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Examining The Implications Of Tabletop Roleplaying Games For Use In Leadership Development: An Integrative Review

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EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES FOR
USE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Abstract

Role-playing games are frequently used within the social sciences to study several aspects of the human experience and development. Existing research suggests that role-playing games encourage the development of critical and strategic decision-making, teamwork, and creative thinking, all behaviors integral to the development of lasting leadership competencies. This integrative review theorizes using TRPG roleplay games as unconventional tools for skill development and examines the implications for leadership applications. This inductive approach revealed a comprehensive picture of the importance of TRPGs integration into leadership development programs. It is at the intersection between creativity and leadership where organizational leaders have the potential to develop creativity training interventions to enhance and increase leaders' creative potential and emotional creativity.

Keywords: Dungeons and Dragons, leadership development, change management, TRPGs, creativity.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	v
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Background	3
Dungeons and Dragons	5
Organization’s Unique Uses with TRPGs	7
Fueled Growth	8
Language and Definitions Surrounding Gamified Learning Theory	9
Leadership Theories and Models Used in Gaming Theory	11
Sloan Leadership Model	11
Situational Leadership Model	11
Adaptive Leadership	12
The Transformational Framework Model	12
Transforming Leadership	13
Problem Identification	13
Chapter Two: Method	14
Literature Search	15
Limitations	16
Data Evaluation	16
Data Analysis and Interpretation	19
Chapter Three: Findings	19
Finding One: Interpersonal Communications and Group Benefits	20
Community, Collaboration, and Ties to Social Achievements	21
Adult Play and Real-World Applications	22
Risk and Failure	23
Emotional Intelligence	24
“Bleed” and Navigation of Experiences	25
Finding Two: Intrapersonal Communications and Social Benefits	26
Mental Health and Anxiety Reduction	26
Relationships and Effects on Loneliness	28

Identity.....	29
Finding Three: Leadership skills development	30
Motivation	31
Autonomy	32
Competency	33
Relatedness	33
Critical Thinking	34
Crisis Leadership	34
Adaptability	35
Flexibility.....	36
Creativity	36
Finding Four: Discussions Against Predetermined Player Transformation in TRPGs.....	38
Gamification as Stultification.....	39
Chapter Four: Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research	40
References.....	43
Appendix A.....	54
Appendix B.....	57

List of Figures

Figure 1. Flow Diagram of Integrative Review (adapted from PRISMA, 2009)..... 19

Chapter One: Introduction

Tabletop roleplaying games are traditionally played around a table and have an inherent social engagement functionality built into the foundations of the game. The game relies on the social interactions between players and their Game Master (GM) to create the play experience and drive the story's narrative through small group communication. The use of imagination, social interaction, role-play, adoption of new perspectives, and shifting roles are all significant components of the game that can provide a feeling of inclusion for players (Bowman, 2010). It also allows players to practice skill sets that can be used outside the game.

Many leading researchers in leadership studies have explored the transferability of skills. With many therapeutic processes, the goal is to incorporate lessons learned into subsequent interactions with others and society. In a recent study utilizing TRPGs in a therapeutic setting, researchers noted that participants exhibited increased confidence and ability to confront others during gameplay. These aptitudes were traditionally difficult for the participants to express and consistently espoused skills learned and practiced with the interpersonal issues and conflicts that arose in their daily lives (Strauss & Burnett, 2021).

In the plethora of research in leadership, few studies specifically address how leadership qualities can be developed, transferred, and maintain permeance alongside regular gameplay of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). This paper aims to illustrate a literature gap and integrate existing TRPG literature as it relates to leadership applications.

Transition and transformation are incredibly challenging aspects of the human experience, regardless of the context. With organizations increasingly requiring and valuing skills markedly different than those regarded by the educational system, adults are subsequently

finding themselves in situations where skills need to be learned and developed for the world today but face barriers. Traditional educational practices often hinder creativity by imposing high-stakes failure, standardization, and emphasizing singular answers (Qian & Clark, 2016). In contrast, TRPGs and game-based learning necessitate developing communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptive leadership competencies.

Critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity have been addressed in many educational games of uncomplicated design to encourage retention and real-world application. Entertainment games can promote meaningful learning by providing players with situations in which players can practice adaptability and encourage curiosity, self-expression, discovery, immersion, collaboration, low-stake failure, and clear goals (Qian & Clark, 2016). Situational learning can increase motivation and engagement using TRPGs, providing opportunities for both players and organizations to benefit and encourage growth that can shape learning optimization. The increasing academic recognition of applied RPG theory and its innovative approach, the models of behavior change, and adoption provide valuable insight into the viability of leadership development applications throughout the training, organizational, and gaming communities.

Faced with complex and dynamic problems in organizational contexts, efforts to facilitate the development of creative leadership benefit from focusing on interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal development. Developing positive relationships that facilitate individual level and team level creativity using narrative facilitation is crucial in the role of effective leadership. TRPGs provide opportunities for intentional group processes and dynamics to happen organically. When the environment holds space and psychological safety for the players to enhance and practice interpersonal effectiveness, the creative climate, leader-member exchange,

empowerment, and transformational leadership may be presented during times of local, organizational, or national change.

By participating in environments that allow individuals to explore social roles, test new ideas, and develop skills through practice with a lower risk of failure, learning outcomes are more likely to be developed with a significant improvement in critical thinking skills and the retention of those skills months later (Yang & Chang, 2013). Vygotsky (1978) states that learning takes place when it is social, active, and situated and that play is conducive to learning. As new training tools, technologies, and applications emerge, awareness, openness, and alignment with theories and capabilities impact TRPGs' inclusivity in leadership development practices.

Background

Tabletop roleplaying games have been a part of mainstream culture since the creation of *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) in 1974. However, the strategy and fantasy foundations of the game have been historically influenced by literature, entertainment, and war. For as long as there has been large-scale warfare, there has been a form of strategic gameplay to enhance skills and prowess on the battlefield. To find evidence of this, we only have to look to history. The Roman Colosseum was built to hold historical battle reenactment; the nobles of ancient Han China would pit their military against each other in games of skill; the tournaments of jousts, melees, and archery of the Middle Ages. These battle reenactments, skill games, and tournaments shifted from initial strategic military practices to public entertainment. Notably, the practice of roleplay became prominently influenced by Arthurian romance literature, and individuals would take on the roles of historical nobles, knights, and pages. The *Pas d'Armes* of the Golden Tree, held in 1468 for the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold's marriage to Margaret of York, is one such

example of this shift. The *Pas d'Armes* was a spectacularly lavish and chivalrous roleplaying mode of entertainment at the end of the 11th and beginning of the 12th centuries in northern France and the Low Countries. Traditionally taking place over an extended period of days, weeks, or months, individuals showcased sportsmanship, skills, and the event became a place of political, social, cultural, and artistic performance and spectacle (Brown-Grant, 2019).

Despite the prevalence of strategic roleplaying games and events utilized for proficiency-building throughout history, modern mainstream media has been highly influential in shaping an ever-changing opinion of TRPGs and those who play them. (Laycock, 2015). The enormous success of the television shows *Stranger Things* and *Vox Machina*; live-play streaming games *Critical Roll*, *Dimension 20*, *High Rollers*; and a recently announced unnamed *Dungeons and Dragons* movie, the media has embraced the once-seen negative nerd culture as an acceptable form of entertainment and trendy. However, negative stereotypes remain, and the public still lacks an essential understanding of TRPGs. Players find themselves navigating the sociocultural perceptions and labels of being antisocial, socially awkward, and having unhealthy obsessive traits. Regardless of critics' negative characterization surrounding gaming culture, researchers continue to discover evidence to the contrary. It has been established that tabletop role-playing games are a collaborative creation that allows players to foster and enhance individual, social, and societal growth (Daniau, 2016; Bowman & Liberoth, 2018), resulting in character and skill development that has a measurable impact (Tariq and Abonamah, 2021). Players have reported intense experiences involving collective and interactive storytelling, where they exercised identity, creativity, and agency practices (Tannenbaum and Tannenbaum, 2010; Cover, 2010).

