

Play to Find Yourself¹

Using Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Spiritual Direction

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“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.”

—Howard Thurman (*n.d.*: *n.p.*)

In January 2020, I returned to the youth centre where I had worked for thirteen years—an incredible one-stop shop for youth who are LGBTQIA+ and/or experiencing homelessness—to run a group called Spiritual Discovery Dungeons & Dragons, wherein we would play *Dungeons & Dragons 5e* ([referred to as *DnD*] Mearls/Crawford 2014), while exploring our spiritual and emotional selves.

The power of games to help us open our sense of possibility was evident from the start. Jerry was one of the players who showed up that day for Session Zero². He looked like what people whose fear dominates them would label a thug: black, sagging jeans and a tough walk. Jerry listened carefully as I explained the different kinds of characters players could choose to be, which included tough warriors and spell-slinging wizards.

“I want to be a healer,” Jerry said.

His friend next to him jumped in, “Nah man, you can be a kick-ass fighter with a giant battle-axe!”

Jerry slowly shook his head and repeated, “I want to be a healer.” (Jerry, *DnD* session with author January, 2020)

We made Jerry a healer.

1 Please note: all client/participant names have been changed.

2 Session Zero is a meeting before actual play begins where you often create characters and discuss what the game will be like.

Nearly a whole pandemic later, I still cry whenever I relive that moment, and I give thanks that my training as a spiritual director helped me to respond simply and with affirmation. Unfortunately, the pandemic ended our ability to gather and play before Jerry was able to dig into what playing a healer meant to him, but that moment alone, where Jerry could see himself being anything, was a profound healing moment. One of many moments that fuels my desire and drive to develop the design and use of RPGs for spiritual growth, exploration, and healing.

By the time you finish reading the following pages, I want you to see that by playing RPGs, people can grow, explore themselves, and heal emotionally and spiritually in ways they do not usually in the rest of their lives. Surveys of the field show there is not much research at all into the spiritual uses of RPGs, so I draw upon the growing field of therapeutic gaming alongside my experience using games for spiritual growth, exploration, and healing.

In the early 1990s, I had psionic powers and caught my first glimpse of how games could be used for more than just fun. I was in my twenties and working as a friend and advocate for isolated and lonely senior citizens at Little Brothers/Friends of the Elderly. I was also playing *2nd edition Dungeons & Dragons* (Cook/et al. 1989). One of my characters was Kerrin Woodwalker, a Wood Elf Psionicist. He used his mental powers to change his physical form. He could turn his arms into swords, become the size of a giant or a mouse, and even become anything I could imagine: a chair, a small tree, anything. In *DnD*, Psionicists are expected to align with a perspective called Lawful, as it supports the ordered mindset they need to be able to use their powers.

This put me in a conundrum because I wanted to play both a Psionicist, a Lawful character, and a Good character. In *DnD*, however, Lawful Good characters usually believe in rules, systems, and institutions. As a young radical and activist, I was not interested in playing that way. In order to get around this conundrum, I decided Kerrin believed that there was really no such thing as Chaos, a viewpoint in opposition to Law in *DnD*. He believed that Chaos was just order that we haven't perceived yet. In order to prove this, Kerrin would act in chaotic, unpredictable ways in order to find the order in his actions. It was a nice workaround, and it gave me the satisfaction of thumbing my nose at Law and Order while also giving me the chance to reflect on Law, Order, and Chaos. Having an outlet to flaunt social convention was fun, but it wasn't the best, deepest, or most transformational thing about playing Kerrin Woodwalker.

First, though, let me say more about what RPGs, such as *DnD*, are. In RPGs, players create a character and give them attributes, personalities, backstories, abilities, equipment, and even superpowers or spells, and then they send them on adventures. (Imagine if you could pretend to be a character from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954a; 1954b; 1955) or Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966–1969) or your favourite comic book or novel. RPGs give you that chance.) These adventures unfold using dice, paper, pencils, and other materials while sitting around a table or virtual tabletops (i.e., online platforms like Foundry VTT and Roll 20). Usually, one player is called the Dungeon Master (DM) or Game Master (GM). This player sets up the world in which the adventures take place and presents the other players, often called Player Characters (PCs), with situations to which to react. For example, PCs may have to scale a wall, negotiate with a captain for passage on their ship, or repel an invading force of a nearby warlord. Players respond by saying

what actions their characters will take. To follow our example: perhaps take out a rope and grappling hook, flash some gold coins, or organize the villagers to resist the assault. Finally, in most games, dice, or another form of chance mechanics, are used to determine if each character succeeds and how well they succeed. As play proceeds, characters usually become more powerful: they become better fighters, learn more spells, acquire items with magical powers, etc. It is important to note that while players may repel the invading forces or stop the attacks on travelers along the road between towns tabletop RPGs are not about winning and losing. Ask a dozen players why they play and you will get 25 answers. Some want to build powerful characters while others just want to experience what it might be like to be a mage. One player may want to gather fantastic magic items such as enchanted swords and magic boots, while the player next to them wants to become a beloved hero. Some games, called one-shots, lasting one play session, usually have an end goal such as solving the mystery which feels like winning. However, many game groups play together in weekly games for months, years, or even decades. They will defeat many adversaries, find great amounts of treasure, or build kingdoms, but there is no winning in which the game is declared over. Play may proceed like long term dramas such as the Star Trek shows where sometimes each week is a self-contained story and sometimes stories unfold over a whole season. Character death is not even losing the game. Players may be upset but they can roll up (create) a new character and keep playing. A character of mine died recently and it was quite poignant and satisfying.

It was half a lifetime and hundreds of game sessions ago, so many of the details are lost to life's minutiae, but time and time again, we found ourselves in trouble after one of Kerrin's experiments,' and somehow, Kerrin was able to talk us out of it without any blows exchanged. On my character sheet (I still have most of my character sheets) is this note: "Believes he will survive and save the world. Goes into much combat, dark caves, somewhat lackadaisical, believing whatever it is, he will survive." (n.d.) Kerrin had a confidence and ability to smooth talk that I did not feel I had. I would say, 'It's not me, it's my character. I'm quiet and reserved.' Then one day it hit me: 'It **is** me. **I'm** the one saying the words that get us out of trouble.' Sometimes the DM didn't even roll to see how charismatic Kerrin had been; she let us go based on my eloquent words alone.

I was getting better at extemporaneous speech and building confidence in myself. This is how I discovered that games can be transformational, and it's when my understanding and quest to know more about the healing powers of RPGs began.

A decade after Kerrin Woodwalker, I answered the long-standing call to study towards ordination as a rabbi. I was ordained in 2003 and started working on the streets of Chicago and the aforementioned youth centre with LGBTQ+ and/or homeless youth at an agency called The Night Ministry. I had many deep conversations with the young people we served about life and its struggles and joys during that time.

While working at The Night Ministry, my team, the Youth Outreach Team, was called on to present to volunteers, other agencies, and the general public on topics such as harm reduction, LGBTQIA+ competency, trauma-informed care, and youth homelessness. My team believed that getting people out of their seats was better than giving lectures, so working both with my team and independently, I created a number of experiential education trainings, including what we called The Bag Game.

Each participant was given a bio cobbled together from the lives of the young people we served. Scattered around the room were 15–20 paper bags labelled ‘ID,’ ‘Job,’ ‘Shelter,’ ‘Food,’ etc. The participants then moved about the room pulling slips of paper from bags that had resources they felt they would want. Sometimes they got a job or their state ID. Sometimes they were arrested for having condoms, got bedbugs, or had all their stuff stolen, thus having to go get everything all over again. Every time the participants’ frustration was palpable, sometimes even tinged with disbelief, which we would counter with facts and anecdotes about youth homelessness. Every time, the participants left with more understanding of the challenges of homelessness and with more empathy for the people we saw daily. Repeatedly I saw that story and a game to play brought home the realities of what it was like to be homeless better than a lecture would.

One of my colleagues at the Night Ministry was Rev. Davi Weasley, also a geek³. We chatted as often as possible about games, comic books, movies, etc. After Davi went back to school for a graduate certificate in spiritual direction, our talk often turned to the use of our geek-doms for spiritual work. In 2014, Davi researched how the tools and methods of spiritual direction could be imported to the gaming table, then ran a *DnD* campaign. I was one of the players. The short answer is yes, they can. More on this later.

I was also learning more about the growing field of work and research into the use of games in education, for developing social skills, and in therapeutic environments. This along, with my talks with Davi and others, led me to enrol in Loyola University’s Institute for Pastoral Studies in the fall of 2017.

When I boil my rabbinate to its core, I am here to be with people on their spiritual journeys. I am here to walk alongside people of all faiths or no faith as they ask the big questions of life: ‘Who am I? Why am I here? How do I manifest who I am? Is there a God and, if so, how do I relate to it? How do I know right and wrong?’

My experience is that the spiritual impulse among humans—the desire to know who we are and to connect to that which is bigger than us and connects us all—came first, and then religion came in to say, ‘Here are some ways to examine and answer those questions.’ Religion is a tool of spirituality, but just like you can hammer in a nail with the side of your wrench, sometimes religion is not the best tool for our spiritual questions. Unfortunately, religion often gets in the way of our spiritual quests. As such, spiritual direction spoke to me deeply. I saw it as a great way to not only enhance my skills as a rabbi but also as the perfect means by which to lead and help bring forth, non-religiously and nondenominationally, healing and personal growth work through RPGs.

