DANIEL HAND

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

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About the Author

Daniel Hand grew up a child of the British military, and, like many forces brats, learned at a young age that imagination can be a comforting source of stability in a volatile world. His first experience with RPGs was a play-by-post writing exercise, in which he played a villainous mercenary bent on keeping an Evil-with-a-capital-'E' conspiracy under wraps—a character who subsequently became the protagonist of his first published story. A couple of decades, dozens of publications, and countless dice-fuelled adventures later, he is now a counsellor who uses RPGs (and stories more generally) to help struggling individuals battle their inner demons by swinging swords at imaginary ones. A proud Friend of both the Burma Star Association and the Parachute Regiment Association, he's still writing adventures, and still rolling the dice. Visit www.monomyth-counselling.co.uk to find out more.

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Fantastical Tales

By the time she turned twelve, Jacqui's day-to-day life had become quite a struggle. She frequently got into trouble at school, her relationships with her mother and friends could be somewhat volatile, and she spent much of her time feeling low, lonely, and hopeless. Her father had tragically passed away when she was eight, a loss that still weighed heavily on the bereaved family.

One day, a teacher suggested Jacqui might benefit from seeing the school's new therapist—and that's where the usual tale of *Client Goes to Therapy, What Happened Next?* took a rather whacky turn. Because, instead of just a room with a couple of chairs and a box of tissues, Jacqui found herself entering a strange world of magic and adventure, with fearsome beasts, wondrous secrets, and epic quests; a world where learning and self-acceptance was acquired at the point of a sword. Instead of speaking about her feelings, she spoke about mighty heroes and sweeping battles; instead of being 'that kid who needs therapy', she became the heroine of her very own story, *The Fantastical Tale of Jacqui and the Two Chairs*.

This is where Jax comes in.

Because, aside from the therapist, Jacqui had another ally in the room, who accompanied her throughout her journey, going everywhere she

went, and facing the same eclectic mix of adversaries: Jax, a half-dragon singer-spellcaster from the tiny seaside village of Darktide, who, never without her magic violin (funnily enough, Jacqui herself played the violin), travelled the land and challenged evil wheresoever it appeared. She was a brave soul, was Jax, always ready to stand up to bullies; but she was also kind, frequently making friends with those same bullies whom she had just defeated.

Jacqui role-played as Jax throughout the therapeutic process, creating her during her very first session, and subsequently using her as an avatar to interact with that fantastical land of obstacles and challenges. She spoke in a raspy, dragon-like voice, gesticulated wildly whenever Jax performed particularly exciting actions, wrote letters, drew pictures, and rolled a lot of dice to see how well this hulking, blue-skinned musician-magician fared in life.

As her adventures unfolded, Jax revealed more about herself, her background, and her circumstances. It transpired that she was extremely close to her father, who had always been there for her, and who had taught her how to use magic; her mother, on the other hand, just didn't 'get' her, and constantly nagged her to do boring jobs. She didn't have many close friends, preferring to spend time on her own; but she did enjoy performing for other people, and liked it when they told her she was good at something. Indeed, it was this search for praise that ultimately ended up being the core of Jax's journey; because, somewhere deep down inside, there was an absolute yearning for 'someone' to tell her that she was a worthwhile person.

Sessions often began close to Jax's home, where 'something' caused an upset, for Jax personally or for the wider community. A quick investigation would reveal a character or clue that hinted at what might be done to rectify the situation; and, armed with this knowledge, she traversed the unusual wildlands around the town, following the trail of information to its source and uncovering many hidden locations and ancient mysteries along the way.

As sessions passed, Jacqui/Jax engaged with friendly characters (her favourite being a gnome doctor who often gave her something to eat), encountered potential adversaries (including a flying lion with a bull's head), and overcame numerous challenges (like using a magic potion to

cure a witch's blindness). In later sessions, Jax realised she really was a worthwhile person—after all, she had saved the community numerous times—and didn't need to wait for somebody to tell her so (though, of course, it's always nice to hear).

As therapy came to a close, Jax was able to go back home and, presumably, live happily ever after. Her relationship with her mother had certainly changed, as Jax learned to hear praise and affection when it was offered, rather than focus on the nagging; her beloved father, sad though it was to see, sort of faded into the background. Of course, there was always room for 'just one more' adventure…but, for the time being, she was good.

Quite inevitably, Jax's journey mirrors Jacqui's in just about every meaningful way. She idolised her father, and had the kind of relationship with him that Jacqui wished she could've had. Her mother, though an active presence in her life, she saw as a perpetual source of criticism and frustration, in much the same way that Jacqui viewed her own mother; and, likewise, her volatile relationships with her wider community tended to be a result of her hyper-alertness to rejection.

By the conclusions of their respective journeys, both Jacqui and Jax had taken huge steps in terms of self-worth and positive intersubjectivity; and, crucially, just as Jax had let go of her dependence on her father, so Jacqui had begun to let go of the idea that her own father's passing was a personal rejection. She could remember him without feeling responsible for his loss.

Because, it goes without saying that Jax *is* Jacqui, even if Jacqui didn't realise it. With only a small amount of guidance from her therapist, Jacqui was able to create a character who embodied all the hopes, needs, doubts, and fears that she herself carried—but who was also able to do pretty much anything she wanted.

For his part, the therapist was able to build a cohesive setting that would behave towards Jax in much the same way that Jacqui perceived the real world to behave towards her. By placing certain obstacles in Jax's way, he was able to steer Jacqui towards situations that would subtly, vicariously challenge her presenting issues, and help her reach the ultimate conclusion that, if Jax could feel loved, then so too could she.

By the time Jacqui finished her therapy, she had amassed a veritable library's worth of adventures, developed a surprising range of vocal talent, and, most crucially of all, learned the weak points in a dragon's scales. *The Fantastical Tale of Jacqui and the Two Chairs* is one neither she nor her therapist is ever likely to forget.

What Are RPGs?

For the past half-century, tabletop role-playing games have brought joy and excitement to countless individuals, of all demographics and persuasions, all across the world. These activities, usually abbreviated to the more manageable 'RPGs', see small groups of players—somewhere between three and six tends to be about average—gather together, create a cast of fictional characters, and collectively imagine what those characters get up to. Each player takes ownership of a single character, devising their personalities, their flaws, their goals; a lead player, the Game-Master (GM), develops the game's setting, and puts obstacles in the characters' way.

Often described as communal storytelling, RPGs in many ways resemble the 'playing pretend' enjoyed by children throughout history: making up entirely fictional scenarios, and, for just a short time, pretending they're real. Whenever a character attempts to do something exciting, the player rolls a certain number of dice, holds their breath, and prays for a positive outcome: pass, and the character succeeds; fail, and…well. Sessions include plenty of silly voices, and frankly unhealthy numbers of colourful dice, and give players the opportunity to see an entire story through their characters' eyes. With RPGs, it really is the taking part that counts.

And these games can be truly epic in scope. Depending on player engagement, and the availability of time, groups can meet on a regular basis for years (even decades) on end, chronicling tales of mighty heroes in tumultuous worlds. In many ways, RPGs can become a lifestyle as much as a hobby; as a social, self-care exercise, they're hard to beat.

The other great thing? They're for *everybody*. The 1980s stereotype of RPGs as being the purview solely of socially awkward, even slightly weird, teenaged boys is long out of date; in truth, players come from all

demographics, and always have. Age, gender, background, experience are all irrelevant. The RPG community has made a point of diversifying its approach in recent years, and has become much more mainstream—a cause championed by a host of very not-stereotypical-geek celebrities: Henry Cavill, Aubrey Plaza, Patton Oswalt, Terry Crews, Ashley Johnson, Stephen Colbert, Vin Diesel, to name a few off the top of my head. Just as anyone can play a boardgame, anyone can play a role-playing game. They've never been more popular.

RPGs as Therapy

They're also wonderfully therapeutic, and can be extremely powerful tools in a practitioner's kit. Making use of numerous creative exercises—including (but not limited to) character-creation, worldbuilding, storytelling, performing, writing, and art—role-playing games essentially hide the therapy behind a veneer of fiction, keeping the more threatening/overwhelming experiences at arm's length, and placing a reassuring third party (the character) between the client and their issues. They are thus uniquely placed to empower clients who might otherwise find it difficult to engage with the therapeutic process.

Much like other, more recognised forms of intervention (see, for example, play therapy or therapeutic role-play), therapeutic RPGs engender growth by allowing clients to witness situations dispassionately, identifying with their character as they overcome various plights, and learning from those fictional experiences. *Un*like those interventions, however, therapeutic RPGs don't have limits in terms of client-base or applicability. Whereas it might be difficult to engage an adult client with play therapy, RPGs can be enjoyed by clients of any age. While therapeutic role-play is often confined to 'realistic' interpretations of perceived/potential events (i.e., looking at situations in which the clients might conceivably find themselves), the entirely fictional nature of RPGs allows for any situation imaginable to be explored, without the resistance often experienced when considering real-life events.

Furthermore, that 'arm's length' approach also makes RPGs an ideal environment for *practice*. If a client struggles in a particular

area—communication skills, decision making, problem solving, resilience, empathy—role-playing provides a means of repeatedly, vicariously experiencing and reflecting upon situations until a 'desired' outcome can be achieved.

On top of all this, RPGs grant the practitioner a rare glimpse at their clients' between-session behaviours. Rather than having to rely on the hypothetical, "What might happen if…?" they can face their client's character with a pertinent situation and see how they react; no matter how 'other' the character may be, the client will always shine through.

In the example above, Jax faced the dangers of the emotional world so Jacqui didn't have to, meaning that Jacqui was able to test boundaries and take risks that might otherwise have been too distressing to contemplate. By empathising with Jax's situation, relating to Jax's thoughts and emotions, and acknowledging how others might perceive Jax's actions, Jacqui was able to apply those 'lessons' to her own life. If Jax could be pleased with herself for helping a witch find a potion, surely Jacqui could be pleased with *her*self for helping a teacher find a missing piece of sports equipment?

Using This Book

This book is specifically designed for those mental-health professionals who wish to use RPGs as part of their client-work. It'll teach you the fundamental building-blocks of storytelling, and provides a simple set of mechanics to help structure play and keep your clients engaged. It walks you through the entire therapeutic process, from assessment to conclusion, and gives pointers on how you might apply them to your theoretic modality.

Importantly, it assumes that you are a trained, professional practitioner, qualified to work with clients on their mental health. If this isn't you, I implore you to proceed with caution: you could cause real harm to the people you're trying to help.

The major difficulty in adapting RPGs to a therapeutic environment (apart from their relative obscurity among mental-health practitioners) is in terms of scale. The 'epic' nature mentioned earlier often results in

mechanics, systems, and play that are well beyond the scope of any realistic interpretation of the therapeutic process. Indeed, the very aspects that appeal to players—group friendships, whole-evening games, and truly immersive story experiences—are those which have previously made RPGs unsuitable to use in therapy.

This book takes RPGs and boils them right down to their fundamentals, making them more applicable to the 'traditional' fifty-minute, one-to-one therapy session. It is both rules-manual and professional primer, and provides everything you'll need to take your clients on the most wonderful of adventures.

The remainder of the book is organised as follows:

Chapter 1 briefly touches upon how and why RPGs—and storytelling more generally—are such useful tools in a therapeutic setting.

Chapter 2 outlines the mechanics that form the heart of the approach—namely, how to tell a collaborative story with your client, and when, why, and how to roll dice.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore the key components of stories (characters, settings, and obstacles), and guides you through the process of creating them.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 show you how to bring these aspects together and, in conjunction with your professional modality, run an RPG-based therapy session; Chapter 9 shows what a therapeutic RPG session could look like.

Chapter 10 covers the conclusion of the client's therapy, looking at ways in which the RPG and its narrative may be brought to a close.

At the back of the book, you'll find numerous resources specifically designed to make running RPGs easier. These include character suggestions like backgrounds, relationships, and abilities; worldbuilding tools such as map-drawing, and ideas for special abilities/items; and much more besides.

With this book in hand, you have everything you need to run a therapeutic-RPG. And when I say 'everything', I mean *everything*: you don't need an acting degree, a career in storytelling, or thirty years' experience running epic, generations-spanning games; you just need this book,

your client, and yourself (O.K., *and* something to write with/on). If, by the time you finish reading, you still feel a bit unsure of yourself, you can always hop on over to my website, www.monomythcounselling.co.uk, and/or sign up for my newsletter, and have a look at some pre-made content (including characters, settings, and obstacles) I've put together.

But that really is an 'if'. In truth—and no matter how you feel about your creative ability right now—you'll probably find that, actually, you don't need anybody else's ideas; you've got plenty of your own, thank you very much. All you need is the right set of tools (which you happen to be holding right now) and soon you and your client will be able to travel over the hills and far away, battle terrifying demons like stress and anxiety, and face the complexities of life from the safety of your chairs.

And it all starts with a simple, "Once upon a time …"

Part I

Underlying Principles

1

Theoretical Approach

Storifying the Therapeutic Process

Storytelling has been a staple of human existence for … well, the entirety of human existence. It conveys lessons, explains the unexplained, and relates life experiences; without it, we'd be just as extinct as the Neanderthals. In fact, our brains actually reconfigure themselves as we listen to stories, mirroring the neuronal activity of someone who's actually participating in events rather than merely listening to them. This gives them an emotional hold over us that can be alarmingly powerful—one that leaves us with no choice but to change the way we think. Stories were therapy long before therapy existed.

Role-playing games occupy a special place in the storytelling world, in that they require everyone involved to tell the story *collectively*, rather than relying on the traditional teller/listener dynamic. This means participants are equally engaged in the narrative, reacting to each other's input and steering the tale in directions everyone finds satisfying. Furthermore, taking sole ownership of a particular character within that story, and being responsible for the entirety of that character's personality and behaviour, gives those mirror neurons even more to work with, and creates a sense that participants aren't just *telling* the story; they're *in* it.

RPGs allow a practitioner to approach their client-work as if it were a storytelling exercise, tapping into that part of the client's psyche that

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instinctively absorbs a narrative's message. This presents alternative solutions to life's problems, and helps reconfigure the client's relationship with themselves. Just as *The Boy Who Cried, "Wolf!"* can teach the folly of lying, so RPGs can teach the value of self-care.

This inevitably requires a shift in the practitioner's thinking, towards a more 'proactive' form of intervention: whereas previously you may have taken a step back, reacting to what the client brings rather than directing proceedings, here you'll have to be a little more hands-on in your approach. If the client is to engage with the therapy, you'll have to actually *make* it engaging, by putting some thought into how a particular fictional tale might capture their imagination, as well as considering how their needs might be addressed within that narrative. Your role as the client's guide through the therapeutic process remains unchanged; now, though, that process involves character-creation, story-design, and scene-setting. Sessions will continue to look much the same as before—the two of you sitting in a therapeutic environment, talking in such a way as to facilitate emotional growth and wellbeing—except now you'll be describing majestic landscapes, enacting titanic struggles, and interpreting the client's mental state via the medium of the story you tell together.

The Fictional Frame

We're all familiar (hopefully) with the therapeutic frame: the boundaried environment that fosters and contains the working alliance, creates a sense of safety and support, and engenders positive change within the client by giving them somewhere they can feel 'held'. Without the frame, the therapy can't happen.

And it's here, right at this very core of core principles, that RPGs have their greatest impact upon the therapeutic process. Because, by shifting the emphasis of a session away from the almost confrontational me/you dynamic of most provision and towards a more me/you/*story* arrangement, role-playing games (and, indeed, storytelling more generally) contribute an entirely new aspect to the therapeutic frame. This 'fictional frame', with its own intrinsic boundaries and parameters, provides an environment many times larger, richer, and more versatile than is

traditionally on offer: an environment in which both practitioner and client may identify, explore, and challenge various presenting issues in a manner and scope otherwise barred to therapeutic work.

It achieves this by offering a sense of distance between the client and their difficulties, allowing such mechanisms as projection, displacement, and symbolisation to inform the therapy rather than hamper it. Attributing various issues to 'somebody else' (in this case, the client's character) instantly makes them easier to talk about; presenting an entire world of harmless (you know, because they're imaginary) personalities/relationships means that thoughts and feelings can be expressed without fear of repercussion. The story-world is provably self-contained: whatever happens in the game stays in the game.

The fictional frame frees therapy from its usual "You"-/"I"-isms, instead making use of the more detached "They", meaning that all conversation, no matter the topic, may be approached candidly. The client doesn't have to be defensive or self-conscious; after all, we're talking about *the character's* issues, not their own. This distance, and the inherent awareness that nothing being discussed represents a real, tangible threat, means that the core component of all therapeutic boundaries, safety, is dramatically enhanced.

Morphing the therapeutic environment into more of a storytelling one also means that situations—difficult or otherwise—may be explored from any number of directions, not just via the filter of 'real life'. Metaphors for lived experiences are everywhere; symbolic representations of feelings and experiences can turn up in the unlikeliest of places; and the sheer freedom of being able to approach a problem by literally blowing it up with magic allows for a catharsis usually barred to client-work. In a milieu where anything is possible, *anything is possible*: there are no limits to how the client may approach unpleasant/unfamiliar episodes, and no fallout for 'failure'. They don't have to worry about getting something 'wrong', and can keep trying over and over again until they get it 'right'.

We must also acknowledge the impact that such a fiction may have on the therapeutic relationship itself: beginning the entire process by taking a client's interests into account, and centring the it upon their

imagination, we help them to feel heard, accepted, and valued *in their entirety*. We consider the things they like, not just the things they don't.

The fictional frame, then, both expands and contains the therapeutic one. It allows more scope for intervention—an entire world rather than a single room—and lets the client maintain a level of detachment from issues that might otherwise be too overwhelming to explore. It adds a layer of fun to conversation, and, most crucially, establishes boundaries that can facilitate growth with minimal risk.

Parasocial Relationships

RPGs are, at heart, exercises in forming and exploring relationships: between the players, between the characters, and between the players *and* the characters. The first two of these relationship-categories have perfect equivalents within the therapeutic process: the relationship between players or game master (GM) and player is analogous to the working-alliance between practitioner and client, the importance of which is well-documented; and the relationships between in-fiction characters can be seen to reflect the relationships that populate the world outside the therapeutic environment. The fictional frame, however, allows for scrutiny of that final category of relationship, the one which develops between the client and their character—and this is where things start to get *really* exciting.

The efficacy of a therapeutic RPG fundamentally rests upon the phenomenon of parasocial relationships, whereby an individual (in this case, the client) forms a perceived connection with another, even though that second party is entirely unaware of their existence (or, as here, doesn't actually exist). These unilateral attachments, like any other relationship, are founded upon the building blocks of empathy, transference, and projection; the only difference is that the relating party's imagination is required to fill in various blanks. This makes them a veritable goldmine for gaining insight into the client's outlook, perceptions, and patterns of relating: if we can explore those filled-in blanks, the reasons for their development, and the effect they have on the client's perceptions (both

towards their intended recipient and more generally), we become able to identify attachment-criteria that would otherwise remain hidden.

The power of these relationships is enhanced by the fact that, being entirely one-way, they pose no risk to the client of rejection, hostility, or hurt. The thoughts/feelings which these fictional individual(s) facilitate within the client (affection, dislike, etc.) can be just as real as with any other relationship; but they can be examined, as it were, 'hypothetically', without risking any antagonism on the relatee's part. Once again, the distance between client and fiction allows difficulties to be challenged without risk of harm.

Perhaps even more importantly, facilitating the development of these relationships within the context of the fictional frame means that the practitioner can watch them grow in real-time, allowing for both reflection and feedback on any causational factors or notable occurrences/trends in the client's behaviour. If the therapeutic relationship is the single most important factor in client-work, RPGs enable multiple such relationships to develop concurrently; utilised effectively, every one of those relationships, even if the other party isn't real, is an opportunity for growth.

Projection: The Client-Character

Ask any writer of fiction, and they'll tell you that no matter how hard one tries to avoid it, aspects of the creator's personality will *always* find their way into the character. This is inevitable: after all, the creator only has their own learned experience to draw from, meaning that anything outside of that experience is impossible to fully conceptualise. A man living his whole life in the British Midlands, for example, would have difficulty envisaging what it's like growing up a woman in the highlands of Burma; likewise, a client who was abused as a child can only *guess* what it might be like to have had a non-abusive childhood. The creator (i.e., the client) thus has a choice, which they'll likely make entirely unconsciously: give the character some of their own, real-life traits, or try to imagine what a person without those traits might look like.

In broad terms, these 'perception factors' (i.e., how the client perceives the world) will generally produce one of two forms of character: a representation of who they feel they are; or a representation of who they would *like* to be. Either way, the therapeutic potential is apparent.

The client's relationship with their character, then, is primarily one of *projection*: attributing various of their own characteristics to this fictional persona, and relating to them in much the same way as they relate to those parts of themselves. These characteristics may be positive (complimentary) or negative (neurotic), or they might simply be an assumption that 'everyone' thinks a certain way (complementary), or a combination of all three. But the moment they become part of the character, they become observable from an outside, non-threatening perspective, both in practice (what it 'looks like' to be a certain way), and concept (what it 'says' about a person).

In other words, regardless of how/why the client creates their character as they do, the relationship they form with them can't help but facilitate change: by acknowledging positive attributes within the character, they can learn to acknowledge those same qualities within themselves; by witnessing various destructive/maladaptive behaviours, and identifying where they come from, they can understand how those behaviours have historically impacted their own quality of life; and by observing the character's actions they can learn new ways of being.

As therapy progresses, clients will come to recognise their characters as part of themselves, and become more conscious of how those traits are with them on a day-to-day basis, and actually always have been. It follows, then, that anything the character can do, the client can do: if the character can challenge a dragon, they can challenge a rude customer; if the character can attain their dreams, there's nothing stopping them for attaining their own. This realisation can be tremendously powerful, and have an almost instantaneous effect on the client's daily experience; once they start to 'channel' their character, the therapeutic process is likely to start winding down.

Empathy: Trait-identification

As well as that more logical, vicarious learning experience, the client will also be more subtly influenced by their ability to empathise with their character. This taps into the immersion one feels when engaging with a story, and helps clients reflect on why an individual might think or behave as they do.

In RPG parlance, this is often referred to as 'bleed': a character's imagined emotions directly impacting the player's real emotional state. We've all had similar experiences, no matter the medium: be it book, movie, or even newspaper, as soon as we identify with an individual, fictional or otherwise, we start to experience their emotions *as if they were our own*. We laugh when something funny happens to them, lean forward in our seats as they enter dangerous situations, cry when they reach their lowest ebb, cheer when they triumph over adversity. Storytellers have made use of this sensation for millennia, purposefully using listeners/readers/viewers' own emotions to amplify the narrative experience, and helping them to feel like they are actually *in* the story. Indeed, the best-received media tend to be hailed precisely because they have such an emotional impact, and for their ability to transport the consumer to the story's world.

Therapeutically, this fictive identification allows for exciting levels of introspection. If the client can be absorbed into the RPG's narrative, and encouraged to enter as closely as possible into their character's point-of-view, they essentially become able to think *as* the character. Thus, when the character comes across various stimulants/scenarios (carefully designed by the practitioner), the client expands their self-concept by seeing the situation through that persona's eyes.

This serves to expand the client's awareness: by introducing previously unknown factors, and having the character react to them, the practitioner helps the client learn from the character's emotional experiences. If, for example, a client has historically been unable to turn to others for support, the practitioner may contrive to have their character cared for by another, play the scene out with the client, and have them experience just what emotional support feels like. The same applies to just about any presenting issue imaginable.

And, once more, the fact that these emotions may be attributed to a fictional third-party means we don't need to overwhelm the client by asking them to relive any traumatic or overwhelming experiences: the character can take the risks, while the client collects the rewards.

Transference: Vicarious Relationships

As well as the client's relationship with their own character, we must also consider their relationship with *other* characters within the fiction. These Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are the personas whom you as the practitioner/game-master will create and play, and with whom the client's character will interact. They might be benevolent, antagonistic, indifferent—whatever the client's story requires; and as play gets underway, the client will inexorably develop opinions of- and feelings towards (i.e., *relationships with-*) these disparate individuals.

These in-fiction relationships will, like any other, contain a sizeable transferential aspect, whereby the client's past relational experiences predetermine any that develop within the RPG. The kindly old washerwoman, for example, might stir up feelings associated with a caring parent, or the gruff blacksmith evoke feelings associated with a childhood bully. Scrutinising the formation and nature of these relationships can be an enlightening experience for the client, giving insight into how and why their real-life ones develop as they do.

On a fundamental level, this process is nothing new—transference (or something like it, depending on your modality) has long been recognised as an important part of the therapeutic relationship. But here, again, the fictional frame expands the possibilities.

To begin with, the 'blank slate' nature of these characters, existing as they do almost entirely within the client's imagination, means that a broader 'spectrum' of relationships may be observed than simply the practitioner-client dynamic. This in turn allows for a wider range of reflection, and opens up the possibility of identifying patterns of behaviour (e.g., does the client show a tendency to relate to a particular demographic in a particular way?).

Following on from this, the practitioner is also able to 'mould' the story's cast specifically to meet the client's needs. If a particular thesis needs to be tested (e.g., does the client always relate to blacksmiths in a particular way?), a new NPC which meets appropriate requirements may be introduced, and the client's subsequent behaviour observed; likewise, once a particularly helpful 'type' of NPC is identified (e.g., kindly washerwomen), the practitioner may arrange for the client-character to come into contact with more of them, and thus encourage those developmentally needed relationships to grow.

And, again, that recurrent theme of distance from the emotions being discussed means that these relationships (and the personas towards whom they are directed) may be explored without the client feeling anxious.

Taken together, these phenomena of in-fiction transference provide an exciting level of freedom, for the practitioner as much as for the client. It does of course mean that there are more moving parts to keep an eye on, but the relationships between the client's character and various non-player characters really open up a world of possibilities.

Working with the Inner child

We also mustn't forget the importance of the actual *play* part of this intervention. Working with the inner child is a recurring part of client-work, and the fun, imaginative nature of RPGs is perfect for engaging a client's younger self.

The 'little us' that we all carry, no matter our age, is the same vulnerable, impressionable creature that crawled over the carpet and ran across the playground; it still yearns for love, acceptance, safety, and *fun*. When that child gets hurt, it naturally wants somebody to soothe its pain—to give it a cuddle and reassure it that everything will be O.K.; when that care isn't forthcoming, the pain and fear endure.

By offering clients an opportunity to play this game, the practitioner gives that frightened, wounded child an opportunity to come out, enjoy themselves, and realise that everything will, in fact, be O.K. Children learn through play; by engaging clients through this non-threatening activity, where they can literally do whatever they please, they have the

time and space to actually *be* children. This gives them the reparative experience they need in order to heal those early wounds.

It's never too late to have a childhood.

A Meeting of the Unconscious

Finally, there's a hugely important 'transpersonal' component to RPG-therapy. With a little bit of reflection and imagination, *everything* within a game can be seen to 'make sense'. Carvings found on a wall, the relationship between the character and an NPC, the presence of an ancient piece of technology; give the story time to grow, and suddenly you'll find your mouth hanging open when you realise how important that previously innocuous piece of information always was.

Many creatives speak of experiences in which, after struggling with a project, an idea occurs to them, "and suddenly everything falls into place." That euphoric moment, experienced in a therapeutic context, may be viewed as the client's therapy suddenly falling into place: when one of you says something seemingly unremarkable, and the other is able to run with it and create an entire scene (or even storyline) out of it, that's when you know that, (a) you're both invested in the game, and (b) you're on the same creative wavelength. Indeed, it might not be beyond question to suggest that a 'meeting of the unconscious' takes place during this process, where you collaboratively find meaning in one-another's imaginings. This joint-imagination can lead to numerous occurrences of, "Oh, wow!" as you both have the same idea at the same time, and it just feels *right*—like the time it transpired that the screaming ghost was always a personification of the client-character's trauma, or when the damaged super-robot turned out to once have belonged to the NPC's grandmother.

These are often the best moments of the entire process: realisations that no one—not even you, the game-master—could have seen coming, but which suddenly transform everything about the game, the character, and the story. They can have a powerful impact on the therapeutic process, and are the experiences that will lead to the most productive internal growth. They'll also stay with both of you for a very long time, even after the therapy has come to an end.

Explaining RPG-Therapy

These, then, are the core therapeutic principles that underlie the RPG-based therapy. I appreciate this overview barely skims the surface of what is in truth a veritable rabbit-hole of theories, methodologies, and approaches, but I hope it gives you enough to both understand what we're trying to do, here, and to pursue the topic further/do some additional reading, should you so choose. After all, this is what makes your provision RPG-*therapy*, not just 'playing an RPG'. Alongside your professional approach, this is what makes your work, work.

This being the case, you might want to put some thought into how you'll convey this information to potential clients (or, in the case of younger clients, their parents/carers). As with any other client-work, your clients are going to come to you with questions—not the least of which will be, "Why should I see you instead of, y'know, anybody else?" You'll already have your own ways of describing both your own personal style of working and how your modality helps clients reach their therapeutic goals; as you familiarise yourself with the techniques described in this book, consider ways in which you might explain to your clients how and why exactly their RPG-therapy will work. If in doubt, put it to them this way: it's fun, it's safe, and it's a chance for them to tell *their* story the way *they* want it told. There's a little more to it than that, sure—but, at the end of the day, 'enjoyment', 'security', and 'independence' are three things lacking in all too many people's lives, and could be exactly what this client is searching for.

When it comes to parents and carers—a.k.a. 'the most important people in a young client's life'—you might also consider (once you and your client have discussed the issue, of course) inviting them to show an interest in certain aspects of their child's therapeutic narrative. This might include asking questions about the client-character's various escapades and being enthusiastic about what might happen next; they could also accompany their child in various creative activities (e.g., play, drawing, writing, etc.); depending on levels of interest, they may even decide to join their child in some role-play—in which case, be prepared to point them in the direction of appropriate RPG material. Working alongside

parents/carers has always been an important part of child and adolescent therapy, and their engagement will inevitably have an impact on the child's progress, both during and after therapy. Assuming the client wishes to share this aspect of their therapy, they and their important adults have access to a playful, creative, and social activity that could potentially have a beneficial impact upon the entire family, long after the child's therapy is completed.

Next steps

For those wishing to explore these topics further, there's a suggested reading list at the back of this book. Alas, research into RPG use within therapy is still frustratingly sparse. The relative youth of RPGs as an activity, combined with early hostility from non-hobbyists (the 'satanic panic' of the 1980s), relegated them to the fringes of society. As a result, only now are earnest attempts at research into the efficacy of RPGs as an intervention starting to be released. More will come; but we're very much at the beginning of the journey.

This being the case, I'll end this chapter with a plea: go out there and proselytise! RPG-therapy is still very much in its infancy, recognised by 'people in the know' (often practitioners who would happily identify as 'geeks') but by few others in the profession. With your help, your expertise, your professional networking, RPGs may become better recognised for their therapeutic potential, and gain a place at the mental-health table.

So tell your colleagues to give RPGs a try, do some of your own research, write your own papers, and publish your own books. If we work together, we'll quickly add this spectacular tool to our profession's kit; ten years from now, it would be fantastic if practitioners could say, "Given my client's needs, I opted to utilise a therapeutic-RPG approach," and have their colleagues actually know what they're talking about.

Let's get on with it.

2

Core Mechanics

Boundaries

It goes without saying that a practitioner must be fully versed in their respective theoretical modality, have assessed the client's presenting issues, and have in place the foundations of a meaningful therapeutic relationship. Without appropriate training and experience, any attempt to offer a client therapy is both unethical and potentially unsafe. This is as true for RPG-based therapy as any other.

Before embarking upon this adventure, therefore, it is recommended that you spend at least an introductory session with your client, exploring their reasons for coming to you, and evaluating any therapeutic aims they might have. This is counselling 101, of course—but it bears emphasizing that, though this approach uses the word 'game', it is still a therapeutic intervention, and must be implemented professionally.

As such, and as with any other therapeutic practice, it is crucial at this stage that both you and your client familiarise yourselves with appropriate boundaries. For our purposes, this applies to creative boundaries as well as logistic- and ethical ones. For example, many RPGs involve some form of combat: now is the time to establish how happy or unhappy either of you are regarding (imaginary) violence—likewise for horror

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elements, or sexual encounters. Both parties should have space to express their wants and needs in terms of in-game activities or behaviour, and to have their respective boundaries respected throughout the process.

(It also goes without saying that both of you must feel able to halt play at any time, should either of you begin to feel uncomfortable. More and more RPGs are highlighting the utility of so-called 'safety mechanisms', such as 'lines and veils', and 'X cards'; in truth, all you really need to do is be aware of your client's ability to have a particular conversation.)

The other RPG-specific boundary you'll want to put some thought into comes in the form of cultural sensitivity. A frequent criticism of RPGs (and indeed of fictional content more generally) has been that certain elements have strayed dangerously close to (if not outright crossing the line into) discrimination. For example, certain races—notably possessed of non-white skin—have traditionally been depicted as being innately evil by birth; others carelessly reference things like slavery, genocide, and sexual repression. Recent attempts have been made to amend these concerns, but the fact remains that it would be all too easy to introduce prejudicial or insensitive tropes into the therapy's fiction without realising it. Be sure to consider this with your clients, even if you ultimately decide to explore those topics.

Finally, an initial session is also an opportunity to discuss your client's interests, specifically in terms of the type of game they'd like to play. Do they want a fantasy setting, with swords and magic, or a space-based adventure, with planet-hopping and giant lasers? Would they prefer lots of exciting combat encounters, or a subtler, more explorative approach? Would they rather have a game with puzzles, mysteries, and ulterior motives, or a straightforward fight between good and evil? Acquiring this information now will make the whole creative process much easier.

What You'll Need

To run an RPG session, you'll need:

- This book;
- A copy of the character sheet;
- A pencil, some paper, and a rubber, for both you and your client; and
- One or more dice (or some other random-number generator).

You'll also need to have (or develop) a little bit of confidence in your imaginative abilities, particularly when you're new to the approach. Don't worry: by the time you've finished reading, you'll have everything you need to make your provision a success. It won't take long to find your feet.

The Story Trinity

When it comes to telling stories, no matter the medium, there are three fundamental factors a creator must consider:

1. Character;
2. Setting; and
3. Obstacle.

This is the holy trinity of storytelling; take any one away, and the whole thing falls apart. Everything else is expendable—even ostensibly 'obvious' aspects like a 'beginning' (war stories seldom cover the protagonist's childhood) or an 'end' (many romances finish at the wedding, but the couple still have the rest of their lives to live)—but you won't get far without these three crucial pieces in place.

This is where most of your work as an RPG-therapist will take place.

The *Character* is where it all begins. This is the aspect of the story over which the client will exercise most control. Once they decide what *type* of character they'd like to play, you can devise the scenarios that will form the bulk of therapeutic play.

The *Setting* is the environment (or series of environments) in which the character 'exists'. This includes the places the character will visit, as well as things like significant artefacts and, importantly, other characters (non-player characters, NPCs) with whom the client may interact. The setting

should be appropriate to the character (i.e., if the client wants to play a sword-wielding magic user, a fantasy setting would usually be more appropriate than a modern day one), and provide opportunities for the client to explore their presenting issues.

The *Obstacle* is the complication/antagonist that somehow prevents the character from being 'content' within the setting as it currently stands. It is the enemy that must be overcome, the curse that must be lifted, the mystery that must be solved—or it is the locked door, the stormy weather, the traffic lights refusing to change. The obstacle should be personal to both the character and the client (i.e., it is an opportunity to challenge the client's presenting issues as well as providing a narrative purpose).

As soon as you have your three elements in place, you and your client are ready to start the adventure. You already have the basis of a story, and now the client-character can take a stroll through this strange new world and take on whatever stands in their way. Have fun! (Chap. 6 will tell you more about how to take your Story Trinity and use it in-session.)

As demonstrated in Fig. 2.1, the key to the Story Trinity is the interconnectedness, the balance, between each element. They are inextricably linked to one-another, meaning that a change in one will automatically entail a change in the other two. The 'ideal' character is one who could not exist in any other setting, and who has a deep, personal reason for wanting to overcome the obstacle; likewise, the more interesting obstacles are those with an intriguing in-setting reason for being. The most effective in-game moments will come as a result of the relationships within the Trinity. A random encounter with an ogre or space-squid will certainly make for an enjoyable few minutes, but will lack the resonance

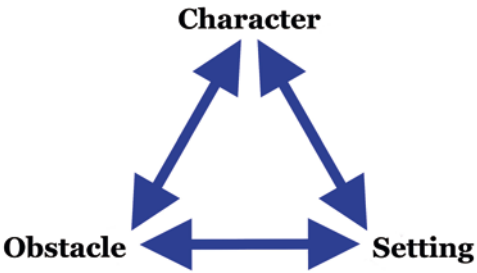

Fig. 2.1 The Story Trinity

of, say, facing down a longstanding enemy who impoverished the character's parents.

In real terms, of course, the rule of 'shoulds' applies, that is to say, don't feel you have to do something just because some book tells you there 'should' be a relationship between particular characters/settings/obstacles. Whatever works, works. Your two main concerns are always:

1. What therapeutic value might this character/setting/obstacle have for my client?
2. What would be the most enjoyable thing to do right now?

As long as you have a character to play, a setting to play in, and an obstacle to overcome, you'll do just fine.

Theatre of the Mind

Some RPGs make use of miniatures, models, and/or floor plans to boost player immersion. This gives players a clearer view of the goings on in-game, and helps keep everyone on the same page in terms of locations, distances, movements, landmarks, and so on. This is particularly helpful in terms of developing and exploring a setting, and simulating combat; but they can require a good deal of preparation.

With a view to simplicity, then, we're going to employ a concept known as 'theatre of the mind', and let our imaginations do the work. You don't need miniatures or a floorplan; you just describe the environment, listen to each other's descriptions, and act according to the images you've collaboratively built up. Theatre-of-the-mind play requires only that you put a bit of thought into what might transpire during the session, and that you are able to communicate these thoughts to your client. You can be as specific or as vague as you want, your epic ideas needn't be limited by your artistic ability, and, if you forget something, you can just add it in later. With theatre-of-the-mind, you and your client really can do anything you want.

Perhaps most importantly, though, theatre-of-the-mind lets clients interact with each aspect of the game—character, setting, and obstacle—entirely as they themselves perceive it to be. Their interpretation of, for

example, a seedy western tavern might be completely different to what you envisaged while describing it; by giving them free-rein to explore and describe their own imaginings, you gain an insight into where their mind turns when presented with certain information, allowing for reflection on why they imagine things as they do.

Actions

In terms of actual 'mechanics', the key part of RPG play is in taking *actions*.

Put simply: whenever the client-character wishes to do something that stands a reasonable chance of failure, they must trust their fate to the dice. Different games use different terms—saves, checks, tests, rolls, throws, the list goes on—but they always boil down to the same thing: applying the sides of one's dice to the surface of one's table:

1. The client-character enters a situation whose outcome is somehow uncertain;
2. The practitioner determines that a roll is required;
3. The client rolls the appropriate die/dice;
4. The practitioner compares the roll with the appropriate target number (see the tables below), and confirms the success or failure of the roll; and
5. If the roll is a success, the client describes how the character achieves their aim; or
5. If the roll is a failure, the practitioner describes what goes wrong.

Once this process is complete, you're ready to carry on with the adventure … until another challenge comes along!

This sequence of events remains the same for all less-than-certain in-game acts, regardless of the form they take. An action might require a display of strength or finesse, trying to convince another character to agree to something, or aiming to strike an opponent.

Of course, not everything in-game involves taking some form of risk (the act of breathing, for example, may normally be considered an uncontentious issue), and so may be considered automatically successful in any

attempt; likewise, some tasks are outright impossible (breathing without air, unless the character is protected by some magic/technology/ability). So don't feel you have to slow the session down by asking your client to roll every time they want to open a door; save the dice for when the door is protected by a magic sigil or a maniacal computer.

Prolonged Actions

Sometimes, you might want to drag a particular action out, so that it takes more than just a single roll to succeed or fail. These prolonged actions, though not always appropriate (you'll usually want to keep play running as smoothly as possible), are a great way of heightening a moment's excitement.

An example could be when the client-character is attempting to pick a lock while trying to avoid a patrolling guard. Handled as a single die roll, this scenario has the potential to be somewhat anticlimactic: they open the door (yay), or they don't (boo). Handle it as a prolonged action, however, and the tension escalates. First roll—success!—to get past the first lock; but now you can hear the guard's footsteps! Second roll—failure!—your hands are shaking so much, you drop the lockpick; they're getting closer! Third roll … and so on.

If the collective result (i.e., the average of the combined rolls) amounts to a success, play continues as the client planned (the character gets through the door without being discovered); if it amounts to a failure, the situation becomes sub-optimal (the guard walks around the corner). Either way, what would otherwise have been a quick success-or-failure becomes a more enjoyable sequence of "Ah, yes!"-s and "Oh, no!"-s.

Concerning Dice

There are many unusual dice in the world, and none of them should be used lightly. Dice hold a special place within the RPG-world, and so a rudimentary knowledge of their features couldn't hurt. The most common are shown in Fig. 2.2.

