



THE CASE FOR CHAOS: LEVERAGING CONTINGENCY IN TASKMASTER AND IN MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

This essay seeks to examine how tactics wrought in contingency can offer a novel approach to understanding indeterminacy as a resource, rather than a burden. It uses the show *Taskmaster* to identify exaggerated examples of these instances that are explicitly contended with during the show to better understand how contingency can be leveraged. From there, this paper applies the mechanisms through which contingency is leveraged and identifies analogs where mental health clinicians utilize these tactics in their treatment of clients. Clinical data was collected in completion of a master's degree disquisition through ethnographic interviews with 15 clinicians that utilize table-top role-playing games in their practices.

Keywords

contingency, indeterminacy, failure, Taskmaster, television, mental health, therapy, education, TTRPG

"Make the best picture in the sand of a former *Taskmaster* contestant using one of these implements. You must roll the dice to choose your implement. Nothing but air may touch the sand at any point. You have 10 minutes, your time starts as soon as you have rolled the dice."¹ Iain Stirling starts by rolling a four. He grabs the set of bellows that his roll assigns and begins to blow the sand around in a sandbox. Joe Thomas rolls a six and grabs the corresponding longhorn. Paul Sinha claims a small, motorized fan used for inflating air mattresses due to his two. Sian Gibson rolls a three and grabs her panpipes. Lou Sanders rolls a six, inspects her longhorn and looks at it with concern...then she rolls again. Then a third time. She continues to roll until she gets her desired two, and its corresponding motorized mattress inflator.

¹ *Taskmaster*, Series 8, Episode 8, "Aquatic Sewing Machine," featuring Iain Stirling, Lou Sanders, Joe Thomas, Sian Gibson and Paul Sinha, aired June 26, 2019, timestamp 07:43.



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The unpredictable elements that we face in our social lives, or indeterminacy, offer opportunities for developing new logics, as well as growth, transformation, and abandonment of the logics we already hold. These logics hold power over our values, decisions, actions in social life, and can be helpful when guiding behavior through productive patterns, but maladaptive when they undermine our assumptions of self-efficacy.

Clinically, a negative attributional style identifies clients that view the negative aspects of their lives as internal, stable, and global elements of their lives. That is to say that the bad things that happen to them are uniformly their fault (internal), are situationally fixed (stable), and exist regardless of the context that they occur within (global).² Self-efficacy is considered a key influence of overall mental health.³ Fundamentally, a higher sense of control over their lives offers patients better emotional and physical health outcomes. Patients with stronger senses of self-efficacy tend to be

² P. Sanjuan and A. Magallares, "A Longitudinal Study of the Negative Explanatory Style and Attributions of Uncontrollability as Predictors of Depressive Symptoms," *Personality and Individual Differences* 46 (2009): 714-718.

³ A. Bandura, "Self-Efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency," *American Psychologist* 37, no.2 (1982): 122-147.

more resilient to mental strain, and quicker to recover from illnesses that strain may lead to. Inversely, patients with negative affective style, characterized by low self-efficacy are more likely to face depression and anxiety disorders.

The following seeks to examine how tactics wrought in contingency can offer a novel approach to understanding indeterminacy as a resource, rather than a burden. It uses the show *Taskmaster* to identify exaggerated examples of these instances that are explicitly contended with during the show to better understand how contingency can be leveraged. From there, this paper applies the mechanisms through which contingency is leveraged and identifies analogs where mental health clinicians utilize these tactics in their treatment of clients. Clinical data was collected in completion of a master's degree disquisition through ethnographic interviews with 15 clinicians that utilize table-top role-playing games in their practices. These clinicians were selected through gatekeeper and snowball sampling techniques throughout the United States and Canada. Clinicians were conveniently selected across several criteria such as geography, gender, sexuality, and whether their practice was private or as part of a larger institutional framework such as the Veterans Administration, a university health system, or a large non-profit organization.

Indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is created by the unknown forces within play and practice that lead to unclear, or unpredictable outcomes. Distinct from the internal cognitive phenomenon of uncertainty, anthropologists recognize the open-endedness of social encounters as the background condition of our own inability to fully predict the future. Often this is due to cultural norms that allow for wiggle-room within social spaces -identified by Moore as normative indeterminacy that inheres where social expectations are not always uniform or explicit.⁴ Similarly, Jackson posits the indeterminate (or as he puts it, aleatory) dimension of experience as a consequence of; our 'thrownness' into circumstances not of our own making.⁵ Indeterminacy is further explored in broader social theory. Giddens suggests that contingency is ever-present in our social processes and insists on social science attention to the unintended consequence of social action.⁶ Further, McIntyre articulates the limits of predictive or positivist social science in its tendency to ignore the multiple sources of the indeterminate in human experience.⁷

Recent works by Tsing (2015)⁸ and Schnegg (2019)⁹ clearly illustrate the role that complex systems, with their richly indeterminate outcomes, play in confounding our ability to predict. Weather and ecological systems are both indeterminate driving forces for social life resulting in economic realities that could have been substantially different. Schnegg draws on meaningful accounts of such events as themselves fraught with indeterminacy following Sahlins' discussion of cultural frameworks' influence on notions of rationality and action.¹⁰ Finally, Malaby, following McIntyre, outlines a functional taxonomy that organizes thinking about indeterminacy around the sources that create the

⁴ S. F. Moore, "Chapter One: Part of the Story: A Memoir," *Comparing Impossibilities: Selected Essays of Sally Falk Moore* (Chicago, IL: Hau Books, 2016), 3-30.

