ANALOG GAME STUDIES

Generation analog

The Tabletop Games and Education Conference

GENERATION ANALOG 2021

Proceedings of the Tabletop Games and Education Conference

Edited by Evan Torner, Shelly Jones, Edmond Chang,
Megan Condis, & Aaron Trammell

GENeration Analog 2021 Proceedings

GENeration Analog 2021 Proceedings

Proceedings of the Tabletop Games and Education Conference

EVAN TORNER, SHELLY JONES, EDMOND CHANG, MEGAN CONDIS, AND AARON TRAMMELL

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY: ETC PRESS
PITTSBURGH, PA

GENeration Analog 2021 Proceedings by Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License, except where otherwise noted.

Copyright © by ETC Press 2023 http://press.etc.cmu.edu/

ISBN 978-1-387-41946-3 (Print)

The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution, NonCommercial–NonDerivative 4.0 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

IMAGES: All images appearing in this work are property of the respective copyright owners, and are not released into the Creative Commons. The respective owners reserve all rights.

This book was produced with Pressbooks (https://pressbooks.com) and rendered with Prince.

Contents

Introduction 1
Evan Torner; Shelly Jones; Edmond Chang; Megan Condis; and Aaron Trammell

1. The Maker Turn in Classroom Games 5
An Articulation of Gamemaking in Education (GME)
Samara Hayley Steele
2. From Boards and Chits to Circuit Boards and Bits 29
Mirek Stolee
3. “Are You a Planeswalker?” Remediating Magic: The Gathering 43
Jack Murray
4. Materiality Of Keepsake Games 55
Theorizing A Newly Named Game Form
Greg Loring-Albright and Wes Willison
5. Things I Want to Know 67
A Research Agenda Focused on the People Who Make and Play Games
Elizabeth Hargrave
6. The Inflection Point 85
Board Gaming, Race, Gender, and What Early Tech Can Teach Us
Tanya Pobuda
7. Of Orcs and Humans 103
The Strategic Rhetoric of Whiteness in the Public Controversy Over Race and Ability in Dungeons & Dragons, 5th Edition
Cody Walizer
8. Developing Anti-Othering Values in the D&D Community 115
Clayton Whittle and Nate Turcotte
9. Dark Forests and Doomed Adventurers 129
An Ecocritical Reading of Horror Roleplaying Games
Chloé Germaine

10. Reframing Actual Plays 141
Claire Stricklin

11. Digital "Character Keepers" for Analog Games 155
Analyzing Online Play Aids in the Contemporary Indie TTRPG Community
Adrian Hermann and Gerrit Reininghaus

12. Playing the Believer 171
Prioritizing Dimensions of Religion in Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition
Leonid Moyzes

13. Hard Looks and Heartbreakers 183
The Discourse of D&D at the Forge
William J. White

14. Convergence Culture and the Increasing Digitization and Hybridity of Dungeons & Dragons 195
Premeet Sidhu

About ETC Press 209

Introduction

EVAN TORNER; SHELLY JONES; EDMOND CHANG; MEGAN CONDIS; AND AARON TRAMMELL

What would it have been like to hold an academic conference on analog games at Gen Con, the absolute center of the analog gaming world? We still have no idea. But at least there is a story to tell. A quick meeting at Gen Con 2018 that included Analog Game Studies journal editors Shelly Jones and Aaron Trammell and Mikaël Le Bourhis, a representative of Asmodee Research's Game in Lab, planted huge ambitions in all of our skulls. Surely it would be possible, right? Initial talks envisioned a serious academic conference that would allow scholars and designers a broader public forum for their work. So many logistical hurdles began to pop up, however: When would paper proposals be due, given that the hotel lottery already took place six months before the convention? How many papers should we accept, given travel budget constraints? How would this event distinguish itself from Gen Con's already-robust educator programming? Numerous planning meetings left us dazed and confused, but we still put out the call for papers and received a decent pile of abstracts to sort through. Our keynote speakers would be Scott Nicholson, Elizabeth Hargrave, and B. Dave Walters. We were nervous, but hopeful.

GENeration Analog 2020 was, of course, not to be. The COVID-19 pandemic took so much from us all, our humble symposium being just a drop in the bucket. More urgent, too, was the global protest and advocacy movement sparked by the public murder of George Floyd. The Origins 2020 gaming convention, for example, was first moved online and then, in the wake of a lackluster response to the demands of racial justice from the community, canceled altogether. Gen Con 2020 positioned itself a little bit better, hosting some online events and taking advice from communities of color on how to proceed. In our own spaces, we decided to embrace the online-only international conference format that the pandemic required of us and ran it separately from Gen Con on the Zoom and Discord platforms in July 2021. We were also emboldened by the brave protesters worldwide seeking a reckoning with the whiteness of Global North states. The proceedings of our unique and electrifying conference constitute this volume.

"Generation Analog" was lightning in a bottle. The pandemic-era online event became something far greater than the sum of its parts: a feeling, a community, a movement. Beyond simply recording a series of Zoom talks about non-digital gaming for posterity on YouTube,[1] we found ourselves buzzing amidst like-minded scholars in the presentations and chat. It was as if, after all these years of clicking "Publish" on our online quarterly Analog Game Studies journal issues, we were finally meeting its audience for the first time. We were having the conversations about games that we

1. The YouTube playlist for the 2021 Generation Analog Conference can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlYAgBDoVabyV5uyhNOCiJztR8kZTHnF_

always wanted to have, ranging from *what games mean* to *how game culture unfairly gatekeeps its membership*. Previously, these discussions had happened in isolation. We hope, too, that this collection serves as a foundation for decades of scholarship and design to come. So there you have it. Our hearts are on our sleeves for all to see. It has been exciting to play a part in producing the future.

Without further ado, we would like to attempt to capture lightning in a bottle once again and outline the contributions to this volume. It is divided into four sections, admittedly with much dialogue between all their contents. **Making and Materiality** focuses on the fundamentals of analog game design and their hybridity between the classroom and online platforms, among others. **Communities and Inclusion** takes a hard look at game cultures and how they enable and/or block a greater diversity of bodies and voices within them. **Mediation and Role-Playing** carries us into the pairing of form and content in RPGs as a field of research. **Legacies of *Dungeons and Dragons*** concludes the book with three essays on a pivotal game title for us all. Indeed, this volume comes into being against the backdrop of not only the resurgence of *D&D* thanks to the popular TV series *Stranger Things* (2016-) and unprecedented energy around actual play streams such as *Critical Role* (2015-), but also the post-Gamergate reckoning with identity and harassment in gaming circles. If there is one overall message to be gleaned from *Generation Analog*, it is this: We cannot divorce analog gameplay from the platforms and social forces that create it.

Appropriately, the **Making and Materiality** section plunges straight into the messiness of creation and circulation. Samara Hayley Steele notes the pivotal role of student-made games in classrooms of all varieties. Analog games in particular let students play with course-adjacent materials and systems. Mirek Stolee meanwhile provides an analytic framework to apprehend how the analog is adapted into the digital. Jack Murray picks up this thread and uses it to explore *Magic: the Gathering* as a digital tabletop object. Greg Loring-Albright and Wes Willison describe "keepsake games," a recent genre of analog games that helps players explore the self through the re-enchantment and creation of physical objects.

Of great interest to social science and media studies researchers is the **Communities and Inclusion** section, which does a remarkable job of illustrating community problems and solutions within gaming. Elizabeth Hargrave, a notable board game designer and one of the keynote speakers at the conference, directly inquires about the demographics data of the gaming community. The points she raises are then addressed by Tanya Pobuda, who draws on her early experiences in tech reporting to then systematically dissect gaping inequities in the board game industry. Cody Walizer demonstrates how a rhetoric of whiteness dominates all discussions of race in *D&D*, which also prevents efforts at decolonizing the *D&D* community. Clayton Whittle and Nate Turcotte examine efforts in the online *D&D* community to combat this impulse to "other" people of specific backgrounds within their spaces.

The **Mediation and Role-Playing** section embraces the multiplicity of forms and topics to be found in the RPG playspace. Chloé Germaine examines the indie RPG *Trophy*, finding within it a profound "ecohorror" narrative space. Colin Stricklin looks at digitally broadcast analog play, with the finding that orally narrated storyworlds in online play are crucial to both player and audience engagement. Ancient oral traditions live on in modern RPG forms. Adrian Hermann and Gerrit Reininghaus describe how the humble character sheet, a necessity in most RPGs, has been transformed into a so-called "character keeper," a player-shared online document that enables ease of calculation and collaboration. There was a time when many gamemasters would ban laptops and smartphones from in-person play; now these devices are integral to it.

In **Legacies of *D&D***, we have three reflections on this particularly important game, which nears its 50th anniversary. Leonid Moyzes discusses design assumptions inherent in D&D's treatment of religion, a ripe topic for long-term research. Then William J. White examines the online discourse about D&D on The Forge, a forum devoted to the analysis and design of RPGs. An irony is that "actual play" of D&D, rather than mere Internet discourse about it, was a cherished currency in these early 2000s online discussions. The volume concludes with Premeet Sidhu highlighting the modern form of D&D as a result of convergence culture, in which digital platforms have become inseparable from analog gaming.

We know you are as eager to get to the articles as we are, so we won't delay you any longer. Our editorial team remains grateful to Game In Lab, which provided financial support for both the conference and these proceedings, to ETC Press, that brought this manuscript from its long gestation into the world, and to *you*, the reader, who will continue to reflect on our games and culture as you proceed.

Roll for initiative.

–The Editors of *Analog Game Studies*

November 29, 2022

1. The Maker Turn in Classroom Games

An Articulation of Gamemaking in Education (GME)

SAMARA HAYLEY STEELE

Abstract

This article is about experimental educational research I did as a project director for the UC Davis ModLab during the 2019–2020 academic year. Part of this research involved using game design to teach topics from various disciplines, with students making, hacking, and modding games to achieve educational goals in STEM, literature, social studies, theatre, and emergent topics. During that time, I led two teams that worked through trial and error to develop a teaching methodology that I call Gamemaking in Education (GME). This educational approach emphasizes student gamemaking rather than gameplay. In this paper, I discuss what GME is, review some cases in which other educators have used what might be called GME in college classrooms, and situate GME as an application of other proven educational methods including the maker movement in education, project-based learning, and experiential learning. I also offer strategizes for those who wish to implement GME in their classrooms, along with some recommendations for those who wish to engage in future study of GME.

Gamemaking in Education (GME) offers a novel paradigm in which student game creators produce educational analog or digital games about subject matter other than games. In the past, educational games have tended to appear in the classroom in a way that centers gameplay. In GME, the focus is on game*making*. By treating students as the creators of educational games rather than mere players, their engagement with the material "levels up." In educational gamemaking, students might create new games, or hack and mod pre-existing games, while instructors use scaffolding activities to ensure that educational objectives are met. Scaffolding activities might include workshops, playtests, primary and secondary research projects, peer critiques of student games, and reflection papers designed to ensure that student gamemakers meet educational goals such as discussing, analyzing, and (de)constructing models of the subject matter.

In this context, making a game might be compared to essay writing or research paper assignments. Types of gaming media that students might make, hack, or mod in a GME setting include live

action role-playing games (LARPs), board games, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), card games, miniatures, and digital games. Virtually any gaming medium might be used to implement GME, and an instructor's prior knowledge of it may allow students to leverage gamemaking exercises more effectively.

GME treats both the creation of games and the hacking of the platforms and social structures surrounding games as gamemaking. Beyond rulesmithing, worldbuilding, and gamerunning, student gamemaking activities might include exercises in metagaming (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) and player base management (Bowman 2017; Dashiell 2017; Koljonen 2020). In this way, gamemaking exercises might involve design activities at the level of the game, metagame, or gaming community.

Implementing GME

Implementing GME means using gamemaking and scaffolding activities as a framework for students to engage with subject matter. This method might be used to teach any discipline. For example, students in a biogeochemistry class that uses GME might be asked to design a card game about Hazardous Algal Blooms (HABs). During scaffolding activities they could read and discuss literature and data on HABs and related topics while also workshopping, playtesting, and discussing each other's games. In a literature class that uses GME, students might be asked to create a TTRPG module that explores themes in nineteenth-century American poetry, and might even be asked to hack the rules in such a way to incorporate passages from poems into the game's mechanics. During scaffolding activities, these students could play, discuss, and critique each other's rules and mods, and compose "artist statements" exploring how their design addresses themes in primary and secondary texts. A sociology class could use GME to give students an assignment to create a text-based game (using a platform like Twine) that explores social factors that reduce local high school graduation rates. For scaffolding activities they might read sociological articles, review related data, and have the opportunity to launch their games publicly after the class is done.

Additionally, rather than designing a game from scratch, students might instead be offered a partially finished educational game (perhaps designed by the teacher) and be tasked with hacking or modding it in a way that brings educational goals into focus. In another approach, an instructor could ask students to play a popular game about subject matter that is "broken"—for example, the popular board game *Pandemic* (2008) doesn't quite accurately reflect virology or the history of medicine—and then ask them to "fix it" by re-designing the game to more accurately reflect the subject matter.

Student gamemaking activities need not even lead to finished games, as educational gamemaking researcher Joseph Dumit has pointed out:

> …the game does not have to be finished to be useful. Collectively workshopping a game idea provides a format in which suggestions can be discussed for how they interact, and even be incorporated without immediately having to ask if they are relevant. Game design is thus a method, a *paper tool* (Klein 2003) for thinking together about science, facts, politics, and economics. (Dumit 2017)

In Dumit's approach, the process of designing both analog and digital games is used as a process for students to think together about the subject matter. This approach might be considered an intervention into the traditional structure of seminar classes, in which gamemaking offers a new "score" through which classroom learning might be structured (Dumit et al. 2018). Other instructors might find it useful to have students finish their games, depending on their educational goals.

GME as part of the Maker Movement in Education

Educational gamemaking may be thought of a part of the "maker turn" in education (Hsu et al. 2017; Kafai and Peppler 2011; Martin 2015). "Makerism" is a cultural movement that has gained popularity in the last decade, with maker spaces sprouting up in cities and towns across the globe. This movement unites artists, engineers, hackers, designers, and others to work on collaborative hands-on and DIY projects that can range from designing software, to making games, creating DIY magazines ("zines"), and developing open-source insulin. Makerism represents a lifelong interest in learning, in which learning isn't compulsory but rather a side effect of the process of making things together. These efforts often occur within and alongside projects to create publicly accessible "maker spaces" that facilitate public access to maker tools, maker communities, and a maker ideology that values making things. Many maker communities likewise engage in

community management activities[1] that often include efforts to respond to and mitigate types of abusive behavior that disproportionately befall members of marginalized groups.[2]

Many educators, excited to see adults "learning for the heck of it" in maker spaces, have tried to translate this "maker empowerment" (Hsu et al. 2017) into spaces of education. These efforts, however, sometimes don't hit the mark. For example, a school might build a "maker space," but fail to use it in a way related to makerism, leading administrators to scratch their heads as to why students aren't developing that self-motivated "maker spark."

Educational researcher Lee Martin (2015) has identified three important qualities of successful implementations of the maker movement in education: making sure students have access to (1) maker tools, (2) the maker mindset, and (3) maker community.[3]

Maker tools shouldn't be confused with maker products; rather than simply giving students access to computers or games, students need to be provided the tools to create them. In practice, maker tools may include a well-stocked workspace with a range of tools and fabrication materials, alongside mentors who know how to use them. As for the maker mindset, it is "playful, asset- and growth-oriented, failure-positive, and collaborative" (Martin 2015). The objective is for students to improve their skills with using tools—what they make with them is less important. An engaging group strategy session in which students discuss projects that ultimately don't ultimately reach fruition is considered a more valuable use of time than having students produce perfect projects in silence and isolation. The process is more important than product, and that process should be collaborative (Martin 2015; Dumit 2017). As for maker communities, they are organized horizontally, and instructors serve as co-makers and guides rather than leaders (Brahms 2014; Gutwill et al. 2015; Hsu et al. 2017). The role of instructor involves offering access to tools and community, while helping students save time by nudging them to make different mistakes than the ones you have in your own previous making endeavors. A model much like apprenticeship begins to emerge.

1. Some historical examples of maker spaces engaging in space management of this nature include Sudo Room in Oakland, CA, and NoiseBridge in San Francisco, as documented in many cultural artifacts including: "I can almost see the stars…" by Teresa Smith (*Slingshot*, 2014) and NoiseBridge's 86'ed policy (https://www.noisebridge.net/wiki/86). In Smith's essay, they describe a survivor-believing policy in place at Sudo Room, in which those who came forward about experiencing sexual violence are taken seriously and the person they say harmed them is asked to leave. This policy also extends to other kinds of abuse relating to gender, as well as race. Across the Bay, NoiseBridge has a similar policy, however, it also includes a somewhat more controversial approach in which photos and identifying details of those asked to leave the space are posted to a page on the NoiseBridge wiki, ostensibly as a way to render this information accessible to others within the space. Skimming through the NoiseBridge 86'ed page, we can see that gendered violence and "racially charged" behaviors are listed as reasons individuals were "86'ed" from that space. Given NoiseBridge's own difficulties in enforcing these policies, however, a better example might be the Double Union makerspace: https://doubleunion.org Such practices offer some examples of ways maker spaces have at least attempted to make their spaces more accessible to marginalized groups through community management policies and practices.
2. Some historical examples in which we see gamemaking spaces engaging community management practices of this nature include Big Bad Con's anti-harassment policy (https://www.bigbadcon.com/anti-harassment-policy/) and the work of various larp makers in the Nordic tradition, as discussed in blog posts by Sarah Lynne Bowman like "Larp and Consent Culture Techniques" (*Nordic Larp*, 2017).
3. While Martin's research focuses on K-12 students, these principles are general to the maker movement.

Martin's research found that, when properly implemented, classroom makerism aligns with research on beneficial learning environments (2015), in which maker interventions may increase the chance of positive outcomes for students. Makerism also circumvents traditional educational models that are perhaps less effective. In their 2017 survey of educational makerism, Yu Hsu, Chang Baldwin, and Sally Ching discuss describe how maker interventions can help educators avoid the "just-in-case model" of learning (Gershenfeld 2007; Hsu et al. 2017), an approach in which curriculum is presented in relation to some imaginary future use, which students may learn to suspect will never come. Successful implementations of makerism use a "learning-by-demand model" (Hsu et al. 2017) through which students can apply lessons they learn right away, stimulating their appetites for the subject matter.

Maker interventions may also improve diversity within some disciplines. One study of a youth program found that the use of a maker movement strategy with e-textiles helped bridge the gender gap in certain STEM topics. Young women students demonstrated a higher propensity to identify as technologically proficient following intervention (Kafai et al. 2014). Later research looked at dozens of studies of similar maker interventions with e-textiles and found that, in close to half (48%) of the studies in which demographic data was collected, enrollees came from BIPOC and Latino backgrounds (Jayathirtha and Kafai 2019). While this high ratio may have been due to targeted outreach, the researchers point out that this data shows that this approach successfully reached those communities. Additionally, analysis of the studies found that the open-ended maker activities were sometimes used by BIPOC students in creative ways to facilitate healing and celebrate culture (Jayathirtha and Kafai 2019).

In the past, maker interventions have tended to approach topics in STEM, but through gamemaking, maker pedagogy may be opened up and applied to nearly any discipline.

Taking Cues from the Maker Movement in Education

Treating educational gamemaking as an extension of the maker movement in education, educators who wish to implement GME in their classrooms might find general research into educational makerism instructive. Drawing from Martin's tools-community-mindset approach, an instructor might think critically about how their gamemaking curricula enables student access to gamemaker tools, gamemaker community, and the gamemaker mindset. Do students have access to the proper workspace, tools, and software needed to make the games? Are there activities that allow students to take on the mindset of a gamemaker by speaking, writing, and strategizing from the perspective of a game designer? How are students being offered access to gamemaking community? How have you positioned yourself as a co-maker? What formal community processes need to be in place to keep this student gamemaking community diverse and accessible?

Likewise, drawing from Hsu, Baldwin, and Hui's concept of the "learning-by-demand model," an educator wishing to implement GME will want to think strategically about the relationship between classroom materials and the gamemaking activities. Do the gamemaking activities give classroom materials "a place to go"? Are students able to directly apply what they are learning about the subject matter while making games? How do scaffolding activities support students' gameful engagement with the subject matter?

GME as Experiential Learning & Project-Based Learning

Beyond being an extension of the maker movement in education, GME may also be structured to implement other proven educational methods, including Dewey's project-based learning, and Kolb's experiential learning.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) breaks educational activities down into a multi-stage cycle, in which students move between four types of activities: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Through the process of ELT, students develop a "learning identity" while laying foundations for lifelong engagement with the subject matter (Passarelli and Kolb 2011). When implemented well, experiential learning has been found to increase cognitive skills in the subject matter (Mutmainah and Indriayu 2019), increase retention of knowledge (Alkharashi 2020), and to reduce the likelihood that students will drop out of college or graduate school (Prussia and Weis 2003). Using scaffolding activities, educational gamemaking may be taught in such a way to allows implementation of the full experiential learning cycle.

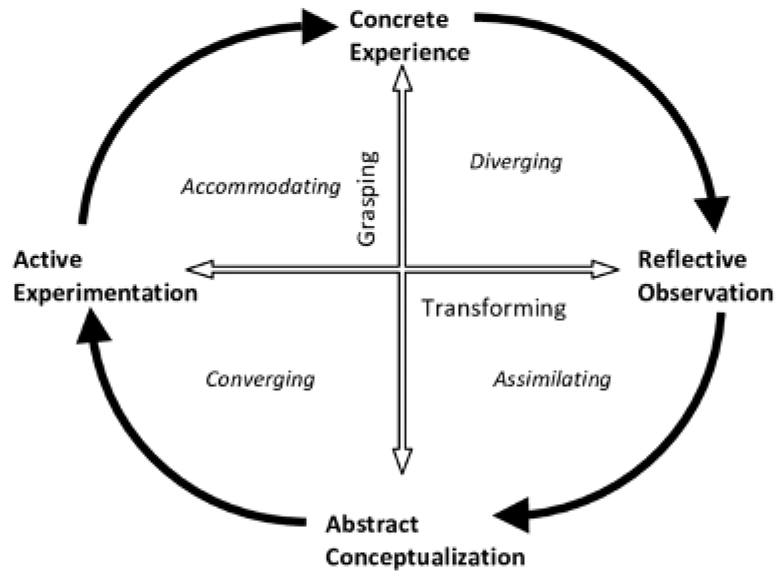

Fig 1. The Experiential Learning Cycle (Passarelli and Kolb 2011)

Project-based learning (PBL) allows students to learn about a subject by working on a complex challenge or problem for an extended period. According to a meta-analysis conducted by Purdue University, PBL implementation can increase long-term retention of material, foster replicable skills, and improve teacher and student attitudes towards learning (Strobel and van Barneveld 2009). Educational gamemaking may be taught as an implementation of PBL, in which students engaged in extended work on a single complex challenge over an extended period. Through GME, a game design project may be used to organize student efforts to grapple with a complex topic, or even with multiple topics simultaneously. For example, during the game design of *Frack!* students engaged with topics from social science, geology, mathematics, economics, and software development while working on a single project over an extended period (Dumit 2017).

Some Examples of GME in the College Classroom

Below are four examples that document how GME has been used at the college level to teach a diverse range of topics across social science, the humanities, and STEM. While many university educators are already using teaching methods that might be thought of as fitting within a GME framework, educational gamemaking is rarely documented as a unique method separate from approaches that are limited to gameplay.

In the examples below, two of the instructors (Dumit and Torner) wrote peer-reviewed articles

that identify and discuss their use of gamemaking to teach topics other than games. These are the only peer-reviewed sources that I have been able to find that identify and analyze educational gamemaking as a separate form of pedagogy from educational gameplay. In the other two examples (Frierson and Leonard), I visited the classrooms and discussed methods with the instructors, allowing me to verify that student activities centered gamemaking rather than gameplay. While others have documented what might be called applications of GME (Dumit 2017, Torner 2016), this is, to my knowledge, the first effort to codify this approach in a general way across disciplines.

Using GME to teach Social Science

In one application of the GME approach, Joseph Dumit and Whitney Jane Larrat-Smith co-taught an undergraduate social science class at UC Davis in which students were asked to design a digital game and a boardgame about the behavior of fracking corporations (Dumit 2017). Gamemaking and scaffolding activities were used to guide (and build an appetite for) disciplinary theoretical texts. As students built the games, they gained experience in modelling and discussing complex social systems.

Fig. 2. The start screen for Frack (2016) a digital game students designed as part of a Science and Technology Studies (STS) class co-taught by Joseph Dumit and Whitney Jane Larrat-Smith. Students also designed a board game with the same name.

Dumit was impressed with the way students seemed to become “hungry” for classroom readings

thanks to the game design intervention (Dumit 2017). Their renewed enthusiasm aligns with Hsu, Baldwin, and Ching's observations about the "just-in-case" model: students lose their appetites for subject matter that has no context or relevance. By making games about subject matter—as Dumit and Larrat-Smith's approach shows—a "learning by demand" model can spark students' appetites for classroom materials.

Exploring the use of gamemaking to teach social science within and beyond the discipline of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Dumit explains that while "social and STS theory emphasize how emergent systems give rise to structures and events, designing a game scales the process down to the step-by-step speed of individual decisions, offering insights into how different systems interact" (2017, 610). This style of gamemaking gives students the opportunity to work at their own pace to understand how different parts of a social system influence each other, while letting students use their gamemaking as a material framework to track relationships between ideas. Thanks to their positionality as gamemakers, students "feel empowered to read across technical fields with real purpose" as they develop "mapping strategies to account for all of the potential actors or stakeholders in a scenario" (Dumit 2017, 608). Through this type of gamemaking, students can develop and test predictive social models, while also engaging in productive discussions about each other's model design strategies in relation to the classroom material.

One aspect of this approach that might be particularly useful in teaching theory is the way Dumit and Larrat-Smith chose to introduce their students to the social problems *prior* to introducing the social theories that address those problems. Early introduction of social problems forced the student gamemakers to tread water for a few weeks, as they attempted to translate the behavior of fracking companies into algorithms for their games. During this time, students started developing their own novel theoretical models to explain why the companies behaved in seemingly counterintuitive ways. This put them in a good position to approach the "great" theories (once they were offered) with a healthy dose of irreverence. The theorists appeared to the students like collaborators who had been modelling the same problem, so they began making theoretical critiques as they forked and modded the "great" theories. We could say a type of "maker empowerment" (Hsu et al. 2017) had set in—undergraduate students were nonchalantly doing disciplinary work at the highest level.

Dumit and Larrat-Smith's approach centered gamemaking strategy sessions, with less attention paid to completing or launching the games. Gamemaking became a means through which students could master the material while collaboratively developing, hacking, and modding interactive, playable models of social phenomenon. Likewise, students could avoid falling into a type of reductive thinking that can emerge when dynamic systems are boiled down into linear talking points during traditional exercises like writing papers.

In his reflection on these efforts, Dumit argues that gamemaking can be leveraged as a "powerful

pedagogical paradigm," and he strongly urges social science instructors to consider the benefits of classroom gamemaking (2017).

Using GME to teach topics in the Humanities

In another example of GME, Evan Torner devised an application for gamemaking as part of his German Literature class at the University of Cincinnati, in which students play, critique, and create educational LARPs, or educational LARPs (EDULARPs), about significant works of German literature, including Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Özdamar's *Mothertongue*.

Torner's approach spans multiple quarters. Students compose scripts for LARPs in one quarter, and then those who wrote exemplary LARPs are invited back in a later quarter to run their games. The new class plays these student-made games prior to reading the text, affectively "enchanting[4]" the text and giving the students a chance to practice their language acquisition skills, as these games are written and played entirely in German (Torner 2016). Through subsequent discussions and critiques of the student-made games, students engage in secondary literature critique, and these exercises lead up to games of their own.

A central part of this approach is that students make "game arguments" about the literature (Kranzberg 1986; Bogost 2008; Kelly 2010; Torner 2016). This is to say that crafting a game mechanic about a piece of literature or art is treated as an analytical activity, in which game mechanics are acknowledged as a form of interpretation. This framing of "gamemaking as analysis" also appears in Dumit's (2017) work, but rather than using games to analyze social behavior, Torner uses games as a form of literary criticism. Gamemaking, in Torner's approach, emerges as a way to "interpret literature in comparable ways to an analytic essay" (2016, 55), with students focusing on the creation of "interpretive mechanics."

In looking at how rulesmithing can be used to interpret literature, we might examine a mechanic from a student-written game from one of Torner's classes. Here is one such mechanic, which Torner has translated from the original German:

> Your name is Werther. Find a person who is engaged [in the game]. Tell them you are madly in love with them and if they don't love you back, you will have to eventually kill yourself. Stand next to them. (Torner 2016)

4. Torner also discusses the added benefit of including *EDULARP* gameplay as part of this approach. LARPs are types of analog games that include improvisational acting and co-created stories. He argues that playing EDULARPs based on the literature uses playful, lived experience to "enchant" these centuries-old texts that might otherwise feel distant to contemporary readers (Torner 2018). In this way, Torner's implementation of GME also leverages the benefits of EDULARP gameplay (Bowman 2010, Bowman and Standiford 2015). However, as Torner mentions, prior to running and playing LARPs, it may be helpful to train students in the use of safety mechanics (Koljonen 2020).

This mechanic, written by a student Sarah B. as part of her game *Unrequited*, offers a deeply cynical reading of the text. Her design choices emphasize Werther's narcissism and Goethe's fatalism. This mechanic "aligns with a 19th century nihilistic view of Werther's situation: that the characters cannot help what they do, and that they will succumb to the malignant will of the world" (Torner 2016, 57). When other students play this student-made game, they are offered this student's interpretation of the text, inviting discussion of how game mechanics are congealed arguments, while likewise gaining experience with interpretative mechanics that will inform their own efforts to craft game arguments about the text.

Another noteworthy choice Torner made is that he structured his classes in such a way that the player base for student-made games would be comprised of enrolled students. Our ModLab courses took a different approach; students created and ran LARP modules for the general public as part of their final project. Our ModLab approach was geared towards spending classroom time on topics in cultural studies and player base management—activities that made more sense with a public player base. Torner's approach, I imagine, allows more class time to be spent focused on the literary texts.

In Torner's approach, students can gain confidence in analyzing art and literature by crafting and critiquing game arguments, while also coming to see "adaptation and argumentation as valid uses for games" (Torner 2016, 58). Gamemaking, in this way, becomes a powerful interpretive tool that may be compared to essay writing, while also expanding students' understanding of the gaming media that have come to increasingly structure their daily lives (Milburn 2018, Jagoda 2020).

Using GME to teach topics in STEM

In another example of GME in action, Dargan Frierson at the University of Washington uses gamemaking to organize a yearly upper-division Atmospheric Science class in which students create digital and analog games on topics related to climate science. Often drawing from C-MIP climate data and IPCC reports, these gamemaking activities allow students to develop unique interpretations and dramatizations of scientific data and findings by translating scientific concepts into playable projects. Many of these games are eventually released on EarthGames.org as part of a game design studio affiliated with the university, allowing students to use gamemaking as a means to engage in public science communication.

One feature of Frierson's approach that I find interesting is how his students create dramatically different types of games with each iteration of the class. One term, they might create a 16-bit digital RPG, the following one a board game, and another brings an augmented reality cellphone game. This type of variation in gaming media and genres is unusual compared to most iterations of GME that I've encountered. Instructors tend to pick a type of game and stick with it from

one quarter to the next. Frierson's approach of constantly switching the game genres and media he uses for the class seems particularly useful for teaching climate data modelling. By having students create games of different mediums or genres each time, students experience the type of open-endedness that those who create scientific models often encounter when developing novel applications for data.

Fig. 3. The Start Screen of Infrared Escape, a game created by a student from one of Frierson's upper-division Atmospheric Science classes. This game uses classic arcade game mechanics to represent a beam of light attempting to escape Earth's atmosphere as it become increasingly clogged with carbon molecules.

Beyond focusing on completing their games, Frierson's students also sometimes develop tools that can be used by other gamemakers. For example, one student project led to the creation of what may be the first translation into Python of the latest C-MIP, a tool that could be used by any gamemaker to represent climate change more accurately in their games.[5] This is just one example of how students in this class dynamically engaged in science communications—not just by creating games for the public, but by creating tools that could be used by other gamemakers.

Students in this class are often seniors in the program, so gamemaking can become a type of capstone, allowing the students to synthesize their studies while working on their games. This may allow students to circumvent the "just-in-case model" earlier in the program; the prospect of designing a game in a future quarter gives them a place to put the things they are learning from day one.

5. The lab may still be looking for someone to help them make this code open source.

Like Dumit and Larrat-Smith's approach, Frierson's approach centers systems modelling, but his focus is not upon developing new theories, but rather is about devising novel applications for established scientific theories (i.e., scientific laws). Strategizing novel applications for scientific data and information is a staple of any many careers in STEM, and Frierson leverages gamemaking to allow students to gain this type of pragmatic experience. Likewise, many student games that have emerged from this class have received national awards, giving students' portfolios a boost just as they hit the job market.

Frierson hasn't yet written any pedagogical papers about his approach; however, there are several news articles that have covered this intervention.[6] Likewise, I had a chance to tour his students' workspace in summer of 2019, and have had subsequent discussions with Frierson about pedagogy that allowed me to gain a sense of his approach and develop a level of confidence in drawing these conclusions.

Through gamemaking activities, Frierson's students develop dynamic, game-based applications for scientific data and information. They demonstrate their abilities to model Earth systems data while gaining experience in communicating disciplinary concepts with the public.

Using GME to teach topics in psychology

In a fourth example of GME, Diana J. Leonard uses gamemaking to organize student coursework in psychology at Lewis and Clark College. In Leonard's approach, gamemaking becomes a prefigurative activity through which students attempt to "design out" or remove forms of systemic oppression from gaming spaces and pervasive society. This means treating game design as community design, while also thinking about the game at the level of game, metagame, gaming community, and society. This deeply holistic approach draws upon Leonard's specialization in Social and Political Psychology, as well as her research into the group dynamics of gaming communities (Leonard 2016, Leonard and Thurman 2018).

I visited Leonard's class as a speaker in summer of 2021 and had a chance to hear from her students about their gamemaking. Leonard's gaming medium of choice is LARP, and much of the student game design work was occurring at the levels of and community management (Bowman 2010; Dashiell 2018; Koljonen 2020) and metagaming—intervening in games from a perspective outside of the games' internal logic or intended use (Boluk and LeMieux 2017). Types of topics she typically explores with her students include RPG gameplay behaviors that can be harmful to marginalized players (Dashiell 2017; Leonard 2021), emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017, 2018, 2020; Leonard 2021),

6. See https://earthgames.org/press

dynamics of making apologies on behalf of groups (Leonard 2019), and community management in gaming communities (Bowman 2010; Koljonen 2020). These discussions are supplemented by theoretical readings in psychology and social science.

Leonard treats games as experiments, an approach that aligns with Patrick Jagoda's argument that games are social experiments (Jagoda 2020). She urges LARP players to adopt the same ethical standards expected of researchers (Leonard 2021). Leonard's students are encouraged to proactively look at games and communities that surround them by identifying social and ethical problems within and beyond games. Then they are asked to design experimental tactics that might intervene in forms of injustice within and beyond gameplay.

In my visit with Leonard's students in 2021, I was impressed that these students were having theoretical discussions that usually don't occur until graduate school. I speculate that a similar phenomenon to what Dumit noticed was at play. Using game design to address a social problem created an appetite for theory, in which game design gave students the incentive to become fluent in other thinkers' ideas (Dumit 2017; Hsu et al. 2017). Her approach likewise positions students to compose theory.

Leonard's approach is very much student-led, with students charting their own projects that are meaningful to them. She likewise works to engage students with the gamemaking community by inviting game scholars and designers to her class and guiding students to online forums and spaces of gamemaking discourse. This lays the foundation for subsequent work in academia and game design, as exemplified by her past students who have gone on to co-author journal articles and present papers at international conferences in the field.

While at this time Dr. Leonard hasn't written any pedagogical papers that explore this approach, my observations as a class visitor and my discussions with her regarding pedagogical projects give me a level of confidence in making these observations. While Leonard's focus is on LARPs, I imagine other gaming media might be approached in a similar way. This approach focuses on gamemaking holistically by treating games as parts of larger systems, allowing students to strategize how gamemaking might be used to intervene in asymmetrical relations of power.

General Observations and Analysis

These four examples of GME show the range of disciplines in which gamemaking activities might by leveraged towards educational goals, demonstrating the potential of gamemaking to be incorporated into classrooms in social science, the humanities, and STEM.

These examples show how student gamemaking can be leveraged to towards a variety of

educational goals including systems modelling (Dumit and Frierson), composing theory (Dumit and Leonard), interpretation and critical analysis (Dumit, Torner, Leonard), and giving students experience in public-facing communications (Frierson). These examples also show ways that gamemaking can take place at the level of the game's formal rules and structure (Dumit, Torner, Frierson) or at the level of metagaming and player base management (Leonard).

These examples show the range of choices an instructor might make in implementing GME. Instructors might choose whether student games needed to be finished, whether students should receive a public player base for their games, or whether to use the same type of game each time the class is taught. They can also decide whether the class will treat games as standalone objects or sets of hackable power relations that extend into the real world.

These examples likewise showcase very different approaches to creating assignment parameters. Dumit and Larrat-Smith used a rather narrow focus in designing student gamemaking assignments, in which students were tasked with making algorithms that represent the observable behavior of a specific thing in the real world (fracking corporations). This approach to assignment design might be called a "railroaded assignment," because the game's topics and mechanics have been selected for them, putting their gamemaking activities on a more narrow track. This technique seems useful for evoking unique theorizations, especially if the information is structured similar to Dumit and Larrat-Smith's approach, in which gamemaking positions students to "implode" a single object into its attendant relations (Haraway 1997; Dumit 2014). This approach offers a gameful alterative to the traditional seminar classroom structure, while presenting a new "score" for structuring theoretical research (Dumit et al. 2018). This approach might be productively compared to writing research papers, especially theoretical versions.

Torner uses something of a "sandboxed assignment" approach to structure students' gamemaking, giving them a greater level of freedom in mechanic design and worldbuilding. A sandboxed assignment still has constraints. However, by leaving some aspects of the gamemaking project open-ended, students have more room to develop unique interpretations of the material. By giving students enough freedom to design interpretive mechanics as part of game arguments, Torner's approach might be compared to essay writing assignments.

Frierson's approach is more of a mix between a sandboxed and railroaded assignment ("sandroaded"?). Students have tight constraints about mechanics, because they must draw from scientific data and information, leaving little space for interpretation at the level of mechanic. However, Frierson leaves the door open for them to approach a very broad range of data and information; looking over the games on the Earth Games website, we see that some student games approach emissions data from a physics/chemistry standpoint, while others such as *Life of Pika* (2018) look at the toll of climate change on animal populations. Some of the games even approach climate change from the standpoint of politics and policy. In these ways, while knowing that their

games must accurately reflect the research, students are given a level of freedom in selecting their subject matter. This approach might be compared to writing research papers.

Leonard's approach might be called a "worlding assignment"—since it blurs the boundaries between games and the world at large—or perhaps "counter-worlding," because students leverage game interventions that disrupt typical (problematic) worlding practices (Spivak 1985). Her approach begins relatively sandboxed. Students become more railroaded once they have selected their topic, leading to activities that might be compared to research paper and essay assignments.

It is worth considering the difference between Leonard's approach to systems—which treats games as extensions of larger systems—and how systems are approached by Frierson and Dumit. Their students replicate real-world systems in miniature, like building a ship in a bottle, as a "system in a bottle" approach). Frierson and Dumit leverage this approach very differently in relation to the systems they are modelling; in Frierson's approach, students apply frameworks created by others, and game design allows students to focus on understanding, communicating, and modeling pre-existing scientific frameworks and laws. In Dumit's approach, students compose theory, in which game design is leveraged to allow students to more easily identify theory gaps—things present theory doesn't cover—and create provisional theoretical models (Klein 2003).

Torner's approach doesn't have much to do with systems, but rather shows the way the craft of a single mechanic can be an argument. It allows students to use gamemaking to communicate affective and thematic understandings of art, while likewise preparing students to approach game mechanics as congealed interpretations when they encounter them in their own lives.

A Note About GME and Academics of Color

Academics of color and women have been using what might be called GME in their classrooms just as long as white men counterparts, and have made unique, novel contributions. Yet, only the pedagogical efforts by white men educators have received peer-reviewed publications or media coverage. I believe this gap may be attributed to well-documented problems faced by academics of color, especially women academics of color, that make it more difficult to receive recognition for novel work.

Documenting novel pedagogy—especially when your primary field isn't educational research—is a type of "soft labor" in the academy. Writing peer-reviewed papers or distributing press releases

happen in an academic's "free time." Free time is something academics of color, especially women, disproportionally don't have due to structural inequalities within and beyond the academy.[7]

As GME pedagogy emerges, now is a good time to support practitioners of color by documenting their work to ensure their foundational efforts in shaping this pedagogical method do not go overlooked.

Towards empirical studies of GME

Observations by instructors of classrooms that use what might be called gamemaking in education (GME) suggest that this approach may positively influence student interest (Dumit 2017) and strengthen analyses of the material (Dumit 2017, Torner 2016).

7. Women of color already experience disproportionally heavy unpaid community workloads (Banks 2018), and this is stacked upon the increased, unrecognized, and necessary work that academics of color frequently do to mentor undergraduates students of color—mentorship that makes a significant difference in whether or not students of color graduate (Insoon and Onchwari 2018, Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group 2017). "Cultural taxation" is a term coined by Amado Padilla in 1994 to describe forms of career-derailing tokenism experienced by faculty of color when they find themselves pressured to do forms of academic service outside of their specialty to allow the university to spread the appearance of diversity widely across the institution (Padilla 1994). The added, unacknowledged service burden of cultural taxation "is a stealth workload escalator for faculty of color, and like stress, it can be a silent killer of professional careers and aspirations" (Canton 2013).

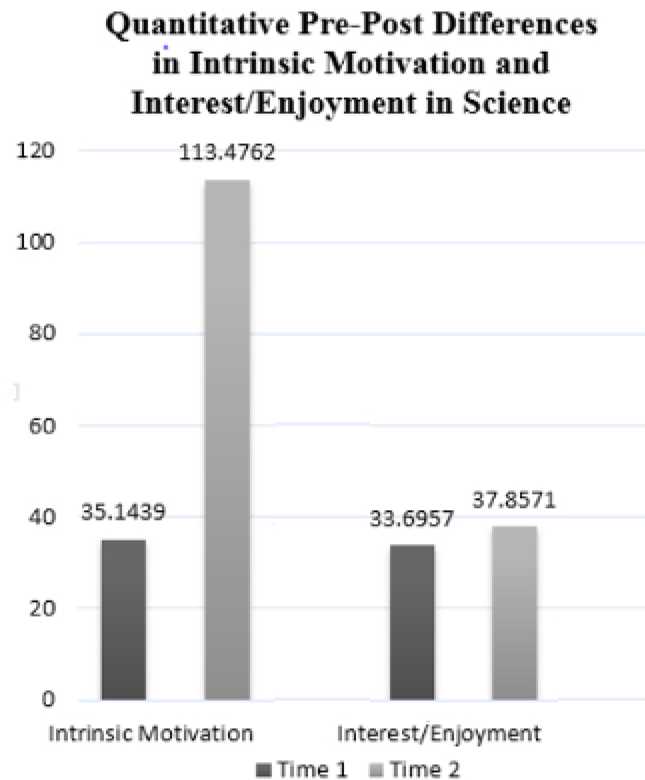

Fig. 4. In the Bowman-Standiford study, students in an eighth-grade classroom (n=21) showed a significant increase in intrinsic motivation to study science and an increased Interest/Enjoyment of science after a game-based intervention that included some materials that might be considered educational gamemaking (Bowman and Standiford 2015).

The Bowman-Standiford Study

While no empirical studies articulate GME as an approach separate from other methods, in one mixed-methods study, students in an eighth-grade classroom (n = 21) received a game-based intervention into their science curriculum which included some activities that might be called educational gamemaking (Bowman and Standiford 2015). In roughly a quarter of the activities, students designed and ran their own content and mechanics for educational games and participated in related scaffolding activities. Following the intervention, investigators found an increase in Intrinsic Motivation and Interest/Enjoyment of science, and they also observed that the gender gap had narrowed in several of the areas tested (Bowman and Standiford 2015).

Suggestions for Future Study

Further study is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational gamemaking activities in the college classroom. One fruitful approach might be to compare a GME intervention with comparable traditional methods of teaching the same material, such as the essay and the research paper.

Other studies might compare the GME approach with game-based methods that do not use gamemaking. It should be noted that that gameplay is often present in GME curricula, insofar as gameplay and playtesting can facilitate active experimentation and concrete experience, ensuring that students are able to complete an experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984). This means GME activities would not need to exclude gameplay, but rather, the game-based activities they are compared to would need to exclude gamemaking.

Additionally, analog RPGs such as LARPs and TTRPGs might need to be analyzed separately, since typical gameplay in these media often requires a level of gamemaking. For example, in many LARP and TTRPG traditions, players regularly design mechanics and engage in game content creation as part of gameplay. Edmond Chang, for example, has used campaign LARP gameplay to teach English Literature classes at Ohio University, in which RPG "gameplay" activities are leveraged towards students creating game materials that engage with topics in literature. In such cases, the line between what is usually thought of as gameplay and gamemaking becomes blurred. This should be considered when studying the educational use of LARPs and TTRPGs.

Testing might focus on things like motivation (Bowman Standiford 2015), cognitive skills in the subject matter (Mutmainah and Indriayu 2019), retention of knowledge (Alkharashi 2020), and rates of student retention and graduation (Prussia and Weis 2003). Developing common language to better taxonomize gamemaking activities may also be useful to this type of educational research.

References

Alkharashi, Majed. 2020. "Comparing Experiential versus Conventional Learning on Knowledge Retention for Teaching Surgery to Medical Graduates." *Saudi J Ophthalmol* 34, no. 2: 107-–110.

Banks, Nina. 2020. "Black Women in the United States and Unpaid Collective Work: Theorizing the Community as a Site of Production." *The Review of Black Political Economy* 47, no. 4: 343–362.

Boluk, Stephanie and Patrick LeMieux. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. 2010. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. 2014. "Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review." In *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman, 112–131. Los Angeles: WyrdCon.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. 2017. "A Matter of Trust – Larp and Consent Culture Techniques." *Nordic Larp*, February 3. https://nordiclarp.org/2017/02/03/matter-trust-larp-consent-culture/

Bowman, Sarah Lynne, and Andhe Standiford. 2015. "Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 5, no. 1: 4–25.

Brahms, Lisa. 2014. Making as a Learning Process: Identifying and Supporting Family Learning in Informal Settings. PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

Canton, Cecil. 2013. "The 'Cultural Taxation' of Faculty of Color in the Academy," *California Faculty Magazine*, December 5.

Dashiell, Steven. 2018. "Rules as Written: Game Algorithms as Game Capital." *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/09/rules-as-written/.

Dashiell, Steven. 2017. "Rules Lawyering as Symbolic and Linguistic Capital," *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 5. https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/11/rules-lawyering/.

Dumit, Joseph. 2014. "Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 29: 344–362.

Dumit, Joseph. 2017. "Game Design as STS Research." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 3: 603. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2017.132.

Dumit, Joseph, Kevin O'Connor, Duskin Drum, and Sarah McCullough. 2018. "Improvisation." *The Society for Cultural Anthropology*, March 29. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/improvisation.

Gershenfeld, Neil. 2007. *Fab: The Coming Revolution on Your Desktop–From Personal Computers to Personal Fabrication.* New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Gutwill, Joshua, Nina Hido, and Lisa Sindorf. 2015. "Research to Practice: Observing Learning in Tinkering Activities." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 58, no. 2: 151–168.

Han, Insoon and Jacqueline Ariri Onchwari. 2018. "Development and Implementation of a Culturally Responsive Mentoring for Faculty and Staff of Color." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 5, no. 3.

Haraway, Donna. 1997. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

Hsu, Yu Chang, Sally Baldwin, and Yu Hui Ching. 2017. "Learning through Making and Maker Education." *TechTrends* 61, no. 6: 589–594.

Jagoda, Patrick. 2020. *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jayathirtha, Gayithri, and Yasmin B. Kafai. 2019. "Electronic Textiles in Computer Science Education: A Synthesis of Efforts to Broaden Participation, Increase Interest, and Deepen Learning." In *SIGCSE 2019 – Proceedings of the 50th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education*, 713–719. https://doi.org/10.1145/3287324.32873430.

Kafai, Yasmin, and Kylie Peppler. 2011. "Youth, Technology, and DIY: Developing Participatory Competencies in Creative Media Production." *Review of Research in Education* 35, no. 1: 89–119.

Kafai, Yasmin, Deborah Fields, and Kristin Searle. 2014. "Electronic Textiles as Disruptive Designs: Supporting and Challenging Maker Activities in Schools." *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 4: 532–57.

Kemper, Jonaya. 2017. "The Battle of Primrose Park: Playing for Emancipatory Bleed in Fortune & Felicity." *Nordic Larp*, June 21. https://nordiclarp.org/2017/06/21/the-battle-of-primrose-park/.

Kemper, Jonaya. 2018. "The Stories We Must Tell: Using Larp to Mitigate Cultural Trauma." Paper presented at the 2018 Living Games Conference, Academic Panel 2: Bleed and Transformation. Boston, MA. May 17–20.

Kemper, Jonaya. 2020. "Wyrding the Self: The Mythical Norm, Internalized Oppression, and Internalized Bias." *Nordic Larp*, May 18. https://nordiclarp.org/2020/05/18/wyrding-the-self/.

Klein, Ursula. 2003. *Experiments, Models, Paper Tools: Cultures of Organic Chemistry in the Nineteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kolb, David. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.

Koljonen, Johanna. 2020. "Larp Safety Design Fundamentals." *RPG学研究 | Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies* 1: 3e–19e.

Leonard, Diana. 2016. "Conflict and Change: Testing a Life-Cycle-Derived Model of Larp Group Dynamics." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 6, no. 1: 15–22.

Leonard, Diana and Tessa Thurman. 2018. “Bleed-out on the Brain: The Neuroscience of Character-to-Player Spillover in Larp.” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 8, no. 1: 9–15.

Leonard, Diana. 2019. “They’re a Sorry Bunch: Perceptions of Outgroup Entitativity Shape the Receipt of Intergroup Apology.” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 22, no. 4: 549–562.