Tabletop role-playing games are unique in their ability to serve as a focus of research across fields, including but not limited to educational, therapeutic, and social intervention (Robinson,

2008). TRPGs aims to improve players' abilities to manage change, increase communication and leadership skills, develop decisiveness, and better understand how they experience the world (Daniau, 2016). The expanded growth, interest, and popularity among collaborative, improvisational, and structured TRPGs creates prime opportunities for researchers to investigate the developmental, therapeutic, and practical uses of TRPGs for leadership development. Potential benefits of playing TRPGs have been observed among educators, researchers, psychologists, and collaborators. Roleplaying is a tool to reveal, develop and practice several soft skills, including creativity and leadership (Daniau, 2010), and prepare for unfamiliar or difficult situations.

To acknowledge the heightened popularity of TRPGs without addressing the historical and current prevalence of controversies surrounding *Dungeons and Dragons* would be remiss. Doing so provides a better understanding of its history and context, those who play the game, and its impact on out-of-game life situations and relationships.

Dungeons and Dragons

Introduced in 1974 by Gary Gygax, *Dungeons and Dragons* was the first tabletop roleplaying game that combined board games with pseudo-theatrical roleplay (Drachen, 2008). Players participate as a group of adventurers of different races and backgrounds, each with a unique backstory. Exploring fantastical worlds, battling monsters, avoiding (or contributing) to political strife, interacting as mercenaries, or becoming hired hands tasked with quests given by infamous, politically stationed noble-born, non-player characters (NPCs) in exchange for favor or coin, is all possible within a developing narrative stunningly orchestrated by the Game Master (GM). Taking the role of the game narrator, the GM sets the stage and places obstacles in the players' paths. Risk and chance are deeply rooted in the game, as a twenty-sided die roll often decides the outcomes of actions.

Despite its initial popularity, *Dungeons and Dragons* became a hot-button issue for parents as fears of the psychological impact of the game rose. The 1980s Satanic Panic became a catalyst for the game to come under a fundamentalist religious assault from groups who feared what the game could do to influence young minds (Allison, 2014; Laycock, 2015). The media ran with and fed off the unfounded fears of parents. The satanic ritual abuse claims were pushed more into the limelight by overzealous law enforcement, unsubstantiated claims, and coercive and suggestive interrogation by therapists and prosecutors. The notion that youth of the '80s were being lured into satanic worshipping cults and committing violent crimes was falsely reported by the media and was given further credibility with continued serial killer media coverage. The 1982 Tom Hanks film *Mazes and Monsters* grossly portrayed and implied that participation in TRPGs caused an immediate psychological crisis for players in the game and successfully enhanced a national fear while doing little to convince parents otherwise. A dark spiral of paranoia swept the United States, and *Dungeons and Dragons* soon became an 'underground' culture. It would continue to hold onto this status as a game for outcasts for decades until the entertainment industry deemed nerd culture mainstream, and pop culture began to shift.

However, Gygax's original D&D source materials codified epistemologies of race essentialism (Rogers, 2020). Racism and the use of "the other" was rampant throughout the source materials, systematizing monstrous humanoids as blatant stand-ins for non-European appearing characters. Misogyny and sexism were also widespread throughout the source materials, with original editions dictating female characters having negative strength modifiers (Gygax, 1979) with overtly highly sexualized imagery of the female body (Garcia, 2017). In the 1970s, D&D culture prioritized the accuracy of simulation over the ethics of simulation, and rape culture was radically rationalized (Trammell, 2014).

In 2014, when the Wizards of the Coast Ltd (WotC) purchased the rights to D&D and released the fifth edition of the *Player's Handbook*, the developers actively addressed the lack of inclusivity and problematic ideologies, including sexism, toxic masculinity, male power fantasies, and racism (Garcia, 2017). Current editions and re-releases, such as the *Curse of Strahd* and *Tomb of Annihilation*, have been under heavy criticism about the race mechanics and harmful stereotypes associated with problematic gameplay. Over time, players and developers have been addressing these embedded issues with the diversification of gaming spaces, the development and incorporation of academic investigation, and integration into community nonprofits and group therapies. While there remains work to be done, contemporary efforts have come a long way from the problematic origins of D&D to expand the positive aspects of TRPG experiences.

Organization's Unique Uses with TRPGs

The *Transformative Play Initiative* at Uppsala University engages in research to explore questions surrounding games' transformability and if it impacts us in profound, meaningful, and lasting ways leading to shifts of perspective, empowerment, engagement, and awareness. *Game to Grow* is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the use of games for therapeutic, educational, and community growth through weekly skills groups for individuals living with challenges such as ADHD, autism, depression, and social anxiety. Around the world, participants of *Game to Grow* have increased their creativity and become more confident and socially capable through the use of TRPGs, notably *Dungeons and Dragons*. *Role Play Lead* similarly works to support the social skill growth of teens living with anxiety and mental health illness through leadership development, while *Let Grow Play Clubs* are popping up in schools and communities, encouraging mixed-age play, promoting leadership, conflict resolution, empathy, and responsibility. Additionally, mental health clinicians have adopted roleplaying games in telehealth group therapies to facilitate individual growth in

group contexts with noticeable emergence of patterns around group development and change acceptance (Eisenman and Bernstein, 2021).

Fueled Growth

Spurred by the 2014 release of the 5th Edition by Wizards of the Coast (WoTC), *Dungeons and Dragons* saw its game grow in popularity, having its highest growth in sales and new players in 2020. In part, the growth of the game's popularity stemmed from the creative agency players have over complicated rules systems for intentional social interaction and collaboration with others. This form of collective creativity in TRPGs is needed for transformational leadership (Lasley, 2020) as it allows for change and the development of a shared understanding.

The COVID19 pandemic further fueled *Dungeon and Dragons*' popularity by connecting people during a time of isolation through an ability to be played virtually via video conferencing software and virtual tabletops. This allowed players and their GMs to play as if they were sitting at the table in person (Scriven, 2020). "These games operate on different communicative levels of interaction from intrapersonal to interpersonal and within emotional, psychological, and social capacities; all of which are performed in the voluntary and encapsulated space of the game" (Rogers, 2020, p. 15). Many utilize role-playing games to manage uncertainties, escape from real-life danger and develop in-game creative solutions and strategies to maneuver out-of-game experiences that require emotional regulation (Caro and Popovac, 2021), conflict resolution (Abbott, Strauss, and Allen, 2020), communication (Adams, 2013; Bateman, 2018; Cao et al., 2018; Sousa and Rocha, 2019) navigation of personal or communal crisis' (Powley and Taylor, 2010; Clemson and Samara, 2013), mental health and recovery (Causo and Quinlan, 2021), and identity alteration (Bowman, 2018; Rodgers, 2020).

Role-playing games provide an environment for players to reinforce factual knowledge, apply strategy and theory, and develop critical thinking skills while developing communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Soft skills that are developed can later be used as a tool include creativity, leadership, and adaptability (Daniau, 2016). Thus, creating prime opportunities for scholars, researchers, and leaders to further explore in-depth implications and connections between soft skill development in roleplaying games for use in leadership applications.

Language and Definitions Surrounding Gamified Learning Theory

Authors and researchers may interchange the terms gamification, game-based learning and teaching, serious games, and simulation, which may cause confusion. Although there are some similarities, there are operational differences. Regardless of the term chosen by those using game-based learning, many researchers agree that game-based education increases the motivation level of learners due to the situational knowledge that occurs and the autonomy it provides (Coe, 2017; Gerdenitsch et al., 2020; Tariq, 2021). There has been misunderstandings and malapropism around gamification and game-based learning. The definitions, acronyms and various criticisms around GBL are included below for clarity.

Game-Based Learning (GBL). Game-based learning (GBL) has been used for decades to enhance deep learning. GBL is a learning approach driven by game technologies (Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Sousa & Costa, 2014; Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2003) and that learning results from playing the game. Game-based learning encompasses fun, play, engagement, serious learning, and interactive entertainment. GBL is a pedagogical (K-12) or andragogical (adult) approach to learning defined as “a type of gameplay that has defined learning outcomes” (Ahmed & Sutton, 2017). GBL is designed to balance subject matter with the real world and describes an approach to teaching where students explore relevant aspects of games in a learning context designed

specifically for teachers. Teachers and students collaborate to add depth and perspective to the experience of playing the game.

