Gamification:

How game design and narrative therapy can work together

by Luke Kalaf

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Abstract

This paper documents ways of incorporating gamification (using game design elements in a non-game context) into therapeutic conversations using narrative therapy principles to uncover skills and knowledges suppressed by dominant discourses.

Key words: gamification; games; metaphor; Dungeons and Dragons; D&D; role-play; TTRPG; failure; procrastination; Aboriginal; narrative practice

This paper details explorations and adventures in the therapeutic uses of game metaphors and gamification alongside narrative therapy principles. It describes conversations with "The Traveller" and others for whom games provided resonant language and metaphors. Games provided new ways of thinking about problems and the skills being used to respond to them. In particular, games helped us to identify sites of resistance to dominant discourses about procrastination and productivity, and to build alternative narratives that better captured local skills and knowledge. Metaphors from fantasy game design brought forward new concepts for story development, such as side quests, preparing spells and building a homebase. This provided experience-near language for exploring problems, and openings for alternative stories of creativity, friendship and the development of new skills.

The conversations described in this paper were grounded in narrative therapy theory and practice. I drew on work from Michael White (2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007), David Denborough (2005) and recent innovations in the use of games and fantasy for therapeutic purposes (Andersen-Giberson, 2016; Salja, 2022; Taylor, 2014).

The stigma of gaming

The discourse of gaming as a problem is so prevalent that it's necessary to specify that this isn't the focus of this paper. On the contrary, it's about how games and gaming metaphors can provide possibilities for addressing unrelated problems. But it can be hard to talk about games without conjuring up terms like addiction, obsession, mind-numbing, useless and escapism (Erickson & Monk, 2018). While these terms may not necessarily be inaccurate, when they become the only language used in relation to games, this can "close off the possibility of finding alternative understandings and explanations of what is going on during the gamer's lived experience" (Erickson & Monk, 2018, p. 2).

The stigmatisation and pathologising of gaming can recruit people who game into this way of thinking and identifying. Several papers by narrative practitioners have looked at the discourse around gaming and the effects and missed opportunities of defining gaming solely as a problem (Andersen-Giberson, 2016; Dinç, 2019; Erickson & Monk, 2018). Using narrative

principles to externalise the influence of games can "offer a separation and un-totalising of identity" (Andersen-Giberson, 2016) that doesn't negate any negative effects of gaming.

In line with the possibilities described in this paper, Chan (2021), Nyirinkwaya (2020), Salja (2022), Taylor (2014) and Wong (2012) have described inviting gaming experiences and metaphors into conversations to explore what is important to a person, what they learn from gaming, and how this relates to what they value in their real-life experiences. Skills used in games can be translated into real-world contexts (Anderson-Giberson, 2016; Dinç, 2019).

Context and location

The language, metaphors and ideas offered in this paper were gifted to me as a practitioner. While the focus of this paper is on games, gaming and game design, the stories shared here were co-authored with Aboriginal people. As my co-adventurer The Traveller said, "The stories you will be sharing are Blak stories".

I work as a narrative therapist in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Heath Organisation. We provide free medical and social support to people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Some of the people I meet with have asked for the support themselves, and some have been given the option by a doctor or case worker. Aside from cultural identity, there is no criteria for someone to access the service.

I have come to narrative practice from a place of privilege. I identify as a European Australian decedent of immigrants from Greece and Holland. I was born into a middle-class family, and have experienced a life of financial stability, education and familial support.

Counselling can position people as problems that need to be fixed to support wider social cohesion. Emily Salja (2022, p. 23) argued that it is imperative to recognise that conventional therapies can be hazardous to those who are not "palatable to dominant discourses". There is potential for therapy to be a "vehicle of colonisation" (2022, p. 23). As a profession, particularly in so-called Australia, counselling has historically used problem-focused diagnostic mechanisms to tell the stories of Aboriginal people.

Prominent narrative practitioner and Kaurna Elder Aunty Barbara Wingard has written about the importance of bringing forward stories about skills

of resistance, survival, thriving and honouring cultural knowledge (Wingard, 2001). The effects of colonisation are central to many conversations in the work that I do and to my position as a non-Aboriginal person working in spaces where I attempt to be of support to First Nations persons. Through a history of forced removal of lands and family, the people I meet with are disproportionately affected by child protection laws, over surveillance and over servicing (Cunneen & Rowe, 2014). They are aware that my notes could be requisitioned by the Department for Child Protection, thus contributing to an experience of being surveilled. Counselling work is not apolitical: we are governed by certain laws, held to organisational policies, and directed to report on outcomes influenced by funding bodies (White & Epston, 1990).

