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Cardstock and Containment:
Exploring Therapeutic Affect in Magic: The Gathering *for Adults*

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Doctorate in Counselling and Psychotherapy (DPsychotherapy)

The University of Edinburgh

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Errata Declaration

I, Dr. Holt J.S. Hauser, submit amended pages ranging from 143 – 160 of *Cardstock and Containment: Exploring Therapeutic Affect in Magic: the Gathering for Adults* as an errata to the original publications. This errata is to correct previous errors made in the referencing list, particularly the omission of the following referenced citations:

Archer, M. et. al. (1998). Critical realism : essential readings / edited by Margaret Archer [and others]. Routledge

Archer, M. (2002). Realism and the Problem of Agency. Alethia, 5(1), 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1558/aleth.v5i1.11

Bhaskar, Roy (1975). A Realist Theory of Science. Routledge.

Bhaskar, R. (1993) Reclaiming reality: a critical introduction to contemporary philosophy.London: Verso.

Bhaskar R. (1998) The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences. 3rd edition, London: Routledge

Maton, K., & Moore, R. (Eds.). (2012). *Social realism, knowledge and the sociology of education Coalitions of the mind*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Sayer, A. (1992) Method in social science: a realist approach . 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

I declare:

(a) These omissions were in genuine error.
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Signed Declaration

I, Holt Hauser declare:

(a) this thesis has been composed by myself

(b) that the entirety of this thesis has been the result of my own work

(c) that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified

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Date: 12/05/2020

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Abstract

The field of mental health and gaming has grown with the surge of the digital gaming industry in the last thirty years. While research on video games in regard to mental health, especially their effects on children, concerns about pathological use, and potential applications health interventions, is becoming a known field of study, there are many more avenues for approaching games that have yet to be explored. There are three nexuses in which research into games and their relationship with mental health are underrepresented: 1. Qualitative, experience-focused research; 2. Research focusing on adult populations; and 3. Research on traditional games. Where these three nexuses meet, there is an absolute dearth of research. Given substantial previous work into the impact of games on human culture and society, and promising results from other populations and types of games, this thesis considers whether this might be a worthwhile subject area for future mental health research to expand on.

With this epistemic gap in mind, this thesis uses an ethnographic approach grounded in social realism to provide a foundational inquiry into whether traditional games can be considered therapeutic for adults. The hope for this research is that its results may be applicable and usable by further academic work from a wide breadth of different disciplines and onto-epistemic approaches. Using the game *Magic: The Gathering* as a case study, this work analyses the digital artefacts and experiential accounts offered by players, the design elements that are worked into the game, as well as the personal experiences and insights of the author as a *Magic* player, therapist and researcher. By marrying observations and experiences from the ludic field of *Magic: The Gathering* with theories from counselling and psychotherapy, the author outlines a process by which we might determine whether an activity is therapeutic. By applying this definition to narratives and outcomes offered by players online, this research concludes that traditional games can be therapeutic for adults, and further inquiry is needed to fully understand what impacts and potential benefits traditional games could have on the field of mental health for adults.

With this conclusion in mind, this thesis also offers an understanding of how one might theorize or conceptualize the ways a game can be therapeutic. This thesis maps out a potential path through which therapeutic affect evident in outcomes may develop in relation to game-play interactions, through a process of working with culturally established boundaries and expression both in-game and in the community that constitutes a process of contained reality-testing. This process is also explored alongside the complex relationship and entanglement of wider social discourses and contexts that *Magic* is a part of, such as assumptions made about games as a whole as well as issues of difference and diversity in gaming. In doing so, this research offers a model of how mental health research into games can be applied at an experiential level, as well as creating a reference point for the potential further application of counselling and psychotherapeutic theories in game.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

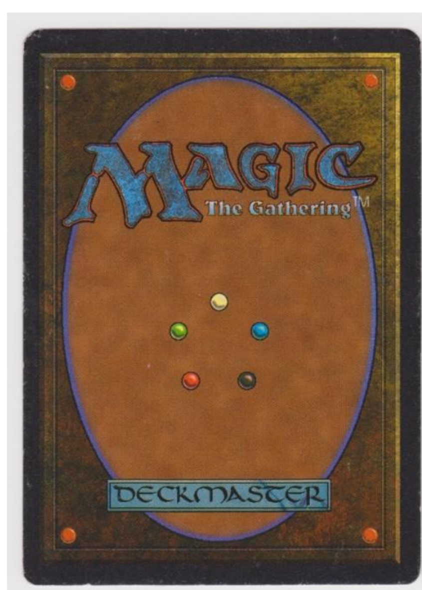
The initial idea for this project appeared a far less ambitious task than it has ended up. I began an investigation into a topic close to my heart and at the front of my mind as a newly qualified practitioner: the traditional games that I had invested so much of my free time and energy into outside my work as a therapist. I feel that playing *Magic: the Gathering*, a trading card game, at a high competitive level had been an incredibly therapeutic experience for me and not only served to be a means of relieving myself from the demands of therapeutic practice in the form of self-care, but also that the game had made me more reflective and self-aware of my strengths and limitations. With that in mind, I want to begin this work with an exploration of my first experiences in *Magic*, and invite you into what it might be like to discover the game and start playing.

The first time I played *Magic the Gathering* was at my sister Hillary's house in 2013. She lived in a small second floor apartment in North Park in San Diego, a traditionally poorer suburb of the city that was currently undergoing sweeping gentrification, with her partner, Simon, and my niece who was only about 9 months old at the time. It was the fall after I had finished my undergrad degree in English Literature, and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I was living in my father's trailer at the time near Riverside, and had decided to come down for a week or so to spend some time with Hillary, and meet my niece and Simon properly. I'd lived in Scotland for the previous four years, and was never good at keeping in contact.

Their old roommate just moved out, so I had a room to myself. A few days into the trip, I was starting to get a bit stir-crazy, and started curiously exploring the room. I noticed under the bed there was a number of flat white boxes. They were heavy, and unusual - I'd done a lot of moving work and had never seen storage boxes like these. They weren't secured with tape or anything, so I opened one up, and found it was filled with what must have been hundreds, maybe even thousands of cards. They had bright vivid colors on their borders - each of them with words that seemed almost to be written in another language. They had images with art that was striking in their difference - some looked like typical fantasy work, but some were

odd, abstract, dark. Some had illustrations of a Japanese style that caught my eye. I found myself flicking through each of the cards, looking at their names with interest.

I looked at the back of the cards, and found textured shades of muddy brown, at the center of which was five orbs of different colors, above which was a stylized logo emblazoned with the words "Magic the Gathering", and at the bottom of the card "Deckmaster". I felt excited as I read the words. I had heard about this game before, but never seen it. I shouted to the kitchen, "Simon - are these cards yours?"



"Yeah man!" he said back, as he strolled over to the room, "Do you play?"

“Uh… no,” I responded, a bit embarrassed by the fact I was looking up at him from the floor, towers of cards surrounding me.

He laughed at the sight. “Pick two colors, and some cards you like from those colors, and I’ll show you how to play.” And so I did. Through the week I played with Simon once he finished work as often as he was willing. *Magic* is a tough game; I hadn’t won a single game against him by the time I left. There was always one more trick, one more rule I didn’t know, and he would always get me. As I packed my things, I had already resolved to play the game more and figure out how to do it best. And to beat Simon.

My brother Reed and I had decided we were going to travel the west coast up to Oregon and Washington state looking for a city that was more suitable for our means - which meant cheaper living, and hopefully with better jobs. As we started travelling the west coast, I started keeping a blog that I called ‘Youth in Desult’, that continued for the next one and a half years. It was mostly about my struggles to find work or a path through life at that time, and looking back at the blog I find it funny that in almost every post I mention *Magic*. Interestingly, I don’t call it *Magic* there, just ‘cards’ - I didn’t want to say the name as I thought I’d get teased about playing *Magic* - but it is always there, in images, in talking about local card shops, about people I’d met. It ran like a steady current in the background, and I remember making special stops off at certain stores in Portland to look at cards or to buy packs of the new set during the trip, since Simon wanted to play when I next saw him in Washington for Christmas, since that’s where my mother lived.

After the Christmas holidays, due to some developments with family, I ended up moving in with Hillary and Simon. At first, the move was a struggle. It was my first time properly settling into a new city since I left home to go to university. This time, however, there was no halls of residence, or introductory courses or workshops. I didn’t have a car, and even if I did have one I wasn’t sure where I’d drive to. I was 22, and it dawned on me that, between running to job interviews, household chores, video games, and trying to keep in contact with my partner who still lived in Scotland, that I had little social interaction. I was struggling to figure out my career, and realized that I had no friends, and no idea how to make them.

Magic developed into a mainstay of my non-work schedule. To occupy the time between responses from potential jobs, or waiting for a commencement date in a new office, I sifted through the white boxes under the bed, and tried to make new

decks to play against Simon. I would often try to coax him into playing once he got home from work, mostly so we didn't end up staring at a TV in silence or playing video games, which I usually filled the day time hours with. For many months, I still couldn't win a single game. Perhaps that worked out better for both of us; it had become a hill to climb, this constant task that kept me centred and sane as the hot days rolled by with non-responses or career dead ends. That worked out, since Simon liked winning, no matter the opponent. After butting up against a fickle reality, where my fate was decided by faceless people behind closed doors representing massive organizations, I revelled in even having a *chance* to try and defeat this nearly impossible opponent. I could see my struggles pay off as I improved, and my resentment for the world of professionalism and careers, of 'finding your place' when I felt I had none, was channelled into defeating Simon, and showing to him through gritted teeth that I would defeat him, and I would earn a place in the world.

Eventually the day came. I was able to win a best of three matches after much deck tuning, an awful lot of reading articles online, and probably no small amount of luck. It was then I decided that, maybe, we should play in a tournament - an actual tournament in an actual game store. Simon laughed at me when I suggested it, his expression making clear that we could have gone any time before, but we agreed the next week we would go to 'Friday Night Magic' at a game shop that was a mile walk down the road from us.

When we showed up, I felt nervous. There were about 30 players there, waiting. I could see they knew what they were doing - the way they handled their cards and decks was fluid and natural, like how Simon did it. The constant, rhythmic, machinic flicking of card sleeves rattled in my ears as I fumbled nervously when handling my cards. I felt self-conscious, and nervous, but excited. I was competing with these other people - and while there were tangible prizes, I jumped at the thought that people might think highly of me if I did well, as I heard the regulars talk of pros and friends alike. I felt like I had little recognition elsewhere in my life; hell, I struggled to find entry level positions at bars down the road, let alone in any semblance of a career. Maybe I could find recognition here.

The tournament was a whirlwind - we were playing a format called 'booster draft'. When the judge sang out, "Please raise your hand if you have *not* done a booster draft before, and would like to learn how", I was the only one to raise my hand, and I could feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment. Draft is a limited format

in which a table of eight players, each of whom opens a booster pack, takes one card out, then passes the rest of the pack to the left. This process repeats itself until all the cards are disseminated, then it is repeated with two more booster packs, changing direction between packs. Finally, using the cards one picked, each player tries to make the best deck they can, then plays against one another. Frankly, I had no idea what I was doing. But I tried to summon all the tips Simon taught me, and the wisdom of pro-written articles as I sat down with the seven other players.

Somehow, after some tight games, I ended up breezing through the tournament and taking first place. When I was announced as coming in first place, it felt like I was throwing a middle finger to the world that was constantly telling me 'you're not good enough'. In the moments earlier, of pushing a lethal attack towards my opponent, I felt powerful. I looked up and saw the gears turning as they realized that the game was over, that I had won, that they had been bested. Satisfaction coursed through me - retribution for all the times recently that I had been denied what I had worked hard for. My rage and disdain for a society where I felt out of place, miniscule and unappreciated was simultaneously vindicated and absolved.

I was aware that I didn't *know* how good the cards were, or what things were valuable from the packs we opened, and that was part of the rush; *I* did this. *I* got this result from playing my best, going with my gut, and taking what I could from the games I played against Simon. Some of the people in the shop weren't happy about some random, inexperienced player coming in and taking the tourney, but I was on top of the world. As a reward for my efforts, I got a couple of packs as prizes, and a promotional card - Elvish Mystic - that I still have to this day.

Simon congratulated me, as did some of the other regulars who had welcomed me to the shop earlier. I wanted more of this feeling. I remember my insecurity melting away, and I thought as a point of pride, “Yeah, I’m a new player - and I still won.” Where previously I had wanted to lash out and inflict my fury on the world, I no longer held onto that anger, as I held the promotional card in my hand. I had been validated in the simple act of winning. My agency was restored, and my thirst for recognition quenched. I was a person capable of greatness. I had earned this victory. And I could earn other things too, outside this game.

When my previous opponents had looked up from the gamestate, picked up their cards, then reached their hand over the table with a smile and say, “Good game” when my victory was assured, I knew that those emotions were okay here. This was a place that I could put that intense energy when no-one else would take it - my drive, my passion, my dedication and my frustration. And when I continued to express ambition in a match of *Magic*, win or lose, others were okay with that, and those feelings could be held. We all wanted to win the next game, in every tournament. I felt that was respected in the other. Rather than it ruining the sanctity of the game or the social nature of this gathering, it made the games I played worthwhile. We were all fighting our hardest and that wasn’t destructive, but stimulating and meaningful - and at that first tournament, I came out on top. The estranged but always lurking desire to usurp and claim victory, the part of me that

felt taboo and rejected, that I may be worthwhile, and that I can be recognized as better than others, felt validated. And it felt understood that these feelings were not out of spite to the other I faced, or as a judgement of their value, but as a simple expression that *I* can do something - and do it well. I could be good at *Magic*, not despite these difficult feelings I held within me, but because of them.

Of course, I had plenty to learn in *Magic*, but from then on attending the weekly Friday tournaments became a part of my schedule, embedded into my life in San Diego. Sometimes it felt like the only stable thing - and it needed to be stable to hold my discontent. There was sometimes friction in the apartment when issues reared their ugly heads. I was frequently changing jobs, as most of my work was temporary, and I was trying different things to see if sales or construction or teaching was something I could do for 40 hours a week for the foreseeable. But *Magic* was always there, and the people in the shop were always there. Soon enough, it was the locals from the shop who I was inviting over to hang out, or going out with, usually with a play mat, a deck of cards, and some dice to make sure if we needed to we could play wherever we wanted. While not every *Magic* tournament went as well as that first one, it was an area of my life that I could remind myself that I was actually competent at this thing, even when I was being turned away from places for being under qualified or not having enough experience. It was the only thing I could really expect out of the week - that I would play on Friday. And after enough Fridays passed, I found the work I was looking for.

When I began the research process, I assumed that there would be significant research speaking to experiences like this one. However, I found in reviewing the literature, outlined in the next chapter was not a rich vein of literature and work with which my experiences could dialogue with, but an uncomfortable vacancy in the field. My initial, perhaps naive assumption in beginning this task led to the creation of this thesis, *Cardstock and Containment*, and a body of work that I hope substantially furthers how we think about games as a therapeutically affective practice for adults. This introduction will delineate a clear focus and objective for the work. It will also discuss the warrant for this thesis to fill an epistemic gap in the current body of mental health research pertaining to traditional games. It will also

briefly explain the methodological approach that was chosen to meet this rationale. Finally, I will outline the structure of this thesis, and acknowledge the limitations of this work regarding the content and considerations that were unable to be included in *Cardstock and Containment*.

The foundational texts on humanity's relationship with games is primarily drawn from sociological and anthropological works written in the first half the 20th century. Nearly all investigations into games will cite Johann Huizinga's foundational sociological work on humanity and their relationship with games entitled *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938. While this work has clearly been incredibly valuable and influential to the world of social science and its conception of humanity as a race in which play and games are inherent, its conclusions need clarification with more current theories of the mind. Contemporary texts in the field of counselling and psychotherapy on traditional games were incompatible or completely irrelevant to my understanding and experience of game-play, primarily treating games as a tool to be utilized as an intervention for those who have mental health issues. It is my hope that this work adequately addresses the substantial population who play games and enjoy therapeutic affective experiences that are absent in the body of literature, and to consider whether more research should be done in this field.

I consider the warrant for this research to be two-fold in the context of counselling and psychotherapy: it has applications and benefits both on a clinical level, and a theoretical-development level. Traditional games are currently in the midst of what many have called a 'Golden Age' (Mawson 2019). In card, board, and role-playing games, there has been a massive surge in popularity worldwide, and these trends don't appear to be slowing down (Hudak 2017; Research and Markets 2018). In terms of research, I see this as a call to action for the world of counselling and psychotherapy. A great deal of the work of therapy involves the psychotherapist being willing to enter into the world of the client, to consider and be open to the meanings that they associate with the activities, choices and relationships that make up their lived experience. This reaching to understand is essential, and I would argue requires far more than an openness to difference and an empathic disposition; it requires dedicated effort, research, and consideration on the part of the therapist. This heightened engagement on the part of the practitioner becomes even more important when the topic in question is one that is stigmatized or frowned upon in the cultural discourses in which the practitioner is operating.

The stigma surrounding devoted players of traditional games has been present in western discourses decades (Smarr-Foster 2017). From *The Simpsons* to *South Park*, popular media often depicts those who dedicate energy and interest to games, whether digital or traditional, as nerdy, lazy, socially inept, mentally ill, or even dangerous and prone to violent outburst (CNN 1997; Duggard 2015; Laycock 2015; McGonigall 2011; Steinfield 2018; Tsukayama 2014). As Euteneuer bluntly states: "We live in a society and culture that denigrates play and games" (2019, 786). Often the practice of playing games, too, is interpreted as acceptable only if it is taken at a casual level, for games in western culture have come to be analogous for frivolous pursuits, reserved only for time-wasting or those who have the privilege of not needing to work - perhaps a persistent hangover from Roger Caillois' (1957) famous definition of games as inherently unproductive.

The pervasiveness of this discourse, and the very powerful, contradictory experiences that I have had as a player, has become a major motivation for conducting this research. These dominant discourses will color most people's perceptions outside the gaming community, including practitioners of counselling and psychotherapy. As gaming becomes more mainstream, more of the clients coming to therapy will engage with them. It is our duty as therapists to seek to know more, and to be open to understanding the meaning these games take on for our clients. To that end, this thesis seeks to elucidate these experiences for those counsellors and psychotherapists who may be otherwise uninitiated into the world of traditional games and may have trouble shaking their preconceptions of the value (or lack thereof) of traditional games by exploring how or in what ways these games might be therapeutically affective for their clients.

Looking past the here-and-now effects of this research, the significant gap in research about traditional games presents an opportunity for the field of counselling and psychotherapy in terms of developing theory on therapeutic processes. In the course of my work and research, I noted several potential points for improvement in the study of games and hobbyist practices. First, I have yet to find an understanding or conception of what is 'therapeutic' outside the counselling room, despite its widespread usage in the common social lexicon. It is not uncommon to hear a peer speak about a recreational activity and describe it as 'therapeutic' for them. What does it mean for something that is not therapy to be 'therapeutic'? If this topic is to be broached and tapped as a resource for improving the theories of counselling and

psychotherapy, a working definition of 'therapeutic affect' needs to be developed so that this common phrase can serve as a marker for further research opportunities that might improve our current models of therapeutic change. This definition must be robust enough that it can meet the demands of inquiring into this field of what can or cannot be therapeutic, and how this therapeutic affect manifests. This thesis seeks to offer such a definition, and even if it is flawed, this should move discourse forward about how we might conceive of traditional games, and other recreational activities, as therapeutic.

Second, there is little research into *how* or *in what way* games can be therapeutically affective. Counselling and psychotherapy, by not strictly adhering to a diagnostic model, do not share the privilege of bio-medical models for determining a yes/no answer for questions concerning therapeutic development. Instead, our field has the advantage of having models of mental change and therapeutic development that are far more nuanced and process-driven in their conception of the human psyche, rather than being bound to the quantifiable and externalizable. As Flyvbjerg (2001) explains, the methodological tool set of the so-called 'hard sciences' does not have the power to generate an understanding of *how* or *why* in social contexts, or the *meaning* of a phenomena. Qualitative methods seek to get close to experience and are more effective in considering these questions by exploring the meaning of experiences in light of theory, and being able to use that to develop more advanced and effective understandings of the subject in question. If we are to come up with a more complete understanding of how or in what ways recreational activities can offer therapeutic affect to participants, it requires an approach that is focused on the experience of the agents enjoying these benefits, the context in which these activities are engaged with, and using theory to try and parse or understand how these experiences fit into our theories of mind. *Cardstock and Containment* offers an attempt at approaching non-therapy activities through the rich resource of therapeutic theory in order to explore the processes that might be at play and convey therapeutic affect. This examination is meant to be exploratory, and I imagine there will be plenty to criticise and develop in this approach to traditional games and the relational aspects therein. Nonetheless, it should serve as a starting point further works can build on, test, and discourse with as the field of experiential research develops in the field of games and how they relate to therapeutically affective processes.

With these points in mind, I decided to use a method that is experience-near, but can relate to a number of different dialogues and discourses at the macro level. I have approached this project as an ethnographic case study, where the case is a singular game: *Magic: the Gathering*. This methodology arose because of an awareness of the discourse around games, and the fact that a game has a culture of its own. The beliefs, customs, and accepted models of being in that culture will have an influence on what gameplay means, and its relationships with other contexts will be paramount in understanding the process of generating therapeutic affect. To adequately explore these aspects of the subject, the focus of the work is fairly streamlined - I have researched one traditional game and have worked to determine whether the cultural artefacts and experiences therein constitute a process that playing it can be therapeutic for adults. While this means that I will not be scrutinizing other individual games, I will at times be speaking to the contextual elements that make up public perception of other gaming communities, such as video games and role-playing games, though the primary focus will be that of *Magic* and its cultural characteristics and contents.

This thesis is comprised of nine chapters. Chapters 2 and 4 constitute the background work necessary for working with *Magic* in an analytic way for readers who have not played or necessarily heard of *Magic* through a literature review and historical examination of *Magic*. Reading these will both allow the reader to understand the language of the game, and this research's place in the wider discourse of research on traditional games and mental health. Chapter 3 will outline onto-epistemic approaches, methodology and methods chosen for this work. Chapter 5 delineates the existence of a cultural narrative of therapeutic affect in *Magic*, and explores outcomes as they pertain to this works definition of therapeutic affect. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 all attempt to outline a process by which we can understand how or in what ways therapeutic affect is developed in playing *Magic*. The final chapter is the conclusion of this thesis, in which findings will be discussed, and proposed opportunities for work going forward will be outlined.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This literature review outlines the history of play and games, offers definitions of these terms, and outlines their use in counselling and psychotherapy research. It then acknowledges gaps in that research as they pertain to traditional games. It also considers the body of research in other games, especially sports and video games, as they relate to mental health, counselling and psychotherapy. Since this research will also be seeking to make a claim to how therapeutic affect manifests through game-play, I will also offer a definition of therapeutic affect for the purpose of this work based on psychodynamic and person-centred theory.

Play and Games: Definitions and History in Counselling and Psychotherapeutic Practice

'Play' is a concept that has been described as integral to the development of human individuals and society, and has been established as a universal human activity that is present in nearly every human culture (Huizinga 2002; Schaefer and Reid 1986; Wilde 1994). In order to focus on how the concept relates to therapy, Schaefer and Reid (1986) drew a clear distinction between 'games' and 'play'; "Play" refers to "a pleasurable, naturally occurring behavior found in both animal and human life… [that] often involves a distortion of reality, a pretense… an 'as if' quality" (p.1). Games, on the other hand, refer to organized playful activities in which there are clearly defined rules and objects – whether they be based on physical, strategic, or chance elements (Schaefer and Reid 1986). Huizinga (2002) made expressly clear through his research the ubiquity of games in human civilization and posited that they play a distinct role in the establishment of cultural and social structures, as well as reinforcing specific cultural values. To him, there can be no human culture without games, and that the act of engaging and playing games is an inherently human exercise - and this claim forms to basis of most work investigating the importance of games to humans.

Before we go further, it is essential to fully outline the differences between types of games for usage in this work. On a philosophical level, the medium of the game doesn't change its essential features; it will have some number of the aforementioned characteristics: physical, strategic or chance elements. I use sub-categories to draw a distinction between different areas of research and application

in the field of games, using the categories of bodily-kinesthetic games, digital/video games, traditional games, and serious games. Each of these mediums have different characteristics in how one relates to the game, but also serves to distinguish the frequency of research on each later in this section.

Bodily-kinesthetic games are those which the physical aspect of the game is at the forefront of importance for participation or competition. The most common example of this is sports: for most sports, physical conditioning, coordination and exercise are necessary to excel at the game. While strategy and chance do come into play, especially at higher competitive levels, they typically are not necessary for participation, and they can be played in a physical space that permits it. These are usually identified as the oldest kind of games because it is not necessary to have a purpose-built object or device to play, and they are present in every human culture (Huizinga 2002).

Traditional games are those that often require some sort of game-object to play, and typically require less physical skill and more strategic skills to play. Sometimes referred to as table-top games, traditional games generally require players to be together in a communal area and communicate directly to maintain the rules of the game. These include board games (chess, checkers, go, *Scrabble*, *Catan*), card games, (poker, solitaire, *Dominion*, *Magic: the Gathering*) and, more recently, table-top role-playing games (*Dungeons and Dragons*, *Shadowrun*, *GURPS*).

Digital/video games are defined by the medium of play, rather than specific gaming characteristics. Digital games are played using some electronic means, rather than being played in a physical or ‘real world’ space. A video game itself can have content pertaining to any number of objectives, whether they be designer-created or player-driven. The relevant detail of this distinction is that the player is not needed to be in a physical space with another player (though they can be if they choose), only to operate the system on which the game is being played (computer, console, etc.), and have the necessary inputs to play it, whether that be a keyboard and mouse, a hand-held controller, or a voice/touch operated tool.

Finally, I have included ‘serious games’ separately as they have been specifically designed for clinical use. They can take any form of the other types of games (i.e. bodily-kinesthetic, traditional, or digital/video), but they have a specific intent: to be used in mental health interventions concerning specific diagnosis and

disorders. Examples include board games for ADHD (Bridges 1989), working with specific traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse (Corder 1999) or children going through family divorce (Epstein et al 1985), as well as behavioural issues such as antisocial behaviour (Mitlin 1998). Some are designed for the express purpose of encouraging higher self-esteem, acknowledgement of consequences, or other lesson learning by the player (Ceranoglu 2010), which will be described in more detail later in this section.

'Play' has a history in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, almost as long as the practice itself. Stemming from psychoanalytic practice, from the 1930s practitioners such as Melanie Klein and Anna Freud were writing about the use and benefits of play in the therapy room (Drewes 2009; Matorin and McNamara 1996; Schaefer and Reid 1986). This type of play was usually done using toys and pretend exercises in which the client could act out certain phantasies and typically centered around unstructured playful activity. Games, however, were not explicitly referenced the counselling room until 1957, when E.A. Loomis published the first paper on the use of board games in the counselling room, detailing interactions with child and adolescent clients in which he utilized checkers as a medium by which therapeutic transactions could happen (Loomis 1957). While Klein mentioned that she used games including checkers to open children up to therapy, it wasn't until this time that the phenomenon had been spoken to directly as a useful means of working with clients (Schaefer and Reid 1986). Since Loomis' work, fascination and interest with the use of board games in the counselling room grew immensely in the 1970's with the development of serious games (Schaefer and Reid 1986; Reid 2001). However, even with this growing interest and development, many practitioners retained that games represented a risk to therapeutic interventions, as their rules-based nature defended against imaginative play (Solnit 1993) or provided opportunity for avoidance of primary pain issues (Bary & Hufford 1990).

Serious games have been used with relative success in medicalized outcome-focused interventions for physical or mental health issues (Bonnechere 2018; Bowers 2014; Jain & Anderson 2014; Lawo & Knackfuß 2018; Lohse 2014; Ni & Ni 2014; van Tuijl 2012). Serious games also exist for certain approaches to counselling and psychotherapy, such as CBT (Brezinka 2014; Jeong 2007), Rational emotive therapy (Wilde 1994), and specific play therapy interventions (Stone 2015). Most of the research implementing these games speaks to several benefits to users,

especially children, surrounding confidence building, ego development, and use for developing rapport with the client. This development of and widespread access to digital games has shifted game development towards digital serious games in recent years for mental health research, providing substantial evidence that they result in positive outcomes for participants (Eichenberg, Grabmayer & Green 2016; Eichenberg & Schott 2014; Fleming et al. 2014; Fleming et al. 2016; Li et al. 2014). However, the focus on digital games has meant that traditional games have been relatively left behind in recent works. Despite evidence in these studies, there remains doubt within the counselling and psychotherapy field about games' role in the counselling room, with increasingly less confidence in using games in the counselling room the more severe a client's case presentation (Eichenberg, Grabmayer & Green 2016). Part of this perception may also be associated with stigma from mental health practitioners who have been found hold assumptions about those who play games, especially adults; for example, Lis, Chiniara & Biskin (2015) found that 22% of psychiatrists believe that playing table-top role-playing games is associated with a pathological mental health issue, and Ben-Ezra Et al. (2018) concluded that about a third of social workers hold the same assumption.

Gaps in the Research: Unspoken Issues, Themes and Populations

While research into games' applications in mental health has been developing over the last sixty years, the approach and the group of study of recent research is somewhat narrow. While there are a number of different resources for looking at bodily-kinesthetic, video/digital, traditional, or purpose-built therapeutic games in a counselling setting, the vast majority of these studies, only look at the benefits to children (Bellinson 2007; Bekker, Eggen and Sturm 2010; Douglas and Carless 2010; Gekker, Schijven and Vosmeer 2014; Ni & Ni 2014; Oren 2008; Schaefer and Reid 1986; Streng 2009;). This is likely due to observed benefits of gamifying processes (McGonigal 2011), and the implementation of games in child educational settings (Mantorin & McNamara 1996; Miller 2008; Nickerson & O'laughlin 1980). As a result, many games that are designed for the purposes of therapy are often about directing the client's thought processes towards a specific outcome, lesson or mode of thinking (Brezinka 2014; Bowers et al. 2011; Drewes 2009; Matorin and McNamara 1996; Plummer 2008; Schaefer and Reid, 1986;

Shapiro 1992; Streng 2009; van Tuijl 2012; Wilde 1994). As the field of study has grown in the past ten years, more research is becoming available pertaining to adults (Bowers et al. 2011; Ceranaglu 2010; Eichenberg & Schott 2014; Eichenberg, Grabmayer & Green 2016; Fleming et al. 2014; Fleming et al. 2016; Li et al. 2014; Lohse et al 2014). However, these studies are in the minority compared to those focusing on non-adult populations, and have an overwhelming focus on digital interventions.

This lack of research into adults' relationships with games is not only tangible from a research point of view, but also in a theoretical one. Drewes (2009) contends that for children, games develop a wide-range of psychological features: self-expression, access to the unconscious, direct and indirect teaching, abreaction, stress inoculation, counterconditioning of negative affect, catharsis, positive affect, sublimation, attachment and relationship enhancement, moral judgement, empathy, power/control, competence and self-control, sense of self, accelerated development, creative problem solving, fantasy compensation, reality testing, behavioural rehearsal, and rapport building. Reid (2001) states that traditional competitive games enhance a child's ego functions, give children a sense of competence and reduce self-doubt, help manage impulse control, all while revealing intellectual skills, reality testing processes and images of the self. These works define clear benefits for children, but there are no such statements on how games might impact adults.

Alongside this, there is also a lack of research on traditional games. While video games and sports have been researched and investigated from several theoretical positions through a variety of methods (as will be outlined in the next section), research on traditional games leaves much to be desired (Mantorin & McNamara 1996). Research that does exist tends to offer little in the way of explanation for their conclusions on traditional games, positing that the benefits are inherent to the games themselves while providing little evidence to support such claims (Schaefer & Reid 1986; Gardner 1983; Crocker & Wroblewski 1975). Not only are these inadequately substantiated, but they also have become a primary resource for research coming after. This has created an environment where the capacity for traditional games to generate therapeutic affect has never been adequately investigated as research has trended towards other types of games. This in part is due to digital games' position in the forefront of popular media, and discourse surrounding sports as being suitable for adults in a western context,

therefore making research more readily funded (Jaouen 2010). This is especially concerning in light of the rapidly increasing popularity of traditional games, with the industry now being worth more than a billion dollars globally in board games alone, not including card, role-playing, and other traditional games (Martin 2017).