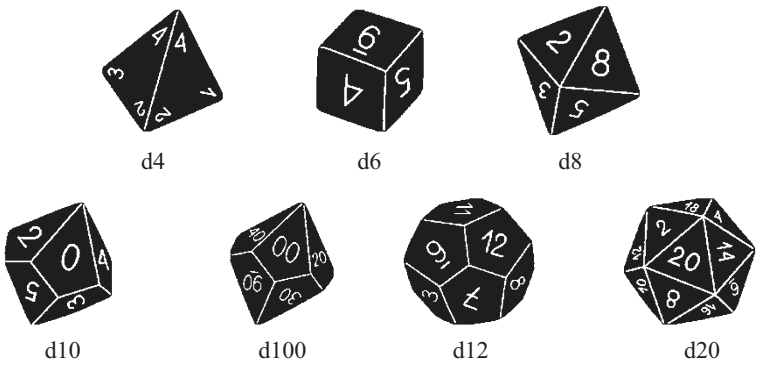

Fig. 2.2 Polyhedral dice

As you can see, the name of each die is a 'd' followed by its number of sides (with the exception of the d100, which gets rolled in conjunction with the d10). You might occasionally come across a d# that isn't represented here, but they tend to be derived from one of the above (a d3, e.g., is a d6, halved).

If ever you see another number in-front of the name (e.g. 2d20), this simply means that you roll that number of dice (i.e. roll two d20s) and add the results together. Additionally, some rolls may be modified by adding or subtracting an appropriate number: 2d20+5 or some such. Finally, some actions may be made easier or harder by rolling two dice and taking either the better or the poorer result. This is called advantage (making it easier to get a good result) and disadvantage (making it harder).

Despite their ubiquity, however, dice are actually the *least* important part of the RPG experience, there to motivate engagement and creativity rather than dictate proceedings. In reality, one set of mechanics is little better/worse than any other—the most important factor is in how the numbers inform the character's experiences. Bearing this in mind, this book, unlike the majority of RPGs out there, doesn't stipulate which dice you 'need' in order to play a session, acknowledging that first-time readers are unlikely to have immediate access to piles of dice; rather, it provides a variety of core mechanics, one of which should, hopefully, meet your needs. If you can only find a single d6 (or, after an eternity of searching through old boardgame boxes, maybe even two), no problem—there are rules for that; if you like the look of a d20, but don't really want to clutter your desk up with a whole set of dice, great—there are rules for that, too;

if you'd rather use your own personal combination of polyhedrals (or a pack of playing cards, or a homemade spinner consisting of nothing more than a piece of cardboard with some numbers and an unbent paperclip), or forego random numbers altogether, there's precisely nothing stopping you. Don't feel the need to rush out and buy every die under the sun!

Core Mechanics

Once you've established which dice you have access to and/or would like to use, the next step is to familiarise yourself with the appropriate numbers.

Whenever the client attempts an action, the process is always the same: just have them roll the die/dice, and consult Table 2.1. Once you have

Table 2.1 Core Mechanics

d6	2d6	d20	Result	Description	Example
1	2	1	Total failure	The character fails completely in what they were attempting to do; 'something bad' happens.	The door stays locked, and the magic sigil starts to glow; was that an evil cackle in the air…?
2	3–5	2–5	Failure	Whatever the character wanted to happen doesn't happen.	The door stays locked; the character must try something else.
3	6–7	6–10	Partial success	The character succeeds in what they were attempting to do, but something goes wrong.	The door opens, but the sigil starts to glow.
4–5	8–11	11–19	Success	Whatever the character wanted to happen happens.	The door opens without issue; the character may proceed as intended.
6	12	20	Total success	The character performs better than expected, achieving their objective and more besides.	The door opens without issue, and the character learns how to use the sigils on other doors.

your result, take a moment to decide precisely what impact it will have on the character/situation, and then either you or the client narrates what happens next.

After that, the adventure continues.

Remember that this is just an example to give you an idea of how a system *might* work. If, instead of a d6, 2d6, or a d20, you wanted to roll 2d8, or 4d10, or a d12 plus 4d6, go right ahead: create your own results table and have some fun. That's how you *really* make a game your own: any and all of these mechanics may be fudged or even ignored entirely if they get in the way of having a good time.

Ability Modifiers

As the client's character grows, they'll develop certain special abilities that may, depending on the situation, make a particular action more likely to succeed. These abilities grow in strength as the game progresses, ranging from Level One to Level Six, with each level adding an incrementally higher modifier to the roll in question. (Subsequent chapters will look at when and how to level characters up.)

If you wish to use these additional rules, simply have the client make their roll as usual, and add the appropriate value from the Table 2.2.

Do note that a 'Total failure' can't be modified out of; likewise, a 'Total success' must be rolled outright to be achieved. And again, feel free to create your own rules: if you want level 3 to give advantage to a roll, or level 5 to add a d12, it's your table, your (and the client's) rules.

Table 2.2 Modifiers

Level	d6	2d6	d20
1	+1	+1	+1
2	+1	+2	+2
3	+2	+2	+3
4	+2	+3	+4
5	+2	+3	+5
6	+3	+4	+6

Encounters

When a client-character interacts with another sentient being (i.e., an NPC) in the course of their adventure, this is called an 'encounter'. Some encounters will be peaceable, requiring nothing but words and courtesy to achieve a positive outcome—think a contest of riddles with a deformed halfling, or an interview with a vampire; others, however, might require the drawing of swords or the aiming of blasters.

Whatever the scenario, encounters are handled in much the same way as any prolonged action: the client makes rolls (adding any applicable modifiers), and these impact how the encounter plays out as a whole. During an important conversation, these rolls represent how good (or bad) an impression the client-character is making on the other party; during combat, they represent how well (or poorly) the client-character is holding their own against their opponent.

In the course of a conversation, there may come opportunities for the client-character to steer a topic in a certain direction—perhaps by lying, revealing important information, or making a reasoned argument—and so it would be appropriate to roll the dice, to see how well they do. Successful rolls produce a favourable reaction, such as the other party agreeing with what was said; failures lead to the other party becoming more cautious in their dealings, perhaps thinking they're being misled. A total success represents an immediate breaking of the ice, making the characters comfortable in each other's presence; a total failure means the conversation has become standoffish, even hostile, and might result in the NPC refusing to talk further.

When combat is joined, client and practitioner take it in turn (usually beginning with the client, though this should reflect the narrative) to make attack rolls on behalf of the combatants. A successful attack reduces the target's hit points by the damage value of the weapon being used, taking into account any special modifiers (e.g., those associated with special abilities, or the effects of certain items). A total success inflicts double damage; a total failure means the combatant must miss a turn, trying to regain their composure. When a target is reduced to 0 hit points, they are

removed from play, at least until such time as they have been able to recover.

Once again, such mini-games may not always be appropriate: exchanging pleasantries with a passing traveller can be handled without rolling any dice. The dice need only come out when they would add to the fun of a situation, or if there is something to be potentially gained or lost, which might affect how the adventure continues.

Example of Play

A client-character, Zelia, has just entered the dark, dank main chamber of a long-forgotten tomb, and now has to find the Eye of the Tiger—a gold-tinted jewel said to possess magical properties—before a treasure-hunting adversary can get their hands on it. The only problem is, now that she's here (after a long, arduous, journey through the jungle), it turns out it's embedded in the head of a huge cat-shaped statue—and Zelia forgot to bring a ladder!

Zelia's player, Jules, decides the best approach is to try and climb the statue. She has a full set of polyhedral dice, so picks up her d20, breathes a quiet prayer, and rolls.

12—a success!

The therapist asks Jules to describe how Zelia makes her way up to the jewel (encouraging her to be more effusive than simply saying, "She climbs up,"), and before long the character, despite a few hair-raising brushes with gravity, and the odd disconcerting creak coming from the ancient structure, is eye to Eye with her prize.

Before she can celebrate her victory, though, she still needs to pry the jewel free of its socket—a task suddenly made infinitely more urgent because a very faint sound of voices suddenly emanates from the doorway below, accompanied by the flickering yellow of torchlight. The treasure hunters have arrived! What's Zelia going to do?

Jules asks if she can try to stick her dagger into the socket, to help get some leverage; the therapist says of course, and, because Zelia has reached Level 3 with her Knife Skills ability, that means she gets an additional modifier of +3 on top of her regular roll. Things are looking good …

Until they're not, because it's an atrocious roll: the d20 comes up 2, giving a total of 5—a failure!

The therapist explains that the jewel is wedged in too tight to budge, so Jules is going to have to make a choice: try again, and get caught in the act, or look around for somewhere to hide? Either way, the voices have nearly reached the chamber …

Part II

Preparation

3

Character

The Importance of Character

The client's character is the focal point of the RPG, the imaginary personality around whom the creative work will centre. More importantly, they're the conduit that connects the client to the therapeutic process, and by far the most powerful tool at your disposal. The more thought you put into the process now, the more your client will relate to them; and the more they relate to them, the more likely they are to empathise, and take on board any lessons the character might learn.

In many ways, creating a character is an exercise in discovery (even if the client already has an idea about who they want their character to be), and may provide insight into the client's own relationships and outlook. A good place to start is by identifying your client's special interests. What sparks their imagination? If they have specific ideas about what they'd like to do, now's the time to talk about them: this will be the foundation upon which the whole RPG will be built.

For example, what *genre* would they like to play? If they enjoy fantasy fiction, their eyes will probably light up at the thought of creating a halfling barbarian; if they really love battles among the stars, maybe they'll suggest a space cowboy; superhero-lovers will likely jump at the chance to create their own.

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Some questions to consider right at the very beginning:

- Who is their favourite fictional character, and what is it about them that they like?
- What kind of books/films/shows do they enjoy, and what makes them so good?
- Do they have any particular hobbies, and why do they find them so enjoyable?
- If they could do anything at all, in real life or just pretend, what would it be?

Even if the client finds themselves initially paralysed by choice, questions like these will quickly elicit some form of response; in this age of franchises and shared universes, it shouldn't be too difficult to come up with a few ideas.

Of course, this freedom of choice must be mitigated by your own ability to run the game. If, for example, you don't feel able to run a cyberpunk-style game, there is no point saying, "How about a cyberpunk character?" even if the client expresses an interest. Give them another option, that you're both happy with. In reality, it'll only take a few tweaks for that cyberpunk character to fit a different setting.

You'll also want to consider how your client's presenting issues might be addressed via this fictional being. This process involves, among other things, looking at the significant relationships (both healthy and unhealthy) in the character's story, as well as the attributes, outlooks, and quirks that constitute their underlying personality. This is where, if you pay careful attention, your client's values and experiences first make their way into the game. If you take your time, and keep these considerations in mind—even if, at this stage, they seem somewhat trivial—you'll develop a character who effortlessly meets your client's therapeutic needs; that's when the real work begins.

The Character Sheet

The next step is to actually start filling out the character sheet (Fig. 3.1). This helps the client get to know their character, and provides a convenient point of reference for such things as modifiers and equipment. Simply follow these steps (in or out of order):

1. Give the character a Name;
2. Provide one or two Descriptors;
3. Identify a couple of Traits;
4. Take a look at their significant Relationships;
5. Consider their Hopes and Fears;
6. Come up with some Mannerisms;
7. Devise some special Abilities;
8. Assign starting Hit-points (usually ten);
9. Assign starting Luck Points (usually two); and
10. List any Items they happen to be carrying.

(If you're after a quicker start, you could even get away with just doing steps 1 and 2, and filling everything else in as you play.)

Step One: Character Name

Although this is at the top of the sheet, it wouldn't be unusual if it were one of the last things the client came up with. Ask them, "What's your character called?" and they may give you a blank, terrified look and say, "I don't know."

Names can be difficult. There are literally infinite options available. Should it be a made-up collection of syllables that sounds otherworldly and eccentric, or 'normal'/real-life? Should it 'mean' something, or just sound cool? These are valid questions, but the key is to remember one simple fact:

It doesn't matter.

In many ways, the character's name is the least important thing about them. 'Bob' is just as authentic for an elven spearman as 'Arahel Longhaft' or 'Leggy Lass'; as long as the client likes it, nothing else matters.

Hello. My name is _____ 1 _____ and I am

a _____ 2 _____ _____ 2 _____ .

I am _____ 3 _____ and _____ 3 _____ .

Family: 4

Hope: 5

Friends: 4

Fear: 5

Adversaries: 4

Mannerisms: 6

Abilities

1. _____ 7 _____ Lvl ____

2. _____ 7 _____ Lvl ____

3. _____ 7 _____ Lvl ____

HP: 8 / 8 Luck: 9 / 2

Items: 10

Fig. 3.1 Character sheet

So how does one come up with a name? The simplest answer, as with much of the creative process, is to reflect on the tropes of the chosen genre, and play with them until something clicks. A good place to start is by looking at the names of various well-known characters within that genre, and examining how/why they work. Say them out loud. Do they have a particular ring to them? Are there any similarities in spelling or pronunciation? What kind of image do they conjure?

If you want to be a bit more thorough, there are some excellent websites that list/define countless names from countless cultures; the hunt for a name could be as simple as choosing something from one of those lists, or, perhaps, taking part of one name and splicing it together with part of another. Other websites will randomly generate a name for you.

Other points to consider include:

- Is it the character's birth name?
- A chosen name?
- A title?
- A nickname/alias?
- Who gave the character this name?
- Does it possess some deep, underlying meaning?
- Does it say something about the character's personality?
- Or does it just sound funny?

The process for naming a character can be as simple or as complex as you like, but the end result will always be worth the effort. Give a character a name, and they come alive in a way that will resonate with the client's imagination, drawing them into the fictional world. Suddenly they're a *person*.

Step Two: Descriptors

This is where you decide the character's fundamental being.

A good way to get started is to ask, "How would the character describe themselves?" Another is to help the client think of one adjective and one noun (or two nouns), put them together, and appraise the result. This can

range from "little" and "boy" all the way to "super flying robot monkey" and "with laser swords coming out of her arms" and beyond.

The noun might be the best, and simplest, place to start: what exactly *is* the character? Again, stock tropes or clichés are useful—fantasy lovers would likely enjoy playing a warrior or sorceress; science-fiction enthusiasts might want to play an astronaut or android; superhero fans could try an inventor, or even a mutant.

The adjective will likely follow on from the noun: if the client wants to play a knight, they could be a "human" knight, or a "gargoyle" knight; an alien could be "telepathic" or "shapeshifting"; vampires might be "blood-sucking" or "lovestruck".

(Of course, two nouns would work, too—e.g., "robot" "sailor", "mage" "assassin", "inhuman" "pilot"; the same rules apply.)

You'll notice the blank spaces are big enough for more than just one word apiece; the client may of course insert slightly more descriptive phrases. Maybe the character is a "mystical cowboy" "with a talking horse", or a "saffron-robed vicar" "who can shoot ice out of his eyes".

Don't be afraid to make stuff up. An imagination interfaced with a dictionary/thesaurus can be a tremendously powerful tool, and it can be lots of fun coming up with our own unique terms and phrases. How cool does an "invisicloaked" "wraithfinder" sound? Or a "strata-faring" "bargainer-priest"?

Of course, the same character could be described numerous different ways. There's no reason a "Human" "Witch-hunter" couldn't also be described as a "BDSM" "Elf-fetishist"; but focusing on two descriptors gives both you and your client a mental image that encapsulates the core principles of who this character actually *is*.

Quick Start

For some clients, now might be a sensible place to dive into the game proper. If they're struggling to concentrate, or the session is moving on and you'd like to give them a taste of play before you finish, believe it or not, you already have enough to get started. Sure, the concept might be a

bit threadbare, but Donald the Raving Giant already has enough about him to cause some mayhem. Other details, such as where he originally came from, or what clothes he's wearing, can be decided later.

At any point past this one, therefore, feel free to start playing, safe in the knowledge that you've done enough for now.

Step Three: Traits

The next task is to flesh out the character's personality. Again, this is just a case of choosing some adjectives; unlike the descriptors, however, which focus more on the character's overall concept, the traits are an opportunity to tell the world what they are like as an individual.

And again, there are no limits: whatever the client says goes. Is the character friendly? Standoffish? Happy? Sad? Cautious? Deceitful? Strong? Slow? Homesick? Very attached to their spaceship? Always on the lookout for new paintings? Nothing is off the table: "tough" and "resourceful," is no more or less valid than, "a hopeless romantic" and "often act without thinking," or, "big" and "blue."

These traits don't have to have anything to do with each other—the character could very well be "proud" and "always hungry", or "an insomniac" and "really want to be a dendrochronologist." Indeed, some of the best in-game moments come when characters' traits contradict themselves. What if they're "scared of heights" and "able to fly", or "always kind to strangers" and "hate meeting new people"? The fun and drama (not to mention therapeutic potential) of placing a character in a situation where the client must decide how to walk a particular moral/emotional tightrope should not be underestimated.

Finally, these traits and descriptors aren't the be-all and end-all of the character's existence; they're just the outline. As you proceed through the game, you'll learn much more about the character than any piece of paper could ever show; if any of these new characteristics seem more appropriate (or fun) than the ones you've already recorded, there's precisely nothing stopping you from changing them. Simply help the client to go with what feels 'right'.

Step Four: Relationships

We all know the absolute importance of relationships to a person's life and outlook. From early attachment figures to teenage romances to bonds with offspring, we are all a product of our interpersonal connections. The same is true of fictional characters.

This is where you begin to populate a wider cast of non-player characters, and, in the process, go about personalising the game's setting to this particular client. Even if you haven't yet put any thought into the setting itself, this step will give you plenty of ideas as to what it might look like.

You'll notice that there are three headings—Family, Friends, and Adversaries. This should hopefully be self-explanatory—but, just in case, here are some things to consider:

In terms of family, you might begin by asking the client, are both of the character's parents alive (and, if not, how did they die)? Are they still together (or were they ever)? Does the character keep in touch? Did they even have parents, or did they come into being some other way? Were they abandoned? Do they have any siblings, and were/are they close? What about extended family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.? Are they married? Do they have children? Keep a special eye out here because the client's answers/imaginings will very likely reveal (consciously or unconsciously) some of their thoughts regarding their own relatives.

As for friends, does the character actually have any, or are they a complete loner, free (or bereft) of worldly connections? Do they have a single bestie for life, or lots of more casual acquaintances? How long have they known these individuals? Under what circumstances did they meet? Were they always friends, or did they start out as adversaries? How has their relationship developed over time? What about romantic partners? Again, there's lots of therapeutic scope, here, alongside all the world-building opportunities.

Adversaries is an interesting topic, providing yet further insight into the client's mindset, as well as producing some excellent and enjoyable story potential. These hostile individuals will almost inevitably portray characteristics that the client considers to be 'not good', thus allowing for exploration into some of their underlying beliefs. There's also no better obstacle than a disgruntled opponent out for revenge! So encourage the client

to have a think about how this individual knows their character. What happened to cause the rift between them? Was that rift always there, or were they once friends? What's this person like—evil, or just misunderstood? What do they want from the client-character? And why (if it isn't readily apparent) hasn't the client-character just given it to them? These adversaries needn't necessarily play an active role in the game, but they're an intrinsic source of conflict, and so may prove a useful storytelling device.

With these important relationships in place, the character becomes a much more 'rounded' individual; the story world feels more 'lived in'. Off-screen events can be made up and referred to at a moment's notice, entire storylines concocted merely by tapping in to this early work: the character might decide to head to their childhood home for a break, or an old nemesis arrive unexpectedly and demand an apology for what happened at school.

Step Five: Hopes and Fears

Another opportunity for both character-building and insight, hopes and fears can be very helpful in terms of giving an idea about how the character might behave in various circumstances. If ever the client is stuck on what to do next, it may be helpful to review the character sheet and think about how the character feels, based on their hopes and fears (i.e., what are they trying to achieve/avoid?); nine times out of ten, an appropriate course of action will present itself.

Giving the character something to hope for gives them a goal. This might be modest (hoping to buy that shiny new space screwdriver, for example), or grandiose (hoping to end a generations-long war). In truth, though, scale doesn't really matter: as long as they have something to look forward to, they'll keep the story moving forward.

Similarly, their chief fear can be anything from common, well-known phobias to social anxieties, catastrophic thinking, or even some existential dread that there's 'something' out there which means to destroy the very fabric of reality. Perhaps they're terrified of heights, dislike crowds, or don't want to become a space-ghost. This provides perfect fodder for in-game complications: just when the character seems moments away from triumph, their greatest fear manifests itself. What will they do now?

In both cases, the most pertinent question to ask—either now or later—is, "Why?" Why is the hope something to be striven for, even if it means having to face hardships? Why is the fear so terrible that it must be avoided at all costs? Why did these hopes and fears develop? Why hasn't the character already gone out into the world, conquered their inner demons, and achieved their ambitions? By answering these questions, you give the character some agency, and create numerous potential storytelling hooks.

Whatever hopes and fears the client ultimately settles upon, bear in mind that they'll likely be things that the client themselves view as 'good' and 'bad' (i.e., they'll instinctively project their own hopes and fears onto their character). This information can be explored at your convenience, either in-game or as part of a direct conversation between the two of you.

Step Six: Mannerisms

Does the character have any particular habits, sayings, or quirks that set them apart from others, or that others might find amusing/annoying?

Mannerisms are *great* for helping clients actually role-play as their character. It's all well and good knowing that they desperately yearn to be a lead guitarist, and their mum's name is Charlotia; but nothing will get your client putting on a funny voice quicker than deciding they always cry, "Honey, I'm home!" whenever they enter a building (even when it isn't their home), or performing the eye twitch that always seizes them when they have to think too hard about something.

Like the rest of this process, mannerisms can be pretty much anything: serious, amusing, disturbing, irritating, alarming, whatever. As long as it gives the client something to say/do *as* their character, and helps them *enjoy* the role-playing experience, it's a keeper. So help the client spend a little time considering whether the character has an annoying laugh, walks with a limp, or always wears a particularly garish item of clothing; if it can be thought of as a conversation-starter, or even just promises to be very silly, a mannerism will really help the role-play experience.

Step Seven: Special Abilities

Everybody's good at something.

To represent this, each client-character has access to three special abilities—things they have a reputation for being good at doing ("Oh, yes! That young Endfric—sings like a cock with its head inside out, but you'll never find a better shot this side of the asteroid belt!"), and can be proud of themselves for ("Do you know what? I *am* good at fishing!"). These abilities might be everyday skills, professional expertise, or esoteric talents, and can be wild fun to generate. Is the character an exceptional duellist? A proficient linguist? A gifted explorer? Can they cast spells? Transform their arm into a range of electronic appliances? Run faster than the speed of sound? These abilities can be as specific or as broad as the client likes; as usual, the key factor is enjoyment.

As mentioned in Chap. 2, these special abilities will give the client modifiers to add to their dice rolls, so remind them that their decisions here will directly impact play. If all the character's abilities are combat-related, they'll certainly be able to clobber their way through an army of goons—but they might struggle to change a lightbulb. Also, beware the perils of making these abilities too powerful: this is a character at the *start* of their journey, not the end, and giving them too much power now leaves no room for growth.

Once the client has come up with three special abilities, give each of them a level: one begins at level three; a second at level two; and the third at level one. This gives the character a range of specialities that will make them more proficient in certain areas than in others. They can still attempt other tasks, of course, but they'll find those less-familiar feats more difficult.

Step Eight: Hit-points

Hit-points are a simplistic way of measuring how healthy the character is at any given moment. In short: the more they have, the better they're feeling.

Each client-character starts the game with a base level of ten hit-points; mark this down in the right-hand space of the 'Hit-point' section on the character sheet. Until the character levels up, this is the maximum

number of hit-points they may possess (unless boosted by some special in-game mechanic like a spell or piece of equipment); should they ever need to recover hit-points, they can only heal up to this maximum number. The left-hand space is to record the number of hit-points the character currently has. This number will frequently change, going down when the character takes damage (usually via combat or accidents), and up when they rest or heal. Should the character ever reach zero hit-points, they'll usually at the very least be knocked unconscious, or (depending on pre-agreed boundaries) perhaps even die (an eventuality which might well require a new character to be created).

As the number of hit-points decreases, it would be a good idea to have the client narrate how the character is feeling, and how their injuries/ailments are affecting their ability to act. Either way, they'll want to keep track of how many they have!

Step Nine: Luck

Sometimes the dice *really* don't want a character to have a good day, and will do everything they can to create havoc—low-level opponents dominate the battlefield, obvious story prompts go unnoticed, and the game grinds to a halt. This can be incredibly frustrating.

To offset these destructive episodes, it can be an idea to give the character a small number of 'luck' points—essentially 'get out of jail free' cards that allow the client to automatically succeed in a roll of their choice, force an opposing character to automatically fail at something, or otherwise help to nudge a stagnant story forward. If the character is running low on hit-points, really needs to get away from that swarm of flying swordfish, and the client rolls a one on their d20…now would be a good time to use a luck point. The same goes for when they've spent what feels like hours trying to figure out a puzzle and really could do with a neon sign that spells, 'sesquipedalian'.

As with the hit-points, use the appropriate space to track the number of luck points available. The total number of luck points gets restored to their original value every session.

Remember, though, that 'failing' a task only means that the character didn't achieve their stated aim; it doesn't mean the story can't carry on. Indeed, some of the most enjoyable role-playing experiences come when a character suddenly finds themselves in hot water, having to figure out some means of scrambling to safety. Luck points are really only there to be used when a situation has gotten so far out of hand that there really is no other choice but to cheat a little. Everything else, 'success' or 'failure', is an opportunity for both the plot and the therapy.

Step Ten: Items

This part of the character sheet can be used to track the various accoutrements the character has on their person at any given time. The list will likely grow as the game progresses, with the character finding/buying new objects/upgrades; for now, though, you'll probably want to limit the shopping spree to just two or three items. A good spread would consist of a weapon, a piece of protective- or restorative kit (like armour or a first-aid pack), and a genre-appropriate gimmick that would likely come in handy during play (a dwarf miner might carry a magic candle, for example, while a starship captain might have a sentient spacesuit; if the client struggles to come up with something, just help them reflect on some of the tropes of the chosen genre, and something will eventually come up). Give items the appropriate starting stats as shown in Table 3.1.

Don't worry too much about basic essentials like food or money; just assume the character has everything they need to get by, day-to-day. If the client needs help with maths, or presents with dietary issues/eating disorders, then sure, such considerations could prove useful to the therapy; in most cases, though, having to keep track of such things would only serve to slow play down, and add a distracting layer of complexity.

If an item has specific mechanical effects (e.g., it delivers a certain amount of damage, or requires a custom rule like 'reloading' or 'concentration'), be sure to note it alongside the item itself.

As usual, the key things to consider are coolness and fun: if a particular item (no matter how ridiculous) gets the client excited to play, go with it.

Table 3.1 Starting statistics

Weapons	On a successful hit, inflict on average 3 or d4 damage to an opponent.
Armour	Reduce the damage from an opponent's attack by 1.
Healing	On a successful use, increase the recipient's HP by 3 or d4.

Job Done

And that's it. That's the client-character created. With your guidance, the client has turned an almost blank piece of paper into a (hopefully!) three-dimensional avatar, complete with personality, bonds, and capabilities, via whom they can interact with the story that will lie at the heart of their therapy.

This single piece of paper contains everything the client needs to engage with the world that you'll present them. It may take all of ten minutes to work through the creative process, or it may consume an entire session; no matter how long it takes, none of this time is wasted. After all, the fundamental truth remains that the character *is* the therapy—and the better the character is realised, the more effective the therapy will be.

So let the client take as much time as they need. The more details they add, and the more they fill out the character's backstory, the more they'll get to know this brand-new creation; and, ultimately, the more fun they'll have when the dice start to roll.

Character Growth

A staple of RPGs is that characters get stronger as time goes by. Lowly farmhands become mighty kings, arrogant billionaires get cool metallic suits, withdrawn princesses become singing ice-queens: no matter how humble their beginnings, the implicit promise of any narrative is that the protagonist will have grown by the end.

Mechanically, we represent this growth by increasing the character's statistics (i.e., their hit-points and damage output, as well as the levels of their various special abilities).

At regular intervals (every other session, perhaps, or at the end of a particular adventure; the rate will inevitably vary from client to client), let the client:

1. Increase their character's maximum hit-point total by one, to an overall maximum of twenty; and
2. Increase one of their special abilities by one level, each to a maximum of level five. Once they've all reached five, let one of them ascend to level six.

On top of this more regular, incremental growth, another means of beefing up the character's capabilities is to upgrade their equipment. As the client explores the setting, once in a while (every two or three sessions/adventures, maybe) let them go shopping, or else have them stumble across some previously forgotten stash, wherein they will completely coincidentally discover the Double-barrelled Revolver or External Underpants of Extra Speed that is *exactly* what they've been looking for. As well as upping the character's damage output/giving them a bit more protection, this provides moments of genuine in-game excitement: there are few things that get RPG-ers hotter under the collar than loot. It doesn't matter how cheap and nasty that Kritonite Pole is, or how clearly useless the Plasma Tissue of the Idej Knights—give it a cool name, and players will *fight* each other to possess it. So be sure to produce the odd artefact every now and again, just to scratch the kleptomaniacal itch that every RPG character in existence possesses.

All in all, most characters' progression will resemble that shown in Table 3.2.

The concept of the 'levelling up' of player-characters is a key component of the vast majority of RPGs; by demonstrating growth within the game's narrative, you can supplement your client's own emotional development within the therapeutic relationship—an observable representation of their progress. Because there's nothing cooler than the moment a character suddenly finds themselves able to easily overcome obstacles that, only a session or two before, were a considerable challenge.

Grabbing a new magic sword always helps, too.

Table 3.2 Character progression

Level	HP	Average damage[a]	Special ability levels
1	10	3 or d4	1, 2, 3 (6 total)
2	11	3 or d4	(7 total)
3	12	4 or d6	(8 total)
4	13	4 or d6	(9 total)
5	14	5 or d6	(10 total)
6	15	5 or d8	(11 total)
7	16	6 or d8	(12 total)
8	17	6 or d8	(13 total)
9	18	7 or d10	4, 5, 5 (14 total)
10	19	7 or d10	5, 5, 5 (15 total)
11	20	8 or d12	5, 5, 6 (16 total)

[a]Note that this is the average damage the character should inflict per combat-round. The client might want a really powerful attack, which delivers a lot of pain; if so, consider giving the weapon/ability a special rule that makes it harder/slower to use (e.g., needing to be reloaded), and so can only deal damage, say, every other turn

Example Character

Nineteen-year-old Gary entered therapy after telling one of his lecturers he was experiencing anxiety about coming exams, accompanied by intense low-mood. After a preliminary session, during which he professed an interest in RPG therapy, he and his therapist set about creating a character.

With a few suggestions from the therapist, Gary decided he wanted his character to be a pirate. Not a 'normal' pirate: he wanted them to be a bit out of their depth in the pirating world—something like a "new" pirate, or a "small-time" pirate. Or maybe a pirate so small-time they could only pirate a river. Skipping Step One, because he couldn't think of a name just yet, he went straight on to Step Two and described his character as a "river" "pirate".

Step Three was fairly straightforward: he had an image in mind of his character as quite short, and getting very excited whenever something she—"Huh! I just realised it's a she!"—sees something she thinks is really cool/piratey; so he decided her traits would be "short" and "excitable".

Moving down the character sheet, to Step Four, Gary wasn't sure what to say about his character's family, so the therapist asked if the character's parents were still alive. "Yes," Gary replied, "but I don't think she sees them very often. And she has a sister. A younger sister; I think they probably still live together, but my character left home. In fact, she *ran away*

from home." After a few more moments' thought, he decided the character's family was quite wealthy, and that they live on a houseboat (which made the character want to become a pirate). Further conversation (including the odd prompt from the therapist, whenever Gary got stuck on a particular issue) ended with the character's remaining relationships—friends and adversaries—being filled out.

By the time he came to Step Five, Gary had already developed an idea of what his character's hopes and fears would be. The hope was obvious: to become a great pirate! But the fear, too, had begun to seem quite apparent: her seemingly tight-knit, well-bred family might not approve of her choice of occupation. And families can be distressingly judgemental.

Moving on to Step Six, Gary remembered his character's excitable nature from Step Three, and gave her a habit of hopping from foot to foot whenever she saw an opportunity for some pirating. He also decided to give her a very piratey catchphrase.

(At this point, the therapist remarked that the character felt very 'child-like'—enthusiastic about the idea of going out into the big, wide world of adventure, but still yearning for her parents' approval.)

For Step Seven, Gary went all-in on the pirate tropes. He wanted his character to shout lots of "Arrrr!"s and "Mateys!"; he wanted an old-fashioned pirate firearm; and he wanted treasure maps.

(For Steps Eight and Nine the therapist told Gary to give the character ten hit-points, and two luck points.)

Suddenly, Gary had a stroke of inspiration, and decided to call his bouncy river pirate Tilea—he couldn't think where the word came from, but it sort of 'sounded' piratey, and that's all he needed to go back and complete Step One.

Finally, Step Ten, Gary discussed with therapist some of the pieces of equipment he wanted Tilea to carry. She'd need the blunderbuss and treasure map mentioned in Step Seven; and every wannabe pirate needs a cool, curved sword. The therapist agreed, and offered appropriate stats/rules.

And with that, Gary was ready to begin his RPG-therapy.

The entire process took approximately fifteen minutes, after which Gary's character sheet resembled Fig. 3.2.

Now it was time to take Tilea on an adventure!

Hello. My name is *Tilea* and I am

a *river* *pirate* .

I am *short* and *excitable* .

Family:
Mum & Dad
Mia (sister)

Hope:
To become a famous outlaw

Friends:
Heinrich
Elfa

Fear:
That Mum & Dad will be disappointed in me

Adversaries:
Oleg One-Eye (wants my boat)

Mannerisms:
Bounces up and down when excited
"Time to get rich!"

Abilities

1. *Blunderbuss* Lvl 3
2. *Pirate cry* Lvl 1
3. *Map Reading* Lvl 2

HP: 10/10 Luck: 2 / 2

Items:
Blunderbuss (d6 damage, reload)
Cutlass (3 damage)
Treasure Map

Fig. 3.2 Gary's character sheet

Reviewing the Character-Creation Process

As you read through this chapter, you'll hopefully have spotted the myriad ways in which the straightforward act of filling out this piece of paper can provide insight into a client's state of mind, and their view of the world. Following the above steps helps the client visualise who their character is, where they come from, and how they feel, think, and behave. This provides exciting therapeutic oportunities.

So take time to consider the client's choices, and the reasons behind them. By analysing this simple, clearly defined, fictional character, you are actually analysing the much more complex, enigmatic, real-life client.

Whatever happens, there'll always be 'something' to be gleaned from the process. Why did the client give the character that name; did it have some specific meaning/resonance, or did it just sound good? What is it about the character's descriptors and traits that the client finds so admirable or unenviable? Are there any correlations between the character's relationships and the client's own? Does the client share the character's hopes and fears? The list goes on.

As you and your client go through the character sheet, be sure to continually ponder the client's reasons and reasoning—stated or unstated, conscious or unconscious—for any hints of their outlook, behaviours, or underlying values. As with any other therapeutic modality, this cultivation of information provides a perfect opportunity to both develop the therapeutic relationship, and help the client to enhance their self-awareness. Hold the character up against the client, and any similarities/contradictions between the two will become readily apparent.

You'll likely also have noticed that, as well as developing the primary protagonist of the coming therapeutic narrative, this process is also really helpful in terms of expanding the other two aspects of the Story Trinity: you can now develop a setting that incorporates not only the client's needs, but also their interests (by looking at the example character sheet, e.g., it's pretty clear Gary wanted boats, skulls and crossbones, and plank-walking); and having a good think about the character's adversaries and fears will provide several obstacles for the client to overcome. This makes the rest of the creative process considerably easier.

Furthermore, the completed character sheet can act as a reference for the client as they ease themselves into the actual act of roleplaying; if ever they find themselves at a loss for what to do next, a quick glance at their sheet will usually be enough to figure out how their character would act (and why) in a given situation.

By the end of this exercise, you'll hopefully have a better understanding of both the client and their presenting issues. Indeed, with enough reflection, you'll probably find yourself able to fill out a character sheet with the *client's* name at the top of it! And you've uncovered all of this just by pondering the fictional attributes of a fictional person.

4

Setting

The World Where You Live

Every story has to happen 'somewhere'. Be it the bowels of a wooden horse standing before a mighty city, a triangular ship in a solar system far, far away, or a darkened room haunted by the sound of passing cars, all narratives must have some sort of context (time, location, mood, etc.) that governs the tale's telling. Without a setting, the client's lovingly created character has nothing to do—you can't walk down an orange-brick road if the road doesn't exist!

Your first task, when it comes to creating a setting, is to establish the right 'feel' for the upcoming therapy. What kind of world would fit the client's needs, and how can you ensure it's appropriate for the stories they wish to experience?

This will probably be relatively simple to figure out. As with finding a character concept, all you need is a vague idea of genre/theme, and you can get started. If the client enjoys fantasy, you're likely looking at a pre-industrial land with haunted forests, ruined castles, and enchanted mountains; a space-opera will need planets, asteroids, colonies, and ships; superheroes can make do with a city block or two, with plenty of banks to be robbed, modern metropolitan infrastructure to go wrong, and dark

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8_4

alleyways for the character to change into their costume. Once you have a broad concept in place, all you need to do is refine it.

If all else fails, *just ask the client what they'd like to see in the game*. This part of the process works very well when practitioner and client work in concert, so let them contribute. If they design the layout of a town, the ecology of a planet, or the location of a big superhero convention, they'll engage with the fictional world in a way that wouldn't be possible if you did all the work yourself.

Locale-Building

Once you've decided on a general concept, the next step is to arrange the setting's geography: the locations, landmarks and topography that make up the physical world.

The key to this part of the process is to keep things small-scale. Realistically, a client's therapy will only last for a limited period, and there simply won't be time to explore every nook and cranny of an entire world. When it comes to creating a setting, then, think in terms of building a neighbourhood rather than a continent: an area across which the character could reasonably expect to travel from one side to the other, have some sort of adventure, and still be home in time for tea—perhaps the equivalent of walking to the nearest town, or warping between planets. Better to begin too small than too big.

This is where maps prove themselves useful. Just like their real-world counterparts, fictional maps bring an imaginary world to life in a way which description alone simply can't. They're also great for use during play, as they can show a client where their character is, where they can go, and how to get from one place to another.

For most clients, you'll only need to create five or six individual locations within any given setting; everything in-between is just filler, to help set the scene. Mountains, planets, cities—put them on paper, and suddenly you have a brand-new world. Don't worry about making it look like a professional piece of cartography—in truth, all it takes is to mark down a few 'X'-s and give each of them a place-sounding name.

X					
			X		X
X					
	X			X	

Fig. 4.1 Example map layout

Folding a sheet of A4 paper into a four-by-six grid gives you space for up to twenty-four locations; all you have to do is decide what goes where. This would give your map a layout similar to that shown in Fig. 4.1.

And that's it. Honestly, that's all you'll need. Give each of those 'X'-es a label, and you're good to go. Sure, stylised iconography would look nicer, but the principal remains the same.

Naturally, this isn't a hard and fast rule (it's always your call), and a 'reasonable' distance will differ from game to game (a spacecraft could probably travel greater distances than a donkey, for example), but this is generally the level of development we're aiming for: escapades rather than epics. And just because we're using the word 'small' here, we're talking in terms of *numbers*; in truth, one of those 'X'-es could be an entire planet, but for these purposes that planet counts as a single, discreet location.

Now, there *might* come the odd client who, for one reason or another (maybe their therapy is longer-term, or maybe they just burn through adventures), do indeed manage to exhaust this limited supply of

locations. This will be the exception rather than the rule, but, if it happens, you have two options: either (a) add more locations to your existing setting; or (b) expand the setting outwards slightly, drawing another map and placing it alongside the original.

Another advantage of keeping a setting small is that it aids that most important aspect of any client-work: safety. Much like the therapeutic environment itself, the setting's role is to encourage risk-taking without actually placing the client at risk—and risks become much easier to take when they are (a) small, and (b) scarce. If the world gets too big, it begins to feel hostile. If a character can't go out for an afternoon stroll without stumbling upon a monster's lair, the world becomes threatening in a way that discourages exploration; and if the client is too afraid to explore, the therapy will inevitably grind to a halt. A small, cosy location, on the other hand, bordered on all four sides by the literal limits of the world, remains 'doable'. The ominous black hole is less scary when it's right next to a brightly lit space restaurant.

This type of gaming is often referred to as 'sandbox' play, meaning players can enjoy total freedom to do pretty much anything they like. Fancy taking a wander down to the old haunted mansion? Let's see what we can find! Prefer to stay on the high street and hear the local gossip? Why not do some shopping while you're at it?

In contrast to 'campaign' play (which usually requires tasks to be completed in a certain order), sandbox play revolves around steering clear of anything too 'epic': for our purposes, several small-scale incidents are preferable to a single, overarching storyline. This makes life easier: rather than thinking up a complex series of plots, you just need to give each major location—five or six, remember—a single obstacle, and let the client decide where to go. No need for big villains or elaborate webs of interconnected events; all you need are some plot hooks for the client-character to take a bite at.

