It's Dangerous to Go Alone: An Ethnography of Friendship Through Tabletop Gaming Communities of Practice

By

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Abstract

As the world continues to move online in the 21st century, in-person communities of practice continue to thrive in game stores, libraries, campuses, and in personal homes. In these spaces, and many others that are too varied to name, people engage with tabletop roleplaying games as members of groups of adventurers. Individuals come together to create identities, craft narratives, and build connections with one another that continue even after the game ends. This paper examines the ways that these communities of practice are constructed and maintained by the diverse group of individuals who inhabit them, and how they come to construct identities and meaning through their engagement.

Over the period of 18 months between 2017 and 2019, participant observation fieldwork was conducted with various tabletop roleplaying game groups across the Ottawa, Ontario area. This took place at game stores, campuses, libraries, people’s homes, and restaurants to understand the ways in which people come together in-person to play games such as Dungeons & Dragons and Pathfinder. Interviews were simultaneously conducted with individuals from these groups to develop life-histories of some of those involved in these communities.

What was found throughout this research was that individuals were coming together to play games, but more importantly to develop a sense of belonging and to build communities of practice with other like-minded game players. This has informed a dissertation which may more accurately be labeled an ‘ethnography of friendship’, and which analyses (1) the role of play in the lives of members of communities of practice, (2) identity as it is constructed through performances as people engage in roleplaying activities, and (3) the role of in-person communities and friendships in an increasingly digital world. As we increasingly rely on digital technologies and online worlds to foster our relationships, many people still seek in-person communities. This has been made clearer with the easing of social distancing restrictions and lockdown orders following the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals have quickly moved to rebuild the in-person communities of practice that were put on-hold for the past 2 years.
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Chapter 1 – Introductions

Introduction

*The power of creating worlds, controlling deities and dragons, and leading entire nations is in your hands ... You are the master of the game – the rules, the setting, the action, and ultimately, the fun.* – Dungeon Masters Guide.

The first week of classes had just begun, with new undergraduate students bustling about the campus, looking lost but excited as they attend their first classes of the semester. University campuses are always busy at this time of the year, as students actually attend classes, before the malaise of late term kicks in. Having not been to campus in a while, I parked and checked my phone again for the location of the meeting I was attending. It was Friday of the first week of classes, which could mean one important thing for those few students on campus that spend their spare time playing tabletop games – the first meeting of the Carleton Tabletop Gaming Club.

The group was created in September of 2013, and serves to provide students and other university members with a meetup group that plays tabletop games once a week. The group books classroom space in one building of the University, and spends their Friday nights in classrooms playing *Dungeons & Dragons, Warhammer, Magic: The Gathering*, and a wide variety of board games. The group met at 5pm, and I was a little bit early – just enough time to grab some snacks and go and introduce myself to others who were arriving.

As I arrived at the designated meeting spot a few others were sitting around, all separated by some space, none of them talking. I sat down and asked the individual sitting across from me if this was in fact the right place. A young-looking man, he turned up from his computer and said that he was also here for the group and that he was hoping to play some *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). “Success!” I thought, and told him that I was also there for *D&D*. He then went back to looking at his computer and I waited a few more moments for people to show up. Just then I saw a past student from a class that I was a teaching assistant for, Arnok, whom I knew to be an
organizer for the group. He excitedly walked over to me, asking if I was there for research. He told me that they were hoping to have a few D&D groups this semester, but that it was sometimes hard to find dungeon masters (DMs). By this time there were about 20 people sitting around, none of them talking, all waiting for the gaming to start. Some announcements were made about the group, and then it was time to start the pairings.

First, Arnok stood and asked who was there to play Dungeons & Dragons and whether there were any DMs. 11 people raised their hands, just over half the people there, and 2 called out they were DMs looking for players. We broke into two groups, and went off looking for a room that we could start in. Having never played Dungeons & Dragons before, I really did not know what to expect from a first session so I followed along. As we sat, I introduced myself, and many jokes were made about researching games and turning D&D into a job, which the players seemed to faun over. We all introduced ourselves and then the DM – Mize Tarrendoom – explained how she was hoping to run the sessions while stressing the importance of our character’s backstories and our agency in the gameplay and storytelling process. Players discussed their experiences with D&D in the past, or lack thereof, and what characters they wanted to play in the campaign. We all decided to build our characters and meet next week at the same time and place to start our campaign. Facebook information was exchanged so that we could keep in touch until then, and we parted ways. One week later, the adventure would commence.

Over the next week I spent time preparing a D&D character sheet (see Appendix A) which is a detailed sheet containing all of the statistics for one’s character including their physical appearance, abilities, equipment, and unique features. This process takes a few hours for a new player as there is a strict set of rules to follow to make a character in the game. Along with
this, players are often expected to write a backstory explaining who one’s character is, how they came to be where they are at the start of the adventure, and the motivations, morals, and faults they have. This character-building process is meant to get the individual into the mind of the character as they will be roleplaying them throughout the campaign. Decision making is done through the eyes and mind of the character, with the player being expected to not think “outside” the game.¹ Building a character can then be an intimate process, as players often include aspects of themselves in the identities of the characters. However, often characters are made for many other reasons, the most common being comedy. It is quite common to see players building characters that are silly, witty, or excessive in any number of ways, to augment their roleplaying with humour.

For my first character I made a Human Monk named Evendur Dundragon, a martial arts master who had been separated from his parents at a young age. His father being arrested for an accidental crime, and his mother having passed away, Evendur grew up on the street and joined a monastery to find direction and meaning.² Having now constructed my character, and having written a backstory for him, it was time to return to the group and start playing the game. We met the following Friday at 5pm, grabbed a space to play in one of the classrooms the gaming group had booked, and introduced ourselves again – but this time as our characters. Everyone spoke as their characters, but still in their own voices (later on in this campaign players would adopt accents for their characters, to distinguish them and create more of a roleplaying feel) and gave a brief introduction, not divulging too much so that our backstories could come out as we played.

¹ Using information from outside of the gameplay, that would be considered to be information the characters could not have, or speaking with each other about strategy that the characters couldn’t know, including the mechanics of play and the character types is considered “metagaming” and is frowned upon in most D&D groups. However, the extent to which it is allowed or not varied from playgroup to playgroup I engaged with throughout this fieldwork. ² Among D&D players, there is a common joke that no character has a happy childhood/upbringing. Apparently strife is necessary to be an adventurer in the D&D universe.
It is an awkward experience beginning a new D&D campaign, as players get used to what it’s like to play this new character of theirs and introduce this character to a group for the first time. Some are excited to show off the character they have created, while others express nervousness or shyness having to perform in front of others, while showing off their creative endeavours. This, of course, is augmented by the experience of being in a group of strangers – which is the case for most of the D&D groups that will be discussed in the coming pages. Not only are players of these games creating characters and performing them during gameplay, but they are doing so in front of a group of players they are unfamiliar with.

After 4 hours of gameplay, we had completed our first session, and had made the first step in building a group of friends (which I will call the University Campaign) that would continue to meet weekly to play long after this fieldwork was completed. After leaving the field, I continued to go to weekly D&D sessions with the individuals I met in this group – Gigrid Casklash, Sagrir Gratsk, Sin Kakov, Gerkan Willowcrusher, and Chandra Nalaar. Over the time playing with this group there were some changes in personnel, such as Urger Tallthorne choosing to leave for schooling reasons, and Mize moving back home (across the country from us) but the group is still playing together. It is this process of making a gaming group, and maintaining that group, that will be at the centre of this investigation into the nature of playing tabletop roleplaying games. Unlike board games, wargames, collectable trading card games, etc., tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG) often require the investment of all members of the group to meet on a semi-regular basis, often over the period of months, if not years. This has the affect of forming a group of friends that is quite stable. And this forming of a group leads me to ask why it is that people look for a group like this to be a part of in our current socio-cultural context.
Understanding the ways people make friend groups and gaming communities, and the meaning they get out of these groups, can help us to understand the state of leisure communities in North America at this time. When entering the world of tabletop Roleplaying Games (RPGs) one must first situate themselves in the gaming world in general. The gaming world has grown massively over the last 30 years, as video games have come to dominate many people’s leisure time. This move to video games arose out of the combination of advancements in computer technology and interests in fantasy, science fiction, and tabletop gaming. As computer technology has advanced, programmers and game designers have worked to take many elements of group-based tabletop gaming and recreate them in the video game world. This is largely seen in the seemingly endless amount of video game RPGs that exist, which allow players to take on a role and play through a game world while leveling up and honing one’s skills. This has allowed individuals to enjoy roleplaying gameplay on their own, cutting out the need to always meet in a social group. As tabletop gaming requires people to come together in a mutual meeting place (a home, gaming store, coffee shop, etc.) scheduling can often become a problem. Therefore, video games, especially those with online capability, have allowed for gaming to take place whenever an individual is free, rather than whenever an entire group is available.

At a time when we have more access to resources that allow us to be solitary while still feeling connected to others (social media, online gaming, video calling) there are still many groups that meet in person on a weekly basis to take part in their hobbies. It would be just as easy for these people to play D&D online, over a video calling system (which has become a reality during the Covid-19 pandemic through the use of software such as Zoom and Roll20) but overall people still desire to leave their houses and go to game stores, restaurants, university campuses, libraries, and any other free open space they can find to meet and play the game with
others in person. This seeking out of real-world contact in the face of more convenient digital options, points us to a longing for real-world human connection, and the love that people have for playing games with others in person. I argue here that these digital technologies people can use to connect lead to feelings of anomie that can be counteracted through in-person engagement and membership in gaming groups and communities. Therefore, this will be the focus of this research – to understand the way people living in modern-day North America seek out, and maintain, gaming groups and communities over long periods of time, often with strangers, with the end goal of playing a game they truly enjoy while forming close bonds and connections with others in gaming communities of practice.

To start, for the purposes of this project, tabletop gaming involves any gameplay that occurs within a group (2 people or more) and uses either a board, cards, miniatures, or pencil and paper. This definition encompasses many different styles of gameplay, but here I mean to look at one type of game more than any others – the tabletop RPG. Tabletop RPGs are collaborative experiences that include a game master (GM) and players coming together to work through a storyline (campaign) often as a group, to achieve some specific goal or to just play in a constructed world. These games include different gameplay styles such as wargaming, exploration, chance, strategy, and roleplaying. Understanding these games and how people participate in them requires one to immerse themselves in the gaming world. This does not only mean the actual playing of the games, but also in the hanging out that occurs around the phenomenon itself. Plainly put, tabletop gaming is not just people getting together to play a game but is made up of groups of game players who hang out, work, and play with and around games,
creating a gaming community of practice\(^3\). In the two years spent in the field, not once did I encounter a group that arrived to play a game and did only that. There was always catching up, sharing of stories, jokes, food or drink, and generally just an atmosphere of friendship and community participation.

Tabletop games are first and foremost a leisure activity, one that people take part in on their free time for pleasure. In this research project, I will come to focus on the topic of pleasure in leisure communities, as I see it as being imperative to understanding why and how people come to take part in these communities, and the meaning that is produced when they do so. Alongside this study of pleasure, I will also come to examine leisure in general, as it has come to play an important role in our lives in North America through its impacts on our identity construction and sociality. For many, careers are no longer one of the main identity building processes in our lives. Rather, leisure activities have come to have great impacts on our identities, as we celebrate our individuality and our freedom to choose what we do in our “spare” time. This of course will be problematized later as I examine what it is to take part in leisure activities in our current North American context and argue that leisure activities often involve high amounts of labour and the development of expertise. It is important to recognize at this point though that leisure activities have a large impact on identity construction and sociality.

Furthering the examination of tabletop games, I will look to the topics of fantasy storytelling and roleplaying in order to understand how people construct meaningful stories through tabletop game play, and how both fantasy storytelling and roleplaying impact identity

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construction. These topics will also come to impact examinations of gender, race, and class as they will show us both how normative forms of being exist in these spaces, and how involvement in these spaces can allow people to challenge these norms. It is the purpose of this research project to first understand tabletop RPGs and the communities of practice constructed around them in great depth, so that I may come to take this understanding and use it to impact theories of identity production, communities of practice, leisure and pleasure, and sociality.

I will argue throughout this dissertation that communities of practice as a concept outlined by Penelope Eckert (1989) can help us to understand the ways that tabletop game players come to make meaning in their lives, while also shaping the forms of interaction they engage in as they hang out and play games. Importantly, although most game players “hanging out” in game stores, community centres, libraries, restaurants, and their basements (or other areas of their homes) seem to be focused on the act of playing a game, they are also engaging in a community of practice. This community of practice carries with it complex forms of social interaction, norms, and conceptualizations of identity and personhood that shape their interactions, social identities, and relationships outside of the game itself. This means that just like many other areas of our social worlds people struggle with expressions of gender, race, and class. They struggle with belonging to a group and making meaningful relationships. They struggle with their identities and how to express them. In this dissertation I will therefore show the ways people address these struggles through belonging to a community of practice of tabletop gamers. At a time when the world increasingly exists online and interaction is found through the use of digital technologies, these game players are finding meaning through in-person interactions and storytelling as they engage in tabletop roleplaying games.
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTIONS

Historical and Ethnographic Context

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a realm called the Midwestern United States – specifically the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin – a group of friends gathered to forever alter the history of gaming. It wasn’t their intent to do so. They were tired of merely reading tales about worlds of magic, monsters, and adventure. They wanted to play in those worlds, rather than observe them.

The history of tabletop gaming can be rather difficult to follow, as humans have been playing games in various forms far back into the archeological record. As board games were often made of wood, and contained many small pieces, much of what is found suggests that there were many different board games being played throughout our past, but it is difficult to actually define what these games were. Many scholars cite Tafl (taefl, tabula) as the dominant early era board game of the Anglo-Saxons, but as Bayless suggests in his history of tabletop gaming, the diversity of game pieces found in archeological digs suggests that there were many different games being played by Anglo-Saxons. When looking at the early history of tabletop games, it is clear that Tafl is considered to be one of the earliest and most widespread games amongst the Anglo-Saxons, but as Bayless shows in their history of games in medieval Europe, Taefl is the name that was given to all board games by the Anglo-Saxons. This would be similar to how we currently consider “playing cards” to encompass a variety of games that all use a pack of 52 playing cards. It is clear then that the Anglo-Saxons were playing a variety of board games, as we can see in the archeological record, but these games they played have even earlier origins. To then look at the history of tabletop games, we must start with the Romans. We can then trace the

development of European games through until the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s.\(^5\)

Beginning with Hall and Forsyth’s work on early board games and their introduction to Britain and Ireland, we see that board games are understood to be cultural artifacts that were passed between interacting groups as a form of cross-cultural exchange. Games were not appearing independently in different cultures, but rather were being passed on, and then becoming popularized in those new places. The Romans passed on *Tautl* to the Anglo-Saxons, and this game (set of games) became quite popular from the 5th to the 11th century. Hall and Forsyth argue that we can follow the spread of board games along with the spread of literacy, showing that these games were transferred to new people as cultural transmitters.\(^6\) Games worked in this early period as a way for people to foster interaction with new peoples, and to teach them about their own cultures. They then provided a takeaway from those interactions that would stick with people as they continued on afterwards. As for the transmission of *Tautl* from the Romans to the Anglo-Saxons, the game maintained great popularity until the introduction of Chess in the 11th century. As we see in Ian Payne’s work on games of chance among the Anglo-Saxons, along with boards and game pieces, there have also been discoveries of dice which suggest the possibility of gambling amongst the Anglo-Saxons as well.\(^7\)

\(^5\) Mulvin, Lynda & Steven E. Sidebotham, “Roman Game Boards from Abu Sha’ar (Red Sea Coast, Egypt),” *Antiquity* 78 (2004)


Gaming was an important element of both Roman and Anglo-Saxon culture, as we can see these sites in the archeological record that are heavily littered with gaming paraphernalia.\(^8\) Along with this existence of game related artifacts in the archeological record in Europe, we can also see that gaming existed and held important cultural positions in Northern Africa, India, and Japan far back in the archeological record. The game *Wei Hai* from Japan (now called *GO*) dates back to approximately 3000 B.C.E., whereas the game *Chaturanga* is believed to have emerged in India around 500 B.C.E. These were both strategy-based board games, with *Chaturanga* even using a gridded board and game pieces that represent warriors and leaders. This represents some of the earliest wargaming found and shows that our interest in simulating war, fighting, and politics through the use of board games is not a recent phenomenon. *Chaturanga* was impactful in that it would have a great impact on the development of *Chess*. As Michael Sebbane shows in his work on Egyptian board gaming, finds indicate that games were popular as early as 7000 B.C.E. One game that is found quite commonly in the archeological record of this area is that of *Senet*, which was played continuously for over three thousand years, and is thought to have been reworked into the game *Tab* which is still played to this day.\(^9\) These games found in the early archeological record in Egypt suggest the important role that games played in the leisure lives of Canaanites.\(^10\) Not only are game boards and pieces found from this time, but there is also the existence of public spaces of play, where larger gameboards are found in what are understood to be public spaces. These boards are similar to those found in individual dwellings, only larger, which indicates that these may have been used for public play.


The existence of public gameplay as far back as 7000 B.C.E. helps us to understand the importance of gaming in community building and social cohesion throughout human history. As we look through the archeological record we can see these many instances of board games and other games of chance (dice), that point to games as a way of spending leisure time, as a form of community interaction, and for cross-cultural interaction. These games were largely strategy based, rather than chance based, and often related to war or political relations. Tafl was at first believed by game scholars and archeologists to be a strategy game where one player had to escape their king from the center of the board while the opposing player tried to capture them. This game style of having different objectives while being opposed to one another created an unequal standing between the players however, and this style of gameplay would lose out to new games being developed – such as Chess. Chess, of course, was an equally matched game, where both players had the same game pieces, objective, and starting positions. Chess was all around a more in-depth strategy game, and would become the most popular game in Europe from the 11th century on.¹¹

Following the introduction of Chess, board games came to be largely focused on this strategy-based style. Chess has the longest running history of any current games in the West, and has clearly had great cultural impact ever since its introduction in the 11th century. Wargames and strategy-based games such as Chess would be used to teach military tactics and strategizing, while also being played for leisure. Later, Chess, and other strategy-based board games similar to it, would become less desirable for military strategy training, which would lead to the

development of the game _Koenigspiel_ in 1664. This game was specifically designed for developing and training war strategies and would become an important part of military training in Prussia. Along with this game came the development of _War Chess_ in 1780 and _Kriegspiel_ in 1811, leading to the growing popularization of using wargames for military training and strategy. In the 19th century, the game _Tactics_ would take this board game style, and would lay a grid over a map in order to allow players to manage movement of pieces more accurately. As these games became more and more popular for military training, they also began to be noticed by those outside of the military. 12

As these wargames began to gain public interest, the use of miniatures in gaming was popularized in the game _Naval Wargame_ in 1903, with miniatures that were designed to look like what they were representing. This caught the eye of a prolific writer, H. G. Wells, who would popularize wargaming for the general public through his book _Little Wars_ in 1913, in which he outlined the use of miniatures in wargaming, and wrote a set of rules based on other wargames that could be taken up and used by the general consumer.13 This new style of tabletop gaming took the strategy style play that existed in games such as _Chess_ and added in an element of roleplay where the players were looked at as military generals commanding great armies. While these wargames were being developed in Europe, another style of game was becoming popular in North America – the family board game.

It was the mid 19th century, and two brothers, W. & S.B. Ives began to print and sell both board games and card games in great enough quantity that they could reach a large audience. Playing cards were very popular in America, because of their use in gambling. This association

with gambling meant that families tended to shy away from them as games for their children however, and instead looked for other games that they could play that would help to reinforce strong Christian morals.\footnote{Whitehill, B., Games of America in the Nineteenth Century. \textit{Board Game Studies}, 9, (2015): 65–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004} Parents therefore began to look for board games that provided fun ways for children to learn about morality and modes of being a good member of society. One example of these morality-based games was \textit{Mansion of Happiness}, which saw players attempting to achieve the highest level of happiness through their performance of morally good deeds. Other games of this era included those focused on education, those that reinforced patriotism, and historical games that helped to teach people of certain important historical events. These were all traditional board games, but rather than using dice as we understand most board games to do now, these games used teetotums (spinning tops with numbers on their sides). At this time dice, similar to playing cards, were associated with gambling, and were therefore examples of immoral behavior that should not be included. It was later in the 19th century that two publishing groups – The Mcgloughlin Publishers and Milton Bradley – moved away from morally oriented games and instead focused on producing games of pure enjoyment.\footnote{Whitehill, B. (2015).}

This era of game development/publishing began the mass adoption of board games in North America, which continues to be popular to this day. Games such as \textit{Candyland}, \textit{Snakes and Ladders}, \textit{Life}, and \textit{Monopoly} are among the most popular family board games in North America, and one would be hard pressed to find an adult who has not played, or at least seen, one of these games. These games were all born out of the tradition of familial board games and introduced many generations to tabletop board gaming. This style of gaming, in conjunction with the war and strategy gaming discussed above, creates a history of gaming that we can see to have
direct affects on modern tabletop gaming. To continue this examination of the history of tabletop gaming it is important to look at one company in particular that had a large impact on the gaming market, and specifically on the wargames that influenced *Dungeons & Dragons* – Avalon Hill.

As wargaming began to grow in popularity amongst the general public, some board game companies decided to step into the wargaming market. In 1952, Charles Swann Roberts II created the game company Avalon Hill which would focus on the production and printing of board wargames. In 1954 Avalon Hill released their first game *Tactics* which would go on to sell 2000 copies over the next 3 years. For their next release in 1958 the company released *Gettysburg* for the 100th anniversary of the battle.\(^{16}\) This game would garner much greater success, selling 140,000 copies by 1963. With these early board wargames, Avalon Hill developed some key gameplay mechanics on controlling armies on a map, and using dice rolls to determine damage, that would stay with wargames well into the computer age. As Avalon Hill began to experience more success, they decided to release a wargaming magazine that would help them tell potential customers of upcoming releases and expansions, as well as showcasing columns on strategy and design. An important part of this magazine was the “Opponents Wanted” section, that allowed players to post ads for competitors for free. As people began to look for others to play against in their area, local play groups began to form that would advertise in the magazine creating communities of wargamers. For many however, living in areas without many players was common, and to tackle this problem play-by-mail kits were created by Avalon Hill to allow players to play games with people across the United States. It was at this time that

the community of wargamers would begin to connect with one-another, and this would lead to the first wargaming convention in 1967.\textsuperscript{17}

As wargaming began to grow in popularity, groups sprouted up across the United States that attempted to create a community of players that could share ideas, tactics, and design ideas, while also connecting potential players with one-another. In 1966, the United States Continental Army Command (USCAC) was founded by William Speer. Later that year Gary Gygax would join, and would become an important member, helping to organize conventions. The next year, the group would change its name to the International Federation of Wargaming (IFW) and in July would hold its first convention. Unfortunately, only 75 people showed up to the first convention, which had been promoted by Avalon Hill in their magazine. Following the failed convention the group was on the brink of dispersal, but the Vice President of the group Scott Duncan stepped up to take over and attempted to revitalize the group. A convention was planned for the following year, and to this Gygax donated $15 of the $50 needed to book a venue. This donation was made on the condition that the convention be held in Gygax’s home-town of Lake Geneva. Along with his involvement in this group, Gygax was also rapidly writing for different wargame publications, submitting articles on strategy, design, play groups, settings, and war campaigns.\textsuperscript{18} In August 1969 the second wargame convention was held in Lake Geneva, now called GenCon (The Geneva Convention), and it was at this event that Gygax and Dave Arneson would first begin discussing plans to collaborate on a game together.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} Peterson, J. (2012): 27-33.
\textsuperscript{19} Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson are the original creators of Dungeons & Dragons.
In 1970, the International Wargamer magazine held a poll to ask readers who had done the most for wargames in the last five years, and Gary Gygax was considered to be that figure. At the next GenCon Gygax would meet Donald S. Lowry, who had recently created a game publishing company – Guidon Games. Gygax became the editor of their line of wargame guides, and would soon release a game under the company titled *Chainmail* in March of 1971. This would be Gygax’s first game release, and this game implemented a new system of armour and weaponry management which would pioneer customization in wargames and in future roleplaying games. Along with this new set of game rules was an included set of fantasy rules, that were described as “rules for Tolkien fantasy games” and was therefore the first published game to combine medieval warfare and fantasy elements – allowing players to relive famous fantasy battles, and to create their own campaigns in these fantasy settings. This ruleset included fantasy figures, magic spells, and magic items allowing players many new elements to add to their home wargames and campaigns. Chainmail was met with a mixed reception, with many players being upset by the inclusion of fantasy figures that were much more powerful than any soldier could be. The debate carried on in wargaming group newsletters, with some people enjoying the fantasy supplements, and others being completely opposed to it. Gygax would later state that he believed it would be some time before the fantasy elements were accepted in the wargaming community.\(^20\) Overall this inclusion of fantasy elements would change wargaming, and would lead to the creation of *Blackmoor*, Arneson’s fantastical medieval wargames campaign, which is considered to be a direct ancestor of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

During the early 1970s wargames were undergoing important changes such as the inclusion of these fantastical elements, but there was another important inclusion that would directly impact the creation of *D&D* – campaigns. To this point, most wargames saw two opposing sides attempting to defeat the other, but with *Chainmail, Black Moor*, and other fantastical inclusions, the campaign setting would be adopted by wargamers in a more significant way. These campaigns would bring the inclusion of objectives in the games, along with storylines and multiple win conditions other than destroy the enemy. Arneson’s *Black Moor* campaign reached Gygax, who quickly asked for a ruleset, which Arneson handwrote for him. Gygax had been using a referee in his wargame campaigns as it allowed an objective outsider to make judgement calls. Gygax took Arneson’s rules and constructed a largely independent system in the *Castle Greyhawk* setting, attempting to do so long-distance with Arneson. This was a struggle as communication took some time, and so Gygax took many liberties when creating the ruleset. What made this game so different from everything else was that players were encouraged to take on the role of someone who existed in the game world. No longer were people wargaming by overseeing all the actions that occurred on the board simultaneously. Rather, players were a part of the story, and actively took part in performing a role as they worked through the storyline. This development in the world of game design would forever change tabletop gaming, allowing for the combination of board wargaming and interactive storytelling. The game was released by Tactical Studies Research (TSR) in 1974, with an initial 1000 copies being sold at $3.00 each. 21

Over the next 10 years, TSR would be very successful with its *Dungeons & Dragons* games. Unfortunately, the company struggled in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, and in 1996

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after a series of publishing and printing problems, was bought by Wizards of the Coast. TSR had separated from Gygax in the mid 1980s, and this had led to a long period of Gygax being sued by TSR for copyright infringement. In order to set things straight, Wizards of the Coast CEO Peter Adkinson wrote cheques to Gygax, Arneson, and Gygax’s ex-wife Mary Jo, in exchange for a “clean bill of health on the intellectual property”.22 This would open up a collaboration with Gygax and would lead to the creation of the 3rd edition of Dungeons & Dragons. Along with this release came the creation of the Open Gaming Licence (OGL) in 2000 which would allow companies to produce adventures and materials for the 3rd edition without the need to pay royalties. This supercharged the gaming industry and lead to the creation of Pathfinder by the company Paizo, which would have a great impact on the TTRPG environment. Our current game market is booming, with Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, and other TTRPGs experiencing a resurgence in popularity.