The final concern with the established body of research on games is its near exclusive positioning from a bio-medical framework, preoccupied with measurable outcomes from gaming interventions in medical or mental health contexts. This is characterized by quantitative approaches to recording behaviours using game-play as a variable for phenomena ranging from those with certain disabilities, the ability to maintain employment, evaluation scores of rationality or depression levels, amongst other measures (Bateni 2012; Ceranoglu 2010; Gekker, Schjiven and Vosmeer 2014; Pope and Bogart, 1996; Review of Optometry 2011; Santos, De Meneses, Garcia and Brasil, 2015; Wilde 1994). While I do not fault these researchers for considering these correlations, this approach disregards the foundational work in the field of games from Huizinga (2002). Huizinga asserted that games are culturally ingrained and entangled, necessarily coming out of and generating culture through engagement through the act of game-play. By ignoring the cultural and experiential nature of the act of game-play, we have resigned ourselves to settle for statistics that do little to elucidate, explain, or create an understanding of the process involved in perceived outcomes and how it may generate therapeutic affect for those who play. While outcomes of using games as an intervention tend to be positive in the research by most metrics, it appears that this may be a case of running before we have learned to walk. We need more research into the process of how games work to generate therapeutically affective experiences upon which interventions can be designed and considered, rather than the other way around.

It is in the nexus between these three gaps - adult populations, traditional games, and investigating processes rather than outcomes - that my research positions itself. Given the research on playing traditional games is limited outside of the sources provided, I will turn to the literature on the closely related and far more explored fields of sports and video game research to highlight themes and results from others works that have informed the focus of my research.

Sports

The literature on sports and exercise as it relates to mental health is a sizable one (Biddle, Fox & Boutcher 2000; Carless & Douglass 2010; Faulkner & Taylor 2005; Leith 2002; Morgan 1997) and is suitable as a reference point for traditional games since sports are gaming activities. Conclusions made about sports in mental health have helped illustrate themes of interest to research on traditional games, and therefore warrant inclusion in this literature review. That said, scrutiny of sports as an area of research for the purpose of this work must be treated with a degree of caution due to the nature of sport as physical activity, and how this relates to bio-medical conceptions of health.

The majority of mental health studies in sports that have been conducted, according to Carless and Douglas (2010), "have tended to focus primarily or exclusively on the extent to which physical activity alleviates the symptoms of mental health problems" (p. 16). A substantial portion of this body of literature has been dedicated to observing sport and exercise in the context of specific 'severe' diagnoses with generally positive results as an intervention (Callaghan 2004; Carless & Faulkner 2003; Elllis et al. 2007; Faulkner & Biddle 1999; Faulkner & Carless 2006; Faulkner et al. 2005; Fox 1999; Fox 2000; Grant 2000; Takahashi 2011; Takahashi, Suhara & Okubo 2012; Saxena et al. 2006; Stathopolou et al. 2006; Teychenne, Ball & Salmon 2008). Positive results are also reported in using sport and exercise in the treatment of individuals in which their mental illness is long term or chronic (Beebe et al. 2005; Crone 2007; Crone et al. 2004; Carter-Morris & Faulkner 2003; Faulkner & Sparkes 1999; Fogarty & Happell 2005; Jones & O'Beney 2004; McDevitt 2006; Raine, Truman & Southerst 2002; Skrinar et al. 2005; Soundy, Faulkner & Taylor 2007). Of particular interest to the field is research into depression, and there is a great deal of research showcasing the alleviation of depression symptoms in individuals who engage with sporting activities (Lawlor & Hopker 2001; Mutrie 2000; O'Neal, Dunn & Martinsen 2000; Perron-Gélinas, Brendgen, & Vitaro 2017; Saxena et al. 2005; Stathopolou et al. 2006; Teychenne, Ball & Salmon 2008).

While these elucidate how sports can be used as an intervention, preoccupation with medical outcomes have their limitations. Carless & Douglas explain that, "By focusing on measurement… as opposed to meaning…, the ways in which physical activity and sport may help individuals recover from mental health

problems has mostly been sidelined" (2010, 16). This is particularly apparent when scrutinizing the themes that those experiencing mental health issues prioritize. Using the work of Anthony (1993), Repper & Perkins (2003), and Davidson et al. (2005), Carless and Douglas posit that those experiencing mental health issues are less occupied with the alleviation of medical symptoms, and that "core themes of recovery" are instead defined by the desire to:

> rebuild social roles and relationships [;] develop meaning and purpose in one's life [;] recreate a positive sense of self and identity [;] change one's attitudes, values and goals [;] enact, acquire and demonstrate ability [;] pursue personal interests, hopes and aspirations [;] develop and maintain a sense of hopefulness about one's future (Douglas and Carless 2010, p. 15)

These themes serve as Carless and Douglas' guidelines for considering recovery in mental health in their research. In order to inspect how sports and physical activity contribute to recovery of mental health issues, they use narrative inquiry research that focuses on the experiences of individuals and their stories in relation to these themes and to sport and exercise. Carless and Douglas, through the course of their work, describe three ways in which sport and physical activity can contribute to the recovery of mental health conditions:

> For those individuals who previously held (or currently hold) an athletic identity, re-engaging in physical activity or sport can facilitate the reconstruction of a valued sense of self or identity that has been lost or damaged through the experience of mental illness.
>
> For others who perhaps do not hold an athletic identity, 'adventure' experiences through physical activity or sport can stimulate the creation and sharing of new life stories around the experience of action, achievement and relationships.
>
> For others, physical activity or sport can serve as a vehicle or stepping stone for particular outcomes (e.g. improved fitness, weight loss, social connectedness) which help individuals to – in one way or another – move on in life. (Douglas and Carless 2010, p. 161)

Carless and Douglas (2010) claim that these outcomes are "closely related to the meaning that the activity holds for the individual concerned", and are highly dependent on "the history, needs, preferences and aspirations" of the individual, rather than being, "beneficial to all people" (p.162). Carless and Douglas (2010) also acknowledge that these experiences have a strong cultural component, and contend that the cultural fabric of sport in particular "are more likely to *cause* mental health difficulties", especially if there is "an orientation towards performance outcomes" (p. 162).

Carless and Douglas' (2010) work, on the most fundamental level, demonstrates that engaging in game-play can have mental health benefits, which

lends credence to further inquiry into other types of games. It also corroborates the influence of cultural meanings in one's experiences of games, and that socio-cultural values and expectations have a significant influence on experience of game-play for players. This suggests that inquiries into processes related to mental health should be cognizant and aware of socio-cultural influences and contexts surrounding the game, which is consistent with Huizinga's (2002) conclusions. Finally, Carless and Douglas' (2010) work with narrative reveals the personal meaning that sports and exercise have to the person involved, and that this meaning is necessarily entangled with whatever mental health improvement or outcome that may occur. In researching how processes of therapeutic affect may develop in games, this approach indicates the value of focusing on the experiential data and nuances that occur in the game-play action, rather than solely paying attention to intervention outcomes.

Video games

As far as research on videogames is concerned, most of the work done to investigate the psychological effects of playing videogames have been searching for correlations between video games and anti-social behavior (Granic, Lobel & Engels 2014). This is largely due to videogames being associated in popular media with violent acts - for example, many school shootings in the 90's and early 00's in the U.S. were perpetrated by people who claimed they played first-person shooter games (Granic, Lobel & Engels 2014) – and being socially stigmatized and politically scrutinized as a result. Only in the last few years that research has started to investigate the benefits of playing games, and their applications for therapy (Ceranoglu 2010). That being said, the vast majority of the research that has been done in direct correlation to therapy has been concerned specifically with the population of children and adolescents (Brezinka 2014; Plummer 2008; Tuijl et al. 2012). Many of these articles base this on the fact between 95% and 99% of teenagers or children in the U.S. play videogames (Granic, Lobel, and Engels 2014; Ceranoglu 2010; Mclean and Griffiths 2013). However, authors have begun to acknowledge that most adults, especially those aged 18-35, engage with videogames as a regular practice (Dini 2012), though studies that engage with older generations are rare (Pearce 2008). When adult populations are studied, again, the

most prevalent type of research is bio-medically oriented, with studies approaching video games as an intervention for physical or psychological disorders (Bean, Nielson, Van Rooij, & Ferguson 2017; Bonnechère 2018; Charlton 2002; Hamid 2012; Jain & Anderson 2014; Lawo & Knackfuß 2018; Lohse et al. 2014; Ni & Biddiss 2014; Santos, de Menses, Garcia, and Brasil 2015) or seeking to stimulate negative affect, like social anxiety disorders or increased impulsiveness (Toa et al. 2017). Most of these studies speak examine the efficacy of virtual reality or augmented reality technology in the treatment of physiological issues, but increasingly more research is acknowledging video games' role in mental health and well-being (Bavalier 2013). Recent studies have indicated that videogames have a positive effect on social skills and cognition, as well as having positive results as a direct therapeutic tool (Ceranglu 2010; Granic, Lobel and Engels 2014; Horne-Moyer, Moyer, Messer and Messer 2014). While the literature speaks to a range of positive effects in these interventions, authors have also acknowledged difficulty in implementation from a training, development and logistic point of view (Bowers et al. 2011).

Research into video games as an entity beyond their use as a medical intervention is broadening as the field grows and develops, with more inquiries into the nature of human's relationships with videogames and the relationships that form in digital spaces. Substantial work has been done acknowledging the intricate sociality within videogames from different cultural perspectives (Boellstorff 2015; Lárez 2014; Lee & Pulos 2016; Taylor 2009), and how videogames can foster social interaction outside the game itself (Maitland et al. 2018). While much of the findings speak to relationships with game objects, means of expressions, and the intricacies of digital game cultures, there has been ample critique of established social structures in gaming as well, from feminist (Alexander 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015; Consalvo 2012; Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer 2017; Wingfield 2014) and queer (Condis 2015; Markuch 2015; Ruberg 2018) perspectives. Videogames have also been posited to act as a safe means of expression for players' latent desires that would be socially unacceptable or damaging outside of it (Denham & Spokes 2019). Other authors have argued that videogames are an insightful window into how humans think and problem solve, and that how we relate within videogames is reflective of how we relate with our surroundings outside of them (Gee 2008; Gorbet & Sergio 2018; Hamlen 2011).

The most prevalent theme between both the bio-medical work and cultural-anthropological work in videogames is a consistent scrutiny between the link of what happens experientially in the process of game-play and how this links to the 'real' world. As T.L. Taylor (2006) explained, as these games become mainstream, we see more and more that "'virtual' spaces leak over into our 'real' worlds" (p. 151). This is not just in the way players act or are physically affected, but also about how players think about the world, its social structures, and accepted values. The work linking these two features in the literature above demonstrates that the two realities of 'virtual' and 'real' are linked, even if they are boundaried and often conceived of as separate through the constitutive process of play. This work troubles dominant discourses stemming from Huizinga's (2002) theories that ludic space is inherently separate from 'real life' in its play boundaries, an issue which will be addressed in Chapter 8.

How to Define 'Therapeutic Affect' in a Gaming Context?

Given the literature around videogames and sports and mental health, game-play has been demonstrated to have promising outcomes as a treatment. However, it also exposes issues with current research - namely that research is concern with outcomes, and not how they come to be. In order to discover *how* games can be therapeutic for those playing, this inquiry must be aligned with an awareness of the cultural context and experience in which the game is played. This is consistent in the 'leaky' nature noted by Taylor (2006) in videogames - what happens in the game is reflective and mixed with understandings of the outside world. The next chapter will address these points, but first I will outline a definition for 'therapeutic affect' so that these features can be considered. Just as Douglas and Carless (2010) drew a distinction between medical outcomes and focus themes of those suffering from mental health issues, so too does this work need a set of explicit guideline of what it is examining.

In this area, the literature is less helpful. Most theories of the therapeutic in person-centred and psychodynamic counselling and psychotherapy have been written towards the practice of therapy between counsellor with client. Any game not intended for use in therapeutic practice cannot be a part of this model of therapy, and this work does not seek to equate the act of playing games to undergoing therapy. Other fields, such as neuroscience, offer little help in establishing a definition of therapeutic affect; as Labar (2015) writes, "the neural mechanisms that

integrate [emotional affect and memory] processes to achieve therapeutic goals are unknown" (p. 38). Layman definitions for 'therapeutic' are, unsurprisingly, broad. Cambridge Dictionary defines therapeutic as, "Causing someone to feel happier and more relaxed or to be healthy" (2018), a definition that seems both divorced from the complex, often painful processes that can foster therapeutic change, and the context in which happiness or pleasure is derived (i.e. using this definition one could claim consistent intoxication is therapeutic since it can cause happiness or relaxation).

In order to develop a working definition for 'therapeutic affect', I will use macro-level observations and the stated ideals of therapeutic practice from different person-centred and psychodynamic theorists as a basis for conceptualizing therapeutic affect outside the counselling room. This assumes that the practice of therapy is itself therapeutic, which is intuitive; not only does substantial research attribute positive outcomes based on personality change to a variety of different therapy approaches and formats (Dolan, Evans & Wilson 1992; Ishizuka 2014; de Jong & Gorey 1996; Norcross, Nicholson & Prochaska 2018; Price et al. 2001), but fundamentally a definition of therapeutic affect should be roughly comparable to ideal therapy outcomes. Naturally, the theoretical discourses I will be referring to have a number of details and sub-concepts, the particularities of which will be explored in later chapters where I consider the micro-interactions of game-play and its relation to the development of therapeutic affect.

In formulating a definition of the 'therapeutic', it is important to acknowledge that I have drawn principally from person-centred and psychodynamic models of therapy. As my practice as a therapist is located in the dialogue between both, I feel it would be both disingenuous to imply an expertise or understanding of the vast amount of other theoretical work that has been produced in other mental health approaches. Moreover, I cannot extricate myself from my own theoretical predispositions and positions, and I don't think I could offer, for example, an understanding of the 'therapeutic' from a Jungian, cognitive-behavioural, psychiatric, etc. perspective while abiding by my own professional beliefs on the subject in good faith. That is not to say that conceptions of therapeutic affect should be strictly limited to my approach. Indeed, articulating therapeutic affect through other models would be worth a great deal by those who have the practical and academic experience of those concepts. With that said, I will leave it up to other mental health professionals to do further research on how we might conceive of 'therapeutic'

activities in their own approaches to mental health, rather than attempting to interpret unfamiliar fields of study where I risk of applying theory in a misguided manner.

Person-Centred Theory of Therapeutic Processes

Tudor and Worrall (2006), in their book *Person-Centred Therapy: A Clinical Philosophy* offer a succinct, summarised their understanding of Carl Roger's theories of person-centred therapy, and likewise is a serviceable text in conceptualizing what person-centred theory might consider integral to the therapeutic process. Rogers explained that the person-centred approach is "Philosophy", and that when "lived, it helps the person expand the development of his or her own capacities… [and] stimulates constructive change in others" (Rogers 1986/90, p. 138). Leading on this philosophical point, Tudor and Worrall (2006) enlist Wittgenstein's work to make a few claims about the process by which therapy works as a practice:

> Psychotherapy is not a body of doctrine but an activity … [;] Psychotherapy is a meta-activity, and not of the same order of things as the natural sciences ... [;] Psychotherapy results in the clarification rather than the creation of propositions … [;] The task of psychotherapy is to make thoughts clear and to give them sharp boundaries (p. 14-16)

Ideally, through a process of being in relationship with the counsellor and employing other aspects of person-centred therapy, such as the six necessary and sufficient conditions, the client is to get in touch with other aspects of their organismic self - particularly "fluidity, creativity and personal power" (Tudor and Worrall 2006, 227). Fluidity represents an individual's capacity as an organism to 'actualise', a key feature of person-centred therapy that reflects organisms' tendencies to grow towards what they need or want. Creativity is the capacity of an individual to manifest new ways of being or new objects or artefacts within the world, a process entangled with a sense of differentiation or individuation of the self. Finally, personal power has to do with autonomy, a person's ability to regulate one's self, use that regulation as a means of promoting the actualizing process rather than being influenced or, at times subjugated by internal or external self-evaluation that has been put in place by others. It is important to note that this personal power is not granted by the therapist, or offered, but it is instead a natural state of the organism when it feels free to express itself personally and as itself.

Psychodynamic Theory on Therapeutic Processes

Psychodynamic therapies and theorists tend to consider therapy in a somewhat similar manner, but tend to focus more on the practice of making meaning, and growth through access to meaning. Freud, as the progenitor of the psychodynamic tradition, famously began with the desire to understand the mind as a scientist would, to best taxonomize the processes by which the human mind experiences the world in order to design a method of treatment for psychological distress, hysteria, melancholia, or deviancy. Later in his career, Freud would speak into the nature of the externally unknowable and unquantifiable, "the irrational facts of human suffering", and "the diabolical discourses of the unconscious [that] challenged the philosophy of consciousness and the presumed supremacy of reason" (Dufresne 2017, p. 27-28). The psychodynamic tradition from then followed suit, concerning itself with the process of making meaning out of that which cannot be known, and how to bring the client into a position in which they can wonder about aspects of oneself, present and past, that might help elucidate, relieve, or resolve the anxieties that are present in the client.

Seminal works by theorists have, naturally, been concerned with how this process of reflection, meaning making, and subsequent change in the client can occur, and how it develops in the counselling room. D.W. Winnicott contended that, just as children are ideally allowed the potential space of play with caretakers who permit them to construct and derive meaning in the space between external and internal reality, so too is the process of therapy is concerned with engaging in play:

> Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. (Winnicott 1971, p. 38)

It is through this play that there is the emergence of potential space, in which reality can be crafted into a more desirable place through client's understanding of it, in the same way a child is empowered with their creative abilities to fabricate wild and fanciful dreams and imaginings and use them to perceive the world differently.

Wilfred Bion, similarly, was concerned with the experiencing of the counselling session itself, inspecting the component interactions of counsellor and

client, and wondering about how change could occur. For Bion, it was the elements of the session that allowed for the emergence of truth and mental growth. As Bion conceived of it, “the mind grows through exposure to truth” (Symington & Symington 1996, p. 3), and the therapist facilitates that process of exposure by working with the client to help digest the feelings and aspects of self that can be apparent to the therapist, but not necessarily to the client themselves. At a glance, marrying these proposed processes of change might seem counterintuitive, or even contradictory to one another. However, I would contend that Bion and Winnicott’s ideas are aligned, insofar that ‘truth’ for Bion is not external, but found from within the self and in relationship, just like the potential space that is explored through Winnicott’s play. In this space is where the therapy happens, and much of psychodynamic theory in its concepts are to make the space for playful ‘truth seeking’, and to foster the client’s ability to safely make meaningful their experiences.

Due to how the concept will be used in later chapters, it is important to elaborate on Bion’s conception of containment in the generation of therapeutic affect in a psychodynamic framework, and its distinctions from other concepts such as Winnicott’s holding. In Bion’s understanding (Symington & Symington 1996), humans are configured in a dynamic state between container and contained, that changes as entities and feelings in the locus of human experience seek to be taken in by another. Bion codifies the original container/contained relationship as that between the mother’s breast and the infant in pain, and that the infant seeks an entity to contain their feelings of pain and struggle. When this works in harmony, it can be beneficial; one can be a container for the emotions that cannot be contained by the other, and this can be a tolerable configuration in a loving and intimate relationship. This is not a static or ubiquitous arrangement however; sometimes the container is not strong enough to hold what needs to be contained, and likewise sometimes that which needs to be contained can be volatile or poisonous to the container after prolonged exposure, or potentially even render the container unable to contain anything beyond this. Moreover, one who acts more often as a container in one relationship might need more containment in other relationships (though not necessarily so), and within the same dyad there may be different demands for containment between the two individuals. These features, in Bion’s thinking, lead to mental growth at every stage of development: containment offers the ability to conceive of what cannot be articulated in the contained (pre-conception offering the opportunity for realization), as well as offering attention and inquiry that might lead to

action in the contained. Of particular import in conceiving of the therapeutic affect outside of therapy room is the dynamic relationship being presented; in therapy, the therapist is more often associated with container and the client as that which is contained, but the reality of the container/contained relationship is one in which those roles are not fixed, and indeed will change at different parts of the relationship, and still create the opportunity for therapeutic change to occur.

Although the concepts are related, and often confused, it is important to distinguish this from Winnicott's conception of the holding environment (1960), which is best related to the developmental time in infancy in which the caregiver literally holds the infant to provide comfort. Ideally this offers a framework for which empathy and love can be felt by the child, and as the child grows, the holding environment becomes wider to include other forms of holding and security, focusing less on physical holding and more on emotional security. In practice, the therapist takes on the role of offering a holding environment through the maintenance of boundaries, such as timings, keeping spaces identical, contracting, etc. Once that safety is recognized, familiar, and becomes internalized by the client, they will be more able to engage with this process of play and exploration, leading to the exposure of truth, until the presence of the therapist is no longer necessary for the client to be engaged in such a way. In this configuration, however, the roles are relatively static; the infant or child is always expected to reside within and use the holding environment, whereas the parent role is expected to offer and maintain the environment. Holding, therefore, goes only in one direction, rather than being a dynamic process in the dyad.

A Definition of Therapeutic Affect

Both of these explanations of psychodynamic and person-centred processes of change are simplistic and general nature; indeed, multitudes of articles, chapters and books exist outlining the concepts I have referenced in brief. However, it is from that generality that we can derive a useful working definition of the therapeutic outside counselling. The desired outcomes of person-centred therapy are not defined in a format of a particular feeling or way of being - except that one who enjoys the benefits of therapeutic action should be enabled or become able to define those things for themselves. It is in part a liberation from the constraints of others'

opinions or complexes that prevent expression, so that an individual feels that they can do and be as they feel they want to be. All of this is reflected in how person-centred theory conceives of the therapeutic act itself, as something that 'results in clarification', 'makes thoughts clear', inspires creativity and assists in the process of developing personal power. Psychodynamic theories, too, are concerned with giving the client space to discover truth - to be used as an object or container for the immediate anxieties and difficulties of the client, until an environment can be created in which the client can experiment, explore and engage with the process of finding, making or playing with their truth. Again, the therapeutic is not prescriptive about what should be done or felt, but it is understood as something that should be conceived of as enabling, enlightening, creative, and ongoing.

By amalgamating these theoretical frameworks, I offer a definition that encompasses the processual nature that both approaches offer as part of the therapeutic processes. Therapeutic affect is not one, singular type of event or feeling, but a process of engaging in a changing sense of self. 'Therapeutic affect', then, can be defined as a process of relating to an experience that, 1. enables thinking and reflection to occur, and in turn frees individuals from the imposed suffering or constraints of an established impinging system of thought or experience, 2. helps the individual consider themselves, to wonder about their experience of the world and what is meaningful or important to them, or 3. permits the individual the ability to create changes that the individual deems desirable.

Conclusion

While research is available in the field of games as a whole in mental health, there is substantially less work on traditional games. Furthermore, research on adult populations is also lacking. Finally, the body of research as it stands focuses primarily on outcomes from interventions instead of considered how or in what way the act of game-play can have benefits for mental health. By learning from approaches used in video games and sports, this study will consider the process by which therapeutic affect can be generated by using an approach that takes into account culture and context in the examination of experiential accounts and social phenomena within the act of game-play. The next chapter outlines this process in detail, covering onto-epistemic assumptions of this approach, methodology and specific methods of doing so.

Chapter 3 – Onto-epistemology and Methodology

As outlined in the literature review, the experiential nature of traditional games for adults has not been adequately considered with regard to the generation of therapeutic affect. Therefore, this research explores the role traditional games might play in fostering mental wellbeing and creating therapeutic experiences. This chapter will outline the onto-epistemological basis for this research, its methodological approach, and the methods this research employs. I have used a social realist approach to explore an ethnographic case study on a singular traditional game, *Magic: The Gathering* (hereafter *Magic*). My personal experience of the game, as well as the experiences that have been shared in digital artefacts created about the game, offer insight into processes of generating therapeutic affect, and are employed to consider whether this should be further researched in the field of gaming.

Intents of the Research and Onto-epistemological Assumptions

Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) explained that, “From both an understanding-oriented and an action-oriented perspective, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur” (p. 78). While Flyvbjerg was speaking to qualitative research in general, this concept summarizes well the intersection of traditional games and psychotherapy research. For example, observing the rate at which clients who play a serious game in therapy attend counselling sessions (as in Wilde 2014) only indicates that there may or may not be a correlation between game-playing and client attendance. It does not, however, indicate what characteristic of game-play that facilitated engagement in the process of therapy, or how the game-play process links to therapy. While we may not be seeking to understand a ‘problem’, Flyvbjerg’s logic still follows that research into games and their therapeutic affect should be seeking to clarify the underlying processes at work. Given the definition from Schaefer and Reid (1986) used in the literature review, for games to exist, they require a creator to define the game and give its contents and objects meaning in the game’s context. This creative process indicates that the subjective experience of ascribing meaning to the game, which

exists between game creator, player and potentially gaming community, is integral to understanding any therapeutic affect game-play might produce. As such, the onto-epistemic position for this inquiry needs to both acknowledge the subjective experience of the individual, and the social-cultural configurations that exist as part of game-play that inform those subjectivities.

This research offers a dialogue between these subjectivities and the established literature to inspire further research to be undertaken. My hope is that the research gaps remain unfilled by quantitative methodologies can be bridged by focusing on the cultural experiences that are integral to game-play. Ideally, this will establish foundations on which further inquiries into individual gameplay experiences can be based, or help develop new quantitative measurements that could be used to investigate gameplay's effect on mental health. This translatability demands compatible onto-epistemic foundations on how this knowledge can be produced. To that effect, this research adopts an onto-epistemological position of social realism.

To make use of and refer to the work that has already been done on games and their applications in counselling and psychotherapy, most of which is positivist and from the bio-medical discourse, it would be difficult to maintain logical consistency while adopting a stance of social constructivism. The main problem of speaking across this ontological rift is delineated by Cruickshank's (2002) writing of the logic of immediacy, and its role in identifying 'truth':

> The philosophical logic of immediacy is a term that refers to positions that hold that truth is knowable with immediacy. The temporal aspect of this is the truth is known 'immediately', meaning that truth can be recognised straight away: The manifest truth is immediately recognisable as such (2002, p. 7).

Cruickshank posits that this logic is integral to positivist onto-epistemologies and truth-relativist onto-epistemologies such as social constructionism. 'Truth', according to this logic, is bound to what human agents identify and conceptualize as 'truth'. This becomes problematic in trying to seek out a translatable 'truth'. The foundational beliefs behind both ontological approaches assume that an agent perceives the 'truth' and that 'truth' identification is an immediate occurrence, despite the fact they are based on different (and often contradictory) models of what constitutes 'truth'. Cruickshank insists of truth-relative ontologies that:

> ... [I]n making truth *wholly* relative to perspectives, such relativism *reduces* truth to perspectives, and the consequence of this is that to know the norms of a community, or to

> know the concepts that constitute, say, a scientific perspective… is to know the 'truth'. In this case, 'truth' becomes a synonym for the contents of the perspective (2002, p. 7).

Positivist ontologies run into a similar logical difficulty:

> [W]hat *exists* is defined as what can be *known*, and what can be known is defined by *how the mind knows* via sense experience. We have certainty in knowledge because *what* the mind can know, meaning what exists, is defined to fit the conception of *how* the mind can know the world (Cruickshank 2002, p. 10).

Dialoguing between these two positions is problematic insofar as that they both hinge on the human perspective of observation but have different assumptions for what constitutes 'truth'. Therefore, neither ontological position can accept the other's truth - no agent can ever observe the other's truth with immediacy, which makes any conclusion drawn unsatisfactory in both onto-epistemic conceptions.

To get around this epistemic deadlock, I instead turn to the ontological position of social realism. Social realism is an onto-epistemic approach to research and education in the social sciences that grew from the philosophy of critical realism developed by Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1993A;1993B; 1998), and expanded upon later by proponents such as Margaret Archer (1995; 2002) and Andrew Sayer (1992; 2000). The development of social realism as an approach to knowledge generation primarily stems from an attempt to explore spaces between ontological positions of absolutism and relativism. The impasse of discourse between these two positions, especially in their most hard-line formulations, have, as Maton and Moore (2010) note, created:

> [A] false dichotomy between, on the one hand, the belief that knowledge must be decontextualized, value-free, detached and 'objective' and, on the other hand, the idea that knowledge is socially constructed within particular cultural and historical conditions (and necessarily entwined with issues of interest and power) (p. 2-3).

Social realism offers an approach that considers these ontologies and their epistemic position not from the false dilemma of 'either/or', but a 'both/and' position in its conception of existence and knowledge generation (Maton & Moore 2010).

What does it mean to be 'both/and' regarding constructionist and positivistic onto-epistemological approaches? This is a complicated philosophical position to tease out in its entirety (as the volume of Bhaskar's work attests). Given this thesis' length limitations, I outline only the major principles of social realism as they relate to formulating research in the social sciences, rather than deriving their logical proofs. The underpinning philosophical positions social realism takes from critical realism are those of ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality (Archer et al. 1998). These principles can be summarized as: 1.

Knowledge is concerned with an entity out with itself that is *real*; therefore, knowledge is *symbolic;* 2. Knowledge as a symbol is not the same as absolute truth, as knowledge is inherently structured and based on the socio-cultural contexts in which it is produced - knowledge, therefore, exists as an object independent of truth; 3. Knowledge claims are not relative or equitable in nature, but can be judged on their merit by rational, intersubjective means that are not external or absolute, but are executed through collective social systems. This section breaks down the implications of these principles and how they further this research's goal of producing findings that are foundational and translatable between different research approaches and modalities.

The combination of ontological realism and epistemological relativism in social realism means there is a marked existential distinction between 'the object that is' and 'that which is known', thereby circumventing conflicts of truth-immediacy with the existence of a phenomenon. Social realism posits that there is an external realism, but one that is observed subjectively, such that knowledge is a symbolic attempt at representing external reality. Knowledge, therefore, is inherently social in character, but this does not mean knowledge is relative in nature. Instead, knowledge is seen as independently existent, but not necessarily substantive of truth, as is the case in positivist and constructionist paradigms in their employment of a logic of immediacy. Moore and Maton summarize this idea, stating:

> [R]ational objectivity in knowledge is acknowledged as itself a fact (we do actually have knowledge) but it is also recognized as a social phenomenon (it is something that people do in socio-historical contexts) and it is fallible rather than absolute or merely relative. This allows knowledge to be seen in itself, not merely as a reflection of either some essential truth or social power but as something in its own right, whose different forms have effects for intellectual and educational practices. (2010, p. 3)

This means that knowledge is an object itself, and that getting closer to 'truth' - the actual nature of external reality - is entangled with the human social contexts and interactions that produce knowledge. However, not all knowledge is equitable; after all, contradictory claims to knowledge exist. Since knowledge is not directly representative of truth, this means that competing claims co-exist, but they can be judged as more or less fallible through evaluation by accepted socio-culturally dependent reasoning. What is accepted as knowledge, therefore, will change over time as values change in socio-cultural mechanisms. This means what is 'known' will evolve as we develop new and more varied means of interpreting observations about 'what is' - though our epistemic claims will always be relative in nature due to

our limits as observers and researchers. This, however, does not mean that truth itself is completely relative, but rather that "the truth content of a concept is not reducible to its origin within a conceptual scheme because if it has any truth content, this will arise from its relationship to an external reality" (Cruickshank 2002, p. 98-99).

So, why jump through this complex middling position between positivism and constructionism? First, adopting an ontology of social realism means that this piece of work is not designed to insist or define once and for all whether traditional games are or are not therapeutic, or a singular true way of how they are therapeutic. Instead, knowledge claims stemming from this research become objects of study and discourse that may be evaluated and argued with or against through other means or methodologies. Theoretically, this would mean that my findings, as a piece of knowledge, would be up for rational judgement, and a potentially varied rigorous working through - some of which would, ideally, take the form of further research on the subject.

Second, social realism offers an effective and practical approach to socio-cultural knowledge generation that has been established in the broad health field, as well as in counselling and psychotherapy. Knowledge is conceived as dependent on human actors while also being an independent object of study - and this also extends to culture and social interaction. This line of logic means that social realism posits that culture and social phenomena exist independent of their human progenitors, and can be studied as independent entities (Clark, Lissel and David 2008; Clark, Macintyre & Cruickshank 2007). In medical research this has been shown to be advantageous in seeking to understand the effects of complicated social systems surrounding health, especially examining the effects and effectiveness of policies and organizational strategies relative to cultural contexts (Clark, Lissel and David 2008; Clark, Macintyre & Cruickshank 2007; Clark & Thompson 2010; Pawson & Tilley 1997; Oladele et al. 2013; Sayer 2000). Social realism permits a focus on identifying causal mechanisms by accepting that these mechanisms may be contingent on specific combinations of environmental factors - especially social-cultural ones. In counselling and psychotherapy, Pocock (2015) argues that an approach to therapy based on critical realism is desirable from a theoretical point of, "help[ing] to stabilize constructionism" (170) and reflects the reality of therapeutic practice. He states:

> On what basis then do we choose between constructions? … I argue that… when strong constructionism no longer supports practice we become covert realists. … [W]ithout a realist ontology little can be said on how the therapist should decide which ideas to bring to the dialogue when it is her turn to speak. (Pocock 2015, p. 168-170)

In other words, in determining what is acceptable in therapeutic practice and what theory one employs to work with the client, practitioners are engaging in an implicit realism of the therapeutic that acknowledges, “all the interacting forces, powers, mechanisms, sets of relationships and relationships between relationships, which may (or may not, if the tendencies are not actualized) produce a measurable event” (Pocock 2010, p. 175) are real. This serves not only as a justification for the methodology of inquiry, but its goals too - that ‘therapeutic affect’ is real, definable, and an object that it is possible to study and consider in the context of traditional games.