A Safe Space

At the centre of this new locale needs to be somewhere safe, where the client-character can rest between adventures, chat with friends, have some fun, and, well, feel safe. This could be the character's childhood home, a stronghold in the wilderness, a sprawling settlement, or even just a particular community to whom they can turn for support. It could be of any scale, too, from a small cave to a city of planets (whatever that might look like). The most important factor is the need for this location to be seen as somehow separate from the more dangerous world around it. This is where the character goes to get away from it all, without having to worry about setting off any traps or stumbling across any wandering monsters.

The safe space is where the vast majority of adventures will both begin and end. This is where the client-character gets given quests upon which to embark, or hears rumours about strange goings on; then, after they've completed that quest, or investigated the rumours, this is where they go to celebrate (or get some paracetamol).

In short, the safe space is an area of (at least relative-) stability, and can be relied upon to be in much the same state/condition from one visit to the next. It's the snuggly blanket against the cold outside.

So what does this safe space need? In a word: *character*. Give it a few descriptors, traits, and inhabitants, and it'll quickly take on a life of its own. Some things to consider include:

- What's the safe space's name (if it has one)?
- How big is it?
- What's its primary purpose?
- Is it all pretty homogenous, or do different areas have their own particular feel/identity?
- What's the client-character's abode like?
- Where might they go to spend money (to buy new gear, or just have a good time)?

- Who are some of the significant personalities within the community, what do they do, and how do they know the client-character (see NPCs, below)?
- Is there something unique/peculiar/famous about the place?
- What kind of relationship does the safe space have with the surrounding area and its inhabitants?

These various characteristics can, for the most part, remain fairly vague. It doesn't matter if the security chief doesn't have a name yet, nor does the precise layout of the generation ship's lower decks. You may even decide to move on without even giving the place a name; "the town" or "the colony" or "the house" is sufficient. Sure, details like this wouldn't exactly *hurt*—but outlining a long, detailed history is optional rather than required.

Again, this is a perfect opportunity to ask for the client's input. Let *them* decide what their character's home looks like; let *them* populate the place with various personalities; let *them* come up with some of the rumours/enigmas/eccentricities that all communities generate. Remind them about the people and events on their character sheets, and encourage them to find a place for them. This gives them a personal stake in the location, and helps make it somewhere they *want* to spend time. 'The' safe space becomes 'their' safe space—and creating this tiny part of a world can be both fun and therapeutic, even between sessions.

Of course, just because this location needs to be safe doesn't mean it needs to be *boring*. There's nothing stopping you from creating an adventure that takes place *within* this particular part of the setting (perhaps there's a mystery that needs solving, or a character with a troubled past moves in next door). There's also scope for various games/activities, not to mention role-play, such as fairs and carnivals, relaxing and hearing the gossip down the local pub, or taking part in competitions and community events.

However, much like the therapeutic environment itself, this safe space represents a protective bubble—the 'in here' as opposed to the 'out there'—and as such should remain stable and familiar, to both client and character. In a world of upheaval, this is a place where they should feel in some sort of control.

Major Locations

Now that the client-character has somewhere to stay, they need somewhere to go. These major locations will constitute the remaining 'X'-s on your map, and are where the obstacles really start to come into the picture.

By and large, major locations fall into three categories:

1. *Friendly locations*. These will often be settlements of some form and size, where mostly affable people can be found, though they may also be 'events' of some kind. The monastery of an order of space monks would fit the bill nicely, as would a neighbouring town, or a local fair set up in the main city park. Don't mistake 'friendly' for 'safe', however; these places and their occupants have errands to be run, problems to be solved, and tempers to be calmed. Friendly locations are where the client-character will go when they want a relatively non-lethal day out—a chance to rely upon their brains and social skills rather than the speed of their draw.
2. *Hostile locations*—places where it's pretty clear 'something' bad is either happening or about to happen, even if the precise details aren't yet known. A supervillain's laboratory, a planet of thieves, or a dragon's den are all examples of hostile locations. This is where client-characters go if they fancy a high-octane, heavily combat-focused adventure, with plenty of opportunities for crossing swords (and trading insults) with a dastardly bad guy or three.
3. *Mysterious locations* are those places on the map that are, well, mysterious; there's 'something' there, but nobody knows exactly what. An enchanted forest filled with mythical beasts (but are they friendly or hostile?) would be a perfect mysterious location, as would an old abandoned mine (what's down there, and why was it abandoned?), or a wormhole to…who knows what? The lure (and fear) of the unknown works its magic, here, as clients' imaginations will instinctively work to fill in the gaps; maybe they'll go there and find a new friend, or unwittingly awaken some ancient evil.

These can all vary in terms of scope, scale, and style. Indeed, the 'location' might in fact be nothing more than a single character (not even

necessarily where they live, just where they can be expected to be found), or it could be a doorway of some kind (a star-jump, maybe, or a magic puddle) that leads to an entirely new location (or even world). You might decide that a single location takes up more than just one square on your map: perhaps an entire forest is haunted, and a character will have to brave the ghosts if they want to reach the Witch Queen's palace, or maybe one side of your solar system is dominated by a desert planet that's simply too big to fit on the map.

Furthermore, don't hesitate to bring in some of the details you and your client came up with, during the character-creation phase. If the client decided their character's sweetheart lives in another town, just down the road, it would be sensible to include another town; likewise, if the character hopes to one day return to the space dock where their brother mysteriously disappeared, take the hint and mark that megastructure down. As you'll recall from Chap. 2, the components of the Story Trinity affect each other; allowing character to influence setting is a sure-fire way of bringing the latter to life (as is incorporating some of these new locations into the character's backstory).

Once you've marked these locations down, consider the same details as for the safe space—name, size, function, and so on—to give them a sense of personality; these are where the vast majority of play will take place, so you'll want to make them both intriguing and engaging.

Minor Locations

Once you have the important stuff down, everything else on your map is just filler—the flourishes that make it more than a piece of paper with a few random doodles. These additions will vary from setting to setting, but they'll tend to fall in the region of incidental details rather than major landmarks. On a fantasy map, say, you'll likely want to add a river or a forest; a superhero city might need some roads, or be blocked off into various estates; and a space-opera map might benefit from some warp-lanes or asteroid belts.

Minor locations like these add a little colour to the game world, providing a sense of 'completeness', a feeling that the world has more

happening in the background, as well as creating numerous opportunities for so-called random encounters (see Chap. 6), which you'll now be able to vary from square to square, depending on the type of terrain you've put there.

Non-Player Characters

Now that the world has physical form, it's time to populate it. If your RPG is to be therapeutic, you'll need to consider the personalities with whom the client-character will interact, for it will be those relationships that ultimately determine the client's outcomes.

Non-Player Characters, NPCs, are the lifeblood of a setting: they convey information, provide insight into events, and generally just give the client-character someone to speak to. NPCs are the good guys who dispense quests and rewards, the bad guys bent on destruction who must be stopped, and the 'regular folk' who populate the world in-between. They also provide an opportunity for the formation of that other most crucial aspect of any client-work: relationships.

By now, you'll have a pretty good idea of the world these characters inhabit—the places they live, the sights and sounds around them, the kind of lives they lead—which means you have everything you need to figure out who these people are, what roles they play, and how they may relate (or be related) to the client's character (you'll likely already have a number of NPCs to hand, from the character-creation process).

Don't worry—you don't need to fill out an entire character sheet for every child playing in the background; in fact, once you've got the hang of it, you'll be able to create entire casts of NPCs off the cuff, without the need for any preparation.

NPCs can be divided into three broad categories:

1. *Friendly NPCs*, who are generally (if not quite universally) on the client-character's side. This is a fairly broad category, encompassing everyone from the galactic princess to the local grump who just wants

people to stay off his front lawn. Friendly (and neutral) NPCs provide plenty of opportunities for social encounters.
2. *Hostile NPCs*, who, for various reasons and using various methods, want to rain on the client-character's otherwise sunny day. These may range from low-level busybodies (the local grump after you've trodden on his lawn) to epic bosses with armies of henchmen. These are frequently a source of hostility, and thus very useful when it comes to creating obstacles.
3. *Background NPCs*, who populate the setting and provide opportunities for low-level interactions. Much like extras in a film or television programme, their primary purpose is to make the setting 'feel' like there's a world beyond the main story. They'll frequently appear once or twice, play the part they're required to play, and never be seen again; that said, every now and again you'll come across an NPC who, purely because something about them captures the client's (or your) imagination, grows beyond that limited role and winds up becoming a recurring character (like the local grump who always makes a mumbling comment about staying off his front lawn every time the client-character passes by).

NPCs needn't be human, or indeed capable of communication. A slobbering monster that snacks on smashed cranium is still an NPC—albeit one to approach with caution.

You'll need examples of all of these, if you're to make your provision a success—though precisely how many will vary, depending on your client's issues and requirements (clients who struggle socially will likely need a greater proportion of friendly NPCs, while those who experience difficulties expressing anger will probably benefit from an abundance of hostiles). Your best bet is to start small and work outwards: give each major location one or two 'major' NPCs (e.g., the corrupt town mayor, or the enchanting queen of the forest) and a handful of background ones (e.g., henchmen or local residents), and that'll usually suffice.

All NPCs, both 'major' (i.e., those who contribute significantly to the RPG's narrative) and 'minor' will require the same details:

- *Basic details* like name, gender, rough age (you won't often have to be more specific than, 'child', 'young', 'old', etc.), and appearance;
- Their *role* within the setting (i.e., their in-world job, as well as any allegiances they might have), which will determine how and why the client-character comes into contact with them, and how friendly/hostile they may be;
- One or two interesting *features*, which can range from subtle to over-the-top, depending on how you want the narrative to play out (even if clients can't remember an NPC's name or their role in the story, they'll repeatedly reference "That bloke who had no nose and was always sneezing,");
- A *goal* towards which they are working, the scale of which will grow with the NPC's significance to the story; and, if necessary,
- Some *combat statistics* and any pertinent *special rules*, for when actions need to speak louder than words.

The actual nature of these NPCs will inevitably vary, depending both on the story you and your client are telling, and on how far into that story you are. There will, for example, be a marked difference between the farmer's wife encountered during the first few moments of play, who wants nothing more from life than to look after her young family, and the galactic warlord, obsessed with uniting all space life under her banner, whose downfall is the ultimate aim of an adventure. The former will require very little in the way of preparation, while the latter will need a little more thought put into her.

You'll also likely remember that the client's character sheet specifically requires the invention of certain NPCs (families, friends, and adversaries), and so it's important you dedicate sufficient brainpower to those individuals' development. This is another perfect opportunity to centre the setting around the character. If the client decides that their character's best friend owns an hotel, put some thought into how you might manifest that NPC in-game (as well as deciding where that hotel is situated on the map); once that's done, you'll be able to integrate them into the therapy, and so have someone with whom the client-character can interact, and to whom they can turn whenever they need support. Likewise, if the character's main adversary is a robot who can change into a canon, you're

already set for a powerful obstacle NPC, whom the client will eventually have to overcome.

By the time you have as few as two or three NPCs within your setting, you're in a position to drop your client right into the RPG, confident in the knowledge that there's something for them to do; by the time you've created all of the major NPCs, and liberally sprinkled the landscape with some background ones, you'll have a game world neither you nor your client will ever want to leave.

Recycling Ideas

Sooner or later, you'll find you have a surfeit of pre-created settings, which you can recycle and adapt to house just about any character, and so it would be 'inefficient' to design a brand-new setting for every client. Once you've reached this stage, it would be far from cheating to use your knowledge of a given setting to influence the creation of both the client's character and the obstacles they'll eventually face.

So, just as long as you continue to bear your client's needs in mind, feel free to apply their newly defined character to a setting you've already created. Instead of creating a totally unique fantasy land that has a town for the client-character's parents to live in, just say they live in a town you've already created; instead of devising an entirely new downtown district for the client's street-level superhero to protect, go with the downtown district you created with another client, a few months ago.

Having these earlier settings to fall back on will make the entire creative process easier. If your client is struggling to come up with their character's traits, for example, just suggest some setting-appropriate ones (e.g., a woodsman who would be a perfect fit for your previously designed woodland locale, or a genderfluid alien character would perfectly complement the cast of genderfluid NPCs you created for that ice planet, a while back). If you already have a world at your fingertips, there's no point making everyone's lives harder.

Because, as with every other therapeutic process, you're here to help your client—and if that means using an already realised setting to help them create their character, that's a perfectly reasonable and professional

course of action to take. It can also be very interesting (and enlightening!) to see how two different clients respond to the same scenarios.

Example Setting

Thirty-one-year-old Jen began RPG therapy after she revealed to her therapist that she had never been allowed to play games as a child, and now felt as though she didn't know how to have fun. During the assessment phase, she professed to having an interest in science-fiction, particularly anime (Japanese cartoons), and subsequently created an astronaut mech-pilot, Lalah, to be her character.

This being the case, the obvious setting for Jen's therapy would be somewhere in space, and so she and her therapist put their heads together and came up with enough details to keep Lalah busy for the foreseeable future.

A spaceship, representing the mech-team's base of operations, acted as Lalah's safe space. Jen and her therapist enjoyed an extended conversation about some of the other personalities on board, including the gruff Captain Crombie, fellow pilot Ryoka, and the perpetually inebriated ship's mechanic, Reynolds; they also discussed the ship (subsequently named the *Justice*)'s layout, creating places like Lalah's quarters, the crew's mess, the bridge, and the mech hanger. (Later on in the therapy, Jen drew a plan of *Justice*, and the drawing was subsequently incorporated into the RPG.)

To give Lalah some things to do, Jen and her therapist devised seven major locations: (1) a civilian space colony (a huge structure that allows people to live in space—a friendly location) (2) another, abandoned, colony that had fallen into disrepair (a mysterious location) (3) an enemy ship that, for currently unknown reasons, is in pursuit of *Justice* (a hostile location) (4) the space fortress from which that ship was launched (another hostile location) (5) a giant space weapon of currently unknown origin (a hostile location, because whoever made it likely didn't have tea parties in mind) (6) the Moon, upon which was a lunar city (a friendly location) and, of course, (7) the Earth, should Lalah decide to brave atmospheric entry and see what she and her giant robot could get up to

			X Colony		
	X Moon		X Justice		
X Earth				X Enemy Ship	X Fortress
	X Giant Weapon		X Abandoned Colony		

Fig. 4.2 Jen's 'map'

in real gravity (a mysterious location, because Lalah had never been to Earth before).

The 'map' ultimately resembled Fig. 4.2.

The story and therapeutic potential of these locations was readily apparent—for example, why was the enemy ship so intent on capturing or sinking *Justice*, and what was that giant space weapon aiming at?—and so the therapist was subsequently able to devise some scenarios that would engage Jen and help guide her towards acceptance and understanding of the inner child who, even three decades into her life, just wanted to play.

The therapist later added some minor locations, to spice up in-game travel, including asteroids, wrecked satellites, and raiding space bandits.

Jen and her therapist then took a little more time and created some additional NPCs to populate the setting outside of *Justice*. This led to the creation of: Captain Syms, the commanding officer of the pursuing enemy ship; Bask, a shop owner in the civilian colony, who always seemed to have what Lalah needed; and Dr. Noa, the scientist who designed the giant space weapon. More NPCs would show up, once play began; for

now, though, the setting had enough about it for Jen to get immersed in the RPG, and for Lalah to get into mischief.

Reviewing the Setting-Creation Process

By now, you'll likely have a good idea as to how your client's RPG-based therapy will play out. You know the character, and so are able to envisage the kind of story the client would like to play, and you have a setting that will allow those stories to be told.

As with the character creation process, a key question to ask is, "Why?" This is especially true for any aspects of the setting that the client helped to create. What is it about the safe space that makes them feel so secure? Why do they find the hostile locations so threatening? How do various NPCs indicate aspects of their current mindset? Bringing these thoughts to the client's attention will offer perfect opportunities for reflection, and go a long way towards raising their self-awareness.

Throughout this process, you must also keep asking yourself, "How will this element help my client?" Each location, each NPC, each event must at the very least engage the client's interest; even better would be for them to provide opportunities for emotional risk-taking, character growth, and challenging the client's unhelpful thinking.

If you have studiously taken these considerations into account, you will by now have an entire world on the table in front of you, purpose-built to address this client's therapeutic needs. Combine that with their character and some appropriate obstacles, and you'll have everything you need to make their therapeutic RPG work.

5

Obstacle

The Reward Is Always in the Journey

Obstacles are the aspect of the Story Trinity that makes a story a *story*, rather than a vignette. With character and setting alone, sure, you could create a beautiful piece of imagery—a static account of a single situation—but nothing would actually *happen*. "This is the story of the three little pigs; the end."

Because stories are never about the end result; they're about *getting* to the end result. They're about the possibility that the end result might, in the end, not actually happen. Sure, we 'know' the attractive couple will get together by the story's conclusion. But what if they *don't?*

Obstacles, and how characters respond to them, are the meat of a story—the plot that keeps the reader/watcher/player interested enough to keep going until the end. How will the caped, nocturnal-mammal-based superhero escape the cackling villain's trap? Tune in, next time!

More than this, obstacles are the key to making this a 'therapeutic intervention' rather than 'just another RPG', and it's here that you'll do the majority of your preparation. This is where the fictional frame proper comes into the equation—the key ingredient that will pull double-duty of engaging your client and vicariously challenging any distortive

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8_5

thinking. By putting various well-thought-out challenges between the character and their stated aim, you encourage your client to think about how to overcome them. This produces opportunities to reflect upon the relative merits and demerits of 'the character's' chosen actions; and this, in turn, provides insight into the client's ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, which will ultimately lead to better self-awareness.

First and foremost, then, it's important that you never lose sight of your client's presenting issues. If, for example, they come to you for help with anxiety, and create a Robin Hood-esque character, an appropriate obstacle would be one that places the character in an anxiety-inducing situation (e.g., a burning castle) and requires them to overcome (or at least understand) that anxiety, as well as accurately applying numerous arrows to various targets, if they hope to escape. This scenario, with its simple structure, allows the client to objectively assess their character's anxiety, its causes, and consequences, and gives them an opportunity to challenge that anxiety while at no point being asked to experience it, themselves.

Of course, any number of obstacles might provide ideal interventions for any given client. The trick is to get the balance right between story and therapy. Go too far in one direction, and you're essentially just offering your client a gaming session; too far in the other, and you might as well skip the RPG entirely. And, just like any other aspect of life (especially mental health provision), you'll never get it one hundred per cent right, one hundred per cent of the time. Just do your best, trust the creative work you and your client have already done, and see where the story takes you. The therapy will find your client all by itself; your job is simply to nudge it in the right direction.

Obstacle Types

In real terms, the vast majority of RPG play consists of four primary activities:

1. *Exploration*, of the setting in general, and individual locations in particular;

2. *Interaction* with various NPCs, both friendly and hostile;
3. *Combat* against monsters and NPCs, in one-on-one duels or larger-scale battles; and
4. *Puzzles* of numerous varieties, from avoiding traps to unlocking secrets to out-riddling gatekeepers.

Each provides an opportunity for some form of dramatic tension, inasmuch as they stand between the character and their aims. If they're on the hunt for buried treasure, for example, they won't find it without a good dose of looking around; nor are they ever going to get the local Mayor to talk about her Deep Dark Secret without *talking* to her. Boil down any RPG session and, somewhere at the bottom of the cauldron, you'll find at least one of these tasks.

Which, of course, makes the process of creating them relaxingly simple: all you need to do is take each of the major locations in your setting (friendly, hostile, and mysterious) and apply at least one (but preferably two or three) primary activity to each. Put some thought into how an obstacle sits within its environment—a ship adrift in space, for example, allows for exploring unknown decks, talking to a lone survivor, fighting an alien monster, and/or trying to hack into the main computer. Once you're done, and have a setting full of obstacles for the character to overcome, you really are ready to get playing.

NPCs as Obstacles

You'll have spotted in the previous section that at least two of the primary activities require another person/creature to be present if anything is to happen; it's rather difficult to have a sword fight with nobody on the pointy end, or a deep philosophical conversation with the floor! As previously mentioned, NPCs are the beating heart of any RPG setting, and as such will form the core of much of the actual role-play.

So be prepared to create several more NPCs. That giant penal-planet you marked on your map might serve perfectly well as a dilapidated place to explore, or even as somewhere to fight a horde of faceless rioters; but

you'll double its playability if you give it a major NPC, like the prison's warden, or a big-time gang leader who has all the other prisoners under their thumb.

Even if you decide not to let the client-character ever actually encounter said NPC, their creation automatically gives a location an extra layer of complexity, life, and coolness. You'll know they're there, pulling various strings and ensuring things go the way they want them to go; and if you know there's more to this place than meets the eye, the client will feel it, too.

Ultimately, NPCs are there for the client to react to; so think about ways of getting them in the client-character's way. Forgetfulness, keeping secrets, outright hostility: all these and more can put an NPC in the obstacle category, as can having them be the dispenser of errands or quests. A 'prophet'-like NPC, for example, could loudly proclaim that the client-character is the latest in a long line of Chosen Ones, who will bring about the downfall of the Zlorbian Dragons and ensure a new golden age. Now, this could be absolute gibberish, but one thing's for certain: it'll get your client intrigued, and they'll happily spend hours trying to figure out what it all means. The same applies to 'fetch quests': tell them that a local mob boss has put out a reward for the return of some lost heirloom, and the client will fight entire armies to get their hands on it. And then there are those NPCs who just see the client-character as an irritant, and will happily have them 'removed', either vicariously (via contrivances such as henchmen or traps) or personally (see the section on combat, below).

Lesser NPCs can be obstacles, too. Maybe they're pilgrims searching for the prophet, a local archaeologist who thinks the heirloom belongs in a museum, or the very henchmen sent to remove the irritant. They might be there solely to further the story, but they can also come in very handy if the client gets stuck and needs a pointer on where to go or what to do next.

However you decide to use your NPCs, make sure you keep track of them. If you don't maintain some kind of record, you'll have no idea who does what, where, or why, so make sure you use the NPC Record at the back of this book (or come up with one of your own).

Never be afraid to break out an NPC (or bring in a new one); they're by far the most powerful tool in your box.

Exploration

Client-characters will spend a good portion of their time travelling from place to place, wandering around strange locations, and generally not knowing where they are. This is due in no small part to the fact that, certainly during earlier sessions, they've never been anywhere, meaning that everything is being experienced for the first time; but it's also due to the innate ability people have always had to look at a map and think, "I wonder what's happening there?" There's something alluring about the unknown, and clients will eagerly send their characters deep into undiscovered country, just to satisfy their curiosity.

Exploration obstacles can be a particularly useful form of intervention for clients who struggle with low self-esteem and/or difficulties making decisions. Wandering through a forest, for example, or trying to find a way through a maze, allows for the making of several very low-level decisions, which can both minimize the overwhelming risks they've traditionally associated with responsibility (does it really matter if you go left or right to get around a tree?), as well as giving them a taste of what being 'right' feels like. More generally, they can help clients challenge anxiety by having their character face the unknown, and reflecting on how the character felt before, during, and after their little jaunt in the secret underground bunker. Having the character experience and overcome *their* fears demonstrates that the client can experience and overcome theirs.

Exploration as an obstacle, then, presents as taking a location (major or minor) and gradually expanding on the client's understanding of the place. You can achieve this simply by going back to the setting and dedicating a bit more time to expanding each square into its own semi-contained environment—much like taking a sentence of description and expanding it to a paragraph. You might decide to take that place-name and map it out in its entirety, so that you end up with a detailed floor plan; or maybe just create a list of objects, people, and events that might be found there.

Your best bet is to think of a location as a sort of self-contained network-cum-maze, with branching off points that interconnect different areas/rooms, through which the character can travel (and find things or have random encounters as necessary), but which all ultimately lead to the adventure's conclusion. A simple example of such a layout might resemble Fig. 5.1.

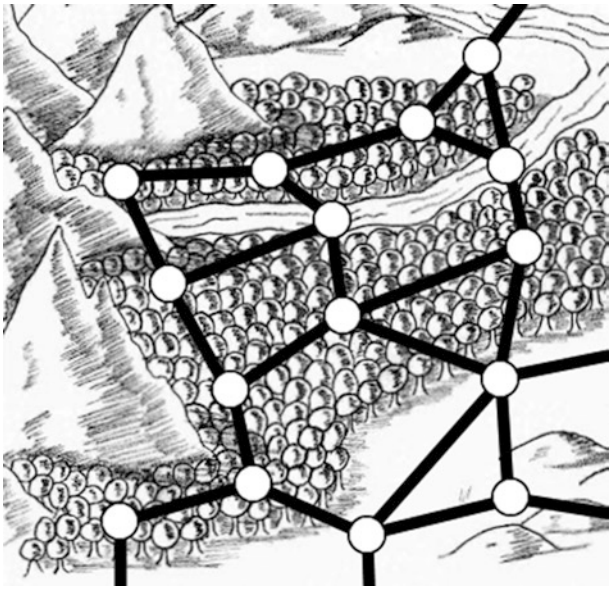

Fig. 5.1 Exploration network

At the end of the day, this is nothing more than some circles connected by some lines; but now you're able to give a description of where the character is (in this case, maybe they're in the hills to the south, somewhere in the forest itself, or at one of the river crossings), and offer various options as to where they might decide to go next. Thinking of exploration in these terms means that (a) you'll never lose the character (even if the character gets lost), and (b) you'll know that, no matter which way the client goes, they'll inexorably move towards the adventure's conclusion.

Either way, the fundamental building blocks of exploration as an obstacle—in the real world, just as much as in a fictional one—are (a) "What am I going to find?"; and (b) "Oh wow/Oh no, look what I've found!" The wonder of the unknown, combined with the excitement of getting one's hands on shiny new stuff, has been the motivating factors of explorers since forever; keep this simple, widely held instinct in mind, and your map becomes a world of enticing possibilities.

Start off by making the location (and its surrounding area) stand out as being interesting in some way, either by giving it an ominous name

('the Pit of Despair' positively *begs* to be searched), drawing a particularly noteworthy icon on your map (there *must* be something worth seeing in that old, flying monolith, right?), or coming up with a suitably enticing description to be delivered by a knowledgeable NPC ("I haven't got a clue what's inside; all I know is that that old warehouse was shut down two years ago, and yet every night, the lights come on, and I hear people moaning, like they're in some kind of pain,"). Once you've done that, you can flesh the area out by considering things like:

1. What purpose did/does this place serve?
2. Who/What occupies it?
3. What is to be found there (treasure? a person of note? something happening or about to happen?); and does the client-character know about it in advance (and if so, how?), or is it some secret that will only be revealed when they get there?
4. How easy is it to reach and navigate (and if the answer to that is, "Not very", then *why)*?
5. How do individual areas within the location relate to each other (e.g., are they fairly linear, or a complex matrix of interconnected zones)?
6. Are there any booby traps lying around, or some other kind of security system or hazard that might complicate the character's exploration?

When you're finished, you'll have a miniature location-bible to hand, with all the relevant notes and layouts. Some of this preparation will almost certainly go to waste (clients will frequently find ways to circumvent whole swathes of your lovingly created dungeon); but at least you know you're prepared for most eventualities.

This work will most aptly apply to mysterious locations, whose very purpose is to be explored; in truth, though, *everywhere* is ripe for exploration—even if the character has been there already. A hostile location is still an unknown until the character has had a look around; a friendly location (up to and including the safe-space) may have more behind the scenes than the character is initially aware of. Even the landscape between locations can be explored: maybe that innocuous piece of terrain is actually the forgotten entrance to an underground city, or that little asteroid belt turns out to be full of space-dragons.

Finally, be aware that exploration will require a fair amount of description on your part, during play. You'd therefore be wise to jot down some particularly visual features that would jump out at the character as they traverse the place, and brush up on your purple prose. There's a world of difference between, "You're standing in a dwarf tunnel," and, "You find yourself in a long, wide corridor, lit at regular intervals by dull glowstones fitted into the ceiling. The creamy-white stonework on the walls is incredible, covered in carvings that depict great battles of old; clearly the masterful work of the dwarves. Up ahead, the outline of a door hints that you are nearing your destination." Make the place sound interesting, and your client will forget they're really just sitting in a small room, trying to work through some issues.

Interactions

The client-character's relationships with various NPCs will provide by far the most opportunities for role-play within sessions. Exploration requires attentiveness, combat focuses mostly on the game's mechanics, puzzles tap into the logical part of the brain; but interactions are where you can reasonably expect your clients to get into character. Expect interactions, therefore, to form a considerable part of your RPG work.

For one thing, they're your quickest and easiest means of conveying information. The character will need to ask for directions, go shopping, find somewhere to sleep, hear local news, and so on—all things that require some form of polite conversation if they're to get what they want. This is all relatively straightforward, and shouldn't require much in the way of preparation; just answer the client's questions in an NPC-appropriate voice, and wave them on their way.

Things can get a little more in-depth when it comes to using NPCs as part of a wider narrative (for example, using them as a plot hook to get the character/client interested in an adventure); after all, if they're going to send the client-character on a quest, you'll at least need to know what the quest is, and how this NPC is involved. Are they just a messenger/gossip ("I heard a rumour there's gold in them thar hills.")? Are they intimately involved, even the patron of said quest ("Smuggle these food discs through the atmospheric siege line and I'll reward you.")? Or are they

actually a *part* of the adventure, encountered somewhere along the journey ("Keep going straight on until you see the lamppost, then turn left.")?

If you want to make use of interactions as a specific aspect of the client's therapy, however, you'll have to get some semi-detailed plans in order. This is where the 'major' (i.e., non-background) NPCs you created as part of the setting will come into play. So grab your notes and get ready to add a third dimension to your cast.

A key part of creating NPCs is giving them a goal/motivation. This can be anything from, "I fancy a cup of tea," to, "I am going to destroy the universe." You also want to make sure that, even if those goals don't necessarily *conflict* with the client-character's, they at the very least don't *align* with them, either. That cup of tea, for example, might use the last clean cup, and nobody bothered to put the dishwasher on! This means that the client's character has to enter into a dialogue with the NPCs, or else get nowhere on their personal journey. The moment that dialogue begins, the role-play begins; the *relationship* begins.

As with more traditional forms of therapeutic role-play, the primary key to making these interactions successful is to identify the issues you wish to address. Whatever it is, consider how it might be challenged by this NPC, and how you might use the NPC to help the client reflect upon the situation, and work these thoughts into the NPC's personality. If the client believes they are inherently unlikeable, for example, consider having the NPC be a loving individual who takes the client-character under their wing, sees to their needs, and demonstrates unmistakeable loving kindness towards them; then you can reflect (out of character) on the evidence (or lack thereof) for the client's fears being justified. Or, if they come to you with elements of body dysmorphia, perhaps you might contrive to have the client-character meet a stunningly beautiful NPC who is just as critical of their own appearance.

Don't feel the need to be subtle, here: sometimes your best bet is to present clients with in-game equivalents of themselves, wait to see how they react to the situation, and letting them witness just how markedly their behaviour towards others is different from their behaviour towards themselves. Giving clients a positive experience of humanity, and providing them with reparative relationships to counter destructive ones, is a core principle of much mental health provision; so give them some

friendly faces to turn to, and let them practice the kinds of interpersonal-relations they'd like more of in their lives.

Of course, you'll likely find it necessary to present the client-character with some less-than-wholesome interactions, too. These might come in the form of a bullying/abusive/cold NPC, a negative in-game experience such as breaking up with a friend/love-interest, or even having the character come to terms with a bereavement. If we give the client opportunities to challenge any 'unhelpful' ways of thinking they may have developed in relation to such unpleasant individuals/experiences, we become able to engender positive change.

First and foremost, though, it's vital that you remember the simple, straightforward fact that everyone who comes to you for support is vulnerable in one way or another. It is of paramount importance that you maintain boundaries, and keep the client safe and 'held' throughout such interactions.

As with the nicer interactions, the primary means of therapizing unpleasant NPCs is to have them behave similarly to people the client has come across during their life. This can take the form of direct hostility towards the client-character, or by meeting 'survivors' of experiences similar to those faced by the client. Such instances are where RPG therapy truly shines, because clients may actually 'act out' their feelings towards the individuals in question, without needing to be afraid of an actual confrontation. They can experiment with different ways of approaching the situation ("I wish I'd said that at the time,"), enact some sort of revenge (potentially including violence, in which case combat might be called for), or even attempt reconciliation. Howsoever the client chooses to approach the situation, the enterprise should at the very least prove cathartic and give some insight into potential alternative means of responding to the unpleasant situations that previously haunted them.

Combat

A good scrap is a great way to engage clients. More importantly, combat offers ample opportunity to explore issues around confrontation, anger, and aggression, not to mention giving clients a chance to 'get back' at

certain individuals. They can also be a chance to let off steam after a long week of being nice to people.

Violent encounters can take many forms, and be against many different types of opponent. They can be a faceoff against specific, named, antagonists (e.g., the character's adversaries, or some other 'big' villain who has been terrorizing the setting); they could be larger-scale battles, either one-against-many or many-against-many; or they can be so-called random encounters (frequently referred to as 'wandering monsters'). And, of course, combat doesn't have to be 'hostile' per se: there are plenty of situations in which two (or more) people can engage in fisticuffs without actively trying to bring about the other's demise (training, competitions, mock battles, games, etc.).

Whatever the scenario, combat is usually a fairly simple undertaking: two or more participants have at each other, and continue to have at each other until one of them is incapacitated (i.e., killed, knocked unconscious, or otherwise rendered harmless), surrenders, or flees. Obviously, the higher profile the enemy, the likelier they are to give a good account of themselves: low-level grunts or henchmen will collapse to the floor with a single 'biff' or 'whack', intermediates will probably need an additional 'oof', while big bosses might even require a 'kapow'. And, of course, the longer they stand, and the harder they hit, the more likely the client-character is to get a headache.

The key words, when it comes to RPG combat, are 'circumstances' and 'scale'. If you plan to provide a combat-based obstacle for the client to sink their teeth into, begin by asking yourself how hard you want to make life for their character. The usual answer will be along the lines of, "Just hard enough to make it exciting, but not so hard that we have to print off a new character-sheet."

Chapter 7 will walk you through the actual mechanics of combat encounters; for now, though, your main job is to work the obstacle into the therapy. So, consider things like:

1. How many opponents will the client-character face?
2. How tough are they?
3. What are their goals?
4. Is the client-character alone, or do they have allies?

5. Is this the client-character's fight, or are they stepping in on someone else's behalf (and if so, whose)?
6. What role will the environment play in the battle?

As with any other NPCs, you want your opponents to feel like they're part of the world—so put some thought into where, how, and why they'll turn up. In general, there are three main categories of adversary:

1. Grunts, who are very much the rank-and-file of the enemy's forces—there more to overwhelm an opponent with numbers than ability;
2. Lieutenants, who are the mid-tier threats, formidable in their own right, deadly in groups; and
3. Bosses, the big villains, who'll be the most dangerous foes (not necessarily solely in combat) the character has to face.

Foes can take just about any form you like—humans, monsters, robots, ghosts, whatever—but they all fall into one of these categories (some ghosts are just more powerful than others). Perhaps the easiest way to think of it would be to imagine a combat-based adventure as a pyramid, with a single boss at the top, a small number of lieutenants in the middle, and a large number of grunts at the bottom; as the character progresses, they move from one level to the next. (Incidentally, bosses will pretty much always be 'named' NPCs; lieutenants may or may not be fleshed-out, depending on if the client-character has met/formed a relationship with them, or you're just essentially using them as tough grunts; and grunts will often just be background extras.)

Additionally, as the character grows in strength, so too should the people with whom they trade blows. This serves the dual role of making the enemies 'feel' more dangerous as the game moves along ("I'm so much stronger now than I was at the beginning, and this guy *still* nearly beat me!"), and keeping the play from becoming too easy ("*Another* supreme bad guy I can pulverise with one punch? Yawn.").

To give you an idea of each category's general strength in comparison to the client-character, Table 5.1 gives the statistics (the number of hit-points they possess, the amount of damage they inflict on a successful attack, and any 'slots' for special abilities they might have).

Table 5.1 NPC development

	Level	HP	Average damage[a]	Total ability levels[b]
Grunts	1	2	2 or d2	1
	2	2	2 or d2	1
	3	2	2 or d2	2
	4	3	2 or d3	2
	5	3	2 or d3	2
	6	3	2 or d3	2
	7	4	3 or d4	3
	8	4	3 or d4	3
	9	4	3 or d4	3
	10	5	3 or d4	3
	11	5	4 or d6	4
Lieutenants	1	5	2 or d4	3
	2	5	2 or d4	3
	3	6	3 or d4	4
	4	6	3 or d4	4
	5	7	3 or d4	5
	6	7	4 or d6	5
	7	8	4 or d6	6
	8	8	4 or d6	6
	9	9	5 or d6	7
	10	9	5 or d6	7
	11	10	5 or d6	8
Bosses	1	10	3 or d4	6
	2	11	3 or d4	7
	3	12	4 or d6	8
	4	13	4 or d6	9
	5	14	5 or d6	10
	6	15	5 or d8	11
	7	16	6 or d8	12
	8	17	6 or d8	13
	9	18	7 or d10	14
	10	19	7 or d10	15
	11	20	8 or d12	16

[a]Note that this is the *average* damage the individual in question should dish out per combat round. You might decide to give an enemy a particularly nasty attack, which delivers a lot of pain, but requires a missed turn while they reload. Additionally, if the client's character has an item/ability that negates a certain amount of damage, potentially consider allowing for this by upping the enemy's damage output by the requisite amount

[b]"Special" rules, as with the client-character's abilities, can be anything you think would make the enemy more compelling/fun to face. Whereas the client-character is limited to three abilities, however, adversaries can have as many abilities as you choose, as long as none goes above level 6, and the sum of those abilities' levels does not exceed the value stated

As a general rule: no matter how far into the game you are, bosses should be roughly on a par with the client-character, lieutenants should be about half as strong, and grunts about a quarter. These, of course, are just guidelines; by all means feel free to jerry-rig your own setups as per your own needs. Maybe you want to make a 'super-lieutenant', or a slightly tougher grunt who's looking to move up in the world. Or maybe you want to create some one-of-a-kind monster, with 100 HP, 2d20 damage, and 40 special-ability levels, against which the client-character has no hope of victory, and which exists solely to convey the value of a prudent withdrawal.

Once again, it is of paramount importance that you respect boundaries, and always give the client the option of halting play; if they don't wish to face a particular scenario, don't force them to.

Puzzles

Puzzles usually manifest in-game as some form of mechanism designed to keep players away from a desired location. This can present as, "find or create a special kind of key", "follow a clue to figure out what to do/where to go next", or even, "disarm or escape a trap".

The main question they ask tends to be, "How?" How does the character escape? How do the components open the door? How does one decipher the code? How do you get away with the magic ring if the creepy water zombie won't stop asking riddles? The exhilaration of puzzles comes from the "A-ha!" moment, when all the pieces slot into place and the whole thing suddenly makes sense. Therapeutically, it's possible to tap into that exhilaration, both to reflect on how the client reacts to success—are they exultant? supremely unbothered? pleased with themselves but afraid to show it?—and to dissect their methods of approaching problems.

Puzzles can be of particular use when working with clients who tend to approach life with black-and-white/all-or-nothing thinking (splitting), struggle with issues of confidence, apathetic/fatalistic thinking, or have a very logical, cause-and-effect outlook.

When it comes to creating puzzles as obstacles, your chief concern (apart from the ubiquitous, "How does this serve my client?") is, how does it figure into the setting? That is to say, what is the puzzle's in-setting reason for being, and how and why is the character going to come across it? Is it there to keep people from retrieving something, or to weed out 'unworthy' trespassers (i.e., only someone smart enough to figure out the solution can be considered 'worthy')? Is it designed to keep people *out*, or to keep something *in?* Is it a trap, left in place to punish transgressors who dare to enter? Is there a time limit, after which the whole place will come crashing down? Or is it literally just a game that's there to be played for fun, such as a carnival stall?

Once you've figured out why it's there, put some thought into what exactly the puzzle is, and how it can be solved. There's plenty to choose from: environmental puzzles, where the character has to navigate, make use of, or somehow rearrange their surroundings (a maze, for example, or a system that requires certain objects to be placed in certain locations/positions); riddle or clue-type games, where they have to figure out an answer according to given information; inventory puzzles, where they must collect certain items (essentially fancy keys, or components thereof); memory games; wordsearches; colour games; mathematical problems; illusions; on and on it goes.

Next, consider how the client-character will find the puzzle. What about it is interesting enough for them to try and solve it? What clues will they need to gather before they can figure out the solution? What are the consequences of failure?

Puzzles can be a lot of fun to come up with, and can give sessions a more playful feel—especially if you make some props that the client can use to figure out the solution. If your client is *really* invested in the game, you could even let them take the puzzle away to figure out between sessions! Even better? With only a minimum of tweaking, the same puzzle can be adapted to any setting or genre you choose. After all, a code's a code; the actual mechanics and solution remain the same, even if the aesthetics change. Just swap the arcane symbols on a piece of parchment for a list of numbers on a flickering computer monitor, and you're ready to go.