Modern Tabletop Gaming

With the development of Dungeons & Dragons game designers began to branch out and construct games in a variety of settings, universes, and styles. Games such as Tunnels and Trolls (1975), Traveller (1977), Melee (1977), and Rune Quest (1978) would all be developed to allow players to roleplay in different settings with different rules. Games such as Traveller would allow players to roleplay in a sci-fi setting, and would be more open in their rules to allow players the freedom to construct any story they may be able to come up with. Following this style of open game, developers also began to construct RPGs that were based on popular literary works such as Call of Cthulhu (1991) as well as licensed games based on popular film franchises. For some time tabletop RPGs were very popular in the gaming world, and this

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popularity lasted until the mid 1980s. After this, tabletop RPGs remained popular among dedicated gamers, with there currently being approximately 2 million regular tabletop role players in the United States. With this brief history of the development of tabletop RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, we can now move to look at what a typical game of *Dungeons & Dragons* may look like, and how players come to interact in virtual game worlds in meaningful ways.

In his important work on tabletop roleplaying games (specifically *Dungeons & Dragons*) Gary Alan Fine introduced academia and non-gamers to what it is like to play a tabletop RPG, and what goes into preparing a campaign, being a part of a group, and roleplaying in a fantasy virtual world. Learning to play *Dungeons & Dragons* is very different from the average board game or card game, as players must read a rulebook, prepare a character, and understand at least a little about the world they will be playing in. As Fine states, “members collectively construct histories and biographies for their society and characters” and these are then continually referred back to throughout the playing of the game. The average D&D rulebook is approximately 250 pages, with sections on how to make a character, how to fight, how to purchase and use materials, spell-casting, and general guidelines for how to play. With the ability to do so much in the game, the rulebook has to be detailed enough to answer questions any player may have at any time. Therefore, unlike the average board game where one player will read the rulebook and then quickly teach the other players how to play, with D&D all players read their own copies of the rulebook and then come together to play. This first step to playing *D&D* is often what turns many away, as the immediate time requirement for a starting player is quite high.

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As the players prepare themselves for general gameplay, there is another important role that must be prepped for as well. A typical *D&D* game is made up of 3-6 players and one dungeon master (DM) (in other RPGs this person is often named the Game Master (GM)). The DM organizes the game and is often in charge of constructing the world that the game will take place in. This is not always the case, as there are prewritten campaigns that people can go on, as well as some groups who make the worlds together, but overall the DM is in charge of mediating the gameplay and directing the players to some extent. As players go through the game, the DM will set the scenes they are in, will roleplay any non-player characters (NPC) they encounter, and will provide difficulty levels for any skill checks they attempt to make (these occur any time players try to accomplish something that requires them to use their character abilities – jumping over a gap, making a potion, fighting, climbing, or getting information out of an NPC). Finally, the DM is capable of reinforcing, creating, or changing any rules they would like before or during gameplay. As a person decides to take on the role of DM they therefore take on an immense amount of work, as they must be well-versed in the rules of the game, the world the game is taking place in, and in the dynamics of the group itself. A *D&D* game cannot exist without a DM, making their role extremely important and at some points stressful.

With this brief introduction to the different positions people may inhabit as they play a game of *D&D*, I think it is important here to look at the construction of characters followed by what it actually looks like to play a game of *D&D*. Beginning with character construction, players are expected to come to the table with a well thought out character that has a race, class, background, and has a backstory that is in-depth and relates to the world the character will be played in. Players are given a list of races, classes, and backgrounds to choose from, and these all have different abilities, behaviours, and looks that will affect how the player roleplays
throughout the game. The construction of a character is similar to writing a character for a movie or book, as the character has to fit into the virtual world. The player then must also perform an act called “rolling up” where they roll a series of dice to determine their character’s stats (their unique abilities that are used to overcome different challenges throughout the game). It is the combination of the character’s background traits, and their statistics, that decides how the character will behave in the game world, and therefore how the player should attempt to roleplay as them. Therefore, each character is unique, and the way they are played will also be unique, based on the person who is roleplaying them.

The gameplay of a regular session of D&D is fairly simple in theory, as the DM will set a scene, the players will dictate what their characters are doing, and the DM will determine whether or not they are successful in their endeavors. Often, the DM will be largely absent from the actual gameplay, as they sit back and watch the characters interact in the world they are presenting. As the players act, a story is formed that is often recounted by the DM and recorded by the players as notes or in memory. Many players, and DMs, take quick notes throughout the game, in order to remember what happened, or to record important pieces of information that may be useful later. Finally, there are battle sequences, which require much more involvement of the DM as they must referee the fights while also playing the role of any enemies the players encounter. Battle has a precise set of rules that outline how it is to occur, and this is followed more closely by the DM and the players than any other set of rules in the game. This leads the game to feel like two separate games occurring at once – a roleplaying game and a wargame. It is clear in these moments that the game was born out of the combination of fantasy storytelling and tabletop wargaming.
RPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons are made up of two main elements – roleplaying and wargaming – and so to understand them in greater detail I think it is important to break these apart for a short time, to understand these elements on their own. Wargaming has many elements to it, but largely can be seen as a mixed game of strategy and chance. Players must use strategy to position themselves well in relation to the other players and enemies, and they must also utilize weapons, items, and spells in thoughtful ways in order to be the most effective in their fighting. But in the end, players are at the mercy of dice rolls, which decide whether or not every action they make is successful. Players may be skilled strategists, but a series of poor dice results can lead even them to fail in battle. This element is fun for most players, but can also be rather frustrating, as many of the players I interacted with would explain. On the other hand is the roleplaying aspect of the game. It is this element that we must look at in greater depth, as it has much to teach us about identity production, meaning making, and why players continue to take part in tabletop roleplaying games rather than just wargames.

In their work on language games Jonne Arjoranta explains that roleplaying games consist of four main elements – “a game world, participants, shared narrative power, and interaction.” These four main elements as outlined by Arjoranta are useful in an analysis of tabletop roleplaying as they point to the importance of the game world and shared narrative power among the players. Both participants and interaction are two elements that are common across most tabletop games, whereas the game world and shared narrative power are unique in many ways (in at least their level of importance) to roleplaying games. The game world is quite obviously important, as it is the space that people interact in, and where all characters are understood to

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exist. A flat or unimaginative game world can lead to dull gameplay and generic storytelling. As game worlds come to be more developed however, they provide players with incentive to engage in the world in new and exciting ways, while also driving the construction of a unique story. It is this unique story that separates tabletop RPGs from other tabletop games. Although many board games have interesting and detailed game worlds, they are often unable to change at the whims of the players. This leads them to become stale overtime, as players are forced to play in the same game world over and over again. The fact that the game world is constructed by the DM means that it is unique to that person’s imagination, keeping the game novel and inventive for players, while also providing DMs with a creative outlet.

The second element however is what I will argue is of greatest importance to making tabletop RPGs unique – shared narrative power. Shared narrative power refers to the way that players of a tabletop RPG work together to create a story through the playing of the game. All players are equally involved (hopefully) in describing their actions in the game, and in making decisions on where their characters will go in their adventure. This is what separates this style of game from so many others, as players all write the story together and so none of them knows exactly what the outcome of the story will be – including the DM. Just as players collectively construct their characters’ backstories and histories as Fine shows, they also produce the storyline of the game as they go.25 It is this level of creative expression and involvement that tends to keep players engaged and coming back to play more. It is as if every gaming session is a writing exercise, thus players have a creative outlet along with the gaming elements such as fighting. In her work on fantasy roleplaying Marinka Copier argues that players are constructing temporary worlds that create inter-textual relationships between these imaginary fantasy realms,

their daily lived experiences, history, religion, etc., and that to understand the importance of this style of gaming we must examine the relationships that form between these phenomenon. It is the ability of these tabletop RPGs to provide players with so many meaningful interactions that are embedded in their lives in complex ways that makes these games unique and interesting to study.

Research Design

This research study took place over a period of 18 months, where I, as the only researcher, engaged in participant observation with tabletop gaming groups in the Ottawa, Ontario area. As much of this research is meant to understand how people who play tabletop games come to produce both new, and already existent, identities through their engagement in tabletop gaming, it was imperative that I came to know the participants in great depth. Understanding their individual life-histories gave great insight into their current circumstances and how/why they engage in tabletop gaming and why it is, or is not, important to them and their identity production. Along with getting to know these participants in great depth, it was also important to understand their storytelling in the game setting, as I have argued above that this storytelling is what makes tabletop roleplaying games different from many other types of engagement with games. Studying these stories required an understanding of linguistic anthropological methods, and an understanding of the interpretation of narratives. In this section then I will outline the methods that I used when performing this research, as well as how I will engage with this data gathered throughout the research process.

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I began the fieldwork with the attendance of weekly gaming events in the Ottawa area. Throughout Ottawa and the surrounding towns there are dedicated game stores that host tabletop gaming nights where players of many different game types can go and play, watch, or generally just “hang out” in a game-oriented environment. Although not all gamers spend a lot of time at game stores, these stores are an important part of many gamer’s lives, and provide an easily accessible way to meet tabletop roleplaying gamers. Not only did the game nights provide me with an introduction to people who play these games, but they were also instrumental in building an understanding of where people in this community go to hang out, and how they interact with each other while they are there. My time in these gaming stores was therefore both a method of gathering participants, and a form of participant observation as I took part in these gaming events and interacted with the community of gamers that exists in these spaces. At many of these game stores and events I became a familiar face, and got involved with event planning and community building practices – such as hosting my own game as a DM. As William F. Hanks shows us, lived spaces are both “the object and vehicle of experience” and therefore understanding these spaces was imperative to understanding participant roles and the meaning produced through interaction in these spaces. 27

It is important to discuss participant observation and the role of an anthropologist in the research process in greater depth here, as this was the main form of data collection, and participant observation takes different forms depending on the researcher who is actually performing the research. Much of my understanding of participant observation and field notes has come from the work of Judith Okely. Okely has been influential in her work on anthropologists and their methods in the field, showing us that the recording of field notes,

although a useful exercise, is inefficient as a method by itself as the researcher is incapable of knowing everything that will be important for later analysis while they are in the field.\textsuperscript{28} In this way, Okely argues, anthropologists become walking archives, holding experiences that they may recall as forms of data, even if they were not physically recorded during the field note writing process. As Okely stresses, anthropologists do not exist in a vacuum, devoid of influence while they perform their research. We must then recognize the impact that other’s actions and visions of the topic have, and include these impacts when analyzing our notes and experiences during the writing process.\textsuperscript{29}

Participant observation is often described as “hanging out” but of course it is much more than that. As we spend time with our participants we come to understand their lived spaces, their relationships with others in their communities, the norms and roles that people adhere to in those spaces and communities/cultures, and how these phenomenon affect the people who exist in these spaces. Participant observation is an engaged form of ‘hanging out’ where we must be cognizant of these phenomenon and active in our analysis of these phenomenon through the use of theory. The anthropologist fieldworker must be comfortable with role-switching then, as they strive to become a member of the communities and cultures they study, while also understanding their role as outsider, researcher, and observer in order to analyze their findings. To then link this theory of participant observation and fieldwork to this current project, it was important for me to engage in the game playing process, taking part in tabletop RPG campaigns in various roles (observer, player, and dungeon master or game master) and spending time ‘hanging out’ in game stores, at conventions, and with game players outside of these specific gaming events (at their


homes or other places they spend their time). Field notes were used to record ideas, observations, and general experiences from these times spent with participants, and along with these field notes I also used audio recordings to capture gameplay and the interactions that take place around the actual gaming event. It is this combination of field notes, audio recordings, and lived experiences that will help in producing a detailed account of the tabletop gaming community in Ottawa.

Along with participant observation, interviews also proved to perform an important role in this research project. Interviews were used to gather personal life-histories from participants in order to provide this project with a greater level of depth in regards to the impact gaming communities of practice have on identity production and feelings of connectedness. Interviews were largely unstructured, as I attempted to allow the participants to dictate the direction they wanted to go. Questions were used to prompt discussions about gaming, the person’s home life, their childhood, what they do with their spare time, their work life, and important relationships in order to come to know them in an intimate and personalized way. Though the term ‘interview’ is used to describe these interactions, they were much more conversational instances where participants could talk to me about their personal lives and anything else they might like to include. This was a secondary form of interaction with my participants, but was important for adding depth to my understandings of the impact of gaming, and gaming communities of practice, on the individuals who take part in these practices.

Another important part of this research was the recording of the group storytelling process that takes place during a tabletop roleplaying game. Gameplay was recorded using an audio recorder in order to be able to reproduce the stories verbatim. Along with this, my field notes will help to provide context to these stories including explanations of players’ physical
actions as they took part in group storytelling. As this form of storytelling is both physically and verbally expressive, the combination of these recording methods is meant to help grasp the range of experience occurring in these sessions.

In their work on oral storytelling, Soe Marlar Lwin explains that oral storytelling is a performance, one that is created through voice intonation, physical action, and visual representation, and therefore the performance aspect is not an addition to the storytelling, but an embedded and imperative aspect that must be perceived and understood to fully grasp the story.\(^{30}\) The analysis of this style of storytelling then requires us to be attentive to both the verbal and physical expressions that make up the story. In order to achieve this, I will be using methods borrowed from linguistic anthropology, in order to understand specific speech acts, as well as speech and how it is influenced by context, physical expression, and other visual elements.

Studying speech in this way requires a certain level of comfort with linguistic methods, which I have come to develop through an examination of linguistic, and linguistic anthropological methods. As Silverstein states, “a speech event consists of some sequence of speech behaviours in which some speaker or speakers signal to some hearer or hearers by means of a system of phonetic sign vehicles called speech messages or utterances.”\(^{31}\) As Silverstein then goes on to show, we must be aware of sociological impacts on the speech events, previous speech events, gestural or kinesthetic communication, and role distinction when recording speech events in an attempt to analyze them later.


Silverstein’s definition of speech events and his explanation on how to properly listen to/observe them helps to calibrate a researcher (in this case myself) to be prepared to study human interaction through speech event analysis. This style of linguistic analysis has been termed “multi-modal” as it uses different modes (or boundaries) to observe and analyze interactions. Multi-modality will be an extremely important method of linguistic analysis of oral storytelling in this study, as it should help to capture the multiple ways that game players collaboratively tell a story in a game setting. Bezemer and Jewitt argue that in linguistics, modes of communication other than spoken language are being understood to have a greater impact on speech events than ever before. Due to this, along with my field notes and audio recordings, I also used photography to record gameplay in order to be able to return to these events visually and analyze aspects of the event such as peoples’ gaze, gestures, and appearance. To further this analysis, I will also draw influence from William F. Hanks, and his work on relational approaches to linguistics. From Hanks, we can see that understanding situational, circumstantial, and interpersonal forces is important to analyze any given speech event, as, according to Hanks, it is the perspective that creates the object in the study of language. Therefore, the life-history interviews and participant observation discussed above will help in developing an understanding of these forces, furthering my ability to analyze the speech events that are recorded during game play.

The combination of participant observation, life-history interviews, audio recording, photography, and linguistic analysis have all been included in this project in order to create a diverse understanding of tabletop gameplay, the players who take part in tabletop games, and the

community of gamers in general. The research methods discussed above are an attempt to approach the study of tabletop games from multiple angles, as it is difficult to gather diverse information pertaining to many aspects of peoples lives when performing research. It is impossible to understand every aspect of a person’s or group’s life through a year of fieldwork, but with the variety of research methods included here, a piece of the greater image should be achieved and will provide a unique way of looking at tabletop gaming as it exists in the early twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Tabletop roleplaying gaming is about much more than playing a fantasy or science fiction game and includes important elements of community involvement, friendship building, identity production and the accumulation of social capital. As players join gaming groups they are becoming members of communities of practice that have long-lasting impacts on their social worlds and their sense of self. Members become closely involved with the other players as they see them regularly and share elements of their lives with one another. For the people involved in this research, being a member of a gaming group went beyond showing up to a shared location once a week to play a game. The members shared elements of their lives and become entwined as their connections grew. Many would end up forming friendships, business connections, and in a few cases romantic relationships. It is this that leads me to argue that people involved in tabletop gaming communities of practice are a diverse group of individuals looking for physical world (as opposed to virtual or in-game) connections with others in order to combat feelings of disconnection and anomie that arise from online interactions and deep-involvement with digital technologies.
Many of the meetup gaming groups I joined were made up of members who did not know any other member of the group before they joined. These were people who joined gaming groups they found from in-store and/or online advertisements and discussions. Sites such as Meetup.com, Reddit.com, and Facebook.com (along with many others) were all used by participants to find groups that were meeting in the city to play games. They would show up to one of these groups on the date listed and would join a play group. This very act of moving out into one’s community to find others with similar interests to connect with is made easier through the use of digital technologies as there are many online resources for fostering physical world connections. However, the use of digital technologies has also made it easier to avoid physical world interactions as we can feel “connected” to others through text, phone, and video chat. Playing games online is also very popular and allows people to socialize with other game players from the comfort of their own homes. Therefore, as people in these communities were actively going out into their communities to meet strangers and play roleplaying games with them we can see that there is meaning being made there and a drive to go and have physical world interactions that outweighs the ability to stay home and interact online. I argue this is due to digital technologies’ inability to satisfy our need for human connection and interaction. At a time when we have so many ways to connect with others virtually, we still desire to do so physically and gaming communities of practice work as an important way for people to do this.
Chapter 2 – Play, Fantasy, and Worldness

Entering a New League

It was late March, a few months after I had begun playing regular weekly sessions with the University Campaign, when I began looking for more groups to interact with. Having talked to various individuals about where they play, and how they meet people, I decided to go to a few game stores and see what weekly events they had that involved D&D. Having known some of the game stores in the city already, I got in my car and drove 25 minutes outside of town to the suburb of Orleans. The game store I was looking for at this time was “Kessel Run” and was often talked about in gaming circles as a great place to go for board games, card games, and roleplaying games. I had come here a few months before and chatted to the store manager Jerir Hokhul, who was a long time D&D player, with interests in many aspects of “geek” culture. Jerir had been playing D&D with the same group, on and off, for over 20 years and had told me of the D&D Adventurer’s League which was a drop-in group that met weekly in the store. I did not really know much about how this worked, as from my understanding campaigns required members to be continuously involved, so I was quite interested to see how players could drop in and out without breaking up the campaign.

After driving through rush hour traffic, all leaving the city to the suburbs for the evening, I pulled into the parking lot of Kessel Run and saw the store front, easily discernable due to the life-sized Storm Trooper statue standing in the front window. I walked in and was immediately greeted by one of the two employees at the front of the store. They were standing and talking to a customer, who I would come to know as a regular, about Warhammer. The store was set up in

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33 Warhammer is a miniatures tactical tabletop war-game where players buy, assemble, and paint miniature models and then amass these models into units, battalions, and armies in order to fight other plays in various fantasy and sci-fi settings. Warhammer is often considered to be one of the most, if not the most, expensive hobby/game people can get into in the gaming space.
two sections, which was quite common for the gaming stores I would come to visit throughout my time in the field. The store had a glass countertop display case running along the right-hand side of the store from the front door to about the halfway point of the store. The display case had miniatures, *Magic: The Gathering* cards, and other geek culture related items that many people spent time talking about and looking at when they came into the store to look around, game, or actually buy something. The rest of the front-half of the store was made up of shelving units on the wall and on racks dividing the store into aisles, and these contained dice, cards, bags, books, miniatures, and a large selection of board games. Halfway into the store space however, the layout changes drastically, as there are tables with chairs set up covering the other half of the floor space where players can play *Magic: The Gathering, Dungeons & Dragons, Warhammer*, or any other game they would like. At the very back of the store was a bathroom and a storage area for old *Magic: The Gathering* cards and various other items.

After browsing the merchandise for a few minutes, largely waiting for a break in the conversation between the store employees and the regular at the counter, I approached and asked about the D&D night that was supposed to be running. The employees told me that the game usually started around 6:00 pm, but that none of the usual players had shown up yet. I went and sat down at the back of the store and waited anxiously for someone to show up. Just then a man about my age (mid 30s) with long hair in a ponytail and a goatee came walking to the back of the store carrying a few bags. He introduced himself as Blordom Firewhirl, and that he was the DM for the Adventurer’s League (AL). After introducing myself and why I was there, and a few exchanged jokes about playing games for research, he explained more about how these sessions worked.
The average AL session lasted 3 to 4 hours, and used a log sheet to track your development, which was associated with both your, and your DM’s DCI number, allowing you to drop in and out of any AL session, anywhere in the world. A DCI number is an individualized code given to players by Wizards of the Coast (the producers of *Magic: The Gathering*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and many other games). This code is used whenever you take part in any Wizards of the Coast sanctioned tournament, and allows them to track players around the world, and give them points for participation in different events that can be used on their website. In the case of the AL it was used to ensure positive participation and to keep players from cheating (by advancing their characters outside of the campaign) by enforcing bans on players found guilty of cheating or socially unacceptable behaviour.

Blordom went on to inform me that on average there were 6 players in the group, and that they were quite regularly in attendance with only minor changes in personnel from time to time. As well, there was another group that met at the store, but they did not always show up. Finally, I was also made aware that it was “Modern Night” for *Magic: The Gathering* players, and so it could get loud in the store sometimes. Just as he was explaining this, Tivaumvit Vryavzivzomi, a regular player in the group, came walking to the back of the store with his binder. Dressed in construction clothes (including a bright orange shirt with reflective strips on it) and heavy work boots, with disheveled hair, Tivaumvit sat down at the table and introduced himself. He was an installer for a cable company and came straight from work to the store on Wednesdays. Tivaumvit was a large man, somewhat intimidating, but with a friendly smile, and a silly attitude that quickly disarmed those around him. He joked about going to school to study games, and

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34 *Magic: The Gathering* has a variety of formats for gameplay, with game stores often running different *Magic* nights focused on each of the popular formats.
then quickly started talking about the group, and how the games went. Later, Tivaumvit and his wife would become close friends of mine, inviting my family to his house for dinners and parties with their children.

As the other members of the group came in, I introduced myself and we all sat down to play. I had brought a character sheet, with a pre-made character, so that I could jump right into the game with them. For the first hour of the game the players took turns describing aspects of the campaign, giving me tidbits of backstory to help catch me up to where they were so far. This came to be quite common for me when starting to play with an established group, as often players would revel in retelling their past exploits, and the dangerous or ridiculous situations they had made it through. These stories often straddle the line between game world and physical world experiences, often blurring this line as more time passes between the original experience and the retelling. This occurs as players will recount experiences and not explain whether they were acting in character or not, leaving the listener to either assume, ask for clarification, or simply take the story as an indistinguishable set of game world/physical world experiences. The construction of these fantasy worlds that players engage with in TTRPGs takes a great deal of work for the GM who runs the game, and includes elements of story writing, game development, and “encounter” building – the act of planning for in-game encounters with monsters, non-player characters (NPCs), traps, puzzles, dungeons, etc. These elements are put together, along with the players’ characters to develop the fantasy or sci-fi world that these TTRPGs are played “in”.

In this chapter I will undertake an examination of fantasy worlds and the way we play in and around them through games. Games and play have been connected to the extent that we often understand all interaction with games to be play. This will be problematized here as I will develop a notion of play to help understand the ways that we can switch into and out of play as
we engage in a tabletop RPG. Play, as I will come to show, is not solely an act, but is a disposition that leads to us engaging with our surroundings, with our worlds, in unique ways. Understanding this switch in and out of play also requires us to look to fantasy, worldness, and finally escapism to examine the ways people come to use these spaces to interact in, to build new identities, and to create meaningful narratives. It is important to recognize that being able to “leave” the physical world and enter a fictional or virtual one has impacts on the individuals doing so. Frame analysis will help our understandings here as we can see that games are made up of multiple frames of interaction that people switch between depending on the performances they intend to display and the forms of game play they are currently engaging in. I will turn then to look at fantasy and the interests we have in it. Why are we so drawn to these stories and worlds that are both similar to our own, while having important elements that mark them as quite different? These fantasy game worlds provide us with benefits both socially and psychologically, and understanding these can help us to understand more of why people seek out gaming experiences like these.