Methodology

Now that I have offered the onto-epistemic position taken in this piece of research, I will now outline my chosen methodology: ethnography. What I offer through ethnography is a knowledge claim developed through immersing myself as a researcher within *Magic* culture. Through my experiences, as well as those that members of that community have recorded through the cultural artefacts they have created, I identified themes that appear consistent to the established theories of the therapeutic. The aim of this is to determine if this field needs to be explored from more perspectives, in more contexts, or at greater depth to refine our ability to understand therapeutic affect generated in the game-play process.

While designing this project, much of what brought me to think and wonder about this field of study came from my own experience of playing collectible card game *Magic*, and how those experiences dialogue with my role as practicing therapist. When I was in game-play contexts, I could feel how they impacted me on an emotional level, and observed others sharing these emotional experiences. This became an ongoing reflexive process in which I examined myself and others, how we acted, and interpreted these experiences using concepts that inform my practice as a psychotherapist. Likewise, I conversed with friends and other players about these experiences, which seemed to have an impact on our psychological lives, and our enjoyment of life, not just as players, but as people.

The immersive nature of my identity as a therapist meeting with gameplay, as well as my position of social-realism and its conceptualization of social interactions, led me to formulate this inquiry using the qualitative practice of ethnography. Curtis and Curtis (2011) offer a list of what they consider as the key elements of ethnography:

> An interest in shared cultural activities and their meanings[;] An examination of social phenomena within a specific group in their natural setting [;] A focus on the understandings and interpretations of the people who comprise the case (the insider's perspective) [;] An inductive research process, working primarily with case centric techniques [;] A multi-method approach (usually), incorporating an extended period of fieldwork (Liamputtong 2009). (p. 87)

In this preliminary stage, I was embodying many aspects of ethnography before beginning the formal process of research. I was going out into a field site that was apart from my role as a practitioner or academic. I took a deep interest in the social phenomena that were occurring between myself and other players when we entered tournaments, spoke about *Magic* interactions, shared anticipation for results and pairings, and, of course, when we played the game. I found myself pondering, 'What brings us back to these tournaments every weekend? What are we getting out of this?' - I was constantly working with those questions reflexively through my own lens of experience.

What I am trying to outline is how a reflexive process of self-discovery has transformed into an ethnographic process of collecting data from this fieldwork and employing it in knowledge generation. I chose ethnography as the methodology for this work not because it draws similarities with a level of engagement I was experiencing as an academic, therapist and *Magic* player, but because this inquiry required an immersion in the field site to become aware of the processes of therapeutic affect. Boellstorff et al. (2012) posits that ethnographers, "as practitioners of a field-based paradigm, … must be open to what is happening in the flow of everyday life and craft research questions through our engagement with those life worlds" (p. 32). It is no coincidence that my research question and methodology have emerged from the 'everyday' activities of a focused gaming culture. Rather, being a *Magic* player and reflexively considering these social interactions was *necessary* to be able to articulate a need for research into this subject. Without it, there would be no research question to begin with - I would be ignorant to the research object in its entirety without being immersed in *Magic* culture and experiencing the development of therapeutic affect firsthand.

It is important to outline what I mean by ethnography, and specifically why it was the methodology chosen. This thesis is what Brewer (200) calls "'little'" ethnography, or "ethnography-as-fieldwork" (p. 10). Brewer defines this as:

> [T]he study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (2000, p. 10).

To this end, the researcher's role in this work is to, "understand and explain what people are doing in that setting by means of participating directly in it" (Brewer 2000, p. 18). In understanding 'social meanings', ethnography is necessarily concerned with culture, and the particular form ethnography takes is dependent on a formulated understanding of what constitutes culture (Risjord 2007). The methods of ethnography are not strictly prescribed; as Burgess (1982) explains, "[they] are unstructured, flexible and open-ended" (p. 15). Similarly, guidelines on ethnographic data analysis are similarly flexible; Bernard (1998) claims that ethnographic data analysis is spontaneous, emergent, and context sensitive, and Boelstorff et al. (2012) reflect that, "There is no one way to come up with the insights and claims that give ethnographic analyses their unique stamp" (p. 159). If any commonality can be drawn, it is that, "The most fundamental approach to data analysis is to engage with a rigorous intellectual process of working deeply and intimately with ideas. … It is about finding, creating, and bringing thoughtful, provocative, productive ideas to acts of writing" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 159).

Ethnography fits well with this research on several levels. First, ethnography's strength lies in its capacity as a knowledge-generative methodology. In attempting to 'understand and explain', ethnography as a practice, as Lofland (1996) asserts, "attempts to produce generic propositional answers to questions about social life and organisation" (p. 30) – which is aligned with what this research is studying. This is also consistent with the onto-epistemic position of social realism. The philosophical basis of social realism, "attempts to respond and understand underlying mechanisms", and its "logic… lies in its attention to social and structural mechanisms" (Oladele et al. 2013, p. 3). Knowledge generation in a socio-cultural context is something that social realism explicitly permits, and likewise is compatible with the ethnography's goals. Second, formulating game-play as a cultural entity not only fits with Huizinga's (2002) foundational anthropological research, it also permits a more nuanced and informed means of researching what happens through the act

game-play. By conceptualizing games as having and being constitutive of culture, contextual and environmental factors are integral to the process of developing therapeutic affect through game-play, and require research. In other words, this inquiry is not limited to the game-play mechanisms (i.e. rules, themes, tournaments, etc.), but also includes features that make up that experience associated with and surrounding the game. Social realism posits that culture is external and independent of its human constituents; it is logically consistent, therefore, that this work makes knowledge claims about *Magic* culture through analysis of game-play's social elements and surrounding social structures. Finally, since methods are not fixed in ethnography, this permits the implementation of methods that are best suited to the object being studied, which will be covered in the next section.

That is not to say that this approach is without criticism, or downsides. Risjord (2007) points out the dangers of conceiving of culture as an external entity or object to be studied - primarily that of ethnography as a tool of colonisation. This is especially the case in how ethnography can be used as a means of generalization (Risjord 2007) and can lead to describing and defining findings as aspects of a group in entirety – an effect which, makes people "go missing" (Vernooij 2017, p. 36). This erasing of the social nuances and individual actors from the account in efforts to describe macrosocial processes runs the risk of undermining the knowledge generative task of ethnography (Erikson 2011). I have specifically chosen methods that try to mitigate these concerns; my position as an insider to the research context, and my careful framing of the subject also help to reduce risks for this research to become over generalizing, or enforcing a colonial interpretation from outside the subject. These issues will be addressed in more detail below.

Methods and Analysis

The methods implemented in this study are driven by three factors crucial to formulating this research - first is the scope of the work; second is my position as a researcher; third is a consideration of the ethnographic theory from Brewer's (2000) definition, specifically: "to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally" (p. 10). The methods used to gather data are both traditional fieldwork, through journaling and writing vignettes, and digital fieldwork, by cataloguing social media, blog, video, podcast and other digital cultural artefacts into themes. Thematic analysis was implemented by applying understandings from counselling and psychotherapy theory to themes, which

delineated specific pathways that developed therapeutic affect in *Magic's* socio-cultural interactions. I will begin by explaining the three aspects used in formulating these methods, before explaining the methods in more detail.

Starting with the first, it is impossible for a thesis to have a review *all* traditional games, their various nuances and socio-cultural features. Instead, I opted to scrutinize a single traditional game as a case study. This limits the ability of this work to make generalized knowledge claims about traditional games, which is sensible considering ethnography's strengths as a practice. Ethnography is about the complex actors and constituents of social interactions, and works to investigate the nature of those socio-cultural intricacies to generate understanding. Since culturally and experientially focused research is extremely limited in this field, the hope is that some of the focused understandings in this work might inform the direction further research takes, rather than attempting start and finish a grand unified theory of traditional games and therapeutic affect. That is not to say that the knowledge claims presented are only relevant *Magic* and not to other games; a single case can be enough to warrant or disprove a claim through falsifiability, as in Popper's (1959) famous articulation that the existence of a single instance of a black swan is all that is necessary to disprove the claim 'all swans are white'. Put in other researchers' words, "Ideally ethnographers research narrowly and think broadly, in the sense that they link a delimited and thus doable research question to larger debates" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 54).

The second aspect underpinning my choice of methods is my position as player, therapist, and researcher. *Magic* was chosen for this case study because of my position as an insider. I have played the game extensively for 5 years, representing Scotland in the 2018 World *Magic* Cup and captaining a *Magic* team for three years. From a research design point of view, choosing *Magic* for the case study had practical advantages: my experience as a player provided me with an extensive reflexive data set to contribute to ethnographic analysis, conferred insight into where to collect data, and nuanced my perspective of the cultural context of data collected. Ease of access is a commonly cited benefit to insider research (Atkins & Wallace 2012), which is pertinent as gaming communities can be notoriously hard to penetrate. Boellstroff et al. (2012) mentions the complex ethnographic implications that are a part of performing fieldwork in a specific digito-ludic fieldsite:

> World of Warcraft might seem a petri dish of sorts; it is a virtual world available in nine languages, popular in dozens of national cultures. But to understand player experience it is necessary to take into account where it is played (internet cafes, dormitories, homes, Starbucks), who plays it (young people in China but a more mixed demographic in North America, for example), and why it is played (a variety of reasons). (p. 33)

World of Warcraft is not unique in these characteristics; “People and culture are emergently, dynamically constituted, constantly shifting, alternatively undergoing period of destabilization and stabilization” (Boellstroff 2012, p. 35). Being a long-term member of the *Magic* community, involved in the roil of these processes, will yield more insightful interpretations and analysis in the ethnographic process.

That does not mean, however, that an insider approach is without risks or disadvantages. Giazitzoglu and Payne (2018) assert that, “[I]nsider-ethnographers… may have less analytical awareness of the implications of cultural meanings they already share with members of the group being studied” (p. 1150). There are also key tensions and dilemmas that come as part of insider research; Atkins and Wallace (2012) outline clearly that, “it may not be possible to anonymise some key informants, or a situation may arise in which the outcomes of the study, particularly if they are of critical practice, may bring [the researcher] into conflict with colleagues” (p. 48). While the practice of insider research has become “favoured by ethnographers with some degree of closeness to the culture they wish to examine” (Taylor 2011, p. 3), the complexity of personal research relationships and the researchers position in relation to the object of study must be acknowledged.

My position is that the practical benefits far outweigh the risks in this case. Outsider researchers, “encounter greater practical problems of gaining physical, let alone social, entry to a research site, and may lack sensitivity to members' culture” (Giazitzoglu & Payne 2018, p. 1150). As an insider, I circumvent the issues of access while better understanding culturally salient narratives and concepts present in the data. Insider research is particularly suited for *Magic* because of the relatively flat power dynamics amongst players of my level; my position is not one in which there is a hierarchical entity that can inflict backlash on me for publishing this work, as Atkins and Wallace (2012) acknowledge. While a common theme in insider research is the potential risks or benefits to personal relationships (Stacey 1996; Taylor 2011; Zinn 1979), my research design limits this impact. In line with DeLyser’s (2001) claim that, “insider researchers need strategic alternatives to the traditional interview” (p. 444), both to mitigate personal risk and to better extract study, I chose to use cultural artefacts as a digital form of subject observation and

my personal experiences as generated from the data knowledge from the object of collection process. Being insider also reduces the risk of employing ethnography in an unethical, damaging, or colonizing manner (Risjord 2007). Furthermore, insider research proffers the opportunity to hone in and give voice to what Foucault (1980) refers to as the, "Subjugated knowledges… [those] that have been disqualified as inadequate to this task or insufficiently elaborated" (p. 86). Epston (2014) remarks that insider research's permits the re-emergence of subjugated knowledges is incredibly valuable, and that this advantage is present not only in ethnographic work, but parallels processes of working with the client's frame of experience in therapeutic practice.

However, my identity is more than *Magic* player; I am a therapist and researcher, and the differences between these cultural contexts (and subjugated knowledges) and their influence on my perspective cannot be mitigated entirely. This is not necessarily a downside, however. Part of participating in a gaming community is that the backgrounds and identities of players are variable, but simultaneously enmeshed and met in the act of gameplay. Others have articulated similarities in online communities:

> [N]o virtual world is a petri dish hermetically sealed off from outside influences. Even as virtual worlds have certain boundaries in the sense that one logs into them and leaves them, they take in and transform ideas and practices from other virtual worlds and internet social contexts, as well as physical world cultures. (Boelstorff et al. 2012, p. 49)

In other words, my other identities outside of *Magic* are necessarily an aspect of my identity within it, and inevitable in these idiosyncrasies is that I posit a divergent meaning from others' experiences. To this, I refer back to social realism as my onto-epistemic position - I own that my claims to knowledge and findings are necessarily fallible. However, the endeavour to get closer to truth is still worthwhile, bearing a reflexive awareness of these risks and potentials in mind.

The third consideration is that of devising a means of data collection that does not impose meaning on the object of study externally, as per Brewer's definition. Considering questions of the therapeutic is a delicate matter; counselling and psychotherapy research usually raise ethical questions of participant safety, confidentiality and sensitivity on the part of the researcher (Abrahams 2007). These concerns become a serious obstacle when engaging in ethnographic research, as the social-cultural interactions being studied should, ideally, be in their naturally occurring form. It is difficult to conceive of collecting data directly from *Magic* players

about their experiences of game-play and therapeutic affect without me putting concept to them, potentially altering the views, values, or meanings of the very group I seek to study. If they were not prompted into sharing such experiences, then access is problematic - how does one observe what could be massively long arcs of time in which therapeutic affect might develop through game-play? In terms of physical fieldwork, this reduced my usable dataset to that of my own experiences, as I would not be externally imposing value on them. The use of personal experience is both consistent with ethnographic practice and with social realism's conception of knowledge as external, which includes knowledge of self. However, more substantive data was necessary to make claims of *Magic*'s socio-cultural characteristics; as Boellstorff et al. (2012) wrote, "Personal experience is part of ethnographic research. However, the converse is not true: ethnographic research is not just personal experience. Nor is it simply the recording of firsthand experience." (p. 43).

To find further data, I employed contemporary, digital methods of data collection. The *Magic* community is incredibly active online, with a rich vein of the community stories and viewpoints available there. Hines (2000) advocates that, "Ethnographers should neither dismiss texts as distorted accounts nor accept them as straightforward truths, but should draw on their own 'socialized competence' in reading and writing to interpret them as culturally situated cultural artefacts" (p. 51). Hines (2000) refers to cultural artefacts as entities that are, "shaped by social processes in production and in use" (p. 39) that are reflective of cultural values and meanings in their respective context - this research will be using the term cultural artefacts similarly. The use of publicly published accounts as data will be considered at length in Chapter 4; for now, it should suffice that the collection and analysis of cultural artefacts by other ethnographers on digital games and communities has shown to be effective with a wide variety of media (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hines 2000; Hines 2015; Varis 2015). Through the course of data collection and analysis, my compiled list of digital artefacts included over 90 different articles, blog posts, and social media posts, over 60 different podcast episodes from well-known *Magic* series' ("Limited Resources", "GAM", "HeadGAM" and others), a handful of videos of tournament coverage with commentary, and a library of videos published primarily by Channelfireball, TCGplayer, and StarCityGames, chosen primarily for brand recognition in the community. The amount of observed digital artefacts was greater, but were only recorded if deemed useful for analysis and categorisation (for

example, videos primarily concerned with exploring technical game-play mechanics that did not speak of the experiential nature of playing *Magic* were not recorded). Though all these sources were rich in the process of thematic analysis and contributed ideas that eventually shaped this work, I primarily cite work with experiential writing rather than other types of media. From a practical point of view, this data set permitted me access to explore cultural-engrained viewpoints and experiences, and to observe individuals' experiences in their own words. Ethically, this involved negligible imposition on my part, while simultaneously ensuring that the individual was happy with their words and experiences being in the public domain since they were published.

With the reasonings for the chosen methods outlined, I will delineate what data I collected, the means by which I did so, and how I analysed them to generate the findings of this work. These steps were not sequential, but ongoing, in line with Brewer's (2000) assertion that, "Ethnography is best perceived as a process… data analysis is simultaneous with data collection" (p. 107). The data collection process for my traditional fieldwork was straightforward - whenever I went to a *Magic* involved context, I would bring a field journal. Following the event, either in transit alone or at home, I would write about my experiences, feelings or ideas that arose from the event. Field notes were collected starting in May 2017 up to June 2019, and totalled to 49 journal entries of varying length, interspersed with some spontaneous short notes taken in the moment (i.e. during tournament play) to be later expanded upon in a completed entry. At first, entries would be brief, specific, and primarily observational – my first field note consisted of a singular quotation from commentators Cedric Phillips and Patrick Sullivan taken from Star City Games' Atlanta Open 2017 coverage about how they think and live differently as a result of playing *Magic*, and a few noted remarks from players at a tournament that were similar. Later entries became much more reflexive, detailed, exploratory, and rich in description, and focused on my own position as a player as well as material observed in others.[1]

This is consistent with conceptions of ethnography as an inscription practice (Geertz 1973; Tedlock 2000) in which field notes are its base materials. I organized my written field notes by content to develop themes as I understood happenings from my perspective as player, therapist and researcher. Harrison (2018) states

[1] Refer to Appendix I for an example of one of my later field note entries in its entirety.

that, “traditionally, analysis means reorganizing data in a way that breaks from the chronological ordering of research experiences… as well as from the categorical ordering of data types”, and from this process of reorganization, “different data speak to one another across time, space and form” (p. 80). More personal data was extracted from a blog I kept when I started playing *Magic*, as well as the articles and videos I created for my *Magic* team’s store sponsor. Over time, consistent trends in these themes appeared as part of my experiences of playing *Magic* and being a part of *Magic* social interactions.

Experiences that seemed particularly poignant, powerful, or illustrative of these themes I reformed as a vignette, some of which I have offered as evidence in Chapters 5, 6 and 8. I have taken the term ‘vignette’ from the works of other researchers to mean interpretative reflexive accounts from the empirical research process (Albertín Carbó 2009; Flogen 2011; Tuckermann and Rüegg-Stürm, 2010). My usage of vignettes is part of what Langer (2016) identifies as an “interpretive tradition of presenting significant single cases to illustrate complex research findings”, perhaps most commonly known in “approaches that entwine poetic and philosophical fragments with analytical and self-reflexive elements” (p. 736). The process by which I came to writing vignettes was an organic; As my field notes developed in the research process, the more they, surprisingly, tended towards a narrative, creative style rather than that of uninvolved observation. In my position of researcher, these stories poured out of me naturally in the process. I eventually concluded that, although perhaps unusual compared to other ethnographic practices, this very personal and creative relationship with the game is likely an important aspect of my research, and decided that they should be included in this work as part of the data. Langer (2016) wrote, “In qualitative research… writing does not constitute an unproblematic act, external and subsequent to a finished process of interpretation. Rather, it has to be understood as a specifically situated act within the interpretative process that is continued in the meaningful reading of the produced text” (p. 735). My storied entries, therefore, are constituent of the process of knowledge generation of ethnography and cannot be extricated from the knowledge claims produced.

There were complexities and difficulties that arose in the use of creating and offering vignettes as part of my research, however. My first concern in offering the vignettes is how they are used in considerations of fact, and how they best serve the

object of study. Rath (2012) voiced this complexity in her work on using poetry to explore counsellor training for rape crisis intervention:

> Although the connections between text and lived experience remain obscure, I do wish to generate stories that speak to the logic and cultures of these women…. I am held in dynamic tension between the postmodernist impulse to interrogate the author and challenge distinctions between fact and fiction, and the feminist impulse to use participative research to "give voice" to those who have been silenced. (p. 3)

The vignettes I offer are intended to be cooperative and collaborative with others' experiences exploring what it is like to play *Magic*. Simultaneously, I hope they offer sense of a lived experience of playing *Magic* that is consistent with the culture of *Magic* as a whole, rather than strictly pertaining to my own personal culture. It is important to boundary these vignettes, and locate where these narratives fit with the digital artefacts being examined alongside them. These vignettes do *not* carry more or less weight than other data examined, but strive to be an immersive invitation to the reader into the experience of playing *Magic*. Explanations and analysis of the these vignettes will be brief to avoid excessive recapitulation, which Bordieu & Wacquant (1992) have criticised as a practice of narcissism, and to leave room for readers to interpret them as they wish. Consistent with the social realist approach, I encourage you to use your judgement in evaluating the truth and import of these narratives.

My main method of acquiring data digitally was the collection and collation of published digital artefacts associated with *Magic* designed for public viewing, following guidance from Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Hines (2000, 2015). These were obtained from a wide variety of sources - Twitter, forums such as Reddit, blogs, primary gaming resources for *Magic* from game creators and sponsors, as well as from widely known (10,000+ followers and/or subscribers) independent media influencers, known as content creators. Collection also included recording specific game objects (cards) through digital means, as game objects can be "key to social life and profoundly shapes personal identity" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 122). As in my fieldnotes, these artefacts were organized to find consistent narratives, themes, and experiences. As stated before, many forms of artefact were recorded and analysed, but this work primarily cites textual artefacts due to practical limitations of involving other analysis methods for working with multi-media data. The use of digital texts as cultural artefacts is an established practice and is considered a form of participant observation (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hines 2015). Hines (2000) explains that, "the analysis of texts needs to take into account their

context. Only then can we make sensible, culturally informed judgements of their significance, and indeed only then can we determine their status as accounts of reality" (p. 52). With this in mind, I conducted historical, archival research on *Magic*, a practice which Boellstorff et al. (2012) considers, "essential to any ethnographic project" (p. 120). These sources were compiled, categorized by theme, and considered alongside material that arose in analysis of traditional fieldwork and personal experiences.

Given the culturally and socially constituted nature of this data, discourse analysis was also implemented in working with themes. Part of the process of understanding recorded cultural artefacts involves considering how these works dialogue within *Magic's* cultural framework, and with those outside *Magic*'s socio-cultural boundaries. In order to incorporate socio-cultural context in analysis, I refer to specific narratives, assumptions, and touchstones as being a part of a 'discourse'. This stems from Foucault (1991), and his claim that power is everywhere, enmeshed in the creation and executions of institutions, in the complex fabric of relation, and inherent to the structure and formulation of society through the discourses that are made dominant as regimes of truth. While Foucault is often associated with constructivist ontologies, Elder-Vass (2012) demonstrates that applying Foucault in a framework incorporating critical realism presents an opportunity to, "develop a realist causal account of [discourse's] influence" (p. 10). As previously stated, players come to a gaming culture with their own socio-cultural frameworks and complexities; to understand the cultural artefacts of any game, the question of power must be acknowledged in the game context and its relation to other cultural frameworks outside it. This work does not address power with the intent of criticism or prescription, but to explore how it works in *Magic* culture to gain understanding of game-play experiences. Considering who stands to gain or lose in the creation of cultural artefacts, or how certain feelings and expressions are silenced or encouraged by dominant discourses is illuminating of player experience and processes, and how they fit into an understanding game-play as therapeutic.

Conclusion

I have framed this work as a social realist ethnographic case study focusing on *Magic*, using personal experiences and observations as well as the digital artefacts that constitute socio-cultural elements of the game's community and

gameplay as data. Analysis will focus on themes and discourses, most of which have arisen in my understanding of theories from psychotherapeutic practice as offering insight into how therapeutic affect may be generated through game-play experiences. The next chapter will provide a historical background on *Magic*, elucidating the context in which these experiences exist, and the subsequent chapter will examine the substantive narrative of *Magic* as conveying therapeutic affect from player experiences. Finally, chapters 6, 7 and 8 will describe my understanding of how therapeutic affect might develop based on the themes that have arisen through data analysis and seek to understand them through theory from counselling and psychotherapy.

Chapter 4 - *Magic: The Gathering* Origins, History, Culture and Organization

Integral to the pursuit of ethnography is a willingness to work with the subject of study as it resides within a living culture, interwoven with the fabric of human social interaction (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Brewer 2000). Games are no different as a subject; they have their own cultures, histories, languages and other properties that form a culture and community that exists dynamically in relation to gameplay.

Part of ethnographic work is archiving and comprehending the structure, features and history of the culture in question (Boellstorff et al. 2012). This chapter describes *Magic*'s game-objects, development, regulation and social context that surround it. The reason for this two-fold. First, it's logistically essential that *Magic's* lexicon be thoroughly explained. There are many terms, phrases, and jargon eidetic to *Magic* that both create and sustain a distinct culture in the game. This archival work hopefully will act as a glossary to the reader for terms presented in later accounts. Second, there is more to *Magic* than the ludic interactions between players; the game-play context greatly informs and alters the meaning of that experience for a player. The positioning of game-play within its community, and how it relates to mainstream cultural paradigms is inseparable from the act of playing *Magic*. Establishing the spaces and discourses in which *Magic* exists will hopefully offer a sense of what it is to be a *Magic* player.

This chapter begins describing *Magic* itself, what constitutes playing it, and its similarities and differences with other western games. Then, I offer a brief history of how the game was created, how *Magic*'s owner, Wizards of the Coast LLC. (hereafter WotC), conducts its manufacture and dissemination, as well as the formation of infrastructure and regulatory bodies that create guidelines and uniformity for playing *Magic* and organizing *Magic* events. Finally, I will outline some sub-groups of the *Magic* community, their constituents, and what role they fill in the community. *Magic* will also be related to other discourses about games, and broader social discourses in which *Magic* appears will be acknowledged; these relationships will be further teased out in other chapters, and have been acknowledged to some degree in the literature review.

Magic: The Gathering - What Is It? How Does One Play?

Magic: The Gathering is a fantasy themed collectible card game (hereafter CCG), and was the first of its kind (Owens and Helmer 1996). While card games have existed since at least the Middle Ages, a CCG is principally different from previous card games as one does not have all printed cards upon acquiring a game set. Instead, cards are collected through limited assemblies of pre-packaged cards, referred to as ‘product’, or trading with other players. Depending on a publisher’s manufacturing guidelines, product may be pre-packaged and assembled decks, promotional individual cards (‘singles’), or, most commonly, ‘booster packs’ containing a randomly assorted, fixed number of cards - usually between 10 and 15 singles. *Magic* was the first to employ this system, and uses booster packs as its primary product model for distribution. Singles that are bought individually, opened in boosters, or acquired through trading are part of *the individual player’s* collection. Cards are not used communally in gameplay - each player typically has their own deck, containing their own cards. As time passes, sets containing brand new cards are released, often built around specific themes or story arcs concerning in-game characters - called ‘expansions’ or ‘sets’ - and the process of acquiring new cards begins anew. At a glance, the way the game is produced and distributed may seem trivial, but this game model is essential to understanding how one plays *Magic*, how the community has been formed, as well as the significance of the cards themselves as cultural artefacts.

To highlight the difference between *Magic* and standardized card games, consider a 52-card traditional playing card set. When one buys a deck of playing cards, they expect to have everything one needs to play any game that uses a playing card deck. Likewise, several games have been developed using this playing card set, with different game elements catering to different player interests - whist, hearts, go-fish, etc. – with the deck shared between all players. Now, imagine that, instead of buying a complete pack of playing cards for you and your fellow players, you had to assemble your deck of playing cards. Let’s say you want to play poker, where certain cards are more favourable to have than others (i.e. a pair of 8’s trumps a pair of 3’s). In this world, you can construct your poker deck of *any* 52 cards that you own (i.e. one copy of each number in each suit as is standard, or, just as easily, a deck of 52 Aces of Hearts). However, you cannot go to a store and buy a complete deck - instead, you can only purchase packs containing five randomized

cards. You may open a pack containing 2, 4, 6, 7, and 9 in a mixture of suits. Your next could have a royal flush, all in spades. Sadly, five cards a legal poker deck does not make; you will have to continue purchasing enough packs to complete your deck. If you intend to be competitive and win more games than you lose in poker, you'll have to acquire the most powerful cards you can in order to trump other players. Naturally, other players who also find winning enjoyable will want to do the same.

To play the game, then, one must collect the necessary cards to play, either through buying packs and hoping to get lucky with what they open, trading cards with others, or buying them from those willing to sell, most likely at a premium price. This unique model of acquisition before the act of playing is what *Magic* pioneered (Owens and Helmer 1996). In the example above, playing poker becomes more than the act of game-play. When game materials must be first collected, strategy and play occur before one sits down at a table with a deck of cards ready to compete. The same can be said of *Magic*.

Once you have collected the requisite cards you need to make a deck, then you can play a game of *Magic*. Much like chess, typical games of *Magic* are played with one player against another in which one player can win. Unlike chess, however, the resources at each players' disposal are asymmetrical - each player chooses the cards in their deck, which their opponent may or may not have access to. This resource asymmetry means that *Magic* games are unique and variable, making the game incredibly deep and, frankly, quite impenetrable for the uninitiated.

At the time of writing, *Magic* has printed over 24,000 unique cards (Wizards 2019c). This breadth of cards means that viable strategies that can exist in *Magic* are astronomically high. This makes understanding the game somewhat complicated, as literally every card has its own rules. Much of understanding the gameplay comes down the mechanical templating of *Magic*'s 'rules engine', which dictates how turns work, when players can make game-actions, how cards interact, etc. This makes Magic difficult to pick up, but fosters a long-standing community of enfranchised players who enjoy the immense strategic and tactical depth that the complex rules engine creates. The rules summary below will be vastly generalized to reflect how games of *Magic typically* work, instead of offering a complete understanding of the entire *Magic* Comprehensive Rules – a 229 page document that expands with every new set release. In considering the rules of *Magic*, it's

important to acknowledge that *Magic* was designed with a rich fantasy lore. Since the beginning of the game's development, *Magic's* lore, art and imagery used on the cards allow players to connect with the *Magic* universe *and* game rules (Rosewater 2003b); I will incorporate lore elements into the explanation of the rules to give a sense of *Magic*'s universe to readers.

The lore of the game frames *Magic* as a duel between 'planeswalkers' – powerful magic-users with the ability to travel the multiverse to different worlds called 'planes' - that summon creatures, cast spells, and use weapons as a way to win the battle. The win-condition in *Magic* is relatively simple: each player starts at 20 life, and one wins the game by reducing their opponent's life total to 0. To do this, one constructs a deck by selecting cards that will hopefully cohesively form a strategy to achieve this. There are different types of cards - lands, creatures, sorceries, artifacts, enchantments, etc. - and they each confer different effects. Each turn allows one to play lands, which act as resources to pay costs, and with those lands play spells (non-land cards) which confer strategic benefits to the user. If one plays creatures, one can engage in combat with those creatures to attempt to deal damage to the opponent's life total. After completing the requisite phases of their turn, a player passes the turn to their opponent, who follows the same steps until the game ends. Unlike most traditional turn-based games, both players can take actions on any turn; each time a player casts a spell or proceeds to another phase on their turn, their opponent can respond. Your opponent can make a move that changes the game even on *your* turn, so long as they have the resources to do so, which makes the game complex from both a rules and strategy perspective.

When constructing a deck, each player decides what sort of magic energy, called 'Mana', they want to use when they construct their deck – white, blue, black, red, green, or a combination there within. Each of these colors offer unique spells and effects that the player can have at their disposal. Choosing colors of mana determines the potential type of cards in your deck, and influences what strategies and approaches to the game are viable (i.e. Red decks are typically aggressive, trying to end a game quickly, while Blue decks are typically slow, and take a long time to accrue strategic advantage).

Each color of mana in *Magic* has its own mana symbol and basic land type (Plains, Island, etc.), as shown here.

Each of these colors are more than mechanical, however; they also to relate to a player's experience the game. *Magic* lore associates each of these colors with a certain personality traits and motivations in what is called 'the color pie'. For example, green is associated with nature; red with impulsiveness; blue with knowledge; white with order; black with amorality and selfishness. Likewise, white is more likely to have soldiers and knights as their creature cards, blue has artificers and wizards, and black has many undead creatures.

Examples of iconic creatures in White, Blue and Black colours

Lead Designer of *Magic* Mark Rosewater considers the color pie to be essential to the design of *Magic* cards and development of *Magic*'s creative and iconic art and stories (2003a). Furthermore, types of mana have cultural connotations and meanings as cultural artefacts; they speak to particular players, and identifying with a type or combination of mana is common amongst *Magic* players. Each set that is

released is typically showcase the individuals, creatures, and spells that the five colors of mana make manifest on that plane.

