

# Role-ing the Dice: Identity, Intimacy, and Consent in Table-top Role Playing

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## **About the Author:**

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## Introduction

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) are not new hobbies, nor are they unique to depictions in popular culture. For example, *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, one of the most popular TTRPGs, was first published in 1974 and has maintained a following since its first dice role (Hosch 2022). The game was subject to much scrutiny in the early days, including moral outrage, as *D&D* was tied to the satanic panic of the 1980s (Kennedy 2022). While it can be argued that *D&D* has had a devoted following since inception, with a recent increase in popular culture representation TTRPGs have grown to include a wider array of followers.<sup>1</sup> TTRPGs offer these players the realm to work collectively on world-building, strategizing, and storytelling while providing space to explore identity and characterization.

Why should we consider tabletop role-playing games through lenses of theatre, performance studies, and tools of intimacy direction? TTRPGs draw upon many of the same tactics of educational theatre, applied theatre, and/or immersive performance and share similar goals at heart.<sup>2</sup> These mediums offer space where audiences become more than just audiences but participants in the performance. As Gareth White (2013) points out in *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, these mediums “invite the spectator to participate in ways that are differently active to that which is typical of a theatre event. Both terms serve to legitimate participatory practice, offering something more edgy and exciting than mere audience participation, perhaps” (2). In considering audience relation to TTRPGs, the audience is both an audience and an active player/participant, which undoubtedly falls outside the typical theatre event White describes.

Furthermore, a prominent aspect of performances such as playback theatre, theatre in education (TIE), and TTRPGs is the communal performance and aspect of storytelling. Theatre in Education techniques frequently include dramatic activities that involve journaling, role-playing, and storytelling as a class to learn lessons. Furthermore, in the article “Storytelling, Agency and Community Building through Playback Theatre in Palestine,” Irene Fernández Ramos (2014) points out: “A Playback Theatre event usually lasts around seventy-five minutes and it is constructed from the stories of members of the audience who are invited by a conductor to share short or long stories, or ideas, with the rest of the audience” (14). TTRPGs take the above ideas to collectively generate the story under the guidance of a leader within the game, referred to by many names depending on the system; in *Dungeons and Dragons*, for instance, this role is called the

Dungeon Master (DM). Storytelling is paramount within these differing performance trends as storytelling fuels the gameplay to move forward. In her essay, “The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century,” Anne Bogart (2015) mentions, “I propose to you that storytelling is an act of heroism, that when you actually reach out and tell a story to someone, you’re creating an empathic bridge” (n.p.). I believe Bogart’s quote showcases the power of storytelling writ large and further demonstrates the affective power that exists through TTRPGs.

TTRPGs give the participants the power to shape the world and have a hand in crafting the narrative. The process versus product conversation is the most significant difference between these mediums and more “traditional” theatre or performance. In TTRPG playing, the audience, often, is also the participants/performers. Furthermore, TTRPGs offer participants a world through which they can explore their sense of self by building distinct characters. These characters exist in fantastical worlds or have magical powers yet are typically infused with pieces of the self. The aspects of collective storytelling, character development, and identity formation mark these games as prime areas to explore performance and intimacy.

I will begin by discussing how TTRPG play allows players to experiment with their identity formation. While it is also true that players can form the identity of their characters, the space to experiment with their identities is paramount to my argument for applying consent-based and intimacy choreography-based tools to the TTRPG play sphere. With this potential, it is important to realize the potential for negative experiences within tabletop spaces that could cause players more harm than good. This article examines the connections between TTRPGs and consent-based practices alongside intimacy choreography techniques, developed by organizations such as Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE), Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), and Intimacy Coordinators of Color (ICC), to engage with intimacy and consent in performance. I will discuss how intimacy tools, boundary practice, de-roling techniques, as well as aspects of the “five pillars” crafted by IDC can significantly impact the overall game experience. From there, I discuss how these processes can benefit the player. Ultimately, I argue that TTRPGs are strengthened through engagement with said processes.

I am not the first to consider the issues and ideas brought to light in this paper. While I am thinking specifically about TTRPG systems, consent-based mechanics, and intimacy tools, I build upon the work of multiple scholars throughout this work. For instance, Amanda Rose Villarreal

has contributed much to the ideas of consent-based game mechanics as applied to “gamified performance” and immersive performances. Their work marks a much-needed discussion on consent within varied performance forms. Furthermore, Scott Magelssen, while not writing directly about consent-based mechanics and intimacy, makes many ties to this field in his work, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (2014). However, Magelssen’s conceptualization of simming applies to the TTRPG. In his introduction, Magelssen (2014) states, “Simmings are *likenesses*. As with its linguistic cousin “simile,” the simming is a figure meant to strike a comparison with an event but to always maintain the difference in spectators’ perception between the simulation and that to which it refers” (9). This is a key component of many TTRPG campaigns. While the games don’t necessarily take place in our world, many DMs pull from real-world circumstances to build stories within the world of their games.

Certain ideas I speak of, such as holding Session 0s<sup>3</sup> or discussing boundaries with your table, are not unique to me. In Dropout TV’s *Adventuring Academy*, host Brennan Lee Mulligan talks to numerous TTRPG players who have spoken about the importance of introducing such discussions into their games. However, I hope to lay a groundwork and understanding of how consent-based intimacy tools can enhance these existing tools.

