and relived his provocative victim tendencies during the game: He was caught between his desire to be accepted by others in making poor decisions under their influences and their eventual rejection of and verbal aggression toward Matthew when he refused to accept the consequences of these decisions once results turned negative. He was trying to belong and to fit in, but his actions via his character pointed towards mistaken goals of revenge when he engaged in game play (e.g., "I will get you before you can get me) and inadequacy in the fact that he did not frequently engage in play (e.g., "I do not believe I can belong, so there is no use in trying"). These patterns provided limit-setting

opportunities and teachable moments for understanding and building communication, collaboration, and social skills for Matthew and the other players.

During his second RPG workshop, Matthew was one of five players, and none of the players from his first RPG weekend were present. Matthew exhibited progress in his decisions and interactions with others. Matthew's engagement was much more socially interested during this weekend RPG. He acted much more constructively in the scenario, sought others' attention less, and more happily played his character without inconveniencing others during the game. He successfully juggled between embracing his character and showing some role distance, since he felt concerned by the adventure and still could think of his character as something separate from his *self*. He also managed his multiple roles as player and mentor to others and successfully balanced this with role distancing to help younger players communicate with the group. He either directly relayed their ideas more effectively or asked others to listen to them more attentively.

Through this workshop, Matthew became more aware of the interaction pattern that he exhibited during this and the first RPG weekend. Matthew displayed the mistaken goal of inadequacy when he was confused about something or did not understand what had happened in a situation. He had a tendency to disrupt the flow of the action by doing the first thing that came to mind, which was rarely appropriate and created confusion in the primary framework of the game. In this scenario, the group was on a mission to collect information about secret passages to get a nearby capital city to alert their authorities of an imminent war. They were in a local inn when guards entered the lobby. The other players remained cool and collected, pretending to do nothing in particular in order not to raise the guards' suspicions. Matthew, however, said his

character panicked and began screaming. At this moment, he showed strong role embracement and made his character react as Matthew would have.

In order to remain consistent with the actions interjected by Matthew's character, the game master then was obligated to make the guards intervene and forcefully subdue Matthew's character on the ground to further investigate. Seeing that he posed no real threat, the guards released him and continued with their mission, arresting the innkeeper before leaving the scene. During the processing time that followed this sequence, Matthew explained that he was "a little lost" because he had not been paying enough attention to understand what the others were doing.

He did not juggle multiple roles well, embracing only the desires of his character and not distancing enough from his role to further the group's goals. He admitted acting this way to try to belong to the group and be included in the action. The counselor encouraged him to use productive help-seeking behaviors in order to feel more included in the group and discussed what that might look like. During self-evaluations, Matthew reported learning that it was worthwhile to seek help from others when he did not understand and that taking proper distance from his role to juggle multiple perspectives could help him in future interactions with others. This was a point that we emphasized with him during processing sessions and game times, when appropriate.

During his third RPG workshop, Matthew was one of nine players, regrouped with four other participants from his second RPG weekend. He continued to evolve in his positive and constructive interactions with others, displaying greater social interest than before and relying less on his mistaken goals of revenge and inadequacy. This proved fruitful in his being accepted by the group. Matthew managed multiple roles of player, character, and mentor to others well, with behaviors that were much more stable and rational. He did what he could to help other players and their characters during the scenario. The counselor encouraged Matthew to continue

to seek help for himself when he did not understand things or how to intervene when role-playing dangerous situations, when his mistaken goal of revenge was likely to be triggered.

In his fourth RPG weekend, Matthew was one of nine players, grouped with three others that had attended previous RPG workshops with him. During this scenario, however, Matthew held back quite a bit and was visibly less comfortable this time than during the previous two workshops. He helped other players, but was more distracted, which diminished the quality of his role-play. Although he seemed to belong less during this weekend RPG, the higher social interest he had exhibited in the previous two weekend RPGs remained intact. Matthew made big efforts to act appropriately in the game and to support the group. He took more distance with his role as character, and was more into *doing* for others and the group as a player than *being* in character and more fully embracing the role play. He did not achieve the same balance in his role distance as he had in previous RPG weekends.

We hypothesized that the investments he made to interact more in the group may have thwarted his own investment in his character's actions. This was the exact opposite from his actions during his first RPG weekend. Therefore, finding the balance between different roles (person, player, character, mentor, friend, etc.) is usually difficult and has to be re-evaluated from moment to moment during the game and in the long term to transfer this skill outside of the game.