A Brief History of *Magic: The Gathering*, and its Regulatory Bodies

Magic: the Gathering began as the design project of Dr. Richard Garfield in 1991, then a PhD student, when he approached small-time games company Wizards of the Coast (“The History of Magic” 2018). Garfield originally contacted Steve Adkinson, creator and CEO of WotC, with a board game called *Robo-Rally*, but WotC lacked the production infrastructure to manufacture it. Adkinson was interested, but proposed that Garfield produced a different game to put up the funds to begin manufacture on *Robo-Rally* - preferably one that required minimal production costs, could be played quickly, and was logistically simple enough that it could be bought and played at a gaming convention. Garfield developed *Magic* to fit this request. The game debuted in 1993 at the Origins Game Fair in Dallas, Texas, and was a wild success. Within the first month after the Origins Game Fair, WotC sold what was forecasted as a year’s supply of cards - about 2.6 million singles - which created exponentially more demand due to the acquisition model inherent to CCGs. This first set, now referred to as ‘Alpha’, was reprinted nearly identically (changes made to correct printing errors) to meet demand in much greater quantity two times, first in what is now called ‘Beta’ (7.3 million card print-run) and then ‘Unlimited’ (35 million card print-run). These reprint sets sold extremely well. As the fan base grew, the company looked to expand the game, and released its first expansion, ‘Arabian Nights’, which introduced a whole new set of cards. ‘Arabian Nights’, which offered a fantasy take on middle-eastern mythology, set a precedent for expansions to be flavoured on human history and international culture. This was met with high praise, and WotC printed another new expansion, ‘Antiquities’, establishing the expansion/set model *Magic* has used since.

As *Magic* was created as a one-on-one game, players started to organize competitive play at local stores. WotC took notice of this and decided that this was something they wanted to foster, and held the first sanctioned *Magic* tournament at Gen Con in 1993. Other store owners were inspired, and decided to run tournaments in their own establishments. These tournaments were run to store owner preferences, and disputes were typically settled by whatever means the

tournament organizer had at hand. Inconsistencies in rules interpretations became common, and the bourgeoning *Magic* community demanded a centralized, regulated system for dealing with rules or conduct disputes, as well as guidelines for regulated tournament structures of *Magic* events.

In order to meet this demand, in 1993 WotC created the Duelist Convocation (which would later become Duelist Convocation International, or DCI, as the game grew), to set guidelines for tournament organization for official sanction, make rulings on the game, and track player statistics through membership which players signed up to. Elias Skaff designed a robust official tournament structure required for events to be officially sanctioned which is still used, whereby players engaged in rounds of Swiss tournament play (a non-elimination format in which players are matched based on standings for a fixed number of rounds based on tournament entries) until a final cut for the eight best ranked players by standing (referred to as 'top 8'). The top 8 then participate in a single elimination tournament to determine the winner. The DCI also created a system for sanctioning judges, who make rulings and settle disputes during tournaments, according to the *Magic* comprehensive rules. Player interest after regulation far exceeded expectations, and WotC decided to hold the first *Magic* World Championship in 1994 at Gen Con, a year after the first sanctioned tournament.

The watershed moment that pushed *Magic* from popular past time to international phenomena was the development of the *Magic* Pro-Tour. In 1995, Mark Rosewater and Elias Skaff decided that, in light of the World Championship's success, player performance should be incentivized through exclusive tournaments and prizes. This culminated in the creation of the *Magic* Pro-Tour in 1996, an invitation-only tournament for highly rated players in the DCI membership system and winners of Pro-Tour qualifiers. The prize pot for the tournament was $150,000, and the public response was overwhelmingly positive. *Magic* became branded as an 'Intellectual Sport', and even featured on American sports channel ESPN. When the DCI opened membership to countries outside of North America, suddenly players flocked to tournaments all over the world to not just play the game, but qualify for a tournaments where they could win money by beating the best *Magic* players in the world. The popularity of this concept spawned an entire marketing campaign for *Magic* built around what's culturally referred to as the "pro-dream"

(Wescoe 2018), featuring the tagline “Play the Game, See the World” (Van Lunen 2015).

Rosewater cites this as a crucial part of *Magic’s* industrial success, and much of *Magic* marketing promotes sanctioned tournament play, even for new players. The Pro-Tour (now called the Mythic Championship) is still regarded as the highest level of play in the game, and many players strive for their chance to compete on the world stage. Due to the massive success of *Magic*, and associated WotC IP, gaming giant Hasbro acquired WotC in 1998, who still owns the company.

Since 1996, the tournament, play and marketing models for *Magic* have remained relatively consistent. However, in the last year, WotC has been radically shifting the tournament and marketing structures to incorporate digital platforms into its distribution model to make *Magic* an ‘ESport’ (Chase 2018). This effort has been spearheaded by WotC’s new digital platform for *Magic*, called *Magic: the Gathering Arena*. This is not *Magic*’s first foray into the digital marketplace: its first release dates to 1997 called ‘*Magic: the Gathering*’ (usually referred to as ‘Shandalar’), and a comprehensive digital version of *Magic* was released in 2001 called *Magic: The Gathering Online*. Nevertheless, *Arena* has been the basis for a complete overhaul of the *Magic* tournament system since the game’s release.

The major changes resulting from the push for digital engagement have been varied, but little has been left untouched. Premier tournaments have been rebranded, while others have been discontinued. The Pro-players club, which previously conferred benefits to pro-tour attendees, has been replaced by the *Magic* Pro League, which only consists of 32 players who are given a salary and streaming sponsorship from WotC. These are ongoing developments and are in a constant flux after a long period of stability. Likewise, growing pains have been significant for several *Magic* groups, especially pro-player hopefuls. Nevertheless, *Arena*’s free-to-play model has caused a surge in new-player acquisition, and led to shifts in *Magic’s* market towards digital play. As this project focuses on traditional games and reflects deeply on the nature of so called ‘paper’ *Magic*, it’s important to bear in mind the implications of this research in light of this trend towards profitability in digital spaces that many traditional games transitioning to.

A Glance at the *Magic: The Gathering* Community

Despite digital transitions, paper *Magic* has not changed significantly besides growing far more popular since the major establishment of infrastructure in 1996; *Magic's* current paper player base comprises roughly 20 million players (Duffy 2015). The community, however, is more than players, and comprises many different sub-groups. As stated last chapter, the contextual and cultural interactions between community members are integral to what it is to play the game, and will necessarily be involved in the generation of therapeutic affect . Therefore, it is worthwhile to establish what groups comprise the *Magic* community, who they include and how they interact with one another. These groups are intertwined and are not mutually exclusive; it is likely that a *Magic* community member may identify as part of many of these groups, rather than just one.

Players

'Players' are just what one might expect - those whose primary interaction with *Magic* is playing the game. *Magic*, however, can be played at a variety of different levels, and the level at which a player competes (or seeks to compete) will determine how they are referred to and understood in the community broadly. Culturally, these levels of play impact how individuals are perceived within and without the *Magic* community and how much influence on community discourse they have. These distinctions, while relative, are commonly accepted and propagated through WotC marketing and communication identifying *Magic* players.

Before addressing specific categories of players, however, I will reflect on the demographics of *Magic*, and the relative lack of particulars when it comes to understanding what groups and subpopulations form the *Magic* player base. Ultimately, the player-base demographics are difficult to acquire due to what information is public; unlike census information or community efforts that might be found in other groups, the data for demographic data is held exclusively by WotC as sales information. Due to access issues between different types of players, it is difficult to pin down exactly *who* is playing *Magic* in terms of age, gender, race, religion, etc., as will be explained in the next few paragraphs. Accessible demographic data comes from *Magic* lead designer Mark Rosewater and reports for Hasbro stockholders; these come to light irregularly, and are disclosed only in a few documents. Broadly of the playerbase, Rosewater (2015b) has stated, "the gender

breakdown of male to female [*Magic* players] is 62% to 38%". According to Hasbro fiscal reports, the primary player age demographic in 2013 was "18-to-34-year-olds, with just 25% of its players falling outside that range" (Marder 2014). However, appearing progressive is a clear marketing strategy that *Magic* has implemented in recent years (Orsini 2016), meaning that these demographics, and WotC's understanding articulations of them, have likely shifted, a development that will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7. Beyond that, there is no other official published data on race, religion, ability, or other population data for *Magic* players or consumers.

Overall demographics for international sales, however, say little about the smaller categorical distinctions identified by both the community and *Magic* design (Verhey 2018); for example, the cited figure of a 62%-38% split between male and female identifying players is not consistent with the population of competitive players, of which it is estimated between 1% and 5% of players are non-male (Scharlin-Pettee 2016). This difference is indicative of barriers to entry for those outside the target male, 18-35 demographic - a trend common in other gaming communities as shown by the #GamerGate movement (Alexander 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015; Wingfield 2014). While the tournament environment is rationalized as a model of meritocratic progression, these differences raise concerns about access to the means of competition, and illustrate that, "It is more difficult for some players to scale the rungs of the Magic ladder than others" (D'Anastasio 2019). Much of the counter-discourse to this perspective founds itself on exclusion based on acculturated interest, primarily built on the assumption that women simply don't enjoy competition – a position that is consistently debunked by player accounts (D'Anastasio 2019; Macintyre 2019). Despite outspoken contrary perspectives, the acculturated interest narrative is persistent, and as a result outsider groups – those who do not fit a white, male, young adult, able-bodied identity – risk being gatekept out of *Magic* spaces through 'toxic gamer culture' (Consalvo 2012), including, but not limited to, discrimination, marginalization or othering, harassment, or offering unwanted attention. While situations such as these can be harmful to players, they are not incompatible with generating therapeutic affect. Issues of representation are frequently discussed in *Magic* design and the community, and will be addressed specifically in Chapter 7 in relation to therapeutic processes. In the meantime, it is important to keep these conflicts of representation and access in mind as we speak about subsections of *Magic* community.

Shifting the focus player groups, WotC data reflects that 'casual players' make up the majority group in *Magic*, and outstrip other player groups' financial investment a factor of nearly twenty to one (Stein 2016). These players typically have close-knit play groups, and play in private spaces or occasionally in their local game store, though are unlikely to engage with most events or promotions made by WotC (Rosewater 2007). Casuals often play *Magic* game-variants that are not competitively sanctioned - though some groups play tournament formats using decks that do not prioritize competitive viability. Casual players prioritize having fun in gameplay, as opposed to optimizing play to climb the competitive ladder. While these individuals play *Magic*, they may or may not consider themselves a part of the *Magic* community, and likewise the moniker of 'casual' or 'kitchen-table player' can have very different connotations depending on who uses it. Sometimes 'Casual' is used as derogatory term in competitive environments, and identifying as a 'kitchen-table' player can lead to unacceptance or dismissal in some playgroups (Desperax 2016). This is consistent with institutional practices of WotC; by basing *Magic*'s growth around tournament structures, competitive experience or skill becomes a social metric of evaluation. Those without it will potentially be perceived as different, potentially outsider - and sometimes be treated with less respect.

Taking a step towards tournament play is the group typically referred to as 'competitive players'. Competitive players place priority on honing their *Magic* skills to compete at premier events and earn invitations to events like the Mythic Championship. While the current qualification systems are undergoing a major transition right now, I will refer to the old system of qualification to illustrate of the demands of competitive *Magic*. This system is renowned for being difficult to qualify for premier events through as the slightest hiccup from variance (i.e. bad draws from your deck, or bad matchups based on opponent pairings) could cause a tumble down to the bottom of the system. Competing is incredibly demanding on an individual's time and their finances given the cost of airfare, tournament entries, accommodation and the fact most competitive decks in even the cheap formats cost upwards of £300 (which change potentially with every new set, requiring further investment). It is unsurprising that many competitive players refer to themselves somewhat bitterly as 'Grinders'.

This group is but a fraction of those who play *Magic*. Hasbro CEO Brian Goldner acknowledged, "*Magic* recently achieved the milestone of 1 million active

players in our organized play system. We also have 65,000 players who play in premier events streamed to 'e-sports' audiences" (in Stein 2016). That means of the 20 million worldwide players, only 1 million of those players will actively participate in sanctioned tournaments, and of those only 65,000 will attend Premier events such as open Grand Prix or the Mythic Championship. This competitive player ratio is deceptively high compared to traditional competitive practices; Tennis, for example, has an estimated 60 million strong player base worldwide (Pledge Sports 2017), with 17.9 million registered players in the USA alone (TIA 2015), but only 14,000 of those players compete in any level of pro-qualifying events (Waldstein 2017). Comparatively, this indicates *Magic* culture disposes players to engage with competitive play to a much greater degree than other gaming activities, reinforcing the institutional impact of WotC framing *Magic* primarily around tournament play. That said, being a grinder comes with its own cultural stigmas, especially from casual players. Often grinders are characterised 'try-hards' with a superiority complex that don't have the skills to be a pro. Casual players sometimes state grinders eschew the 'soul' or fun of *Magic* in exchange for winning - for example, by 'net-decking', the practice of using decklists from pro finishes rather than creating new decks (ethical 2017). While content creators and influencers who market towards casual players have tried to shake these stereotypes (Waterman 2018), in many play groups the ugly caricature of grinders as cut-throat, over-competitive, and toxic persist.

The difference between competitive and pro-players can be relatively small as far as lifestyle and involvement with the game go but differ greatly in community perception. The distinction of 'pro' is currently in a state of institutional flux, however, a 'pro-player' generally refers to one who has consistently been invited to pro-tours/Mythic Championships, and are supported financially through gameplay. These players are lauded as the best in the game, and some have become cultural figures in their own right through achievements such as induction into the *Magic* Hall of Fame. Pro presences tends to be widely followed on social media outlets, and are more likely to be selected to be in event 'feature matches' - specifically chosen games that are live-streamed as part of event coverage.

Consistent performance is much easier said than done in *Magic* compared to some other games, as the high skill threshold is brought to bear with the variance inherent to card games. While the rewards may be significant, for many Pros

tournament *Magic* is not their primary source of income due to the difficulty of achieving consistent prize pay-outs from events (winning a Grand Prix typically awards $10,000, while coming 9th-16th place only awards $600). Pros mitigate this through *Magic* content creation for retailers, tournament organizers, or other sponsorship websites. The vast majority of *Magic* content distributed by major third party retailers are created by pro-players, meaning that pros have major community influence, even amongst casual players. Newly implemented pro salaries from WotC are cognizant of this, and include both 'player and streamer contracts with a combined worth of $75,000' (Chase 2018), meaning that becoming a pro is shifting to be inseparable from the practice of developing content and having a public image. Despite the reality of pro *Magic* players investing a great deal of time into making money through other means, the 'pro dream' (Wescoe 2018) narrative that has manifested depicts pros as making their living solely from playing *Magic*, elevating perceptions of pros to near-mythical standards - especially by those who wish to go pro themselves.

Content Creators

Content creators are individuals who create content for consumption by the *Magic* community. Content, as stated in the previous chapter, is a significant source of data in this ethnographic work. It has been demonstrated in strictly digital communities that those who produce posts or content tend to be a much smaller membership than those who consume it (Nonnecke & Preece 2004; Preece & Nonnecke 2004), but *Magic* is a bit more complex in tracking and identifying how content creation works due to its boundaries being ludic in nature. As such, the venue for content creation is vast, ranging from personal blogs, social media accounts, retailer sponsor websites, fora, and in-person interactions at events, rather than a single site. As a result, *Magic* content creators tend to be more similar to social-media influencers, where content is primarily user-driven, highly contextualized and decentralized from the communities' organizing entity, WotC (Mayfield 2005; Chen et al. 2013). While WotC does drive site traffic through content creation, most content is independently created, offering a specific type of content for their target audience.

Content creation includes, but is not limited to, videos, podcasts, articles, blog entries, social media posts, official and fan-made art creations, custom

gameplay paraphernalia (deck boxes, dice, tokens, etc.), and cos-players. Content creators do not come from a specific player subset (i.e. casuals or pros), and, in some cases, creators are not players at all. Content tends to be developed for specific sub-audiences of the *Magic* community to create a distinct and loyal fanbase. For example, many pro players who run streams or write articles tend to focus on their experience and skill as a selling point to appeal to competitive players. Others, such as SaffronOlive, create videos, articles and blogs meant for a casual fanbase that want to explore strange, fun, or budget-friendly deck building in *Magic*. In this sense, the substance of content can be as varied as the form it can takes.

While individual motivation will vary, much of the incentive to create content is to gain influence in the community that can be monetized in some manner. Social media influencers have become part of a complex marketing economy as a means of driving traffic and hits to a specific website through followers, shares or other metrics (Freberg et al. 2018); this is no different in the *Magic* community. Influencer status is often driven through quality engagement rather than quantity (Basille 2009; Strately 2010), as most full-time content creators sustain their work through crowdfunding platforms and subscriptions. This acquisition model grows through recruitment by third-party retailers or WotC, who employ content creators to drive traffic through webstore platforms or to promote events, while simultaneously boosting the reach and influence of content creator. As a result, these creators make up a large part of the fabric of discussion and discourse in the *Magic* community, shaping the exchange ideas and communications in the community at large. The influence of established content creators also encourages a norm of content creation in the community, with many individuals blogging, streaming, recording videos or podcasts in their spare time, though they receive little to no income from these practices. The artefacts produced and consumed in this space represent important touchstones that establish language and experiences endemic to *Magic* culture, and the subsequent four chapters will be inspecting these artefacts in greater detail.

Retailers and Tournament Organizers (TOs)

While the digital space is integral to the *Magic* community, *Magic* is played with physical cards, and *Magic* culture orbits around the physical spaces where

people play. While *Magic* could be played near anywhere, most new players are introduced to it through their local, often independent *Magic* retailer which runs events. These are often referred to as a 'Local Game Store' or 'LGS', distinguished from corporate *Magic* retailers (i.e. Walmart) who only sell product. As well as organizing and running *Magic* events, LGSs offer specialized services of buying, selling and trading singles, whereas corporate retailers do not.

The LGS is essential in crystallizing *Magic* culture. Generally players get their first experience of *Magic*, meet other *Magic* players for the first time and develop a *Magic* network in their LGS. LGSs dictate how *Magic* is perceived by new players and by locals outside the *Magic* community. For many casual and competitive players alike, their LGS is their *Magic* home, where they trade cards, play games, and interact with a community that shares their passion and interests. Once a LGS is approved to run events through the DCI, they become a 'tournament organizer' or 'TO', which means they become responsible for running and maintaining events in accordance with the DCI guidelines. While TOs remain independent, WotC dictates *Magic* marketing programmes and events that TOs are expected to run. These usually take the form of promotional or weekly tournaments that offer players prizes for participation or performance, in part funded by WotC.

Through this centralized system, WotC provides a path to entry into *Magic* that incentivizes players of all skill levels to get involved in tournament culture propagated by TOs. Players who have just been taught *Magic* by staff are often invited to participate in weekly tournaments for new players, framed as a stepping stone to other more competitive events, such as weekly 'Friday Night Magic' events or the qualifier circuits that feed into the Mythic Championship. Doing so offers opportunity for TOs to acquire new consumers and increase revenue, and in turn they edify a competitive tournament culture that is ubiquitous in *Magic* spaces.

Through running larger and more competitive events, as well as engaging in the *Magic* singles market, certain vendors have accrued very lucrative and large businesses much bigger than typical LGSs. These large corporations invest the money earned from sales to make bids on becoming TOs for Premier Events, where they can charge premium prices for entry, and have a culturally significant brand, attracting teams of professional players and content creators. The largest brands bid to monopolize organization on entire tournament circuits (i.e. ChannelFireball is currently the official TO for Grand Prix and Mythic Championships), or to make their

own tournament systems as an alternative to the Mythic Championship system (i.e. the North-American SCG circuit hosted by TO Star City Games). These corporate market interests are driven by event attendance, necessarily shaping the culture of *Magic*, again, towards competitive engagement with the game. That said, as non-tournament game-variants gain greater engagement from players, more and more of these retailers are turning to content creators and marketing strategies that operate outside their role as a TO.

Conclusion

Now that the history of *Magic* as a game, as well as its constituent community structure has been outlined, this can now be considered in the context of the discourses, narratives, and accounts of players and institutional forces in this community. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will consider *Magic* community content as it relates to the development of therapeutic affect for those engaging with the game, and interrogate issues and discourses that arise in working with difference in the player base. Before these discourses are scrutinized, however, the next chapter will focus on outcomes, particularly accounts of experiencing therapeutic affect through playing *Magic*, and the significance of this narrative in a culture of content creation and influence.

Chapter 5 - '*Magic* Saved My Life' : Exploring the Narrative of Therapeutic Affect in *Magic: The Gathering*

"*Magic* saved my life" is a strong phrase, but not an unfamiliar one in the *Magic* community. It's not always formulated as such - sometimes it's "Magic helped me through x", or "Magic helped me realize I was x" or "Magic let me become x"; there is always a semblance of growth in it, the ability to move forward, to become a more honest, reflective, or able person in some aspect of the storyteller's life. These phrases bounce off the walls of an LGS when you ask regulars how long they've been playing *Magic* for or what they like about the game. When you first start playing, the locals are often interested in you - a fresh face, a new member of the group, another person they might see week in and week out. Inevitably, people volunteer what *Magic* means to them. Perhaps it's because the game can be so incredibly impenetrable and overwhelming at first, but they speak as if assuring you, 'I know it's tough now, but trust me, the time you spend here at tournaments, on weekends - it's worth it. It's been worth it for me, it can be worth it for you.'

This research explores the process though which therapeutic affect manifests in *Magic*, but before understanding how a process works, it is important to consider what that process entails. This chapter will outline narratives of therapeutic affect generated through gameplay as presented by community members. As mentioned in the introduction, I also have had a therapeutically affective relationship with *Magic* as a player; However, as addressed in chapter 3, my experience is not substantive of the entirety of *Magic* culture, nor is my narrative one that is entirely unique. While I cannot offer the exact words of those I have met all through my years playing, I can offer you the narratives that many players have shared in *Magic*'s online community.

This chapter will delineate the similarities in construction and meaning of these stories and my own experiences and wonder about this shared community experience of personal growth through the act of playing *Magic*. That said, these stories rarely focus and analyse the individual components of playing *Magic* that led to this transition, growth, change or survival. They typically take the form of retrospective observation of a long period of change, typically years, constructing it

into an illustrative form that is intelligible, likely for the benefit of both the author and the reader. The following chapters will scrutinize the processual elements of these outcomes and consider how therapeutic affect may arise in the process of game-play given these reported outcomes. These stories will be considered using the definition of therapeutic affect established in Chapter 2, which encompasses experiences that 1. enable thinking and reflection to occur, and in turn frees individuals from the imposed suffering or constraints of an established impinging system of thought or experience, 2. help the individual consider themselves, and to wonder about their experience of the world and what is meaningful or important to them, or 3. permit the individual the ability to create changes that the individual deems desirable. Finally, I will explain what these findings mean in terms of the original research question, and how further chapters will proceed with these findings.

Identifying Narratives of Therapeutic Affect in *Magic*

In the introduction to this work, I offered my own story about discovering *Magic*, learning to play, and eventually taking part in the local tournament circuit. This story comes from a period of transition and instability for me; I was just out of university, struggling to find a path that was acceptable for me, while competing in an extremely saturated and competitive job market in a recession economy. My story illustrates how *Magic* was an important structure in my life when job prospects were unreliable. *Magic* gave me a platform for expressing difficult feelings that felt unacceptable elsewhere, and helped me understand my anger, frustration, and feelings of being unacknowledged by confronting them in the development of competence in a practice. This meets the requirements for the definition of therapeutic affect presented hitherto, which is significant in its commonality in the narratives shared about *Magic* in online spaces.

Many authors have reflected on *Magic*'s role offering therapeutic affect to the player, though it is rare that it is acknowledged in therapeutic terms. However, the examples presented in these narratives make it clear that there is a process of reflection, growth and change in which *Magic* takes a central role. For example, some authors write about processing traumatic experiences or making positive changes personal circumstances through playing *Magic*. Dillard (2016) writes about

bereavement after losing his mother, and writes about his understanding of the experience through the structure of a turn of *Magic*. Former pro Jacob Van Lunen (2015) wrote in a well-known article about how *Magic* very literally 'saved [his] life' by helping him find meaning after he tried to complete suicide. Both narratives are concerned with meaning, especially those of their own lives and those of others, fitting well with part 2 of our definition of therapeutic affect.

Others frame narratives of growth around tangible, external goals. On the *Magic* specific board of Reddit, r/MagicTCG, players have posted about how *Magic* played a role in helping them get over opiate addictions (u/Magicnerd1994 2015). Others have spoken about how it helped them get on their feet after being homeless, or being threatened with homelessness. (u/WickedPsychoWizard 2017; Prestage 2016a; Prestage 2016b). Some authors describe how *Magic* helped them get through medical struggles; Christopher B. (2014) noted that in his battle against cancer, which made him "fall into a deep black hole", what got him through was the desire to play his favourite *Magic* cards again. He offers a clear message: "If you ever find yourself in a similar situation… this article is for you…. [F]ind something that you can hold onto - something that was there all the time but that maybe you forgot about" (Christopher B. 2014). *Magic* articulated this way is an object that is enabling, able to be held close and relied upon as a security or inspiration - a message that seems consistent with aspect 1 of the definition of therapeutic affect, enabling these individuals to escape the impinging nature of the 'black hole'.

Others have written about *Magic* in a reflexive fashion, focusing on the internal aspects of selves that they have realized through playing. Chapman Sim (2015) compares playing *Magic* to the film *Eat, Pray, Love*, and contends that playing *Magic* hasn't only brought him enjoyment as a player, but has made him an overall more worldly, happier, and, as he puts it, 'better' person through those experiences. David Pemberton (2016) writes about how he learned to play *Magic*, despite personal reservations about it being a "game of nerds the world over, populated by virgins and pimply faced teenagers"; it taught him to not worry as much about what others think about him and how to make friends as an adult. He ends the article describing playing *Magic* in a bar with one of his friends, while a group of hipsters made jokes about them playing. He chooses to inform his waitress at a volume that group might hear, "'Anyone who has a problem with people playing *Magic* … is a real asshat'", and offers the reader something of a personal sense of

meaning and happiness and it's importance: "I mean, I get it, we were adults in a bar… playing a card game with wizards and elves and goblins. But hey, at least we were smiling" (2016). These narratives, while not limited to the third aspect of our definition of therapeutic, certainly seem to outline ways of changing themselves or their outlook that they deemed desirable.

The cultural narrative of *Magic* as a force for personal enrichment or betterment is one that is not solely limited to content-creators or pro-players who are heavily invested in the game, or those looking to write an alternative culture piece. This narrative is one that is edified by *Magic*'s institutional forces, and is a perspective present in community members outside of content creation. Both WotC and gaming news outlet Hipsters of the Coast have published community submission articles, compiling quotes from individuals talking about how *Magic* has improved their lives (Garraud 2014; Wolff 2017). Of the 33 submissions published in Garraud's article, most of which were anonymous, they range greatly. Some are in the realm of the relatively mundane, but no less important: "10 year smoker here! Just quit smoking 6 months ago so I could buy into Legacy!" (Anonymous in Garraud 2014). Others acknowledge the connection between the game and difficult aspects of their emotional world:

> Depression, insomnia, grief and an attempted suicide… I still feel like a shadow of what I used to be but one piece of the time line is starting to make some sort of sense again. Magic is 'just' a game, but sometimes it's enough to push my head above the water and let me take a breath when I need it" (Anonymous in Garraud 2014).

To others, such as *Magic* commentator and ex-pro-player Patrick Sullivan, it is a philosophical and processual concept of self that becomes apparent, involving a deep interrogation of meaning through *Magic*:

> *Magic* is the game I've found [to be] the closest approximation to how life works, generally… Circumstances are often not 'fair', and in fact the concept of [fairness] doesn't really exist. There are so many decision trees occurring and most people aren't even aware that these decisions are happening, much less that they have any agency in their outcomes. You can play well, better than the person across from you, and still lose. Because of this, the focus can't be on the outcome, though the successes feel nice. The mental and emotional energy should instead be spent on the process. 'Should I have chump-blocked a turn earlier?' and 'Am I being decent to the people around me?' are very different questions, the process behind answering both honestly requires thoughtfulness, honesty, and clarity. I think I've gotten better about answering questions like the latter because of the amount of energy I spent thinking about the former…. [T]his is where *Magic* has influenced my development the most. (Patrick Sullivan in Wolff 2017)

The resonance with which these narratives have with my own life, and the consistency in their formulation leads me to believe that this constitutes a cultural experience that is characteristic to playing *Magic*. However, I am reminded of those previous conversations I had with *Magic* players when I first started playing the game; this is a very particular way of framing the game experience, and creating a cultural expectation and story of what *Magic* is to players. To take a critical approach, it may not be enough to notice idiosyncrasies and similarities, and conclude the significance of these stories to the authors translates to a brute form of evidence that can be used in mental health. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) name this concern when talking about the use of written documents in ethnographic practice, particularly those that have been made or created for public syndication and are autobiographical or biographical in nature:

> Authors will have interests in presenting themselves in a (usually) favorable light…. They are often written with the benefit of hindsight, and are thus subject to the usual problems of long-term recall. Authors have a sense of audience that will lead them to put particular glosses on their accounts… [A]s important as the accuracy or objectivity of an account is what it reveals about the teller's interests, perspectives, presuppositions, and discursive strategies. (p. 124)

According to them, narratives need to be scrutinized further as creations of specific individual actors involved in propagating discourses in the cultural complex of *Magic*. This is especially relevant in an age where content creation is that of influencer culture – and what is presented on online accounts may be embellished, whitewashed, or, though rare due to its unsustainability (Freberg et al. 2018), fabricated in the interest of crafting an online presence for public consumption.

Hammersley and Atkinson's cynicism regarding these types of data is not necessarily shared between other social research paradigms, however. In fact, to many accounts written by the research subject are perceived as of increasingly important to the generation of knowledge. The generation and acceptance of methodologies such as narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) that are focused on the stories lived and told by research participants show demonstrably that the personal accounts and stories publicly offered are accepted as research data. Ken Plummer (2001) states that stories are an essential part of the humanistic foundations of qualitative research, and he advocates:

> …getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways, and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring. (p. 2)

This approach in one where the fascination is with the narrative itself and its expression, rather than a fact checking exercise constantly concerned with the reliability of the storyteller. In specific fields, such as Nursing, the use of unsolicited or published for the public accounts has been in increasing use (O'Brien and Clark 2012). Power et al. (2012) acknowledge, "an increasing realisation in health care that lived experiences of health, illness, and care should be central to informing service design and delivery" (p. 39). Published autobiographies not only offer insight to the 'feeling' of illness experiences, but are incredibly useful in both teaching and personalizing illness for health professionals. O'Brien and Clark (2010) insist that, "First person written illness narratives are legitimate sources of research data" (p. 1680), though further steps need to be taken to solidify standards of practice for using unsolicited written narratives. Contrary to Hammersley and Atkinson's concern about narrator reliability and motivation, Carlick & Biley (2014) contend that unsolicited written narratives are importantly distinguished from solicited methods of data collection since the author does not have access to the reaction of the listener, meaning they might speak more freely.

Applying these thoughts to the presented accounts in *Magic*, for these accounts to be useful in understanding therapeutic affect in *Magic*, it's essential to consider how these written artefacts are positioned culturally to best understand the implications of these outcomes of therapeutic affect. The next section will consider the context of these narratives regarding the established definition of therapeutic affect.

What Can Be Learned From the '*Magic* Saved My Life' Narrative?

With the definition of therapeutic affect in mind, it is necessary to explore fully what the cultural role of these narratives is, how we can consider and use them, and whether they shed light on the question of how playing *Magic* can be therapeutically affective. There is still a lingering question of authenticity - can we trust these works to be representative of an experience of playing *Magic*, or are they result of a intentional storying of the game-play elements? This section will

investigate of the cultural context in which these narratives appear, and the discourses they interact with within and without the *Magic* community.

These narratives, while different in their construction, in author, in involvement or role in the community, share an experience of how *Magic* impacts individuals. To consider the therapeutic nature of *Magic* by using these narratives as evidence, there are a number of important questions that need to be considered in relation to these narratives: Who are the individuals creating these stories, and to what effect? Who are the readers, and how do these narratives interact with their assumptions?

It's essential that we conceive and approach these texts as cultural narratives - they are a distinct and accepted form of story that is part of being *Magic* player. As such, a consideration of discourse and power is necessary in questioning both where these accounts fit into a cultural understandings of *Magic* and what the authors are trying to achieve in doing so. As outlined in Chapter 1 and 2, mainstream discourses around traditional games generally depicts them as non-serious, frivolous, or as time-wasters. The narrative of '*Magic* saved my life' is dominant within the *Magic* community, but stands in direct opposition to mainstream dominant discourses concerning games. The publication mediums are significant in this formulation of opposing discourses; while many of these narratives are published on *Magic* specific sites, and therefore are most likely be read by enfranchised players, a significant amount of these are features in variety publications, such as Pemberton's work in Uproxx, and major periodicals such as Forbes (Orsini 2016) or local news publications (Smith 2013). Medium and common narrative elements, such as explanations of what *Magic* is, suggest they don't target those with knowledge of *Magic*. In other words, these stories aren't just for *Magic* players, but are often written specifically for outsiders.