At Loyola I had the great fortune to meet Professor Jean- Pierre Fortin⁴, who’d grown up on Tolkien and *DnD*. Prof. Fortin encouraged and advised me as I combined my spiritual direction training with using RPGs. For my contextual education internship, I ran Spiritual Discovery *DnD* (which I now offer to the general public) with youth from my

3 There is much debate in the community as to whether we are geeks or nerds, but it is almost exclusively used as a term of pride, having been reclaimed for use in the community like many other derogatory terms that communities have reclaimed from a place of pride and power.

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outreach days at The Night Ministry; and with Prof. Fortin advising, I undertook an independent study on the design and use of RPGs for spiritual direction.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction “involves providing guidance and support for those seeking healing and spiritual development.” (Milgram/Wiener 2014: 13). It is a “relationship between a spiritual guide and a seeker that is focused on the growth of the seeker.” (Ochs/Olitzky 1997: 11). In their final paper about the spiritual direction *DnD* group, Davi defined spiritual direction as

the practice of accompanying an individual or group as they explore their spirit. For some individuals, this will be in the context of exploring and growing in their relationship with God; for other folks, language about connecting with and learning from one’s own heart will be more helpful. (Weasley 2014: 1) Davi continues, “The spiritual director is not a therapist, nor is she a pastor; her job is exclusively to hold the space and to invite attention to what’s happening in the ‘directee(s)’s’ inner life.” (ibid.) much like a GM/DM holds space for the unfolding lives of the characters. It may look like therapy on the outside, but therapy tends to be more about solving problems and has clients meet with their therapists more often than does spiritual direction. While talking is part of a typical spiritual direction session, there can also be meditation, prayer, and talk about God and other words for that which is bigger than us—the Divine, the Infinite Eternal, Nature, the Tao, the Force.

Spiritual directors do not have to be experts in anything but being present. Prof. Fortin taught us that we are not even there to say the ‘right thing.’ “Don’t try to say the right thing,” (n.d.) he told us. “Just be present.” (ibid.) I do not have a seven-step plan to enlightenment. My main technique is to go in empty, ready to be what the seeker needs at that moment. As Carol Ochs and Kerry M. Olitzky, leaders in Jewish spiritual direction, wrote, “Spiritual guides do not help by virtue of their expertise. Rather, they help through their capacity to get out of the way and enable seekers to strengthen their relationship with God.” (Ochs/Olitzky 1997: 1).

The name **spiritual direction** is, admittedly, misleading and a bit problematic. Even our professional organization, Spiritual Directors International (SDI), uses the term **spiritual companion** concurrently with **spiritual director**. Perhaps the biggest dissonance with the word **direction** is that spiritual direction is not very directive: spiritual directors follow the lead of the seeker, asking questions based on what they say. I do not make many suggestions or give much homework in session. When I do make a suggestion or tell a story, it is completely based on intuition and what the seeker has said. For example, if someone says they gain spiritual sustenance from nature, I will ask how often they get out for a walk and when the last time was. If it’s been weeks, I will suggest getting out soon, directly after the session or maybe even right then. The main thing I do, though, is ‘get out of the way.’

Furthermore, while almost all spiritual directors and books on the subject speak about spiritual direction being about the seeker’s relationships with God first and foremost (Milgram/Weiner 2014; Ochs/Olitzky 1997; Ruffing 2011), a belief in God does not

have to be part of spiritual direction. It can focus on the big questions mentioned earlier without ever mentioning a deity or theology.

My biggest guiding principle in life and spiritual direction comes from the quote at the beginning of this article, attributed to Howard Thurman, a minister and spiritual guide for Martin Luther King Jr. and many other members of the Civil Rights Era. He is reported to have said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.” (Baillie 1995: xv) In my work I do ask people about the Divine and what their prayer life is like, but mostly I ask them, ‘What makes you come alive?’ and once we identify it or if they already know, we work on how they can manifest this coming alive. This more than anything is my work as a spiritual director.

Incorporating RPGs into Spiritual Direction

During my studies, I found explanations for my intuitive sense that combining RPGs and spiritual direction would be fruitful. Yes, playing games and spiritual direction independently provide insight, but putting them together makes for a unique tableau for self-discovery and growth. As such, the nature of role-playing games is fertile land for spiritual direction. The games, because they provide role-playing within the context of story, allow for a depth and intensity of introspection, discovery, and transformation that sidesteps much of the resistance we often encounter in ourselves when working through our challenges and questions. Spiritual direction provides a safe, reflective, and constructive space for/in which that work to take place. The next section of this article will explore and expose how this works.

In II Samuel 11–12, we find King David, standing on the roof of his residence gazing over his domain when he spots Batsheva bathing a few roofs away, and he decides he wants her. Long story short, David has her husband, Uriah, sent to the front lines of the current battle with instructions that he is left alone when the enemy advances: Uriah is killed. David then takes Batsheva into his home and after a period of mourning, marries her.

It falls upon Nathan the Prophet to tell David what a horrible person he has been. Nathan is smart. He doesn’t waltz in and tell the king he’s been despicable. That could literally cost him his head. Instead, he approaches David and asks if he can tell the king a story. David is happy to hear a story and grants permission. Nathan tells of a rich man who had lots of goats and sheep (wealth was often measured and indicated by the size of one’s flocks) and a poor man who had one goat. The poor man loved his goat so much he treated it like his child. One day, a wayfarer stops by the rich man’s home. Tradition ordained you feed weary travelers, but not wanting to sacrifice any of his flock, he orders the poor man’s goat slaughtered and prepared. David is incensed at this. “That man should be punished!” (II Samuel 12:5–7) he shouts. Nathan (I always imagine him trying not to smile), replies calmly, “Atah ha’ish/You are the man,” (ibid.). David understands. Nathan keeps his head. Nathan’s story circumvented David’s ego and defenses because it was ‘just’ a story. Nathan provided David with fictional distance, which allowed David to see the truth without his ego and defenses getting in the way.

This same fictional distance allows RPG players to have their characters say and do things they themselves wouldn't, including process emotions. In RPG studies, this fictional distance of 'It's not me, it's my character,' just like I experienced with Kerrin Woodwalker, is called **alibi**. Sarah Lynne Bowman explains alibi as "the social contract by which players accept the premise that any actions in the games are taken by the character, not the player," which "allows players to distance themselves from the actions of their characters." (Bowman/Schrier 2018: 319). While players say, 'It's not me, it's my character,' their "unconscious desires are allowed to become manifest in the role taken, since the persona of the character allows the player a disguise behind which to hide." (Nephew 2006: 122). Kerrin Woodwalker was able to stroll into a meeting with a local baron and simultaneously gather intel on their defenses and ask for a donation to the 'A is for Apple' literacy program we started because I had alibi. I would've been tongue-tied, fearing getting caught.

In order for players to experience transformation and spiritual growth via playing a character in an RPG, though, there must be blood. More accurately, there must be **bleed**—a transference of thoughts and feelings between player and character (Bowman/Lieberoth 2018: 254; Stenros/Bowman 2018: 420). When the actions of a character make a player have an emotional response, it is called **bleed-out**, and when the out-of-game feelings and desires of the player influence the character's actions, it is called **bleed-in**. (ibid.; Eladhari 2018). For example, two siblings may be playing unrelated characters in a game, and when the first sibling's character gets a magic flying robe, feelings may arise within the second sibling around how their parents favoured the first sibling (bleed-out), and even though the characters are best friends, the second sibling may decide to have their character steal the robe (bleed-in). Bleed happens all the time in games and sometimes players use alibi in a negative way to justify the actions of their character, like stabbing another PC in the back, figuratively or by declaring, 'I stab so-and-so in the back.' ('It's what my character would do.')

Bleed is unconscious. We are not trying to do it. When we want to explore questions or challenges through our characters we can **play to bleed** or engage in **steering**. Playing to bleed is to intentionally weaken the barriers between the player and the character. Steering happens when a player directs or influences the actions and behaviour of a character for non-diegetic, or out-of-game, purposes, such as processing real-life challenges. Playing for bleed involves setting up a character through such aspects as backstory and personality, while steering involves using the actions of the character to engage in exploration, etc. (Montola/Stenros/Siatta 2015; Bowman/Lieberoth 2018). Had we been able to continue the game at the youth centre, I suspect that Jerry would have experienced bleed-out as his healer saved party members on the edge of death, which, based on my experiences with other players, would very likely bring Jerry feelings of confidence and increased agency in the world.

When we watch a movie or read a story where a character goes through a breakup or discovers their parents were Nazis, say, we often feel sad along with the character in the fiction. To our brains, that sadness is real. The same is true for and in RPGs. In *Blessed are the Legend-Makers*, Aaron T. Hollander says,

The memories of heroic choices and transcendental encounters may be memories of imagined acts, yet they are real memories; the neural pathways engaged in the course of lateral thinking and moral choice-making are strengthened without being cordoned off as applicable only to imagined situations. (2021: 9)

Speaking of the videogame *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), Steph Aupers says, “While playing, gamers often *experience* their environment as being real, including its supernatural entities and propositions.” (Aupers 2015: 85, original emphasis) And Jonathan Gottschall speaks about how under an FMRI (a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine), a brain responding to fiction looks the same as a brain responding to real occurrences. When we feel sad from something we encounter in fiction, it looks the same to our best medical technology as sadness from an event in our ‘real’ lives. (Gottschall 2014: 12:36–13:46)

Fact and fiction are the same to our folds of grey matter. This can allow for emotional processing and spiritual growth, in the safe, spiritually directed environment of a game. Using alibi, a player can have a character go through feelings such as grief and loss and thus process some of what they are feeling in their day-to-day life. Here’s a great example: A player in one of my Spiritual Discovery *DnD* groups created a near-immortal character who is on a 1000-year alcoholic bender. The character had almost no memories of their life, including their own name. The player told us he was playing the character to process the depression he was going through. This example points at two key factors. The player could do this safely because firstly we worked to make the game a safe space for everyone, and secondly because of alibi and steering. His brain processed the emotions and understandings his character came to as if they were real.

