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## Dual Consciousness: What Psychology and Counseling Theories Can Teach and Learn Regarding Identity and the Role-Playing Game Experience

Elektra Diakolambrianou

*Institution for Counseling and Psychological Studies, [elektra.dkl@gmail.com](mailto:elektra.dkl@gmail.com)*

Sarah Lynne Bowman

*Uppsala Universitet, [sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se](mailto:sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se)*

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### Cover Page Footnote

This theoretical framework is part of a larger ethnographic research project on the therapeutic and educational potential of role-playing games. This project was approved by the Austin Community College Institutional Research Review Committee in June 2020 under the supervision of Dr. Jean Lauer. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of Austin Community College. Sarah would like to thank from the bottom of her heart all of her participants in this study, who have helped her refine her thoughts on these topics by offering their own expertise. Special thanks also to Josefin Westborg, Doris C. Rusch, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, and Kaya Toft Thejls from the Transformative Play Initiative research group, as well as Joshua Juvrud for his insightful feedback on an early draft and the anonymous reviewers of this paper.

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Elektra Diakolambrianou  
*Institution for Counseling and Psychological Studies*  
[elektra.dkl@gmail.com](mailto:elektra.dkl@gmail.com)

Sarah Lynne Bowman  
*Uppsala Universitet*  
[sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se](mailto:sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se)  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1277-8787>

## Resumen

Muchos psicólogos, terapeutas y educadores han enfatizado la práctica del juego, especialmente con la interpretación de roles, como parte del aprendizaje y el crecimiento terapéutico. Este artículo entretiene una plétora de teorías de la psicología, la consejería y los estudios de juegos de rol en un esfuerzo por comprender la naturaleza de la interpretación de roles, su relación con la identidad y su potencial transformador. Desafiando la noción de que la identidad es un monolito fijo y estable, este artículo sintetiza cuatro enfoques generales para teorizar la naturaleza de la identidad extraídos de diversas teorías: la identidad como una construcción social, la identidad narrativa, la identidad como psicodinámica y las identidades como partes de un todo. Los autores postulan que estas formas de enmarcar la identidad pueden ayudar a los actores de rol, diseñadores y facilitadores a comprender mejor la naturaleza multifacética de la individualidad. Este trabajo tiene implicaciones para la comprensión de la representación de los personajes en los juegos de rol, especialmente en lo que respecta al potencial transformador de la experiencia del juego de rol.

**Palabras clave:** identidad, psicología, consejería, teoría, juegos de rol.

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**Abstract**

Many psychologists, therapists, and educators have emphasized the practice of play, especially with enacted roles, as a site for learning and therapeutic growth. This article weaves together a plethora of theories from psychology, Counseling, and role-playing game studies in an effort to understand the nature of enacted roles, their relationship to identity, and their transformative potential. Challenging the notion that identity is a fixed, stable monolith, the article synthesizes four overall approaches to theorizing the nature of identity drawn from various theories: identity as a social construct, narrative identity, identity as psychodynamic, and identities as parts of a whole. The authors posit that these ways of framing identity can help role-players, designers, and facilitators better understand the multifaceted nature of selfhood. This work holds implications for understanding the enactment of characters in role-playing games, especially with regard to the transformative potential of the role-playing experience.

**Keywords:** identity, psychology, counseling, theory, role-playing games.

**I. Introduction**

This article will provide a brief introduction to psychological theories and counseling practices from a wide variety of perspectives in order to make sense of processes of role-playing games, play, immersion, identity, and change. We will start with an overview of role-playing game theory as it pertains to the phenomenon of character enactment and transformative processes unfolding as a result of play, including concepts such as the magic circle, social contract, immersion, and bleed. Then, we will briefly explore theories of identity from social psychology and psychology, including identity as a social construct, narrative identity, and configurations of self. We will discuss psychodynamic theories that emphasize the psyche as divided into parts such as psychoanalysis, depth psychology, transactional analysis, and dissociative theory. We will also briefly address the cognition of play from the perspective of theory of mind, attention, creativity, and metacognition. Following the work of psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Carl Rogers, and D. W. Winnicott, the article will emphasize the importance of play as key to the learning process and to developing an authentic sense of identity and agency.

Throughout the article, we also explore the psychology of play from the perspective of therapeutic practices and modalities that exist outside of the discourses of role-playing games as a hobby or field of academic study. We will emphasize how role-play, identity shifting, narrative, and embodied enactment are present in many existing therapeutic processes to various degrees. Examples include psychodrama, psychosynthesis, Gestalt therapy, drama therapy, narrative therapy, Internal Family Systems, and person-centered therapy. Additionally, we will highlight the work of

clinical therapists who use role-playing games to augment more traditional practices, emphasizing the potential of this hybrid form to infuse more established therapeutic methods with the expanded agency offered by RPGs in applied settings.

Furthermore, while role-taking activities are central to many human experiences throughout time, the article will emphasize the benefits offered by the imagination space of role-playing games, particularly with regard to prolonged perspective taking, co-creative improvisation, the alibi of fiction, and increased agency and empowerment. The article will also address limitations to the form that might interrupt its transformative potential, such as cognitive dissonance, identity defense, and difficulties with integrating these experiences within one's life narrative after they conclude.

While ambitious in scope, this article creates a roadmap of otherwise disparate theories, weaving together concepts from various disciplinary perspectives in order to unpack the transformational potential of the role-playing game phenomenon, particularly with regard to identity exploration. Challenging the notion that identity is a fixed, stable monolith, the article synthesizes four overall approaches to theorizing the nature of identity drawn from various theories: identity as a social construct, narrative identity, identity as psychodynamic, and identities as parts of a whole. We posit that these ways of framing identity can help role-players, designers, and facilitators better understand the multifaceted nature of selfhood. This work holds implications for understanding the enactment of characters in role-playing games, especially with regard to the transformative potential of the role-playing experience (Daniau, 2016).

This work is positioned alongside a growing trend that connects leisure role-playing games with psychological (Brown, 2014; Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018; Kapitany, Hampejs, & Goldstein, 2022) and therapeutic theories in the literature (Lukka, 2013; Burns, 2014; Linnamäki, 2019; Ball, 2022), in applied practice (Gutierrez, 2017; Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett 2021; Atanasio, 2020; Bartenstein, 2022a, 2022b; Diakolambrianou 2021, 2022; Connell, 2023; Kilmer, Davis, Kilmer, & Johns 2023), and in evaluation of such applied practices (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Mendoza, 2020; Causo & Quinlan 2021; Henrich, Sören, & Worthington, 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, & Kotera, 2022; Varrette, et al. 2023).

## II. Theoretical approach

Our goal is to synthesize concepts and practices from role-playing game studies, psychology, and counseling in order to establish core concepts relevant to transformative play. Our departure point will be role-playing games and concepts that inform their processes, rather than established fictions within psychology and counseling, with their respective similarities and differences. Additionally, we have selected these theories from our own research on concepts useful to practitioners of

applied role-playing games, including therapists, counselors, social workers, educators, and other paraprofessionals. Thus, our method of organizing this information will depart from more traditional approaches to explanatory models and their theoretical lineages.