If the object of an article is to convey story or message of interest to the reader, it is significant that these narratives offer a story that might be unknown or contradictory to previous expectations about games to mainstream readers. The narrative of '*Magic* saved my life' presents a depiction of *Magic* that runs clearly counter to mainstream discourse about games by offering an outcome that is beyond the fun or frivolous elements. In my story, I talk about *Magic* as a tool for empowerment at a time when I was vulnerable or disempowered, and this is consistent with other stories that talk about internal growth or learning a way of

being. Other authors link the act of playing *Magic* with tangible, external developments that are, in western medical and social discourses, almost always seen as positive: beating cancer, a tool for passing through suicidal ideation alive, as a means of finding work, quitting smoking, etc. Returning to Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007), these features speak to the intentions that many of these authors have in disseminating these narratives. Through the choice of generally accepted positive examples of 'saved my life' outcomes and the constant framing of *Magic* in the way it is usually perceived by outsiders ('Nerdy', 'Weird', 'Childish', etc.), is it clear these authors have an understanding of the cultural assumptions and expectations that surround *Magic*. I argue that these narratives are intended to debunk mainstream conceptions of what games are or do by using specific language that is accepted as *good* or *positive* by mainstream society and associating it with *Magic*. It is essential that we consider why these authors might take up these challenges, as their intent impacts how one should use these narratives as data or evidence of therapeutic affect as an aspect of *Magic*.

The most obvious, and potentially naive position would be to conclude that all these stories are factually accurate, and the intent of these authors is an honest attempt to set the record straight through their own experience. In compiling these narratives for this project, this is the position that I approached this project with – primarily because of my own experiences with *Magic*. That is not to say that there might be desires beyond a challenging of dominant discourse; if mainstream discourses shift, these author's lives might be more generally accepted and appreciated by those outside the *Magic* community. This benefit to the author, however, does not necessarily run counter to narrative legitimacy; why shouldn't outsiders think differently of *Magic* if they assumed that it was just a time-waster, only to discover it can be profoundly valuable to an individual's experience of life?

There are other motivations authors might hold in writing these stories, however. In the case of corporate stakeholder WotC and third-party vendors such as ChannelFireball that have published some of these articles, there is significant financial opportunity in legitimising *Magic* as a tool for personal improvement. If public perception shifted to conceptualizing *Magic* as a means of not only having fun, but improving one's life, that could be a major selling point. That being said, I find this interpretation somewhat farfetched. Articles published by these companies are not written by the institutional employees, but by contracted content creators

who have a very large remit to “find a niche” (Sylvestri 2012) for their content (given it’s about *Magic*). Large *Magic* retailers seem more concerned with whether the content drives traffic, rather than being concerned specific content of the articles themselves (Sylvestri 2012). While we can assume there is some editorial guidance from publishers, Jadine Klomparens (2018), long time strategy writer at Star City Games, stated, “In today's world, there's only one truly vital rule you need to follow in order to create content worth consuming: *Be yourself*”. If this is the guidance most article writers go by, it seems unlikely that the narrative of “*Magic* saved my life” is fabricated as a marketing technique. Moreover, a far more significant source for these narratives is in news outlets, personal blogs, and forum posts where the authors have far more limited ways to capitalize from an increased amount of sales or a greater market viability in *Magic*.

While these points are important to acknowledge, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make firm conclusions on the general intention of these authors and what stake they have that might not be readily apparent. More than likely these intentions will vary among authors and, for this thesis’ purposes, the specific intent of an article may not necessarily discount it from this work’s claims to knowledge. The interest of this thesis is exploring how playing *Magic* can generate therapeutic affect. This chapter’s goal is to explore the cultural narratives associated with outcomes which fit the definition for therapeutically affective. Intentions that are ambiguous are still useful in answering this question, as a story depicting therapeutic affect demonstrates that this process exists in cultural awareness, as well as acknowledging outcomes that corroborate that such a process can happen.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the existence of a cultural narrative within the *Magic* community that identifies the practice of playing *Magic* as potentially offering positive outcomes for the player’s experience of life. As a cultural narrative, these stories challenge mainstream dominant discourses and assumptions about games and what they do. The reported outcomes in these narratives correspond with the definition of therapeutic affect outlined in Chapter 2 based on psychotherapeutic processes of change. These narratives are consistent across the cultural horizon from within the *Magic* community, and this narrative has been written and described by a wide variety of different authors and for a variety of different audiences. While author intentions are unclear in propagating this narrative, it is evident that this

narrative exists, and shapes *Magic*'s cultural conceptions of how players perceive the process of engaging with *Magic* gameplay. This narrative is reproduced within the community, as well as being given access to those outside the *Magic* community to varying degrees. In this sense, the process of therapeutic affect manifesting in *Magic* is an accepted part of cultural identity and conception beyond individual experience, and therefore an entity able to be worked with and analysed.

With this conclusion reached, the rest of this work will turn its eye to filling in the gaps of this this narrative. The narrative of '*Magic* saved my life' is one that has been chiefly concerned with outcomes that include therapeutic affect. However, this leaves much to be desired; after all, how do these outcomes occur for players? In what way does therapeutic affect manifest, and how might we better conceive of this affective nature for application in the field of counselling and psychotherapy? The next three chapters will use psychotherapeutic theory to investigate how therapeutic affect manifests in *Magic*, and offer a preliminary framework for conceptualizing the experience of game-play as part of a process of therapeutic affect.

Chapter 6 - Therapeutic Affect through Game Design

I have demonstrated how one might conceive of player's accounts as an established cultural narrative of therapeutic affect in *Magic*. This claim opens lines of inquiry considering what aspects of *Magic* are a part of the process of generating therapeutic affect, which will be explored in the remainder of this thesis. Put more simply, if *Magic* is culturally known to be therapeutically affective, it begs the question: *how* or *in what way* can *Magic* be therapeutically affective?

This chapter will further that inquiry by scrutinizing *Magic*'s design. Games originating in the modern era were not born of spontaneity as the earliest forms of playful competition and exhibition were (Huizinga 2002), but have been intentionally and self-consciously designed (Neil 2016). Game-designers, therefore, necessarily form game-play experiences through the filter of their values, interests, and beliefs. Huizinga posited that games are instrumental in creating human culture through their ability to ascribe and reinforce social values through gameplay – for example, by prizing specific skills needed to excel in the game, or implying certain values through the game's boundaries and organization i.e. 'fairness' (2002). With the advent of technological improvements of communication and production, this influence has become more intentional in the creation of games. These values can appear as implicit subtexts, or as explicit expressions of ideology or political points in game material; for example, one rule in *Agricola*, a medieval farming board game, states that placing too many livestock on a space awards no benefits to the player, citing sustainability issues of corporate farming practices of the contemporary era as its rationale (Roseberg 2016). *Magic* is no different, and its rules and organization confer the game-designer's values and understandings through the practice of game-play.

The influence of a game on its players is processual and involves input from the player. A game's impact does not take its complete form in the act of design and publication of a game, which players then absorb. Instead, players have a direct role in making the design of the game come to life by applying their own interpretation to it. It is not uncommon that players use game pieces and objects in ways that the designers may not have intended - for example, the use of 'glitches' in digital games to fundamentally change game experiences, often to the benefit of the player

(Cardoso & Carvalhais 2013). This phenomenon is present in *Magic* too, such that the ironic phrase, '*Magic* as Garfield intended it', referencing *Magic*'s creator Richard Garfield, is a common joke for *Magic* players when describing so-called 'broken' game interactions. Player capacity for rules and value interpretation in-game means that players' game experiences are comprised of an entangled mesh of simultaneous, independent player understandings reverberating off one another, manifesting culture and custom in the creation of new strategies and game-play approaches. To get close to understanding the cultural fabric of *Magic*, it is not enough observe players; one must scrutinize where the game has come from, and the influence designers have over what happens when two players sit down to play.

This chapter will take a 'top-down' approach to considering how the accounts of therapeutic affect might have been generated through *Magic* game-play. As stated previously, the *Magic* community has a strong tradition of content-creation, which is enacted by players as well as *Magic*'s designers. This chapter considers *Magic* design elements that encourage players to encounter deep emotional experiences, self-awareness or personal change by analysing lead designer Mark Rosewater's design articles through a lens of psychotherapeutic theory. While therapeutic affect was likely not an explicit objective of *Magic* design, the strategies taken by the design team to make *Magic* tactically deep, engaging for new players, and rewarding of different playstyles has created a space in which therapeutic experiences might occur, enriching the player experience of the game.

Due to space limitations, this chapter will be focusing on a singular concept called 'the psychographics', a profiling system WotC uses to determine why people play *Magic*. The article that first discussed the psychographics has been acknowledged as, "one of the most-visited columns in magicthegathering.com's history" (Rosewater 2007). The psychographic profiles are so culturally identifiable, that R&D eventually created cards, which are included alongside their description hereafter, for each of them as part of the novelty *Magic* supplemental sets called 'Unglued', 'Unhinged', and 'Unstable'. The influence that WotC employees, and especially design figures like Rosewater, have in the *Magic* community cannot be understated; these concepts considerably shape how players can and do interact with the game. I will offer my thoughts about how these articles affect the community's conceptions of *Magic*, and how these concepts relate to discourses within and without *Magic* culture.

Who is *Magic* Designed For? Inspecting R&D's Psychographics

Rosewater (2002) explains in the article entitled 'Timmy, Johnny, and Spike', that, "Here in Magic R&D our job is to create a game that makes players happy. In order to do this, we have to find out what players like about our game". 'Timmy, Johnny, and Spike' is the article that first publicly acknowledged that the *Magic* design team (hereafter R&D) is not strictly concerned with only creating an internally consistent, balanced, fair game, but they research *why* people play *Magic*. WotC conducted this research according to Rosewater to 'make players happy', but naturally this will be in efforts to improve *Magic*'s appeal for players, thereby increasing revenue. Rosewater (2002) explained, "Doing so has been a long ongoing process involving numerous factors. We've done questionnaires. We've done focus groups. We've lurked on Magic web sites and bulletin boards. We've talked to players in person. Heck, we even see what articles you read on this site". R&D utilized this data to create a profiling system for players which is a cornerstone of *Magic* design. Rosewater (2002) concluded that, "there are three basic types of Magic players", represented by the psychographics, which R&D nicknamed Timmy, Johnny and Spike (and their later added female counterparts Tammy, Jenny and Spike). This section will inspect the three psychographic profiles, their influence in shaping *Magic*'s design, and how they edify cultural identities of playing *Magic*. Finally, I will discuss the impact of the psychographic profiles in relation to the experiences highlighted in the previous chapter.

Timmy/Tammy

Timmy was the first identified and named psychographic (Rosewater 2002). Timmy plays *Magic* for what appears to be a relatively straightforward reason: "*Timmy wants to experience something*" (Rosewater 2013). Rosewater (2013) explains that this 'experiencing' is not limited to gameplay, but attached to the concept of visceral 'feeling': "Timmy plays *Magic* because he enjoys the feeling he gets when he plays". While Rosewater (2013) does not prescribe specific feelings to Timmy's experience, he insists that there is one feature that is particular to all Timmys and Tammies - "The entire reason to play is having a good time".

Timmy/Tammy is perhaps the most intuitive of the psychographics. Games in mainstream discourses are firmly in the realm of recreation and frivolity. The Timmy/Tammy profile, as a result, will seem relatively straight-forward; a great deal of people play games for fun, and *Magic* is no different. Rosewater acknowledges that for some Timmy/Tammys it is about big moments in the game ('the Power Gamer') or variance creating exciting, edge of your seat moments ('The Adenaline Gamer'). Valuable experiences for Timmy/Tammy are sometimes out with the game; some Tammys love the novelty and multi-faceted nature of *Magic*, and the great variety it offers in the form of play formats and cards ('Diversity Gamers'). Timmy/Tammy also includes those who find the environment and context in which the gameplay happens engaging ('Social gamer'), whether in their LGS, during their lunch hour at work, or in the comfort of a friends' home. The appeal for the 'Social Gamer' is not necessarily that playing *Magic* is fun, but that *Magic* is a fun thing to do *with others*.

Johnny/Jenny

The second psychographic Rosewater (2013) outlines is Johnny/Jenny, who plays *Magic* because "*Johnny[/Jenny] wants to express something*". Johnny/Jenny was the last psychographic to be ironed out by *Magic* R&D, as Timmy/Tammy was conceived of first and the existence of a 'tournament player' (who would be the basis for 'Spike') had been established early in *Magic* design (Rosewater 2002). In fact,

Rosewater realized Johnny's existence through his own proclivities; he was neither a Timmy, nor did he play for competition - so why did he play *Magic*?

For Jenny, playing *Magic* for recreation is not the game's main appeal. Rather, *Magic* is primarily a means expression, and presents "an opportunity to show the world something about [themselves], be it how creative [they are] or how clever [they are] or how offbeat [they are]" (Rosewater 2013). Jenny likes to win but winning is not enough; Jenny wants to "win with style" (Rosewater 2002). Unlike Timmy/Tammy, Johnny's motivations may appear foreign to those who do not play games as a dedicated hobby - after all, few casual players organize a game of bridge, *Monopoly*, *Risk* or chess in an effort to *'express something'* through their use of the game's mechanics (though I would not rule out Johnny/Jenny players existing in these games).

Rosewater explains that Johnny/Jenny usually manifest in a couple of ways, just like Timmy. First is the 'Combo Player', who derives enjoyment from finding combinations of cards and using them in an unexpected way, or building an entire deck around a single card. Rosewater calls the second type the 'Offbeat Designer', who wants to come up with strange decks that stress an unconventional or counterintuitive strategy or approach to *Magic* most players might not consider, or that sometimes R&D have not considered. As a result, many people who invent and play combo decks are perceived by the community as being 'smarter' players, or being able to play 'harder' decks (though this line of thought has strong opponents in

the competitive *Magic* scene), as many of these combos and unusual strategies have a very small margin of error when executing them. According to Rosewater, this plays to what gives Johnny/Jenny satisfaction in *Magic*: the way they play the game is saying something about themselves to others, whether it's about perceived skill, intelligence or creativity.

Johnny/Jenny might not necessarily want to express those aspects of themselves however. Rosewater (2013) notes that sometimes Johnny manifests as what he calls a 'Deck Artist', who uses the deck building process as "a form of self-expressive art", rather than trying to "find anything or demonstrate anything". Finally, the last sub-category is the 'Uber Johnny', who thrives on making viable decks or strategies using cards that are deemed 'unplayable', "to demonstrate that they were the one to succeed where all the others failed" (Rosewater 2013). All of these subcategories, Rosewater insists, boil down to one feature that all Johnny/Jenny's share: a motivation that is about being seen and acknowledged in whatever they are communicating, to insist, in Rosewater's (2013) words, "'Look at me world! Look at me!'".

Spike

Spike is the final psychographic profile and has its roots in R&D trying to make cards for the tournament players. Spike has evolved to include more than competitive players, though tournaments are often a tangible means to get what Spike wants from *Magic*. "*Spike plays to prove something*," insists Rosewater (2013), "primarily to prove how good [they are]". Outside of this 'good' distinction, Rosewater (2013) doesn't reflect much on what Spike might be trying to prove, only that, "anything less than a success is a failure" to Spike.

For the uninitiated, this may parallel other types of hobbies and practices, especially competitive sports or competitive career environments. As Spike seeks to 'prove' something about themselves, it may be that they reach for externalizable goals or titles - whether that be winning a tournament at their LGS, the Mythic Championship, or anything between. How Spike achieves this, however, may be less important than the other psychographics. If the goal is to win, Johnny/Jenny would want to win in their own creative way that demonstrates something about themselves. Timmy/Tammy would want to win in a big, splashy way they could tell friends afterwards about, and certainly would want to have fun doing it. Spike, on the

other hand, *just* wants to win. In most cases, Spike doesn't mind the means, so long as it results in a win and getting closer to their goal.

Rosewater separates Spike into sub-categories that are somewhat less developed than the other psychographics, generally focusing on specialisms in the *Magic* gameplay. 'Innovator' Spike wants to find the 'broken' interactions (the equivalent of videogame 'glitches' in *Magic* design) that can be used to create decks with a high win percentage. 'Tuner' Spikes jump in where the Innovators leave off, to take established deck archetypes and optimize their configuration. 'Analyst' Spikes take a macro approach to the game, focusing on elements the metagame (the representation of certain decks in a specific competitive context) in order to leverage advantage. Finally, Nuts & Bolts Spike focuses less on deck selection or creation, instead making a dedicated effort to optimizing their own ability to play. Rosewater (2013) describes Nuts & Bolts Spike as markedly introspective and reflective compared to their counterparts - "[They] believe that the ultimate key to victory is flawless play. As such, Nuts & Bolts Spike spends [Their] energy looking within. [They try] to understand [their] own internal flaws and work to improve them".

Rosewater's (2013) examples primarily frame Spike in a competitive environment and uses language that reference organized competitive play, he insists a common theme that for Spike, "*Magic* is a means to test themselves". The test isn't required to be a tournament outcome; Rosewater (2013) insists that, while examples are conveniently framed through 'winning', this is not Spike's only

concern. While Spikes may play tournament *Magic* for the externalizable opportunity to get, “enjoyment… from marking their own progress” (Rosewater 2013), Spike wants to prove something, and “they want to use the game as a means of demonstrating what they are capable of” (Rosewater 2015a), which is not necessarily contingent on tournament or competitive performance.

Psychographic Combinations, Additions, and Criticisms

According to Rosewater, the psychographics are the fundamental underpinning for *why* people play *Magic*. Rosewater insists each player fits at least one of the psychographic profiles, and most fit a combination of multiple psychographics as it’s unusual to have a singular, focused motivation for playing *Magic*. Tension exists between the psychographics, even if they are reconcilable, however. A Spike-Timmy, for example, will have to make difficult choices between playing cards that they like, or cards that are most efficient.

Interestingly, there are players who have publicly expressed that they don’t identify with the psychographics, which has caused debate about the concept. Matt Cavotta (2005) suggested that there was a profile aside from Timmy/Tammy, Johnny/Jenny and Spike, which he called ‘Vorthos’. Aesthetic appreciation of *Magic*’s art, lore, and flavour drives Vorthos. When Vorthos plays, they make gameplay consistent with lore, but also enjoy other aspects of *Magic*, such as reading syndicated novels or collecting cards as art pieces. Rosewater addressed this by insisting that Vorthos is not a psychographic profile because Vorthos, “is defined by what he cares about and not why he plays” (2007), and instead deigned Vorthos an “aesthetic profile” (2015a). Rosewater offered a companion profile to Vorthos, called ‘Mel’, who appreciates the design features and game mechanics used in *Magic* gameplay and card creation. While Rosewater (2015a) insists that these aesthetic profiles are important to those who play the game, they offer explanations for how players find “beauty” in the game, rather than demonstrating motivation to play. This discourse raises tension between the psychographics’ use, as they establish rigid ‘why’s for playing *Magic* that either exclude other motivations or co-opt them to fit into an established psychographic profiles (i.e. Vorthos might be categorized as a Timmy/Tammy if *Magic* art offers an enjoyable visceral experience).

This raises concern for the limitations and purposes of the psychographic profiles. Vorthos and Melvin are not included, as Rosewater explains, because they do not explain what gets individuals in the door to play *Magic*. If one criticism can be offered to Rosewater's psychographics, it is that they are not purposed for epistemic inquiry into the idiosyncrasies and complexities of *why* people play *Magic*, but are a practice in marketing research. The fundamental goal of these distinctions is to make usable profiles that R&D can market to. Therefore, these profiles stop short of investigating the ramifications of playing a game to 'express oneself' or 'to prove something' by simply accepting the psychographics as an actionable design strategy to promote sales, acquire new players, or retain existing ones. These features are bungled up in the narrative Rosewater puts forth that R&D's "job is to create a game that makes players happy", as the metric by which this is presumably measured is through their business model operates, i.e. revenue. Nevertheless, these profiles are still useful for wondering about therapeutically affective experiences that players get from *Magic,* and how they come about; the impact of these culturally edified psychographics on one's emotional experience of playing *Magic* will be explored next.

Narrative Equity, Emotional Affect, and the Generation of Therapeutic Experiences by Design

Timmy/Tammy, Johnny/Jenny, and Spike were designed to explain why people play *Magic*, and each are linked to an emotional experience. In integrating these psychographics into design, R&D has installed targets for creating emotionally affective experiences through the game. They are a heuristic tool that R&D in *Magic's* fundamental design, openly acknowledged when R&D comments on card creation or when others are invited to participate in the design process, such as the 'Great Designer Search' series (Rosewater 2018a).

In disseminating the psychographics to the *Magic* community, R&D fosters an environment where players identify with the psychographics themselves. In fact, before the initial article 'Timmy, Johnny, and Spike' was published, there was a quiz which players were invited to take to identify which of the psychographics they corresponded to. This reflects the feedback loop through which, by the creation of these fixed profiles, players wonder where they fit in. Returning to Foucault's conception of discourse, by offering fixed options by which players can understand

and make meaning of how they play, other understandings of motivations and meanings in *Magic* gameplay are constricted and closed off .

I have had uncountable conversations with other players, whether casual or competitive, in which people suggested which psychographic they believe they fall into, or speculate on another player's psychographic profile. Within certain play groups, the psychographics take on different connotations. Some grinders assume that Tammy is synonymous with being a bad player, and Jenny ends up making sardonically 'cute', but ultimately bad decisions; Spike, therefore, has the greatest potential to perform well. This, again, reflects the cultural organization of *Magic* as being tilted towards competitive play more so than other games. However, in casual circles where having a good time is a priority, Spike is often conceived as the boogie man that only wishes to savagely beat others in the most efficient, 'unfun' way possible - Spike has lost what the point of *Magic* is. I observe this not to debate these perspectives, but to acknowledge that the psychographics' contingency on relationships between players is missing from Rosewater's explanations of them. The emotional experiences that constitute the motivations of each psychographic are dependent on meeting and relating with others, in difference and similarity. For Johnny to express something, another player must interpret and understand it – otherwise there is no expression. For Tammy to have a good time, someone must play the game with them to begin with, otherwise the worthwhile experience never exists in the first place. For Spike to prove something, there must be judgement of their actions as proof; judgement, of course, requires a judge, and that judge, even if internal, requires metrics by which to do so.

Inherent to the psychographics, then, is relationality. The profiles rely on the players' relationships with the external other; there is an explicit desire for validation, acknowledgement, or a shared experience in each psychographic. Therefore, so long as *Magic* R&D targets and reinforces the play models of Timmy/Tammy, Johnny/Jenny or Spike, they are also encouraging players to relate emotionally or to create emotional experiences with other players.

These emotional experiences, and the relationships that are created in the process of developing them, are somewhat ephemeral in their current description. However, I contend that the psychographics are integral to the process that occurs between players sitting down for a game of *Magic* and contribute to therapeutically affective experiences like those described in previous chapters. What arises through

Magic design encouraging relationality and emotional affect through the psychographics is analagous to mainstay concepts from counselling and psychotherapy theory, using which I will offer applied analysis hereafter. It is important to reiterate that, while this research is attempting to discern how *Magic* can be therapeutic, I do not contend that it *is therapy*. Rather, it creates the environments in which therapeutic experiences can happen for the player, by managing the confines of the game itself through the act of design.

Psychographics as Contractual, Boundary-generative, and Holding

Essential to a productive therapeutic relationship is the act of contracting, a feature in therapeutic practice originating in its very inception with Sigmund Freud. Contracting is essential to managing expectations and agreeing to a model by which counsellor and client will begin, maintain, and inevitably end their relationship together. Sillis (2006) remarks that, "Most therapists would agree that… contracting is essential. Whether they work in private practice, the voluntary sector or the public sector, there will be, at least, a need for agreements about such administrative details as time, place, fees (if any) and duration" (p. 14).

However, contracting in the context of psychotherapy does not begin and end with the administrative aspects of the work. Contracting includes communication of the nature of the work to be done and an explicit disclosure of what therapy will entail. Freud would explain the necessity for a patient's constant commitment to free association and assure his own attentiveness and participation in that process (Jacobs 2006). Other abstract features would also be conveyed, such as "expound[ing] on his concepts of anonymity, neutrality and abstinence", features which have become the "basic tenets of the [therapeutic] frame" (Gregson and Lane 2000, p. 4). Contractual tenets establish boundaries within which therapy can happen, which vary depending on the nature of the work and the theoretical approach of the practitioner.

An integral aspect of therapy is the creation and expression to the client of the frame in which therapy will occur as part of the contracting process. Winnicott speaks to the importance of recreating the holding environment that develops in the mother-infant relationship, in which the baby would be able to have its needs met, its presence both contained and perceived by mother, and eventually developing a

sense of self as differentiated from others (1965). Creating and maintaining a frame acts as a preface to this process of holding the client; "The frame allows us to enter a safe, predictable world, a symbolic holding environment" (Cohen 2017, p. 69). This 'safe, predictable world' offers the client room to engage in creative and sometimes dangerous reflective work that can feel difficult or intolerable otherwise. The frame permits safe attachment with the therapist, facilitating the client's development as an autonomous individual. This also protects the therapist, by establishing what is acceptable or unacceptable in the therapy room - for example, cases where breaching the confidentiality may be required – and makes clear how the therapist can act as container and what can be contained in Bion's conception as explained in chapter 2.

I contend that, similar to the contract that is created in the commencement of therapy, *Magic*'s psychographic profiles create a contract for what playing *Magic* is, and what falls under the purview of that activity. By offering the psychographics to the cultural discourse, R&D specifically defined *why* people play *Magic*, thereby establishing cultural assumptions about the act of playing *Magic*. R&D may have conceived the psychographics through spontaneous observational research, but by creating them, publicizing them, and further changing *Magic*'s design to suit those profiles, *Magic* R&D has established a contract stating the accepted reasons to play *Magic* are one of three: to experience something, to express something, or to prove something - what I call the 'psychographic contract'. Playing *Magic* means consenting to this contract, as *Magic* gameplay is designed to the contract's parameters. I could also draw parallels with the contracting of events - determining the spaces and times in which sanctioned *Magic* occurs, what cards are legal for play and which are banned for being too 'unfun' or 'unfair' to be sanctioned, etc. - but with the length of this thesis, I limit the discussion to the directly emotionally relevant concepts, and leave other analysis for further works.

The psychographic contract edifies three reasons for playing as acceptable, and players accept these models of motivation as normal. Just as the frame provides safety and security for the client to form attachment and express their feelings openly in therapy, the psychographic contract creates an established norm so players can feel safe engaging with *Magic* in an emotional fashion through identification and acceptance of the psychographics. This, in turn, creates iterative feedback for R&D, where they observe more players engaging with the game in an

emotional way, and likewise create card designs and narratives within the lore of the game that will meet the needs of the players adopting the psychographic contract. This represents a process of containment, in which player and designer dynamically hold these cultural features for one another, and contain these means of gameplay.

This is not to say that every *Magic* player is wholly accepting of every players' playstyle, nor does it mean that the psychographics contract is purely enabling; while encouraging emotional expression through psychographic profiles, it excludes motivations outwith, such as Vorthos, Mel, and others which remain unnamed and unacknowledged. To observe the psychographics as a contract is to acknowledge that this conception creates a social norm which enables and creates space for how *Magic* can be encountered and used beyond simply playing it; it becomes emotionally charged, and bound in the relationships of the player. This model serves as part of *Magic's* holding frame, permitting players to encounter and create new emotionally powerful experiences through the game - and to share them with others – which I argue is conducive to creating therapeutic affect.

Creating and Sharing Emotional Experiences through 'Narrative Equity'

The psychographic contract creates a frame in which relational attachment is fostered during gameplay by normalizing gameplay motivations from the profiles. This section will outline the connection between the contract and the generation of therapeutic affect through design.

Rosewater (2007) indicates that his job is to create 'fun' experiences, but the psychographic contract nuance the way that 'fun's definition and limits. Rosewater has written about emotional affect explicitly as a resource that should be maximized when working in game design. "Games are built to create experiences," claims Rosewater (2018b), "I talk all the time about trying to tap into emotional resonance and capture a sense of fun". For example, Rosewater (2018b) describes designing cards in such a way that they have fun gameplay interactions, but also provide value in the narratives they create, which players can tell others after the fact - a concept he calls 'narrative equity'. Similarly, Rosewater has long been a proponent of the color pie of *Magic* (the five different colors of mana and their constituent identities, as explained in Chapter 4) and has stressed its existence, while useful for design

purposes, is immensely important for forming *Magic'*s personality which players form personal bonds and relationships with (Rosewater 2003b).

The strategies that Rosewater uses to 'tap into emotional resonance' are reminiscent the first of Carl Rogers's (1992) necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change in person-centred therapy: "The two persons [client and therapist] are in Psychological contact" (p. 827). Rogers (1992) defined psychological contact as, "a minimal relationship", and it is deemed necessary because "Significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship" (p. 828). Since Rogers' foundational work, the concept of psychological contact has been expanded and clarified, especially in Prouty's work in developing pre-therapy, a practice for those not-yet ready for conventional therapy due to difficulties making psychological contact (Dekeyser, Prouty and Elliot 2008). Most important about Prouty's (1994) work for our purposes is that he conceived of the notion of psychological contact as existing not just between people, but also arising from interactions with objects or internal processes. When Rosewater speaks about making players feel a specific emotion or connect emotionally, he is describing forming psychological contact between that player and the game objects themselves. Using Roger's and Prouty's conceptions, this psychological contact in turn creates the fundamental base line that a player may need to be able to form an emotional relationship with *Magic*, as well as with other players.

This desire to create emotional attachment is made explicit by Rosewater when he posits the concept of narrative equity. Rosewater insists that people make choices within games not only for the in-game outcome, but for value gained outside of the game. 'Narrative equity' relates to storytelling, and the fact that "people will give weight to choices based upon the ability to later tell a story about it" (Rosewater 2018b). Rosewater (2018b) advocates strongly that game-designers should present opportunities to create narratives to players, citing several cases where R&D does this in *Magic*. For narrative equity to be gained, however, there is an underlying assumption that Rosewater does not explicitly address: the player needs someone they can *tell the story to*, one who they feel their story will be impactful or affective in a desirable way.

Being able to communicate a story to another person is essential to engaging with therapeutic processes, and is integral to the way that one relates to themselves and others. The development of narrative therapy by White and Epston

(1990) is a testament to the significant effect that the way that one stories themselves, and that stories that we tell about ourselves, affect our perceptions of the world. Furthermore, McLeod (1997) claims that all talking therapies are concerned with our narratives of self. Payne (2006) writes that, "A person's self-story is a first-person narrative through which he defines who he is, based on his memories of his history, his present life, his roles in various social and personal settings, and his relationships" (p. 19). It is through this self-story that, as Brumer (2004) writes, "we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories…. Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened, and why we're doing what we're doing" (p. 4). The self-concept, then, is 'storied', and, "the language form in which people understand their lives is the storied or narrative form" (Polkinghorne 2004, p. 53). Polkinghorne (2004) explains that narrative therapy as a process "works to assist clients to revise… internalized culture stories into ones that are more inclusive and appreciative of clients' personal power and responsibility" (p. 53). The therapist works with the client to enable more interpretations or meanings to be understood from the events that have occurred in the clients life, causing "aspects of their self that were covered over by limiting interpretations… [to be] looked at through a more open narrative understanding" (Polkinghorne 2004, p. 55).

Magic is designed to creates stories; if these stories are developed through gameplay under the psychographic contract, then it is possible that in the formation and dissemination of narrative from one player to another, something important is being formed and thought about with the self. If narrative therapy works as a practice by, "externalizing internalized dominant discourses allow[ing] for suppressed or subjugated knowledge to emerge" (Brown 2007, p. 177), then *Magic*, by creating opportunities for this externalization to happen through its designing for narrative equity, may be contributing to this therapeutic process. The significance of these stories becomes magnified under the psychographic contract's models of motivation: having visceral experiences, expressing oneself to others, or proving something about oneself. Especially in the case of Spike, empirical conceptions of 'proof' are often grounded on them being demonstrable, which lends itself well to externalizing as a narrative practice; Spike can prove something about themselves not only in how they play, but through the stories that are produced and shared about those plays. Moreover, if the self is storied, then it follows that narratives

shared about the self in the game are also possibly constituent or reflective of a player's self-narrative.

Narrative therapy theory insists that the act of sharing and offering emotionally resonant narratives of oneself and exploring them with others in a different way, can have therapeutic outcomes. If *Magic* is designed to create these situations as part of developing an emotional bond with players and granting them narrative equity in the game, it makes sense that this might lead to therapeutic affect as players engage with opportunities to re-story the self. While it is important to reiterate that I do not contend that *Magic* constitutes a form of therapy, this means of creating psychological contact and stories through narrative equity represents a potential pathway of relating that is present in the narrative therapy process which can yield therapeutic affect.