Gamification. Gamification can be defined as integrating game theory and design, game elements, aesthetics, and game mechanics into a learning or work experience. Gamification of processes, products, and services increases engagement of employees, managers, and customers. The results can be demonstrated in terms of creative thinking, effective and efficient workplace and customer service activities, improved participation and loyalty, increased knowledge acquisition and application, increased performance management, innovative business practices, and organizational and cultural transformation. However, if it is not implemented well, it can result in an over reliance on extrinsic reward motivation and miss the benefits.

Serious Games. Serious games are games in which education in various forms is the primary goal rather than entertainment (Chen & Martin, 2006). The learning process is driven by game technologies, methods of teaching, and targeted training. Learning materializes both in-game and out-of-game through defined complementary activities predetermined and structured around the game by the instructor (Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Tariq, 2021). They involve pedagogy, activities that educate or instruct and impart skill knowledge. They are explicit and contain carefully thought-out educational purposes and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement. It does not mean that serious games are not, or should not be amusing (Zyda, 2005).

Simulations. An educational learning tool driven by game design principles such as competition, achievements, and the rewards system (Kapp, 2012). Learning occurs because of designed activities and challenges within the game and is enhanced by the successes and failures of players. Simulations narrow the focus of serious gaming. Simulation is imitation of reality, used throughout millennia for training, entertainment, and explanation. The games of *Go*, *Chess*

or *Risk* are representative, well-known simulations, while less visible game-based learning simulations would include *SimCity*, *Harvard's case study: Columbia's Final Mission*, or *Planet Jockey Leadership Development*. Simulations combine and encompass a range of multi-sensory experiences including video, audio, motion, haptic, and olfactory. Simulations are often categorized into three categories: live, virtual, and constructive.

Leadership Theories and Models Used in Gaming Theory

Sloan Leadership Model

The Sloan Leadership model developed by MIT faculty Deborah Ancona et al. (2007) is a guiding framework many researchers utilize when investigating leadership qualities in role players. This model was recently updated to include a centralized pillar, building credibility, thus renaming the framework the '4 Capabilities Leadership Framework (4-Caps+).' Key leadership capabilities identified by this model include sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing with the anchoring node of building credibility. This model demonstrates the importance of gaining respect from others by keeping commitments, creating trust, and operating with a keen sense of purpose. It allows leaders to discover their unique characteristics for managing and creating change. Leaders build trust, respect, and authenticity with their teams by drawing upon their values, skills, experience, tactics, and personality.

Situational Leadership Model

The situational leadership theory developed by Paul Hershey and Kenneth Blanchard (1993) is a flexible and adaptable style of leadership that determines whether a leader is more directive or supportive based on the follower's individualized needs and leans into two concepts: leadership itself and the development level of the follower. Situational leaders strategically

deploy their leadership qualities and create better outcomes through intentional personal modifications to positively influence team members and get everyone working towards a collective vision. This leadership model encourages leaders to consider the team members they serve, and the uniqueness of every situation and individual and thus creates a democratic environment and promotes adaptability and flexibility. Situational leadership presents itself within the GM the most frequently through the cyclical process of situational challenge. Whether a social challenge with a nonplayer character (NPC) or tactical combat, the core process continually changes and evolves the narrative. As players make choices, the GM presents interactions, outcomes, and consequences in a repeated series of exchanges, until the players succeed or fail in the challenge.

Adaptive Leadership

Change comes with personal, social, organizational, or political turbulence. Leaders who utilize adaptive leadership strategies, such as creative leadership and change management, mobilize people to tackle tough challenges in the face of transition (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009).

The Transformational Framework Model

Transformational games are those that are developed with the intention of changing players in a specific way that transfers and persists beyond the game. By combining the game design process with a transformational design process, developers and game designers can address the limitations that result from adaptation and support the goals of transformation inherently in the experiences created (Culyba, 2018). The Transformational Framework model developed by Culyba (2018) is used for transformational game design and contains three hallmarks: intention, transfer, and persistence. However, if a player exhibits a change and it only manifests in the game

– for example, a behavior change or a skill gain – the goal of demonstrated change outside the game context is not met. The same can be said if the change disappears once the game ends, the goal for aspect persistence is unsuccessful.

Transforming Leadership

The use of transforming leadership assists leaders in evolving from transactional brokers into designers of social interaction systems and social change (Burns, 2003), allowing players of TRPGs to become active participants and designers of their experience (Lasley, 2020). While transition and transformation are incredibly difficult to navigate, a group of players can intentionally engage in learning about their experience through a transformative role-playing game. This helps participants realize that they can create and adapt to a fictional world and explore the meaning of their experience, personal development and learning process through their personal journey in a collaborative manner (Daniau, 2016).

Problem Identification

Research on role-playing games and their influence on individuals is extensive and multidisciplinary. Still, within leadership literature, the prevalence of data regarding TRPGs, adaptive challenges, and creative leadership development is limited. There have been discussions amongst researchers about the emergent intersection of TRPGs, leadership research, and in what directions it can go. Including roleplaying as practice, leadership as practice, how to study and quantify it, levels of analysis, and to what level of in-game control do you exert to get viable results (Lasley, et al., 2022).

This paper is an integrative review of the literature investigating the use of role-playing games as unconventional tools for skill development and examines the implications for creative

leadership application. An integrative literature review method outlined by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) was used to investigate existing literature, and how the use of TRPGs could be organized to begin integration into leadership applications. The following questions guided the initial research:

1. How does the existing literature frame the use of TRPGs in leadership work?
 - a. What impacts or benefits of TRPGs are related to leadership? Are role-playing games theoretically associated with a transference of skills?
 - b. In the context of roleplaying games, how does leadership exist? How can we understand leadership in different contexts?
2. How does the character creation, development, and role play in-game help players enhance their understanding of leadership or development skills?
 - a. What impact do skills learned in-game have on the integration of leadership skills out-of-game?
 - b. What are the ideas and theoretical inferences within the scholarship of role-playing games that relate to their use in creativity, social skills, and adaptive behaviors?

Chapter Two: Method

A five-stage integrative literature review has been chosen due to its potential outcomes associated with the process, summarization of existing knowledge, identifying research gaps, and informing future research and practice. A more comprehensive understanding of phenomenology can be created by utilizing this process. The methodology followed is one created by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) and was picked due to its ability to synthesize literature from various sources.

It allows for the inclusion of different methodologies and considers multiple perspectives. In contrast to systemic reviews, primary studies that applied qualitative and mixed methods were also included. The five stages include problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis and interpretation, and presentation.

As with all research methods, the maintenance of researcher objectivity is a concern, and it is essential to note that integrative reviews have an increased threat to validity (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Russel, 2005). There may be tendencies for researchers to exclude results that are not congruent with the researcher's existing research, beliefs, and experience. Researchers must ensure scientific validity through documentation and justification of decisions about why data was included or excluded and show how the data support conclusions (Russel, 2005). To account for these concerns, inclusion and exclusion criteria were reviewed by peers.

Literature Search

In compliance with procedures outlined by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), following the problem identification, a further review of the literature was conducted. The following online databases were utilized to search for relevant key terms: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, International Journal of Role-playing, ERIC, JSTOR, and PsycINFO.

A preliminary literature review was conducted to identify search terms relevant to the subject areas. Search terms relating to leadership and tabletop roleplaying games were trialed and the following search terms were developed: truncations of 'tabletop roleplaying games' combined with 'transformational leadership,' 'creativity' (truncated), 'mental health,' 'dungeons and dragons' (truncated), using the Boolean operator 'AND.' A second three-phase search was then undertaken: (i) database search; (ii) incremental search; (iii) applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to focus search.

Inclusion criteria were as follows: peer-reviewed, scholarly journal articles and chapters, published and/or translated in English, original research, systemic review, literature review, theoretical and conceptual articles, case study, conference proceedings and papers, round table events, and position statements. The researcher included all results from 1971 – 2022.