But two more things have to happen beyond what has been discussed so far to allow the player to process his depression through his character. As much as the brain doesn’t know the difference between fact and fiction, it simultaneously does know the difference. Or, at least, it can tell the difference between the sources of the emotion(s). It knows that this sadness is from/that of a fictional character, not themselves. As well, the healthy brain is aware of both the character and the player at the same time. “When we role-play, we inhabit a dual-consciousness in which we simultaneously experience both our own subjectivity and our character’s.” (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 2) Aharon Varady, in his paper on the mythopoetic power of RPGs and his experience adapting *DnD* into a Jewish setting, says of his experience playing *DnD*,

I had in that one game experienced something profound, a pronounced altered state of awareness. I had found myself both in the tower maze, with its secret rooms, traps, and basilisk, as well as in my parents’ dining room surrounded by players who accepted and cared for my imaginary well-being, something that was also translating into my emotional well-being. (2013: 5)

This dual-consciousness is essential for emotional and spiritual growth to happen.

The second thing we need to do is move from ‘It’s not me’ to ‘It **is** me.’ “We can use alibi as a tool to permit greater experimentation, **while decreasing its strength** [emphasis mine] when we wish to transfer skills, insights, and personality traits.” (Bowman/Hugass

2021: 3). When I joined a *Mage, 20th Anniversary edition* (Brucato 2015) game in January 2020, I wasn't consciously trying to explore anything when I created the character Oz. Oz, I decided, was a mage of a specific mixed descent—the product of generations of magical eugenics. He was raised and trained by his grandparents—themselves mages of 'pure' pedigree—to be a mage who unified the Traditions. At his ascension ceremony at age thirteen, he did not awaken and his grandparents were taken away. He spent the next 30+ years trying to awaken. I was very much in the 'It's not me' space, thinking I had made a cool story. Later, I realized I was processing some of my own thoughts and feelings about coming to this work with games and spirituality at around age 50, as well as my wanderer approach to my professional life through Oz. Without trying to, I had put some of myself into my character. Once I started to be able to say to myself, 'Oz is me,' I gained clarity about my life path and work. Achieving this perspective and clarity took dual-consciousness and a timely decrease of alibi.

How can we do all this? Through imagination. There is no such thing as 'just in my imagination.' I teach meditation and Jewish mystical healing prayer and participants often ask me, 'What if it's just in my imagination?' My response is, 'Great! Imagination is where it happens.' Rabbi Joyce Reinitz, also a therapist, says:

The imagination is not meant to be understood as “the unreal” or as fantasy. The imagination is the faculty of perception that stimulates a real experience and response through the creation of a mental image. The imagination is the uniquely human quality that allows us to transcend the physical limitations of time and space, permitting us to have a true sensory experience regardless of the presence of an external stimulus. This sensory experience is not only real but is extremely potent. It brings a shift in our perception which essentially changes us from the inside out. In this regard, imagery is a powerfully instrument for promoting self-growth and personal transformation and can be an important tool to use in *hashpa-ah* (spiritual direction). (2014: 133)

A point of view I accept is that everything we see and experience is a story we tell ourselves about the world: everything we think, see, and feel is processed as a story to help us understand and navigate the world (Ruffing 2011: 2). Imagining that we can engage in spiritual growth, exploration, and healing through our character makes it so: imagining it manifests it. We heal because we imagine healing. We are both ourselves and our characters because we imagine it. Reinitz says, “Imagery and the imagination provide a way to access the deepest parts of ourselves. They transport us beyond the day to day ‘knowing’ which awakens our spiritual selves and allows us to connect to the greater Whole.” (Reinitz 2014: 133) Imagination is the way, the path, the means.

The Magic Circle

All this alibi-ing, bleeding, and imagining at the game table also happens because of magic. That is, **the magic circle**. The magic circle is the space in which gameplay happens: a game table, a soccer field, a video screen, an ice rink, etc. Johann Huizinga first used

the term, saying that when we play, we make a space in which the normal rules of life do not apply, a space that is inviolable to the mundane world of everyday existence and the rules of the game replace the rules of the world. (Huizinga 1955: 10; Salen/Zimmerman 2004: 94–96). However, others point out that the magic circle doesn't fully hold—that the so-called real world permeates the inviolability of the magic circle. (Consalvo 2009; Aupers 2015: 76).

What's clear, though, is that when we play games, three things always happen: we play by rules which (almost always) differ from the day-to-day, we have an experience, we change. For example, most of us don't walk down the street kicking a soccer ball around. We go to an open space with demarcated boundaries and goals and try to get the ball into the appropriate goal. While playing, we may think about our taxes and grocery list, but we are not paying taxes or buying groceries while playing, and hopefully, we are able to block out the activities of daily life. When the game is over, and we have won or lost, we are somehow transformed. It may be as simple as feeling happy or sad about the outcome, but it often includes some sort of reflection on how we played and what the results mean for us. In an RPG, the magic circle is the game table and all the mechanics, character sheets, social contracts of play, dice, and appropriate snacks (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 5). During play, the characters may track down the thieves stealing their Pixie magic, build a flying boat, or negotiate a peace treaty. When the game is over, and the players pack up and go, something about the experience usually stays with them, and they reflect on it, even if it's just the joy they felt spending time with friends. When we leave the field or the game table, we usually don't continue to kick a ball around (until practice time) or roll dice to see if we can climb a wall. The play, boring or exciting, is the magic, and the table, rules, mechanics, and time playing comprise the circle.

However, as pointed out, the real world does pierce the circle. For example, if players on the field hold grudges against other players, one may well hit another a little harder than they should. And while playing *DnD*, I will likely think about my taxes or about having to get up early the next morning. Real-world feelings and attitudes affect gameplay, and gameplay sparks changes in the real world. For example, people build real-world friendships, players bully other players, a bad day for a player can ruin the game for all, or the game can elevate the spirits of a player who is feeling down (Aupers: 2015: 76). In fact, it is this permeability between in-game and out-of-game that allows for growth and exploration to happen. It is part of the dual consciousness. We don't forget we are both a character in an RPG, or a member of a team, and a human. We can hold both truths in our brains and think about the relationship between the two. And the magic circle remains.

The magic circle is also present when we pray, encounter sacred text, ritually use plant medicines, dance, drum, and meditate. We enter a space where the rules of daily life are altered, something happens within that time and in that space, and we leave transformed. Rabbi Marcia Prager teaches that after every prayer service, we leave a little more elevated than when we started (Prager: iii). That transformation/elevation may be as simple as bringing the calm or insight you found with you into the rest of your day, week, or month. When we pray or meditate, we are playing a role. We imagine ourselves as a person who can be calm or commune with the Divine. We create a magic circle with song, candles, incense, plant medicines, movement, etc. Then, we play to bleed: we want the effects of our spiritual activity to bleed out to our daily lives. We may use alibi in a sort of

suspension of disbelief way: 'It's not me it's my character' becomes 'I'm not sure I believe this, but I'll try this weird spiritual practice.' Then we release the suspension so that we can be transformed. When I pray for physical healing or give the 3300-year-old Birkat Kohanim/Priestly Blessing to someone, I use what I call the 'as if' principle, which functions like alibi. I pray as if my prayer works. I bless as if the light I visualize is the true light of the Divine.

The role-playing we do in ritual spaces allows us to "summon the 'powers within' and align oneself with an imagined 'higher' or 'magical' self." (Aupers 2015: 86). Just like we can access these 'powers within' in ritual and prayer, Aupers continues, gamers can "paradoxically gain access to dimensions of self and experiences that are not surfacing in real life." (ibid.)

Growth happens when we go beyond the self, beyond our sense of limits and capabilities. Immersion in role-playing and ritual call and bring us beyond ourselves. In both cases, we can go beyond where we are to a place of potential healing and growth, whether by being in the presence of the Divine or around a table rolling dice. (Fortin, personal discussion n.d.). Doris C. Rusch and Andrew M. Phelps say essentially the same thing in different words, asserting that psychomagic games are ritual spaces where players engage myth and symbolic enactment to partake in transformative activities (Rusch/Phelps 2020: n.p.). Imagine, then, what's possible when we bring the spiritual into the game circle with intention.

