


Autistic Social Advocacy as Accessibility in TRPGs

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Abstract

The realm of tabletop role-playing gaming has been a popular hobby for autistics of all ages and backgrounds for decades. Many autistics utilize role-playing games not just as a hobby but as a means of social connection and community building. Given tabletop role-playing game's alignment with autistic populations, it is not a surprise that throughout the years, therapists and social skills coaches that specialize in treating autistics have looked to tabletop role-playing games as a therapeutic modality to teach social skills to autistic youth and adults. However, special attention must be paid to the fact that at a fundamental level, the social skills that autistics need to flourish in their own autistic-centered communities do not necessarily align with the traditional social skills that are taught in generic non-autistic (allistic) social skills curricula. As such, this paper argues that within the case of autistic social skills groups that utilize TRPGs as an educational medium, a whole new set of autistic social advocacy skills can be taught. This allows autistics to flourish in their own communities as well as allistic ones.

Keywords: Autism, Social Skills, Accessibility, TRPG



要約

卓上ロールプレイングゲーム (TRPG) の領域は、何十年にもわたり、あらゆる年齢層や背景を持つ自閉者にとって人気の趣味である。多くの自閉者は、ロールプレイングゲームを単なる趣味としてではなく、社会的なつながりやコミュニティの構築手段として活用している。TRPG が自閉者と密接に関連していることを考慮すれば、これまでの年月にわたり、自閉者の治療を専門とするセラピストや社会的スキルコーチが、TRPG を自閉者の若者や成人に社会的スキルを教えるための治療的手段として活用してきたことは驚くべきことではない。しかし、特に注意を払うべきは、基本的なレベルにおいて、自閉者が自閉症中心のコミュニティで成功するために必要な社会的スキルは、伝統的な非自閉症者 (アリスティック) の社会的スキルカリキュラムで教えられる一般的な社会的スキルとは必ずしも一致しないという事実である。したがって、本論文は、教育的媒体として TRPG を利用する自閉者の社会的スキルグループにおいて、全く新しい自閉者の社会的アドボカシースキルを教えることができると主張する。このことにより、自閉者は自身のコミュニティだけでなく、アリスティックなコミュニティでも成功することが可能になるのである。

キーワード: 自閉症, 社会的スキル, アクセシビリティ, TRPG

1. Background

The use of role-playing games (RPGs) for applied therapeutic and educational purposes has existed for a long time. Since 1994, therapists and specialists utilizing tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) to teach autistic individuals neurotypical social skills (Blackmon 1994). For the purposes of this paper,

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“neurotypical” refers to individuals whose brain functioning falls within typical parameters and who do not have intellectual or developmental disabilities.

However, in most cases, these treatments are presented as social skills groups and similar therapies, which exist in a framework that adheres often to the medical model of disability. The medical model of disability is part of a larger discussion of how disability exists within culture. It refers to the idea that disability is akin to a disease, and that the focus should be on treatment by clinicians who very often do not have lived experience of that disability in question, rather than inclusion and building accessibility (Buder and Perry 2023). In the social skills education space, traits traditionally associated with autism are seen as deficient, and many expectations around social norms are behaviors that autistics¹ typically struggle with—such as eye contact, engaging in small talk, and perspective taking. Adapting behaviors to conform to neurotypical standards of social behavior is known as masking or hiding one’s autistic traits to appear more neurotypical (Raymaker 2022). This is generally exhausting for autistics and can lead to masking burnout. In many cultures, eye contact may not hold the same importance for communication as it does in the United States, but for the purposes of this paper and many of the social skills groups discussed, it is a fundamental skill that is frequently challenging for autistics.