To narrow the scope of this research, we will focus on concepts related to identity exploration as one of the core functions of role-playing games (Bowman, 2010). As this paper is limited in length, our goal is to provide a sketch that serves as an overview to guide other researchers with these same interests; this overview is by no means comprehensive of all theories and a deeper dive into the vast complexities of these concepts is reserved for later work. To narrow our scope, we are eliding key concepts from sociology and anthropology, as such concepts have been explored in depth before, e.g., sociolinguistic analysis (Dashiell, 2020; 2022), ritual theory (Harviainen, 2012a), etc. Finally, we are especially interested in theorists who describe how psychological and behavioral change happens over time, as our interest lies in the potential of role-playing games to promote personal and social transformation.

Our interests center upon the following questions:

- 1) How can existing psychological and counseling concepts help explain the phenomenon of role-playing?
- 2) How are role-playing games experiences similar or different from other psychological states, as described by theory?
- 3) How can role-playing games give insight into the nature of identity, defined in various ways?
- 4) Given these connections, how can role-playing games best be employed as a vehicle of personal and social change?

### III. Results

#### *Role-playing Game Studies Theory*

While role-playing games can be studied by many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (White, Torner, and Bowman, 2022), one thing remains clear to us: regardless of format, they are fundamentally a psychological phenomenon. Whether played with thousands of people in a field or solo with oneself, the “action” of the game takes place not only through behavioral acts, but in the theater of the mind, i.e. subjective diegesis (Montola, 2003). The player is both the performer and first-person audience (Montola and Holopainen, 2012). Thus, studying role-playing games from outside of the phenomenological experience of play is difficult and misses a major part of the picture.

Studying experience has unique challenges as well. From the beginning of the development of this field, many scholars attempt to address this issue by employing participant-observation ethnography (Bowman, 2020; e.g., Fine, 1983; Cover, 2010; Mizer, 2019; Lasley, 2020), although relatively few take a psychological approach to analyzing the data (cf. Blackstock, 2016; Fein, 2015). However, post-game reflections in the form of observations or interviews do not provide a picture of what happens at the moment of play, only the player's narrative reframing of events after the fact (Waern, 2013). If we consider the liminal, co-creative process of analog role-playing, the stories told after games are akin to a *secondary revision* produced when retelling the content of dreams upon waking (Freud, 2010). Thus, as consciousness itself may be ultimately unknowable or undefinable from a psychological perspective, any attempts at theorizing what happens during an experiential state will be necessarily limited.

With these caveats in mind, we will examine theories of the phenomenon of play both from the perspective of traditional psychology, but also from role-playing game studies, which has developed its own terminology to describe what we believe to be a unique state of consciousness due to its intersection of immersion into activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community (Bowman, 2018). Simply stated, immersion refers to a prolonged attention process (Lankoski and Järvelä, 2012; Jarvala, 2019) with emphasis on a specific mode of engagement with the game and the people within it. (As children, humans often engage in pretend play as a naturally occurring phenomenon. An adult form of structured pretend play (Kapitany, Hampejs, Goldstein, 2022), role-playing games are co-creative experiences in which participants immerse themselves into fictional characters and realities for a bounded period of time through emergent playfulness (Bowman, 2022c). Whether explicitly or implicitly, participants agree upon a social contract within which events that take place initiated by their characters within a magic circle of play are protected by alibi, i.e., the psychological and social permission to behave in ways inconsistent with one's daily roles (Deterding, 2017).

Thus, players experience a dual consciousness (Stenros, 2013) in which they hold fiction vs. reality and player vs. character at the same time, slipping into metacognitive states of consciousness (Lukka, 2014; Levin, 2020, 2023) to manage information between them (Harviainen, 2012b). Contrary to stereotypes of players "losing touch with reality" (Stark, 2012; Laycock, 2015), participants quite agilely manage these frames, although this capacity depends upon their energy levels, as well as their mental and physical states at the time (Leonard and Thurman, 2018). However, despite these mental constructs, players inhabit the same body as their characters, leading some theorists to postulate that there is no clear distinction between the two from an embodied cognition perspective (Lankoski and Järvelä, 2012; Jarvala, 2019).

That being said, players often report the experience of embodying a character as distinct



from their own identity. Thus, despite the metacognitive processes involved with managing fiction of reality and the benefits of alibi, players may noticeably experience “bleed”, the spillover of psychological contents from the player to the character (*bleed-in*) and vice versa (*bleed-out*) (Montola, 2010; Bowman, 2013; 2022a). In other words, with bleed, the mental attention required to hold fiction from reality, character from player, breaks down in a noticeable fashion. While some players claim never to experience bleed, depending on one’s psychological leanings, bleed might be said to be always occurring. From this perspective, when players refer to having experienced bleed, they are actually referring to the point at which bleed has reached their conscious awareness, whether in a subtle or intrusive way, i.e., they have surpassed their *bleed perception threshold* (Hugaas, 2022). Bleed can occur at the emotional (Montola, 2010), physical (Hugaas, 2019), ideological (Hugaas, 2019), or relational level (Waern, 2010; Bowman, 2013) and can lead to shifts in ego identity (Beltrán, 2012; Hugaas, 2022), relationship dynamics (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas, 2022), and experiences of marginalization (Kemper, 2017; 2020)

Discussing bleed can arouse psychological distress in players for several reasons. First, the alibi of play can be considered a defense mechanism (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021) that permits participants to avoid the embarrassment and shame associated with playful or transgressive activities in daily life (Stenros, 2015; Deterding, 2017). The boundedness of play is important for some participants to maintain, who attempt to keep a strict distinction between the frames of daily life and the game (Goffman, 1986; Fine, 1983). Furthermore, bleed can threaten one’s conception of one’s own ego identity and thus feel destabilizing (Bowman, 2022b). In other words, players experience one form of “I” who is the person who began playing the game, with all its associated history, personality constructs, patterns of behavior, and social categorizations. By engaging in perspective taking, they may not only experience empathy (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman, 2021) but actually feel the boundaries between the player and character identities dissolve to a certain degree. This slippage can feel frightening on a psychological level, as player’s might experience identity confusion (Erikson, 1968; Bowman, 2010), but also on a social level, as one’s social roles in daily life that are expected by others might be called into question or feel less motivating (Bowman, 2022b).

Alternatively, players may consciously chase bleed (Nilsen, 2012) and designers may design to facilitate it (see e.g., Axeldon and Wrigstad, 2007). From this perspective, bleed is a welcome intrusion into daily life, whether as a form of emotional catharsis (Bowman, 2015a; 2023) or as a platform for self-exploration and processing (see e.g., Clapper, 2016). At Uppsala University’s Transformative Play Initiative, our research group explores how design and play experiences can use these aspects of social contract, magic circle, co-creative spontaneous expression, alibi, and bleed to help build a transformational container (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021) that facilitates experiences leading to lasting personal and/or social change (Baird and Bowman, 2022). Following D.



W. Winnicott (1960) and Wilfred Bion (1959), our theory conceptualizes role-play spaces as ritualized *holding containers*: environments in which players feel sufficiently secure within the group to explore selves that feel authentic and experience empowerment by projecting fantasy onto social and physical reality. This process can redefine some aspects of reality temporarily for the group (Montola 2012), and possibly permanently in certain cases, e.g., a person discovering their gender identity within a game, then asking the group to acknowledge it outside of the game.