**Fantasy World Building**

To undertake a description of the fantasy world building process we will need to look specifically at a few examples of fantasy worlds and how they are developed. Following this we can look at how people use them/engage with them in various ways. I use a few terms when describing these settings including “physical world” – the world our physical bodies reside in that we navigate on a daily basis and in which most of our in-person social interactions occur in. This physical world is the world people generally consider themselves to be in at any given moment and is opposed to/separate from virtual worlds, fantasy worlds, and other constructed worlds of the mind. The “game world” then can be seen as a world where our gameplay exists, the world that any given game calls into existence when players agree that they will play a game.
This can be as simple as the capitalist paradise of *Monopoly* where players buy property and charge each other exorbitant rates to “stay” at those properties, or as detailed as the *Warhammer* universe where sci-fi and fantasy-based armies engage in total war with in-depth storylines developed through paperback novels. What is important is that these worlds only exist if the players agree that they will play the game in that form. A group of players can play *Monopoly* or *Warhammer* without considering the worlds that the game takes place in, and can instead simply roll dice, employ strategy, and attempt to defeat the other players. However, game worlds come into existence when the players engaging in the game agree that they will be actively playing the roll of characters in the game world, and perform as though they were in said world.

When individuals act in a game world they are then interacting in what Silverstein (2005) explains to be *Chronotopes*, “denoting the temporally and spatially particular envelope in the narrated universe of social space-time in which and through which, in emplotment, narrative characters move.”35 As these worlds continue to be developed by players they come to develop a sense of “worldness”. This worldness is the sense that arises when players feel as though they are actually interacting in a world separate, or apart, from the world we normally inhabit – the physical world. This worldness allows us the chance to behave differently, to present ourselves differently, to create new narratives, norms, and identities to be enacted in this world. The development of these worlds allows us further chances to move back and forth in an act of frame switching where we jump into and out of the game world, often happening rapidly as players play a game. It is this act of fantasy game world engagement that we will then come to examine in this chapter, as we see players engage in a variety of fantasy TTRPG settings in various ways.

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The first fantasy game world we will look at here is that of “The Tomb of Annihilation” – a game world developed by Wizards of the Coast as a “campaign module” for the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D 5e). Campaign modules are pre-written adventures for TTRPGs that a DM can use to plan a campaign. These come prepared with a developed world, storyline, and a set of NPCs, monsters, locations, dungeons, etc., that the DM can use to run their D&D 5e game. Modules also work as a way for *Wizards of the Coast* to further monetize their game system, and supply players with worlds that are ready to play – allowing them to get into gameplay with less fantasy world development time. Campaign modules often follow a generalized format, with sections of the book dedicated to the “main quest” and other sections for extra detail about the world itself, the monsters and NPCs, new spells or items that exist in this setting, maps for all of the locations, and much more. Here I provide the first few sections of the introduction to help show how these worlds are constructed to provide some detail, but also to allow the DM to make the setting their own to some extent.

The books often start off with a brief introduction to the world to provide the DM with a general idea of what this world has to offer. The introduction for the “Tomb of Annihilation” campaign module reads as thus:

**INTRODUCTION**

Something evil is trapping the souls of the dead and draining life from all who have been raised from death by magic. This worldwide "death curse" not only prevents the raising of the dead but also causes creatures that were previously raised from the dead to wither and die. The source of this death curse lies in a trap-riddled tomb hidden beneath a lost city in the depths of a vast jungle.

*Tomb of Annihilation* is a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure that takes place on the peninsula of Chult in the Forgotten Realms. Chult is a tropical wilderness composed mostly of jungles, plateaus, impassable mountains, and belching volcanoes. You can substitute a different jungle setting, changing location names as needed. Alternative D&D settings include the Amedio Jungle of Oerth, the Savage Coast of Mystara, the jungles of Xen'drik on Eberron, or a comparable setting on your home campaign world. This adventure is designed to
begin with a party of four to six 1st-level characters, who should advance to 11th level or higher by the adventure's conclusion.\footnote{Wizards of the Coast (2017). \textit{Tomb of Annihilation}. Hasbro SA, Rue Emile Books, Pg 5.}

In this introduction the DM is offered a brief explanation of the fantasy world the game takes place in, what the campaign is generally about, and gives some suggestions as to who this game is for and some alternate settings this campaign module can be used in (as some DMs will run a campaign of their own, supplementing it at times with different campaign modules). Following this introduction, the DM reader encounters the story overview. This is to provide a more in-depth outline of what this campaign module entails, while simultaneously providing details about the world, NPCs and monsters, and the various locations players will engage in.

**STORY OVERVIEW**

The characters are drawn into the story by Syndra Silvane, a retired adventurer and merchant who, years ago, was raised from the dead. Now, she's withering away. When she consulted priests, Syndra learned that the affliction was widespread and that no spell could cure it. She spoke to her friends among the Harpers, who determined the source of the affliction: an ungodly necromantic device called the Soulmonger. The Harpers received their intelligence from a lich, but they don't know much about the Soulmonger other than its name and general whereabouts. Adventurers willing to help Syndra must travel to Chult, a land of jungles and monsters, to find the Soulmonger and destroy it.

Unknown to Syndra and her allies, the Soulmonger is trapping the souls of the dead and depriving liches of the means to trap souls in their phylacteries. (The Soulmonger snatches up the souls before they can be trapped elsewhere.) Szass Tam, the most powerful lich among the Red Wizards of Thay, has sent operatives to Chult to steal the Soulmonger or, failing that, destroy it. Leading the Thayan expedition is Szass Tam's devoted lieutenant, Valindra Shadowmantle. Valindra has been warned that adventurers might cross her path, so she's prepared for them.

Also lurking in the heart of Chult is Ras Nsi, a mythic, villainous figure among Chultans. Ras Nsi was a human paladin and a sworn protector of the city of Mezro. He betrayed his oaths and was banished. Rather than redeem himself, he raised an undead army to conquer Mezro. The would-be tyrant was defeated and banished once more. Mezro was later destroyed by the Spellplague (or so it seemed), during which Ras Nsi lost his power to create and command undead. He withdrew to the city of Omu, leaving the vestiges of his undead army to
roam unchecked throughout the jungle. That was not the end of Ras Nsi, however. Bitter over his loss of power, he forged an alliance with the yuan-ti lurking in the ruins of Omu and underwent a ritual of transformation, becoming a yuan-ti malison. As a yuan-ti, Ras Nsi imposed his terrible will on the evil snake people and became their leader.

Beneath the cracked and broken streets of Omu lies a secret yuan-ti temple called the Fane of the Night Serpent, where Ras Nsi holds sway and plots to bring about the end of the world. Omu is also home to the Tomb of the Nine Gods. As the characters explore this multilevel dungeon, they encounter the spirits of Omu's trickster gods and are potentially inhabited by them. Each god embodies a different alignment, and any character inhabited by one gains a special power as well as a flaw. The nine trickster gods don't get along, and they try to push one another out of the characters' bodies. As the gods fight over their living hosts, the characters must deal with the deadly traps and monsters that guard the Soulmonger. Venturing deeper into the tomb, they uncover clues about the dungeon's evil architect— the archlich Acererak—and learn that the Soulmonger is feeding souls to an undead horror called an atropal. Once it consumes enough souls, the atropal will transform into an evil god.

Destroying the Soulmonger ends the death curse affecting the world, while killing the atropal incurs the wrath of Acererak. Under normal circumstances, the enraged archlich would be far too great a foe for mortal adventurers to overcome, but with the trickster gods of Omu on their side, the heroes have a fighting chance.37

In this story overview, the DM learns the entirety of how the module is expected to play out, with all the key points of the story so that they can understand how to plan for this campaign. If this were the DM’s homebrewed38 campaign, they would write this storyline themselves along with the world, locations, NPCs, and monsters. As we can see here the world is partially based on already existent settings from the greater D&D universe of “The Forgotten Realms” which encompasses most of the worlds that have been developed by Wizards of the Coast, TSR, Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and the countless developers that have worked for the company over the

37 Wizards of the Coast 2017, 5.
38 Homebrew is a term that describes a game or story line that the DM writes themselves, without officially licenced material (other than the rules of the game itself). Homebrew is a commonly used term and can be employed any time a player makes up something that is not designed by the company who made the game in the first place. Therefore players may homebrew a special type of weapon, a monster, a character class or race, or any other element of the game they choose.
last 45 years. The DM is then expected to have a certain amount of knowledge about the fantasy setting before coming to this module, although it is not necessary to run the game.

In this setting, Chult is described as “a peninsula … in the Forgotten Realms. Chult is a tropical wilderness composed mostly of jungles, plateaus, impassable mountains, and belching volcanoes.”\(^{39}\) However, the DM is welcomed to set this in any jungle-based world or area they choose to, allowing them the ability to manipulate the campaign module to fit different homebrew worlds. What is important to see here is that the game world is developed initially by the company producing the material, but is meant to be malleable so that different DMs can use the module in a variety of settings and “make it their own”. When running a campaign module like this then, the DM will read most, if not all, of the book to determine what settings exist and how the campaign is meant to play out and then will break this down into numerous “sessions” of gameplay that may take place over the period of weeks, months, or years depending on the players involved.

When the DM is ready to start running the campaign module they are given specific scripts that they may follow if they choose to, and descriptions of the specific locations they will engage in. In “Tomb of Annihilation” this is presented as thus:

**STARTING THE ADVENTURE**

The adventure's default starting location is the city of Baldur's Gate on the Sword Coast, in the Forgotten Realms setting. However, any large settlement will do. Possibilities from other D&D worlds include the Free City of Greyhawk on Oerth, the city of Specularum on Mystara, and the city of Sharn on Eberron. To get things rolling, read or paraphrase the following Introductory text to the players:

“For the past several days, the talk of the streets and taverns has all been about the so-called death curse: a wasting disease afflicting everyone who's ever been raised from the dead. Victims grow thinner and weaker each day, slowly but steadily sliding toward the death they once denied. When they finally succumb,

\(^{39}\) Wizards of the Coast 2017, 5.
they can't be raised-and neither can anyone else, regardless of whether they've ever received that miracle in the past. Temples and scholars of divine magic are at a loss to explain a curse that has affected the entire region, and possibly the entire world.”

At this point, invite the players to explain why their characters are together, how long they've been together, and what they've been doing. If the characters don't know each other, you can have them meet at Syndra Silvane's residence.40

Here another important element of the development of a fantasy game world is introduced – the player character (PC) involvement in the story itself. As we see, the DM is encouraged by the module to ask players to get involved in the construction of the world and the storyline by detailing their backgrounds, how they know each other, and what they have been up to in order to help develop the setting. The passage intended to be read to the players above is also known as an “adventure hook” and serves the purpose of getting them into the context of the adventure.

These passages show the ways a fantasy game world is constructed by the DM through the use of a campaign module. Many players engage with D&D solely through these campaign modules that are released on a fairly regular basis by Wizards of the Coast but can also be found through other sources. The internet has allowed players from around the world to share their campaign settings, fantasy worlds, and modules, and many players also will look to these for specific settings (such as settings inspired by popular fantasy or sci-fi settings like *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Dune* etc.). As well, there are other game developers who will publish campaign modules that are intended to be used with whatever game system the GM or DM decides. The publishing and sharing of campaign modules and fantasy game worlds is quite popular among players of these TTRPGs as many do not have the time, the detailed understanding of the rules and game systems, or the creative ability to produce such detailed game world settings.

40 Wizards of the Coast 2017, 8
For the DM running a campaign such as “Tomb of Annihilation” the work does not stop at reading the module and running the sessions. Often, the DM will work with the players to include their own elements into the game world, and to develop unique encounters in the game world from the mind of the DM. Here we can see an example from the Adventurer’s League provided by the DM, Blordom Firewhirl, that should help show the ways the DM can make the fantasy game world their own.

**Mudslide! (100xp Each)**

The characters are carried out of control, down a mudslide for 1d4 rounds each. Roll initiative. Each round, on their turn, they can attempt a DC 13 Strength saving throw to grab onto something to prevent them from being washed further away. A character that fails this saving throw by 5 or more takes 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage. Once a character has stopped sliding, they can attempt to walk across the flooding waters through the muddy ditch. If a character fails either their Strength (Athletics) or Wisdom (Survival) check (their choice) DC 12, refer to the Lost Equipment chart below as each character traverses the mud for 1d4 rounds.\(^{41}\)

Here the DM used an encounter from another book and inserted it as a “random encounter” as the players were traversing the wilderness, in order to provide an exciting encounter that must be overcome by the players. This simultaneously works to develop the fantasy game world as this alters the world the game takes place in, and provides another story element that develops the players’ characters as well. Fantasy game worlds are then made up of a series of encounters that when strung together, in conjunction with the fantasy game world setting, the players’ character’s background and personalities, and the quest they are undertaking all create the detailed game world of the TTRPG.

**Playing in Fantasy Game Worlds**

As players in the AL game, we continued traveling through this vast forest which held all type of animals and monsters and eventually came to a clearing. Here we found some

\(^{41}\) Adventure’s League Notes, 28\(^{th}\) March, 2018.
salamanders, but not any regular salamanders, rather these were fire salamanders. The group prepared for a possible fight, but kept their distance for a while to see what these creatures would do. It was then that Tath Treetail, the group’s Cleric (known for their religious affiliations, their healing nature, and their desire to rid the world of evil) asked the question that would change the situation completely “can I tell what the creature’s alignment is?” Some clerics are able to read the intentions, thoughts, and alignments of others, and Tath was one of those very clerics. Blordom flipped through some pages in his book and read the alignment, his face turned as he knew what would happen as he looked back to Tath and said, “they’re evil”. That was all it took to have Tath declare his intentions to attack, and for the DM to say the words that every player both looks forward to, and fears, “roll for initiative”.

It is in this moment during D&D that there is a great switch in gameplay, and often how players are interacting. Throughout much of the game, players and the DM are taking turns roleplaying and telling a story, narrating what they (their characters) are doing, while the DM sets the scenes, and dictates what the NPCs will be doing. As the switch to combat is made, players often get their character sheets ready, making sure they are ready for their first actions. As well each player must roll a D20 (a 20-sided die) and add their “initiative modifier” to that roll, to determine when their turn to act in combat will be. The term “roll for initiative” symbolizes this switch in gameplay while asking players to roll dice to determine who will act first.

Combat in D&D, and most TTRPGs for that matter, consists of rounds of turns. Each character, PC, and NPC will act in turn during a round. A round in game time takes approximately 6 seconds, depending on the game, and anywhere from 5-25 minutes in real time. Depending on how combat focused the group is, combat can be a serious endeavour, or a light-
hearted one. As well, depending on how much the DM wants the party to get through in a session, how players are feeling in any given moment, and the preferences of each person playing, combat can take less or more time, and can be easy going or stressful. Often this can lead to points of contention as some players will wish to move along quicker, while others will take the combat less seriously and will be having side conversations (conversations that are not related to the game or what is currently happening in game). As combat can sometimes take a great deal of time, upwards of a few hours in some cases, and each player only acts once per round, players will use this time to chat about other things, to look at their phones or browse the internet on their laptops and other devices. Of course, as players begin to pay less attention to the game, others become frustrated, most often the DM, who must then try to get players back on track.

As we began combat, I was able to see the transformation in the players at the table. Tivaumvit, who during regular gameplay took a bit of a back seat, became much more involved, and would act out his character’s movements, pretending to hold a large axe and flex his muscles. Tivaumvit played a barbarian, well known for their physical prowess, anger, and aggressive nature. Along with this, one of the two bards in the group, Hahkof Jilrim, began to pretend to play guitar and would hum and sing metal songs, as his character was acting in the game. This was because Hahkof’s character was from our time-period (2019 Earth) and had traveled by accident into the D&D world. Bards are known for their musical abilities that allow them to cast spells and help support the party, and Hahkof would play with this by singing or humming songs in order to roleplay his character. As gameplay switched, so did the player’s engagement, showing the diversity of the game and how it engages people differently. In these moments, Hahkof and Tivaumvit were both ‘playing’ in the proper sense of the word, but until
that point they had largely been listening to the DM tell a story, while they made decisions about what direction to go and how they should get to different places in the game. Other players had been more obviously ‘playing’ during those moments, as they pretended to be their characters, and attempted to make decisions as their characters would. The players in this setting were all engaged with the game, but in different ways, showing that games in and of themselves are made up of play, but also of serious engagement, social interaction, and sometimes, work.

Theories of Play

Games are commonly spoken of as forms of play, vehicles for play, and as affording play. When we engage with games, we are generally considered to be “playing”. What this play looks like however, and what play entails, is less clear. When looking at TTRPGs play becomes muddled as many of the ways players engage with the game do not reflect what people may commonly understand play to be. For example, is it play when the participants in a game spend a great deal of time creating spreadsheets to track in game world materials, trading systems, and financial portfolios? Here then I will unpack some of the ways play has been theorized to nuance the game experiences participants in a TTRPG are having. Play in itself has been explained and defined in various ways, and here I will engage with many of these in an attempt to clarify how I understand play, and why we should not be using it synonymously with games. Play in itself is a disposition as Johannes Sjoberg (2018) and Thomas Malaby (2007) would argue. Malaby has argued that up to this point (2007) anthropology as a whole has had two ways of talking about play – as representation, and as non-work (2007). As Malaby comes to define this however, we can see play as not actually separated from everyday social life, but as an important part of it. Play should then be recognised as a mode of cultural experience, and importantly as a cultural
accomplishment. In this, we can come to look at play as an integral part of our lived experience. As we engage with play as a disposition, I think it important to look to Huizinga’s Homo Ludens (1950), one of the most often cited works which examines play. As Huizinga presents it, play is “a significant function” one that has sense and that transcends the immediate needs of life. Play is in this sense a way to interact with the world around us, but which can only arise given certain preconditions. Play can only arise, as Huizinga would argue, as a voluntary activity. Play can not be forced on to us by any other individual or institution. It is then an expression of our free will – to choose to be playful, or to have a playful disposition. As Huizinga states “it is free, is in fact freedom”.

Play must first and foremost be understood as this free and voluntary disposition, that any individual can choose to take on, or not, at any given time. Secondly, Huizinga argues that play is not “ordinary” or “real” life. This element of play is where the waters become a bit unclear, as play can arise in any ordinary setting, throughout our daily lived experiences. If we think of how play most commonly occurs, many would think of games or sports we engage in with others. But of course, play is not this bounded of a disposition. We can be playful outside of these structured occurrences, and I would argue, most of our playfulness would occur in the small moments this disposition arises throughout our lives. Of course, some people are known for being more playful than others, and this is most certainly true for children, whose playfulness is much more apparent. As we learn more of the socially and culturally expected ways to

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44 Huizinga (1950): 7
perform, our playfulness becomes more bounded to specific times and spaces but does not completely go away. Play, as Huizinga argues, exists within a circle – one that has been referred to as the “magic circle”. This magic circle has been used to describe games and play, as it assumes that when we play we are playing games. Of course I argue that not all game engagement involves play, and therefore use this magic circle to describe play specifically. This magic circle is a space where the rules of our physical everyday world are no longer strictly adhered to and where we may create, challenge, and reimagine the norms and standards of our everyday world. Here I present a few theoretical examples of how this might take place.

First, take the theoretical individual whom, while at the checkout at the grocery store, responds to the question “do you require bags?” from the cashier with “no, in fact I prefer to juggle” and then being practiced in the act picks up a few food items and juggles them for a brief moment. Following this interaction, most certainly the individual will ask for bags, but in that moment, the person took a playful activity (juggling) and practiced it in an everyday situation which would not often warrant playfulness. In a second example, we can take a very common form of play – word play- and see this enacted quite often in social situations that are not in themselves structured spaces for play. Take the board room meeting which sees a presenter insert memes into presentation slides, and use puns in their speech to engage the audience through laughter. These spaces, which we are taught are for ‘serious’ forms of communication and interaction, and in which we most often present ourselves through ‘proper’ manners, body language, forms of dress, etc., can then also be subject to the playfulness of the individuals inhabiting those spaces. In these ways, and countless others which I am sure come to mind, we can see play as arising not only in these structured moments, but throughout our daily lived experiences, in settings not designated for play.
If we then come to see play as a disposition, rather than of itself a structured spatial/temporal phenomenon, our understandings of games will also change. In his important work *Man, Play, Games* (1958), Roger Caillois approaches this discussion of play and games by linking these two terms almost intrinsically. Caillois begins by discussing play, much as Huizinga has, as a free and voluntary activity, one that is a source of joy and amusement for the individual involved in it. Continuing however, we see Caillois describe play as happening when players have the desire to play the most absorbing game possible to them at any given time, and to be able to engage in said game, and leave it freely, as an escape from responsibility or diversion from daily life. It is upon this that I seek a change in our understanding of play and games. Play does not solely arise within the setting of a game, not all play is in itself a ‘game’, nor are all games continuously playful experiences. The moment when the individual described above “plays” at the grocery checkout is in no way a game as it has no rules, no agreed upon goals or terms of engagement, and is not in itself a space free of expectation, judgement, or consequence. As Caillois presents it, there is a set of criteria which makes up the activity of play—(1) it is free, (2) it is separate, (3) it is uncertain, (4) it is unproductive, (5) it is governed by rules, (6) it is make believe. This list, I argue, is problematic in the ways it bounds play as (1) an activity and (2) to a separate space. This seems much more accurate as a description of games, but with a caveat that point (4) must be questioned, as games do prove to be quite productive in many ways.

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I think then it becomes important to define what a game is, to be able to clearly separate play and games, so that we may talk about the two more clearly. The definition I use for games is taken from Malaby who states that “A game is a semi-bounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes”.\textsuperscript{50} Malaby’s concise definition allows us to look at games as important spaces, which are a part of our world, governed by rules, uncertain, but readable. Much of this is similar to Caillois’ features of play, but excludes the claim to being unproductive, as well as being wholly separate. Games are in this sense bounded, but only in so much as they are still affected by the world, our social interactions, etc., and also affect them. This push to see games as not wholly separate from the world arises as we look and see games as cultural artifacts, much like art, music, and literature, in that we can read much about culture through the reading or playing of a game. As well as being spheres of cultural and social reproduction in that rules, narratives, and the aesthetics of games are both influenced by, and influence society and culture. This is seen in rule sets for games, which often follow social and cultural norms of the society they are produced in. Moving forward with this definition of games then, I return to play, in an attempt to further describe it as a disposition, rather than an act synonymous with games.

If we look to Gregory Bateson next, we find an important work to be examined by those working with games and play - A Theory of Play and Fantasy (1987). In this work, Bateson approaches play from a linguistic standpoint stating that “play can only occur if the participant organisms are capable, to some degree, of meta communication”.\textsuperscript{51} In this case, Bateson is looking at play as being discussed by participants in play, or at least as playful actions including

\textsuperscript{50} Malaby (2009): 84.
statements about play itself – quite simply “this is play”. This statement, Bateson argues, contains a “negative statement” which contains a “negative metastatement”. This statement would read as such “this is play” = “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions, for which they stand, would denote”. Inherently then, the statement “this is play” which can be communicated both explicitly or implicitly, is denoting a frame of play, which references other actions that are not play. So, if we return to the above description, the individual who claims “no I do not need bags, I juggle” is stating that this is a playful sentence, which also points towards the upcoming activity of juggling as a playful one. This sets the frame of interaction apart from the regular space in which they were interacting, which is now denoted as a non-play space. This complicates the point made on play being separate, as this would seem to support that idea. However, I argue that the separateness of play should refer to how we read the actions that are occurring, but while still recognizing the physical world impacts they have, or their ability to still affect the normal space of interaction. Importantly, looking at Bateson helps us to define play as being framed through discursive action, one taken on by individuals and communicated to others, who may, or may not be involved in play.

The magic circle can help us to understand the way in which play occurs, as it denotes a space separate from the implications of breaking norms and standards, but importantly continues to have real impacts on our lives in that same world of norms and standards. I think it is more useful to look at the magic circle as being made of a mesh-like material, with pores through which the norms and standards of our everyday world and important impacts from our out of play and in play experiences flow. This magic circle still allows players to behave differently.

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than they could in a non-play setting, but does not exist solely apart from the players’ lives. Players bring experiences, emotions, preconceived notions, and ideologies into this magic circle and these actively structure how they play. In fact, it is in these spaces, as Clifford Geertz (1972) would argue, that we can understand more about the culture and society that play is occurring in as people play with those social and cultural norms and standards of the spaces and places they live in and therefore directly point to those often unspoken of phenomenon.

I therefore seek to describe play as a disposition, and that this disposition entails discursive action which allows others to understand the actions performed by the individual as playful ones. Through these actions the playful individual is stating that the actions they are performing are to be understood as playful, and therefore of not denoting that which they would usually denote. The actions themselves are the same as they would be normally, but it is the intent and disposition of the individual, as well as the understanding of those engaging in that frame, that denote playfulness. In this we can take an important addition from Clifford Geertz’s essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” (1972) where it is shown that play is an element of culture that is largely indicative of culture – in this, Geertz is stating the importance of play as a way to look at culture, as in these moments of play, cultural phenomenon and norms are often played with, allowing us to see these much more clearly than non-play interactions would allow. Geertz engaged a discussion of the Balinese cockfight as it was a way to understand what being Balinese is really like, in that when people play, they play with cultural norms and standards, those aspects of daily lived experience which are rarely ever discussed.

Looking to these moments of play then, we can ‘read’ culture by examining how it is played with

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and reproduced. Taking this to games which, as was argued above, are cultural artifacts, we can read how people reproduce culture through both games and play, while also looking to how they play with culture in and out of games, to further understand what it is to be of that culture or society.