My anti-colonialist therapeutic stance is to adopt a position of non-neutrality against racism, the occupation of unceded lands and the legacy of violence of colonisation. I refuse to be neutral about the ways their effects continue to show up in our conversations, about the silencing of stories, and about the lack of acknowledgment of cultural disconnection and removal of culture (Drahm, 2018; Drahm-Butler, 2015). Through externalising and re-authoring, I take an influential but decentred stance to resist the violence of colonisation and the messages associated with it, while prioritising stories that support people to feel empowered in their own resistance (White, 2007).

The Traveller and the Black Ball

In our conversations, The Traveller and I had externalised what he called "the Black Ball". He explained that when the Black Ball was close, he experienced worry, dread and a sense that things were not possible.

During one of our conversations, The Traveller said that he had noticed that worry about the war in Ukraine was increasing the influence the Black Ball was having in his life. Amid the troubling news stories that were feeding the Black Ball, The Traveller described accounts of multinational gaming corporations "responding" to the war by pulling their servers out of Russia, so that the Russian public could not play their games online, and then donated money to the Ukrainian resistance. This was the first time that The Traveller's interest in games entered our conversation. The Traveller compared the companies' actions as akin to taking a Gameboy from

a priviledged child and giving five cents to someone sleeping rough. He was frustrated with the ways these profitable companies had made decisions that mostly affected the lives of people who likely had no interest in the occupation of Ukraine, and furthermore live in an authoritarian society with few safe ways of resisting their government's decisions or interests. The Traveller explained, "it's all for show". Through a re-authoring conversation about these reports, we discovered values dear to The Traveller: justice and fairness.

Discourse and procrastination

The Traveller had been developing a television show exploring First Nations issues with a panel of First Nations people. He hoped that if the show were picked up by a network, it would elevate the voices of Aboriginal peoples across South Australia and highlight the communities' experiences and problems. The Black Ball had The Traveller feeling guilty about having been absent from this project that was so important to him, and The Traveller was feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of re-engaging.

Michael White (2002b) wrote about how failure discourses can influence the way we tell our stories: "Never before has the sense of being a failure to be an adequate person been so freely available to people, and never before has it been so willingly and routinely dispensed" (White, 2002b, p. 33). The Traveller was consumed by the idea that participation in anything outside of the television project was a form of failure, which he labelled "procrastination". A discourse of productivity seemed to overshadow his whole story.

Drawing on skills for receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma (Denborough, 2005), I asked The Traveller what he had been doing instead of the project. My intention was to bring forward what was "absent but implicit" (White, 2000) in these activities: were they linked to skills The Traveller had developed in response to the influence of the Black Ball?

The Traveller explained that he had been focusing on writing a Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) campaign with his friend. Dungeons and Dragons is a fantasy tabletop role-playing game in which players are encouraged to embody the character they choose. Using Michael White's statement of position map 2 (2005), we began to document what it was about writing the D&D campaign that was interesting to The Traveller, and

why. He said that creativity was important to him, and that D&D provided an avenue for him to create a fantasy world with its own history and attributes. I asked if there were any other effects of engaging with D&D. The Traveller explained that it was a "good outlet", and that researching all the details that would make the world believable enabled him to "practice writing stories", be "creative" and "explore the mind".

The Traveller was writing the D&D campaign with a close friend, and their plan was to play the campaign with a wider friendship group. This project had brought The Traveller's interests in creativity, connection and community together. In listening to The Traveller, I took a position of curiosity, not invalidating the effects of the Black Ball or positioning myself in the conversation, but exploring what other stories were also available to us (White, 2002b). Through doing so, we were able to enrich an alternative story that ran alongside the dominant one.

The next time The Traveller and I met, he spoke about how he had still been reading the news about the war in Ukraine, but that he'd been able to "turn down the heat" and "lift the lid" to "let off the pressure" of the Black Ball. When I asked how this had been possible, he explained he had asked himself questions: "Why am I feeling this way?" and "Where is it coming from?" When I asked him what he might call this skill he said, "It's kind of like gamifying it". The Traveller explained that it was like breaking down the big quest into small tasks, and considering all the things that need to be completed before "levelling up". He added that it was helpful to think of all the tasks he was doing outside of the television project as small adventures that would support his bigger quest.

Gamification

Gamification is "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 9). Gamification has become increasingly popular in the digital world. Developers have been bringing game mechanics into many different applications, websites and programs. An example of this is in the exercise app Strava, through which people upload the runs, rides or other exercises they complete and receive badges or crowns for their achievements. Another popular app using gamification is the language learning program Duolingo. Again, users receive points, streaks and badges for their continued engagement.

In many uses of gamification, the user or participant is similarly encouraged to complete tasks and remain engaged or active in the program, moving towards a predetermined goal. These programs are single storied and consider very little outside of narrowly defined progress or ongoing engagement. Much of the literature about the use of gamification to promote health or wellbeing is centred on its effectiveness in harnessing engagement in a program or encouraging predetermined outcomes such as healthy eating and exercise (Johnson et al., 2016; Lew et al., 2017; Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021; Shameli et al., 2017).