Before continuing, I want to acknowledge my positionality in TTRPG spaces and the larger problems that exist within those spaces. I am a queer white nerd, which has affected my playing within the TTRPG space. I have played at diverse tables with players representing various identities and experiences. I draw attention to this to acknowledge that harm continues to exist within some TTRPG game systems. I also recognize that there is current discourse surrounding the need for the creators of game systems to address these problems. Looking through social media, one can find that many believe addressing these issues creates an overly sensitive space. In contrast, others believe the systems have not done enough to fix their racial problems.

For example, I highlight *D&D Fifth Edition (D&D5E)*, includes choosing a race as one of the major components of character creation. The character’s race grants predetermined—by the rule book—attributes to the character. It is important to note that within *D&D*, “race” could be thought of as “species,” as human is a single race, and other races include Elves, Dwarves, and Dragonborn. However, it can be difficult to separate some of the ways that *D&D 5E* treats race within the game and real-world racial implications.

While this article is not specifically about racial issues within TTRPGs, race is an essential aspect of identity, and that does not change within the TTRPG realm.<sup>4</sup> *Dungeons and Dragons* is notorious for its problematic history regarding race. Linda Codega (2022) touches upon this in her article, “Why Race is Still a Problem in Dungeons & Dragons,” when she acknowledges the game’s publisher, Wizards of the Coast (WotC), “confirmed what most people already knew; that the fantasy of race in *Dungeons & Dragons* is sometimes racist in a way that reflects the racial dynamics that continue to oppress people of color across the world.” This idea is illustrated in that *D&D* rulebooks have stated that specific races are inherently evil; many of these have also been assigned lore-based histories of servitude and slavery.

Currently, there is much discourse surrounding WotC’s attempt to address racial issues within their editing for *One D&D*, the forthcoming new rule set, which as of publication of this article, has not been released.<sup>5</sup> With the shift from *D&D5E* to *One D&D*, some hope that Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro, the property owners, will shift towards eliminating biological essentialism that has existed in previous versions of the game. However, others are not as hopeful. Connie Chung, an RPG designer and livestream DM, says in an interview with Codega (2012), “Dungeons & Dragons will continue to fail unless—or until—they fundamentally change their approach to race... Which I don’t think they’re going to do.” Codega (2012) also mentions the fact that *D&D* draws upon real-life cultures to create the world of the game and that “as *D&D* moves incrementally towards a game that more respectfully reflects a diverse community of players, it has the opportunity to change gaming culture for the better” (n.p.). Only time will tell if better representation and thoughtful game design will come to fruition for *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Therefore, acknowledging my identity is a crucial aspect of my argument and means acknowledging that TTRPG systems are imperfect and can perpetuate harm to marginalized communities, primarily when tools and care are not utilized within the game. I would also like to take this moment to acknowledge systems such as *Coyote and Crow*, created by Connor Alexander, a Native game creator, and his team of various members of other Tribal Nations that are fighting against racial disparity within TTRPGs. Additionally, many systems beyond *Dungeons and Dragons* seek similar work in addressing equity concerns along numerous aspects of identity.

### Setting the Stage: Context & History

*It's a crisp fall day in New York City in the fall of 2012. I recently started my Master's program, and one of the first friends I made in the city asked if I would like to play Dungeons and Dragons. Of course, as a young nerd, I promptly responded yes but also said I had never played the game. Nevertheless, my friend quickly walked me through creating a character, described the game, and provided an overview of the concepts involved with such campaigns. From the moment of my first dice roll, I was enthralled and continued to join campaigns, play new TTRPGs, and consume media built around this world.*

Tabletop role-playing games fall under numerous categories and systems. Some common TTRPG systems include *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Monsterhearts 2*, *Call of Cthulu*, and *Pathfinder*. According to Amit Moshe (2020) of Cityofmist.com, TTRPGs “are social games played with a group of friends around the table or online, where each participant creates, controls, and plays a fictional character in an evolving story or adventure.” Over the years, I have enjoyed participating in campaigns with various friends in multiple gaming systems. Some friends were friends before the campaign, and others were bonded due to said games. One of the most critical aspects of the TTRPG is the game's collective and collaborative storytelling elements. Like many aspects of applied theatre or improvisation work, TTRPGs call upon the group to make a cohesive story. Ultimately, a DM, Master of Ceremonies (MC), or other ceremonially titled narrator runs the game and provides context for the world. However, the party shapes the world and brings life and nuance to the world being shared. While the DM controls much of the created world, said world would not exist without each player's varied differences, thoughts, and decisions. In an interview with Erika Morey (2018), Siobhan Richardson lays out the 5 C's integral to the intimacy process, one of which is context. I believe context is vital throughout the gameplay and creation of the world, but context about TTRPG systems and applications of the TTRPG are also essential for this article.