What happens next is integration, our hoped-for bleed out. The transformation may happen spontaneously during play or prayer, but often it takes some sort of integration practice. The 'Threefold Path' of walking the labyrinth by Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress offers closely resembles the stages associated with the magic circle. Labyrinths, unlike mazes, have only one path and no dead ends. There is no wrong way and you cannot get lost. There are three steps to walking a labyrinth: (1) Purgation (the walk in)—the letting go of the outside world while focusing on a question or challenge, (2) Illumination (the middle point)—where one stays a while, ready to receive whatever insights or intuition come, and (3) Integration (the walk out)—where one starts to process what was received in the middle and imagines applying it to their lives. (Artress 1995: 69–104) The walk in and out are slow and methodical. Skipping out or off the path will likely result in a lack of conscious integration of the experience. Going into the magic circle of play we leave the 'real' world behind (purgation), have a play experience (illumination), and leave the circle transformed by the play (integration).

After we leave the magic circle of play, we can choose to reflect on the experience and integrate it. "Integration is the process by which players take the experiences from the frame of a game, process them, and integrate their new awareness into their self-concept or the frames of their daily lives." (Bowman/Hugaas 2019: 10) This happens casually in most games as players recall, often to each other, how cool it was when they found that magic sword, say. Here are two examples of what I mean: In one of my games at the youth centre, a player had a character who transformed into a humanoid wolf and into a full wolf. When zombies attacked, she had a critical success on her die roll, the highest number possible, and tore through several zombies with her claws. High fives went around and the player had a look that telegraphed her feelings of power and agency. And the player with the near-immortal character on a 1000-year alcoholic bender, with

whom they were processing their depression, reported feeling more comfortable about their process of reemerging into the (hopefully) post-pandemic environment of the US midwest. “I built Wino to resist social interactions,” the player said, “but he doesn’t, and I’m happy to see this because it shows me I still have the desire to interact with people.” (player in *DnD* session with author, n.d.)

Integration and reflection look different for everyone—journaling, taking a walk, making art, talking things over, etc. Some groups hold briefing and debriefing sessions right before and after the game. In *Spiritual Discovery DnD* we do some briefing/debriefing at the table together, but most of the deep work takes place in separate, one-to-one sessions every couple of games. The goal of integration is for the gameplay to inform and inspire our daily lives. And it happens. “We have abundant testimonies of people’s real lives being rectified or made whole in these game settings: of suicides prevented, of varieties of self-discovery and enlightenment, of communities of whole-hearted interpersonal care.” (Hollander 2021: 2) Players report asking themselves how would their character respond to this or that situation, then acting like their character might in their personal relationships, moral quandaries, and business meetings. (Bowman 2014: 170, 177; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 12, 15)

The question that became obvious to me is: if the processes of gameplay and spiritual practice are so similar and provide close to the same benefits for us, how can we merge the power of playing games and spiritual practice for a synergistic effect?

Working with *Dreamchaser*

In 2017, I found a game that was almost perfectly set up to let me demonstrate what I knew to be true in my gut. That game was *Dreamchaser* (Petrusha, 2017) (For other games with applications in spiritual discovery, see Appendix B). As soon as I read the description, I saw that *Dreamchaser*’s rules and mechanics could be used to work on personal questions, challenges, and goals. I wrote Pete Petrusha, creator of the game, and started beta-testing the game, helping with editing, and eventually running the game at conventions. Other people saw the therapeutic potential in it, too: therapists and social workers would ask Pete how the game could be used in one-to-one sessions with their clients. Pete brought me on to lead the effort to adapt the game for therapy and spiritual direction.

What did I and the others see? Before the game, the GM knows nothing about what will happen (unless they’ve chosen to use a pre-generated setting). As the game begins, each player is given a bunch of note cards. First, they write a goal or dream on a couple of cards. Perhaps they suggest ‘overthrow the empire,’ ‘befriend a dragon,’ and ‘live in the woods.’ Then the group votes on one of these to be the central Dream of the game. Let’s say they choose ‘befriend a dragon.’ That card is placed in the middle of the Dream Map. Then each player picks their role for the game. These are like classes or playbooks in other games. For the ‘befriend a dragon’ game, let’s say, they pick ‘hunter/tracker,’ ‘linguist,’ and ‘astronaut.’ Now the GM knows there’s somehow a dragon and an astronaut in the game. Next, the players write Milestones: things that will happen during the game that make it exciting for them to play. No one gets to veto your choice, but the group does put them in

order around the central Dream. For example, imagine they pick ‘make a magic sword,’ ‘learn an new language,’ and ‘find my long-lost sister.’ Once in order, the game proceeds moving through each player’s Milestone to the central Dream.

What I and others saw was that players in a one-to-one game could easily make the central Dream a personal goal or question and that Milestones could be reimagined as steps to gaining insight to the central Dream. The work has been about how to adapt/use the game with one client in the standard 55-minute session of therapy or spiritual direction. One decision has been that players can either play their literal selves or make a fantastic character, such as a wizard, warrior, astronaut, etc., through whom to explore their questions. For example, say a player is agoraphobic and wants to overcome this. They can choose the Dream of ‘Go outside’ and then the Milestones ‘Journal about it,’ ‘Sit near the door,’ ‘Sit on the stoop,’ and ‘Go outside.’ If the same person chooses to make a fantastic character, they may make themselves a wizard with the Dream of ‘Slay the demon.’ Milestones may be ‘Learn a banishing ritual,’ ‘Make a magic sword,’ ‘Observe the beast in its natural habitat,’ and finally, ‘Face the Demon.’

Along the way, players may find that their central Dream is not the real goal or that one of the Milestones itself needs a separate Dream Map to work through. Unlike in the base game for *Dreamchaser*, in a therapy or spiritual direction session, pivoting and reworking the Dream Map is not only permitted but expected because sometimes, clients (with our help) discover that their techniques, or even goals, are actually coping mechanisms or not their real goals. Once they realize this, we can help them discover and choose new goals.

I have play-tested the application of *Dreamchaser* with a couple dozen people to varying extents. Some example Dreams clients have made are: ‘Make art that connects with people,’ ‘Give my children the tools they need to be their best selves,’ ‘I’d like to forge a deeper connection with my Inner Witch,’ ‘To focus on the things that matter to me,’ and ‘Integrate spirituality into my daily life.’

The player who chose that last Dream was Sandra, a seminary student working towards ordination. We worked together for six sessions. Her Milestones were: ‘Spend time in/with/toward spirit,’ ‘Bring others into the task,’ ‘Find/practice Christian practices that nurture,’ and ‘Find/practice non-Christian practices that nurture.’ At each Milestone, the players do Vision Rolls, which “Encourage players to share foreseeable problems and likely character responses to the journey ahead. The questions help the player get into the headspace of their character while influencing the story at the table.” (Petrusha 2017: 52–55). The questions are: “Why can’t we achieve the next Milestone?” and “How would your character try to solve the problem?” (ibid.) For Sandra’s first Milestone, ‘Spend time in/with/toward spirit,’ the barriers were time and stress. Her chosen ways to overcome the barriers were ‘Just do it’ and ‘Use a timer to define and limit the time.’

One concern I had about doing spiritual direction with RPGs was how directive and structured it is compared to my usual practice of following where the seeker goes.

As stated above, spiritual direction is not very directive. The spiritual director follows the lead of the seeker without a firm structure. One concern I had about incorporating RPGs in spiritual direction was that games would make it more structured and directive, taking away from the seeker’s ability to engage in self-discovery. But Sandra reported finding the check-ins and goals helpful; the external accountability along with

the goals helped her develop her internal accountability. She also reported that bringing others into the task, her 2nd Milestone, became a spiritual practice as she wanted to talk with them about spirituality. Many times during the six sessions I found myself saying things like, ‘It sounds like you’re already doing that’ (making time, inviting others into your spiritual life, etc.) (Author in session with player n.d.) By the time we reached the third Milestone, ‘Find/practice Christian practices that nurture,’ she realized that before starting spiritual direction sessions with me using *Dreamchaser*, she had not really been doing her work in an authentic way. It was more like checking boxes. Now she felt she authentically made time for journaling and being with spirit. When we reached the end of our six sessions, Sandra expanded her last Milestone to include authenticity to building specific practices. She reported attending to her spiritual life in a more organic way and wasn’t compartmentalizing spirituality from the rest of her life. It doesn’t matter how I feel about a person’s progress, unless I sense something off, as my work is to help people find responses that are meaningful to them, but I was very pleased to hear this from a future spiritual leader.

Casey and I worked together for 12 sessions. She was a 30-year-old seminary employee who had not been expected to live past her 20s due to several medical conditions she was born with, including limited hearing and vision. We made her as a character first, and her Dream was ‘Learn to love myself’ and her Milestones were ‘positive self-dialogue,’ ‘stop second-guessing myself,’ ‘be my own companion—not a stranger or enemy,’ and ‘let others come and go without judgement.’ Already an experienced RPG player, she appreciated the assessment nature of making a literal character, but was excited to make a fantastic character.

Casey created Chauntal, a blind oracle who had been living on her own since she was a little girl. Her memory was that a creature attacked and destroyed her village, blinding her in the process. Now at age 15, she lived in a simple house outside a small village, where people would occasionally come to her for blessings or divination.

Chauntal’s Dream was ‘Discover the source of her powers (find the creature, find the answers)’ to which we later added ‘To deal with what she was born with.’ Her Milestones ended up as ‘look for signs this is special, now is the time,’ ‘identity development,’ ‘accept others without attachment,’ and ‘accept that she may never know, and embrace the results of the quest.’