Some clients will love puzzles so much, you might decide to build an entire setting as a puzzle (a sinister funfair, for example, or inside a giant machine that needs to be repaired); others will roll their eyes harder than they roll their dice. If the latter is the case, don't labour the point. Let them find (or outright offer them) a quick and easy way around the obstacle—think Alexander the Great slicing the Gordian Knot rather than untying it—and let them get on with the part of the adventure they actually *want* to play.

Obstacle-Chains (Aka 'adventures')

Most adventures consist of more than just a single, solitary obstacle—and this is as true for therapeutic RPGs as it is for any other. After all, 'exploration' all by itself is less an adventure than it is, 'going out for a walk'; solving one puzzle is not so much a campaign as a quiet afternoon indoors.

Stories are what happen when all these elements come together. If you think of your favourite story right now (regardless of medium), you'll quickly notice just how many times the protagonist has to butt heads with something or someone before they finally get what they're after. The star-crossed lovers must first overcome the Unfortunate Meeting, the Bad First Date, and the Simple Misunderstanding before thinking about settling down; the intrepid detective won't be able to figure out whodunnit until he's Examined the Body, Visited the Scene of the Crime, and Interviewed the Suspects. Make any story too short/simple, and you'll lose the consumer through sheer boredom.

The same is true for us: you don't want the character's day to be anything less than continually complicated, lest the whole thing descend into monotony.

Rather than creating your obstacles in isolation, then, spend some time wondering how some of them might fit together to form a longer narrative—a 'chain' of obstacles, if you will. A very simple example might appear thus (Fig. 5.2):

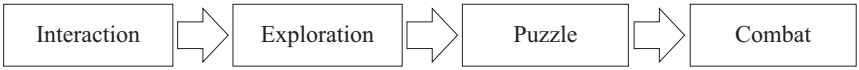

Fig. 5.2 Example obstacle chain

The character hears about a legendary treasure from the local townsfolk (interaction); they search the general area (exploration); they have to figure out how to gain entry (puzzle); and then they must fight the treasure's undead guardian (combat). By the time the adventure is complete, the client will be able to look back and say they had a good time; and you, if you put sufficient thought into the process, will be able to point out how they managed to work through some of their issues.

Of course, your chain could be any combination of any number of components; a war or battle would call for many combat obstacles, while a mystery would err more on the side of interaction and puzzles. The NPCs might be generic background extras, or they might be important players in the character's backstory; the end goal might be 'enlightenment' rather than treasure. But the basic pattern will always remain the same—and if you find yourself getting stuck, just refer back to the basics.

Example Obstacles

Twenty-year-old Xav, who identifies as non-binary, entered therapy following a breakup, hoping to overcome their chronic low-mood and suicidal thinking. The entirety of their young life, they said, had been marred by loneliness, especially when it came to their parents, who had responded with hostility to Xav's coming out. During their initial assessment, Xav spoke of how they felt great sorrow whenever they spoke to their parents, as though they were somehow lost to them; essentially, they were grieving the parents they never had, and that they took for granted the idea that nobody else would accept their life choices, either.

As part of the creative process, Xav and their therapist drew up a seventies-era metropolis, called Court City, within which their character, a cold-manipulating superheroine called Blizzard ('normal-life' name, Emily), operated.

Being mindful of Xav's reasons for entering into therapy, and their stated aims for the therapeutic process, the therapist designed a series of obstacles that would expose Blizzard to more manageable versions of the challenges Xav had to face. He concluded that interactions would likely be the most appropriate form of obstacle for Blizzard to face, in terms of helping Xav process their difficulties, and that a superheroine like Blizzard would have to enter into various combats with some bad guys and their henchman, as this would help keep Xav engaged with the therapy. (What's a superhero without a supervillain?)

Remembering that he had previously created an interaction-based adventure for another client, the therapist decided to incorporate some of those obstacles into Xav's therapy, including integrating Emily's parents into the scenario. By Xav's next session, the therapist had devised a number of obstacle-chains that would take Blizzard all across Court City. One such chain looked like this:

1. Emily would attend a festival in Court City's central park, where she would keep running into people she knew (including, conveniently enough, her parents), none of whom would let Emily get away without a chat;
2. The festival would be attacked by the villainous Firefly (Blizzard's adversary), who would kidnap several revellers (again including Emily's parents);
3. Emily/Blizzard (in or out of costume) would need to talk to various authority figures (police officers, government officials, etc., not all of them pleased with Blizzard's interference) to ascertain Firefly's motives and intentions;
4. Finding some clues left behind at the park (including a receipt that had apparently been stuck to Firefly's foot, CCTV footage, and a tracking app on her parents' phones), Xav would be in a position to figure out where Firefly's secret headquarters were located (underneath 'Pat's Pizza Parlour', accessed through a secret door in the kitchen);
5. Gaining access to the secret hideout would require getting past both Pat and the booby-trapped entrance—a laser net connected to a self-firing machine-gun turret;

6. Firefly won't go down without a fight, so Blizzard better not lose too many hit points to that machine-gun!;
7. Rescuing Emily's parents would provide an opportunity for both sides to talk about secret identities, and allow Xav to ponder the kind of relationship they would realistically like to have with their parents, and how they might broach the subject of acceptance, both of themselves and of each other.

(Other obstacle-chains, while ostensibly different scenarios, also focused on challenging Xav's view of the world as inherently hostile) As play began, the therapist described how Blizzard came to find herself in that opening situation. Xav subsequently watched Blizzard overcome everything that stood in the way of the objective, and was able to ask themselves, is there anything I can learn from this?

Of course, the answer was, "Yes."

Reviewing the Obstacle-Creation Process

Yet again, the most important part of this process is in taking into account the client's needs. Your primary role is to ensure that anything you put in the character's way will somehow have a beneficial impact upon your client's mental health.

You'll achieve this by referring to your client's presenting issues, and reflecting upon what particular form of role-play would most challenge those issues. This is where you pay particular attention to how you apply your particular modality (see Chap. 8), and where you must take care to move only at your client's pace. If a client struggles in social situations, interactions will obviously need to play a big part in their therapy, so a large urban environment populated by numerous NPCs would be preferable to a desert-island with nothing but monsters. If they suffered abuse as a child, they'd likely benefit from an opportunity to speak to and/or challenge a bullying figure, so an overtly evil antagonist would work better than a subtle, spy-like figure. If they have a particular type of phobia, make sure the setting is structured such that the character would eventually (subtly) have to face the object of the client's fear.

In practical terms, though, creating obstacles is just as easy as creating the other two aspects of the Story Trinity: come up with a few ideas, introduce them to your client, and let the therapy do its work. Just as the character gives the game its soul, and the setting gives it its atmosphere, obstacles (and obstacle-chains) give it its *fun*. This is what most of your clients will have in mind, when they see that you offer RPG therapy; this is where the dice are going to come in.

What's more, you now have an outline of the client's therapeutic *story*, which means you (and they) are ready to begin.

Part III

Implementation

6

Telling the Story

Once Upon a Time

When you take a character, a setting, and an obstacle, and blend them together, you have a story; when those elements are designed specifically to address a client's therapeutic needs, that story cannot help but be therapeutic.

The key to an engaging RPG is to maintain a sense of wonder. You and your client have created an inspiring protagonist, an incredible world for them to live in, and a series of exciting adventures for them to embark upon: keep an eye out for those moments that make you go, "Wow!" and you're on the right track. The therapy will happen almost by itself.

The short-session, short-term structure of client-work means that RPG therapy is best approached in an 'episodic' fashion: a wider narrative arc, divided into smaller, more manageable chunks. Episodes benefit from having their own self-contained plot: an element that allows for a satisfying conclusion in the short-term, rather than having to wade through the entire arc before getting any payoff.

As Fig. 6.1 shows, in terms of narrative tension, sure, the single, epic storyline has a very exciting climax—but the episodic structure allows for a more consistently engaging narrative. And while many RPGs have time

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8_6

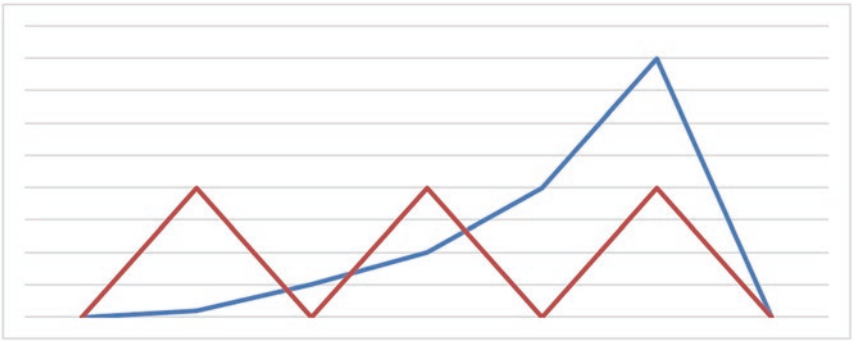

Fig. 6.1 Episodic versus epic storytelling

to tease their players with the idea of what might happen next, we aren't so blessed. We have a limited window of opportunity, so we need to keep our clients engaged on a session-to-session basis.

So when it comes to preparing for a session, put some thought into how you might give your client a satisfying episode of their character's adventure, rather than worrying about building up to some ultra-cool finale that you might never get to. Even if you don't manage to complete an adventure in a single session, you'll likely at least have an exciting cliffhanger to leave things on.

In terms of timekeeping, your best bet would be to structure your sessions broadly as follows:

1. Spend the first ten minutes (give or take) introducing the session, giving the client time to get things from the past week off their chest, and recall where last session's adventure left off;
2. Dedicate the majority of the session (about thirty minutes) to actually playing the game; and
3. Wind up the session with approximately ten minutes' worth of post-game discussion, reflecting on any insights or revelations the play might have provided, and checking-in with the client for the week ahead.

This is a simple, easy to remember outline that will help you keep track of the session's progress without needing to constantly watch the clock. In real terms, half an hour isn't a massive amount of playtime—most

hobbyists would snort in derision at the thought of something so pitiful—but, at the end of the day, it's all we've got to work with. It's enough.

The Story So Far

This form of intervention asks a lot of one's memory. As well as reviewing the client's progress, you'll need to keep on top of the *character's* progress, as well as all the NPCs, obstacles, and so on. When you have a full caseload of clients, this can be a lot of stories to remember.

The solution? Get your client to do all the remembering for you. At the beginning of a session, after you've been through any particular issues they wanted to bring, just ask them what their character got up to during the last session.

By getting them to recall the adventure thus far, you relieve some of the pressure on yourself, and encourage them to re-empathise with their character, getting them back 'in the zone'. They've probably spent a large portion of their week looking forward to this moment; let them have it. It might also provide an opportunity for reflection, if you haven't done so already, on how they feel the character did/felt, during that part of their adventure.

Ideally, the whole preamble will likely take approximately ten minutes; this should be sufficient to check in with the client, cover any administrative issues, and have the session's play all ready to go. Now, this may not sound like much, and you might find your personal approach requires more (or less) review time; just be aware that, the more time you spend on the setup, the less time you'll have to actually play the game.

This being the case, your best bet is for the client to briefly skim over the 'Story So Far', recounting the highlights rather than the details. Chuck Rogers' latest adventure in the twenty-fifth century can be summed up as, "We snuck aboard the Cradonians' mothership and had to find a way into the engine's core so that can we destroy it before they get to Earth," rather than, "Well, first I had to get hold of an unmarked mini-shuttle, because we didn't want the Cradonians to figure out where we were coming from, but that meant going down to the old scrapyard and haggling with the merchant who ran the place, but I rolled really bad

and ended up having to borrow some extra credits from the bank, which I'll have to pay back by doing another job for them; then we had to transfer him the money, and get all the repairs carried out, because the ship was really old. After that, I flew to the Cradonians' mothership and had to convince them I'd been cast adrift from my main ship, and would they…"

Because, as ever, our main concern is *engagement*. The client wants to see what happens *next*, not what happened *last*.

The Story Cycle

Remember the Story Trinity? Well, it's had a bit of an upgrade.

Now, as well as demonstrating the importance of the interconnectedness between each individual component, we can see just how easily those components can be integrated into an ongoing narrative. (See Fig. 6.2.) And, once again, these three aspects (as well as your training, obviously) are all you'll ever need if you want to make your client's RPG therapy a success. Because, when it comes to actually running a session, all you have to do is follow this exact pattern:

1. Describe the setting;
2. Describe the obstacle as it presents itself;
3. Have the client describes how their character responds to the situation;
4. Ask for appropriate dice-rolls;

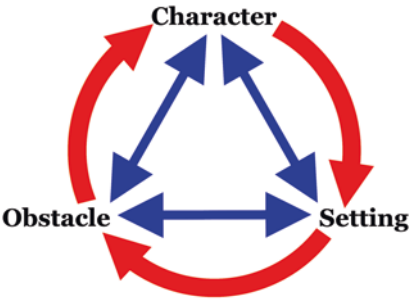

Fig. 6.2 The Story Cycle

5. If the client succeeds, they decide how that success manifests itself; if they fail, you describe what went wrong; and
6. Repeat, taking into account any changes that have just taken place.

And that's it. Honestly. Setting leads to obstacle leads to character leads to setting leads to obstacle leads to character leads to setting. This basic cycle remains the same throughout the therapy: everything, from lifting heavy objects to powering down a giant blue space laser, follows this simple current.

Say, for example, you're picking up a session with a client's necromancer-cowboy having just entered some dingy, backwater saloon. Your first task is to tell the client what the place looks and feels like. Describe how bustly it is, what the other patrons are doing, the clanky sound of the rickety old automatic piano, the stains of spilled beer on the dry floorboards, and so on. Once you've finished painting the setting's picture, it's time to introduce the obstacle: two gunfighters, Billy the Adolescent and Doc Weekoff, draw their weapons and start shooting! After that, all you need to do is ask your client a single, simple question: "What does your character do?"

That's your part done.

The client will declare what they want to do, and describe how they do it. If the outcome of said action is uncertain, let the dice be the judge; otherwise, just agree that the character does what the client wants them to do. Either way, 'a thing happens': in this example, the necromancer-cowboy dives for cover behind the bar. Maybe he succeeds, maybe he doesn't: either way, the situation has changed.

Which means you go back to describing the setting—people are panicking, the automatic piano gets shot and stops playing—and the obstacle—Billy and Weekoff spread out, trying to get better shots—before asking what the character does next (he draws his own gun and gets ready to jump out).

After that, it's your turn again: setting; obstacle. Then the client's: character.

And so the Cycle continues.

If, at any point during a session, you're struggling to think of what to do/say next, just reflect briefly on which step of the Cycle you're currently on, and go from there.

Having been through the entire creative phase, hopefully you're now in a position to understand the importance of this disarmingly simple process. You've structured your client's therapeutic needs in such a way as to integrate them with a relatable fiction; you've helped them create all the essential elements of that fiction; and now you're accompanying them as they journey through it. You've reached the stage where the fiction *is* the therapy.

And that's the Story Cycle's (and the Story Trinity itself's) primary objective: to help your client feel as fully immersed as possible in the world, the experiences, and the emotions of their character. Manage this, and they'll have no choice but to vicariously learn from the character's adventures—even though, on the surface, it's all 'just a game'.

Role-play

Different clients will have different comfort-levels, when it comes to role-play. Some will really get into character, putting on voices and saying, "I do X"; others will stay back and describe everything third-hand. In every way that matters, though, playing an RPG is just a case of playing pre-tend. Take a scenario, put yourself in it, and go. The only difference now is that you've put some advanced thought into it.

Now your job is to immerse them in the fiction. Look them in the eye as you're describing things, and address the story directly to them, rather than just reading some pre-written notes; exaggerate your language, inject it with a sense of that wonder and excitement (the castle isn't, "Big," it's "Biiiiiiig!"); use effusive hand gestures to give a feel for the grandiosity/intimacy/atmosphere/tension of the scene; give vague directional cues, like, "Over there is X," or, "A little way to your right, you see Y"; get into character, when playing NPCs, acting out their personality and behaviours; which means, yes, putting on voices and portraying body language, if you feel comfortable so doing.

This will grab and hold your client's interest, which will in turn keep them engaged. Once again, you'll get into the swing of things very quickly, even if you're not quite sure of yourself to begin with. Just give yourself permission to have fun, and your client will see that it's all right

for them to have fun, too. (More suggestions on how to role-play various encounters may be found in Chap. 7.)

Of course, this form of intervention will require huge ethical consideration on your part: be careful of any prejudicial behaviour you might display, even if only accidentally, and remain mindful of any and all boundaries between yourself and the client. One person's rough Scotch drawl might well be another's harmful cliché; that amusing whistling hiss between an NPC's missing teeth could, to a client, be a potentially triggering experience. So make sure you check, before going too over-the-top. As with boundaries more generally, cultural humility is the order of the day: be conscientious about heritage and identity, avoid stereotypes, and maintain awareness of your client's personal preferences (e.g., being mindful of pronouns while working with clients who are exploring their gender identity).

As for your client, encourage *them* to get in on the role-play action by (a) leading by example (see above), and (b) helping them stay in-character. The best way to achieve the latter is to remind them to consider how their character's personality might display in-game, especially in terms of:

1. Thoughts and feelings—how does the character react internally to the situation they find themselves in (e.g., do they keep these sensations contained, or are they irrepressible)?
2. Physicality—how do they carry themselves (e.g., do they gesture while they talk, or remain still)?
3. Phrasing—how do they express themselves (i.e., what would their choice of words be in the current situation)?
4. Voice—how do they actually *talk* (i.e., what's their voice/diction like, and is the client able or willing to have a go at sounding like them)?

When it's their turn to contribute to the Story Cycle, give them time to think. After all, the client's role (and the character's) is a very reactive one; even those who actively look for adventure are still constantly on the back foot, never quite sure what'll happen next. Sure, there'll be times when you really do want to rush them—in the middle of a fight, say, or as they're trying to escape a collapsing building, or if the client is there because they struggle with decisions and you're practicing keeping

moving—but, for the majority of play, let them take their time, and think about what to do next.

If it seems like they're struggling, remind them to consult their character sheet. That's what it's for. A brief skim through that information should be enough to get them back on track. And, as with any other therapeutic approach, be sure to reiterate that there is no 'right' or 'wrong'; the play is a tool, not a test.

Perhaps the best piece of advice to follow, though, is this: the minute any of this stops being fun (for either you or your client), take a step back and ponder why, and try to figure out some ways in which you might reintroduce it; the last thing this approach should be is stressful.

Improvisation

It's a common adage in the RPG community that, no matter how much preparation a GM puts in, the players will *always* do the one thing they hadn't thought of. The hazard of working with our imaginations, and encouraging clients to work with theirs, is that literally anything is possible: and if anything is possible, *everything* is possible! So be prepared to spend a lot of your time during play being totally, utterly bewildered.

If, for example, you present the client-character with a locked door, there is a range of actions they might take to get through it. Maybe they'll have a look around and find the key. Maybe they'll pick the lock, or use some sort of gadget. Or maybe they'll just pull out their massive warhammer and 'pick the lock' that way. All these are fairly obvious approaches to take, and relatively simple to plan for.

But what if, after you've finished describing the scene, your client looks up and says, "I take out my spell-phone and check if there are any alchemists in the area"? What do you do then?

Truthfully? You'll probably spend a few seconds thinking, "Um…?" Because, let's face it: unless you possess the power of foresight, you'll never anticipate such a random statement of intent. You can be forgiven for not having a clue where the client's ideas are going to take you; a simple 'get the door open' task (a puzzle) has transformed into a 'let's find and talk to someone' (exploration and interaction), and suddenly you're

expected to have an entire NPC ready—and you just know the client's going to have a whole bunch of bizarre questions. This was *not* the way things were supposed to go!

This is where your improvisation skills come in. Because things like this will happen. *All. The. Time.* Simple becomes complicated, readiness becomes confusion, and you'll have no choice but to wind your neck in and get on with it.

So what do you do? Well, much like when you give the client time to think before they take their action, give yourself a few moments to consider the situation that you (rather than they) are now being asked to react to. At the end of the day, there are only two possible outcomes: either the thing the client wants to do is possible, or it isn't.

As long as the client's idea is within the realms of possibility, just go with it. You may not have a clue where things are going, but that just makes the episode all the more exciting. So: "You spend a few moments scanning your spell-phone's screen, and sure, you quickly find an advertisement for a Doctor Eibrau, who says he's an expert in turning anything you want into gold. Doesn't have many good reviews, though."

Sure, this requires you to be a bit quick on the draw, grabbing a name out of thin air and coming up with a few bits of information that fits them into the wider world; but it allows the story to travel in what might be a fun direction, as well as positively reinforcing the client's thoughts/actions, and building their confidence in the process. Because, of course, incidents such as this are actually a *good* thing. If the client comes up with something completely out of the blue, which you'd never have dreamt up, it shows they're engaged enough with the therapy to actually think about the obstacle they're trying to overcome. This should be encouraged. It should be *celebrated*.

What happens next? Who knows? Maybe the client gives the good Doctor a call, and asks him to make up a small batch of black powder. When the character drops by, they find the Doctor has a burnt nose and no eyebrows—obviously a hazard of the job—but he's perfectly affable, and sells the character their desired explosives, which they subsequently use to blow the bleeping door off. Or maybe something else entirely happens.

The point, though, is that thinking on your feet expands the chance for *fun*, and creates opportunities to explore the client's thinking. What

was going on for them when they found themselves up against the locked door? What was it like, talking to the obviously a-tad-batty Eibrau? How did they feel about their plan's outcome?

So: practice. Practice your poker face ("I knew you were going to say that all along!"), practice your stalling tactics ("Why don't you roll for me, to see how it goes?"), and practice your stream-of-consciousness narrative ("This happened then this happened—no, *this* happened, then…").

Spontaneity and improvisation play a big part in all RPGs. Thankfully, they're traits that everyone possesses to some degree; hone yours, and you'll add a whole new level of enjoyment to your sessions.

Consequences

A crucial part of RPG play, as of life, is the knowledge that all actions have *consequences*. The character does something, something happens. When they achieve their aims, they experience favourable consequences; when they don't, they don't.

A large part of your role as an RPG therapist is as judge and jury to the character's attempted actions—confirming dice results, declaring success or failure, and (in the case of the latter) narrating the consequences. In simplistic terms, there are two basic 'types' of consequence that you'll need to adjudicate:

1. The consequences that result from an action roll; and
2. The consequences of the character's (i.e., the *client's*) in-game behaviour.

Most consequences will be fairly obvious: the client rolls to pick a lock; they fail; the door remains locked. The client rolls to attack a dragon; they succeed; the dragon takes damage. Others might need a bit more thought (e.g., the client decides to steal an artefact from a museum; how will the owners respond?), while still others might not be immediately obvious (maybe the client-character fails to learn a secret from an NPC, which leaves them at a disadvantage for a later encounter).

Consequences keep tension-levels appropriately high, and let clients know that, even in this fictional world, they still have to think before they

act. If they do something mind-numbingly stupid (on purpose or by accident), there'll still be a price to pay.

That said, fictional consequences to fictional actions are the raison d'etre of this entire therapeutic approach; they are where you get to challenge or reinforce (depending on their needs) the client's thinking/behaviour. By demonstrating 'appropriate' consequences (both positive and negative), you provide them with the emotional education that, for reasons unique to them, they never got to experience. In-game consequences are where the client learns more about themselves, and where you can most directly make appropriate therapeutic interventions. You'll already have put plenty of thought into the 'big stuff' when you created the obstacles for the client to face; but keep in mind the fact that incredible opportunities to help your client will crop up out of absolutely nowhere—so be ready to grab them at a moment's notice.

Death

The fundamental question that powers a huge number of narratives is, "Will the protagonist make it out of this scenario in one piece?"

That same question applies here, and it's a decision you'll have to make on a client-by-client basis: if it comes to it, are you going to let your client's character expire? As they traverse hostile landscapes, confront dastardly foes, and ponder ingenious conundrums, the character is pretty much always in some form of physical/emotional peril. They only have a certain number of hit-points; sooner or later, their luck might run out, too.

When that happens, what are you going to do?

In basic terms, you have two options. Either:

1. Let the character really die in-game, which would likely require reflection on the emotions resulting from the loss, not to mention creating a new client-character; or
2. Create a less-serious scenario whereby the character somehow escapes their predicament, such as being knocked unconscious rather than

killed, or narrating how they managed to get away just in the nick of time (e.g., by being rescued).

Both of these is a perfectly viable choice, and will depend entirely on the client's needs, and the boundaries you've established. Whichever way you go, the most important part of the job is to explore the emotions (both the client's and the character's) associated with the event in question. Just make sure you've considered the deadliness of your client's therapy, and have in place some appropriate measures to handle any fatal (or potentially fatal) scenarios, should they arise.

Downtime

Don't take the view that the client needs to be on an adventure every minute of every session: this would be both exhausting and, eventually, monotonous. If you refer back to the passage on episodic structure, you'll notice that there are troughs in the tension, as well as peaks. These troughs give the client (and the character) time to catch their breath, celebrate their latest victory (or mourn their latest defeat), and figure out their next move.

In other words: don't be scared to lower the tension, from time to time. 'Low stakes' doesn't have to mean 'boring'. If the client wants to stay within the comfortable boundaries of the character's safe-space, for example, let them. There are just as many opportunities for both role-play and therapy there as anywhere else.

The trick to keeping the atmosphere relaxed, without letting it slip into boring-territory, is to do all the same things you've already been doing—Story Cycle, obstacles, role-play, and so on—but lowering the price of failure. Exploration can still happen, but they're going shopping rather than braving the wilderness; interactions can still take place, but kept on friendlier terms; combat may still be joined, but more as a competition than a dance with death; puzzles may still be encountered, but take the form of games rather than curious hindrances. Successes, failures, discovery, wonder; all of these can still be experienced—but now nobody has to worry about losing any appendages.

Giving the Client Control

Sometimes, you might decide it would be beneficial for the *client* to lead the RPG, rather than yourself.

This, as I'm sure you can imagine, will utterly transform the process' appearance, even if not the fundamental principles we've already explored (the game will still require the Story Trinity, even if the client doesn't actually use those terms). For a start, the client will do pretty much all of the creative heavy lifting, both during preliminary planning and sessions proper. They'll draw any maps, decide what they face, and when, and conjure up any plot points that come their way. Some might even forego the use of a character-sheet (or even dice!) and just go with a more amorphous idea of who their character is.

Client-led RPG therapy tends to be more 'discovery-based' in nature than more practitioner-led provision: the client tends only to have a very broad idea of where they want to go, and what they want their character to do, and will usually have no idea what they'll find until they get there. This relegates your roll to one that is less 'arbiter' and more 'clarifier' in nature, placing you closer to a more 'traditional' practitioner-role. When your client leads the way, for example, you'll likely say things like, "That sounds amazing—I wonder what it means?" rather than asking your otherwise well-practiced, "What would you like to do?" Your job becomes one of interpreting and responding, rather than of narrating and instructing.

Giving a client full control of the RPG can be hugely rewarding—not to mention illuminating. It allows for a (potentially) deeper delve into their outlooks than would otherwise be possible. Is it significant that their bad guys always seem to abduct NPCs' fathers? Or that their character trusts absolutely no one and would torture an NPC rather than believe what they say? Or that their setting is a quiet, peaceful village, surrounded by magical forests, free of worry? It can also be a huge amount of fun for you, not least because it can make you feel like a participant in the game, rather than its director.

You might even get to roll your own dice!

7

Playing the Game

The Role of the Dice

As covered in Chap. 2, the primary mechanic in any RPG is to roll dice, check the results, and decide how well the character did. Different GMs have different styles—some seldom ask for rolls, preferring to let the role-play do the work, while others have players roll for every task, no matter how insignificant. Both are appropriate philosophies, and both have their place; that said, for our purposes, fewer rolls are preferable to more. Overuse of dice is frequently the single greatest cause of frustration when it comes to playing RPGs, not least when it comes to action sequences: short exchanges that in-game only last a matter of seconds can take *hours* to play, what with all the different target numbers, modifiers, special rules, circumstantial events, turn-waiting, and inevitable mistakes. The story's most frenetic moments become a game of violent-sounding bingo ("Twenty, yes! Take that!"; "Aw, two, I don't hit anything!")!

The happy medium tends to be to reserve the dice for actions where failure could be 'interesting' (i.e., the action going wrong would be just as fun as going right), and to not worry too much about making things 'realistic'. (Sure, an enemy trying to grab hold of you might *technically* make it harder for you to get in a good roundhouse kick, but is it really worth slowing down play to read up arcane grappling rules?) These

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
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eventualities will usually be fairly obvious. Walking down the street? Don't bother. Executing a perfect arm-stand, back triple-somersault in the pike position with minimal splash? Reach for the dice. If the scenario is less clear-cut (e.g., talking to a bouncer at a nightclub, or trying to swing from a chandelier), just ask yourself if a roll would make the situation more exciting, or just be annoying; that'll usually be a good enough indicator. Don't feel the need to keep an eye out for 'infractions'; if you forget to ask for a roll and the game carries on anyway, the roll itself can't exactly have been crucial.

Your chief task in this capacity is as arbiter/referee: do the dice represent a success, or a failure? This is the work of fractions of a second, and will usually be quite cut and dry; the only time you might have a dubious result is if you've decided to modify the rules somehow (e.g., to take into account certain unusual factors), in which case you'll know better than anyone what the results mean. Sooner rather than later, you (and your client) will be able to give the dice a cursory glance and instantly know whether to cheer or boo.

The key is in the role-playing of what happens *after* the roll, not the roll itself. If the roll's successful, there'll be an instant of triumph, sure; but the important thing is for the client to remain with the character's frame of reference. What do *they* feel/think/do, *why* do they feel/think/behave that way, and how does the client interpret those emotions/thoughts/acts?

Exploration Mechanics

As mentioned in Chap. 5, travelling from place to place, and having a detailed look around various locations, will likely represent a decent portion of the client's playtime. This helps them experience more of the setting, including seeing the sights and meeting the locals, and provides a narrative shorthand for, "I make my way to the next part of the story." After all, if the character begins their existence all cosy in their safe space, they'll only find stuff to do if they move out of their comfort-zone and have a look around. As in the real world, you only get to the good stuff by putting in the legwork.

Exploration is the part of the game that most relies upon your descriptive language capabilities. This is where you bring the setting—its environment, its climate, its character—to life. So, consider topics such as:

1. Describing the sights and sounds and smells around the character;
2. Giving a feel for the overall atmosphere of the place (is it bright and peaceful? dark and foreboding? oppressive and intimidating?);
3. Letting the client describe *how* their character is travelling (bold and with purpose? slow and cautious?);
4. Trying to convey the idea that the character is a *part* of the setting (e.g., they're familiar with the local vegetation, or are aware of a location's reputation), as are any obstacles they might come across.

Of course, you could make all this stuff up on the fly, or make some notes in advance so that you have something to refer to; the trick is to make sure the whole world *sounds* awesome and full of opportunities. If you feel you need some tips on how to do this, the simplest solution is to reach for a nearby appropriately-themed novel, and see how some professional authors handle their descriptions.

Mechanically, exploration is probably the most straightforward obstacle to implement. The whole process boils down to either, "This is what you find," or, "Roll to see what you find." While journeying from one location to another, this will usually take the form of you saying something like, "You're travelling through X environment, when suddenly you think you hear a sound; make a roll," (though in much flowerier language, as per the last paragraph). Depending on the result, something fun/exciting/scary/annoying may or may not happen. On the other hand, while the character is having an in-depth search around a specific location, the client will usually be looking for something in particular (depending on the plot hook that led them there), and so the dialogue will likely be along the lines of you describing the nature of the place they currently find themselves in, followed by them asking if they find anything pertinent to their investigation.

Of these, the first, inter-location, scenario will usually prove the simplest. By now, you'll hopefully have a rough map of your setting, and this will make everything easier: they can look at it and tell you where they

want to go, via which route; and you can look at it and tell them what they come across along the way.

And what they'll come across is, random encounters!

Random encounters can be huge fun. The character is just out for a nice, peaceful stroll, minding their own business, when suddenly 'something' changes their day, very frequently for the worse. They might bump into a huge, incredibly grumpy monster which takes exception to them moving in on their turf; they might get ambushed by an enemy's grunts, who are bent on stopping them from getting any closer to their boss; they might spot some unusual landmark slightly off the beaten track, or have to traverse some difficult terrain, which slows them down/tires them out; or maybe they meet a fellow traveller who offers to sell them some wares, and has some hot gossip about the nearest settlement.

Every time the character enters a new square on the map, ask the client to roll their di(c)e; if they roll well, nothing happens; if they roll a 'Failure' or 'Total failure', they're in for a surprise. In the latter case, roll again, and compare the result to Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Random encounters

d6	2d6	d20	Encounter
1	2-3	1-4	Ambush! The character is attacked by one or more adversaries of your own choosing; describe the scene, then run combat as normal.
2	4-5	5-7	Suffer an accident! The character automatically loses a grunt's attack-worth of hit-points; describe what goes wrong, and have the client amend their character-sheet.
3	6-7	8-10	Get lost! The character has accidentally wandered into a different square, further away from their destination; describe how they realised this, and have the client plan a new route.
4	8	11-13	False alarm. Nothing happens; continue as normal.
5	9-10	14-16	Find something. Come across something unusual/discover a new landmark; describe it (or have the client do so), potentially mark it on the map, and ask the client if they'd like to explore.
6	11-12	17-20	Chance meeting. Encounter a friendly fellow traveller (either a known or a new NPC); role-play an interaction, and have them provide the client-character with information or supplies.

(Don't forget that the client may use luck points, if they'd prefer a different outcome.)

Alternatively, you could pre-write the encounters, and introduce them to the story as and when appropriate. After all, just because they're called "random" encounters doesn't mean they actually have to *be* random.

When it comes to the character snooping around one of the major locations—be it a sprawling settlement, an old, abandoned fastness, or some creepy enemy stronghold—the gameplay tends to be a bit more player-led. Instead of you asking them to roll, to see if anything happens, *they* ask *you* if anything happens: "Can I take a look around, to see if I find anything?" "Do I notice anything strange or out of the ordinary?" "I bang on all the walls; do any of them sound hollow?"

One hugely important thing to remember when it comes to exploration (especially when exploring purpose-made locations) is to make sure you don't let the client roll themselves into a corner. If they *need* to find something (a secret door, for example, or the location of the bad guys' main headquarters), don't make them roll: just give it to them. Sure, you might have them roll to determine how *well* they find it (e.g., if they roll particularly well, maybe they learn something extra *on top of* the basic information; or if they roll poorly, maybe their search takes a particularly long time, which means they'll need to rush to the next place and have to bypass some other coolness); but if you ask them to roll to find a key piece of information and they *fail*, suddenly the entire game hits a brick wall. Either that, or play descends into a farcical series of exchanges along the lines of:

"Roll to see if you find anything."
"Two."
"Nope. Roll again."
"Oh. O.K.. Seven."
"No. Again."
"Three."
"Oh for goodness' sake. Do it again."
"Eighteen."
"Finally! Yes, you find a piece of paper that has some writing on it."

—which, I'm sure you'll agree, is pointless, frustrating, boring, and time-wasting all rolled into one.

So give them everything they need, regardless of whether or not they actually look for it. If there's a key lying on a table, and a locked door just up ahead, make sure they find that key, if nothing else. If they roll really well, maybe they find the key *and* a builder's diagram of the trap that was placed on the other side of the door. Just don't make the mistake of saying, "You rolled too low, you don't find anything, and now you're stuck."

Which brings us nicely on to the final aspect of exploration that you might want to consider: wherever the character is, always give your client an 'out'. Make each particular scene a choice of some kind (the simplest example would be, "Do you go left, right, or back the way you came?"), and try not to bottleneck an obstacle-chain so that a later point can *only* be reached via a single route.

However you choose to approach topics such as journeys and searches, and whichever way you decide to determine events such as mishaps or clues, exploration is fundamentally about providing opportunities for things to happen, and helping immerse the client within the setting. Practise your descriptive narration, imbue the story with sufficient intrigue and excitement, and your client will love their stroll across the twin-sunned planet's trackless desert just as much as they'll love the final face-to-face with the giant spice slug.

Interaction Mechanics

If exploration is where you get to show off your descriptive skills, interactions are where you can proudly display your role-playing chops. This is also where you'll likely do a lot of your work as a practitioner, as many of your client's presenting issues will likely stem from some form of relationship difficulty; and interactions are, at the end of the day, all about relationships.

Interactions are more a case of you and your client acting out a conversation rather than relying on the dice. When the dice do come out, it's usually for straightforward objectives like trying to discern whether or not the NPC is being truthful, or to try and convince them to come

around to the character's way of thinking. Depending on how friendly or hostile the NPC is, and on what the client is looking to achieve, they might have to make more or fewer rolls; regardless, they follow the same routine as any normal action. Roll terribly, and the character might upset a close friend; roll superbly, and they might convert an erstwhile enemy to their cause.

As mentioned, however, the most important part of running interactions is by far the *role-playing* aspect. This is the part of the job where your number-one priority is to bring your NPCs to life; bring them to life, and you'll bring the game to life. More importantly, you'll be able to really offer your client a tailor-made, therapy-specific chat about their presenting issues.

The first thing to consider in an interaction, then, is, "What purpose does this particular conversation with this particular NPC serve?" Is it primarily a story consideration—conveying a particular piece of information for the character to act upon—or is it mainly to provide an opportunity for the client to explore/challenge their issues?

You'll also want to ponder exactly what *type* of interaction it's going to be. After all, a conversation can be anything:

- Friendly
- Rude
- Polite
- Flirty
- Jokey
- Formal
- Threatening/intimidating
- Scary
- Cajoling
- Pleading
- Desperate
- An interrogation
- A bluff
- All about telling (or upholding) a lie
- Disinterested

Just have a think about how the character (and client) relates to the NPC in question, and how they'd likely talk to each other in a given situation, and you'll have pretty much all you need. You'll already have put some thought into the NPC's motivations (see Chap. 4), so you should hopefully have an idea as to what they want from the coming chat, just as you likely have an idea as to what the client and their character want from it. This being the case, begin the interaction by describing what this NPC is doing as the character approaches, and how they react to the character's presence. Do they tense up? Wave? Hurry over? In many ways, the interaction starts long before either party begins to speak, so put a bit of effort into setting the scene, and building the moment.

When the talk proper begins, it's time to decide one crucial thing: to voice, or not to voice? Don't worry, nobody's asking you to go to drama school, or take on a second job as a voice actor; but giving an NPC some sort of in-the-room vibrancy will contribute hugely to helping the client buy into the story. As you bring the NPC into the session, then, take a moment to consider how to portray them. You'll likely find it easy enough to provide information on things such as their clothing and their appearance; but spare a thought also for things like voice, tone, eloquence, speed of speech. This will help make them individually memorable (even if the client can't remember a particular NPC's name, they'll certainly remember "that chap who sounded like he was talking underwater and wheezed every few words"), as well as making them distinct from one another (the haughty baroness who talks with rolling 'r's and sniffs every few moments will never be mistaken for the old swamp witch who cackles rather than talks, and says, "Tha' i' be," instead of, "Yes, it is.").

It'll also encourage the client to inhabit *their* character, thus enhancing empathy and trait-identification.

And it will make you both laugh. A lot.

This is where you want to make your facial contortions, flailing arms, and wobbly heads really count. Raise your eyebrows in surprise; recoil in fear; smile winningly; clutch at your heart; hold the client at bay. The more you inhabit the NPC, the more real they'll feel. Novels and audiobooks are again very useful, here: pick up a favourite, and take a look at how an author handles a character's body-language.

Be warned: interactions are also where you'll likely have to do most of your on-your-feet thinking, as the client will always, *always* say or do something you hadn't thought of.

In truth, that's about all there is to know about interactions as discreet gaming experiences. You introduce the NPC to the scene, act out the conversation between them and the client-character, chew the scenery up a bit, ask for a dice roll if and when the client has a specific goal in mind, and part ways: All very simple and straightforward.

Taken as a collective, however, there is one more thing about interactions that you'll need to consider (and consider very regularly): what are you going to do about the relationships that develop out of these various conversations? Because relationships *will* develop. Clients will return again and again to their favourite NPCs—often purely to experience your portrayal of them—and will grow very fond of some of the oddballs that populate this imaginary world. Your job will be to help the client manage those relationships, whatever form they take—friendship, student-mentor, tense acceptance, even romantic ones.

Because these relationships, even if they're ostensibly between two fictional beings, are in reality relationships between the client's inner self and their imagined interpretation of some nebulous third party. *Never* forget the importance of this phenomenon. Keep asking yourself and your client, "Why?" Why do they interpret these fictional individuals as they do? Why do they feel about them as they do? Why does this particular relationship strike such a chord?

Everything means something; so what do these parasocial relationships mean to your client, and how can they be used to further their therapy? That, right there, is RPG therapy in action. Everything else—dice, pictures, voices—is window-dressing. This is the most exciting, and the most professionally rewarding, part of the whole process.