Now, you might be asking yourself what supernatural creatures, magical locations, epic battles, and incredible events can offer anyone in terms of identity formation. The truth is that much like writing or devising theatre, TTRPGs provide the same creative freedom to explore notions of self, community, and broader worlds around us. Aubrie S. Adams (2013) further describes such aspects available through TTRPGs in their article entitled “Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons,”

On the surface, D&D may appear to be a game of simple make-believe. However, the emotions, camaraderie, and accomplishments experienced in the game are real; thus suggesting that real-world needs are met through communication in socially constructed RPG scenarios. The notion that needs are met through RPGs is evidenced by the multitude of play-time hours accrued by groups as well as the ways that players bond, construct inside jokes, and revel in retelling specific adventures. (69-86)

Adams' research shows an important social aspect evidenced through *D&D*, which can be applied to the broader world of TTRPGs. However, the social factors go beyond the inter-party dynamics of a campaign and hold power for each player in their character formation that incorporates self-identity.<sup>6</sup>

Depending on the type of system utilized for gameplay, the game may focus more on in-depth battle combat or character building. However, the role-playing aspect of the game is present throughout each system. In her article, "The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games—: From Play Skills to Human Skills," Stéphane Daniau (2016) suggests that role-playing games offer players spaces to practice interactions within their social worlds, to use different forms of language to explore and enrich interaction, confront, or make people aware of various prejudices, stereotypes, concepts, and attitudes, and improve social skills and personal mental health (429). Furthermore, Daniau (2016) goes on to argue that,

The TF-RPG [Transformative Role-Playing Game] aims to accompany individuals in their personal development and learning process, in a collaborative manner, through the evolution of a group of players and their characters, all the while offering them a favorable disposition for learning through the development of their group's imagination (Anzieu, 2004). In other words, whereas the Edu-RPG may be used as a tool for learning, training, or recruiting, the TF-RPG aims also at raising the participants' awareness about their own meaning schemes, such as specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions. (427)

Daniau's discussion of TTRPGs as educational and transformative tools relates to my conceptions of how playing such games can influence personal identity constructions and offer space to explore aspects of self in a low-stakes version of the "real world."

Relating further to identity formation, Aaron Hollander (2021) argues that "TTRPG gameplay facilitates real personal transformation - including identity-clarification, moral expansion, and resistance to interpretive hegemony...At the heart of narrative gameplay is safe experimentation with moral, political, and metaphysical decision-making by way of alternative identities" (316-31). While I disagree with Hollander's assertion that it is safe experimentation—

as safety is never guaranteed—I believe that through consent-based practice, TTRPGs can produce spaces that operate, as Kim Shively (2022) says, “through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standard.” I first heard Kim Shively (2022) discuss this idea Laura Rikard conceptualized during a TIE Zoom training on community agreements. The idea behind the OSHA standard implies that each player can assess their level of risk and then consent to how the TTRPG world is played and shaped. Furthermore, I agree with Hollander in relating the idea that TTRPGs offer the space for personal transformations if players feel supported. I believe that such support can be more fully developed through consent-based practice.

Through my experience playing TTRPGs, I have had the opportunity to experience many worlds and inhabit numerous characters other than myself. Among those characters are Caiden, the wood elf wizard; Alice, the chaotic halfling bardlock<sup>7</sup>; Preston, a water elemental and camp counselor; Atlas, a gorgon looking to protect those closest to him; and most recently, Isaac, a literal teenage nightmare. While each character has been vastly different in their construction, abilities, looks, and overall method of being performed, they have slivers of my personality and backstory infused into their personalities and histories. As a result, I have had the opportunity to use those characters to bring out different parts of myself I was exploring at given times or to work through personal aspects of my history that I wanted to give a different perspective.

Acknowledging that it is possible to use TTRPGs to explore aspects of self and identity, it is also essential to recognize what TTRPGs are not. As with numerous areas of theatre, especially in the applied theatre and improvisation realm, this type of performance is not therapy, nor should it be confused with such. I acknowledge that role-play can frequently be used as a tool for healing. However, it is important to note the differences between theatre and performance and what is considered drama therapy. Robert Landy and David Montgomery state:

[Drama therapy] is the application of one or more forms of drama and theatre to people who choose to explore personal and collective problems and to take action toward change. The facilitator is a trained and licensed drama therapist, and all involved enter into a contract of confidentiality and safety. The forms of drama and theatre can include, but are not limited to: free play, improvisation, storytelling and story-making, role-playing, puppetry and mask, and theatre performance. (Landy and Montgomery 2012, 171)

This definition is critical to note because while aspects of TTRPG may sound as though they could fit into this definition, the key is that such techniques are facilitated by someone who is trained and licensed. TTRPG, as I mentioned above, can explore; however, it is not therapy.



Collective storytelling is integral to the gameplay of TTRPGs. The role of storytelling is backed up by a recent interview that popular game runner and dungeon master Brennan Lee Mulligan of Dropout's *Dimension 20* gave to TikTok creator and TTRPG journalist Rowan Zeoli (@rowanzeoli). In this interview, Mulligan tells Zeoli (2023),

I think one of the beautiful things about TTRPGs and why I think there is a love of them in this moment is the idea that they are a game that prompts you into the building of community. It's not passively consumed. It's something that makes you find people you love or at least people that you care about and wanna hear and tell a story with them, and you tell a story together...So I wanna be clear: I don't think that tabletop games can save the world, but I think that they are a healthy part of a balanced breakfast.

Mulligan speaks to the potential of the storytelling aspect to prompt better horizons as a result of engagement. Furthermore, Scott Magelssen's conceptualization of simming events also points to this potential in TTRPGs. By drawing upon theorists like Jill Dolan and José Esteban Muñoz, Magelssen (2014) offers, "Simming need to reference the known world but be conspicuously unlike the world enough to offer a hopeful version of what we might strive for" (9). As Mulligan hopes, such potential might lead players to a better tomorrow through engagement.

Furthermore, while one person often guides the game, each player, their performance, and what they bring to the table helps influence and change the overall narrative. Drawing from applied theatre once more, in the article "Creating Dialogue by Storytelling," Pässillä, Oikarinen, and Kallio (2013) highlight the ways that collective storytelling offers participants the ability to make sense of socially-constructed structures and offers participants the possibility to create meaning in co-creating dialogue (162).