⁵ M. Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁶ A. Giddens, "The Agent, Agency," *The Constitution of Society* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1984), 5-14.

⁷ A. MacIntyre, "The Character of Generalizations in the Social Sciences and Their Lack of Predictive Power," *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 89-108.

⁸ A. Tsing, "The Life in the Forest," *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 155-166.

⁹ M. Schnegg, "The Life of the Winds: Knowing the Namibian Weather from Someplace and from Noplace," *American Anthropologist* 121, no. 3 (2019): 830-844.

¹⁰ M. Sahlins, *Islands of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

unknown; seeming randomness, performativity, social guess work, and the open-endedness of meaning itself.¹¹ The discussion of indeterminacy offered here follows this tradition.

To begin with, the most easily identified driver of indeterminacy within a conventional game is stochastic. Stochastic contingency is indeterminacy created by systems that are complex enough to be mistaken for random. Clear examples of stochastic contingency are offered in the form of dice, as above, well shuffled cards, or complex algorithms that are unseen by the players of video games that create random, or seemingly random outcomes. Rolling a natural 20 on a given 20-sided die roll is just as likely as rolling a natural 14. Drawing three kings on the river is as likely as drawing a specific, though unsuited 3, 7, and jack. In a mental health setting, low self-efficacy might see unsuccessful results (a rolled 14, and unsuited 3, 7, and Jack) as deserved, fated, or determined through some other form of magical thinking. This is despite the equal likelihood of more desirable results.



Figure 1: Dice and shuffled cards are clear examples of stochastic contingency because they create random, or seemingly random outcomes. Image from Pixabay. Free to use.

Notably even if we identify all the relevant information we can prior to a stochastic event, the 33% likelihood of a Druid, Priest, Warrior glove token being awarded as a result of slaying the raid boss,

¹¹ T. Malaby, "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games," *Games & Culture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 95-113.

The Curator,¹² the stochastic event, the loot table algorithmic roll, still create indeterminacy for the balance druid desperate for their 4-piece set bonus. Trick plays, and on-side kicks show clear examples of social contingency in sports. Ecological elements also present stochastic contingency in these sports settings, such as throwing a football into the sun, or wind, or rained out baseball games.

In addition to the chaotic elements provided by complex systems, a given participant is subject to their own performative contingency as well. This is often attributed to errors in performance, or oversights. Typical examples are missed free throws, and false starts in sports. In games, such as tabletop role-playing games, this can occur when a player attempts to demonstrate a skill outside their archetype's wheelhouse. When applied to low self-efficacy, performative failures re-enforce low self-efficacy offering global frames for their failures that are perceived to continue offering failure regardless of the context of a given endeavor.

Social contingency results from an uncertainty about other participants' resources, values, or points of view. Trick plays, and onside kicks show clear examples of social contingency in sports. In games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, examples arise when clerics refuse to heal because they "aren't that kind of cleric." Real-time strategy games often result in ambushes, or so-called *cheese strategies* that opposing players fail to predict or refuse to engage in. Social failures re-enforce low self-efficacy when participants internalize failures demanding the full responsibility for them when values or beliefs are not shared uniformly.

Finally, semiotic contingency arises from a lack of a shared understanding of symbols, generally language. Here, indeterminacy is founded in a disconnect between participants about what the game is, and what the rules are. Often the most common examples here are points of contention prior to the participation in a game, "is it one-two-three-shoot, or shoot ON three," "what 'house rules' should we be aware of?" et cetera. At times semiotic contingencies extend even to individual sports, a 50-meter swim does not end at 50-meters, it ends when the swimmer touches the sensor at the end of the lane. Again, individuals re-enforce low self-efficacy when they take on full responsibility for a disconnect in the meaning of the symbols they encounter with others rather than sharing responsibility for poor results.

A Case for Tactics

In general, the indeterminate is viewed as a series of obstacles or constraints that need to be managed for success in a given action.¹³ In games, dice determine the number of spaces travelled around a board or resources to be gained, or a stochastic element added to a fixed value to determine success. Shuffled cards, once dealt, offer a limit to the resources available to players from which they must create the strongest hand. Rules offer semiotic guidelines that must be operated within lest participants be accused of cheating.

This understanding of contingency prioritizes the bureaucracy-like structures and arbitrary limitations of games while overlooking the practice undertaken by participants. Failing to recognize the agency brought to games by participants suggests they leave several cards on the table. Instead, in understanding contingency as a resource that can be leveraged, contingency expands from limitation to tactical gambit when confronted by creative actors. While this paper focuses on a

¹² "The Curator," *Wowhead TBC*, retrieved May 5, 2023, <https://www.wowhead.com/tbc/npc=15691/the-curator>.