Our 55-minute sessions were an organic flow of play and talk. (unedited session notes are in Appendix A.) It is worthy of note that things went as hoped and better. Casey used bleed-in, bleed-out, and steering throughout the sessions. She also used alibi and the release of alibi as we played and talked. She actively practiced integration outside of game time. She said things like “Chauntal is teaching me through her confidence,” and “Outside of game, I sometimes think ‘How would Chauntal act now?’” (player in session with author n.d.) Casey felt she learned about herself and grew as a result of using *Dreamchaser* in spiritual direction.

As I said before, players can choose to either play their literal selves or make a fantastic character, such as a wizard, warrior, astronaut, etc., through whom to explore their questions. To my surprise, all but one of the people who joined me as play-testers decided to play themselves instead of making a fantastic character. This surprised me because all were experienced gamers, used to making fantastic characters, and 12 of them

I met at a play-testing convention. When I realized the trend, I asked each subsequent player why they chose like they did. They reported feeling that playing a fantastic character was too far away if they wanted to work on an actual goal. One player noted that since they wanted to solve a personal problem, starting with themselves as a character was the most straightforward approach. I adopted this practice and now have everyone start with making themselves as their character. It works as a good assessment of where they are at emotionally, physically, and spirituality, as well of their sense of self and how their important relationships are going. Then in each session, even if they later choose to make a fantastic character, the literal character can be used as a ‘check-in for how the person is doing at the time. Here’s an example of what this looks like: Each character has three health stats—Body, Mind, and Spirit—for which they get 12 points to divide among the three. It is useful to ask the person what the three numbers are for them at each session.

Working with Fantastic Characters

My original thought was to have players put a lot of intention into creating a fantastic character that reflected the questions and challenges they wanted to address. Then through play we would address them, and the GM would steer the game so that opportunities to explore the issues selected would happen, as occurred in the examples with *Dreamchaser* described earlier. Then I played some *Troika!* (Sell 2015) and *Exquisite Polycule* (Bats 2020), both games that use randomness in character creation. My personal and professional opinion was that random character generation and pre-generated characters that come with some adventures and games would not allow players to address personal issues and challenges. I love creating characters with deep backstories, interesting quirks, and complex values and felt it would benefit players to do the same because then they could choose what to work on.

Having played these two games, however, I found myself thinking about the possibility that taking choice away, such as happens with randomly generated characters and pre-generated characters, ends up serving to increase alibi. *Mage: 20th Anniversary* edition does not use randomness in character creation, but when I was making my character Oz, I thought I was just creating a cool back story, without putting any of my real-life questions into him. As I said earlier, I realized that I was working through feelings about coming to this work at the relatively late age of 50. You could say that my sub- or unconscious was at work here, but I believe that we humans are really good at finding patterns and meaning, even where they don’t exist. To speak to this point: Once in grad school, for a class called The Ethics and Esthetics of Failure taught by Matthew Goulish, I gave a presentation where I handed people texts and asked them to take turns reading randomly selected passages while I passed random objects around the room. When we discussed what the lecture was about, the class came up with some beautiful and deep conclusions. Then I told them I was using the failure method of Incorrect Method (Goulish, in class lecture), and so I had intentionally not planned the presentation, gathering the objects that morning and deciding what to do with them during the presentation. We humans are good at making connections and a-fixing meanings. As such, even with randomly generated characters, players can and will find ways to explore themselves and

their questions. Perhaps it is because with such characters, the fictional distance of ‘It’s not me, it’s my character’ that comes with alibi is even stronger because they can more easily say ‘This character was formed randomly, so it can’t possibly be me,’ but given the human brain’s propensity to find meaning, I have observed they can manage to identify with the character. (Perhaps this is the topic of another bit of research.)

This is also true in games where players are given ‘pick lists’ to choose from during character creation, such as many Belonging Outside Belonging game like *Wanderhome* (Dragon 2021) and *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* (Alder/Rosenbaum 2018). For example, in *Wanderhome* when creating the Caretaker character, players pick from a list of characteristics that includes, “Alert, Reflective, Patient, Friendly, Expressive, Organized, Gentle, Masculine, and Feminine” players are instructed to “Pick 2 you value being and 2 that feel exhausting to be.” (Dragon 2021: 48) Given the limited choices, players may pick qualities that sound merely interesting, which then later through play they realize have an application to their lives. They are able to increase alibi because the limited choices may seem to not be all that relevant to them.

The Importance of Enhancing the Magic Circle

Just before sundown on Friday night, Jews around the world light Sabbath candles to mark the beginning of the holy day. People stop and maybe reflect on the week, release the pressures and tensions they’ve felt, and try to let themselves slip in the sabbath space for the next 25 hours. Many times, I’ve watched this happen, people using the ritual of the candles to distinguish between one time and another. The candles prepare us to experience Sabbath. Many gamers have rituals for starting and ending games, even if they don’t think of them as rituals. The GM screen goes up, dice get poured onto the table, character sheets come out. ‘Ok, who remembers what happened last time?’ If your group is lucky, you have a prodigious note-taker amongst you, and the notes get read or summarized. When combining games and spiritual direction, it is helpful to ramp up the ritual so as to clearly establish the magic circle and demarcate the time and space between play and not play. In Davi’s game we had a set ritual, which, with some variation, I use to this day. After the dice and character sheets came out, we had a few minutes of silence. Then each person had a few minutes to share their hopes for the game, thoughts about the game, questions they wanted to address during the session, etc. The last thing was each person would say their player name and the group would repeat it. Then, each person would say their character name and the group would repeat it. This brought us in to the magic circle of the game. This step aligns with the Purgation step when walking a labyrinth: we let go of our day-to-day lives and inhabit our character and the world of the game. After play ended, there were again a few minutes of silence, then each player responded to three questions: ‘What did I appreciate about my participation today? What did I appreciate about someone else’s participation? What will I take with me from today’s session?’ Finally, we spoke our names aloud again, but reversed the order—going from character name to player name. This helped players consciously leave the magic circle. This aligns with the integration step of walking a labyrinth. I stream tabletop RPGs with the CASTT Gamers (the Community of Applied, Spiritual, and Tabletop Gamers)

and we have adopted a modified version of the name and question ritual in our streams. It not only helps us transition into the magic circle but also helps us model how games can be used in applied ways.

Mechanics Matter

In discussions of this work, I am fond of saying even *DnD* can be used, as it is what we do with the games that allow for the work. Alibi and bleed happen in any game, whatever the system, but certain mechanics direct the game in particular directions. In classic *DnD* players advance by killing monsters and collecting treasure. This encourages players to have their characters kill as much as possible and hoard treasure. Other games include rules and mechanics that support self-discovery better.

The Norwegian game *Itras By* (Giaeвер/Gudmunsen 2012) takes place in a vaguely European city in the interwar period, with healthy doses of the weird and surreal added in. Players don't have numbered stats like Strength and Wisdom, nor must they choose character classes. Players can be and do anything that is allowed by the other players and GM. The game can be played with a GM or without.

I have played this game with the same group since early 2020. Two things make *Itras By* wonderful for inner work: the fact that characters can do anything and its surrealism. The game's authors write:

“By using free whims without demands for logic, they [the Surrealists] created distortions of reality, placed things where they didn't belong. They created something incomprehensible, yet strangely compelling; they lifted the veil of reality a fraction of an inch.” (Giaeвер/Gudmundson 2012: 7)

Jewish mystics call this veil the *pargawd*, the veil of illusion, that seems to separate the physical world from the spiritual world. Pulling aside or traversing the *pargawd*, brings us from a state of small or finite mind, *mochin d'katnut*, to *mochin d'galdlut*, or big or infinite mind. Being in *mochin d'galdlut*, we experience the spiritual realm, seeing that the separation between the worlds is an illusion perpetuated by our minds, souls, and cultures (Winkler 2003: 93).

The game's surrealism encourages players to lift the veil and see though the elements of the physical world into the spiritual. And that players can have their characters do anything and be anything is liberating. Make yourself the image of your dreams. Give yourself powers beyond mortal ken. See how your idealized self plays out. In addition, players can make supporting casts for their character, including adversaries. Players have the opportunity to design colleagues and adversaries reflecting their challenges and questions, be it imposter syndrome, depression, feeling adrift, etc.

Another game that invokes the veil between worlds is *Imp of the Perverse* by Nathan Paoletta (2019) which takes place in a Jacksonian America (1830s to 1840s) gone Gothic. Each character has an Imp of the Perverse on their shoulders, “birthed from their particular untamable urges and compelling them to commit terrible deeds.” (Paoletta 2019: 9) Players fight monsters who are people that gave in to their perversity. This is how charac-

ters fight their own call to perversity. The game asks, “Can you resist the seductive draw of your own perversity long enough to gain your humanity—or will you embrace your Imp and become damned?” (ibid.) I have not yet played the game, but a player could put their own challenges into the Imp and see how it plays out, or playing a character who struggles with ‘made up’ perversity can be of value to a player.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians (Walsh 2021) is a “game of queer action romance that celebrates queer love and power.” (Walsh 2021: Handouts p1) The game uses the Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) approach to game design, derived from the game *Apocalypse World* by Vincent and Meguey Baker (2010). Actions in PbtA games are called Moves and players roll 2d6 and add any modifiers to see what happens when they try to, for example, Entice someone, try to Figure out a Person, or offer Emotional Support. A 10 or higher, called an Up Beat, is a success. A 7–9, a Mixed Beat, is a success with a catch. 6 or lower, a Down Beat, is a complication. The action may succeed but something big goes wrong, or entirely unintended things happen. They often result in something funny happening or even the revelation of important information along with the failed action. When a player rolls a Down Beat they gain experience, which allows them to advance, gaining new powers or skills or improving what they already have. Failure is the way you advance in *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* and has high potential spiritual and therapeutic value.