The database search identified 135 articles and an additional twelve primary articles were retrieved by hand searching. Once search results were compiled, and duplicates removed, the author screened each title and abstract. A total of 147 articles were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria to focus the search, and forty articles were discarded. The decision to include or exclude each article was documented with a note made discussing reasoning of exclusion. The remaining articles (n=85) were retained for further assessment against the quality appraisal criteria.

Limitations

The results included in this study are limited to the articles contained in the databases searched. Articles originally published in another language but presented with an English translation were used where those without translation were not. While each database was intentionally chosen due to the depth and breadth of the resource content, readers should note that it is possible that additional resources relevant to this topic exist. Therefore, conclusions made in this study are limited to the content of the data.

Data Evaluation

The data evaluation stage is aimed at assessing the quality of the sources. In this integrative review, the researcher included peer-reviewed, scholarly journal articles, chapters, books, original research, systemic reviews, literature reviews, theoretical and conceptual journal articles, case studies, conference proceedings, and position statements. All of which were screened for quality

and validity. Notes were made so that the results of the study were weighed when considering overall trends, but not used as a focal point in this research. The date ranges that were included stem from 1971 to 2022. Four questions serve as intentions to guide the discovery of research within integrative reviews. They are: What is known? What is the quality of what is known? What should be known? What is the next step for research and practice (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005)?

Following the initial screening, full text of selected studies was retrieved with all articles available. Utilizing comparative strategies for quantitative and mixed method studies, the National Health and Medical Research Council (2009) Evidence Hierarchy was used and ranked each article. Each article was scored against a body of evidence matrix (Table 1) using a four-point scale (Excellent – A; Good – B; Satisfactory – C; and Poor – D) (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009). Studies that scored satisfactory (C) and above were retained for data abstraction and synthesis.

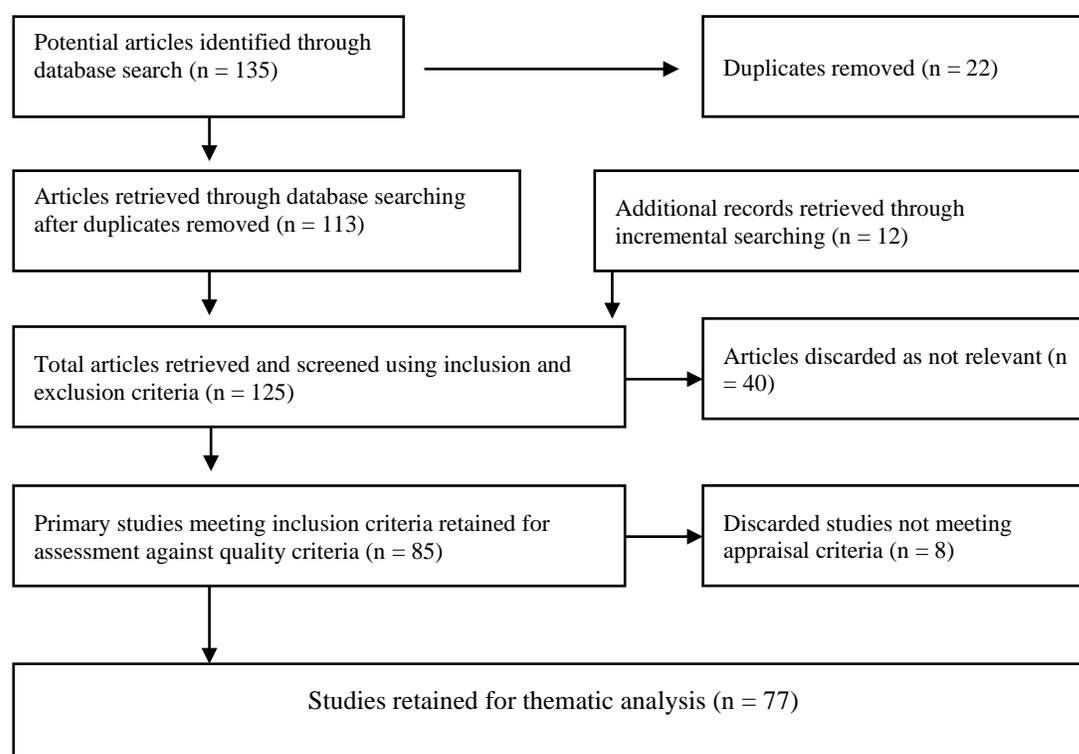
Table 1. Body of evidence matrix

Component	A	B	C	D
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
Evidence Base	One of more level I studies with a low risk of bias or several level II studies with a low risk of bias	One or two level II studies with a low risk of bias or a SR/several level III studies with a low risk of bias	One or two level III studies with a low risk of bias, or level I or II studies with a moderate risk of bias	Level IV studies, or level I to III studies/SRs with a high risk of bias
Consistency	All studies consistent	Most studies consistent and inconsistency may be explained	Some inconsistencies reflecting genuine uncertainty around question	Evidence is inconsistent
Impact	Very large	Substantial	Moderate	Slight or restricted
Generalizability	Populations studied in body of evidence are	Populations studied in the body of evidence are	Populations studied in the body of evidence differ to target population	Populations studied in body of evidence differ to target

	the same as the target population for the guideline	similar to the target population for the guideline	for guideline, but it is clinically sensible to apply this evidence to target population	population and hard to judge whether it is sensible to generalize to target population
Applicability	Directly applicable to TRPGs and leadership contexts	Applicable to TRPGs and leadership contexts with few caveats	Probably applicable to TRPGs and leadership contexts with some caveats	Not applicable to TRPGs and leadership contexts

SR = systemic review; several = more than two studies

Qualitative studies were reviewed using the CASP appraisal tool '10 Questions to Help Make Sense of Qualitative Research' (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009), and ranked according to qualitative design (low/medium/high). Studies that were ranked medium and above were retained for data abstraction and synthesis. A total of 77 studies that met the quality appraisal criteria were retained: qualitative (n=43); mixed method (n=11); quantitative (n=23), as seen in Figure 1.



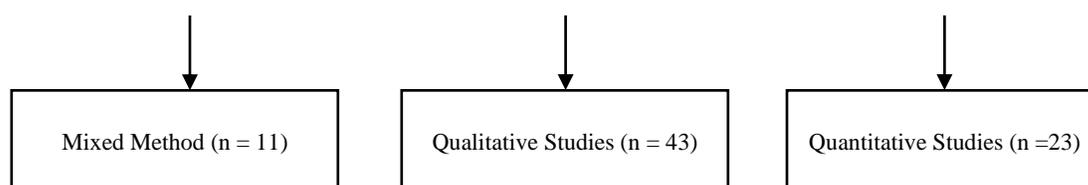


Figure 1. Flow Diagram of Integrative Review (adapted from PRISMA, 2009)

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was consistent with Whitemore and Knafl's (2005) methodology, where data was analyzed inductively by identifying significant patterns or content and themes related to leadership skills development, social communication and collaboration, and experiential learning within role-playing games. This iterative process applies a constant comparative method throughout data abstraction, reduction, display, conclusion, drawing, and verification stages (Whitemore and Knafl, 2005). With a continuous focus on the research question "how does the existing literature frame the use of TRPGs in leadership applications?" Findings were sorted into significant content patterns in the data and reported upon in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Findings

There were four identified significant patterns of content in the data. These findings were:

(a) experiential learning through roleplay has been highly studied and used in educational and therapeutic settings, but less so specifically in leadership development applications; (b) the social and individual impacts of TRPGs on social achievement enhances communication, sense of community and collaboration amongst players; (c) using game-based learning programs suggests that players have an increased likelihood to transfer skills learned to the workplace (d)

transformative effects on players frequently were pre-determined through game design, guided play, and specified objectives.

Finding One: Interpersonal Communications and Group Benefits

The first finding addresses a broader acceptance towards the application of TRPGs in learning environments to develop fundamental leadership skills, in ways not offered by traditional learning environments. Bowman, Torner, and White (2021) discuss this shift in the recent academic research. They state due to the 1980s Satanic Panic and the resulting shaming of TRPGs in the 1990s and 2000s, academic seriousness on the topic was previously nonexistent. However, because of the increased popularity today and the ability for TRPGs to be integrated into every sphere of human interaction, researchers will find more academic institutional support (Bowman, et al., 2021).