¹³ Malaby, "Beyond Play."

very new product, *Taskmaster* a British television show piloted in 2015, the use of contingency as tactic has been a hallmark of games, often baked into them as both constraint and objective.

Opportunities for leveraging stochastic contingency may be the most challenging to conceive of, obscured by complex systematized elements that seem inflexible. However, those inflexible elements are often used to gain advantage. Throughout the 1980s the NFL had limited facilities requirements for home teams, but amenities used on home team benches were required to be provided for guests. This allowed the Minnesota Vikings to gain an advantage by refusing to provide heaters for their benches, allowing them a stochastic advantage over away teams that practiced in warmer environments.¹⁴ Similarly, competitive long-distance runners train at altitude, leveraging an ecological advantage to breathing and oxygenation when they compete at sea level. The most prevalent TTRPG *Dungeons and Dragons* offers built in mechanics for players to leverage stochastic contingency by finding ways to gain *advantage* on a given roll (or at least mitigate *disadvantage*) allowing them to roll their D20 twice and take the higher value. Similarly, the game master can offer inspiration as a currency to be cashed in by players to gain *advantage*, when they feel the need to use it.



Figure 2: Sports provide a clear example for tactical leverage. Image from Pixabay. Free to use.

¹⁴ "Ex-Vikings HC Bud Grant's Insane Cold Weather Rituals," *NFL*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.nfl.com/news/ex-vikings-hc-bud-grant-s-insane-cold-weather-rituals-0ap3000000618782>.

Performative contingency bares the clearest opportunity for tactical leverage, particularly in sports. Conceptually, sports are built for individuals or teams to meet each other on a level playing field and perform their sport to the best of their ability. In general, the presumption is the side that trains the hardest and roots out the most performative errors might be the winner (though notably, genetic physicality, and coordination also play a role). In this way, sports training often includes a large focus on so-called fundamentals, practicing free-throws, kicking field goals, et cetera. Actors (both teams and individual participants) seek to minimize the threat performative contingency has on their actions, and leverage an advantage over less prepared, more error-prone opponents.

Leveraging social contingency is conceptually built into an entire genre of games as the ultimate goal. Social deduction games like *One Night Werewolf*, *Blood on the Clocktower*, and *Secret Hitler*, pit participants against each other to determine the roles one-another play and secure their desired outcomes. When outmatched in skills of coordination, youth basketball teams can train in conditioning instead, allowing them to use their endurance as a tactic when skill is lacking.¹⁵ Additionally, money-ball management techniques seek to make the most out of finite resources aiming for successful mediocrity over the limitations of the sensational. Notably, salary caps arise in professional sporting leagues as an institutional limit specifically targeted to limit leveraging social contingency by pumping financial resources into a team until it cannot be beaten.

Finally, semiotic contingency is often leveraged with the creation of house rules in games. Free Parking offers the player who lands there the taxes collected in *Monopoly* but only if it is agreed upon as a house rule beforehand. Again, semiotic contingency is often built into the tactics of games like *Codenames* where team captains must communicate messages to their teams in order to select the correct cards and avoid opponent's or bomb cards. The clearest example of semiotic contingency as a tactic is the immediate success at charades that saccharine couples find in popular television situation comedies, so in touch with one another, that they need very little language to communicate their messages.

At base level, tactics always leverage some contingent element of events they create gambits within. Below, this paper examines the exaggerated and explicitly analyzed tactics devised and implemented within the British panel show *Taskmaster* as a foundation providing a template on how they can be implemented by clinical mental health practitioners.

Taskmaster

At time of writing the British show *Taskmaster* is currently broadcasting its 15th series. It has inspired several international versions, including an unsuccessful U.S. adaptation. Further, *Taskmaster* features several one-off events such as the annual *New Year's Treat*, and the *Champion of Champions* event that occurs every fifth series. The core format of the show involves five contestants, generally comedians or TV Personalities, competing in humorous and creative challenges set by the Taskmaster, Greg Davies, and Taskmaster's Assistant, Alex Horne.

The tasks are broadly divided into two categories: pre-recorded and live tasks. Pre-recorded tasks are filmed at a dedicated set, *The Taskmaster's House* under the supervision of Alex Horne, while live tasks are performed in front of a live studio audience. Live tasks consist of the *Prize Task*,¹⁶

¹⁵ M. Gladwell, "How David Beats Goliath: When Underdogs Break the Rules," *The New Yorker: Annals of Innovation*, May 11, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/how-david-beats-goliath>.

¹⁶ "Make the best picture in the sand of a former Taskmaster contestant using one of these implements. You must roll the dice to choose your implement. Nothing but air may touch the sand at any point. You have 10 minutes, your time starts as soon as you have rolled the dice." See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPZ19L85_eA&t=7m43s.

where contestants bring items that fulfill a thematic prompt to win initial points, and an episodic *Studio Task*¹⁷ concluding each episode with a live often kinesthetically challenging task. Contestants earn points for their performances, and each episode crowns a winner based on total points. Further, the series winner, determined by cumulative points across all series episodes, is granted the title Grand Champion and awarded a gilded trophy modeled after Greg Davies' Head.