For those who don't play traditional games, Spike is likely one of the more relatable of the psychographics. Endemic to western neoliberal cultural values is that engaging in competitive practices yields positive outcomes for individuals, financially and personally. Achievement in a competitive setting has been researched in other types of games, particularly sports, in relation to mental health, though these are often interpreted through physiological models and focus on outcomes, as mentioned in the literature review (Callaghan 2004; Morgan and O'Connor 1988; North, McCullagh, & Tran 1990; Su, Lee & Shinger 2014). Carless and Douglas' (2010) work on the narratives of those who participate in sports and exercise as they relate to mental health, however, is useful for our purposes. Carless and Douglas (2010) describe the narratives that arise as contrary to the meta-narrative of mental illness: engaging in "action" vs. the illness narrative "of not doing much and not having much to do, of withdrawing from life"; "achievement" leading to "confidence and optimism regarding future activity" vs. the hopelessness and lack of confidence associated with mental illness (p. 62-65). Carless and Douglas (2010) argue that self-narratives of achievement and action create an identity "which revolves around achievement, success and 'being good at' a specific activity which is *culturally accepted and endorsed by others*" (p. 65 [my italics]). The articulation of Spike in the psychographics establishes in *Magic*'s community that *Magic* can be used as a means to prove something about the self - that what is done in *Magic* is acceptable as an achievement in its cultural discourse, which is not necessarily the case in mainstream discourses. The psychographic contract

reframes *Magic* from something in which achievement is *not* typically 'culturally accepted and endorsed', into one that is validated and acceptable. Establishing *Magic* as an entity in which performance is culturally accepted as achievement creates opportunities for Douglas and Carless' perceived identity of 'confidence and optimism' to manifest by presenting players with opportunities to re-story themselves through these achievements. Using the previously established definition of the therapeutic affect, this process of reflection therefore offers the potential for therapeutic affect to be generated for the player through a process of considering themselves, their experiences, and the meaning of them in the process of proving themselves by playing *Magic*.

So, how does this play out in practice? Where do these stories fit in for *Magic* players, and where do they appear? The phenomenon that led me to self-narratives is a cultural practice in *Magic* called 'Bad Beats'. 'Bad Beats' is when a player talks about a negative experience after playing a game of *Magic* - particularly tournament or competitive context. Consider the following vignette which is inspired by my own experiences and perspective on competitive play, and what it might feel like for you.

Imagine waking up at 8.30am on a Saturday, packing decks into a bag, grabbing a quick cup of coffee, then getting a bus into town. From there, you get a 2 hour train, followed by a 45 minute walk to small game store on the outskirts of a town centre. You clutch your bag under your coat so none of your cards get damaged from the rain that's been pissing down all morning. You finally arrive, register your slot in the tournament, and the shop employee says little besides confirming your name and DCI number. The walls are clad with brightly coloured collectables, board games, and some *Magic* product - many look like they haven't been touched since last time you were here. You squeeze through the twenty other players who are crammed into the small shop, some of which you recognize from previous tournaments, looking for a seat to relax in before it starts. You shake hands, offer pleasant greetings and small talk through tired eyes before finding two of your friends who you play with at your LGS. You get the usual chatter - 'How are you feeling today? Ready to crush?'; ' Did you find those cards you needed for your deck in the end?'; 'I think this is the one I'm gonna win'. You nip around the corner to the bakery for another coffee that will, hopefully, get you a bit more alert before the tournament starts in 20 minutes.

A typical start to a preliminary pro-tour qualifier. It's not the most pleasant Saturday morning - they don't call it the grind for nothing after all. You're here because winning one of these tournaments is your shot to become a pro. You've gone to tens of these tournaments, and winning one is your first step to making it, living the *Magic* dream. You've played your deck innumerable times at the local shops near home, and have practiced hours with friends, some of whom made the trip. You know that you've probably put more into this than most the locals here. Now it's time to convert. Time to make it count and show them what you can do.

You return in time to see the pairings go up for your table, and find your seat for the first round. The judge begins their announcement, shouting over the players' murmurs and reminding them of the rules for today's tournament, while you take out your playmat and your deck box. You take a moment to look at your deck and make sure all your cards are there, before starting to shuffle. The shuffling has become rhythmic, automatic after so many repetitions, an involuntary process that hums as you focus on the task ahead. You let your eyes wander, and give off an air of coolness to the passers-by who could be your first opponent, but you can feel yourself stomach tighten with excitement – and nervousness. You need to start strong to win this tournament, and that begins here. Your opponent sits down across from you, and offers a smile and a handshake, before saying quietly, "Good luck, have fun." You roll some dice to determine who goes first, and your 8 beats their 4. You'll be on the play, which is always good.

Suddenly, the judge booms across the room, "Magic Players! Welcome to Round one. You have 50 minutes, and you may begin!"

Suddenly, the small shop is filled with the dull roar of voices, mixing such that it's impossible to make out what anyone is saying beyond your table. You and your opponent cut each other's decks, and draw your opening hands. As you stare at the 7 cards that come off the top, you can't help but scowl. The hand is unplayable. You have no choice but to throw it back and take a new one with one less card, and much to your dismay you look up and see your opponent nodding their head and smiling, before saying confidently, "Yup, I'll keep this one!"

You shuffle quickly, again presenting your deck to the opponent, and take a fresh hand from your deck, but only taking 6 cards this time. You scan them, and you find your stomach is no longer tight, but in rapid descent, falling down a pit of no return. Again, the hand is unplayable. You know how unlikely it's going to be to win

on a mulligan to 5 cards, but it's your only choice. "I'll mulligan again," you state, as you put your cards back into your deck a second time and begin shuffling. You hear your opponent take a sharp intake of breath, before saying in a tone that could only be described as half-apologetic, and half-excited, "Oh, that *really* sucks. Sorry." You can't help but be a little bit frustrated by the insincerity of their comment.

You lose summarily after your mulligan to five, and your next game doesn't go much better. In a flash of an eye, you're signing the match slip the judge left on your table, marking your opponent's space with 2 wins, and yours with 0. You sign your name, and pass it to your opponent, extending a hand and saying humbly, "Good game."

Your opponent looks at the match slip with a glowing smile, pleased with their victory, before looking up to you. Their grin retreats, turning into a sort of guilty smirk, as they reach their hand and shake. "Sorry again for all those mulligans," they comment, before quickly scampering off to hand the judge the slip.

There's still 30 minutes left on the round, and you find yourself crestfallen after being beaten so quickly. You go outside to see one of the people from your local shop across the road, having a smoke. They catch your eye, offer a subdued wave, and ask, "How did round one go?"

You stroll over and can't help but let your frustration slip into the account. You recount some of the finer details - if you could call them that - of the match, before summarizing it in an angry outburst: "I lost to some bullshit mulligans. It was like I just couldn't keep an opener, I never drew what my needed, and it felt like opponent always had the nuttiest draws. Like, what was I supposed to do? How come I never get that lucky?"

Your friend stubs out their cigarette before remarking, "Jeez, those are some really bad beats. But… it sounds like you made the right calls. You weren't going to win those games if you kept trash hands, right?"

They pause for a moment, before turning and giving you a smile that makes you feel more calm. "Don't worry - you'll take the next round. Have some fresh air and come back with a clear mind. You may have lost the first round, but that doesn't mean you can't win the rest, eh?"

This is a common interaction for players in competitive *Magic*, and recognized enough that many pro-players have written articles about 'Bad Beats'

stories, primarily advocating that they can have a negative impact on one's competitive performance. Nevertheless, 'bad beats' are illustrative of the emotional experiences of playing *Magic* and potentially how it creates therapeutic affect in those that play.

In this vignette, much of the communication and motivation is understandable through the psychographic contract. We might think of 'You' as a Spike; *Magic* is a game, under the psychographic contract, where one can prove something about oneself, and therefore it is deemed socially acceptable that one might be very invested in playing. 'You' are motivated to prove that you're good enough to be a pro magic player, and the metric of proof is winning. 'You' care about this game immensely, enough to put time and work into doing well. This attitude has been designed for in and is accepted in *Magic*.

The first round does not go to plan, and the response is anger at the loss. Integral to 'bad beats', however, is the act of telling someone else. 'You' may have experienced the loss, but it becomes part of a wider narrative of the self - as unfortunate, but perhaps also entitled to win because of the hard work - and the opponent as lucky, unskilled, or perhaps a bad person in their apparent smugness. Due to the psychographic contract, 'you' feel that it is okay and acceptable to express this dissatisfaction to someone else. While this might seem somewhat obvious, it's important to acknowledge that this is *not* necessarily the case in other contexts in life (i.e. an analogous work loss or family difficulty). Inherent to the psychographics is the emotional resonance and aspects of expression that are built into the game's design.

Many writers have written on the subject in a competitive context, especially how the 'bad beats' story can negatively effect the storyteller. Will Jonathan (2018), a sports psychologist who writes for Channelfireball.com, appeals to neuroscience when describing someone expressing 'bad beats' as forming negative neural pathways in the brain related to such events. Making these pathways more accessible supposedly makes it more likely you will "indulge in destructive emotions like anger" (Jonathan 2018). Brian Demars (2016), an ex-*Magic* pro, wrote a similar article from a less technical point of view, where he posits that, "The fact of the matter is that nobody in the entire world cares about my (or your) bad beat story". Ironically, in Demars (2016) attempt to dissuade the reader from engaging in 'bad beats' stories, he tells his own in the article, and learns something from reflecting on

the response others had to his narrative: “The lesson for me was that effort doesn’t necessarily equal success…. I also learned that I don’t need to justify my successes or failures to anybody, not even myself”. Aside from the value judgement being placed on certain emotions, both of these criticisms neglect to address the listener’s impact on this conversation - that they may affect how the storyteller considers themselves through the narrative offered.

In the vignette, when ‘you’ tell your ‘bad beats’, ‘you’ are engaging with a self-narrative of powerlessness - ‘What was I supposed to do? How come I never get that lucky’ - and inviting others to engage with that story. This is a vulnerable exchange, in which one is admitting to loss, and working through where responsibility lies, and what that means for one’s self concept. In other words, the game has been affective, and fostered a space in which that difficult affect (disappointment, insignificance, loss, etc.) can be shared with another player because of a mutual cultural understanding of *Magic* and its tenets. The other player, ‘your friend’, offers a rethinking of the events recounted, and encourages a re-storying of the self. While not every ‘bad beats’ story is met with this response, this is reflective of my experience of the ‘bad beats’ exchange - that the listener hears the storyteller, offers sympathy, and sometimes more by emotionally engaging with the experience. Both in the vignette I’ve offered and Demars’ example, a dominant discourse is able to be interrogated, thought about, and accepted through the articulation of the ‘bad beats’ story and the response of the other - ‘Sounds like you made the right call (despite losing)’, or ‘effort doesn’t necessarily equal success’, despite prevalent western cultural assumptions. ‘Bad beats’ stories may or may not be competitively useful - but these examples demonstrate that they provide a space where therapeutic affect can develop based on the psychographic contract.

Cardstock as Transitional Objects; Expression through the Contract

Spike may seem straight forward, but it’s also important to explore *Magic*’s other endorsed means of relating to the game. The following vignette will try to explore some of the features of Johnny/Jenny, and the ways the psychographic contract enables expression through gameplay.

Magic decks are a bit funny when it comes to names. At the top of your deck registration sheet when you go to a tourney, there’s a blank for a name. Most folks

choose something sensible, probably some sorta reference to the cards or colors that are in the deck. Red aggro. Blue-White control. What they lack in creativity, they make up in function. They do what it says on the tin.

My Legacy deck does not have a sensible name. It's called Death and Taxes. Rumour has it in the early years of *Magic*, some notable player made the joke that, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, besides death and taxes… and that guy who shows up to the tournament with white weenie". The originator is lost, but their joke has truth to it - white is the great equalizer in *Magic*. White as a color in *Magic* is about equality, law, sacrifice for the greater good. And I am that guy who is shows up to tournaments with it.

Legacy players love unfair, hyper-efficient *Magic*. They wanna make sure they get to do some of the most busted things that can be done in the game. They want to win on Turn 2, or even Turn 1 if possible, no matter what the opponent does - and most likely take some pleasure in opponent's helplessness to stop it all. They use strategies that R&D have identified as 'unfun' for *Magic*, and have slowly phased out with every new set. And I don't know what it is about me, but I can't enjoy that sort of *Magic*. Sometimes my friends joke that I don't like good cards. I suppose in some ways they're right… but only if you take 'good' to be 'unfair'. All I really want is for us to sit down and be able to enjoy a fair, balanced game - and so I take it upon myself to make sure that happens. I play Death and Taxes - the deck that makes *everyone* play fair… or face the consequences.

I couldn't tell you the amount of times I've sat down with an opponent to play some Legacy, had a pleasant joke and a laugh with them, and it all changes the moment I played my first card. I'd set a Plains on the table, put down my Mother of Runes (or as most call her, 'mum'), and watch as a cordial smile turns into a grimace of frustration, or an exaggerated eye roll. "Oh", they might remark, "I didn't realize I was playing against the fun police", before we engage in a long, drawn out game.

At first, I found the reactions a bit off-putting, but now I've developed a sorta pride around it. If I'm feeling particularly friendly, I might offer the response of, "Ah, well, if you're not doing anything wrong, you got nothing to be afraid of". And, what I'm saying is true - Death and Taxes is pretty bad against grindy, resource advantaged, conventional decks in the format. Come ready to play some proper

Magic and you can beat me fair and square, and I'll shake your hand afterwards too.

"If you're not doing anything wrong, you got nothing to be afraid of." I think about that phrase, and all the knights, guardians, priests, and crusaders that make up the creatures in my Death and Taxes deck, and I know fine well what I enjoy about playing those cards.

I know righteous anger was never something I was allowed when I was young, and only now am discovering it as an adult. When I was young my mother would talk about her divorce from my pop, and she would say, "While he wasn't a good husband to me, we never shouted or screamed at one another, and never, ever did he use anger to make me feel afraid". I sometimes wonder if that's made me feel like there wasn't space for anger in front of others - cause I certainly have felt a lot of it through my life that I didn't allow myself to express, even when I thought someone was acting unjustly, or being just plain shitty.

Before I became a therapist, I wanted to be a police officer. I felt I was a good enough person that maybe it should be my job to try and do good unto others - that the job would permit me to act where before I felt it wouldn't be right, or okay. I realize now how naive that was - hell, I probably should've realized it at the time - and sometimes I think that not making it through the final interview might have been the best thing to happen to me. But sometimes I still feel loss about it - a different life I could've lived. Sometimes I still feel there's a part of me that would've been *good* at it, that I would've done good despite all those bigoted or corrupt cops you always see in the news, those who abuse their power and commit atrocities upon the

people they are meant to protect. They see an easy way, and forsake the right way, the difficult way.

When I put a guardian, a protector, a recruiter, an *avenger* on the table in these games of *Magic*, that part of me feels sated. Sure, the table next to me and my opponent will probably finish their entire match before we finish our first game - cause by the time I win, it'll probably be turn 8, 9, 10, rather than their turn 2 wins. But that's how it should be done, and I know part of what makes it feel so good is knowing it's being seen by others. I hear the reactions and expressions when I put these cards on the table, when I talk about Death and Taxes and that I haven't ever played a different Legacy deck. Finally, my chance to fight back against the things that feel unfair, or wrong. To punish those that would abuse others. It feels so silly saying those words about a game, but I get to feel like I'm doing something just for once, like I was not allowed to as a boy. I get to make a point (and trust me, sometimes it can be pretty cutthroat) rather than constantly doubting, reflecting, and wondering as I am outside of it. And I get the title that comes with it, a receipt for all my hard work - "the fun police". And year upon year, it still somehow feels like work worth doing.

Johnny/Jenny wants to express something about themselves. This vignette demonstrates the game objects are being used as a reflection of the player. Communication is happening by me, a player, to an opponent, and this communication is being made by gameplay choices understood through cultural understandings of game-objects as signifiers. This, again, is a feature of the frame offered by the psychographic contract in conjunction with other design features, particularly colour identities and card art. However, in this example, the features of the cards are not just adding identity to the game, but are creating objects by which the player can derive an understanding of *themselves* that can be expressed.

Returning to Winnicott, my relationship with and expression through the cards reflects a process of working with transitional objects. Transitional phenomena are those that exist in the space between the external, objective reality and the internal, subjective world; transitional objects exist in "the intermediate area of *experiencing*" (Winnicott 1971, p. 2). When Winnicott writes about transitional objects, he regards their acquisition as an essential part of the infant maturation process in negotiating play space with the mother. The first transitional object is conceived as, "the original not-me possession" (Winnicott 1971, p. 4), which begins

to develop the child's capacity for negotiating the dyadic, fused relationship of 'mother and baby' to a capacity for individuation. This is vital to maturation, and is a healthy, non-pathological development in the psyche that becomes the framework for enabling play, as well as engaging in the act of creating and identifying symbols (Caldwell and Joyce 2011, 100-102).

While transitional objects are conceived of in Winnicott's work as a childhood phenomenon, they are strictly limited to the infant experience. Research shows that transitional object use is present in adolescents and adults (Cohen, K.N. & Clark, J. A. 1984; Newson, Newson & Mahalski 1982; Sherman, Hertzig, Austrian & Shapiro 1981). Many have written about client engagement with transitional objects in therapy as a key feature of progress or development for clients (Arthern & Madill 1999; Murray 1974) . The world of the transitional is present in the process of play and the use of illusion in the act of conception and development of the self as a human entity that exists in the world (Winnicott 1971).

Is it appropriate to dub the use of *Magic* cards in the previous vignette as an example of game-objects acting as transitional object? There is a merging of the storyteller's worlds in the experience of playing Death and Taxes. Features of how I think about myself, my memories and experiences, and abstract values such as 'fairness', become entwined with the externally presented figures that are present on cardstock. This transitional experiencing of the cards, importantly, is not limited to my understanding or projections - it is perceived and understood by the other, my opponent, through conceptualization and observation of the game pieces. Therefore, the transitional object is permitting the external other to permeate into me, as I accept the judgements and acknowledgements of the other person. The card as a transitional object becomes a link between internal and external world that is categorized not just by output, but also by input.

Winnicott insists that every transitional object stems from being a derivative of a symbol of the mother's breast (1971) - but there are sub-symbolizations that can happen, such as a physical object representing "the continuing reality of the therapeutic relationship and of the continuing existence of the therapist as a supportive presence" (Arthern and Madill 1999, p. 4). So too has my deck become a representation of a continued existence of an internal, past-self - the one that wanted to be 'fair' through action by being a part of the police. In a way, it allows that past-self to live within me, as I take on the role of 'fun police'. Furthermore, the deck

as a transitional object is accepted and translatable to the other; it has social values that have been created around it in the context of *Magic*, and those have been co-opted into the deck reflecting aspects of myself.

This final observation is essential to understanding how this process came to be - that my deck has become a transitional object. The cultural expectations about what is appropriate and can be done with the decks or cards in *Magic*, as per the psychographic contract, *permits and encourages* this use. Relating to the deck transitionally becomes a feature of acting as Johnny/Jenny; it is a mode of expression, and likewise others may perceive and ascribe meaning to decks or cards selected for play. I do not claim that every player does this, or every player relates transitionally with their game-objects, but that it *is* possible. The potential for relating transitionally creates opportunity for Winnicotian play in the act of playing *Magic*. This sheds light on some of the outcomes presented in the last chapter. The potential space for engaging with playful relating offers is an incredibly important feature to therapeutic change (Winnicott 1971), and this space is created through cultural discourses propagated by *Magic*'s design through the psychographic contract.

Why the 'why' of *Magic* matters

This chapter has focused on a few elements of *Magic* design in order to elucidate the processes that potentially yield therapeutic affect. Somewhat fittingly, in exploring the psychographic contract in the *Magic* community, I have played out Rosewater's concept of narrative equity. Through game-play, I have garnered the experiences that I have shared here; it has offered value to me in the form of narrative. In order to understand this storied process, I have offered that this phenomenon is encouraged through R&D's design of *Magic* through the psychographic profiles Timmy, Johnny and Spike, and that this discourse permits a way of relating to the game and storying oneself in relation to it. The narratives I offered, and their analysis through psychodynamic and narrative theory, have hopefully illustrate how working with the psychographic contract creates situations where emotional and relational depth can manifest beyond an engagement with the pleasure of frivolity.

It is important to address and make clear that this is not an effect that is limited to within the game; these stories and psychographic identities become featured in the lives of those who identify with this community. Linking back to Huizinga's work in *Homo Ludens*, much of human civilization's use of and creation of games have been in conjunction with the development of cultural values as a means of stressing behaviour or knowledge perceived to be of cultural merit (2002). It is essential to acknowledge that the values and experiences that are understood as permitted ways of playing *Magic*, using Taylor's (2002) word, 'leak' into other aspects of the player's life.

I have illustrated but one element of *Magic* design that, fundamentally, encourages play that is in line with psychotherapeutic models of development: that it is acceptable and contained that one who plays *Magic* might prove something about themselves, and that will feature psychological contact and connection; that the game-objects can be used to story oneself and playing the game can be a means of expressing oneself to others; that it is okay to enjoy the visceral and social experiences that come with playing the game. This design choice in *Magic* was implemented to appeal to players, and thus yield financial gains, but that intent doesn't fix an outcome for players – perhaps this is another 'glitch' unexpected by R&D used to the players benefit.

Whether or not this potential for therapeutic affect was expected, the institutionalization of the psychographic contract in design means this potential is built into *Magic*, and has become a feature of *Magic* culture. From this acceptance comes containment for psychological contact, relationality, emotional depth, play with transitional objects, etc., which may allow players to integrate these permissions to other elements of their lives. If this is the case, it is plausible this could convey therapeutic affect and the outcomes reflected in accounts in chapter 5. The applicability of experiences within *Magic*'s cultural spaces and to other aspects of life will be further explored and scrutinized in chapter 8.

However, with this observation demands nuance in attempting to understand therapeutic affect in *Magic*, for not every element of *Magic* culture is dictated and designed for. There is more to play experience than gameplay, and these features might proffer therapeutic affect to players, or enlighten us as to how therapeutic affect develops. The next chapter will inspect a few of these features, to further explore how players might be affected by playing *Magic.*

Chapter 7 - *Magic* Community and Therapeutic Affect

While the chapter 6 investigated *how* or *in what ways* playing *Magic* can create therapeutic affect by scrutinizing its design, this chapter seeks to approach this question through *Magic*'s social interactions. I will be investigating the socio-cultural location of *Magic* as a game and consider social features that may be part of the process that contributes to the therapeutic outcomes players have described. That said, the *Magic* community and game-play exist in tandem; one cannot play *Magic* outside of a social entangled setting with its host of expectations and norms at play, and *Magic* is not designed from a culturally blind position. This chapter's content, therefore, is only independent from the last rhetorically, as it is easier to organize certain similar game experiences in this vein. Both gameplay and community experiences interact in constant and complex ways, and to map all these paths is a work that will take further research to explore adequately. In this chapter, I will be examining an intersection of two features of *Magic*'s socio-cultural structure – discourses surrounding inclusivity of minority groups, and the competitive *Magic* subculture. A great deal more themes and phenomena could be investigated in the *Magic* social structure, but that is a task I must leave to other researchers.

Safe Spaces, Inclusivity and Exclusivity in *Magic*

In order to understand how the *Magic* community works with minority groups, it's important to first outline where *Magic* stands in terms of the wider discourse around games and the politics of inclusivity therein. After the #GamerGate fallout occurred in 2014 when feminist critics took the videogame industry to task on its ethics of representation in digital gaming journalism, few - if any - gaming communities were left untouched (Euteneuer 2018) by what creative luminary Damion Schubert described as an, "unprecedented catastrofuck" (in Walschots 2015). The identity of being a 'gamer', until that point, was marketed to and characterized as predominantly male, white, and straight, and was predicated on the idea that a 'gamer' has more dedication, skill, and operates at a competitive level in the games they play (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer 2017; Pendaris, Harrison and Drenten 2016; ; Taylor 2012). Likewise, in-game content was skewed in terms of representation; "these preferences are reflected in both a lack of female

video game characters and hyper-sexualization of the female characters that do exist" (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer 2017, p. 421). Games developers are only recently acknowledging their responsibility for gender, race, and LGBTQ representation in their games (Markuch 2015). The response to feminist critiques that culminated in #GamerGate was infamously characterized by a loud resistance from groups of self-identified 'gamers', which included death and rape threats towards outspoken critics (Alexander 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015; Wingfield 2014). What became evident was a "Toxic Gamer Culture" (Consalvo 2012) stirring underneath the surface of gameplay - one that "is characterized by a prevalence of gender-based consumer harassment, [and] systematic disempowerment [of women] in the marketplace" (Pendravis, Harrison, and Drenten 2016, p. 237).

This 'gamer' subculture has rallied not only around misogynistic attacks, but by also being "explicitly hostile toward diversity" (Ruberg 2018, pp. .1), lashing out in racist and homophobic ways. Massively popular and influential gaming icons like YouTuber and vlogger PewDiePie (Felix Kjellberg) and Twitch Streamer Ninja (Tyler Blevins) have both used racial expletives on live streams in anger at opponents, and PewDiePie has on multiple occasions made anti-semetic comments on his videos (Alexander 2018; Ramanan 2017); neither of these content creator giants received any sort of institutional punishment of any kind from their relevant games or social media platforms. Upon recent announcements of LGBT characters featuring in popular AAA video game franchises, such as *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*, the gamer subculture responded with "homophobic backlash" (Ruberg 2018, pp. 1.3). Ruberg (2018) states, "the gamer identity itself is fundamentally tied to straightness" (pp. 1.3). As Condis (2015) put it, "True gamers and fans are assumed to be straight… or, if they are queer, it is assumed that they will remain in the closet" (p. 199).

As it stands, these issues within gaming communities are in constant conflict and interrogation both in an official institutional capacity by game developers and in player communities. As digital games garner greater mainstream acceptance and appreciation, the old guard of white male geeks and nerds become cells of resistance against the inclusion of others. As Alexander (2017) put it:

> Sexism is such a hot topic… because new voices are virtually banging down the [games] industry's doors to be recognized, included, and heard. The geek tree house is terrified at the idea of change. The obsessively earnest Internet comments and tweets about how games absolutely are an expressive art form that deserves as

> much respect as anything else are paired with claims about how feminism and "censorship" are going to ruin everything for them, naturally. (p. 58)

Most of this background information was written and made in reference to digital games; that does not mean that *Magic* is free from the same cultural hang-ups around toxic gamer culture. Indeed, the 'treehouse' is an endemic aspect of not just videogames, but the gaming institution as a whole; this audience was catered to from the very beginning, which has created strongholds where those who originally felt socially outcast and turned to games to find community are now put into a position where they gatekeep others. However, I acknowledge this development in gaming culture to highlight social and institutional differences of the *Magic* community from it, and to wonder whether these differences have played a role in generating the therapeutic affect described previously.

Magic has had a very different approach to diversity and inclusivity compared to other games due to its developed by WotC. WotC has a longstanding tradition of attempting to establish themselves as inclusive; first on their list of company values is "Inclusivity", and their company motto is, "Dragons and elves belong in our worlds, and so do you" (Wizards 2019a). Adkinson, founder and first CEO of WotC, stated that, "Even before the success of *Magic*, Wizards broached the problems of inclusion and civility in the gaming community… such progressive ideas were in the air" (in Jahromi 2018). Likewise, artwork and depictions of major story characters have been designed intentionally incorporating many characters of diverse ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation from early in *Magic*'s development. As mentioned previously, the first *Magic* expansion, Arabian Nights, was based on middle-eastern folklore, and sets since have represented other cultures sensitively in expansions such as Kamigawa (Japanese), Theros (Greek), Tarkir (Pan-Asian), and Ixalan (Pan-American). Hugh McMullen, WotC's Director of Communications, stated the incorporation of diversity in generic fantasy was intentional, and linked this to consumer identification with the game objects: "there are black characters in the world inspired by Greek mythology…. There are women warriors, women wizards, women sages, and women goblins. Whoever you are, you can see yourself in the game" (in Orsini 2016).

These efforts have not always been successful, however. Most accounts state that *Magic*, particularly competitive *Magic*, was primarily played by white men until recently, and vocal 'gamer' contingents still make their presence known over issues of diversity, just as in videogame communities. Many players from

marginalized groups state that change truly started in the early noughties, when WotC began taking a hands on approach in ensuring that, "[*Magic* is] a game for everyone… [and] a high fantasy haven for people of all stripes" (Orsini 2016).

The examples of institutional intervention from WotC are numerous. Artistic direction is made with explicit prompts aimed towards diverse representation (Orsini 2016). Women, members of the LGBTQ community, and racially diverse streamers and content creators are explicitly selected for high-press invitational tournaments with massive cash prizes to demonstrate, "the depth and diversity of the *Magic* gaming community" (Wizards 2019b). WotC created a community-focused mandate in addendum to their code of conduct, which includes explicitly includes welcoming 'all kinds of people', to be displayed in all WotC sanctioned venues (Cocks 2017). WotC decided to demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and diversity through the company branding, content and associated products; examples include *Magic* clothes and accessories featuring LGBT rainbow iconography (Custom Ink 2019), and publicising employees who are shown annually to participate in LGBT+ Pride (u/SarahPMe 2017) and women's rights rallies, amongst other politically progressive activities.

WotC has also made it clear that they will oust players that may threaten the social safety of *Magic*, especially those acting in a discriminatory manner. Perhaps the most well-known case is that of Jeremy Hambly, a *Magic* content creator who gained notoriety by harassing female cosplayers and others outspoken against toxic gamer culture. Hambly received a lifetime ban from sanctioned play as part of what Elaine Chase, WotC's Vice President of Global Brand Strategy, called "steps we are taking to help foster a better, more inclusive *Magic* community" (Chase 2017). Other players, including former pro-player Travis Woo, were also banned for varying lengths of time for maintaining a social media group called 'Magic for Bad' in which members posted misogynistic, racist, transphobic and homophobic comments and reviews of players (Hipsters Staff 2017). This explicit institutional curating of the *Magic* community is unique amongst gaming communities, and sends a very clear message about what WotC want for the *Magic* community - inclusivity, diversity, and safe spaces. In this way, WotC dictates which behaviours are and are not acceptable in the cultural sphere of *Magic*, employing inclusive discourses that have arisen out of the #GamerGate movement as representative of the culture and ethos of WotC.

While WotC's intentions in taking this stance, of course, are confounded by their position as a company that stands to gain financially from positive public image and subcultures believing they accept them or their ideologies, inclusivity has undoubtedly become a tenet of the *Magic* community and an important aspect of *Magic*'s culture. Arguably some of the biggest influencers in the digital *Magic* community, such as Eilidh Lonie (AliasV), Emma Handy (@Em_TeeGee) and April King (@CubeApril), have made a platform through vocal acknowledgement of their marginalized identities alongside their content, a stark difference from historically dominant voices of *Magic*: a small club of pro-players that primarily consisted of straight cis-men. As mentioned in chapter 4, it's estimated that between 1 and 5 percent of competitive players are non-male (Scharlin-Pettee 2016), while Rosewater (2015b) stated that market analysis indicated that 38% of total players were women. This disparity has been a point of tension for much of *Magic*'s history; (primarily male) authors have offered reasons for a lack of female representation since the second Pro-tour (Stein 2017). The approach taken by most authors was an attempt to 'figure out the issue' (Dama da Rosa 2011), but discourse began to change by the early 2010's. Alongside the issues illuminated by #Gamergate, inclusivity in *Magic* was given the lexis of feminism and queer theory to critically examine the issue with an awareness of men's role, and WotC's role, in perpetuating it (Demars 2017; Fournier 2017; Jameson and Roman 2016; Shanks 2017; Wolff 2015). Simultaneously, *Magic* has been praised for its visible acknowledgement and promotion women, people of color, trans identities, and other marginalized groups (Dadoly 2015; Fournier 2017; Kaestner-Frenchman 2017). This debate persists even now, and these values are constantly being challenged. Just as #GamerGate is still ongoing for many of those involved (Walschots 2015), so too does *Magic*'s clash of discourses continue between those aligned with the established 'gamer' meritocracy, with its problematic privileging of those with gameplay skill which inevitably stems from wider issues of social inequity (Paul 2018), and those working towards a more inclusive community.

While there is a debate, the discourses offered in *Magic* content are strongly in the direction of inclusivity and diversity as a positive, important aspect of this community, and that it has a tangible benefit for people within it. Perhaps it is fitting that recently, for the first time in history, a non-male player won *Magic*'s premier pro tournament. Autumn Burchett, a non-binary transgender person, took down Mythic Championship 2019 and was met with unprecedented public support. Overnight

Burchett went from Pro-tour hopeful to a crowd favourite. In the digital community, hundreds of followers added 'Knight of Autumn' to their twitter handles (a reference to a recent card printed at the time), to show support for Burchett upon their widely received announcement (Burchett 2019a); Pteramander, a card that was critical to Burchett's winning record, was co-opted as a symbol of trans rights, along with the phrase 'Pteramander says Trans rights' (Burchett 2019b; Burchett 2019c); Burchett was even interviewed by Forbes in recognition of the achievement - the only other *Magic* player to enjoy such a feature was Huey Jensen, longstanding *Magic* pro-player and hall of famer who recently came out as gay (Orsini 2017; Orsini 2019).