Leonard, Diana. 2021. “Playing for Pain: Benefits, Pitfalls, & Strategies for Role-Playing Marginalized Characters.” Lecture as part of the Transformative Play Initiative lecture series, Department of Game Design, Uppsala University. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0KJo46vtNE.

Martin, Lee. 2015. “The Promise of the Maker Movement for Education.” *Journal of Pre-College Engineering Education Research* 5, no. 1: 30–39. https://doi.org/10.7771/2157-9288.1099

Milburn, Colin. 2018. *Respawn: Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mutmainah, Rukayah and Mintasih Indriayu. 2019. “Effectiveness of Experiential Learning-based Teaching Material in Mathematics.” *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 8, no. 1: 57–63.

Passarelli, Angela and David Kolb. 2011. “The Learning Way: Learning from Experience as the Path to Lifelong Learning and Development.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, edited by Manuel London. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Padilla, Amanda. 1994. “Ethnic Minority Scholars, Research, and Mentoring: Current and Future Issues.” *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 4: 24–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/1176259

Prussia, Greg and William Weis. 2003. “Experiential Learning Effects on Retention: Results from a Required MBA Course.” *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice* 5, no. 4: 397–407.

Richard, Gabriela T. and Yasmin Kafai. 2015. “Making Physical and Digital Games with E-textiles: A Workshop for Youth Making Responsive Wearable Games and Controllers.” In *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Interaction Design and Children*, ACM SIGCHI, 399–402. DOI:10.1145/2771839.2771926

Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group. 2017. “The Burden of Invisible Work in Academia: Social Inequalities and Time Use in Five University Departments.” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 39: 228–245.

Strobel, Johannes, & Angela van Barneveld. 2009. “When is PBL More Effective? A Meta-synthesis

of Meta-analyses Comparing PBL to Conventional Classrooms." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning* 3, no. 1: 44–58.

Torner, Evan. 2016. "Teaching German Literature Through Larp: A Proposition." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 6, no. 1: 55–59.

Bio

Samara Hayley Steele, MFA (she/they) is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at UC Davis. She has been a practitioner and organizer within the maker movement for over a decade and a gamemaker since 2002. They are a former foster kid. For those interested in incorporating GME into their classroom, resources and syllabi may be found at: samarasteele.com/GME

2. From Boards and Chits to Circuit Boards and Bits

MIREK STOLEE

Abstract

Since the early history of digital computing, analog games have been adapted into digital forms. More recently, adaptations are emerging in the spaces between analog and digital games, notably in designer board games. Fantasy Flight Games has advocated for companion mobile app integration in their games, and publisher CMON recently announced Teburu, a physical board game system with integrated electronic elements. Prior frameworks for understanding analog game adaptation frame games as entirely digital or analog, making them unable to adequately address these hybrid examples. This article introduces an object-focused approach based on Noah Wardrip-Fruin's operational logics. By framing analog board games as collections of objects, this approach includes games across the analog-digital spectrum based on which specific objects and rules are made digital, and how. A descriptive analysis of board game adaptations dissects adaptation into three subprocesses: mediation of game objects, digitization of game information, and codification of rules. The combination of these subprocesses enables the analysis of various existing hybridizations and illuminates new potential forms of analog-digital hybridity in board games.

Keywords:

board games, analog games, hybrid games, digital games, adaptation, framework

---

The board game *Gloomhaven* (Childres 2017) is massive in terms of both components and rules. Its box dominates any shelf and weighs over twenty pounds. It contains separate card decks for 35 types of enemies, cards and miniatures for several player classes, and over 100 cardboard tiles representing battle arenas. These numerous components make it difficult to set up, manage during gameplay, and organize for future play sessions. The diversity in the scenarios and the challenges they pose for the players makes the rules similarly difficult to manage. Each enemy has

individual statistics based on the chosen difficulty of the scenario, and players must manage their health, status effects, and actions in addition to selecting their own moves. Even outside of playing the game, coordinating a group of up to four players over the time it takes to finish the campaign is an undertaking in itself.

To play *Gloomhaven* digitally, in contrast, is as simple as launching the software and selecting a mission. In Flaming Fowl's (2019) PC version, the miniature figures and enemy standees come to life in fully animated 3D models that are automatically placed in their starting locations. The software replaces cardboard tiles representing the game's dungeons with furnished 3D environments. Enemy actions are performed automatically, and the tokens used to keep track of their statistics are replaced with standard video game health bars. When the session is finished, the game's components and any progress made in the campaign is stored away in computer memory, ready to be retrieved for next time the players want to play together online.

Gloomhaven could have been created as a native digital game. Its PC version resembles digital turn-based dungeon crawler games more than it does a physical board game. But its board game form has sat at the top-rated spot on board game database BoardGameGeek since late 2017. Its sequel board game, *Frosthaven* (Childres 2020), raised almost 13 million dollars on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter, the most of any board game project on the site to date (Gebhart 2020). *Gloomhaven*'s physical form appeals to many players. Yet, the game can be played in several forms of varying digitality. Besides the fully digital PC version, players might also choose to play with a companion application. Mobile apps like *Gloomhaven Helper* (Esoteric Software 2018) help manage the enemy statistics and abilities in game. Other players might play GabrielM's (2018) version of *Gloomhaven* on the digital platform *Tabletop Simulator* (Berserk Games 2015). This version features all of the game's components in a physics sandbox, but without the rules enforcement offered by Flaming Fowl's version.

These versions lie on a spectrum between fully analog and fully digital. Current frameworks for understanding adaptations of analog games are not robust enough to include these spaces between purely analog and digital forms, but they provide a foundation for a broader, object-focused approach to studying analog game adaptation. Like a film adaptation of a novel translates the story from a written medium to a visual one, a digital adaptation of a board game translates elements from the physical game to a computer game. Linda Hutcheon's (2006) work on adaptations helps contextualize this process in relation to other forms of transmedia adaptation. Hutcheon centers this analysis around stories. Written texts like novels tell stories, visual media like television and film show them, and computational media like games allow users to interact with them.

But while board games certainly can tell stories through their gameplay, for many games that is not the primary focus. Then what is being adapted between these versions of the same board game? Grabarczyk and Aarseth's (2019) ontological framework proposes an answer. Their

framework includes a category called “game adaptations” for board game adaptations of video games. *Bloodborne: The Card Game* (Lang 2016), for instance, is adapted from the video game *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015). Per Grabarczyk and Aarseth, these board game adaptations resemble their digital counterparts in two “layers”—mechanics and presentation.

In *Bloodborne*, players take the role of Hunters who fight monsters and cosmic horrors. Players take this same role in *Bloodborne: The Card Game*, fighting many of the same foes featured in the video game. Like the video game, the board game rewards players with “blood echoes” when they defeat enemies, and those are lost when the player’s character dies. The board game’s presentation also resembles the video game: the typography on the cards, the art for the enemies, and weapons that can be equipped appear to be taken directly from *Bloodborne*. It is not the story, but the presentation and the mechanics that are transferred and changed in the process of game adaptation.

Jesper Juul (2003) comes to a similar conclusion. TO Juul, the difference between a physical game and its digital adaptation is how they store the game state and the way their rules are enforced. Juul positions games as finite state machines that at any moment in time can be in only one state. For physical board games, the placement and orientation of individual pieces collectively store the current game state. But this is not true for all tabletop games. Tabletop RPGs store certain elements of the game state in the minds of players. But in many board games, players can read the game state by observing the pieces. A board game’s presentation layer consists of all its individual game components. The game state, then, is stored by the presentation layer’s objects. In a digital game, that same information is stored in computer memory.

This state changes over time, according to the rules. Changes in a physical game state are reflected in movements of the pieces. Players cannot change the game state arbitrarily during play; outside of actions available to the player, the pieces cannot be moved. In Juul’s framework, the enforcement of these rules is called *computation*. Players collectively enforce the rules of a physical board game because the machinery of the game runs on human processing. Computation is the enforcement of the game’s mechanical layer.

Although Grabarczyk and Aarseth only explicitly describe the unilateral adaptation from a video game to a board game, the structure of their framework affords reversal. Adapting board games is a two-part process: adapting the presentation and the mechanics. To transfer the presentation layer is to recreate each of the game’s objects for the new medium. We can use the term *mediation* for this process. Mediation refashions the objects for the new medium, and in doing so, creates distance between the player and object. In digital versions of board games, this means that the object is represented on a screen and players need an interface like a mouse or touch screen to interact with it.

When adapting the mechanical layer, there is no need to change the board game’s mechanics.

Designed to be run by humans, board games usually have simpler mechanics than video games and can be recreated on computers. As Altice (2014) notes, games might even gain mechanical or numerical complexity in the process of adaptation. Board game rules can be converted into Boolean logic in the game's programming without loss of mechanical detail. We can call this process *codification*.

In both frameworks, *Gloomhaven* and its PC adaptation are placed on opposite sides of the spectrum of board game media. On one side lies *Gloomhaven* with its physical game state and human-enforced rules, and on the other is *Gloomhaven* on PC, with digitally mediated components and rules enforced by the computer. They help us understand the relationship between *Gloomhaven*'s purely analog and fully digital forms. However, the spaces in between where the *Tabletop Simulator* version and *Gloomhaven Helper* reside, are not yet clear. These frameworks are insufficient for understanding these liminal spaces because they treat both the presentation layer and the mechanical layer as monoliths, not allowing for partial adaptation of either element.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin's operational logics allow us to break the presentation and mechanical layers into smaller units that can be adapted individually. Operational logics are the basic units of game mechanics, "combinations of abstract processes and their communicative roles." (Wardrip-Fruin 2020, 47) In *Gloomhaven*, the rule that a piece can move from one hex tile to another and cause an adjacent piece to lose resources is an abstract process. When designers assign specific board game components to those mechanics, thereby creating the game's presentation, those processes take on communicative roles. Our character moves toward an enemy and attacks.

An object-focused approach based on operational logics understands game state and computation as a result of the mediation of specific objects and the codification of abstract processes that govern those objects. Individual objects are either physical or digital, and each contributes to the collective game state. Rules pertaining to those objects are either codified or not, giving the computer control over those components and their relevant abstract processes. This perspective allows for not only combinations of mediation without codification and codification without mediation, but also partial mediation and partial codification. We can analyze mediation and codification individually and observe their impact in terms of Juul's framework.

Mediation and the Game State

Pandemic (Asmodee Digital 2018), an adaptation of the board game *Pandemic* (Leacock 2005) for Android devices, is a typical example of the mediation of a digital adaptation. It copies the presentation layer almost entirely from the physical game. *Pandemic*'s Android version uses the

same art assets for the cards as the board game, so the sprites of the card faces look exactly the same as the physical cards. But *Pandemic*'s plastic tokens and pawns are replaced with 2D sprites.

Mediation aims to recreate affordances of the physical object in its new digital representation. For players to read the game state, the representations need to convey the same information as their physical counterpart. Each card in *Pandemic* has a suit and the name of a city on the board, and the Android version displays that same information on its cards. These cards and tokens can no longer be held physically, and have lost many of the material pleasures described by Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith (2016). But with digitality comes new affordances. The computer can move the game's cards and tokens autonomously, allowing the game to be set up and managed automatically.

Juanito' *Pandemic Scripted Setup* (2020), a fan-made version of *Pandemic* on *Tabletop Simulator*, features similar benefits of digital mediation. *Tabletop Simulator* is a digital platform on which many different board games can be played. Modders can add games by importing media assets like images of card faces or 3D models of game components. These mediated objects can be controlled by the computer, allowing the game's setup to be automated, or "scripted."

Games on platforms like *Tabletop Simulator* allow us to isolate the effects of mediation from those of codification. Unlike *Pandemic* on Android, *Pandemic Scripted Setup* does not enforce the game's rules. However, its digital objects are still arranged spatially on the game's digital tabletop to recreate the game's human-readable game state. The ways in which game components are mediated enable certain kinds of gameplay. This is most obvious in the genre of dexterity games, board games requiring the use of physics. *Jenga* (1983) tasks players with removing wooden blocks from a tower without causing the tower to collapse.

Vassal Engine (Kinney 2000), another tabletop platform, mediates all components in two dimensions, without physics calculations. This form of mediation suffices for the wargames *Vassal* was originally designed to support, but not for dexterity games (Flaibani and Kinney 2010). But *Tabletop Simulator* has its own constraints. Any cards on top of each other will form a deck and the system automatically aligns them in one orientation. Playing a game that stacks cards perpendicularly or in other unusual ways would be difficult. *Pandemic* can be played on both *Tabletop Simulator* and *Vassal*, but that is not the case for every game. Both platforms mediate objects in a digital space accessible by multiple players, but the games those players can play are determined by the way in which those objects are mediated.

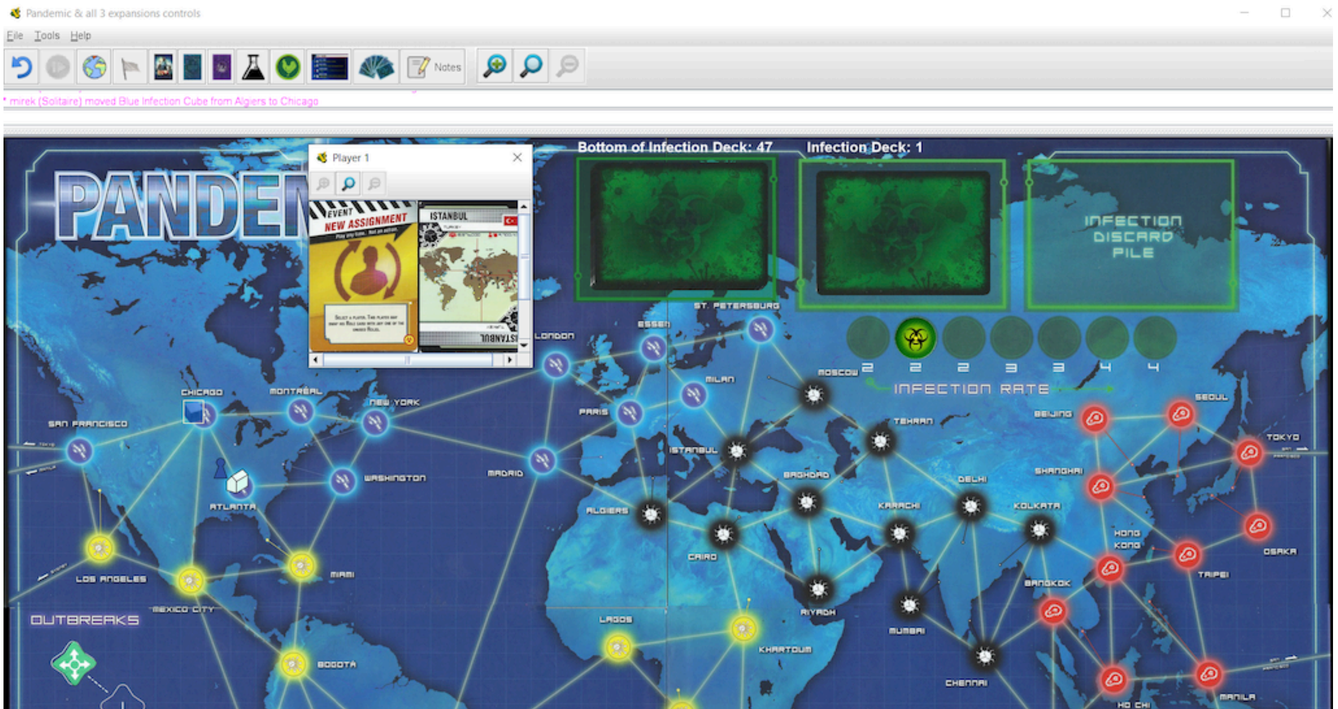

Figure 1: Pandemic module (2020) on Vassal Engine

Figure 2: Pandemic: Scripted Setup on Tabletop Simulator.

While there are many *Tabletop Simulator* mods with scripted elements, other mods rely on human computation. This is mediation without codification, but it is also representative of a particular type of digital game state that is not quite the same as what Juul describes. The game state of these mods is still stored in the positions of objects, only they are digital. This creates a digital game state readable by humans, but not computers. In *Pandemic* on *Tabletop Simulator*, this means no variables track the number of cubes in each city, the locations of player pawns, or the cards in players' hands. What is missing in these versions is the distillation of mechanical information into computer variables that can be referenced in code. We can call that process *digitization*, and it is an important prerequisite for digital computation.

Codification, Digitization, and Computation

The mechanics of *Pandemic* on Android are identical to those of the physical version. The challenges posed by the game's rules and how players can respond are indistinguishable between versions. When codified, however, these rules are no longer optional. Players cannot make their own house rules in *Pandemic*'s Android version nor accidentally cheat the game's systems. One potential benefit is that players do not need to comprehensively understand the rules to play. Physical *Pandemic* is simply a box of assorted objects until a player reads the rulebook. As the digital version reacts to their actions automatically, players can explore the game's mechanics. But digital computation requires an additional step beyond codification.

Pandemic on Android handles the execution of player actions as well as the presentation of challenges. At the end of each player's turn in *Pandemic*, several cards are drawn from a deck to determine the location of new disease cubes in what is called the "infection phase." To execute that action, the system needs to read the current game state. Cities in *Pandemic* can hold three disease cubes of a single color. If a fourth is supposed to be added, the city instead experiences an "outbreak" that spawns a cube in every adjacent city. If the computer were unable to read the current game state before the infection phase, it could not handle outbreaks. *Pandemic* demonstrates that digitization, in addition to codification, enables the system to enforce the game's rules.

Just as digital mediation can exist without digitization, a computer-readable game state can be created without mediating the game's components. One approach is to modify game components so that their characteristics can be detected by the computer. Mandryk, Maranan, and Inkpen's *False Prophets* (2002) is an example of a research project using this technique. Each component is fitted with an LED that is detectable by phototransistors. The computer uses this information to dynamically reveal the game's map, which is projected onto the table as players move their components.

A more recent example is CMON Games' *Teburu* (2019a). CMON has an interest in maintaining the materiality of their components. Their former company name, CoolMiniOrNot, alludes to their history of providing many plastic miniature figures in their games. Using embedded electronic sensors in the bases of miniature figures and networked dice, Teburu aims to make the physical game state seamlessly readable by the computer. The computer instantly recognizes dice rolls, maintaining digitization without digital mediation and without requiring additional player input to the system.

CMON (2019b) calls *Teburu* "the future of board gaming," but the digital computation it provides comes at a cost. Xu et al. (2011) describe board games as a media that combine physical and social interactions. They found that "chores" like shuffling decks and maneuvering physical objects encouraged players to track what the other players were doing and engage with them. They also found the social negotiation necessary to collectively enforce rules was pleasurable for some players. Mediation, digitization, and computation can remove such chores from the experience, to the detriment of players who enjoy them.

Partial Adaptation

Other games target a middle ground. Some components may be digitally mediated while others take physical shape, leading to games that have a dual game state: stored partially in physical components and partially in computer memory. Only some of these games' operational logics are adapted. This approach is common in companion mobile applications for physical board games. If the physical components are unnecessary, the game essentially becomes a fully digital game, so board game publisher Fantasy Flight Games is particularly careful in their adaptation process. *Star Wars*: *Imperial Assault* (2014), a dungeon-crawler set in the Star Wars universe, received a companion app called *Legends of the Alliance* (2017) after its release. In the base game, one player took the role of the Empire, facilitating the enemy side of the game against up to four other players. With the addition of *Legends of the Alliance*, players can play the game fully cooperatively, and the app takes up the Empire's mantle.

Legends of the Alliance shows that mediation, digitization, and computation can operate on the level of individual game components. The plastic miniatures that represent player characters and enemies exist only in physical form. Since the app does not know their locations, the enemy AI is limited; the app provides instructions for what the enemy characters do, but relies on the players to perform those actions on the physical board. Were the player characters and enemies tracked digitally, though, *Imperial Assault* would become a video game. For *Imperial Assault*, digital mediation and digitization are purposefully limited to preserve the importance of the physical components and allow players to enforce rules pertaining to those components.

Figure 3: An enemy activation in Legends of the Alliance.

Gloomhaven

We can now use this object-focused approach to analyze the various forms of *Gloomhaven*. As a physical game, it feels as if it is fighting against the limitations of its medium. The complex enemy AI requires both intimate knowledge of the rules and the use of many additional components. The existence of so many different digital versions of the game that make it easier to play points to its inaccessibility. These versions of the game attempt to reduce the complexity of either components or rules through partial mediation, digitization, and codification. An object-focused approach allows us to understand not only the relationship between *Gloomhaven*'s physical form and its PC adaptation, but also the shades in between.

Using apps like *Gloomhaven Helper* in conjunction with the physical pieces hybridizes *Gloomhaven* through mediation. The game state becomes easier to track by removing the need for several of the game's tokens and cards. Enemy health is tracked by pressing plus or minus signs on the app screen, rather than by adding or removing tokens. The enemy action cards for each group are placed in the order in which they will resolve. By mediating the relevant components and codifying the rules for enemy resource tracking and action determination, *Gloomhaven Helper* reduces both

the number of components required and the need to manage those rules. But as the app has no knowledge of the game state beyond these components, enemy turns and all other mechanics must be completed manually using the figures on the board.

The *Tabletop Simulator* version of the game goes a step further by digitally mediating all of the game's components. All the game's pieces are translated into digital cards and figures that exist in *Tabletop Simulator*'s physics sandbox. With the click of a button, players can set up each of the game's scenarios. Enemy health is tracked on the figure itself using a health bar, removing the need to cross-reference the figures with their health information that is present, even when using *Gloomhaven Helper*. The initiative tracking used in *Gloomhaven Helper* for the enemies is expanded to include the initiative of player characters, while other rules of the game are still left to the players to enforce. Players move their pieces around the board manually and execute the actions of the enemies without computational assistance.

Figure 4: A player plays the card "Provoking Roar" in Gloomhaven on Tabletop Simulator.

Figure 5: The same situation in Gloomhaven's standalone digital version.

At the far end of the digital spectrum, we find *Gloomhaven*'s PC version. The mechanics of the game are still largely identical, and the effects of mediation are readily apparent. The plastic miniatures of the base game are now fully animated 3D models. While character portraits are taken directly from the art assets of the physical game, *Gloomhaven* on PC appears very different. Even the cards that players use to select their actions hardly resemble physical cards. Cards in the physical game display two possible actions that players can select. In the digital game, actions become two separate buttons that the player can click. All the rules are completely managed in this version, meaning the game does not allow players to move their pieces in ways counter to the rules, and handles the enemy turns automatically.

The ideal stopping point on the spectrum will depend on the player. Each position on the spectrum offers different conveniences and pleasures. To revel in physical excess is simply not possible in the digital space of the *Tabletop Simulator* version, but online play using *Gloomhaven Helper* would require a sophisticated audio-video setup. For players seeking a streamlined game, it's possible that Flaming Fowl's digital version becomes the definitive experience. The existence of so many options implies that many players find the base game difficult to play. Mobile app stores and platforms like *Tabletop Simulator* have opened the doors to fans who want to add digital elements to their games. While *Gloomhaven Helper* is officially licensed, many other companion apps for the game are fan-created. The versions on *Tabletop Simulator* are similarly created by fan modders.

Players choose not only to play adaptations, but to perform the process themselves. But for those who sought out *Gloomhaven* because of its abundance of bits and systems, these adaptations will not suffice.

Taking an object-focused approach to board game components allows us to apply Juul's (2003) framework to board games. Juul provides examples of combinations of types of game states and computation, contrasting the analog game states and human computation of board games with the digital memory and digital computation of video games. He does not present examples that combine analog game states with digital computation (or vice-versa), but we see these combinations in board games. We also see that game states and computation individually need not be completely analog or digital. Many hybrid games feature both analog and digital components, and parts of the rules that are handled automatically while others are socially negotiated.

Board games are sets of objects tied together by rules. Adapting them digitally is a three-part process: their objects are digitally mediated, their game state information is digitized, and their rules are codified into the game's programming. Board game adaptation is a spectrum from analog to digital, based on degrees of these processes. The benefits of digital elements beckon designers to push games further down the spectrum, inventing new forms of digital-analog hybridization. Hybridization challenges conceptions of presentation and mechanics as simple binary terms, each being entirely physical or entirely digital. Understanding analog games as collections of operational logics, rules with associated components, prepares us to better examine these liminal spaces.

References

Altice, Nathan. 2014. "The Playing Card Platform." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 4. http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/11/the-playing-card-platform/.

Asmodee Digital. 2018. *Pandemic: The Board Game*. Asmodee, Android.

Berserk Games. 2015. *Tabletop Simulator*. Berserk Games, PC game.

Childres, Isaac. 2017. *Gloomhaven*. Cephalofair Games, board game. 2nd ed.

Childres, Isaac. 2021. *Frosthaven*. Cephalofair Games, board game.

CMON. 2019a. *Teburu*. CMON, board game platform.

CMON Games. 2019b. "Teburu: A New Evolution in Board Games." July 18. https://www.cmon.com/news/teburu-a-new-evolution-in-board-games.

Esoteric Software. 2018. *Gloomhaven Helper*. Esoteric Software, Android.

Fantasy Flight Games. 2017. *Imperial Assault: Legends of the Alliance*. Fantasy Flight Games, Android.

Flaibani, Roberto, and Rodney Kinney. 2010. "The Master and His Vassal (in English)." https://iltredicesimocavaliere.wordpress.com/info/the-master-and-his-vassal-in-english/.

Flaming Fowl Studios. 2019. *Gloomhaven: Digital Edition*. Asmodee Digital, PC game.

FromSoftware. *Bloodborne*. 2015. Sony Computer Entertainment, Playstation 4.

GabrielM. 2018. *Gloomhaven: – Fantasy Setup (Scripted UI)*. Steam Workshop, Tabletop Simulator mod.

Grabarczyk, Pawel, and Espen Aarseth. 2019. "Port or Conversion? An Ontological Framework for Classifying Game Versions." In *DiGRA '19 – Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, August 2019.

Hutcheon, Linda, and Siobhan O'Flynn. 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Juanito. 2020. *Pandemic Scripted Setup*. Steam Workshop, Tabletop Simulator mod.

Juul, Jesper. 2003. "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness." In *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, 30–45.

Kemppainen, Justin, Corey Konieczka, and Jonathan Ying. 2014. *Star Wars: Imperial Assault*. Fantasy Flight Games, board game.

Kinney, Rodney. 2002. *Vassal Engine*. PC software.

Lang, Eric. 2016. *Bloodborne: The Card Game*. CMON, board game.

Leacock, Matt. 2008. *Pandemic*. Z-Man Games, Inc, board game.

Mandryk, Regan L. and Diego S. Maranan. 2002. "False Prophets: Exploring Hybrid Board/Video games." In *CHI '02 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computer Systems – CHI '02, April* 2002, 640–641. https://doi.org/10.1145/506486.506523.

Rogerson, Melissa J., Martin Gibbs, and Wally Smith. "'I Love All the Bits': The Materiality of Boardgames." In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, May* 2016, 3956–3969. https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858433.

Scott, Leslie. 1983. *Jenga*. Leslie Scott Associates, Board game.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. 2020. *How Pac-Man Eats*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Xu, Yan, Evan Barba, Iulian Radu, Maribeth Gandy, and Blair MacIntyre. "Chores Are Fun: Understanding Social Play in Board Games for Digital Tabletop Game Design." In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play, January* 2011.

Bio

Mirek Stolee is a lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he teaches students in the Computer Science: Computer Game Design and Art & Design: Games and Playable Media programs. His research explores the relationships between digital and analog objects and spaces, focusing on escape rooms and board games.

3. “Are You a Planeswalker?” Remediating Magic: The Gathering

JACK MURRAY

Abstract

This paper analyzes several digital adaptations of Wizards of the Coast’s analog trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* in order to develop two axes for describing digital adaptations of analog games, in order to identify what experiences are important for each approach. The first axis draws on Richard Bolter and David Grusin’s theory of remediation, which maps adaptations of the interface on a scale of immediacy to hypermediacy. This paper situates *Magic* as an analog platform that facilitates play through interactions between the assemblage of components, rules, and players, to focus on the mechanical, material, and social interactions that make up the interface. Then the narrative and thematic elements are analyzed to explore the relationship between *Magic*’s narrative universe and the act of play, and introduce the second axis which ranges from thematic to ludic adaptations. The second axis begins with Cameron Kunzelman’s framework of subjective and affective adaptations for analyzing film-to-game adaptations, then is expanded to include analog-game-to-digital game adaptations. By introducing questions of player subjectivity and affective engagement when playing analog games, this paper offers an axis ranging from thematic to ludic adaptations in dialogue with Kunzelman’s framework. These axes are then used to pose questions about what gets lost, added, changed, and preserved during the process of adaptation and how each approach to adaptation indicates a specific experience.

Keywords:

Magic: The Gathering, Shandalar, MTG Arena, Remediation, Adaptation, Affect, Platform Studies

---

This paper is broadly about how we can approach the question of analog to digital remediation, and more specifically about the different ways that people have attempted to adapt the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* to digital computer games. The impetus for this analysis is to examine different approaches to adaptation and what experiences each approach privileges. In

other words: what is changed, preserved, or lost when moving from an analog platform to a digital one? To answer this question, this paper develops two axes on which these approaches can be mapped. One is an axis of immediacy to hypermediacy drawn from David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (1999) theory of remediation. The other is based on Cameron Kunzelman's (2016) work on affective and subjective adaptation and ranges from primarily ludic approaches to primarily thematic approaches to gaming.

To begin, I want to work through what *Magic* is, not just as a card game, but as an entire platform assemblage. By "platform" I refer to Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort's (2009) concept of platform studies through their in-depth analysis of gaming hardware and the ways that it affords specific kinds of creative production and play. More recent work on platforms have argued for a broader approach to platforms that situates them within their larger media ecologies (Apperley and Parikka 2018) and communities of play (Švelch 2016). Additionally, myself and others have argued for a larger understanding of what it means for analog games to function as platforms and media assemblages (Murray 2020). Of particular interest are interventions into platform studies from the analog game studies space that position the material components (Altice 2014), the rules, and players as part of a system that functions in much the same way other hardware and software platforms operate (LaLone 2019). In the context of *Magic*, this lets us imagine the act of sitting down to play a game as one way to interface with the larger assemblage of play. The description of the material aspects of play lets us describe the experiences and codified processes involved in playing the game.

When two or more players play *Magic*, they take turns playing cards that contain explicit and implicit instructions that describe actions and influence the game state in a process that seems remarkably similar to coding a computer program. Indeed, the intricate interactions described in the formal rules of *Magic* and the actions stated on each card are complex enough to meet the criteria for Turing completeness (Churchill, Biderman, and Herrick 2019), which determines whether a program can be written in the system that can theoretically (though not necessarily realistically) be used to solve any computational problem. The physical act of placing cards is important for this because, as Paul Booth notes, a game component "doesn't *come into being* as a meaning making object until it has been placed on the board and its use assumed by the player" (Booth 2021), which emphasizes the importance of the material components for players' ability to interpret and execute the procedures of *Magic*. The materiality of *Magic* is one of the reasons it makes a prime target for digital and hybrid adaptations.

In addition to its computational aspects, the format of *Magic* also serves a narrative purpose. Narrative play in *Magic* functions in much the same way that Booth identifies for paratextual board games, in that they ask us to interpret the events of the game within the context of their own world (Booth 2015). Wizards of the Coast has invested many resources into establishing the narrative world of *Magic: The Gathering* through transmedia endeavors, including developing more than

70 books, graphic novels, and crossover works such as supplemental materials for *Dungeons & Dragons*. In addition to the paratexts, with the marketing tagline "You are a Planeswalker," *Magic* positions the player within this narrative framing and each game of *Magic* inherently becomes part of this narrative universe. In *Magic*, players are planeswalkers—magic users who draw on the power of the land to cast powerful spells and summon allies. Each player's deck is referred to as their "library" and the cards in it make up the spells in their repertoire. Every time an action is taken by a player, it translates both mechanically (as described by the rules) and narratively (as described by the names, art, and flavor text printed on each card). In addition to assembling a set of instructions to be executed each turn, players create a timeline of narrative events that describe the battle between themselves as a planeswalker character. The narrative framing of *Magic* extends beyond individual instances of play and is often discussed on *Magic* player forums. For example, the r/Vorthos subreddit, named for the player archetype that engages with narrative themes (Rosewater 2006), is dedicated to discussions of *Magic* stories and lore.

Figure 1: Flavor interaction between Defenestrate and Creeping Inn. Drawn by @flavorjudgedrw. Used with permission from the artist. https://twitter.com/flavorjudgedraw/status/1439260677030350850

Theme is a guiding principle for *Magic* on a ludic level as well. Each of the five colors of mana used to cast spells and their combinations have a specific guiding archetype that is mechanically and thematically reflected. Additionally, sets of cards are designed around an established set of thematic archetypes, drawing on and contributing to the larger narrative world of *Magic*. Color and set themes play off of each other and allow players to build their own flavor into the

decks they construct. The term “flavor win” is often applied to decks that have a win condition that adheres to the broader themes, such as playing a combination of a character and their companion or signature spell to win the game. On the other hand, there are often unintended implications when card flavor intersects with the procedural and mechanical effects of cards. This engenders another kind of narrative play where players imagine scenarios with cool, terrifying, and humorous outcomes based on their ability to interpret the combination of theme and mechanics with a narrative lens. A prime example of this is the Twitter account @flavorjudgedraw, which provides simple illustrations of the outcomes of user submitted card interactions (Figure 1). From these examples we can clearly see that narrative play in *Magic* is facilitated by the relationships between the material components, the codified rules, and the player community.

Remediation

With these elements of *Magic* in mind, let us return to the questions at hand: how is *Magic* being adapted to digital platforms and how do we describe these approaches in a way that highlights important decisions about the adaptation process? One way to approach these questions is through David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s theory of remediation. According to Bolter, remediation describes the tendency for one medium be represented within another through a “process of cultural competition between or among technologies” (Bolter 2001, 23) that “define themselves by borrowing from, paying homage to, critiquing, and refashioning their predecessors” (24). The process of remediation exists on an axis with “hypermediacy” on one end and “immediacy” on the other. Immediacy describes the tendency or desire for the interface of an object to completely disappear. It erases the gap between representation and the object it is representing by seeking to mimic the original media as closely as possible. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, acknowledges the representation and makes the difference apparent, essentially leaning into and celebrating the gap. To start off building our map we incorporate the axis of remediation to look at how the interface of *Magic* has been adapted for use on digital platforms.

There have been numerous attempts at creating a way to play *Magic* online. In 2002, *Magic: The Gathering Online* was released to utilize the growing internet infrastructure, which allowed players to play *Magic* online. MTGO managed to mimic many aspects of paper *Magic*, including a secondary card market. While it is still supported and has a substantial player base, it was largely supplanted by the release of *Magic: The Gathering Arena* in 2018. Like MGTO, *Arena* is an app driven version of *Magic* and is Wizards of the Coast’s attempt to compete with Blizzard’s *Hearthstone* for the digital card game market. Both *Arena* and MTGO are primarily interested in preserving the “traditional” experience of playing *Magic* by sitting down at a table across from your opponent. As such, the interface uses images of cards, implying a table, deck, and hand. There is little to no thematic framing for the game beyond player icons of recognizable characters or

Arena's tutorial sprite. However, both games go out of their way to include the economic platforms by providing different in-game currencies that can be purchased with real-world money, or slowly earned by playing the game.

These currencies can be used to purchase booster packs containing cards, or cosmetics that mimic accessories such as card sleeves. In MTGO, the currency can also be spent to buy cards from a secondary market run by other players. Both MTG *Arena* and MTGO are first-party attempts to adapt the phenomenological experiences of traditional paper *Magic* to what Jan Švelch (2016) calls the "cultural layer" of the *Magic* platform. On the remediation axis, both of these adaptations are placed towards the immediacy end of the spectrum because the primary focus is on replicating the experience of "playing with paper," while acknowledging that they are digitally mediated experiences by taking advantage of digital affordances to streamline executing actions, enforcing rules, and tracking resources.

Other approaches for playing *Magic* remotely have been around for a while, but partially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, more platforms have emerged and gained popularity. Among these platforms is *SpellTable*, which was recently acquired by Wizards of the Coast. *SpellTable* is an augmented reality tool for playing *Magic* that utilizes the affordances of a networked game client to allow players to play online using webcams. In this way, *SpellTable* allows players to use their own cards and maintain the physical tactility that is associated with sitting down to play in person with their friends. What makes *SpellTable* an adaptation rather than just webcams over video chat is how it seeks to enhance the experience of playing this way. By adding utilities such mana and damage calculators to streamline gameplay, it also visually identifies cards and makes their information visible within the client. Both *Arena* and *SpellTable* attempt to recreate a similar experience, though their approaches differ. Where *Arena* wants to create an entire self-contained ecosystem that utilizes all of the advantages available to a digital client to streamline play, *SpellTable* emphasizes the physicality and materiality of *Magic: The Gathering*. *SpellTable* maintains its ties to the assemblages of *Magic* and so is closer to the immediacy end of the spectrum.

In contrast to *SpellTable*'s attempt to hybridize the tabletop and *Arena*'s streamlined play, Berserk Games' *Tabletop Simulator* recreates the table in a digital space. *Tabletop Simulator* is not explicitly an adaptation of *Magic*, rather it is a digital platform that provides digital versions of components and allows players to recreate any number of games. Since its release in 2015, *Tabletop Simulator* has become one of the primary ways to play board games online and is used widely by both players and designers for its versatility. The goal of *Tabletop Simulator* is not to make the play streamlined, though it can be with built-in scripting tools and effort. Instead, it revels in the awkward chunkiness of the interface, following the tropes of the "simulator genre" of the early 2010s, despite its gradual move towards increased usability. It is possible to play *Magic* in *Tabletop Simulator*, but as the name suggests, the focus of the experience is on the material components

of a game, not on the games themselves. *Tabletop Simulator* leans towards hypermediacy, because while it can replicate the experience of playing *Magic*, the interface highlights the mediating layer of the computer. These previous examples are all interested in replicating the traditional experience of playing the card game of *Magic*. What follows complicates our single axis of remediation.

Figure 2: Remediation axis (slide 14). Created by Jack Murray. Full slides available at https://www.jackademia.com/files/genanalog21.pdf.

Affective and Subjective Adaptation

In 1997, before even MTGO, MicroProse released their officially licensed *Magic: The Gathering* video game, commonly referred to as *Shandalar*. Instead of only adapting the traditional experience of *Magic*, *Shandalar* heavily leans into the thematic elements. *Shandalar* is an adventure roleplaying game in which the player designs and plays as a planeswalker traveling through the world of *Magic*, fighting monsters, and exploring dungeons. However, rather than simulating cards as spells that the player character can cast, combat encounters in *Shandalar* are actual games of *Magic* played against enemies and cards collected along the way. *Shandalar* even goes so far as to simulate a community of *Magic* players, letting you buy, sell, and trade

cards with non-player characters. As an adaptation, the interface for playing the card game is constrained by the affordances of computing at the time but includes a full implementation of the digital *Magic* system bundled with the game which functions similarly to MTGO and *Arena*. *Shandalar* foregrounds its digital nature, though unlike *Tabletop Simulator* its goal is to expand on the thematic experience of *Magic*.

Around the same time as *Shandalar*, Acclaim released their take on a *Magic*-themed real-time strategy game *Magic: The Gathering: Battlemage*. However, beyond theming and a passing nod to cards as a unit selection user interface element, the gameplay holds few similarities to the card game. Additionally, Cryptic Studios announced *Magic: Legends*, an action RPG in the style of Blizzard's *Diablo*, in December of 2019. Like *Battlemage*, *Legends*' primary focus was on the purely thematic elements of *Magic*, letting players play in the universe of *Magic* with only cursory references to the card game. Neither game was immediately well received. *Battlemage* was panned by critics for its difficult to use controls and Cryptic announced that *Legends* was being discontinued only 3 months after its initial release, following fan backlash regarding monetization strategies. Both of these games are interesting because of how they approached the task of making a *Magic: The Gathering* video game. Their purely thematic approach to adaptation, alongside *Shandalar*, complicates the single axis of remediation. To properly map approaches to adaptation, the thematic experiences, in addition to the interface of *Magic*, need to be accounted for.

To account for thematic experiences, I turn to Cameron Kunzelman's description of affective and subjective adaptations. Kunzelman's analysis draws on the video game adaptations of film to examine what kind of experience the video game provides for the player (Kunzelman 2016). This framework is useful because its synthesis of remediation and assemblage theory understands adaptation as "a relationship between two objects (the original and the adaptation) and a relationship between those two things and an entire realm of objects that press upon them" (6) and affords an understanding of how a media object exists within historical context and the broader media ecology. In other words, when thinking about adaptations of *Magic* we must also consider the entire assemblage of *Magic*. The ludic experience of *Magic* is not the only facet of the game that defines what it means to engage with the game as a wholistic media platform. This framework gives us language to speak about the experiences of playing *Magic* that exceeded the boundaries of the mechanical procedures defined by the rules of the game. This form of analysis is useful when examining these adaptations of *Magic* beyond the level of the interfaces, however the gaps between film to game adaptation, and game to game adaptation, complicate its application.

To lay out the initial parameters of the framework, what Kunzelman describes as affective adaptations are experiences that are primarily interested in replicating the feelings of an object or experience. In the case of film, this involves evoking the affective responses to the thematic elements of the film. Rather than adapting the film directly, an affective adaptation homes in on its ephemeral qualities. This might look like a game where you play in a version of the film world that

"feels right" rather than one that is exactingly correct. Subjective experiences on the other hand enforce a specific subject position on the player. In contrast to affective adaptations, a subjective approach allows players to engage with the experiences of the film from the perspective of the character, while also maintaining their position as an observer of the events of the film (Kunzelman 2016). This approach works well because the kinds of interactions one has when engaging with a film are markedly different than the interactions a video game asks them to have. We can begin to see the problems with applying this approach to game to game adaptations, because oftentimes the kinds of interactions they ask of players are very similar, where the gaps become visible.

Thematic and Ludic Adaptation

Subjective and affective elements cannot simply be placed on opposite ends of the axis to represent analog game to digital game adaptations. This is partly because, when playing an analog game, we occupy multiple subject positions that are regularly invoked and actively relied upon. As Paul Wake (2019) notes, players oscillate between their subject positions as a player at a table playing a game and as their character embedded within the thematic and narrative events of the game. For example, *Arena*, *TableTop Simulator*, and *SpellTable* all aim to adapt the player subject position with little thought to the thematic elements. *BattleMage* and *Legends*, on the other hand, exclusively adapt the thematic subject position, while *Shandalar* relies on an amalgamation of both positions. Further, Booth argues that the meaning-making processes in a board game comes from "the tension between an authorial presence and audience play" (Booth 2015, 17) whereas a paratextual game based on subject positions within a film "closes up gaps within the narrative" (Booth 2015, 15). It is unclear which experiences are being adapted with each approach.

Kunzelman describes affect as the intensities of sensations flowing between bodies that "does not require a subject but merely a (drastically) expanded notion of a body" (Kunzelman 2016, 13). From another perspective, Aubrey Anable uses affect in her analysis of video game assemblages to refer to "aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things, but are often registered only at the interface" (Anable 2018). Broadly speaking, affect is a way of talking about the inarticulable processes of feeling and the relational networks that influence these processes. While a subject is not necessarily needed to describe the flow of affect, the subject positions of players are described by their relationships within the network of affect. It is impossible to separate the subject positions from how they are oriented affectively by elements of the game assemblage. The question becomes, if affective adaptations are those which "generate a set of conditions that communicates an almost ineffable experience of 'feeling right'" (Kunzelman 2016, 13) and subjective adaptations are about "putting X player within Y subject" (11), how do we differentiate the feelings and subjectivity of playing *Magic* at a table from the feelings and

subjectivity of inhabiting the world of *Magic*? What affective and subjective experiences are being preserved, changed, added, or lost in the process of adaptation?

Figure 3: Adaptation Graph (slide 17). Created by Jack Murray. Full slides available at https://www.jackademia.com/files/genanalog21.pdf

Conclusion

In the games examined so far, we have the feeling of playing *Magic* on one hand, and the feeling of engaging with its digital adaptation on the other. Signaling towards either *playing* or *engaging* prepares players for what kind of experiences they should expect. In lieu of affective to subjective, I propose that we use thematic and ludic to describe this spectrum of adaptation. In this case, "thematic" describes a preference towards the narrative and thematic elements of *Magic*, whereas "ludic" describes adaptations that prefer preserving the experience of playing the trading card game. *Magic* adaptations are now mapped by the axis of remediation—ranging from immediacy to hypermediacy—and the axis that runs from thematic to ludic. Games in the immediacy/ludic quadrant tend to like what we might expect from an experience that is aimed at recreating what it is like to sit down and play *Magic*. Games in the thematic/hypermediacy quadrant look less like what might be initially viewed as an adaptation of *Magic*, and might be considered purely

paratextual games. However, as I argued earlier, the thematic elements of *Magic* are just as integral to the platform and assemblage of *Magic*. For example, *Legends* and *SpellTable* are no less versions of *Magic* than *Arena*. Rather, they are adaptations that value vastly different parts of the play experience.

There are a variety of approaches to creating digital adaptations of *Magic: The Gathering*. The chart I have developed allows us to map the different ways that adaptations approach its various dimensions. From this we can identify which aspects of the game are preserved, lost, or changed. By extension, we can understand what kinds of experiences are important for each approach to adaptation. As the line between analog and digital play continues to blur, these are important questions to ask when examining or designing digital adaptations and games with hybrid modalities.

References

Altice, Nathan. 2014. "The Playing Card Platform." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 4. http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/11/the-playing-card-platform/.

Anable, Aubrey. 2018. *Playing With Feelings: Video Games and Effect*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.

Apperley, Thomas, and Jussi Parikka. 2018. "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold." *Games and Culture* 13, no. 4: 349–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015616509

Bellomy, Ian. 2017. "What Counts: Configuring the Human in Platform Studies." *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 2. http://analoggamestudies.org/2017/03/what-counts/.

Bogost, Ian, and Nick Montfort. 2009. "Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers." *Digital Arts and Culture*, December 12, 2009. http://nickm.com/if/bogost_montfort_dac_2009.pdf.

Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Bolter, Jay David. 2001. *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*. New York: Routledge.

Booth, Paul. 2021. *Board Games as Media*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Booth, Paul. 2015. Game *Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games*. Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Churchill, Alex, Stella Biderman, and Austin Herrick. 2019. "Magic: The Gathering Is Turing Complete." *CoRR* abs/1904.09828. http://arxiv.org/abs/1904.09828.

Kunzelman, Cameron. 2016. "Subjective and Affective Adaptations: Remediation and The Playstation 2 Videogame." *Wides Screen* 6, no. 1.

LaLone, Nicolas. 2019. "A Tale of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Origins of the Game Platform | Analog Game Studies," September 16, 2019. http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/a-tale-of-dungeons-dragons-and-the-origins-of-the-game-platform/

Montfort, Nick, and Ian Bogost. 2009. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Murray, Jack. 2020. "More Than Just the Table: Analog Games as Computational Platforms." In *International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, 1–4. Bugibba Malta: ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3402974.

Rosewater, Mark. 2006. "Timmy, Johnny, and Spike Revisited." *Magic: The Gathering*, March 20, 2006. https://magic.wizards.com/en/articles/archive/making-magic/timmy-johnny-and-spike-revisited-2006-03-20-2.

Švelch, Jan. 2016. "Platform Studies, Computational Essentialism, and *Magic: The Gathering*." *Analog Game Studies* 3, no. 4. http://analoggamestudies.org/2016/07/platform-studies-computational-essentialism-and-magic-the-gathering/.

Wake, Paul. 2019. "Token Gestures: Towards a Theory of Immersion in Analog Games." *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 3. http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/token-gestures-towards-a-theory-of-immersion-in-analog-games/.

Bio

Jack Murray is a PhD Student in the Texts and Technology program at the University of Central Florida. He received his MA in Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication with a focus on Critical Game Studies from the University of Texas at Dallas. His research focuses on the intersections between digital and analog games, narrative systems for games and interactive fiction, and understanding technology through games and play. When not working on research, game projects, and daydreaming about board games, Jack likes to race cars, swordfight, and lay on the floor with his dog, Kiska.

4. Materiality Of Keepsake Games

Theorizing A Newly Named Game Form

GREG LORING-ALBRIGHT AND WES WILLISON

Abstract

In this piece we investigate the term Keepsake Games. Coined by game designers Jeeyon Shim and Shing Yin Khor in early 2021, the term describes games that involve creating or altering material objects as a part of gameplay. The term captures formal and thematic aspects of play and games that are present in previous game forms, yet the new term establishes and gathers these aspects in distinct fashion. This piece draws upon Shim and Khor's own writings, similar game forms and practices, and our own autoethnographies of playing two games with keepsake properties. We explore similar game forms and the experience of playing these games not to create a strict definitional boundary, but rather to explore the thematic and formal qualities that this term captures. We conclude by proposing two axes upon which to locate keepsake and similar game types in order to encourage scholars and designers to continue to engage with this newly named game form.

Keywords:

Materiality, Role-Playing Games, Keepsake Games, Autoethnography, Cultures of Play

---

From December 15, 2020 until January 7, 2021, game designer Jeeyon Shim and conceptual artist Shing Yin Khor ran a Kickstarter campaign to fund *Field Guide to Memory*. The designers coined the term "keepsake game" to describe the new style of gameplay they hoped it would establish. In this piece, we will probe the boundaries of the keepsake game coinage. While we do not wish to police a hard terminological boundary, we will situate keepsake games amidst other, similar game forms, and establish a model for theorizing this specific kind of material play. Both Jeeyon Shim and Shing Yin Khor published reflections on the coinage of the term keepsake games. Khor's piece lays out some formal aspects of keepsake games:

> The keepsake must be the byproduct of the gameplay process. The gameplay process is also the production of the keepsake… in order to engage with a keepsake game, the player must modify an original artifact (or begin a new artifact creation process) as part of gameplay, to produce a unique object that is the result of a collaboration between the designer and player. (Khor, 2021)

The first set of assertions makes keepsake games stand out from other games. As we note when discussing Ivan Mosca's work below, games are traditionally assumed to be replayable. Replayability, by necessity, assumes that gameplay objects are unaffected by the play of the game. There are, as we will show below, numerous game forms that require indelible, irreversible alteration of their components that are not keepsake games.