The community-building aspect is also reaffirmed in a recent article by Keri Blakinger for *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "The Dungeons & Dragons Players of Death Row." In this article, Blakinger interviews Texas death row inmates over several years and discusses how they use TTRPG to stay connected during incarceration. Blakinger (2023) reports,

Death row didn't offer any of the educational or mental-health programs available in regular prisons; rehabilitation isn't the goal for those on death row, and special programming is not always logistically feasible for people held in solitary confinement. For these players, the games served as their life-skills course, anger-management class and drug counseling, too. (n.p.)

Blakinger's interview points to the creative community-building power and connections forged within TTRPG. Furthermore, she states, "Over time, their lives in the game world led to the sort of friendships solitary confinement usually prevents...They talked about game strategies and what to do when guards confiscated their playbooks or moved them to different cells every few months" (n.p.). Blakinger's work also aligns with Zeoli's interview and Pässillä et al. in reaffirming the power of collective storytelling for participants.

It is easy to recognize that the playing of TTRPGs is not just the stereotypical depiction of lone nerds donning capes and dice in the basement, as portrayed in numerous 80s-themed media. The popularity of TTRPGs can be seen in the television shows I mentioned in the opening (*Stranger Things*, *Community*, and *Riverdale*), in podcasts such as *Critical Role*, *Dimension 20*, *These Silent Secrets*, *Transplanar*, and *QueerRPG*, and in the recently released major motion picture, *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*. Beyond popular culture, TTRPGs also contribute to the pedagogical practice within classroom spaces. In the pedagogical sphere, I acknowledge Dr. Quincy Thomas and their recent use of *D & D* within their theatre history course. I have also used TTRPG mechanics for my students in a cinema course to put them into roles as producers talking about their films.

Furthermore, the purpose of this paper is not to argue the importance of role-playing and identity development through the lens of TTRPGs; however, this is an area of research I hope to continue. While I mentioned above that *D&D* is one of the most popular TTRPGs, in the following section, I will reference and use *Monsterhearts 2*<sup>8</sup> as a case study. One reason I use *Monsterhearts 2* in exploring identity formation through role-playing, intimacy, and consent is that "in *Monsterhearts*, you explore some difficult themes: dysfunctional relationships, teen sexuality, coercive power, trauma, abuse, violence, and queer marginalization" (Alder n.d.). Ultimately, these themes will depend on the MC running a game and the dynamics of the players at the table, but the themes within each game offer an excellent place to explore the threads I seek.

I draw attention to the above aspects because such games' pedagogical, personal, and community-building elements should not be pushed aside. Considering players may use TTRPGs to explore aspects of their identity and games have the potential to offer rehearsals for everyday life, it is increasingly vital that players take the opportunity to respect one another and build together for consent-based table spaces. Because of the issues and identity formation practices at

play within such TTRPGs, I believe that the tools of intimacy education could be deeply intertwined with such games. Utilizing these tools within the game-building structure can help campaigns be more consent-based and create a positive experience for all involved.

### **Setting the Stage: Boundaries & Consent**

So, if TTRPGs offer the space to explore character and identity formation through role-play, how can we begin to shape those spaces so players feel supported and can navigate their risk? I should start this exploration of intimacy by acknowledging that the campaigns I currently play in have been playing for multiple sessions over months to years. Due to our repeated and frequent exposure to one another, we have created close bonds and friendships. This sense of community amongst our table is important because, as Alexis Back and Tina M. Newhauser point out in *Supporting Staged Intimacy: A Practical Guide for Theatre Creatives, Managers, and Crew*, “The responsibility to change a culture must be shared throughout a whole. Building a culture of consent requires proper foundational support based upon understanding of the hierarchy” (2023, 65). I previously drew upon Siobhan Richardson’s interview with Erika Morey concerning the 5 C’s of intimacy choreography. The following sections of my argument concern themselves with two more of those C’s that are vitally important to consider: communication and consent. Continued communication and understanding of the relationships and dynamics at the table are crucial.

As a result of our continued campaigns together, certain norms have come to exist within our party. I recently attended Theatrical Intimacy Education’s “Community Agreements” training led by Kim Shively and Susanne Shawyer; in this training, we spoke of norms, community agreements and their differences. Norms are how we tend to behave and exist with each other. Norms exist through a series of reinforcement and practice within given spaces. Community agreements are a more aspirational vision of how I want to be and how we will be as a group. Community agreements require one, buy-in from the group; two, enforcement by all group members, not just one person wielding power; and three, documentation and revisitation (Shively 2022).

While the discussion of norms and community agreements are closely related, I would consider many of the tools I discuss in this article as norms rather than community agreements. I believe them norms mainly because the game’s facilitator has implemented these techniques.

While they have been shaped and enforced by the group's buy-in, we don't specifically have a moment of documentation and naming them as community agreements. However, by discussing expectations as a tool of the game, as I discuss below, facilitators can build a culture of consent that supports players' boundaries and helps shift said tool into gameplay norms. Whether a group is established and has been playing as friends for years or if it is a new table that has come together, I believe conversations around these areas to be paramount in moving toward gameplay.