After these four RPG weekend workshops and the ongoing counseling support he received from his psychologist, Matthew was doing better in school and in his interactions with his family. Although he was reacting less extremely with his peers, there was still progress for him to make in his social interactions with classmates, where he had not yet found a true sense of belonging. The work started during the RPG interventions continued in individual sessions.

## Discussion

Van Tassel-Baska and colleagues (2009) argued that the arts may “serve as a bridge to deeper levels of cognition” and that the subjective experience of engaging in the arts may “free a gifted child’s mind to connect with herself [*sic*] and those around her [*sic*] in more meaningful ways” (p. 229). RPGs are a fun and efficient way to motivate children and adolescents to involve themselves in the treatment setting. RPGs may offer interesting possibilities for the development of the self, such as safe identity exploration, emotional expression and regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal skill building.

Firstly, the incarnation of different identities allows players to explore and integrate various aspects of themselves and experience negative consequences in a secure environment. Thus, they may build their identity and individuality little by little, which is of particular significance during late childhood and adolescence. In the case of Matthew, we were able to see this evolution across four RPG weekends, where he learned to progressively temper his reactions to scenarios and engage more appropriately with others. During the second and third RPG weekends, especially, Matthew interacted more within the scenarios and with the other group members. He found ways to connect with others and further the groups’ goals through his ability to juggle multiple roles as player and mentor to others by explaining individuals’ needs and ideas more efficiently to everyone.

Secondly, the game provides a place where players may express their pent up emotions, again, in a safe way for themselves and for others (Blackmon, 1994; Enfield, 2007; Fine, 1983; Lizé, 2004). In fact, the role distance between players and their characters allows individuals to express or act out emotions that would be too threatening if expressed directly. Matthew’s pre-emptive revenge-seeking tendencies to hurt or kill innocents within the scenario during the first

RPG weekend were a prime example. His private logic and mistaken revenge goal to “get them” before they could “get” him or his group could have been interpreted as a protective instinct in a virtuous light. However, Matthew’s character’s actions raised unnecessary suspicions of his group in the tavern, thereby endangering the other characters more than helping them. Acting this out in the game carried no real-life physical consequences for anyone involved, but allowed Matthew to see that his revenge goal was maladaptive in promoting friendship or camaraderie with others and ineffective for advancing the adventure in a positive direction. Matthew became conscious of these aspects of his private logic and balanced his role distance between what the group needed from him as a player with what he wanted to do as a character. He was better able to choose more socially-interested actions in future RPG weekend scenarios.

Thirdly, through imaginary universes and characters, RPGs give individuals the opportunity to consider various aspects of the self, from the darkest to the most virtuous, and to see these aspects as external objects. When the counselor identifies and reveals the mistaken goal(s) a character and – by extension, a player – exhibits, the participant can consciously decide how to change his or her strategy to belong or find significance more appropriately within the group. For Matthew, this process occurred across several RPG weekends as he realized that some of his actions ran contrary to the groups’ goals. The margins were blurred between how others perceived Matthew’s character’s actions and the real-life consequences others levied against Matthew as a player in ostracizing and criticizing him for making those character decisions. These group dynamics provided growth opportunities for Matthew to find more constructive ways of belonging and for the group to learn to accept another player’s mistaken goal(s) as a means of seeking significance within the group.

Finally, RPGs allow players to develop interpersonal competences. Since the story of the game is co-constructed through verbal interactions, players have to communicate with each other and with the referee. Moreover, players are brought to cooperate as a group to overcome the difficulties of the scenario (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Zagal, Rick, & Hsi, 2006). Matthew became aware of the negative interaction patterns that resulted from his misunderstanding certain game sequences. He was able to recognize these patterns and take corrective steps. Matthew better managed his role distance to avoid acting inappropriately and juggled his multiple roles as player, mentor, and character to seek significance by being helpful to others and to the group.