While swords may cross often they are as likely to end in a kiss as blood. Instead of hit points or health, characters take conditions such as Angry, Guilty, and Insecure when wounded. (Walsh 2021: 17) The game is about relationships, with mechanics for tracking and flirting. In fact, the book includes tips for how to flirt. There is a sizable focus on the safety mechanics that make the table safe for players, and the game has a ‘no fascist or bigots allowed’ rule. With such a focus on relationships, the game can be good for people who stumble through relationships and don’t feel comfortable saying how they feel.

Which brings us back to *Exquisite Polycule*, by Georgie Bats (2019). In *Exquisite Polycule* players tell “a love story, or multiple intersecting love stories, between 3 or more characters.” (ibid 1) Here again, characters can be anything, and as mentioned above, the random character generation can allow for stronger alibi at the start of the game. *Exquisite Polycule* is liberating because the whole idea of the game is for players to declare their feelings for each other. Safety mechanics are emphasized in the game to help players separate their character’s feelings from their own. In between rounds, there is a check-in about the relationships between the characters, which also serves as a time for players to check in about how they’re doing with the play. I found it liberating to run around declaring my affection for the other characters and was quite good at flirting. This game can be a good means for practice and confidence building.

Dream Askew/Dream Apart, by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum, respectively, are two gems in one book. The games are the first in the Belonging Outside Belonging system (BoB). The games are inspired by PbtA, and also use the moves and playbooks PbtA games use. The biggest difference is that the games have no GM. Players create the story together, taking turns speaking for the narrative and setting elements of the game. This can allow players to take more agency in how the story unfolds. Players can challenge their character, and everyone else’s in poignant and profound ways. It gives them space to open their imagination in new ways.

The other big difference is that these games are based on tokens, not dice. If players want to make a Strong Move, like ‘Get out of harm’s way’ or ‘Move unseen,’ the players spend a token. Players gain tokens when they make a Weak Move, which is when an action fails or a character is left vulnerable. Weak Moves include ‘Promise something you can’t possibly deliver’ and ‘Take apart something crucial to repurpose its parts.’ You start the game with no tokens, so players must make their characters vulnerable to gain tokens and be able to succeed in their actions. This can be good practice for life.

One Child’s Heart by Camdon Wright (2020), which I contributed to, has players play professionals (social workers, therapists, clergy, law enforcement) who go into a traumatized child’s memories—not to change their past, but to help them develop tools to better navigate their lives in the present. Playing a character helping someone work through their trauma in this way can be a valuable experience for players.

The Doctor Who RPG (Chapman et al. 2015) downplays violence as a solution. Its mechanics make actual fighting the last option in a conflict. During a conflict, play progresses in the sequence of Talkers, Movers, Doers, and last, Fighters (ibid: 81). Players are encouraged to find non-violent solutions to problems.

The rules, mechanics, and settings of all these games, and all games, give players a scaffold, a structure around which to navigate the world and their challenges. They can be designed to facilitate the work of spiritual discovery.

When I rolled up my first character in 1979 (a human thief named Grack—I still have the piece of loose-leaf paper we used as a character sheet), I had no idea the journey of self-discovery I would go on the next 42+ years. I have done a deep exploration of my gender, playing non-binary characters, characters whose gender was unclear to others, a boy who used he/him pronouns and wore a corset and makeup, and so on. I played characters who served their deity without question and I played characters who did not believe any of it but still served. I’ve explored polyamorous relationships and celibacy. The fictional distance afforded by playing a character in an interactive game has allowed this exploration.

This work makes me come alive. And there is more I am excited to investigate. I want to go deeper into the work described above. I read *Dungeons and Dilemmas* by Jesse Burneko (2020), about how dungeon design can be used to further narratives and I want to delve into how dungeon design can spur self-discovery. Most of the work I talk about now involves a professional—therapists, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors. I want to create guides to help players do this work on their own, at their home tables, without them vomiting their personal issues all over the rest of the players. I want to bring more indie games to the tables I run for spiritual discovery.

And I don’t want to do this alone. This is a rather nascent field—spiritual direction and RPGs. I am building a community of collaboration that is in its infant stage now. If you are a spiritual director or otherwise related professional who uses or wants to use RPGs in your practice, please reach out to me. I want to talk to you.

Appendix A

S1 Literal

Dream: Learn to love myself

Steps: (1) Positive self- dialogue. (2) Stop second- guessing myself. (3) Be my own companion—not a stranger or an enemy. (4) Let others come or go without judgement.

Player has played a number of RPGs (*DnD*, *Pathfinder*) for many years, especially loving character creation and development. First time for spiritual direction. They have a good critical eye and champion accessibility in games. The player has vision and hearing impairment and other as yet undisclosed physical issues. We opened the session with my past/future road mediation, which was difficult but not detrimental or distracting, given their medical history and questions of longevity because of their illnesses.

The player declared a desire to transform their Literal character into a fantastic one, ‘warning’ they would return w/at least a page of back story. Next session we will create a Fantastic character who’s Dream and Milestones reflect those of the Literal character. This player mostly worked out the steps themselves, with little discussion.

S2

Player came with ideas for making character Fantastic. *Initial Dream* was “accept myself for who I am” with the same or nearly same Steps. The backstory was that as an infant a creature came and destroyed her village, except for her. When she made eye contact with the creature she went blind. She developed heightened senses and oracular abilities and came to be known as a person to go to for help and information. She was both feared and respected. The character had recently been having visions telling her it was time to seek out the creature to ask it questions, to get answers. We redefined the Dream to be something around talking to the creature.

We also redefined the first Step/Milestone as ‘leave’. I asked the Vision Roll questions. What’s stopping you from going, what’s blocking you? The answer was “I don’t wanna!” and fear she would lose her oracular abilities. While redefining the Dream and the Vision Roll the player said this Dream was essentially her experience being born with physical challenges and that she had never really examined them. She didn’t say so, but I’m thinking she has a lot of emotions around her state that she has not dug into.

We played out a scene where she woke from a dream about mold and rot creeping up on her. She went outside to her shrine and discovered her supplies were fetid and disintegrated. She felt a presence in the nothing of her blindness and a beckoning to the left. She felt danger, but nothing was there. It was time to answer the call of her dreams and visions, and find the creature.

Notes: Player always referred to her character in 3rd person. I tried using 2nd person, but she held her stance so I switched. Character’s name is Chaantal.

S3

This session we worked on the first Milestone, 'looking for signs she is special.' We were still on the idea that she had to leave home to find the source of her power, to find the creature that attacked her village. She went inside to divine. We discussed how she would do that, being blind. She came up with drinking tea and feeling the leaves. I played it as the aroma sent her into a trance. She then discussed with a spirit guide what to do. She was very resistant to leaving home. I established that she was familiar with the village, knowing people there and being known by people. This alone was a teaching moment for the player; that she was known and could do more than expected. 'I know and see more than I give myself credit for.'

She decided to go and packed. We discussed whether she would over or under pack, deciding Chauntal would under prepare. Walking the road to town a child approached, "Ms. Chauntal, tell me the good word." Chauntal said something about it being a good day to be outside, patted the child's head and sent them off. We determined there was a grange where retired farmers formed a council of earth-based elders, guiding the village in planting and what not. Chauntal approached the grange where she encountered an elder who invited her to sit on the ground and gave her mint to chew on.

This may be the end of the first milestone as player originally wrote, "positive self-talk".

S4

We started this online session with discussion of the previous session and how they went. Player said Chauntal was "teaching me through her confidence. She's more comfortable in the world than I am." Also that, the character is "a manifestation of who I want to be in the world." We spoke about how the player is infantilized by people because of her serious medical condition and despite Chauntal being quite capable, she found herself doing the same thing to her. She described Chauntal as being capable of caring for herself and comfortable with other people. At the same time she doesn't realize that everything she needs is already in her and she needs to find a balance between being present in the world and in her mind.

A chunk of this conversation was around how she depends on the spirits to guide her for eventing she does and she wants to not depend on them so much. The Milestone was 'Identity development' and player saw this as Chauntal having confidence to not depend on the spirits so much. Her answer to the 1st VR question was that Chauntal doesn't trust herself and relies onto spirits for everything. Player knew Chauntal has what it takes, but Chauntal hasn't figured that out yet. Player's answer to question 2 was Chauntal needs to realize the spirits are not always right, they have their own lives/agendas, and they're not as divine as Chauntal thinks they are.

I started pivoting my sense of the story that was coming. I had thought here would be an encounter with a spirit, complete with revelation and understanding. But now I was thinking maybe the spirits are just part of Chauntal, manifested to help her until she doesn't need them. Maybe they are real, but they don't know more than they do, helping Chauntal because they do. They don't have some fated insight or knowledge, they just pay

attention, like a spiritual director. I also was thinking about how the player is like a guide for the character, shepherding the character through life and decisions.