### **Session 0 as Boundary Practice**

*It is my typical Thursday night. I turn on my computer and lighting set up, log in to Zoom and Roll20<sup>9</sup>, and wait for my fellow players to arrive. Throughout the pandemic, I have been involved in multiple TTRPG campaigns that take place digitally. Thursday nights are reserved for my weekly Monsterhearts 2 game. In this game, we have a ghost, a werewolf, a literal nightmare, an immortal, and a magician trying to navigate their place in various communities. Our Master of Ceremonies (MC) guides our characters through situations, both natural and supernatural, that allow our characters to discover themselves and discover each other. Tonight is Session 0, one of the most crucial gameplay sessions of the entire campaign. During this session, the MC discusses the specific rules of the TTRPG, the safety tools of the game, and the boundaries set by players. This session helps generally set the tone of how the game will progress. "Thank you all for joining tonight. I'm quite excited to start this story with all of you. I'd like to thank you all again for filling out the pre-game boundary sheet. We will talk through this sheet tonight. Additionally, tonight's session aims to set our expectations for each other and the game and prepare us to move forward. We may start to play tonight, depending on how much time we have after getting through all of that! All right, everyone ready? Any questions? Then let's jump in!"*

If you have any experience with intimacy choreography or coordination, the above Session 0 might sound similar to the first night working with an intimacy professional. Considering intimacy tools, I relate the ways that Session 0 exists within this toolbox. As stated, Session 0 exists to ensure that the players and MC are all on the same page and able to move forward into an enjoyable game. As Ann James and Cha Ramos discuss in their interview for HowIRound, intimacy choreography, consent tools, and boundaries exist not to police the process but rather to fully enter a community and celebrate a spirit of holistic humanism (James and Ramos 2022). I

have seen discourse within TTRPG spheres about how today's tables have become "too sensitive" or "care too much about social justice."<sup>10</sup> In their post, "RPG: Consent in Gaming Has Everyone Talking," J.R. Zambrano (2019) backs up this assertion about comments and consent-based mechanics, stating,

Go to any comment section about this subject, including this one, and you'll find people telling you some form of:

- *I never needed this, we've been doing it for years already*
- *This is just a cold cash grab to score points*
- *If someone showed up at my table with one of these I'd throw them out*
- *Anyone that needs this can't function in society*
- *Anyone that needs this shouldn't game*
- *People are so sensitive these days, what is happening to society*
- *Do I have to get your consent before the orc can attack you now?*
- *Are you gonna revoke your consent if I kill you?*

These comments that Zambrano addresses back up a belief that consent-based mechanics or intimacy tools will only tell you what you've done wrong. However, I believe that James' and Ramos' thoughts are correct in considering such complaints. These tools and conversations are not meant to police games; they are not meant to "suck the fun" out of combat or tell a DM they are wrong, but instead, they help us to get it right. Consent-based mechanics and intimacy tools ensure players can enjoy and participate fully in such worlds.

Triggering materials and trauma for players differ from high stakes within the game world. The conversation surrounding safety tools and consent within the TTRPG system often suggests that said tools take away the stakes. As facilitators of the gaming world, it is important to first question what we mean by raising the stakes. If we think we can only raise the narrative stakes of the game and performance of character by encroaching on players' real-world boundaries, then we are doing something wrong. To this end, I agree with immersive theatre scholar Leah Abelson (2018), who, in the article "Construction Consent in Immersive," writes, "Mystique is not worth putting someone's physical or emotional health at risk. Elegance is not worth ignoring the unfortunately common violations that people may encounter. Simply put, we need to acknowledge that performers are people, and that actions have consequences" (n.p.). In the case of TTRPGs,

players are performers and audience members simultaneously, and their boundaries are valid in the game world.

Plenty of options exist for raising stakes within the worlds we create without harming ourselves or our players. For instance, sexual assault is a hard line I do not cross within my games, as it is a boundary for many at my table. Much like an intimacy director considers boundaries in their choreographic approach for the stage or film, the same applies to me as a facilitator of TTRPGs. If I cannot find a way to tell the story without putting my players, not their characters, in danger or crossing their boundaries, I am doing something wrong. It might take more work and planning, but continuing to create consent-based spaces within the TTRPG culture that encourage players to be their best characters is worth it.

The tools I discuss, therefore, become vital to role-playing games that explore multiple vectors of identity and possible trauma. These tools help each player navigate themselves, as a player and as a character, as they move through a world that is similar and vastly different from our own. For instance, in *Monsterhearts 2*, the game's tagline is "Keep it Feral," a reminder to players to play in the moment and live in the chaos that adolescence can bring. Keeping it feral is possible when each player feels secure and able to participate in their role-play enthusiastically. As I mentioned above, the repeated use of these tools in TTRPG spaces develops the practices into norms that reinforce how players and facilitators behave and are in a community with one another, again developing a culture of consent. Building upon a legacy of intimacy choreographers and professionals, Black and Newhauser (2023) state, "It will take openness, work, study, and long-term commitment to begin to create an inclusive, healthy work environment for all" (89). While Black and Newhauser refer to consent-based practice in intimacy choreography in live performances, I believe this sentiment also applies to TTRPG spaces. If TTRPG creatives are willing to be open, work, study, and make a commitment that better practices are better for these spaces, then we can begin to foster a deeper culture of consent within our games.