There has been considerable interdisciplinary research recently examining role-playing games and their impact on players' via social, physical, and psychological effects (Abbott et al., 2021; Causo & Quinlan, 2021; Lehto, 2021; Orr et al., 2020; Lasley, 2020; Cao et al., 2018; Bowman, 2018; Daniau, 2016; Zhang & Kaufman, 2016; Adams, 2013; Kentworthy et al., 2005). Game-based learning in business and education is an experience that can help individuals and teams improve their performance (Brown, 2011), commit and take responsibility for learning (Pivec, 2007), knowledge acquisition (Pivec, 2007; Ahmed & Sutton, 2017), achieve and sustain engagement (Hartt et al., 2020; Kentworthy & Wong, 2005), promote transformational mind-sets (Smith, 2020; Bowman, 2018) and open the mind to creative thinking and innovation (Dyson, et al., 2015; Karwoski & Soszynski, 2008; Lasley, 2020).

Community, Collaboration, and Ties to Social Achievements

Collaboration and engagement in teamwork and communication are vital for the players to succeed in both in-game and out-of-game goals. Orr, King, and McGonnell's (2020) study expanded the conversation with an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of players. Their findings suggest that the participants experienced a positive influence on their social skills immediately following a TRPG session, resulting in a perceived improvement in their overall social competence. It is a common shared experience for individuals participating in role-playing games and D&D to have experienced societal alienation due to a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of their hobbies. Labeled as outcasts, players turn to role-playing games to build a community where they are accepted and reject the stereotypes. Research has shown that several themes and subthemes emerge among gaming groups, of which social competence and lived experience dominates (Orr et al., 2020).

Those who participated in structured, regularly scheduled gameplay showed higher rates of rapport among fellow group members and demonstrated a need to maintain camaraderie and a sense of belonging. (Orr et al., 2020; Adams, 2013). Building strong rapport and personal relationships with group members has been shown at gaming tables to be one of the most critical factors in creating a collaborative and creative community. The practice of role-playing offers a much-needed sense of community (Bowman, 2010), where individuals can safely explore the various aspects of their personality without fear of judgment from mainstream society. It could be contended that TRPGs contain spontaneous "communitas," where the members of the group are equal in their ability to experience the very spirit of community with the increasing inclusivity and diversity among gaming tables. Bergström (2012) states role-playing games reinforce the idea of "playing for togetherness" and collaboration by allowing players to look at their processes with analytic precision.

Participating in the collective enthusiasm of roleplay and interaction rituals, players are presented with opportunities to evaluate and understand the consequences of individual and group actions, which enhances the ability to self-reflect. Players face scenarios that not only train but demand the examination of moral sensibilities, asking players to investigate their ethical values in challenging decision-making situations (Wright et al., 2020). Players test their comprehension of these values by accepting different tolerance levels within snap-decision making and fast events.

Adult Play and Real-World Applications

The act of play and engaging in group participation in the form of games is an essential and regular aspect of developmental growth, including formal, non-formal and informal segments of our learning as children. Formal primary education utilizes many game-based learning methods to help children learn vital educational foundations. Non-formal education will utilize non-traditional learning environments, with structured programs. Informal learning is spontaneous, unstructured, and unintentional. Bowman (2010) and Vygotsky (1978) suggest that the act of role-playing finds its roots in essential aspects of human social behavior, including childhood pretend play, storytelling, and ritual. Many social behaviorists, game theorists, and educators agree that the act of play allows for creative thinking, abstract problem-solving, and social learning.

There is an ongoing interdisciplinary discussion among researchers regarding the positive effects play has on adult learning, retention, and real-world application (Tariq, 2021; Cebulski, 2017; DeMarco et al., 2007). Including the effects of work gamification on productivity, enjoyment, and fostering leadership competencies (Gerdenitsch et al., 2020; Bateman, 2018; Cebulski, 2017; Kenworthy & Wong, 2005; Reeves, 2007), the role game-based learning has on

leadership development (Tariq, 2021; Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Pivec, 2007) and the effects play has on perceived social benefits (Lehto, 2021; Orr, King, & McGonnell, 2020; Garcia, 2017; Adams, 2013).

Risk and Failure

Sitting around the *D&D* table with a mug in hand and good company abound, a constructed, safe, physical space emerges for individuals to participate in unscripted, improvisational role-play. Players who have developed an emotional attachment to the characters they play can experience situations and challenges that are real and emotionally charged. On the surface, *D&D* exudes the appearance of a game of make-believe. However, many players report that the emotions, lessons, camaraderie, and accomplishments experienced in-game feel very real.

Participation in authentic, immersive, high-risk, high-failure games creates situational learning environments that allow players the opportunity to practice their capacities and investigate failings and weaknesses. Danger and risk of failure are written into the mechanics of games, regardless of the game format. However, by lessening the fear of repercussions, the mistakes and failures of the player turn into opportunities for self-reflection. The lowered consequence of failure encourages risk-taking, openness to innovative ideas, and character and player choice exploration. Risk becomes more apt to be taken on by participants of TRPGs when they know there is no right or wrong answer (Cebulski, 2017). This empowers players to develop more vital senses of introspection (Bowman, 2010), potentially resulting in a higher awareness of choices, actions, and consequences.

Emotional Intelligence

Players recognize the act of role-playing provides individuals with a better understanding of human behaviors (Bowman, 2010) while teaching them concepts of the self, behavioral changes, cognitive abilities, social skills, and anxiety management (Adams, 2013). When motivated to improve their emotional intelligence, players can do so if they are given the right information, guidance, and support. (Goleman, 1998). When presented in a psychologically, physically, and emotionally safe environment, players can ask for a candid assessment of their strengths and limitations from their co-players and GM. The guidance received presents players with opportunities for reflection and the creation of a developmental plan for how their character may react to future scenarios. With the support from the TRPG group, players practice handling different situations, managing what to do when a mistake happens, and how to learn from setbacks. If GM's and leaders cultivate these resources and practice continually, they can encourage the development of emotional intelligence skills that could provide valuable insight and response to situations the player experiences outside the game.

It is important to note the juxtaposition between TRPGs played as leisure and those played primarily for educational and development purposes. Bowman suggests that paradoxically when role-playing games, specifically *Dungeons and Dragons*, shifted from a game of leisure and were removed from the societal damning of the 1980's satanic panic into the realm of serious games and academia, "the mainstream [found] role-playing valuable when geared toward a specific 'purpose' and when structured and overseen by authority figures such as managers, therapists, educators, and drill sergeants" (Bowman, 2010) thus losing the societal stigma it was initially associated.

“Bleed” and Navigation of Experiences

The concept of *bleed* within roleplay studies is a key term frequently used within the Nordic Larping community but has also been incorporated into applied RPG theories. Bleed refers to experiences a player has when elements of their character-life spill over into their real-life, and vice versa (Bowman and Lieberoth, 2018). Feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states of the player can be affected and may heighten the identification with the character. However, it is crucial to note that not all experiences that bleed through are positive. There can be experiences where the player may become so deeply immersed in their character and create situations and scenarios that can cause both character and player conflict (Leonard and Thurman, 2018). Consequences of a player’s actions, when immersed too deeply, can be felt both in-game and out of the game, which may hinder gameplay, the overall narrative of the story, and may cause potent neuropsychological responses in the individual due to potential social rejection by the community.

Imagination and narrative are fundamental in TRPGs, as it allows players the opportunity to create mental environments that are not real but realized. The connection that exists between the environment and the narrative can lead to participatory culture, where players are actively engaged and interact with fictional materials (Bowman, 2018), leading to an immersive experience. By both enacting and observing, players of TRPGs engage in a type of play that has been removed from the realm of voyeurism and have the agency to impact and be impacted by the story. This sets up the conditions for bleed to exist between our experience in the imagined environment and other real situations.

5th edition *Dungeons and Dragons* adventures are heavily influenced by narrative and the player’s ability to utilize visual imagery and inventiveness. Players develop creative, mental imageries during gameplay that can later be a subject of reflection (Wasserman & Banks, 2017)

resulting in transformational learning and transference from the game to out-of-game situations (Bowman, 2013; Daniau, 2016).