Combat Mechanics

When it comes to the vast majority of RPGs, combat (and action scenes more generally) is where that ironic clash between narrative tension and mechanical languor can be most pronounced. In theory, this is where the

excitement should be at its height; in truth, it's where games grind to a halt, as role-play takes a back seat to ultra-specific mechanical considerations. Where mere moments before the client could say, "I walk across the room," and move on to what happens next, suddenly we zoom in and get laser-focused on the whats and hows of every little twitch. The character doesn't just go and beat up the enemy; they *attempt* to land a punch (with a roll), then they calculate how much damage they inflicted (with a roll), then they *attempt* to block the enemy's incoming attack (with a roll), then they calculate how much damage they have sustained (with a roll), and then they *attempt* to swing with their sword (with a roll), and on it goes until one side or the other is out of hit-points.

Excitement quickly becomes tedious.

So rule number one of therapeutic combat is, keep it *quick*. Every practitioner and every client will have their own specific preferences as to levels of brutality and description; but regardless of whether you want 'hard R' violence or 'PG' fisticuffs, the only way you'll keep the excitement going is if you don't get bogged down with maths, rules-lawyering, and paperwork.

Combat itself usually begins in one of two ways: an interaction goes poorly, meaning the combatants have had time to develop some sort of enmity before coming to blows; or, one side ambushes/blindsides the other, meaning it's a case of butting heads right from the beginning.

Either way, the routine is simple:

1. Beginning with the client (unless, for narrative reasons, you decide the enemy should go first), one side declares what they're going to do;
2. Then they roll to hit (just like every other action; if the character has a pertinent special ability, they may add the modifier to either their attack roll or their damage allocation); and,
3. If successful, they deliver (or roll for) the appropriate amount of damage as stipulated by the weapon/ability they're using (adding any appropriate modifiers if not already used);
4. Once their turn's complete, the other side has a go;
5. Repeat until the combat is concluded.

As mentioned in Chap. 5, combat situations end in one of three ways:

1. One side or the other has been reduced to zero hit-points, and so is either destroyed or rendered unconscious (depending on the boundaries you've agreed with your client);
2. One side surrenders to the other, by rolling to convince their opponent to spare them; or
3. One side flees the battlefield, by rolling to outrun their pursuers (which might turn into a chase, if the other side doesn't give up).

(Each of these may be followed up with appropriate role-play, for example an interaction between victor and surrendered.)

Simple as this system is, it's still easy to fall into the dreaded excitement-via-spreadsheet scenario as mentioned earlier. Roll, yay; roll, boo; roll, yay. It's a dice-off. How, then, to keep things frenetic and enjoyable?

For a start, make sure you both *describe* the combatants' actions. "I hit for X points of damage," ranks as one of the most boring sentences in human speech. Is the character fighting for their life, or filling out a questionnaire? Much better to declare, "I see the thug coming at me, so I step back, block his knife attack, and with a loud 'Kiai!' I pivot on my heel and round-house kick him in the side of his head." Suddenly the whole fight becomes a lot more visual, and a lot more visceral.

Back in Chap. 2, we looked at using a theatre-of-the-mind approach to role-play, rather than using miniatures/models on a tabletop map of the battle's environment. This saves time worrying about distances and needing special rules for things like attacking from different directions, or what happens when a combatant moves from one location to another; but it also means that, if you don't make a point of describing both the scene and the various combatants' actions, it'll all feel bit … bland. So make sure you never stray from the Story Cycle: describe the battlefield (setting) and the enemy's place within it (obstacle); have the client describe their action (character); then show how the battlefield (setting) has changed (e.g., by looking at how the combat has moved to a different area), and have the enemy attack (obstacle); before letting the client make their next move (character). Creating a clear, rapidly changing image of the scene will help make the whole combat *feel* fast—even if, in real terms, that single duel took up half the session.

Don't worry about being too paperwork-accurate. If things start slowing down, be a bit hand-wavy with things like enemy hit-points and

special abilities—if they're nearly defeated, for example, just say they've succumbed to their injuries, or somehow escape/surrender. A common trap GMs fall into is the belief that stats and rules are pre-eminent; but there's nothing to stop you from throwing those rules aside if it would make your sessions more enjoyable. If all else fails, have an ally (for either side) turn up to help.

As an addendum to this, don't let damage go to waste. When a client-character's attack dishes out enough damage to hurt (or even overwhelm) more than one enemy at a time, *let them*. It can be incredibly frustrating to hit an enemy and inflict six points' worth of damage, when the enemy only had one hit-point remaining; that's five whole points wasted! Instead, let the client spread their damage across multiple opponents: those six points suddenly take out the first grunt, a previously healthy second and third, and even takes a chop out of a fourth!

This is incredibly cinematic. Some of the coolest moments on screen or in print are when a single protagonist faces off against a massive horde of foes and proceeds to mow through them like a strimmer through grass. If you want to make a character look badass, just pitch them against a crowd of nameless goons and press 'play'. So let the client lay about them left and right, taking out enemy after enemy, and showing how truly unstoppable their character is. It'll be the most enjoyment they've had all week, and markedly cut down on combat time.

Finally, add some *complications* to your combat. A time limit (e.g., a volcano erupting or the bad guy getting away) is an excellent tension-builder, as it ratchets up the stakes and ensures the combat *has* to finish quickly. Introducing a hostage to the situation, or someone the character is trying to protect, means the client has to think about more than just dealing out damage. Whatever it is, a complication adds to the hectic atmosphere, and forces things to keep moving.

Combat can bring a lot of fun to a game, and clients will often actively seek it out. Implemented with care and professionalism, it can also be a great means of gaining insight into the client's approach to life. When the fighting draws to a close, give yourself and the client time to process the emotions, and cool down after the rush. Describe the scene as it now stands, how the stakes have changed, and what the implications of the outcome might be. Let everything sink in. Combat can, by its very nature,

unleash a veritable storm of thoughts and feelings, so it's important to reflect upon what's going on for both the client and the character (the two may not necessarily have the same reaction to events), and ensure that the client feels held, and able to continue.

The most important part of any combat obstacle is that it be exciting and *frenetic* to play. A lot of RPG combats often descend into seemingly never-ending grindathons, with both sides whittling down various numbers until one or the other of them reaches zero. If you approach combat with a bit of thought, and make it *part* of the story instead of an *interruption*, your client will be so engaged with the play that they'll forget they're in therapy!

Healing

Even if a character never actually dies, they'd have to be stupendously lucky to get through an entire adventure without sustaining any sort of damage. Sooner or later, be it through accidents, combat, or traps, they'll inevitably lose some or even most of their hit-points.

This provides the game with a ticking-clock aesthetic, leaving the client in no doubt that they must proceed with caution (or practice running away), lest their character's adventures come to a pre-emptive conclusion. They may know broadly what they have to do—get to the right place, fight a band of goblins, rescue the fairies, fix the clock tower—but they must also do it *before they run out of HP*. And with every hit-point lost, every step taken closer towards 'the end', things are obviously going to get more and more tense. More and more exciting.

But the hit-point stream can't all be one way: the character needs to be able to heal, or they'll barely survive the journey to the end of the front lawn.

In general, there are two approaches to HP-recovery:

1. Mechanical, whereby a set number of hit-points may be regained on specific occasions (when using a healing item, for example, or the character taking a rest); and

2. Narrative, whereby the client describes what their character does to heal themselves (taking a breather after a fight to wipe the sweat from their brow and put on a plaster, going back home for some tender, loving care, or even taking a holiday).

You can be as generous as you like, but you generally can't go wrong with letting the character regain some hit-points (a quarter of their total, say) during a mid-session 'rest', and having them revert to full hit-points at the beginning of a new adventure.

Whatever you decide, the character can normally only heal back up to their current number of maximum hit-points. You might occasionally choose to give them an additional bonus—maybe a bionic virus or esoteric ritual has temporarily given them a burst of vitality (i.e., some additional hit-points)—but 'temporarily' is the operative word.

A fun little side-game can be to have the client keep track of their character's injuries (the amount of joy players take in their character's misfortunes can sometimes be alarming), and take old wounds or conditions into account when role-playing certain scenarios. Hearing a six-year-old mock-complain about a bad back never gets old.

With this constant drip, drip, drip of hit-points coming in, a character will usually be able to cope with the constant drip, drip, drip going out. Again, considerations about themes of death and harm should be considered—both in terms of boundaries and of therapeutic value—but, as far as anything can be in a game ruled by dice, this is usually a sufficient safety-mechanism.

Puzzle Mechanics

As mentioned in Chap. 5, puzzles can be particularly tricky to do well. For a start, they occupy a unique position in the whole gaming ecosystem, in that they can't simply be dice-rolled or role-played away. The client, not the character, is doing all the thinking—and really the only way to find out if they're able (or even willing) to see the exercise through is to put it in front of them and watch what happens.

There's also the fact that no two puzzles are exactly the same, in appearance, execution, or solution. Many of them will share various characteristics, but their specific implementation will ultimately rely upon the choice both of the puzzle itself and of its in-game placement. This makes puzzles slightly harder to offer generalised operating instructions for.

That said, there are still a few basic principles you'd do well to remember:

First off, as with any other encounter, make sure any puzzle is *optional*, with alternative means of progression. If the client isn't interested in breaking the code or rearranging the idols, don't force them. Convey the potential benefits of overcoming this particular obstacle, certainly; but the autonomy must always rest with the client. For example, figuring a puzzle out might enable them to take a short cut to their objective, meaning they can circumvent a number of booby-traps; but if they either can't or won't put two and two together, no biggie—it just means they'll have to take the longer, more dangerous route.

You must also make any and all puzzles *obvious*. If the character enters a room with a half-dozen paintings, each of which contains a clue that, when combined, will release an imprisoned ghost, they'll be completely oblivious to the puzzle's (and the ghost's) existence unless they know they're supposed to be looking for clues in the paintings. It doesn't matter how ingenious the puzzle is, nor how great the prize: if the client doesn't realise it exists, all your efforts will be wasted, as will any therapeutic opportunities that might have presented themselves.

Make sure, then, that the client (both in and out of character) knows both what the puzzle is, and why they want to get past it. Foreshadow both it and its solution long before it actually comes into view. If the character needs to put a gemstone into the hands of a statue to open a door, make sure you show previous statues which *are* holding gemstones, standing next to open doors, and have the client-character discover a similar gemstone lying seemingly discarded somewhere; that way, when they come across an empty-handed statue next to a closed door, they should have all the pieces they need to work things out. If you give the client all the information they need, well in advance, you give them control of the scenario; if you don't (or you hide certain clues behind rolls which they might fail), they'll struggle to figure things out and, not unreasonably, feel a little cheated.

Finally, don't drag out any agony. If they're clearly struggling—giving you blank looks, or barking up completely the wrong tree—it's perfectly all right to give them clues. Heck, it's perfectly all right to give them the *solution*; the last thing you want is for your client to become more and more dejected as time goes by because they simply can't get their head around the situation in front of them.

Whatever you do, therefore, make sure you have some clues to hand, ready to reveal in the event of brain-freeze. A good rule of thumb is to have three:

1. A very vague hint, referring back to your earlier foreshadowing ("You seem to remember seeing something like this when you were trawling through the library,");
2. A more specific observation about the puzzle's mechanism, or the components thereof ("As you scrutinise it, something about the bamboo pipe nags at you."); and
3. An explicit description which is only one step removed from actually giving them the answer ("As you look at all the tiles, you realise some of them spell out a word.").

Beyond this, consider having the sentient door just blurt out the answer to its own riddle.

Of course, don't *rescue* your client. If they show no interest in the puzzle or whatever lies beyond, don't feel obligated to reward them for the work they didn't do: this would come across as patronising, and also undermine the value of their successes in other areas. So let them walk away, and move on to a part of the adventure they're eager to play. The aim here is to reward the attempt, not punish the failure. If we are to fully exploit the therapeutic potential of in-game emotions, those emotions must be genuine, not manufactured. Just to labour the point: it shouldn't matter overly much if the client can't figure the puzzle out; if all else fails, they should have another perfectly serviceable route to their objective.

In terms of generalisations, that's pretty much all there is to know about puzzles as an RPG exercise. Of course, each and every puzzle will have its own intricacies, but, as long as you follow these guidelines, you'll be all right. Just be ready for your clients to come up with some truly bizarre 'solutions' to problems that, to you, look mind-bogglingly simple;

never underestimate a player's ability to think a little too far outside the box.

Note-taking

As with all client-work, maintaining some form of record of sessions' proceedings is an intrinsic component of RPG-based therapy; indeed, the RPG's presence actually gives us *more* to keep track of! After all, you already have a character sheet, a map sheet, and an NPC record (all of which may be found at the back of the book, or online) before play even gets underway!

I'm not going to tell you how to put your notes together: we each have our own personal styles and preferences, and it would be inappropriate for me to dictate how you approach this rather intimate process. But I would advise, on top of your more therapeutically-focused documentation, that you keep track of at least the basics of the client-character's journey. Information like session number, the location that the character visited, and the nature of any obstacles they came across, as well as some notes and doodles about what the character got up to, and how they approached those difficulties, would usually be sufficient.

You might want to use a template like the note-sheet at the back of this book, or you might keep your own dedicated gaming-journal; but giving yourself a space to contemplate the RPG's narrative will both keep past events clearer in your mind and help you plan future adventures (e.g., by using the space to sketch out a rough dungeon plan, or list the components to a puzzle). By the time the client's therapy reaches its conclusion, you'll likely have a lovely little bundle of scribblings, including the character's details, the setting's map, information on various NPCs, and a brief overview of the therapy's story. Depending on your personal approach, and as long as you have kept your game notes separate from your clinical/process ones, such a collection might make a nice gift for the client to remember their journey by.

As always, any and all documentation should be anonymous and stored securely in accordance with appropriate ethical and legal requirements.

8

Applying Your Modality

Reflection and Insight

Of course, for our purposes, the RPG is really just a tool that helps the client access their therapy. No matter how much fun you and your client are having together with the game, you must never forget that the core purpose of this approach is to therapise your client. *Always* bear your training, professional modality, and ethical guidelines in mind.

Your top priority is to remain constantly aware of any and all potentially therapeutic opportunities that arise during a session. And they will be numerous: every time the client makes a decision on behalf of their character, meets new NPCs or experiences a new situation, succeeds or fails a task, will *somehow* provide insight into their ways of thinking. Your job then becomes one of interpreter, feeding that information back to the client and helping them make sense of what's going on for them.

How you respond to these opportunities will vary according to your own professional and personal approach to your client-work. You may decide to pause play the moment something significant happens, and discuss the incident while it's fresh in everyone's minds; or you might want to make a mental note of various happenings, keep playing, and discuss the scene as a whole at the end of the session; or it could be a combination of the two.

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8_8

This chapter will look at some ways you might apply RPG-therapy within the context of your own theoretical modality. Alas, I'm only able to consider a limited number of approaches (and, even then, only by skimming the surface); nevertheless, I've endeavoured to include a relatively broad spectrum, to which I hope most of you can relate, at least in part. Whatever your modality, though, put some thought into how you intend to extrapolate the client's progress from their in-game behaviour, and how you'll use this information to inform the rest of the therapeutic process.

This is the part of you that has to remain outside of the game itself, seeing the fictional world from a distance like some particularly empathic god. After all, just because your and your client's imaginations are engaged in this transpersonal activity, the rest of you is still in the room, living, breathing, thinking, and feeling. So keep an eye on your client's body language, and be ready to intervene whenever it is appropriate.

This is also the part of you that has done this job a thousand times before—that is to say, being a professional practitioner. Because, in truth, how is this any different to the rest of your client-work? You might not use dice with all your clients, but the core requirements remain the same: be present, be empathic, and listen.

So go out there, therapise your clients in exactly the same way as you always have, and try not to think too much about the fact that you're talking about little brown aliens asking to communicate with their place of residence. You've got this.

Supervision

Clinical supervision is, as we all know, absolutely fundamental to ethical client-work. It facilitates best practice, ensures ethical thinking, and provides a practitioner with some individual support. A good supervisor is crucial to good outcomes.

The primary considerations and purposes of supervision remain the same for RPG-based therapy as with any other: analysing the content,

processes, and quality of a practitioner's provision, gaining another perspective on a given situation, and offering pertinent feedback on particular interventions.

I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how to raise particular issues with your own supervisor, but here are some considerations I hope you'll find helpful:

- Is *RPG Therapy* appropriate for this client? Do their presenting issues and therapeutic goals lend themselves to the approach? What interventions do you foresee as being particularly helpful?
- How might the client's character be interpreted as a representation of the client themselves? What aspects of the character do you think would be particularly fruitful avenues to explore? How does the client feel about their character?
- In what ways can the setting—in whole or in part—be utilised therapeutically? Why did you approach the setting's creation as you did? How do you intend to introduce the client to various elements of the setting?
- Are the obstacles you've presented appropriate for this client's therapy? How do you intend to make use of them within the therapeutic process? Are there any other modes of intervention that you might employ?
- Is there anything about the client's in-game behaviour that seems particularly noteworthy? Do they have a tendency to approach various situations in a particularly helpful or unhelpful frame of mind? Are there any NPCs with whom the client enjoys interacting?
- Does the client engage with the therapy outside of the game? How do they respond to any insights or patterns brought to their attention? Does the intervention appear to be beneficial, or might a different approach be in order?
- How might you interpret the therapeutic process in accordance with your professional modality? Is there a particular intervention that comes to mind which you feel was especially effective, or one that was less effective than you might have hoped? Are there any areas of the RPG process in which you feel you need more practice?
- What types of response does the game elicit within you? How can your supervisor support you in your work, even if they personally have little

or no experience of RPGs? How might you exercise self-care as part of the process?
- Are there any CPD activities you might consider, which could add to your RPG-therapy repertoire (e.g., familiarising yourself with other systems)?

Do bear in mind, especially to begin with, that your supervisor might not be one hundred per cent sure of just exactly what you're talking about! Any mention of dragons, spacecraft, or supervillains will likely be met with a bemused, "What are you babbling about?!" They'll come around; just be prepared to repeat yourself a few times.

Person-Centred Therapy

The person-centred approach to psychotherapy, with its core thesis that, given a conducive environment, individuals are naturally and independently able to grow towards their own fully realised potential, is characterised by acknowledging the client's position as 'expert' within the therapeutic process. As such, person-centred practitioners who utilise RPGs will likely experience more in the way of client-led games than the majority of their peers. Letting the client take control of both the creative process as a whole and the actual session-to-session play sits well with the modality's non-directive approach, and allows for self-actualisation to occur within the client by encouraging exploration rather than providing external insight.

The person-centred RPG-therapist, then, will likely dedicate the majority of his or her efforts to facilitating an environment in which the client may explore the RPG's narrative 'naturally' (i.e., largely free of pre-written storylines, with play characterised by a sense of discovery rather than by a more railroaded approach). By ensuring that the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence remain in place throughout the therapeutic process, the practitioner creates a setting within which the client feels safe enough and heard enough to bring about change within themselves. In an RPG therapy context, this would mean encouraging the client to understand that there are no

'wrong' stories to tell—within the game or their real lives—and making sure they feel heard and supported in their creativity.

If emotional difficulties are the result of an incongruence between the client's self-concept and their experiences in the here-and-now, the RPG therapist may help their client by encouraging them to bear in mind the traits, hopes, and fears they attribute to their character during creation, and contrasting those with their in-game actions. This allows for an exploration of both the character's conditions of worth and their locus of evaluation, as well as any changes within the same. By empathising with the character's experiences, and recognising that the character themselves came about as a result of their own subjective experiences and outlooks, the client may take on board any 'lessons' the character learns; by witnessing the character's growing acceptance of their organismic self, they become better able to accept their own. As the therapy moves towards its later stages, the character's perceived and idealised selves will become better aligned, providing a model for self-growth that the client is in a position to attempt to emulate.

Much like 'regular' person-centred practice, this version of RPG-therapy requires a 'hands off' approach, which can sometimes lead to narratives feeling a little 'aimless'. As with regular practice, though, just trust that the client will always end up going where they need to go; simply being there with them is enough to foster their story's telling.

Psychodynamic Therapy

The central belief of the psychodynamic approach, that a person's present emotional difficulties may be linked directly to earlier experiences, is a relatively simple concept, and one that lends itself particularly well to the character-focused aspect of RPG-therapy. A psychodynamically minded RPG therapist would likely find the ability to explore a character's backstory especially useful to their client-work, allowing an opportunity to explore any links between the character's past experiences (even if they are only created spontaneously, as a result of specific questioning) and their in-game behaviours.

The primary therapeutic aim of a psychodynamic intervention, of making the unconscious conscious, may be achieved by asking questions of the client regarding their character's underlying motivations for any given action, and interpreting their responses in respect of the client's own psychopathology. If, for example, a character's emotions or behaviour is affected by past experiences, the client may be brought to realise that the same might be true of themselves. This, in turn, encourages further self-reflection, leading to greater insight.

The psychodynamic approach also posits that stresses and anxieties come about as a result of long-standing, deep-rooted, but now out-of-date ego defence mechanisms. Taking these unconscious mental strategies into consideration as part of an RPG-based approach would entail being mindful of their formation and nature, and bringing any extant examples (on the part of the character, or in terms of the client's behaviour towards certain NPCs/situations) to the client's awareness. As defence mechanisms come about as a means of protecting oneself from uncomfortable/unacceptable thoughts/feelings, a frequent risk within psychodynamic therapy is that the client, confronted with these aspects of themselves, may become resistant to the therapeutic process. By taking the stated position that these unacceptable thoughts and behaviours are actually those of the character rather than of the client, the practitioner may reduce these potential difficulties by helping the client feel free from the risk of any feared repercussions, thus allowing for more engagement and a greater level of analysis.

Another important concept within psychodynamics, that of the role of transference and countertransference within the therapeutic relationship, may also be seen to manifest itself within RPG therapy. Whereas a transferential relationship within the therapeutic environment traditionally takes the form of the client viewing the practitioner in accordance with certain past relationships (e.g., behaving towards their therapist in the same manner as they have habitually behaved towards their parents), here the process may also extend to their relationships with in-game personas. To the client, these personas, be they the client-character or practitioner-controlled NPCs, may become fictional representations of various significant individuals from their history; analysing their feelings towards these fictional beings, and considering how and why they feel as they do, may

potentially yield similar results to the process of exploring the therapeutic relationship itself.

(This does not, of course, mitigate any risks or benefits associated with the traditional manifestation and use of transference or countertransference within therapeutic practice.)

By offering clients a 'blank slate' in the form of both their character and the setting more generally, the psychodynamic RPG therapist provides their client with countless opportunities for reflection, insight, and growth. In addition to this, the perceived distance between the client and the difficulties being discussed can allow for a greater depth of conversation than might otherwise be possible. This has the happy advantage of reducing the amount of stress that traditionally burdens the client-practitioner relationship, potentially allowing for a freer, more relaxed form of intervention.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

CBT, with its primary focus on the relationship between behaviour, thoughts, and emotions, has in RPG therapy an excellent means of both highlighting that relationship, and modelling more constructive ways of being to counter the client's previously destructive ones. A huge benefit of RPGs, from a CBT point of view, is that session-to-session play is rooted in the present, with only as much consideration given to a character's backstory as the practitioner and the client choose to give; the focus may therefore remain on how to devise and implement positive change *now*.

Following an initial assessment, during which the client may be asked to discuss the issues that trouble them, a CBRPG therapist would subsequently be able to put the client's character into various situations that mirror those activating/triggering events; this opens the door to in-depth exploration of the character's inferred emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, as well as a look at the cycle of how one leads to another, which leads to another, and back again. This in turn has the potential to prompt the client to consider their own patterns of behaviour—for example, what their own automatic thoughts happen to be in similar scenarios. Using the character as a third-party in this guided discovery allows for

somewhat clearer thinking on the matter than if the client were asked to talk exclusively about their own experiences: by being able to talk hypothetically about what the character 'might' be thinking, the risk of the client getting caught in their own negative thought-patterns is lowered.

Once the character's (and, by extension, the client's) learnt behaviours have been broken down into their component parts, the RPG may also help the client challenge those smaller components. Any 'shoulds' and 'musts', for example, may be identified and questioned in context, as may any hot thoughts/irrational feelings; how realistic/appropriate are they, given the character's situation? How much evidence is there within the RPG scenario that would support those thoughts, and how much evidence is there that would discredit them? And if they aren't realistic/appropriate for the character in their situation, then why should they be realistic or appropriate for the client in theirs?

Finally, the RPG itself provides the perfect testing ground for new patterns of thought/behaviour. Having identified and challenged their character's (and their own) old ways of thinking, the client is now able to devise and rehearse some potentially more helpful ones, totally free of any possible repercussions. This safety means techniques may be practiced to perfection before ever having to implement them in real life; by letting the character take all the risks, the client can get a glimpse of what success could look like.

In addition to these in-session exercises, the creative nature of CBRPG therapy allows for a wide variety of 'homework' tasks. Writing stories about the character's experiences, or letters to NPCs, illustrating their emotions, or simply pondering how an obstacle might have been approached differently, are all relatively straightforward tasks, which give the client space to practice these new ideas (as well as some self-care).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The key therapeutic aim of ACT, to encourage psychological flexibility within a client, may best be achieved within an RPG therapy context by working with the client to identify areas of *in*flexibility within their

character. By consistently remaining mindful of the hexaflex's six core principles—being present in the moment, accepting difficult thoughts or feelings, defusing oneself from intrusive thoughts, observing oneself in the context of one's experiences, identifying the values by which one wishes to approach life, and committing to taking action consistent with those values—the practitioner may encourage reflection upon how and why various in-game personas (including NPCs) demonstrate rigidity. This allows for experimentation in these areas without the client becoming fused to any particular ways of thinking.

Instead of attempting to remove or change unhelpful modes of thinking, ACT, as its name implies, looks to *accept* negativity as an unavoidable part of life; when the client-character is faced with various damaging emotional/behavioural processes (be they internal or external), the practitioner might elicit growth within the client by demonstrating the efficacy of psychological flexibility. Witnessing the character's growth towards their observational self, for example, and how that growth may beneficially impact the character's moment-to-moment being, opens the door for the client to attempt such growth, themselves; similarly, having the character remain true to their values and act in accordance with them (i.e., committing to focused actions) may provide a role-model for the client to emulate. By really drilling down into the specific thoughts and feelings that the character experiences in any given moment—particularly when faced with hardship—you have an opportunity to demonstrate examples of what both fused and defused thinking looks like, and to invite the client to consider ways in which they might defuse themselves from some of their own unhelpful ways of being. Furthermore, the approach can highlight both the character's historic tendency towards experiential avoidance (e.g., approaching early obstacles with a, "This is a problem, let's not dwell on how it's making me feel," mindset) and their move towards more here-and-now mindfulness (i.e., "Well, this sure is a thing that's happening, and this is how I'm feeling,").

As ACT is very much an action-oriented approach, a character-focused narrative lends itself particularly well to the identification of old, problematic patterns of behaviour, specifically with the view to forming new, more helpful, attitudes towards life. Obstacles and interactions may be approached both holistically and from any one of the core principles, and

the client encouraged to develop their character in accordance with those principles (for example, via their special abilities); this experience will naturally impact upon the client's own outlook, and allow them to 'develop' themselves in a similar manner.

Transactional Analysis

The key underlying principles of a transactional analysis, that communication between individuals is a fundamental part of the human experience, and that people possess the necessary potential to lead their own lives in any manner they see fit, have in RPGs what amounts to a substance little short of gold-dust. After all, you've suddenly got up to five layers of transactions that might be analysed: those between the client and others in their day-to-day lives; those between the client and the practitioner; those between the character and various NPCs; those between the client and the various fictional personas; and those between the practitioner and the various fictional personas.

This communication-rich environment provides fertile ground for exploring the client's unconscious life-scripts, as well as any games they might habitually play with various others. Not only may the client-character's in-game behaviour provide insight into, for example, the ego-states the client themselves may inhabit during specific transactions, but the entire underlying concept of parent, adult, and child ego-states, and of complementary, crossed, and ulterior transactions, may be witnessed and explained especially clearly, using the character and NPCs as examples. TA prides itself on being easy to understand; but a TARPG therapist has the ability to simplify the whole process down to child-friendly levels by using these fictional scenarios and unthreatening language.

On top of this simplicity, both the character-creation process, with its emphasis on relationships, and the transactional nature of the role-play itself, allow for an in-depth, immersive understanding of how scripts are originally formed, and how they present in later life. The importance of strokes, racket-feelings, and stamp-collecting can likewise be demonstrated, without the client becoming defensive; it is not they, but the character, who is discounting or redefining their lived experiences. After

these concepts have been witnessed second-hand, the client will likely have an easier time in understanding their own patterns of living.

Finally, the RPG lets the client practice new ways of being and communicating, providing a model for future relationships and interactions. An I'm O.K./You're O.K. life position can be modelled, explored, and rehearsed, as well as healthier, complimentary transactions that will serve them better than the crossed ones they've so far had to make do with. Scripts can be rewritten, previously symbiotic relationships experimented with, and games *literally* played until a healthy scenario can be landed upon.

In many ways, transactional analysis has been making use of a variant of RPG therapy ever since it was first introduced—after all, what better way to analyse transactions than to role-play them? The introduction of a formalised role-playing 'system', then, fits TA perfectly. And because transactions retain the same fundamental principles, regardless of whether the individuals involved are magical warriors or supervillains, the RPG aspect therefore adds a layer of safety and simplicity to proceedings, while retaining that core, underlying structure. The only difference now is that the games people play are *literally* a game; and what you say after you say hello is usually, "I attack!"

Attachment Theory

The use of RPG therapy in the wider context of an attachment-focused approach would likely focus primarily upon examining the character's attachment styles (as well as those of various NPCs), including how and why they might have formed, and how those experiences may reflect the client's own. The freedom to imagine just about any scenario means any number of attachment relationships may be considered, and the ability to displace the situation onto the character and/or NPCs helps keep them safe from the overwhelming, painful emotions frequently associated with non-secure experiences in childhood.

The core concept of attachment theory, that one's earliest relational experiences have a lasting impact upon the quality of one's life, is a model ripe for in-game reflection. Deep exploration during the creative process,

especially of the character's relationship with their primary caregiver, would uncover similarities with that between the client and theirs, thus providing a 'case study' of how those relationships affect one's later emotions/behaviour. It would also highlight the presence of any idealised differences (e.g., giving the character what the client imagines to be a happier childhood than the one they themselves experienced), allowing for an added layer of insight into what the client believes an 'ideal' relationship (parental or otherwise) might look like.

Subsequent to these initial discoveries, the client may be encouraged to explore ways in which a more secure attachment-style could develop by giving the character a series of safe, caring relationships, which demonstrate what a healthy way of being with others might look like. Reflecting upon ways in which in-game personas communicate with one another intersubjectively, for example, would open the door to the client developing intersubjective skills, themselves; by witnessing the character's growing ability to trust others—and having that trust rewarded—will invite the client to do likewise.

By addressing the client's inner-child, the playful nature of RPG therapy creates an environment ideally suited to demonstrating the attunement and coregulatory skills—such as availability, sensitivity, responsiveness—that their primary caregivers may have failed to show them. This reparative work would help the client express themselves through play, without fear of judgement, probably in a way they'd never previously been able to do; the practitioner therefore becomes something of an attachment figure, encouraging the child to play, and demonstrating the attentiveness that child still desperately needs. Giving the client this secure base from which to explore the world (via the RPG) will facilitate the emotional development they previously lacked, rebuilding their ability to be both self-sufficient and able to turn to others for support. After all, if the character can ask for help, why can't the client?

Finally, the RPG provides an opportunity to experience the healthy conclusion of a relationship—not just with the practitioner but with all the fictional individuals they've grown attached to, along the way. That those relationships were parasocial (i.e., not 'real' in the traditional sense) means they'll likely be easier to let go; the same goodbyes must be said, but the emotional intensity is lessened.

An attachment-based RPG is the perfect example of how to use the game to practice life skills: let the character do all the hard work, and learn through them. Used effectively, this intervention gives clients a chance to experience the joy of play that perhaps they'd never before experienced.

Dialectical Behavioural Therapy

When it comes to DBT, with its history of helping individuals to accept and manage extreme, often overwhelming, emotions, RPG therapy offers that most important of learning tools: a friend to guide one through life's turmoil. The incredible power of the relationship between a client and their character means that anything the character can do, the client can, too; if the character can be seen to work on themselves, the client can follow their example.

The essential role of mindfulness within DBT, in helping clients develop their 'wise' minds and tolerate their more overwhelming emotions, may here be bolstered by the ability to 'practice' mindfulness within the game, and by the distance between the client and the emotions being considered. Using the character as an example, you can help the client learn the importance of slowing down their thoughts, and paying attention to what's happening around and within them: you as the practitioner have just described the scene around the character; now, have the client annunciate what the character's experience of the moment is. This exercise is an opportunity to highlight the simplicity of mindfulness as a technique, demonstrating that it is possible to be objective about a situation (these are the facts of the imagined scene, so how does the character perceive them?), rather than putting one's own subjective spin on it.

Similarly, the furtherance of distress-tolerance, emotion-regulation, and interpersonal-effectiveness will benefit greatly from having a fictional example to look at, in terms of what those techniques may look like in action. By witnessing another individual (irrespective of their fictional or nonfictional nature) performing these skills—such as taking difficult events and feelings in their stride, learning to identify and experience emotions more constructively, and developing assertiveness—the client

becomes better able to start practicing them, themselves. The character becomes a 'teacher', modelling the skills and behaviours so that the client may in turn learn from them.

DBT practitioners have a reputation amongst 'those who know' of taking on complex, sometimes very at-risk clients; this being the case, the key task of DBRPGT as an intervention is to help the client stay grounded, and facilitate their learning of various skills to help them move forward in their lives with as little distress as possible. As well as being a positive, fun experience in their own right, RPGs are perfect for helping highly strung individuals, because they allow them a chance to practice tempering-skills before actually having to add their own upsetting emotions to the equation.

Cognitive-Analytic Therapy

Much as CAT marries analytic and cognitive schools of thought, so a CAT approach to RPG therapy would make use of both the history-inclusive creative process (especially with regards the character's background) and the present-focused aspect of the role-play itself. This joint approach allows the client to make sense of their character's situation, and figure out ways of changing it.

A crucial part of a CARPGT process would be in harnessing the distance between the client and the situations/emotions to be analysed. The 'arm's length' nature of RPG play, with its fundamental trope of being outside-looking-in, allows for a very objective view of the issues as presented by the character. In this manner, the client may identify and map out aspects of their own learned behaviours that may not be conducive to a fulfilling life, and so subsequently be able to develop new, more constructive approaches to being. By relating the client's background and experiences to those of their character, the practitioner is able to facilitate change in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact manner that opens the client's eyes to their patterns of thinking/relating in an easy-to-understand, non-threatening manner.

While at first glance, the intense and time-limited intervention that is CAT might seem at odds with the more relaxed, explorative nature of

RPG therapy, the two go hand-in-hand exceptionally well. Early reformulation sessions, for example, may be aided by the second-hand nature of the character-work, not least by the line drawn between in-game behaviour and how this might be a reflection of the character's past, comparing these scenarios with the maladaptive thoughts and behaviours within the client themselves; the recognition phase would also be able to take advantage of the fictional frame, helping draw a literal map of the character's cognitive landscape, composed of recognisable landmarks and icons; and the revision process, focusing primarily upon identifying and practicing exits from that landscape, will benefit from having the character try out those escape routes first, before the client need put themselves at risk. Throughout the process, the character's presence offers that wider, birds'-eye view that makes a situation easier to step back from and analyse more clearly, which in turn helps plan the concrete steps needed to break free of historic feedback-loops.

In addition to these more general benefits, the habitual use of letter-writing as part of the CAT process could also be greatly assisted by the fiction, particularly when it comes to saying goodbye. As well as saying goodbye to each other, practitioner and client may acknowledge the character's struggle as part of the journey, perhaps even going so far as writing a letter to the character (and/or NPCs) themselves. Adding that extra level of creativeness to what can normally be quite a dry exercise could potentially make the experience easier to face, especially for those clients who might find the concept of writing a letter to their therapist a somewhat daunting task.

Cognitive-analytic therapy takes the collaborative part of the therapeutic process especially seriously, and so will find an ideal partner in RPG therapy's cooperative aspects. Everything, from developing the Story Trinity to having in-character conversations, is a joint effort that requires a good deal of putting heads together. Add to this the playful creativity that may transform exercises into activities, and this time-limited approach may be made even more accessible to potential clients.

Jungian Analysis

RPG therapy, by its very nature, can be seen to share a number of qualities with traditional Jungian therapy, not least in its heavy reliance upon creativity, and the interpretation of communally imagined scenarios. Symbols and happenings fairly beg to be interpreted, and, just by studying the actions and inner workings of the client's character, the practitioner may present the fundamental principles of archetypes, individuation, and complexes into a medium practically tailor-made to deliver them.

In the first instance, the very earliest steps of the creative process—exploring the client's interests in terms of genre and, more importantly, character-type—may provide early insight into their archetypal tendencies. By considering the new-born character's descriptors and traits, and referring to the most recognised archetypes and their respective roles/characteristics, the client may figure out for themselves which category the character had likely 'inherited'; a subsequent exercise, simplified by this first practice, may involve the client considering their own archetype, and any similarities or differences between them and their character.

The client's attention may also be brought to the ways in which their character's behaviour is different from their (the character's) core beliefs (e.g., as expressed in their hopes and fears). This would allow for a clear observation of the separation of the self from the persona—the contrast/conflict between one's core beliefs and the image presented to the world. The character may present as a brave adventurer; but who are they *really?* This leads neatly into reflecting upon ways in which the character may learn to accept their whole selves, including aspects such as the anima or animus, which can provide a role-model for the client to emulate.

A more direct intervention may lie in the ability of the practitioner to confront the client with aspects of their own shadow, via the character's adversaries. These NPCs—be they the named individual devised during the character creation process, or an NPC introduced later in the game—represent the darker side of both the character and the client, and may be more openly challenged, via combat or dialogue. Handled appropriately, this may lead to insight, acceptance, and catharsis.

Indeed, the entire RPG experience might be viewed as an 'on the table' form of Nekyia: letting the client experience a metaphorical Katabasis while the character experiences a literal one. (After all, what is an obstacle-chain/adventure if not a journey into, and return from, the underworld?) Especially when the client is invited to contribute more directly to the running of the RPG (coming up with imagery, obstacles, etc.), the session-by-session journey into the setting will very strongly resemble the client's journey into their own psyche. The client may be encouraged to reflect upon the character's adventures—even to journal upon the subject—and so draw parallels to their own spiritual exploration. By bringing these unconscious parts of themselves more in-balance with the conscious, the client moves closer to individuation; in this way, the character and their story become companions to the client's later, post-therapy growth.

Adlerian Therapy

Adlerian therapy, with its focus on belonging, struggling with feelings of inferiority (and overcoming them), and entering into a more harmonious relationship with the rest of the world, is another easy shoo-in for RPG therapy. After all, if there's one thing that unites the vast majority of characters in any RPG, it is that they exist somehow 'apart' from the rest of their world, and are often unsure of their ability to face challenges (the dice can be fickle masters, after all). They can also be very socially unaware, as the escapism offered by RPGs frequently allows for 'questionable' solutions to social conflicts.

The Adlerian RPG therapist therefore has ample scope for working with the client via their character, and how they interact with the setting and obstacles, more generally. In particular, they can encourage the client to identify and come to understand the feelings of inferiority that have heretofore discouraged them from achieving their full potential, and to move towards a more positive, self-improvement-focused frame-of-mind.

This may be achieved by examining the character's backstory and relationships, and taking a little more time than is 'strictly' necessary

(according to the character-sheet), to explore the character's youth experiences, their position in their family, and reasons for behaving in certain ways. The practitioner may also encourage the client to recognise and celebrate their character's strengths/abilities, in turn opening the door to it being O.K. to recognise and celebrate their own. The optimistic, forward-looking philosophy of the Adlerian approach provides an opportunity to glimpse what a 'better' world might look like, for example by envisioning their character as the kind of person they'd *like* to be, which would both give them something to aim for and provide an expectation of success; after all, if their character can do it, why can't they?

Incidentally, these activities are also clearly consistent with the four traditional stages of Adlerian therapy—engagement, assessment, insight, and reorientation; by utilising the RPG playfully and consistently throughout the therapeutic process, the working-relationship will benefit greatly from the fun factor, the client's situation may be explored via their relationship to the character, their current difficulties interpreted in accordance with the character's, and they become able to develop and practice new strategies for future growth. In many ways, this is the core structure of RPG-therapy, too: start in a bad place, learn why, and get out.

Adlerian therapy takes the view that a person's style of living is fundamentally a method of coping with feelings of 'inferiority' (or, put more positively, feelings of 'wanting to be better'), and that a healthy communal life is crucial to a fulfilling existence; what does RPG therapy offer if not a means to witness character-growth and social-engagement?