Khor's second statement begins to lay the groundwork for an understanding of how to differentiate a legacy board game from a keepsake game. By invoking the figure of both the game's player and its designer, Khor moves the definition out of a materially constrained domain and into the realm of artistic investment. The insistence upon not only the material object, but also its circumstances of its production and its co-producers, are what make keepsake games distinct. The formal constraints that Khor details are present in Jeeyon Shim's writing, but Shim is more interested in thematic concerns, namely:

- reconnection to the natural world through stewardship and beauty
- understanding human stories as one part of a vast ecosystem
- creating participant-oriented artistic experiences
- exploration of community through imaginative play
- firsthand experience of racial diaspora (Shim 2021)

If Khor delimits how a keepsake game's keepsake object comes to be, Shim explores what that object is meant to do or mean. Indeed, the meanings that Shim lays out accrue to the object throughout the process of play. To Shim, the intent of the keepsake game project is, "to produce beautiful, memorable artifacts *through the whole course of the gameplay process*" (Shim 2021; italics added).

Khor approaches the material keepsake object and works backwards through its procedural creation to its co-authors: the game designer and the player. Shim starts with the process and its intended thematics and situates the keepsake object as a result of those processes. Both Khor and Shim are collaborators, so share a vision of what a keepsake game is, though they describe it differently.

Similar Game Forms

This section will give an overview of games that have formal and thematic resonances with keepsake games, as they explicitly center the creation and alteration of materials. Consider a canonical example of innovative role-playing games that produce memorable objects: Avery Adler's *The Quiet Year.* The game centers on the collaborative creation of a map representing space, time, and community relations. Players draw locations, events, and characters, shaping the story of a post- and pre-apocalyptic world. The map is central to the gameplay, and its creation follows Khor's definition of keepsake games in that "[t]he gameplay process is also the production of the keepsake" (Khor 2021).

Journaling games were a formal innovation in the RPG space that are also similar to keepsake games. Whereas the artifacts in games like *The Quiet Year* feature multiple players collaborating to create an artifact within the constraints set by the designer, most journaling games feature one player interacting with an artifact (the journal or digital prompts) created by the game designers. If the term "keepsake game" had not been coined, *Field Guide to Memory* would be easy to classify as a journaling game. Players are instructed to find a journal of their own and write in it, then append clippings, pressed leaves, and a napkin as part of play. The primary interactions with the materials of the game involve the player reading a prompt (delivered digitally or, at an elite Kickstarter tier, by mail) and writing in the journal.

Some journaling games differ from *Field Guide to Memory* in that a journal is provided. Consider the critical darling *Thousand Year Old Vampire*, a game that can be purchased either as a printable PDF with spaces to fill in, or as a lavish book with the same spaces for writing. Whether the game provides a journal or asks players to bring their own, journaling games require that players "modify an original artifact… as part of gameplay, to produce a unique object that is the result of a collaboration between the designer and player" (Khor 2021).

Finally, a relatively recent innovation in board gaming also fits certain aspects of Khor's formal definition of a keepsake game: the legacy game. Originating in 2011 with the publication of *Risk Legacy*, this game type differs from standard hobby board games in that gameplay requires the modification of components, usually by destroying, writing on, or stickering them. Additionally, these games often feature a linear narrative complete with plot arc, twists, and surprises. As such, these legacy games—unlike standard board games—are consumable, and are meant to be played once. Some, such as 2018's *Betrayal Legacy*, remain playable after the linear narrative has ended, though the game's pieces bear the marks of the narrative as the players enacted it.

Not every game that asks players to make irreversible marks or alterations immediately results in a keepsake, and not every game with keepsake potential is a keepsake game. However, the affordance of indelible change to gameplay materials is a strong formal gesture of keepsake-ness.

It is not the objective of this paper to police a genre boundary around keepsake games. However, parallel to the ways in which Shim identifies diasporic concern as a crucial component of the genre's content above, we similarly see a diasporic spread of the genre's formal and thematic qualities both to and from keepsake games as a terminological "homeland."

Autoethnography

Games have formal properties that suit them to autoethnographic research: their situation of play, when instantiated using materials, transcends mere materiality. To quote Paul Booth's recent book on board games: "the game itself as a mutable, textual, tangible object does not *come into being* without the addition of player agency" (Booth 2021, 9; emphasis in original). While a game exists as a physical entity, it is not fully instantiated until it is played. Media- or object-based analyses of games can reveal their formal properties, but ethnographic observations of games can reveal important aspects of a game-in-play. That is, autoethnographic and interview methodologies allow access to different data: the feelings experienced by players, even by the author-as-player.

If games writ large are well-suited to autoethnographic approaches, keepsake games are also well suited to this method. These games are personal, and ask players to inscribe something of themselves into the game. As such, personal, reflexive, and reflective methods are required to fully grasp what a keepsake game is doing. Additionally, keepsake games are so far solo games, played alone, or if in concert, with others through social media. As such, observing the game in play would not reveal much even to the most dedicated observer. An account of the internality of the player is necessary to study these games.

In this section, we will present autoethnographic reflections upon our two separate play experiences of two games, one keepsake (*Field Guide to Memory*) and one with keepsake properties (*Pandemic Legacy: Season 2*). Each of us took detailed notes on our feelings during play, then participated in a collaborative, iterative process of drawing out themes and moments that aligned or conflicted with extant research on games and materiality. In crafting our autoethnographies for this project, we were deeply indebted to Heewong Chang's (2008) *Autoethnography as Method*, a text that makes autoethnography clear and approachable to the novice practitioner.

Greg: Field Guide to Memory

I played *Field Guide to Memory* for about a month, starting on April 10, 2021 and ending on May 8,

2021. I played once a day, missing a few days due to travel. In its original run, the game was played on weekdays over four weeks, with players taking the weekend "off."

By the end of my playthrough, my game consisted of:

- A brown, faux-leather-bound journal with about half of its pages marked
- A pen (initially a special pen chosen for the task, soon replaced by "whatever pen was readily available")
- A disposable picnic napkin with some sketches on it
- Stains from pressing leaves in the back of my copy of *Air & Light & Space & Time*
- An envelope containing a letter and one of the pressed leaves
- A second pressed leaf, taped into the journal
- Numerous printouts from the game's PDF, printed on my cheap black-and-white laser printer, onto the backs of articles from my grad school coursework

Most of the time, I played *Field Guide* in the early-to-mid afternoon while my one-year-old child took his second nap of the day. I would stand at my standing desk, pull the journal down from the bookshelf to my right, and open the game PDF (kept open and minimized unless I had recently restarted my computer). I would read the day's prompt and print any pages of ephemera before undertaking the journaling aspect of the game. I would stand at my standing desk, look at my screen, and hold my notebook in my hand. Then, after completing my in-game journaling on paper, I would open a text document and type a few short reflections on my experience. All the quotes in this section are from these reflections. A few times, the game prompted me to go outside and take a walk or visit a park, which I did (usually as a part of my daily dog walk). Most of my writing was short, in part because the game encourages this, in part because of my baby's presence (naptime was my only time to get other work done), and in part because I wasn't really sure what I was doing. This lack of clarity—bumbling about, following instructions but not quite "clicking" with an underlying structure—characterized my time with *Field Guide*. I have spent a lot of time since finishing *Field Guide* thinking about exactly why that might be.

I have a history of making and playing games, especially those that involve interacting with spaces and places. While I am a relative newcomer to role-playing games, I am not an outsider. This game seems tailor made for me as a player. I noted throughout the game's run that the daily rhythm of it was off-putting. On day two I wrote that "It feels like a devotional, which I hate." A devotional, of course, is the evangelical Christian practice of reading the Bible every day, often accompanied by readings from a third-party book of prayers and interpretations. Having been raised evangelical

and since departed that tradition, the daily routine of Field Guide evoked bad memories of church and family pressure to participate in this daily ritual. Another task that the temporal regularity of the gameplay evoked was homework. As I wrote after starting my daily gameplay in the afternoon and being interrupted: "I'm wrapping up this evening. The baby is asleep on the other side of the door, and I'm here with my *Field Guide to Memory* PDF open on my laptop, sitting at the dining table that takes up the other corner of the small living room, with a lit candle stuck in a wine bottle while I finish my 'homework' for the night." While I experience homework as less onerous than devotionals, neither would be mistaken for "playing a game."

This tension between work and play—between the mundane and the ludic—was productive, even though it frustrated me in the moment. These experiences, I suspect, parallel those of many new parents, especially those who must parent during lockdown, as I did and still do. If I was expecting a playful respite from the daily drudgery of diapers, sleep training, and being stuck in the house, *Field Guide* did not deliver. However, the game's insistence on "legacy, wonder, cryptids and the vastness of a human life" (Shim and Khor 2021) created a productive dialectical tension. The game emerged not in the moment of play, but rather in the cumulative effect of playing and having played. This work laid groundwork and then built upon it. These moments of joy, surprise, and grief wouldn't, I suspect, have worked without the daily rhythm of work (play) to set them up. The fifth day of play was the first time that I truly enjoyed playing *Field Guide*, writing "OH SHIT the conspiratorial stuff goes deeper… there's another, even more conspiratorial piece of ephemera." Without the buildup, such emotional payoffs couldn't have occurred.

Of course, this is not a revolutionary assessment. Narratives generally work this way. What I hope to foreground with this observation is the game's temporal dimension. Although *Field Guide*'s material innovations are its most obvious feature, I found myself impressed by the way it weaves materiality and temporality together. The setups and payoffs, the way that my journal slowly acquired leaves, pages, and scribblings, and the knowledge that a (fictional) letter written might receive a response on a following day—all of these elements rely on the daily rhythm of play that I found so grating. As I wrote in my final day's journal entry: "My heart is full, and I'm carrying a warm memory with me for the rest of the day."

Wes: Pandemic Legacy: Season 2

Last March, as the US started to enter lockdown in the face of COVID-19, my housemates and I finally took the shrink wrap off *Pandemic Legacy Season 2* (*PLS2*). We had played *Season 1* a few years prior, and thoroughly enjoyed it. But considering how much emotional and scheduling intensity the game demands, we shelved *PLS2* until a rainy day. Quarantine proved to be that rainy day.

It goes without saying that the contexts of playing *Season 1* versus *Season 2* differed dramatically. The storyline of *Season 1* matches the events of 2020 more closely; a disease spreads in surprising and dangerous ways, and the CDC collaborates with governmental agencies and military powers to stem its spread. *Season 2*, on the other hand, is set decades after the events of *Season 1*, with floating havens of resistance fighters struggling to get organized and join up with other resistance forces around the world. Had we begun playing *Season 1* in March 2020, it would have largely "matched" what we were reading in the news. The only parallels between our lived experience and the events of *PLS2* were only the broadest of comparisons of companions hiding away in "arks," waiting for the global catastrophe to subside.

But when we concluded *PLS2*, we found ourselves collecting and cherishing the various character cards we'd developed over the course of play. Unlike its predecessor, these artifacts from *PLS2* became something like keepsakes—icons and totems reflecting our experience of navigating this game's plots and challenges within the wider context of a global pandemic.

In the spring and summer of 2020, as we navigated the 12 in-game months of *PLS2*, our encounters carried the weight of not only our memories of *Season 1*, but also push notifications on our phones constantly updating caseloads and spread statistics, our grief at losing time with our loved ones, and even losing our loved ones to the disease. As our lives were marked with isolation and restriction from material contact with anyone else, *PLS2* offered a material diorama in which we could explore our immaterial concerns.

Pandemics exhibit properties of what Timothy Morton (2013) has called *hyperobjects*—vast unitary phenomena that are too large for any individual human to understand. *Pandemic Legacy: Season 2* attempts to render such a hyperobject not only "graspable," but playable. Unlike a sandbox-style toy (e.g., a box of Legos), *PLS2* does not present the player with a collection of objects that bear pandemic-like qualities—for which I was thankful. Grappling with the overwhelming scale of a pandemic was a daily emotional and intellectual drain, and thus the strict trajectory along which *PLS2* unfolded was a strange comfort in the midst of such a chaotic global moment. Compared to incessantly refreshing the disorienting feed of pandemic news on *The New York Times*, playing *PLS2* was accessible and even reductionist, thus giving us space to reflect on the hyperobject at a more human scale. A pandemic is in no way a playful context—mistakes or recklessness can bring deadly consequences—but *PLS2* opened space and provided material to interact with a diorama or simulacrum of the hyperobject with a low penalty for experimentation. The comfort that this brought in no way led to recklessness in the real pandemic, but it alleviated the sense of total disorientation.

The artifacts of the pandemic—masks, hand sanitizer bottles, Clorox wipes, ticket stubs from canceled concerts—are compelling, but don't on their own encode stories. By comparison, the artifacts of *PLS2* encode a narrative through a game board with altered land masses and national

boundaries, and character cards with added attributes and scars. *PLS2*'s gameplay leans towards the destruction and deterioration of the game's materials and world rather than the creation of a specific object (a la Khor and Shim's keepsake definitions). This posture is thematically reflective of the game's deeper story about a public health crisis. As we watched the pandemic unfold around the globe, the slow eroding and destroying our microcosm of that event was emotionally resonant. We felt sadness, grief, anger, and fear.

These were not pleasant feelings. Accordingly, as we progressed through the game, I felt reluctant to continue playing. As the caseloads rose in China and Italy, and then in the US, the prospect of revisiting that loss and destruction through *PLS2* was repulsive. It was scary not because our actions had any real-world consequences, but because our emotions were so intense and unsavory. Playing *PLS2* thus felt like something to be "worked through," like how I force myself to show up for therapy even when I don't want to. This is how I ultimately recognize keepsake elements of *PLS2*, which was not designed as such: I was personally involved. In the material choices of adding scars to character cards or adding markers to indicate the growing caseload of cities around the world, I felt myself personally invested not just in the game's global context, but in its murky translation of my own global context.

Theorizing Keepsake Games

In this piece thus far, we have investigated the designers' own definitions of keepsake games, briefly highlighted common play practices and game forms, and undertaken two autoethnographies. Here, we synthesize these three strands to establish a theoretical framework for scholars to use in investigating keepsake games going forward.

Towards that end, we will suggest two polarities that we have found to be useful in situating games that invest themselves in their materiality: closed ←→ open, and indelible ←→ rewritable.

The "closed ←→ open" polarity maps most succinctly onto the phenomenon of documented rules. An open, jumbled box of Lego presents no rules to direct the player, thus representing the far end of this pole, a sandbox-style "toy." At the other pole are rules-bound activities, many of which fall into the category of "games." Within games, there are levels of openness and closed-ness; consider a "crunchy" simulationist RPG (rife with specific rules for specific situations, tables to calculate odds, and prohibitions against certain actions for certain characters) as compared to a story-driven, rules-light RPG. Both are more closed than the open box of Legos, but the crunchy game is certainly more closed than the story-driven game. Similarly, if a similar box of Legos includes step-by-step instructions for using set pieces to assemble a given construct, it is more closed than the mixed, rules-less box that introduced this section. When interaction with the materials of the

object is constrained by rules imposed by the object (or its situation as media), that object is more closed than open.

Keepsake games possess both “open” and “closed” attributes. On the one hand, the rule set participates in the creation of the keepsake artifact. Players who completely disregard the prompts, rules, and suggestions in the core game document cannot be said to have played the game. On the other hand, the keepsake games that exist thus far are not “crunchy,” simulationist games.

Our second polarity connects more directly to the material aspects of keepsake games that we have been discussing thus far. “Indelible ←→ rewritable” refers directly to the materials used in play, and how easy it is to reverse one’s interactions with those materials. Again let’s consider Legos. One can reassemble and disassemble a pre-designed Lego set or a wholly invented construction indefinitely, limited only by one’s interest, ability to continue, and the durability of the plastic pieces. Legos are rewritable. At the other end of the spectrum is “indelible.” Doodling with an open and toy-like pen and paper is indelible; marks made on the page cannot be unmade. To make a similar comparison at the “closed” position on the first spectrum, original (non-legacy) *Pandemic* is rewritable, because its pieces can be packed away and its game re-played in the same fashion repeatedly. By contrast, *Pandemic Legacy* is indelible, since its materials and its narrative are irrevocably altered in the course of play.

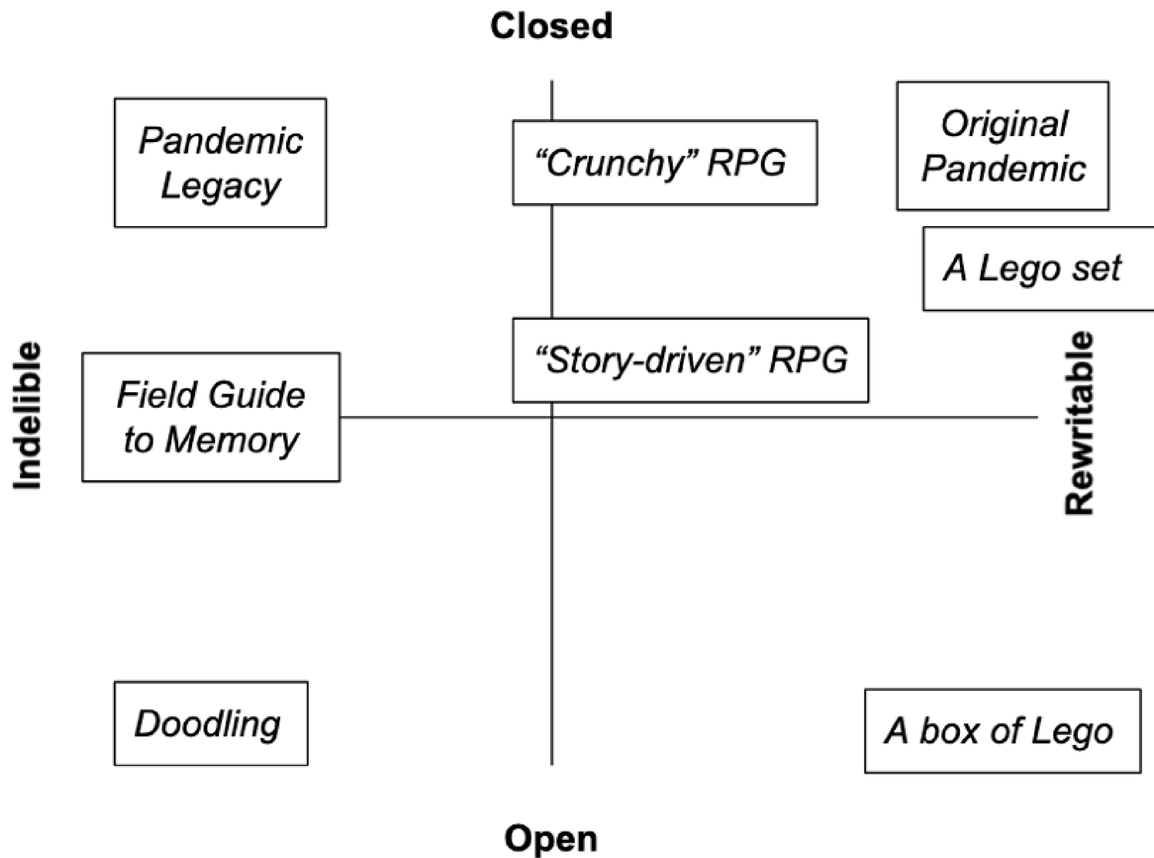

Figure 1: Polarities and examples

We do not present these polarities as strict taxonomies; instead, we hope to create a model by which keepsake games and similar types can be mapped to locate productive similarities and differences. By using these two polarities, we situate keepsake games among other forms (see Figure 1) and invite other scholars and game designers to explore these tensions.

Bibliography

Booth, Paul. 2021. *Board Games as Media.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method.* Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Khor, Shing Yin. 2021. "On Keepsake and Connected Path Games." *Patreon.com*, February 15. https://www.patreon.com/posts/on-keepsake-and-47599952.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shim, Jeeyon. 2020. “Field Guide to Memory.” *Kickstarter.com*, December 15. https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/jeeyonshim/field-guide-to-memory.

Shim, Jeeyon. 2021. “Keepsake and Connected Path Games, and new projects.” *Patreon.com*, February 15. https://www.patreon.com/posts/keepsake-and-and-47599049.

Shim, Jeeyon and Shing Yin Khor. 2021. *Field Guide to Memory*. Self-published.

Bios

Greg Loring-Albright is a PhD Candidate in the Communication, Culture, and Media program at Drexel University. His dissertation assesses tabletop (board, card, role-playing) games and their digital adaptations as media environments. He also works as a game designer, creating games and experiences for tables, parks, museums, and campuses.

Wes Willison lives and works at the intersections of faith, place, and making on the land of the Lenni Lenape in Philadelphia, PA. He recently received his Masters of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary.

5. Things I Want to Know

A Research Agenda Focused on the People Who Make and Play Games

ELIZABETH HARGRAVE

My day job is making board games, not researching them. But before I made board games, I spent more than two decades doing social scientific research. I got a master's degree in public policy in the 1990s, and came to Washington, DC to work in the planning and evaluation office at the US Department of Health and Human Services. When I came to Washington, I participated in a group supporting women in health policy, because we were outnumbered in that space, particularly among decision-makers. Almost a decade later, I started playing hobby board games. Imagine my surprise when I started going to more public board game events; the world of board games is much more skewed male than my experiences in the health policy world ever were. When I began attending design-focused events, the difference was even more striking.

As a trained policy analyst, I started asking lots of questions about why this gender skew existed, and expanded from there to ask questions about other types of diversity. In this paper, I'll share some things that we do know about the board game industry, but also pose a lot of questions that I would love to see more research on. Some of the high-level questions I want to talk about are:

- What is the demographic profile of board gamers, designers, and publishers, and how is it changing? (And how can we speed up that change?)
- How might the demographic skew be affecting the types of games that get made?
- What makes people think games (or gaming) are "for them"—and what keeps people away?

A fundamental assumption behind these questions is that if we can answer some of them, we might be able to address some of the factors causing board game spaces and the board game industry to be dominated by white men. If we can do that, I believe we can grow the universe of people who play board games and make better games.

What is the demographic profile of board gamers, designers, and publishers? In order to understand the current push for more diversity and inclusion in board games, it is important to understand how far the demographic profile of gamers, designers, and publishers is from that of the general population.

Gamers

Surveys of board gamers have been conducted that ask about demographic characteristics. In general, these surveys have used convenience samples—for example, sharing a link on social media and asking people to pass it around. This methodology does not necessarily lead to a representative snapshot of board gamers, but it is the data we have available.

Gender

Across the three surveys with the most robust sample sizes, the gender breakdown is similar: about 1 in 4 respondents identify as women (Figure 1)—about half as many women as one would expect if the board gamer population looked like the world population.

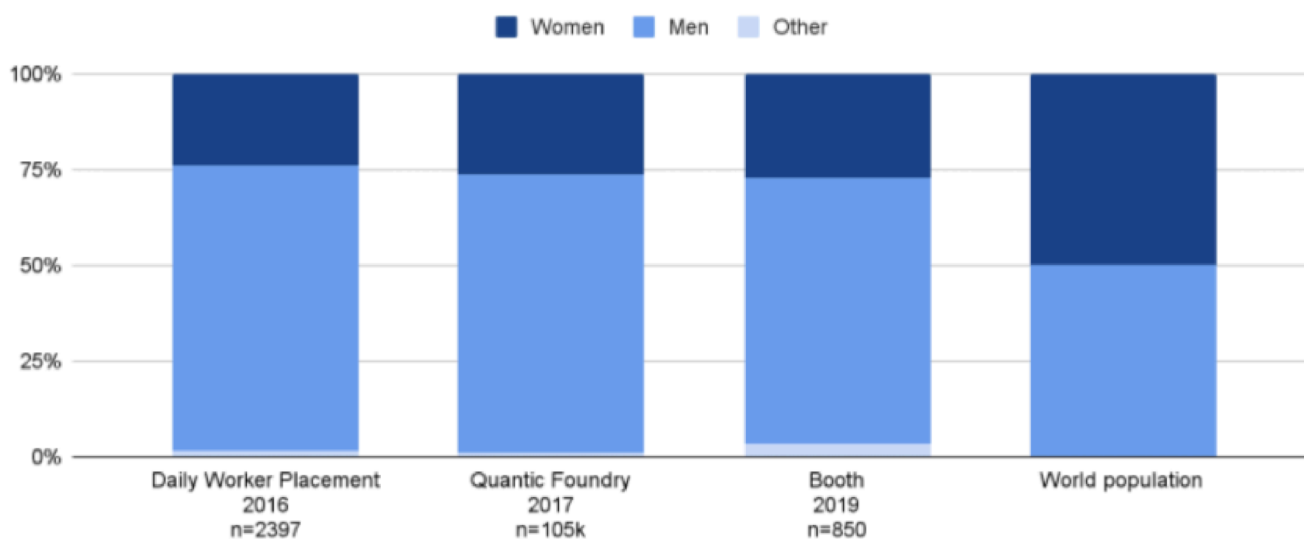

Figure 1: Board Gamers by Gender, Various Surveys (Hoye 2016; Booth 2019; Quantic Foundry n.d.)

In 2019, I reached out to several Facebook groups broadly targeted at board gamers and asked if they would share their demographic information. Most of these general-interest board game groups reported a gender split in this same range, with between 20–30% being women. When I inquired about the Facebook groups for several popular boardgames, the range was much wider. Most of the gamers who responded had fewer than 10% women in their Facebook groups, while a few were 30% or more women (Hargrave 2019).

I have not reached back out to these groups in 2021, but I do have access to the data for the *Wingspan* Facebook group. In that group, the share of women has risen from 30% in October 2019 to 41% in September 2021. This happened as membership in the group nearly doubled (from 7,290 to 13,750) in the last 2 years, meaning more women than men have joined the group.

Race and Ethnicity

There is less information publicly available about the race and ethnicity of board gamers. One survey that has published data in this area is the one that Paul Booth did for his book *Board Games and Media*, in which 87% of respondents identified as white and non-Hispanic. The (mostly US) board gamers in the survey were far less likely to identify as Black, Asian, or Latinx/Hispanic than individuals in the general US population (Figure 2).

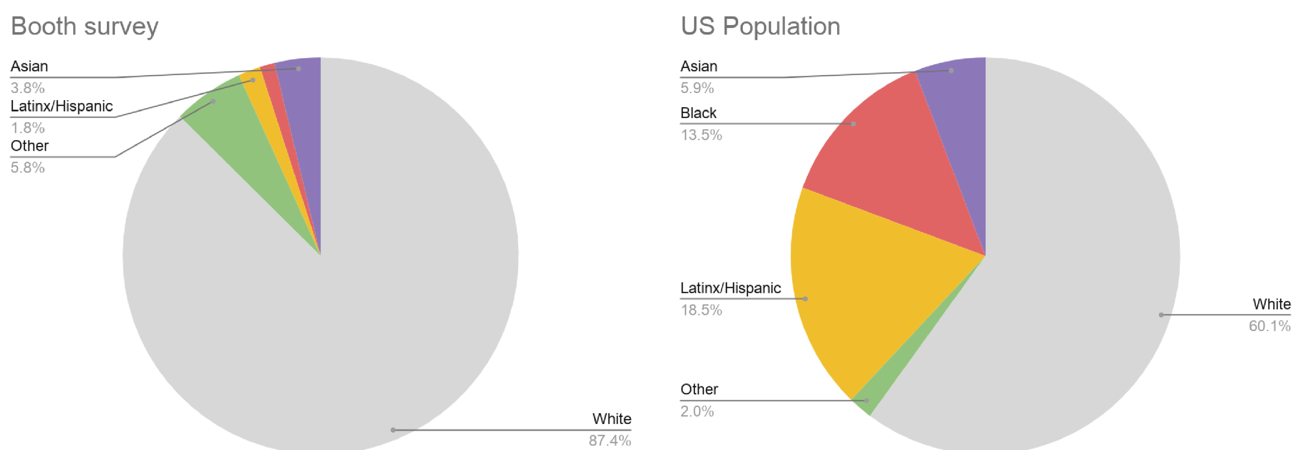

Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity of Board Gamers vs. US Population, 2019 (Booth 2019; US Census Bureau n.d.)

This overwhelmingly white demographic skew aligns with my anecdotal observations of the large board gaming events that I have attended. In 2014, Ajit George wrote about his experience as a non-white gamer at Gen Con:

> I saw almost no one who looked like me. By far, the most visible minorities at GenCon were the hired convention hall facilities staff… It was a surreal experience and it felt like I had stepped into an ugly part of a bygone era, one in which whites were waited upon by minority servants. (George 2014)

These preliminary pictures of board gamer demographics lead to a lot of questions:

- *Who can we even count, and how*? Board games are a niche hobby, which makes board gamers inherently difficult to survey. To date, attempts have necessarily consisted of putting a survey out on social media and seeing who responds. However, there are some captive audiences that might lead to more universal demographic data for the gamer population. For example, researchers could work with large conventions, online play platforms like Tabletop Simulator and Tabletopia, or *Board Game Geek* (BGG) to obtain demographic information for their users.

It is worth noting that each of these sources still leaves out a significant (and probably skewed) portion of the board gamer universe (Figure 3). There is likely a large population of people who play board games in private home settings and rarely engage with online platforms or conventions, and it is possible that these less-public gamers have a different demographic profile. But even imperfect sources seem more likely to be more representative and consistent over time than the existing convenience sample approach.

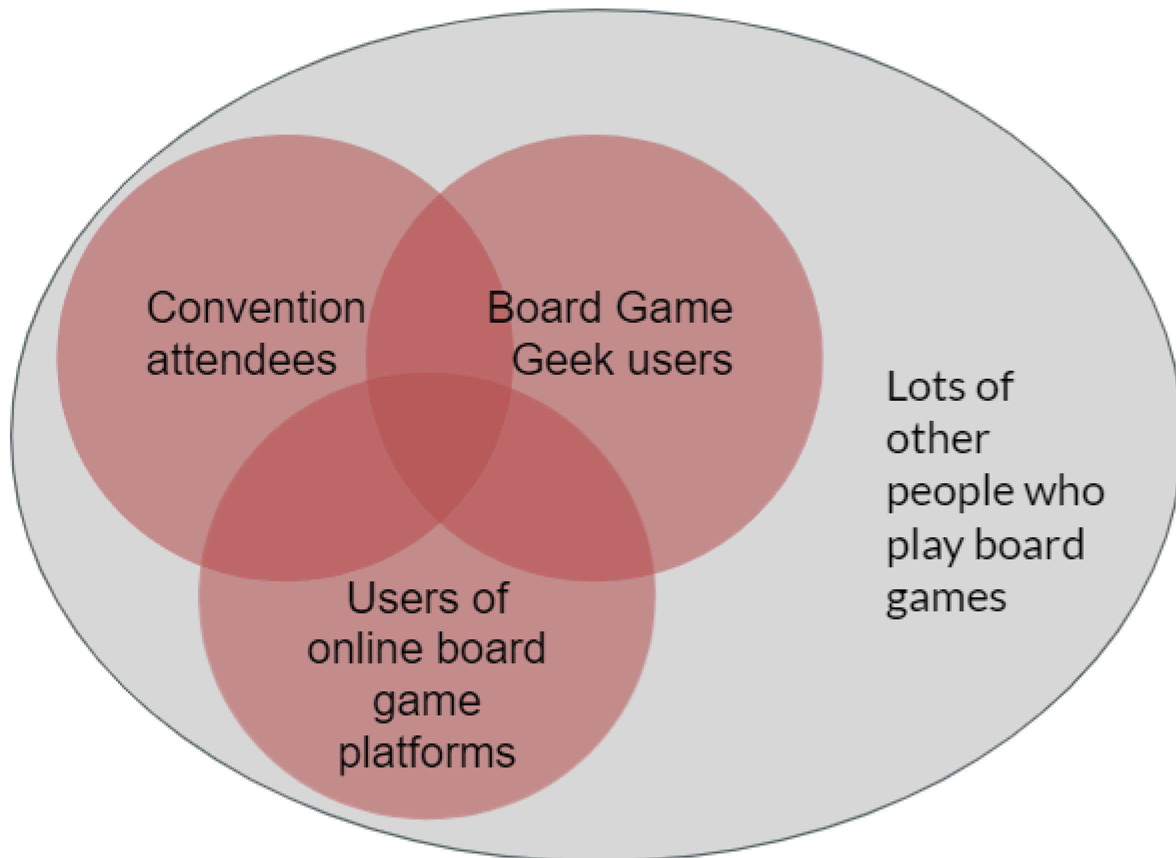

Figure 3: Countable and Uncountable Board Game Populations

- *What are the demographics of the people we can measure, and how are they changing over time*? I believe we are likely to see rapid change in gamer demographics over the next several years, but we won't know for sure without measuring the change.
- *What historical factors contributed to this demographic distribution*? To the extent that board games have evolved out of cultures like wargaming and *Dungeons & Dragons*, are those cultures still affecting the demographics of gamers today? What factors are still in play, and what has been left behind? What could that tell us about how to move forward?
- *Are some venues more diverse than others, and why*? Anecdotally, it seems to me that some board game venues attract noticeably different clientele. I could imagine a series of case studies of game stores and conventions that are succeeding at reaching a gaming population that looks more like the general population. For example, Labyrinth Games and Puzzles in Washington, DC is a woman-owned business in the heart of a majority-minority city that does a lot of outreach to schools and libraries in their area. I have never been to an event there that is all white, and I have never been the only woman—which I cannot say for game nights at some other venues I have visited.
- *What is the psychological and emotional experience of a gamer who is in the extreme minority at a gaming event*? How likely are they to return?
- *What has worked in other industries to diversify the user base and grow a market*? Board games are hardly the first industry to face the opportunity to grow into untapped markets because some populations have traditionally not engaged with our products. What could we learn from others?

Game designers

The universe of board game designers is a more easily captured universe than that of board gamers. Lists of board games and their designers are readily available on sites like Board Game Geek. Many designer profiles even include information on things like gender and geographic location.

Gender and Race

Tanya Pobuda (2018) first published on the gender and race of the designers of the top 200 board games as ranked on Board Game Geek, and has since expanded her study to include the top 400

games (Figure 4). In both studies, about 93% of designer-game pairs[1] were white men designers; 3% were white women, and 4% were men who identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC).

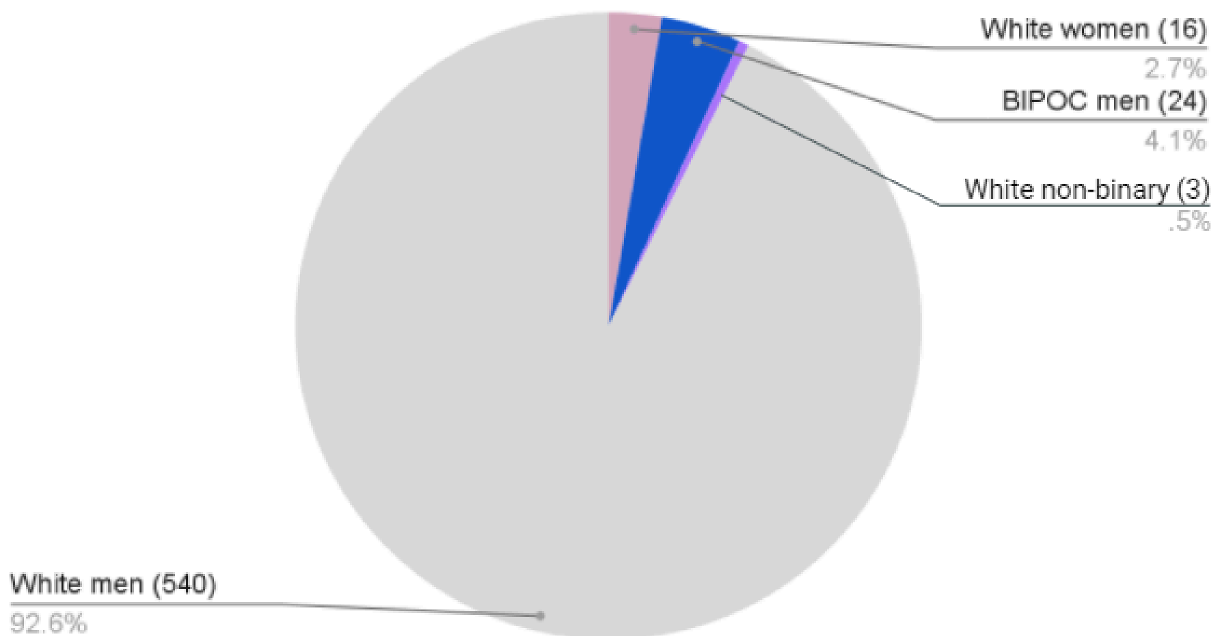

Figure 4: Designer Race and Gender x Top 400 Games on Board Game Geek (Pobuda 2021)

Geography

The population of board game designers also appears to be highly unevenly distributed by geography. I pulled information on the geographic location for the designers of the Top 100 board games on Board Game Geek (Figure 5). Of those games, over half were designed by people living in Europe, two-fifths were designed by people living in the United States, and four had a designer living in Australia. Among this top tier of board games, there were no designers living in South America, Asia, or Africa—regions that together make up four-fifths of the world's population.

Pulling data on only 100 games certainly limits the representation of game designers who are from those parts of the world in this dataset. For example, *Cartographers*, whose designer is Brazilian, is currently ranked #116. In addition, it is likely that the English-language Board Game Geek

1. In Pobuda's methodology, each designer of each game counts as a single observation——meaning that games can be included multiple times if they have more than one credited designer, and designers can be included multiple times if they have more than one game on the list.

website rankings are inherently skewed toward games distributed in English, which particularly favors games released by publishers in the US and by European publishers with established US distribution channels.

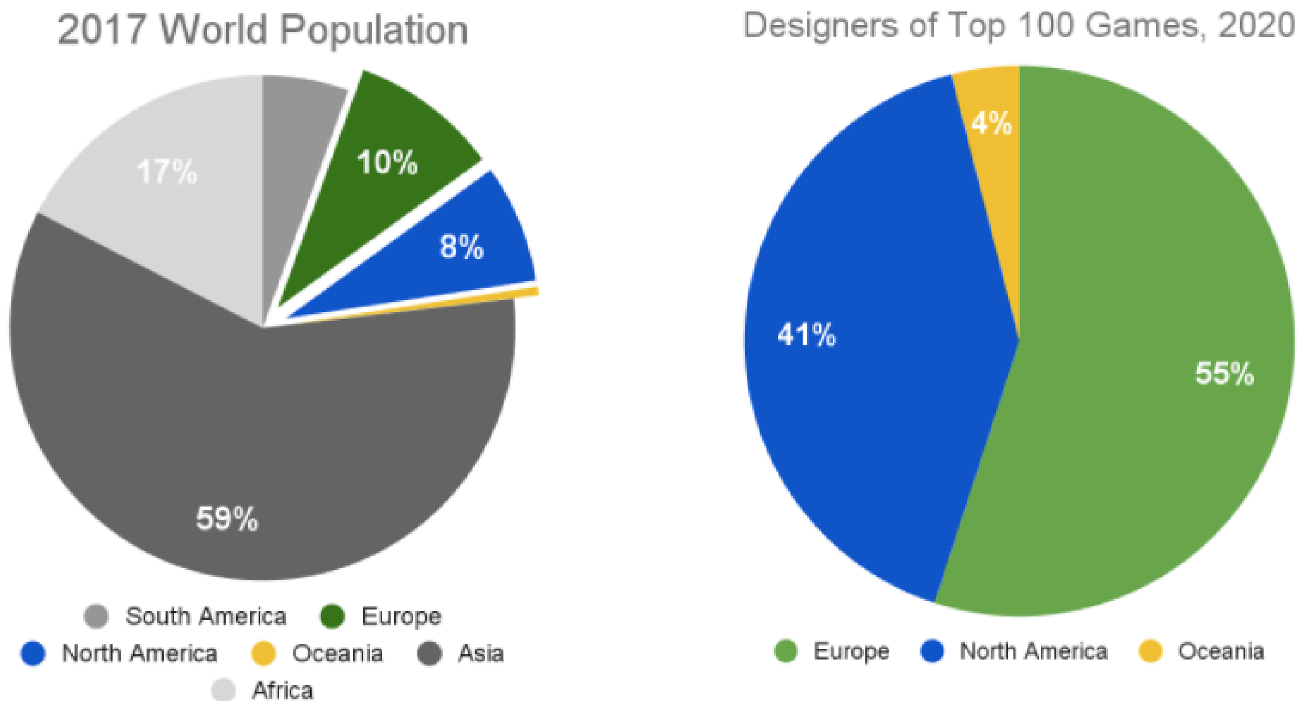

Figure 5: Location of Designers of Top 100 Board Games vs. Location of the World Population (World Population Review n.d.)

Still, changes in methodology seem unlikely to change the overall story of a designer population that is not even representative of the population of board gamers presented above, let alone the general population. Some further avenues for research on this issue could include:

- *Do designers look like the census of gamers from several years ago, or are white men disproportionately likely to become designers*? I believe that, from a general population of board gamers, a subset of them will become designers and another subset of those designers will actually make it through all the hoops to get their game published (Figure 6). This process takes time, so it is likely that the demographic profile of published designers is based in part on the demographics of the population of gamers from several years ago. Are there other factors that are weeding people out along the way, and are disproportionately affecting underrepresented groups? Is the population of designers even whiter and more demographically male than the population of gamers ever was?

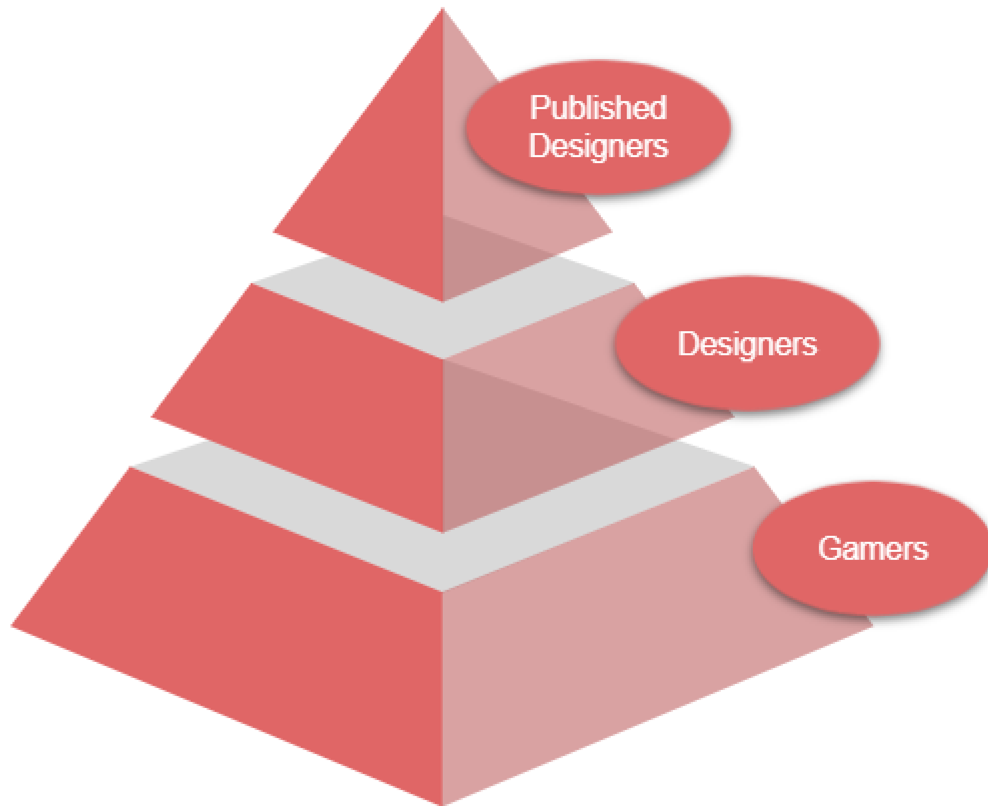

Figure 6: Designers Start as Gamers

- *What are the real and perceived barriers for women and BIPOC at each stage of becoming a published game designer*? If we can identify some of these hurdles, we might be able to address them and improve pathway to game publishing for under-represented groups.
- *How will the board game market grow worldwide, and will that translate into more designers outside US and Europe*? For example, an active effort to grow a board game community in Nigeria has been getting attention and funding from around the world, and had been supporting a network of design, playtesting, and publishing. Similarly, there are growing networks of board game conventions and designers in Latin America and Asia, but with a few exceptions those games have mostly not made it into other markets yet. Will that change over time?
- *What have been the effects of programs seeking to help designers from underrepresented backgrounds*? There are several different programs specifically aimed at helping underrepresented individuals break into the design world, including the Indie Game Developer Network Diversity Sponsorship, New Voices in Gaming, the Pathways Fellowship, and the Zenobia Award. Each program takes a different approach with a mix of mentorship, funding, and networking. Evaluating these projects could help determine the effectiveness of

their different approaches: Are they helping people make the leap from gamer to designer? Are they helping designers get published? Are certain strategies particularly effective?

- *Has online pitching removed barriers and increased diversity*? The pandemic has led many publishers to develop ways for designers to pitch games to them remotely, rather than at a convention. Pitching at a convention can be costly, so it seems possible that online pitching could remove barriers and increase access to publishers.
- *Do RPGs have a more diverse design community than board games? If so, how did that happen?* I have not been involved in the world of roleplaying games, but my impression is that the designer pool in that sector (and particularly in indie RPGs) includes a higher proportion of women and BIPOC creators than we see in board games. If this is true, I would love to know more about the history of how this pattern developed.

Board game publishers

As an anecdote for my presentation, I looked up the CEOs of 18 of the largest board game publishers.[2] All but one of them (Chern Ann Ng at CMON) was a white man. Given the information above about the population of gamers and designers, this is unsurprising; most publishers started as gamers, and several were designers before entering publishing. Much more research could be done in this area:

- *What is the demographic makeup of leadership and staff at publishers, and does that correlate with the games they make*? The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative has done interesting longitudinal studies of staffing in the movie and music industries. Similar studies could be done for board games, looking at the CEOs and decision-making staff: who is reviewing game pitches? Who is making decisions about art? Do the demographics of these staff correlate with things like the demographics of the designers that they publish, the characters in their games, or their customer base itself?
- *What capital and connections does it take to start a successful game company*? Historically, board game companies had to raise capital to enter the industry. Kickstarter has changed that dynamic, although a successful campaign still requires significant up-front outlays for expenses like art and marketing. Has the reduced cost of entry diversified the pool of individuals who have decided to become publishers?
- *What are publishers doing to diversify*? *What supports do they need*? In the summer of 2020, many game publishers stated a desire to do better at diversity and inclusion. The Game

2. Most publishers are privately held companies that do not report sales or earnings——making it difficult to discern the "largest" publishers. Perhaps a more systematic process would be to again rely on the Board Game Geek rankings, and pull publisher information for the top board games.

Manufacturers' Association (GAMA) has started a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative: what should they be doing? What are publishers already doing? What is working?

Are there correlations between demographics and game preferences? The market research company Quantic Foundry developed a Gamer Motivation Profile quiz[3] that has been completed over 100,000 times. The questions place each respondent on a grid of twelve different motivations for gaming, including how much they enjoy conflict, social manipulation, cooperation, social fun, strategy, discovery, immersion, aesthetics, chance, and accessibility. In 2017, the company released an analysis of the responses from 90,000 gamers and how they differed by gender. That report found that women were more likely to respond in ways that suggest that cooperation and social fun are major motivators for them, while men were more likely to be motivated by conflict and social manipulation (Figure 7). In addition, men were more likely to rank higher on enjoying strategy and the discovery process of learning new games. Women were more likely to say that they enjoy chance and games that are easy to learn and teach (Figure 8). Meanwhile, non-binary gamers (not shown, 1% of the sample) were more likely than either men or women to say that they value immersion above these other motivations.

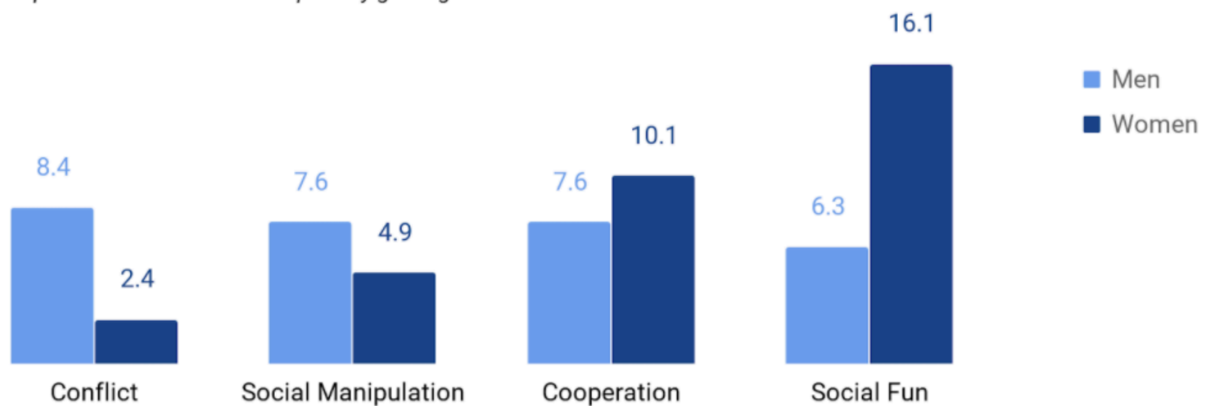

Figure 7. Share of Men and Women with Conflict, Social Manipulation, Cooperation, and Social Fun as their Primary Gaming Motivation (Yee 2017)

3. https://apps.quanticfoundry.com/surveys/start/tabletop/

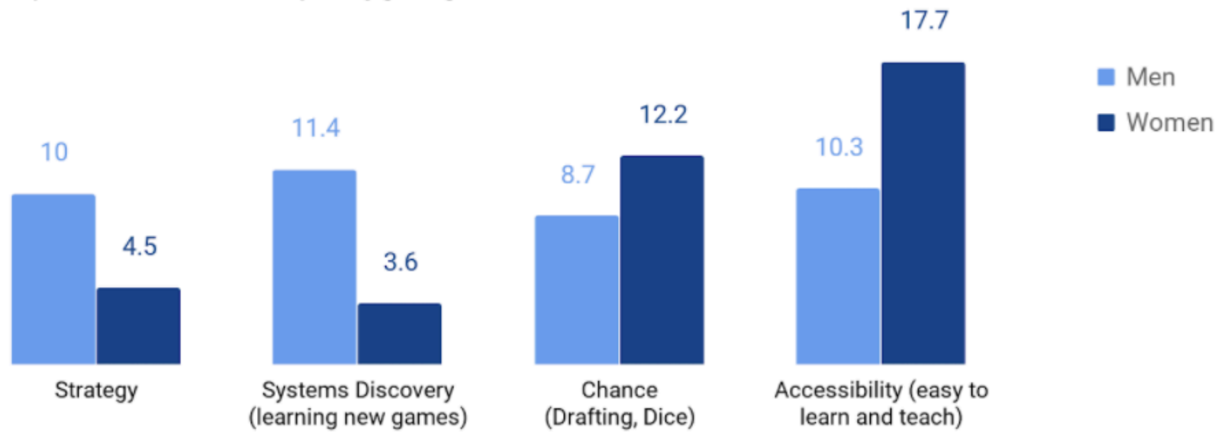

Figure 8: Share of Men and Women with Strategy, Systems Discovery, Chance, and Accessibility as their Primary Gaming Motivation (Yee 2017)

It is important to note that there is a great deal of variance within these patterns. While there are clear correlations between gender and some of these gaming preferences in this dataset, there are many people whose individual answers are the opposite of what their gender might predict. In addition, this data does not give any insight into where these preferences come from; it is likely that many of them are the result of socialization, not innate characteristics. However, while the data cannot be used to make assumptions about any one individual's preferences or where those preferences come from, there do seem to be distinct differences between men and women's gaming preferences at the group level.