Finding Two: Intrapersonal Development and Social Benefits

The second pattern identified by this researcher is concerned with the internal discovery and development of identity, management of mental health and diminution of social isolation. Many *Dungeons and Dragons* players will vehemently express how playing D&D helped them overcome many physical, mental, and social barriers. Social anxiety and the reduction of symptoms are among the most frequently mentioned when players are surveyed on the impact D&D has had on their lives (Abbott et al., 2021). Recent literature supports much of the anecdotal evidence that participation in TRPGs provides instances of demonstrated social achievements (Abbott et al. 2021; Balzec, 2016) acceptance (Orr, et al., 2020; Pinkston, 2019), and skills within a community of like-minded individuals (Rodgers, 2020; Kirby et al., 2014). Motivations to play TRPGs are situated in the game's ability to "utilize communication as a tool to enact democracy, enhance relationships, participate in spontaneity and perform morality" (Adams, 2013). TRPGs provide scenarios that urge players to engage in social interaction, accomplish goals, and traverse complex political and social structures, all with the unspoken promise of providing thrills of uncertainty and enhancing the joys of camaraderie (Bowman, 2010; Bergstrom, 2010).

Mental Health and Anxiety Reduction.

Tabletop roleplaying games are remarkable sites for social engagement and cognitive health benefits (Adams, 2013, Daniau, 2016, Fein, 2015; Sargent, 2014). The use of games for mental health has gained a lot of academic attention in recent years. Within this research, several studies suggest that they might have a positive impact on players' mental health and anxiety.

Lehto (2021) discusses the principles of cultural agency and how the positive impacts that individuals gain from culture or art vary based on the level of the individual's activity and involvement. Engagement is divided into three levels, experiencers, partakers, and actors. Experiencers interact with everyday culture, partakers take part in or do something to get closer to culture, and actors create art or culture (Lehto, 2021). Players of TRPGs are both experiencing and exercising agency in the game while acting out their character's reactions to situations. Their level of engagement as a participant in roleplay checks off each engagement category, placing them theoretically in a prime situation to receive advantages towards anxiety reduction and mental health enhancement. Psychological improvement (Orr, et.al, 2020) emotional regulation, and coping self-efficacy (Caro & Popovac, 2021) among players has been shown to increase through regular engagement in social and cultural agency. By changing the focus of cultural agency to doing and how it affects individuals and groups, Lehto (2021) suggests that it could offer an interesting possibility to research the role of leisure play in RPGs and well-being.

The three pillars of TRPG gameplay, combat, roleplaying, and exploration, provide situational instances for players to develop and enhance emotional self-awareness skills. Increasingly, scholars are exploring potential benefits associated with roleplaying games and emotional regulation. For example, gaming is linked to positive cognitive states of flow (Czikszentmihalyi, 1990) and absorption into the world allows for escape through an experience of positive emotions (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018). Interactivity and immersion within the game allow for a more intense experience of emotion due to rich narratives and connection with the player's in-game character, which acts as emotional stimuli (Villani et al., 2018).

Relationships and Effects on Loneliness.

It would be remiss not to touch upon the effects of isolation and loneliness that were collectively felt during the Covid19 pandemic and its continued impact on individuals' mental health. According to Mental Health America (2022), an estimated fifteen million Americans are affected by social anxiety disorder. In a 2021 study, researchers at the Arkansas School of Social Work sought to examine the use of D&D in a therapeutic setting to develop and implement a creative intervention to enhance and maintain social connectedness for difficult-to-engage populations.

Outside the controlled therapeutic uses of TRPGs to combat social anxiety, depression and loneliness, restricted social gatherings and global lockdowns forced many players to explore the use of D&D virtually. *Dungeons and Dragons* has seen tremendous growth over the years with Wizards of the Coast (WoTC) estimating 50 million players since its 5th edition release in 2014. WoTC's saw a 24% revenue increase during 2020 (Baker et al., 2022), with researchers noting simultaneously the interactive and social benefits of playing D&D for those facing the Covid19 lockdowns (Arenas et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2022; Scriven, 2021). Traditionally done pen and paper style, the transition to a fully remote style of play was not a straightforward transposition of experience. Anecdotally, players reported that while remote play was an important activity to maintain a semblance of social connectivity, it did not hold the same weight as in-person play (Scriven, 2021).

It did however, create a cultural bridge between those experiencing social isolation out of necessity due to the pandemic and those whose social isolation came from perceived differences that are outside the social norm. Fein (2015) states "gaming practices, such as Magic cards and role-playing games, which organize social interaction around the structured co-creation of high-intensity narratives of power and transformation, organize those drawn to such practices into

social collectives infused with significant personal meaning and identification” (p. 315). Out of a sense of commonality, a welcoming atmosphere and protectiveness arise toward those who struggle socially. Inclusivity is a value that many promote within the nerd culture community, for when rejected, nerd communities are a place that people can go. More research is needed to compare the social, mental, and physical benefits and downsides of virtual D&D play versus in-person play.

Identity

There is a misunderstanding related to identity expression and experimentation through authentic roleplaying; the presumption that the game calls for you to play as “someone else.” To clarify this misinterpretation, we can consider self-presentation theory and its expressiveness, while also recognizing there is no single version or true self, and that identity is performative and multiplistic (Goffman, 1959). While our expressions of self may not always seem compatible to observers (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), participating in roleplay and character development is a practice in existential therapy.

Players learn the ability to inhabit the headspace of someone other than their primary ego identity, creating a chance to develop empathy (Bowman, 2018; Lasley, 2022) As we age, we become fixed in the societal expectations and necessities of rigid patterns of behavior. Roleplaying allows players to re-experience the permeability of childhood and imaginative play. Transformational learning allows for this identity alteration (Bowman, 2010; Daniau, 2016). Identity is formed and created in part socially (Goulding & Shankar, 2011) and personally, allowing players to align or misalign with internal identities that may be stigmatized or experiment with personas coveted or feared (Tynes, 2010). Through their character work as active agents within their own stories, players are empowered to use the game to serve individual

and collective identity needs. Players can explore parts of themselves that have been suppressed or repressed by societal expectations and the dominant culture (Bowman, 2017; Rodgers, 2020).

Orr et al. (2020) suggest that tabletop role-playing games may have a psychological benefit similar to the therapeutic role-playing techniques often used as part of social skills interventions.

Finding Three: Leadership skills development

At the heart of the search for the development of leadership skills in players of tabletop role playing games, is the question of what experiences provide the opportunity to shape, test and cultivate leadership skills and the ability to lead. This review looks to answer the question of how TRPGs provide the opportunity to cultivate leadership skills. The third finding suggests that it is at the intersection of creativity and leadership where we will find this opportunity. The literature surrounding leadership development through game-based learning suggests that using games in learning activities and programs increases the likelihood that the participant is significantly more apt to transfer skills learned and developed in-game to the workplace (Kentworthy & Wong, 2005).

There have been extensive conversations around the driving power of participant motivation (Coe, 2017; Cebulski, 2017; Reeves, 2007), MMORPG's online environments fostering leadership development (Reeves, 2007; DeMarco, Lesser & O'Driscoll, 2008), work gamification enhancing motivation (Cebulski, 2017; Coe, 2017; Reeves, 2007), and game-based learning influence in leadership skills development and professional upskilling (Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Tay, et al., 2022). There are potential opportunities and an appropriateness for TRPGs to be used in leadership development applications.

Researcher Bryon Reeves discovered that individuals participating in MMORPG leadership displayed qualities of the pillars of the Sloan Leadership Model; visioning, relating, sense-making, and inventing (Reeves et al., 2007) and building credibility. The complexities of leadership development are well known, and game leadership is just as intricate. Reeves (2007) identifies how the pillars of the leadership model relates to gaming leadership. Visioning requires game leaders to develop a creative and compelling vision for the players by demonstrating a sense of urgency, hope, and confidence through storytelling. Leaders guiding players through TRPGs must remain flexible, allow players permission to break with convention, and implement processes encouraging team goal setting, creativity, and completion.