In this medical model, autistic traits are generally meant to be diminished, and neurotypical traits are meant to be increased. The goal of social skills groups is to build generic neurotypical social skills needed to survive in a dominant neurotypical American culture while also being a fun escape for the participants of these groups. These skills can help individuals fit into social situations, succeed in neurotypical normative job situations or school, and communicate effectively with neurotypical people (Katō 2019). These group goals may fit into more generic and generally useful skills, such as building healthy frustration tolerance (using dice rolls to create unpredictable situations) or developing teamwork skills (via situations in game that require clear communication and planning). However, programs that use the medical model of disability often promote neurotypical normative traits such as eye contact, sitting quietly, and not stimming (Brunell and Brunell 2023). This perspective assumes that social skills only exist within the neurotypical framework, and that social behaviors outside of the non-autistic (allistic) behavioral norm are inherently abnormal and should be fixed.

In the United States, common social skills taught include reciprocal communication, eye contact, appropriate conversational topics, and socially accepted facial expressions. *Game to Grow*, a Seattle based company, has successfully used TRPGs to teach thousands of teens these social skills and has developed training courses for aspiring therapeutic and applied game masters (Pitt et al. 2023). Similar organizations, such as the *Bodhana Group* and *Geek Therapeutics*, offer “Therapeutic Game Master” certifications. Utilizing TRPGs on a therapeutic and social skills front has come into vogue.

The medical model of disability contrasts sharply with the social model of disability. Although the medical model states that disability is a diagnosed disorder, the social model sees it as a form of naturally occurring human diversity (Craine 2023). Therefore, many of the things that create disability are socially constructed by a society designed for the non-disabled. The term neurodiversity builds on this idea, positing that neurodivergence is a form of naturally occurring neurological diversity, or neurodiversity (Craine 2023).

The social model of disability, in this context, argues that while neurotypical social skills may help autistics survive in a neurotypical world, autism as a form of neurodiversity requires its own set of skills for self-advocacy (Leadbitter et al. 2021). These autistic social advocacy skills require questioning the norms of neurotypical social skills and looking more frankly at the social skills required to flourish as a non-masking autistic engaging with other unmasked peers. To survive as an autistic in a neurotypical world, neurotypical social skills and masking are important for things like career success, but autistic advocacy is required as a social skill to help build a more accommodating and neurodiversity-affirming

¹ The use of identity first language will be used exclusively in this paper when talking about autistic individuals, as in the experiences of this author and his personal preference, this is the preferred language, with autistic individuals and autistics being used interchangeably.

world. There has been some effort to develop this field of autistic social skills, such as the five autistic love languages outlined by Stimpunks (Boren 2022), although none of them specifically address advocacy.

2. Developing Autistic Social Advocacy Through TTRPGs and Community Building

Over the past decade, I have been running social skills TRPG groups with *Aspiring Youth*, a Seattle-based organization. My work focuses exclusively on teens, with special interest groups such as *Minecraft* (2011), *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), and designing and testing prototype role playing games. One such campaign has continued for the entirety of my work in this field, and in this group I have served countless autistic teens in developing social skills.

In my early years, behavioral support was a big focus, targeting goals such as raising hands, minimizing disruptions, and avoiding phone use during sessions (Katō 2019). However, during the COVID-19 crisis our group transitioned to a digital format using Discord, a popular gaming chat app.² The participants had a means to play virtually and engage outside of the game. Over time, I noticed a significant increase in peer advocacy, and other emergent skills (Katō 2019). Students would regularly advocate for their needs, navigate each other's neurodiversity and access needs, and bond over their shared experiences with autism. Throughout this time, six distinct autistic social advocacy skills, emerged.

1 Self and peer advocacy: Students demonstrate the ability to advocate for their own access and support needs, while also helping others do the same. This might include things like highlighting the need for ear protection, asking that the lights be turned down, or realizing another student is struggling and helping them advocate for their needs.

2 Safety: Students are able to identify their own safety needs and communicate them effectively. For instance, they might describe specific triggers, highlight safety needs, or know when to step away from a potentially unsafe situation.

3 Navigating access needs: Learning how to compromise, set healthy boundaries, and discuss work-arounds without an adult explicitly facilitating navigation of different or conflicting access needs is critical. The most common manifestation of this is when one student gets very loud when he is excited, and he is sitting near a student who requires low volume.

4 Autistic normalization: Students normalize their own and peers' autistic traits. This may look like accepting another's stimming as normal, or acknowledging that another player's character sheet may have gaps or differences due to challenges with written language, and not criticizing it.