These differences at the group level suggest to me that published games might reflect a set of preferences that, on average, are inclined towards those of men as opposed to those of women. This gender bias has the potential to create a feedback loop in which games themselves reinforce the status quo. That is, the games reflecting male designers' preferences will attract more men to become gamers. The designers who come from that pool will continue to be overwhelmingly men, continuing the cycle.

I would be happy to be proven wrong on this speculative cycle. Some of the questions I would love to see answered include:

- *Would there also be differences in preferences if the data were analyzed by race, ethnicity, or country*? Presumably, the Quantic Foundry data could be analyzed in these ways, if they collected this information in the initial quiz.
- *Do designers' games, on average, tend to reflect the preferences of their own demographic group*? The feedback loop I described above depends in large part on this question. Similarly,

do publishers' choices tend to reflect the average preferences of their own demographic group? Would bringing in more diverse designers and publisher staff help the board game industry appeal to a broader audience?
- *To what extent have design styles been based on geography, and what new design styles are emerging*? Among designers, we have historically talked about "Euro" and "Ameritrash" games: styles that were associated with geographic regions. While those boundaries have certainly blurred in recent years, do they persist in people's preferences? Could you describe a separate set of characteristics of games coming from different places—for example, are the games coming out of Japan objectively so different that could together be described as a "style" of game?

What makes people think a game (or gaming) is for them?

Up to this point, I have largely been discussing who gamers and designers *are*; in this section I would like to discuss some of the factors that might be affecting who *becomes* a gamer: representation, complexity, time, and money.

Does representation matter?

Along with studying the demographic distribution of board game designers, Pobuda has also studied the visual representation of humans in those games. She has found that the demographics of human figures in board game cover art are more closely aligned with the gamer population than with the world population; only 23% of figures appear to be women, and 18 percent appear to be BIPOC (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Figures in the Cover Art of the Top 200 Board Games, by Gender and Race (Pobuda 2021)

In other forms of media, studies have shown that lack of representation can drive down consumer engagement. In one study that asked 1,000 women in the United States and the United Kingdom about their TV and movie watching, two-thirds said they had stopped watching a show because it used negative stereotypes of women, and a quarter had stopped watching for lack of women characters. Among younger women, nearly half (46%) had stopped watching a show for lack of women characters (Geena Davis Institute 2017). Similarly, a study of the top 100 films released in 2018 and 2019 found that movies with more representation of Black or Latinx characters were more likely to draw audiences from those demographic groups (Movio n.d.).

These studies suggest that a similar effect might come into play in board games. Related questions include:

- *How is representation changing over time*? Anecdotally, it does feel that representation in board game covers has been becoming more diverse. Whether this is true could be documented by looking up covers for the list of top games at different points in time.
- *Does representation in cover art make a difference in who buys a game*? Would it be possible to run studies using targeted A-B testing (e.g., Green Inbox) to test whether different types of representation in a board game's art attract different audiences to click on an ad? What could we learn from Kickstarter funding data about the success of games with different levels of diversity in their art?
- *What are best practices*? If there are publishers who want to be intentional about representation, what practices can they put into place to help them do it well?

Is complexity a gatekeeper?

As *Wingspan* has reached a non-gamer audience, the issue of complexity has been on my mind. Within the hobby board game world, it is not a particularly complex game. However, for people who have never played a modern hobby board game, *Wingspan* can seem impossibly difficult. Across all hobby board games, complexity impedes the industry's ability to attract new gamers.

There is evidence that gamers who engage with Board Game Geek prefer more complex games, and rate them more highly (Vatvani 2018). In his research on this subject, Dinesh Vatvani adjusted for that complexity bias and generated an adjusted top 10 list. The result was a list that looked much more like a list of gateway games (Figure 10). A search for the top-rated "Strategy and War" games on Amazon results in an even lighter group of games that straddles the hobby and mass market, with Gloomhaven as a solidly hobby outlier just making the list.

Top 10 Games on BGG, 2018	**Top 10 Games After Adjusting for Complexity Bias, 2018**	**Top 10 Games on Amazon, 2021**			
Title	BGG weight	Title	BGG weight	Title	BGG weight
Gloomhaven	3.87	Pandemic Legacy: Season 1	2.83	Five Crowns	1.25
Pandemic Legacy: Season 1	2.83	Codenames	1.28	Catan	2.32
Through the Ages	4.41	7 Wonders Duel	2.22	Skip-Bo	1.22
Twilight Struggle	3.59	Gloomhaven	3.87	Ticket to Ride	1.85
Star Wars: Rebellion	3.72	Crokinole	1.25	Sequence	1.33
Terraforming Mars	3.24	Patchwork	1.62	Ticket to Ride: Europe	1.93
Terra Mystica	3.96	Ticket to Ride	1.85	Rummikub	1.74
Scythe	3.42	Mechs vs. Minions	2.43	Dutch Blitz	1.28
7 Wonders Duel	2.22	Santorini	1.72	Pit	1.16
The Castles of Burgundy	3.00	Mansions of Madness: 2ed	2.68	Gloomhaven	3.87
Average	**3.47**	**Average**	**2.12**	**Average**	**1.56**

Figure 10. Top Games on Board Game Geek and Amazon, by Complexity (Vatvani 2018)

The board game industry will continue to publish games in a wide range of complexity levels. With

the lens of wanting to bring new people into the hobby, it might be helpful to ask questions about complexity:

- *What is the best way to measure complexity*? The crowdsourced nature of the BGG weight rating leads to discussion about whether these ratings are even "correct." There is a whole body of research that could be done on what makes a game complex, and how that overlaps with accessibility to new gamers.
- *As BGG has grown significantly, has the complexity bias changed*? It is possible that longer-term users have a stronger preference for a high level of complexity, for example.
- *What makes a game a true gateway game*? If you asked gamers what game got them into the hobby, and what was it like to learn that game, what could we learn from that?
- *What can designers do to help newer gamers have a good experience*? One of the things that we added to *Wingspan* early on was a separate pack of starting hands, accompanied by a set of instructions about how to play the first four turns of the game. Once players had played those four turns, they should have gained a good of how the basic actions of the game work. This was inspired by the tutorial setup of *Fog of Love*, and represents an onboarding strategy that could probably be incorporated into a lot of games.

Who has the time and money?

Time and money are additional potential barriers for new gamers. The top ten games on Board Game Geek currently have an average retail price of $91, and take an average 134 minutes to play. In comparison, the top 10 games on Amazon listed above cost an average of $41 and take 48 minutes to play. Access to time and money can also be correlated with gender and race, at least in the United States. US men spend an hour more per day than women on leisure activities (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020.), and white households in the US have a median income 70% higher than the median income of Black households (US Census Bureau n.d.).

It is unlikely that the cost or play time of hobby board games will come down significantly. In fact, recent supply and shipping issues are likely to drive prices up. We can think about ways to ease the burden on new gamers, particularly those who are tight on time or money:

- *What effect do children have on gaming habits*? In my anecdotal experience, many of my gamer friends have had their gaming time and energy dramatically reduced when they have children, which has not been evenly distributed by gender. It would be valuable to document whether this is a widespread phenomenon. If so, we could think about how gaming venues could welcome children in a way that enables gamer parents to continue playing the games they love. To the extent that venues are already doing this, has it had an effect on the

diversity of gamers that they attract?

- *Are shared games (at libraries, clubs, and game stores) used by people that wouldn't otherwise be able to buy games*? Libraries seem to be taking on the mission of developing game collections that can be borrowed or used on site, to increase access for more would-be gamers. How could the impact of these programs be documented?
- *To what degree are time and money barriers for designers, as well*? If gaming is already a luxury hobby, game design is even more so. It is a time-intensive process, and yet almost all game design is done on spec, with designers pitching to publishers and getting paid after all their work is done. Do first-time game designers tend to have higher-income day jobs and more free time than gamers who do not start designing? How much time and money do they put into developing their games? How many have children, and how do they juggle family obligations? How can mentorship and scholarship programs address some of these issues?

Do board games bleed?

One of the most remarkable things about seeing my games out in the world has been getting notes from people about how those games have changed their real-world behavior. *Wingspan* players have bought binoculars and field guides, while *Mariposas* players have planted butterfly gardens. One person even said *Tussie Mussie* had caused them to start giving real flowers more often, with notes about their meaning.

Crossover between gaming and real-life behavior has led me to think about "bleed." Bleed is a term that was first coined in Nordic larps and has spread to role-playing in general. It describes the phenomenon in which a player's thoughts and feelings outside a game are influenced by their character's experiences inside the game (or vice-versa). Hearing about how players have taken concepts from my board games out into real life raises concerns about other ways that board games might unintentionally bleed, and how that might affect the gaming communities that we create:

- *Do representations of characters of different genders and ethnicities (or lack thereof) affect player attitudes outside the game*? Is it possible, for example, that all-white-men representations in so many games help to subtly normalize white men demographics of gaming spaces in the minds of gamers? Could diversifying game art not only make games more welcoming to more people, but also influence the social dynamics of the groups that play those games?
- *Do representations of how in-game worlds work affect our attitudes about how the real world works*? For example, do games that portray unlimited access to natural resources like wood

and ore, and feature no consequences from their extraction, affect players' attitudes toward environmental crises? Do representations of colonialism and conquest affect players' attitudes on historical or current foreign policy?

Conclusion

This paper has raised far more questions than it answers, and I'm sure many readers will have many questions of their own to add. I hope that some intrepid researchers will take on the challenge of answering even a few of those questions. May their answers help guide us as we strive to make the board gaming hobby one that truly welcomes all people and represents the diversity of human experience.

References

Booth, Paul. 2019. "Who's At the Table? Board Game Players and Communities." *Meeple Mountain*, August 27, 2019. https://www.meeplemountain.com/articles/whos-at-the-table-board-game-players-and-communities/.

George, Ajit. 2014. "Gaming's Race Problem: GenCon and Beyond." *Tor.com*, August 13, 2014. https://www.tor.com/2014/08/13/gamings-race-problem-gen-con-and-beyond/.

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and J. Walter Thompson. 2017. "New Study Shows Women Will Turn Off a Film or TV Show If Too Stereotyped or Lacking Female Characters." February 25, 2017. https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/new-study-shows-women-will-turn-off-a-film-or-tv-show-if-too-stereotyped-or-lacking-female-characters.pdf.

Hargrave, Elizabeth. 2019. "OMG My Wife Wants to Play Your Game!: Gender Differences in Game Preferences." Presentation to the Tabletop Network, Dallas, TX, November 2019.

Hoye, Nicole. "Survey Results #1: Who Are We?" *Daily Worker Placement*, February 19, 2016. https://dailyworkerplacement.com/2016/02/19/survey-results-1-who-are-we/.

Movio. n.d. "I Want to See Me: Why Diverse On-Screen Representation Drives Cinema Audiences." White Paper. https://movio.co/i-want-to-see-me/.

Pobuda, Tanya. 2018. "Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry." *Analog Game Studies* 8, no. 2. https://analoggamestudies.org/byline/tanya-pobuda/page/2/.

Pobuda, Tanya. 2021. "'I Didn't See Anyone Who Looked Like Me': Gender and Racial Representation in Board Gaming." Presentation to the Bradley Tabletop Games Symposium, May 21, 2021.

Quantic Foundry. n.d. "Notes on the v2.0 Board Game Sample." Accessed November 17, 2021. https://quanticfoundry.com/board-game-v20-sample/.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. n.d. "Time Spent in Selected Primary Activities, by Selected Characteristics, Averages for May to December, 2019 and 2020" https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t03.htm.

U.S. Census Bureau. n.d. "Real Median Household Income by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1967 to 2017." https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2018/demo/p60-263/figure1.pdf.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Quick Facts: United States." https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219.

Vatvani, Dinesh. 2018. "An Analysis of Board Games, Part II: Complexity Bias in BGG." *Dinesh Vatvani* (blog), December 8, 2018. https://dvatvani.github.io/BGG-Analysis-Part-2.html.

World Population Review. n.d. https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents.

Yee, Nick. 2017. "The Primary Motivations of Board Gamers: 7 Takeaways." *Quantic Foundry* (blog), April 27, 2017. https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/04/27/board-gaming-motivations/.

6. The Inflection Point

Board Gaming, Race, Gender, and What Early Tech Can Teach Us

TANYA POBUDA

Abstract

This is a précis of ongoing PhD dissertation research that looks at the relative number of BIPOC and women designers involved in the making of top-ranked board games, specifically in those games that represent the top 400 ranked games on *BoardGameGeek* (BGG). The article shares a snapshot of a quantitative visual analysis of the gender and racial representation in the artwork featured on the covers of the board games, and examines the results of an extensive and wide-ranging online survey conducted from August to October, 2020. The research study uncovered that 92.6% of board game designs were created by white men. The study also found that, of the human representation found on the cover art of the boxes of the top 200 BGG games, images of men or boys represented 76.8% of the sample of 647 figures. Women or girls were represented 23.2% of the time (195 figures in total) compared to men. Only 17.5% of the human representation was that of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) on the cover art of board games or 112 total figures, versus 528 images of white figures, which represented 82.5% of the sample. The 320 respondents to an online survey shared that representation was a notable factor in their perceptions of, and behaviors within, the hobby and industry. A full 84.9% of the respondents indicated that positive representation in games increased their enjoyment of the game.

Keywords:

Race, gender, board games, representation, industry, dashboards, market

---

The 1990s marked the early days of my career as a tech reporter. Later, as a marketing professional, I'd make corporate dashboard reports for business leaders compiled from manual content analyses of media coverage, USENET discussion boards, even user-created Bulletin Board Services (BBSs). My job, first as a journalist, and then as a corporate communications manager, was to help businesses determine what strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were facing

them. Who was their audience? What was their audience saying? What were some of the gaps in the market that they could use to their advantage? What were their competitors doing?

As the world became increasingly digital, I'd make these dashboards virtual, updating them in near-real time, to allow busy executives to wander their hallways with a web page that looked akin to an airplane cockpit, with gauges and pie charts showing daily performance and possible threats.

Figure 1: An example virtual dashboard. Photo by Luke Chesser on Unsplash.

When I decided to go back to school after 26 years in industry, I started to look deeply into a sector that I was both personally interested in, and one that I realized bore some significant similarities to the early days of personal computing: the board game market.

In the US alone, the board and card game market was worth $4.4 billion in 2019. In 1992, the personal computer market was worth $11.39 billion (Alsop 2020; Jarvis 2021). Today, the board game market is projected to grow to $30 billion by 2026 with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 13% (Arizton 2020). To my grizzled marketing veteran's eye, I could see that

the board game market is at the same inflection point as early tech, poised either for dramatic, transformative growth, or doomed to stay mired in a stunted and niche category.

Early personal computing in the late 1980s–early 1990s was an outsider business. It was a marginal pursuit, a preserve for early adopters, most of whom were white, middle-class men living in urban or suburban areas. This was because personal computing was an elite hobby at that time, meant for people with a little more than average disposable income, vast expanses of leisure time to tackle intricate worlds of homebrew hardware and software creation, and a sense of comfort with being a niche enthusiast proverbially "alone against the world."

Many of the early entrepreneurs in this space were men who started their fledgling businesses from their garages, basements, or living rooms. Indeed, many of the businesses I'd visit when writing articles about the burgeoning personal computing (PC) market in Canada had an ad-hoc, unprofessional quality: dank offices in basements, airless rooms in loading bays, and nondescript industrial park offices on the outskirts of the city. People worked in these organizations for the passion, not the perks. Employees, most often, looked a lot like the company founders, in many cases they were friends, neighbors, and even relatives. The operators of these businesses were invariably men, mostly white, and were true believers in the promise of PCs. These early adopters believed that PCs were something everyone would be interested in if they only tried them. These business leaders kept the faith in their visions even when those around them, and the market, did not.

I was an early adopter of PCs myself, as one of two families in my small town with a computer system in our house. Later, I was regarded as a novelty as a tech reporter—a woman writing about PCs—a fact that was often commented upon. Some of these early entrepreneurs were very welcoming but would also worry that I wasn't understanding what they were saying. At times, they asked if they could send information to my editor, who was a man.

The PC business was a "Wild West" where every group of college buddies felt they could strike it rich. For many first movers, being the only game in town was a formula for success. However, as the market expanded, some of those small companies run by foosball-playing frat buddies fell by the wayside. Those businesses that wobbled and ultimately fell were the ones who went with their "gut" alone. These early players thought they could read the market dynamics by "feel." They were disadvantaged by their ignorance of the changing marketplace and their profound lack of understanding of their audience, demographic shifts, and dynamics.

At this stage, I'll ask board game enthusiasts: does this ring a bell? I'll argue board game companies are finding themselves at the same inflection point as those early PC purveyors. Would they expand their market or focus only on the die-hard early adopters? For early tech leaders, their choice was either to expand, recruit new audiences, or doggedly cling to their increasingly saturated base. I'll talk a little later in this piece about how choosing one or the other fork in the

road, the choice between a devoted base versus doing the hard work of market expansion, turned out for these early tech leaders.

In the middle of 2018, my search for audience demographic information for board games didn't turn up much solid data. What I did find were statistics from publishers and hobbyists that revealed a significant skew toward consumers who were white men. Surveys such as those conducted by Stonemaier Games (2019) indicated that 81.1% of their registered users were men. Another survey from *Daily Worker Placement* survey saw only 6.1% BIPOC participation in a demographic poll (H. 2016). A particularly dismaying finding was a 2016 poll of wargaming members of *Paxisms*, which showed a membership that was 99% men (Brynen 2016). Based on these kinds of numbers, any reasonable observer might conclude that the hobby skews heavily toward white men, rather like those early PC enthusiasts.

When I contrasted these board game numbers with video game demographics, my cognitive dissonance grew. Video gamers have grown increasingly diverse over the years:

- 46 percent of all digital gamers are women (United States)
- 50 percent of all digital gamers are women (Canada)
- 46 percent Black Americans play video games often/somewhat
- 47 percent of Hispanic Americans play digital games often/somewhat (Clement 2021)

I made it my objective to find out what the dynamics drove this strange demographic skew in board games. Indeed, I was so curious about this question and others, I decided to do my entire PhD dissertation on the board game market.

I first determined that *BoardGameGeek* (BGG) was the right platform to assess the current state of the board game hobby. In doing so, I was looking to create two empirical building blocks to assess the current state of the hobby through a lens of gender and race. BGG was selected because it has roughly 2 million registered users, and is typically in the top-five board gaming global platforms based on page views and other engagement metrics (including bounce rate) (Alden 2019). BGG got 12.63 million views in the 6 months preceding April 2021 (SimilarWeb 2021). I looked at the top 400 BGG-ranked games, and this gave me a sample space that reflected a contemporary snapshot view into current user's top-ranked games and play praxis (Pobuda 2018).

From that sample, I found that a staggering 92.6% of the labor of board game design was that of creators who were white men (Figure 2).

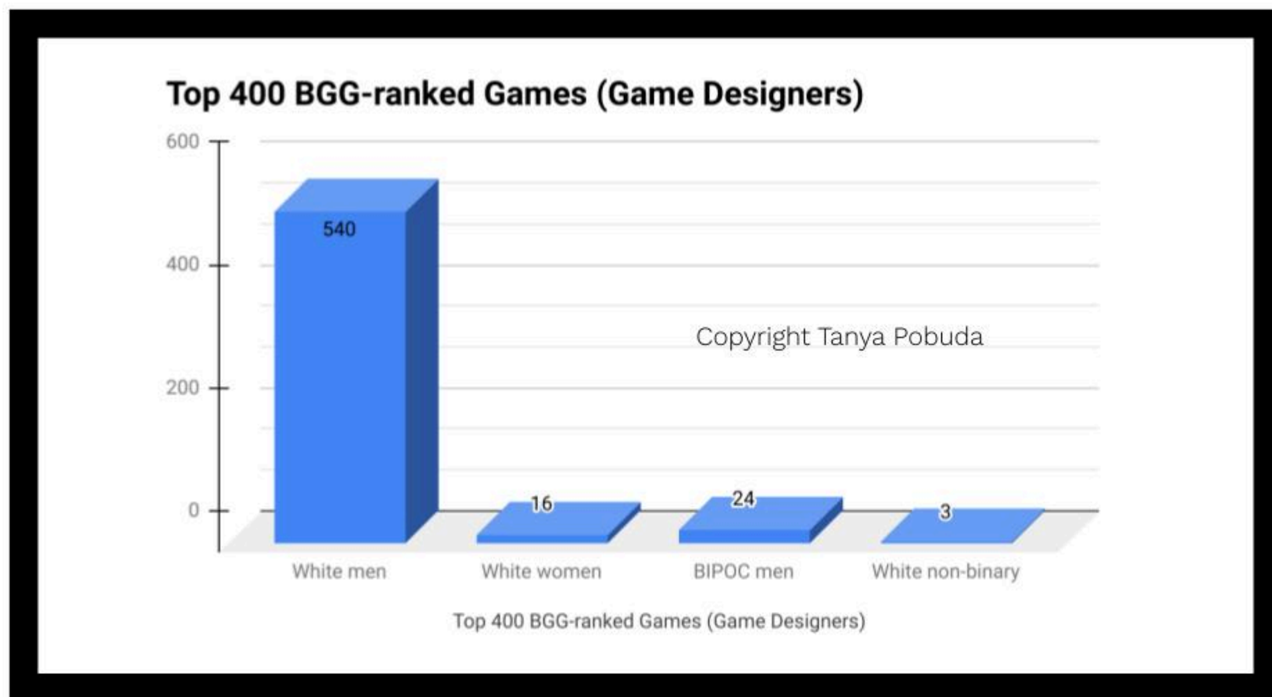

Figure 2: Top 400 BGG-ranked Games (Game Designers). Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

From there, I found that of the 1,974 figures represented on the covers of the top 200 BGG games, only 17.5% of the human representation on the boxes was of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC)—112 total figures, versus 528 images of white figures which represented 82.5% of the sample (Figure 3). This indicated a distinct skew in the data collected toward white identities on covers of these top-ranked games.

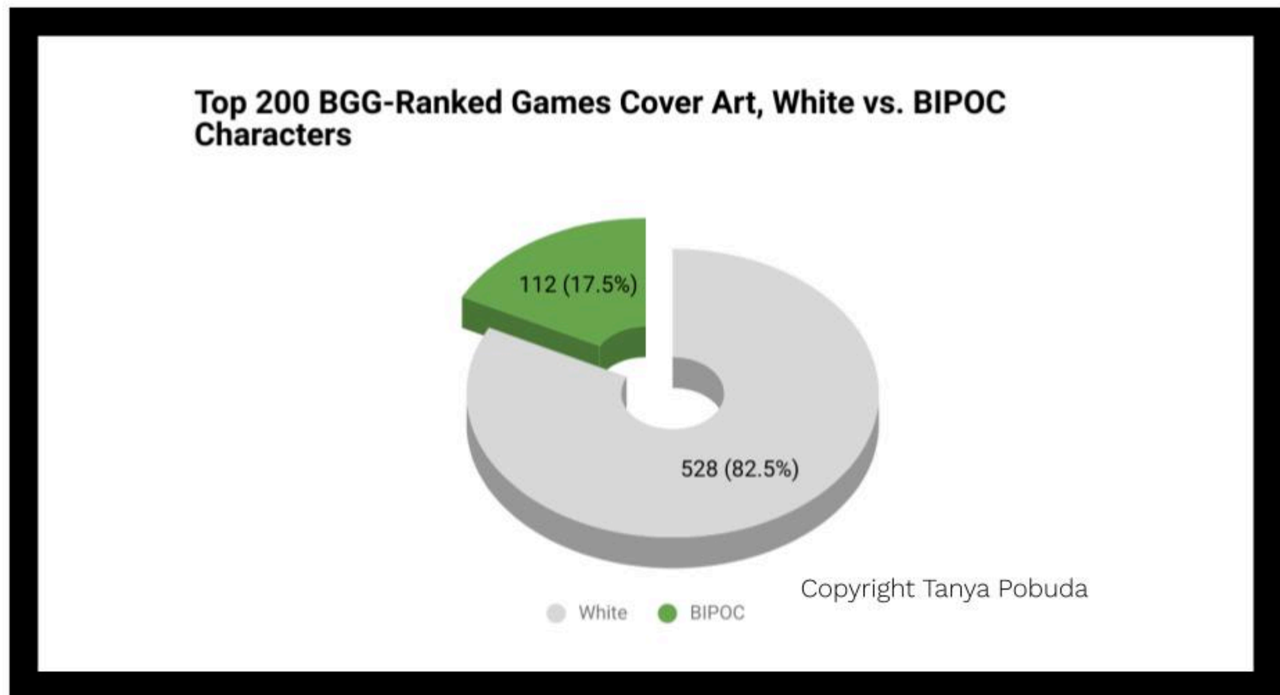

Figure 3: Top 200 BGG-Ranked Games Cover Art, White vs. BIPOC Characters. Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

Of the human representation found on the cover art of the boxes of the top 200 BGG games, there was an uneven split between the representation of men and women. When only looking at human representation, men or boys represented 76.8% of the sample, or 647 figures. Women or girls were represented 23.2% of the time, or 195 figures in total (Figure 4). The covers are an invitation to purchase or play, and demographic representation can play a role in consumer behavior, enticing people to purchase or use the products based on their ability to see themselves in the marketing messages (Henderson and Williams 2013).

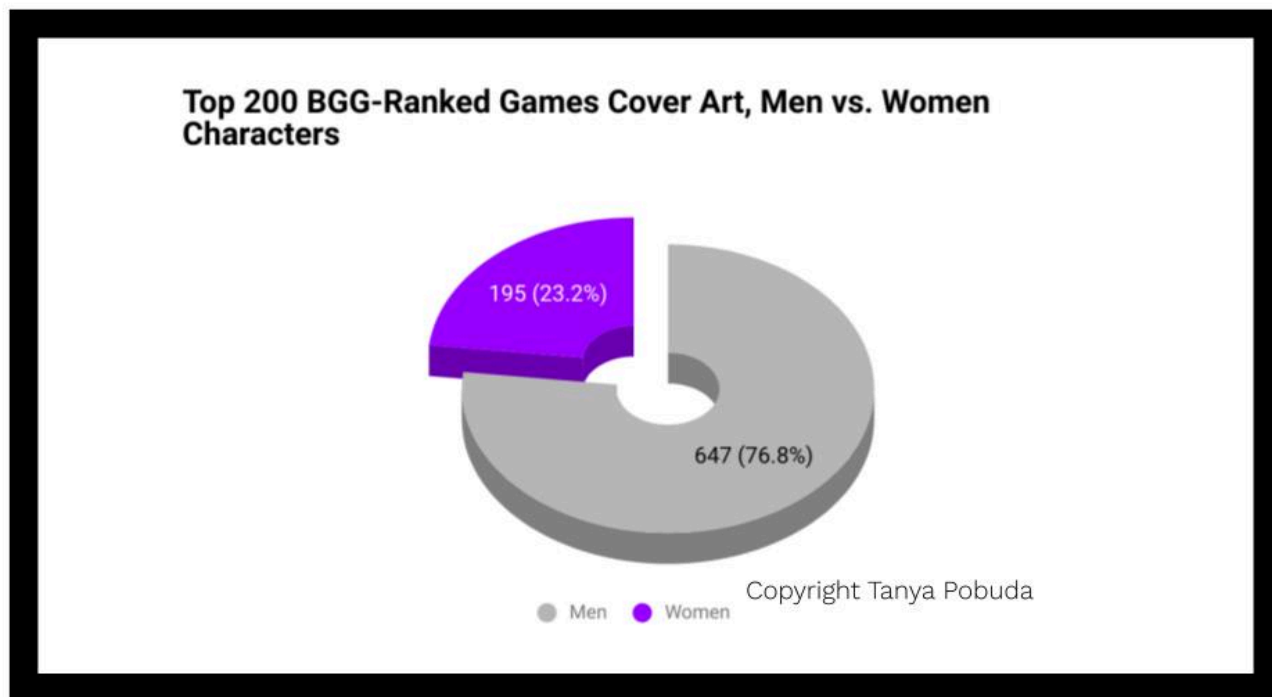

Figure 4: Top 200 BGG-Ranked Games Cover Art, Men vs. Women. Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

The labor findings in my more expansive PhD dissertation study were consistent with another study I conducted several years earlier (Pobuda 2018). In that study, I found that 93.5% of game designers were white men. Establishing that the labor groups who create popular media such as board games are overwhelmingly white men may help us to understand why consumers see such limited representation of other demographic groups within games in terms of artwork and playable characters. Looking at the artwork of the top 100-ranked BGG games in 2018, my research found that white men were overrepresented in images on the cover, back and side panels of popular board games (Pobuda, 2018). White-presenting representation made up most of the characters that appeared on boxes at 83.7%, while illustrations of BIPOC rested at 16.3% in the 2018 study. The 2018 and 2020 studies yielded a consistent result, allowing me to make a strong conclusion that white men are overrepresented in the labor of game design, and in the cover artwork relative to the population of both the US and Canada.

With these empirical building blocks in place, I shifted my focus to the question of the board game audience. Does limited or absent representation matter to players and purchasers? I conducted a likert psychometric survey that assessed the perspectives of avid board gamers (most of the respondents were BGG users with established BGG profiles). I asked them questions about how and why they engaged with the board game hobby. I asked about their relative levels of agreement

or disagreement with statements on topics including representation. I asked redundant and varied questions on certain topics to triangulate levels of agreement.

While I recruited for diversity for my respondents, no one was excluded from filling out the survey (however only one response per internet protocol address was allowed). Here's a breakdown of the online survey respondents' demographics:

- 78.9 percent reported being in a relationship with another person(s)
- 81.8 percent completed some form of postsecondary education
- 58.5 percent reported household incomes higher than $50,000
- 73.8 percent from North America
- 67.8 percent reported being in their 30s or 40s
- 60.4 percent identified as women
- 25.3 percent identified as men
- 9.4 percent identified as non-binary
- 74.9 percent identified as white
- 20.4 percent identified as BIPOC
- 52.8 percent identified as LGBTQIA

What I found in the responses was that gender and racial representation played a role in playing, purchasing, enjoying, and engaging with the board game hobby. The 320 respondents I surveyed shared that representation affected their perceptions of and behaviors within the hobby and industry. I uncovered a level of definitive agreement, and even passion around the question of representation in board games from the respondents with the following findings:

- 81.5% said they wished publishers would publish more games designed by women designers
- 81.7% said they wished publishers would publish more games designed by BIPOC designers
- 82.8% said they wished publishers would ensure their board game artwork had more equitable gender representation
- 84.9% wished publishers would ensure their board game artwork had more equitable racial representation

Still more notably, 84.9% of the survey respondents said that positive representation in games increased their enjoyment of the game (Figure 5).

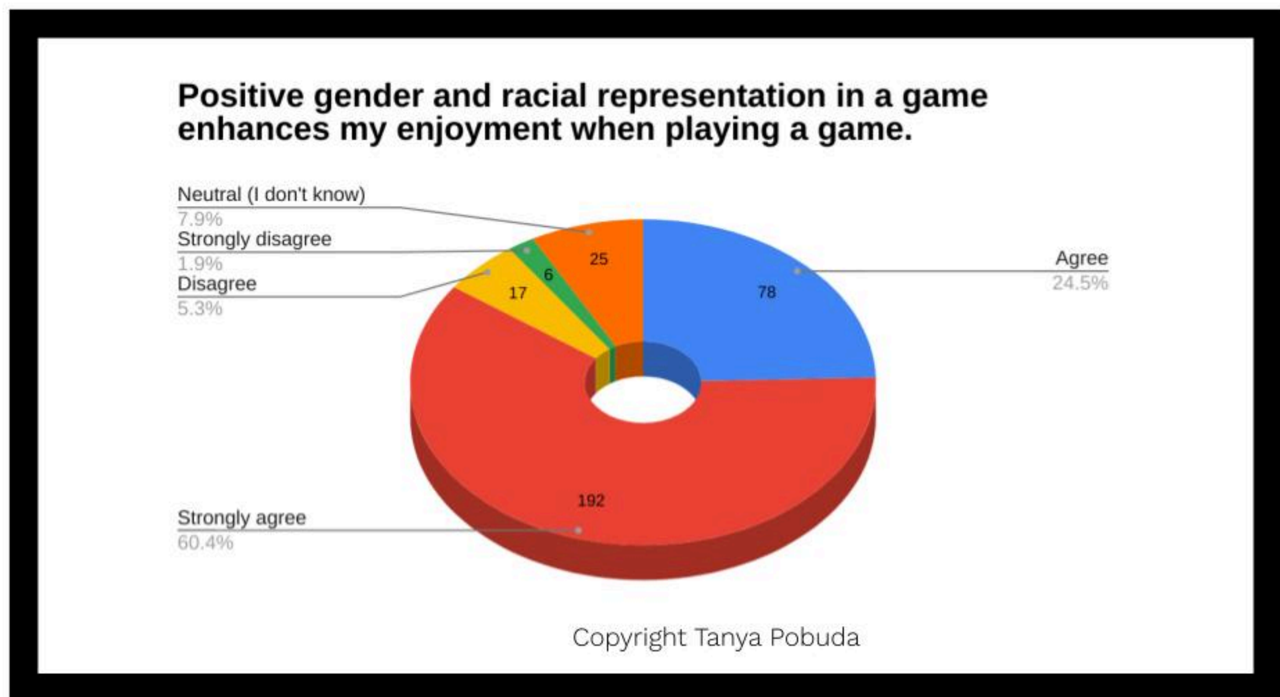

Figure 5: Answers to the question: "Positive gender and racial representation in a game enhances my enjoyment when playing a game." Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

It should be noted at this point that 74.9% of my sample respondents were white, several of whom shared they didn't want to see white-only representation in their games. As a long-time watcher of board game fora, this finding calls into question the oft-repeated notion that if a creator puts BIPOC representation on a game or publishes a work by a BIPOC creator, you'll alienate a white audience (Figure 6). I got comments from the survey respondents like these:

> My responses are intended to reflect that a) I am bothered by the lack of representation and access in the hobby to non-white, non-cisgender participants, b) stores, conventions, "public spaces" need to create a more welcoming atmosphere that includes checking privilege, harmful language and behavior, c) I am more interested in playing/purchasing a game designed by non-cisgender or BIPOC person and/or with characters and rules with diverse representation.

Another comment, one of the 174 lengthy written comments that some of the respondents wrote to me at the end of the survey, read:

> I really appreciate studies like this taking place as I believe it is a topic that many people who view themselves as minorities will find interest in. I have recently invested more time in playing board games over the past couple of years with my significant other and

have been bothered on many occasions by the lack of representation of women and racial diversity.

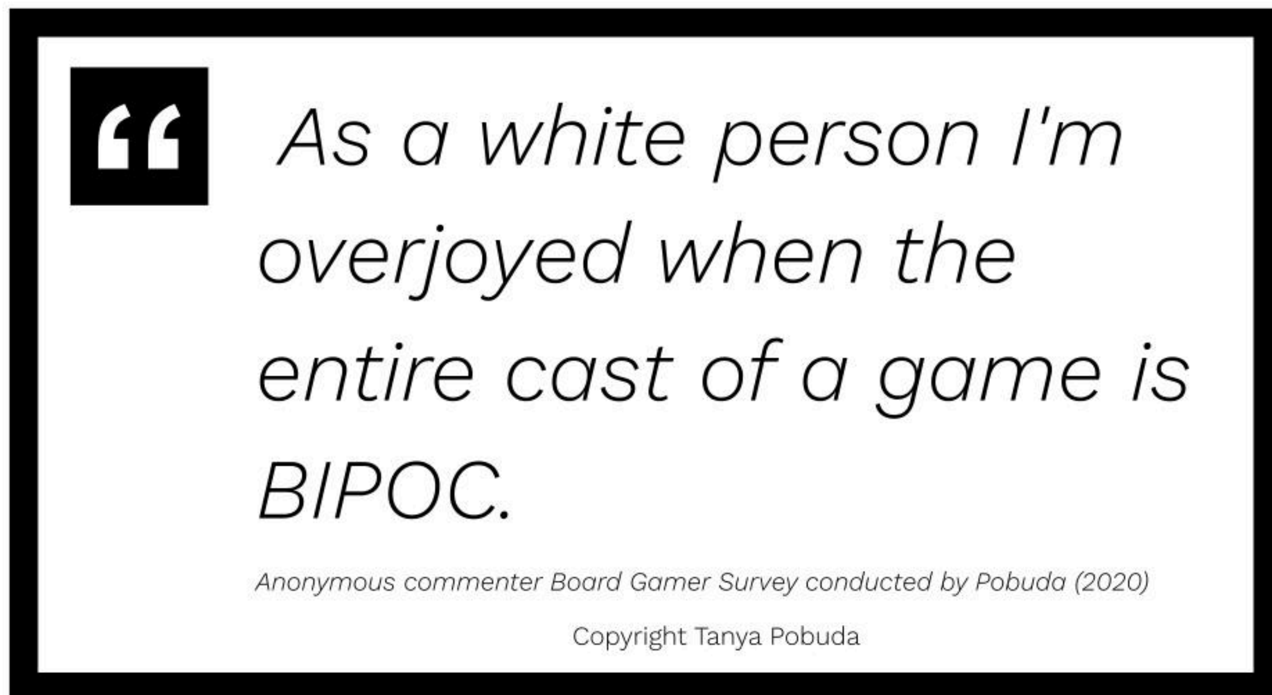

Figure 5: Answers to the question: "Positive gender and racial representation in a game enhances my enjoyment when playing a game." Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

The lack of diversity and a skew toward white men in the representation of cultural products continues to challenge other North American cultural industries beyond board games. I looked at several analogous studies in video games, film, and television, to examine whether a lack of diversity and representation had a bottom-line impact in those cultural industries. This survey of research revealed that films lacking authentically diverse representation (based on pre-pandemic box office figures) will lose $32.2 million during the opening weekend, and ultimately, 80% of their total budget over the full theatrical run (Higginbotham, Zheng, and Uhls 2020). An analysis of family films with people of color in lead roles revealed that these films generated 15.4% more revenue, meaning they grossed $21 million more than those with white leads (Davis, Di Nonno, Heldman, and Narayanan 2016).

For games companies, the US continues to be the largest consumer market in the world, at $12.5 trillion worth of spending in durable and non-durable goods and services. The US market continues to be crucial to board game creators' success, worth nearly a third of the entire global

board game marketplace, and new demographic research and projections reflect the changing domestic audience landscape.

In the US, the white, non-Hispanic population has declined to 57.8% of the total population (Census.gov 2021).[1] The number of multiracial people living in the U.S. in 2020 has increased by 276% over the 2010 census (United States Census Bureau 2021). If I were being charitable, I would estimate that white, non-Hispanic men make up exactly half of the 57.8% of the US white population. As women make up more than half of the population at 50.5%, the percentage of white men living in the US must be smaller than that (The World Bank 2020). That total percentage of white men becomes even smaller still if you isolate the smaller cross-section of white, heterosexual men, as we consider from the available data that 5.6% of the US population is LGBTQiIA , according to a 2021 Gallup survey (Jones 2021). These calculations take us to an audience size of white straight men that is anywhere from the low to mid 20s, in terms of their percentage as a proportion of the overall US population.

In the Canadian city where I live, the population is 50.2% white, with 49.9% of the population identifying as BIPOC (Canada Population 2021). Looking at global demography, Black, Indigenous and People of Color represent over 80% of the world's population [2] (Figure 7). BIPOC as a term is being replaced by the term people of the global majority (PGM) because that is an empirically accurate statement when we broaden our lens to look at the global population. Through this global lens, the decision-making on the part of cultural industry content creators making games, books, movies, television to ignore BIPOC identities becomes even more perplexing.

1. "2020 Census Redistricting: Supplementary Tables". United States Census Bureau. August 12, 2021. Retrieved September 6, 2021.
2. Glossary of Terms (2021) People of the Global Majority, Retrieved from https://socialwork.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/DEI-Glossary-of-Terms.pdf, Retrieved on Sept. 14, 2021.

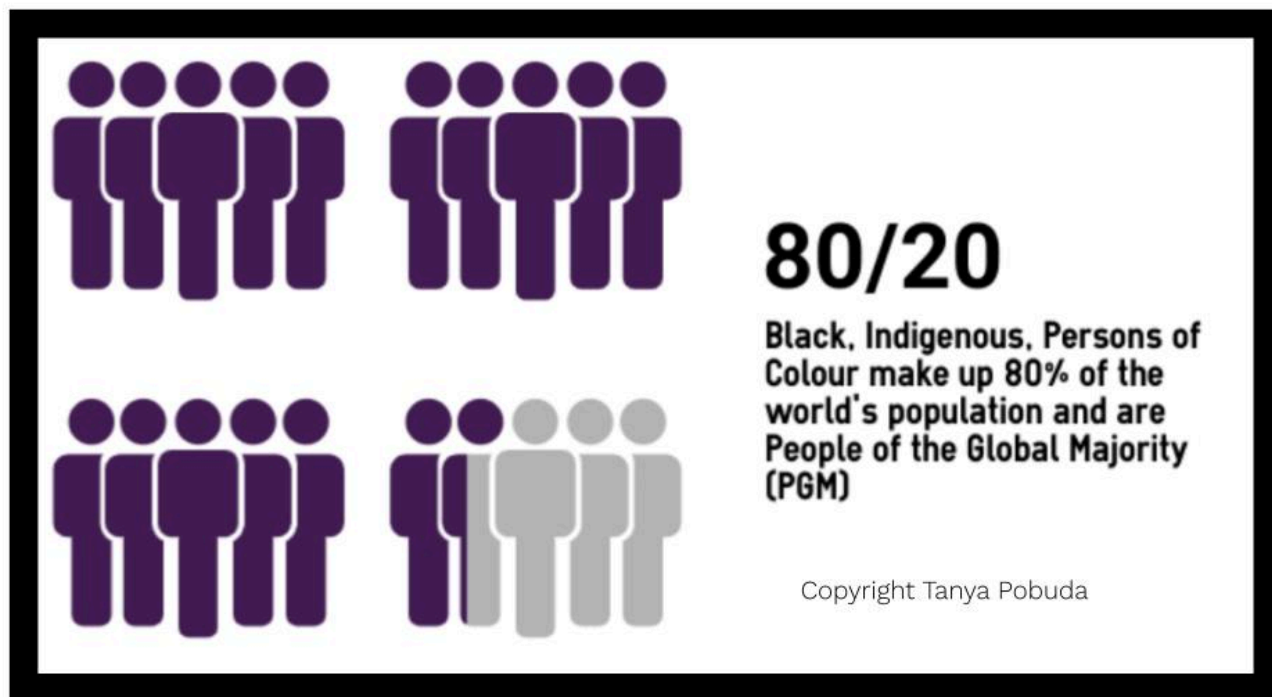

Figure 5: Answers to the question: "Positive gender and racial representation in a game enhances my enjoyment when playing a game." Copyright Tanya Pobuda (author).

Thinking about the long-term planning for cultural industries, it is important to understand that the racial composition of those under 18 is majority BIPOC at 52.7%, meaning that the Canadian population of white, straight men is somewhere in the range of high teens to approaching a little less than 20 percent (Bahrampour and Mellnik 2021).

This high-level, cursory look at the audience in North America population demographics would be the kind of thing I'd put in a corporate dashboard. This demography analysis underscores that games companies are not making decisions about representation in game artwork nor board game labor based on population demographics and addressable markets. We can see that the decisions made about artwork and labor aren't undergirded by even basic audience or addressable market data. Given these available statistics, would you stake an entire business model on an audience of this size?

So, why are board game companies and creators making decisions like overweighing the representation of white men on their products? Why are they publishing the designs of white men creators at a rate of over 90%? I'm going to posit that the market is in the throes of some of the same growing pains I observed in early tech. Board games companies are showing some of the same markers of immaturity and absent rigor I saw in personal computing in the early 1990s. Remember that in the early days of tech, companies were essentially "mom and pop" shops,

groups of buddies guided by their "gut" or data, or led by mercurial, charismatic founders who led by whim. There was little professionalization across product development, hiring, marketing, and market execution.

These organizations struggled with quality and were challenged by a changing marketplace as the sector matured. The early tech companies were seat-of-pants enterprises. These PC pioneers succeeded almost despite themselves, often because there were no other options. Missing audience research and limited market awareness didn't punish the tech pioneers much in the early days of tech. However, as the market matured, competition intensified, meaning gaps in the leadership, empirical research, and market execution seriously harmed the growth and survival of these companies. Companies weren't watching the market or listening to customers; they had a "not-invented-here" attitude toward managing their business. They lacked a dashboard view into their sector.

Why don't these gaming groups, companies, and products reflect their wider populations? They should (frankly, it is just math) and when they don't, some force is acting to create a discernible skew. Such a dramatic skew as revealed in my research means something is going on within (and outside of) these businesses and hobby groups that prevent them from reflecting the wider populations in the US and Canada. Institutional and systemic forces can prevent labor groups, play groups, and educational groups from looking like their surrounding population. Millions of decisions have created the circumstances that have marginalized board gaming, leaving it with stunted growth and limited reach.

In the 1990s, one of my old technology clients vehemently refused to believe in the importance of market and audience expansion, and accordingly, didn't much like my advice. This company was famous for one of its past presidents saying (way before my time): "There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his [sic] home" (Ref 2011)[3]. This organization stuck doggedly to their hardcore, white, engineering, academic, and technical base. This client refused to budge despite my best efforts. Their blinkered, unwavering focus was always on their devoted audience. This company had no time for any other audiences, and instead aggressively rejected any expansion strategies as a waste of time.

Today, this company no longer exists.

Another client—a forward-looking company with an unusual (for the time) corporate performance model focused on aggressive market growth—gave things away, held workshops to an ever-expanding group of demographics, including kids, parents, and seniors, in specific communities and sectors. In later years, this ambitious company gave free software and computing training on cruise ships, retirement communities, and elementary schools to create literacies and expand

3. "10 Most Memorable Tech CEOs of the Digital Era". PCMAG. Retrieved 27 March 2016.

their market. They used all the tools available to welcome more communities of people, in an all-out effort to share the joy and excitement of PCs. They created literacies, partnered with schools, libraries, and training institutes. Their low-hanging fruit—the market they could attract with little to no effort, this saturated audience of white, professional, middle-class men—wasn't where this company spent the entirety of their marketing and product design resources. Applying Pareto's Law of 80/20, the company spent 80% of their time expanding their base. It was from an early-adopter beachhead where this company radiated out, scouted, politicked, and cultivated new audiences. Thus they broadened the market for PCs, making it more inclusive than it was previously.

Today, this client commands the tech market, and is a member of the so-called "Frightful Five" global tech giants.

Board game creators, publishers and their financial backers today have a choice. They can ignore the demographic realities of Canada, the US, and the world. They can ignore how the market is shifting and the competitive landscape is growing fiercer. These creators can ignore the findings of this PhD research. Some will, without a doubt, place their dogged focus on the early adopter market of white men, and regard expansion efforts as pointless. However, if they continue to play to a supersaturated, narrow, and empirically small, and decreasing demographic population, they will have difficulty growing, thriving, or even surviving. Any cultural product that ignores racial diversity in its planning, creation and marketing is strategically flawed.

The rise of personal computing can offer many historical lessons for interested learners. We can all also learn from large corporations and cultural industries that are, rightly, shifting to embrace women, BIPOC, non-binary, LGBTQiIA representation and inclusion in their planning, product development, governance, and marketing outreach. For these market leaders, diversity, inclusion, and equity is not only the right, moral and ethical thing to do. It is simply good business strategy.

Today, advocates in the board game industry are speaking out for diversity and equity. These transformational leaders are trying to make games and gaming spaces more welcoming and inclusive, yet they are often harassed and threatened for their pains. I often think of these heroic changemakers as acting akin to a valiant doctor trying to save the life of a skeptical and ungrateful patient. In my view, this is what these transformational leaders are. The same stutter-step process of progress, backlash, and regression I witnessed during my tenure as a market watcher in early PCs is similar to what I see playing out in board gaming. Can a healthy sector survive and thrive if there is a dogged, even militant focus on less than a quarter of the U.S. population and less than 10 percent of the global population? One of the most important reasons I decided to research this topic is that I have seen and experienced the social and financial harm that can come from the politics of exclusion and gatekeeping. Often, the greatest harms come to the gatekeepers themselves. Remember my client that discounted market expansion as a waste of time? They failed spectacularly and wound up on the trash heap of history.

So I say to the board game market, there's an emergency red light flashing on your sector dashboard. The health of your business is at stake. Take a page from early tech by expanding your market. As members of the hobby community, we all have significant work to do to make games and gaming spaces equitable, inclusive, and diverse. If you are a board game creator, publisher, content creator, your embrace or rejection of diversity and inclusion will have a measurable impact on your long-term business survival.

Board games are at an inflection point. Choose wisely.

References

Alden, Scott. 2019. "2,000,000 Users!" *Board Game Geek* (message board), February 8, 2019. https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2147066/2000000-users.

Alsop, Thomas. 2020. "Computer and Software Store Sales in the U.S. 1992–2015." *Statista*, March 2, 2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/197603/annual-computer-and-software-store-sales-in-the-us-since-1992/.

Arizton. 2020. "Board Games Market – Global Outlook and Forecast 2021–2026." https://www.arizton.com/market-reports/global-board-games-market-industry-analysis-2024.

Bahrampour, Tara, and Ted Mellnik. 2021. "Census Data Shows Widening Diversity; Number of White People Falls for First Time." *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2021.

Brynen, Rex. 2016. "Women and Wargaming: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." *PAXsims* (blog), September 3, 2016. https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2016/03/09/women-and-wargaming-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/.

Canada Population. 2021. "Toronto Population 2021." https://canadapopulation.org/toronto-population/.

Clement, J. "Distribution of Video Gamers in the United States from 2006 to 2021, by Gender." *Statista*, August 20, 2021. https://www.statista.com/statistics/232383/gender-split-of-us-computer-and-video-gamers/.