Burchett's victory has not only been extremely important for *Magic* when it comes to breaking historical grounds for inclusivity; it also has had demonstrable effects on players who see diversity and representation supported in the communities they surround themselves with. Likewise, narratives speaking to what seeing this representation has meant for players have surfaced. Kirsty McIntyre, a *Magic* judge and content creator known for advocating trans rights in *Magic* by introducing #illgowithyou badges to European premier events (@Channelfireball 2019), compiled a host of responses from 32 players around the world after Autumn's win in the article, "A New Age of Magic". McIntyre framed these accounts with an acknowledgement of the toxicity present in certain groups within *Magic*:

> Representation matters. It's not politics, or pandering, or giving anyone special treatment. It's about a community that's too often on the end of hostility and prejudice having the door opened to them. It's about the acceptance we demonstrate, through the coverage team using a player's pronouns. It's about the effect that this will have on trans and enby players who are worried about how the Magic community will receive them, seeing players like Autumn being celebrated across the world for their achievements. (Macintyre 2019)

I will be using some of the voices Macintyre compiled alongside counselling and psychotherapy theory to explore whether this political discourse central to *Magic* culture might shape processes generating therapeutic affect as we have seen in previously presented player accounts.

The Theory of Group Therapeutic Processes

In the task of therapy, a knowledge and openness to other cultures, histories, and lifestyles besides our own as practitioners is a hallmark feature of the work. Ralph R. Greenson (1966) famously wrote of therapeutic practitioners in "That 'Impossible' Profession" that:

> The analyst should possess a lively interest in people, their ways of life, emotions, fantasies and thoughts. … An analyst should meet the unknown in the patient, the strange and the bizarre, with an open mind and not with aversion and anxiety. One has to be free of the usual restricting conventionality of society and relatively indifferent to the superficialities of everyday life…. [T]he capacity to empathize requires a willingness to temporarily and partially to give up one's own identity. (p. 15-16)

It is part of the task to be willing to occupy other's worlds in the role of facilitating the work of therapy. It is not enough, however, to simply state that we might be open to understanding any sort of person that comes into the counselling room ready to do work, when we, ourselves, are positioned in our own social and cultural norms. This is the importance of Greenson's statement; we must be willing to relinquish our fixed sense of identity when acting as a therapist. This requires more than simple willingness - it takes action, research and work. In the more contemporary words of Carlotta G. Miles (2012), "People, indeed, are different and have different backgrounds, values, and cultures. To prepare to see people from cultures other than our own, it is our professional responsibility to learn as much as possible about other cultures" (p. 205).

The importance of this openness and awareness, in its most simple form, is a feature of empathy, and a capacity for empathy to exist between client and therapist. Empathy as a part of therapeutic work is nearly ubiquitous amongst approaches – Rogers (1992) stated it was a necessary and sufficient condition for therapy, Freud (1912) insisted that even behind the blank screen it is necessary for transference relationships to develop and be maintained, and countless others have stressed the importance for re-enacting the empathic formative relationship between caretaker and child with the client. When speaking about the *Magic* community, however, I want to be cautious not to fit the player's relationship with the community neatly into the dyadic relationship of client-therapist; after all, as I have stated many times already in this thesis, I do not contend that *Magic* is therapy. Instead, I wish to wonder what might be occurring to encourage growth and therapeutic change in the *group setting* of the *Magic* community, rather than focusing on a dyadic model used in the last chapter. This section will investigate how what experiences might manifest in the *Magic* community through the process of interrogating community values, employing Yalom's theories of group therapeutic action to understand how these interactions may yield therapeutic affect. In order to conceptualize *Magic*

community interactions this way, I will first outline theoretical framework for group therapy in this work, especially its form and function. This is in line with previous research demonstrating that gaming contexts present opportunities for playing out group therapeutic action (Streng 2009). I will then apply these understandings to the accounts offered in Macintyre's article as evidence of processes that may be occurring.

The purposes of group therapies are identical to that of traditional one-to-one counselling and psychotherapy: to facilitate participants' understanding of themselves, thereby empowering them to make changes or to grow towards their desired experience of living. One of the key differences of working in a group setting is what Kauff (2017) calls, "the opportunity to *use* interactions and reactions between members, from member(s) to therapist, and from individuals to the whole group as windows for exploring what is going on inside each member individually" (p. 592). In other words, group members act not only as participants, but simultaneously as observers; they are privy to others' processes, and get a chance to listen as well as speak, and to relate to others' experiences in a way that might inform their understanding of their own. Kauff (2017) sums this up by stating that, "In sharing feeling, thoughts, and fantasies as freely as possible with one another, members gain access to aspects of themselves they may previously have been unaware of, and help one another to do so as well. This awareness is the precursor to change" (p. 592-593).

Irwin Yalom (2005), who has extensively contributed to theories of group psychotherapy, argued that group therapy acts as a social microcosm through which, "central problematic issues of all the members will be evoked and addressed" (p. 41) , provided the therapist can provide and maintain the prerequisites and foundations to a facilitative working environment. Both Kauff and Yalom's approach to the work of group therapy deems it necessary that there must be a capacity in group members to share and offer their experiences to the group; Yalom (2005) states this capacity for work when he writes, "*if the group is conducted such that the members can behave in an unguarded, unselfconscious manner, they will, most vividly, re-create and display their pathology to the group*" (p. 44). Expecting members of any group to be wholly unguarded and unselfconscious, however, is no small order. However, as established in the previous chapter, *Magic* by design has elements that encourage expression and experimentation in gameplay and

relationality. What is essential to the practice of group therapy, and thinking about *Magic* as engaging in group processes, is acknowledging how the capacity for containing that openness is created.

Numerous factors contribute to openness in a group setting, but perhaps the most common feature noted in the literature is a process of contracting. As described in the previous chapter about *Magic*'s psychographic contract, contracting is an essential part of creating a boundaried, secure environment for the work of therapy to happen; the same reasoning is present in group therapy theory. Rutan and Stone (1984) wrote that, "The contract is the foundation for a productive and safe therapeutic environment…. We are convinced that any group needs a clear contract in order to be effective" (p. 114-115). Yalom (1975) advocated the use of a "system of preparation" (p. 250), either through a preliminary session or the offering of specific guidelines to participants before joining. The therapeutic contract in group interventions can take different forms than explicit explanation of boundaries and requirements in the intervention, but also can be prescriptive of appropriate behaviour and safe ways of meeting. Harkening back to Freud's original articulation of the 'Rules of the Game' for his requirements of therapeutic practice (for example, that the client would be lying down on the couch, that they must speak openly about what ever thought enters their mind, confidentiality, etc.), so too can group therapy formulate how members are expected to be in the group. While it should be acknowledged that, as Rutan and Stone (1999) later wrote, "One of the tasks for members is to determine what will make their efforts in the group most useful" (p. 116), and necessarily this task will not be completed at the outset but will be an ongoing process during group therapy, some ways of being in the group can be established in the initial contracting of the group. This creates a standard by which to hold members to account. "The contract is critical to defining the conditions required for the group to function," Kauff (2017) states, "[but] it is also absolutely necessary to identify *resistance*, that is, the way(s) in which the individual or the whole group avoid confronting the underlying causes of anxiety" (p. 594). By establishing a contract of expected behaviour, this creates an opportunity for an acknowledgement of when group members do not meet the commitment established in the group.

As I described in chapter 5, there are already boundaries that determine ways of being that are acceptable in *Magic* gameplay. Given the inherently relational

aspects of the psychographic contract and game design features like narrative equity, I contend that this process of creating boundaries and acceptable ways of being also plays out in the ideological and cultural debates of the *Magic* community, both on and offline. If we conceive of the *Magic* community as paralleling a therapeutic group setting, the role of facilitator is filled not to any static individual, but to the institutional role of WotC in both establishing and maintaining rules, and their efforts to curate the community. Players abiding by these community standards engage with one another, and likewise opportunities for conflict, resistance, and expression are brought to bear in an open field of communication.

Returning to the theoretical understandings, the contracting process becomes a part of the process of facilitation and growth within the group. Yalom (2005) argued that therapeutic beneficial group experiences can be identified by "eleven primary factors":

1. Instillation of hope
2. Universality
3. Imparting information
4. Altruism
5. The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group
6. Development of socializing techniques
7. Imitative behaviour
8. Interpersonal learning
9. Group cohesiveness
10. Catharsis
11. Existential factors (p. 1-2)

Many of these categories are fundamentally linked with the practice of the formation of relationships between the different members of the group; due to space limitations, I will examine the accounts offered by McIntyre by referring to the most compelling and demonstrable of these factors.

The Voices of "A New Age of *Magic*" as Representations of Yalom's Factors at Work

If we consider the *Magic* community, as a group that is engaged in a considered way of relating to one another through gameplay and communication, it follows that inclusivity has been made part of the established contract for relating in the group. This has been generated by social trends, and edified through the institutional power of WotC. As with the psychographic contract, the way of playing and relating that WotC determine are acceptable are part of the contract of the group that is the *Magic* community. By establishing a code of conduct and exercising the right to ban players from *Magic* and *Magic* stores, the structures of relationship and acceptable conduct and behaviour are made explicit through edict. By engaging with the development of this contract through consumer feedback and discourse, as well as abiding and supporting the stipulations of these codes of conduct in *Magic* contexts, community members act as participants and observers to the interactions and relations that are held in this community. By participating in the social microcosm that is *Magic*, and abiding not only by the contractual rules of conduct but also the subtle and implied cultural contractual elements, such as the psychographic contract, that influence and determine of the fabric of what is and isn't acceptable in the context of *Magic*, players are brought into expressive, psychological contact with one another. Through this contact, *Magic* community members engage in processes of relation to one another through play and social interaction. Likewise, this means that some of the processes that arise in the *Magic* community, and the therapeutic affect seen in the outcomes in chapter 5, indicate that therapeutic group theory might inform how we understand interactions that occur within the contained environment of the *Magic* community. If the *Magic* community members act in relationship, it is possible that Yalom's therapeutic factors may arise and manifest in the social interactions that are acted out in the group, providing a potential route through which therapeutic affect is developed.

In order to map this route in others' experiences, let us return to Macintyre's work in "A New Age of Magic", and consider the accounts offered in response to Burchett's Mythic Championship victory through the lens of group therapeutic theory. In reading through the different accounts, the accounts bear a striking resemblance to some features of Yalom's model - primarily in the categories of

instillation of hope, universality, group cohesiveness, and altruism. Other categories could also fit, such as that of catharsis or potentially corrective recapitulation, but to make those connections would require more data than the accounts offered, and may be useful for further research that could focus on details of community members affected.

Yalom explains that the instillation of hope is indicative of the group member's faith that the process of being in the group and doing the work of therapy *can* in fact help the individual. Yalom (2005) asserts that "Not only is hope required to keep the client in therapy so that other therapeutic factors may take effect, but faith in a treatment mode can in itself be therapeutically effective" (p. 4). If a group member believes that their situation *can* become better, and that they are doing something helpful to improve their situation, there is a much higher chance that the intervention *will* be helpful. Furthermore, Yalom insists that group interventions are unique in that members of the group will inevitably have contact with others at different stages of the therapeutic process that help to foster, form and fortify hope as the client progresses through the peaks and troughs in the work of therapy. In a sense, all other therapeutic factors are somewhat contingent on the client having the faith to continue engaging long enough to attain deeper benefits.

Since hope seems to be the base ingredient for improvement and growth in Yalom's model, lets first inspect the accounts that speak of it. Again, it is important to reiterate that *Magic* as a game is not built for the purpose of therapeutic improvement, nor is it a stand in for therapy; nonetheless, those who participate in the community will have hopes. Hope in the context of *Magic* isn't typically articulated to such a therapeutic end, but players will engage with games and gaming communities to get some sort of outcome, benefit, or connection as a result. In terms of marketing and player culture, hope plays a fundamental part in constructing and supporting the competitive environment for *Magic* and is a big part of the competitive atmosphere. As outlined in chapter 4, the idea of the 'pro dream', that one might be able to travel the world playing professionally based on the individuals skill, is a massive draw to organized play, and has contributed to *Magic*'s worldwide success as a game. This is extremely relevant for generating experiences that are therapeutic for the player; in Chapter 5, while discussing Spike as a psychographic, I acknowledged Douglas and Carless' research concluded that achievement in sport can lead to mental health improvement, especially being able

to excel in a manner that is socially acceptede. If the community, in acting out issues regarding difference and marginalization in *Magic* creates hope for players to experience that achievement and acceptance in competitive *Magic* and other contexts, this could be a substantial part of the process of creating therapeutic affect.

Many of the accounts in “A New Age of *Magic*” express that hope has been instilled in a competitive context for the individual, but also a hope for the community and culture of *Magic* regarding their identity as trans or non-binary (hereafter ‘enby’) *Magic* players. Given the manifestation of toxic gaming culture, many players speak of negative affect associated with competitive events due to their gender identity, ranging from ‘stress’ and ‘pressure’ to perform to ‘being terrified’ (Miranda Keith, Adrianna, and Moosewerk in Macintyre 2019). These anxieties, sadly, are not ones that are limited to gaming life - as Meyer (2003) pointed out, sexual and gender minorities experience ongoing and chronic stress as a result of marginalization in almost all contexts - though toxic gaming culture no doubt contributes to these fears and anxieties. The players who mention this note that in observing Burchett’s victory, and the community response to their result, that there was a sense that these stresses have been lessened, that they could achieve strong results in competitive *Magic* as Burchett has, and that they wish to continue playing *Magic* as a result. As Miranda Keith put it, “I like the game, but the stress of playing at that level as a trans person is a lot, and I was ready to let it go. After this weekend, I’m not sure about that anymore. … watching someone like me absolutely crush it, and the community’s positivity about the whole thing, sorta reignited my dreams” (in Macintyre 2019).

I contend that Burchett played out a conflict that was feared by these players, and came out not damaged or punished, but accepted and celebrated. Visibility created a sense of hope in these players, where previously this hope had been limited or squelched in some manner due to marginalization and oppression of their gender identity. This reflects some of the integral aspects of a therapeutic group as an intervention; these players are both observers and participants in this victory, sharing in Burchett’s experience and expressing the impact it has had on them. This relating to Burchett’s result is clear by the way that the accounts seem to use it as a proof in concept that other trans and enby players can play and belong in those gaming contexts despite past experiences. As Shea Liz put it, “Reading recent

stories about harassment in the Magic community made me feel like I would never be strong enough to play sanctioned MTG again, but seeing Autumn win the MC gives me the thought of 'If they can win a MC, there's no reason I can't play'"(in McIntyre 2019). That is not to say that Burchett's win has suddenly made the space completely safe and okay for marginalized players, but it has demonstrated that there is room and possibility for change. Moosewerk reflects, "I'm less terrified than I've ever been of coming out now thanks to Autumn. I'm still freakin' scared but this whole thing has opened my eyes to how far we nerds have come as a community. It feels beautiful to see so much acceptance" (in McIntyre 2019). The claim of 'how far we nerds have come' demonstrates a belief in the potential that progress can be made in eliminating fear, in making spaces safer, and towards players feeling accepted and acceptable in these spaces through a group project these players feel a part of as demonstrated by the use of 'we'. This process of seeing issues of marginalization broached and met demonstrate that observation within the community can change how the players think about themselves and their own potentials for achievement.

The 'we' aspect of this exchange is incredibly important in drawing parallels with group therapeutic interaction as a means of understanding the impact community development can have on individual players. Returning to Yalom's therapeutic factors, universality signifies the feeling of belonging to 'something greater', as small as a specific group, or as large a concept as being 'normal'. Yalom (2005) explained that:

> Many individuals enter therapy with the disquieting thought that they are unique in their wretchedness, that they alone have certain frightening or unacceptable problems, thoughts, impulses and fantasies…. To some extent this is true for all of us, but many clients, because of their extreme social isolation, have a heightened sense of uniqueness. Their interpersonal difficulties preclude the possibility of deep intimacy. In everyday life they neither learn about others' analogous feelings and experiences, nor avail themselves of the opportunity to confide in, and ultimately to be validated and accepted by others. (p. 6)

To have a feeling of universality, then is to be involved in 'deep intimacy'; to 'learn about others' analogous feelings'; to 'avail themselves to the opportunity to… ultimately be validated and accepted by others'. This is entangled with developing group cohesiveness - a means by which the group works as a social microcosm, rather than being impeded by anxiety, avoidance or resistance. Flores (2017) linked this specifically to multicultural issues and diversity, stating that:

> The group leader's task… is to promote and integrate the diverse perspectives within the group into a coherent whole that allows the group to move between shores of rigidity and chaos. The group leader's aim is to foster a process of shared reflection that generates multiple perspectives on experience, helping group members keep from getting trapped in the 'reality' of one view. (p. S56)

This 'integration' is analogous to universality - that though we may have differences we can also be a part of the same group - but also implies an ability to occupy the space of other group members in an attempt at empathic understanding which combats 'getting trapped in the 'reality' of one view'.

While I have already acknowledged how the hope for personal achievement might generate therapeutic affect, it is clear from many of the accounts in "A New Age of *Magic*" that players feel personal stakes not only in achieving results for themselves, but in identifying as part of a close, intimate community. As Tom Walters put it, "Knowing that there were other people like me in my community – that they could not just be getting by, but absolutely thriving, made me feel so much stronger and less alone" (in McIntyre 2019). This indicates a sense of belonging and universality can manifest in the *Magic* community. This is especially relevant in cases where universality may not be felt in other aspects of the individual's life. Hailey explains:

> Autumns victory and the overwhelming support of their friends and the *Magic* community celebrating it was something I will hold on to for a very long time. Even when the world doesn't want me or any trans/non-binary person, at least I know this community has a place for us in their hearts, and I will forever call it home (McIntyre 2019).

Playing out social issues within the *Magic* community has the potential to change how the individuals involved think about themselves - that they have a place. Anon also reflected this feeling, saying, "I met Autumn properly recently, and their NB status helped me discover mine. I've never felt better about myself. Autumn winning the MC has inspired me to no end and has validated me more than anything before" (in McIntyre 2019). Seeing diverse populations represented in *Magic* as active, accepted community members creates a sense of validation in individuals with similar identities. Most of the submissions in "A New Age of *Magic*" corroborate these feelings; Ates, Tifenn, Kali Rainwater, Jane Q, Emma, Autumn Cook, Kendra Smith, Alesha, and Io Angela all echo these sentiments. Inclusivity in one's 'favorite game' might make one feel accepted, acceptable, and that their identity, feelings and even their existence is valid in their self-concept. Importantly, this validation is not limited to the confines of the game - it also extends to features of the person's experience of life as a whole. As Eser put it:

> I am an agender MTG Judge and out to almost all aspects of my life. For most of my life I felt very wrong for being in my body and being myself. The huge uproar and support the magic community is showing since Autumn won the MC is so so fantastic. For me it makes clear that I have found my place and that I am not wrong. I will be myself with pride! (McIntyre 2019)

This certainly qualifies as therapeutic affect according to the definition previously outlined, and indicates that this process of relating in the community and engaging with these issues can generate therapeutic affect for players.

The accounts don't only speak of their own feelings of acceptance, however; they also speak about the mainstream, cis-gendered community, and their role inthis event. Eleven of the accounts cite specifically the *Magic* community's positive and supportive response to Burchett winning, and acknowledged the coverage team for the Mythic Championship using preferred pronouns when referring to Burchett and treating Burchett with equal regard as they did other players. Kaylee Mullins explains the significance of having a trans enby person referred to appropriately by competition officials:

> The biggest thing to me though was seeing coverage (and other pros) using their pronouns. Normalizing this is so important; and it wasn't a big deal — Autumn was just another competitor in a truly impressive top 8. Yes, the significance of the diversity & representation was highlighted in their top 8 interview but other than that they were just like any other player up there and that is important too. (in McIntyre 2019)

These comments reflect Yalom's conception of group cohesiveness - that the *Magic* community, while composing of different parts and identities, is one that works together to manage, hold and accept difference. Gabby Squalia points out that this is a rarity, and incredibly valuable to players who in other circumstances feel marginalized and not adequately represented:

> I don't know that I've ever had the experience of hearing a professional team refer to someone like me by our name and pronouns so reliably over so much time — not in the context of a story about gender, but as a factual statement in ongoing reporting. I know that I have never had the opportunity to witness live one of my community being so excellent for so long, and being so celebrated for it. It was a landmark that... reverberated far beyond the game of Magic. (in McIntyre 2019)

In each of these statements is an acknowledgement that the issue's importance, and that it is being met by other members of the group who are not necessarily implicated or directly affected by it. There is a sense that the *Magic* community is one that is trying to bridge boundaries, with the assistance of the institutional practices of WotC, to overcome issues within the community of intolerance, epitomized by figures like Hambly and toxic contingents of the *Magic* community. Furthermore, there is an open acknowledgement that this has effects for the players

that is not limited within *Magic* itself - it 'reverberated far beyond', and made those implicated feel differently about themselves or how they might be treated in other contexts.

This effort by the unaffected members of the *Magic* community in this issue of trans/enby representation is reflective of another therapeutic factor in groups: altruism. Yalom (2005) explains that, "Many psychiatric patients beginning therapy are demoralized and possess a deep sense of having nothing of value to offer others. … the experience of finding they can be of importance to others is refreshing and boosts self-esteem" (p. 13); he claims that this is a fundamentally unique feature of group therapy - that clients help one another. The means of altruistic help that Yalom (2005) ranges from "Support, reassurance, suggestions and insight", to "simply having been present and allowing their fellow members to grow as a result of facilitative, sustaining relationship" (p. 14). This is ultimately entangled with the process of relating and wanting to understand others beyond ourselves. Yalom (2005) writes, "life meaning is always a derivative phenomenon that materialized when we have transcended ourselves, when we have forgotten ourselves and become absorbed in someone (or something) outside ourselves" (p. 15).

The last point I wish to close this chapter is widening the lens somewhat on this issue, and reflecting on Yalom's conception of altruism in light of Burchett's win. Rather than turn back over each of the quotes offered here, it is more important to end observing altruism in a structural, enabling level, and to consider that the efforts of all parts of this community have created and maintained *Magic*'s boundaries such that divisive conflicts can be contained and worked with, thereby changing people's lives.

Ultimately, the offer of inclusivity is one of altruism. Equality for those that are different necessarily must be accepted and offered from those in a more privileged and powerful position (in this case visible pros and content creators, those that are a part of WotC R&D and marketing, and those who go out of their way to make a platform for those who might not otherwise get one). Considering revelations from #GamerGate, taking this position certainly isn't a standard or an expectation for game developers; many avoid it for fear of being implicated in the toxic discourse of the gamer subgroups, or being accused of having a political agenda, something McIntyre addressed directly in her introduction to "A New Age of Magic" by stating clearly that representation isn't "pandering" (2019) . WotC has taken an extra step

beyond the norm in creating an environment that strives and works to be safe for everyone. That is not to say they have nothing to gain in this practice - it is important to acknowledge that they are a company, and there is profit in the acquisition of minority and LGBT market - but many other game developers have been able to become industry leaders by *not* tackling this issue, and speaking little to the issues of racism, homophobia, and other inclusivity issues that are rife in gaming communities. The efforts of the loud voices in *Magic's* community and its structural organizers has begotten another altruism that has made this line of analysis possible - those that are part of the enby and trans community. “A New Age of Magic” is the collection of insights and experiences that trans and enby players have offered in the service of others who might be affected, but also so that those who are outside this locus of experience might understand. Certainly, the burden of explanation and offering their experiences of how they have been affected by their issues is not expected of them, or their responsibility. However, it demonstrates a commitment and engagement to a group process that is reflective of Yalom and other's theories on the therapeutic forces at work in the group. It is an offering of the self that the other members of the community hear and bear witness to, and, in doing so, it promotes the ability to reflect on our own positions in *Magic*. Engaging with these voices in the community/group permits self-awareness, growth, and learning about how others might be affected by these issues. By inviting us to into their locus of experience, they are inviting us to take meaning in those beyond ourselves, the ‘transcendence’ Yalom speaks of that is essential to finding meaning in our lives.

The impact of these discourses transcend further. They extend outwards, escaping the bounds of how these players experience *Magic*, and reach into how players might experience life. It manifests and permits them to hold hope for what they might achieve or do, and how they might be treated by others, validating their identities and existence where other experiences in their life may not be able to engage them in that way. This observation and transferability within the game to the experiences outside the game not only aligns with other literature on the topic such as the culturally shaping nature of games as presented in *Homo Ludens*, but it also outlines a clear theoretical path by which aspects of relating in the *Magic* community might allow therapeutic affect might occur. In the next chapter, I will further explore this transferability feature not only in the grappling with social issues, but those of our perception of our internal world in the analysis of competitive practice in *Magic*.

Chapter 8 - Game-Playing and Reality-Testing

The last two chapters have explored how or in what way therapeutic affect might manifest for those who play *Magic*. Chapter 6 explored aspects of *Magic* gameplay design that create contained, boundaried spaces by which players can potentially engage in personal development through the psychographic contract. In Chapter 7, I likened the *Magic* community developments to those of Yalom's therapeutic factors of group therapy, and how issues of identity, acceptance and validation can be explored. These engagements within *Magic* contexts ripple outwards into other aspect of the player's life; I contend this reflects an ongoing process of developing ways of being within the contained environment of *Magic* which resemble reality-testing. Reality-testing constitutes a crucial theoretical aspect of therapeutic change, where processes, thoughts, and ways of being are played out within a safe space, and then integrated into other aspects of their lives once determined to be beneficial. In this chapter, I will scrutinize how this process might play out in *Magic* by considering the subculture of *Magic* with which I have personal expertise with as a player: competitive *Magic*.

Competitive *Magic*, as mentioned in chapter 2, constitutes the part of the community that are members of the pro community, or are developing competitive players known as 'Grinders'. The psychological demands of playing competitive *Magic* are similar to other high level competitive sports - 'mental game' is a common subject in sports psychology, generally concerned with one's perception about the practice and process of improvement, how one works with tournament results and how one makes progress in achieving competitive goals (Feltz 1983; Gill 1990; Jonathan 2017; Judge, Bell, Bellar, & Wanless 2010). By identifying concepts, principles, and ways being in competitive *Magic*, I hope to trace their route as they manifest in a player's way of being as an individual. Ideally, this account will illustrate how learning and being as *Magic* player might translates to general aspects of player's lives, filling in the final gap of how what happens in a game might confer therapeutic affect to the individual.

Conceptualizing 'Reality-Testing'

Before exploring accounts and determining a path by which playing and interacting with *Magic* might constitute reality-testing, I will clearly define the term. 'Reality-testing' has a number of different conceptualizations depending on the field,

discipline or approach that the term is being used in, and it is essential that it's clear what exactly I am attributing to the act of playing *Magic*. To understand 'reality-testing', one must determine what 'reality' is, and what constitutes 'testing' it. 'Reality' is the existence that all humans experience, consisting of the negotiation between external, outside-the-self reality and an inner, subjective, psychic reality. The concept of this divide between an external and internal reality dates to the foundational work of Freud (1911), and his articulation of the 'reality principle'. This has become a cornerstone for theories of the mind, and has been developed, becoming more complex and nuanced as our understanding of reality itself grows. Winnicott (1971), as mentioned earlier in Chapter 6, conceived of the potential space that is between external and internal reality - transitional space. Winnicott theorized that integral to psychological development in infancy is learning to understand the external and internal world as separate, while being able to occupy the experimental transitional space of play that exists between the internal and external reality.

The separation of internal and external reality is only the beginning of the discussion, however. Questions as to the nature of reality is a complex issue that depends largely on the onto-epistemic position one holds. Freud contended the external world is fixed and measurable, but insisted that humans, in our subjectivity, could never have true access to it, just as we can never have access to another's internal world (Freud 1900). Others since have developed an understanding of a social constructionist psychotherapy and have worked on the internal/external reality conception with this philosophical underpinning (Hoffman 1992; Schafer 1970). To these thinkers, humans are not isolated autonomous units, but exist in the formations and configurations of socio-cultural realities in which we participate and abide, and that concepts of 'external' reality exist within these paradigms.

With these differences in mind, I will leave the question of the exact nature of reality to more qualified philosophers to discuss. For the purposes of this work, I will use a more classic understanding of the internal and external world, drawing off the work of Winnicott and Bion, that are consistent with social realism. The essentials of this are: 1. there is an external, tangible reality that we and others interact with and perceive in varying amounts of completeness or incompleteness; 2. there is an internal space that we know and occupy to some degree, which is not readily accessible by others (or potentially ourselves, in the case of the subconscious); and

3. the two are not separate, but entangled in our subjective realities - we can manifest our internal realities in some fashion externally, and we hold representations of the external world internally as internal objects.

What, then, constitutes 'testing' this reality? Billow (2016) defines reality-testing as an activity that, "centers on a particular theme or object. It evolves towards organization and rationality, with a goal to define and solve problems" (p. 362). Billow (2016) couples this with testing-reality, which "involves approaching reality without necessarily looking for or coming to definition, clarity, or closure", and insists the two processes are bound as, "reciprocal manifestations of the drive to know and of tasks of learning" (p. 361-362). The reality-testing we are concerned with is that of, "'Inner' life, [where] reality testing seeks to reach understanding, clarify distortions and the influence of past traumas, and prepare for appropriate behavior" (Billow 2016, p. 552). Inner reality-testing is often concerned with exploring aspects of the self, such as one's motivations for actions, how we are affected by others, or comparing self-concepts with the perceptions of others. This is a feature of utmost importance according to the definition of therapeutic established in chapter 2: this inner reality-testing process corresponds almost directly with the features of therapeutic affect, and demonstrating its presence in *Magic* gameplay would elucidate a major component of how therapeutic affect manifests through it.

Paradoxically, the results of internal reality-testing are influenced by and through the realm of the external; the verdict of the internal test is offered externally, and judged through the lens of external interpersonal relationships and social configurations, which then implicitly or explicitly determine whether concepts or ways of being are acceptable, or 'reality adequate' (Rapaport 1951). This aspect of reality-testing is important in conceiving of players and gaming communities as engaging with therapeutic processes of groups, as discussed in chapter 7. Bion, however, raised concern with how this process is used when exploring the potential anxiety-avoidant configurations groups can hold - particularly in those that are truth-avoidant, hierarchical or dogmatic (1970). For inner reality-testing to convey therapeutic affect, it is necessary that an individual's external world can hold and accept the outcome of their inner reality-testing process. The space in which this experimentation and testing occurs, therefore, must be safe, offer containment, and be properly boundaried. Given too much external pressure to conform to a particular system or way or being, it is possible that this reality-testing never occurs, and that

the individual never experiments with different ways of being, acting, or manifestations of the self, for fear of painful repercussions, such as social isolation and stigmatization. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that fundamental to most counselling and psychotherapeutic interventions is a tenet that holds openness to the clients' world, whether that is articulated as Roger's unconditional positive regard (1992) or Freud's blank screen.

Reality-Testing: Why does it matter?

While offering theories of therapy and interventions is important for informing interpretations of my and others' experience of playing *Magic*, it is important to be clear about why this reality-testing process matters for this inquiry. Ultimately, it is my opinion that the dearth of research about games and their impact on the life experiences of players has much to do with a culturally held assumptions about the nature of games as separate from the external or 'actual' world. As I outlined in chapter 1 and 2, dominant discourses about traditional games depict them as pursuits useful only for recreation, or 'time-wasting'. By asserting that gaming can be an internal reality-testing process, I am inherently challenging the assumption that the world of play, fantasy, and gaming is separate from so-called 'real life' for the individual playing, just as T.L. Taylor (2006) remarked in her observation of the perceived separation of 'real' and 'virtual' worlds.

I contend that the things that we do, the way that we play, and the interactions we have gaming contexts are *real*, but take place in environments that are more contained than other contexts. This occurs through a process of establishing cultural expectations and understandings that are different from those of mainstream society. The boundaries of a setting create a sense of containment that permits a different way of relating, a sense that one can be and do things differently than in mainstream socio-cultural environments, and that this behaviour is *tolerated and accepted*. This isn't to say that gaming cultures are limitlessly accepting, but experimentation in ways of being, contingent on specific cultural boundaries, can take place. As a result, players have freedom to express themselves differently than how they do in other contexts.

As outlined, this could still fit into the dualism of 'real life' vs. 'fantasy'. People playing games may experiment or change the way they act while playing games, but that is separate from 'real life' and likewise goes no further than those

contexts of playing. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear about a player who lashes out at others, sometimes excusing themselves briefly from the game, or stopping playing the game altogether - with the caveat that 'they aren't an angry person'. Nor is it uncommon to hear that someone is a nice guy, but when they're winning at game, they are *so* condescending. These articulations posit a split between the 'real' and the 'fantasy' of games, to the point where who one is in gameplay does not influence the qualities associated with their identity.