I began this discussion with an attempt to define what play is, and in turn to separate it from the game in order to further our understanding of both. To take from Malaby again, an important reason for separating games and play is that “seeing games as play, and play as opposed to work is that games become domains intrinsically set apart from everyday experience”.56 Setting games apart from everyday experience, as something “safe and pleasurable”57 we inherently lose some of what makes games so important to people. Games themselves engage people because of what they share with everyday experience.58 As well, through games many people come to have meaningful experiences, and these experiences are in themselves an important part of their everyday lives. When looking at people who game on a semi-regular to regular basis, including many who game multiple hours a day, we must come to see that the game itself is an important part of their social worlds. That these games are not some separate sphere that they can interact in safely without consequence, without being productive, but rather that their productivity, their consequences, and their meaning is being constructed through and around the game. When one’s social group is made up of people involved with the games they engage with, we limit our ability to understand their daily lived experiences, their

(re)constructions of culture, and their social norms and standards, if we consider these games to be synonymous with play.

In Bonnie Nardi’s ethnography of the MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) World of Warcraft she examines the ways that players come to experience certain elements of their play as “work like”.59 Nardi found that many elements of the game were looked as not as play experiences by her participants, but rather as moments that afforded play at a later time – farming in game materials, “grinding” for experience points to make one’s character a higher level. The players in this study presented some of their in-game achievements as taking “hard work” or “dedication” and these were positively valued forms of engagement with the game itself.60 Nardi then comes to argue that play may be understood as being made up of moments of “dedication”, “hard work”, or “seriousness” and may in fact entail certain obligatory actions that all work to afford the activity of play.61 Play here is further complicated as it may be that certain forms of play (or as I would argue engagement with a game) may include these other forms of action that are not described by those engaging in them as play. Therefore it is not that the play itself is work as Nardi is showing, but rather that elements of game involvement are not play.

Returning back to the Adventurer’s League (AL) above then, it was an important moment when Tivaumvit and Hahkof began “playing” their characters, showing a change in disposition from one moment to the next, as it outlined this very nature of the game – to allow play, to be a safe space for people to play, to promote play, but to not be made up solely of play. Having

largely sat back, listening to the narrative and watching others’ actions, they did not present dispositions of play – rather they were intent listeners, an audience for the others who were playing, the people to whom it was being communicated that “this is play” in opposition to “that not being play”. As combat began however, they pretended to carry weapons, to act as their characters, to play with those identities that are references to various cultural artifacts in pop-culture. The buff, angry, larger than life barbarian, reminiscent of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character in the *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) film. Flexing his muscles and kissing them, much like professional wrestlers and bodybuilders do in pop-culture, Tivaumvit was now playing in the game.

This moment of fluidity between non-play and play shows the act of frame switching actively occurring as players engage with the game in a variety of ways. It is these moments where we can see that not all time spent in a game environment is made up of play, and that the game itself can contain many other forms of interaction - many other dispositions. Although these players may have not been “playing” actively as they were taking on more of a listening role in the game at that time, they were still within the magic circle and were recognizing that the others actions were within that space as well. As people have side-conversations around the game, and they sit back and listen, or jump into their role as the character they switch their frames of engagement. These frames can be switched rapidly in TTRPGs as players will often simultaneously carry-on side-conversations and act as their characters. This rapid frame switching shows the messiness of these interactions, and like many other forms of social engagement becomes easily read the more one is steeped in those spaces.
New Fantasy Worlds Lead To New Physical World Connections

Shortly after I started attending weekly Adventurer League sessions at Kessel Run, I was informed by another participant from the University Campaign about a new game store that had opened up in town. The store was called The Forge, and not knowing it at the time, this would become the main site for the rest of my time in the field. The morning after being told of this location, I looked up their hours of operation and location, and took a trip over with my daughter in tow. We arrived at the store and as we walked in were greeted by two of the three store owners, Renaldo and Samwise. The smell of baked goods and coffee was in the air, so we grabbed some snacks and a coffee and I began to chat with the owners. I explained to them why I had come into the store and they seemed very enthusiastic and wanted to be involved or help out in any way they could. They explained that they were a cosplay and cards store but had already received a great deal of interest about having a D&D night and were trying to plan something.

Although the store was still being set up, as there was a great deal of empty space, it already felt warm and welcoming, with a castle aesthetic (the walls were covered in large grey-brick print wallpaper, and there was a fire-place with a television in it playing music (see figure 1). After this meeting, the University Group agreed to switch our meeting location to The Forge, as it would provide easier access for most of the members and was a nice change from gaming in a classroom. Within a few months of this initial meeting, I would be traveling to the store on an almost daily basis to join in various campaigns.
It was about 11:00 am on a sunny Sunday morning in June when I met with Shiop Lam and 4 others for a new campaign Shiop had written. We would meet at The Forge, which had now been open for a few months and was building a community. Renaldo and his wife Talve, the owners of the store, were in attendance, along with Shiop’s best friends Brorouk and Lihron, who were also a couple. Talve was joining not to play, but rather to assist Shiop with his DMing, as Shiop is legally blind and therefore needs support with dice rolling and character placement during combat on the battle grid (a game board made up of 1 inch squares often used to denote 5 feet of physical space in the game world- See Figure 2).
The store usually did not open until 12:00 pm on Sundays, but as the owners were joining in the campaign they gave Shiop permission to start before opening time, so that the store would be quiet for the start of the session. As well, both Renaldo and Talve were working the store once it opened, and so this gave them time to play without being interrupted.

Since the store had opened a few months before, Shiop and Brorouk had been there on almost a daily basis. They had become friends with Renaldo, Talve, and their business partner Samwise. Often, when I would visit the store on other days of the week, I would run into Brorouk and/or Shiop just hanging out, playing *Magic: The Gathering*, or working on their
laptops. Brorouk frequently was found sitting on the couch that was over in the corner of the store by the door to the owner’s office. There was a table there as well, and Brorouk would be organizing cards, either for the store or for himself, or working on various other projects he had on the go. Shiop and Brorouk ran a YouTube channel that reviewed television shows and movies and had recently received a sponsorship from the store. This relationship continued to develop over the time that I visited the store between May and December of 2018. In many ways, Shiop and Brorouk were some of the founding members of the community that existed at the store, inviting their friends to the store, who would in turn become regular members of the community there.

On the first morning of Shiop’s campaign we had been brought together, hand picked by Shiop, to play in a campaign he had been writing for some time. Shiop was a script writer, and so he had talked at length of how his campaign would be like a movie that we could play through, with promised twists and turns that would keep us on the edge of our seats. We set up at a table at the back of the store by the kitchen and coffee maker, as all of us were large coffee drinkers and Renaldo promised free coffee while we played. By the time I arrived, Renaldo had already put some Dungeons & Dragons inspired music on the TV that sat in front of the unused fireplace, and that often had a fire displayed on it. This mantle was a focal point of the store, with books and figures on top, and a stuffed cat curled up in front on the floor. It added a sense of warmth and hominess to the store, which is quite different from the average game store. With fresh coffee brewing, and some pastries cooking in the oven, the store smelled, looked, and sounded warm and welcoming – the perfect setting to start this campaign.

After our introductions, we began our three-hour long session, which saw us starting on a hunt to discover who had been mindlessly killing animals in the great Forest of Redwood. The
world Shiop had constructed was a fantastical one, full of mythical beasts, knights, and mysteries to unfold as we explored. This, in many ways, felt like the other fantasy worlds we had all engaged with throughout our time reading fantasy, playing games, and watching movies. What stood out here however was the persistence of the game world. This persistence is something we often see in virtual worlds, that exist in online spaces. These spaces continue to exist when the people are not interacting with them individually, and they can therefore change and be affected when the individual is not interacting in them. In the case of Shiop’s campaign, the world itself continued to exist outside of our scheduled weekly meetings. Shiop would roll dice and have random encounters occur, or would have other developments happen in other parts of the world (including our home-towns, or to people we knew from our individual backstories, that were not present in the current campaign) that would have possible impacts on our campaign overall. This worked to create a sense of worldness. The world we were playing in existed not only in our minds, but across our minds. It did not, however, exist in a virtual space, in a server or database. There were also no physical relics of the space in the physical world. This world existed in another space. A space the was simultaneously all of our imaginations. I look at this as an example of a chronotope, “the temporally and spatially particular envelope in the narrated universe of social space-time in which, in emplotment, narrative characters move”.62 Our characters, and through extension ourselves, were engaging in this world apart from the physical world.

As we traveled through our lives in the physical world, Shiop’s campaign world was still existing, so that when we returned to the real-world time and space when we all entered this chronotope together (Sunday mornings at The Forge) things had changed, it had still been going.

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However, what is important to recognize about this space is that it is quite different from virtual spaces in some important ways – mainly that it cannot be accessed by anyone, other than Shiop, individually. In some instances however, Shiop and one other player would enter the world in a one-on-one session, showing that we did not all need to be present. Therefore, it was almost as if Shiop himself was acting as the server, the creator, the editor, and a player.

Shiop’s campaign finished up around 1 o’clock in the afternoon, and I still had a lot on the schedule for the day. As most people hold their gaming groups on the weekends, Sunday was often the busiest day of the week for me. I decided to hang around The Forge for a little while longer and grab some lunch. Shiop and I went over and grabbed some pizza from the pizza place next door, and then went back to the store to play some *Magic: The Gathering* and chat. Shiop told me the importance it held for him to have a detailed world that stayed alive while the player’s were not at the table together. This dynamic that Shiop expressed was important, as it felt both exciting, but also, at times problematic. Although Shiop wanted a campaign set in a world that existed while we were not at the table, he also seemed to struggle with actually putting this into practice. It seemed that Shiop struggled with something that many DMs and storytellers do – letting one’s creation go into another’s hands. It is not easy to allow the fantasy world, the characters, and the storylines one has created to be taken by others and manipulated. In Shiop’s case, sometimes it felt as though we had agency in the world and the story that was being told, whereas at other times we were along for the ride. As one of my notes from the field, written two sessions later, states…

“I find the roleplaying in this campaign to be less in-depth this week. It feels much more like a story that Shiop wants to tell – rather than one we all create together. This makes the campaign feel like it is on rails, creating a different dynamic than some of the other campaigns I have been in. This campaign however is run by Shiop who is a screenplay writer – I wonder if this then leads him to want to create a complete story rather than an open world? Shiop does prompt us to make
our own decisions, but sometimes this feels more like a quiz, than a true open decision-making process.” Fieldnotes, Sunday July 1463, 2018.

This should help to outline the way these fantasy worlds we come to engage in exist in a variety of ways. At points they feel dynamic, open, free, whereas at other points it is akin to reading a choose your own adventure novel. This points to the ways in which games take on different forms and involve different types of play. When discussing game worlds in relation to tabletop games there are those that allow the players to openly explore and engage with a variety of elements in the world – these are called sandbox game worlds. On the other end of this spectrum are games of emergence, where there is a clearly defined set of rules and a clearly defined ending or goal. These games have a specific set of boundaries in which play occurs and which define when play is finished.63 These campaign styles invite different styles of players and often players and GMs must discuss what type of worlds there are interested in exploring, and how “structured” they would like their play to be. The fantasy world is still there, and allows us to engage within it, but how we do so differs depending on who is involved and how the play is defined.

After my lunch with Shiop, I left and went to another game. This game started around 6pm, and was a drop-in style that allowed players to join at different times, and for new players to drop in to see if they wanted to play D&D. I had been coming here for a few months by this point and had joined in a campaign run by Emer Shessad. Emer was one of the most detailed storytellers I met throughout all of my fieldwork. He would spend long periods of time detailing every element in a room, building, or in the world we were interacting in. This was received well

by some players, and not so well by others, with discussions often occurring after games about how skilled he was as a storyteller, or about how slow the gameplay was. This points to the ways different players looked for different gameplay styles. Some people were there to tell stories and get fully immersed in a game world, whereas others wanted action, excitement, battles, and puzzles.

**Escapism**

Fantasy worlds lend themselves to a variety of forms of interaction. We can explore unique worlds, have interactions with different people and species, encounter puzzles made up of things we could only imagine, and fight great battles using techniques and weapons we have never seen before. When looking at fantasy worlds, it is important to try and understand why people want to take part in, or read about/watch a fantasy in the first place. There are a few reasons that we can look to that may help to explain why people engage with fantasy. When I discuss fantasy here, I refer not simply to the act of imagination, but of the greater phenomenon of fantasy storytelling. First and foremost fantasy provides readers, viewers, and players with an enjoyable experience that is apart from the daily lived experiences they know and live in. These experiences of fantasy are based on the general interest in something outside of our realities. Importantly, this engagement in fantasy does not need to focus specifically on fully constructed fantasy worlds with monsters, princesses, and magic, rather these can be stories that take place largely in the “real-world” and add in a fantastical element, or events that are outside of normal expectations. In her work *Reading the Romance* (1991) Janice Radway focuses on

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women who build communities around their ongoing engagement with romance novels. These romance novels span a variety of genres, while being considered romance at their core. When we look deeper into romance novels, we see that they may be in some ways centred around exciting romances, but they also employ adventure, mystery, crime, and fantasy tropes to drive the novels and to keep readers engaged. This first reason for fantasy engagement is one that most of us who read, watch television, or movies can relate to – it is the fantastical element of the stories that engages us as it presents us something different or apart from our everyday lived experience.

By far the most popular explanation for why people engage in fantasy worlds and storytelling is to escape. This of course comes about in a variety of ways, fills many different needs for escape, and has often been responded to dismissively and therefore requires a great deal of unpacking. I begin then with Wamrelink, Harteveld, and Mayer’s (2009) “Press Enter or Escape to Play” and their description of what is required for the concept of escapism to exist. In their work, the basis of escapism sits upon the assumption that there are two contexts in which an individual or group’s actions, interactions, and performances may be expressed – daily life and activities that escape daily life. Daily life is made up of school, work, chores, errands, social interactions, etc. and the activities that escape daily life are various but may include television, reading, playing a game, etc. If we travel back a bit then I would turn to E. Hirschman (1983) as he offers us an explanation for escapism that we can build off of. Hirschman states that “escapism offers the individual an avenue to a more desirable state of being than one presently experienced” and furthers this with the example of engaging in an activity “not for its intrinsic

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qualities, but for its utility as an anxiety reduction mechanism.” In his work Hirschman focuses heavily on escapism as a coping mechanism for high anxiety or emotional stress, and although this can be an important way that people use escapism, this is not the only reason they do so.

Returning then to Warmelink, Harteveld, and Mayer, I think it important to look to their dichotomy of escapism that separates forms of escapism into “cause-based” and “effect-based”. Cause-based escapism is considered to be escaping from some specific phenomenon, feeling, or event. This is then further categorized into mundane breaking vs. stress relieving where those escaping are doing so from boredom or the lack of stimulus vs. escaping from stress, pain, worries, etc. On the other hand, effect-based escapism is focused on those who escape in order to achieve something, such as transcending reality. This is then further divided into pleasure seeking vs. imaginative conjuring. Pleasure seeking focuses on escapism to feel good or to satisfy hedonist desires, whereas imaginative conjuring is that aspect of storytelling and world construction – the escape in order to further develop the ability to imagine. Here we are able to then take a variety of forms of escapism, and see the ways that people come to engage in fantasy as a form of escapism. Escapism can be a very cathartic exercise, allowing one to reimagine themselves and/or their realities. I want to take a break then from this theorization of escapism and fantasy to talk about an important interaction I had with an informant during my fieldwork to help outline this point further.

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68 Warmelink, Harteveld, and Mayer (2009): 2
69 Warmelink, Harteveld, and Mayer (2009) “Press Enter or Escape to Play” 2-3
Early into my fieldwork I was working part-time as a barista at a local coffee shop. One afternoon in August a regular customer of ours came into the store, Nikham Parhel. Nikham worked at another business nearby and came in everyday on his lunch to grab a coffee and chat. Everyone working there knew him quite well and would chat with him about work and social lives. That day as Nikham came over to the drink hand-off he overheard me talking to another customer about a board game that they had just purchased and was sitting on their table as they had their coffee. I had mentioned to the person that I had played it before and it was a fun game. Nikham asked what game we were chatting about and then stated that he loved playing board games. After that we started talking about games, and quickly D&D was brought up. I told Nikham that I had just started the fieldwork for this research project and he was very intrigued, asking if he could be involved, and if we could talk about it more.

The next day the two of us met up and talked about Nikham’s lifelong love of games in their various forms. Here I include a rather lengthy excerpt from our discussion, as it helps to outline the ways we get involved in gameplay and fantasy, and how fantasy can be used to help us through difficult parts of our lives.

Dirk. So how old were you when you started gaming?
Nikham. Nintendo, I probably would have been about 8.
D. So a life-long thing?
N. Oh yeah.
D. And how old are you now?
N. I'm 30.
D. Oh nice, we're the same age.
N. Oh, really? Cool!
D. So, you started off early on Nintendo, and then when did you get into tabletop stuff?

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70 The title was *Exploding Kittens*, a card based game designed by Elan Lee and Shane Small, and published by The Oatmeal in 2015 after an extremely successful Kickstarter campaign.
N. When I really started getting into that stuff would have been college in 2007.

D. Okay, cool. And do you remember what drew you too it?

N. Umm, the people I was socializing with, and that I could relate to, were people that were playing you know, D&D, and other sorts of board games and Magic: The Gathering and other things like that. And I could relate to these people. And, they just drew me in, and… you know?

D. So that whole kind of community?

N. Yeah!

D. So would you say you are also into other areas of what many would describe as "geek" culture?

N. Yeah man, I watch twitch all the time. I mean, I'm on my computer and the other screen is Twitch.

D. And what about reading books or comics and things like that?

N. Well actually, and I'm okay to say this, I grew up with language problems. So like, D&D and board games became an outlet for me. And actually because all of the original D&D material was all written, there was no such thing as Twitch, and no such thing as YouTube, I had to do all that reading myself. It was really when I first started feeling passionate about reading, because it let me become somebody I'm not.

D. Hmm, okay, that’s very cool man. And so when you were young you had some problems reading?

N. Yeah, because I'm visually disabled, some people saw that and they didn't give me the same education as everybody else got, and so I had language barriers.

D. Where did you grow up?

N. About an hour outside of Ottawa.

D. And so, you saw these barriers in place. At the time did you notice these barriers, or is this a hindsight experience?

N. I always knew.

D. Like as a child you felt people were treating you differently?

N. I've always been treated differently

D. and you felt that?

N. oh yeah, society has always made me feel like that.

D. So, maybe if we could talk about that further, how did you cope with that? Do you have coping mechanisms that help you with being treated differently?

N. Oh, um, I have to take the knowledge that not every person interacts with someone with a disability often. And uh, there’s kind of a culture with people with disabilities, and if you interact with someone long enough, they'll teach you that they just want to be human. They want to feel normal. And when you treat them impaired or as disabled, all that you’re doing is you’re telling them "you’re disabled, and you're worth less than I am."

D. Or you’re different than me in this way?

N. Yeah. So what I tell my friends when they ask about my disability, is that the biggest thing you can do to enable me is to let me tell you when I need help.

D. Okay, yes I have heard that before, so just so I can portray you accurately, what is your disability and how do I talk about that?
N. Well, my disability has kind of a long name, it is called progressive spastic paraparesis. Um, it is a nerve disability that weakens the nerves in my body.

D. Alright thank you for describing that. And so, have you ever felt you have outlets for these feelings.

N. Oh yeah, gaming, 100 percent.

D. Anything else?

N. My friends, and relationships. People that I trust.

D. So would you be able to talk about gaming as an outlet?

N. Well yeah. I've actually been thinking about this interview and about this specifically. Well gaming, I mean, people want to feel good, they want to feel achieved and proud about themselves. Gaming is just a set out problem, someone's imagined problem with an image put to it. My job is to beat this image. To beat this problem they've given me. And that’s what’s fun.

D. That’s a very interesting way of looking at gaming, I haven’t thought about that. As someone making a problem that you come along and solve. I've heard a lot of people talk about gaming as being problematic. One person I talked to recently just at a social event I was at, heard what my research was about and said "oh yeah, actually my son has a problem with gaming, he seems to want to play all the time. He spends a couple hours an evening just playing video games or board games with his friends. And I worry that he’s not getting out and experiencing the world." and I responded by saying that he must be learning something and getting something out of gameplay, as people don’t just play games for no reason at all. Maybe there is a social or personal reason people go to games. So you mentioned that learning D&D was an important and new form of engagement for you as you had to read the material and write things down and this had been something you lacked in the past. So what would you say your favourite aspect of D&D is?

N. Definitely my favourite aspect of D&D, well actually there’s two of them. I am a different person, I can be as evil, or as good, or a charitable as I want to be. But I also think I'm not in any way disabled. We are in my imagination and someone else’s imagination, and what’s more powerful than saying what you are in someone else’s imagination? Like, what’s more, what can you do more than being in your imagination?

Nikham expressed this important aspect of gaming, that I think accurately portrays what it is to escape in a few different ways. Nikham was in some ways escaping his disability, as he came to be an actor in the fantasy worlds he inhabited while he played. Escapism through gameplay appears to allow us, for short periods of time, to take on alternative selves. These selves can have a mediating effect on our understandings or conceptions of our own abilities in the physical world. Nikham would talk to me openly quite often about his disability as he saw it. He was limited in his mobility due to this degenerative condition and was well aware that it would progress further the older he became. To cope with this eventuality Nikham dove into his roleplaying, often acting this out with his hands, making different facial expressions to simulate
a character, and changing his voice to put on character accents. The effect, as explained by Nikham, is to imagine oneself completely as another person, allowing him to forget who he was and what his disability limited him from doing, for periods of time while he was engaged in the game.

Escapism in this sense serves as a coping mechanism for dealing with one’s life circumstances. Being marked as different or unable can have serious effects on a person’s well-being, their ability to interact with others in society, and to feel as though they are valuable, productive members of society or social groups. Hagstrim and Kaldo (2014) discuss escapism in terms of positive and negative reinforcement, looking to the ways this behaviour can be understood as a response to “negative aspects of real life.” To them, we can see positive-escapism as “something is given by the game that reinforces behaviour” and negative-escapism as “something is taken away in real life that reinforces behaviour.” The authors then turn to look at escapism as negative escapism in order to focus on the avoidance behaviour which can be seen to arise when some game players become immersed heavily in gameplay. This description of escape behaviour by Hagstrom and Kaldo must be critically examined, as seeing this behaviour as “avoidance behaviour” can cast two possible connotations onto this practice. First, which is the way Hagstrom and Kaldo appear to be presenting it, is the view that game engagement can be an addictive practice, and this addiction can be made more intense by the existence of “avoidance behaviour” that leads players to seek out this in increasing ways. In this sense we can see the furthering of a discourse on gaming behaviour as addictive and therefore

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72 Hagstrom and Kaldo (2014), 20.
problematic. This view has been promoted in many aspects of social life in North America, where we can see the existence of a fear around gameplay and the affects it may have on youth. This was brought up in my conversation with Nikham as I recalled a conversation with a person at a public game night. Although game addiction is a reality for some, it can also be a problematic description of these behaviours which do not lead to addiction, but do work as coping strategies, having the outcome of positive affects on one’s mental health. Warmelink, Harteveld and Mayer found this as well, when they saw that players they studied were describing escapism as a label that had been attached to their gameplay styles, and that they believed this to be a negative label attached by mainstream media sources to problematize their behaviours. In Nikham’s case he seems to be engaging in this negative escapism but in doing so he is not becoming reliant on these games, as I knew him to have a healthy social life and work life, but rather this behaviour showed him as agentive—he was reframing his situation to choose who he was, what he was capable of, and what role he could play in a social group and/or fantasy world.

Not only was Nikham expressing agency through his engagement in tabletop roleplaying, but he also used escapism as a tool to read and write fantasy worlds in a way he found he was unable to do in the public-school system. As Nikham has been the subject of discrimination in the public-school system through their denial of his different needs for reading and writing, he found D&D was a tool that gave him the ability to be literate. Shiop also explained similar experiences with the education system.

Shiop - Growing up in the school system for me was a hard time because of my disability. They didn’t understand RP tunnel vision (Retinitis pigmentosa). They didn’t try to understand it. Now the rhetoric is "we're trying to help you the best we can." “No you're not.” So, what would happen is normally I would get a work sheet which is the same as that (points to an 8 1/2 X 11 sheet of paper) work sheet, blown up 10 times its size with a photocopier. So every time something gets blown up it gets thinner and thinner, and I would say "I just need the same words as you, just bolded a little bit" Because

tunnel vision it makes things narrow, they didn’t understand that, they didn’t pretend to understand that. And so in middle school I got labeled as that. And in high school I got labeled a retard because of that. And um, I got in the special-ed program in high school. And yeah, I hated it. I hated school so much. But um, in high school I met a couple of teachers that made it easier on me, I could count them on one hand, but they were the best.

Dirk - So do you have any positive memories of them?

S. I have positive memories, but they could only be in so many classes. You get other teachers who clash with you and I would clash with them. And what makes it worse is in middle school I got told that handwriting is the way of the future. And so in high school I can write like a mofo, I can write like this and that. In high school we were writing a note and everyone’s still printing, and I’m like "why is everyone still printing, its stupid." So I went like this (scribbles in the air) done, and handed it to the teacher and she’s like "well what’s this?" "Well I've written it, its handwriting." And she’s like "well we don’t accept handwriting here, only printing." I looked at her and I'm like "do you think I know how to print? I spent all my time learning how to handwrite”. So, I have positive memories about high school, but there’s only so many people that can help, And the rest couldn't even give a shit.