One argument I have seen in online spaces against the need for a Session 0 is that, in many cases, TTRPG campaigns are comprised of friends who have played together for long periods. While I respect the idea of knowing each other, I also agree with Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard (2020), who, in *Staging Sex*, write that "people will deny simple logic and the evidence of their own senses in order to fit in with a group—getting them to ignore their own comfort levels is easy. No one wants to be the one to redirect the flow or change the mood of a room. Being the first one

to say ‘no ’is the hardest” (8). I would argue that it might be even more challenging for friends to be the first to say no or speak up if a boundary has been violated without prior knowledge. Sometimes having discussions around boundaries and human needs is more challenging with people we have known for long periods rather than those we have met recently. Session 0 helps establish conversation around consent and boundaries as standard practice rather than demands of a “ problematic or overly-sensitive player.”

Furthermore, Amanda Rose Villarreal addresses a similar circumstance in their dissertation, “ Unscripted Intimacies: Negotiating Consent in Gamified Performance.” In discussing their experience as an [actor/audience member/indicate role] with the immersive performance piece *Sleep No More*, Villarreal (2021) states that “incomplete onboarding regarding the rules of the performance can lead to uncomfortable miscommunications, especially with the absence of clear diegetic communication practices” (81). By discussing *Sleep No More* and the lack of communication regarding actor boundaries and audience expectations, Villarreal illuminates a problem of participatory, immersive storytelling: how can participants know they’ve done wrong if expectations haven’t been set? Simply put, we don’t know what we don’t know. Applying Villarreal’s observation and emphasis on the importance of “onboarding” practices to TTRPGs reaffirms the importance of Session 0 and setting up these expectations as a group. Considering boundaries and expectations applied to TTRPGs, I again draw upon Abelson (2018), who further writes that “setting expectations for rules of engagement would provide numerous benefits to not just the performers, but the audience members themselves” (n.p.). Knowing that these discussions are important to have, what does this look like in practice?

Moving more concretely into how intimacy tools can be used within the TTRPG world, one difference between intimacy choreography and TTRPGs is the physicality and experience of touch that exist within the gameplay. Boundaries for intimacy choreography often involve tracing the areas of the body that are not to be touched during choreography. These boundaries are essential for scene partners to discuss and understand so that the actors can engage with each other on stage. In a TTRPG, especially a virtual tabletop, the sense of touch and proximity are less active. However, boundaries exist not only in how we physically interact with one another but also in our emotional and mental interactions. Therefore, understanding boundaries is a vital part of the TTRPG experience. Rather than boundaries being about negotiating bodily autonomy for the stage,

in the TTRPG, boundaries become an exercise in understanding what type of content is not consented to by the players in the space.

The MC can employ a pre-game check sheet to prepare for a conversation around boundaries and content within the game. This document is a spreadsheet with player names listed, as well as a variety of scenarios. The scenarios range from every day to a bit more magical (again, in most TTRPGs, we are talking about supernatural and magical worlds). Such scenarios might include horror topics such as bodily injury and harm, bugs, blood, and demons as well as intimate content such as relationships, sex and romance. Scenarios also can include social and cultural content such as ableism, heterosexism, or racism. In this collaborative spreadsheet, my MC also offers a Not Listed heading, which prompts players to provide other potential triggers that might not have been considered. This spreadsheet is similar to how an intimacy choreographer might work with a theatre to put content disclosures on an audition form. The idea is to give the auditioners, or in the case of TTRPG, the players, the opportunity to consent to the story's content.

Once players receive the spreadsheet, they take time to go through each listed scenario carefully. The MC sets up a color coding within this system to mark each scenario. In our game, we use a four-color system. First, green: this is a go; I am ok with this content, and the MC can include this content at will. Second, yellow: this type of content is ok if it is veiled in its reference or is talked about ahead of time. Third, orange: this type of content is a possibility; however, it needs to be discussed as a group ahead of time to understand how it would play into the narrative. Fourth and finally, red: this is a hard line = NO; do not include this content in the game. This system sets up the basis of our boundary practice within the game. This sheet is filled out ahead of Session 0 so that during that session, the players and MC can talk through all the boundaries and understand how those boundaries factor into the gameplay. Since this is a shared spreadsheet, the MC and the players can continue to check in with boundaries throughout the campaign. Additionally, if boundaries change or develop throughout the process, the sheet can be updated to reflect those changes. The MC and players can then have conversations and check-ins after Session 0 to address how those boundaries may have shifted. While boundary practice differs between how an intimacy choreography might work in a theatrical setting versus a TTRPG virtual space or even physical table setting, boundaries remain an essential consideration and discussion.

In my own experience as the person leading a game, this pre-game sheet has become an invaluable tool. As I plan moments or ideas for the plot I want the players to face, I can go back to



this sheet and see if anyone has a boundary around specific ideas. In one game I ran, I planned to use a spider monster as part of the dungeon the players were moving through. However, upon checking the boundary sheet, I noticed that one of my players had a hard no for spiders because of an intense phobia. This simple check-in offered me the opportunity in my planning to make a shift to another monster that fit the theme while simultaneously avoiding overstepping a player's boundaries. I also had the experience of beginning to craft a plot line for a game and seeing a player had a yellow mark next to the theme. Seeing the yellow, I spoke to them about the idea and how it worked for their boundaries. Through this conversation, it was clear that the plot line did not infringe upon their boundaries, and the player was excited about its inclusion. These simple tweaks in the game design and check-ins with players offered everyone the chance to participate enthusiastically without crossing boundaries.