### Identity Theory in Role-playing Game Studies

What is identity? Popular notions of identity such as this list of Dictionary.com (2022) definition tend to describe it in the following ways:

1. The state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions.
2. Sameness over time, unchanging despite circumstances.
3. The condition of being oneself or itself, and not another.
4. Individuality.
5. Condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that distinguish or identify a person or thing.
6. Specific personality and cultural traits.
7. The sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time and sometimes disturbed in mental illnesses, as schizophrenia. (Dictionary.com, 2022)

Overall, these definitions emphasize a continuity of selfhood, or *sense of self*, with an emphasis on perception: how others see us and how we see ourselves. Our sense of self can affect how we view ourselves in relationship to our own self-worth, other people, society at large, and culture. Humans find comfort in having a sense that their own identity is fixed, i.e., they are consistent and unchanging. This comfort is especially prevalent when that identity establishes a sense of belonging in one or more groups, a place within the social structure, a sense of purpose in life, etc. People also expect the identities of others to remain fixed, which is also comforting; people know what to expect from one another, how to discern established status hierarchies, how to behave, how to categorize each other, etc.

From this perspective, it is understandable why shifts in identity in role-playing games might feel destabilizing, especially considering the various types of bleed. It also helps explain why outsiders find role-playing so threatening, just as they once found actors suspicious: the ability to suddenly misrepresent oneself can prompt suspicion, and thus may feel destabilizing to the

social order (Bates, 1988; 18-21; Bowman, 2015b). However, contrary to these concerns, the vast majority of role-players are able to engage in character enactment without major psychological, interpersonal, or social disruptions.

### *Types of Characters with Relation to Player Identity*

The relationship between players and their characters is truly fascinating and we are only beginning to scratch the surface of understanding it. Based on her participant-ethnographic work, Bowman (2010) has categorized nine types of characters, emphasizing how the player described their character in comparison to their own identity (as they defined it). These categories are not exhaustive and characters often fit into more than one category. Furthermore, the themes were pulled from interviews with players who engage in long-term, campaign-style play where they design their own characters, which is a special type of character design. However, even in short-term games or RPGs with pre-written characters, the players likely have similar relationships to their characters: they draw from parts within themselves to enact their characters, and often emphasize or embellish a particular element based on their own interests, inclinations, or aversions.

The first type is the *Doppelganger Self*, in which the player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar. Examples include a new player embodying a character similar to themselves to try out role-playing; an experienced larper playing *close-to-home*, i.e. a character with a similar identity or set of life circumstances as their own; or a group playing fictional versions of themselves in an alternate timeline. The second type is the *Augmented Self*, in which the player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar, but the character has an important addition or augment that shapes their identity. Examples include the player's identity plus extreme wealth or superpowers. The third type is the *Devoid Self* in which, again, the player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar, but the character has an important aspect removed that shapes their identity. Examples include the player's identity minus growing up in a loving family or minus empathy.

The next categories are *far-from-home* to greater and lesser degrees. The fourth type is the *Fragmented Self*, when a facet of the player's personality, life, or interests is magnified to become a central part of that character's identity. Examples include the player's interest in cooking manifesting in the character of a food critic; the player's anger manifesting as the character's default emotion and form of expression; or the player's interest in spirituality manifesting in the character being a spiritual guide as a profession. Note that according to Bowman (2010), most role-playing characters are based on one or more fragments or parts of the player, which will become relevant later in this paper when we discuss *parts work* and *configurations of self*. The next category is the *Repressed, or Regressive, Self*, in which the character represents a regression into an earlier stage

of humanity, consciousness, and/or an animalistic state. Examples include the player embodying their six-year-old self at a larp about a birthday party; the player embodying a character from a pre-verbal culture; or the player embodying the character of an anthropomorphized cat. These types of expression of self can have therapeutic potential when paired with Inner Child therapy, as players can use role-playing to access repressed or fragmented younger selves, give them expression, and explore opportunities for healing.

The next categories focus on character types that embody personality traits that the player and/or society at large considers desirable or undesirable. The sixth category is the *Idealized Self*, in which the player embodies a character they admire or wish they could be more like. Examples include the player embodying a brave hero character who always does the right thing; the player embodying a healer character who is always compassionate and selfless regardless of circumstances; or the player embodying an extremely empowered character who never backs down from achieving their goals. The seventh category is the *Oppositional Self*, which describes a character who the player believes is entirely different from their own self-concept and toward whom they may even have an aversion, or an aspect of their unconscious that they find abhorrent or unrelatable, i.e. their *shadow* (Beltrán, 2013; Bowman, 2021, in press). Examples include a player embodying a villain character who engages in acts that the player finds repugnant; a player embodying a character who has a completely different political and religious background from their own; or a player drawing upon traits from someone they know and dislike that they express through the character.

Related to this category is the eighth type, the *Taboo Self*: a character who engages in behaviors that the player and/or society at large finds taboo or transgressive (Stenros, 2015; Bowman and Stenros, 2018). Examples could focus on a behavior the player finds taboo, such as embodying a cannibalistic character, or the player embodying characteristics authentic to themselves, but taboo in their society, such as a character who has a gender identity different from the one assigned to them at birth (Baird, 2021). In this case, the player may not find these behaviors problematic, but society at large or certain groups within it may. In fact, the player may find the experience liberatory to important parts of their identity that have been repressed.

Finally, the ninth category is the *Experimental Self*: a character that the player creates as an experiment to explore a certain personality type, character concept, costume style, aspect of performance, etc. Examples include a player embodying a character that requires extensive prosthetics and props to appear realistic; and a player creating an unusual character in order to see how that personality would interact within a particular role-playing fiction, i.e. “I wonder what would happen if...” Players may feel more detached to these experimental selves than to other characters, but not necessarily.

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*Immersion into Character*

In addition to the phenomenon of players believing their characters are distinct from their own self-concepts to greater and lesser degrees, they also describe a spectrum of immersion into their characters (Bøckman, 2003; Bowman, 2018). Immersion involves pretending to believe that our identity is different (Pohjola, 2004); adopting the worldview of the character through perspective taking (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman, 2021); and thinking, responding, and behaving according to the new identity. This process can help players develop empathy for themselves, for their character, and potentially for people in the outside world with similar worldviews, personality traits, or experiences as that character (Meriläinen, 2012; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman, 2021). Despite this potential for empathy, embodying characters with marginalized identities the participants do not share must be handled with care to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman, 2021). Finally, players are encouraged to return to their daily identity (or identities) after the game, i.e., they do not “lose themselves in the character”. However, players may experience ego bleed, where personality and archetypal contents spillover from the character to their ego identity after the game (Beltrán, 2012; 2021). Furthermore, they may experience more generalized identity bleed, where multiple forms of bleed affect their *identity complex* (Hugaas, 2021). Some players may find such experiences intrusive, whereas others deliberately strive toward these kinds of long-term shifts.

Theorists have developed metaphors for the phenomenon of immersion into character in terms of the experience within a player’s consciousness. One example is the driving metaphor (Bowman, 2015b; 2018). When *in the driver’s seat*, the player feels they have full control of the character’s actions. When *in the passenger’s seat*, the player shares some control of the character’s actions. When *in the backseat*, the player is watching the actions, but the character has control of most actions. Finally, when *in the trunk*: the player and character are undifferentiated and merged and/or the character controls all action. This metaphor is similar to steering (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta, 2015), in which players consciously steer the direction of character actions due to a variety of factors, e.g., practical reasons, smoother play experience, aesthetic ideals, desired personal experience, ethical or unethical motivations. Steering implies a greater degree of control than the *in the trunk* experience.