Davis, Geena, Madeline Di Nonno, Caroline Heldman, and Shrikanth Narayanan. 2016. "Jane Top 50: Gender Bias in Family Films of 2016," *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*. https://seejane.org/the-see-jane-top-50-gender-bias-in-family-films-of-2016/.

H., Nicole. 2016. Survey Results #1: Who Are We? *The Daily Worker Placement*, February 19, 2016. http://dailyworkerplacement.com/2016/02/19/survey-results-1-who-are-we/.

Henderson, Geraldine Rosa, and Jerome D. Williams. 2013. "From Exclusion to Inclusion: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Marketplace Diversity and Inclusion." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 32:1–5. https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.32.S.1.

Higginbotham, Gerald D., Zhanpeng Zheng, and Yalda T. Uhls. 2020. "Beyond Checking a Box: A Lack of Authentically Inclusive Representation Has Costs at the Box Office." *Center for Scholars & Storytellers*. Los Angeles: UCLA. https://gdhigginbotham.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Gerald-D-Higginbotham-1.pdf.

Jarvis, Matt. 2021. "'Digital Fatigue' is Fuelling Board Game Sales among Adults – Report." *Dicebreaker*, May 20, 2021. https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/board-game/news/board-game-sales-2020-digital-fatigue.

Jones, Jeffrey M. 2021. "LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest U.S. Estimate." *Gallup*, February 24, 2021. https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx.

Pobuda, Tanya. 2018. "Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry." *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 4. https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/12/assessing-gender-and-racial-representation-in-top-rated-boardgamegeek-games/.

SimilarWeb. 2021. "Total Visits to *boardgamegeek.com*." https://www.similarweb.com/website/boardgamegeek.com/.

Stonemaier Games. 2019. "5 Revelations from Our 2019 Demographic Survey." *Stonemaier Games* (blog), November 11, 2019. https://stonemaiergames.com/5-revelations-from-our-2019-demographic-survey/.

The World Bank. 2020. "Population, Female – United States." https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.IN?locations=US.

United States Census Bureau. 2021. "2020 Census Statistics Highlight Local Population Changes and Nation's Racial and Ethnic Diversity," August 12, 2021. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/population-changes-nations-diversity.html.

Bio

Tanya is a board game academic, licensed drone pilot, artificial intelligence chatbot creator, and

virtual and augmented reality practitioner. Her research on board games has been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Analog Games Studies Journal*, and podcasts including *Stuff Your Mom Never Told You About*, *The Spiel*, *Who What Why Podcast* and *Beyond Solitaire*. She is a PhD Candidate in Ryerson & York University's Communication & Culture program, with a 26-year background as a journalist, certified project manager, and digital storyteller. Tanya has a background in public relations, communication, marketing and web design. Her Twitter account is @PobudaTanya, and her website can be found at tanyapobudaphd.com.

7. Of Orcs and Humans

The Strategic Rhetoric of Whiteness in the Public Controversy Over Race and Ability in Dungeons & Dragons, 5th Edition

CODY WALIZER

Abstract:

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) connects between fantasy fiction and real-life ideology, specifically regarding ideology of race. In this essay, the "human" race default of D&D is connected with discourses of whiteness and the races of "orc" and "drow" are connected with discourses of ugliness, essentialism, and evil. These in-game stereotypes in turn reproduce real-world anti-Black stereotypes.

Keywords:

Dungeons and Dragons, race, fantasy, discourse, communication

---

D&D, like Tolkien, makes race literally real in-game by applying immutable modifiers to character ability scores, skills, and other characteristics. The in-game fiction justifies these character traits as absolute realities; they also just happen to be the same cruel and untrue things racists say about different ethnicities, which I am frequently told is a coincidence or makes sense in the game or something. (Hodes 2019)

Reckoning the Human

In 2019, James Haeck, then a contributor for the popular *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) platform *D&DBeyond*, published a post titled "Reimagining Racial Ability Scores" (Haeck 2019). As Haeck states, the motivation for this post came from a Twitter thread in which Haeck described his distaste for a game mechanic in *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* that ties a character's race to

their ability scores. Haeck then cited James Mendez Hodes' blog post *Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth*, in which he writes, "This is to say nothing of the fact that linking ability score penalties (which are thankfully absent from the fifth edition *Player's Handbook*, at least) to your choice of race has distasteful similarities to real-life racist ideology" (Haeck 2019), and links readers to Hodes' work.

In this essay, I argue that these "distasteful similarities" link discourse on fantasy race and real-life racist ideology. This essay answers Nakayama and Krizek's longstanding "invitation for communication scholars to begin to mark and incorporate whiteness into their analyses and claims" (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, 305) by critiquing the public controversy over fantasy race and ability in *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*. Additionally, my rhetorical criticism will extend Hodes' discussion of a decolonial approach to fantasy race and ability scores by engaging with what Armond Towns (2018) calls "reckoning with the human." Finally, much like Hodes, "I can't ignore the staggering racism which directly inspired the Tolkienian tropes which influenced every corner of nerd culture, most of all *Dungeons & Dragons*" (Hodes 2019). I hope to intervene by peering beyond these tropes towards a critical vocabulary to decolonize role-playing games.

The Controversy Over Fantasy Race and Ability Scores in *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*

Over the lifespan of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* an intense controversy has taken shape over the association between ability score and race in the game's core design. If a social controversy is "an extended rhetorical engagement that critiques, re-situates, and develops communication practices bridging the public and personal spheres" (Olson and Goodnight 1994, 249), then the discourse surrounding fantasy race and ability fits that definition. Oppositional arguments between two main groups characterize this controversy; the first group advocates for the status quo or even the "good old days" of D&D when race and ability were linked; the second group is composed of people who advocate for decoupling race and ability scores. Within this exchange of reason-giving, two key themes emerged in arguments offered by both sides: race as concrete and the evil "other." The remainder of this essay will be devoted to analyzing this controversy with these two themes in mind. As Darrin Hicks notes in his article *The Promises of Deliberative Democracy* (2002), "It is precisely the transformative potential immanent in political controversy, the potential to make incommensurability the engine of innovation, and the potential for agonistic debate to transform self-interested participants into public-spirited actors that makes it so valuable for theories of deliberative democracy" (Hicks 2002, 256).

Whiteness as a Strategic Rhetoric

Rhetorical analyses often concern the constitutive function of words and communicative behaviors. In controversy analysis, constitutive forces are created within "oppositional argument," as Olson and Goodnight define it. This is to say that these messages "delimit the proper expression of opinion and constrain the legitimate formation of judgement within personal and public spheres" (Olson and Goodnight, 250). Words and communicative behaviors create who we are and what it is appropriate to be.

In a way, Nakayama and Krizek's article *Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric* is a work of controversy studies. Just as we often conceive oppositional arguments within the public sphere as representing space, and particular notions are named "positions," the discursive space of whiteness is their subject. It should go without saying that myriad social controversies adorn the discursive space of white and define its relationship to the discursive spaces of Black and Brown. The authors write:

> In this essay we are interested in a specific position-the discursive space of "white." "White" is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain. It affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. It wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position. (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, 292)

Nakayama and Krizek attempt to name the rhetorical "contours" of whiteness as a discursive space. Nakayama and Krizek's theorization of a strategic rhetoric combines three concepts: Michel de Certeau's idea of strategy; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari's conception of the assemblage; and Michel Foucault's discursive formation. To paraphrase their treatment of de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), strategy denotes dominant subjects' foundational practices and features (businesses, armies, and scientific institutions). These practices, and the impacts they appear to create, suggest both a level of intentionality and a strong link between the orientation and goals of these dominant subjects. In other words, strategies represent the overall framework of dominant subjects and their position. Therefore, strategies represent the "things" subjects produce as they manage their territory and relationship to those outside it.

Meanwhile, a tactic is the space of the "other" (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, 295). Tactics represent actions by non-dominant subjects to navigate the landscape, or "positions" created by dominant subjects. Applying whiteness as a strategic rhetoric to this controversy renders strategies and tactics more legible, establishing strategies through quantitative ability scores. The rules of the game represent clear examples of strategies, as the *Wizards of the Coast* are a business, just as de Certeau describes. They establish and attempt to manage the "interior" of the game as a matter of

strategic capture of certain targets, customers. *Wizards of the Coast* are dominant in this regard, given the popularity of their intellectual properties D&D and Magic: the Gathering.

Rhetoric, the second part of "strategic rhetoric," is composed of two additional concepts: assemblage and discursive formation. Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage is designated as important because of how "they offer a spatial view of power relations that upends traditional, linear histories. Thus, we must understand the assemblages that produce and reproduce power relations in particular ways" (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, 294). Assemblages are non-hierarchical, non-stratified, non-linear relations of power. Nakayama and Krizek apply the concept of assemblage by "extending Foucault's discursive formation," in which "Foucault argues that these are not logically organized frameworks that function in non-contradictory ways. The construction of 'white' as a category is replete with contradictions in the ways it expresses itself" (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, 296–297).

> All of this is to say that the concept of whiteness as a strategic rhetoric synthesizes three things:
>
> 1) Whiteness operates as a strategy, meaning it operates from the position of the dominant subject.
>
> 2) Whiteness and its relation to the other is non-linear and is not fixed—rather, it is an assemblage.
>
> 3) Whiteness is contradictory as a dominant relational framework in its invisible centrality.

To apply the concept of strategic rhetoric to whiteness means that when thinking about whiteness, we must think of how individual interactions represent its power as an organizing force. We also should consider the tactics that we might employ as people involved in those interactions. The process of education and critical scholarship can serve as a vital intervention into the process of interpellation and socialization that occurs in any setting, including around the gaming table.

Nakayama and Krizek identify six strategies (or "organizational features") of the discourse of whiteness. The position of whiteness is coded as: 1) powerful; 2) neutral; 3) natural; 4) a nation; 5) un-label-able; 6) Anglo or Pan-European. Moon and Nakayama (2006) extended the idea of a strategic rhetoric focusing on heteronormativity. Moon and Nakayama write that strategic rhetoric can describe the dominance of various subject positions such as the heterosexual, the wealthy, and the white. They write, "we extend the analyses of Whiteness by reconfiguring the framework around a larger notion of the strategic social construction of identities, rather than the more specific one of Whiteness. By doing so, we situate Whiteness as a strategic formation of racial privilege enmeshed with other social identities such as heterosexuality and masculinity"

(Moon and Nakayama 2006, 89). This extension could allow scholars to take an intersectional view on the construction of ability and race in the real world.

Oppositional Argument in the Race and Ability Score Controversy

The controversy over race and ability scores intensified and took on a new character of social justice in the later 2010s. As is mentioned above, two themes emerged from the oppositional arguments offered by each side. The case study of the Orc emerged from the theme of race as concrete, as Orcs were a fantasy race founded in orientalism and colonialism. The second theme of the evil other invoked the Drow to discuss how real-life racial groups are depicted as monstrous. It is also true that "While a live social controversy cannot be summed, the trajectory of its arguments does invite reflection" (Olson and Goodnight 1994). I contend that these two themes and two case studies are central to understanding the controversy over race and ability in *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*. In terms of establishing a rough timeline for this controversy, the article "Race: the Original Sin of the Fantasy Genre" by Paul Sturtevant published in *the Public Medievalist* (2017) represents a suitable beginning, and the blog post "Diversity and *Dungeons & Dragons*" published in June 2020 on the official D&D site is an endpoint. Indeed, these texts' content and the discourse that followed them on social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit represent dynamic and varied oppositional arguments in this controversy. As central texts, each also mentions the Orc and Drow as examples of their associated themes. The post "Diversity and *Dungeons & Dragons*" reads:

> We present orcs and drow in a new light in two of our most recent books, *Eberron: Rising from the Last War* and *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*. In those books, orcs and drow are just as morally and culturally complex as other peoples. We will continue that approach in future books, portraying all the peoples of D&D in relatable ways and making it clear that they are as free as humans to decide who they are and what they do.

The idea that these races are "as free as humans" is the point of the present analysis. As these case studies of Towns' read of Fanon's human reveal, the subject position of the human (whiteness) remains elusive to the figures of the Orc and the Drow. This post is also significant because it came in the wake of social uprisings after the death of George Floyd. The fact that racial violence motivated these changes represent how *Wizards of the Coast* as a dominant subject has strategically re-oriented itself within (but never outside) the position of whiteness.

Race as Concrete: Defining the Orc

> Why does Z put beaks and feathers on Orcs!? (Orcs is not a form of Auks.) The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the 'human' form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types. (Tolkien 1958, Letter #210 to Forrest J. Ackerman, in Carpenter 2000)

Helen Young is the author of the landmark book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2015). In an interview, she describes the linkage between scientific racism and the foundation of Tolkienian fantasy when she says:

> In Middle Earth, unlike reality, race is objectively real rather than socially constructed. There are species (elves, men, dwarves, etc.), but within those species there are races that conform to 19th-century race theory, in that their physical attributes (hair color, etc.) are associated with non-physical attributes that are both personal and cultural. There is also an explicit racial hierarchy which is, again, real in the world of the story. Middle Earth is literally a racist's fantasy land. (Young in Perry 2017, para. 7)

Indeed, Young inspired Hodes' orienting quotation and offers us the vocabulary necessary to link scientific racism and Tolkienian fantasy. Tolkien influences D&D, and although *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* has no established setting, the mainstay settings of D&D (such as the *Forgotten Realms*) have dominated its published products. These settings tend to lean into Tolkienian tropes. As evidenced by Tolkien's quotation at the beginning of this section, the conception of fantasy races has a sinister and allegorical meaning.

James Mendez Hodes' two-part blog series *Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth* is all about the fantasy race of the Orc. Hodes connects Tolkien's statements here to the idea of the "martial race myth." When Tolkien identifies the Orc as "flat-nosed" and "slant eyes," he is not just coding orcs (and other monstrous figures) as "other"; he is contrasting this form with the "human." It then becomes clear that race would be a natural and measurable demarcation of who is human, based on the appearance or absence of these traits. Some responses to Haeck's post on *DNDBeyond* about changing these mechanics read like this one:

> I could not disagree more. Ability scores reflect the cultural and biological characteristics of fantasy races. Gnomes aren't strong; they are creative. Elves aren't hearty; they are agile… I've been playing since 2nd edition. In those days, races had ability score negatives and limits to what classes they could excel in. Over the years of updated editions, those race/class advantages and disadvantages disappeared. However, the spirit of why those

> facets existed did not disappear from the game worlds. For instance, elven culture is still intertwined with the arcane arts and orc tribes are still barbaric and uneducated.

Several responses to Haeck on Twitter read the same way:

> @Tweeter1: So the average Gnome is every bit as strong as the average Goliath?
>
> @Tweeter2: Seems like it ignores the inherent stockiness of Dwarves and Inherent lithe grace of Elves. The least dexterous elf should always be more dexterous than the least dexterous human. Genetics.
>
> @Tweeter3: I guess the idea is that you would be able to play your dwarf wizard if you wanted to without worrying about a better option being out there? What's the point of race then? Especially for humans and half-elves?
>
> The theme of race-as-concrete represents the first way that whiteness manifests in this controversy as a strategic rhetoric. The concretization of race is a reproduction of white as natural and neutral. The idea that race is concrete is an integral part of the processes of dehumanization.

The Evil Other: The figure of the Drow

Related to race is the idea of alignment—a character's moral tendencies and orientation towards the world—which is also tied to race within the core *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* rules. When describing how alignment manifests, the D&D rules describe Dark Elves and one of the most famous characters in D&D lore, Drizzt Do'urden from R.A. Salvatore's series of books set in the *Forgotten Realms*. The *Player's Handbook* reads:

> Were it not for one renowned exception, the race of drow would be universally reviled. To most, they are a race of demon-worshiping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark, emerging only on the blackest nights to pillage and slaughter the surface dwellers they despise. Yet one drow, at least, broke the mold. In the world of the Forgotten Realms, Drizzt Do'Urden, ranger of the North, has proven his quality as a good-hearted defender of the weak and innocent. Rejecting his heritage and adrift in a world that looks upon him with terror and loathing, Drizzt is a model for those few drow who follow in his footsteps, trying to find a life apart from the evil society of their Underdark homes (WotC 2014).

R.A. Salvatore himself identifies the racial dynamic around Drizzt as racist. He is quoted in

an interview as saying, “One of the things that intrigues me about fantasy is that it is racist. You’re not talking about humans, so I guess you can get away with it. Orcs are supposed to be the embodiment of evil in fantasy” (Craddock 2014). In this way, R.A. Salvatore describes the enthymematic function (Olson and Goodnight 1994, 249) of whiteness in the controversy over ability scores and other traits inherent to fantasy races in D&D. This is to say that the Blackness of Drizzt may be a non-purposeful part of the story, but the otherness is not. Blackness, for Salvatore, was incidental to the otherness that Salvatore felt was created in-universe by the existence of a fantasy race. While it may be admirable that Salvatore has grappled with Drizzt’s origins and the idea that fantasy is racist, racism is far from intriguing. The strategic rhetoric of whiteness maintains political structures of oppression and inequality.

Here, race does not determine but influences moral tendencies and orientation towards the world. This influence is so significant that only the most exceptional of the Drow (Drizzt) can overcome it. In many ways, this discourse of good and evil reproduces the strategic rhetoric of whiteness as affirmation-through-negation (or invisible centrality) that whiteness occupies, according to Nakayama and Krizek. This also represents the “good as light, evil as dark” Manichean logic that Fanon (2008) describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This controversy has not ended but entered a new stage after the publication of “Diversity and *Dungeons & Dragons*” in June 2020. The space of whiteness is being named by many interlocutors in this public controversy.

On the Otherness of Orcs and Drow

Armond Towns argues that racial rhetorical criticism cannot reckon with the human. This controversy is noteworthy for the inducement of the human as Towns names it. In many ways, this concept of the human is the discursive position of whiteness. This is the discursive assemblage—the ideological and rhetorical construct of the dominant subject. Towns calls for communication scholars to understand two productive modes of analysis in the face of the overrepresentation of this dominant subject: the theoretical and the radical (Towns 2020). So far, the present analysis has offered a theoretical approach to fantasy race and ability scores, and has moved toward understanding the violent and strategic constitution of Black and Brown life. That is whiteness as a strategic rhetoric. The discourse surrounding this controversy has also existed within the theoretical space. In contrast, the radical mode of analysis and discourse would offer an account of “Fanon’s tripling that points toward new humans” (Towns 2020, 79). I move to conclude my essay with a discussion of a radical Fanonian vocabulary, and how it represents an important extension of the decolonial logic already found within the tactical rhetoric of advocates such as James Mendez Hodes.

Fanon's Human

Frantz Fanon's concept of the "human" is Wynter's "Man1 and Man2;" (Wynter 2003) and Da Silva's "transparent I" (Da Silva 2003). This is the Hegelian subject in the subject/object dialectic. As shown throughout this analysis, Fanon's human is present in the critiques advocates have offered of decoupling race and ability score. James Mendez Hodes articulates how dehumanization and personification occur within role-playing. Still, his read of dehumanizing violence could be extended by a deeper analysis of Fanon's human and an alternative understanding of the Orc and Drow subject positions.

Hodes writes, "Every orc is a person the way every human is a person. Orcs can get it wrong and go too far and fall to evil just like humans can and do. But the orc as a symbol of decontextualized violence is over. The horde is the community. The axe is the tool that breaks chains. Orcs punch Nazis." While this passage may not be short on passion, it reproduces the logic of the "human." This apparent contradiction posits the Orc as an "other" capable of claiming or reclaiming subjecthood.

Fanon's Tripling

Frantz Fanon's concept of new humanity can be best understood as the product of decolonization. According to Fanon, decolonization is always a violent process that reeks of cannonballs and blood (Fanon 2008). The new humanity that comes after the colonizers have been killed also depends on the colonized destroying themselves as the colonized. The process of decolonization takes place from within the colonial situation; in other words, decolonization cannot begin absent or outside of coloniality. There is no return to the past before colonialism nor is there an escape from the changes in self-constitution that the colonial situation necessitates. From within this colonial situation, the colonized does not occupy the subject/object dialectic. As Towns writes, "Fanon was not capable of self/Other recognition, but was, instead, the infrastructure necessary for the self/Other to exist in the first instance. Put simply, if the self/Other has a binary form, the tripled figure is the foundation, that third element unaccounted for in Hegel's terms of recognition. Indeed, the black body does not have 'being,' in the Western ontological sense" (Towns 2020, 78). From the realm of non-being, or from within the tripled figure, we can posit a great deal of potential. This potential, Towns argues, is the essential part of Fanon's invention.

Another contribution that Towns makes to theorizing this invention is the idea that the space of non-being is the space of the medium. This is to say that the Black or Brown body (read: Orc) is one "extension of man." Towns' read of Marshall McLuhan synthesized the idea of the Black or Brown body as medium (matter) allows us to move past relying on the recognition from within

the human (the strategic rhetoric of whiteness) into a shared decolonial fight. It allows us to move past attempting to reach equal status as "people," "man", and "human," and instead to see ourselves as something new. But what about Orcs? While Orcs bear resemblance to and impact real people, they are not "real"; there is no violence to do to the Orcish body, only violence to do to real Black and Brown bodies. In this way, as features of fantasy, Orcs represent a literal medium for both colonial violence and decolonial liberation. This is not a semantic difference.

The new human is an elusive construct, as there is a risk of its overdetermination. The process of affirmation through negation can be useful to us in this instance because we can affirm what the new human might be by what it is not. The new human is not an Orc wizard or an ethical Drow. In other words, the new human is not a non-being that seeks recognition from the dominant subject position. The new human is not one that "works hard" to become human.

To conclude, the present analysis argues that two related critical vocabularies—whiteness as a strategic rhetoric and Fanon's human—are tools to critically analyze and decolonize games. I call on those interested in doing the work of critical game studies to study and apply this vocabulary alongside me. While I hesitate to posit the new human as any type of formal figure, I can say without a doubt that some part of the new human lies in the boundless realms of magic. It is up to us to move toward grasping the potential offered to us by Fanon's tripling and the realm of non-being. Fantasy, and the bodies of the people created within fantasy stories, represent a unique medium for moving beyond a representational politics and towards a radical one.

References

Carpenter, Humphrey. 2000. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: Houghton Mifflin.

Craddock, David. 2014. "'I Want to Rip Your Heart Out:' R.A. Salvatore Interview (Part 3)." *The Escapist*, October 16. https://www.escapistmagazine.com/v2/i-want-to-rip-your-heart-out-r-a-salvatore-interview-part-3/.

Da Silva, Denise. 2007. *Towards a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. trans. Steven Rendell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New ed. London: Pluto Press.

Haeck, James. 2019. "Reimagining Racial Ability Scores." *D&DBeyond*, August 14. http://www.dndbeyond.com/posts/563-reimagining-racial-ability-scores.

Hicks, Darrin. 2002. "Promises of Deliberative Democracy." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 2: 223–260.

Hodes, James Mendez. 2019. *James Mendez Hodes* (blog). "Orcs, Britons, And The Martial Race Myth, Part I: A Species Built For Racial Terror," January 14. https://jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/1/13/orcs-britons-and-the-martial-race-myth-part-i-a-species-built-for-racial-terror

Moon, Dreama G., and Thomas K. Nakayama. 2006. "Strategic Social Identities and Judgments: A Murder in Appalachia." *Howard Journal of Communication* 16, no. 2:87–107. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10646170590948965

Nakayama, Thomas K. and Robert L. Krizek. 2009. "Whiteness as a Strategic Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3: 291–309.

Olson, Kathryn M., and G. Thomas Goodnight. 1994. "Entanglements of Consumption, Cruelty, Privacy, and Fashion: The Social Controversy over Fur." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 3: 249–276.

Perry, David M. 2017. "How Can We Untangle White Supremacy From Medieval Studies? A Conversation with Australian Scholar Helen Young." *Pacific Standard*, October 9. https://psmag.com/education/untangling-white-supremacy-from-medieval-studies.

Sturtevant, Paul. 2017. "Race: the Original Sin of the Fantasy Genre." *The Public Medievalist.* https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-fantasy-genre/

Towns, Armond. 2018. "Whither the 'Human?' An Open Letter to the 'Race and Rhetoric' Forum."

Towns, Armond. 2020. "'What Do We Wanna Be?' Black Radical Imagination and the Ends of the World." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1:75–80.

Wizards of the Coast. 2014. *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition: Players Handbook*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast.

Wizards of the Coast. 2020. "Diversity and Dungeons and Dragons." *Dungeons and Dragons*. June 17. https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd

Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation–An Argument." CR: *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3: 257–337. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

Young, Helen. 2015. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge.

Bio

Cody Walizer is Visiting Teaching Professor and Director of Debate at the University of Denver. He holds degrees in communication and sociology. His dissertation is titled "#TakeAKnee: A Rhetorical Criticism of the NFL Anthem."

8. Developing Anti-Othering Values in the D&D Community

CLAYTON WHITTLE AND NATE TURCOTTE

Abstract:

This article traces the preliminary stages of a greater research project investigating the development of anti-othering and inclusions practices and values within a *Dungeons & Dragons* creator space. Through a series of in-depth interviews, the researchers speak with creators, both established and new. These interviews reveal an informal and organically developed process of learning within the creator space that, among other things, normalizes anti-othering and inclusivity as not only an ethical value, but a skill relevant to the production of high-quality content. Though this conference paper represents only the preliminary steps of our work, the initial findings provide initial theoretical guidance for understanding how these processes took root and became so ingrained within the culture.

Keywords:

Metagame, creator spaces, informal learning, social justice, game design

---

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid by educational and cultural researchers to game design. Their research has examined questions ranging from how game design-based curricula can teach computer science skills (Baytak and Land 2011) to the study of community and identity within role-playing game spaces (Hawley 2014). In this study, we examine how a game design space serves as a learning point for anti-othering values.

What is The Lounge

This study examines the experiences of members of a social and professional meeting space

organized by creators of unofficial *Dungeons & Dragons* content. This space, which I will refer to as The Lounge, is populated by amateur creators who publish (or hope to publish) content on D&D's official online marketplace, DMsGuild.com. The Lounge, a highly informal space organized on the social media platform Discord, provides these creators a communication network and community center. They can participate as much or as little as they wish in the chat rooms within The Lounge. These chatrooms vary significantly, but are organized by topic, which range from highly specialized discussions on game mechanics to completely unrelated socialization.

The DMsGuild itself also warrants a brief explanation. DMsGuild.com is one of several platforms that represent a new way of approaching game publication. In much the same way that online shopping has changed the nature of getting a physical product to a consumer, the DMsGuild and other online game content marketplaces have done the same for role-playing game content. On these sites, customers can purchase access to user-created content. Creators have the freedom to upload content with very little oversight. In exchange, the website takes 50% of sales. This arrangement allows new creators to publish content with minimal gatekeeping and essentially no financial investment or risk, which allows game designers to simply upload their product to the online marketplace.

The Creators

The social, financial, and logistical accessibility of online process has opened game publication to more potential creators. In the past, many factors may have prevented an individual from publishing their work. As our participants point out, some of these factors are quite tangible, such as a lack of time or money to attend conventions and pitch a new product to a publisher. More pointedly, as other participants mentioned, the power to publish was unequally held by straight white men who did not always create an atmosphere that made creators from "othered" groups feel welcome.

With many of these barriers removed, the online publication space has seen a surge in new content and creators. These creators have naturally formed their own gathering spaces, many of which exist only on social media. The Lounge is one such space, loosely moderated by fellow creators and maintained to create a welcoming and supportive environment. Within The Lounge, editors, writers, artists, and other creators collaborate and share a communal space. Publishing groups are formed, new projects are imagined, and the politics of the RPG industry are discussed at length.

These conversations, conducted in full view of the public (as there is no gatekeeping process for joining The Lounge), do far more than simply facilitate the creation of new content for *Dungeons*

& Dragons. As other studies have shown, the mundane conversations that take place in similar spaces define and enforce a culture by rewarding or punishing behaviors that follow or violate values (Gee and Hayes 2012). This research project focuses on these enforced values, specifically on the explicit and often passionate pursuit of "anti-othering" as a value by the members of The Lounge.

A Community Focused on Anti-othering

Gaming cultures have been the focus of notoriously public "othering" events. Both within the games themselves and the communities around them, othering through misogyny (Stang and Trammell 2020), racial typing (Garcia 2017; 21AD), and bullying (Bussone et al. 2020) has been documented. The members of The Lounge take actions to confront activities and diminish language that are damaging to "othered" groups. Members self-police their communication in chat channels by discussing strategies for pursuing equity within the industry and employing "sensitivity consultants" to provide valuable insight on how traditionally othered groups may perceive new content. Projects that are conceived within The Lounge take on othering not only in their real-world execution by promoting diverse hiring practices, but within the narrative of the world by challenging game mechanics and narrative tropes the designers find problematic.

Seeing this uniquely supportive environment, the research team began to ask how members of the community had normalized anti-othering practices into this game creation space. Our ongoing interaction with this community provided some initial insights into these questions. Though this investigation is ongoing, a series of six in-depth interviews with informants resulted in us discovering themes that illuminated answers our questions and now guides our continuing ethnographic work.

These preliminary interviews indicate a unique internal culture that takes on the qualities of both an informal affinity space (Gee and Hayes 2012)—a term referring to hobbyist spaces which tend to focus on participation in that hobby—and a more organized professional community of practice (Hoadley 2012), which refers to communities built to sustain professional training or development. The resulting culture supports varied strategies for learning to be an accepted member of the community (Abrams and Lammers 2017). Further, the social structure of the organization encourages new members to participate in the co-construction of knowledge by creating content and supporting traditionally othered voices. We suggest that it is through the professional empowerment of even the newest member—a practice developed with the goal of encouraging creative and innovative content creation practices—that traditionally othered voices were able to make themselves heard and influence both the practice and culture of The Lounge.

Study Procedures and Methods

The path our research team took to developing this study was unique, and as laden with personal growth as it was with moments of personal and professional reflection. Not only was personal experience with The Lounge crucial to investigating it as a space, but also in conceptualizing the study. As with all research, our own experiences greatly influenced how we formed our questions (Creswell 2013) and how we answered them (Hunt 2010). Members of our research team were already involved in The Lounge as hobbyist *Dungeons & Dragons* creators working on several projects. Initially, our team was interested in learning and training practices in the group, and how those practices were influencing the growth of job-relevant "hard skills" like technical editing. As the COVID-19 pandemic raged around us, we became more socially involved in The Lounge. What had been an online space for seeking game design advice or finding collaborators for us had become a primary social circle in which we deeply and earnestly engaged.

As we looked around the space and engaged in non-research conversations, it became apparent that we were not alone. Discussion within the group had expanded to include far more personal issues, and heated discussion on politics and othering rarely stayed confined to the chat channels reserved for those conversations. Both The Lounge and the creator community at large had also recently experienced several divisive incidents regarding othering. These incidents spurred significant debate over the practices of othering and anti-othering in the space surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons*. Creators and members of the community participated in charged conversations regarding how professional and industry practices othered people of color and LGBTQ people, how markets favored dominant sexual standards and punished content depicting non-dominant sexuality, and how the core designs of the game reinforced misogynistic and ethnocentric stereotypes.

Research Questions

Our questions then, began to focus on the formation and reinforcement of values and politics within the community and how these might impact the politics of the artifacts they created (Winner 1980; Pinch and Bijker 1984). Drawing on both ethnographic traditions (Fielding et al. 2017), the specific line of questioning was spurred by our personal experiences both in and out of The Lounge. We were driven to ask, if the content generated by the creators "has politics," how were the identities and experiences of those creators being formed within this community? Specifically, we aimed to answer two questions:

- (1) How did the members of this space engage in learning the anti-othering attitudes that were so prevalent?
- (2) Why had this community seen so much success in creating a supportive atmosphere that successfully confronted othering?

Methodology

To respond to our questions, the research team aimed to recruit members of The Lounge into a series of conversations. We recruited six members of The Lounge to participate in interviews over the course of several months. To provide a safe and private space for these conversations, we relied on individual interviews with participants rather than focus groups or public conversations (Creswell 2013).

Recruitment

To help us better understand our observations within The Lounge, we recruited six key informants for in-depth interviews. These informants were approached directly rather than through a general recruitment posting. Our experiences and conversation within The Lounge had brought us into contact with individuals that we felt had highly valuable and unique insights into interactions within the space. We chose to pursue individuals whose experiences could be used to generalize towards all of the group (Creswell 2014; Driscoll and Gregg 2010). Informants were chosen such that our sample included both established and newer creators, as well as members of both dominant and non-dominant cultural groups. Participants were not directly compensated.

Interview procedures

Each participant spoke with the lead researcher on several occasions. We first conducted preliminary sessions that were not recorded to introduce the research and confirm that participants understood what it entailed. Participants then sat with the lead researcher for their main interview, which ranged from one and a half to three hours. As the analysis took place, we scheduled and conducted follow-up interviews or asynchronous chat sessions. These sessions often had the goal of clarifying answers to accurately represent the participants' voices or pursue questions that arose during analysis.

Interviewers generated questions by drawing on the narrative research tradition (Savin-Baden 2010). We conducted loosely structured interviews, which often began with the same questions, but could divert from a script to pursue the most relevant stories from each participant. Specifics of interviews varied, but each focused on the primary themes of identity construction, othering and anti-othering, community, and social power relationships within The Lounge and its connected communities.

Method of analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2014). The constructionist epistemology of thematic analysis allowed the research team to perform a detailed analysis of the data while still prioritizing the experiences and realities of the interviewees, rather than the semantics of their answers (Braun and Clarke 2006). Recorded interviews were each viewed several times. From this initial viewing we developed initial primary codes. After initial codes were developed, the team organized coded statements and snippets of conversations into broad themes that drove the interviews.

We describe our approach to the thematic analysis as latent and holistic. We focused our analysis efforts on understanding the perspective of our interviewees, not just the words they chose to use, choosing the latent analysis methods of Boyatzis (1998). In searching for these latent themes, we chose a holistic approach, selecting codes from phrases within the interview text that captured the meaning of a section of the conversation (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally, our analysis was conducted with an inductive approach (Creswell 2014). The resulting themes therefore do not represent every possible conversational theme arising during the interviews, but only those relevant to research questions at hand. Random pseudonyms were assigned to each of the transcripts to prevent any breach of confidentiality.

Findings

The research discussed above is a continuing project that deserves and requires significantly more investigation as it matures. However, our team has identified initial themes within these early conversations that, when taken together, provide insight into the link between the professional and value-driven learning processes within The Lounge.

Themes

During the analysis process, our team identified four core themes: *The Floodgates*, *Functionality as Inclusivity*, *Two-way Mentorship*, *and Content with Purpose.* These themes were taken from interviews as overarching thematic threads. While each theme was not present within every conversation, each theme was prevalent in the majority of interviews.

Theme	Description	Example
The Floodgates	References how the online marketplace model dramatically shifted the ability of new creators to have their content recognized.	*"By creating the DMsGuild, we've created a new pathway that isn't dependent on one's ability to fit in to that dynamic. And we are richer for it."*
Functionality as Inclusivity	Seeing other members first as potential collaborators in a pseudo-anonymous professional space rather than members of a demographic	*"I've been lucky to work with people with new perspectives that challenge my old school way of doing things. This includes them making new and exciting adventures. They bring new solution set."*
Two-way Mentorship	Newcomers learning from old-timers and old-timers learning from newcomers, rather than a one-way, experience-based hierarchy	*"I want to use my small power to include those voices. I could never think of the stuff these new writers think of."*
Content with Purpose	Creating content that promotes anti-othering, or at least diminishes othering through its creation process or within the artifact	*"It's the people in charge of The Lounge that make it valuable. They are women, people of color, and LGBTQ members. They've had negatives experiences in these spheres and want to make it better for others."*

The Floodgates

Reference to *The Floodgates* was one of the most surprising and prevalent themes across all the interviews we conducted. All the creators we interviewed discussed, as part of telling their own creation story, how the opening of The DMsGuild changed the nature of publication within the *Dungeons & Dragons* community. From established creators who did not see themselves as part of othered groups to new creators that expressed feelings of unwelcomeness in the traditional publication process, each valued the accessibility of the new online marketplace.

Carric, a pseudonym, discusses how the old publication process required fitting in with gatekeepers. They were all, according to Carric, straight men who tended to favor people who looked like them, making publication more difficult for anyone else. As Carric put it:

> A lot of past careers in tabletop have started because of networking with the existing community or industry creators, which, as I've mentioned, was somewhat homogenous. By

> creating the DMsGuild, we've created a new pathway that isn't dependent on one's ability to fit into that dynamic. And we're richer for it.

Byron, one of the most established and successful creators in the marketplace, echoed this sentiment. He added that these new voices created content that challenged the old tropes and added significant value to the market as well as the experiences of players:

> My experience is that these voices are the ones that innovate and have non-traditional ways of getting at the win condition. There is something about being an outside voice, one that isn't part of the stereotype, that brings a new perspective.

Functionality as Inclusivity

The theme of *Functionality as Inclusivity* emerges from Byron's claim that new voices added unique value to the content created by members of The Lounge. Interviewees overwhelmingly spoke of their relationships within The Lounge putting collaboration and professionalism first. This took on two forms. The first is the technology empowered members of The Lounge to make their professional identity the primary identity they show to the world. The second is the explicit recognition of the value of including LGBTQIA , non-binary, women, and non-white voices in the creation process.

Several interviewees referenced how the pseudo-anonymity provided by the chat room format allowed them to take on the role of creator, independently from any other identities such as gender or race. By using only chat, creators were able to professionally collaborate, sometimes over significant periods of time, on projects without their identity coming into play. Interviewees went so far as to claim that some collaborators had total anonymity, "Some of the most successful creators, like MTBlack, are still completely anonymous. Only a handful of folks know who they really are." In the second aspect of this theme, creators discussed the explicit value of having new voices within the creative space. As Byron said:

> I've been lucky to work with people with new perspectives that challenge my old school way of doing things. This includes them making new and exciting adventures. They bring new solution sets.

Carric expands on this, explaining that the value that new collaborators bring goes beyond just game design changes. In their perspective, new content can push boundaries by discussing topics and cultures that would previously have been problematic if written by people unfamiliar with those topics. The increasing prominence of LGBTQ and non-white creators, Carric argues, allows them to include those communities within the fiction in a respectful and uplifting way.

Two-way Mentorship

The theme of *Two-way Mentorship* was a surprise to the research team. The traditional community of practice models of professional organizations usually cite a hierarchal learning process in which established members teach new members. As the new members become more skilled, older members are presumably pushed out by these rising talents (Lave 1991). Even the more informal affinity space models emphasize the role that seniority plays in teaching newcomers skills needed to contribute to the group (Squire 2012). In The Lounge, however, we found that collaborators regularly learned from each other.

Secret put it very succinctly when they said, "People have a mentality of wanting to learn from me, since they hired me." New members brought new skills, so rather than needing retraining, they elevated projects to which they contributed. Secret claims that despite having only just joined The Lounge, their services as both a professional editor and sensitivity consultant were deeply valued. Established creators that we interviewed indicated their appreciation of new voices and how they greatly elevated the quality of products produced by members of The Lounge. All the established creators interviewed discussed the significant increase in product quality that accompanied the influx of new creators. As new voices became more prevalent, established creators learned how they could adjust their own creation processes, while newer creators learned the core processes and skills needed to create content.

Content with Purpose

Interviewees emphasized their desire to create purpose driven content, and for their creation process to be driven by tolerance and empowerment. For the content itself, creators cited their experiences with other creators as inspiring them to create more inclusive content. These changes to the content were complex and subtle. Some of the more explicit attempts to create more inclusive content included writing more diverse characters, having a sensitivity readers work with writers to identify problematic content, publishing accessibly designed documents for the visually impaired, creating content that challenged in-fiction racial stereotypes, and supporting products that keep like-minded values. It is important to note, however, that not all of those interviewed agreed with this perspective. Salamander, one of the more established creators, made it clear that they chose not to involve their identity in their products. To them, creating for *Dungeons & Dragons* was a place to rest and escape their full-time job, which dealt directly with LGBTQ rights activism.

Creators also prioritized anti-othering through a multitude of creative strategies. These strategies included listing pronouns in usernames to normalize the practice, refusing to work with creators

that published problematic content, and (in extreme cases) refusing to hire collaborators from dominant groups. As one creator puts it, "I only hire people that have traditionally been kept out. If I can give someone the edge they need to break in, that's awesome."

Analysis

Analysis of this early data set can only provide limited insights, making extended investigation a priority for the research team. However, this early data set does provide a theoretical jumping-off point to guide further investigation. We see the four themes—*The Floodgates*, *Functionality and Inclusivity*, *Two-way Mentorship*, and *Content with a Purpose*—as telling a story. By teasing out this story, we hope to develop theories for empowering anti-othering in other creative and professional communities.

To that end, we see the unique history of The Lounge as crucial to understanding how anti-othering became a dominant value within the group. *The Floodgate* represents a catalyst event, a sudden removal of systematic barriers to entry by traditionally othered groups. It is important to note that only *some* of the systematic barriers were removed. Economic and education barriers still pose a significant barrier to entry, especially as they apply to availability of and training with different technologies. As one of the interviewees points out, "I recognize that I am extremely privileged in being able to pursue what is essentially a professional hobby."

With some systematic barriers removed, we have observed an emphasis on individual contribution. Established creators looked for contributors who could improve their product, often with both parties enjoying anonymity to the point of never knowing each other's names. It is possible that this anonymity, combined with the passion our interviewees had for creating quality content, were factors in establishing the *Functionality as Inclusivity* theme. This is an important path for our continuing research. One question that we continue to ask in our ethnographic observations is how the passion of hobbyist creation factors into creating anti-othering sentiment in creator cultures, as creators so highly value the end product that any person capable of contributing to that is seen as equal. This possibility is well encapsulated by Carric, who told us that, "everyone in the group is just a hobbyist that fell in love."

An emphasis on the final product may also have contributed to establishing the *Two-way Mentorships*, which seemed to defy traditional models of mentorship in professional settings (Lave and Wenger 1991; Gee and Hayes 2012). Mentorship operated more like two members of a team in a creation-based constructivist learning environment, which values the unique skills of others and in which members learn from each other (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Hmelo-silver, Kapur, and Hamstra 2018; Kapur and Bielaczyc 2012). We see these two-way mentorships as contributing

to the growth of anti-othering sentiment, as they nurtured equal footing between established and unestablished creators. Though not in and of itself a sign of anti-othering sentiment being taught, how this relationship might have contributed to the growing prominence of anti-othering within The Lounge is a primary point of investigation for our team, moving forward.

Conclusions

This research is still in its infancy, and the analysis here represents only the first stages of research. Indeed, at this stage of the research project, we have generated as many questions as we have answered. As this project moves forward, the research team must refocus efforts on pursuing the questions created by this first stage. To that end, our team will continue to engage and recruit key informants. In addition, our team plans to expand our work into ethnographies of other, related creator groups to compare our evolving theories with other communities.

References

Abrams, Sandra Schamroth, and Jayne C. Lammers. 2017. “Belonging in a Videogame Space: Bridging Affinity Spaces and Communities of Practice.” *Teachers College Record* 119, no. 11: 1–34.

Baytak, Ahmet, and Susan M. Land. 2011. “An Investigation of the Artifacts and Process of Constructing Computers Games about Environmental Science in a Fifth Grade Classroom.” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 59, no. 6: 765–82. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9184-z.

Boyatzis, Richard E. 1998. *Transforming Aualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Brown, John Seely, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid. 1989. “Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning.” *Educational Researcher* 18, no. 1: 32–42. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203990247.

Bussone, Silvia, Cristina Trentini, Renata Tambelli, and Valeria Carola. 2020. “Early-Life Interpersonal and Affective Risk Factors for Pathological Gaming” 11 (May): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00423.

Creswell, John. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, John. 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Edited by Vicki Knight, Jessica Young, Kalie Koscielak, Brittany Bauhaus, and Megan Markanich. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208956.

Driscoll, Catherine, and Melissa Gregg. 2010. "My Profile: The Ethics of Virtual Ethnography." *Emotion, Space and Society* 3, no. 1: 15–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2010.01.012.

Fielding, Nigel G., Raymond M. Lee, Grant Blank, and Christine Hine. 2017. "Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances." In *Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*, edited by Nigel G. Fielding, Raymond M. Lee, and Grant Blank, 401–13. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957992.n23.

Garcia, Antero. 2021. "Chapter 1: 'I Piss a Lot of People off When I Play Dwarves like Dwarves': Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Teachers College Record* 123, no. 13: 1–26.

Garcia, Antero. 2017. "Privilege, Power, and *Dungeons & Dragons*: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3: 232–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691.

Gee, James Paul, and Elisabeth Hayes. 2012. "Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-Based Learning." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha A Barab, 129–53. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guest, Greg, Kathleen MacQueen, and Emily Namey. 2014. *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436.n7

Hawley, Imogen. 2014. "Intersubjective Imagination: Identity and Community Building within *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Ethnographic Encounters* 5, no. 1: 1–9.

Hmelo-silver, Cindy E., Manu Kapur, and Miki Hamstra. 2018. "Learning through Problem Solving." In *International Handbook of Learning Sciences*, edited by Frank Fischer, Cindy E. Hmelo-Silver, Susan R. Goldman, and Peter Reimann, 210–220. 1st ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hoadley, Christopher. 2012. "What Is a Community of Practice and How Can We Support It?" In *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments*, 286–300. New York: Routledge.

Hunt, Matthew R. 2010. "'Active Waiting': Habits and the Practice of Conducting Qualitative

Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 9, no. 1: 69–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691000900107.

Kapur, Manu, and Katerine Bielaczyc. 2012. "Designing for Productive Failure." *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 21, no. 1: 45–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2011.591717.

Lave, Jean. 1991. "Situating Learning in Communities of Practice." In *Perspective on Socially Shared Cognition*, edited by L.B. Resnick. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: American Psychological Association.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pinch, Trevor J., and Wiebe E Bijker. 1984. "The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other." *Social Studies of the Science* 14, no. 3: 399–441.

Savin-Baden, Maggi. 2010. "Changelings and Shape Shifters? Identity Play and Pedagogical Positioning of Staff in Immersive Virtual Worlds." *London Review of Education* 8, no. 1: 25–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460903557662.

Squire, Kurt. 2012. "Designed Cultures." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha A. Barab, 11–31. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stang, Sarah, and Aaron Trammell. 2020. "The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Games and Culture* 15, no. 6: 730–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059.

Winner, Langdon. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Deadalus* 103, no. 1: 121–36.

Bios:

Clayton Whittle is a game designer, teacher, and games researcher. He is currently a Ph.D. student at Penn State University, where he studies game creator spaces and design theory for transformational games for social justice. Dr. Nate Turcotte is an assistant professor in the department of Leadership, Technology, and Research at Florida Gulf Coast University. His research focuses on place-making and embodied learning.

9. Dark Forests and Doomed Adventurers

An Ecocritical Reading of Horror Roleplaying Games

CHLOÉ GERMAINE

Abstract

This paper explores the ecological potential of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) through a close reading of contemporary horror games. I argue that these games go beyond representing and mediating anxieties around ecological disaster. Instead, I propose that they offer a generative mode of collaborative worldbuilding in a time of climate crisis. I interrogate the ethics of TTRPGs through the lens of ecocriticism, identifying tensions between game texts and game play. These tensions exist between the expression of ecophobia—which tends to position nature as an antagonist—and the attribution of moral considerability and agency to the more-than-human world. Such tensions are productive and play out through collaborative storytelling techniques and ludic mechanics that invite players to reflect on the interrelationship between humans and the worlds in which they are embedded.

Keywords:

tabletop roleplaying games; horror; the gothic; environment; ecology; ethics

---

Mary Flanagan (2009) has argued that games function as a means for creative expression and instruments for conceptual thinking. More recently, Alenda Chang (2019) proposes that because games straddle multiple real and imagined worlds, they offer unique insights into environmental questions. Where Flanagan and Chang focus on the affordances of video games, this paper examines table-top roleplaying games (TTRPGs) as creative and conceptual interventions with respect to pressing social and political problems. Following Nick Mizer's (2019) elaboration of how table-top roleplaying games produce rich "interworlds" replete with potential meaning, I explore TTRPGs as a generative mode for collaborative worldbuilding in a time of climate crisis. I contend that this worldbuilding is a collaboration not only between human players around the table, but

includes the more-than-human beings and agents that emerge from the interworlds generated through play.

This paper proposes that TTRPGs are conceptual resources for developing eco-ethical principles and dispositions, and as practical interventions with affective dimensions that encourage reflection and action on the climate crisis. While defining TTRPGs in detail is outside the scope of this paper, Flanagan's description of games as "situations with guidelines and procedures" and a type of "technology" (2009, 7) delineates TTRPGs from other media (such as film and literature) that also seek to represent the human interrelationship with the environment and, sometimes, to prompt attitudinal change. Flanagan's definition of games as technology supplements their status in this paper as both texts and experiences. As texts, games produce representations. As experiences, they combine aspects of the game world and the world beyond. As technologies, they demonstrate emergent properties that generate potential—new engagements between human players and the more-than-human beings that emerge in play.

I identify horror games as an important site for developing ecological awareness in TTRPG design and play. Examples of "ecohorror" games—games that represent the natural world through the story moves and aesthetics of the horror genre—are diverse, and not all explicitly engage with the climate crisis. However, even many ecohorror games in which ecology is not the thematic focus evoke what critics in other disciplines have called the "eco-gothic" (Hughes and Smith 2013) or the "eco-weird" (Onishi 2020), often through dialogue with literature and film. In the UK, *The Shivering Circle*, designed Howard David Ingham (2018), and *Solemn Vale*, designed by Mark Kelly (2021), adapt the mid-twentieth-century folk horror mode. Expressed in such films as *The Wicker Man* (1973), folk horror invites players into rural locations where something sinister lurks under the landscape. In the US, *Trophy*, designed by Jesse Ross (2020) reworks the adventure roleplaying game (RPG) through the genre of the Lovecraftian weird, as players take on the role of doomed treasure hunters entering a forest that doesn't want them there. As players progress through the "rings" of the forest that structure the gameplay, they encounter increasingly ruinous horrors. *Trophy* has inspired other games with explicit political and ecological themes, including *Oligarchy* designed by Burkett and Kurtz (2021), in which players adopt the role of greedy elites trying to make profit as environmental crises engulf the planet. These indie RPGs expand the ethical potentials of eco-horror, the eco-gothic, and the eco-weird by locating their players as active participants in the unfolding of the story, the creation of worlds, and their destruction.

Modalities

I begin by recounting my experience playing a tabletop roleplaying game called *The Court of the Radiant King*, written for *Trophy* by Monkey's Paw Games. This sets the scene for the following

discussion by blending my experience as a player with a reading of roleplaying games as narrative texts, collaborative experiences, and ludic technologies.