### **Shifting Boundaries: The Self-Care Cue in Practice**

If you have trained or worked with members of Theatrical Intimacy Education, you have heard the term "button" used at some point. As Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard (2020) describe in *Staging Sex*, "The button is a word that indicates that the action needs to pause for a moment. Pauses might be to ask a question, clear something up, shake something out, or even to avoid sneezing into someone's face" (17). One of the most important aspects of the button cue is that when it is called, everyone takes a moment to breathe together before moving forward. In our *Monsterhearts 2* game, we employ our version of "button" based on visual sign language cues explained to all the players. These visual cues offer opportunities to support players if the specific subject material infringes upon boundaries.

Our soft cue, the most similar to "button," is crossed fingers held to the camera. This signal allows players, out of character, to ask questions and clarify things to move forward. Holding the crossed fingers also differentiates between talking as the character and talking as yourself, the player. The fingers cue can also function to say we aren't exactly at a boundary now, but this material could be headed there, and I'm making you aware. Finally, the crossed fingers button cue offers the space to discuss and be mindful of potential danger as we traverse complex content. As Pace (2020) describes, this cue is effective because, much like actors, it allows players to clarify moments or breathe when their trauma responses activate (19).

I have experienced such cues used across multiple campaigns. While some might argue that this would take them out of the game, in my experience these moments have strengthened the role-play narrative by allowing characters and players to fully understand the moment before moving forward. In one of the *Monsterhearts 2* games, the button cue was used because players needed to take a moment to remember the backstory. Taking the moment with the self-care cue allowed all the players to get on the same page and move forward with the role-play. This moment strengthened the narrative because the players were on the same page rather than confused about intention and plot.

The other cue is the no/stop, and consists of a player crossing their arms into an x. Once this cue is seen, the scene is immediately stopped because a boundary has been crossed. At that point, the players and MC will debrief what occurred if it fits the players' boundaries. It might also signal that we have to take a second for a break and allow the moment to settle before having a conversation. Either way, communication around what has occurred and typically an apology for the boundary cross are addressed in this moment. These self-care cues offer players the autonomy to navigate their emotions as players while also role-playing characters within the game.

Speaking from my experience, I have yet to see the no/stop cue utilized within our games with the measures implemented through discussions in Session 0, consistent communication with the button cue, and the boundary check sheet. The discussions and checking of the sheet by whoever runs the game help ensure these moments don't occur. I would also like to point out that if these moments do happen, it does not mean that an MC has failed or done something wrong; boundaries shift all the time. This is the power of setting up such cues. I would rather introduce the cues and never need them than come up against a new boundary and have a player feel as though they have to power through.

Both cues mentioned above are not meant to derail the game or take players out of their characters. However, they ensure that each player can optimally participate and remain focused on their character despite the presented subject matter. Ultimately, it is important to remember that the performance of TTRPGs is a game, and players should not have to suffer undue trauma or relive trauma for the sake of dice rolls. The button cues our table utilizes help to ensure that each player can enjoy the game to their full potential. Furthermore, as Pace (2020) argues, these button cues "normalize the need to pause for a second and ask a question or adjust a boundary" (19). Normalizing the need for self-care and taking moments in TTRPGs is vital to protect each player

because while the games exist in powerful and supernatural magic worlds unlike our own, we can't know how game materials might affect players. The button gestures offer space to maintain the game's integrity while empowering players to be their best characters through communication and consent.

### **Closing Practice: De-Roling the Role Play**

*"After the chaos you all created as Gideon's father left the camp, you turn in for the evening. As the five of you fall asleep, the camera pans away from the camp, where we see the silhouette of the man you all just messed with as his car rolls to a stop miles from camp. Your plan to blow his tires worked, and now he is stranded. At this moment, you hear him yell and curse and get out of the car. He punches the car, and you see the door crunch inward on itself as it is pushed off the road. Lightning streaks across the sky, and you see a bolt come down onto this man; he is gone. And that is where we will end tonight's game." Varied sounds of multiple expletives and gasps come from the zoom panels that stretch across my screen. "Alright, let's do some favorite moments!"*

I have discussed norm-setting and community agreements, which start in the pre-production aspects of gameplay and move into the actual play of the games. I have also addressed the button self-care cues utilized throughout each session and gameplay. I next turn to the end moments of a session, where we de-role and unpack the gameplay. For theatre practitioners, de-rolling is also not specific to intimacy choreography. Many practitioners throughout theatre history, such as Boal, offer techniques as closure for actors. Closure is so important to the process that Richardson marks closure as the final C of the 5 C's. Richardson is not the only intimacy professional to highlight the power of closure; Chelsea Pace (2020) offers de-rolling as a "simple but powerful tool for getting separation between actor and character" (33). Additionally, Black and Newhauser (2023) offer that de-rolling is an important aspect of self-care and "is created through uncomplicated mental and physical rituals, consisting of simple or easy movements and thought patterns" (226). In this section, I offer how the campaigns I am a part of utilize a de-rolling technique drawn from theatrical techniques.

While there are many possible ways to de-role, especially in theatrical contexts, our tables de-rolling technique is simple and effective. The first piece occurs once the MC calls the game for

that day, often with, “And that’s where we will end our session.” There is a sense of group breathing in that final moment, or quite often, some form of collective exacerbation, which might consist of a group laugh or a cacophony of expletives, depending on the ending. This moment is a collective closure, signifying the switch from role-playing characters to us as players.

The next stage of our party’s de-roling method moves into what we call “Favorite Moments.” During this portion, each player brings up their favorite personal movement, group moment, and MC moment of the game. These debriefs allow players to unpack the game while others listen and support them. Each member of the campaign volunteers their moments while others listen. Sometimes, the favorite moments of a player include short discussions with the rest of the party about particular poignant moments. Finally, our MC also offers their favorite moment from each character during that session. The debriefs and discussions provide space between character and player and, as a group, unpack the session together in community.