Matthew made significant progress across the weekend RPGs. He set and achieved individual goals to better control his emotions, understand and reason through his privately logical impulses to do something – anything – to find significance within the group, and to more appropriately interact with others through his character. As Enfield (2007) noted, he was able to “experiment with and master elements of an alternative identity – the person they would like to become” (p. 230) and transfer some of those newly acquired skills outside of the treatment setting. After the RPG interventions, Matthew had fewer behavioral and academic problems at school and began to interact more appropriately with his peers. Enfield (2007) reported similar positive results from parents and teachers of his participants, noting improved social functioning and communication skills and decreased impulsivity. Enfield remarked that, over time, participants engaged with one another more and cooperated more to confront challenges and monsters in their scenario, as our participants also did.

We advocate for using RPGs in counseling and play therapy intervention settings, in particular with clients who are reluctant to work directly on their problems with the therapist. Rubin (2007) highlighted the benefit of tension reduction that comes with resolving problems

through fantasy and imaginal play. Fantasy might, then, be an alternative medium for accessing and investigating frail or sensitive aspects of the self and in helping clients develop personal strengths. Moreover, the structure given by the rules of the game provides a frame for interaction, as well as growth and limit-setting opportunities for the play therapist that help clients transfer newly-learned skills outside of the treatment setting.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Goffman's social roles, embracement and distancing, along with Adlerian concepts used in a semi-directive RPG/play therapy approach, may help gifted children and adolescents develop communication, collaboration, and emotional regulation skills and further help them to concretize their personal identities. Case studies have demonstrated the power of RPG interventions, and further research and practice is encouraged. Although this research was exploratory in nature, future research could utilize longitudinal means of tracking individuals' progress through an RPG/play-therapy intervention. For instance, differences in quantitative measures of self-esteem, affect (e.g., anxiety or depression), or behavior could be evaluated over time using repeated-measures ANOVA (for larger samples) or using latent group analysis in structural equation modeling (for smaller samples). Other research could qualitatively study the effects of different aspects of the RPG process. More specific qualitative and quantitative outcome data would serve to further support the effectiveness of such interventions in the future.

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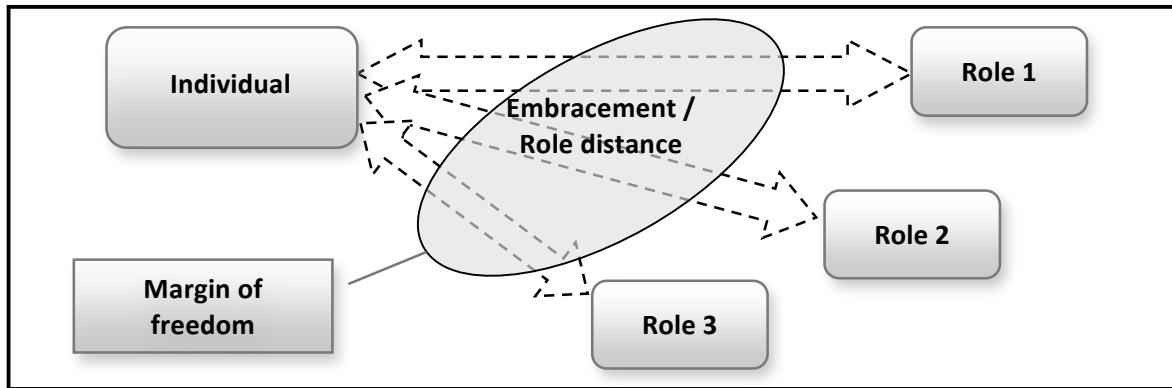
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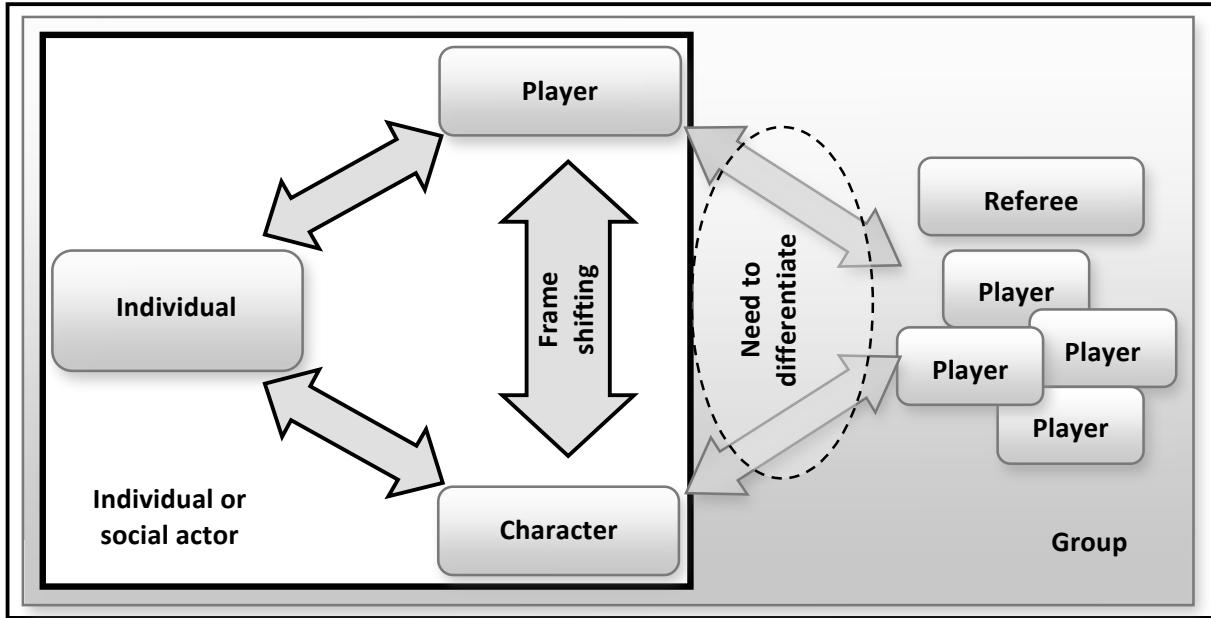
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*Figure 1.* Role-taking through role embracement and distance. The balance between accepting multiple roles and distancing from them creates a margin of freedom that allows individuals to construct their identities.