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

SFBRPGT is all about helping clients figure out what they can do now, rather than focusing on what might have happened in the past. By focusing on the ways in which a character approaches various obstacles, the client may begin to understand the types of inner strengths needed to cope in life, as well as start to realise that they too might possess some of those strengths.

The SFBRPGT practitioner can help clients get a quick handle on who their character *is*, what they hope for, and how they intend to go about attaining that hope. Much of the 'fluff' of the character-creation process—relationships, fears, backstory, and so on—might be skipped altogether, or at least acknowledged more as sources of strength than of difficulty; meanwhile, putting some careful thought into the character's descriptors, traits, and special abilities, will help the client view them as a goal-attaining machine rather than as a problem-solving one.

When it comes to actually playing the game, the primary focus remains the character's ability to traverse their world, and overcome any difficulties along the way: by figuring out how to approach a given situation as their character, the client can apply that newfound understanding to themselves. Keeping the character's end-goal in mind at all times would help here: knowing what that long-term aim is helps put every difficulty or choice into context, and thus helps the client decide both what they ought to do, and how they ought to do it.

That end-goal could be established very early on in proceedings. The miracle question, a staple of SFBT for its goal-setting proficiency, may be represented here by taking a sneak-peak at what the client would like their character's post-adventuring life to be; this scenario will very likely correlate with what the client thinks a 'happily ever after' looks like, and so provide an opportunity to consider both (a) how they themselves might work towards that end, and (b) how much of that vision already exists in their life.

Other SFBT staples, like identifying exceptional situations to 'always' thinking, and scaling difficulties in terms of surmountableness, may also be explored in-game: was there ever a time when the character *didn't* feel X way, and does that somehow correlate with a real-life experience?; and are there some obstacles that feel more difficult to tackle than others? In the latter case, the SFBRPGT practitioner may even mechanise the identified hardships by making appropriate obstacles harder or easier (depending on the client's perceptions) before putting them in the character's way. Furthermore, repeating obstacles can prove a helpful means of monitoring the client's progress, allowing for direct comparisons between 'now' and 'then'; if the same obstacle feels easier now than it used to, the client can be seen to have progressed.

The essence of solution-focused therapy is its brevity; as such, any RPG-use will by necessity eschew some of the more in-depth, long-term aspects of gameplay—not that it matters. After all, by helping the client find the companion that is their character, you've already helped them identify another part of themselves that has the strength to carry on. In some cases, that might be all the help they'll need.

Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt as a therapeutic modality is interesting, for our purposes, as it already makes use of many of the elements that constitute RPG therapy. Role-play has long played a role in gestalt interventions, as has the concept that individuals (or characters) consist of a number of different 'parts', which come together to form a 'whole' being. The importance of experiencing situations in the here-and-now, divorced from the past, future, or 'beyond', is what makes RPGs so enthralling on a moment-to-moment basis; gestaltists too take the view that one's perception of the present is fundamental to increasing one's awareness.

In many ways, then, RPG therapy may simply slot into gestalt practice. Giving the client an entire sandbox to play in allows for almost unlimited experiential experimentation, which in turn fosters self-awareness and growth. By being a third party to the character's in-context thoughts/behaviours, the client learns to be objective about various situations, being non-judgementally present rather interpreting events through a distorted lens.

A common complaint among GMs is that players tend to face a particular obstacle, overcome it, and never think about it again. For a gestaltist, this phenomenon exactly mirrors the desired scenario of becoming aware of one's problems, tackling them, and letting them fade into the background. The character's being forever in the here-and-now, addressing problems as they crop up, and moving on, may be taken as an example of how the client can approach their own difficulties.

The character's actions may also be helpful in terms of facilitating self-awareness within the client. By being encouraged to describe the character's physical sensations—including observable body language, and

whereabouts in their bodies feelings manifest—the client becomes more aware of their own; integrating this physical awareness with other parts of their human experience will encourage a move towards wholeness.

The client's use of language, too, (especially when discussing their character) can prove insightful. RPG-play, by its very nature, involves a certain amount of distance between the mind that makes a decision, and the contextual consequences of that decision. A correlation in language between how the client speaks about their own experiences, and how they speak about the character's, may well indicate that they unconsciously view themselves almost as a character in the 'RPG of life'—a piece on a board, separate from their true selves, and so separate from the pains life brings with it.

Other resistances may also be highlighted by exploring the client's reactions to 'bad' events within the game, such as attributing blame to NPCs, constantly trying to avoid disagreements, or blaming themselves for a bad roll. Learning to relate more healthily with others, acknowledging social responsibilities, and gaining an understanding of their place in the world, will help them overcome these barriers between themselves and their reality.

Narrative Therapy

A key role of the narrative practitioner is to help the person learn how to externalise their problems, and to consider ways in which an alternative, healthier, life-story might be narrated. It'll hopefully be apparent, therefore, how RPG therapy might be useful in such a setting: by creating a fictional narrative, one which just so happens to contain many of the same problems that the person has raised, those problems are automatically externalised, and so may be considered from an objective point-of-view.

An RPG approach to narrative therapy would be another case of letting the client's character lead by example. RPGs, by their very nature, tend to tell tales of larger-than-life individuals who take just about everything in their stride. In this way, the person, via their character, may consider alternative ways of viewing the problems in question, and so

rewrite their own narrative by taking into account the ways in which they interpret the character's. Just as they would not equate the character with, for example, the five-headed monkey-alien that attacked them on their way to mine the asteroid belt (i.e., they're more than just 'a five-headed-monkey-alien victim'), nor do they need to equate themselves with their experiences of being bullied at school (i.e., they're more than just 'a person who gets bullied').

The external narrative of the RPG is also helpful in demonstrating that every protagonist lives many different stories at once. If the character is seen to be part of a story about rescuing a cat *and* a story about working as a newspaper reporter *and* a story about taking down a bald supervillain, it stands to reason that the person may also be part of multiple stories (e.g., a story about living a life *and* a story about attending therapy). The RPG narrative also provides an excellent opportunity to highlight the fact that, no matter how fully realised in the character's mind, the stories they tell themselves would likely be interpreted differently by NPCs. By acknowledging the importance of context to a story's telling, the person becomes able to shift perspective on some of their own narratives.

Systemic Therapy

A systemic approach, in which an individual is seen in the context of their wider patterns of relationships, would also benefit greatly from the bird's-eye view afforded it by RPGs. By presenting the client (or clients, if being used in a family/relationship setting) with a fully realised setting, complete with various groups and communities and relationships (i.e. systems) that comprise various NPCs, the practitioner is able to demonstrate the wider concept of how the individual is impacted by every other member of that system, and how altering the system's makeup will bring about change within the individual (which, in turn, further alters the system).

The systemic RPG therapist will therefore likely spend a little more time creating their intervention's setting than their peers, putting extra thought into how NPCs relate to each other (and to the client's

character), and, more broadly, how various in-game systems overlap and influence each other. This early preparation will certainly pay dividends, down the line, and give the whole game a more 'lived in' feeling than more improvisationally developed ones. The character will demonstrably be part of numerous disparate systems, each with its own demographic (e.g., family, work, community, enemies) and history, and so may be seen as but a single part of an entire network of relationships. By immediately seeing the character in the context of these wider relationship-patterns, the client is encouraged to consider how their character's mental/emotional wellbeing is both directly and indirectly influenced by various other 'moving parts'; once these factors have been recognised, it's only a small step for them to take to view themselves as part of their own systems, with all the implications that has for their mental-health. Demonstrating, for example, that the character's fears may be traced back to a cyclical relationship with certain NPCs, it follows that a positive change in that part of the system would have a positive effect on the character's difficulties. The client can thus recognise how their own issues may similarly be traced back to a specific area/level of their own system, and that a small change there might have a substantial impact upon their own wellbeing.

By reflecting upon ways in which the character may work to improve their situation by altering aspects of their system(s), the client becomes better able to plan and work towards making changes in their own. Furthermore, the practitioner is in an ideal position to role-play (or at least describe) various ways—both obvious and subtle—that the in-game systems may change in accordance with the character's behaviour, thus modelling possible ways in which similar actions might influence the client's situation.

With their respective focuses on relationships and interactions, both systemic and RPG therapy are an ideal match in terms of formulation and goal-setting. By placing the character in a clearly defined set of fictional systems, the practitioner encourages growth within the client's awareness of their own circumstances, and provides guidance on how various changes may be implemented.

Play therapy

In every way that matters, RPG therapy fundamentally *is* play therapy, with all the safety, comfort and support the latter implies. Clients of all ages, regardless of their abilities to recognise or communicate their thoughts/emotions, may express themselves freely and safely.

The RPG-play therapist will utilise the same skills they would normally expect to employ in their client-work: creating a safe space in which the young client may express their thoughts and emotions without being expected to actually articulate their experiences. It just so happens that the medium this particular approach makes use of is more a storytelling than a tactile one.

In an RPG therapy context, then, the practitioner may encourage social/emotional learning, in addition to increased self-awareness and empathy, by helping clients explore the game both as their character and as an observer. By putting themselves in the character's shoes (or those of an NPC), they may explore different perceptions than their own, while remaining safe from the risk of being penalised for any 'mistakes' they might otherwise be too afraid of making. This provides excellent opportunities to practice new thoughts and behaviours, and to see a situation from other people's points-of-view.

In addition to the role-play itself, the RPG may also be used to influence other creative activities. These exercises, such as drawing pictures of their character, playing with toys that represent certain in-game situations, or writing letters to an NPC, may offer further avenues for expressing difficult feelings, and developing their emotional/relational understanding.

The character's presence in the room also provides another element of continuity to proceedings, which will further the young client's feelings of safety; just as the practitioner is the same, the time is the same, and the setting is the same, so too does the character occupy a position of stability. This bond will likely enhance the client's engagement with the therapeutic process, and gives them another ally who can help them explore their thoughts/feelings.

At the end of the day, RPG therapy and play therapy are essentially the same thing, albeit using slightly different media. All the same rules apply, just with more focus on storytelling and contextual continuity.

Group Therapy

Tabletop role-playing games are predominately social/communal activities; although there's an increasing market for one-to-one and even solo-play, the huge majority of RPGs continue to be geared towards larger groups of players.

This being the case, RPG therapy might be said to have an ideal home in a group therapy setting: it brings together a disparate group of individuals, engages them, and asks that they participate in a joint exercise in a meaningful, respectful way. In fact, open just about any 'mainstream' RPG manual, and you'll likely find a passage describing the setup and dynamic of a typical RPG group—and if you swap the words 'players' and 'GM' with 'clients' and 'practitioner', you have a pretty good description of a typical therapy group.

As with much group-work, change is encouraged by facilitating discussion about relevant topics, ensuring everybody present is able to contribute, and encouraging group cohesiveness. Here, though, these tasks are approached via the medium of the game, as opposed to the more traditional medium of 'space to talk': by helping each client interact with both the game and each other, the practitioner eases them into an environment that is both supportive *and* fun. Going through the entire process together, of creating characters, making decisions within the setting, and overcoming obstacles, means that clients within the group become able to rely upon each other for help and support, both within the game (e.g., working together to overcome a powerful foe) and around the table (e.g., by helping each other with rules).

A key consideration, here, though, is the need to take into account more than just one person's interests/preferences, when it comes to choosing or designing a game. In one-to-one sessions, it's perfectly simple to tailor play to that client's love of a particular genre; in a group setting, different clients will want to play different games. One person might

want to play fantasy, another wants to travel through space, while another wants to thwart supervillains. Managing differences such as this is part and parcel of group-work, of course; but taking multiple people's tastes into account—either by mediating between conflicting parties, or simply dictating what the nature of the game will be—is a task peculiar to group settings.

Nevertheless, the cohesive nature of the gameplay—working together as a team to overcome various physical/emotional hardships—is an ideal incubator for both personal and mutual growth, continually creating opportunities to explore maladaptive thoughts/behaviour, give and receive feedback, and practice various skills in a social setting. Imitative behaviour, both in- and out of character, can help clients learn new ways of being from those around them (e.g., an anxious client might learn from a confident character's actions). Interrelationship and transference between clients and characters (client-client, client-character, and character-character) also provide for reparative recapitulation to occur within those clients whose past relational experiences have been less than ideal.

In addition to in-session benefits of group RPG therapy, this more traditional experience of RPG-play would make a transition to a non-therapeutic group significantly easier, should individual clients wish to pursue it as a hobby. The learning of self-care is thus an implicit aspect of this approach.

Remote Practice

In recent years, remote provision has markedly increased, letting clients access sessions over the phone or online. The results have been remarkably positive: where previously many scoffed at the idea of working in anything other than a face-to-face setting, we can now honestly say that this distance-based work *works*. Excitingly, we're in a world where clients can access therapy no matter where they are or what their personal situation might be.

Depending on your personal provision, of course, this means there's every possibility that you might decide to offer RPG therapy to your clients remotely.

In practical terms, this scenario means just a little more preparation on both your and your client's parts. For example, you'll need to send them a copy of the character-sheet in advance of the creation session, to give them time to print it out; they'll also need their own dice/random-number-generator. It would also mean minor in-session changes, like having to remember to hold the map up to the camera when asking the client where they'd like to go next. Finally, if the client decides to do any other related activities, such as drawing or writing, and wish to share it with you, they too will have to transmit it.

Other than that, however, implementing the approach remotely need only be as different from your in-person provision as you wish it to be. The primary processes of the intervention, audible storytelling with a hint of visual inspiration, do not require the participants to be physically present—just so long as they are able to communicate their ideas and meanings effectively. Many, many casual RPG groups have made the transition to online-play, finding they're perfectly able to continue their adventures from the comfort of their own homes. Indeed, a whole industry has built up over recent years, catering directly to the online-RPG market; online dice rollers, interactive maps, digital rules-encyclopaedias, even whole virtual-tabletops, are now a thing. And that industry is only going to grow.

If these tools can work for an entire social community, what's to stop them from working for us?

9

Extended Example of Play

Fourteen-year-old Hayley was initially brought to counselling by her mother, following a difficult transition to a new school. Her parents had divorced the previous year, forcing Hayley, her mother, and her younger sister to relocate to a more affordable area, nearer to relatives who could help out when necessary.

Following the move, Hayley became unusually (for her) disinterested in her learning, frequently failing to complete homework, paying little attention in class, and often being required to attend detentions. She managed to develop a small circle of friends, but didn't feel very close to them; they were people to hang out with, not people to turn to for support. At home, Hayley often felt like she was expected to look after her little sister, Florence, as her mother seemed not to be handling the divorce very well. Her father was often abroad for work, meaning she sometimes only saw him for a single weekend every couple of months.

Early sessions were quite strained, with Hayley finding it difficult to engage with the therapeutic process. After a while, her counsellor, fearing she was coming close to terminating her counselling without really getting any benefits, suggested they give RPG therapy a try. Hayley agreed, and subsequent sessions saw them create a fantasy game to coincide both with Hayley's personal interests and with a current topic in her English lessons.

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Hayley's character, a spellcasting 'Aquinian' (a human, magically mutated to be able to breathe underwater) called Minara, lived in a world that was predominately ocean, with a smattering of islands here and there, and various underwater cultures—some of whom could live within the water itself, others living in air-supplied settlements.

The following example is taken from the start of a session's play, after the initial check-in and review/update, during which Hayley disclosed—rather sullenly—that she was due to see her dad over the coming weekend.

Minara had just discovered a ruined temple-complex, submerged off the coast of a small isolated island in the northwest of the setting. Local rumour had it that the particular area of water was haunted, with even the fish and other sea-life avoiding the place.

Counsellor	So, remind me where we left off?
Hayley	We were—well, *I* was—swimming around to see if I could find out why all those merchant ships kept sinking.
Counsellor	That's right, of course.
Hayley	That witchdoctor on the island said the area was cursed or something. The people who used to live there worshipped a demon, and basically a tidal wave came up and washed the place away. Apparently.
Counsellor	That's the one. Gotcha. So. [Refers to setting notes; puts on storytelling voice.] You've left your boat up on the surface, presumably using your magic anchor?—
Hayley	[Nods. The 'anchor' was actually an enchantment that Minara had placed on her little catboat, which meant it wouldn't drift away while she wasn't aboard—a rather handy little gizmo for a boat!]
Counsellor	—and now you're swimming straight down towards the seabed. You can feel the water coming in and out of your lungs. It's weird—you can breathe perfectly well, thanks to your Aquinian abilities, but it feels kind of 'heavy' as it goes down your windpipe, know what I mean? Your eyes have gotten used to the salt in the water, but the whole world is murky, and gets gloomier and gloomier, the deeper you go. You can hear, but everything's a bit dull. Apart from the water, there's absolutely no movement—
Hayley	Except for me.

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Counsellor	—except for you. So it looks like the locals were right about the fish avoiding the area. But it's all quite pretty; you look up, and the waves are dancing above you, really bright and … wavey. When you look back down, you realise you're getting quite close to the bottom—you're not far from land, so it isn't too deep—and as you move forward it starts to look like there's something looming up towards you. Do you want to make a— Oh, actually! Sorry, one thing I forgot: did we not say last week that we needed to roll for exploration? We were going to do it, but then decided to leave it for today?
Hayley	[Sighs, looks aggrieved that the counsellor remembered.]
Counsellor	Would you rather not? There's nothing to say we can't give it a miss, if that's what you'd prefer; to be fair, I should've remembered sooner.
Hayley	No, it's fine. [Picks up her d20 and throws rather than rolls it; it rewards her with a four, meaning a roll on the random encounter table.]
Counsellor	Yeesh, that's not good.
Hayley	[Doesn't say anything; just glowers at the table.]
Counsellor	[Rolls her own die, grimaces, and shows Hayley the result. It's a 1—a wandering monster attack!]
Hayley	Oh, my days! [Hits the table.]
Counsellor	[Pauses.] Yikes. What's going on for you, there?
Hayley	Nothing.
Counsellor	[Silence.]
Hayley	It's just … [She shakes her head. After a moment, she picks up her die and glares at it.] Stupid thing.
Counsellor	It's just … ?
Hayley	[After a while, she shrugs.] Always goes wrong.
Counsellor	[Decides not to push too hard, so early on in the session; it feels like she's on the verge of disengaging.] Hey, at least we're getting all the bad rolls out of the way now!
Hayley	[Says nothing; gives one of those, "Yeah, right!" half-sneer, half-grimaces.]

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Counsellor	O.K. So, yeah. You're swimming towards the bottom, you think you can see some kind of structure or pillars a little way ahead of you—but, before you have time to get a good look at it, something else catches your eye. Just a silhouette, at first, kind of hanging in the air above the pillars. Hanging in the water, sorry. But it's *big*; and fast. And as it moves closer, you start to make out some of the details. Its mouth is wide open; that's the first thing you notice. Almost a circle. You see two or three rows of razor-sharp teeth jutting out towards you. Its gills are long and black against the faint blue of its flesh. This thing's so big it could swallow you whole and not even need to clear its throat. And suddenly the shape gets bigger; it kind of twists side-on to you, and you can see it's really long, like it's mostly neck; and it has *wings*—two or three sets, it's difficulty to see right now—like it's actually *flying* through the water. It swoops around one of the pillars, and you, Minara, find yourself, alone, up against a giant winged sea-serpent! What are you going to do?
Hayley	[Clearly a bit more interested, but still hesitant:] I dunno. Swim away.
Counsellor	Are you asking me, or telling me?
Hayley	[Shrugs.]
Counsellor	Minara's in trouble … It's getting closer, she's a sitting duck.
Hayley	O.K., fine. Um…
Counsellor	Tick tock, let's go, come on.
Hayley	O.K., it's coming towards me—is it too fast for me to outswim it?
Counsellor	Very, very much so.
Hayley	O.K. I know I can't get away, so I reach down to my belt and pull out my Wand of Ice Damage. Can I zap it?
Counsellor	Only one way to find out.
Hayley	I aim right at its mouth, think the command, and roll [As the wand is one of Minara's special abilities, and is level three, Hayley gets an additional +3 on top of her d20, which she elects to help her aim rather than damage.] Twenty-four!
Counsellor	Wow, yep, that'll definitely do it. Tell me what happens?
Hayley	So I point it forward, and, like, this white cloud just appears in front of me and blasts towards the serpent's mouth. It gets bigger and bigger as it shoots through the water, and whacks it right in the gills
Counsellor	[Visibly impressed] So. Cool. Roll for damage.

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Hayley	Five.
Counsellor	Niiiice!
	[Takes the monster's hit-points down from twenty—it's a BIG monster!—to fifteen.]
	He didn't like that. And with that roll, I imagine his mouth is frozen open?
Hayley	Yeah! Like, the water freezes right around its gills, so it can't breathe.
Counsellor	Ew, nasty. Well played!
	And that's kind of thrown him. He swerves away from you, almost like he's trying to shake his head after a brain-freeze. He needs to clear his gills, otherwise he'll, you know, die. In fact
	[Rolls a five; takes another hit-point away.]
	If he can't breathe, he'd better hurry up and figure out what to do!
	So, he's side-on from you again, looks like you've bought yourself a bit of time. What's next?
Hayley	Can I swim down?
Counsellor	Sure. The water's a bit cold, after your magic; but yeah, you can move. Towards the ruins you saw?
Hayley	Yes.
Counsellor	Cool. As you move closer, a statue comes up at you from out of the gloom.
Hayley	It attacks me?!
Counsellor	[Laughs.]
	Sorry, no. You just move close enough to see it.
Hayley	[Rolls her eyes in relief.] And can I shoot at the thing again?
Counsellor	Yep.
Hayley	[Elects to save the modifier to do extra damage.]
	Not as good. Ten.
Counsellor	Still hits. But we'll say you're too busy swimming to put all your effort into it, so you don't add your modifier.
Hayley	Oh, my days! Why did I waste it? Four.
Counsellor	Still pretty good.
	[Reduces the monster's hit-points to ten.]
	So, now it's his turn. He—
	[Rolls to see if the monster can snap its mouth shut to break the ice; twelve.]
	That'll do it. He can breathe again. He starts moving down into the ruins, but he'll have to wait for his next turn to attack. He brushes up against one of the columns as he moves, which sends a cloud of sand billowing outwards.

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Hayley	Well, I back up against one of the walls or whatever, try to give myself a bit of cover. I hold my wand in both hands, really concentrate, put all my thought into it. And
	[A total score of sixteen]
Counsellor	Wahoah! Told you you'd used up all your bad rolls!
	[Hayley rolls; the counsellor marks down the damage—the serpent is down to seven hit-points.]
	And do you know what? He's had enough. He turns around, and starts swimming away. Didn't even get a bite at you!
Hayley	Can I shoot him as he leaves?
Counsellor	[Considers.]
	He's probably moving away from you quite quickly. You'd need to roll very high.
Hayley	I'll give it a try.
Counsellor	Sure.
	[Hayley rolls a five—even *with* the modifier!]
	No, he's gone. He really isn't used to his dinner fighting back—must've gotten lazy in his old age! But at least now, we know why the fish stay away from the place!
Hayley	Yeah.
Counsellor	Hey, was that a smile I just saw?
Hayley	[Does that teenager thing, where they refuse to agree with the adult, even if they're terrible at hiding their thoughts.]
Counsellor	So what we're saying is, "That worked out better than expected."?
Hayley	It was all right, yeah.
Counsellor	[Gives a very unimpressed look.]
	"It was all right"? Wow, blow me away with your enthusiasm, why don't you?
	[Gives a moment or two for the more relaxed atmosphere to settle in.]
	And now are you going to tell me what you meant, earlier, about things always going wrong?
Hayley	[Grimaces slightly, shrugs.]
	It's just, every time I try to do something, it feels like I mess it up.
Counsellor	[Puts her counsellor-face on. Silence, until it's clear Hayley needs a nudge.]
	Can you give me an example?

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Hayley	[Thinks for a little while.] Like, when I go to see my dad, I know all he's going to want to talk about is my detentions. He never cares whenever I do something right, he just goes on and on about how I should be doing better. It's never good enough for him. And if it's not him, it's mum, saying I should be looking after Flo better. It's … It's stupid. [Trails off.]
Counsellor	And for a moment it felt like even the dice were criticising you? *Something else* you've got to do better at?
Hayley	[Nods.]
Counsellor	And what's the point in trying, if it's never going to work?
Hayley	[Nods.]
Counsellor	[Ponders awhile.] O.K., here's a question for you: What do you think Minara was feeling, in that moment? Apart from, "Oh my God, there's a great big monster coming at me!" obviously.
Hayley	Probably didn't feel anything. It's not her fault that thing came out of nowhere.
Counsellor	But it's your fault that a couple of dice—one of which *I* rolled, let's not forget—landed wrong side up?
Hayley	[Silence.]
Counsellor	[Decides not to push too hard.] O.K.. Speaking of Minara, might be best not to leave her where she is—the salt in the water won't be doing her hair any good! So, in the course of the battle—was it a battle? Or just shooting fish in a barrel? In the course of the battle, Minara swam down and discovered that there's a whole bunch of ruins down there.
Hayley	Yeah.
Counsellor	And now you find yourself flanked on both sides by a series of these tall, ornately carved columns, each with these really elaborate capitals, with figures of mythical beasts and what look like angels or gods or … something, it's difficult to see from where you are. And as you look around, you realise that that statue you nearly swam into, earlier, is actually one of a whole series of them—one between each pair of columns—and every one of these statues is kneeling towards the road between them, their heads bowed. Let's have another go at exploring, shall we?
Hayley	[Rolls.] Fourteen.

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Counsellor	There, you see? That's better, isn't it? So, you think this is some kind of processional avenue, which leads between two really important sites—usually something like a shrine and some greater temple.
Hayley	Like the one on that holy island, with all the nuns?
Counsellor	Well remembered. Exactly.
Hayley	Can I see which direction the main building is in?
Counsellor	Not from where you are; it looks like you're somewhere right in the middle, so it doesn't matter which way you look, the avenue just disappears into the murk.
Hayley	I suppose I could just try one end, and if that doesn't work, I can try the other?
Counsellor	Could do, if that's what you want to do. Why don't you have a closer look at some of the statues? [Hint, hint, hint…]
Hayley	[Frowns slightly, as a faint bell starts to ring.] O.K., I go up to the first one I saw, the one that scared me, and take a look.
Counsellor	And as you do, you see that it's of a very well-built man, all bulging muscles and abs, with perfect hair—a bit like Henry Cavill! And there's a symbol—a glyph of some kind—carved into the front of the pedestal that he's standing on.
Hayley	Oh! [Shuffles through some of her notes, until she finds the counsellor's handout, from when Minara was back on the holy island.] Like this?
Counsellor	[Feigns surprise.] Now that you mention it, yes! It does look a *lot* like that! [And play continues.]

In this example, you'll hopefully have spotted instances of all of the major selling points of therapeutic RPGs. There's a clear dividing line between the 'RPG' and the 'Therapy', but the one demonstrably informs the other.

The Story Cycle turns ever onward: sea to monster to ice blast to ruins to glyphs to whatever Minara did next. (She figured out which way to go and gained access to the temple, which ultimately revealed itself to be the prison/shrine of an ancient demon, which Minara just about made a good job of—though it was a much closer-run thing than with the sea

serpent, and she only managed it by remembering to use the magical artefact she'd obtained from the witchdoctor!) All of the major obstacle categories were present in some form, too: a previous interaction with the witchdoctor provided the information necessary to find the temple; exploration allowed for the complex's discovery; the combat got the adrenaline pumping; and the glyphs were a simple puzzle (seeded in an earlier session) to get the little grey cells working.

On a more 'meta' level, the counsellor admirably demonstrated some very necessary game-running skills, such as preparation (laying the trail that led to the complex, including foreshadowing the puzzle—which, incidentally, helped the character in her task, but wasn't a brick wall that needed to be knocked down—and having notes to read from for tasks like describing the temple complex) and improvisation (that entire winged sea-serpent incident was grabbed from thin air, with only the monster's generic stats being looked up), as well as keeping the client's decisions at the centre of the unfolding drama (not least in rewarding Hayley for her quick-thinking in targeting the monster's gills). Hayley did most of the remembering, decreasing the likelihood of the counsellor getting her clients' games mixed up; and the session's episodic nature meant Minara was never far away from having something fun to do, but was allowed a bit of a break between Big Monster Fights.

Most importantly, the RPG aided the therapeutic process in a number of ways: it brought an initially reluctant client 'into the room'; it facilitated insight into unhelpful aspects of the client's thinking (about always being wrong); it was able to challenge that thinking (by comparing the client's situation with the character's); it strengthened the reparative nature of the therapeutic relationship by encouraging playfulness; and (towards the end of the session, subsequent to this excerpt), it enabled Hayley and her counsellor to reflect in a bit more detail upon her week, her thoughts and feelings, and on how Minara might be cited as an alternative approach to life.

Every practitioner will have their own personal style—and doubtless you'll have spotted some instances where you'd have acted differently—but the fundamental core of this entire approach remains the same: 'fun' plus 'distance from emotional risk' equals 'engagement' plus 'personal growth'.

That's the idea, at any rate.

10

Concluding Therapy

The End of the Beginning

We all know the value and power of a good ending. We have it drilled into us from day one of basic training: along with the beginning and the middle, the end is the most important part of the therapeutic process. The ultimate goal of all therapeutic relationships is essentially to help the client become their own therapist—to support them as they move towards an understanding of their own inner-workings, and help them make use of this new knowledge. The ending is an inevitable part of any client's journey, because, after all, the whole point of the process is to get them to a place where they can look after themselves.

Sooner or later, then, every therapeutic-relationship must by design come to a conclusion—and this is as true for RPG therapy as it is for any other intervention. And, as with any other intervention, you must be guided by your training, and the tenets of your professional modality.

There are countless texts out there that deal with giving clients 'good' endings, so there's not much to be added to that particular subject, here. Celebrating successes, reflecting upon progress, identifying alternative means of support, preparing for the unknown, saying goodbye: all the usual topics of conversation must be covered within our final sessions,

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also. But RPG therapists have a few additional considerations to take into account. If we continue to view the therapy in terms of the fictional frame, the conclusion's role is to demonstrate the fictional world's new, healthier status-quo, in which a 'happily ever after'—or, at least, a 'happily for now'—has become possible. This is the part of the story that reflects a protagonist's reconciliation between their wants and their needs, and prepares them for an existence beyond the story's telling. Much like with the therapeutic process itself, the final words of a story are only an 'end' inasmuch as they are a transition from one part of the journey to another. In truth, the story is far from over.

In addition to giving clients a good therapeutic conclusion, we also want to give them a good *narrative* conclusion—a conclusion that represents both their character's growth and their own, and provides a satisfying wrapping-up of any loose ends. After all, a key aim of any therapeutic ending is to keep the number of unanswered questions to a minimum. For our purposes, this extends to questions centred upon the game as a whole and its various components—particularly when it comes to the fate of the character, and the overall outlook for the setting and any villains (or other omnipresent obstacles) therein.

The client—via their character—has spent their journey developing and practicing the skills necessary to face the core issues that first brought them to you; now the time has come to drive home the message that they are in fact ready to face those issues head-on. The boon of congruence, enlightenment, self-actualisation, is there for the taking; all they have to do now is reach out and take it.

The art of concluding therapy is the art of gently letting a client go—setting them free to traverse the world in their own manner, safe in the knowledge that they'll be able to catch themselves if they stumble. For our purposes, by the time we reach this final stage, we want to be able to demonstrate the client's readiness to enter into this new way of being by reflecting upon the *character's* readiness to enter into theirs.

After all, the character's journey *is* the client's journey; their story *is* the therapy; their respective conclusions are one and the same. This is where the journey always led.

Endings can bring up a lot of emotions for the practitioner as well as the client, and it's our job to hold those emotions and process them as professionally as we can, be that through self-reflection, peer-support, supervision, or our own personal therapy. Hopefully, though, your endings with your RPG therapy clients will also be tinted with excitement and fondness—not just for the client, but for all the incredible tales you told together. This is a unique gift that our more traditional colleagues have never had the chance to experience. Treasure it, and take heart in the fact that, as well as helping this troubled individual, you've helped bring into their world a piece of art that you, and you alone, have had the privilege to witness.

What better goodbye could our clients give us?

Reviewing the Client's Journey

Many practitioners make use of some form of progress review on at least a semi-regular basis, to gauge how the client is progressing in their therapy. Reviews can also help inform how future sessions might be approached, even if the conclusion is, "Keep doing what we're doing."

When it comes to RPG-based therapy, the review process can also be an opportunity to scrutinise the therapy's *narrative* progress. If, as is the central conceit of this approach, the character's growth is analogous to the client's, this means that the efficacy or otherwise of the intervention may be judged according to how much the character has developed.

Here are a few topics of conversation that might be useful:

1. How does the client feel about the process so far?
2. Are there any elements of the story that they'd like to change? Where would they like the story to go next?
3. How close do they feel to their character, and do they see any similarities between the character and themselves?
4. Do any of the NPCs, locations, or incidents in the game remind them of people or experiences in their own lives? Can they say a little about how and why?

5. Do they have any particular favourite NPCs/locations? Why do they feel that?
6. How do they think their character feels about their experiences so far?
7. Are they beginning to demonstrate/experience any of their desired outcomes?
8. How do they feel the setting has changed? Are there any correlations with how their own world has changed?

Now, obviously, this list is not exhaustive; but hopefully it gives you an idea of some of the more 'niche' considerations that an RPG therapy review entails. Nevertheless, the core questions of the process remain the same here as with any other modality: is the therapy working, and where does the client want to go from here?

Many of us are already aware that regular reviews can be very helpful—not least because, as well as gauging a client's progress, they help lay the groundwork for a future ending. As the story moves along, it becomes increasingly clear just how close (or far away) that ending might be; so make sure you keep an eye on it, even if you yourself tend not to make use of 'formal' in-session reviews. As the ending draws near, you can use this 'data' to plan a satisfying conclusion to the RPG's story.

Which is a hugely important task, because, as everyone in the creative industry knows, it doesn't matter how enjoyable a story is if you don't stick the landing.

Just Ask the Client What They'd Like to Do

A hugely important part of making a story's ending 'satisfying' lies in giving the consumer what they want. Do that, and they'll remember the experience for the rest of their lives; don't, and they'll have forgotten it by the end of the week.

Before we get on to how we go about creating a satisfying ending, though, let's consider what we *don't* want from this process:

There's a lot of talk these days, among writers and fandoms, of 'subverting expectations': building a story in such a way as to suggest a certain event/development is going to take place, and then pointedly *not* doing

that. This approach, its proponents argue, helps to avoid clichés, and keeps the reader/viewer/listener/player on their toes; this consumer approach, of never knowing what's going to happen next, has been exacerbated by the relatively recent transition in the entertainment world from simple, self-contained stories to huge, multi-volume epics, and is exemplified by the oft-repeated demand, "No spoilers!" Some creators actually *change* their planned ending, just because a small number of consumers have guessed what might happen!

Point of order: this is *not* what we want for our clients.

We don't want to bore them, of course, but 'not being bored' is assuredly *not* the same thing as 'being terrified of what might happen next'. Our chief goal, as far as the RPG's story goes, is to *fulfil* the client's expectations, not subvert them. *We want* to give them what *they want*.

The best way to achieve this is for you to get an idea of what the client would actually like to see before the story comes to a close. And the best way to achieve this?

Ask.

No big fancy professional methodologies are necessary here, just a brief discussion and a few sessions before your planned ending. Even if they haven't already thought about it (though many of them will have!), they'll still have at least a vague idea of how they'd like their character's story to end.

In all likelihood, depending on your client's temperament, these ideas will boil down to either: (a) it would be 'nice' to see X; or (b) it would be 'cool' to see Y. The one tends to involve closure and tranquility, while the other can be relied upon to include fireworks and catharsis (of course, a particularly well-constructed climax will include elements of both); what they both have in common is an opportunity to witness the conclusion of their character's adventures. They have followed these remarkable individuals through hazards, trials, and celebrations—and so it is only natural that they would like to see some form of resolution.

That resolution's form depends entirely upon the scenario you've been following: where it all started, what decisions were made along the way, and how things have changed since filling out the character-sheet. It might involve a gratifying "Take that!" aimed at a long-term foe, or a nationwide celebration in recognition of the character's awesomeness, or

it might all end with nothing more than a nice cup of tea and a packet of biscuits.

Regardless of aesthetics, the key point is to *find out what the client wants from the RPG's ending*. You likely already do this, when it comes to therapeutic endings; this process is merely an extension of that.

When it begins to feel like the conclusion might be coming into view, then, be sure to initiate that conversation. Not only will it provide insight into the client's hopes and goals (both narrative and therapeutic), it'll also give you time to plan ahead. A few topics to consider might include:

1. What do they want to happen to their character once their adventures are over?
2. What does 'happily ever after' look like?
3. Are there any situations/plot-hooks that remain annoyingly unresolved?
4. Are there any situations/plot-hooks that they'd prefer to leave alone (and, if so, why)?
5. Is there a particular adversary they *really* want to punch in the face?
6. Are there any friendly NPCs or relationships that they'd like to revisit?
7. Do they have any idea of what might happen to the character's friends/relatives?
8. What about any items they've collected?
9. Is there some big event (previously hinted at or completely new) that will befall the setting, for good or ill?
10. How big a final showdown do they want?

As soon as you have an idea of what the client is looking for, you'll be able to construct a scenario that meets their requirements. Of course, you can never quite be sure how things will work out—maybe the dice will be in a particularly bad mood, when the time comes—but you'll at least have something to work with. All you have to do is make a note of the client's responses, look at them in the context of the story so far, and contrive a means of getting the narrative from A to B.

Once again, though, it's important to remember that, specifically when it comes to narrative, our primary aim is to fulfil rather than subvert expectations. Failureto deliver a satisfying conclusion runs the risk of

deflating everything that came before, and leaving one too many unanswered questions; it therefore behoves you to put at least a little thought into how you might give the client the denouement they hope for.

A Therapeutic Climax

Before the character or the client can go back to their lives, however, they must first demonstrate to themselves that they've overcome the difficulties that once plagued them.

In other words: it's time for the Last Battle.

This is where the story, the *therapy*, reaches its climax. If you recall Chap. 6, episodic structure allows for more frequent, if somewhat smaller-in-scope, 'climaxes'—the high points of an enclosed story that get the blood pumping—whereas a longer-term narrative, while offering less in the way of instant gratification, offers a single, explosive climax. Well, this is the part where we get to have our cake and eat it.

Because, no matter how many episodic climaxes we've narrated so far, we can always go one bigger. The character saved a village last week? Now it's time to save a nation. Stole a priceless antique from an intergalactic collector's vault? Not bad, not bad: but a *real* master thief would break into the secret police's headquarters and abscond with the plans of that new, world-dominating super-weapon. If you feel you've been pulling your punches so far, it's time to take the gloves off.

There are an infinite number of ways a climactic event may be structured: an almighty battle between armies, a first kiss in the middle of a ballroom, or a tiptoe down the stairs to discover a spy's identity. This is why we can turn on the telly, go to the cinema, or buy books over and over again; even though we know what's going to happen, we still want to see *how* it happens.

So go on and raise the stakes, force the character to confront the epicest of epic situations, and end everything on a high note. You'll give the client an experience they'll never forget, and solidify their connection to the character's adventures. Take inspiration from your favourite media, if that puts you at ease; in reality, though, all you're doing is taking those obstacle-chains you've already used and making them slightly grander in

scale. That's all. Look where the character was going anyway, make everything harder to accomplish, and the cost of failure even more dire than usual, and the narrative will take on a power that has you both alternately holding your breath and punching the air. There's a reason why a movie's soundtrack reaches a crescendo over the final ten minutes.

If we want to make a climax *therapeutically* powerful, though, we need to embrace this opportunity to shine a light on just how far the client has come, over the course of their therapy. We do this by placing the character in a situation whereby they must confront an embodiment—either as an NPC, some form of system, or even a literal reconstruction—of the client's pre-therapy thoughts/beliefs/and behaviour (i.e., their initial presenting issues). Such a scenario leaves the client no choice but to face the demons that brought them to you in the first place—continuing to view them from a safe distance, of course—and see them as the toxic force for ill they always were.

The best endings mirror their beginnings; the best villains mirror the protagonist. As emphasised during the character-creation process, characters are defined by their flaws as well as their talents, their fears as well as their hopes; an effective villain is one who has succumbed to those flaws, embracing that dark side of their personality and demanding others around them follow suit. It would be too exhausting, even dangerous (not to mention monotonous), to face the client with such pointed interventions from day one; now, though, if the client really does feel like they're in a place where they've surmounted the issues that once held them back, this final challenge can raise the stakes and make the climax more directly personal to their needs. You've challenged their presenting issues throughout the RPG process; now it's time to *challenge* them.

Take some time to think about the person your client was when they first arrived, most notably their inner voice and destructive thinking, and throw that back at who they are now. If they were very self-critical—"I'm stupid" "It's always my fault" "I can't do anything right" "No wonder nobody likes me"—now's the time to give those words to an in-game adversary—"*You're* stupid" "It's always *your* fault" "*You* can't do anything right" "No wonder nobody likes *you*"—and see how the character reacts. If the client is indeed where they want to be, the response will be somewhere along the lines of, "Shut up!" followed by an attack-roll.