Similarly, Moyra Turkington (2006) has developed a theatrical performance metaphor (Bowman, 2015b; 2018). The first state is the *marionette*, in which the player directs the character as if it were an external object, which is “nothing more than a tool with good aesthetic value”. The second state is the *puppet*, in which the player partially inhabits the character, but they have control of how the character behaves and the reasoning behind it (Turkington, 2006). The third state is the *mask*, in which the player maintains a distinct identity, but has an emotional, empathic connection

with the character that influences the character's actions. The fourth state is the *possessing force*, in which the player abandons personal identity, surrenders to experiencing the full subjective reality of the character (Turkington, 2006).

As mentioned above, these “in the trunk” or “possessing force” states do not last for long, but they can be incredibly powerful for players that seek them out, indicating a decrease of vigilance such that the character can momentarily “take over”. In this case, the previous identity does not evaporate, but perhaps becomes dormant as another state of consciousness is more prominent. Furthermore, while the term is similar, we should not conflate these states with *possession* in terms of states that can be achieved through religious rituals and mystical experiences, practices which are often more all-consuming and quite culturally specific.

Each of these theories presupposes identity as a fixed, stable state, as mentioned in the above definitions. This next section will explore identity through the lens of various psychological and social psychological theories that call into question this rigid, focused identity state, considering identity from a wide variety of alternative perspectives.

### *Identity Theories in Psychology and Counseling*

#### **1. Identity as a Social Construct**

To fully understand the role-playing process from the perspective of psychology, we must first explore how identity is understood in various theories. The simplest and most commonly used form of identity is the notion of identity as a social construct in social psychology (Stets and Serpe, 2013) and other fields, which defines identity as composed of external labels applied by society to categorize people, as well as ways people categorize themselves based on participation in groups. These aspects of identity may refer to one's social role, or *role identity*, e.g., “teacher”, “mother”, “partner”; one's demographic information, or *social identity*, e.g., “Black”, “upper class”, “woman”; or one's cultural or subcultural affiliations, or *group identity*, e.g., “French”, “Buddhist”, “gamer”; or socially recognized categories that guide behavior, or *person identity*, e.g., “moral”, “kind”, “just”. Since each of us holds many of these identities, this theory posits some are more important to our experience than others and thus are positioned in hierarchies to one another both internally and externally (Stets and Serpe, 2013). Social constructionism arises in part from symbolic interactionism, in which all interactions take place on a social stage within which people are expected to enact certain normative roles (Goffman, 1959), a theory commonly used in role-playing game studies (see e.g., Montola 2012).

From this perspective, one's internal experience of identity is not considered fully valid unless external social groups recognize it, i.e. *identity verification* (Stets and Serpe, 2013, p. 35-36).

Thus, one's social identity is not only within one's own power to define, but need also be verified by the group to promote emotional well-being. For this reason, individuals may seek to work within groups to raise awareness and request verification of aspects of their identity should they differ from established norms or assigned labels. Such processes are usually slow and sometimes rejected by the group, for example, the difficulties many LGBTQIA+ individuals face when coming out (Baird and Bowman, 2022).

Role-playing games allow players to experiment with different social roles and identities (Moriarty, 2019; Baird, 2022; Femia, 2023) in ways that can feel liberatory, especially for people who experience marginalized social identities in daily life, i.e. *emancipatory bleed* (Kemper, 2017; 2020). In daily life, our identities are internalized psychologically, unconsciously placing limits on our self-concepts and, thus, on our perceived range of actions in the world, especially when the fear of censure, ostracization, or extermination is present. Role-playing games can provide a brief respite from these constraints; however, lasting transformation of social identities requires buy-in from social groups outside of the magic circle, which can be challenging. Nonetheless, role-playing games can provide an important stepping stone for people wishing to express identities that feel more authentic or redefine how their assigned social identity is perceived within a group. This phenomenon is especially true when the group acknowledges one's identity through verification off-game, i.e., when the role-playing community becomes a *transformational container* (Bowman & Baird, 2022).

## 2. Narrative identity

Experiencing new roles in games can widen players' perceptions of self, especially when considering the central role of narrative. We experience massive amounts of stimuli on any given day, which our minds tend to organize in a somewhat coherent narrative, e.g., "I woke up, then went to work, then had dinner with a friend, then went to sleep". Such simple narratives allow us to manage information overwhelm and the subsequent confusion caused by it. From a constructivist perspective, narrative construction is part of a larger process of assimilating, accommodating, or rejecting new information in order to manage cognitive overload and make sense of reality, skills that Jean Piaget believed play helps develop in children (Bergen, 2015; Paris, Ricardo, Raymond, and Johnson, 2021). Applying a social constructivism lens, according to Lev Vygotsky, central to this play process is the use of symbolic language (Bergen, 2015), which often figures heavily in role-playing narratives and myths.

If we take this principle to a lifelong level, simplified narratives become central for meaning making, as discussed in existential psychology and narrative therapy. Although our narratives are usually multiple and multidimensional, we often carry one that is more dominant over the rest,



for example:

- “Ever since I was a child, I wanted to go to space, which is why I became an astronaut”, or
- “My whole life, I’ve been searching for my Other Half, which is how I knew my partner was the One at first sight”.

When our dominant story is problematic, it becomes an obstacle to our personal growth and positive change, which can be the cause of emotional pain, distress, and dysfunctionality. Such a dominant story may derive from judgmental and/or negative external evaluation that has been internalized in the form of a *core belief*, as well as from societal and systemic sources of influence and pressure.

This internalization may make people perceive their problems/issues as personal defining attributes and lead them to think that they “are” the problem, while at the same time leading them to follow unwillingly behavioral patterns that reproduce the dominant story in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Freedman and Combs, 1996). These narratives often contain *limiting beliefs* about one’s capabilities in the world and the nature of reality, especially when paired with disappointments or traumas, for example:

- “I’ve always been terrible at math, so I will never become an astronaut”, or
- “I was rejected, so I am unlovable and will spend my entire life alone”.

When paired with marginalized and/or oppressed social identities, these internalized limiting beliefs can become exceptionally difficult to challenge, as these beliefs might be reinforced through social interaction, for example:

- “I am a woman and therefore have always been terrible at math in class”, or
- “I am considered fat by others and therefore unlovable”.

Narrative therapy works to deconstruct unhelpful meanings, giving the person the agency to construct their own narratives and ways of being and experiencing.

These dominant stories coalesce into what some therapists call a person’s *narrative identity* (McAdams, 2011). In a specific form of therapy involving narrative identity, the emphasis is helping the client create a redemptive story arc, for example:

- “I was told as a woman I would never succeed at math, but I managed to persist throughout school and become an astronaut”, or
- “I always considered myself too fat to be lovable, but I opened myself up to dating and met a wonderful partner”.



The process of narrating such redemptive arcs can be considered healing as it works to change the fundamental precepts that shape a person's experience of reality. Central to these arcs is reframing one's perspective to emphasize personal agency.

Role-playing games can create a bridge between a character's narrative identity and one's personal narrative identity (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021). In these cases, such beliefs might shift in the following ways:

- “My character was an officer on a spaceship who used complex math every day — and I was the one completing those equations, so perhaps I am good at math after all”; or
- “My character fell in love and happily married for life — and I was the one experiencing that story, so maybe it is possible for me as well”.

Such experiences are bolstered when the players agree to acknowledge the person as capable in these ways in-game, i.e. *playing to lift* (Vejdemo, 2018), and are especially potent when playgroups acknowledge the person as capable in these dimensions outside of game. Alternatively, one can view their character's story as a cautionary tale, e.g., “My character's negative beliefs about love left them miserable and alone, so I want to open myself to love and tell a different story for my own life”.