The pre-recorded tasks are further delineated through team tasks, long-term tasks, and individual tasks. Team tasks involve teams of competitors grouped asymmetrically by producers in a team of two and team of three expecting participants to work collaboratively on tasks ranging from physical tasks¹⁸ to creative projects.¹⁹ Long-term tasks combine pre-recorded and live elements, such as buying a gift for the Taskmaster²⁰ or completing a thematic photo challenge.²¹ Individual tasks are smaller, often lighthearted challenges assigned to a single contestant.²² These often do not award points and are used as humorous interludes and broadcast bumps into advertisements in the original television feed.

While generally consumed as a broadcast media product (as legacy media in the UK, and digitally available media in the US), *Taskmaster* remains a distinctly analog endeavor. The physicality of the game in real space(s), as well as the face-to-face elements derived from the live broadcast where points are awarded creates a space where participants must negotiate and defend their tactics in real-time to be successful. The materiality and uniformity of the tools offered for completion of the tasks creates physical constraints that are generally understood by contestants. Still, the charismatically created reality related to rules, the tasks, and the universe in which contestants complete them all create opportunities for contestants to negotiate success and failure of tactics that are hardcoded out of digital alternatives. As final arbitrator, Greg Davies further iterates these opportunities as he creates, re-enforces, and abandons logics throughout the canon of the show. Examples are provided throughout this text.

Tactics in *Taskmaster*

In general, a first blush examination of tasks in *Taskmaster* creates opportunities for social and performative contingency either to be seen as the obstacle that the task is intended to present, or as the tactic competitors are intended to utilize. Because of this the tasks often default to performative

¹⁷ Prize tasks ask contestants to bring an item into the show that fits a specified category such as, "Most Exciting Thing Beginning with 'G'" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDnRoxgZhV0&t=1m51s>) or "The Boldest Belt" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDnRoxgZhV0&t=1m51s>).

¹⁸ Studio tasks are live during the adjudicated sessions of the show. Participants perform an activity often on stage such as, "Wearing the blindfold cover yourself in sticky notes. Sticky notes must be applied individually. The person with the most sticky notes still sticking to their body after 100 seconds wins." See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-HWSd6oDvs&t=39m56s>.

¹⁹ "Achieve a rally of exactly 24 shots. You must each take the same number of shots. You must be stood at least 6 foot 8 inches apart from one another. The object struck may neither touch the ground or be held at any point during the rally." See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzgWSEj8h58&T=32m10s>.

²⁰ "Buy the best present for the Taskmaster. Here is 20 pounds. You have 10 weeks. Your time starts now." See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82c2y94BvEA&T=26m31s>.

²¹ "Be photographed in the most unusual situation wearing this fez. You have 8 weeks. Your time starts now." See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzgWSEj8h58&t=15m06s>.

²² Individual tasks often target a single participant such as in series 1 with Josh Widdicombe who was asked in a single episode to "Count the beans in the tin of baked beans. Your time starts now" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CznOFGU9jUA&t=845s>), "Count the hoops in this can of spaghetti hoops. Your time starts now" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CznOFGU9jUA&t=19m59s>) and "Count the grains of rice in this bag of rice. Your time starts now" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CznOFGU9jUA&t=2237s>).

tactics in the case of physical and kinesthetic tasks,²³ and social tactics in what seem more creative ones.²⁴

Notably, the in-studio tasks often offer the clearest social, or performative tactics. Prize tasks are always dependent on social contingency, and social tactics, though on occasion they leave room for semiotic tactics as well. In the case of prize tasks contestants are expected to rely on their own values and resources to bring in items that fit the category, however in examples like “coolest blue thing,” semiotic tactics are utilized by John Richardson, and Joe Wilkinson using regional definitions of “blue” shared throughout Northern England. While the other three contestants bring in objects that are the color blue, Richardson and Wilkinson bring in items that are lude. This regional understanding offers Richardson and Wilkinson an opportunity to charismatically defend their entries as unique, or unpredicted items that encourage Davies to award points based on the humor that is offered, rather than a strict interpretation of the task based on conventional definitions.

Alternatively, the final in-studio task of every episode is usually a physical or kinesthetic task, although exceptions exist where the task is a social task instead. These include tasks like, “Stack your buckets so that they are taller than you, then put one beanbag on top of the buckets. You may not leave your spot at any point.”²⁵

Notably, the physicality of these tasks is not always limited to a single performative tactic. While the intention presented in the prompt provided likely calls for participants to carefully stack their buckets, Jamali Maddix engages in a second performative tactic, throwing bean bags and buckets at other contestants’ stacks in order to sabotage their attempt. In this way, Maddix aims to succeed not only by building his own tower, but also by mitigating his opponent’s success in the endeavor.