By drawing a line directly between those early patterns of thinking and this final struggle for the character's survival, we highlight how far the client has come, and point out just how insidious those thought patterns were in the first place. From their new position of strength and actualisation, they can face these old demons and reject them outright with satisfying finality.

This single confrontation may be the entirety of the climax—an intimate duel of wits or prowess—or the prelude to a larger, more chaotic, battle (you've beaten the wicked witch, great, but you've still got to get through her army of airborne apes). However it plays out, you'll want to make it tense and powerful; a fitting crescendo to conclude the character's (and so the client's) struggles. Don't worry about being subtle; if the client doesn't immediately recognise the point of the exercise, you'll only have to tell them, later on.

In narrative terms, this is the end of the line: whichever way it goes, whether it ends in victory or defeat, this is where everything that came before was always heading. Therapeutically, this is where all your hard work pays off. So make it memorable. Have some fun. And be as bombastic and over-the-top as you please—both of you.

Epilogues

We often offer clients an opportunity to reflect on what might happen next, and where they'd like to go in their lives; when concluding RPG therapy, you also want to give them an opportunity to consider where their character will go next in *their* lives. This simple exercise can give the client a good deal of closure, both for the RPG and their therapeutic journey as a whole, tying up any loose ends ("Whatever happened to that stray cat?"), taking a step back and viewing the setting with a fresh set of eyes ("It's amazing to think how much everything has changed."), and, giving the character a change of pace ("I haven't had a lie-in in three months!"). (Or maybe not—maybe they've decided the life of an adventurer is for them, and they'll never hang up their sword again—lie-ins are a thing of the past.)

Epilogues are a common tool used throughout the creative professions, providing a brief glimpse into what the world looks like, now that this current part of the story is over. If the romance novel led to a Happy Ever After, the epilogue is where we get a glimpse of just *how* happy the ever after is; if the action-adventure film ended with the protagonist saving the day, this is where we get to see whether they transition back to their 'mundane' lives, or get on a boat with some elves and an angel.

More to the point, epilogues tend to be vague—a snapshot rather than a detailed account. They're there to wrap the narrative up, not continue it. They can be relatively short-term, leaving the future completely wide-open, or they can give an overview of the rest of the protagonist's existence unto death. They can be hopeful, ominous, contented, or uncertain; but whatever it is, an epilogue is at its most powerful when it's *brief*—a still image rather than an entire animation. This brings the narrative to a gentle close, while also highlighting the fact that, though this might be 'an' end, it's not 'the' end.

For our purposes, giving a client an opportunity to touch upon their story's aftermath lets them see past the closing curtain, and eases both the character and themselves back into the 'normal' world. In other words, an epilogue is a chance to acknowledge that the therapy, at least for now, is over.

This is where we get to see a more 'balanced' world. How does it compare to the world as it stood, all the way back at the story's beginning? Is this really what the character was looking for? Is it enough to meet their needs? Or is it still lacking in some capacity?

The simplest way to get the client to put some thought into an epilogue is to ask them some variation of the following: "What happens next? The character has done X, they've seen Y, and achieved Z; in a few brief sentences, what does their life look like, from this point onward?" As this will likely be influenced by the final session (the epilogue would be drastically different if, say, the character falls in the last battle!), it may not be practicable to ask too far in advance; but it's not unreasonable, as the therapeutic process enters that 'the end is nye' phase, to ask them to put a little thought into the matter.

An important point to emphasise is that the dice have no say, here: whatever the client wants to happen, happens. If they want their

character to enjoy a happy life from here on out, lovely; if they want them to struggle with, and ultimately succumb to, some form of threat (external or internal), then the character's in for a rough ride. As with the process of *creating* their character, the process of *dismantling* them is entirely within the client's control—the payoff to all the hard work they've put into getting the character where they are. Everything here is by design; any loose ends that remain hereafter do so either because the client *wants* them to remain, or because they were so small as to have been forgotten.

Some clients might even decide they don't actually want to give the story an epilogue at all. Maybe, for reasons of their own, they'd rather not know what happens next, preferring instead to leave the future an entirely blank page, to be written on as and when the moment fits. That's fine, as well.

An epilogue to the RPG is also an excellent opportunity to explore the client's own epilogue—what their own lives might look like, beyond their adventure within the therapeutic process. Just as we dedicate plenty of time to reflecting upon how the character's pre-game backstory and in-game activities may in some way be telling of the client's own, it stands to reason that the character's future may in some way be telling, too.

The epilogue process, then, as well as providing a means of winding both the game and the narrative down, is a final, prefect opportunity to bring things to your client's attention, gain insight, and let the character be the guide through the unknown.

Finally, an epilogue can be a chance to celebrate both the character's story and their influence upon the therapy. After all, let's not forget just how much trouble they've been through, over the course of their 'adventures'; that they survived long enough to tell the tale should at the very least be recognised!

Saying Goodbye

As with the narrative ending, now's the moment to do one final and all-encompassing review of the client's therapeutic journey. This process is one you'll already be familiar with: reviewing the client's progress (both within and outside the therapeutic environment), acknowledging

feelings towards the conclusion itself, conjecting what the future might hold, ensuring safety measures and other sources of support are in place, and so on. Warmth, hope, and celebration tend to be the order of service (often with an appearance by, "My door is always open," thrown in for good measure).

When a role-playing game has played a significant role in the client's therapy, this final reflective exercise will by necessity entail looking at how and why the game, its myriad elements, and the actual act of playing impacted upon the client's outlook. It will of course be up to you to judge how much time and brainpower you dedicate to this as part of the ending process, but the importance of the game to the therapeutic process ought to be borne in mind.

Here are some suggested questions:

1. What was their favourite part of the game? Why did they find it so enjoyable?
2. Which part of the game/story did they find most helpful to their outlook/frame of mind? What about it was so powerful?
3. How do they feel their character has changed (if at all) since the beginning of their story? Are they more content/at peace with themselves, and if so, why? (And if not, why not?)
4. Do they feel they've learned anything from their character? If so, what—and why did it have such an impact?
5. If they could give a single piece of advice to their character, what would it be? Is there anything else they'd like to say to them?
6. What do they think their character would say to them?
7. How do they feel about saying goodbye to the character and their adventures?
8. How do they think their character would feel in this situation?
9. Are there any strategies they might try, in order to keep the character (and any lessons they learned) in mind as they move beyond therapy?
10. Is there anyone or anything else in the game (e.g., a favourite NPC) they'd like to say goodbye to before moving on?

The single most significant element of any therapy's outcome is the relationship between the client and their practitioner: as such, examining

that relationship is often an intrinsic part of any conclusion-process. Because RPG therapy relies so heavily upon the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the client's character, however, they (and the client's relationship with them) will inevitably feature prominently within the conclusion process, too. If the character is the client's avatar within the game, and their relationship with them the vehicle within which they traverse the therapeutic process, it would be negligent of us to fail to analyse that character, and that relationship.

This process, as with other areas of the approach, is very much boosted by the character's fictitious nature: they aren't real, so feedback/comments are entirely one-way. No matter how big a presence the character has had, they can't say or do anything to cause the client distress. This allows for a remarkable sense of freedom which is usually lacking in examination of the client-practitioner relationship (no matter how skilled the practitioner, there's always a perceived risk of misinterpretation, hurt, and even rejection). So make use of the freedom on offer: it protects you just as much as it protects the client. Boundaries remain, of course; but this setup means you can make observations/ask questions that might otherwise have had to be approached more cautiously. For example, when asking a client how they feel their relationship with you has helped them, it is important to phrase the question carefully, lest it be perceived as fishing for praise; asking how they feel their relationship with the *character* has helped them, however, runs no such risk. Similar enquiries may be made of their relationships with various NPCs.

All this aside, though, the top priority is for you and your client to explore the therapy's effectiveness, and the client's ability to move into a world beyond therapy. How and why have (or haven't) they changed over the course of their therapy? How might they make use of any insights or skills they've learned? This session, after all, is merely a small part of a wider process, and as such must be seen in terms of everything that has come before, and everything that may or may not come after.

And it's a chance to say, "Goodbye." Or, at least, "See you later." So once you're done with all the psychobabble and well-wishing, make sure you give the client time to wave farewell to their character, who has been their unfailing companion throughout this process. It may be sad, it may be joyful, it may be anxious; whatever it is, it'll be therapeutic.

Future Adventures

Just because the practitioner-client collaboration has (at least temporarily) come to an end, that isn't to say the client's imaginary escapades need be entirely over. After all, the RPG's fiction is still there, and still full of creative potential.

A final session, then, could very well include discussion on how the client may make future use of the character, setting, and obstacles that have proven so beneficial to them thus far. Just because one adventure has come to an end doesn't mean another can't begin.

Because, as previously mentioned, a story never truly 'ends'; no matter how grand or epic or final a climax may be, there's *always* scope for more. Just because the character ultimately reached some form of nirvana doesn't mean nothing ever happened in their lives ever again—paradise would be rather boring, otherwise! And even if the character died, or in some other way became personally removed from the narrative, their impact upon the setting and its inhabitants would still be felt; their story continues in the actions of the individuals (perhaps previously known NPCs, perhaps new characters entirely) that they left behind.

With all of this in mind, how might we encourage (or at least keep the door open to) the exploration of further narratives, subsequent to the therapeutic process itself, that can keep the client in touch with their character, and their therapeutic journey?

Naturally, the answer to this question will rest largely on (a) what the client's creative interests are, (b) how invested they've been with the narrative side of their therapy, and, ultimately, (c) whether or not they actually *want* to carry on telling their character's story. If they have little interest in seeing what happens next, and would prefer to leave things as they now are, there really isn't much point examining further options. The same goes for if they have little taste for the idea of doing all the creative work (e.g., writing or drawing) that further exploration would require. So start by gauging how much they actually care about continuing the story.

Assuming there *is* some interest, though, the next step is to consider (or get the client to consider) their creative interests/abilities. They might

enjoy making pieces of art, or fancy themselves a budding author; maybe they express themselves through singing, or like to explore different varieties of cooking. Whatever they enjoy doing, there'll always be a way for them to bring those interests to the character's story. If they like to design and make clothes, for example, maybe they'd like to try their hand at creating something their character would wear? If they spend their evenings writing short-stories, why not write one about one of the character's later adventures (or, indeed, write a more streamlined version of the story told within the therapy)? An exercise which frequently produces results is to have them write a letter to the character (or other NPCs), explaining their thoughts and feelings about various events and experiences. These messages can often be very heartfelt, and frequently yield therapeutic results.

In practical terms, you're mainly asking, "What happens next?" They don't have to answer right now; but providing that little seed of thought will usually be enough to encourage interested clients to further explore the stories you and they have been telling.

Now might also be a good time to question whether or not the client is interested in pursuing gaming as a hobby/social exercise/self-care regimen, in their post-therapy lives. RPGs are, after all, social exercises at heart; for those clients who have historically struggled in social situations, or have been feeling isolated from the rest of the world, finding a group of similarly interested individuals might be just what they need to boost their mood. The miracle of the twenty-first century is that we are literally able to converse with people all around the world: somewhere, with a bit of careful looking, there'll always be a gaming group that would perfectly fit your client. If this is something they'd be interested in, encourage them to peruse some of the available RPG systems, get an idea of the kind of game(s) they'd like to play, and search specifically for a group that plays that particular game (or something like it). They'll be out there, somewhere.

Finally, these future adventures are an opportunity, if everyone involved wishes, for people like parents/carers, spouses, siblings, and friends to take an interest in the client's ongoing self-care. RPGs' social nature means that they might make for a perfect excuse to spend time (and build relationships) with various important people in one's life: the same fun

and excitement that has permeated the therapeutic process could just as easily work its magic on, say, the family unit. Likewise, creative endeavours more generally are a chance for the client's interests and efforts to be celebrated. As part of this final session, then, you might consider discussing the potential merits of sharing this new aspect of their lives with their loved ones; if the client is young, perhaps even consider offering their parents/carers encouragement on how they might support their child.

The point here is that, if they want to, the client is perfectly able to take the story of their RPG with them, and follow it to wherever they want it to go. After all, this story is *theirs*. Sure, you helped tell it, may even have done most of the creative legwork; but they'll be invested in their character in a way nobody else in the world ever could be, to the point where it would be weird—even a form of betrayal—if anyone else tried to tell it. So hand it over to them with the necessary gravity, take pride in the fact that, between you, you've created something utterly unique, and watch as they and their story move on to the next chapter.

Your job? To prepare yourself for your own next adventure.

Hasty Or Unplanned Endings

Sometimes, alas, the therapeutic process is cut short. This can be a complex set of circumstances to navigate, bringing up a range of thoughts/emotions within the practitioner, and adding an insidious "What if—?" to proceedings.

Again, the usual procedures/reflections apply: you've had your training, you know how to respond to incidents like these. But what does such an abrupt ending mean for an RPG practitioner in particular, that other practitioners don't normally have to consider?

Put bluntly: not much more than you'd expect. Sudden endings are no less difficult or upsetting for us than they are for our more conventional peers, and so the need for respectful concern, appropriate referrals, self-care, and robust supervision is as important for our practice as it is for theirs; we aren't shielded from the perils of our profession, just because we use dice!

If the client just ups and leaves (with or without a Dear John), there's only so much we can do. We'll muse over the client's therapy as a matter of course, and these musings will likely include reflecting upon the RPG's construction/progress, and maybe a lament for all the exciting possibilities never now to be explored; but them's the breaks.

If you can manage to arrange a final session with the client, however, or were given a bit of advanced notice that they intended to terminate their therapy, there are still some things you can do to offer that satisfying ending we've spent this whole chapter talking about. Depending on how much time they give you, you might even find it possible to work through the entire process as described over the previous pages (albeit perhaps with a few cut corners); but it's more than likely you'll only have a single session with which to wrap up both the therapy and the narrative.

How? Well, skipping the build-up and the epilogue, for a start. You might already have considered a portion of the story's ending during a previous review, but it's unlikely you'll have everything in place to meet all those expectations. Similarly, you simply won't have the space to cover the character's life after the RPG. You might be able to acknowledge that further stories are possible and that the client can keep their character with them in perpetuity; but the in-depth discussion of these subsequent adventures will likely be another casualty of the conclusion's haste.

Instead, limit the conclusion to focusing on the core concerns of the approach, namely:

1. How they've felt about the character, and their relationship with them;
2. If there are any conclusions they might draw from their in-game behaviour, and how this has differed from their real-world thoughts/actions; and
3. Whether or not they feel able to take some of their character's lessons and implement them in their own lives.

In a single fifty-minute session, that's probably all you'll have time to get through and still be able to reflect on the therapy more generally, ensure that appropriate avenues of support are in place, and do any necessary paperwork. This will likely feel wholly unsatisfactory—but, at the end of the day, a significant part of handling any abrupt ending is in

coming to terms with our own disappointment. I'm afraid that's just one of the many hazards of this job.

Example Conclusion

Ademir, 43, entered therapy with the aim of processing some of the long-term effects of historical trauma (specifically, resulting from physical and emotional abuse during childhood at the hands of his father, and a series of similarly abusive relationships throughout his adult life). From his early twenties to the end of his thirties, he relied upon a combination of alcohol and drugs (developing a particular dependence upon crack), exacerbated by a period of homelessness immediately before being referred to a charity-based therapist.

As his sessions progressed, Ademir and his therapist made regular use of RPG-play, set within the context of the Vietnam War (a personal interest of Ademir's ever since school, when he was taught by his "Mad as a box of frogs" history teacher, Mr. Lowder). The charity, like many free-to-use agencies, was only able to offer a limited number of sessions (in this case, twelve), meaning the therapy's conclusion was a known factor from the beginning; this in turn provided a clear structure for the therapist to approach the lead-up to, and wind-down of, Ademir's final session.

Ademir's character, an elite special-forces soldier named Mitch (short for Mitchell, his surname—his first name was Andrew, but no one ever called him that), spent the vast majority of the game either in a firefight, running towards a firefight, or running away from a firefight (in readiness, of course, of running back *into* the firefight at the earliest possible convenience). But he also spent a lot of time rescuing cut-off/pinned-down comrades, covering for troublemaking delinquents, and generally sticking up for the fearful and downtrodden. As sessions progressed, the rather sporadic nature of early play, which led from mission to mission (often beginning and ending with a dash from/to one of the conflict's famous Huey helicopters), gave way to a wider narrative that involved a downed reconnaissance aircraft and its pilot, a small patrol of soldiers (led by Mitch himself), and a local North Vietnamese Army area-commander bent on capturing both.

With some pointed support from his therapist, Ademir was quickly able to acknowledge some of the similarities between Mitch and himself. Like himself, his character was haunted by the violence he had experienced, and was fiercely protective of the people he cared for, not wanting them to experience the same hardships he had; in essence, the gruff soldier was a representation of the defender that Ademir wished he'd had, earlier in his life. Mitch also made use of drugs to dull his horrific memories: when this feature was first introduced, it was as an attempt on Ademir's part to add a layer of realism to the game (drug-use having been a major issue amongst American soldiers throughout the conflict); this connection with the character's behaviour was not lost upon the player.

When Ademir's therapy drew to a close, the therapist helped to lay the groundwork by enquiring about Ademir's hopes for the RPG's conclusion. In response, Ademir detailed how he would like the final act of Mitch's adventures to include a full-on showdown with Ngô, the NVA commander, who had been his nemesis from the very beginning (he was the named adversary on Ademir's character-sheet).

When the time came, in addition to acknowledging the therapy's imminent conclusion, Ademir and his therapist spent their penultimate session playing out that final battle. Unbeknownst to either Mitch or Ademir, Ngô had set up an ambush further along Mitch's route, and was using sporadic attacks to push the patrol into it. After a series of frenetic engagements, interspersed with rolls to avoid various booby traps, Mitch and a few of his men (alas, not including the downed pilot) managed to blast their way out of the encirclement and call down some artillery fire on Ngô's forces. The fate of Ngô himself, whom Mitch had personally managed to take a few shots at, remains annoyingly unknown. It was an intense, exciting session, and one that, partway through, seemed set to end badly for Mitch, thanks to Ademir rolling a one to lob a grenade. Both Ademir and the therapist came away from the experience in a bit of a buzz!

The following week, after reflecting upon the awesomeness of the battle, the two of them spent some time reviewing the ups and downs of Ademir's therapy, including an extended chat about the impact the RPG had on the experience. During that conversation, Ademir was able to acknowledge Mitch's role in opening his eyes to the nature of some of his

long-lasting difficulties, as well as helping him to develop some more appropriate ways of thinking/behaving. The final battle in particular was a reminder that the recipient of violence or abuse cannot be held responsible for the attacker's actions; no matter the latter's reasonings, *they* are still the ones who carry the act out. Just because Mitch was a soldier in a foreign country, Ngô was the one who orchestrated the attack, and thus bore the responsibility for the resultant deaths; likewise, just because Ademir knocked a cup of tea on to the carpet, it was his dad who chose to resort to violence. The only difference was that Mitch was able to fight back.

In the end, both men agreed that Mitch was a good chap, whom they'd enjoyed getting to know. Rather sagely, Ademir said the biggest thing he'd taken from Mitch was the idea that bad things can happen, and that one doesn't need to feel good about them, or try to blank them out; but they don't have to dictate the rest of your life, either. He hoped that, after the war, Mitch would have returned home, got married, and lived a "normal" life. He'd remember the fighting, the jungle, the enemy, and every now and again he'd meet up with his old war buddies; but that part of his life was over, and now it was time to, as Ademir put it, "Chill the hell out."

It was a powerful message indeed for a client to leave therapy with!

When discussion turned to possible future means of continuing Mitch's war, Ademir revealed that he had already begun work on a poem (having never before considered such an activity) entitled *Mitch's War*, and that he was likely to read some more books about the Vietnam conflict, with a view specifically to envisaging the role a man like Mitch might have played. The RPG had rekindled his interest in the period, putting in place an ideal form of self-care.

All in all, Ademir felt that, by creating Mitch, and giving him people to interact with, care for, fight, destroy, he was able to reach a more stable balance within his own, real world. When he first came to therapy, he was very much at the mercy of his past; now, there was some hope for the future.

His story, though not yet finished, was ready to move on.

Reviewing the Practical Skills of RPG-Focused Psychotherapy

As with any therapeutic intervention, I appreciate that first impressions of this approach might be a little overwhelming. Reading this book, I'm sure you've had moments where you thought, "This is way too much to remember." Don't worry: sooner or later, you'll acclimatise yourself to your new therapeutic surroundings, become familiar with the processes and activities involved, and the vast majority of the work will happen somewhere in the background of your consciousness. You'll be fine.

In my experience, the hardest part of putting this approach into practice is keeping track of things. Different clients will require different forms of intervention, and it can be rather easy to lose your place amid all the worlds, storylines, and tweaked mechanics. Is Henry the one with the special rule about re-rolling odd numbers, or is that Arthur? Was it Penny whose feisty superheroine saved all those people from the collapsed motorway tunnel, or Lucy? Did I give that monster some stats for the fight Nathan's going to have, this session … or is it Liam who's going to have that combat? 'Bleed' between clients has always been an issue within this line of work, becoming somewhat inevitable as one's caseload increases; when one takes on the role of storyteller on top of the role of practitioner, it can be easy to get a little lost between worlds.

But you manage. Like with any other methodology, you get used to the ins and outs of what you need to do, find a routine, and give yourself over to the process.

What will that process end up looking like? Well, you'll likely find yourself switching sporadically between scene-setting narrator, rules lawyer, and therapeutic interpreter. In reality, this is nothing you haven't done before: every time you tell a friend/relative about your day in the office, you're narrating a story; every time you wait your turn in a queue, you're adhering to rules; every time you sit down with a client, you're interpreting their words/behaviours. And by the time you've reached the point of actually running an RPG-based session, you've already done the lion's share of the work, anyway. You've got your Story Trinity in place,

you've got your client interested in the concept; everything else, in the nicest possible way, is just going through the motions.

Just like anyone else starting a new job, your early career as an RPG therapist will be speckled with the odd mistake. You'll forget how to run combat, you'll reveal a surprise twist too early, you'll role-play an NPC from a different client's game; but, just like any other new job, you'll get used to it. The dice will appear when you need them to appear, the rules will embed themselves in your psyche, and you'll become a dab hand at keeping your client in-character. All it takes is time, experience, and practice.

The key parts of the process are to give the client a sense of security, of distance from the problems they've come to you to face, and to make the entire process as enjoyable as possible. Get these elements right, and you're on to a winner. And, the Story Cycle one last time for good measure: setting, obstacle, character, and repeat.

Yep, you've nailed it.

Resources

Further Reading

What Next?

With this book in-hand, you have everything you need to offer your clients an RPG experience as part of their therapy. It is now well and truly within your ability to storify the therapeutic process, create a character, setting, and obstacle to help engender growth within the client, tell a narrative in such a way as to cultivate that growth, and bring it to a satisfying and meaningful conclusion. The fictional frame is yours to command: you are now, in every way that matters, an RPG Therapist.

Where you go from here is entirely up to you, and is limited only by your own interests, and the happiness or otherwise of your bank account. You may decide that this is all you need: you've read this book, familiarised yourself with the skills and understanding needed to use RPGs as part of your client-work, and that's enough for you. Or you may decide that, having dipped your toe into these particularly geeky waters, you can't wait to dive in at the deep end.

If you're part of the latter crowd, I hope you can swim.

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8

Because there are *so many* tabletop role-playing games out there, each with their own tone and focus, and it would take an entire university's worth of practitioners a lifetime of study to figure out the merits of each of them. You've got narrative games, strategy games, class-based games, skills-based games, dice-less games—the list goes on, each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and each would require a unique, individualised approach to make it appropriate for client-work. You could play a hundred of them and never find the 'perfect' system—or you might find it within moments of your first scan of the bookshelves.

Your best bet, in terms of making a start in RPG society, is first to consider the type of game/system you'd be most interested in exploring. Just as when you and your client considered the kind of game *they'd* like to play, now it's time to ask yourself what kind of game *you'd* like to play. Consider the same questions—the type of genre you enjoy reading/watching/listening to, the action- or role-play-levels you prefer, your perfect level of rules- and narrative-interaction, and so on—and cast your eye across the internet. Your debit card will never forgive you.

There are plenty of online stores designed specifically to cater to the TTRPG market; that said, I highly recommend, before you press 'buy' on any of them, that you first have a look to see if you have a brick-and-mortar game shop anywhere in your vicinity. These locations are like fae gold: they'll tell you exactly what you're looking for, and offer you more than you could ever hope to possess. Just walk through the door and you'll be in a world of colour, fun, and geekery. And dice. (If they don't have at least a barrel-full of dice, tell them they're doing it wrong.) Any eclectic games shop owner worth their salt will have forgotten more about different editions of RPGs and their associated products than you or I could ever hope to learn; all you have to do is tell them the kind of thing you're looking for, and why you're looking for it, and they'll recite a list of recommendations.

In addition to helping you find and purchase various games and pieces of equipment (such as GM screens), these stores will likely also be able to point you in the direction of some local gaming clubs/groups. Getting in touch with these bodies (or at least being aware of them) could serve both as self-care for yourself and (assuming there are enough groups to prevent accidental mixing of roles) your clients.

As well as actually consuming the games themselves, either as part of a group or by yourself, you also have the option, thanks to the inescapable presence of streaming sites and social media, of experiencing them vicariously. There are now so many podcasts, video channels, blogs, and forums dedicated to "the Hobby" that it wouldn't be over-egging it to say that there's an entire culture (or, at least, 'sub'-culture) out there that's dedicated solely to the owning, playing, and *enjoying* of tabletop role-playing games. Everything, from actual-play series to book- and game reviews to tips on how to improve the gaming experience, is available at the tips of one's fingers, with thousands of hours of brand-new content being produced every week. Some is great, some is passable, some is mediocre, some is plain bad; but all of it is, in its own unique way, helpful. You'll learn different ways of playing, different ways of running games, different ways of approaching the same situation, different ways of creating entirely new situations; just, different ways. Be careful, though, because, depending on your levels of interest and/or inner-geekiness, you might find these shows that you tune into purely for CPD purposes start to become an integral part of your own self-care—to the point where choosing between spending four hours a week playing RPGs, and four hours a week watching somebody *else* play RPGs, becomes a real existential conundrum.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Whatever you ultimately decide to do with your time, and your money, you have a plethora of resources available to you; your job now is to sift through the masses and masses of options and find that tiny speck of gold that is your perfect RPG.

And heck—if you can't find it, just write your own!

Whatever you do, have fun. If you have fun, your clients will have fun; and if your clients have fun, they'll blitz through the therapeutic process before either of you knows what's going on. Then you get to do it all over again!

Good luck.

RPGs

Here are a few suggestions to get you underway on your RPG-hunt. This list is *really* not exhaustive, and I'm conscious that I've neglected some really big names; but this should be sufficient for your immediate needs.

Great next steps
First and foremost, feel free to head on over to my own website, www.monomythcounselling.co.uk, and have a look around. You'll find links to other articles/stories/podcasts/videos, and even be able to contact me about getting some one-to-one or group training. You'll also be able to sign up to my newsletter; if you do, you'll automatically be sent a free, pre-made set of characters, a setting, and some obstacles to use with your clients. Any future RPG therapy products will also be listed there.
Dungeons & Dragons. Easily the most influential RPG out there, although to my mind a bit too rules-heavy for our purposes. To play, you'll need at least the Player's Handbook; if you're running the game, you'll need The Dungeon Master's Guide and The Monster Manual, too.
One-hour RPG: The City Watch and *The Wizards of the White Tower*. A couple of zines by Steve Dee, each offering ten D&D adventures that can all be played within an hour—a rare gem for those of us who can only offer short sessions.
Thirsty Sword Lesbians. An amazing game that puts characters' feelings front-and-centre; in *TSL*, you actually heal by other characters offering you emotional support! Tell me that isn't perfect for our needs! *TSL* uses a popular game-system called 'Powered by the Apocalypse' (PbtA), which focuses more on storytelling than statistics.
Quest. A very easy ruleset, with minimal mechanics, and gorgeous art; they even have a free pre-written adventure on their website.
The *International Journal of Role-Playing*. Contains numerous articles about all aspects of RPGs, including their psychological, social, and therapeutic benefits. Great research material.

Fantasy
The One Ring Role-Playing Game. Hands down my own personal favourite RPG. I'm a huge Tolkien nerd, and *TOR* makes you feel like you're in *The Lord of the Rings*. Any client who enjoys either the books or the films will love it.
Mouse Guard Role-playing Game. A straightforward game, based on an excellent comic series, in which you play an ickle-wickle mousey-wouse, with a huge black axe. Comes in an epically heavy boxed set, and includes rules for beliefs, goals, and instincts, which some practitioners might like to explore.
Blades in the Dark. A game in which players assume the roles of criminals (usually with hearts of gold) carrying out various 'jobs'. Introduced a number of influential mechanics (e.g., flashbacks and 'clocks') which are quickly becoming industry-standards.

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Fantasy
Pathfinder. Came into being as a reaction to certain rules-changes in *D&D*; it's quite 'crunchy', and might not be a sensible first RPG for either you or your client, but it's right up there as one of the most 'important' RPGs in terms of cultural impact.
Beyond the Wall. A charming RPG, which makes excellent use of pre-designed roll-tables/playbooks (akin to the 'Inspiration' sections in this book). Assumes you know what you're doing, but allows for a pick-up-and-play approach that requires minimal preparation.

Science-fiction
Scum & Villainy. A space-version of *Blades in the Dark*, where players live just outside of polite society, and make a living running less-than-legal operations. Great for 'space westerns'.
Cyberpunk Red. A gritty, dystopian look at the future, where massive corporations fight wars over resources, and cybernetically enhanced characters must fight to survive in an uncaring world.
Starfinder. A spinoff from *Pathfinder*, and very much 'space fantasy' rather than straight-up sci-fi; allows for spellcasting, laser-axe-wielding robot-dwarves.
Traveller. One of the first RPGs made, and currently in something like its thirteenth iteration. A very detailed, realistic (i.e., 'hard' science-fiction) system that really simulates the oppressive massiveness of space.
For appropriate fans, both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have official RPG tie-ins, which allow players to interact with those famous worlds.

Superhero
Spectaculars. An amazing product that looks more like a boardgame than an RPG, it comes with endless tools to help you create superpowered characters, settings, and obstacles. A design of beauty.
Mutants & Masterminds. A great comic-book RPG, that lets players create just about any hero with any ability/power-set they can think of.
Sentinel Comics. A wonderfully colourful behemoth of a book that really creates the feel of a comic, as opposed to a superhero film.
Masks: a new generation. Another PbtA game, *Masks* focuses primarily on teenage superheroes and their origins/coming-of-age stories, placing particular emphasis on the emotional side of juggling being a hero with going to school.
For individuals who are really into particular films/comics, *Marvel Mulitverse Role-Playing Game*, and *DC Adventures* help players interact with famous superheroes like Spider-Man and Batman.

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Miscellaneous
DIE: the role-playing game. Quite dark, so I wouldn't necessarily advocate playing it with clients, but it has some intriguing concepts that make it worth a look. For example, one character class, the 'Emotion Knight', is a fighter who uses emotions to fuel their attacks; another, the 'Neo', is an addict who needs a 'fix' to power their abilities.
Night's Black Agents. Another dark entry—modern-day superspies versus vampires—but contains fantastic advice for designing cities, 'operations' (i.e., obstacle-chains), and 'conspiracies' (i.e., networks) of hostile NPCs, plus some great rules for running mysteries.
Monsterhearts. Yet another PbtA game with a focus on emotions/relationships, this time of teenaged 'monsters' of the classic-horror variety; great for anyone who likes angsty vampires.
Art of Wuxia. Revolves around the famous Chinese martial-chivalry genre.
Kids on Bikes. Recreates the vibe of little-children-in-big-scary-world offerings like *ET*, *It*, *The Goonies*, and *Stranger Things*.
Twilight 2000. A military RPG, very down-to-earth and realistic.
Deadlands. Cowboys and zombies!
Big Eyes Small Mouths. Based on manga/anime (Japanese comics/cartoons), *BESM* really does make you feel like you're in *Mobile Suit Gundam* or *Sailor Moon*.
Wanderhome. A very gentle, bucolic game, in which people (anthropomorphic animals) are inherently good, fighting is over, and hospitality is everywhere. A huge focus on narrative, character growth, and healing from old wounds. Doesn't use dice.

Related media
Boardgames like the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* and the *D&D Adventure System* roughly simulate the 'feel' of an RPG, but their use of cards and tiles means there's less prep-time involved.
Colostle. A solo journaling game that uses playing cards to prompt play, set in a wondrous, quirky world.
The streaming channel *Critical Role* has become a behemoth in the RPG-world. A group of voice-actors who host weekly RPG sessions, they're famous for the fun and epicness of their games. Well worth a watch, but don't fall into the trap of comparing your role-playing abilities to these professional, award-winning productions.
There are also plenty of review/think-piece channels, hosted by inspiring individuals like Seth Skorkowski, Ginny Di, Dave Thaumavore, *Dungeon Masterpiece*'s Baron de Ropp, and *Dungeon Craft*'s Professor Dungeon Master. Really worth checking out, if you want some tips.

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Related media
If you're after up-to-date RPG 'news', websites such as *Gnome Stew: the gaming blog*, *Roll 20*, and *Polygon* report and review just about everything RPG-related.
There are some great webcomics out there, explicitly related to RPGs, my favourite being *DM of the Rings*, *Order of the Stick*, and *Newman*.
If you're looking for inspiration, especially when it comes to puzzles, go online and see if you can find episodes of old 1980s and 1990s gameshows, like *Knightmare*, *The Crystal Maze*, *Treasure Hunt*, *The Krypton Factor*, and *Fort Boyard*: you'll find countless riddles, challenges, and mysteries to add to your own games.

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Hello. My name is _____ and I am

a _____ _____ .

I am _____ and _____.

Family:

Hope:

Friends:

Fear:

Adversaries:

Mannerisms:

Abilities

1. _____ Lvl ___

2. _____ Lvl ___

3. _____ Lvl ___

HP: ___/___ Luck: ___/ 2

Items:

Name Location, role Description Notable traits/mannerisms Goal(s) Hit points: Damage: Specialabilities Notes	Name Location, role Description Notable traits/mannerisms Goal(s) Hit points: Damage: Specialabilities Notes
Name Location, role Description Notable traits/mannerisms Goal(s) Hit points: Damage: Specialabilities Notes	Name Location, role Description Notable traits/mannerisms Goal(s) Hit points: Damage: Specialabilities Notes

Client:	Character:

Session:

Location:	Obstacle:
Notes:	

Session:

Location:	Obstacle:
Notes:	

Character Inspiration

Heroes of Magic and Might

If your clients find themselves struggling with/overwhelmed by the character-creation process, they can use these tables to make life a little easier. Just work through each step in turn, having them roll on the appropriate tables (or simply choose something they like the sound of), and use that information to define their character. (If the table has numbers across the top and down the side, roll once to select the column and then again to select the row.)

Depending on the dice you're using, select the row/column that corresponds with these results:

Row/column	d6	2d6	d20
1	1	2-3	1-4
2	2	4-5	5-7
3	3	6-7	8-10
4	4	8	11-13
5	5	9-10	14-16
6	6	11-12	17-20

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Coincidentally, you might wish to use some of these ideas, yourself, when it comes time to develop NPCs; the 'Setting Inspiration' section contains further information on that subject, including more examples of names, features, and abilities.

When creating (and subsequently developing) characters, bear these statistics in mind:

Level	HP	Average damage	Total ability levels
1	10	3 or d4	6 (1, 2, 3)
2	11	3 or d4	7
3	12	4 or d6	8
4	13	4 or d6	9
5	14	5 or d6	10
6	15	5 or d8	11
7	16	6 or d8	12
8	17	6 or d8	13
9	18	7 or d10	14 (4, 5, 5)
10	19	7 or d10	15 (5, 5, 5)
11	20	8 or d12	16 (5, 5, 6)

Step One: Character Name

Male names

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Ascalan	Durgah	Grondar	Leyamar	Pravas	Uradin
2	Assimar	Evrit	Halandar	Lothwin	Quang	Veago
3	Balar	Faonir	Hallath	Melkar	Readh	Wyclav
4	Bori	Fianah	Inhot	Nikail	Saliut	Xalos
5	Caldred	Goldor	Jacapus	Norson	Tula	Yazir
6	Dilos	Greyon	Kainen	Olric	Ukuw	Zaron

Female names

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Alliea	Evin	Iiti	Mahlia	Piya	Urshla
2	Anhura	Folwyth	Jalia	Melrith	Qashi	Viyan
3	Bethari	Gwyl	Kassriel	Nerhal	Rahara	Walahren
4	Ceina	Haishath	Kizhi	Nilmara	Serien	Xaawo
5	Divya	Hildfrida	Lamara	Nirla	Sinrit	Yaara
6	Eilwyn	Idriel	Lysandra	Nishal	Thiri	Zhura

Step Two: Descriptors

Descriptors can really be anything; to keep this section focused, however, we'll limit options to two aspects: races (sometimes called 'species' in other RPGs) and occupations (or 'classes').

	Race	
1	Human	Us, but with a bit of a chip on their shoulder because they aren't the only sapient beings in the world, and are in fact the shortest-lived.
2	Dwarf	Short, tough, gruff individuals who live underground, mine precious materials, and place enormous value on their beards.
3	Elf	Ethereal, long-lived beings, famed for their grace and beauty, who possess a deep affinity for the natural world.
4	Furry	Anthropomorphised animals or humans who possess animal features/can turn into animals/can communicate with animals.
5	Greenblood	Come in many shapes and sizes, but united in their intimidating appearance and unflattering reputation for brutishness.
6	Halfling	Little folk, possessed of great charm, healthy appetites, and an easy-going manner that is hard to overcome.

	Occupation	
1	Artist	Use their creative/performative abilities to entertain, encourage, and inspire others.
2	Godtalker	Possess the ability to interact—plead, bargain, argue—with the gods, and have them interject in worldly matters.
3	Mage	Powerful beings who can harness esoteric knowledge, summon arcane powers, and warp reality with but a word and a gesture.
4	Outlaw	Unconstrained by the rules of society, happy to borrow from the haves and give to the have-nots (which may include themselves.)
5	Treasure-hunter	Spend their time exploring the world, trying to find long-lost artefacts—perhaps for scholarly reasons, or just naked greed.
6	Warrior	Rely on brawn rather than brains to get them through their day, and often have a deep connection with their weapon of choice.

Step Three: Traits

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Adaptable	Courageous	Diplomatic	Generous	Mischievous	Sad
2	Adventurous	Creative	Disciplined	Guarded	Nervous	Scatter-brained
3	Aggressive	Curious	Evasive	Impulsive	Outgoing	Strong
4	Bold	Defensive	Excitable	Intelligent	Protective	Stubborn
5	Cautious	Detached	Extravagant	Kind	Reckless	Superstitious
6	Cheeky	Determined	Friendly	Loyal	Reserved	Tall

Step Four: Relationships

Family

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Mother	Cousin, Male	Girlfriend	Lover	Son	Stepsister
2	Aunt	Daughter	Granddaughter	Mother-in-law	Son-in-law	Stepson
3	Boyfriend	Daughter-in-law	Grandfather	Nephew	Stepbrother	Uncle
4	Brother	Father	Grandmother	Niece	Stepdaughter	Wife
5	Brother-in-law	Father-in-law	Grandson	Sister	Stepfather	None
6	Cousin, Female	Fiancé	Husband	Sister-in-law	Stepmother	Other/ choose

	Family
1	Lives in a small seaside town, a long way away. Haven't seen them for a long time, but know they'd be there if I needed them.
2	A minor noble, well known at Court. Mixes with high society, and takes fashion and trends very seriously.
3	Works as a craftsperson in the next village. Quite distant, didn't keep in touch; I never really knew them.
4	A miner, further inland. A good sort, very reliable, but can come across as gruff and overly crass to those who aren't well-acquainted.
5	Married into a respectable family, sometimes gives the impression they're too good for their other relatives.
6	A famous performer, travelling the land, loved wherever they go. Visits whenever they come through the area, but never stays too long.

(*continued*)

(continued)

	Friend
1	Known each other since we were children. When I left home, they continued to work for their family's business. A reliable, comforting source of stability.
2	Used to work together, but lost contact after they left; met by chance, sometime later, and have stayed in touch.
3	Didn't like each other at first, but became closer as we learned more about each other, realising we had a lot in common.
4	A fellow adventurer. We met in a dungeon, nearly killed each other, then realised we were on the same side; we've been good buddies ever since.
5	Were once lovers, but weren't right for each other; remained close, even though life took us down different paths.
6	A local dignitary, who doesn't always approve of my unofficial (albeit heroic) activities; helps when they can, but won't hesitate to criticize my methods.