Outside of a therapeutic relationship, the gameplay itself can function as a kind of narrative psychotherapist. The embodiment of character can function as an externalizing conversation, often also providing unique outcomes; participants are not playing alone but with other people who may at any point challenge their dominant story, knowingly or not. Moreover, a transformative role-playing experience on its own can provide participants with revelations that allow them to become aware of their narratives and deconstruct them, leading to one or more re-authored identities. Essentially, any character embodiment is to some extent a re-authored identity, as we will discuss in later sections. For example, Theresa “Tess” Tanenbaum (2022a) has described her own *restoring* process with regard to exploring her trans identity through role-playing games. However, the role of formal or informal debriefing or other forms of processing in facilitating the actualization of these transformative processes and their therapeutic potential is crucial. Transformative impacts can also be supported by pre-game workshop activities for character creation, relations, intention setting, etc (Bowman & Hugaas, 2019).

A similar process is involved in certain cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) practices, with an emphasis on altering the behavior associated with reinforcing the limiting belief. For example, if a client learns to catch themselves self-labeling as incapable, they can practice replacing that behavior with a more supportive one, such as encouraging self-talk, e.g., “You are actually great

at math as your recent test demonstrates!” or affirmations, e.g., “I am an intelligent and capable woman”. Such practices substantiate the belief into clear behavioral patterns that can influence positively a person’s decision making, e.g. “I am an intelligent woman; therefore, I will apply to that astronaut program”. CBT has been applied to larp by Lennart Bartenstein (2022a, 2022b) and is a common technique used by tabletop therapists (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer, 2020; Varrette, et al. 2023). Furthermore, several practitioners cite narrative therapy practices more broadly as useful tools for activating the transformative power of role-playing games, including leisure (Murphy, 2023) and therapeutic applications (Atanasio, 2020; Diakolambrianou, 2021; Kilmer, Davis, Kilmer, & Johns, 2023), or discuss the power of narrative in therapeutic RPG applications more broadly (Connell, 2023).

From this perspective, some therapists view role-playing games as a space of *behavior rehearsal* (Munday, 2013), where players can experiment with actions that might otherwise feel too risky, challenging, or even impossible. Games also often allow space to fail with little-to-no social consequence, which can free players from embarrassment such that they feel safer in continuing to practice desired skills. For example, some therapists will include Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) scripts as an intervention in the middle of a role-playing adventure, using the in-game situation as a space that feels safer to practice helpful social behaviors (see e.g., Atanasio, 2020). This approach views the role-playing game not as the intervention itself, but rather as a vehicle through which the intervention is delivered. The alibi, narrative, and character lead to a decrease in vigilance for many players, which may help them become more open to trying and possibly failing at new skills; their daily identity may feel less threatened by the behavior and, thus, their identity defense (Illeris, 2006) may not arise, which can often serve as an impediment to learning (Diakolambrianou, Baird, Westborg, and Bowman, 2021; Westborg, 2022).

### 3. Identity as psychodynamic

In psychodynamic models of the mind, consciousness is divided into parts. In the Freudian model, the psyche contains three parts. The first is what we consider our “self”: the aware part that we associate with our identity, which is called the *ego*. The other two are repressed below our conscious awareness: the *id* and the *superego*. A Darwinian in intellectual orientation, Freud conceptualized the *id* as containing oppositional forces toward creation and destruction. These chaotic drives (Spielrein, 1994) are essential to human reproduction and survival, while also threatening to it. In psychoanalytic theory, *eros* — also known as the libido or sex drive — is in constant opposition with *thanatos*, also known as both the aggression and the death drive (Freud, 1990). Paradoxical in nature, the *id* represents the wild, untamed, “animalistic” part of humanity that, when left unchecked, will lead to rampant sexuality and violence.

Therefore, Freud indicated that another part of the unconscious, the *superego*, was necessary to keep the id in check. Originally called the Censor, the Superego refers to the internalized norms of social reality that moderate the unruly desires of the id (Freud, 1990). The superego often manifests through introjected mental models of people external to the self, such as the Bad Parent or Inner Critic, who may shame or even abuse the ego. These parts constrict our thoughts and behavior, urging us to stay within the bounds of social acceptability as a means to keep us safe. Externally, our caregivers, educators, lawmakers, and enforcers are often tasked with embodying these norms, transmitting them, rewarding “acceptable” behavior, and punishing transgressions, leading to constriction in how the ego expresses itself (Winnicott, 1960).

For Freud, this unconscious, warring relationship between the id and superego is necessary for the ego to adapt to its conditions, propagate the species, and keep society intact. However, this inner turmoil and the necessity of suppressing our deepest desires in order to preserve civilization leads to a profound sense of “discontent”. This discontent might manifest in experiences that are labeled “monstrous” and associated with mental illness, for example emotional dysregulation, repression, neurotic behavior, compulsions, addictions, psychosis, etc (Freud, 2010a). Especially difficult for the psyche to manage is the aforementioned death drive — especially when aggressive urges manifest as harm to self or others — as well as the libidinous impulses of eros. These impulses are constantly monitored and controlled by external social groups and the internalized norms associated with them. For Freud, the psychoanalyst’s role is to help bring these unconscious parts into awareness through talk therapy and dream analysis, which he believed would lead people to achieve a greater sense of inner coherence.

Carl Jung expanded upon this concept of the id to encompass more than just these survival and reproduction-based drives. Reconceptualizing it as *the shadow*, Jung viewed this part as containing all aspects of personal and collective thoughts, instincts, and behaviors that cause the ego distress and/or identity confusion (Jung, 1976). Individually and culturally, we instinctively disavow these elements by keeping them submerged in the unconscious. Jung frames the ego as containing the conscious parts of identity that we own and are aware exist, which are often defined in opposition with aspects of the shadow. While these aspects are not always negative or antisocial, the psyche suppresses any elements that make us doubt our sense of self. For example, if a person believes themselves to be highly empathetic and nurturing, they may unconsciously repress any instincts toward ruthlessness or cruelty, but those aspects still exist within the personal and/or collective shadow. The personal shadow includes aspects directly related and oppositional to one’s sense of self, whereas the collective shadow contains aspects that humanity as a whole or particular groups suppress as a coping mechanism.

Confronting the Shadow creates discomfort and may generate cognitive dissonance or exis-

tential confusion, for example, “If I am empathetic, how can I also be cruel? If humans value and desire freedom, how could we also enslave other people?” These lines of questioning can lead to a destabilization of the rather fragile ego, which needs to cling to constructs of identity in order to perceive itself as intact, sovereign, and morally just. As a result, many people may never engage in the work needed to reconcile these parts. However, for Jung, the ego is only fully developed when it engages with its shadow and its other unconscious aspects, leading to a process of *individuation*: growth into a more unified, balanced, and whole Self (Jung, 1976). Other elements can include archetypes within the collective unconscious, which manifest within complexes in the individual psyche, as well as internalized constructs of feminine (*anima*) and masculine parts (*animus*). Notably, these latter concepts have become increasingly more problematized as binary notions of gender are challenged (e.g., Beltrán, 2021), although some people still find them meaningful.