While the tasks lean toward the tactical default of performative or social tactic, stochastic contingency is leveraged as well, as is to a much more frequent degree semiotic contingency. Rarely do seemingly random processes show their face throughout the series of *Taskmaster*, possibly because a stochastic element built into a task seems like a constraint that goes beyond the expected limitations of other tasks and seemingly limits tactical approaches. The example that opened this paper provides one of the limited number of stochastic examples.²⁶ When a stochastic element determines the tools available to complete a task, Lou Sanders leverages stochastic contingency and keeps rolling a die until she has earned the tool presumed to be optimal. Similarly, when asked to “Draw the biggest and best circle. Your circle must be completed in one single sweep,”²⁷ Kerry Godliman is the only contestant that benefits from having accumulated snowfall at the *Taskmaster House* and utilizes a garden full of snow as a canvas. Meanwhile, other contestants resort to finding supplies that work together in large format, for example chalk and

²³ “Score a goal from the furthest distance. You may take only one shot. If you don’t score a goal you are disqualified. You must perform a terrific goal celebration whether or not you score a goal. There might be a bonus point for best goal celebration. You have five minutes. Your time starts now.” See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c4ildPel5I&t=30m57s>.

²⁴ “Make the most special effect. You have one hour. Your time starts now.” See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-HWSd6oDvs&t=31m15s>.

²⁵ *Taskmaster*, Series 11, Episode 1, “It’s Not Your Fault,” featuring Charlotte Ritchie, Jamali Maddix, Lee Mack, Mike Wozniak, and Sarah Kendall, aired March 18, 2021, timestamp 41:17. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNTxnYm81n8&t=41m19s>.

²⁶ “Make the best picture in the sand of a former *Taskmaster* contestant using one of these implements. You must roll the dice to choose your implement. Nothing but air may touch the sand at any point. You have 10 minutes, your time starts as soon as you have rolled the dice.” See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPZ19L85_eA&t=7m43s.

²⁷ *Taskmaster*, Series 7, Episode 2, “My Eyes are Circles,” featuring James Acaster, Jessica Knappett, Rhod Gilbert, Kerry Godliman and Phil Wang, aired September 12, 2018, timestamp 29:45. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVvCDSK5NsQ&t=29m56s>.

concrete, or permanent marker on a scaled map arguing the scale increases the size of the circle (leveraging semiotic contingency instead of merely performative).

Beyond this example, semiotic contingency is regularly leveraged to gain an edge over competitors. Tasks are regularly redefined or intentionally misinterpreted to challenge presumed expectations. These shifts lead to the most resistance from competitors and the most debate from the taskmaster, and his assistant. Occasionally, subject-object agreement is challenged, as in the team task, “wearing these hands on each of your hands at all times, communicate to your teammates the names of these films, books or TV programmes. You may not raise your voice.”²⁸ While Sara Pascoe, and Rob Beckett attempt charades to act out the names of the media titles, Dave Gorman, enlists the help of a passerby to shout the names of the titles across to his teammates Paul Chowdhry, and Al Murray, thus not raising his own voice, but requesting an assistant raise their voice, not addressed by the task.

During these contentious assessments, Davies’ role is magnified. Ultimately, *Taskmaster* offers an example of charismatic authority derived from the whim and fiat of Davies, however, this authority is often cached in the appearance of traditional authority derived from the fifteen series history of the show.²⁹ While a traditional view of authority would view the run of the show as canonical, identifying the language to inform the rules of the tasks, examples exist where Davies defies that traditional expectation and employing his own social contingency sways from prior opinions.

Prime examples of this disconnect, and exploration of charismatic authority show themselves in what Horne describes as “the classically ambiguous English prepositional phrase,”³⁰ and eggs as being “enclosed in a chalky shell.”³¹ In the former example, prepositional phrases within tasks offer inconsistent flexibility in what is considered acceptable for their completion. When asked to “place these three exercise balls on the yoga mat on the top of that hill. The task is complete when all three balls sit fully inflated and stationary on the mat,”³² four contestants devise various performative tactics to carry the three large exercise balls to the yoga mat at the top of the hill. They ask for passers-by to assist them in carrying the balls to the top of the hill or ask for assistance from strangers to ensure the balls do not blow down the hill as the contestant runs back down the hill to bring the remaining balls.

Instead, Richard Osman climbs the hill, retrieves the yoga mat from the top of the hill, brings it to the yoga balls, and places them on top of it at their original site. When his tactic is questioned by his competitors, Alex Horne enlists the expertise of noted British lexicographer Suzie Dent, who offers that Osman’s interpretation was less common, but acceptable due to the “classic ambiguity of the English prepositional phrase.”

²⁸ *Taskmaster*, Series 3, Episode 5, “The F.I.P.,” featuring Al Murray, Dave Gorman, Paul Chowdhry, Rob Beckett and Sara Pascoe, aired November 1, 2016, timestamp: 20:20. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDdx3oXQs9s%25t=20m32s>.

²⁹ M. Weber, “Part II: Power,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated/edited by H.H. Gerth, and C.W. Mills (Oxford University Press, [1946] 1958), 159-266.

³⁰ “Place these three exercise balls on the yoga mat on the top of that hill. The task is complete when all three balls sit fully inflated and stationary on the mat. Fastest wins. Your time starts now.” See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWQW73P3aN0&t=5m50s>.

³¹ “Get an entire egg into one of those metal things. Highest single score wins. If you get an entire egg into one of those metal things without it breaking your score is doubled. You may not move the chair or the metal things, and you must release your eggs while on the chair. You have 10 minutes. Your time starts now.” See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_Nc5j2xGg8&t=13m48s.