*Figure 2.* Representation of the interactions between the individual and his or her roles as player and character in a RPG group. Contrary to the individual's daily role-taking behavior, in a RPG s/he has to assume multiple roles simultaneously. This requires changing frames of reference. RPG, as a collective activity, renders these changes visible, and other players must be aware of and correctly attribute players' or characters' actions to their corresponding roles.

*Table 1.* Observation form used during game sessions. Behaviors were evaluated from “inadequate/poor” when the considered behavior was not regularly observed, “adequate, suitable” when the behavior was positive and “excessive/overdone” when it was too frequently observed.

Social skills (group leadership and collaboration)	
Participation	Speaks frequently and explains ideas regularly
	Is active in the game
Task orientation	Reminds others of group objectives
	Is concerned by group efficiency
	Intervenes in other players' actions to help the other(s) succeed
Relationship orientation	Intervenes in other players' relationships to mediate conflict or to <i>connect</i> with others
	Explains things to other players (rules, character sheet elements, etc.)
	Reassures or comforts other players, promotes belonging, displays social interest
Awareness of and sensitivity to others	Observes actions and situations of other players
	Acts according to other players' actions and situations to further group goals (social interest)
Instrumental coordination	Awareness of his or her character strengths and weaknesses
	Acts according to his or her character abilities
Communication skills	
General	Uses gestures to help understanding
	Speaks loudly (enough)
	Chooses suitable sentences
Cooperative	Explains own opinion or situation
	Listens actively to others opinions (how others <i>count</i> )
	Negotiates with players who have a different opinion
	Expresses positive feelings towards others, displays social interest towards others
	Says, “Yes” to other players' requests
Assertive	Asks questions, asks someone for something to connect with others and appropriately gain significance within the group
	Says, “No” to other players' requests
	Expresses negative feelings towards others, lacks social interest
Problems solving abilities	
Problem representation	Clarifies the situation (asks the referee questions, for example)

Goal	Shows understanding of the goal to achieve (reminds others, for example)
Use of past experience	Identifies useful and necessary resources Suggests hypotheses, plans actions, demonstrates willingness to take risks
Solution seeking	Suggests many solutions, demonstrates capabilities
Solution selection	Is able to choose a solution Explains his or her choice
Role-taking management	
Identification Embracement	Uses the pronoun "I" when speaking about the character
	Mimics character actions
	Speaks as the character
	Experiences the emotions of the character (or because of what happens to the character)
	Understands and uses the character's attitudes and goals
Distance Role distance	Is able to consider the character as something separated from himself or herself; is able to take some distance from his or her character's actions and is not personally affected by what happens to the character
	Is able to do something logical for the character, despite costs to the player or person (for example endanger or sacrifice the character)