There is risk in using games as a metaphor for life. Many games have specific confines and rules that restrict players and determine the aims, goals and directions of play. Many games are built on patriarchal and colonising ideals; consider Grand Theft Auto, Risk, Chess and the increasingly popular Catan. I was aware that in using gaming metaphors with The Traveller, I might unintentionally reinforce the single-storied narratives influenced by the structuralist discourses I had intended we expose.

The type of gaming that is structured by rules and encourages competition and the achievement of set goals can be seen as distinct from "play", which suggests a more free-form, expressive, improvisational and even "tumultuous" recombination of behaviours and meanings (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 11). The "play" aspect of game design might be most useful in narrative conversations. Games can give us metaphors with which we can play and explore, suggesting language, skills, knowledge and avenues for reflection. Play might even be used to expose unhelpful discourses. This is where I have found role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons to be helpful. In D&D there can be limitations to the world the players are in, but generally speaking, the players are free to explore and interact in the game world, choosing where they go and what they do, creating openings for all kinds of conversation located in landscapes of identity and action (White, 2007). Fantasy landscapes like those of D&D can be a powerful tool for externalising problem stories and complex discourses:

> Instead of the problem being positioned in reality, we can take a step back and view it through the lens of a familiar fictional character or from an array of fantasy landscapes. This can feel like stepping out of the middle of oncoming traffic and instead watching from the sidewalk as the cars race by. Once we can see the pattern of traffic, we can use that information to decide when to cross the road. (Salja, 2022, p. 20)

Taylor (2014, p. 61) adds that game metaphors can serve as an effective way of externalising viewpoints and re-authoring events, and also do so "from a place where [a person has] more knowledge than they might realise".

Talking about games in a narrative context

Therapists are likely to find greater success if they create room for language that is familiar and comfortable to those they work with (Erickson & Monk, 2018, p. 12). White (2007) described the importance of naming as an initial step in "loading up" the significance of something otherwise unnamed (2007, p. 266). To honour The Traveller's naming and meaning-making skills, and to invite language familiar to him, I asked him more about his D&D world building. I provided an "editorial" (White, 2007, p. 238) of what we had spoken about in our previous meeting, and I asked him what, in D&D terms, he might name his time spent writing the D&D campaign. He called it a "side quest", and explained that side quests are alternative paths that adventurers can go down. They might not directly contribute to the main adventure, but they provide possibilities for gaining experience or finding valuable new weapons, skills or resources. With any one of these gains, a player might return to the main adventure better placed to complete their quest.

Continuing to "load up" the significance of this new narrative, I asked The Traveller what it meant to him to consider his D&D creative writing as a side quest of sorts – might it support him to gather valuable resources or even "level up" in his main quest? The Traveller responded that it was helpful to think that his activities weren't just procrastinating: the writing was good practice for the writing that would be required for his TV project, his friendships were important to him, and he was really excited by the prospect of playing this campaign with them.

He added that you can spend too long on side quests, and this can have consequences for the main adventure. The stories in the main adventure can develop while you're focused elsewhere, and the tasks can become more difficult. This was relevant to The Traveller because he knew that he wanted to get back to his main quest of developing the TV show, and he didn't want to let the jobs list get too long in his absence.

At the end of our time together that day, I asked The Traveller what our conversation had him thinking about. He explained that our conversations were like another side quest that was supporting him to build experiences that he could take back to his main quests. Even when our conversations went off on a tangent, "they still provide experience and knowledge that support the bigger stories".

The next time we spoke, The Traveller was happy to tell me that he had returned to working on the TV show project in "full force". He had also sought more shifts at work and had been able to improve his financial situation enough to buy his partner the birthday present they wanted. The Traveller explained that he had been able to see that the Black Ball wasn't him all along, because it wasn't telling all his stories, so therefore it can't have been within him. Being able to renegotiate his relationship not only with the Black Ball, but also with his other interests had made it possible for him to take control and re-engage in areas of his life that had previously felt overwhelming.

Inviting gaming into new conversations

Following the conversations I had with Traveller, I introduced the idea of games into conversations with others I was meeting with. I learnt about skills in preparing spells and equipping weapons – ways of ensuring you are ready for any encounter you may have. Gaming metaphors helped one person to consider the tasks they do when they "need to be studying", such as cleaning their room or responding to texts from friends, as important parts of setting themselves up for the main quest. This helped to create space from the influence of failure discourses that presented a single story of procrastination as a deficit.