Shiop struggled in the education system and found a place for himself outside of the public school system in acting school. His mother had put him in there because of the discrimination he faced in public school along with a great deal of bullying. In acting school Shiop learned how to improv, which he details as leading him to want to tell stories. This led him to build characters for D&D and become involved in roleplaying. Both Shiop and Nikham used tabletop roleplaying games as a way to escape their experiences, and to enable them to perform in ways that expressed their agency. Feeling in control therefore appears to be an important reason as to why people engage in escapism. For Shiop this came in the form of writing, but when talking about the types of characters he created, he tended to play characters that were very similar to him.

Dirk. So, when making characters, what kind of characters do you tend to construct?

Shiop. Alpha males.

D. Alpha males?

S. Yeah.

D. Why do you think that is?

S. Because I’m a bit of a leader. When I sit down to lead and there’s an alpha male, we’re going to have problems, because two alpha males want to drive this bus. Only one can. And I'm more of a leader, I'm not, I don't play well gaming in the back seat. But I try. I try. I'm getting there.

D. So you make characters that are similar to you?

S. Yeah.
D. Is there any reason for that?
S. Well I guess I mean, I was bullied when I was young, and now I'm a way different person, so I like, I like to build those characters because of what I went through when I was young.
D. So kind of like, you like your current identity so you want to produce that more?
C. Yeah, uhuh.

Although Nikham and Shiop played different styles of characters, they both took part in escapist behaviours as they played and worked on D&D materials. Therefore, Nikham was escaping for both cause-based, and effect-based reasons, allowing us to see that this dichotomy does not always exist as separate sets of experiences, but rather as a way to detail the multiple ways we may escape simultaneously.

Cosplay

These explanations of escapism look to a few definitions for how we may define escapist behaviour. At the same time, we can look at another form of escapism which has become prevalent in geek and nerd culture, and specifically across fandoms – cosplay. Cosplay (costume play) is a popular form of expression in which individuals construct costumes modeled after characters from various mediums, and wear them out to events such as conventions, costume parties, photoshoots, shows, etc. in order to show their love and devotion to the source material, or for the interest of others. Cosplay does not necessarily include escapism, as some cosplay is done for the pure aesthetics of putting on a costume and presenting that image to others. However, cosplay is also done as a form of personal expression and the choice of different characters can be influenced by attachment to that character, sharing their ideologies or either sharing, or wanting to present a similar physical form to the character. Cosplay in many ways can be seen as an expression of an identity that is being assumed by the performer, with performers often attempting to match facial expressions, mannerisms, and key body movements.

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or poses associated with that character.\textsuperscript{76} Through the act of cosplaying, people can then take-on an alternate identity, often feeling as though they are that character, and therefore providing an escape from their real-world identity.

There is more at play though when one cosplays. Not only is the individual taking on the identity of the character, changing their appearance and often forms of speech or body movement and expression, but they are also showing their emotional attachment to a specific character or story.\textsuperscript{77} Much as people do when they come to immerse themselves in game worlds and fantasy worlds, the cosplayer is taking this identity out of the fantasy or game world and is bringing it to life in the real-world. This is an agentive process through which the player presents themselves to others as both a fan and as the character. The cosplayer then is able to mediate certain aspects of their real-world identity and experiences through the adoption of this form for relatively short periods of time. In this way we can see the ways that cosplay allows the player another form of escapism, but one that is quite differently valued than video game, tabletop game, or other media engagement. I would like to mark this point here, as it is important for understanding the value that is put on certain forms of engagement with media. To be a consumer of media, or to engage through the playing of a video game or tabletop games brings connotations that the individual is avoiding or passively consuming. We can see open discussions of gaming addiction and worries regarding what these forms of engagement are doing to youth. However, in cosplaying, and what I will come to discuss next – the consumption of literature – we see self-development, agency, production, and community/social interaction. I argue then that productivity in the forms

\textsuperscript{77} Gn, Joel (2011): 589.
accepted by the society or culture we live in has an important impact on how we view peoples’ leisure activities.

**Participatory Media Consumption**

Now I would like to turn to look at escapism as many people experience it in their daily lives – through the consumption of various forms of media. Much of our engagement with fantasy worlds, and the act of escaping, comes through the reading, listening, or watching of media. Books, comics, television, movies, radio/podcasts make up the ways that most of us encounter fantasy, sci-fi, and fiction in our regular lives. Watching television/movies and listening to radio/podcasts are more passive experiences as we do not have much control over the delivery method of these, and therefore I argue escapism through these forms of consumption is also a more passive experience. However, when looking at the reading of comics or books, the consumer is more active in that they must engage with the text in order to consume it. As the reader moves through a book they read at their own pace, in whatever setting they choose, and interpret the words (or pictures) in whatever way works best for them. In the reading of fiction novels, the individual often does not have many references outside of the work for how the character or scenes look, sound, smell, or feel and therefore must rely on the author’s descriptions alone. In this, the reader is an active agent who produces these pictures, sounds, feelings, and smells in their own mind, rather than being shown them. In this way, the reader is able to then escape into their imagination.

In her important work *Reading the Romance* (1991) Janice Radway provides us with a look into the lives of women who form communities of practice around their love for reading.

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78 Although readers do not often have reference material for how the characters in their fiction novels may look other than the in-text descriptions, the sharing of fan-art has intervened to the point where readers can google a character name and see how others who have read the same works have imagined them in their own artwork.
romance novels. In this ethnography, we see a picture form of women who in many ways adhere to socially dictated positions through their roles as mothers and homemakers, and whose mobility is hindered by these roles. Radway shows us that women are therefore using romance novels as an agentive practice through which they can escape daily problems, relax, and carve out personal time. Radway considers this engagement with fictional fantasy worlds through romance novels to be a form of escape for these women, as they come to inhabit these worlds for short periods of time throughout their days. It is the ability of these novels to transport one out of their daily lived experiences and into a fantasy world that provides escape but it is also important to recognize the role of the actor themselves, in that they are the ones producing this transportation in their minds. Interestingly enough, Radway also found in her work that the family members of these women, and others around them, would sometimes problematize this practice as it seemed to distract them from their obligations to the family. Through reading, however, we can see that in similar ways to Nikham playing a roleplay game, Shiop writing and acting out characters, and cosplaying, these women were able to find a form of escape from their daily lived experiences, from problems in their lives (whether they be social or personal) and their lack of mobility.

In his work on participatory cultures of media consumption, Henry Jenkins has argued that new forms of technology have led to increased levels of agency in the practice of media engagement. Jenkins looks at the ways that new technologies/tools allow consumers to

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“archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media culture”\textsuperscript{83} Jenkins employs Pierre Levy’s ideas of the “cosmopedia” to explain the ways in which online fan communities may represent this phenomenon of “expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture”\textsuperscript{84} Here Jenkins looks to explain the ways that communities of fans form online to create active engagement of materials they consume with others who share their interests. This works to further develop the fictional worlds that these fans follow, and shows that escapism may also involve this active engagement with the materials people consume outside of the act of viewing/reading/listening.

What I think it is most important to take away from these discussions of escapism is the common theme of fantasy engagement, and the ability to move oneself into various fantasy worlds that appears to be quite important to those who engage with this genre. As was discussed in the opening of this section, it is important to try and understand why people seek out fantasy in its various forms so that we may further understand that practices that arise around fantasy itself. For my participants fantasy was exciting and engaging because it was different from the world around us. Being able to imagine fantastical forms, environments, etc., was fun because it let their imaginations run away from their everyday realities. For some this takes the form of escapism, which allows people to deal with problems they encounter throughout their lives. Escapism must be seen in these cases not as a problematic behaviour that leads to addiction, disattachment, and disregard for one’s obligations, but rather as a way to cope with what it is to be a part of a society or culture that requires one to conform to norms and standards as they act in the

\textsuperscript{83} Jenkins (2006): 135.
\textsuperscript{84} Jenkins (2006): 137.
world. Being able to produce one’s own meanings outside of these expectations and being able to reimagine oneself or present oneself in whatever one sees fit works to support the individual’s well-being. Of course, game addiction is a real-world problem that does affect people, but it is only one part of the realities of what it is to be engaged on a deep level with fantasy worlds through gameplay, reading, and cosplaying.

Fantasy escapism produces these very helpful ways of coping with one’s life circumstances, showing some of the important reasons why people come to fantasy on a regular basis. After my conversation with Nikham, we decided to try and play a campaign together, and overall it went extremely well. I had a series of players who were looking for a place to play, and I decided that I could open up my home to my participants to join in a game. Playing in game stores is an important way that many players come to meet others and build communities of gameplay, but often these games move to people’s homes as they develop closer relationships with one another. I think this is largely because homes are more comfortable, quieter, and private (which allows people to perform their characters in different ways, as fewer people are watching them) and are less constrained by hours of operation. So, it would come that I would take on the role of host for a group of people I had met in various places throughout my research who had all become close to me. In this way I think we can see the “participant” part of participant-observation becoming clearer, as I learned what it was to become a more embedded member of these play groups. I was now hosting a D&D game, giving people food and drink, and introducing these players I met at meet-up groups and game stores to my wife and daughter. Our lives were truly becoming intertwined.
Fantasy Writing and Augmented Reality

As I began to embed myself more in the lives of my participants, and they did so with me, I noticed the forming of close connections that existed outside of gameplay. These communities of practice existed not just around the table, but through text conversations, Facebook and Discord groups, and in hangouts throughout the week outside of game day. One afternoon I was invited by Tivaumvit (our axe wielding barbarian from earlier) to his house outside of the city. Tivaumvit was at home for the day with his 3 children, and as I was at home with my daughter he told me to bring her along and all the kids could play together. So, we jumped in the car and drove across the city for approximately 40 mins (a long drive for a 3-year-old) and met Tivaumvit and his family. As the kids ran off to play together, Tivaumvit and I sat down and chatted for just over two-hours about his life as a tabletop roleplaying gamer. For Tivaumvit, TTRPGs were not just a way to play or escape into a fantasy world, but also importantly offered him a way to write and perform stories that he was passionate about producing. About an hour and a half into our conversation Tivaumvit explained how he got into writing, imagining sci-fi and fantasy worlds, and his own experiences with escapism...

Tivaumvit. I used to come up with my own stories all the time. Like, I got into Star Wars so I started coming up with this whole sci-fi story. So I think to be honest with you, I think my journey throughout role-playing wasn't as much about playing but more about finding my place as a DM. You know? As a game master. Because I'm able to give to life worlds and ideas. And like, I've written like two different novels. Not published obviously.

Dirk. But like you've written and gone through the writing process?

T. Yes. You know, and it's given me sort of an outlet. You know, to all of these fantastical ideas that I wouldn't be able to put in a book per se, but if it's just a world at that point as a DM I can create that world. I'm not going to be one of those "my precious setting" sort of, you know like "okay so like you're in this castle, and so little did you know 100 years ago in this castle was this wizard that lived here and he killed everybody and..." you know I could if I wanted to, but let's keep it topical.

D. I just want to say that this really is great information. Such interesting stuff you're hitting on.

T. Is it gold? "it's gold Jerry."

D. It absolutely is gold Jerry! So you got into storytelling and that kind of, you know, idea. Is that something that your friends were into as well? The way you found a connection with your friend groups?
T. I guess I come up with a lot of these alter egos, and worlds that they live in and all that. Like, I remember I built this spaceport. Okay, so when I was a kid, okay actually like mid-teens, I had this train track, not that huge (shows with his hands) it was about this big, and I didn't know where to put it because I got it for Christmas one year… I don't know, whatever. So I went to Home Depot and bought these big wooden boards and I put it down on my floor in my room and then I put the train together and then what I did in the middle was I built an entire Spaceport out of Lego. And I was like, I made facsimiles of X-Wings another Star Wars stuff. And then like my own stuff too. And then I literally came up with this whole character and people who live in the Star Wars world, but they live in this like Planet near this spaceport. But like the focus was the spaceport. And I came up with all that. And I kind of did that all the time.

You know, a further example like I said I came up with this whole [Tiv]-man the zombie thrasher. You know, everybody was like “if you have any zombie questions, ask Tivaumvit.” Because I'm watching all the George Romero movies and playing Resident Evil, and I have Max Brook’s Zombie Survival Guide. You know, like these alter egos that I kind of came up with for myself. Like I remember I walked in on You and Blordom and you were talking, and it's the whole topic of escapism, and I guess these sort of regressions in my mind. Like I said I've written a couple of novels. And so you know you asked me did I share that with my friends, and actually so like from that perspective yes I did. Because in 9th grade I started what I called my ultimate story. Okay like, sort of like the pinnacle of all the stuff I had created in the past. This was going to be like the piece de resistance. I called it Tivaumvit's ultimate story. So I literally wrote like an entire three novels worth actually. I think I have about a thousand pages. It's pretty bad because I was 14. But I used to bring my chapters to school. And I would just do this at night, when trying to go to bed because I always had a hard time trying to fall asleep so I would just come up with all this shit in my head. You know and then it takes a while to get it on paper. You know, but like I did, to the point where so everyone knew me, like “yeah Tivaumvit brings his stories to school.”

The ability then to make these advanced worlds that Tivaumvit could express himself through was seemingly the most important part of the process for him. Writing these detailed worlds was a way to let his imagination run-away, to re-imagine who he was, and what the worlds that he loved, or created, could have in them. I think it important to look specifically at Tivaumvit’s additions to certain worlds, such as that from Star Wars, as it shows the different ways that people become enmeshed in these fantasy and sci-fi stories.

Much like within the world of cosplaying where individuals and groups build costumes based on characters from their favourite fictional worlds in order to show/build their connection with that piece of media, to escape into a world where they become the character for short periods of time, and to express themselves, the worlds of fan-fiction and slash-fiction take tales that are told for a massive audience, such as Star Wars, and reworks them to suit certain
subcultures and to express the (re)imaginings of the writers. The fans of many series become entrenched in the worlds they read/watch/play in/listen to and therefore want to also express their creative desires through the production of materials that include these worlds. This may be in fan/slash-fiction, cosplaying, live-theatre productions, etc., and these help to further enmesh the lives of the fans and their fictional/sci-fi interests.

In Tivaumvit’s case, he came to develop his imaginative practices through the building of a world-within-a-world. His spaceport was not a recreation of the Star Wars universe or any specific scene, but rather a new creation within that world. He then continued to do this through his love of zombie films and games, and horror of various types. Finally, this led Tivaumvit to start writing his own stories, not based on a specific fictional universe, but of his own creations. Through this creative process Tivaumvit built connections with classmates and friends to share his love for creating fictional stories, and this finally led him to become a DM/GM in a variety of different games. This trend of using what one knows and reimagining or adding to them also took his daily lived experiences and the real-world around him as influence. Later in our discussions, Tivaumvit would explain how he and the people he played with took the familiar world around them and augmented it through tabletop gameplay. Here Tivaumvit is explaining a World of Darkness campaign he and his wife were a part of where they were werewolves who lived in modern-day Ottawa.

Tivaumvit. Okay so over on St. Joseph over there, there was an adult shop called the Rixx, so Vampira (Tivaumvit’s real-world wife) was the owner of the RIXX. So she was our pack alpha, and you know, like we did some stuff and there were some stories, you know where some rival werewolves are trying

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to muscle in on our turf. You know, turns out they were serving that like evil god-spirit, you know, and things like that. And it was brutal, it was really brutal, because like there were times where we ended sessions and we were all like terrified. The whole point, the whole aesthetic to the world of darkness is that its modern horror. Okay, so like, that’s why its like vampires and werewolves and stuff. Like contemporary horror. Um, so yeah, and like Crandle would make that. So we used to have one of our allies was the powerful fate spirit that lives at the church on St. Josephs, and we would constantly ask it for advice and help.

Here Tivaumvit is getting at the way his playgroup would take the world around them, the world they were very familiar with, and augment it and reimagine it. This had an effect of making the world feel much more engaging, as it was easier to imagine what one’s surroundings would be like. However, it also pushed the players to imagine themselves in the spaces that they inhabit regularly, with fantastical elements added in. This playing with the world around oneself was a way to escape into fantasy, but in a way that could feel more realistic, because it was not that different from the world they already knew. When we escape, it is often into worlds, situations, and with characters that are quite different from ourselves and our lived realities, but for Tivaumvit and his playgroup, much of the fun of escaping came when it was into a world very similar to their own, but with different abilities. The roleplaying aspect here was also unique, as the players would choose characters that in many ways resembled people that could easily be members of our society. Therefore, playing a seemingly mundane character who has something fantastical happen to them is a way to reimagine oneself and what might happen in these circumstances. Much as we will play imagination games with friends and colleagues such as “what would you do if you won the lottery?”, in what I am calling augmented reality tabletop games, people imagine what they would do if they were to become a werewolf in Ottawa in the 21st century. Augmented reality is a term used recently to describe the reimagining of our spaces through the use of devices such as phones, handheld game consoles, etc., where the user will look at the world around them through the device, which will add to or change that space in some
way to create the experience of that thing being a part of one’s real-world. Doerr and Occhi (2019) show this in their examinations of the extremely popular mobile game “Pokemon Go”. Doerr and Occhi argue that augmented realities are new forms of virtual worlds, ones that have a necessary connection to the real world. Although augmented reality is a digital phenomenon, I think the crossover into TTRPGs works here, as people come to play with, and modify, the reality they know, in order to further their experience of the game.

The writing of fiction is often an important way that we come to understand the world around us, and work through problems that are sometimes too difficult to face in person. For players in the fantasy world writing is a way to come up with stories that help them express themselves and their interests, and to share these with their friends or fellow game players. For Tivaumvit, writing fantasy worlds and sci-fi worlds was the key-way that they came to engage with TTRPGs, and shows us another form of escape. As they (re)imagined the world around them and their favourite fictional universes they were able to escape their daily lived experiences – such as the mundaneness of work life, or the difficult social terrain of high-school. Sharing stories and worlds with others brought these people together with others, and they received joy out of presenting their fictional worlds to others and seeing them explore them.

After our interview Tivaumvit asked if I would like to join in a Chronicles of Darkness campaign with him. He had been writing a story and wanted to run it in a campaign. The story was set in Ottawa at the current time of the research, and would take place in a neighborhood I

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88 This Augmented Reality (AR) technology became extremely popular through the mobile phone game “Pokemon GO” where players could catch Pokemon in a the game, that appeared on their screen when using their camera to look at the real-world around them. This had the intended effect of making it seem as though a Pokemon was in the park with them, or on the sidewalk, street, or in the tree they were standing beside.


lived in a few years before when I first moved to Ottawa. He expressed that he would like to do this with a small group of people (about 4) and that he would like it if we were already close friends. So, I invited my wife and a close friend of ours to travel out to Tivaumvit’s house bi-weekly, along with one of Tivaumvit’s friends that I had become friends with through Kessel Run – Stuldil Darksword. The game took place over the period of a few days and involved us, as regular everyday humans with no special powers or weapons, exploring an apartment building we all lived in. The apartment building was a real-world building, and as Tivaumvit was an installer for a popular internet/television provider he had actually worked in this building when it was built. Therefore, Tivaumvit had detailed knowledge of the building and his maps were accurate to the real building itself. Experiencing his story, we felt immersed in this world that was simultaneously familiar and not, as small fantastical elements were added to the story, and as the mystery we were trying to solve developed. By the time the game finished we all felt close to Tivaumvit in a new way – not only had we spent many hours in his house, with his family, playing a game – but we had also worked through a campaign he wrote allowing us to understand him through his art.

The fictional writing/storytelling aspect of TTRPGs is what can really drive people to become so immersed in the games they play. As we experience the worlds and characters that the DMs create, and we also express ourselves creatively in those worlds through the roleplaying of our characters new bonds are formed. Simultaneously, our involvement, and often escape, into a fantasy world that is a product of the many elements spoken of in this chapter (i.e. looking for enjoyable experiences apart from our daily lived experiences, cause-based escapism or “escape from”, effect-based escapism or “escape to”, escapism as production, escapism as consumption, and fictional writing) provides us with many important outcomes, and experiencing these
together as a group works to build bonds with the other players and the DM that are associated with those effects. Overcoming one’s disability through escapist gameplay, and doing so with others who help reinforce the world you are in and your assumed abilities has the unique effect of forming close forms of attachment with those people. As I have attempted to show with Tivaumvit then, we importantly build unique relationships with people as they share their imaginative creations with us, and this element of fantasy has great effects on our engagement with communities of practice around games.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have approached the topics of play and fantasy to try and further our understanding of why gameplay communities are such a meaningful form of social engagement in a world often struggling from a lack of in-person community interaction. Beginning with a discussion of play, the key take away was to look at play as not a singular act, but as a disposition – a way we come to interact with the world around us. Fantasy then is engaged with in a series of ways, and these ways all provide their audience with different meanings – but important meanings nonetheless. Fantasy, as I first showed is just a generally enjoyable form of fiction. Fantastical elements are included in many types of media, and I think this is popular as it appears that for many, fantastical elements are enjoyable for their ability to spark our imagination and make the mundane exciting and new. Outside of this, fantasy can provide us with various forms of escape that I attempted to address throughout this chapter. Escapism has had a tumultuous past in our society, often having negative connotations. As described by Tolkien in his work “On Fairy Stories” there appeared to be a problematizing or vilifying of “escapism” as it was conflated with the concept of “the flight of the deserter” as if to escape for brief periods
was to abandon or flee the modern world/reality. The concept of escapism has also been simultaneously framed as both hedonistic and cathartic depending on why/how the escapism is used as was shown earlier by Wamrelink, Harteved, and Mayer (2009). Here I tried to reframe this to show the positive ways it was used by tabletop gamers I interacted with. From challenging ableism, reframing people’s experience in public institutions, and providing relief from the challenges of daily life. We may then see that for many, fantasy is a way to cope, a way to experience different forms of life, and to reimagine who one is.

The concept of worldness was introduced in this chapter to help understand the ways we view fantasy worlds and game worlds as separate from our own. As I showed however, for some, taking the known world and augmenting it is another way to escape and reimagine oneself. Finally I approach fantasy and escapism through the lens of leisure activities and reimagine why we problematize this behaviour. This is when we can look to productivity as a key aspect of a neo-liberal society, and why certain forms of escapism become problematized. When one is creating, writing, producing they are a productive member of society, therefore fulfilling their expected role as productive citizen. However, when one is a passive viewer they are apart from/counter to the ideal citizen. Games at points have been presented as time-wasting leisure activities as they are consumptive practices with little-to-no production – obviously misguided and misunderstanding of the nature of gameplay. When we reframe gameplay to show the way people produce stories, identities, and communities we can see these forms of interaction as productive after all. As game players engage in these communities of practice they challenge their daily lived experiences and create new and important forms of interaction that help them to produce meaning. This meaning is, seemingly, what many of those who come to engage in

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TTRPG communities are looking for when they join a gaming group and shows why they continue to do so on a weekly basis. These interactions create meaningful attachments to others in these groups, and they are relived through the telling of stories of shared experiences in these fantasy game worlds.
Chapter 3: Leisure Communities of Practice

Game Mastering and the Labour of Play

About 8 months into my time in the field I had been playing a lot of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Four or five nights a week I was going to different stores, campuses, or peoples’ houses around the city and joining in games as a player. I had developed a binder of character sheets that were all accompanied by sets of notes to remind me who they were, what campaign they were a part of, what was happening in that character’s storyline, and who the other characters and players were in those campaigns. Of course, most TTRPG players are not playing four or five different campaigns a week, but many are in at least two, and keeping track of all of the adventures one has and who their different characters and co-adventurers are can become a time-consuming and labour-intensive process. As I logged 15 to 20 hours of gameplay a week, coupled with the 1 to 2 hours of prep-time for each session and the travel time to and from each game, I came to recognize that these leisure commitments took a great deal of time. On top of this, I had been talking to the DMs in the campaigns I was a part of and realized that if I was to understand what this whole TTRPG lifestyle was like I would need to try my hand at DMing.

There are many ways to DM, but in general this practice includes preparing storylines and worlds where players can adventure and have “encounters” with non-player characters (NPC), monsters, and the other players. Some DMs choose to run adventures that are pre-written and can be purchased from game stores or online. These adventures are often published by Wizards of the Coast, but pre-written campaigns can also be found online in D&D related forums and communities. Although these are pre-written, they still take a great deal of prep-time as the DM must know the details of the campaign in great depth in order to be able to make judgement
calls and roleplay all the characters that the players will meet in these worlds. On the other hand, a DM can make all of this material themselves including writing a storyline and building a world, or using a common world like The Forgotten Realms detailed in *The Dungeon Master’s Guide* (a book published by Wizards of the Coast which details all of the in-depth rules for DMs to be able to run a game). Whatever route they take the DM has much planning to do to be able to run a campaign for a group of players.

For my first experience as a DM I decided to run a pre-written adventure for a group of new players at The Forge. This, I thought, would give me a chance to introduce some new players to the game while also learning first-hand what it took to be a DM. I decided on “Lost Mine of Phandelver” which is considered a beginner adventure published by Wizards of the Coast and sold in their “D&D Starter Set” (see figure 3). I had purchased the “Starter Set” a few months prior, and so I began to read through the adventure, taking notes and planning out how I would run the game for a group of players. This process included reading the whole adventure which was contained in a single 63 paged booklet (see figure 4).
CHAPTER 3: LEISURE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Figure 3: D&D Starter Set Booklet

Figure 4: Lost Mine of Phandelver Booklet
The booklet contained everything a DM would need to run the adventure including maps, NPCs, storylines and reference information on monsters, magic items, and how to actually run this adventure. Along with planning for the adventure itself, I would also need to put on another hat that the DM must wear – that of party organizer.