	Adversary
1	Disliked each other ever since we were children; that animosity only grew as we aged.
2	Were once rivals for the love of the same person; neither of us has ever been able to forgive the other's behaviour.
3	A business rival, who will happily make use of underhand (and even illegal) tactics to gain an advantage.
4	Toady to a local official, through whom they can cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people; very spiteful and slimy.
5	Leader of a group of ruffians, who care nothing for law or niceties; hates me because I beat them in a fight in front of their goons.
6	A senior noble, who uses their power to intimidate, persecute, and terrorise the people of this land; doesn't know/care I exist, but they must be stopped

Step Five: Hopes and Fears

	Hopes
1	To prove myself worthy as a warrior/lover/merchant/scholar/other.
2	To undo a curse/enchantment that blights the land.
3	To overcome the evil king/wizard/cult/bandits/other.
4	To get revenge for some ancient family injustice.
5	To become rich and/or powerful.
6	To settle down for a quiet life.

(*continued*)

(continued)

	Fears
1	That evil will triumph over the world.
2	That I will be rejected/abandoned by my family/people/love.
3	That I will never escape the destiny I was prophesied to possess.
4	That my enemies might find and defeat me.
5	That the people I care for might suffer.
6	That I may never find peace.

Step Six: Mannerisms

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Always rubs hands together	Bites fingernails	Drums fingers on surfaces	Often talks to self	Says random words	Tight shoulders
2	Always says sorry	Bites the inside of their cheek	Guffaws loudly	Plays with hair	Sniffs as if there's a bad smell	Twitching eyelids
3	Always scruffy	Blinks one eye slightly after the other	Loud breathing	Punches friends on the arm	Speaks very quickly	Twitching lips
4	Always wears a certain item	Can't stay still for long	Never lets others finish speaking	Raises eyebrows	Strokes chin when thinking	Uses a lot of 'buffer' words.
5	Annoying laugh	Clears their throat a lot	Often asks inappropriate questions	Rolls eyes and groans	Talks very quietly	Very high-pitched voice
6	Avoids eye-contact	Gesticulates wildly when talking	Often licks lips	Rubs back of neck	Thousand-yard stare	Wobbly head

Step Seven: Special Abilities

As a rule of thumb, the client will likely want to give their character one ability appropriate to their weapon and/or other items (see Step ten, below); on top of that, have them roll one or two abilities from the table below, or use them as inspiration.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Alchemy	Darkvision	High-born	Lore-master	Psychic	Stealth
2	Alert	Dead-talker	Hunting	Low-born	Riding	Strength

(*continued*)

(continued)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
3	Athletic	Deft-handed	Insightful	Lucky	Romantic	Survival
4	Comforting	Diplomatic	Intimidating	Magic-sense	Singing	Swimmer
5	Cooking	Far-sight	Keen-eyed	Nature-talker	Sneaky	Technology
6	Dancing	Fearless	Leadership	Praying	Spellcasting	Travel

Steps Eight & Nine: Hit-Points & Luck

Give the character a starting maximum of ten HP, and two luck-points.

Step Ten: Items

New characters will likely need three pieces of kit: a weapon; something to either preserve or restore their health; and a useful/unusual tool to help them in certain situations. Try and keep weapons' damage output in-line with the character's current level; likewise, all protective items reduce an adversary's successful attack by 1HP, and healing items, on a successful role, restore either 3 or d4 HP, depending on your use of dice.

	Weapons	
1	Axe	A heavy metal blade attached to a wooden haft; some are double-headed, others are small enough to be used as projectiles.
2	Bow	May be carved from a single piece of wood, or made from a number of materials glued together. Don't get the string wet!
3	Chakram	A plate-sized, metal, bladed ring spun at high speed and hurled at the enemy. May also be used hand-to-hand as a slashing weapon.
4	Knife	A tool as much as a weapon, small enough to be carried without getting in the way; come in different shapes and sizes.
5	Spear	A long pole with a metal blade/spike at one end (sometimes both); some require two hands whereas others can be thrown as javelins.

(*continued*)

(continued)

	Weapons	
6	Sword	Can be single-handed or two-handed, double-edged or single-edged, straight or curved, plain or ornate; but they all hurt.

	Health	
1	Armour	Chainmail, scale-mail, plate-armour, helmet, greaves, vambraces: whatever the name, its purpose is to protect the wearer from blows.
2	Healing potion	A small vial of magical liquid; guzzle it down (or maybe it only takes a few drops), and the recipient will miraculously feel better.
3	Apothecary kit	Contains various herbs, balms, and ointments, as well as the tools needed to turn them into useable medicines.
4	Prayers	Sometimes the gods can be merciful, and may dispense healing and support to their followers. But beware: they may demand a price.
5	Shield	A sturdy combination of wood, leather, metal, and paint, that has a permanent place between its carrier and their enemies.
6	Spells	Certain magical spells can heal wounds, cure illnesses, and even restore life; strong spells often require rare components.

Special items can be just about anything; to generate something unique, roll on the first table, for the 'aspect' (which may also be applied to weapons/health-items), then on the second, for the type of object. Some of the combinations might be a bit…'whacky', but they're often the best ones.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Ancient	Detecting	Glowing	Irritating	Pearl	Talking
2	Belligerent	Elemental	Gold	Jade	Pet	Tattered
3	Bone	Enchanted	Haunted	Jewelled	Reinforced	Toy
4	Burning	Exotic	Heirloom	Magnetic	Runed	Transforming
5	Carved	Floating	Holy	Mechanical	Singing	Warding
6	Cursed	Glass	Ice	Musical	Spell	Zombie

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Animal	Bracelet	Game-piece	Lockpick	Quill	Sheath
2	Backpack	Brush	Hat	Map	Relic	Staff
3	Belt	Candle	Hook	Medallion	Ring	Tattoo
4	Bird	Cloak	Instrument	Mirror	Rope	Tool
5	Book	Coin	Jewel	Necklet	Sand-timer	Wand
6	Bottle	Earring(s)	Lantern	Pipe	Scroll	Whistle

Setting Inspiration

Secondary Worlds

If you need a little inspiration, putting your fantasy setting together, hopefully these tables will make life a little easier. Just roll on the appropriate ones (or simply choose something you/your client like the sound of), and use that information to define the paracosm. (If the table has numbers across the top and down the side, roll once to select the column, and then again to select the row.) If you're drawing a map, you may wish to create your 6 × 4 grid, mark down a handful of squares as major locations, and role a major/minor location for each square in turn.

Depending on the dice you're using, select the row/column that corresponds with these results:

Row/column	d6	2d6	d20
1	1	2-3	1-4
2	2	4-5	5-7
3	3	6-7	8-10
4	4	8	11-13
5	5	9-10	14-16
6	6	11-12	17-20

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Safe Spaces

The character's safe space is usually their home, but this is not a hard and fast rule: it might be the home of a cherished friend, or a place that makes them feel at peace.

Settlement		
1	Dwelling	An isolated residence, be it a farm, a cottage, or a cave.
2	Thorp	A very small, communal settlement, consisting of a few houses.
3	Village	A modest yet largely self-sufficient community in the countryside.
4	Town	A substantial urban environment, often a region's economic hub.
5	Suburb	An outlying district of a larger built-up area.
6	City	A huge metropolis, comprising every level of society.

Major Locations

In truth, pretty much any location could fall under any of the three categories:

Friendly		
1	Castle	A mighty stronghold, built as a sanctuary against enemy attacks. A bustling community living in close proximity.
2	Farm	Anything from a small holding to an industrial community, growing crops, rearing livestock, or tending vines.
3	Monastery	Places of learning and faith, often built like fortresses to keep the peaceful folk inside (and their riches) safe from raiders.
4	Settlement	An urban location of varying size (see above), where people come together to live, work, and play. Often quite smelly.
5	Tavern	A local establishment, where people can relax and socialise. Often a starting point of adventures, and source of combat.
6	Valley	A secluded location, hidden (or, at least, sheltered) from the rest of the world.

Hostile		
1	Camp	A makeshift settlement (which may have become semi-permanent over time), housing armies, outlaws, or other, more desperate, folk.
2	Dungeon	Originally built to 'house' criminals (or anyone the local lord wants rid of), but which has since become a breeding ground for evil.
3	Hideout	A (usually well-hidden/hard-to-find) lair out of which various personages on the wrong side of the law operate.
4	Monster's nest	Creatures of all sizes and persuasions will aggressively protect their young from any perceived threat.
5	Ship	Self-contained worlds of hard personalities, suspicious of outsiders, happy to forego ethics—and that's even if they *aren't* pirates!
6	Tomb	Built to transition souls from one life to the next, they naturally draw the attention of restless spirits looking for peace/revenge.

Mysterious		
1	Fae clearing	Some places are so touched by magic you can *feel* it; maybe it's a fairy's home, a doorway to a lost realm, or the residue of a spell.
2	Maze	In addition to presenting a challenge in and of themselves, these strange formations beg the question: what's on the other side?
3	Mine	Probably started out as a legitimate business interest, but then 'something' happened, and it might be best not to find out what.
4	Monument	Who built this bizarre object? Why? Is it just a marker, or is there more to it—and should you investigate, or leave it alone?
5	Ruins	Fortresses, religious compounds, even entire towns; what caused the place to be abandoned, and why did nobody come back?
6	Temple	Which god(s) was this site built to worship, *how* were/are they worshipped, and what are their and their followers' intentions?

Minor Locations

Terrain		
1	Coast	Sand, shingle, cliffs; stormy or calm; exposed or sheltered; inhabited or secluded: a place where water meets land.
2	Forest	Woodland has long been associated with the extraordinary and fantastic; but what goes on beyond the branches?
3	Grassland	Wide open spaces, where wind and animals roam free, and one can see where one is going, all the way to the horizon.
4	Marsh	Wetlands form where the land is saturated by water, making them both treacherous and mysterious to navigate.
5	Mountains	Highland areas can be rocky, filled with vegetation, or permanently snowed under; what sort of creature might live in that environment?
6	River	From narrow streams to major waterways, rivers have long been the lifeline of civilisation.

Travel		
1	Open	Easy to navigate; presents no hindrance.
2	Dense	Can be traversed, but takes time and effort.
3	Hazardous	May only be negotiated by people with great stamina/willpower.
4	Enchanted	A place touched by magic, which may present its own challenges.
5	Haunted	Dark landscapes, filled with creatures of ill omen.
6	Impassable	A barrier to all travel that must be circumnavigated.

Drawing a Fantasy Map

The single most important skill necessary for drawing a fantasy map is the ability to draw wobbly lines. Seriously: learn to shake your hand slightly while you're drawing a line, and you've nailed it.

Coastlines
The coast is nothing more than a curvy line. 

(*continued*)

(continued)

Coastlines

If you wish to make it a little more intricate, all you have to do is draw that same line, letting your hand 'tremble' as you draw.

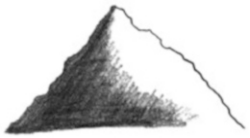
And if you want to make it a bit more distinct, add some rounded 'W's to show some waves.

Mountains

These are basically just triangles without a bottom.

For a nicer look, do the whole trembly-hand thing again.

And scribble in from one side, to make it look like shade.

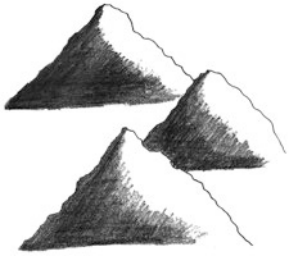


(*continued*)

(continued)

Mountains

If you want a full mountain range, just add more.



Rivers

Much like with the coast, rivers are just a not-straight line.

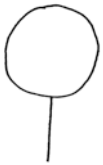
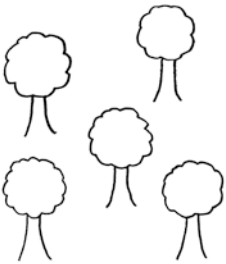
As we're up-close, you might want your rivers to be quite wide, so draw another 'trembly' line.

And then another.

(*continued*)

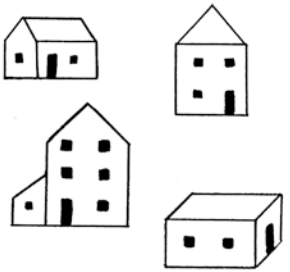
(continued)

Rivers	
And add more wobbles in the middle, to make it look like a running current.	

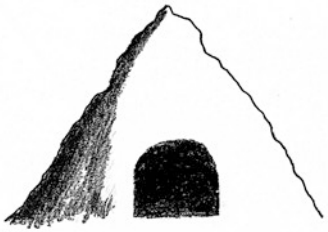
Forests	
Trees are just lollipops—a circle, with a line coming out the bottom.	
Or, if you want to be a little fancier, you could draw a 'cloud' rather than a circle.	
And if you wanted to be even fancier than that, you can widen the trunk by drawing two curved lines.	
A Forest is just several trees.	

Landmarks

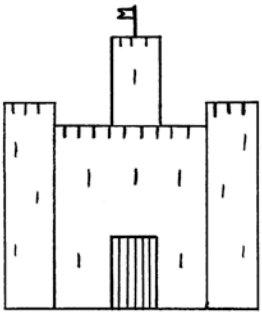
A Town is a collection of rectangles, with triangular tops, with some squares/rectangles for doors/windows.



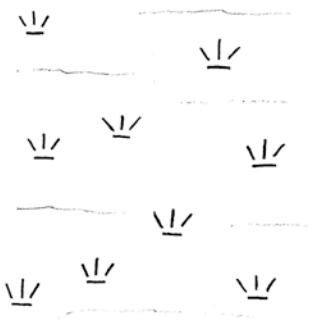
A Cave or Mine is just a mountain with a black hole.



A Castle is a square, with a rectangle on either side and on top; add a door (another rectangle) and some short lines for windows and battlements.



A Marsh is a collection of 'crown'-shaped symbols, with some 'waves' between, like reeds poking out of the water.



NPCs

Depending on the story, each type of NPC may fall under any of the three categories (friendly, hostile, or background). You can find further inspiration for NPCs in Appendix A. If you expect an NPC to get into combat, remember to give them the appropriate number of Hit- and Damage-Points:

	Level	HP	Average damage	Total ability levels
Grunts	1	2	2 or d2	1
	2	2	2 or d2	1
	3	2	2 or d2	2
	4	3	2 or d3	2
	5	3	2 or d3	2
	6	3	2 or d3	2
	7	4	3 or d4	3
	8	4	3 or d4	3
	9	4	3 or d4	3
	10	5	3 or d4	3
	11	5	4 or d6	4
Lieutenants	1	5	2 or d4	3
	2	5	2 or d4	3
	3	6	3 or d4	4
	4	6	3 or d4	4
	5	7	3 or d4	5
	6	7	4 or d6	5
	7	8	4 or d6	6
	8	8	4 or d6	6
	9	9	5 or d6	7
	10	9	5 or d6	7
	11	10	5 or d6	8
Bosses	1	10	3 or d4	6
	2	11	3 or d4	7
	3	12	4 or d6	8
	4	13	4 or d6	9
	5	14	5 or d6	10
	6	15	5 or d8	11
	7	16	6 or d8	12
	8	17	6 or d8	13
	9	18	7 or d10	14
	10	19	7 or d10	15
	11	20	8 or d12	16

Male names

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Amadeus	Chandra	Erdal	Maruf	Sargon	Trystan
2	Ajok	Culhwch	Eshu	Minthar	Swa	Uparaja
3	Artor	Dieter	Icthion	Neiterkob	Tarabya	Vortimer
4	Ashurnasirpal	Djeha	Johan	Perrard	Thadominbya	Wulbari
5	Asri	Drudwas	Kabundulu	Qureyoon	Tristram	Yunan
6	Cadmus	Duban	Kwoth	Sakra	Tros	Zawgyi

Female names

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Iseult	Badroulbadour	Gbadu	Isolde	Minthami	Olwen
2	Abuk	Bixia	Gleti	Jiandi	Morgiana	Rusalka
3	Afua	Buluku	Gloriande	Kumari	Mwaynun	Setkya
4	Allat	Bunzi	Gretal	Makeda	Nambi	Thaney
5	Aminatu	Chang'e	Guanyin	Manat	Nüwa	Woyengi
6	Amokye	Dunyazad	Hànbá	Mazu	Nzingha	Zumurrud

Occupations

Friendly		
1	Adventurer	Someone who seeks to make a living by taking risks, be it by hunting dragons, seeking treasure, or by exploring the unknown.
2	Dignitary	A high-ranking official, who forms part of the land's ruling class, and sees to the smooth running of laws and government.
3	Healer	Knowledgeable, often kind-hearted individuals, who tend to the sick and injured, assist childbirth, and support the community.
4	Merchant	A trader, businessperson and all-around money-maker; usually either has or can get anything a character needs.
5	Monk/Nun	A person of the cloth, who has dedicated their life to worship, reflection, and labour, often somehow apart from society.
6	Scholar	People whose lives revolve around the pursuit and communication of knowledge, from lawyers and archivists to scribes and teachers.

Hostile		
1	Bandit	Those who prefer to live outside of the law, and who survive by taking from others rather than contributing to society.
2	Black-marketeer	Some goods can't be purchased legally, but there's always someone willing to bend the rules—for a price, of course.
3	Cultist	Followers of usually frowned-upon gods, who want nothing more than the triumph of their deity over the world.
4	Magician	Powerful individuals who can use their arcane knowledge to do…pretty much anything they want.
5	Monster	Essentially animals of varying stature, makeup, and intelligence. (See the 'Obstacle Inspiration' section for suggestions.)
6	Noble	A wealthy and powerful individual, usually by merit of their birth, who can be jealous of their power and scornful of 'commoners'.

Background		
1	Farmer	An individual (and their family) who works hard, lives off the land, and produces goods for market.
2	Children	May be street urchins, young students, noble offspring, happy and playful, sad and needy, helpful, or troublesome.
3	Blacksmith	A highly skilled craftsperson who produces metalwork of various usages; may be turned to when a sword or armour needs fixing.
4	Innkeeper	The owner of the establishment where characters may find food, ale, somewhere to sleep, and, more often than not, quests.
5	Guard	One who keeps watch over a specific jurisdiction, be it a city's streets, a particular person's body, or an entire nation.
6	Beggar	Someone who has fallen on hard times, and has to live on the street, relying on kindness and charity to get by.

Goals

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	To hunt and kill a famous or legendary beast.	To find and marry their missing (or escaped) fiancé.	To release an imprisoned god/demon.	To live forever/ prolong another's life.	To become an influential royal advisor.	To prove themselves worthy of another's love.
2	To protect a secret.	To find paradise.	To rule the land.	To gain knowledge.	To win a contest.	To form an alliance.
3	To live a normal, peaceful life.	To bring about the end of the world.	To resurrect a dead lover/ child/other.	To find a long-lost relic.	To produce and sell magical drugs.	To overcome a rival family.
4	To spread a particular religion.	To escape an enemy's grasp.	To regain their honour.	To explore the world.	To flee an arranged marriage.	To overthrow the government.
5	To clear their name.	To become rich.	To rescue someone.	To find salvation.	To collect a debt.	To get revenge.
6	To defend the innocent.	To return a body for proper burial.	To be the best in their field.	To spread word of impending doom.	To conquer new lands.	To prevent a conspiracy.

Features

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Has a lisp.	Appears sad.	Lectures people when talking.	Is always in a rush.	Is unnervingly tall.	Talks like a pirate.
2	Always calls people sir/ma'am.	Can't pronounce their 'r's.	Has a high-pitched, cackly laugh.	Is always trying to sell something.	Has a deep facial scar.	Talks with a very nasal voice.
3	Always has one eye closed.	Can't seem to stop talking.	Always asks what day it is.	Is annoyingly happy all the time.	Looks anxiously around all the time.	Visibly seethes with anger.
4	Always makes a cup of tea.	Ends all sentences as if they were questions.	Has a pet.	Is missing a number of teeth.	Shows total disdain for 'lower-class' people.	Walks with a limp.
5	Always seems annoyed.	Always thinks of the worst outcome.	Has a slow, deep voice.	Is perpetually inebriated.	Sneers when they talk.	Wears ornate clothing.
6	Is missing an ear.	Has a catchphrase.	Has an evil smile.	Forgetful.	Sniffs a lot.	Wheezes loudly.

Special abilities

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Balanced	Doomed	Influential	Occult	Sneaky	Time-reader
2	Charismatic	Duellist	Intelligent	Persuasive	Strange aura	Tragic
3	Cocoon	Elemental touch	Levitation	Pet	Stun	Unpredictable
4	Cutting words	Emotionless	Magic	Raise dead	Summoning	Vengeful
5	Dexterity	Ensnare	Masked	Rapid heal	Swarm	Venom-spit
6	Dirty fighter	Focused	Mutated	Scaly skin	Tactician	Wall-walker

Monsters

These may be entirely animalistic in nature, supremely intelligent beings, or anything in-between. As such, they may simply be animals for the client-character to survive, or full-blown NPCs, with their own personalities and goals. With a few imaginational adjustments, any of them may fall into any NPC category (friendly, hostile, background; grunt, lieutenant, boss).

If the creature is essentially a human in monster form, you may choose to give it a more human motivation; if it's more bestial in nature, consult this table:

Instinctive goals/behaviour	
1	Protect its young.
2	Guard something (e.g., a treasure or entrance).
3	Feed.
4	Defend its territory.
5	Escape a perceived threat.
6	Procreate.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Hydra: many-headed beast.	Chimera: lion-goat-snake hybrid.	Gryphon: beast with eagle's head, lion's body.	Nāga: beaked snake that can swim through the earth.	Popobawa: one-eyed, bat-winged demon.	Troll: huge, tough, dim-witted humanoids.
2	Aziza: tiny, forest-dwelling fairies (flightless).	Chinthe: giant guardian-lions.	Harpy: vicious human-bird hybrid.	Nawarupa: a monster possessing features of nine animals.	Scylla: shark-toothed water monster with many heads and tentacles.	Undead: ghosts, skeletons, zombies.
3	Baku: trunked tiger-bear which eats dreams.	Cyclops: giant with only one eye.	Impundulu: lightning-bird.	Nymph: spirit/being associated with nature.	Shetani: deformed night-demon.	Unicorn: horse with a horn (often magical).
4	Belu: giant-fanged, grey-skinned ogres.	Dragon: powerful reptilian being.	Inhuman: vampires, werewolves.	Peik-ta: ghosts tormented by hunger.	Snallygaster: reptilian bird with octopus tentacles.	Xiangliu: nine-headed serpent.
5	Bixi: dragon with a turtle's shell.	Giant spiders: with strong webs.	Kongamato: flying lizard.	Peng: giant fish that transforms into a bird.	Tikoloshe: short, invisible tricksters.	Yale: hoofed beast with tusks and horns.
6	Charybdis: giant-mouthed water monster.	Gorgon: creature with snakes for hair.	Minotaur: human with a bull's head.	Phoenix: magical bird that regenerates i n flames.	Tree-beings: sapient trees that can walk/talk.	Zhenniao: bird with poisonous feathers.

Obstacle Inspiration

Here Be Dragons

If you find yourself struggling to come up with obstacles to put before the client's character, hopefully these tables will make life a little easier. Just roll where appropriate (or choose something you/your client like the sound of), and use the result to inform play. (If the table has numbers across the top and down the side, roll once to select the column, and then again to select the row.)

Depending on the dice you're using, select the row/column that corresponds with these results:

Row/column	d6	2d6	d20
1	1	2-3	1-4
2	2	4-5	5-7
3	3	6-7	8-10
4	4	8	11-13
5	5	9-10	14-16
6	6	11-12	17-20

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8

Quests

Overall goals for the client's character to strive towards are:

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Retrieve a mislaid item	Rescue a kidnappee	Remove a curse	Defend a settlement	Solve a murder	Attend a council
2	Find missing travellers	Repair a damaged item	Discover an ailment's cure	Learn a figure's identity	Recover a legendary treasure	Sit in judgement on someone
3	Deliver a message	Slay a monster	Protect a person	Assassinate someone	Steal something	Uncover a conspiracy
4	Unite a separated couple	Gain another's affection	Break someone out of prison	Disarm a dangerous weapon	Consult a wizened elder	Appease angered spirits
5	Win a contest	Help a craftsperson	Resolve a dispute	Collect a debt	Escort travellers	Find an escaped pet
6	Kidnap someone	Capture a fugitive	Conquer a stronghold	Spy on someone	Escape an assassin	Locate a lost site

Exploration: Random Encounters

Depending on the result rolled on the random-encounter table, consult the appropriate table below:

d6	2d6	d20	Encounter
1	2-3	1-4	Ambush! The character is attacked by one or more adversaries of your own choosing; describe the scene, then run combat as normal.
2	4-5	5-7	Suffer an accident! The character automatically loses a grunt's worth of hit-points (appropriate to current level); describe what goes wrong, and have the client amend their character-sheet.
3	6-7	8-10	Get lost! The character has accidentally wandered into a different square, further away from their destination; describe how they realised this, and have the client plan a new route.
4	8	11-13	False alarm. Nothing happens; continue as normal.
5	9-10	14-16	Find something. Come across something unusual/ discover a new landmark; describe it (or have the client do so), potentially mark it on the map, and ask the client if they'd like to explore.
6	11-12	17-20	Chance meeting. Encounter a friendly fellow traveller (either a known or new NPC); role-play an interaction, and have them provide the client-character with information or supplies.

Ambush	
1	You have disturbed a monster in its nest/lair; it attacks.
2	A group of robbers have lain in wait, looking to take whatever riches you may have.
3	You stumble upon a cursed/enchanted location, and must escape/defeat its guardian.
4	Another traveller happens your way, and attacks without provocation.
5	A boss (or the character's adversary) has sent a group of minions to subdue you.
6	The boss/adversary themselves chooses to attack you in this desolate place.

Accidents	
1	You miss your footing (e.g., trip on a root, misjudge a step), and fall.
2	You trigger a hunter's trap (e.g., snare, foothold, punji, deadfall, pit).
3	You get struck by an environmentally-appropriate hazard (e.g., rockfall, flood, fire).
4	The weather is terrible (too hot/cold/wet/etc.), and you're feeling the effects.
5	You surprise a fellow traveller, who instinctively attacks before realising their mistake and lowering their weapon.
6	The land is affected by a curse, which saps your strength.

Lost	
1	A custard-thick fog descends on the area, making navigation impossible.
2	Something about this place looks awfully familiar; you've been going in circles!
3	A monster/bandits attack; you escape unharmed, but you had to run into wild territory.
4	You come across some impassable terrain (e.g., a rockfall or collapsed bridge), and will have to find a way around.
5	You ask another traveller for directions; it seems they didn't know the right way.
6	You agree to accompany another traveller for a while (e.g., as protection, or just because you enjoy their company), but this takes you a long way off-course.

False alarm	
1	You pause for a moment, listening; you could have sworn you heard whispers in the mist, but, after a time, nothing happens.
2	A loud rustling comes from nearby; after a tense moment, a small, furry animal jumps out and runs away.
3	Another traveller appears; you exchange pleasantries, then go your separate ways.
4	It's a beautiful day, and you can't help but take in the scenery.
5	You disturb a monster; it growls at you, but doesn't attack (and retreats if approached).
6	You discover some tracks (human/animal/monster), but, on closer inspection, they appear quite old.

Discovery	
1	An ancient grave/barrow/tomb/monument.
2	The ruins of a long-abandoned building/complex/settlement.
3	The entrance to a cave/dungeon/catacomb.
4	A coin/gem (either half-buried or at the bottom of a body of water) that hints at a nearby treasure.
5	A dead body (recent, decomposing, or a skeleton), which will need to be reported, and may have documents that point towards a secret/lost location.
6	A hidden abode/settlement, clearly still occupied.

Meeting	
1	A traveller comes the opposite way (i.e., from your destination); has some information about an NPC who might be helpful to the character's current task.
2	A local invites you into their home, gives you food; recover any lost hit-points.
3	A chance encounter with a known (friendly) NPC.
4	You see someone being attacked; if you rescue them, they'll vow to return the favour someday.
5	A merchant passes by, and will happily trade an item/sell it for a favour.
6	You catch up with a clearly wealthy caravan/body of travellers; if you're polite/ helpful, they'll reward you with goods/food/information.

Interactions

NPC behaviour during a conversation (in addition to their individual features):

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Has a minor injury that keeps bothering them.	Becomes suspicious about a particular statement.	Keeps looking for something they've misplaced.	Is enjoying the chat, wants to keep talking.	Was interrupted doing something illegal.	Goes vacant for a moment, lost in thought.
2	Is worried, but trying not to show it.	Starts coughing, struggles to stop.	Suddenly remembers something unrelated.	Is clearly in a pensive or thoughtful mood.	Is impatient for the discussion to be over.	Has difficulty pronouncing a word.
3	Gets something in their eye.	Has just had some good news.	Struggles to find the right words.	Loses their train of thought.	Take offense at something.	Has just had some bad news.
4	Is putting off doing a big task.	Says something to themselves.	Points their finger at the character.	Runs a hand through their hair.	Rubs their forehead.	Raises their voice.
5	Has just had sex.	Has a headache.	Has just had a row.	Mumbles something.	Changes the topic.	Offers refreshment.
6	Clears their throat.	Scratches an itch.	Sighs.	Farts.	Sneezes.	Burps.

Combat

Enemy actions/demeanour during combat (in addition to their individual abilities):

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Has been looking forward to this fight for a long time.	Switches their weapon to the other hand.	Remarks angrily at a damaged item of clothing.	Asks for a moment's pause to get their breath back.	Puts everything they have into a big attack.	Tries to tempt the character into joining their side.
2	Likes the character despite being foes.	Comments on the character's prowess.	Throws something at the character.	Uses an item of scenery as a weapon.	Irritated they have no choice but to fight.	Sick and tired of the character's interference.
3	Has more important things to do.	Trips the character over.	Jumps up onto higher ground.	Jumps to lower ground.	Tries to escape the battle.	Attacks somebody else.
4	Kicks the character.	Punches the character.	Shouts in triumph.	Shouts in fear.	Calls out an order.	Insults the character.
5	Cries out in pain.	Wipes their face.	Flexes their arm.	Examines an injury.	Winks at the character.	Breathing heavily.
6	Ducks.	Jumps back.	Snarls.	Spits blood.	Smiles.	Tells a joke.

Complications

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	The boss is escaping while his minions slow you down.	Someone has been poisoned or hurt, and has little time left.	A guard is coming, but the character mustn't be discovered.	The item being fought over is delicate, and mustn't be damaged.	The monster or enemies must be defeated in a specific order.	The enemy has a really powerful special ability that's ramping up.
2	The character has been given a time-limit.	A third party arrives, fights everyone.	The 'enemies' are actually possessed innocents.	The enemy is moments away from achieving their aim.	Mistaken identity; they're on the same side!	One enemy is shouting commands to the others.
3	An innocent NPC gets caught up in the fight.	The place is on fire, and burning quickly.	A powerful weapon is about to go off.	The weather makes fighting treacherous.	Fighting atop a carriage or wagon.	A larger battle is being fought on all sides.
4	The enemy flirts or jokes while fighting.	Combatants must make quips with each attack.	Must fight long enough for someone to escape.	The character's weapon breaks.	A natural disaster starts to occur.	Must fight more than one type of opponent.
5	The only escape-route is closing.	The battle is part of a chase.	More enemies arrive.	A sleeping monster is nearby.	Can only fight at long-range.	Can only fight up-close.
6	The ship is sinking.	Fighting underwater.	Difficult terrain.	The place is collapsing.	An ally gets knocked out.	Fight at a bottleneck.

Puzzles

For our purposes, we'll say there are six varieties of puzzle:

Puzzles		
1	Riddles	Specific phrases/questions which have some sort of veiled solution; when faced with a riddle, the character will likely be required to provide a correct answer before being able to continue. (The answer might itself be a clue to another puzzle's solution.)
2	Inventory puzzles	Require an individual to collect various items and (usually) bring them to a certain location.
3	Codes	Situations in which certain information has been transformed into an alternate (often ostensibly meaningless) form; code puzzles require the character to decipher/implement the hidden message.
4	Environmental puzzles	Require the character to utilise/manipulate the world around them in order to proceed.
5	Locked-room mysteries	Present a scenario whereby 'something' has happened (or needs to happen) in a specific area, even though it is apparently impossible to get in or out (at least without detection). Requires the character to solve (or carry out!) the activity.
6	Logic puzzles	Require the character to deduce the solution, based upon specific (clear) information.

('Traps' usually fall under one of these categories, the key difference being that, if the character makes the wrong move/gives the wrong answer, something bad happens.)

	Riddle puzzle	Solution
1	The more you take away, the bigger I become. What am I?	A hole.
2	Towns without houses, forests without trees, mountains without boulders and waterless seas.	A map.
3	What has a head and a tail, but no body?	A coin.
4	A part of heaven, though it touches the earth; some say it's valuable, others that it has no worth.	A rainbow.
5	I shine brightest in the dark. I am there but cannot be seen. To have me costs you nothing. To be without me costs you everything.	Hope.
6	What falls but never breaks? What breaks but never falls?	Night and day.

	Inventory puzzle	Solution
1	The character has been tasked with finding a specific item (e.g., a giant gemstone, or book of spells).	Discover its whereabouts, and acquire it.
2	A door/chest/drawer/and so on is locked.	Find the key.
3	After finding a number of strange artefacts, a similar object is found seemingly in-place.	Putting the found objects in the correct positions.
4	Creating a magical item requires specific materials/ingredients and instructions/ recipes.	Collect them, and bring them to the appropriate craftsperson.
5	A location is difficult to reach/navigate.	Purchase a map.
6	A machine/contraption (e.g., a mechanical lock) has malfunctioned.	Find and replace the missing/ damaged part(s).

	Code puzzle	Solution
1	A message from one conspirator to another seems innocent, but there's something strange about it.	Acquire the key, and decipher the real message.
2	Send a message to an NPC, in the knowledge that someone else will likely read it first.	Formulate a code, and encrypt the message.
3	An NPC/document delivers a seemingly meaningless sequence of numbers/letters/symbols.	A location/situation references those symbols, requiring a particular order/input.
4	Come across a 'combination' lock/ password that prevents progress.	Find the appropriate combination/ password.
5	A series of strange/rudimentary images (or hieroglyphs) are somewhere in the vicinity of a complex mechanism.	The images are in fact instructions on how to activate the mechanism.
6	Two (or more) very similar images (e.g., paintings, or a mirror reflecting a room) actually have some differences.	Identify the differences, and reflect on what they might mean (e.g., the paintings have different symbols/ numbers, indicating they should be hung in a certain order).

	Environmental puzzle	Solution
1	A natural hazard/obstacle (e.g., a river) must be traversed.	Do what one would do in that situation (e.g., find or make a rudimentary bridge/raft).
2	A maze (with or without moving walls).	Must be navigated/escaped appropriately.
3	A location needs to be mapped.	Explore the location, and record its layout.
4	An entrance/passageway can only be accessed by specific people (e.g., tiny, or incorporeal).	A local piece of vegetation magically conveys the necessary qualities.
5	A powerful creature/monster/band of enemies has made a location its home, and must be removed before progressing.	Lure it/them away with bait or a diversion of some kind.
6	The environment itself is a problem/hindrance (e.g., it's too dark to read an inscription).	Rearrange the environment to produce the desired effect (e.g., by unblocking/reflecting sunlight).

	Locked-room puzzle solution
1	Close scrutiny of the room's security system (e.g., guard routes/timings) exposes flaws that may be exploited (e.g., blind spots/gaps in the rota).
2	The act was committed earlier, but a ruse initially gave the appearance that all was well.
3	The act was actually committed, unseen, *after* the door was opened.
4	A secret passage exists that allows ingress/egress unseen.
5	There's a hiding-place *within* the room that allows the culprit to leave after the act is discovered.
6	A remote/mechanical device within the room carries out the act without the culprit's direct involvement.

	Logic puzzle	Solution
1	A grid requires certain letters/numbers/symbols to be put in the right order (e.g., Sudoku, magic-squares).	Use the information given to deduce each symbol's location.
2	Using a series of statements, only one of which is true, to identify something.	Determine the truth/falseness of each statement, and infer the implications.
3	Using a series of statements, *all* of which are true, to identify something.	Cross-reference each statement with each object, and identify the object to which all statements apply.

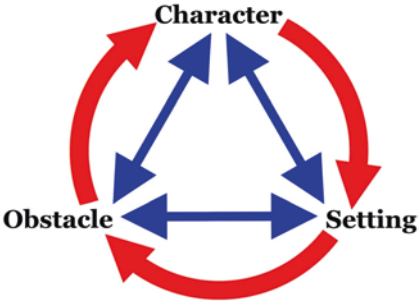
(*continued*)

(continued)

	Logic puzzle	Solution
4	A shape made of multiple smaller shapes, might be disassembled; the smaller shapes might be put together to form a different shape.	Take the first shape apart, and reorganise the tiles to find the new shape.
5	Mathematical puzzles (e.g., calculating values according to given factors).	Using numbers/mathematical principles to work out the answer.
6	Inference puzzles (e.g., 'If x is the same as y, and y is the same as z, is x the same as z?').	Follow the meaning from one circumstance to the next, until reaching the final one.

Core Mechanics Summary

Story Trinity + Cycle



Dice

Actions

d6	2d6	d20	(Own)	Result
1	2	1		Total failure
2	3-5	2-5		Failure
3	6-7	6-10		Partial success
4-5	8-11	11-19		Success
6	12	20		Total success

Modifiers

Level	d6	2d6	d20	(Own)
1	+1	+1	+1	
2	+1	+2	+2	
3	+2	+2	+3	
4	+2	+3	+4	
5	+2	+3	+5	
6	+3	+4	+6	

NB: A 'Total failure' can't be modified out of; a 'Total success' can't be modified into.

D. Hand, *Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31740-8

Character/NPC Statistics

	Level	HP	Average damage	Total ability levels
Client-character	1	10	3 or d4	6 (1, 2, 3)
	2	11	3 or d4	7
	3	12	4 or d6	8
	4	13	4 or d6	9
	5	14	5 or d6	10
	6	15	5 or d8	11
	7	16	6 or d8	12
	8	17	6 or d8	13
	9	18	7 or d10	14 (4, 5, 5)
	10	19	7 or d10	15 (5, 5, 5)
	11	20	8 or d12	16 (5, 5, 6)
Grunts	1	2	2 or d2	1
	2	2	2 or d2	1
	3	2	2 or d2	2
	4	3	2 or d3	2
	5	3	2 or d3	2
	6	3	2 or d3	2
	7	4	3 or d4	3
	8	4	3 or d4	3
	9	4	3 or d4	3
	10	5	3 or d4	3
	11	5	4 or d6	4
Lieutenants	1	5	2 or d4	3
	2	5	2 or d4	3
	3	6	3 or d4	4
	4	6	3 or d4	4
	5	7	3 or d4	5
	6	7	4 or d6	5
	7	8	4 or d6	6
	8	8	4 or d6	6
	9	9	5 or d6	7
	10	9	5 or d6	7
	11	10	5 or d6	8
Bosses	1	10	3 or d4	6
	2	11	3 or d4	7
	3	12	4 or d6	8
	4	13	4 or d6	9
	5	14	5 or d6	10
	6	15	5 or d8	11
	7	16	6 or d8	12
	8	17	6 or d8	13
	9	18	7 or d10	14
	10	19	7 or d10	15
	11	20	8 or d12	16

Exploration

Ensure the client knows whereabouts on the map their character currently is, and ask them where they'd like to go next, and which route they wish to take. For each square travelled through, have them roll; if this results in a Failure/Total Failure, roll on a random encounter table and play the result.

Random-encounter table:

d6	2d6	d20	Own	Encounter
1	2-3	1-4		Ambush! The character is attacked by one or more adversaries of your own choosing; describe the scene, then run combat as normal.
2	4-5	5-7		Suffer an accident! The character automatically loses a grunt's attack-worth of hit-points; describe what goes wrong, and have the client amend their character-sheet.
3	6-7	8-10		Get lost! The character has accidentally wandered into a different square, further away from their destination; describe how they realised this, and have the client plan a new route.
4	8	11-13		False alarm. Nothing happens; continue as normal.
5	9-10	14-16		Find something. Come across something unusual/discover a new landmark; describe it (or have the client do so), potentially mark it on the map, and ask the client if they'd like to explore.
6	11-12	17-20		Chance meeting. Encounter a friendly fellow traveller (either a known or a new NPC); role-play an interaction, and have them provide the client-character with information or supplies.

Interactions

Have the client declare what they wish to achieve from the interaction (e.g., gain certain information, make an impression, intimidate, etc.), and have them roll the dice. Role-play the results, asking for further rolls if the client wishes to achieve further specific objectives.

Combat

Beginning with client: roll to hit (with modifier, if appropriate); apply (or roll) damage according to the weapon used; repeat for opponent; repeat until one side or the other is destroyed (i.e., been reduced to zero hit-points), has surrendered (must make a successful roll to convince their enemy), or has fled (must make a successful roll to escape).

Puzzles

Make sure the puzzle is optional, and that there are alternate means of progressing if the client decides not to engage. Provide information well in advance; make sure they're aware of the puzzle's existence; have some clues on standby, should they need a hint; and be willing to solve it for them, if they get stuck or frustrated.

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