For depth psychologists, creativity, imagination, and symbols hold the keys for mediating this otherwise destabilizing process of individuation: the process of encountering the personal and collective unconscious and evolving oneself accordingly (Jung 1964). Jungians view creative activities such as dreams, meditation, active imagination, and artwork as manifestations of the repressed unconscious, including the shadow, serving as forms of compensation (Jaffé, 1964; von Franz, 1964; Jung, 1976). Freud had a more reductive view of dreams, framing them as manifestations of unconscious wish fulfillment, for example the id trying to satisfy itself through less conscious and more abstract means such as cryptic or shocking imagery (Freud, 2010b). For Freud, this wish fulfillment also pervades works of art, which is evident in the pervasive obsession with — and consequent public anxieties around — themes of sexuality and violence in popular culture texts such as role-playing games (Nephew, 2006).

Later, D. W. Winnicott would view creative work from a different but complementary lens. He analyzed the role of play in child development particularly in terms of authenticity and empowerment. For Winnicott, if children are permitted to engage in free play and feel supported enough by their caregiver to temporarily project their view of fantasy on reality, they will discover, express, and develop a more authentic self-concept (Winnicott, 1960). Often, such play will be projected onto a *transitional object*, which the child enchants with their imagination, allowing them to retain a small feeling of omnipotence in a world where little is in the child’s control (Winnicott, 1971). If such behavior is admonished or otherwise punished, the child will develop a *false self*, meaning they will exhibit the behaviors and traits expected by the environment in order to conform, but repress their authentic self into their unconscious (Winnicott, 1960).

Similarly, Erik Erikson viewed pretend play as essential for exploring empowerment by practicing authoritative roles such as parents or superheroes (Bergen, 2015). Erikson also emphasized how children process aspects from their reality through play by projecting “a relevant

personal theme on the microcosm of a play table” (qtd. in Bergen, 2015). Erikson also famously described the ego identity vs. confusion stage occurring in adolescence and early adulthood as a central component in the life cycle of human development, emphasizing that a stable sense of ego identity was necessary for healthy psychic life. He described the process of exploring one’s identity as a *psychosocial moratorium*, in which young people experiment with different ways of being in the world (Erikson, 1960). Within this context, role-playing games are particularly useful for adolescents, as they encourage identity exploration (Bowman, 2010; Hammer et al., 2018) and themes such as superheroes can be particularly potent, empowering, and useful in a psychotherapeutic context (Enfield 2007).

These views frame creative play as essential to a child’s sense of authentic identity, self-esteem, and empowerment. These identity-focused theories contrast with the more cognitively-focused views on development emphasized by Vygotsky, who believed play was important for practicing self-regulation, and Piaget, who believed play was central to the development of mental schema (Paris, Ricardo, Raymond, and Johnson, 2021). In recent years, psychologists have begun to connect childhood pretend play processes with adult pretend play in *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop role-playing, terming it *pretensive shared reality* (Kapitany, Hampejs, Goldstein, 2022). Regardless of their perspective on the role of the self, these foundational developmental theories form the basis of various modalities of play therapy.

Many later psychologists would come to reject psychodynamic techniques as “ineffective” from a therapeutic perspective, for example favoring cognitive behavioral approaches that more easily reprogram the psyche and the patient’s subsequent behavior. However, psychodynamic approaches still remain popular today in certain subcultures. For example, theories and practices related to working with shadow parts of consciousness thrive especially in communities associated with psychodrama (see e.g., Clark and Davis-Gage, 2010), alternative spirituality (see e.g., Aurnyn, 2018), fiction writing (see e.g., Kaufman, 2007), personal development coaching (see e.g., Moon, 2012), art therapy (see e.g., Mosinski, 2011), and transpersonal approaches to healing. Over time, the term shadow work has morphed to include not only the unconscious, but also more conscious aspects of the self that a person may want to criticize, disown, hide, or shame. Shadow work in role-playing games often involved players exploring 1) Experiencing loss, violation, and/or trauma; 2) Exerting power over others; 3) Portraying undesirable personality traits; 4) Expressing mental health challenges; and 5) Exploring dysfunctional or maladaptive social dynamics (Bowman, 2021, in press). Shadow work is also used in therapeutic practice, e.g., with MMORPG characters (Bean, 2020). However, playing with the shadow indefinitely without sufficient processing can cause issues in communities (Beltrán, 2013), hence the “work” required in shadow work.

Also common within transformational communities are practices that are identical to or

closely resemble role-playing activities: character embodiment, dialoguing with “parts” of the psyche, using imagination as a means to gain empowerment, etc. Popular offshoots of traditional psychodynamic theories and practices include among others:

- **Inner Child and Reparenting work:** Identifying one or more younger selves and caring for them as a nurturing parent would. While this practice originated in the field of psychodynamic approaches, nowadays it is considered a model that can be integrated into most psychotherapeutic approaches;
- **Transactional Analysis:** Identifying the different roles we play in interpersonal dynamics throughout the day and our lives, including shifting between Parent, Child, and Adult states of consciousness, as well as the “games” we play with others;
- **Internal Family Systems:** Identifying the multitude of parts within the psyche, giving these parts expression, and bringing them into harmony with one another. Although this *parts work* would be best categorized as an integrative instead of a psychodynamic practice, it follows the psychodynamic concept of the inner dialogue between the self parts;
- **Psychosynthesis:** A similar process focused upon exploring subpersonalities, some of which have archetypal significance within the self, with the goal of achieving a more holistic, transpersonal state of being;
- **Dissociative Identity work:** Identifying various personality structures that have become partially or fully realized identities and bringing them into harmony with one another, either through integration or through healthy interaction. Nowadays, dissociative identity work will include an eclectic approach, mixing techniques from a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches outside the psychodynamic field.

Various practices that work with parts of identity are utilized as trauma-informed interventions in healing communities. Trauma survivors often experience their memories, bodies, connections with reality, and even their identities as fragmented into parts. These parts may operate totally unaware of one another or in dialectic conflict with each other, which the survivor experiences as psychological distress. Therefore, processes that involve raising awareness between these parts and encouraging healthy relationships between them can lead to a more harmonious state of consciousness (Siegel, 2010).

Not only can we directly streamline character enactment in role-playing games within the context of these “cousin” practices in therapeutic circles (Lukka, 2013; Burns, 2014; Linnamäki, 2019; Diakolambrianou, 2021), we can also extrapolate that the same benefits to well-being that psychologists attribute to creativity and play are possible within RPG communities. Through narra-



tive embodiment, RPGs allow us to work with parts of our psyche that would otherwise be difficult, uncomfortable, or even psychologically destabilizing to approach; such work is a key component to individuation. In other words, character enactment in role-playing games can be used intentionally as a vehicle to develop more authentic, empowered, individuated, balanced, and integrated self-concepts in daily life.

#### 4. Identities as part of a whole

Some psychological theories view the self as part of a whole, which may include both unconscious and transpersonal contents. For example, the *person-centered* therapeutic approach developed by Carl Rogers (1959) in the early 1940s views the person as an organism: a holistic entity in which the biological, psychological, and social aspects of existence are intertwined and inseparable. Each organism is believed to have an inherent *actualizing tendency*: an internal force that promotes the organism's survival, differentiation, and evolution. Within this framework, the self-concept is a part of the organism; it consists of the elements of our internal and external experiences that we view as relating to us. However, this self-concept is often distorted by our conditions of worth, i.e., our perception of what our environment and the important "others" in our lives expect from us in order to accept us and regard us positively. This distortion can lead to us only allowing some parts of our authentic self to enter our self-awareness and get integrated into our self-image, while other parts of us — the ones that are negatively regarded or deemed unacceptable by our environment — are suppressed, distorted, or denied. This notion is similar to D. W. Winnicott (1960)'s dichotomy between the authentic self and the false self (described above), as well as Freud's concept of repression.