At first glance taking on the DM role seems to be quite straightforward – (1) Read the rules\textsuperscript{92} (2) Plan the adventure (3) Grab some friends (4) Play. However, one quickly realizes this is not as simple of a process as these four steps may seem. The first two steps are solitary activities the to-be DM can do in their free time. This can take hours, days, weeks, or longer depending on how much planning the DM wants to do or feels is required, how detailed the world the campaign is set in will be, and how detailed the campaign itself will be (for some an adventure hook and the first session worth of material is all that is needed, for others the entire adventure from beginning to end is written). However, step three is where things can get complicated. Often groups of friends that all want to play together are not too hard to find, but finding a time and place that works for everyone is. This leads many to run campaigns in public locations such as game stores or libraries, where the time and date are set for the campaign and then players who are free during those times sign up. This leads the DM to also play the role of organizer, choosing party members, setting dates and times for sessions, and updating group members on information regarding all these details as the campaign goes on. People’s schedules change, availability of locations change, and people miss sessions frequently. On top of this, as is

\textsuperscript{92} By reading the rules, I actually mean read a lot of rules. Depending on the type of person you are when it comes to games, this can include the reading and understanding of three text-book sized game manuals – “The Player’s Handbook”, “The Monster Manual”, and “The Dungeon Master’s Guide”. Now, reading all three of these is not required completely, but having a good understanding of what is outlined in these books is going to make your job as a DM much easier once you actually start playing and the players in the group hurl questions at you about anything they can think of in regards to the game you are playing. Therefore, a prepared DM knows the ins-and-outs of the game system they are playing as to not have to spend time looking up rules in the middle of an encounter.
bound to happen in social settings, disagreements occur and personalities do not always fit well together which can lead to tensions that the DM must often step in to mediate. This element of group organizer and scheduler can often be the most difficult for DMs to navigate.

I spent about 3 weeks preparing the campaign using the booklet provided in the starter set. These published adventures have a standard style they use in how the book is presented to the reader. They often open with a description of the world or setting in which the campaign is to be run, and some “history” that helps the DM to understand what context the adventure is taking place in. They will also include a description of how to run the adventure and the level of characters it is intended for. The adventure is then broken down into chapters or “parts” that each have subsections for encounters the players may have as they travel through the world. As well, they will often include dungeons, castles, swamps and other locations that come with maps and often serve as key components in the adventure (See figure 5). Therefore, planning the adventure is a learning process in itself as one must learn how to read these guidebooks and what components of a campaign are essential and which are secondary.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{93} D&D adventures often contain a great deal of tertiary encounters that players can engage in but are in no way necessary for completing the main campaign. However, these “side quests” are they are often termed, are often considered to be important to making the game world feel more complete and open to players’ free exploration. Some campaigns spend more time on side quests than the actual purpose for the campaign to the point where the side quests become the main component of play.
Once I had planned my campaign, I decided to approach The Forge to see if I could run a D&D campaign on Tuesday nights from 6:00 PM until 10:00 PM (closing time). As well, I needed to find some players, and asked for guidance on the matter. Excitedly, the owners informed me that they were planning a “Learn How to Play D&D” night at the store, and 10 people had already signed up. They were hoping to find some DMs who could volunteer and then split this group of people up into two or three smaller groups, running campaigns for them in the store (this was all done at no cost to the players, and the DMs were not paid in any way by the store). What timing! I agreed to sign up as a resident DM for the store, and one week later I came to the store for the introductory session.

I arrived on a Wednesday afternoon around 4:00 PM for the 5:30 PM start time of the “Learn How to Play D&D” session. I was asked to join in as somewhat of a teaching assistant (a role I was already quite used to given my many years of graduate studies at a university) where I would help the expert DM to show players how to build a character, how to play the game, and then to run an introductory encounter to give them a feel for the gameplay. I was excited and...
nervous for this new experience so I had been preparing for the last week, reading up on all the D&D information I could (commonly asked questions, detailed rules for various actions one may perform, etc.). I met the expert DM, an older man with grey hair, a round face, and rosy red cheeks. We chatted for a few minutes, and he seemed quite relaxed, having been running this same introductory D&D class around the city for years. He seemed passionate about the game and liked to teach people how to play D&D as he wanted to share it as much as he could with others.

Around 5:00 PM the new players began to show up, and all sat at the table. Everyone introduced themselves and we began to talk about what got people interested. After a few minutes we dove right into character creation. I sat with some players describing how to create a character, asking questions about what their inspiration was for a character and what role they would want to play in the game. We then looked through the book together and decided on what races, classes, and backgrounds each person would have. After about an hour and a half of character creation we began our first encounter. An encounter in D&D is usually made up of the party meeting a monster, enemy, or NPC of some sort and talking with them, solving a problem, or engaging in combat. This encounter involved a prison escape which was designed to teach people basic gameplay mechanics such as how to sneak, make an attack, and talk through an engagement with an NPC. Following their escape from the prison another resident DM and I explained to the players the two campaigns we had prepared, and the group split into two. With

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94 Races in D&D typically include Human, Elf, Halfling (similar to Hobbits from J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels), Dwarf, along with many others that have been developed over the years. These really are “species” but D&D has always used the term “race” to describe them.

95 Classes in D&D refer to one’s profession or lifestyle choice commonly including fighter, monk, cleric, wizard, sorcerer, druid, rogue, ranger, paladin, and warlock. These “classes” dictate the character’s abilities and style of gameplay (will they fight with a sword, cast spells, sneak around, or heal other members of the party).
my group of players now determined, we created a WhatsApp group, and decided that we would join together next week to have our first session of “Lost Mine of Phandelver”.

One week later, the players and I all came together to begin our adventure which would see the characters save some dwarves from goblins, to search for riches, and to explore great cave systems and dangerous enemy hideouts to finally find the fabled “lost mine of Phandelver”. Play started slowly as I introduced the players into the world, everyone introduced their characters to one another, and they were given the “adventure hook” which is designed to get the players started off in their adventure. Members of my group were playing for various reasons – some wanting to meet new people as they had recently moved to the city, others looking for a new game to play as they had heard of the game before but never knew how to get into it, and one player who was learning so that he could then run games for his wife and children. What was certain was that all of us were taking part in a learning process like so many other TTRPG players. It would take a lot of work and importantly a desire to continue playing, but we were all developing in our gaming hobbies together.

In this chapter I will unpack the discussion of games as pleasure, leisure, and work to examine our understanding of game communities as leisure communities of practice. Through games we construct meaning, we build and maintain social relationships, and we move up and down arbitrary systems of hierarchy and rank which further impact how we interact with games and the people we play them with. It will be made clear in this chapter that games are a form of pleasure, a form of leisure, a form of play, and for many, a form of work and that coming to look at them in these ways we can further develop the role we give to games in both a cultural and societal context. As Casey O’Donnell argues in his engagement with Geertz’s theory of Deep Play, “games need to be pushed, much as anthropology was, to look at their entanglements, the
ways they are rife with connectivity beyond a single given ‘game’”.96 O’Donnell pushes us to look at games as “in/with/of/as culture” just as any other art form is, so that we may broaden our understanding of games, as well as culture.97

Leisure in a Busy World

After the first session of this new campaign I was now running, it was important for me to get down to work on planning the next session. The weekly meetings make for a convenient regular schedule so that one can plan when their gaming will take place. As many of the people playing TTRPGs in evening meetup groups work during the day they are able to schedule in regular meeting days, giving themselves a night to look forward to as they go about their lives. Along side this is that especially for the DM, there is a great deal of planning that goes into each session and the DM has a limited time frame to do so. As players actions often change what is happening in a campaign the DM must develop new content to be ready for whatever the players may want to do in this world they are playing in. In many ways planning for a session involves generating encounters, but also planning responses to possible actions players may take. Due to this, much of the content that DMs create is never actually seen by players or is remolded as a way to evolve with the players’ expectations of the game world. In many ways, playing a TTRPG is akin to improv, to the extent that guides on how to DM will borrow improv strategies and teachings (such as the “Always say yes” rule). It was then time to get down to work as the next session was going to be here quickly.

98 The “Always say yes.” Rule states that those practicing improv (or playing a TTRPG) should always respond to another actor’s questions or statements in an affirmative sense, in order to allow the scene to be open and to evolve freely, rather than saying “no” which makes it more difficult to continually produce new ideas and performances.
Taking place in Ottawa, Ont., it is important to recognize that a large part of the workforce in this city is centred around government operations. Whether or not they worked for the government, many of the participants in this study were affected by the regular governmental hours of operation. Many businesses exist in the Ottawa area that support governmental work in various ways such as the food industry, tech, construction, and repair industries, along with various support services. In many ways it is a 9-5 city, one that leaves lots of room for evening and weekend social activities. Of course, this will be problematized in this section, as we see the ways leisure activity is economically and culturally coded, but the individuals I engaged with throughout this research had a great deal of leisure time that they filled with various activities. Deciding how one ‘spends’ their leisure time shows the values they place on this leisure time, as well as on the activities they choose.

I think it is important to delve into the concept of leisure time, focusing on the expertise that many express through their leisure activities. Leisure and ‘free time’ have become important parts of our daily lived experiences in North America, with the activities we take part in during this time often saying more about us than our careers do. When looking at low to moderately paid members of our population, I argue that work can become disassociated from identity as it may not be an important and meaningful way an individual defines themselves, but rather a means to an end. At the same time, if this work is too draining or physically demanding in a way that leaves people tired and unable to practice in-depth leisure activities during their free time, they may not define themselves completely by the work they do, but do not have the free time to take part in in-depth leisure activities that inherently affect one’s identity construction. What arises then is a portion of the population that has free time, (somewhat) disposable income (while

not being considered wealthy) and the energy (both mental and physical) to practice leisure activities in groups and communities that come to define more about who they are then their careers ever do. Looking at leisure then becomes important as it holds a great deal of information about how parts of the North American population make meaning in their lives and subsequently define themselves and their culture.

**Free Time and Class**

Free time, or what has also been described as freedom in opposition to work and obligation, has been largely defined within a modern post-industrialist framework where individuals were considered to have a certain amount of freedom outside of their work and self/familial care time. Rojek shows us that this is explained by the “post-industrial society thesis” which shows that leisure time was at once tied with social progression.\(^\text{100}\) Leisure in a post-industrial capitalist society is embedded as a piece of this system, where one has time which is considered to be labour time to be sold, obligation time which is used for self care, familial care, etc., and free time where one can take part in leisure activities seemingly in whatever way they choose. In this system then our leisure time as Rojek describes it becomes both constrained and enabled by power relations\(^\text{101}\) which are complex systems of relative positions based on one’s positionality in any given context. However, our leisure time is not actually free as we must continue to present ourselves as a competent worker, as a responsible and law-abiding citizen, and we must not take part in acts that would affect our ability to continue to work during our labour time.\(^\text{102}\) Our leisure time is therefore importantly caught up in a series of relative positions in a post-industrialist society where we take part in leisure activities defined as

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acceptable and that fall within the narratives of what it is to perform leisure activities in this setting.

Part of the constraints attached to free time and leisure activities is that of accessibility. Accessibility of leisure activities is affected by space, capital, knowledge, gender, race, ability and a host of other factors. In her book on low-wage labourers in the United States, Barbara Ehrenreich attempts to live as a low-wage laborer in a variety of positions such as waitress and house cleaner, and in these positions outlines many of the difficulties that people working to live in these positions struggle with. Along with the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of supporting oneself on a minimum wage income, we see that many factors add to the list of what makes life difficult for people in these positions. Where one lives in relation to where they work, the food they are able to eat, the nature of the labour they perform, the relationships that are formed in these positions and the lack of social capital produced all come to weigh heavily on one’s ability to survive.103 This, of course, is not new to anyone who has worked a low-wage position or has been a part of a social circle where others do, or has paid attention to class struggles and the increasing problems with unemployment, poverty, and access to resources that many face. Why this is important here is that we see the ways that free time and leisure are also allowances of certain class positions.

The ability to engage in free time activities is one that was navigated by many of the frequent TTRPG players I met in the field as games are often scheduled on a weekly basis and therefore making it to every session can become difficult depending on one’s work. For some participants this was not the case as their 9-5 jobs allowed for evening and weekend play.

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However, for others it was a struggle to constantly find time to engage in the activity they loved. This was most obviously true for Brovir Ruz and Kethed Vadebu from Kessel Run. Both were in school and worked part-time low-wage jobs in the evenings and on weekends, and due to the nature of scheduled shift labour they often struggled to arrive on time or to make it at all. Often Kethed would be scheduled at his work in the evening during one of our scheduled game nights. This precarious form of labour meant that his free time changed around from day-to-day and made it difficult to plan anything far in advance. For others, school had great impacts on when people could play as assignments and exams would lead to differing levels of business on any given week. However, school in itself represents a different position than low-wage labour as it points to one’s access to a university or college education. Many of these students (which made up a significant portion of my participants) lived in low-wage conditions but had stable free time due to class schedules and exams that were known of long in advance.

What we can see then is that these people are inhabiting different class positions in different spaces of their work, education, and social lives. This is discussed by Frow (1995) when he looks at the ways that class is not simply dependent on economic conditions, but rather multiple subject positions that are simultaneously political, ideological, and economic. As well, Frow argues that there is no necessary congruence between these subject positions and we can see this at work as players come together from different economic, educational, political, and certainly ideological spheres to engage in tabletop games together. However, sometimes these spheres do impact one another depending on the case in context specific variables. If one is outwardly sexist and treats men and women differently in the playing of the game, which was encountered during my fieldwork, then those people may not come back to play together. Wright

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emphasizes that in fact class structure should be understood as “a structure of social relations that generates a matrix of exploitation based interests”. These social relations work then across contradictory classed positions, forming alliances to move around in these class positions. Therefore what is important is that these classed positions do not inherently stop people from engaging which is why the gaming groups I engaged with so easily worked across many of these typically classed positions. In no instance during my fieldwork did any member of a gaming group express that they excluded another, or felt excluded due to a class position. However, what they did express was how these interactions in gaming communities had led to upward mobility as people had found employment and other forms of social capital through their engagement with people in gaming groups. I will engage with this term social capital in a later chapter on community involvement, but at this point it is important to recognize that social capital is an outcome of these gaming groups that can affect one’s mobility outside of the group itself.

One of the important elements of class that does come into play in these game environments I engaged with was that of knowledge. Knowledge over time has become increasingly tied to class positions as access to knowledge is affected by one’s general access to resources while the holding of specific sets of knowledge leads to one’s position in various classed spheres. This is discussed by Bonnie Urciuoli in her work “Skills and Selves in the New Workplace” (2008). In this we see Urciuoli describe the ways in which skills have become reimagined as “technologies of the self” and that increasingly students and those entering the

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workplace see themselves as “bundles of skills.” The ability to use digital technologies, communicate, and to come into a job position with the skills needed to perform the job (rather than to be trained) are preconditions of employment under modern capitalism. Knowledge then becomes a form of capital and in turn affects one’s class position. However, this is important for gaming in regard to the presentation of expertise often seen in gaming and in leisure activities in general. Being an expert in one’s leisure activity is of increasing importance as our identities are increasingly informed by the leisure activities we engage with in our free time. Free time is afforded then by our class positions in a variety of ways, and this can be seen clearly in how people are able to join different leisure activity groups.

Leisure Activities as Self Making Practices

As I began to spend more time at The Forge I would show up early before game sessions to hang around and talk to people in the store, many of whom were avid Magic: The Gathering (MTG) players. I built a deck for myself to bring (In MTG, play is made up of two or more players, each of whom builds a 60 card deck which can consist of no more than 4 of the same card, attempting to deal damage to the other player through the conjuring of spells and creatures, in order to reduce the opponent’s life total to 0 from 20) and began playing regular games before I would play D&D in the evening. Most D&D sessions start around 5:30 or 6:00 pm, as people come straight from work to play, but as people arrived at different times, I would chat with them over a game or two of MTG. One evening, as another player, Asnah Nama, and I were waiting for our campaign to start we chatted about how they got into gaming, and how they spent their free time throughout their week. Asnah was a government employee, one who engaged in many different leisure activities.

In this excerpt from the conversation we had, Asnah discusses when and why she got into TTRPGs, as well as why she spends multiple nights a week playing them. Not discussed here is that Asnah also played baseball, practiced martial arts, and was a part of other special interest groups that all made up important parts of her weekly schedule (as we chatted, we interrupted ourselves with discussion about the game we were playing, and these have been left in to provide context as to what a normal conversation during gameplay is like – these parts are italicized to help with clarity).

Dirk. So when did you start playing roleplaying games?
Asnah. Um, last year?
D. Oh so was that was your first time, when you went to Hometown? So that was September 2017?
A. Yes.
D. And what led you to get into playing roleplaying games?
A. Well, the guy I was dating at the time was really into them, and he was going to this weekly event, and I asked to come along one time just to see. And I had fun. For me it’s really easy to get excited about things other people are excited about. Right? Like, if someone is really passionate about something, I'm like "yeah I can get on board with this" and then it’s like "okay now I really like this" and then when we stopped dating I was like "yeah, I'm still going to keep playing".
D. So do you remember at all what your first experience was like?
A. Yeah it was very overwhelming. Like, the knowledge that I felt was required.
D. (Rolls die) Well I'm not going first.
A. (Rolls die) I guess I’m going first.
D. Do you need life counters? Oh you have your.... I use d10s, I find it’s easy to count your life with them.
A. Um, so it was kind of overwhelming, just because I had no previous knowledge. So just playing with a bunch of people that just seem to know everything.
D. Right? Okay.
A. So it was a little bit much there. But everybody was really welcoming and willing to help with the stuff that I did not know.
D. So you started playing at hometown which is like an open night that people can show up to play games?
A. Yes.
D. So you said everyone was helpful, but that it felt like you were the only person who didn’t know what they were doing. What was that like?
A. Well because I'm a military kid, I'm kind of used to just rolling with it, well you …
D. Mind the pun
A. What?
D. Just rolling with it
A. Oh wow, that didn’t even occur to me. Just naturally occurring puns. So I’ve learned that just because something is hard doesn’t mean it won’t be fun later. So I’ll just keep whatever, we’ll see what happens. By the way, do I draw?
D. Yeah, because its commander. So would you say that you've always been interested in playing games in some form?
A. Uh yeah, it’s always been a part of me growing up. I mean it’s just what we did. So it just kinda, I guess the type of games changed, but yeah.
D. So just in different forms but its always been there?
A. Yeah
D. So then, what's your favourite aspect of roleplaying games? Why do you keep playing?
A. I enjoy solving puzzles. Um, so it’s kind of a group activity of solving puzzles. And I also really enjoy people watching, so it’s a great front row seat to those sometimes ridiculous-ness, and interesting things.
D. Is it important to be in a group and problem solving, or do you like that in solo games as well?
A. I find as well, just the group thing is a socializing opportunity. So I can go out and be social, not just stay at home and do math in my room.
D. (laughs) sounds good. Do you play in more than one group?
A. Yes, I am currently in two campaigns.
D. Why is that? Why spend two days a week playing D&D when there are so few days and so many things to do?
A. Um, because each group is different. Like the interactions are always different. Depending on the personalities that are involved.
D. So it never feels stale?
A. No not at all. And if I'm playing with specific people, over and over again, you know, I get to hang out with them. Always fun.
D. So do the people you are playing with become friends over time, or do they remain just people you play a game with?
A. Kinda a bit of both. So not everybody becomes a friend. Like, I don’t think they are inherently bad people. So I definitely don’t mind seeing them. But sometimes personalities are not going to be, yeah.

For Asnah then, games provided a meaningful form of social interaction that she could engage with on a weekly basis. As she explained, it was overwhelming to first get involved as there were many aspects to gameplay that she had to learn when she started. However, the group she first joined was supportive and welcomed her no matter her skill level. Others were happy to
explain parts of the game to her, and to help her through any parts she had trouble with – a way to express their in-game expertise. Along with this, Asnah, being busy during her free time, made space for two D&D campaigns as they kept her engaged mentally through problem solving, and therefore the social interactions, and game elements, always felt fun and new. Leisure time in this way becomes important to those who have it, as it is a way to meet people, make friends, build communities, engage mentally and/or physically, and generally enjoy oneself. Asnah’s work was not very engaging but provided her with a fair amount of free time that she used to engage herself in other ways.

What one does with their leisure time has become an important defining factor of that individual’s identity in current day North America. As our work becomes stabilized, well paid, and untaxing mentally or physically, what we do with our free time often says more about us than that work does. In our past, human’s labour was tied closely with one’s identity. Members of the community would be known for their work as craftsmen, artisans, tradesmen, etc., creating an image as community member and skilled worker. However, as we moved to factory work and industrialized forms of labour, no longer did our work provide the satisfaction, work ethic, and community identity.\(^\text{108}\) In his work *The Labour of Leisure: The Culture of Free Time* (2010) Chris Rojek looks to the ways leisure time has become embedded as an important social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that structures the time we spend outside of work.

According to Rojek “leisure is where we get the people knowledge and coaching skills that enable us to be recognized as competent, credible and relevant actors in the plethora of social, cultural, and economic situations we encounter.”\(^\text{109}\) It is through our leisure activities that we


become practitioners of various activities, and through our continued engagements build a knowledge bank that we can then express to others. Margot Weiss, in her work on BDSM communities, argues that to become a practitioner of one of these leisure activities, in her case SM, the individual is required to develop “self-mastery and self-knowledge that is bound to community rules, techniques, and perspectives.”\(^\text{110}\) As we learn these rules, techniques, and perspectives we come to perform as members of said community, finding a place for ourselves amongst the other practitioners. It is also through these rules, techniques, and perspectives that we show other members of the community our right to belong.

Upon my first visit to Kessel Run outlined in the previous chapter, the distinction between groups in terms of rules, techniques, and perspectives became quite clear when I went to make my first attack roll. Being that D&D is a game with a set of rules one must follow to play, it was important to see that different groups have their own ways of doing something as important and defined by the rules as rolling dice. In the Player’s Handbook it is made clear that when attacking, one rolls a D20, reads the number rolled, adds their attack modifiers (determined by the weapon used, the player’s stats and proficiencies, along with any other buffs or nerfs\(^\text{111}\) which are applied). This number is then compared to the foe’s Armor Class (AC) and if equal to or higher than the AC a hit occurs. Once a hit has been determined, damage is calculated through subsequent dice rolls. These are determined once again by the weapon used, and then modifiers are added to these dice rolls. However, playing at the AL, I found that players were rolling all the dice at the same time (to hit and damage) and stating them as one, ex. “that’s a 19 to hit for 12


\(^{111}\) Buffs and Nerfs are terms used to describe +/- to traits. A Buff is when a trait has been increased (a play on the colloquial term buff to describe a muscular person) and a Nerf is when a trait has been decreased (referring to the toy foam shooting NERF guns which are popular amongst youth in North America).
piercing damage”. This small difference showed one’s position as either a regular player, or a drop in member of the community. These moments of technique may appear rather inconsequential, but they are enough to mark members of the community differently than others.

Drop in AL can quite simply be a way for some to play D&D whenever they have free time, but for others it becomes an important form of community involvement. Weiss argues that the commitment to community as a form of belonging is what differentiates these leisure activities as communities of practice.\textsuperscript{112} Through this both practitioners and a community are built. In terms of the members of AL, those that chose to appear weekly did not only show up and play but engaged in normative forms of practice through the following of rules, techniques, and perspectives. Many of the players that showed up on a weekly basis chatted with the store employees, purchased snacks and drinks (even though there was no requirement to do so, and that outside food and drink were allowed) and would perform within the group in ways meaningful to that group specifically. This most commonly occurred in the sharing of miniatures that people were either painting themselves or purchasing in-store or online. Having a miniature that accurately represented one’s character is by no means required in the game, and many D&D groups use generic figures, dice, Lego Minifigures, or other small pieces to represent their characters on a playmat or map. However, there were a few regular members in this group that had a good deal of interest in these miniatures, and would share recent purchases, techniques of painting, or information as to where to acquire them. After I had returned multiple times in a row for the weekly sessions, a miniature was chosen for my character from one in Blordom’s

\textsuperscript{112} Weiss, M., (2011): 12.
Leisure Activities as Culturally Coded and Classed

What leads an individual to choose a specific leisure activity is an important discussion to have here before continuing into the different forms of practitioners that are found in these communities. Our consumption behaviours and practices are, as Grant McCracken (1988) would point out, culturally coded and socially constructed. How we choose to consume products and activities and where we choose to spend our money and time are not simply a matter of individual preference but are steeped in long histories of cultural practice and meaning. This leads to leisure activity choice that is also culturally coded. What leisure activities we take part in are influenced by the ways we see these activities represented in the collective cultural conscience and is impacted by a variety of spheres which we can understand as classed from the earlier discussion regarding Frow (1995). Therefore, prominent ideologies, political leanings, economic positions, social positions and connections, and cultural norms and standards can all play roles in what leisure activities we choose to take part in. If we look at gaming through this lens to understand why people get involved in games, we see the complex systems that may lead people to choose to play a TTRPG rather than bowling, quilting, skiing, or any other number of leisure activities.

In the interview included above, Asnah talks about why she got into playing games and this was for her “something they always did” as a family. Asnah told me later in that same interview that one of the reasons she was drawn to games was they often felt nostalgic to her. As a child, Asnah recalled waking up early on Saturday mornings with her father and driving to the local video rental store where they would rent a Nintendo Entertainment System and a few
games for the weekend. Then her and her father would often spend their free time on weekends playing video games. Coming from a military family, life was often quite regimented and games provided a fun and relaxing way to engage with her father and this stuck with her throughout her life. Games in this sense were constructed in Asnah’s mind as a positive leisure experience and one to be sought after. TTRPGs are quite different from video games however, and therefore bring people together from different spheres with different interests and backgrounds. Just being into games is most certainly not a precondition for TTRPGs, but these games are often chosen by people who are interested in fantasy, science fiction, role playing, problem solving, story writing, and for some construction work and building. Konah Sternwolf explained her childhood experiences to me one day and how they led her to engage in TTRPGs later in her life.