³² *Taskmaster*, Series 2, Episode 1, “Fear of Failure,” featuring Doc Brown, Joe Wilkinson, Jon Richardson, Katherine Ryan, and Richard Osman, aired June 21, 2016, timestamp: 5:48.

While traditional authority would extend this flexibility to future tasks where prepositions could be exploited within the text of the tasks, Davies intervenes exercising charismatic authority instead. When presented with the task, “maintaining eye contact and making continuous small talk with this Swedish person, put on the wetsuit, flippers, face mask and snorkel. Your head may not leave the Swedish person’s frame at any point. You may not move the laptop from its current position,”³³ Noel Fielding devises a tactic that similarly exploits prepositional ambiguity stacking the wetsuit, flippers, face mask, and snorkel on his head, thus ensuring they are “on” him. Despite canonical logic of traditional authority, Davies disqualifies and chastises Fielding for failing to complete the task.



Figure 3: Eggs are inconsistently defined throughout different series of the show *Taskmaster*. Image from Pixabay. Free to use.

Similar disconnect occurs throughout the show, though less explicitly, when defining an egg. When completing the tasks, “using only the items currently on this table, get the egg as high as possible. The egg must not break,”³⁴ and “find the boiled egg. You may touch two eggs. You may

³³ *Taskmaster*, Series 4, Episode 5, “Meat,” featuring Joe Lycett, Hugh Dennis, Mel Giedroyc, Lolly Adefope and Noel Fielding, aired May 23, 2017, timestamp: 15:45. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljLBbpnkK2c&t=16m19s>.

³⁴ *Taskmaster*, Series 1, Episode 3, “The Poet and the Egg,” featuring Frank Skinner, Josh Widdicombe, Roisin Conaty, Romesh Ranganathan, and Tim Key, aired August 11, 2015, timestamp: 31:51. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82c2y94BvEA&t=31m58s>.

damage two eggs. You may not damage the boiled egg,"³⁵ the shells of eggs are defined as a part of the egg. If the shells break, the contestants are disqualified. However, when presented the tasks, "eat me [an egg]. Fastest wins,"³⁶ and "get and entire egg into one of those metal things. The highest single score wins. If you get an entire egg into one of these metal things without the egg breaking the score is doubled. You may not move the chair or the metal things, and you must release the egg while on the chair"³⁷ the egg's shell is defined as a distinct container of the egg itself. This is despite the latter's egg breaking language explicated written within the task. This time Alex Horne exercises charismatic authority, rather than Davies, as he declares that "the shells is not relevant. The eggs of birds are enclosed in a chalky shell."

Notably, within the context of the show, eggs are defined as including their shells in series one when asked to throw eggs, though shells are excluded from their definition when asked to eat eggs, included once again when asked not to break an egg, and once again explicitly excluded from an egg above in series 9. The history of the show has negligible impact on how eggs are defined, or how tactics are delineated as allowed, or not allowed. The charismatic authority exercised by Davies, and Horne in response to tactical gambits is reliant on leveraging contingency. In response to contestants offering appeals that would align with the canon of the show, charismatic authority is used to disrupt logics that develop throughout the show's tenure.

Therapeutic Applications of Contingency as Tactic Through Games

While the tactics devised by contestants on a British panel show are exaggerated examples of leveraging contingency for presumed success, the notion is often unknowingly extended into other realms beyond the scope of games, and *mere* entertainment in much more subtle ways. A *contingency as tactic* paradigm could be useful when considering a myriad of other aspects that actors view as beleaguered by indeterminacy, while the benefits are overlooked. In reframing the problems of indeterminacy as resources actors can leverage, we can bring innovative approaches and move beyond conventional paradigms.

One such shift away from conventional paradigms is exemplified by creative arts therapies like music and art therapies and psychodrama. The foundations of creative arts therapies rely on six key processes. While most associated with Psychodrama, these extend to art therapy, music therapy, and most recently emergent therapeutically applied tabletop roleplaying games. As a goal, psychodrama aims to reorganize perceptions and reduce mental pain by employing six fundamental processes: (1) Expression/Communication, (2) Art Making Processes, (3) Reflection/Awareness, (4) Relationships, (5) Intersubjectivity, and (6) Ruptures.³⁸

³⁵ *Taskmaster*, Series 7, Episode 10, "I Can Hear it Gooping," featuring James Acaster, Jessica Knappett, Kerry Godliman, Phil Wang, and Rhod Gilbert, aired November 7, 2018, timestamp: 08:15. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjARUcqnQ24&t=8m15s>.

³⁶ *Taskmaster*, Series 2, Episode 2, "Pork is a Sausage," featuring Doc Brown, Joe Wilkinson, Katherine Ryan, Jon Richardson, and Richard Osman, aired June 28, 2016, timestamp: 05:09. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aATsSsBxRh0&t=5m14s>.

³⁷ *Taskmaster*, Series 9, Episode 7, "A Cuddle," featuring Doc Brown, Joe Wilkinson, Katherine Ryan, Jon Richardson, and Richard Osman, aired October 16, 2019, timestamp: 07:21. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_Nc5j2xGg8&t=13m48s.