As with psychodynamic theory, the personality is not viewed by the person-centered approach as an entity that is stable, unidimensional, and harmoniously integrated. According to later theorists like Dave Mearns and Briane Thorne, the self is a mosaic of configurations: a range of differentiated self-concepts that appear in different circumstances (Mearns, Thorne, and McLeod, 2013). Each of these *configurations of self* represents a coherent pattern of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and each one has different needs, desires, and views of the world. According to the situational circumstances, different configurations arise within us — even in the course of a common day — without us necessarily being aware of the process. The coexistence of these configurations within us can be harmonious and functional, or a cause of constant conflict and distress, depending on many factors relating to our life experiences, personality, structure, and levels of self-awareness.

In role-playing settings, when participants create characters and stories that are consciously more on the *close-to-home* scale, they are essentially staying closer to their self-image and their symbolized experiences. Although they do not drift far from their comfort zone, this process may



still hold therapeutic value if it allows them to explore their self-concept and internalized behavioral patterns, i.e., the behaviors that align with their conditions of worth. Most importantly, such a process may help players gain more insight and understanding as to how and why these patterns have been formed within them, in what instances they arise, and how they influence their interactions with others: other players, but also other people in their lives. For example, a person who, in real life, feels the need to always be useful to others: this condition of worth would probably influence how this person connects and relates to family, partners, friends, even colleagues and authority figures. It would dictate that this person needs to be “useful to others” everywhere. Therefore, a close-to-home character of that person is very likely to follow the same pattern, also needing to be useful to other players. However, meaningful debriefing and processing may help them locate and identify this “useful to others” condition of worth, and then work on how and why they have internalized it, what it means for them, and how it might impact their life choices.

The further players drift away from their comfort zone and into a range of characters and stories that — at least seemingly — appear to be far from their self-image, the therapeutic value of the material may increase, as they may be exploring the uncharted waters of parts of their authentic self that have been suppressed or denied. This notion corresponds with shadow work through role-playing, as described above. Furthermore, players may be experimenting with alternative ways of being that can more easily arise in the safe environment that alibi provides them with during role-playing. According to the person-centered perspective, what they will be portraying and exploring will always be some configuration(s) of their self, which can either be close to their awareness and self-image or further away. This closeness depends on the level of challenge they choose to present themselves with each time, as well as how they perceive their self-concept at any given moment.

From this person-centered perspective, Virginia Axline developed Nondirective Play Therapy, later called Child-centered Play Therapy (CCPT), an approach in which she sees the combination of the play process with the relationship built between therapist and child as a vehicle of psychotherapeutic potential. Axline (1991) identified eight core principles of CCPT:

1. The therapeutic relationship must be engaging, inviting, and warm from the beginning.
2. The child must be unconditionally accepted by the therapist.
3. The therapeutic environment must be totally non-judgmental for the child to feel uninhibited and willing to express emotions, feelings, and behaviors.
4. The therapist must be attentive and sensitive to the child’s behaviors in order to provide reflective behaviors back to the child; this way they may develop self-awareness.

5. The child must be able to find solutions to their problems whenever possible. This way the child understands that they are solely responsible for the changes in behavior that they do not make.
6. Through dialogue and actions, the therapist acts as a shadow, allowing the child to lead the way through this therapeutic journey.
7. The therapist recognizes that the procedure is steady and should progress at the child's pace.
8. The only limitations are ones that ensure that the therapeutic process stays genuine and the child remains in the realm of reality, i.e., that they are aware of their purpose and role in the therapy.

Person-centered theory describes the actualizing tendency: an inherent force that drives each of us towards our individual potential without a positive or negative connotation, similar to an internal GPS that guides us to actualizing ourselves. When a human is born, the actualizing tendency is the only force guiding their actions: the baby is hungry so it eats, it wants to explore the world, it asks for attention, etc. Therefore, a holistic organismic internal evaluating process guides our actions because we have not yet formed a self-concept as infants.

As we grow up, two processes start happening. First, we gradually develop the self-concept and the consciousness of self. Second, we start getting feedback from the environment, i.e., significant people and society, about what parts of ourselves are acceptable and which are not. Given that we also have an inherent need for positive regard, we will inevitably internalize at least some (if not all) of these conditions that the environment sets to give us positive regard, and thus they will become internal conditions of worth, e.g., "I am only worthy when I am productive". This notion relates loosely to the relationship between ego, id, and superego described above; narrative identity; and the social construction of identity, i.e., the personal identity of "productive".

Such conditions can become ensconced in our core beliefs. The result is that these conditions of worth start influencing and dictating our self-image, leading us to distort or even deny external or internal experiences that contradict the Ideal Self, which in this context, is the self as dictated by the conditions of worth. According to the person-centered theory, this distortion is the root cause of stress, anxiety, and almost all types of psychopathology, which then person-centered theory of therapy attempts to "heal" through empathy, self-acceptance, and authenticity. This practice is similar to other therapeutic techniques that emphasize self-compassion, such as Gestalt therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and mindfulness.

With regard to connecting person-centered therapy in role-playing games, several thoughts emerge. First, the configurations of self can help explain how easily we can shift from one charac-

ter to another, as well as why we need alibi as a tool to access these suppressed parts of ourselves through immersion into character (Bowman, 2018). Instead of needing to develop a hypothetical *theory of mind* distinct from their own perspective, as Piaget describes, role-players are accessing different configurations of identity that lay dormant within themselves. Also, though role-playing experiences are technically fictional, the player fully experiences them, so new configurations of self are possible to develop through the process of bleed paired with reflection (see e.g., Hugaas, 2019, 2022). Second, many of Axline's core principles are applicable not only to fostering a perception of safety between facilitators and players in psychotherapeutic contexts, but are likely also helpful in leisure contexts (Diakolambrianou, 2022). Third, exploring new, dormant, or rejected configurations of self within a context that feels safe such as a role-playing game can help players access and practice enacting a self that feels more authentic (Diakolambrianou, 2021). As mentioned above, this process is especially helpful for people who have experienced marginalization (Kemper, 2017; Baird, 2021) and can be undertaken purposefully by participants through a process known as *liberatory steering* in an effort to *wyrd the self* (Kemper, 2020), i.e., use role-playing as a conscious tool to experience personal transformation and emancipation.

### **Other Therapeutic Applications of Drama and Role-playing**

Now that we have explored the complexity of identity at length from different perspectives, in this section, we will mention a few additional examples of drama and role-playing in therapeutic contexts. The most obvious connections are various therapeutic role-playing practices in which the therapist takes the identity of someone the client is afraid to confront, giving the client space and opportunity to experiment with new behaviors. This practice is usually encountered not as a standalone therapeutic process, but as a technique that can be used within the framework of various psychotherapeutic approaches. An example is Gestalt Therapy, where viewing the present moment is central to experience and processing those contents can be approached through role-playing. Examples include the Empty Chair technique, in which clients role-play speaking to an absent person or a part of themselves as if they were in the room; and the Topdog-Underdog, in which one part of the self representing social expectations confronts another part of the self representing self-sabotage.