Player relationships are one of the most important foundational aspects of role-playing games. Game leaders utilize the relating framework by developing relationships with the team members both in and outside of the game (Reeves, 2007) while also inventing new ways of working together to realize a common vision to the narrative. Sense-making requires leaders to know and understand the contexts in which teams' function, maintain flexibility, and work collaboratively, and game Masters (GM) must utilize sensemaking to comprehend situations where outcomes are unknown. Given the rapid pace of change in today's global business, organizational, and social environment the need for this kind of leadership flexibility is evident.

Motivation

While the assumption can be made that leadership skills such as flexibility and adaptability are cultivated at a higher rate for the game master (GM) of a TRPG, this would be an incorrect assumption. Authentic role-playing provides experimental and situational learning opportunities that engage both the affective and cognitive domains of the learner (Bloom et al., 1956) for both individual and the group. Researchers found a prevalence of gaming leaders

promoting and encouraging environments conducive to team success. “Victories belong to the team, almost regardless of individual effort. This was not just about building relationships in general, but also building up the sense that each person was a valued, competent contributor to the success of the team” (Balzac, 2016, p.131). Players who participate in spaces that they perceive to be both physically and psychologically safe spaces motivated players to continue playing. When a player can connect with a like-minded group of individuals with whom they can navigate various levels of intimacy, feelings of autonomy and competence increase.

Autonomy

The self-determination theory presented by Deci and Ryan (2008) suggests that humans have three basic psychological needs that underlie growth and development. People are more likely to continue their behaviors and have a higher level of contentment when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are optimally supported. Researchers note that in player descriptions of TRPGs, leadership development, and personal motivations, they were describing the three legs of self-determination theory as “structural elements of the team, as modeled by the leader, that contributed to the willingness of a team to follow the leader” (Balzac, 2016, p. 131).

Players engage in role-playing equal to that of the GM. It has been widely reported anecdotally amongst gaming tables and researchers that the autonomy players have keeps them motivated to continue playing (Orr, et al., 2020; Gerdenitsch, et al., 2020; Coe, 2017). This sense of control over one’s choices provides higher satisfaction rates in the freedom of solving in-game problems (Orr et al., 2020), providing further character development. Players experience intrinsic motivation by being able to control the game and their choices, thus giving them the opportunity to explore distinct parts of their identity within the safe boundaries of the game.

Competency

The GM supports players by providing them with optimal challenges and opportunities to encourage narrative gameplay, encouraging a sense of initiation while providing a structure that allows players to mobilize and organize their reactions. Emotional competence as a “learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in an outstanding performance at work” (Goleman, 1998 p.28). Researchers suggest that TRPGs have the potential to fulfill human needs (Adams, 2013), such as those indicated in Goleman’s (1998) five elemental model: self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships. Players who participate in the exploration of distinct aspects of their identity through regular gameplay and character development report higher levels of social competence and social success (Orr et al., 2020; Garcia, 2017), experience social needs being met (Adams, 2013), and a sense of belonging (Coe, 2017).

Role-play allows participants to shift the scope of their perspective by occupying an alternate mind space (Bowman, 2010), expanding their understanding of why people do things, for what reasons, and how social dynamics alter each reason. Researchers noted anecdotally that through the engagement of personal and group identity work, participants were more motivated to continue playing TRPGs (Coe, 2017). This motivation encourages researchers interested in further examining group dynamics among players of TRPGs and organizational development.

Relatedness

The need to feel connected and have a sense of belonging to others is intrinsically human. Research shows that participants’ character development and maintenance of in-game and out-of-game relationships through continued involvement in TRPGs manifests, in part, due to a maintained acceptance within a social group. The complexities of interpersonal

communication can create a phenomenon amongst players where characters in game may be having a stressful and argumentative conversation with a member of their party, but out of game, the players may or may not feel this emotional surge (Bowman, 2010).

Abbott, Strauss, and Burnett (2021) discovered that players who struggled to find meaningful connections with others, had elevated levels of social anxiety and isolation, found D&D groups appealing because of a developed sense of belonging and connection with the other players. Bowman stresses that even in competitive TRPGs, adults can form a theory of mind of the other members of the group, affording opportunity to anticipate, respond and react to actions (2010).

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a fundamental component of leadership practice, and as both daily and organizational life grow and progressively become more complex, the ability to think critically becomes increasingly important. Within leadership, critical thinking is associated with different competencies. Where teachers use process drama in educational settings, roleplaying serves up skills in the service of developing emotional and social learning. They have found that it enhances a students' ability for critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork (Bowman, 2010).

Crisis Leadership

Leadership is a critical factor in crisis management and not one that previously had a significant emphasis among those teaching organizational behavior, strategic management, or leadership development. However, those trends are changing among researchers. Powley and Taylor (2010) suggest two pedagogies for developing skills related to successfully leading through crisis, which include communication, caring, vision, empathy, expertise, and practice.

Clemson and Samara (2013) showed that crisis management roleplay using narrative inquiry helps to enhance individual reflections that facilitate interdisciplinary, integrative, and transformative learning. Leaders who successfully lead organizations through change and challenging contexts have high aptitudes and skills development through communication, vision, caring, empathy, expertise, and practice. Bennis and Thomas (2002) discuss the framework of crisis leadership. The idea of crisis leadership lies with who a leader is and how a leader responds to a crisis while embodying characteristics that enable them to traverse rugged terrain, providing experiences that shape and test the ability to lead. Powley and Taylor (2010) presented two teaching approaches to provide learning objectives for students to develop an increase in self-awareness to strengthen their understanding and self-development, increase critical thinking skills to assess challenges and circumstances during a crisis, and develop the ability to draw upon these skills in varying levels of situations and challenges.

When taken in the context of TRPGs, the narrative environment, exposure, and practice of a continued shifting and changing story delivers an experience that allows players to build a cooperative, organizational, and communitive culture with the ability to manage and transcend adversity flexibly. Powley and Taylor (2014) state that “crisis leaders are effective because they possess the awareness of themselves and others in the context of dynamic, tenuous, and shifting situations” (p.562).

Adaptability

The ability to change one’s behavior in response to changes in a situation and to have access to diverse ways of thinking, enables GM’s and players to shift and experiment while in flux. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties (Heifetz, et al., 2009). Deeping awareness and perspective helps players

understand how they think and how their group thinks. Role players, in conjunction with communication, continuously invoke this skill throughout the various challenges and situations the GM presents to the party. Adaption does not necessarily mean success in the challenge faced, however. Sometimes they will receive an award as a testament to their prowess as an adventuring party, be it treasure, accolades or information. Bowman suggests that those who have played RPGs for an extended period of time tend to find contentment not in the continued success in and survival of their character and goals of the team, but in the successful enactment of their character and the actions taken (Bowman, 2010).

Flexibility

In a study examining work gamification and its effects on enjoyment, productivity, and the role of leadership, researchers found that workers who gamified their work-related tasks were more likely to maintain organization and increase productivity. Secondary findings supported these observations as researchers found favorable variable rates and associations between workers who gamified their work and productivity rates (Gerdenitsch et al., 2020).

Organizational leaders looking to approach change management should consider the benefits TRPGs have on developing flexibility in employees, as role-playing creates a vehicle for developing skills in communication, self-awareness, and problem-solving.

Creativity

Creativity is inherently engrained in role playing games, from character creation to worldbuilding, rules formation, and everything in between. Creativity has also become a critical concern for most organizations during times of uncertainty and change. Williams (1969) first introduced the cognitive-affective model of creativity, proposing that originality lies within the cognitive and affective dimensions. Role playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, not

only engage the imagination but also requires players to use their cognitive problem-solving skills to accomplish the goals set forth by both their character and the Game Master. Researchers have found that TRPG players had higher creativity scores than non-players and electronic RPG players, implying a correlational link between TRPGs and creative potential (Chung, 2013; Dyson, et al., 2015).

Interestingly, Kawowski and Soszynski (2008) discovered in their experiments that while creative potential increased at similar levels, TRPG groups that played for two hours regularly with distributed sessions throughout four weeks had higher gains in flexibility than groups that played together in an extended, single-day event – often called a ‘one-shot.’ A recent study on the effect of TRPGs on creative potential, Dyson et al. (2015) partially supported Karwowski and Soszynski’s findings. Remarkably, the control group of their study received lower scores on average on the creativity index post-test than on the pretest. Researchers also discovered a statistical significance in the improvement of the treatment group on the mean overall creativity index. Their findings support that TRPGs can improve students’ creative potential and divergent thinking. There are potential opportunities for organizations to develop regular creativity training interventions to enhance and increase leaders' creative potential and emotional creativity.