Debriefing these favorite moments often includes laughter and camaraderie in reliving the game’s events over the past three-to-four hours and thinking about the moments as players rather than living the moments as characters. By engaging in this de-roling technique, each player enters a critical space of reflection and distance to separate themselves from the character. Finally, these moments allow players to look for visual cues to see if players are okay after the game. The players can check in on one another during the closing process and help each other step away from the characters until the next game begins. These check-ins often in the form of a Zoom DM or a quick text message to another player to check in. Often, these messages are along the lines of, “Hey, this was a heavy session for your character. Are you doing ok?” Additionally, after the Favorite Moments, the check-in can also come in the form of the check-in from the MC, generally asking everyone in the game if they are good after the session. I can attest that I have had heightened emotions during *Monsterhearts 2* campaigns. The de-roling aspects of our closing helped me separate Isaac from Cody with the assistance and care of my fellow party members.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing again from the interview I cited earlier with Brennan Lee Mulligan, tabletop games are not going to save the world. However, they might be a rehearsal to help send us toward that better world. Throughout this article, I have looked at how TTRPGs have a history of identity formation and potentially traumatic culture for players. I have argued that intimacy tools and

consent-based culture could significantly impact the health and well-being of players through the adoption of tools and check-ins. In their article, “Focus on Impact, Not Intention: Moving from ‘Safe’ Spaces to Spaces of Acceptable Risk, Laura Rikard and Amanda Rose Villarreal (2023) explain that the qualities of consent involve being fully informed and freely given, that our decision-making abilities are fully engaged, that we are aware of power dynamics, and that, finally, we can provide an enthusiastic yes. The interventions I have discussed above offer players the ability to engage these four qualities and contribute to the culture of consent in the TTRPG sphere.

The interventions I offer above are not new. I am sure many TTRPG game leaders have implemented similar ideas and techniques into their praxis, most likely without the vocabulary of consent-based mechanics and intimacy tools. I do not seek to shape my ideas of how intimacy choreography and tabletop role-playing games are novel or the first of their kind. Instead, I build upon a legacy of many intelligent, caring, and intentional humans who shape both fields. Furthermore, I document these ideas and techniques here, hoping that more tablescapes will adopt them into their table norms. With each table that builds upon these techniques and legacies, a more consent-based culture of TTRPG will emerge. As Theatrical Intimacy Education consistently states, “Better is better,” so why not implement at least one of these techniques into your next session and see for yourself?

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of the rise in popular culture representation include both scripted and actual play (recorded versions of TTRPGs being played) shows. Some examples include, *Stranger Things* (2016), *Dimension 20* (2018), *Critical Role* (2015), *Riverdale* (2017), and *Community* (2009).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank the various individuals who have influenced my thinking on TTRPGs and safety tools and for whom I have lived many lives over a short time. Those individuals include Astrid, Eric, Maggie, Quincy, Gina, Liz, Mike, Nikki, Zack, Braeden, Mariah, Trey, Liv, Zann, Jarod, Marcus, Preston, Andrew, Ric, Catherine, and Alex.

<sup>3</sup> Session 0 is the session before the actual game begins in TTRPGs. This session allows the opportunity to discuss the expectations of the word, the ideas of the campaign, and to go over ground rules and establish expectations for players. There is no prescribed notion across TTRPGs of what Session 0 should look like in practice. Furthermore, there are arguments about if a Session 0 is even necessary.

<sup>4</sup> For those who are unfamiliar with *D&D* character building, as you create a character there are many options you must choose as you build. They include your race, your class, a subclass, ability scores, starting items, and depending on the level feats and spells.

<sup>5</sup> *Dungeons and Dragons* specifically has been through many versions of the rules, lore, and publishing books for play. Ultimately, it is up to the players at the table which version of the game they play. While I typically play 5E, there are many who still use older versions such as 3 for their tables.

<sup>6</sup> A campaign is style of game play that takes place over multiple games or sessions. Campaigns for TTRPGs can spans months to years. Members of a TTRPG group that meet regularly to play in a campaign are typically called a party. Typically, each game within a campaign is then referred to as a session or an episode.

<sup>7</sup> In *Dungeons and Dragons*, the bardlock is a popular mutli-class option for players to develop. Multi-classing means taking levels in multiple player classes, in this case it is the combination of the Bard and Warlock classes.

<sup>8</sup> *Monsterhearts 2* is a TTRPG developed and published by Buried without Ceremony. The group of friends I play with describe the game as “CW teen high school world meets *Supernatural*, *Sabrina*, *Charmed*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” That is a role-playing game where the player’s characters have a monstrous side and are working to fit in.

<sup>9</sup> Roll20 is what is known as a virtual tabletop - a space that TTRPGs can be played online for players that are physically distant. They offer a variety of game tools and maps to ensure a better digital playing experience. These virtual tabletops allow players to move tokens around a map as though the players would if they were at a physical location together.

<sup>10</sup> While I have not included specific references in this article, there are numerous examples throughout social media, specifically Twitter and Reddit that show these sentiments. There are many examples of players that think consent-based practice and conversation will ruin the “liveness” of the game and police players, ruining the characters in the process. This argument is similar to Sean Bean’s discussion of intimacy coordinators on set.

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