We played the scene meeting the elder at the grange. Given our talk before, I had the elder not give much advice, rather asking Chauntal to listen to their heart to know the truth. This played out well. She decided her heart wanted to go west, to find the source. Regarding the spirits not being so divine, maybe we will come to “the journey is the answer.” Chauntal had asked the elder “have you ever been afraid.” The elder laughed gently, saying yes, many times. They discussed this, Chauntal asking did you ever run away, to which the answer again was “yes, but other times I stood up, sometimes getting help.” It was kinda amazing doing SD through the elder, through a character. The elder was giving guidance, which was me giving guidance to the player—exactly a goal of this whole endeavor.

Chauntal asked how she could repay the elder, to which the elder said, you could bless the crops. Chauntal did and went west. She accepted a ride with a farmer going to the mill in the next town. They talked jovially, Chauntal happy to chat when someone was not there to ask anything of her. Player described Chauntal as trusting of others in this way at the same time not familiar with it.

In both sessions it came home to me strongly that I need to be even more open to pivoting than in regular game sessions. I have to pay attention to where the players lead the sessions. Have to be completely willing to let go of any idea I have of where the story will go. We are dealing with complex lives and experiences that are revealed to me slowly over sessions. My understanding of the player deepens as we go.

S5

Chauntal set out for the next town. After a while a traveller in a wagon offered a ride. Chauntal accepted. She enjoyed the ride, socializing and listening to the man talk about his life and the world of wheat and flour. Player said Chauntal was surprised at how much she liked small talk/just talking. She got to the inn and went to eat. Friendly older barkeep. Chauntal decided to cast some runes for herself. Given how she is feeling about the spirits I decided to make their response vague and very open. I gave the answer to her questions about what is happening and what will happen as: “Present-upcoming challenges, what will happen as a result of change is, and the challenge is you, you will still be you.” All in prep for Chauntal to discover agency in her role as oracle. I asked player to say what the meaning of the answer was. This led to discussion about not wanting to depend on spirits.

I have an idea to have the spirits explain that it’s really about her, that she is right about them not being all that special. However, I also am thinking to ask the player to narrate the meeting between the spirit(s) and her.

A bard performed, which Chauntal enjoyed. She realized she had forgotten her notebook so decided to buy a new one. Learning there was a scribe in town she asked the bard to allow her to ask for help getting there from the stage. A gruff man offered to take her there. The barkeep interjected saying he would get her there. The gruff man’s name is Nalt. Chauntal stopped to talk with Nalt, while the barkeep gently tugged her away.

Player said that Chauntal felt for Nalt as someone who is also not trusted. She made it to the scribe and got a new journal and a delightful encounter.

At the beginning of the session player said her hope for the session was to stay present and not let her anxieties seep into Chauntal's experience. She said her initial response was to have Chauntal be suspicious of others, but she realized that was the player and that C was more naive and trusting than the player, who is more careful. C could keep calm in the face of things with which she wasn't familiar. You don't know till you try. She was letting C be who she is, which is good practice for herself.

S6

C headed back to the inn, intending to talk with Nalt. But first we talked about if player thought we had accomplished the second milestone, identity development. Player spoke about learning from C example to live her own life. For so long people have made decisions for player, thinking that in light of her medical situation, they were taking care of her. She reported she using C as a vehicle to ask herself, "what do I want." She spoke about for so long her biggest concern was just to stay alive, with all the surgeries and all, that now she is almost 30, she is somewhat surprised to be alive. She has to, gets to, make all these decisions and is not used to it. Her dad still tries to tell her what to do. She feels fear and then looks to C who is also making these decisions but without the fear. "What if I was more _____, didn't care what people thought." Right on with what I hope will happen for players. Character experiences and attitude are bleeding back to player life. Player is learning from their character and spurring personal growth. Player can try things through their character. So, identity development for character and player!

Thus, we moved on to the next milestone: Accept others without attachment. The situation with Nalt seems perfect for this. Player said how attachment is not quite the right word. In response to VR1 player said that C doesn't always see herself as a person. I'd think she meant she sees herself more as a role, the oracle. She also is coming to a realization that not all conversations are about something bigger, that C almost always looks to the subtext. She hadn't previously got that sometimes conversations about the weather are just about the weather and connecting, not some other thing. She wants to be able to accept that people are sometimes just connecting. Along the lines of her realizing she enjoys small talk, chatting, like with the wagon guy. In response to VR2 she said she would realize she doesn't need to be fixing things, people all the time. She could learn to take people at face value more often.

She found out Nalt was at the jail, so she went to see him. He wasn't very receptive, but she told him he has a purpose and that she would be back. He's pretty fully accepted himself as a ruffian criminal of no value.

Player is in a phase of life of making adult decisions for herself for the first time in her life. She can now see a future and knows she has to plan for it. She's understandably afraid and also determined to make the decisions that are best for her. Her dad has said how now that she has a job she should stay there for 40 years and have security. Player isn't sure, knowing just that she wants to make decisions for herself, even if it is staying at job for a long time. Her character is helping her make these decisions. As she guides

her character through her life, her character is guiding her, helping the player be able to make decisions and manifest.

S6+

C encounters a farmer while traveling, approaches and offers to bless the crops. Farmer doesn't trust C at first. Why should I trust you? C sticks up for herself. Farmer accepts blessing. C accepted farmer without attachment.

We discussed how C doesn't know how to live in agency, always having to be the healer or seer. She doesn't understand idea of living for self or that she has power in her own life. Player said this is also her. Player said how she usually hesitates and thinks about things, while C just does things. "I'm using her to practice how I could react."

S +1

We moved on to Milestone 4, rewriting it as "Accept that she may never know and prepare to embrace the results of the quest." We'd been discussing that C was too dependent on the spirits to guide her and that she needs/wants to not depend on them and make decision in her life, much as the player was dealing with similar issues. VR1 about obstacles brought responses like C needs meaning/reason, accepting 'just because' as why she is the way she is would be too difficult. VR2 brought the suggestion that C could meet someone who has walked the path before and shares their experience. Player asked if they and C really need to know the source of her power, why she is the way she is, but that both really want to know. Both could work to accept what is as what is and take back power from there. The player wants to have meaning and cause for her medical issues. She also realizes that no one is going to tell her, she needs to decide for herself.

In town she goes to an inn for the night, where she meets a young waitress who has dreamt of going to the city, 2 days journey. The waitress, Kilah, says you're lucky, which C defers. Kilah says, "we're all lucky in some way."

In discussion the player made 2 suggestions. Nice taking of agency. 1. Maybe next time C asks the spirits don't help. 2. C meet someone who accepts no reason (?), is happy, doesn't play the game.

Penultimate Session

Chauntal and Kilah approached the city. As I described it C and player had reactions. Player reported a feeling like they would when they dissociated. We slowed down. The question was do we stop and discuss our do we stick with the fiction. We have a habit of discussing the connections between C and player, so we did a little of that, then I switched over to asking how C was doing and what she was doing, as well as describing what she sensed. Player did ok, able to stay in the game and not dissociate.

We discussed possibilities for the monster and C's history. All the above was started by Kilah asking C if she knew the name of her town that was destroyed. C had no idea, and Kilah suggested it's possible it's in her memory somewhere. As we discussed more player started thinking maybe C was already going blind and it was not the fault of the "monster" and in fact maybe the monster actually helped C. I asked, maybe there wasn't

actually a monster. Player wasn't sure about this, but did offer that maybe the monster did not cause the destruction.

Many possible ends played in my head, when player said she would spend the week writing the end. Awesome. She took agency, in the decision that she would write how C's story resolves, what the source of her powers is, how she came to be how she is. Next session we will discuss the ending she writes. I will ask how it relates to the player, this is of course if she somehow doesn't go to such questions herself. Which she likely will.

Final Session

Player did not write an ending. She tried but nothing felt true and she started dissociating as she worked on it. She reported how she and C were merging more and that made resolving difficult and dissociating easier.

We discussed multiple outcomes and how she felt about them. What if the town was still there and they gave C as an offering to the sprits to stop the damage, what if C disappeared and they had looked for her, what if the spirits had hid her from the people. None of these were satisfying, some made C and the player angry. She did not believe the family looked hard enough. She reported that as a child she went through a phase trying to prove she was adopted. In a possibility where the spirits said they had been preparing her because the dark was coming she rebuffed them, saying she wasn't going to work with them.

We discussed what if the village was indeed wiped out. Ending up on it was and I introduced a woman in a hut on the edge of the village, with children running around. Children who were infants when the village was destroyed, The woman had been away from the town when it was destroyed, returning in time to save the kids, and staying. C decided to stay and rebuild. We talked through the epilogue and C helped grow the town, making it a place for orphans and people separated from their families, they were drawn there. Many reunions happened. Many didn't and people some of them stayed. She used her oracular abilities and became known as a water witch. She took on apprentices and students. Kilah and her family stayed connected. Her mother spent lots of time there using her mason skills to build the town. They were her lifelong surrogate family.

C continued working with the spirits, but it was more a partnership. She didn't depend on them and did much on her own. Some adventures, even big ones, happened and C lived to a ripe old age.

Appendix B: One Page Game Summaries

These 'One-pager' summaries were created for the Discord community CASTT Gamers – Community of Applied, Spiritual, and Therapeutic Tabletop Gamers as a shared resource of the potential value and use of RPGS we played.