³⁸ C. R. Armstrong, J. S. Frydman, and S. Wood, "Prominent Themes in Drama Therapy Effectiveness Research," *Drama Therapy Review* 5, no. 2 (2019): 173-216.

At their surface, TTRPGs offer the opportunity for participants to explore three social worlds simultaneously, deeply exploring their sense of “self,” and “other.”³⁹ Notably, participants simultaneously occupy space in three distinct frames; that of the person engaging in their everyday lives, burdened by bills, transportation, technological problems et cetera; that of the player engaged in a game responsible for relevant mechanical and social rules (to the degree that they are enforced), navigating their relationships with other players; and that of their characters that have motivations, interests, abilities, and relationships distinct from the social space they occupy.

With trained guidance, this shift in frame offer participants opportunities to enact their characters (expression/communication), develop stories collectively (art making process), engage in critical assessment of character’s circumstance and envision unique solutions to problems (reflection/awareness), contemplate the differences between themselves, and their character (relationship), share story focus and attention (intersubjectivity), and strive to develop new ways of doing things and understanding the play world (rupture). The processes of psychodrama are part in parcel of the genre.

Under guided frame shifting from clinical professionals, the mechanical rules of tabletop games offer patients the opportunity to explore additional explanations for their shortcomings. TTRPGs offer opportunities to retrain internal, stable, and global logics. Character creation mechanics govern character abilities, granting patients an external cause of failure. The necessity of dice rolling offers players limits to the stability of failure. Finally, the skills system of many TTRPGs provide various specific tasks at which characters can fail or succeed independently from one-another, undermining global understandings for failure.

The extension of games into mental health modality is one prime example of the utility of contingency as a resource, rather than an obstacle.⁴⁰ Clinicians that offer APA accredited therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games leverage contingency to promote better outcomes amongst their clients. The first step is reframing “patients” as “clients.” As mental health professionals engage their clients as willing, and equal participants in their mental health, they are reframed as assets that are mobilized to promote their own success. This frame is far afield from a traditional deficit based medical model where “patients” are broken, or incomplete things to be “fixed” by professionals. The social contingency offered by the participants that walk through a clinic door shifts from obstacle to tactic.

After reframing patients to clients that are allies and actors to be counted on to promote their own mental health, contingency becomes even more imbedded in the therapeutic work that clinicians practice through therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games. Stochastic contingency is embedded in the game mechanics used by clinicians. The dice offer an element that can be deferred to as a stochastic arbiter of success, but not necessarily one that has final say. This occurs both explicitly within the rules of the games used, and illicitly defying explicit rules as well as general social conventions of the games.

As a result of the 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and its dominance in the genre, many modern games have an *advantage* mechanic. This allows players to roll two dice and take the higher result. This is weighed against a *disadvantage* mechanic that has the inverse effect. Many specified mechanical situations that offer advantage are outlined in the manuals of *Dungeons and*

³⁹ G. A. Fine, “Chapter 6: Frames and Games,” *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 181-204.

⁴⁰ B. Thomas, “Boundaries of Imagination: A Study of Therapeutic Table-top Gaming,” (Master’s Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2022).

Dragons, and 5th edition compatible alternatives. This includes magic spells such as *Truestrike*,⁴¹ class abilities such as the Barbarians *Reckless Attack*,⁴² and conditions such as *Invisibility*.⁴³ Similarly, spells, class abilities and conditions may impose disadvantage, as well as environmental circumstances such as obscured vision from fog, or darkness. In addition to these mechanically awarded chances to leverage contingency, clinicians can make use of the *advantage/disadvantage* mechanic by rewarding, or penalizing participants that make choices that are in-line, or out of line with their therapeutic goals withing the context of a specific roll.⁴⁴ This benefit can be leveraged as inspiration, a kind of currency offered by game masters that can be banked and utilized later. This is valuable as a reward if a client makes a choice that is particularly in line with their therapeutic goals, but the situation does not warrant a roll.

Further, clinicians can cheat if it makes for more effective therapeutic intervention.⁴⁵ While fudging dice rolls is often frowned upon among game participants outside of a clinical setting, clinicians operate with a different goal in mind, growth in the mental health of their clients. This means the game rules and social norms that would normally be shunned are at clinicians' discretion. If a client would benefit from them rolling poorly as a game master, they can choose to report a poorer result than was generated by the stochastic arbiter.

Leveraging of stochastic contingency allows a frame for success and failure that lies outside of the individual making the role. When a check is called for by a game master the player makes a roll (typically of a 20-sided die) and adds several modifiers to the die-roll rarely exceeding 10. Ultimately, this means that often the die-roll has the largest impact on success or failure. Stochasticity of the die-roll offers clients the opportunity to externalize their own success or failure and point to a great, or terrible roll as the cause.

Clinicians also leverage performative contingency by catering the goals of the current game session around the needs of their clients.⁴⁶ If a client needs to work on engaging with others and being more socially active, clinicians can offer obstacles that can only be addressed by their class's skillset. A fighter or barbarian might encounter a large obstacle that needs to be moved through sheer strength, or a wizard may encounter some form of ancient arcane script that needs to be deciphered. Importantly, this tactic can also be used to move the focus away from participants that need to work on impulse control or allowing others to take the lead.