The player characters are a motley group, barely holding on to their sense of selves. As we navigated a wooded labyrinth, we were transformed in both mind and body. Evading slathering beasts with human faces of those we had wronged, we found our way into the ruins of a forgotten kingdom in the heart of the forest. Before us lay a gleaming treasure pile, composed of items deposited by all those who had attempted the journey before and never returned. Atop the pile sat the fabled crown of the Radiant King, a prize that had tempted many a ruined adventurer in times gone by. Entranced by the crown, I took my dagger and plunged it into the back of one of my erstwhile compatriots, kicking him away from the spoils. As I lunged for the treasure, I completed a transformation that started when I stepped through the boundary of the forest, sealing my fate as the latest to be bound to the Court of the Radiant King. Only one of the party escaped with their life.

Many horror TTRPGs promise an experience like the above: a series of encounters with monstrous beings, a descent into bodily or psychological disintegration, a sojourn in an inhospitable landscape, and the peril of opening oneself to more-than-human forces. The game system of *Trophy* makes such an experience available to players, explaining in its opening pages that "the game tells the story of the treasure-hunter's physical and mental descent as they move deeper and deeper into the dangerous forest [...] This is not a hopeful story of brave and daring adventurers that slay dragons and drag bags of gold back to town. This is a horror story of entitled pillagers meeting tragic ends" (Ross et al. 2021, 4).

This mode of roleplaying draws on the genres of the dark fantastic developed in print fiction since the eighteenth-century, including the uncanny, the weird and the gothic. These terms refer to particular "affects" elicited by stories as well as certain narrative structures common to those stories, and they are interrelated rather than distinct. The uncanny is typically traced to Sigmund Freud's essay of the same name (1919), but more broadly names a modality of literature and media that centers on the turn from the intimate and familiar to the strange and unfamiliar; it names that moment when the homely becomes distinctly unhomely. The gothic has a more precise definition, provided by the literary critic Chris Baldick (1992, xix); it emerges from the combination of an inheritance in time (the past returning to haunt the present, the uncovering of old secrets) with the sense of enclosure in space (evoking feelings of being trapped or claustrophobia) leading to a "sickening descent into disintegration" (of the mind, the body, or both). The weird is often traced back to early twentieth-century pulp writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, though its roots are older. Mark Fisher (2016) links the weird to the word's archaic meaning ("fate") and its implication of twisted forms of time and causality, and of experiences that seem alien to human perception. Contemporary horror roleplaying games deploy the gothic, the weird and the uncanny to develop

emergent modes of storytelling and play that disclose intimate relationships between game worlds and players.

Such intimate relationships are not always comfortable and tend to trouble how roleplaying games construct player characters as agentic, autonomous individuals seeking to achieve feats of mastery against the backdrop of a world that provides material for their development. *Trophy*, in contrast to the typical shape of the adventure TTRPG, evokes the weird nature depicted in Algernon Blackwood's stories, in which protagonists are persecuted by, or give themselves over to, an animated landscape. Indeed, the tagline of the game, which tells us that "the forest doesn't want you there," recalls Blackwood's story *The Willows* (1907). In this story, two friends on a canoe trip down the Danube encounter sinister and divine willow trees that attempt to lure them to their deaths. The landscape becomes an antagonist in Blackwood's story, but it is also a membrane between, or point of contact with, a phenomenological experience normally foreclosed to the human. *Trophy* turns on similar dynamics, rendering its environments not only agentic and antagonistic, but also a means of disclosing different modes of accessing and being in the world. Games such as *Trophy*, then, are a mode through which we might foster more ethical relations with the more-than-human world in which we are embedded. In making this claim, I follow critics in the environmental humanities who identify modes such as the gothic and the weird as resonant for negotiating what has come to be called the Anthropocene (Estok 2018; Alder and Bavidge 2020; Tidwell and Soles 2021). Though a contested term, the Anthropocene names the present as a period in which anthropogenic climate change is transforming physical environments, habitats, societies, and politics in unpredictable and complex ways, leading to consequences at geological, temporal, and spatial scales (Stormer and Crutzen 2000).

The Symbiotic Real

If TTRPGs as experiences engage in psychological work, as is often claimed, I want to explore how this work relates to how we negotiate our troubled sense of belonging to the planet in a time of climate crisis. Bruno Latour (2017) claims that ecology is driving us crazy, diagnosing denial, hubris, and depression as pathological responses to the climate crisis. There is, however, "no cure for the condition of belonging to the world. But, by taking care, we can cure ourselves of believing that we do not belong to it, that the essential question lies elsewhere, that what happens to the world does not concern us" (Latour 2017, 13). Playing horror roleplaying games is one strategy for dealing with that condition of belonging to the world that the climate crisis has brought to the fore. It confronts human interdependence with a natural world from which we have never been separate, despite centuries of denial, particularly in the West or the Global North—though we might better think of it as the "Minority World," following Shahidul Alam's (2008) challenge to the West's rhetoric of democracy. In engaging players through imaginative encounters with damaged ecosystems and

hosts of ecological others, *Trophy* gestures to what the philosopher Timothy Morton (2017, 17) calls the "symbiotic real"—a realm of ecological belonging that has been thoroughly "walled off" by the philosophy, science and politics of this Minority World for at least 250 years:

> The symbiotic real is a weird "implosive whole" in which entities are related in a non-total, ragged way… In symbiosis, it's unclear which is the top symbiont, and the relationship between the beings is jagged, incomplete. Am I simply a vehicle for the numerous bacteria that inhabit my microbiome? Or are they hosting me? Who is the host and who is the parasite? The term "host" stems from the Latin *hostis*, a word that can mean both "friend" and "enemy."'

The ragged modes of interdependence Morton describes here play out in horror roleplaying games as characters engage in imaginative acts of worlding, creating and encountering hosts of more-than-human beings, perhaps even adopting the role of one such being. In *Trophy*, for example, you can play as "fae-born," while in *Mörk Borg*, a Swedish roleplaying game set in a dying world, character options include the animal-human hybrid "fanged deserter." In their morphic variability, these character roles approach what Kelly Hurley (1996) calls the *abhuman*, since they are always on the verge of becoming something other than themselves. They point to the permeability of the human subject, and its kinship with other-than-human animals. Such kinship is the material of the symbiotic real, though as horror TTRPGs suggest, it is not always an easy affair. Morton's description of the symbiotic real through the undecidable word "host"—meaning both friend and enemy—is echoed in the ambivalence of *Trophy*, which uses a ludic system called "Ruin" to explore such interdependencies between environment and player. In *Trophy*, "Ruin" is a way of managing psychological disintegration. When characters reach a score of 6 "Ruin," they lose their minds, as it were, and are wholly given over to the host landscape and act in its interest. This means the player gives up control of the character. However, the rules allow characters to choose to reduce their "Ruin" score before this outcome, though this means sabotaging their companions' efforts to navigate the terrain and reach their goal. "Ruin" is a ludic and narrative device, then, through which players negotiate their situatedness within the symbiotic real of the imagined worlds they have entered. Accruing ruin means accepting conditions, one of which is to be "haunted." Being haunted is, according to Morton, a state conducive to developing relationships of care with the hosts of ecological others with whom we are connected through the symbiotic real.

Beyond Ecophobia

So far, my explanation of TTRPGs emphasizes aesthetic properties, such as haunting and the uncanny, which risk inscribing eco-phobic responses to "Nature." Ecophobia is a disposition that

pervades the cultures of the Minority World, and is driven by something more than just the fear of environmental disaster. As eco-critic Simon Estok (2016, 132) suggests, "[e]cophobia is what allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world… The epic frustrations of not being able to hold and control nature are at core ecophobic and have variously found their way into production of film and literature and have been very important and influential in how some genres have developed." Ecophobia is a human condition of antipathy towards nature, a maladaptive evolutionary strategy stemming from a need to control. It is no wonder, then, that ecophobia proliferates in the face of the complexity and scale of the climate crisis, which is a reminder that our control of nature was only ever illusory. Horror media is shot through with eco-phobic representations of nature. As a result, it is often a less than ideal storytelling vehicle for negotiating the climate crisis.

That said, while casting nature as a vengeful antagonist or a monster to be defeated is hardly conducive to climate action, a dose of the weird, the uncanny and/or the gothic can foster intimacy rather than separation and antagonism. The modes in the TTRPGs I identify here show what Morton (2016) has called a "dark ecology." To Morton, ecology is dark because to encounter the symbiotic real we need to be "sufficiently creeped out." Other eco-critics have also identified the gothic, the uncanny and the weird as productive for moving beyond what Sarah Dillon (2018) calls the dead end "horror of the Anthropocene" and towards narratives that advocate for more intimate dispositions towards nature. Such intimacy means first grasping the human as one of the more-than-human ecological others that comprise the symbiotic real. Morton (2016, 100) describes ecological awareness as glimpsing the "monster in the dark mirror, and you are a cone in one of its eyes." This means accepting the non-separation of nature, but also becoming "creeped out" by humans and their planet-destroying actions. Here, what was once familiar (human being) has become and is encountered as strange, while what seems familiar (modes of human production and consumption) are reconfigured as monstrous. This is the ecological uncanny.

Eco-critics Gan, Tsing, Swanson, and Bubandt also write in a gothic register in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, emphasizing the "monsters" and "ghosts" that inhabit "haunted" Anthropocene landscapes (2017, 2). Elsewhere, Brian Onishi (2020) explores the eco-weird apparent in climate change fiction as a mode that uproots our feelings of homeliness in the face of epistemic limits. He writes that "The very laws of nature are broken, leaving us in a newly realized foreign world, and we ourselves are left untrustworthy narrators of our own experience" (159). Again, he draws on the apparatus of the uncanny to think through troubled relationships of belonging in a damaged world.

Horror TTRPGs such as *Trophy* stage just such an eco-weird experience in their complex interplay between greedy and ruinous human adventurers (who are very unreliable narrators) and a sentient landscape that seeks to reclaim those that intend to consume and exploit it. By engaging the affective properties of the dark fantastic, these games reveal the damaged and haunted landscapes

of the Anthropocene, engaging players in acts of worlding that makes explicit their complicity in the degradation of the land. These acts of worlding further evoke uncanny intimacy with more-than-human agents, rupturing fantasies of human control and custodianship. Indeed, the environments of TTRPGs continually reveal human epistemic and phenomenological limits. The games "unhome" players from a disposition toward nature that would hold it as separate and, in their explorations of collapse, perturb the notion of ecology as composed of stable systems, and racist anthropocentric assignations of value based on holism (that is, on everything having its "natural" place in the system). Dark ecologies are dynamic and changing, whose members are not subservient to an idealized whole. I turn now to two short case studies to explore these claims in further detail.

Example 1: *Solemn Vale*

In the British RPG S*olemn Vale*, player characters return to an isolated rural village populated by unfriendly locals who refer obliquely to eldritch superstitions and violent rituals. The game riffs on the folk horror genre, though without the reactionary disavowals that tend to play out in the climax of such films as *The Wicker Man* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*, which often reinscribe the values of patriarchal capitalism by casting the countercultural characters as wholly monstrous, or bring about their defeat. However, instead of asking players to defeat the monsters, and by providing them with diminishing opportunities for escape, *Solemn Vale* engages the player in a series of ambivalent choices through which their interaction with the land becomes ever more intimate and their complicity in systems of exploitation is revealed. In the scenario "Family Matters," run by game master (GM) Matthew Dawkins for the Red Moon Roleplaying podcast, the player characters enter Solemn Vale intending to claim an inheritance. Increasingly strange revelations about the family's heretofore hidden history puncture the characters' fantasies of abandoning successful careers in London for a quiet life in the country. During the climax of the game, the player character stands over an abandoned mineshaft on her newly acquired property, deciding whether to "feed" an antagonistic local to the entity that lurks below. In so doing, she will rekindle the pact her family once had with the inhuman powers living under the landscape of the Vale. Here, a romanticized and implicitly racist vision of Britain's supposed rural past founded on whiteness, exploitation, and exclusion, is exposed as always already bound up in the excavationary logic of capitalism.

The family's wealth comes from mining and maintaining its status, which requires feeding the hungry thing that still occupies the shafts they dug into the land. Humans and more-than-humans—including the land itself—are intimately bound in relationships of exploitation as well as custodianship, and to face this is to give over the fantasy of control and separation that pervades modernist thought. The game manages this unraveling of modernist rationality through "weird"

dice, which are accrued through interactions with strange aspects of Solemn Vale. Weird dice can be added to tests that help players progress through obstacles in the game. However, adding weird dice also means allowing for the possibility of unexpected effects. Here the ludic system supports the narrative trajectory, with mechanical randomness eroding the autonomy and agency with which players begin the game, and each roll of the dice further enfolds them in the landscape of Solemn Vale.

Example 2: *Hollows of Desolation*

My second example is Gordie Murphy's *Hollows of Desolation* (2021), a game built on the mechanics of *Trophy* in which players invent and explore a collapsing ecosystem to discover and bring back treasure. A ravaged and animated landscape emerges in play through the interactions of the GM, the players, and the imagined world itself, which is not pre-designed but created through play. Magic is important in the game and functions as a metaphor for the "magical" thinking of extractive capitalism. If player characters use magic to progress through the landscape (which often they must) they accelerate the collapse of the hollow, leading to dangerous "dredge" effects, which might include the appearance of monstrous creatures or toxic extrusions from the land itself. Such "dredge" effects emphasize the interdependence of human and more-than-human worlds, as human magic draws on and affects the damaged landscape, making the journey ever more perilous and the need to use magic more urgent. Again, rather than being determined in advance by the scenario, dredge effects are explored in play and determined by players in the conversations that occur around play. Through such collaborative storytelling mechanics, the game presents ecosystems not as stable wholes, but as unstable, open systems. This ecosystemic move towards openness punctures a notion of ecology rooted in teleology and cybernetic fantasies of human control. This loss of control is given imaginative force through the dark fantastic aesthetics favored in the game. In one game we ran, a player decided that the collapsing hollow had partially swallowed his former ancestral home. They began their exploration in the degraded and decaying grounds of the house, concretizing the uncanny and unhoming aspects of the eco-weird.

Metagames

The TTRPGs I describe here draw on collaborative storytelling techniques as well as the mechanics of classic roleplaying games by incorporating randomness through dice rolls. Immersion is frequently punctured as players move in and out of the story to discuss potential consequences of

dice rolls and collaborate to decide on outcomes of decisions. In these moments, players engage in reflective discussion, revealing that TTRPGs are not only stories and games, but also metagames. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) describe metagaming as a critical practice of playing, making, and thinking—a mode of intervention in the political and cultural economies in which we as players are situated. *Hollows* is exemplary of how contemporary TTRPGs invite players to metagame. The playbook explains that "players will work together to create the particular environment that their game takes place in" (2021, 6). The book poses questions about the hollow and asks players to draw a rough map and mark important natural features. All this occurs before gameplay begins.

The ecological ethics of the game *Hollows of Desolation*, particularly its mechanics of magic and dredge, further suggest a connection between metagames and what Karen Barad (2007) calls the "ethics of worlding." She suggests that "the very nature of materiality is an entanglement" and that seemingly separate "'parts' of phenomena are co-constituted" (Barad 2007, 393). Thus, "[e]thics is therefore not about the right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part" (Barad 2007, 393). The ethical principles of entanglement, intra-action, and worlding emerge intuitively when we play games like *Hollows* and *Trophy*. We are not creating an environment that is a passive background for adventurers to explore. This isn't about mapping a dungeon, fighting the bad guys, and escaping with the loot. This is an exchange between the game master and the players, and once that exchange has begun, the world of the game itself becomes intimately entangled with the players and their characters.

In *Trophy*, *Hollows*, and *Solemn Vale*, the imagined environment discloses its subjectivity in play. The environment that players build in *Hollows*, for example, in turn also builds itself as we describe new encounters, discuss potential dredge effects, and understand the consequences of our explorations of the space. Nick Mizer's ethnographic investigation on dwelling in tabletop RPGs emphasizes that the agency and concreteness TTRPGs confer upon imagined worlds is a potential affordance of the hobby. He writes that, "The element of the unknown depends on cultivating and respecting the concreteness of the imagined world, rather than bending it to meet other goals the players might have" (2019, 152). I think this concreteness of the imagined world, and the respect it engenders in players for more-than-human beings, is readily apparent in games such as *Hollows*, where it takes on an eco-ethical dimension.

Conclusion

As Anna Tsing (2015) suggests, we are living in a world in ruins, and precarity is a condition that pervades all modes of life. Our culture, politics, and daily lives have yet to adapt to these

new conditions. We continue to be mired in modernist modes of thought and beliefs about our relationship to the Earth, imagining we might still treat it as a resource to consume or manage. Latour (2017, 10) reminds us that "[a]n alteration of the relation to the world" is the scholarly term for madness. In a time of climate crisis such madness is upon us whether we would wish it or not. An alteration of relationships between humans and more-than-humans—along with a transformation of human dispositions to the environments in which they are embedded—is the only way through the crisis. TTRPGs explicitly invite alteration and madness, negotiating the horror of the Anthropocene to foster new dispositions towards the more-than-human world for the players who enter or build worlds as part of the game. The games discussed in this paper recognize the precarity of the worlds they construct, and the complex interdependence and intimacies that comprise it. These are endgames for the endgame and, if ecology is driving us mad, we might all benefit from gathering around the table and rolling some dice.

References

Alam, Shahidul. 2008. "Majority World: Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy." *Amerasia Journal* 34 (January): 87–98.

Alder, Emily, and Jenny Bavidge. 2020. "Ecocriticism and the Genre." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, edited by Clive Bloom, 225–42. Cham: Springer.

Baldick, Chris. 1992. "Introduction." In *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, edited by Chris Baldick, xi–xxiii. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Boluk, Stephanie, and Patrick LeMieux. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chang, Alenda Y. 2019. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. 2000. "The 'Anthropocene'." *IGBP Newsletter* 41: 17–18.

Dillon, Sarah. 2018. "The Horror of the Anthropocene." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 6, no. 1.

Estok, Simon C. 2018. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. London: Palgrave.

Estok, Simon C. 2016. "Ecomedia and ecophobia." *Neohelicon* 43, no. 1: 127–145.

Flanagan, Mary. 2009. *Critical Play*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Fisher, Mark. 2016. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books.

Smith, Andrew, and William Hughes. 2013. *Ecogothic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2017. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mizer, Nicholas J. 2019. *Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*. London: Palgrave.

Morton, Timothy. 2017. *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. London: Verso.

Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Onishi, Brian. 2020. "Weird Ecologies and the Uncanny in The Happening." In *Philosophy, Film and the Dark Side of Interdependence*, edited by Jonathan Beever, 157–174. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Tidwell, Christy, and Carter Soles. 2021. "Introduction: Ecohorror in the Anthropocene." In *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*, edited by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles, 1–22. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Tsing, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bio

Dr. Chloé Germaine is a UK academic working across the disciplines of English Literature, Game Studies, and Youth Studies. She is Co-Director of the Manchester Game Studies Network at Manchester Metropolitan University and co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Material Game Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2022). Her research interests in Game Studies include horror and gothic games, LARP, TTRPGs and board games, with a focus on the environment and ecology. She is lead investigator on the project, "Play and the Environment: Games Imagining the Future," where she works with young co-researchers to explore the affordances of board games in a time of climate crisis. The project is funded by Libellund and Game in Lab. Chloé is also a roleplaying game designer, and her original games and scenarios have been published by *Cthulhu Hack* and the *Gauntlet*.

10. Reframing Actual Plays

CLAIRE STRICKLIN

Abstract

This essay is the product of a corpus analysis of YouTube comments from the popular actual play podcast, The Glass Cannon Podcast (GCP). It considers the implications of audience conversations that surround the primary text, preserved via the digital trace of comments sections. This follows a critique of established frames from Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy*, where I emphasize the bleed between gameplay, game world, and the social. Appending an additional "entertainment" frame to accommodate the performative nature of podcasts, I propose to classify audience comments according to their primary frame, relying upon keyword lists generated through coding and tagging. This process begins with established theoretical frames, but also suggests ways in which mediated gameplay goes beyond them. I conclude that as players dive in and out of their various roles around the gaming table — friend, gamer, heroic adventurer, comic persona — audiences must learn to follow along, shifting from one frame to the next. This essay emphasizes the importance of the non-human actors present within the network, ultimately proposing a "technology" frame that influences the performative relationships of play.

Keywords:

Tabletop Role-playing, performance studies, corpus analysis, quantitative methods, frame analysis, digital humanities

---

This essay is an exploration of active audiences and the digital transmission of analog gameplay. As an area of research, "actual plays" mandate sociological explorations, both of the people who watch tabletop roleplaying series and the products of their fan activities. While a naive reading of the genre might construct such series as a transcription of an event—a simple recording of play—media theorists like Philip Auslander (2011) and Jay Bolter and Richard Gruisn (2000) illustrate the transformative nature of mediation. In effect, pointing a camera at the tabletop changes the nature of the game. It adds a new element to the performative situation: a previously nonexistent "outside audience."This outside audience is distinct from the "inner audience" of a

traditional TTRPG: the players themselves. While this original inner audience does not disappear from the performance of a tabletop roleplay series, they no longer play solely for their own enjoyment. Rather, their audience is displaced by the needs of content creation. While the sociology of TTRPGs has been well-established since the early 1980s (Fine 2002), the rise of tabletop roleplay series demands answers to new questions: How do we account for this new outside audience? What is their role?

The answer requires data that can be difficult to obtain. If the act of play is fleeting, the experience of watching gameplay is doubly so. Surveys, interviews, and direct observation are all valuable tools, but as a first attempt at explicating the outside audience, this study has settled on a quantitative methodology to drive and direct subsequent exploration. For that reason, I have undertaken a suite of corpus analysis techniques to investigate outside audiences and begin to establish their theoretical positioning.

In this essay, I will provide a short history of the underlying theory that motivates this research, associating the lineage of a frame analysis approach with TTRPGs. From there I explain the methods of corpus analysis that I've used to construct my analytical framework. Finally, I will share the results of that analysis before concluding with their implications for a formal description of "the tabletop roleplay series." Throughout, it is important to remember that this project is fundamentally an exploration of TTRPG aesthetics. It seeks to understand tabletop roleplay series through the lens of viewership—what do audiences want? The goal of this research is to generate an expanded model for TTRPG performance that accommodates non-player audiences and offers new directions for digitally mediated game design.

1. Theoretical Context

The question of aesthetics is informed by the field of performance studies, and particularly by performance scholar Richard Schechner. "Art creates its own reality," says Schechner, "And actively interacts with social life" (Companion Websites 2012). In essence, the worlds of art and of the social are not separate spheres, but mutually constitutive. In his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, Daniel Mackay draws on Schechner's terminology to formally theorize TTRGs. He assigns elements of the interactive gaming experience to drama, script, theater, and performance, thereby adapting TTRPG play to Schechner's performative paradigm (Mackay 2001). Notably, Mackay argues that his model is significant "because of the lack of performer-spectator division. Role-playing games simply do not have observers who remain apart from the action" (Mackay 2001). This sentiment echoes Robin D. Laws, who wrote, "Interactive gaming is in its very essence highly resistant to critical analysis. This is because the gaming experience itself is not set up to be observed by outsiders" (Laws 2017). Obviously, what was true in 2001 no longer applies in 2021. Or at the very least, it is applicable not in quite the way Laws envisioned. Where he imagined that amateurs were made self-conscious by the gaze of observers, the genre

of the tabletop roleplay series has been conceived and constructed as performance. In such a paradigm, roleplaying remains an essential component, but the presence of outside audiences alters its character. From this observation it is possible to derive an important corollary: when the circumstances of play shift, so too do its conventions.

Mediation is not the only possible cause for such a shift. Compare a home game of *Dungeons & Dragons* to the tournament-style play of early gaming conventions (Peterson 2012). When gameplay shifts from the mimetic to the agonistic, the measure of success shifts in kind. The death of a character may be a moment of successful drama in the home game, while an identical death in the tournament represents abject failure. These shifts are generic in the same sense as Erving Goffman's comparison of theatrical and radio frames, in which "syntactically different functions are accorded to phenomenally similar events" (Goffman 1974). In that sense, the work of the would-be critical analyst begins not with a description of game mechanics or fictional events, but with context. If my task is to formally describe the shift from private play to public entertainment, then the peculiar circumstances of tabletop roleplay series are a necessary part of that analysis. The first and most important circumstance of such an effort is the introduction of its outside audience.

Gary Alan Fine's classic book *Shared Fantasy*, a foundational sociological exploration of TTRPG cultures, helps pave the way for reconceptualizing TTRPG play. Relying upon Goffman-style frame analysis, Fine settled on three primary frames to describe the situation of a typical TTRPG: social, gameplay, and the gameworld (Fine 2002). These correspond respectively to the relationships of the people at the table, the game as a game (viz. its mechanics), and the fictional world participants build together. In another sense, these frames correspond to people as social beings, players as ludic beings, and characters as narrative beings. Mackay elaborates on Fine's framework by breaking the gameworld frame into three sub-frames distinguished along grammatical lines (Mackay 2001). Analog games scholar Robyn Hope addresses tabletop roleplay series as such, proposing a "fan frame" to accommodate both outside audiences and the fan-like behaviors of cast members. She also proposes an "entertainment frame" to accommodate "the social context of a performer of any kind who is faced with an audience" (Hope 2017).

These additional frames demand a choice on the part of the would-be corpus analyst. Which are most applicable to audience studies? Which can be readily identified by human coders and computation? Although Hope's "fan frame" and Mackay's "gameworld subdivisions" provide useful insights, I've chosen to eschew them here. Instead, this study focuses on the four starting frames listed in Figure 1. In brief, the fan frame simultaneously relies on affective engagement, reference to outside media, and a sense of community belonging. These qualities may be safely derived from transcripts of play or one-on-one interviews, but their digital traces are too varied to track through corpus analysis. As for Mackay's subdivisions, they stem from the primacy of direct experience in the "imaginary entertainment environment" of the game world. They receive special attention in Mackay's construction because he emphasizes the agency of characters within fiction.

For Mackay, "a recording of a role-playing game performance is not a recording of the aesthetic object. The aesthetic object must be reified from the performance in the memories of the players" (Mackay 2001). That is not the case in the context of a tabletop roleplay series; an outside audience is not concerned with the "imaginary entertainment environment" because they cannot access it in the same way or to the same extent as the more traditional TTRPG audience: the players themselves.

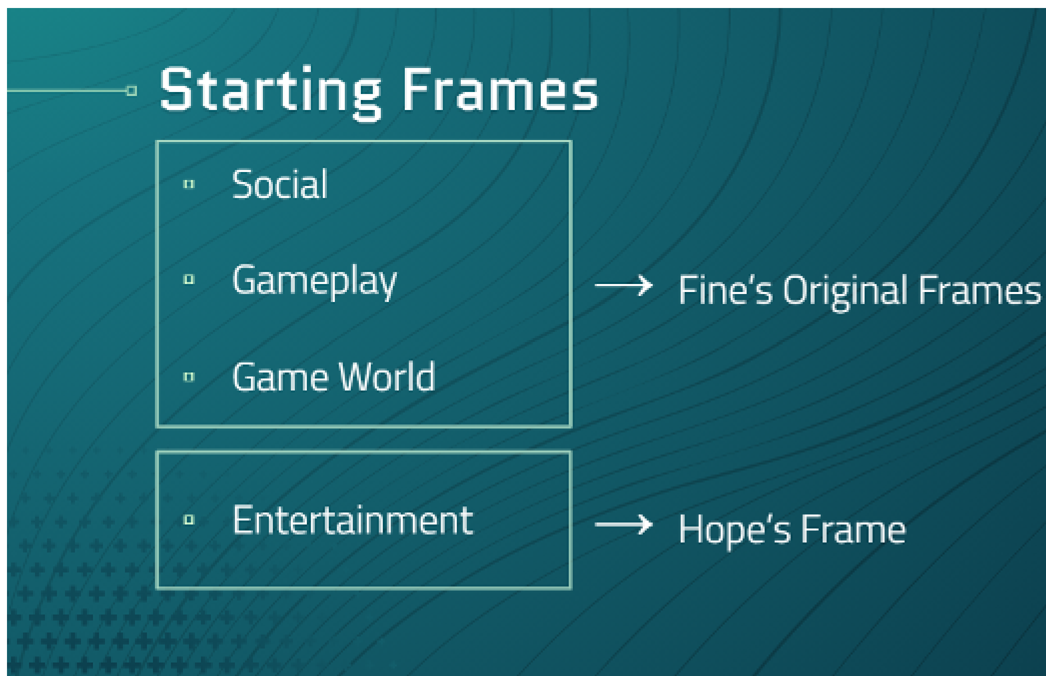

Figure 1: The four frames of this corpus analysis.

Bearing these considerations in mind, the four base frames that undergird this study correlate to social (people), gameplay (players), gameworld (characters), and entertainment (performers). These categories formed the basis of my approach to a corpus analysis of *The Glass Cannon Podcast.*

2. Method

Thus far I've provided a model of TTRPG play, theorized in terms of performance. However, as it has been developed by Mackay and others, this model focuses on the conventional "inner audience" of TTRPG play rather than the "outside audience" of non-players watching a stream or recording. Acknowledging that outside audiences fundamentally change the performative situation of play, I had to decide which frames those audiences might inhabit. With these points established, the techniques of corpus analysis could begin to provide new insights.

Corpus analysis refers to computationally assisted techniques for looking at large texts. By understanding how outside audiences reshape the existing performance model, we can address several questions with significant design consequences: How do audiences interact with tabletop roleplay series? Which frames seem to hold their interest? For my test case, I settled on *Side Quest Side Sesh*, a spinoff from the popular *The Glass Cannon Podcast* (GCP). My choice of show offers several advantages. The series uses the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* rules, a system noted for its mechanical complexity. The concomitant rules that such a system engenders provide a useful marker in machine-assisted discourse analysis. The GCP is also a mid-sized show, meaning that there would be enough fan interactions to populate my models, but not so many as to overwhelm human interrogation. Finally, my familiarity with the show would serve to make some of the in-jokes populating the corpus more intelligible to analysis.

Using the YouTube Data Tools hosted by the University of Amsterdam's Digital Methods Initiative, I scraped user comments from the first eight episodes of *Side Quest Side Sesh.* The next step was tagging and coding. Along with three volunteers, I manually sorted these comments into the four theorized frames: social, gameplay, game world, and entertainment. The goal of the exercise was to discover whether audiences displayed more interest in particular frames. What exactly were their conversations about? Did they discuss fictional characters, the relationships between players, or the show as a show?

To answer these questions, I relied on a suite of freeware corpus analysis tools called AntConc, developed for concordancing and text analysis. The initial strategy was to mine keywords—terms that were clearly associated with one of the theorized frames—from the eight hand-coded episodes. Whenever the coding team found a comment that was unanimously agreed to correspond to a particular frame, we would search for keywords in that comment that helped support that determination. In cases of disagreement between coders, follow-up conversations were used to form consensus. If a consensus could not be reached and a given comment or keyword was deemed ambiguous, it was excluded from the final keyword lists.

The next step was to compare the keyword lists generated from the first eight episodes to the entire corpus, using the results as a rough determinant for where the conversation might lie. In general, coding and tagging provided entertainment words that could apply to any form of audio-visual entertainment. Words like "watch," "episode," "content," and "GCP" (the initials of the show) were typical. Gameplay words included "rules," "attack," "grappled," and "fight" (combat being the most mechanically intensive aspect of play). The gameworld frame featured keywords like "festival," "creepy," "legend," and proper nouns such as character names or place names. Finally, player names, descriptions of physical presence such as "looks," and the word "banter" were typical of the social frame.

3. Results

Before delving into the results of the corpus analysis itself, one key process-based insight deserves comment—the issue of "laminated" frames. In terms of the frame analysis that undergirds this study, lamination is the concentric, onion skin, matryoshka doll aspect of the approach. Frames overlap one another and bleed into one another, but as our study suggests, their interrelationships are not uniform.

The manual process of tagging and coding revealed significant overlap between the entertainment/social frames (95 cases) and gameplay/gameworld frames (35 cases). For example, the name of a cast member might indicate an interest in that entertainer's persona (entertainment frame) or in the social dynamics at the table (social frame). By the same token, a fictional concept like "gold pieces" (gameworld frame) might also reference the in-game currency of "gold pieces" (gameplay frame). In these instances, comments are often tagged as belonging to both frames, and there are plausible arguments for either interpretation. This goes beyond the problem of polysemy, as coders have difficulties distinguishing such "laminate" cases even after lengthy debate.

The implication is that the frames themselves are porous constructs. Audiences transition between an in-character and out-of-character mindset, keeping pace with the players as they oscillate between frames. In a tabletop roleplay series, audiences are obliged to manage the same permeability of frames as the players they spectate. As players dive in and out of their various roles around the gaming table—friend, gamer, heroic adventurer, comic persona—audiences must learn to follow along, moving from one frame to the next. The important point is that, although corpus analysis might seem like a technique of precise sorting and clear division, frame analysis demands interpretation. The social processes described here are not always neatly partitioned, but indistinct and occur simultaneously. As Sebastian Deterding argued in his frame analytic account of video game play, "multiple framings can be going on at the same time, and a single individual can partake in multiple framings" (Deterding 2014).

From this initial observation, we turn next to the results of the corpus analysis. The thirty-seven episodes of *Side Quest Side Sesh* that make up the main corpus of this project feature 1,317 individual comments, totaling approximately 27,000 words. After cross-referencing my own findings with the work of three volunteer coders, the resulting keyword lists were then compared to this main corpus. A simple count of corpus keywords demonstrates a rough sketch of commenter interests.

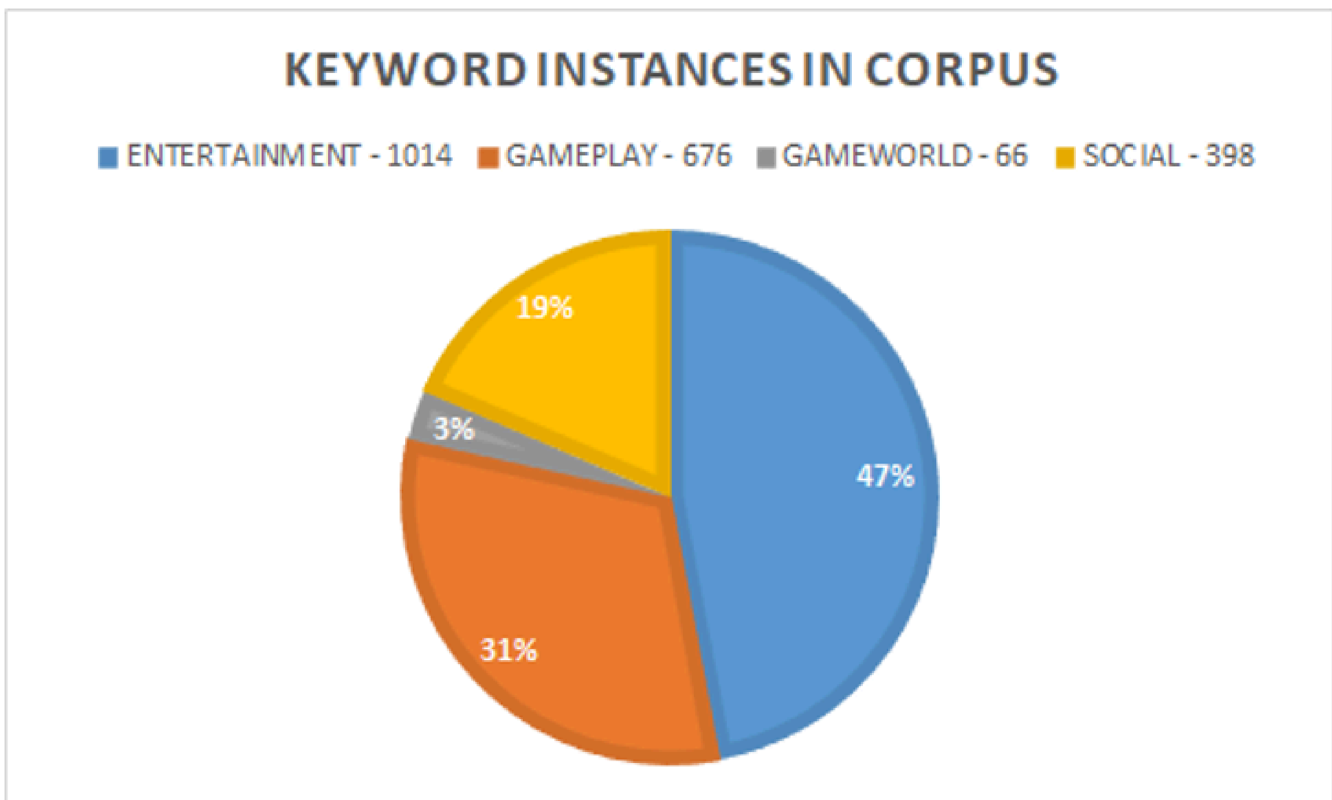

Figure 2: "Entertainment" proved to be the dominate frame, while the "Gameworld" frame was least prevalent.

In the parlance of AntConc, "word types" correspond to individual keywords, while "word tokens" represent the raw number of hits each keyword list received in the corpus. Based on the team's eight-episode survey, the entertainment frame contained 126 word types and 1014 word tokens. The gameplay frame featured 78 word types and 676 word tokens, while the social frame featured 23 word types and 398 word tokens. The gameworld frame had 24 word types but only 66 word tokens (see Figure 2). This last result was perhaps most surprising. For all comments that could be clearly tagged, only 3% were associated with the gameworld—the sphere of the fantasy setting, its characters, and their associated narrative.

There is an obvious objection here. Realizing that my methodology had only accounted for characters and place names introduced in the initial eight episodes, I created a second gameworld keyword list that was enhanced by additional characters and place names gleaned from the *Side Quest Side Sesh* fan wiki ("Side Quest Side Sesh"). However, even after adding these ad-hoc terms derived from later points in the narrative, the corpus analysis still yielded only 92 word tokens (see Figure 3).

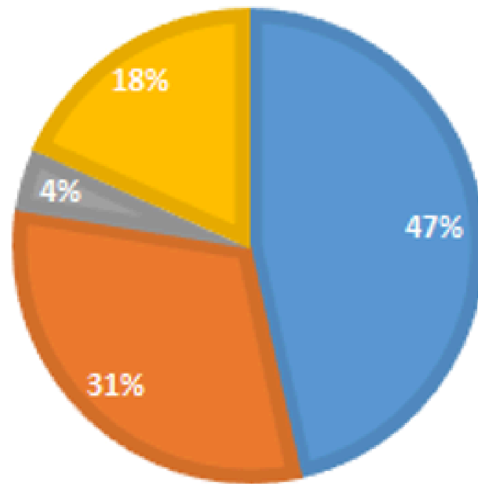

Figure 3: The trend remains similar even with additional "Gameworld" keywords.

Even an adjusted keyword list still put the gameworld frame in a distant fourth place. The conversations taking place in the YouTube comments of each episode just did not focus on the narrative content of the show.

Of course, these findings are only a first step. As with ethnographic methodologies more generally, the process of coding and tagging is iterative. The theorized frames provided by Fine and Hope may offer a useful starting place, but they are not this study's endpoint. To validate these starting frames and perhaps discover new ones, I next turned to the Topic Modeling Tool. My goal was to deduce whether the chosen frames were valid beyond pre-theorized assumptions. Could an algorithm pick new or existing frames out of the corpus?

As Posner and Wallace explain, "topic modeling is a method for finding and tracing clusters of words (called 'topics' in shorthand) in large bodies of texts" (Posner and Wallace 2012). It offers a way to gain a new perspective on a body of work, representing a healthy departure from this study's baseline of Fine's 1983 text. By chunking the corpus's comments into individual episodes, the Topic Modeling Tool produced the following lists:

List of Topics

0. downed attack healed damage fight killing enemy hit death strength abilities door neighbors based monster turnal noc points healing round → **Game Mechanics (gameplay)**
1. erik ya guy b0ge2u7y_le series batman continuing mona zoom putting personal hillbilly zachary random 00 nice androids fighter gnoll feast
2. grappled rules grapple condition grappling attach stirge target escape creature joe ability stirges encounter con players damage haven cg components → **Game Mechanics (gameplay)**
3. water joke wall shot wrong line mercer sight ouch rock cover wild november laney alexander pick fraggle clutch ingram paul
4. 39 br quot guys troy love joe skid ðÿ grant watch great youtube character don time side www good https → **Appreciation for Content (entertainment)**
5. bell taco literally forest nidal bird sneak south cracker state amazing dominate separate uskwood attack barrel nerd description book tune
6. href amp city https kickstarter sweetygirlz http 0 online mqfcpuowjz0 beadle 6igcuqii6cs engaged complete ƒðÿ chronicles grimms beadleandgrimms projects ike
7. ads video light lighting minutes ad adds full defender night small videos court opponent ricka premium kids opponents bunch ê → **Technical Issues (technology)**
8. 2e joy nftrs393b_m days ha map switch hundreds net terrible professor fishing fly laughter final escape return range scent intro
9. johnny poor long male blindness bat playing glasscannon rollin lucky cleric cat matty yeah world album holidays mic cricket 5e

Figure 4: Top 10 Topics Identified by the Topic Modeling Tool

By my reading—and it is only one reading, since the techniques of corpus analysis are always subject to human interpretation—the topics identified by the algorithm correspond to the simple word counting techniques we've already seen. Game mechanics in topic 0 and 2 show familiar words like "attack," "abilities," "target," and "grapple." Diving down into the episodes that bear the strongest relationship to these topics, one discovers armchair generals picking apart the plays from the episode. This corresponds neatly to the theorized gameplay frame.

Topic 4 offered numerous keywords from the social frame (Troy, Joe, and Skid are three cast members' names). However, when scoping up from the topic list and back into the corresponding comments that populated it, the sentiment expressed is general appreciation for content. "We love you guys" sums up the overall theme, and Topic 4 is therefore placed in the entertainment frame. Commenters were reacting to micro-celebrity personas rather than focusing on the interpersonal interplay of human beings in a gaming situation. Again, this topic confirmed the presence of an expected frame.

Topic 7 was different though. It seemed to offer the first hints of a new frame within the corpus. Going back to the corpus's text, many comments that coders had classified as "entertainment" contained keywords related to technology. Platform-centric words like "internet," "audio," "video,"

"desync," and "software" repeatedly arose. Indeed, words in Topic 7 like "ads," "video," and "lighting" suggest an additional "platform" or "technology" frame beyond the category of entertainment. Conversations about ads on YouTube and the dynamic lighting function of the Roll20 virtual tabletop—the favored digital environment of *Glass Cannon Network* games—feature prominently. This also suggests something that should have been obvious in retrospect: the experience of a tabletop roleplay series' audience is partly shaped by hardware and software design.

A final insight from the Topic Modeling Tool lies not in the identified topics, but in a telling absence. Keywords from the gameworld frame are sprinkled throughout the topics. Place names like "Nidal" or character names like "The Professor" appear haphazardly. They do not seem to coalesce into solid "gameworld" discussions of their own. In fact, when we visualize the whole of the corpus across all 37 episodes (See Figure 5), it becomes clear just how rarely discussions focus on the gameworld. Even the social frame only manages to overshadow entertainment once, and that is in episode twenty-three, in which a demonstrative player has a meltdown over his character getting permanently blinded (e.g., one commenter wrote, "I feel so strongly for Joe. His anger and disappointment is completely tangible and understandable and I wish things had worked for him"). Figure 5 also offers an at-a-glance representation of the series' combat-heavy episodes, in which episodes eight, twenty-two, and twenty-seven featured some of the more mechanically complex moments of the corpus. One explanation is simply that audiences respond to what they see. If players spend most of an episode's runtime on combat, it stands to reason that the conversation will center around that content. However, the domination of entertainment and gameplay across all episodes suggests a more consistent theme.

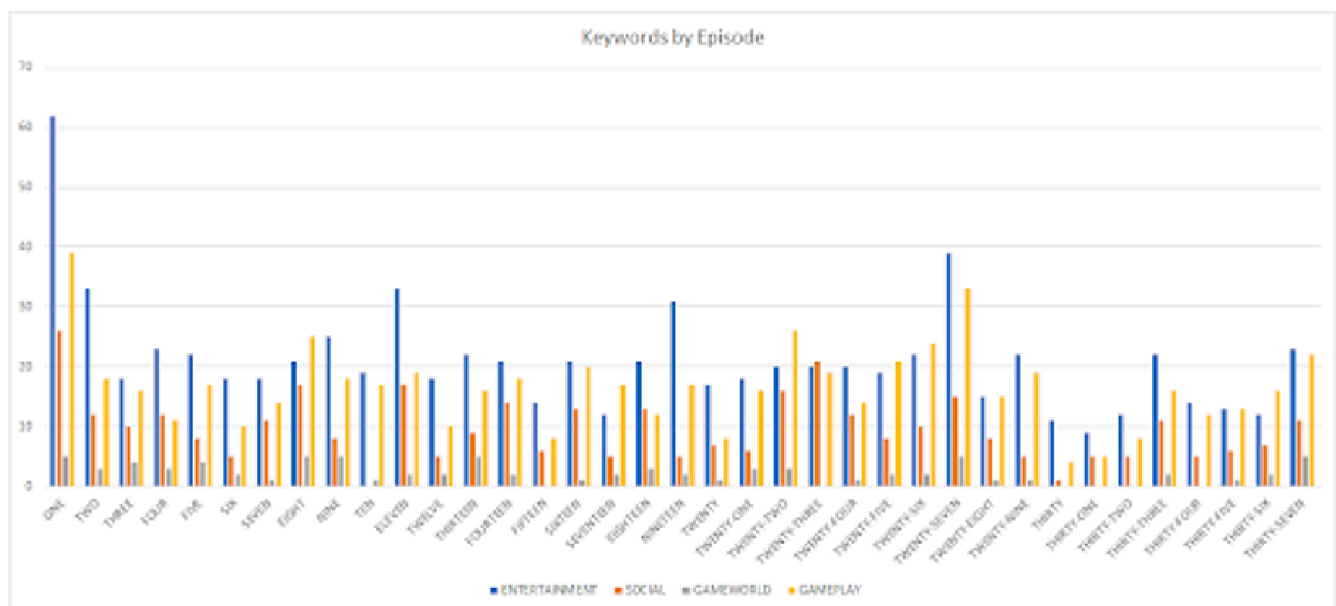

Figure 5: The blue "Entertainment" bars and yellow "Gameplay" bars dominate.

4. Conclusion

My study of the Glass Cannon Network's *Side Quest Side Sesh* set out to discover which frames outside audiences reference when interacting with tabletop roleplay series. It is comparatively small as corpus analyses go, referencing only 37 episodes of a single podcast using one game system. In that sense, its results should be understood as specific rather than general; preliminary rather than holistic; and contingent rather than absolute. However, the results strongly indicate a focus upon the theorized entertainment and gameplay frames.

This conclusion is particularly notable in the context of Mackay, who makes a point of the importance of the game world to roleplaying. He is explicit that his favorite parts of the hobby are when the world disappears and he becomes engrossed in the fiction, experiencing the world as his character. He often speaks in a wistful, "you had to be there" sort of tone, saying that this experience is only available to the players at the table: "It is from these moments that lasting friendships are made, and they are experiences that are impossible to record with any hope of capturing the essence of the game" (Mackay 2001). Viewed in this context, the reduced presence of the gameworld frame in a YouTube comments section makes sense. The viewing audience simply aren't "there" in the same way that players can be "there." Although these audiences may wield influence over the content of performance, they cannot inhabit the same fictional world as the players they spectate. Their positioning within the performance model will not allow it.

In terms of Mackay's performance studies model adapted from Schechner's formal structure, the activities of normal TTRPG play neatly follow the formula for performance. However, the presence of an outside audience troubles Mackay's reading. There is a solution though. When he introduces his model, Mackay briefly notes the bounding "ritual" frame—a largest-possible circle that includes and envelops performance—before discarding it. While the superstructure of ritual may be extraneous in the context of a private game, in which the players are the only audience and small group dynamics hold sway, the introduction of a larger media ecosystem into the framework changes the calculus. Based on the results of my corpus analysis, my suggestion is to reintroduce Schechner's ritual frame by incorporating the diverse fan activities of outside audiences, the market apparatus endemic to professionalized performance, and the effects of non-human participants on the performative situation—entertainment, market, and technology frames, respectively.

I will conclude by commenting briefly on this final frame. From my perspective, it is evident that a layer of technological mediation surrounds tabletop roleplay shows. They are supported by streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube. Their existence depends on the same audio-visual equipment as any other multimedia production. As the data from the corpus analysis also indicates, audiences are aware of and affected by their presence. In total, I found 92 matches for "gameworld" keywords in my corpus. There were about as many for this proposed technology

frame. This result suggests that the media that bring us our fantasy worlds are at least as important as the worlds themselves. The implications for the design of games and their streams warrant further research.

References

Auslander, Philip. 2011. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Companion Websites. 2012. *Performance Studies: An Introduction—What Is Performance?* Video, 2:15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfAM9dftV1A.

Deterding, Sebastian. 2014. "Modes of Play: A Frame Analytic Account of Video Game Play." PhD diss., The University of York. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3411.8488

Fine, Gary Alan. 2002. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hope, Robyn. 2017. "Play, Performance, and Participation: Boundary Negotiation and Critical Role." Masters thesis, Concordia University.

Laws, Robin D. 2017. "The Hidden Art: Slouching Towards a Critical Framework for RPGs." *The Oracle: Essays* (blog).

Mackay, Daniel. 2001. *The Fantasy Role-Playing: A New Performing Art*. Los Angeles: McFarland & Company.

Peterson, Jon. 2012. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. Unreason Press.

Posner, Miriam and Andy Wallace. 2012. "Very Basic Strategies for Interpreting Results from the Topic Modeling Tool." *Miriam Posner's Blog* (blog). https://miriamposner.com/blog/very-basic-strategies-for-interpreting-results-from-the-topic-modeling-tool/.

Bio

Claire Stricklin is a PhD student in the Georgia Institute of Technology's Digital Media program. Her research focuses on collaborative storytelling in hybrid environments. By examining the shifts in emergent behavior that appear when play moves from the analog to the digital world, her work articulates the complex relationships that form between people, formal systems, and networks of power. Outside of the academy, Claire has published numerous third party adventures in the *Pathfinder 1E*, *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*, and *Starfinder* game systems. She is also the co-creator of *The Handbook of Heroes*, a webcomic focused on high fantasy tropes and tabletop role-playing games.

