

Introduction

This pilot project explores **tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs)**, particularly **Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)**, with **neurodiverse people**. Using an **ethnographic approach**, it combines direct observations and semi-structured interviews to understand how autistic and neurodivergent players engage with the game. The project also seeks to challenge **neurotypical assumptions** about role-playing games and their communities.

A further aim is to highlight fruitful areas for future research, shaping a larger funded study into the educational and therapeutic potential of TTRPGs. Findings show how role-play can support **creativity, communication, and confidence** in inclusive gaming spaces.

D&D was chosen as one of the worlds most popular role-playing games since 1974. Its **Players Handbook** provides structured rules for creating characters, while gameplay offers limitless scenarios and freedom of choice. This balance of structure and creativity makes **D&D** an ideal lens to study how neurodivergent people connect, strategize, and thrive.

Results

Inclusivity & Welcoming Atmosphere

- Player's patient and eager to explain rules (without frustration)
- Safe space for newcomers → mistakes seen as part of play
- Encouragement from players and DM quickly removed self-consciousness
- Reinforced: no single "correct" way to play

Fun, Laughter, & Creativity

- Constant laughter, joking, and collaboration observed
- Group invented "Boulder, Parchment, Shears" for decision-making
- Chanting together during tense dice rolls
- Nostalgic conversations and shared humour strengthened bonds

Memorable Encounters

- 15-year-old enthusiast felt confident to ask about joining
- Venue hosts and players warmly supportive
- Interaction highlighted inclusive, community-driven culture
- Players reflected positively afterwards, valuing the exchange

Escape & Wellbeing

- D&D described as an "escape" from real-world anxieties
- Consequences limited to the game world → creative freedom
- Players felt free to be collaborative, imaginative, and authentic selves
- Roleplay fostered a sense of safety and belonging

Abbreviations Key

TTRPGs – Table-Top Role Playing Games
 D&D – Dungeons and Dragons
 DM – Dungeon Master

NPC – Non-Player Character
 ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
 ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder



Timeline of Events

1. Qualitative Readings

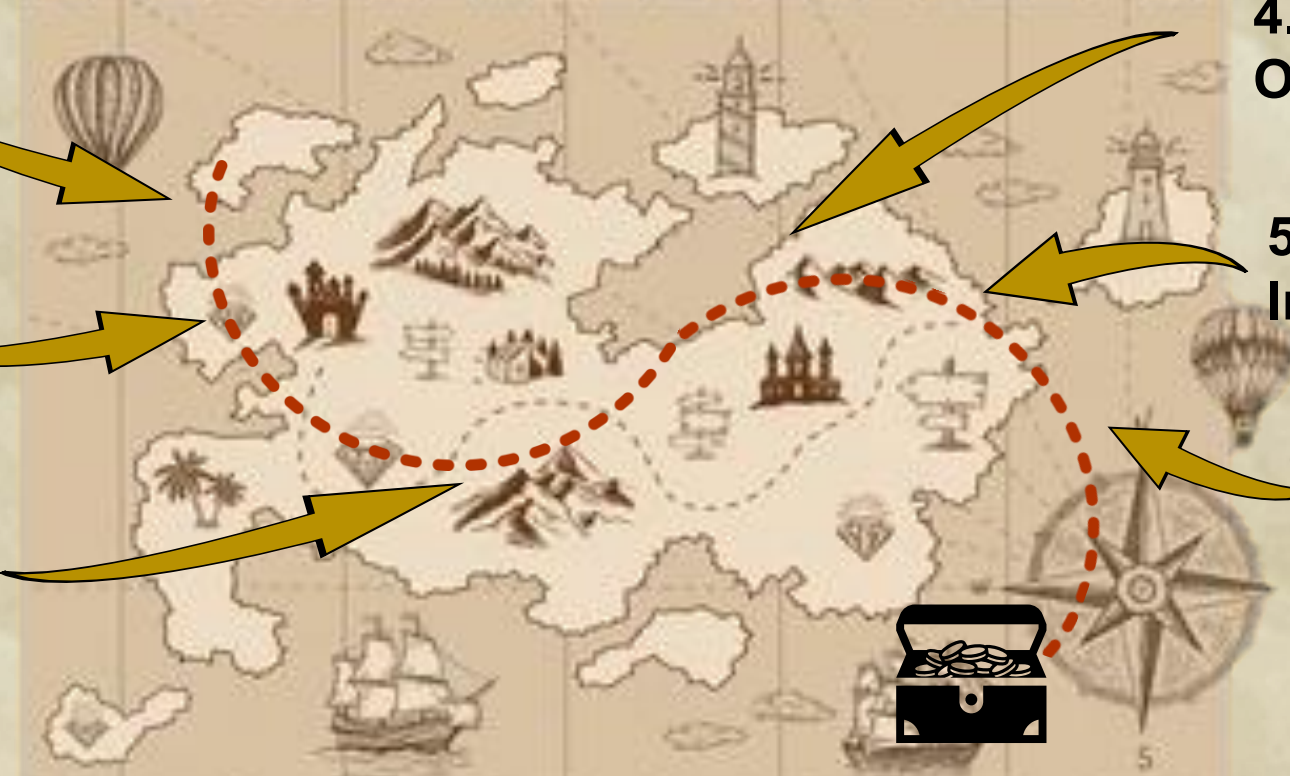
2. Venue Visit & Documents

3. Q&A session at 'Up A Level' in York

4. Game 1 & Observation

5. Ethnographic Interviews

6. Game 2 & Observation



Methodology

Interviews: Four participants took part in interviews, three in person at *Up A Level* and one via written responses. Twelve questions, designed with my supervisors, explored **experiences of TTRPGs, community dynamics, and their impact on wellbeing**. Each interview lasted 15/20 minutes and was semi-structured, allowing space for follow-up questions. Participants were reminded they could skip questions or withdraw within seven days. Recordings were transcribed and deleted the following week.

Observations: **Ethnographic** observations were made over two *Dungeons & Dragons* games at *Up A Level*. A short "two-shot" campaign was run with three participants and a DM, with me joining as a fourth player while also observing. Notes were recorded on a prepared template, focusing on body language, group dynamics, and **signs of enjoyment** (by far the most frequent category). These were later typed up and reflected upon, including consideration of the impact of my dual role as both player and observer.

Quotes & Findings

Reasons for positive impact on wellbeing:

- "TTRPGs give people an escape... personally for me, it is a **way of recharging**. My wellbeing's a lot better when I can do it."
- "I've made new **friends** through it. It's fantastic."
- "It's **creatively expressive**... socially, it's massively helpful."

Game Therapy UK Perspective:

We interviewed an educator and volunteer at the charity Game Therapy UK; here were some of his thoughts on the therapeutic power of role-play:

"Helping children **find a voice**, even if it is behind this mask of a character ... as long as they are engaged and everyone has had a **chance to shine**."

"It worked so well that students started **attending school** when they weren't before... we **recognised there is a therapeutic aspect to this**."

Interview Results Poll



Challenges

One major challenge was moving from my chemistry background into my first **qualitative** project. I had little experience with **ethnographic methods**, so I relied on reading and discussions with supervisors to develop the skills I needed. Though demanding, my scientific background gave me a structured perspective on observation and analysis that strengthened my approach.

Another hurdle was the unpredictability of game sessions. On one occasion, a session was cancelled while I was already en route to the venue. Instead of losing the opportunity, I adapted with the support of supervisors and hosts, running an **informal Q&A** that built trust, answered questions, and helped me integrate further into the community.

These challenges taught me the value of flexibility, resourcefulness, and collaboration—qualities that became central to the research and to my personal growth as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Observer Self-Reflection

I chose to play a **half-orc cleric, G rondar Stillblade**, a simple but supportive role focused on healing and protecting the group. This clearly separated my own voice from my characters and gave me space to **explore roleplay** without worrying about complex mechanics.

Though I had some roleplaying experience, I shaped my approach on the balance of personalities at the table and online games I had watched. My key takeaway was that **collaboration** is central aim of D&D: success coming not only from completing objectives, but also from roleplay, humour, and contributing with a lighthearted attitude that supports others play.

The Impact of TTRPG's as a Safe Setting for Exploration:

- "D&D is a **safe space for expression** because it's **storytelling**... In a D&D game, there is **no real-world consequence**. You can take risks because the risk is purely in the game."
- "For people who are not very social, there can be a **lot of social anxiety**, in a D&D game you can take it slow and it's not a problem."
- "You can give people an understanding that there is **no wrong answer**, if your character is highly strung and says something rude. They can say that there would be in-game consequences, but there isn't going to be real world consequences for that. **And that is the safety**."

Conclusions

This pilot project shows that **TTRPGs** such as *Dungeons & Dragons* foster **safe, creative, and inclusive spaces** where players can thrive. The culture of play observed was one of **patience and laughter**, with community members supporting one another and welcoming newcomers. Interview findings strongly underline these observations: with every participant reporting TTRPGs had a **positive impact on their wellbeing**, including benefits such as **friendship, confidence, and creative expression**. Observations of game sessions confirmed that role-play encourages both **verbal and non-verbal communication**, while shared humour and teamwork created a strong sense of belonging.

These insights highlight TTRPGs potential for supporting **wellbeing and community**, especially in neurodiverse groups. The interest shown by **Game Therapy UK** in publishing these findings, paired with the opportunity for larger-scale studies, promises to deepen our understanding of how role-playing games can be used to their full potential as **tools for inclusion, therapy, and education**.