Through exploring the use of game metaphors with other adventurers, I learnt that online games like Minecraft and Fortnite also afford possibilities for meaning-making that interrupts the notions of failure that can dominate identity stories. For example, I learnt from a young person about the importance of building a house in Minecraft. This is not the "most fun" part of the game, but if you build a house, you can use it to keep your things safe at night when the zombies come out. This allows you to build on the hard work you've put in elsewhere. This metaphor made it possible to consider skills for completing less preferred work to keep their

teacher "off their back a bit" so they could spend more time on their main adventures, like being with their friends.

Revisiting gaming metaphors with The Traveller

The Traveller and I revisited gaming metaphors in a later conversation. Much had happened since he had first offered me the side quest metaphor. I let him know that I had introduced the idea to other people I had met with. He was happy to hear that his contribution had supported others in telling their stories, and that it had been a useful frame to explore and deconstruct normative ideas of productivity.

Our conversation returned to what was happening in The Traveller's life, and we continued to explore this through gaming metaphors. I had learnt in a previous conversation that The Traveller was having troubles in his family. He was struggling to talk with one of his family members because he couldn't support them in the ways that they were asking for. The Traveller informed me, however, that he had recently had a conversation with this family member. I asked how this had been possible for him, hoping to uncover the skills he had used. He explained that he had spoken to the family member over the phone, and this gave him a sense of distance and control: he could more easily leave the conversation if he needed to. I asked what he might call this if he borrowed language from D&D. He explained it was as though his character had prepared several spells "just in case" he needed to use them. He named the spells "pass without trace", "dimension door" and "misty step". In D&D, such spells allow a character to move from one place to another without being seen or noticed. I asked, "What did it make possible, having these spells prepared?" He said that they made him feel safer, so he could take more of a risk and venture further into his family member's worries.

The Traveller told me that his family story was one of his main quests. The side quests (our conversations together) had been where he'd learnt how to prepare these spells. With them prepared, he felt it had become possible to participate in his main quest once again, but now better equipped.

He added that he had initiated the conversation with his family member, asking what was going on for them.

I asked him if initiating the conversation had been another skill. He agreed, explaining that it was through "bridging the gap" that he had been able to sidestep the requests that made him uncomfortable, and instead offer support on his own terms. Asking whether there was a D&D term he might use to describe this, he named these his "cooking skills". These are skills only certain players can use to make a meal that boosts the abilities of the other players in their party. Cooking skills require time, and The Traveller could use them when he felt he could offer them freely.

Productivity, procrastination and efficiency: Turning towards collectivism

Throughout my conversations with The Traveller, externalising the Black Ball helped us to uncover skills and knowledges, including those he transferred from the world of gaming. It also enabled us to identify values of creativity, friendship, fairness and justice. The Traveller began to situate the problems he was experiencing as external to himself and identified preferred identity stories. Throughout this re-authoring process, D&D offered metaphors that helped to reduce structuralist influence on The Traveller's stories.

Instead of assuming gamers are "hollow dupes … lacking the capacity for critical discernment" (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p. 5), therapists can adopt a position of curiosity, and invite others into it too, to interrupt this discourse by exploring the effects and the meaning of gamers' relationships to games.

I grew up playing boardgames and digital games, but fantasy and role-playing games are new to me. I have been enthralled by the possibilities that they create through imagination and play. I have also been interested in the ways that role-playing games can go beyond dominant discourses and provide opportunities to explore what lies beyond perceived boundaries.

The use of game metaphors and mechanics with The Traveller and other adventurers had me considering this: if rest is framed as procrastination, what do we lose? Capitalism co-authors discourses of hyper-productivity and sociopolitical imperatives of constant contribution. How does this influence our framing and understanding of rest? Being introduced to the use of game metaphors for therapeutic conversations expanded the possibilities for understanding the effects of capitalist discourses of productivity, as well

as making visible the effects of the discourses of abstaining from activities and/or choosing rest, creating openings for alternative narratives.

I think about the many ways we might build on gaming metaphors to weave in re-membering practices, to honour community contributions to quests we undertake, and to make visible the skills and knowledge of individuals and communities. In these conversations, we could explore how we are witnessed and understood in these quests and how we might co-construct quests and contribute to collective story telling.

In their very architecture, many games embody capitalist and colonial representation, structures, ideas and designs (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009). Thus, gaming language is not impervious to meanings that reflect dominant structures of power. Therapists need to be aware of this, or risk reproducing dominant hierarchies. But the playing of games can create metaphorical spaces where better understandings of these systems become possible. Game metaphors have potential for therapy that is decolonising, anti-colonial and subversive to normative standards. Through The Traveller's invitation to explore the language and logic of games, I have learnt skills that support attempts to create decolonised, safer spaces for the people I interact with. Through integrating language from games people are interested in, we can foreground the individual's meaning-making skills, while creating distance from the problem.

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