This split represents a resistance to permitting what happens in the play space to be valuable to the 'real world', only permitting significance to the game itself; this tendency is reflected in the narratives that are presented in mainstream media. In fact, until the last decade or so in research, it has primarily been in a discourse of pathologized mental health (Bean, Nielson, Van Rooij, & Ferguson 2017; Charlton 2002), in which players become so inundated with a game or gaming experience, that a player becomes unable to differentiate between the 'reality of the game' and 'real life'. To be affected personally by a game implies that the individual may be, at best, a particularly vulnerable group (such as children) or, at worst, divorced from reality or potentially psychotic. Widespread controversies in videogames are, "almost as old as the video game industry itself" (Copenhaver and Ferguson 2018), with *Death Race* being the first game pulled from the shelves in 1976 for depicting character death. These concerns were highly publicised, as digital games such as *Mortal Kombat* created more realistic violence, causing fears that the game may cause children to become more violent (Copenhaver and Ferguson 2018). Traditional games have not escaped this stigma either; The 'Moral Panic' (sometimes referred to along with the 'Satanic Panic' [Laycock 2015], a period of American public hysteria concerning conspiracies about middle class devil-worshipping paedophiles in the U.S. [Hughes 2017]) was a time when *Dungeons and Dragons* and other fantasy games were feared to cause children to turn to Satanic worship. This led to severe stigmatization of players and, in certain parts of the United States, organized efforts to ban the games (Laycock 2015). Waldron (2005) reflects that, "the impact of these accusations lingers on to the present", and contributed to the development of RPG communities as counter-cultural.

In contemporary media, the conception of how games impact individuals is commonly framed through a narrative of games addiction (Zastrow 2017; Roman 2019), where purportedly one might choose to live their life in the 'fantasy' of a game

instead of in ‘reality’. Researchers have found little evidence to suggest this is a major risk of gaming independent of comorbidity between other underlying health conditions (Griffiths et al., 2016.; King et al., 2013), and, at present, it is unclear how to approach or designate these when compared with other hobbies and practices (Bean, Nielson, Van Rouij, & Ferguson 2017). Mainstream media also associates violent criminals, especially school-shooters in the United States, with video games; major news outlets and even politicians (CNN 1997; Steinfield 2018) draw attention to the fact that many of these individuals frequently played first-person shooter titles, in which the victory condition of a game is to shoot and kill opposing players (Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett 2011). The implication of these correlations is that acts being carried out in a ‘fantasy’ of a video game can cause an acting out of violent or murderous behaviour in ‘real life’ - a cautionary tale insisting on the divorce between gaming and ‘real life’, less one becomes unhinged. This conclusion is widely disputed by a majority of the academic literature on the subject, as covered in chapter 2.

If playing games is a process of internal reality-testing, this dualism becomes shattered; playing and *being in the game* becomes a means by which we are working on acceptable ways of *being as ourselves*. In other words, our emotional and psychological experiences in gameplay, as well as the ways of being that are accepted in a game, will influence how we act and are in other contexts, and vice versa. This is consistent with previous findings – as seen in my previous vignettes from chapter 5 and 6, how I have acted while playing *Magic* has been a reflection of what I have felt outside of the game and could not express. What is important to note here is that there is a process of affect occurring. Based on the emotional, relational experiences that these situations present, which allow a reality-testing process to occur, an individual might be affected in a manner that is beyond the gaming experience. Reality-testing, therefore, presents a route for potential therapeutic affect to develop.

There are many complex relationships that are bound to arise in this feature of gameplay that will be particular to specific gaming communities, and their relationship with culture at large. For example, there might be a sort of balancing act between the stigma of being identified as ‘nerd’ and the improved sense of self gained by playing a particular game, and other issues relating to the lived experience of a culturally engrained split between in-game and out-of-game

divisions. However, examples such as these are so numerous and that I must leave that for future research to untangle and explore. For now, I will be scrutinizing how *Magic* can generate therapeutic affect by using reality-testing process as the bridge by which the gameplay experience translates into a different way of being for the player. Likewise, the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to demonstrating the presence of this reality-testing process, and how the ways of relating in *Magic* have had a direct effect on how one sees and experiences the world.

Grinding as Being, not Doing

With reality-testing clearly defined, and its relevance to how *Magic* can be therapeutic affective, I will look at examples of how this inner reality testing process might manifest. I offer a vignette of working through loss as a competitive *Magic* player, and then will then be discussed in how I operate in other contexts as a result of this reality-testing process. Being a competitive *Magic* player involves far more than practicing and playing well; it involves a way of being and reflecting on one's experience in order to generate understanding. The ultimate goal of this approach is to have success in the competitive field but cannot be disentangled from a praxis of becoming through using experiences accordingly. The following vignette is from my experience at the 2018 World Magic Cup held in Barcelona, Spain; it is intended to serve as an illustration of an ongoing competitive process from years of engagement with *Magic*, rather than being a singular contained and applied case of reality-testing.

It was warm as we left the event hall. Warm and loud. We left the cool interior of concrete, fluorescents, and high ceilings into afternoon sun, a massive four lane roundabout in front of us packed with people and cars. We stood out starkly in our kilts, but I didn't really notice like I had earlier, when I was swelling with pride. I started smoking as soon as we were outside. I felt vacant at that moment - somewhere else. All I could stare at was this massive statue in the middle of the roundabout. It was covered in angels or saints, with massive columns around it, and small alcoves with more fine details. It had to be at least 70 feet tall. It felt far more than that. Some stone figures looked down at us - the statues who gazed at each other shared gossip.

I didn't even notice the loud cheering and the sound of unmuffled engines right next to us as I continued my staring contest with these immortalized figures above me. Dani broke the silence between the three of us. "Holy shit," he spat, jutting his head back on his neck as if he'd just been slapped square in the forehead. "Are those a bunch of… *Santa's on Motorbikes*?"

I took a sharp inhale from my vaporizer. I turned to the street we'd walked across to get here from the apartment and saw a mob that, to my surprise, exactly fit Dani's description.

"Wow, there's so many of them," Stephen said with a chuckle. And there was. We walked closer to cross the road and they seemed to extend back, back farther than we could see from the roundabout, down the main road towards a palace of some variety. There must've been hundreds of them. It didn't feel real.

Suddenly, I felt like I was bobbing, a piece of flotsam being carried along in a tide, unsure where I was going. We pushed in front of the motorbikes, between police cordons who were trying to disperse a large crowd forming around the motor-mounted Santas. We clung to our bags containing swag and gear given out before the main event started at the World Magic Cup. It might have been free, but it was valuable. Dani seemed wary of everyone in the crowd, and the sounds of motorbike engines backfiring and fireworks popping off made me jump, whipping me back into my body.

Eventually we made it out, and around the corner. We strode in the middle of a major thoroughfare, on a small path, lined with thick trees on either side of us. Three abreast in kilts. Again I became empty, fascinated with the trees as they shuddered in the coastal wind.

"So, I guess this was a waste of a trip," Dani stated as soon as we were out of the cacophonous crowd. He sounded horribly defeated.

"Ach, well," Stephen responding, his Scottish accent flaring for a moment, "It had to happen eventually. You gotta be pretty lucky to make it to day two of every single World Magic Cup. The odds were bound to catch up to us."

Dani squeaked out a scoff. "And now we're stuck here for three more days."

"Hey now," I found my own voice chirping, "We aren't *stuck* here. We got a free vacation out of the deal. Now we can just do whatever the fuck we want for the

next few days, courtesy of Wizards - and we don't have to sit in an event hall and play *Magic* for any of it!"

This sparked a laugh from them, but it was hollow. We all would have loved to be confined to that concrete block for the next few days. A rush of anger flowed through me for a moment. How had I found I was consoling the people who have had time on bigger stages than this and found far more success? I was the one who performed well, who had a positive record throughout the rounds, and now I was saying, 'it's going to be okay guys'. This was my one shot for the foreseeable, and I was somehow trying to make them feel better. I took a long breath, and I put the thoughts out of my mind. It could've easily been me pulling bunk draws all day, not them. No one is entitled to wins in this game; we all know that far too well.

"Now we get to drink nice drinks, and eat good food, and see some cool shit," I declared, "And we deserve that. We played our best, and our best was good. Sometimes you do everything right and make all the correct decisions - and you still lose. We don't have anything to be ashamed of."

I was still watching the trees, and I realized I was smiling – half-laughing at what I'd said. It was a nice sentiment, and we all knew that phrase - we all knew it's true, too - but none of us were ready to cross that bridge yet. Somehow, a free vacation to Barcelona felt a shitty consolation prize. The others offered me silence and the clattering of brogues in response.

In a few minutes, we were back at the front door of the Airbnb. We stopped by a small market on the way, and aside from a few broken expressions in Spanish and discussing what beer to buy, we said little. We squeezed into the tiny lift and took the slow ride four floors up. I glanced around to the others and saw they were both looking downwards. Thinking. Reflecting.

It was the same for all of us I like to think. That we were all in that moment inspecting and thinking about our plays from the day, the decks we constructed, the hands we decided to keep and the ones we threw back. Did we make the right call for the decks to register? Would we be playing tomorrow if I didn't make that one call? Was our communication off? Our seat order? This is the ritual after every bad tournament. You can't let a loss just be a loss. You need to learn from it. I think of one of the best players I know that helped me become competitive - Grant. When I first met him, he was on the pro-tour, and everyone had told me how good he was.

So I did the only sensible thing in my view since I wanted to get better - I bought him a pint, and I asked him how to do it, to get to his level, how to win more matches. Grant squinted his eyes, scratched at his large ginger beard, and then laughed in my face when I asked. He told me, “Getting good at this game isn’t about winning matches. It’s about losing them.” He paused for a moment, and laughed again at my expression which, I imagine, relayed a state of absolute confusion. “I mean, you only win matches and games once you’ve lost enough. You have to lose and lose and lose, and only seeing how you lost will you figure out the right things to do. And if you wanna be good - well, you gotta be ready to lose.”

I remember the burning in my cheeks thinking about that conversation as we entered the flat. It was embarrassment. I’ve lost a lot of games of *Magic*, and I thought by the time I got to the World Magic Cup I’d lost enough. But you’re never done - how silly I was to think that I might be getting close. After fiddling with the keys, we entered the flat to find it empty - we were rooming with team England, and they were still playing, evidently. I went into the small kitchen and shoved the groceries in the refrigerator, grabbing a beer out for myself. “Hey, me too,” Dani shouted, and I grabbed a bottle for him. Stephen quickly retreated to his bedroom.

I sat at the dining table with Dani. I opened our beers, took a big gulp, and let loose a long, dragged sigh. There was silence for a moment, and I stared down at the table and felt sorry for myself. My eyes scrolled over a mess of cardstock strewn across it from the practice games the night before that now felt like a waste.

Suddenly Dani started cracking up with laughter. I looked up, perplexed at him while he squinted over his glasses warmly. All he said was a resounding, “A-Yup”. I probably gave him the same look I gave Grant.

“Don’t worry, pal - it’ll pass in about three months,” Dani said knowingly – then I started laughing, hard. I had forgotten that Dani went to his first pro tour and had a really rough go of it - but the second time around he came top 16 in one of the hardest tournaments there is. He survived. And now he was here together with me scrubbing out of another world class tournament. And then I knew: this loss sucked and hurt, but we would survive. He held his beer out and gave a nod, and I clinked mine to his.

“I guess it’s all just part of the process, I suppose,” I said, and took another long draught of my beer before letting a melancholy smile spread across my lips. He

followed his drink with a refreshed *Ahhh* that was almost commercial in its typicality, before declaring with a self-effacing smirk, and a shake of the head, “Yep. Cheers to the process.”

This vignette is one that is essentially about loss. Despite hours of practice and dedicated work that we had put in, Team Scotland did not qualify for the latter stages of the tournament. As my first invitational premier event, I had high hopes, and we all had to engage with the difficult process of managing a disappointing result. The emotional challenge of being with loss, being able to own the loss, and having the capacity to accept and learn from the loss was contingent on cultural teaching and principles from *Magic* as a practice, and the integration of these principles in a game setting can be understood as a reality-testing process. I will outline how these ways of being manifest in the vignette, their correspondence with other cultural artefacts, and interpret them through their application in other parts of my own life with psychotherapeutic theory.

I believe it useful to first consider a wide-angle look at the major arc of the vignette in general, which covers what I would consider a relatively short transition from being psychologically out-of-contact to being in contact with my teammates, and my own emotional state. The interaction between my teammates and I, particularly Dani’s initial evaluation that the trip was ‘a waste’, brings me into a sphere of being able to evaluate this experience of loss for myself. At first this is done on a practical level (‘we got a free vacation’) then to a game-play level (‘Would we still be playing tomorrow if I didn’t make that one call?’), and, finally, to a reflexive, emotional level (‘It was embarrassment’). This is reflective of an ongoing process that has been a part of me playing competitive *Magic* for the past five years. This vignette is the most recent and perhaps most articulate representation of this journey, but this process has been worked with continuously with a wide cast of different teammates, friends, and colleagues. It is my belief that this processing would not be possible if not for the internalization of cultural competitive *Magic* concepts, and these concepts have become a part of my way of being outside of my role as a *Magic* player.

The most illustrative example of this in my life would likely be becoming a therapist, and the ongoing reflection constituent of the process of professional growth that is essential to be a therapist. While this vignette is from late 2018, I have been engaged and involved in competitive atmospheres since 2014, long before I

considered beginning the process of becoming a therapist. Training to become a therapist evaluates one's ability to use experiences reflexively in a manner that would permit the trainee to think about how they feel, and how they affect others. Rogers identified this need in the concept of congruence, knowing one's own emotional state and being able to be in contact with it, in order to offer the self in genuine relationship to the client (1992). Psychodynamic theorists have articulated this process in the transference/counter-transference model, as the therapist's ability to work with and identify their own feelings and emotions enables them to consider the projections that might develop in the transferential relationship with clients. By the time I undertook my training as a therapist, I was already an engaged competitive *Magic* player and working with similar processes of self-evaluation and reflection - and I believe that this is no small coincidence. I had already adopted this reflexive model for self-improvement, which made the transition to using reflexivity in my relational work natural. This continues to be a feature of my growth as a therapist; thinking about interventions with clients, considering one's rationales, and reflecting on whether I am acting in service to the client's needs. In this sense, some of the features of this loss processing activity in *Magic* draws parallels to Casement's internal supervisor (1985); it is a way of stepping away from the self internally, considering fundamental theories and the perspective of the other, and taking learning away from that experience for the self.

While this experience is valuable, for it to be relevant to the work at hand about games and applicable to further study, I want to link it explicitly to the cultural understanding of being a competitive *Magic* player, and demonstrate that this isn't a process that is only localized within myself. Part of my loss expressed in the vignette is working with framing oneself and one's performance relative to outcomes. As I put it: 'Sometimes you do everything right and make all the correct decisions - and you still lose.' This is a common phrase amongst *Magic* competitors (Handy 2019), and some speculate it originates from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Captain Jean Luc Picard when he stated: "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness. That is life" (Kemper & Scheerer 1989). While it is nigh impossible to trace an exact etymology, it is likely the *Magic* competitive community took it from concepts in sports psychology, pop-psychology and other philosophies of competition, using it as part of a discourse using 'process oriented' vs. 'results oriented' conceptions of performance.

‘Process driven’ approaches are ones in which a competitor focuses on the practice of an activity as an on-going, internal process of development, as opposed to a ‘results driven’ approach, in which the priority of one’s practice is to demonstrate and create tangible, externally recognizable. Pro-players write extensively on process driven approaches in-game (Duke 2018; Owen 2014; Sutcliffe & Loucks 2015) and outside the game (Braun-Duin 2018; Stark 2018). Results-driven approaches often are described critically as unsustainable, a “demon” on your back moving one closer to being “out of sanity” (Fournier 2018). Sports psychologist Will Jonathan writes extensively about this both in articles (2018) and in his book specifically about *Magic* (2017). Even I have been commissioned to write articles on process driven competitive approaches, considering internal growth above external results as a cornerstone of competitive play (Hauser 2018). Clearly, this concept is both taught and accepted in the competitive culture of *Magic*: focusing too much on outcomes as a means to measure oneself as a player is acknowledged as something that both stunts growth as a player, and contributes to burn-out and inadaptability when encountering opportunities for growth.

This process-driven approach is clear when I speak about the ‘ritual’ that takes place after every tournament, that one ‘[C]an’t let a loss just be a loss. You need to learn from it.’ Grant’s advice to me references this too - losing as a necessary aspect of becoming competent - and I acknowledge that, ‘You’re never done’ with this part of the game; it is ‘all part of the process’ of improvement and growth. This process is worked relationally with my teammates; the difficulty of learning from this experience is made more tolerable by exploring it with Dani, by the evaluations of Stephen, and an empathic acknowledgement of each other’s struggle with the loss.

However, each of these developments are framed very closely to the game itself, and what is happening in or around the game. If we are to think of this as a reality-testing project, it should bear some consequence in how one interacts as an individual in other spaces To delineate clearly this connection, I wish to refer to one of the experiences I cited in chapter 5 as indicative of the potentially therapeutic nature of *Magic*:

> *Magic* is the game I’ve found [to be] the closest approximation to how life works, generally… You can play well, better than the person across from you and still lose. Because of this, the focus can’t be the outcome… The mental and emotional energy

> should instead be spent on the process. 'Should I have chump-blocked a turn earlier?' and 'Am I being decent to the people around me?' are very different questions, the process behind answering both honestly requires thoughtfulness, honesty, and clarity. I think I've gotten better about answering questions like the latter because of the amount of energy I spent thinking about the former. (Patrick Sullivan in Wolff 2017)

Sullivan draws clear parallels between processes learned in game applying outside of the game. The article of origin offers a vast array of accounts in players sharing the experience of *Magic* impacting how they are in the world. Some of these changes are ones we might be less concerned with in the scope of this work, but others certainly fill the third criteria of our definition of therapeutic, such as improvements in confidence, working with difference, reflecting on bereavement, forming an identity and understanding of self. While I do not wish to write too extensively into these accounts, as outcomes have been covered at length in chapter 5, it is crucial that these accounts draw a link between a way of being in *Magic* becoming integrated into how they exist in the world.

These outcomes, mine and those of others, map to the offered definition of therapeutic affect. This process-oriented way of being inherently is one that promotes reflection, meeting criterion 1. The propagation of this discourse in articles insists that one think about the game, what they want from it and in it, and how to make meaning from experiences, satisfying criterion 2; and this reflection is done in the service of creating changes that the individual deems desirable, fulfilling criterion 3. These elements have integrated into my way of being in the world - for coping with loss in my own life, improving myself in other practices, and accepting that sometimes undesirable things will happen that I am not culpable to. This demonstrates that part of the way in which therapeutic affect manifests through *Magic* is by gameplay's reality-testing nature. Finally, the experiences shared by others of personal development corroborate this, showing that playing *Magic* permits reality-testing to happen, and this reality-testing enables therapeutic affect.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This thesis has explored how or in what ways therapeutic affect may be generated by the process of playing *Magic: the Gathering*. This thesis was intended to be exploratory work for whether there should be further research into this field. My hope was that, if I was able to demonstrate how games could convey therapeutic affect, by both working with my own experiences and those of other players contained in the cultural artefacts created in the *Magic* community, then this would determine whether further research into field would be fruitful. I have approached this line of inquiry from an ethnographic position, opting to scrutinize a single case of a game, *Magic: the Gathering*, by considering it as an entity with a culture, and considering how that culture may enable therapeutic affect to occur for adults. This concluding section will seek to link the ideas of these chapters together to offer a concise explanation of this thesis' findings.

What, then, are the findings of the work presented? I have outlined in this case study the existence of a narrative of therapeutic affect as part of the culture of the game, as well as traced a route of how elements of game design and community culture can generate therapeutic affect. I believe my inquiry has contributed to the field of how one can approach research into the 'therapeutic' outside the counselling room. In chapter 2, I offered a three-pronged definition for what constitutes something that is therapeutic that is not therapy, based on a dialogical understanding of person-centred and psychodynamic counselling theories of change. This knowledge claim to therapeutic affect progresses how researchers can consider other, non-therapy activities as potentially generating therapeutic affect. This could act as a starting point for further research into traditional games, and inform research with the guidance of a 'litmus test' by which one may use to frame discussions of 'therapeutic affect', which at times can seem nebulous or ill-defined in other works.

Chapter 6, 7 and 8 explored *how* or *in what* playing *Magic* can create therapeutic affect through its culture of gameplay and community. I have shown how design and institutional elements of gameplay impact the cultural discourses and experiences held within the *Magic* community, and how they facilitate therapeutic affect through processes corresponding to existing models of therapeutic change. Most notable of these findings is the containing features that *Magic*, as a game and

community, offers players in the formulation of the reality-testing nature of game-play rather than maintaining the split between the 'real' world and the 'fantasy' of games. The incorporation of psychodynamic and person-centred theory elements, while present in other fields, is absent in the developing field of games, traditional or otherwise. My work has demonstrated that theories of the mind have a place in understanding the importance of humanity's relationship with games. My approach has challenged mainstream discourses commonly held about games, and has attempted to outline a coherent process by which we might think of therapeutic affect arising within games. This is but a first attempt at such a project, and I expect that further research will grow this base of knowledge - though I doubt there will be any ubiquitous grand theory about how therapeutic affect is generated in all cases and for each individual. Hopefully, this thesis constitutes the first of many efforts in continuing to develop and nuance our conception of games and their importance in our experience of the world.

In terms of furthering the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, from the beginning of this work I have acknowledged the popularity and widespread nature of traditional games, and how this industry is in a stage of growth. This in turn means that as time goes on more of our adult clients will be 'gamers', or play games. A recurring theme throughout this work has been the invitation for the reader to enter *Magic*'s world, as a practitioner ideally enters their clients' worlds. I hope this work has been a gateway by which practitioners understand their client's interaction with game-play, and assists in conceiving of the impact game-play can have on a client's life. Many of the concepts I have applied to *Magic* are ones that are frequently a part of the work and analysis of psychotherapy. I have demonstrated clearly how the interactions that happen in the games our clients play may be part of a client's process of experimentation towards self-understanding, acceptance, or relief from psychic distress. These are only a few examples of how we may consider our clients' experiences of gaming, and hopefully the methods used in this work opens practitioners understanding of such habits, guiding reflections and thoughts that could potentially be offered back to clients in a way that may assist in the work of therapy.

Regarding my own research journey, I have developed a new understanding and relationship with the research process and what it entails, but also am aware of the narrative I started this work with as compared to where I am now. I have been

struck by the degree of creative and personal input that has become a part of this work, and likewise the demands that research can have on an insider researcher – particularly if they offer their own experiences as data. My work has necessarily been entwined with my sense of self and lingering consideration of the validity of my experiences as evidence of therapeutic affect as I present them the reader; this consideration through the writing process has at times been a difficult one to hold. I do not, however, feel adrift in a world of uncertainty like I did in my introductory vignette – and I am not sure I would have been able to do personal research like this without the self-awareness and containment playing *Magic* and being a part of the *Magic* community has offered me. That said, if I were to do similar work in future, I think it would be crucial that I reflect on the personal costs that an undertaking like this can have, and whether that pain and sacrifice is worth the undertaking, considering the uncertainty of the final product and what it might do going forward. Furthermore, I would encourage others to be more patient in the process of uncovering and writing personal narratives in research; it is the nature that the work of a thesis is time constrained, but I feel that this can come with great personal cost if the researcher is personally involved and offering themselves in its formulation. In this case, I believe my research has demonstrated how narratives from within a community can not only invite the reader in, but can be a critical part of the knowledge generation process – that the themes and stories that community insiders find important can also be relevant to the furthering of field of counselling and psychotherapy, but I am aware not all research so personally involved yields results such as mine.

That said, I am aware my methods had limitations in terms of its capacity to generalize knowledge claims and to outline specific forms of intervention to be carried forward. For this research to be useful then, it needs to form foundations for those who would carry on work in this field, and approach traditional games with these outcomes in mind. This brings us to a final point of consideration: where does further research go from here? I contend that more research needs to be done to further understand how therapeutic affect develops through gameplay, and what this means for therapeutic intervention and inquiry. I approached this research from an onto-epistemic position of social realism to be applicable to later approaches of varied disciplines and theoretical frameworks. Likewise, I will describe what I hope to see in future research generally in qualitative and quantitative research approaches compatible with a number of different onto-epistemic positions.

Hopefully, this may get us closer to knowing more about the therapeutic effects of playing games for adults.

From a general study point of view, what I would like to see is an inspection of other cases or types of traditional games. My research has focused on a singular game, *Magic: the Gathering*, but the number of traditional games that exist is vast. This is not to say there isn't more work to be done with *Magic*, but that expanding our knowledge base about games will be necessary going forward. I believe it would be valuable for other case studies to be conducted on other traditional games to explore whether similar cultures and structures exist that create similar outcomes and processes of therapeutic affect for players. Of special interest would be inquiries into other types of traditional games. *Magic* is a card game, but I have largely ignored board and role-playing games due to the limitations of breadth in this work. It would be valuable to consider how these games might be different culturally, and to inspect whether these games also proffer therapeutic affect to players. By inspecting both different types of games, and different particular cases, my hope is that certain themes or consistencies would become apparent, which might elucidate the nature of therapeutic affect developing through game-play.

Although quantitative inquiry is admittedly not my field of expertise, I do have some recommendations for inquiries into games and therapeutic affect from this approach. A first step in the right direction would be to look at relevant populations. This work specifically worked to understand the adult experiences of playing games, and came up with promising preliminary results. Quantitative work needs to look further into this, even if it is simply applying similar quantitative measures that have been used in previous studies on children and adolescents. I would also be curious to see if there is some sort of study that could be formulated that works to consider therapeutic affect, or specific emotional responses that are a part of the game-play experience, rather than logistic or diagnostic outcomes. In line with Douglas and Carless work, it believe it would be fruitful to focus on experiences that are of pressing interest to the population of a study, rather than working from a model that prescribes positive or negative outcomes, as in the biomedical model. In chapter 5, I demonstrated that many of the narratives of therapeutic affect, while similar thematically, can be very different by relating to specific personal outcomes for players; I believe it would be valuable to formulate further quantitative study in this field with that aspect in mind.

From a qualitative position, I would like to see more of a focus on the particular and the individuals who play games. Much of this work has been me considering the game from a cultural and discursive position, using own experiences, as well as the documented cultural artefacts that have been disseminated on *Magic* from a wide swath of players. In this sense, I have used my position as therapist, researcher and player to observe, interpret, and finally translate what *I* sense is going on from the language of *Magic* into that of counselling and psychotherapy. Future research would do well to consider how the players themselves think of these experiences when faced with these concepts, and how they think therapeutic affect has or has not developed for them, perhaps through methods such as interviews. Interviews and other relational inquiry methods are not only in-line with the ethos of counselling and psychotherapy as a practice but could lead to insightful connections which could help to bridge the field of psychotherapy and the world of games. I hope that this work has offered a contextual basis for justification for those studies, so that this research can be conducted in future without fear of its relevance being lost in its particularity.

As a final point, I wish to briefly consider an approach or outcome that may be considered in framing further research. If there is a compelling development in this field of demonstrating that therapeutic affect is generated consistently in the act of game-play, then I believe it is necessary further inquiry will need to be done to consider how counselling and psychotherapy can change or adapt as a practice to incorporate aspects of game-play. While previous attempts have been made to develop interventions that incorporated the use of games, most of these have sought to utilize very didactic or directive approaches in the games themselves and, as I stated before, seemed to push too quickly for development without having a firm basis of empirical research. It may seem somewhat distant, but I believe the development, or at least investigation, of a non-directive use of games in the counselling room would be worthwhile as a long-term research consideration, and could take a number of different forms ranging from 1:1 counselling, group work, or even community interventions.

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Appendix I – Personal Journaling Field Note Examples

Taken from an excerpt in my field notes when travelling to the World Magic Cup, this is meant to be indicative of some of the personal reflection done in field notes as a player of the game that was at time constitutive of some of my field notes. Generally, these types of notes were not set to specific tasks, but freely associated, in order to spontaneously observe and consider themes for later analysis. The following entry, for example, was considered alongside other works under the themes 'identity', 'teammates', 'transition', and 'goal achievement'.

December 13th, 2019

This time it feels different. I get to the airport in the twilit hours of a new day. It is not quite tomorrow, and it is not quite yesterday. It feels like this inbetween space is important - I am in an inbetween. Inbetween places. Inbetween results. Inbetween pro. As I lodged my luggage in the check and made my way through the check in, shuffling along in queues, I was lost in thought. I still am. My ears are taking me to somewhere else as I listen to Phoenix' *Ti Amo*. Wrong language, but right feeling.

I feel anxious. Not in an impinging way - it reminds me of when I took my first flight to Scotland. It was early then too. I knew I wouldn't be coming home when I returned to Los Angeles. Atleast, home would be different, it would change. I would belong somewhere else and be a part of something that I didn't quite know yet. There was expectation, and fear, but also excitement - I wanted to get the fuck out. I wanted to leave. I had my brother with me, ferrying me across the ocean and into a new place. He knew where he was going. If anything got too fucked, I could always follow him.

For months I've been thinking about this tournament. This is the first tournament that *I* have been *invited* to. Im sitting in the 'Spoons in Edinburgh airport like I always do, and it is packed. It never sleeps. Most of the time I've been here with teammates. Trusted companions. If anything got too fucked, It'd be with them, and I led those times quite often. I am aware of my aloneness now. They were not invited. I am representing them, but they are not present with me. They do not keep me company or comfort me. They are riding in the back of my skull, but they don't know it. And when I return from this trip the team will be no more as well. An ending is happening. A transition is rolling on, and I don't know where to.

The electronic sounds in my ears made me feel for a moment that I was sauntering towards leaving entirely. That I was not getting on a plane to another country, to a tournament grounded on earth, the *World* Magic Cup, but I had a phantasy that I would be slingshotted into the great blackness of space later. I imagined the 80's and 90's styling of spacefaring anime, the transit centres ina usually dystopian place where earth had already ceased to exist as we know it - hell, often times the people who lived there were thought of as pitiful, unfortunate creatures left behind in the wake of a hellscape of our own design. And I am leaving, but theres still fear. I have only known the earthly. What if I don't like what I find out there?

I keep on thinking about what Dan said. I have been for the last 4 months since he said it to me. 'You know when you go up a level,' he said thoughtfully, a half-full pint in his hand and the slight foam of beer on his lip as we sat in the Cuckoo's Nest, 'When you go up a level, you always go alone. You can't bring everyone with you.

And you'll meet new folks at the level you goto - but you can't bring us with you.' I despised that he said that. I didn't know how I could continue without the team, without all of those people that have supported and followed me. Who have improved me, and became close to me. People who have become my most meaningful connections. How can they not go with me? How can they leave me to continue this fight without them?

Of course, they haven't. They're still here. I still think of them, often. Even the people who left. The team is ending in a week. It feels hollow, a slow consumptive death as I have had to ramp up more and more, and get ready for this trajectory towards the outside realm, while the others have slowly tailed off, found other paths that they want to pursue. A team of 11 dwindled to 9, to 8, to 6, and now we are 5. When I left to Scotland I went because I felt like I had realized what Los Angeles was, and I wanted to be a part of it no-longer. The goodness was long gone for me, and I took my chance to cut and run. But now it feels like everyone else is leaving me. It is making this game gray to me, and burdensome. I was with Dan last night too, in the Dreadnought, and I wished that he was on my World Magic Cup team instead of the others who have been constantly harrying and troubling me with their disorganized bullshit and power trips. If I am entering a new level, a new space, I fear that I might be left with no one to trust up here, that I might never have a team again and that I have to rely on myself.

But there is another anxiety too - what if it is good, but I don't have what it takes. What if I take up the mantle and fight on and on, and eventually lose a slow struggle with this game. This is a big break. This is a chance. We could make something of this - I could even get that protour qualification I've been wanting for so long. The clarity of knowing that I can be good at something, *anything*. I was thinking about what Willy Jensen was saying in response to that sport science cunt on Twitter who was advocating for not personally identifying too closely with *Magic* as it leads to 'unhealthy behaviours'. Willy, of course, states plainly, 'Actually, I am a Magic Player. That is who I am. And I wouldn't be doing this with my life if I didn't identify myself that way.' I wondered for a moment who I was - if I was looking for that same clarity of purpose, that same identity. Something I could put my flag in and say, 'This is me. Look at me. See who I am.' And part of that requires shooting off into this unknown place.

I don't know if I will crash and burn. I could punt this entire tournament - hell we've had enough deck changes in the last 3 days, and Im playing a deck tomorrow that I've never piloted in my life as of now. What does it mean if I fail? What if I am a magic player who never was?