Each game has something about their settings, rules, character creations and advancement, and mechanics that makes them useful for plumbing the depths of our souls and discovering who we are. A game where advancement happens as a result of gaining experience points from killing monsters and gathering treasure, like *DnD* (especially early editions), lead players to a hack and slash style of play. A game that rewards players

for milestones achieved, like *Dreamchaser* and a variant rule in fifth edition *DnD*, is more easily used for self-examination. But it is not only the mechanics that make games suitable. Yes, mechanics matter, they give us a structure, scaffolding, around which to work, but, as I like to say, even *DnD* can be used for spiritual work. You just have to let rules and mechanics fall to the wayside at appropriate times. My friend Allen Turner, a game design professor and designer (Ehdrigohr), said to me that even murder hobos, players that want to run through dungeons killing everything and collecting treasure, are doing it for a reason.

Game and creator: *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* by April Kit Walsh

Submitted by: Menachem Cohen

Available at: <https://www.evilhat.com/home/thirsty-sword-lesbians/>

Genre: fluid, open, decided by players and GM

Format: GMed (GMfull/less version available), PbtA

Players and Age Range: 3–7, PG-13 and higher

Themes and Keywords: lesbians, relationships, flirting,

Description: TSL is a “game of queer action romance that celebrates queer love and power.” (handouts: 1) “The game invites you to feel the deep emotional conflict of your PC and care about the other characters in the game. This is game about feeling things and forging relationships.” (book: 4) Play starts with players and GM world building, including the size and values of their community and the toxic powers in the world. Genre and tone are decided by the group, though many settings are provided. Players pick from a number of playbooks, like The Chosen, The Scoundrel, and the Nature Witch. Actions are taken through Moves, some called Basic Moves which all players have and some specific to each playbook. Success or failure is determined with 2d6 and can also be narratively determined. While swords, or energy sabers, may cross, much of the ‘combat’ does not involve physical injury, and may end in a kiss rather than blood. Damage is recorded in Conditions, like Angry, Frightened, and Hopeless and are mitigated through Moves by the player or others. There are not hit points or health stats. There are 5 stats, which start at -1 to +2 to the 2d6 rolled for actions.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: This game is all about relationships and flirting and can be very liberating. Moves such as Figure Out a Person and Emotional Support can be used to increase player skills and confidence. Safety mechanics are built into the games and the group decides on such things as Lines and Veils together. How much sex and romance and violence is also determined by the group. Included in the game is the rule “No fascists or bigots allowed” followed by details/examples of what this includes (book: 11). Finally, like many PbtA games, failure is part of how characters advance, so players are encouraged to try new things and take risks. Additionally, use of safety mechanics and check-ins during the game are rewarded with advancement.

Game and creator: *Exquisite Polycule* by Georgie Batts

Submitted by: Menachem Cohen

Available at: <https://georgiebatts.itch.io/exquisite-polycule>

Genre: fluid, determined by group

Format: GM-full/GM-less

Players and Age Range: 3–6 adults

Themes and Keywords: sex positive, polyamory, stigma, healthy relationships, boundaries, consent.

Description: In *Exquisite Polycule* players tell “a love story, or multiple intersecting love stories, between 3 or more characters.” Character creation is collaborative and largely random. Play moves through 4 rounds—Meeting-Cute, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action—during which players take turns framing scenes. Relationships develop over these rounds and are diagrammed in a Relationship Web after each round.

The game includes variant rules for 2 players.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: *Exquisite Polycule* can be used to explore and process stigmatized ideals and behaviors an individual has. By playing a character trying to unabashedly establish a polyamorous group players can explore how it feels to act on beliefs and/or behaviors that bring shame or are prohibited. Players can learn and practice such concepts as consent, sex-positivity, and boundaries. The Relationship Web used to track romantic entanglements, which resembles sociograms, can also be useful to chart relationships in others games as well as default life.

Finally, the use of the somewhat random character generation might facilitate the fictional distance and alibi—it’s not me, it’s my character— that keep our egos and defenses out of the way, allowing for delving into personal issues in RPGs.

Game and creator: *Itras By*. Ole Peder Giaever & Martin Bull Gudmunsen

Submitted by: Menachem Cohen

Available at: <https://itrasby.com/>

Genre: Surreal early 20th c. European Urban

Format: GMed or GMfull/less

Players and Age Range: ~3–6, Game book contains adult themes and images.

Themes and Keywords: Surreal(ism), urban, imagination, the absurd, chance/resolution cards

Description: *Itras By* is a “journey away from reality as you perceive it with your everyday senses...the means are elements from surrealism; an art movement from the 2’s which tries to portray the life of the subconscious.” (4–5). The game takes place in a vaguely European city of the 1920–3s. City residents fly around with jetpacks and dance in a club on a street where it’s always Friday, and rumor has it that if the dancing stops there the world will end. The only game mechanics are the Resolution and Chance cards, which say things like ‘yes, but’ or make everyone play their shadow twin. Characters don’t have

such things as stats and skills, having in their stead ‘dramatic qualities’, ‘intrigue magnets’, and ‘supporting characters.’ Characters can be and do anything, limited only by their imaginations and consensus at the table: a bipedal bison who erased his own memories; a cyborg spider who rides on the shoulder of his human intern; a hotel employee who is only seen when he wants you to see him who manipulates the physical elements of the hotel to fit guests needs, who transforms to the life of the party when he puts on his Zoot Suit, and turns out to be one of the secret primal forces of the city.

Play is largely improvisational and twists and turns based on the imagination of the players and the whimsy of the cards. Much of the book and the supplement, *The Menagerie*, are fiction like descriptions, all of which you do not need to read. In fact, it has been fun to every so often discover a new piece of the city and do something with it.

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: You can be and do anything. There is no limit. *Itras By* therefore provides a canvas and template for exploration of self to the fullest extent. This may be true of many RPGs, but *Itras By* begs and cajoles, laying out the red carpet and an all you can eat buffet. The lack of crunch may prove difficult for some. The surrealism foundation of the game facilitates this exploration. About surrealism the creators write, “the subconscious contains knowledge of a reality behind that which we can normally perceive.” They say, “the Surrealists lifted the veil of reality a fraction of an inch.” (7). The game aims to give us access to that not perceived reality, throwing open wide the doors of perception and discovery. Gamemasters and players can mine the game for the benefit of clients and self.

Game and creator: *Imp of Perverse* by Nathan Paoletta

Submitted by: Menachem Cohen

Available at: <https://ndpdesign.com/imp>

Genre: Psychological Horror in a Jacksonian Gothic setting.

Format: GMed

Players and Age Range: Gm + 1–4 players, Game contains adult themes and images.

Themes and Keywords: Gothic, Horror, perversity, anxiety, monster

Description: *Imp of the Perverse* takes place in a Jacksonian America (1830s to 40s) gone Gothic, where “dark passions pierce the all-too-thin Shroud over the land of the dead.” (Paoletta 2019: 9) Each character has an Imp of the Perverse on their shoulders, “birthed from their particular untamable urges and compelling them to commit terrible deeds.” (ibid.) Players fight monsters who are people who have given in to their perversity. This is how characters fight their own call to perversity, but it is quite likely that one will fall, becoming the next monster in the game, with the player switching to the GM role (if players choose an ongoing campaign). The game asks, “can you resist the seductive draw of your own perversity long enough to gain your humanity—or will you embrace your Imp and become damned?” (ibid.)

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: I have not yet played the game, but a player could put their own challenges into the Imp and see how it plays out, or play-

ing a character who struggles with “made up” perversity can be of value to a player. The game has a system for tracking characters’ slide towards or movement away from perversity that could be useful for professionals and clients. The mechanic where a character who gives in to their Imp becomes the next monster and the player of said character becomes the next GM could lend agency to a player in working through their issues. Having the control of the GM and a community fo players fighting their monster may end up being very supportive.

Game and creator: *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* by Avery Alder & Benjamin Rosenbaum

Submitted by: Menachem Cohen

Available at: <https://store.buriedwithoutceremony.com/products/dream-askew-dream-apart>

Genre: Belonging Outside Belonging. No dice, no masters.

Format: GMfull/less

Players and Age Range: 3–6 players, Game contains adult themes.

Themes and Keywords: Queer, community, shtetl, collapse,

Description: *Dream Askew/Dream Apart* are two gems in one book. The games are the first in the belonging outside belonging system (BoB), also called no dice, no masters. The games are inspired by PbtA, using the moves and playbooks PbtA games use. The biggest difference is that the games have no GM. Players create the story together, taking turns speaking for the narrative and setting elements of the game. *Dream Askew* is subtitled “Queer strife amid the collapse,” and *Dream Apart* is subtitled, “Jewish fantasy of the shtetl.”

Applied/Spiritual/Therapeutic Application and Value: Since there is no GM this can allow players to take more agency in how the story unfolds. Players can challenge their character and everyone else’s in poignant and profound ways. It gives them space to open the imagination in new ways.

The other big difference is that these games don’t use dice. The games are based on tokens. If players want to make a strong move, which is when something goes right, like, ‘Get out of harm’s way’ or ‘Move unseen’, the players spend a token. They gain tokens when they make a Weak Move, which is means an action fails or a character is left vulnerable. Weak Moves include ‘Promise something you can’t possibly deliver’ and ‘Take apart something crucial to repurpose its parts.’ You start the game with no tokens, so players must make their characters vulnerable to gain tokens and be able to succeed in their actions. This can be good practice for life.

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