11. Digital "Character Keepers" for Analog Games

Analyzing Online Play Aids in the Contemporary Indie TTRPG Community

ADRIAN HERMANN AND GERRIT REININGHAUS

Abstract

This short paper discusses a central aspect of online play culture in the indie TTRPG community: the "character keeper," a shared and emphatically digital character sheet, most often realized as a Google Sheets spreadsheet. Keepers are shared sheets that allow all players to refer to the information on all the player characters simultaneously. In this function, as well as regarding the other characteristics we discuss, they therefore go beyond only functioning as digital equivalents of paper character records. The main part of this paper outlines important characteristics of character keepers and attempts to locate them within the broader context of research into character sheets and (role-playing) game studies, discussing issues of participation and co-creation, platform studies, and the aesthetics of indie TTRPGs. In conclusion we sketch opportunities for future research into indie TTRPG play culture, actual play, and the use of character keepers during gaming sessions.

Keywords:

character sheet, character keeper, indie TTRPGs, online play, participation, platform studies, aesthetics

---

Character creation is a central element of most role-playing games and should in fact itself be considered part of playing the game (Torner 2019). Arguably, the keeping of a record of persistent traits for a unique character can even be understood as *the* most important step that allowed role-playing to emerge from wargaming in the early 1970s. The history of character sheets therefore might allow us to trace the emergence and development of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) (Peterson 2012).

Role-playing game studies have, however, not paid much sustained attention to character sheets, even though much of the existing literature in the field deals with character performance and the complex relationships between players and characters (Fine 1983; Bowman 2010; Bowman and Schrier 2018). In this short paper we want to address this lack by discussing a version of the character sheet that has become a central aspect of online play culture in some parts of the indie TTRPG community: the "character keeper" as a shared and emphatically "digital" character sheet, most often realized in the form of a Google Sheets spreadsheet. We will do so in three sections. First, we will introduce character keepers as digital character sheets, then analyze some of their elements and characteristics, and conclude with perspectives for future research on play culture, actual play, and how character keepers are used during sessions.

Character Keepers as Digital Character Sheets

As the most important "player-facing" resource in TTRPGs (Morningstar 2016), character sheets are, as suggested by Lars Konzack (2013), a crucial element for keeping the "textual machine" of the game session running. In the sense proposed by Jessica Hammer (2007) they thus can be understood not only as part of the primary, but also of the secondary and tertiary roleplaying texts (Konzack 2013). Building on this, we could understand character sheets as both "systemic" and "compound" elements in the context of the theory of game elements proposed by Aki Järvinen (2009). They contain information and serve as an interface for the player to interact with the game system and game world. In regard to their materiality, they can be described as a central component of "role playing materials" (Järvinen 2009, 87). How are these aspects translated to online TTRPG play over voice chat or video conference?

While paper character sheets can of course be used while playing TTRPGs online, over the last decade many forms of storing character information digitally have emerged. One way of doing so is using a so-called "character keeper"—a term coined by Jason Cordova, founder of the online TTRPG community "The Gauntlet".[1] Character keepers are digital character records that are most often created using the web-based spreadsheet program Google Sheets. They gather data about all a game's characters in one place. Groups normally use no additional digital or paper private sheets.

The Google Sheets document used for a character keeper contains various individual spreadsheets, either one sheet per character or a single sheet for all characters plus a variety of other sheets for additional information (e.g., on the game system and setting, or on safety tools).

1. Jason Cordova, personal communication, July 12, 2021. The Gauntlet can be found at https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/.

During the session, this information is updated in real time. All players and the facilitator or game master (GM) have editing access.

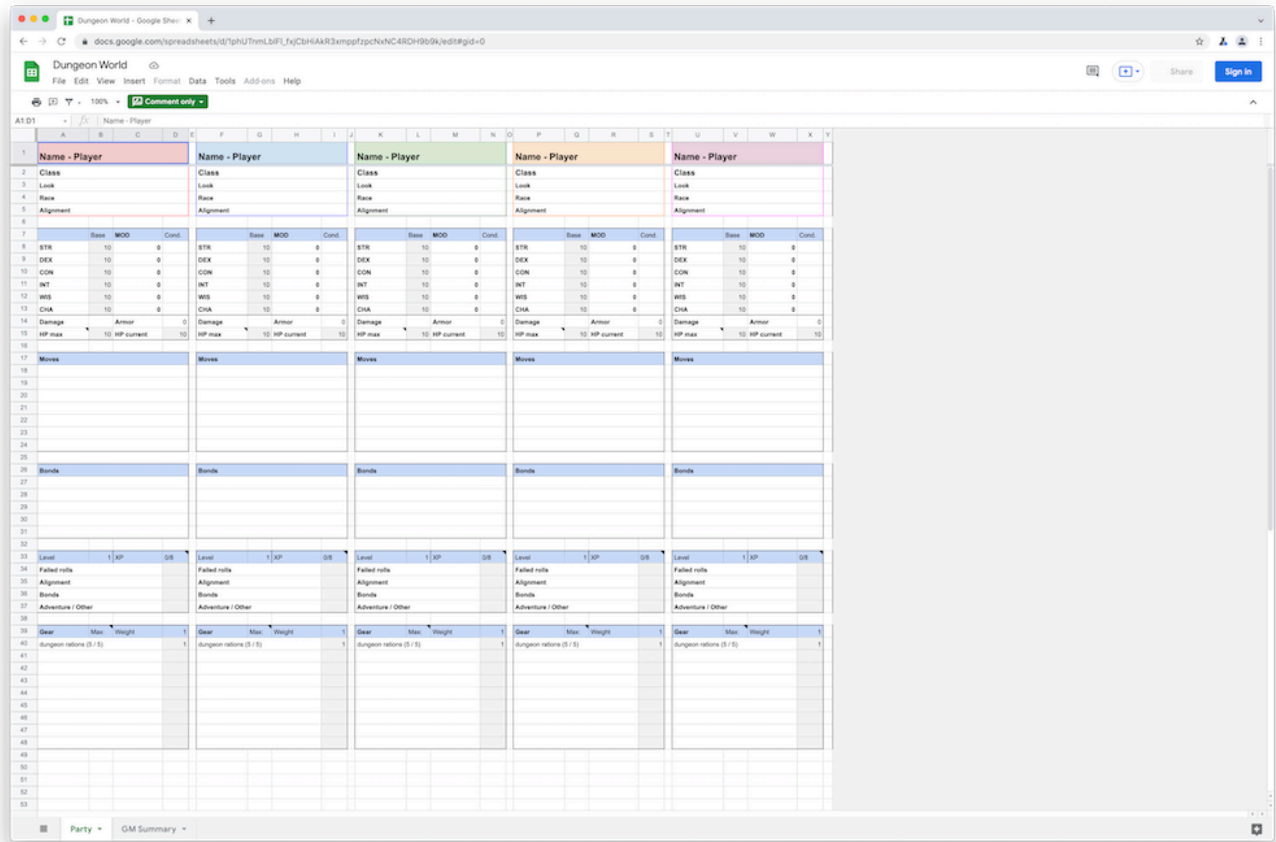

Figure 1: Screenshot of a 2013 character keeper (empty) for Dungeon World.[2]

2. The template can still be found online at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1phUTnmLblFl_fxjCbHiAkR3xmppfzpcNxNC4RDH9b9k/edit?usp=sharing.

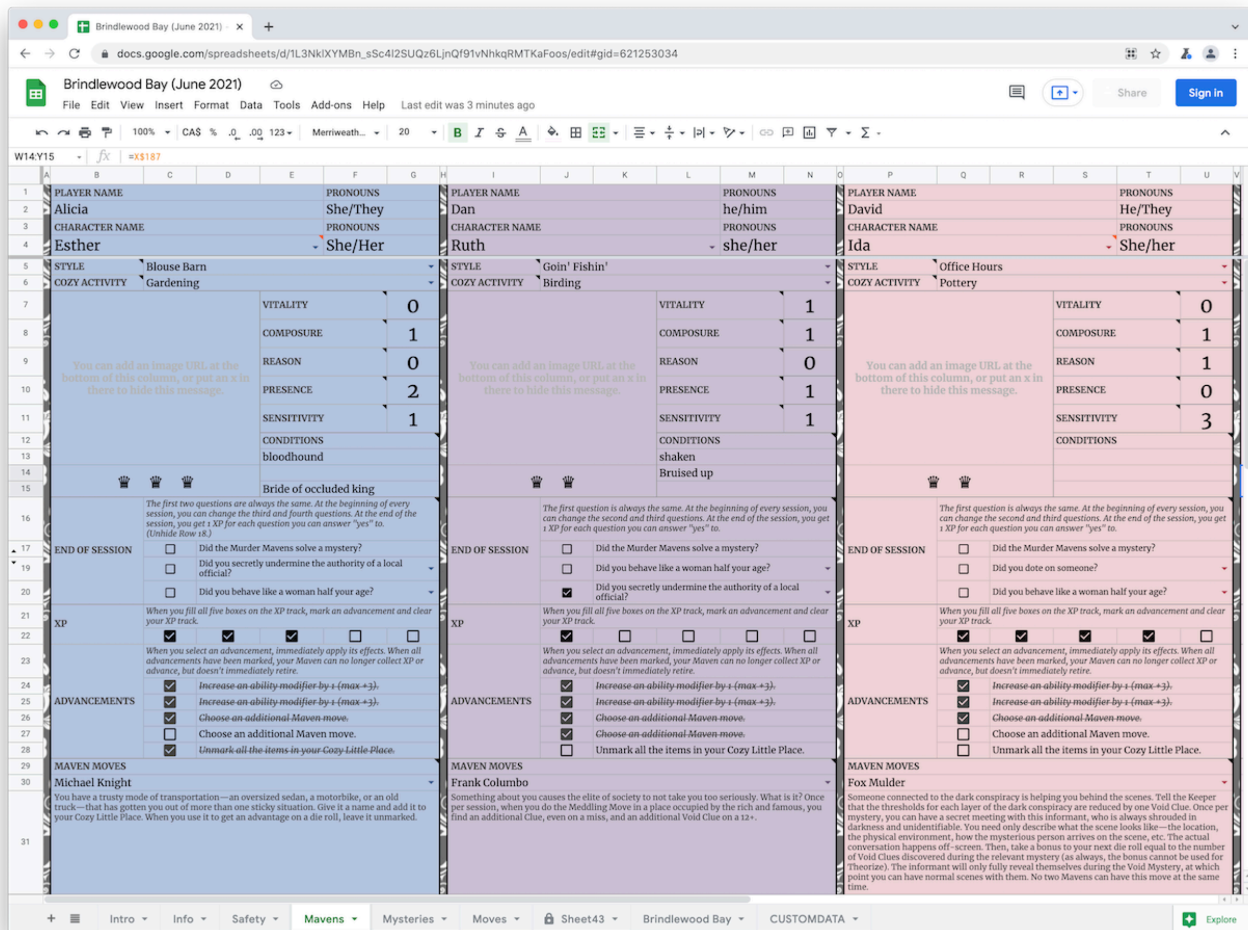

Figure 2: Screenshot of a 2021 character keeper (in use) for Brindlewood Bay (Cordova, 2020).[3]

Figures 1 and 2 show screenshots of relatively simple and empty 2013 character keepers for *Dungeon World* (LaTorra and Koebel, 2012) and a much more complex 2021 keeper in use for *Brindlewood Bay*. In addition to detailed character records, the latter contains a variety of other tabs on Safety Tools, Moves, Mysteries, and GM Information. The document allows everyone to look up details that would be mostly inaccessible using paper sheets. Depending on the play style, this can create opportunities for collaborative narration in which players pro-actively address each other's characters' traits and backgrounds.

While at first sight, character keepers simply function as digital equivalents of paper sheets, they go beyond them in at least the following regards: 1) they serve as shared sheets, and allow all players to access information on all of the player characters; 2) many sophisticated keepers take advantage of the programming interface of Google Sheets to provide functions like drop-

3. The template for this keeper can be found at https://arktosaur.us/keepers/brindlewoodbay.

down selections for character options or real time calculation of stats; 3) keepers often also track shared session and campaign notes (e.g., lists of NPCs and ongoing mysteries); 4) the facilitator or GM can keep scenario and game state information in the keeper; 5) some keepers include reference information needed to play the game (e.g., basic rules, skill lists, and moves), often making additional materials unnecessary; 6) supplementary tools that facilitate play like safety tools are often integrated; 7) a keeper might also contain links to other accessories used during online play like a dice roller or additional visualization tools (Google Drawings or a Virtual Tabletop [VTT] like Roll20).

These characteristics are not simply technical differences between digital and analog character sheets, they affect the resulting play culture. This also distinguishes keepers from other forms of digital character sheets that are often still designed as "skeuomorphic" digital translations of paper sheets that mimic the characteristics of paper.

How are character keepers actually used in online play? Most keepers are "unofficial" creations made available as links to a "master" spreadsheet template. The biggest collection is the Play Aids Google Drive folder of The Gauntlet, which collects over 400 character keepers as of June 2021.[4] The facilitator makes a copy of the master template, saving it in their own Google Drive. While playing, players keep a browser tab with the keeper open, referring to it and updating it.

The use of character sheets or keepers is of course only one aspect of online play practices. More research is needed on how people organize their digital play spaces. How are browser windows positioned in relation to audio or video chat software? Do players use additional resources like PDFs? How are digital tools combined with analog instruments like notebooks, pencils, and physical dice (Webb and Cesar 2019; Hedge and Grouling 2021)?

In the 2010s, playing TTRPGs online became increasingly popular. Soon, Google Docs was used to keep shared notes on a play session or ongoing campaign. There seems to have been some hesitation, however, to transfer character details to a shared document, as the paper character sheet was considered 'sacred' and firmly remained under the player's control. Slowly, character information crept into collaborative notes.

Some of the oldest Google Sheets templates that could be called character keepers were designed by Shawn McCarthy in mid-2013. The first was the *Dungeon World* (LaTorra and Koebel, 2012) keeper shown in Figure 1. In addition to a simple tab with all character information, it provided a "GM Summary" with names and volatile information like armor and hit points. Other keepers created by McCarthy at the time were for *Fate Core* and other "Powered by the Apocalypse" games

4. The folder is part of The Gauntlet's Community Resources and can be found at http://tiny.cc/TheGauntletPlayAidsFolder.

like *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts*.[5] The concept quickly spread through the online indie TTRPG community, leading Jason Cordova in December 2015 to create the already mentioned Google Drive folder that collects the character keepers used by The Gauntlet. Over the course of the next few years, keepers became a staple for online play in a variety of indie TTRPG communities. Soon, blog posts appeared describing the format and providing design tips (Barford 2019a; 2019b). Keepers were also released as part of games published through the indie game marketplace itch.io. Since 2020, as online TTRPG play became much more prevalent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, more keepers appeared on the web in spaces unconnected to The Gauntlet.

Elements of an Analytical Perspective on Character Keepers

From a game studies perspective, we suggest discussing character keepers in relation to existing research on character sheets in role-playing game studies, and in relation to three broader issues: participation and co-creation; platform studies; and the aesthetics of indie TTRPGs.

Like paper character sheets (Konzack 2013, 87), character keepers function as primary, secondary, and tertiary texts in TTRPG play (Hammer 2007, 70–71), connecting these different levels and forms of text. Keepers can either be designed by a game's author or publisher (forming part of but also reflecting that game's primary rules texts and general setting). Or, as unofficial player creations, they can represent an attempt to make aspects of these primary texts available for play. At the same time, they can also be understood as secondary texts building on the work of the primary author(s), particularly when a keeper is created not for general use with a particular game system, but rather as a customized tool which a group wants to use in a one-time game or campaign. GMs might also revise and rework an existing general keeper according to their own needs and desired scenario. In play, the concrete Google Sheets document used becomes a crucial element of the tertiary text that emerges during the session and might be its primary trace afterwards.

As a repository of information, character keepers contain static, stable, and volatile character information (Morningstar 2016, 129). The format of the keeper implies that all records for a game session are kept in the same Google Sheets document, either on a single or on separate tabs. The use of tabs distinguishes keepers from many other forms of digital character sheets, even ones created with Google Sheets but which adhere to the individual one-player-one-document-model inherited from analog sheets. Additionally, the keeper document might include a variety of other game and campaign information, as mentioned above.

5. McCarthy's announcement is still online (https://rpggeek.com/geeklist/158462/shawns-google-doc-rpg-resources), as is the folder with his templates (https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B0vWBycQ-A9OcnY2UFFzdkN4QXM&usp=sharing).

One particularly interesting feature of Google Sheets in regard to information management, even if in practice it seems to not be really used much in play, is the integrated version history, which makes all changes that were made to a sheet re-traceable. In most cases, at any particular time, a character keeper presents a “clean” record of the current situation, meaning earlier versions of for example volatile information (like hit points and conditions) are no longer visible. In this regard, it differs from analog character sheets which over time might accumulate multiple material traces of how particular information has changed (Hutchings 2013). Character keepers contain a complete repository of its own history, which is often missing from other digital character sheets.

In the same way that Konzack describes it for analog character sheets, keepers represent the “characterology” inherent in a TTRPG system, while they remain a particular interpretation and implementation of this characterology.[6] At the same time, while Konzack’s analysis focuses on “official” sheets, most character keepers available so far are the result of creative work by players or GMs. Therefore, they are less an official presentation of a particular system’s characterology and more an outcome of an analysis of the system by the keeper’s creator, comparable to many unofficial or semi-official paper character sheets. Many popular “indie” TTRPGs now have multiple character keepers available, which represent different interpretations of that game’s characterology, with some indie game designers increasingly providing “official” keepers.

As components, character keepers are systemic game elements that are manipulated, updated, and adjusted during play. In their function as an information repository and as the main interface between players and their characters—as well as between the players and GM and the whole of the fictional world of the game in the case of more complex keepers—they serve as compound elements (Järvinen 87–88). Their connecting role is realized in a digital translation of the various connections afforded by analog paper sheets. In providing a current record of stable information like stats and skills, by tracking volatile conditions or health status, and for example in featuring character images, keepers play an essential role in imagining the characters, their history, and their evolution. Likewise, they facilitate affective connections between player and character (Webber 2019). But a digital sheet in general and character keepers in particular also enable different and additional forms of connection that are a result of their digital nature and the additional features based on Google Sheets.

For example, as mentioned above, character sheets’ shared structure foregrounds connections not only between a player and the imagination of their own character. They also might facilitate both the groups’ imagination of all player characters as well as NPCs, and the relationships between them. At the same time, character keepers also lack some characteristics and affordances of analog sheets. For example, the rectangular grid nature of Google Sheets makes it more

6. Konzack’s concept of “characterology” describes how a character sheet’s design influences “how the character is played” (2013, 86). He argues that “character sheets are not neutral, but allow for a certain range of player behavior”, encouraging some and discouraging other activities (2013, 86).

complicated to implement freeform drawings. The game *The Skeletons*, for example, asks players to sketch their character on top of the existing drawing of a skeleton, which is more difficult to implement in a character keeper. Also, some uses of paper sheets' physical materiality, such as their destruction during play or after a character's death, are impossible, so have to be reimagined in a digital form.

As "roleplaying materials" (Bienia 2016), character keepers thus differ in their materiality from paper character sheets. However, just because they are digital does not mean they have no materiality (Banks, Bowman, and Wasserman 2018). As indicated above, they feature traces of their history in a different form than analog sheets, on which volatile information might be entered, erased, and re-entered many times over the life of a character, wearing the paper out. In particular, the concrete role of character keepers in the ensemble of digital and analog tools used for online play is an important topic for further research. It transfers the perspective pioneered by Bienia (2016) that describes TTRPGs as networks of material, narrative, and ludic actors—including light, table, battle map, and game master screen—to an investigation of digital setups for online play and the arrangement of different elements on screen.

Especially when facing a possible end of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many more people were introduced to online play and character keepers, TTRPG players are thinking about how to transfer aspects of the play culture facilitated by character keepers back to playing around a physical table (Brown and Rogers 2020). Early reflections on this topic (Beakley 2021) and reports of using digital character keepers when playing at a physical table[7] hint at how the format captures and facilitates important elements of contemporary indie TTRPG play culture.

Our examination of character keepers can also be related to broader approaches within game studies. One approach concerns audience participation, co-creation, and "modding" (Jenkins 2006). Since their emergence in the mid-1970s, TTRPGs have been characterized by a culture of creative re-interpretation and tuning of the rules of the individual game being played, in addition to the creation of settings and stories by players and GMs, often discussed as "house rules" or "homebrew" (Hammer 2007; MacCallum-Stewart and Trammell 2018; White et al. 2018; Peterson 2020; White 2020). Despite one of *Dungeons & Dragons*'s creators' early attempts to rescind this invitation to act as a game designer when picking up the practice of playing TTRPGs (Peterson 2020, 254), this form of "remixing" on the levels of story *and* rules (Horton and Beard 2021) remains an important part of TTRPG culture. It can be understood as an aspect of the "framework agency" (Hammer 2007, 76–77) displayed by gaming groups—a reworking of the "canonical limits" (Hammer 2007, 74) established by the primary author(s) of rules and settings. Not surprisingly, ever since the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the creation of unofficial, revised, or "remixed" character sheets has been one of the forms of creative engagement of players and GMs within a particular TTRPG

7. Dan Brown 2021, communication on the private Slack workspace of The Gauntlet.

system (Peterson 2012, 551–555). The popularity of the creation, use, and continuous adaptation of digital character keepers in the contemporary indie TTRPG community should be understood as part of this creative "do-it-yourself" culture that has consistently accompanied the history of TTRPGs. At the same time, it can be understood as part of the transformation of TTRPG practices through digital technologies, which also influences their remixing cultures (Horton and Beard 2021, 328).

Another approach is platform studies, as character keepers are not just character sheets produced using digital tools (like word processing or graphic design software). They are digital software tools that are created and used on a particular software platform: Google Sheets. Platform studies (Bogost and Monfort 2007), a field adjacent to game studies, proposes an approach that "investigate[s] the underlying computer systems that support creative work" (Bogost and Monfort 2009). It is interested in the "connections between platform technologies and creative production" (Bogost and Monfort 2007, 176). The intersection of platform studies and analog game studies (and TTRPG studies in particular) approaches has recently become an interesting topic of research. While Altice (2016) has argued for including "non-digital media" into platform studies and treating playing cards as platforms, Bellomy suggests that people themselves "constitute a unique computing system, e.g. a unique platform" (Bellomy 2020, 190) due to their "ability to compute" (191). Švelch (2019) advocates for an approach that primarily addresses the "cultural and social dynamics of platforms" (63) and moves beyond an "artificial disparity between digital and analog games" (64) by discussing how platform studies could benefit from a closer engagement with analog games.

Lalone describes *Dungeons & Dragons* as "the first platform, or environment that programming can be performed on" (Lalone 2019). In bringing together some of these arguments, Švelch's three categories of "hardware, software and culture" (2019, 65)—which he distills from Bogost and Montfort's five analytical levels of reception/operation, interface, form/function, code, and platform (Bogost and Montfort 2007, 177–178)—could be productively mapped on Lalone's description of *Dungeons & Dragons*'s rulebooks and system as the "hardware" on which the "software" of the campaign runs (Lalone 2019). At the same time, they seem to correspond to the distinction between primary, secondary, and tertiary texts of TTRPGs discussed above (Hammer 2007, 70–71).

According to Bogost and Montfort, platforms can be described as follows: "Whatever the programmer takes for granted when developing, and whatever, from another side, the user is required to have working in order to use particular software, is the platform" (Bogost and Montfort 2007, 176). Lalone takes this to mean that "D&D's system is its programming language, the GM is its processor, and the players and GM together work as its memory" (Lalone 2019). In a less metaphorical way that is more connected to existing theoretical perspectives on TTRPGs, by combining a platform studies perspective with Hammer's description of the different types of

texts implicated in TTRPG play, one could analyze the performance of role-playing games as a text that emerges from the platform provided by the primary text of rules, setting, and the "programming" done by secondary authors. Together, they create the elements of the scenario and situation that is played out as the tertiary text of the gaming session.

While we did not adopt a platform studies approach to character keepers in this paper, focusing instead on a broader introductory analysis, the way particular keepers are enabled and constrained by the particular affordances of Google Sheets as a software platform is a promising topic of study. In continuing the debate on platforms in analog game studies, one could ask questions from two perspectives: on the one hand, how does the software implementation of the character keeper—as both a primary text and a connecting element between all three types of text—contribute to the emergence of concrete narratives in TTRPG play? On the other hand, how does Google Sheets as a computational software platform inform both TTRPG online play and game design through its use in the creation of digital character keepers? The study of character keepers therefore also points us to some important issues in the contemporary study of analog games in general.

As a central element of play culture and game design, digital character keepers can be understood as an important aspect of contemporary indie TTRPG aesthetics. An aesthetic perspective on a game can be understood as focusing on "how it plays, as a function of the various design choices" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2020, 121) of a game's creators. In a complementary proposal for studying indie video games, Thon has suggested an analysis of "indie aesthetics" that includes an exploration of audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics (Thon 2019). We suggest that this model, which was formulated to describe the aesthetics of video games, can also be extended to games in general. One could analyze ludic and narrative aesthetics, but to analyze TTRPGs (as well as board games), "audiovisual aesthetics" would have to be broadened to include the analog and digital materiality of TTRPGs. While some important material aspects of tabletop role-playing games like dice are closely linked with ludic aspects (e.g., rules and mechanics), we argue that the character sheet should be a prime focus for analytical efforts in (TT)RPG studies, as it binds together the narrative, ludic, and audiovisual/material aesthetics of role-playing games. In addition, going beyond aesthetics in a narrow sense, looking at character sheets—or in our case digital character keepers—also lets us analyze social aspects of role-playing games, like how a particular game models relationships between player characters or integrates the use of safety tools. As the main interface in TTRPGs, the character record is centrally important for any analysis of TTRPG aesthetics.

Conclusion: Future Perspectives on Play Culture, Actual Play, and Character Keepers in Practice

In this short paper, we have attempted to provide a first glance at the emergence of character keepers as digital play aids in the indie TTRPG community. At the same time, analyzing their influence on how people play TTRPGs online is hardly possible by studying keepers in isolation. In this sense, many of the concrete ways that their affordances affect play culture can only really be studied by observing gaming as an activity (Stenros and Waern 2011).

Future research should therefore at least partly focus on analyzing the use of character keepers in concrete gaming sessions. The rise in online play has contributed to the realization that TTRPGs have always been a multimodal, transmedia phenomenon (Hedge and Grouling 2021). At the same time, the broad success of recording actual play TTRPG sessions—both as professional entertainment productions and amateur endeavors—provides a broader empirical basis for the study of TTRPG play culture than has ever been available before. The Gauntlet community in particular has collectively produced hundreds of actual play videos that are stored on YouTube channels, which could serve as the empirical material for a study of the play culture afforded by character keepers.[8] Among the questions to be asked in this context are: what effects does the use of digital character keepers have on playstyles and table culture? How do they influence and change the gaming experience for different types of players? Applying the variety of player typologies and theories on using character keepers in practice could yield interesting lessons both for theorizing online TTRPG play as well as for character keeper and game design.

Additionally, the question of accessibility is an interesting field for future research. How do designers of keepers and supplementary Google Sheets like safety tool templates integrate accessibility concerns into their work? How do keepers, and online play in general, contribute to making TTRPG culture more accessible to a wider diversity of players? It would also be interesting to compare and contrast the use of character keepers with the increasing popularity of a variety of VTTs like Roll20 and the digital character sheets used in these contexts. How do the implementations of character records differ and how do they influence actual play? In particular, in which situations are keepers used in conjunction with VTTs in online play? As "role playing materials," keepers are used in a wide variety of ways in game preparation and play. What features that a keeper provides are used regularly, and which features only see occasional use? What forms of "subversive" use, live hacking, or reprogramming emerge during play? In other words, how much can using a software keeper be understood as equivalent to developing a particular version of the keeper for the game at hand?

8. They can be found at https://www.youtube.com/TheGauntletRPG/playlists and in podcast format at http://gauntlet.hellomouth.net.

Looking at these exciting questions, and many additional possible perspectives, we are convinced that research into character keepers and TTRPG online play in general is only just beginning.

References

Altice, Nathan. 2016. "The Playing Card Platform." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 4. https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/11/the-playing-card-platform/.

Banks, Jaime, Nicholas D. Bowman, and Joe A. Wasserman. 2018. "A Bard in the Hand: The Role of Materiality in Player–Character Relationships." *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 38, no. 2: 61–81.

Barford, Michael G. 2019a. "Introduction to Online Character Keepers." *The Gauntlet Blog* (blog). https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/blog/introduction-to-online-character-keepers

Barford, Michael G. 2019b. "Basics of Online Character Keepers." *The Gauntlet Blog* (blog). https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/blog/basics-of-online-character-keepers.

Beakley, Paul. 2021. "The Slow, Weird Return To In-Person Play." *The Indie Game Reading Club*. https://www.indiegamereadingclub.com/indie-game-reading-club/the-slow-weird-return-to-in-person-play/.

Bellomy, Ian. 2017. "What Counts – Configuring the Human in Platform Studies." *Analog Game Studies* 4, 189–206. https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/03/what-counts/.

Bienia, Rafael. 2016. *Role Playing Materials*. Braunschweig: Zauberfeder Verlag.

Bogost, Ian, and Nick Montfort. 2007. "New Media as Material Constraint. an Introduction to Platform Studies." In *Electronic Techtonics: Thinking at the Interface. Proceedings of the First International HASTAC Conference*, 176–193. https://hdl.handle.net/10161/9139.

Bogost, Ian, and Nick Montfort. 2009. "Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers." In *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01r0k9br.

Bowman, Sarah L. 2010. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Bowman, Sarah L., and Karen Schrier. 2018. "Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 395–410. New York: Routledge.

Brown, Jahmal and Richard Rogers. 2020. "Outta the Park With Rich Rogers: Diceology 25." *Diceology: The Podcast About Games* (podcast). https://www.diceology.com/blog/diceology-25/.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. 2020. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, 4th ed. New York: Routledge.

Fine, Gary A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hammer, Jessica. 2007. "Agency and Authority in Role-Playing 'Texts'." In *A New Literacies Sampler*, edited by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, 67–93. New York: Peter Lang.

Hedge, Stephanie and Jennifer Grouling. 2021. "Introduction: Structure to the Stories." In *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*, edited by Stephanie Hedge and Jennifer Grouling, 1–16. Jefferson: McFarland.

Horton, Lisa and David Beard. 2021. "The Critical Role of New Media in Transforming Gamers Into Remixers." In *The Routledge Handbook of Remix Studies and Digital Humanities*, edited by Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough, 325–341. New York: Routledge.

Hutchings, Timothy. 2013. "Griim Cole, character sheet extraordinaire." *PlaGMaDA* (blog), July 5, 2013. http://plagmada.blogspot.com/2013/07/griim-cole-character-sheet.html.

Järvinen, Aki. 2009. *Games Without Frontiers: Methods for Game Studies and Design*. Saarbrücken: VDM.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press.

Konzack, Lars. 2013. "Characterology in Tabletop Role-Playing Games: A Textual Analysis of Character Sheets." In *WyrdCon Companion Book*, edited by Sarah L. Bowman and Aaron Vanek, 86–93. Orange: Wyrd Con.

Lalone, Nicolas. 2019. "A Tale of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Origins of the Game Platform." *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/a-tale-of-dungeons-dragons-and-the-origins-of-the-game-platform/.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther and Aaron Trammell. 2018. "Role-Playing Games as Subculture and Fandom." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 364–378. New York: Routledge.

Morningstar, Jason. 2016. "Visual Design as Metaphor: the Evolution of a Character Sheet." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 5. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, [2014] 2016.

Peterson, Jon. 2012. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press.

Peterson, Jon. 2020. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Stenros, Jaakko and Annika Waern. 2011. "Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy in Videogames Studies." In *Videogame Studies: Concepts, Cultures, and Communication*, edited by Monica Evans, 11–22. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Švelch, Jan. 2019. "Platform Studies, Computational Essentialism, and Magic: The Gathering." *Analog Game Studies* 3, no. 4. https://analoggamestudies.org/volume-iii-issue-iv/.

Thon, Jan-Noël. 2019. "Playing with Fear: The Aesthetics of Horror in Recent Indie Games." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 10, no. 1: 197–231.

Torner, Evan. 2019. "Literary and Performative Imaginaries – Where Characters Come From." *Nordiclarp*. https://nordiclarp.org/2017/01/31/literary-and-performative-imaginaries-where-characters-come-from/.

Webb, Andrew M., and Pablo Cesar. 2019. "Uncovering Seams in Distributed Play of Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *CHI PLAY EA '19*, October 2019, 773–780. https://doi.org/10.1145/3341215.3356253.

Webber, Nick. 2019. "Table Talk: Archives of Role-Playing's Personal Pasts." Paper presented at the 2019 *Role-playing Game Summit*. https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/12/archives-of-role-playings-personal-pasts/.

White, William, Jonna Arjoranta, Michael Hitchens, Jon Peterson, Evan Torner, and Jonathan Walton. 2018. "Tabletop Roleplaying Games." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 63–86. New York: Routledge.

White, William. 2020. *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at the Forge, 2001–2012: Designs and Discussions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bios

Adrian Hermann is Professor of Religion and Society at the Forum Internationale Wissenschaft, University of Bonn in Germany. He specializes in the global history of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and recently has begun to engage in the field of role-playing game studies. He teaches in various cultural studies and media studies B.A. and M.A. programs at the University

of Bonn. Over the last 15 years he has written on Christianity and Buddhism in Latin America, the US, as well as in South and Southeast Asia. He is currently finishing a book on an anti-colonial Catholic movement in the Philippines around 1900. After being an avid TTRPG player through most of the 1990s he has recently taken up playing and studying TTRPGs as part of his investigations of contemporary audiovisual and digital media.

Gerrit Reininghaus is an active role-player, RPG designer, and community organizer. He has coined the term LAOG (Live Action Online Game) for a framework of freeform RPGs and LARPs, which are explicitly designed for online play, benefiting fully from the medium and its potential for creative design. He has been involved in character keeper design since the beginning and follows the development of this format actively as the administrator of the largest free repository on the subject, The Gauntlet's Play Aids Folder. Gerrit has a Diploma in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science (Humboldt University Berlin), and holds a Master of Public Policy from Sciences Po School in Paris and the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. His RPG contributions can be found on his blog alles-ist-zahl.de and on his YouTube channel *betafunktion*, where he hosts his actual plays of TTRPGs and LAOGs.
The template can still be found online at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1phUTnmLblFl_fxjCbHiAkR3xmppfzpcNxNC4RDH9b9k/edit?usp=sharing.
The template for this keeper can be found at https://arktosaur.us/keepers/brindlewoodbay.

12. Playing the Believer

Prioritizing Dimensions of Religion in Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition

LEONID MOYZES

Abstract

The article addresses how *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* portrays religion through "religious" classes and backgrounds. The analysis is built around Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion (Smart 1996), the idea of configurative resonance (Apperley 2010; Chapman 2016), prototext (Roth et al., 2018) and the concept of affordances (Linderoth 2011; Shaw 2017). The main research question is: what elements of religion are designated as *most important* through the game affordances when one plays characters with a religious class or background?

Three dimensions of affordances can be distinguished. The "core" dimension is almost inevitable, as the rules provide few affordances to avoid certain elements of religion, such as ethics and doctrine. The "hidden" dimension is characterized by a small number of affordances to interact with religious elements and more affordances to ignore them. The ritual, emotional, and material dimensions fall into this category. The "optional" dimension includes affordances in an intermediate position: the game rules provide affordances both to engage or ignore with religious elements, including mythology and sociality.

This categorization shows a consistently Christian-centered and secular approach to the depiction of religious characters within D&D rules. Believers are represented as a separate category of people, mostly characterized by their adherence to certain ethical ideas, which serve as a basis for all relationships with others. These ideas are presented as logical extensions of religious doctrines, and to preach them is the main form of religious activity. This logic of representation is problematic, because it unconsciously recreates popular misconception about religions, particularly Islam, which often serve as a basis for prejudice.

Keywords:

Dungeons and Dragons, Representation of Religion, Affordances in Games, Resonance, Ninian Smart.

My article addresses how the 5th edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* constructs the image of religion and represents religious believers. Using Ninian Smart's idea of "religious dimensions," I propose that the architecture of these dimensions implied in D&D reflects a particular notion of religion and a specific religious ideology. For the sake of brevity, my analysis will focus on representation of religion in a single supplement of the *Dungeon & Dragons – Player's Handbook* (PHB), excluding *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Monster Manual* and other books. While these supplements surely offer more game mechanics and narrative ideas about religions and believers for both players and dungeon masters (DMs), they ultimately rely upon the architecture and the ideology of this representation outlined in the *Player's Handbook*.

Resonance

An important term for this article is "resonance," borrowed from digital game studies. The term was initially introduced by Thomas Apperley (2010, 21), later expanded on by Adam Chapman, whose definition I'm using in this research. For Chapman, resonance "describes the sensation of interpreting a representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game's rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the everyday world in which we live" (Chapman 2016, 36). Apperley also introduces the concept of "configurative resonance" (Apperley 2010, 135) to describe the situation in which the player's action creates a game situation that causes the resonance. For example, a player uses their freedom to configure a character provided by tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) to play a hero reminiscent of a popular figure like Gandalf or Geralt of Rivia.

Resonance illuminates how widespread religion is in D&D since the early beginnings of the game. Among the first three classes presented by Gary Gygax in the very first D&D rules back in 1974 (Gygax and Arneson 1974), the player class of Cleric had clear religious connotations. Coincidentally, the same ratio of one religious class to three non-religious classes is present in the 5th Edition of D&D. The Cleric, Paladin, Druid, and Monk obviously resonate with popular images of religious practitioners, and their powers and spells evoke different stories from Western and Eastern religious narratives and traditions.

And "Religious" classes are just the tip of the iceberg.

There are also religious archetypes of generally "secular" classes, like Barbarian's Totem Warrior, which clearly resonate with the popular image of a tribal religious fighter guided by ancient spirits. There is also a "religious" background present in the Acolyte. The appendix of the PHB outlines many different pantheons that can be venerated by characters of any class. Even among playable

races we can find an option resonating with religious discourse in popular culture: tieflings, people with demonic heritage.

This abundance of character options in the PHB is supplemented by elements resonating with religions from other rulebooks. Some such elements include "religious" monsters—like devils from the *Monster Manual*—"religious" artifacts in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and quests involving churches and cultists in official adventures. While I do not want to justify the infamous "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, the very idea that D&D relates to religion does not sound as improbable as it might seem at first, once we understand religion as a set of cultural artifacts and texts, and not as an actual practice.

Affordances

At the same time, it is important to account for the interactive nature of TTRPGs. While some elements of the game may resonate with religious imagery and narratives, nothing stops groups of players from ignoring those connotations. They may ignore them, for example, to not offend anyone, or to avoid any topics deemed "too serious." Clerics can be played as simple healers, and Monks, often portrayed through East Asian stereotypes of professional martial artists, can be played just like another unjustly oppressed racial minority without a specific religious and metaphysical status. On the other hand, nothing stops particular groups to imagine societies in which all members of fighters or wizard classes also possess religious significance and have received corresponding training. The mutability of TTRPGs is an important reason for their appeal, as well as an obstacle to studying how games represent different real-world concepts and situations.

Still, some of those options are obviously much easier to implement in game than others. In order to analyze this complexity, I use another concept from digital game studies—affordances. The term was borrowed from the ecological psychology of James Gibson by Jonas Linderoth, and later used in a number of articles, for example, a work of Adrienne Shaw (2017) on "interpretative affordances."

For Gibson, "the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson 1986, 127). Linderoth, in turn, proposed viewing videogames as a set of affordances that players have to discover during play (Linderoth 2011). This idea is productive in the case of TTRPGs, which function as sets of different types of possible actions and decisions presented to players as resources for creating or evading in-game situations, characters, and stories.

This brings us to the problem of representation of religion. In the context of affordances, the

question can be framed as follows: what image of religion and its followers is easier to create with affordances provided by the game rules of *D&D 5th Edition*? What types of religious characters are easier to come up with and play with, and what type of religions and images of believers do they resonate with? What types of configurative resonance are difficult to create with the resources provided by the game, either because of game mechanics or the proliferation of narrative tropes implied in the PHB?

Types of Affordances

It must be mentioned that the problem of narratives and tropes is equally important as that of rules and mechanics. In the end, games of D&D are bound by nothing except for the players' imagination. As an anecdotal example, my own tabletop game ran for more than twenty sessions without a single combat, entirely focused on court intrigues and interpersonal relationships between members of an elven aristocracy. Neither I nor my player had to change any rules, just find other ways of using them. But the imagination itself can be strongly influenced and even colonized by rulebooks and popular culture that their authors and readers are accustomed to relying upon to tell stories.

The inherent open-ness of TTRPGs calls for introducing two different and interconnected circles of affordances. The first can be called "affordances to conceive." They are strongly connected with the idea of resonance and address the problem of how likely players are to come up with a particular idea during the gameplay when relying upon what Stuart Hall called "dominant decoding" (Hall 1991). Those affordances are created by textual, visual, and procedural types of semiotic signs, positioning the game inside broader culture.

A typical example here is selecting a race for your character: after decoding D&D as high fantasy, a player expects the game to provide them with options to play as an elf, a halfling, or a dwarf, while expecting options for wookiees or daleks to much lesser extent. The same goes for the choice of classes and backgrounds, and later for different decisions made during the game. A rulebook attempts to guide our ability to imagine viable courses of action. This circle of affordances even tries to provide the ability to explain away the lack of specific options, like playable orcs, by implying that such "evil" people cannot be included among the core races. While this idea is obviously problematic—and sparked heated discussions for many years—it is fairly consistent with other signs presented by the game.

The second circle of affordances can be called "affordances to act," and it includes game mechanics used to decide the outcome of a player's decisions. In the context of representation, this circle of affordances encodes different characters as more or less playable, in terms of our ability to create them and the possibility of later dealing with different in-game tasks like combat

and investigations. For example, how easy is it to find affordances for playing a Halfling Fighter as a truly effective combatant, on par with other members of the party? Or, on the other hand, is it possible to play as a truly pacifistic character? Or as a professional cook, who possesses no special abilities aside from being skilled at preparing magnificent meals?

Relationships between two circles of affordances—to conceive and to act—can be metaphorically linked to a cycle of theorization and experimentation. Affordances to conceive provide players with narrative resources necessary to come up with characters and actions—"theories" that can be framed as questions addressed to the game: can I play that way? The second circle allows for experimentation, answering the aforementioned question.

Strong discrepancies exist between the two circles, like situations in which it is easy to imagine a type of character, but difficult to create it according to game rules. This difficulty causes frustration, and often leads to players accusing the game of being illogical, unfair, and constraining. Simultaneously, it is important to notice that affordances to conceive often include possible explanations for the lack of affordances to act. For example, should a Halfling Fighter player discover that their character is less effective in combat than that of a Half-Orc player, the rulebook would provide the affordances to frame this not as a constraint. It would instead frame the differences in rules as an example of a gameworld's internal coherency, since halflings have been encoded as a non-belligerent race since the time of Tolkien. The final decision whether to submit to this logic or to dispute it rests in the hands of players, and depends upon their personal beliefs and backgrounds. For the purpose of this article, I will analyze both circles of affordances, discussing the question of what kind of religious characters and organization are encoded in D&D Fifth Edition, as well as what types are easier to create and play.

Dimensions of Religion

I will use Ninian Smart's concepts of religious dimensions to organize D&D elements pertaining to representation of religion. Smart, a Scottish religious scientist who lived and worked in the second half of the 20th Century, is noteworthy for his anti-essentialist approach. Religious studies often center on the question of the origin of the religion or the attempt to find a common denominator between different traditions that would unite them, from ancient animistic beliefs to scientology. Instead, Smart thought that religious studies should be preoccupied not with the search for the true definition of religion, but with ways to organize and systemize our knowledge of the field. For this purpose, he created the concept of seven religious dimensions—different types of mechanisms for preserving religious experience that exist to different degrees in every spiritual tradition (Smart 1996).

Smart hoped that analyzing religion through the prism of these mechanisms—which lack a universal hierarchy—would help scholars escape the confines of a Christian-centered paradigm and find balance between historical and non-historical parts of religious traditions. Most importantly for the purpose of this article, Smart attempted to abandon the question of "what religion is" in favor of the question "what religions are there?" He thought that religion studies should concentrate on traditions, churches, movements, and congregations. In this article, I use Smart's dimensions to analyze how a particular cultural product portrays believers.

The seven dimensions proposed by Smart are (with examples from Christian tradition for clarity):

The doctrinal or philosophical dimension is an intellectually coherent expression of the main ideas of a specific religion, especially those concerning ontology and metaphysics. It includes religious philosophy, theology, mystical texts and other claims about the nature of the world, the human, and the divine. The existence of the body and soul and the concepts of the natural world and eternal God are important elements of Christian doctrine.

The mythological and narrative dimension consists of all narratives that possess religious meaning accepted by members of a religious community or tradition. It includes the stories we call mythologies, describing the creation of the world or important deeds of gods and heroes, as well as stories of significant, supposedly historical religious figures. The life story of Jesus is an obvious and most notable example of this dimension in Christianity.

The ethical and legal dimension consists of prescribed norms of behavior, including a stance on what actions are considered good or bad in terms of morality, as well as specific religious laws and restrictions. Christianity and other Abrahamic religions pay a lot of attention to this dimension; the Ten Commandments and numerous commentaries on them are a good example.

The ritual or practical dimension includes actions and behaviors prescribed to or avoided by followers of a spiritual tradition. Daily prayers, fasts, and masses form this dimension in Christianity.

The experiential or emotional dimension includes psychological states that possess a special meaning for the religion or are saturated with intense religious feelings. Different types of religious ecstasy, such as Christian meditation, are especially widespread and cultivated among some modern Protestant denominations.

The social dimension consists of social relationships between members of a single religion as well as religiously conditioned interaction between them and the wider society. Church organization is an example of the former, while different political initiatives advocated by Christian believers comprise the latter.

Finally, *the material dimensions*, which were proposed by Smart separately, encompasses material

artifacts endowed with a special meaning by a religious tradition. These artifacts were either created by believers, by some other group, or found in nature. Church buildings, crosses, clothing of priests, and other objects constitute this dimension for Christianity (Smart 1989).

Specific practices, artifacts, and ideas may belong to more than one dimension. For example, Christian mass in its entirety combines practically all of them. It is used as a way of remembering the life of Jesus (mythological), while being strongly based upon Christian philosophy (doctrinal). It includes preaching and prescribing behaviors and values (ethical). The denial of communion can be used as a way of punishing believers (social). It is often supposed to create an elevated state of a psyche in the participants (emotional). Finally, the ceremony itself often involves quite elaborate trappings (material).

Still, through Smart's methodology it is quite possible to untangle this web of relationships by, for example, pointing out which dimensions are more important than others on the basis of historical and modern practices. The same operation can be done with the fictional religious teachings constructed in the PHB.

Religious Dimensions in *Dungeons and Dragons*

It would be useful to distinguish three categories of religious dimensions in *Dungeons & Dragons*. "Core" dimensions are inevitable, as the rules provide few affordances to avoid game elements that resonate with those dimensions of real-world spiritual traditions. "Hidden" dimensions are characterized by a small number of affordances to interact with religious elements and more affordances to ignore them. "Optional" dimensions are in an intermediate position; the game rules provide affordances both to engage or ignore them, relegating the final decision to include or exclude them to participants of the game.

The first core dimension in D&D is ethical. Gods are characterized by their position on the alignment chart. The description of the Cleric class states that two most important questions for players are what god they serve and which principles they want to embody (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 57). In the same vein, archetypes of Clerics (58–63) and Paladins (85–88) are differentiated through their ideals and values. An interesting consequence of this attention to the ethical dimension is its demands, including a coherent (if unattractive) ethic for so-called evil gods like Lolth and Gruumsh. In the PHB, this is implied by the message in description of Dark Elves, which signals that problematic ethics of their society stems directly from Lolth teachings (24).

The second core dimension, which serves as a justification for the ethical dimension, is doctrinal. Religious ethics in D&D are based on the meta-religious doctrine of posthumous fate. Every believer after death goes to a plane of existence that accords with their ethical beliefs and the

will of God they venerated (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 300–303). This doctrine unites all religious traditions mentioned in PHB. On the other hand, the descriptions of some pantheons or spiritual traditions include signs encoding different religious doctrines popular in popular culture, like the superiority of a particular race or importance of the natural world over material. These can serve as another justification for the ethical dimension.

The final category, optional, includes a social dimension. Acolyte's Feature (127) and descriptions of religious classes refer to the different elements of this sphere. Social structures are built around temples, the solidarity of believers as a community, and social roles performed by priests like officiating marriages. At the same time, all these elements exist at the periphery of game rules. For example, they are not directly included in the main gameplay economy of experience, gold, rest, and spells, thus allowing DMs to either introduce elements resonating with this dimension of religion or ignore them.

The mythological dimension is similar. The PHB mentions deeds of gods and "historical" pantheons, like Ancient Greece or Egypt (297–299), which most of us know through myths. Their very presence hints at the necessity to address this subject, which may inspire Dungeons Masters to create their own mythologies or use the existing ones for their campaigns. But the game does not present a universal way to include the mythological dimension. There are no systems and recommendations for retelling or remembering religious narratives. So while it is hard to entirely forget that religion contains its own stories, it is equally easy to ignore them in a game session, even while playing a religious character.

It is also important to note that the mythological and doctrinal dimensions in D&D are often closely intertwined. Religious narratives more often tell stories about the gods and their actions that created the game world as players know it, then about specific religious figures like prophets.

The material dimension of religion lies between the optional and the hidden, but closer to the latter. Rule-wise, religion in D&D is practically devoid of any material consideration. It lacks religious artifacts with obvious spiritual values. There are no elements that resonate with venerated icons and sacred animals, and no specific religious architecture. The religious economy is reduced to the general ability of temples and religious communities to provide for their own, implied in the description of the Acolyte Background.

The PHB offers only two game elements that resonate with the material dimension of religion: holy symbols, and material components for divine spells. There is a parallel between these elements and material components for Wizard and Sorcerer spells. Both provide enough affordances to regard them as non-religious, like bolts for a cleric's crossbow. Tellingly, the holy symbol in the PHB is framed as a separate and discrete artifact with fixed value (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 151), and not as a material object that resembles the description of god's symbol present in the book. Basically, it is a tool, not a symbol.