5 Autistic joy: Beyond normalization, this involves finding joy in specific enjoyable aspects of the autistic experience. For example, students might take pleasure in shared interests or celebrate the unique traits of others.

6 Contextualizing/Bonding over autistic traits: Students find common ground in shared autistic experience, creating opportunities to bond. A common example is sharing favorite stim toys, or identifying when someone is infodumping, talking at length about a special interest, or stimming and celebrating it as such.

As COVID-19 protocols eased, the Discord server remained integral to our group dynamics. The six autistic social advocacy skills that emerged during this period became increasingly evident as the students supported each other not only during game play but also in daily life situations. Because of this space where they could practice these skills, friendships developed that allowed them a greater deal of peer support during times of stress, as well as opportunities to support each other in ways that were not tied to typical neurotypical social opportunities. Examples of this included students helping each other with school work, writing guides on interacting with neurotypicals, and offering mutual support in times of conflict and stress.

A key aspect to this development was the inclusion of autistic facilitators. Central to the autistic self-advocacy movement is the principle "Nothing about us without us" (ASAN 2022). The movement

² Discord website: <https://discord.com/> (accessed 2024/10/10).

highlights the lived experiences of autistics in informing effective autism treatment and support. Both the author of this paper, the second facilitator, and the original game master who brought the author on board are all autistic. The current co-facilitator, a former group participant, leverages her lived experiences with autism self-advocacy and allows a significant degree of comfort for the teens, as she can act as a highly authentic peer counselor in her role. The author, having successfully built friendships with other autistics through gaming as well, exemplifies these advocacy and social skills.

3. The Importance of Table Management for Development of Autistic Social Skills

A critical component to effective facilitation of these skills is to look at the art of skillful facilitation as the milieu for developing the autistic social-advocacy skills, while looking at the table as a means for developing a sense of playful masking. Traditionally, masking refers to presenting as neurotypical in day-to-day life, but RPGs create an opportunity for the mask to be removed from one's personal identity and instead attributed to a fictional character. Instead of learning things like eye contact and small talk to succeed in a customer service job or in school, these skills are reframed as things that a talkative bard or a formidable barbarian might do, backed up by narrative and game mechanics as a motivating factor. Learning to make eye contact to succeed in school carries elements of shame and a feeling of fundamental deficit, but using it to intimidate a guard in a fantasy game is an engaging, less personal challenge. By sandboxing masking as a component of role-playing, it becomes an improvisational, playful act rather than a normative expectation. At the table, autism is embraced as the norm, and becomes a place where learning how to interact with other autistics in an autism-centered way is built.

Recently, I sought feedback on what made the groups work well. Students appreciated the normalization of autistic traits within the group, with one male student enthusiastically stating, "Maximum autism! I love that everyone here is autistic, and we can talk about our special interests without feeling bad!" Another female student contrasted this experience with more traditional therapeutic settings, saying, "This isn't like other groups where you force us to be vulnerable. I've had so many groups where they force us to talk about deep personal stuff that I just make stuff up because I don't want to share with strangers. But this group, you don't force anything, and I can be vulnerable when I'm ready." A male student stated, "You are the most reasonable adult I know. This group has made me feel like I have friends and am normal, instead of treating me like I'm in a medical treatment."

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Tabletop role-playing games are likely to remain a beloved hobby among autistics. Practitioners using TRPGs to promote social skills must ensure that these games reflect authentic autistic social flourishing. If applied solely to teach neurotypical normative autistic social skills, TRPGs risk becoming an activity that views autism as a disorder rather than a valid form of diversity, ultimately harming participants' experience with a popular autistic hobby. With the framework presented here, the focus on including autistic facilitators, reframing masking as a playful activity, and building autistic advocacy skills, organizations hoping to utilize TRPGs as a means to teach social skills can reflect on how they can reframe their programs and retool them to promote the social model of disability. Doing so creates a space where these applied groups build towards better accessibility in social skills training, where autistic social behaviors are celebrated and encouraged, rather than neglected and ignored.

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