Dirk: So I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about your childhood and family life?

Konah: So I'm from a small town, like, probably about 7000 people, like really small, and isolated. Like 100km from anywhere. Anyway, so you know like, my parents were always really good, like they are still together, they still live there. So, family life was really stable. I have one sister, she's younger than me, she's 18 right now. And uh, yeah, so in high school didn’t really connect with people. I basically have one good friend from high school, who I still keep in contact with. So yeah, it was like, not the best time.

D. How did you spend your time?

K. Um, lets see, we didn’t really have internet or cable, um, until I was a teenager. So, we read a lot, watched TV but with very limited channels so we rented movies a lot. We would play outside a lot. A lot of outdoors stuff. I liked to help my dad when he was making stuff. He's a construction worker so he was often doing renovations on the house and stuff. If it was up to him he would be more of an inventor, so he's always working on random projects. So, I enjoy anything where I’m building stuff, like working with my hands. Whether that’s knitting or building stuff, like woodworking. I guess that’s why I like cosplaying so much. So that, and a lot of reading.

D. Did you ever play games as a household.

K. A little bit. We would play video games together sometimes. Like sometimes we would rent a Nintendo 64 and stuff. And then we would play basic board games, mainly on holidays and stuff like that, or when we had family over we would play Mad Libs. Or like, sometimes, Cranium or things like that. Sometimes my grandma would buy board games from the thrift shop. They were mostly bad, but then like, no one would want to read the rules so we would have what we call trailer park rules, and just like change the rules to whatever we wanted them to be. So, we did game a bit but just basic stuff.

D. And what were you reading usually?

K. Lets see, when I was really little I read every book about animals I could find, so that hasn’t changed. But other than that I did read fantasy, Like the classic fantasy and adventure things, mostly.
Yeah, comics, more like Calvin and Hobbs. I never got into comic books because I found it hard to know where to start. I did get into Manga when I was a teenager. Rented it all from the library.

For Konah then, many elements of gaming and geek culture existed in her early life, along with an affinity for the outdoors, animals, and building things. These led her to engage with cosplay, fantasy, and vast fantasy worlds as a way to engage with those phenomenon she had been interested in since childhood. Konah would often play characters in D&D that had connections to animals and nature such as Druids and Rangers, as this was a way for her to express her love for those things. For many of my participants TTRPGs were not something they had played for many years, but instead were something they felt drawn to throughout their lives. Being a part of subcultures that connected easily with TTRPGs such as fantasy and sci-fi, cosplaying, video gaming, storytelling, and interests in war, battles, and fighting were all reasons people came to try out TTRPGs. The drive to be a part of a certain community often comes from these life experience and one’s various class positions not only because those leisure activities may require one to be able to afford the activity or have free time for it, but because we become shaped and influenced by those around us and by the environments we grow up in. Therefore thinking about joining a TTRPG group is less likely to occur to someone who is raised in a set of classed spheres that in no way value and in some cases discourage those forms of engagement and/or encourage and value other forms of leisure time engagement.

Practitioners and Expertise

In leisure communities, becoming a practitioner requires one to learn these rules, techniques, and perspectives to a level of comfort where one becomes able to teach them to another. As Rojek shows us “the display of competence is not simply required for work settings,
it also applies to relations with parents, children, friends, and leisure networks.” In this way, to become a practitioner of a leisure activity does not only require one to take part in that activity, but to also spend time and energy becoming a competent performer of said activity. It is this that makes up the labour involved in leisure activities – that one is to become competent, or to some extent an expert, in their leisure time showing their position as member to all others in and around that community. In this, the practitioner also can become a skilled teacher of this information, able to bring others into their leisure community. As Asnah discussed above, her first experiences playing D&D were in an open group, and although the game is overwhelming at first, many members of the group were willing to help her learn how to play. This, I argue, happens for multiple reasons.

First, members of gaming groups often, but not always, thoroughly enjoy having new players to play games with. Opening one’s gameplay up to new members can often prove to be a rewarding experience, as these new players can bring new ways of looking at the story, puzzles, or combat with them. This is not always the case, as sometimes new members do not always mix well, but quite often having more people to play a roleplaying game with provides fun new forms of interaction. As social interaction is why many players continue to play D&D and other TTRPGs, having new people join is often exciting as there is someone new to tell a story with, and to have unique social interactions with. This can also sometimes lead to stressful or awkward situations, as new members may be experts in the game from their past groups, but may do things differently from the new group they are joining. When this occurs, there is often a period of tension as the new member accepts the rules, techniques, and perspectives of the new group

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and integrates. However, sometimes the group and the new member compromise finding a middle ground between their norms and the new player’s, or the new player decides not to stay or is asked to leave (this happens very rarely, and is often quite a stressful situation for all parties). Overall though, the general consensus from participants throughout my time in the field was that new players meant exciting new chances for interaction.

Secondly, having new players produces situations where competent or expert practitioners can share their knowledge of the game with newcomers. Showing one’s expertise at something like a game can arise throughout regular gameplay – in exhibitions of skill, problem solving ability, acting, etc., but one of the most obvious ways for this expertise to be shown is in the teaching of new players. Often this comes across in very positive ways, as new players ask questions and experienced players will provide answers, but it can also occur when someone is trying to look like an expert. In this section taken from a campaign I joined with a long-time D&D player who was beginning a game for mainly new players, this interaction occurred.

Thiey Kiang (DM). He passes you the dice and says, "Is there anything wrong with these dice." And remember you can speak up at anytime if you want. Like you can also socially say something if you want.

Kune Havenfury. I'm just super new so I'm just trying to figure it out.

Thiey. Okay, it's up to you. It's whatever you guys want to do.

Gaston. Do we know that she figured that he was lying about that’s all that’s on him? Or is it only she that knows that?

Thiey. Only she knows that, but I just asked her. If she wants to say something she can.

Kune. I'm just going to say that he…

Thiey. You can, but if you're going to say something try to say it in first person. You know what I mean? Like "my character does this" more "well guess what guys, that motherfucker is LYING!!!!" or whatever. But you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. We're also, like, we also have to get used to…

Kune. Okay well I'll call him out on lying.

Thiey. Ok so you're standing there, what do you say to him? "Excuse me miss, is there something wrong?"

Kune. "There's something not right, I feel, in my aura,
Thiey. "You're what?"
Kune. "That you're lying"
Thiey. "You're aura says I'm lying? Uh Laval, I think this woman's crazy" And he looks at you and says "aura? What do you mean buy aura" I know you didn’t mean it to the character but he looks up and down you and still doesn’t quite understand what you mean by it.
Kune. Would I not be wearing like a paladin garb?
Thiey. Uh you could be wearing, you don’t have any symbols because you're not part of a faith, but
Kune. No, cause like the book said, I would still wear the symbols I would just have a slash across them saying that I didn’t have faith anymore.

As most of us were new to this edition of the game (second edition, which is very different from the current fifth edition) we were taking directions from Thiey quite closely in the building of our characters and in regular game interactions. Thiey, however, had emphasized that he wanted us as the players to take the lead on roleplaying and decision making, as he wanted the game to be a collaboration between us and him. Here, however, Thiey continued to interrupt Kune, a brand-new player, and to tell her how to act and what choices she may make. Thiey was an interesting example of the expert gamer from my time in the field as he was very open to having new players join his campaigns, even opening up his house to complete strangers to come and play.

At the time of this fieldwork, Thiey lived in a suburb outside of the city with his wife and pets. I was instructed by Thiey to show up Sunday morning for 10:00 am, and to be prepared by having read certain parts of the D&D Second Edition game manual. Upon arrival I was welcomed and brought down to the basement where a few other players were waiting – but not everyone had arrived yet. Thiey’s basement was an impressive game room with many miniatures, figures, posters, and other decorative items all relating to gaming or geek culture in one way or another. Along the far back wall was a bookshelf that spanned the length of the wall, approximately 15 feet, and was about 5 feet high. This bookshelf was completely filled with
game manuals – showing the devotion Thiey had given to TTRPGs throughout his life. The
centrepiece of the room however was Thiey’s gaming table. An impressive piece, Thiey
explained that he had built this table along with a family member. The table was made from an
old pool table, with the playing surface removed to allow for a large flat-screen television to be
laid in, and then covered with a sheet of plexiglass. The pockets had been turned into cup holders
with dice trays and pencil holders as well, and finally an area around the television for rolling
dice. This setup allowed Thiey to sit on one side of the table where he had a computer on a
separate desk, and project images onto the television for all of the players to see. Most often
these were maps, but if the group ever needed any other images, Thiey could easily bring these
up.

This impressive gaming setup was quite obviously a point of pride for Thiey, who
enjoyed sharing this great space with others. Thiey had created this social space so that he could
play the games he loved from his own home, while having people (friends and strangers) come
to him to share in social interaction. The willingness to open one’s home to complete strangers in
order to play a TTRPG shows the dedication to not only the game, but to meeting new people
and having meaningful, and varied, social interactions. For Thiey, this also proved to be a space
where he could show his expertise off to others, through the teaching of new players, the
displaying of his impressive collection, and the presentation of a dedicated gaming space. Thiey
had committed a large part of his life to this leisure activity, and therefore showing his expertise
in it, while sharing this activity with others, became a very meaningful form of engagement for
him. Throughout my time in the field, his name would often come up when I met other players,
who would discuss that they had seen his invitations in local online D&D groups or had been to
play at his house as well. This level of community membership also brings cohesion to a
community, as complete strangers come to share common contacts such as Thiey.

Looking at community members such as Thiey, it becomes clear that leisure time and
activities are not accessible by all members of our society, and rather that they are these classed
positions that members of our society access on an inequal basis. Rojek shows in his work on
leisure that leisure is very much a product of these inequal distributions of power and class in our
society. Through this we can see, as Rojek argues, that corporations work to develop functions
which build leisure demands within the population.\textsuperscript{114} In this, we see that many of our leisure
activities are produced as such in our society, and this is quite clear in the gaming industry.

Game materials themselves require a great deal of investment on the parts of players, with the
cost of books, miniatures, dice, play mats, maps, and stationary. There are, of course, various
other ways to spend money on TTRPGs such as paints, character sheet holders, terrain, spell
cards, etc., and although almost none of these items are actually required for play, these items
often become sought after the longer one is involved in the game.

\textbf{Games as Financially Dictated Spaces}

Much of geek culture is based around spending money on games and game related
materials, as some of the markers of these communities are how one adorns oneself with game
related merchandise, and what game materials one plays with. On top of these game related
materials, self identification in leisure communities also occurs through the purchasing, display,
and adornment of context specific materials such as figurines, apparel, decal stickers, tattoos, etc.
which work to present and reaffirm a person’s identity as a member of this culture. In his work
on the ‘extended self’ Belk points to the ways that “possessions not only serve as cues for others

\textsuperscript{114} Rojek, C., (2010): 40-44.
As individuals join leisure communities and become actors within them, they are able to further express themselves as such by the associated materials they represent themselves with and that mark them as a part of those communities. Often for TTRPG groups this can involve the creation of group names, logos, and other forms of group stabilizing markers which help to form cohesion. If we look to these gaming leisure groups we often see the development of group identities linked to in-game encounters and occurrences.

For Thiey, his membership in this community was performed through the space he created in his basement which he invited people into and which showed his dedication. The presentation of a shelving unit with his D&D reference books works as a collection through which Thiey can present an image of himself as skilled and knowledgeable GM to the players that come into his home. Belk argues that these collections are social identity markers that work to display to others our interests and associations\textsuperscript{116} and as this occurs one such as Thiey further solidifies themselves as part of the imagined community of D&D enthusiasts. On top of this we can see that along with physical possessions Thiey is also expressing another form of capital that he has in the gaming space – knowledge. Not only does Thiey have an impressive collection but also a great deal of knowledge of the game and its history. As Thiey has shelves in his gaming space with all of the game books on display this simultaneously references his financial investment, the ability to curate such a vast collection, and the breadth of knowledge he has gained through the reading of those materials. Thiey, like many others, is working on and through identities as he engages in these communities. Under the heading of geek activities and

\textsuperscript{116} Belk, R. W., (2013).
associations. D&D is quite unique in that players can play with just paper, pencil, and a few dice, but this does not stop players from gathering a great deal of materials to go along with their gameplay. Of course, Wizards of the Coast (WotC), the company who produces the game, is a corporation, one that’s main purpose is to make money off the production of games. Often players are quite critical of WotC for their business practices, especially in regards to their more prominent product MTG. But this does not stop players from buying the newest products when they come out. In terms of D&D this is most commonly in the form of new books that contain new monsters, spells, characters or new campaign modules.

During my time at The Forge, there was a lot of excitement, as for the first time in the history of either game WotC was doing a crossover between MTG and D&D. I came into the store one afternoon to play some MTG with Shiop and Rhireid, two MTG and D&D fans, and both were very excitedly talking to one of the store owners. “Hey, what’s happening?” I said as I set my bags down and started to pull out some of my game materials and audio recorder. “Have you heard about Guilds of Ravnica?” Rhireid said excitedly to me. “I mean, I’ve been following it a bit, looks like a cool set” I responded. Guilds of Ravnica was the new game expansion for MTG and was very exciting for many long-time players of the game. As described on the MTG Wiki, from gamepedia.com, “In the storyline of Magic: The Gathering, planeswalkers are among the most powerful beings in the multiverse. Within the game, they represent the thematic identities of the players. Planeswalker is also a card type within the game.”117 In the game, these planeswalkers travel between different planes of existence battling each other and the beings they come upon. These different planes of existence often make up the settings for different game expansions, which on average are released every 3-4 months. These usually come in the

forms of blocks, which consist of three expansions centred around one main theme. Each set usually contains between 150-300 new cards. One of the most popular planes in the MTG universe is Ravnica, a planet that is made up of one large city, which is ruled over by 10 different guilds. The guilds make up colour combinations from the 5 colours of magic in the MTG game – White (W), Blue (U), Black (B), Red (R) and Green (G). The first Ravnica block was released in 2006-2007, and met a great reception by players, quickly becoming one of the most popular settings in the game. A second block was released in 2012-2013 and was titled “Return to Ravnica”. Rhireid here was referring to the upcoming third block, “Guilds of Ravnica” which was to be released in two sets on October 2018, and May 2019.

For players of the game, new MTG sets meant new cards to build decks with, or to modify old decks with. As well, there were events based around the release of the set such as pre-release where players paid on average $30 and received 6 packs of cards, which they built a deck with and competed against other players for prizes. Game stores put on these pre-release events, which are sanctioned by WotC, and which often prove to be quite popular amongst players. Some players refer to pre-release and spoiler season as being like Christmas time for MTG players. For this upcoming set however, as stated above, WotC had decided to do something new that Rhireid could not wait to tell me about. The new set would be released alongside a new D&D campaign module that would be set on the plane of Ravnica. To date, the MTG and D&D universes had been kept separate, but due to the ability for D&D to be set in any universe, WotC could use this as a way to promote the new MTG set to D&D players, most certainly in the hopes of getting them to buy MTG product, as well as getting MTG players to try out D&D and buy these campaign modules (along with the other books they would need to play the game). Acquiring new players equals new customers for a game company, and therefore
finding ways to not only engage those who already play your game, but to lure in new players is an important business tactic. As players such as Rhireid discussed their excitement about this crossover, that I admit I was excited for as well, being engaged in both of these games on a regular basis with my participants, it also became clear that WotC was, at its core, a business, and one that was adept at getting people to buy its product.

For a company like WotC, they have created/expanded upon an entire new leisure activity – TTRPGs and Trading Card Games (TCG) that they have supported through sanctioned tournaments, video games, merchandise, written and visual media, etc. Along with this, Mark Rosewater, head developer of MTG has a weekly podcast where he talks about aspects of the game and its design, and similar company developed podcasts exist for their other intellectual properties (IPs). Along with all of these ways WotC has come to promote their product, they have also fostered a vibrant community that produces internet content about MTG on a daily, if not hourly, basis. There are countless YouTube channels, Podcasts, news websites, etc., that continually breath life into the community through the production of material related to all aspects of this game. This has meant that a leisure activity – MTG – has for some turned into a lifestyle, a career, and a devoted form of game play. If we look then back to Rojek, he reminds us that “studies of class and leisure have forcefully demonstrated that choice and practice in free time are conditioned by inequality”\textsuperscript{118} and that this market of games quite obviously reproduces this. A leisure activity such as MTG or D&D require participants to spend money to be involved, and often to stay involved. This is not through formal membership fees or door costs, but rather through the presentation of the self as a competent member of the community.

Game Cultures of Consumption

To present oneself as a competent member in these tabletop gaming communities, people will often show off their knowledge of rules, techniques, and perspectives which is often done through their engagement with game materials and their adornments of merchandise. Wearing a t-shirt with a design or image related to a game or pop-culture phenomenon can be one way this is achieved, and this is furthered if that design or image is from an obscure source. Much like the phenomenon of the “hipster” in modern North America, being into things that “outsiders” are less likely to know can show that one is a “true” member. Therefore, wearing a *Game of Thrones* or *Superman* shirt can present one as a peripheral member, whereas a *Kiki’s Delivery Service* symbol or an *Undertale* t-shirt may show that one is a more involved member. As well, noticing one of these more obscure images can then also mark the noticer as member while validating the noticee’s position. Through purchasing power individuals can come to show their membership in the community, and often this is increased the more the individual devotes financially to that leisure activity. As shown earlier with the AL members, miniatures played an important role here as players would show off their miniatures to one another. McCracken (1988) argues that the consumption practices of a specific group can show their cultural connections and what is considered important or meaningful in those spaces and we see this here with gaming culture as membership and meaning is at some points expressed through consumption practices.

Along with one’s positions in and around these communities comes, in some cases, the attempt or desire to be viewed by others as an in-group member. Along with expressions of expertise and knowledge comes one’s expressed and/or perceived dedication to the game in question. As shown briefly above, this can often be achieved through the materials one has for the game, the way one adorns themselves with symbols related to the game, and in some cases the financial investment one makes in the game and game related activities. Our purchasing
power is an important part of our position in society, and what we do with that capital we spend says a great deal to others about who we are or want to be. In terms of leisure activities, these can become associated with financial status, and therefore class position, as the more one can spend on these items, the more serious they are considered to be as a member of the community. Of course, there are exceptions to this, as some members look at those who spend “too-much” on game materials as being unintelligent in their spending habits. In terms of spending power, we can look to MTG as this phenomenon is often shown through the cards that people have in their decks, or in their collections in general. MTG has a very large after-market, where cards are sold between individuals and private game stores, both online and off. This market is supported by WotC in that they do not reprint certain cards and flood the market with product that has high resale value. In this way WotC supports the independent retailers, producing scarcity for certain cards. This has led to a high value being placed on cards, often related to their “power” in the game itself. For example, land cards, which make up approximately a third of a standard magic deck (20/60 cards) are often some of the most sought-after cards when they have powerful in-game affects. Land cards that produce 1 colour of “mana” the magical element needed to cast spells, are cheap, often costing cents each, if not being given away for free. However, lands that allow you to add multiple colours of mana, or that allow you to search for other land cards in your deck, can cost players anywhere from $5-$250 per card! The average cost for a powerful land card is approximately $20 to $40 however, but when a player has many of these in their deck, the cost of the “land base” can be upwards of $200-$400 per deck. This makes the player’s deck more powerful, allows them to win more games, and shows them as being a more involved and competent member of the community.
As practitioners spend money on game resources, and game related materials, they show their devotion to the leisure practice itself through their purchasing power. This tying of economics and leisure activities therefore not only differentiates who can take part in which leisure activity, when they can do so, and whether or not they have the free time to, but also to which level they may be considered a competent or core member of the community. As one spends more time in these communities, they often spend more money, producing a higher level of engagement in the community and securing their status as core member. When it comes to D&D, although the game itself costs quite a bit less than MTG, the ability to spend free time designing characters, storylines, and game worlds also shows one’s class position and their access to resources. Having too much free time can be looked at both positively and negatively in our society however, as some may consider those who spend “too much” time on games as being lazy and not wanting to do “real” work. However, these views are more likely to arise from members outside of these communities of practice, rather than in them.

Community Defined Knowledge

These positions in and out of the community are developed by community members who present themselves as knowledgeable and work to define what it is to be knowledgeable in these specific contexts. Becoming a knowledgeable player takes on many forms in these groups, and is often relative to the people one is playing with. An individual may be considered knowledgeable in one group, but when they go to play with another group they may no longer be considered an “expert” if that group’s general knowledge level of the game has greater depth. Weiss (2011) shows us this in her work with the BDSM community in San Francisco as she takes note of the way people become SM practitioners. For Weiss, this is done through “producing, policing,
mastering, and debating the boundaries between safe and dangerous play.” Here practitioners are in a continual process of development – the continual act of becoming. And this becoming is something that resonates in TTRPG groups as well. Players learn as they read and play, as they talk to others about the game in those moments around play that become so important. Before a game, during breaks, and after a game, as well as between sessions throughout one’s week players will talk about the game they play with others. They often discuss the game’s mechanics, new ideas for stories or characters, and will tell anecdotes about their play experiences. These moments are of great importance to the building of one’s game knowledge and experience, and this was made clear to me one summer night playing at Hometown.

A group of us had started a new campaign 2 weeks prior with Emer Shessad as the DM. In our group was Konah Sternwolf, Drijomvos Zyngode, Asnah Nama, Fejac Mekelda, Firvarnal Zuveni, and myself. This was our third session, and it was starting off great. Before the game started, we all grabbed drinks and food and socialized. We had only been a group for a few weeks and we were already starting to build group cohesion through our chatting about television shows, video games, and other such things. As the session began, one player raised the glass of beer to the rest of the group and stated “to a good session” to which everyone raised their drinks and responded in kind. The session started off as we came into a house and slowly examined our surroundings. Not long in we were engaged in combat, and as we were playing low-level characters (we were level 1 out of a possible 20 levels) it did not take much and my character was slain by our foe. It was a powerful moment as we all looked around the table at each other, shocked by what had occurred. Was I dead for real? Surely there must be a way to revive me. Even Emer was surprised, obviously not expecting one of us to actually die in the 3rd session. We

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took a break and I went outside from the stuffy room we had been playing in to get some fresh air.

I was standing against the wall of the building as Emer came out of the restaurant and approached me. “Listen man, I’m really sorry about that” he said, with a look of remorse on his face. He then explained that he really did not mean to kill my character, but regrettably, the character was truly dead. He offered for me to make another character, and I reassured him that I wasn’t upset – characters die and that’s part of the game. He then explained that he was trying to build a sense of danger into the campaign and did not expect that combat to go the way it did.

Emer had been a DM since he was in high school, and he was now in his 30s with almost 20 years of experience in the game. He too continued to learn the game. After our chat we went back inside, agreeing to not let the other players know that I was actually dead. They picked up my body in the game and brought it to a safe spot and tried to revive me to no avail. After the session everyone approached me and explained how this had really impacted them. They had already felt attached to my character and they hoped I would join with a new character – which I did the following week.

Most importantly to come out of this situation was that every week after this, on our mid-game break Emer and I would go outside and chat about how the game was going. One week, he had a run in with Konah who was quite upset with him about her character’s ability to direct a donkey through the house, as she kept failing to be able to do so. She lashed out in the session, yelling that she was frustrated and did not know what to do. Emer was quite shaken by this, and during our weekly huddle outside together he explained that he did not know what he had done wrong. We chatted about the skill-checks he was making Konah do to steer this donkey through an old Victorian style home, up and down stairs, etc., and confided that he was not great at
dealing with problem players – especially those who lash out verbally at him. I assured him he had handled it well and that he was running the campaign in a very fair and reasonable way and to not let this player’s frustrations weigh too heavily on him.

In these moments around, outside of, and in between game play players develop themselves as players of the game, but also as friends and community members. Emer and I would continue to be friends after my fieldwork had finished, taking our children to the museum together and chatting over coffee. We developed our roles in these groups at the same time however as we continually developed ourselves as knowledgeable players. Responding to character death, difficult in-game situations, and frustrated or upset players are all parts of becoming a knowledgeable GM or player and in our conversations we continued to work through what that meant to us. Being a knowledgeable member of the community is an identity form that constantly changes depending on one’s position and what other members are present. Emer was, for many of us, the most knowledgeable player we knew, but he also continued to develop his knowledge through conversations with players and his willingness to learn new forms of engagement. In that same campaign Firvarnal was also a knowledgeable player that many of us asked questions to and urged to lead us in decision making when a difficult in-game problem arose. However, Firvarnal eventually left the campaign leading to other players such as myself and Drijomvos to become the go to players for questions. This relative and relational nature of expertise is apparent in these TTRPG communities as players often defer to whomever is perceived as being the most knowledgeable among them.

In regard to TTRPGs, being a competent or expert member of the community comes much more from one’s understanding of the rules and their ability to roleplay their character (along with being able to take on different accents) than it does from purchasing power. This is
largely due to the fact that there is just not as much to spend money on, outside of miniatures, books, and game room development. However, the act of reading the rulebooks itself is a time-consuming activity, which requires the individual to have access to free time and to be somewhat educated in that they can read and understand dense text material. Each D&D handbook is approximately 200-350 pages and contains written text, images, tables, and maps, all which an individual must be able to understand to grasp the full detail of the book. Knowing the details of character construction, combat, spellcasting, and general existence in the game world is a large task and being able to cite rules without reference is often looked at as impressive. It is this then that can mark an individual as a competent member – a true example of “knowledge is power.”