The ritual dimension, paradoxically, belongs to a hidden category. On one hand, most religious classes use magic, which can be framed as resonating with religious rituals up to the literal use of the term in the description of spells. But the ritual dimension, as a separate set of elements, is a part of religion constructed by the actions that imbue it with religious meaning. In that sense, it is absent. Rituals, both divine spells and ceremonies performed by acolytes, are framed as extraordinary and unnecessary for religious characters in day-to-day religious life, unlike the need to follow a religious ethic. Divine magic is performed in combat or in other tense situations, while the acolyte rituals reinforce different social changes. The closest mechanic that resonates with an image of a ritual performed by believers as part of their spiritual lives is the monk's meditation (78), but it is still grounded in the D&D economy of combat and rest.

The same logic applies to the emotional dimension. Individual spells and abilities, especially from the Paladin class, resonate with popular culture imagery. In turn, they are inspired by stories that touch on the emotional dimension of religion. But D&D mechanics completely overshadow the emotional dimension of religion by the ethical dimension. "Negative" effects like fear or rage can be condemned by "good" gods (and vice versa), but the system does not contain any affordances to simulate a desire for an emotional spiritual experience, like religious ecstasy or feeling of divine presence. It can be, of course, role-played by participants of the game. But unlike the mythological and social dimensions, neither rules nor narrative descriptions emphasize this element of religion.

D&D Religion: Christian-centric and Secular

It is possible to point out the four most problematic characteristics of religion in D&D Fifth Edition.

First, by positioning ethical and doctrinal dimensions at the center of following a faith, the game implies that religion is a philosophical system reinforced by supernatural powers stemming from the original creator of the philosophy. This representation creates many affordances for the critique of the religion—especially regarding gods as manipulative and irresponsible—that are often used by players and DMs. This is an extremely Christian-centric (specifically Protestant-centric) approach. It follows on the ideas of Max Weber, who put Protestantism at the root of modern Western society. To Weber, the idea of different religions serve as a basis for radically different societies and individual behavior (Weber 2002).

Second, because ritual and emotional spheres are coded as hidden, religious behavior is implied to be constantly aimed at the external world. By far the easiest way to designate your character as religious in this system is to try and change the game world in accordance with their religious values, very often with violence. Those ethics, even among gods coded as "good," imply the need

to purge undesirable elements from the world. Purging codes a very secular, outsider approach to the religion, which is viewed as something that can be practiced either in private—without any real and deep need for temples, material trappings, and a community—or in public, connected with the desire to change the world.

Third, this representation encodes the problematic idea that a religious ethic is universal among members of the same religion, since it is directly and uncritically taken from a single text containing all of the religion's teachings. In this logic, a believer's ethics vary only by degree of fidelity and fervor, but not by their interpretation of ethics. This view on religion, at least in Russia, has served as a foundation for Islamophobia and similar prejudices, in which every member of a faith is held accountable for action of a single terrorist, and a quotation from Quran is presented without context or authentic commentaries.

It is important to note that Smart's ideas can guide how we rectify the situation. By creating new fictional religions, classes, backgrounds, and rules based on different architectures of religious dimensions, and not simply different ethics, it is quite possible to make D&D more nuanced, respectful, and interesting.

Bibliography

Apperley, Thomas. 2010. *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global.* Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as history: How videogames represent the past and give access to historical practice*. New York: Routledge.

Gibson, James. 1986. *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated Publishers.

Gygax, Gary and Dave Arneson. 1974. *Dungeons and Dragons*. Lake Geneva: TSR Publishing.

Hall, Stuart. 1991. "Encoding, decoding." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 90–103. London: Routledge.

Linderoth, Jonas. 2011. "Beyond the Digital Divide: An Ecological Approach to Gameplay." Paper presented at the DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play, Utrecht. http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/9/7

Mearls, Mike, and Jeremy Crawford. 2014. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2017. “Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies.” *Media, Culture & Society* 39(4): 592–602.

Smart, Ninian. 1989. *The World’s Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smart, Ninian. 1996. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weber, Max. 2002. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Penguin Classics.

Bio

Leonid Moyzes is a religious scholar from Moscow, a game researcher, and a long-time tabletop RPG and boardgame player. The focus of his research is on representation of religion in digital and analog games, especially different kinds of RPG and strategy games. His interests also include approaches to simulation of romantic and other types of emotional attachment through rules and, more broadly, relationships between popular narratives and game design. Currently, he teaches a course on the history of tabletop games for future game designers at the Institute of Business and Design in Moscow, Russia.

13. Hard Looks and Heartbreakers

The Discourse of D&D at the Forge

WILLIAM J. WHITE

Abstract

This paper examines how "D&D" was invoked in online discussions at the Forge, a website for independent role-playing game producers and players, in order to contribute to a more general understanding of the tension within systems of participatory culture between intellectual property regimes and pop cultural fandom's expressive creativity. It suggests that during the period of the Forge's greatest popularity and influence—its "Summer phase" from 2005–2007—a common discourse posited that people whose only experience with role-playing was D&D were a particular kind of audience for independent TTRPG designs. We conclude that a more detailed account is necessary to understand the implications of this observation.

Keywords:

Discourse analysis, Dungeons & Dragons, The Forge, participatory culture

---

The tension between *Dungeons & Dragons* as the trademark for a piece of intellectual property owned within a capitalistic culture industry and a label for a set of pop cultural practices is neither wholly comfortably nor completely accurately described by the phrase "role-playing games." This tension is a prominent motif in several accounts of the development of TTRPGs (Peterson 2012, 551–71; Appelcline 2014, 1:102; Peterson 2020, 148; White 2020, 3–4). The fuzziness and contestability of the boundary between counts as D&D and what doesn't matters mainly as a commercial consideration, as is suggested by the notes taken by 1977 convention-goer who attended a panel on the future of *Dungeons & Dragons* led by two officials from TSR Inc., then its publisher:

> There was a lecture on the one true way to play D&D. All others are called variants. Should one of the variants decide that it has become variant enough to split off and publish

> itself, then this OK, PROVIDED SAID VARIANT DOES NOT USE EVEN ONE LITTLE BIT OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. If the variant does use TSR material, TSR will try to sue for everything. (Sean Cleary, *Wild Hunt* #19, quoted in Peterson 2012, 581)

One place where this tension can be seen in high relief is in the digital archives of the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com), an online discussion site for independent tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) design, publishing, and play that was active from 2001 to 2012 (White 2020). Emerging from the creative ferment of the late 1990s and early 2000s and facilitated by the diffusion of Internet-enabled communications media, the "indie RPG" scene at the Forge advocated "creator ownership and self-publishing [and] promoted the idea that every aspect of a game's rules should be carefully designed to emphasize the game's core themes rather than relying on popular TRPG conventions" (White, Arjoranta, Hitchens, Peterson, Torner, and Walton 2018, 79).

During the same period in which the Forge was open for business, Wizards of the Coast (WotC)—the company that had become the owners *Dungeons & Dragons*—published new editions of the game, and promoted new regimes for publication of third-party materials for D&D (Appelcline 2014, vol. 3:156). The concomitant "d20 boom" and subsequent "d20 bust" reflected the interaction of commercial strategies by TTRPG producers interested in maximizing the audience for their wares, presumably hoping to take advantage of bandwagon effects available because of D&D's leadership in the tiny TTRPG marketplace (Appelcline 2014, 4:403–10).

This parallel historical articulation speaks directly to the purpose of the Forge. As its co-founder and principal voice Ron Edwards put it in a 2017 interview, "The accomplishment [of the Forge] was to re-establish creator ownership, or as it later came to be called, DIY, as a viable, respected context for publishing role-playing games and associated material" (Lafayette 2017). When Edwards first started writing about TTRPG publishing (Edwards 1999), he recalled, "any such thing was aggressively dismissed and even suppressed in terms of visibility and sales, by nearly all participants in RPG publishing, to an extent I think you'd find unbelievable" (Lafayette 2017). While several forces acted to create the tools and resources TTRPG designers could use in making their games available for sale, Edwards added, in the early years of the twenty-first century:

> The Forge was the only place to champion the Hobby of Equals, as [Forge participant] Paul Czege called it, in which transparent publishing was a subset of real play, rather than a separated gulf between august, closeted designers and grateful, infantilized fans. Now that viewpoint is acknowledged, respected, and supported across multiple communities and venues and activities. The Forge is dead; long live the Forge. (Lafayette 2017)

Given this tension, examining the discourse of D&D at the Forge can illuminate some of the dynamics of creativity in the cultural spaces of fandom and the constraints upon participatory culture caused by its entanglement with mass media systems (Jenkins 2006, 257–60).

Go Count the Threads

The archives of the Forge can be treated as an enormous textual artifact comprising more than 250,000 posts (White 2020, 39), organized into "threads" initiated by different participants in online discussion. Each thread consists of at least an original post (OP) by its original poster (sometimes also referred to as "the OP") and usually subsequent posts by others in response. Threads are located in different forums that were defined by their purpose and which served to constitute a "hierarchy of different acts" (Van Dijk 1997, 5) at the site as a whole (White 2020, 132–3).

From a discourse analytic perspective, this archive makes up the structured traces of the discursive process that produced it, indexing efforts to accomplish social, political, or cultural action by posters. Posters on the Forge occupied particular sociocultural roles and identities, and were operating within both local (interactional) and global (societal) contexts that were constructed through interaction (Van Dijk 1997, 7–16) as shaped by dynamics of power and ideology (16–34).

	Actual Play (AP) Forum		Returned on Search…		…and in AP Forum	
Phase	Thread Count	% over seasons	Thread Count	% over seasons	Thread Count	% over seasons
Spring	14912	36%	111	41%	19	21%
Summer	17537	43%	78	29%	37	41%
Fall	4534	11%	41	15%	13	14%
Winter	4215	10%	42	15%	21	23%
Total	41198	100%	272	100%	90	100%

Table 1: Distribution of Threads Within the Forge's "Actual Play" Forum Over Time Compared to Those Returned on a Search for "Site:indie-rpgs.com D&D"

In order to begin to explore the way that posters at the Forge discussed *Dungeons & Dragons*, I used Google to search using the term "site:indie-rpgs.com D&D," because the Forge's own built-in search function was notoriously unreliable. Use of this phrase ignored related but less common ways of referring to the game, including "DnD," as well as shorthand for the different editions of the game: "3E" "3.5" "4E" and so forth (usage which may refer to similarly numbered editions of other games). This is a weakness of the current study in terms of completeness, although there is considerable overlap in usage, such that a thread where one poster uses "DnD" will often have another who uses "D&D."

Over the life of the Forge, different forums were opened and closed as its operators sought to shape the way that participants interacted with each other and the site more generally (White 2020, 37–40). Across the lifespan of the Forge, the "Actual Play" (AP) forum was a constant presence, having been created shortly after the site became active in April 2001 (there were 17 posts in five AP threads by the middle of May 2001) and remaining open to posting until the site closed on June 1, 2012. Actual Play served as a (digital) speech genre at the Forge, distinct from gaming "war stories." That is, it was an "embellished oral retelling of a [TTRPG] play session among friends and colleagues," and considered unreliable exactly because of the use of linguistic ornamentation to create an "emotional effect and narrative coherence that belie what the lived play session contained" (Torner 2021, 20). As one Forge participant described it, an AP post was a "blend of this is what was going on at the table, this is the cool fictional stuff, and then it was like, oh shit, there's mechanical stuff that's helping this fictional stuff happen" (White 2020, 195). As Torner (2021) points out, this usage of Actual Play refers to a heuristic and analytic endeavor—a reflexive effort to improve play and facilitate design that stands in contrast to the contemporary as of this writing usage that uses the term to refer to the performative practice of streaming live or recorded instances of play through digital media—a practice that is to be sure "rapidly challenging the culture of [TTRPG] play" (21).

Table 1 shows that the 90 AP threads that include a reference to "D&D" either in the title or the OP are distributed over time in a way that resembles the overall distribution of the Actual Play forum as a whole, albeit more closely during the middle ("Summer" and "Fall") periods than either the first ("Spring") or the last ("Winter") phase. To the extent these differences are meaningful, they support the inference that D&D was an object of discourse within Actual Play proportionately *less* in the earliest days of the Forge and proportionately *more* in the latest ones, implying somewhat more reference to playing D&D as time went on. This quantification does not imply statistical significance, but rather condenses the raw data into visualizable form as a context for interpretation (see Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, 33–8, for a discussion of the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods in computer-mediated communication research).

The History of D&D

A focal point for some early discussion of D&D at the Forge was an essay discussing the history of D&D by emphasizing its ad-hoc development by individual groups of players that were often quite isolated from each other. In "A Hard Look at *Dungeons & Dragons*," Edwards argued that:

> The concept that *Dungeons & Dragons* "invented" role-playing is patently false. Rather, D&D was the first publishing epiphenomenon of role-playing as a hobby, intertwined with its development but providing, itself, only raw material, not procedure. It provided the

> first official role-playing texts, but those texts themselves invented very little; rather they provided patchy stuff that had to be shaped into role-playing at the local level. (Edwards 2003)

This perspective is supported by autobiographical memoirs of D&D players (Barrowcliffe 2007; Gilsdorf 2009) that point to ways that players invented their own game-worlds, play styles, and rules systems. It is also supported by the observations of contemporaneous observers, who saw that "there is no such thing as *Dungeons & Dragons*, but rather there are umpty-eleven different fantasy role-playing games, approximately as many as there are dungeonmasters" (Blake Kirk quoting Greg Costikyan in *Wild Hunt* #13, cited in Peterson 2021, 148). Posters at the Forge contributed to this understanding as well. One longtime player offered this perspective:

> "Old school" D&D…[was] decidedly "gamist" in Ron's sense: the focus in terms of player-reward was on Step on Up. But the weird thing was, the game itself arguably doesn't have any elements that facilitate this…The system here was totally, entirely, the verbal negotiation between player and DM. I found this to be true over and over as player and DM from my first games in '76-77 onward. You Stepped on Up by not playing the game! ("The Grognard Speaks: System and Step on Up in OD&D," August 9, 2004, Actual Play forum)

Fantasy Heartbreakers

Another idea relevant to D&D at the Forge was the concept of the "fantasy heartbreaker," discussed in two essays by Ron Edwards (2002, 2003a). Giving a number of examples from games published in the 1990s, he explained that they were independent fantasy RPGs modeled on D&D which while (1) presented as "a perfect salad of patch rules, unquestioned assumptions, and … 'innovations'" also possessed features that showed them to be (2) "the products of actual play, love for the medium, and *determined creativity*." While today the term is thought to be "vaguely pejorative" (see, e.g., the Board Game Geek entry), at the Forge it was regarded as salubrious exercise to try one's hand at writing one's own "heartbreaker"—a D&D-inspired variant that dug into the thematic aspects of the game that the designer found appealing. In fact, some participants at the Forge could look back into their own design history and see their work as having heartbreaker-like features. Forge contributor Paul Czege invited Forge readers to follow a link to a tour of his by-then nearly 20-year-old juvenilia, which began:

> There's no date on it, but there are enough clues for me to estimate closely that I wrote it in 1983 or 1984, when I was either a sophomore or junior in high school […] It's 49 pages, lovingly hand-lettered in all caps, and seven pages of pencil illustrations by me, all on loose-leaf paper […] elves, dwarves, a few funky races, randomly generated attributes,

> character classes, and elaborate formulas for derived scores. I might have to fax the whole thing to Ron so he can suss out the "one good, possibly brilliant feature." (Czege, 2003)

Similarly, Clinton Nixon, the Forge's first technical administrator, suggested that he had created a fantasy heartbreaker just a few years earlier in the run-up to the release of *Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition* by Wizards of the Coast in 2000:

> The exercise of creating your own Fantasy Heartbreaker has got me thinking. I started to design my own […] but realized I already had a Heartbreaker sitting in my closet: The Nutcracker Prince, which I co-authored with Peter Seckler. About two months before D&D3E came out, Peter and I […] collected all the information on d20 we could, and took all our house rules, and added a few new things that we thought D&D could have used and made a game […] One reason I think d20's been a good thing for the industry as a whole is that it has let all those old D&D juices flow out. ("Heartbreakers on Fire (that is, d20)," January 19, 2003, RPG Theory Forum)

These utterances suggest a narrative in which D&D may stand as a source of inspiration or point of origin. Ultimately, it serves as a foil and a distraction for TTRPG designers whose goal should be something other than emulating *Dungeons & Dragons*.

D&D in the Actual Play Forum

However, these points of discussion don't encapsulate the entirety of the Forge's engagement with D&D. To get a better sense of this engagement, I examined the 90 Actual Play threads that either mentioned D&D in the post title or in the OP to get a sense of the shifting dynamics of conversations "about D&D" in the context of actual play over time. I ascribed particular motifs to each of those OPs based on an emergent coding of themes:

- **D&D vs. Other Games.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that invoked D&D in comparison to playing other games: "It was a nice break from our long running 3E D&D game."
- **D&D Problems.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that could be read as complaints about the design or typical play practices associated with D&D: "I've got a nice little D&D game that has been running for 4 sessions now and I'm relatively pleased with how it is going. The majority of my players are complete novices to role-playing and therein lies my only real frustration with the game. They don't seem to want to take any proactive action in the game."
- **D&D Tropes.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that referred to typical in-game experiences or play practices associated with D&D in a positive or neutral fashion: "As a side note, it'd almost be a weird piece of performance art to play D&D, etc. with complete disregard for the

unspoken conventions. 3000 orcs, brief fight, new characters. 2000-foot tall unicorn, brief fight, new characters. Repeat. Or is that just your 11-year-old nephew's regular game?"

- **Old School.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that described the aesthetics of the earliest editions of D&D or invoked attempts to replicate that aesthetic: "A few months back I'd acquired a mint condition copy of the ol' Red Box edition of D&D. After reading through it again for the first time in what must have been at least fifteen years I decided that I had to play it again. See, I could clearly remember there being something totally awesome about playing the old red box, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. So, I wanted to play, observe with an analytical eye, and distill out just what the awesome was. I finally got my chance this past Sunday."
- **D&D as Experience.** This motif was ascribed to OPs in which being a D&D player or having played D&D was an experiential characteristic of one or more individuals mentioned in the post, often in the context of introducing them to a different game: "So I'm going to run Lacuna at the upcoming tiny con. (I've already got someone signed up for the con session. I checked the other games he's signed up for: D&D, D&D, D&D, D&D, D&D, D&D, Lacuna. Heh.)"
- **D&D as Text.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that referred to the rule books, manuals, or other written texts of *Dungeons & Dragons*: "I was well-prepared to run an adventure called Gorgoldand's Gauntlet (author pointed out the link, it's legitimately available and was originally part of a *Dungeon Magazine* freebie disc) with a few small modifications, most importantly including Paizo Goblins. Explicit Rules Variants: Epic 6th Level rules (low-powered D&D)."
- **D&D as Activity.** This motif was ascribed to OPs that referred to playing D&D as a current or ongoing activity of one or more individuals mentioned in the post: "I found even Ron's play of D&D to be highly idiosyncratic from the AP posts. Despite his claim to be playing it in a way he claims is not his typical style."

In the absence of a second coder, intercoder reliability scores can't be calculated; this is a weakness of the current study, although some discourse analytic methods typically rely on interpretive methods wherein the singular instrumentality of the researcher is validated by the contextual knowledge, systematic procedure, and self-reflective practice of researchers themselves (Fairclough and Wodak 1999, 279).

Motif	Season Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter	Total	Mean	SD
D&D vs. Other Games	9 (z 0.58)	12 (z -0.03)	4 (z 0.24)	11 (z 1.09)	36	9.00	3.08
D&D Problems	7 (z 0.00)	11 (z -0.22)	5 (z 0.81)	6 (z -0.27)	29	7.25	2.28
D&D Tropes	5 (z -0.58)	7 (z -1.01)	3 (z -0.32)	3 (z -1.09)	18	4.50	1.66
Old School	2 (z -1.44)	4 (z -1.59)	2 (z -0.89)	2 (z -1.36)	10	2.50	0.87
D&D as Experience	6 (z -0.29)	17 (z 0.95)	2 (z -0.89)	5 (z -0.55)	30	7.50	5.68
D&D as Text	6 (z -0.29)	14 (z 0.36)	2 (z -0.89)	11 (z 1.09)	33	8.25	4.60
D&D as Activity	14 (z 2.02)	20 (z 1.54)	7 (z 1.95)	11 (z 1.09)	52	13.00	4.74
Total	49	85	25	49	208	52.00	21.42
Mean	7.00	12.14	3.57	7.00	29.71	7.43	
SD	3.46	5.11	1.76	3.66	12.38	4.80	

Table 2: Counts and Z-Scores for Motifs Ascribed to D&D-Related Actual Play Threads Over Time

Table 2 summarizes the results of this procedure, and includes z-scores for each cell compared to the within-seasons (column) mean. A z-score is a descriptive statistic that expressed variation from a mean in units of standard deviation. For example, a z-score of -1 indicates that the associated value is one standard deviation below the mean. No statistical inferences should be made, but the numbers direct the viewer's attention to potentially interesting or noteworthy trends in the data. Using within-season z-scores avoids the distorting effect on measures of central tendency of the high volume of posting that took place during the period of the Forge's greatest popularity and influence—its "Summer phase" from 2005–2006.

The z-scores direct attention to the shifting patterns of engagement with D&D over time. One thing that seems fairly consistent, however, is the extent to which "actual play" of D&D was a prominent motif across the life of the Forge. Only during the Summer phase was D&D as experience a prominent motif, suggesting that it was during this period that most of the proselytizing and advocacy for games other than D&D took place, as Forge participants reported on their attempts to introduce people to their games whose only experience with role-playing was D&D. Only during the Winter phase of the Forge did references to reading D&D texts reach a proportionately high number, possibly reflecting the greater number of D&D versions and volumes published at that point as well as the shift in Forge participation after about 2007 (White 2020, 63–4).

Conclusion

Table 3 integrates the above discussion into a single narrative summary that serves as a provisional account of the way that the Forge as a collective understood D&D, as it emerged from a close reading of the forums. Space precludes doing more than offering this tentative exploration and suggesting avenues for continued exploration.

Season	Dates	Orientation toward D&D
Spring	2001–2004	D&D is a point of departure for game design, part of the background against which indie game designers operate but not a thing to be emulated in their designs without conscious reflection.
Summer	2005–2006	D&D may be part of the baggage that players bring to the table, including assumptions that other games will try to challenge.
Fall	2007–2009	D&D is something that needs to be played to be understood, particularly given the publication of new editions in recent years.
Winter	2010–2012	D&D can be treated as a number of different rules-bearing texts that shape play in different ways, like other role-playing games.

Table 3: Narrative Summary of Engagement with D&D at the Forge Over Time

Clearly, the next step is to elaborate this tentative account through more detailed discourse analytic procedures in line with Denzin's (1999) "method of instances" for examining computer-mediated communication. In particular, attention can be directed to how the ongoing discourse of the Forge speaks to changes in modes of thinking about the relationship between game designers and their audiences as pop cultural producers and consumers, versus members of a broader participatory culture. It may be that the "Summer phase" of the Forge represents a moment of specific interest for understanding these dynamics.

References

Appelcline, Shannon. 2014. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Role-Playing Game Industry*. 4 vols. Silver Spring: Evil Hat, Inc.

Barrowcliffe, Mark. 2007. *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons, and Growing Up Strange*. New York: Soho.

Czege, Paul. 2003. “In A Dimension Syncopatic With Ours.” https://www.123.net/~czege/syncopaticheartbreak.html (site discontinued).

Denzin, Norman. 1999. “Cybertalk and the Method of Instances.” In *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, edited by Steve Jones, 107–26. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Edwards, Ron. May 5, 1999. “The Nuked Apple Cart.” *The Forge*. Accessed February 19, 2019. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/12/.

Edwards, Ron. March 1, 2002. “Fantasy Heartbreakers.” *The Forge*. Accessed October 1, 2021. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/9/.

Edwards, Ron. January 17, 2003. “More Fantasy Heartbreakers.” *The Forge*. Accessed October 1, 2021. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/10/.

Edwards, Ron. June 4, 2003. “A Hard Look at D&D.” *The Forge*. Accessed October 1, 2021. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/20/.

Fairclough, Norman, and Ruth Wodak. 1997. “Critical Discourse Analysis.” In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, edited by Teun A. Van Dijk, 258–84. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

“Fantasy Heartbreaker.” *Board Game Geek*. Accessed October 1, 2021. https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/272145/fantasy-heartbreaker

Gilsdorf, Ethan. 2009. *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*. Guilford: Lyons Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Lafayette, Lev. March 2017. “Ron Edwards Interview.” *RPG Review* 34. http://rpgreview.net/files/rpgreview_34.html.

Peterson, Jon. 2012. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press.

Peterson, Jon. 2020. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Sudweeks, Fay, and Simeon J. Simoff. 1999. “Complementary Explorative Data Analysis: The Reconciliation of Quantitative and Qualitative Principles.” In *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, edited by Steve Jones, 29–55. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Torner, Evan. 2021. “Actual Play Reports: Forge Theory and the Forums.” In *Watch Us Roll: Essays*

on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games, edited by Shelly Jones, 20–31. Jefferson: McFarland.

Van Dijk, Teun A. 1997. "The Study of Discourse." In *Discourse as Structure as Process*, edited by Teun A. Van Dijk, 1–34. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

White, William J. 2020. *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at the Forge*, 2001-2012: *Designs & Discussions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

White, William J., Jonne Arjoranta, Michael Hitchens, Jon Peterson, Evan Torner, and Jonathan Walton. 2018. "Tabletop Role-Playing Games." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal, 63–86. New York: Routledge.

14. Convergence Culture and the Increasing Digitization and Hybridity of Dungeons & Dragons

PREMEET SIDHU

Abstract

Over the last seven years, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) (Arneson and Gygax 1974) has risen in prominence and popularity with a broadening of its player demographic. Though there are many factors motivating renewed engagement with D&D, in this paper I discuss the increasing digitization and hybridity of the traditionally non-digital game. I stress the importance of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) to understanding contemporary tabletop role-playing experiences. Data was collected from interviews and gameplay observations (13M, 7F, aged 18–34), focus group discussions (9M, 5F, aged 24–55), and an online survey (172M, 153F, 23NB [Non-Binary], 6 No Answer, aged 18–63), which collectively explored player histories, motivations to play D&D, engagement with D&D paratexts, and personal play experiences. An important finding from my analysis of this data suggests that the modern play of D&D is hybrid. I argue that the increasing digitization and hybridity of the game can be best explained through Jenkins' (2006) concept of convergence culture, which examines "the flow of content across multiple media platforms" (2). This paper discusses the impact that digital paratexts and tools have had on accessing and experiencing contemporary D&D play—both inside the game and beyond—noting that the relationship between digital and non-digital should not be overlooked when engaging in future research and discussion on traditionally non-digital games.

Keywords:

Dungeons & Dragons, digitization, hybrid games, convergence culture, resurgence

---

In recent years, interest in the intersection between the digital and non-digital in game studies has been steadily growing. The digitization of games—the process of converting analog information

into a digital format—has motivated research leading to the development of definitions and theoretical concepts such as “hybrid digital boardgames” (Rogerson, Sparrow, and Gibbs 2021) and “smart device tabletop games” (Kankainen and Tyni 2014). In alignment with these amalgams of digital and non-digital, Jenkins’ (2006) understanding of “convergence culture” similarly encapsulates “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (2), but foregrounds the role and motivations of the participant rather than the content. An ideal case study that showcases the increasing digitization and hybridity of the game medium is the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).

Since its inception in 1974, D&D has been framed as the quintessential TTRPG. Characterizations of D&D play in literature and discourse often describe groups of players who gather in person, roll physical dice, and engage in imaginative role play and storytelling. However, since the release of the game’s latest ruleset by Wizards of the Coast in 2014, D&D play and related paratextual media have become more hybrid and digitized—with more players choosing to incorporate both digital and non-digital elements into their own games.

In this paper, I discuss one of the key findings from my research into the contemporary resurgence and appeal of D&D. My analysis of multiple datasets suggests that contemporary D&D play is more hybrid than currently expressed. Using Jenkins’ (2006) convergence culture, I argue that the game’s increasing digitization and hybrid play practices have contributed to its modern resurgence and increased player interest in the game, providing further insight into the game’s current cultural cachet.

Related Work

Created by Arneson and Gygax in 1974 to address their perceived limitations of the popular wargaming genre, D&D is a collaborative TTRPG where groups of players usually meet in-person to role play characters and tell stories with their friends. In every playing group, one player takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM)—a player who narrates the story, referees the game, and embodies the monsters, challenges, and non-player characters (NPCs) that the playing group encounters. Together, DMs and players explore shared imagined worlds, overcome challenges, and build rich relationships by utilizing dice rolls and player discretion to govern the outcomes of in-game actions and events. Historically, D&D was often viewed as a complex high fantasy hobby, further maligned when it was implicated in the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980s (Laycock 2015, 101–136; Sidhu and Carter 2020b, 3–4). However, perceptions towards D&D and its players have evolved considerably since then and the game is experiencing a modern resurgence.

Often referred to as the foundation of modern RPGs, elements of D&D’s design have been adopted

and modified in many digital and non-digital successors (Zagal and Deterding 2018). Along with its depictions in current popular media content such as Netflix's *Stranger Things* and the Twitch livestream *Critical Role* (Chalk 2018; Sidhu and Carter 2020b, 7–12), interest in D&D has been rising. The game experienced a 33% increase in sales in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Witten 2021). As the influence of D&D has been widespread, there has been significant research conducted on the game in various fields of interest.

Fine's (1983) foundational ethnography of D&D play and players remains pivotal and is widely referenced when framing social dynamics in games. However, as the context, design, and player base of D&D has transformed over the years, contemporary research and discourse has targeted other important aspects of the game. Notably, there has been extensive consideration of the game's present inclusivity (Beidatsch 2021; Cote 2020, 190–197; Jones 2018; Jones and Pobuda 2020; Stang and Trammell 2019; Stokes 2017; Trammell 2014) and comprehensive historical documentation of the game (Peterson 2012; 2018; 2020; 2021). Research has also reviewed D&D's rulesets (Dashiell 2017; 2018), related media representations and modern resurgence (Chalk 2018; Sidhu and Carter 2020b; Stanton and Johnson 2021), and the influence of the game on digital successors (LaLone 2019; Voorhees Call, and Whitlock 2012; Zagal and Deterding 2018). More recently, D&D's immersive experiences (Mizer 2019; Wouters, Rogerson, and Hu 2021) and educative potential for diverse learning outcomes and contexts (Cook, Gremo, and Morgan 2016; Garcia 2020; Polkinghorne, Turner, Taboada, and Kerr 2021; Sidhu and Carter 2021; Sidhu, Carter, and Curwood 2021; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2017) have been investigated.

In addition to the aforementioned areas of interest, there has also been explicit research focused on digitization. Pape (2012) examined whether the digitization and automation of traditional tabletop games could enhance the game experience, finding no negative impact on the sociality of the game and highlighting the potential benefits of digitizing games. Regarding immersion and enhancement of player experiences through digital tools, Wouters, Rogerson, and Hu (2021) explored the potential for facial biometrics in D&D play. Their work points to the increasing hybridity and digitization of the game. Likewise, various edited collections over the years have continued to review the implications of digitization on D&D and TTRPGs more broadly. In Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock's (2012) *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*, the scope and implications of digital role-playing games are richly analyzed. Furthermore, Jones' (2021) *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* presents how actual play content is bridging the gap between digital and non-digital—further emphasizing D&D's recent increased digitization. Moreover, Hedge and Grouling's (2021) *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*, highlights how TTRPG players are engaging with technology to further enhance their role-playing experiences. Situated within this field of interest, my research into the appeal and resurgence of D&D contributes further qualitative data from current players to bolster existing understandings of digitized D&D practices.

Research Methods

The aim of my research was to better understand the resurgence and appeal of D&D through contemporary player experiences. As a result, my two overarching research questions were:

- Why are people playing D&D?
- What do current players find appealing?

To address these research questions, I designed three collaborative studies that involved qualitative and quantitative data collection. Data collection methods were derived from two key works: *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012) and *Game Research Methods: An Overview* (Lankoski and Björk 2015). The findings presented in this paper are drawn from my first two studies, which involved a combination of player interviews, participant observation of gameplay, focus group discussions, and an online survey. Below are brief overviews of my data collection, participant recruitment, and data analysis procedures.

Data Collection Methods and Participant Recruitment

Study 1 (May–September, 2019) explored factors in D&D's resurgence and appeal through a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation of gameplay. Twenty Australian D&D players (13M, 7F, aged 18–34) across 4 different playing groups were recruited by word of mouth, and were involved in pre-play interviews, observations of play sessions, and follow-up post-play interviews. These data collection methods investigated their motivations to play D&D, experiences playing, player histories, and engagement with D&D paratexts. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, in compliance with my research ethics approval, and had to be current DMs or players of D&D.

Study 2 (August–December, 2020) utilized focus groups and an online survey to yield further insight into the breadth of modern D&D play experiences. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by word-of-mouth and social media advertisements (e.g., on Facebook), resulting in three focus groups with 14 participants (9M, 5F, aged 24–55) being conducted. Participants for the online survey were also recruited by word-of-mouth, snowball recruitment, and social media advertisements (e.g., on Facebook, Reddit, and Discord). The survey was advertised as being about "Player Experiences in *Dungeons & Dragons*" and a total of 354 participants completed the survey (172M, 153F, 23NB [Non-Binary], 6 No Answer, aged 18-63). As in Study 1, participants were required to be at least 18 years old in compliance with my research ethics approval.

Data Analysis Methods

My analysis of data was influenced by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which afforded me the opportunity to construct theoretical understandings about D&D's contemporary resurgence and appeal *throughout* and *after* my data collection processes rather than *before*. This ensured that the emergent themes and findings were grounded in real player experiences and the data, rather than my own assumptions and predictions. A combination of open coding and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) was used to annotate and analyze interview transcripts, observation field notes, focus group transcripts, and survey responses.

Initial analysis of qualitative data relied on open coding (Charmaz, 2006). Open coding was the process of identifying and assigning common expressions or concepts in the data. I annotated my data with initial thoughts or "codes" so that deeper examination could occur later in the analysis process. For example, the interview response "*Stranger Things* has really brought the resurgence of D&D into the mainstream" (29F, Player), was open coded with the words "media," "digital influence," and "resurgence." These codes allowed me to observe similarities, differences, and trends that were present throughout the data sets. These codes formed the first iteration of a meta-theme (e.g., "digitization of D&D") that was consolidated throughout the axial coding process.

Axial coding is the process of linking the categories, annotations, and summaries (i.e., codes) identified during open coding back to overarching meta-themes. The process of axial coding consolidated the core concepts and expressions used in this paper, such as "digitization" and "convergence culture." Axial coding was conducted in a similar fashion to open coding. However, importance was placed on how these codes were linked or interrelated so that a cohesive argument and prominent trend in the data could be ascertained and presented. For example, during open coding there were many references to the influence of digital media on players' experiences with D&D. During axial coding, "digitization" was coded to capture all findings of this trend, which became the focus of this paper.

Findings

Before the COVID-19 pandemic—which inherently increased digitized D&D play—findings from Study 1 (May-September, 2019) suggested that the modern play of D&D was a hybrid—a mixture of both digital and non-digital playing practices and technologies. Seventeen out of Twenty participants (85%) emphasized the impact of digital platforms, paratexts, and tools on their own play and consumption of the game. When asked about how they accessed game materials or

enhanced their own D&D games, participants cited a variety of digital examples, including Twitch streams, YouTube videos, actual-play podcasts, D&D Beyond, Roll20, DMs Guild, and even the Internet more broadly. However, these statements conflicted, as many of the participants had also negotiated their identity as D&D players in an oppositional stance (Kruse 1993, 34) to digital gaming practices and cultures. In other words, participants praised the immersive tactility and benefits of in-person non-digital D&D play while simultaneously using phones or digital assets to enhance their games.

Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Study 2 (August–December, 2020) deepened the investigation into digital and non-digital D&D play. Addressing my two overarching research questions while adequately accounting for contemporary playing contexts, preferences, motivations, and considerations, a section of my survey was designed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on D&D play. A majority of participants in the survey (n=251, 70.9%) responded that the location of their D&D play had been affected in some way, leading to growth in digitized play. Additionally, survey data indicated that most participants (n=194, 54.8%) played D&D in both digital and non-digital spaces, almost a quarter (n=95, 26.8%) played D&D solely in-person, and the remainder (n=65, 18.4%) playing D&D in digital spaces or formats only. Because only one out of four participants engaged with D&D as a traditional non-digital TTRPG, the combined data from both studies reflects what Jenkins (2006) terms convergence culture.

Discussion

The Impact of Convergence Culture on D&D

Convergence culture is conceptualized by Jenkins (2006) as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (2). Moving beyond established understandings of technological integration and the increasing digitization of media, Jenkins articulates and reflects on the relationship between concepts such as “media convergence,” “participatory culture,” “collective intelligence,” “transmedia storytelling,” and “collaborative authorship.” These interrelated concepts explain how consumers and fans are now active agents in their creation and consumption of media, in comparison to previous passivity. The existence of convergence culture has provided D&D players with increased agency over their play, consumption, and even creation of D&D-related content. Viewing my findings through the paradigm of convergence culture provides reasoning and motivation behind the increased digitization of D&D—both in-game and beyond the game—that has contributed to the game’s modern resurgence and increased its broad appeal.

As new media and technology continues to shape contemporary gaming cultures and

environments, data from both studies suggested that D&D's publishers and the broader D&D community had both made strong efforts to reduce the barriers of entry into the game. Participants indicated that this was accomplished by offering more digital and financially accessible alternatives to in-game rules and materials—both officially licensed and fan-made. One of the participants in Study 1, a long-time player and DM indicated that because of new media platforms like D&D Beyond and DMs Guild—and in combination with the freely available Systems Reference Document—there was more access to "all kinds of cool [D&D] stuff that used to be a lot of hard work or money to get" (33M, DM/Player). Similarly, another participant also attested that D&D was "being swept up in this greater cultural trend of things becoming more accessible digitally" (26F, Player). Supporting Trammell's (2019) previous work on analog games and the digital economy, convergence culture highlights the invisible role of "fan labor" and unofficial content creators that have also contributed to D&D's contemporary resurgence through their creation of accessible game materials.

In addition to the proliferation of access, digital platforms and tools were also used by participants to enhance their D&D play experiences. In my observation of D&D gameplay (Study 1, May-September, 2020), one in-person playing group was observed using digital dice rollers, tracking digital character sheets, and even using sound ambiance apps such as Syrinscape to support and enhance their experience and immersion within the game. Another group was also seen using digital visual representations of in-game characters and environments, as opposed to physical ones. Moreover, the ability to recruit players and play D&D online through platforms like Roll20, Tabletop Simulator, and even Discord or Zoom was repeatedly mentioned by survey participants as a major reason behind increased or continued play of D&D during periods of lockdown throughout COVID-19. For players that are unable to play D&D in-person for various reasons, these digitized alternatives allow them to keep engaging with the game they enjoy playing. As contemporary research into D&D begins to critically investigate how digital tools can be used to enhance players' experiences (Wouters et al. 2021), it is possible that the future of D&D may become more digitized than it is currently.

In contrast to the positive implications of digitized D&D play, there was also a solid counterargument presented by participants against the game's increased digitization. In both studies, participants noted that the physical sociality and limited screen time often associated with in-person D&D play was part of the game's modern appeal and resurgence. This finding contradicts Pape's (2012) research, which suggested there was no impact of digitization on the sociality of non-digital games. A participant in Study 1 made it clear that what they loved about D&D was the "immediacy of it in your body" (25NB, Player). Limited screens and minimal parameters on play afforded some players greater immersion and engagement with the game. This sentiment was also echoed by another participant who stated there was "something really simple and appealing about not being in front of a screen. Just having a pen, paper, and [let] your imagination run wild" (31M, DM/Player). When asked to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on their

game play, a common argument put forth by focus group and survey participants was that while D&D was able to be played digitally or be enhanced by digital tools, it was an inherently different experience than in-person, non-digital D&D play. As different players have different expectations of the game space and motivations behind their play of D&D, further research into this area is required.

Digitization Beyond the Game

Along with elements of in-game digitization, representations of D&D play in digital media have also contributed to the game's broader resurgence in popularity. In particular, the actual-play livestream *Critical Role* was repeatedly mentioned by participants across both studies. *Critical Role* (and other similar D&D media) reveals how convergence culture has driven interest and attention towards the game. The show presents old media (a traditionally non-digital home D&D game) through new interactive media (like Twitch and YouTube). The popularity of this stream and initial convergence has resulted in positive fan cultures and collective intelligence surrounding D&D content. Subsequently, this has led to dedicated transmedia storytelling that appeals to different demographics of potential players.

In 2019, *Critical Role* raised $11.3 million from their fanbase on Kickstarter to create an animated show reimagining adventures from their livestream and original D&D meta. As a result of their Kickstarter's success, *Critical Role's* animated show was co-opted by the mass media conglomerate Amazon for their "Prime" subscription streaming platform, which will undoubtedly draw further interest towards D&D. More recently, collaborative authorship has allowed *Critical Role* to release an in-canon campaign setting published by WOTC (2020). Convergence culture has allowed consumers of D&D to now become producers of D&D on a previously unmatched level. The show's progression from a home campaign, to live broadcast, to mass-media partnered animated series, to in-canon campaign guide, exemplifies the impact that convergence culture has had on D&D's modern resurgence and highlights the intrinsic relationship between digital and non-digital D&D practices. This echoes the sentiments of one participant that noted D&D "was really well suited to the way media was moving" (28M, DM/Player).

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has discussed the increasing digitization and hybridity of contemporary D&D play as what Jenkins (2006) calls convergence culture. Beginning with a brief introduction into the rising digitization of games, I reviewed the existing literature surrounding D&D and

contextualized my own contribution among existing discourse focused on the impact of digitization on TTRPGs. Having provided a foundational understanding of my research, I summarized my data collection, participant recruitment, and data analysis methods, which were informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Data from both of my studies suggested that the contemporary play of D&D was more hybrid than currently acknowledged. Although there are many factors motivating renewed and engaged play of D&D, in this paper I discussed the increasing digitization and hybridity of the traditionally non-digital game—stressing the importance of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) in understanding contemporary and future tabletop role-play experiences.

References

Beidatsch, Eleanor. 2021. "In *Dungeons and Dragons* You Can Be Almost Anything You Want So Why the Backlash Over a Combat Wheelchair?" *ABC Australia*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-02/dungeons-and-dragons-disability-in-tabletop-gaming/100068926.

Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor, eds. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chalk, Alex. 2018. "A Chronology of *Dungeons & Dragons* in Popular Media." *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 1. https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/06/telling-stories-of-dungeons-dragons-a-chronology-of-representations-of-dd-play/.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Cook, Mike P., Matthew Gremo, and Ryan Morgan. 2016. "We're Just Playing: The Influence of a Modified Tabletop Role-Playing Game on ELA Students' In-Class Reading." *Simulation & Gaming* 48, no. 2: 199–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878116684570.

Cote, Amanda. 2020. *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. New York: New York University Press.

Dashiell, Steven. 2017. "Rules Lawyering as Symbolic and Linguistic Capital." *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 5. https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/11/rules-lawyering-as-symbolic-and-linguistic-capital/.

Dashiell, Steven. 2018. "'Rules as Written': Game Algorithms as Game Capital." *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/09/rules-as-written-analyzing-changes-in-reliance-on-game-system-algorithms-as-shifts-in-game-capital/.

Fine, Gary A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hedge, Stephanie, and Jennifer Grouling, eds. 2021. *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*. United States: McFarland.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press.

Jones, Shelly. 2018. "Blinded by the Roll: The Critical Fail of Disability in D&D. *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 1. https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/03/blinded-by-the-roll-the-critical-fail-of-disability-in-dd/.

Jones, Shelly, ed. 2021. *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. United States: McFarland.

Jones, Shelly, and Tanya Pobuda. 2020. "An Analysis of Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery in Top-Ranked Board Game Rulebooks." *Analog Game Studies* 7, no. 2. https://analoggamestudies.org/2020/12/an-analysis-of-gender-inclusive-language-and-imagery-in-top-ranked-board-game-rulebooks/.

Kankainen, Ville, and Heikki Tyni. 2014. "Understanding Smart Device Tabletop Games." In *Proceedings of the 18th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Media Business, Management, Content & Services*, ACM, Tampere, Finland, 238–241. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2676467.2676511.

Kruse, Holly. 1993. "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture." *Popular Music* 12, no. 1: 33–41. DOI:10.1017/S026114300000533X.

LaLone, Nicolas. 2019. "A Tale of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Origins of the Game Platform." *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/a-tale-of-dungeons-dragons-and-the-origins-of-the-game-platform/.

Lankoski, Petri, and Staffan Björk. 2015. *Game Research Methods: An Overview*. ETC Press.

Laycock, Joseph P. 2015. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. United States: University of California Press.

Mizer, Nicholas J. 2019. *Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Pape, Joseph A. 2012. "The Effects of Digitization and Automation on Board Games for Digital

Tabletops." MSc Thesis, Queen's University Ontario Canada. https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/6946.

Peterson, Jon. 2012. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press.

Peterson, Jon. 2018. "Precursors." In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by Jose P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 55–62. London: Taylor & Francis.

Peterson, Jon. 2020. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Peterson, Jon. 2021. *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Polkinghorne, Adric, Jane Turner, Manuela Taboada, and Jeremy Kerr. 2021. "Critical Fail: Addressing Problematic Designs in Table-Top Role-Playing Games for Narrative Therapy and Community Wellbeing." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2021*, 1–5. https://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DiGRAA2021_paper_22.pdf.

Rogerson, Melissa J., Lucy A. Sparrow, and Martin R. Gibbs. 2021. "Unpacking 'Boardgames with Apps': The Hybrid Digital Boardgame Model." In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–17. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3411764.3445077.

Sidhu, Premeet, and Marcus Carter. 2020a. "Exploring the Resurgence and Educative Potential of *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Scan* 40, no. 6: 12–16. https://issuu.com/scannswdoe/docs/scan_40_6_july2021_issuu

Sidhu, Premeet, and Marcus Carter. 2020b. "The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D's Resurgence." In *Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference: Play Everywhere*, 1–20. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_223.pdf.

Sidhu, Premeet, and Marcus Carter. 2021. "Pivotal Play: Rethinking Meaningful Play in Games through Death in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Games and Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005231.

Sidhu, Premeet, Marcus Carter, and Jen S. Curwood. 2021. "Unlearning in Games: Deconstructing Failure in *Dungeons & Dragons*." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2021*, 1–4. https://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DiGRAA2021_paper_17.pdf.

Stang, Sarah, and Aaron Trammell. 2019. "The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female

Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Games and Culture* 15, no. 6: 730–747. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059.

Stanton, Ryan, and Mark R. Johnson. 2021. "The Audiences of The Adventure Zone: Analyzing Actual Play as Inclusive Gaming Media." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Australia* 2021, 1–4. https://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DiGRAA2021_paper_12.pdf.

Stokes, Michael. 2017. "Access to the Page: Queer and Disabled Characters in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/05/access-to-the-page-queer-and-disabled-characters-in-dungeons-dragons/.

Trammell, Aaron. 2014. "Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 3. https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/.

Trammell, Aaron. 2019. "Analog Games and the Digital Economy." *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 1. https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/analog-games-and-the-digital-economy/.

Voorhees, Gerald A., Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock. 2012. *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Whitten, Sarah. 2021. "*Dungeons & Dragons* Had Its Biggest Year Ever as Covid Forced the Game Off Tables and onto the Web." *CNBC*, March 13, 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/13/dungeons-dragons-had-its-biggest-year-despite-the-coronavirus.html.

Wizards of the Coast [WOTC]. 2014. *Player's Handbook*. 5th edition. https://dnd.wizards.com/products/tabletop-games/rpg-products/rpg_playershandbook.

Wizards of the Coast [WOTC]. 2020. *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount.* https://dnd.wizards.com/products/wildemount.

Wouters, Niels, Melissa J. Rogerson, and Yian Hu. 2021. "The Potential for Facial Biometrics in Role-Playing Games." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Australia* 2021, 1–2. http://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DiGRAA2021_paper_30.pdf.

Wright, Jennifer C., Daniel E. Weissglass, and Vanessa Casey. 2017. "Imaginative Role-Playing as a Medium for Moral Development: *Dungeons & Dragons* Provides Moral Training." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 6, no. 1: 99–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167816686263.

Zagal, Jose P., and Sebastian Deterding, eds. 2018. *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*. London: Routledge.

Bio

Premeet Sidhu is a PhD student at The University of Sydney. Her research focuses on understanding the modern resurgence and appeal of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Her current research interests include investigating how meaningful player experiences in both digital and non-digital games can be applied to game studies, education, and media.

The ETC Press was founded in 2005 under the direction of Dr. Drew Davidson, the Director of Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), as an open access, digital-first publishing house.

What does all that mean?

The ETC Press publishes three types of work:peer-reviewed work (research-based books, textbooks, academic journals, conference proceedings), general audience work (trade nonfiction, singles, Well Played singles), and research and white papers

The common tie for all of these is a focus on issues related to entertainment technologies as they are applied across a variety of fields.

Our authors come from a range of backgrounds. Some are traditional academics. Some are practitioners. And some work in between. What ties them all together is their ability to write about the impact of emerging technologies and its significance in society.

To distinguish our books, the ETC Press has five imprints:

- **ETC Press:** our traditional academic and peer-reviewed publications;
- **ETC Press: Single:** our short "why it matters" books that are roughly 8,000-25,000 words;
- **ETC Press: Signature:** our special projects, trade books, and other curated works that exemplify the best work being done;
- **ETC Press: Report:** our white papers and reports produced by practitioners or academic researchers working in conjunction with partners; and
- **ETC Press: Student:** our work with undergraduate and graduate students

In keeping with that mission, the ETC Press uses emerging technologies to design all of our books and Lulu, an on-demand publisher, to distribute our e-books and print books through all the major retail chains, such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Apple, and we work with The Game Crafter to produce tabletop games.

We don't carry an inventory ourselves. Instead, each print book is created when somebody buys a copy.

Since the ETC Press is an open-access publisher, every book, journal, and proceeding is available as a free download. We're most interested in the sharing and spreading of ideas. We also have an agreement with the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) to list ETC Press publications in the ACM Digital Library.

Authors retain ownership of their intellectual property. We release all of our books, journals, and proceedings under one of two Creative Commons licenses:

- **Attribution-NoDerivativeWorks-NonCommercial:** This license allows for published works to remain intact, but versions can be created; or
- **Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike:** This license allows for authors to retain editorial control of their creations while also encouraging readers to collaboratively rewrite content.

This is definitely an experiment in the notion of publishing, and we invite people to participate. We are exploring what it means to "publish" across multiple media and multiple versions. We believe this is the future of publication, bridging virtual and physical media with fluid versions of publications as well as enabling the creative blurring of what constitutes reading and writing.