Role-play allows for the continued practice of creative thinking and abstract problem-solving. “In theorizing about play, a metaphorical transformation is often made – play is likened to a psychological projection, or play is viewed as a cognitive process” (Schwartzman, 1976, p. 291). The practice of role-playing provides essential functions; it enhances cohesiveness among groups, encourages complex problem solving, provides participants the opportunity to learn an extensive array of skills through scenarios, and provides a safe space to allow identity alteration (Bowman, 2010).

Finding Four: Discussions Against Predetermined Player Transformation in TRPGs

Throughout the examined research, the fourth finding revealed that the transformative effects of players were frequently assessed and quantified alongside specified objectives within specific disciplines. While game-based learning, simulation, and gamification demonstrate benefits to engaged learning, little research was explicitly found investigating change developed through narrative, regular, leisure gameplay without a prior plan to influence players' skill development, and the significance of its presentation, practical implication, and transference.

In a recent study, Phelps and Rusch (2020) argue against the use of the transformational framework presented by Culyba (2018) despite its status as the state-of-the-art framework for the games for change community. They postulate that it precludes the ability to acknowledge and allow for discussion of less clearly measurable transformations and suggest instead shift control of potential transformation to the player by basing it on the concept of emotional and psychological resonance (Phelps & Rusch, 2020). Psychological resonance can be applied to any image or narrative that sticks with an individual with a tendency to spontaneously emerge (Goodwyn, 2016). Resonance hinges upon the nature of the game itself as it is played, emerging from the moment-to-moment engagement in the game's structures and mechanics. They argue that designers can intentionally design for personal transformation without pre-determining the kind of change the game should ignite or seek to impose upon its players (Phelps and Rusch, 2020). However, it is important to recognize that unintended change can happen without the active practice of reflectivity post-game, yet the question of the type of change, retention, and permanence of skills and lessons learned remains.

Active reflection and continued practice of skills can be seen more regularly in players who participate in game sessions (campaigns) long-term than those who participate in a single

game or one-shot. However, active reflection and skill gain can be tainted by the influence of media and outside pressures. Qian and Clark (2016) found that the impact of game-based learning on skills development within the 21st century revealed that for full effectiveness, the game has to be dependent on game designs that establish learning theories with proven design elements used within the entertainment industry (2016). Torner (2016) argues that TRPGs combine performance, procedure, and improvisation to tell stories and reflect storytelling, but that self-reflexivity found in TRPGs informs a broader discourse for the capability of media to reflect onto the player, thus removing a semblance of the player's ability to practice existential existence. Organizational leaders interested in developing unconventional creative applications to encourage personal development will need to be cognizant and find the careful balance between predetermined goals and player (employee) autonomy.

Gamification as Stultification

Bateman (2018) brings to the discussion the acknowledgment of divisiveness amongst game studies researchers about the gamification of work and bringing play into the workplace. He asks, "how can we simultaneously be valorizing autonomy and yet pragmatically suppressing play through the application of programs of 'gamification' acting in culture, the workplace, and even in games?" (Bateman, 2018, p.1197) He contends that the contrast between work and play collapses if play is seen as indeterminate and that attempts to incorporate the ideas of play into the workplace (gamification) does not result in worker satisfaction and greater playfulness in the workplace. Instead, in forcing patterns of understanding onto players and workers, gamification becomes a parallel to stultification; "a binding of wills instead of an emancipation" (Bateman, 2018, p.1193). Achievements can constrain a player's autonomy and are stultified by the contradiction of the gamification of games. In conjunction, Detarding (2016) argues that the

player whose experience is conditioned by achievements can no longer be assumed free to exercise their autonomy as their play is dictated by specific challenges that game developers, or game masters, have specified for them.

Narrative gameplay as seen TRPGs, on the other hand, is built fundamentally upon the collective agreement of a group of players to develop a story together. Bateman (2018) states that this is an example of an “emancipating play contract” (p.2100) where the players, the game system, and the developers of the game, are engaged in practices that have the potential to be transformative. However, this is dependent on the players ability to manage a balance between the pursuit of pre-specified goals and their practices towards the aesthetics of their authentic self (Bateman, 2018). Due to this, when researching the intersection of leadership development and roleplaying games researchers will need to determine the level of control or lack thereof, the researchers, GM, players, and game developers have on the intended and desired outcomes when studying the development of leadership competencies through gameplay.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research

This integrative review and analysis make it possible to identify how roleplaying games can be utilized in the ongoing research into the development of transferable leadership skills and developed a comprehensive picture of the importance of TRPGs integration into creative leadership applications. Creativity is a critical factor in effective leadership that not only enables organizations to solve problems and respond to opportunities in a world of uncertainty and change, but also allows individuals to exhibit a variety of characteristics that represent decisions or ways of making creative decisions.

The intersection of creativity and leadership emphasizes the development of individuals and discussions around creative leadership and its nature are complex and may be seen as contradictory. This review illustrates the gap in the literature examining the intersectionality of creativity, leadership, and the influence of TRPGs on leadership skill development. The data that emerged in this review returned four significant findings related to TRPGs, the impacts, and benefits developed for players that could theoretically be integrated for use in leadership applications.

First, there have been documented positive effects play has on adult learning, retention, and real-world applications. Second, participation in TRPGs offers a much-needed sense of ritual and community and provides instances of demonstrated social achievements, acceptance, and skills. Third, intentional and specific roleplay may directly impact leadership skills that could be transferred to the workplace, and fourth, transformational effects on players that were quantified were noted to have been completed with pre-determined objectives and for specific disciplines.

While it has been documented that the development of leadership skills and competencies can occur in some online and tabletop role-playing games (Balzac, 2016; Daniau, 2016; Clayton, 2017; Smith, 2020), additional questions remain around the sociocultural benefits of in person play compared to virtual play, and how participants' leadership behaviors out-of-game are influenced directly by skills they learned in-game based on the players time commitment. This researcher suggests an exploration of what leadership skills can be learned and developed through extended gameplay of *Dungeons and Dragons* and what impacts or effects occur.

Research is also needed to determine whether tabletop roleplaying games can provide participants the skills to manage change, enhance creative leadership and flexibility in times of crisis, and whether that learning is transferred to behaviors beyond the game. While the existing

literature and research offer a starting place for designing methods of measurement between the intersection of roleplay theory and leadership theory, there remain several areas in which further investigation is warranted. These research gaps formed the basis for this integrative literature review. This field will benefit from further exploration of the topic.

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Appendix A

CASP's Qualitative Checklist: '10 questions to help you make sense of qualitative research.'

Source: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2022). CASP (CASP Qualitative Studies Checklist) Checklist. [online] Available at: <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>

Section A: Are the results valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider what was the goal of the research; why it was thought important; its relevance.

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants; is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal?

3. Is it worth continuing? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g. have they discussed how they decided which method to use).

4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the researcher has explained how the participants were selected; if they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study; if they are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part).

5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the setting for the data collection was justified; if it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview, etc); if the researcher has justified the methods chosen; if the researcher has made the methods explicit; if methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why; if the form of data is clear; if the researcher has discussed saturation of data.

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location; how the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design.

Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if there are sufficient details for how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained; if the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent, confidentiality, or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study); if approval has been sought from the ethics committee.

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if there is an in depth description of the analysis process; if thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data; whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process; if sufficient data are presented to support the findings; to what

extent contradictory data are taken into account; whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias, and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation.

9. Is there a clear statement of findings? [Yes] [Can't Tell] [No]

Hint: Consider if the findings are explicit; if there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments; if the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst); if the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question.

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?

Hint: Consider if the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge, or understanding (e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature; if they identify new areas where research is necessary; if the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used.

Appendix B

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

8/26/2022

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Samantha Funk entitled, EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES FOR USE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Leadership Studies.


_____ Advisor


_____ Second Reader

Accepted



Leadership and Organizational Studies Department Chair