However, in some approaches and practices, drama and role-playing are the main element and medium of the approach itself. The term "role-playing" was coined by Jacob L. Moreno, whose study of child's play led him to develop his techniques of psychodrama and sociodrama (Blatner, 2004). While Moreno did not self-identify as a psychoanalyst, he developed therapeutic play techniques for individual and group therapy, emphasizing the importance of role-playing as a tool to improve mental health and well-being. He invented psychodrama in the early 1920s, a psycho-

therapeutic method of exploring internal conflicts by dramatically reconstructing them in a group setting, usually under the direction of a trained psychodramatist. Moreno describes psychodrama as “an action method” and “a scientific exploration of truth through dramatic art” (Moreno, 1946, 37-44). His improvisational and political approach to theater — rooted in his earlier groundbreaking work called Theatre of Spontaneity — is evident not only in his theory of psychodrama but also in his later work on sociodrama. Sociodrama is a method used for groups to reenact and explore social situations of conflict and oppression, which would, in the 1970s, become the foundation for Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (Castillo, 2013).

The strongest theoretical link between role-playing and psychodrama is Moreno’s approach to the dramatic role as an acting and interacting entity: something that humans actively embody and not passively wear. This view was contrary to the paradigm of his time that viewed dramatic roles cognitively, as a part of the self that has been absorbed by the mind (Landy, 1993, 52-54). On the other hand, a major difference can be located in the methodological directivity of psychodrama; although spontaneity is necessary and desired in the content that participants bring and the way they engage with it in the psychodramatic session, the director (psychodramatist) leads the process by instructing and guiding them through selected exercises and techniques (Jennings and Minde, 1993, 28-31). Interestingly, many of the techniques used in psychodrama and sociodrama can arise organically in role-playing games as conscious or unconscious player choices.

Drama Therapy is a broad term, referring to the application of the art of drama in various frameworks and settings with the aim of creating a therapeutic, remedial, and useful experience for the participants. In his book *Drama as Therapy – Theatre as Living*, dramatherapist Phil Jones (2007) identifies and describes nine core processes that occur in dramatherapy, thus explaining its psychotherapeutic effectiveness: 1) Dramatic Projection; 2) Therapeutic Performance Process; 3) Drama Therapeutic Empathy and Distancing; 4) Personification and Impersonation; 5) Interactive Audience and Witnessing; 6) Embodiment; 7) Playing; 8) Life-Drama Connection; and 9) Transformation. All these processes can be observed in role-playing games, and particularly encouraged in role-playing games designed for transformation (Berg, 2016; Mendoza, 2020; Diakolambrianou, 2022; Kilmer, Davis, Kilmer, and Johns, 2023).

Fixed Role Therapy was developed by George Kelley in 1955. It is a form of brief, constructivist and dramaturgical therapy in which the therapist encourages the client to enact a new role (written by the therapist) for about 2 weeks. The goal of this embodiment is to try alternative views of the self and the world. It is based on Kelly’s theory that suggests people develop *personal constructs*, which are essentially mental representations about how the world works. They then use these constructs to make sense of their observations and to interpret information and experiences. Kelly also believed that all events are open to multiple interpretations, an idea which he referred to

as constructive alternativism. When individuals are trying to make sense of an event or situation, they are able to select the construct they want to use as a lens through which to interpret the experience. This process can happen as the event unfolds, but also when reflecting back on the experience (Kelly, 1955; 1963). Players who engage in one specific role-playing character for long periods of time are assuming a form of FIxed Role, although within a fictional setting rather than daily life.

These are but a few of many examples that require unpacking to further understand the psychological processes underpinning them, as well as their relationship to role-playing game practices.

#### IV. Conclusion

This article provides a theoretical exploration of identity, with the following research questions guiding its approach:

- 1) How can existing psychological and counseling concepts help explain the phenomenon of role-playing?
- 2) How are role-playing games experiences similar or different from other psychological states, as described by theory?
- 3) How can role-playing games give insight into the nature of identity, defined in various ways?
- 4) Given these connections, how can role-playing games best be employed as a vehicle of personal and social change?

With regard to the first question, we have synthesized existing psychological and counseling concepts with regard to how they tend to describe the nature of identity, establishing four categories: identity as a social construct, narrative identity, identity as psychodynamic, and identities as parts of a whole. These categories help broaden our understanding of the phenomenon of role-playing games, in that the purported distinction between “player” and “character” is far more complex than players are often comfortable acknowledging. Embracing the multifaceted nature of identity can help us identify areas for personal and social growth that can be catalyzed within role-playing games as transformational containers (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021; Baird & Bowman, 2022).

With regard to the second question, enacting characters in role-playing games are quite similar to the altered states of consciousness explored in various counseling modalities, e.g., Psychodrama, Gestalt Therapy, Internal Family Systems, Dissociative Identity therapy, etc. One distinction is the context within which these games are played, i.e., the collective understanding of the goals of leisure play vs. therapeutic or educational play. However, some players claim that leisure

role-playing games can have therapeutic impacts (see e.g., Bowman 2010), and thus the benefits of role-playing seem to transcend context to some degree, adding credence to its overall transformative potential. Furthermore, these therapeutic modalities often focus on quite narrow parameters for play, role creation, spontaneous co-creation, and agency to affect the fictional world, while role-playing games expand these parameters considerably. This potential has led many therapists to use role-playing games as vehicles for therapeutic processes in recent years (Gutierrez, 2017; Atanasio, 2020; Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett 2021; Bartenstein, 2022a, 2022b; Diakolambrianou 2021, 2022; Connell, 2023; Kilmer, Davis, Kilmer, & Johns 2023). A growing research trend involves evaluating such applied practices (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Mendoza, 2020; Causo & Quinlan 2021; Henrich, Sören, & Worthington, 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, & Kotera, 2022; Varrette, et al. 2023).

From this perspective, with regard to the third question, role-playing games themselves can provide powerful insights into the nature of identity, especially in a world that tends to view identity as fixed by social labels and/or stable personality traits. By exploring identity in the metacognitive state of role-playing, in which players are both self and character at the same time, players can come to the awareness that their identity is not fixed, but rather malleable. This awareness can be used to realize that some aspects of one's life narrative can sometimes be similarly altered if one realizes one's own capacity to shape it, just as one can in role-playing games (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021).

Given these principles, while thorough exploration of the many ways in which the transformative power of role-playing games can be maximized is beyond the scope of this paper, broadening our conception of identity in play can help players, designers, and facilitators target specific impacts more effectively. Such an understanding can, for example, impact the way workshops and debriefs are designed, with a greater emphasis on the working with characters as meaningful parts of the landscape of selfhood rather than disavowed projections that exist outside one's own experience. As such, role-players can still refer to "character" and "player" as shorthand for aspects of experience that are vastly more complex and interwoven. From this perspective, role-playing gives us a fascinating view into our own inner workings in ways that other modalities struggle to achieve.

This short exploration of the theoretical and practical intersections between role-playing game studies, psychology, and counseling illustrates the complexities involved in understanding consciousness and identity. Necessarily, many related concepts in this field were not possible to include, as the landscape of theories aiming to understand both the psychology of play and identity is expansive. As such, this work should be understood as laying groundwork rather than exploring each topic with great nuance or comprehensively describing all relevant theories pertaining to identity. Future work will expand upon these connections, further interweaving their explanatory



potential for the benefit of all three fields, with an emphasis on considering goals of personal and social transformation through role-playing games. Ultimately, while consciousness may be impossible to fully articulate and understand, the meaning-making process involved in exploring identity on- and off-game is valuable in and of itself.

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