Due to the class structure of many TTRPGs leveraging performative contingency creates a non-global framework for success and failure. If Fighters and Barbarians are good at things that require strength, there is no reasonable expectation that they would be successful in a check to determine the origins of a magical doodad. Similarly, Wizards' skills generally lie in their knowledge, rather than their might. It should not surprise a client playing a Wizard that they failed at an athletic attempt to move a large rock. Their skills lie elsewhere. The class structure of these games creates context around success and failure that mitigate global perspectives of failure. Failure at lifting a heavy rock does not predict failure to identify a narrative McGuffin.

⁴¹ J. Crawford, R. Thompson, and P. Lee, *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook 5th Edition* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2015), 284.

⁴² Crawford, Thompson, and Lee, *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*, 48.

⁴³ Crawford, Thompson, and Lee, *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*, 291.

⁴⁴ Thomas, "Boundaries of Imagination."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Social contingency is leveraged by clinicians hoping to create a need for their clients to be more flexible in their approaches.⁴⁷ If a therapeutic group meets little challenge in encounters because they have developed a standard approach that proves successful, a clinician can offer encounters that take advantage of alternate roles being unfulfilled. If the healing cleric misses a session, the clinicians can offer encounters that do not allow the group to take as much damage or rely on other strategies to heal or mitigate that damage. The clinicians may create a trap that separates the fighter from the rest of the party and attack that party while it is missing its regularly relied upon durable damage taker. Similarly, opportunities to leverage social contingency arise when players create characters that *play against type*, such as creating a Cleric that refuses to heal relying on the time-honored battle-cry “I’m not that kind of Cleric.”



Figure 4: Roleplaying games provide opportunities to leverage social contingency in a variety of ways. Image from Pixabay. Free to use.

The creation of a demand for new tactics undermines stable logics. As circumstances shift, so do successful approaches to navigating those circumstances. If success depends on circumstance, so

⁴⁷ Ibid.

must failure related to checks, encounters, and narrative arcs. A new approach offers new opportunities to highlight different characters, focus on new clients, and explore new techniques.

Finally, clinicians can leverage semiotic contingency to offer clients agency, even when things seem thoroughly decided.⁴⁸ The most extreme example of this is in character death. When a client's character dies, they may *be forced to* roll a new character, they may *get to* roll a new character, or the party may decide that they do not accept the death of that character and face the new objective of bringing that character back. The latter choice offers whole new set of contingencies on how that might be done; the party can blackmail a priest to resurrect a character, raise enough money to resurrect that character themselves, or find a portal to hell and take the characters soul back by force.

Leveraging semiotic contingency allows for new interpretations and experiences focused on external, circumstantial, and shifting client frameworks for success and failure. This extends up to and including whether an outcome was a failure or not. In redefining death as an opportunity for the next arc of the game, clients (as players) suspend the final arbitration for failure to the end of the next chapter.

An Applied Future in Games

While commercial games are rarely developed primarily as a therapeutic tool, and secondarily as a social exercise, the development of TTRPGs specifically for the purpose of mental health, education, or other training is underway. The development of Critical Core by Game to Grow marks a concerted effort to create games specifically aligned to therapeutic intervention.⁴⁹ Its developers describe the game as "combin[ing] modern developmental therapies with the mechanics of tabletop role-playing games to help kids connect with their families, their friends, and the world around them. Players build social confidence, communication, and collaboration skills, develop frustration tolerance, emotional resilience, and caring for others, all while rolling dice and having fun."⁵⁰

Recognizing more broadly the mechanical aspects of games that allow for therapeutic, education, or other training intervention, provides an opportunity to create new, and modify existing games in ways that offer bolstered opportunities for growth. Paying attention to the opportunities to leverage contingency by allowing clinicians and educators to manipulate mechanics of developing games allows for more engaging, and more accessible sessions. This could create opportunities to address issues that are currently underexamined, and under resourced.

In framing therapeutic sessions as a *game night* rather than a *group therapy session*, stigmas associated with seeking treatments can be better managed and mitigated. This is particularly the case with veteran clients that may have shame or be ostracized by their cohorts based on long-standing institutionalized expectations related to seeking help.⁵¹ Similar populations may exist within marginalized groups in both urban and rural communities.

Further, specified communities may see the flexibility of games as a valuable modality to address their own trauma through their own terms. Internalized inferiority is often due to historical events beyond the reach of individual clients. These include individual perception of inferiority built on historical experiences of White Supremacy, internalized community-based inferiority from

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Critical Core," *Game to Grow*, retrieved July 18, 2024, <https://www.criticalcore.org/>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Thomas, "Boundaries of Imagination."

systematized marginalization medical and mental health institutions, and internalized ancestral inferiority because of colonization practices.⁵² It is possible that intergenerational traumas may be mitigated when these communities develop games or build narrative structures within existing games that face these historical traumas head-on, allowing clients to process their inherited statuses.



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⁵² J. Mullan, “Introduction,” *Decolonizing Therapy: Oppression, Historical Trauma, and Politicizing Your Practice* (New York: Norton and Company, 2023).