Along with one’s understanding of the rules also comes their ability to cite previous campaigns/experiences in the game, as well as previous editions of the game. One player I engaged with at the Forge, Fenrir Greybeard, had been playing the game for many years, having played second, third, 3.5, fourth, and fifth editions. Fenrir would often compare current fifth edition rules to the rules of the other editions he had played, to either critique or support judgement calls made by the DM at the time (Me). This occurred in one scenario where the players had recently come into possession of a property in the city they were in. Arriving at the house they were met by a poltergeist who did not want to give up the residence willingly. The characters came into a dining room area, and from behind the bar the poltergeist began to throw glasses at them, which smashed on the ground and walls around them. The group responded by trying to speak to the poltergeist, while Fenrir stopped, and turned to me and said “I pick up one of the pieces of smashed glassware and examine it”. I responded that it looked like a well made, but dusty, glass drinking cup. Fenrir then turned to the other players and exclaimed “glass is
extremely valuable in D&D, we should all start picking this up and go and sell it, then we will have all the money we will ever need in the game.”

In this moment Fenrir did a few things – first he tried to do what game players often term “breaking the game”. This is when a rule, ability, and/or game mechanic will be exploited to achieve an outcome that will sway the odds greatly in the favour of the players or individuals who discovered the break. This is generally frowned upon in D&D as it takes the players out of the roleplaying, and creates an environment where players are being cognizant of the game mechanics and/or rules. Secondly, Fenrir was showing his knowledge of the game rules, including prices of items and their rarity in the D&D universe. *The Player’s Manual* and *Dungeon Master’s Guide* both provide lists of items, their general costs, and their rarity in the world, and if one is knowledgeable of these, they can perform more effectively in the game world, or utilize this knowledge to save or make money. These prices are guidelines of course, as the DM has final say, but players still have access to this general information in the books. Here then, Fenrir was referring to past versions of the game, along with the new one, both expressing his knowledge to the other players and myself, while trying to find a way to “break the game” and complete the tasks ahead of the party in the fastest way possible.

In all of the D&D groups I played in during my time in the field, “breaking the game” occupied a unique space. Although it was generally frowned upon by players, it was also often talked about, and was a subject of great interest for many players. DMs would often discuss how players would try to break their campaigns, showing that players did enjoy this activity to some extent. In many ways “breaking the game” symbolizes a great deal of skill, as players must know the rules and mechanics of the game in great detail so that they may manipulate them. Often this requires players to bend rules or use them in ways not intended by the game designers or DMs.
Another way that players “break the game” is through the use of “broken” characters. A “broken” character is one that has statistics or abilities that give it a great advantage in certain settings, but usually these are coupled with disadvantages in other areas. However, when combined with other features (class or race abilities, weapons, armour, spells, etc.) the character’s advantage may be exploited, creating a character that is so powerful they have an unfair advantage and make the game’s challenges ineffective. Being able to recognize the rules, statistics, and abilities that lead to a character being “broken” also requires a great deal of understanding of the game, and shows a player’s knowledge and therefore their competence.

Nardi shows this engagement with rules and the modification of them, (which she terms “metagaming”) that allows the players to manipulate a game to work for them. When rules are learned and understood in-depth by players, they can then manipulate them in order to excel in certain ways at the game.

Breaking the game shows a level of understanding of the rules and therefore an expertise in the game. To know the game well enough to break it conveys a level of expertise and comes with certain status markers in the community. In these contexts of breaking the game we can see that different types of players emerge. There are players who play a game casually, getting involved with a game on their free time and treating it as a pleasurable leisure experience. These players have the game bleed into their lives when they talk about their game experiences, think about the game outside of designated game time, or include the game (or elements of it) in their identities. However, there are other types of players that take their playful engagements to a different style of engagement – treating play as a profession, as something to develop an expertise of. In their work on power gamers, Taylor (2003) argues that casual gamers are often

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perceived as “having a life” or as having reality to ground them and to keep them from becoming too absorbed by the game they play. Power gamers are those who become focused on developing their game play to a level of expertise that allows them to maximize their effectiveness in various gameplay elements. The power gamer studies game elements, statistics, and tactics so that they can win the game in the most effective way. Being the most efficient with their problem solving or overcoming an enemy is the key to play for these types of players.

In a conversation I had with Gen and Foreih one night at a coffee shop, we were chatting about how much time DMs spend creating material for campaigns and how most of it never gets used. This, they said, was due to players having agency and going off in directions you never thought they would. As well, players were likely to try and solve your well thought out puzzles in ways you never expected. Sometimes this was cleverness, sometimes thinking of things from a different standpoint, and sometimes it was breaking the game. Developers often create patches for their games that modify the rules in order to respond to the ways players break their games. Through this practice of breaking games and modifying rules the game world itself is recreated in certain ways, another aspect of emergence as the rules of the game are restructured to create new boundaries. Gen then, prompted by Foreih, told me this story of a moment where he broke the game. I had asked how they responded when players did things that were out of the box or unplanned. Foreih then responded:

Foreih: It's just I learned to lie really well. I think that was it. It's like “yeah I totally know what's going on now.”

Gen: And that's what the random die roll that they can't really see is for.

121 Taylor, T.L. “Power Gamers Just Want To Have Fun?: Instrumental Play In A MMORPG.” Social MMOG (2003): 301.
Foreih: Yeah, that look.

Gen: No, it's deliberate. Do you want them to be second-guessing everything that they do? It's the same as “are you sure you want to do that?” It's like the mirror…

Foreih: It's the mirror, that's the best one I've heard.

Gen: The mirror is a magical item in second edition called The Mirror of Opposition. When you look into it, your doppelganger immediately steps out and tries to kill you. And there can only be one. I've managed to come across one in this one campaign and purchased it, and everyone, including the DM, forgot that I had it.

Foreih: The long con

Gen: Yeah, the long con. Six months to a year later, whatever it was, we're in the section where we're tracking down and having to deal with an ancient Red Dragon. In Second Edition their breath weapon kills artifact level stuff. The one ring? It's dead. That Kind of thing. Then I realize I have that mirror. I also have a Ring of Mind Shielding so nobody knows I have the mirror because of the ring. So I reveal the mirror, and I give the DM a note saying this is what I'm doing. I pick the mirror up, it is covered because of the bag of holding. I position myself so that the dragon is coming straight at me and memorize where everyone is standing to the best of my abilities and then I reveal the mirror and let it just happen. And the DM just looks at us and says “I forgot that you had that. Everybody roll a d10.” And everything went higgledy-piggledy from there.

In this moment, Gen describes how he “broke the game” using what Fareih and Gen both term “the long con”. It is this knowledge of a great deal of items and scenarios that allows a player to be perceived as competent in the community. Gen had been playing D&D for over 25 years, and knew a great deal about the many different editions of the game, and spoke of these game moments proudly. In this way, we can see Gen being marked by Foreih as a competent member as she says “that’s the best one I’ve heard”. These stories work as markers of one’s position in the community, as they detail how long one has been playing the game and how much knowledge they have of the game.

The ability to present oneself as a competent or expert member of a gaming community such as D&D includes a large time requirement, as reading these rulebooks is no small task. Many TTRPG players enjoy reading to some extent, and therefore consider it part of their leisure

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124Here the DM is asking the players to all roll a check (check to see if they succeed on a completing a specific task, or to determine the order they will take in combat). Usually this would be done using a D20 (20-sided die) but in this example either the individual misspoke or the DM was asking for a different type of check that would not use a D20.
time to read these books and become knowledgeable of the system. For others, it is a form of work to study rulebooks and build characters. The act of playing the game may take anywhere from 2-10 hours a week, but much of this leisure activity exists outside of the actual gameplay itself. Prepping for gameplay can take upwards of 20 hours a week, as players read books, build characters, write stories and background material, and paint miniatures and terrain. Often this is coupled with the consumption of visual and audio media in the form of podcasts and online videos of people playing these games, all contributing to the players’ competence in this community of practice.\textsuperscript{125} This dedication to the activity itself, including all the forms of knowledge, creation, and labour existing around and outside of the activity demonstrates the individual to be a dedicated member of the community.

Leisure activities require the individual to spend a great deal of time preparing, practicing, learning, and acting both within and around the chosen activity in order to present oneself as competent. This, of course, shows that these activities are classed activities. The ability to spend a great deal of unpaid time (free time) on a leisure activity which is largely unproductive, done for pleasure, or for individual gain shows the inequality inherent in these practices. As Rojek would argue, these practices are conditioned by inequality.\textsuperscript{126} Without a socio/political system, where some are wealthier than others, have access to different resources and spaces than others, and are unequally advantaged in various ways leisure activities which rely on free time, individualized use of space, rarity of goods, etc., would not be possible. For an item to be collectible and valuable, it must therefore be in limited supply and hard to access. To have a great deal of free time that is used engaging in leisure activities, we must have disposable

\textsuperscript{125} Eckert, Penelope, (1989); Eckert, Penelope and Sally McConnell-Ginet, (1992); Bucholtz, Mary, (1997).

income. This is not meant to demonize these positions, but rather to situate them in our current context so that we may further understand how these activities take place, why they take place, and how they came to be.

To further understand why and how we take part in leisure activities I think it important to look at the phenomenon of pleasure. A great deal of leisure activity is performed because of its ability to produce pleasure in our lives in various ways. It is important to recognize that these activities exist to fill a number of voids in our daily lived experiences, and an important part of that is hedonism. How this is produced, why we seek it out, and the various ways it arises will be examined next. People often infer about pleasure, but usually not explicitly. Understanding this will allow us to see the value people place on pleasure in our current context, and what that says about us as members of this culture and society.

**Pleasure Play: Gaming for the Fun of it**

A few weeks prior to the sessions with Fenrir and the glassware experience, I had joined in with another Wednesday night D&D crew at the Forge. This group was run by one of the 3 store owners, Talve Stelmari. Talve was a cosplaying enthusiast and was newer to D&D but had decided to run an introduction campaign for people coming into the store. Talve chose to run the introductory campaign of *The Lost Mine of Phandelver* which I had already played through a few times in different groups. I showed up early this evening and approached Talve to ask if I could sit in on the game. The session started at 6:00 pm and it was currently 5:00 pm, giving me some time to chat with people in the store and grab a coffee. Some of the regular MTG players were hanging around looking through boxes of cards, and so after saying hello I went to help Talve set up after she agreed to me joining in for the evening. We moved some tables around and set up a play grid, and then grabbed the miniatures Talve used for her sessions. These were classic horror
themed miniatures such as Frankenstein’s Monster, Zombies, Dracula, Werewolves, etc. (a true example that the this was a “theatre of the mind” as many players claimed, and that the items on the table did not have to be accurate representations of in-game material). Talve then set up her DM screen and got her books ready.

At this time some players began to arrive. The group of players was made up of 5 members, 2 women and 3 men, and as they sat down I told them all about my intentions there and they all joked with me and welcomed me into the group. Before gameplay started the players were being very silly, joking around about their characters and how they would probably all “do something stupid and die.” Two players Shierih Earthdream and Norah Earthsleep told me how they were new to the game and just liked making fun characters and joking around for a few hours each week. Conrad Hussleton and Rhireid Khonil on the other hand had been playing for some time, but enjoyed a more laid-back style and so they came to weekly games here just to have carefree style play, rather than min-maxing (the process through which players develop their characters or armies to have statistics that maximize their effectiveness through minimizing their “weak” stats that are not often utilized, and therefore focusing on their strengths). Finally, Horcu Ezirne did not really talk much – he was a shy younger man, who looked to be enjoying the interactions others were having more than anything.

Part of the experience of being a member of a gaming community of practice includes the connections to other forms of fandom and the general “geeking-out” that occurs when individuals discover crossovers between themselves and others regarding the types of media they consume and the other hobbies they practice. Ito (2009) discusses the ways in which geeking-out is a socially important practice of relationship building and learning that occurs when people share the same interest. This, Ito shows, becomes important for adolescents as they begin to
develop complex social networks. Their participation in specific areas of social and cultural practice allow them to develop these networks as they practice with others. In TTRPG communities of practice this often took the form of verbally referencing television shows, movies, music, books, games and online communities through quotations, comparisons to current experiences or events, or by directly asking if people knew of (x) show, movie, book, etc. Not only did this allow people to geek-out together and discuss their favourite shows, movies, etc., but it also allowed others to signal their connections or involvement in these fandoms.

Therefore as the game started, many jokes were made about Norah playing a bird-person, including references being made to the popular cartoon television show *Rick and Morty* and a character who is literally named “Bird Person”. This race in D&D is the Aarakocra and was released in a supplemental book and therefore are a little more rarely played than the common Dwarves, Elves, Humans, and Halflings. As Norah began to describe her actions, the group began to make fun of her choice of action in a very lighthearted way. Norah wanted to use her ability to fly to go up and stealthily check out the surroundings, but quickly the others laughed because she was wearing chainmail armour which clangs and jingles when one moves, making it very difficult to sneak around. This of course would be exaggerated by being a 6-foot-tall bird, flapping one’s wings, and flying above creating a funny image for the group to laugh at. Norah decided she would stay on the ground, but not before poking fun at herself.

In this group, much of what drives the interactions and the different scenarios the players encounter is humour. There is always a joke to be made, and this is received well by the other players in the group. I did not notice anyone, including the DM, getting frustrated with the

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amount of joking, or that many of the elements of the campaign were taken so light-heartedly. At the end of this session, I quite literally began to have pains in my sides from laughing so much, as the players all had a great sense of humour and really did not take the game too seriously. But not only was this the case, also the players were very supportive of one-another, giving each other help when wanted, but not over-explaining or trying to appear as one is more knowledgeable than any others. This created a healthy group dynamic. At the end of the session they invited me back for the next week, and I was sure to join. This was some of the most fun I had encountered engaging with D&D yet, and I was not even playing!

For some, D&D is a very serious activity, where storylines matter, have heavy content and where the challenges are extremely difficult and require the players to be serious about how they are playing. For others however the game provides a chance to have fun in a fantasy setting. Some may view their D&D campaign similarly to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, whereas others see it as being more akin to Monty Python. What is obvious from this is that players are finding ways to play the game that are pleasurable to them. Quite obviously Talve’s group loved humour and not taking things too seriously, so for them it became an exercise in comedy improv, whereas for others tactics, strategy, serious wargaming, and deep dark storylines were what drove their engagement. Here I will unpack this further to talk about the role of pleasure in gaming, as it is important to recognize that if it was not for the pleasurable experiences of playing a game, serious gameplay would most likely not exist.

Pleasure can be a difficult concept to engage with, as we have had a tumultuous relationship with it throughout human history. Pleasure seeking has been problematized, and in many cases demonized as demonstrating the weak will of an individual. As Huta and Ryan show, pleasure seeking was portrayed negatively as early as the fourth century BCE when Aristotle
described it as a vulgar way of life. Aristotle saw eudaimonia (the seeking of wellness and self development) as being a key component of positive deeper principles.\textsuperscript{128} As Kim, Kang and Choi argue in the work *Pleasure Now, Meaning Later* (2014) there is often debate as to whether or not the key to happiness is through pleasure or meaning, and that there is a trade off between these two. That people must sacrifice one for the other.\textsuperscript{129} However, we can look at these two concepts – Eudemonism and Hedonism as not opposed, but as complementary forms, that are used in achieving wellness of the individual.\textsuperscript{130} Opposed to the concept of hedonism along with meaning is often productivity. As seeking pleasure is quite often not viewed as a productive enterprise, it has been problematized as not contributing to one’s overall happiness. Here I will attempt to counter this view, and to instead show the key ways that pleasure seeking can be an important component to one’s overall wellness.

What is Pleasure?

I think it first important to start by discussing what is considered pleasurable by humans.

In their work Biswass-Diener et al. provide a list of six types of pleasure that humans can experience. This list consists of

- Non-sensory likings (pleasure derived from objects or people)
- Pleasures of gain and relief (pleasure derived from met expectations)
- Pleasure of Achievement (pleasure derived from the attainment of goals)
- Social Pleasure (pleasure derived from social interactions)
- Activity Pleasure (pleasure derived from the enjoyment of the process rather than the end goal)
- Esthetic pleasure (pleasure derived from nature, beauty, and sometimes empathy).\textsuperscript{131}


\textsuperscript{130} Kim, Kang, and Choi, (2014): 262.

Here we can see that pleasure is not just relegated to how something may physically feel, but is also an important socio-cultural construction based around expectations, goals, interactions, and feeling as though one is doing something or achieving something. Our esthetic and non-sensory pleasures are what I argue many commonly think of when considering pleasure as something measurable or tangible, but it is the pleasure which is derived from these other four types that also both provide, and detail, a great deal of meaning in our lives. It is here that we can begin to make the connections between hedonism and eudemonism as they rely on acts of eudemonism to arise.

When asked, I think many would be able to clearly recognize how it feels to complete a task, or to meet someone’s expectations of them. As well, having a meaningful, engaged, and/or close conversation with someone known, or are just meeting can be rewarding and pleasurable. The act of doing something is also often spoken of as the reason why we did the thing in the first place – not the end goal. However, I do not think most would describe these as hedonistic activities. Hedonism is not always demonized, but it most often is not associated with productivity at work, or with doing things for others, or having a great conversation. But in the ways described above – setting goals for oneself to complete, and doing so, may be viewed as a hedonistic enterprise.

What becomes important then is looking at pleasure in both the short-term and long-term. Of course, eating or drinking something which tastes good is a pleasurable exercise – often one associated with hedonism. Along with these includes drinking alcohol and taking drugs, gambling, sexual intercourse, viewing appealing images or videos, enjoying beautiful weather, taking a cool swim on a hot day, etc. All of these, I argue, would be considered common examples of hedonistic activities. Of course, these are subjective experiences – as individuals
would differ on what parts of these are actually pleasurable, but what is important is that these are the activities we consider to be pleasurable. On the other hand, pleasure as was discussed earlier can be derived from completing goals and meeting expectations. I would argue that most people would not consider these hedonistic activities, even though they are similar in that they are long-term enterprises. What must be the case then is that for many, intent is important in determining what is hedonistic and not. If one intends to do something because it is pleasurable this is hedonistic. However, if the act is done for other reasons and pleasure is a by-product, then that is no longer a hedonistic enterprise.

As Kim, Kang, and Choi (2014) argue, Hedonists and Eudemonists are commonly put at opposition to one another – the opposition being focused on whether happiness is achieved through pleasure or meaning. Eudemonists produce meaning through self-development, wellness, and productivity. On the other hand we have Hedonists who create a happy life for themselves through pleasure seeking behaviour. If pleasure seeking behaviour is often associated with a lack of self-control, whereas self-development and wellness are the epitome of self-control. In their study, Kim, Kang, and Choi found that meaning and pleasure can be related, in that the more meaningful something is the more pleasurable it becomes, and that in general people preferred meaningful activities and a meaningful life over a pleasurable meaningless life.

If we look to Huta and Ryan, we can see that pleasure was found, in their research, to be a way to manage short-term emotions, but that in the long-term this effect faded. However, eudemonia had very little to no effect on positive affect in the short or immediate-term, but had

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an impact on long-term happiness.\textsuperscript{134} As well, eudemonia and meaning were found to be closely linked, leading to a greater understanding of the positive outcomes of self-development and self-care.\textsuperscript{135} However, Biswass-Diener et.al. found in their research that “hedonistic affective states, and pleasure specifically” were correlated positively with overall life satisfaction.\textsuperscript{136} This seems to point us to an understanding that overall happiness may be derived from both of these affective states, eudemonia and hedonia, and that we may look at these as being more intertwined than they have been considered to be in the past.

Pure hedonism, which sacrifices other parts of one’s well being and life goals in order to feel pleasure in the short term can most certainly be seen as having long-term negative impacts on the individual’s well being. However, if we take hedonistic affective states as an allowable part of our lives which are centred around the development of the self, and with overall wellbeing, there are positive outcomes on both our short-term and long-term wellbeing. Sacrifice in the short term is not always necessary to produce a happy and meaningful life, and in-fact, this can lead to unhappiness now which can have negative impacts on our ability to stay focused and goal-driven.

If we look back to gaming then, the act of gameplay is often done because of the pleasure people derive from it. But, if one spends too much time playing games, and does not focus on personal health and well-being, and does not look-towards self-development, they may experience long-term unhappiness. What becomes important then are the ways we include a

\textsuperscript{134} Huta and Ryan, (2010): 757-758.
\textsuperscript{135} Huta and Ryan, (2010): 758.
pleasurable activity in our lives, as not opposed to, but as a part of, our meaning making, self-development, and overall wellness.

Games as Playful, Pleasureful, Leisure Experiences

As I continued to return to Kessel Run for the AL sessions, I began to notice some lack of enjoyment amongst players on a weekly basis. This began one week as a woman had messaged the AL Facebook group stating that she would be joining one evening. As soon as I arrived the regulars began to tell me about this player. I was told “She’s a little slow, you’ll see what I mean” by Tath, who seemed to have a real distaste for this person I had not met yet. As she arrived, the players pretended to be nice, giving half smiles (looking strained and insincere) and looking down at their papers a lot. The jokes among the group were also much less present, and the morale overall seemed to be quite low. As we played, I began to see that this new player, Mai Xuay, was newer to the gameplay and that she had a lot of questions about how the rules worked, how her character sheet worked, and how to generally play the game. Although the players at AL were usually very welcoming of new players who asked questions, it appeared that when this became excessive, they began to lose their patience.

About two-hours into the session players began to audibly moan whenever Mai began to ask questions, as this slowed down gameplay and made it difficult to continue to move through the campaign. For a few weeks before this session, the players, as well as the DM, seemed to be more focused on moving quickly through the campaign, going quickly from battle to battle, and talking often about leveling up and experience points. In this setting, Mai was slowing down gameplay quite a bit, especially during combat as she asked many times “where is my initiative shown on my character sheet” (which many players consider to be quite clear). By the end of the
session the players were all rushing to finish and cleared out quite quickly once the game was done.

The next week I came back to AL and the players were all rearing to go. As we started traveling through the world, things were once again being pushed along quite quickly. Comments were made about slowed progression due to Mai being there the week before, and therefore they wanted to “catch up” to where they would be (even though there is no actual deadline for what needs to be done in any given session). Quickly we came to a monster, and this was attacked immediately. After the fight, we found we had killed a mother salamander and her babies, and that she was just trying to protect her offspring. Everyone began to laugh as we realized in this moment we truly were the evil ones, even though Tath had attacked because the monster’s alignment was “evil”. We called each other baby killers for the next 2 hours as we played, joking in almost every situation about how we really were just out looking for babies to kill in this campaign. At this point, it was clear that the lightheartedness had returned to the group and people seemed to be having fun again.

Not all gameplay is pleasurable as I have come to see from my time in these different gaming groups. But more specifically, gameplay is made up of moments where people are having fun, where they are doing work, strategizing, organizing, having meaningful social interactions, and are telling stories. However, gameplay seems to also be made up of moments of frustration, stress, anger, and awkwardness. Most importantly is that these different emotions and situations arise alongside one another, making gameplay challenging to break down into specific categories. Often a session with the same group can be both frustrating and jovial, or stressful and exciting, or maybe it is just silly and lighthearted. As shown above, sessions of D&D take on all of these markers, as just like many other social situations they are extremely varied. D&D
groups are varied forms of communities of practice, ones that create their own ways to perform, their own techniques, their own viewpoints on how the game should be played. Studying a game like D&D we see that the rules and storyline are only small parts of what the gameplay is actually about. More so, these are active leisure communities where individuals show their own expertise, their membership, their dedication to their hobby, but also where they make friends, find love, and build communities and systems of support.

Gameplay itself is meant to be pleasurable. Most game designers do not design their games to make people angry or frustrated, but instead to make an enjoyable experience for players. Whether this is achieved through challenge, strategy, esthetics, social interactions, comedy, or interesting, fun, or engaging storylines, a key purpose of games is to have fun. In this way, games are a hedonistic activity. They put pleasure in the forefront, whether explicitly or not. However, pleasure from games may be achieved in various ways. The six forms of pleasure described above should help us to understand that games are complex in the ways they create pleasurable experiences. In Talve’s campaign this was done through enjoyable social interactions that were humorous, whereas in AL this was done through the achievement of goals such as completing sections of the campaign or leveling up. Others such as Thiey and Fenrir enjoyed showing their expertise, and trying to be as knowledgeable about the game as they could be.

In this chapter I have shown the ways that play and pleasure exist in our lives, and how we understand them in various contexts. Looking at a game such as D&D as a leisure activity, we can see the ways that it is a meaningful phenomenon through which people make meaningful social interactions, build communities of practice and become members of these communities. As was important we can see that games as leisure activities are not solely made up of play. Within them they carry elements of work, pleasure, and play which all depend on the various
contexts in which the game is played and with whom. Different games satisfy different desires for play as well, as we see with war games, games of chance, social interaction games, simple strategy games, or games such as cookie clicker where the individual simply taps a screen to make as many cookies as possible – with no real reward for doing so. Sometimes games keep us busy as we wait for other things to happen in our lives (waiting at a doctor’s office or for the bus to come). Others engage us over long periods of time and require a great deal of work to make happen – such as planning a D&D campaign, building characters, painting miniatures, and making maps and terrain. This is not all play but are all forms of interacting with games.

As we look to games as an object of study, we must also be aware that they are more complex than being moments of play. For many of my participants play was a secondary function of engaging with games. Rather, they were building relationships with people, getting out of their house, exercising their minds, and having fun in a social space. Being a member of a group or community was at the centre of what many of these people were doing. As D&D is not made up of one set up objectives or style of play, there was a great deal of room for interpretation as to how a session would take place. D&D often takes place in private residences, and these are important ways we invite people we know into our lives, into our homes, and interact with them often when we are in a vulnerable state – acting and being creative. However, public spaces that host D&D games are a clear attempt to build communities that are meaningful to all those involved.

Late one evening as I sat at the Forge watching Talve’s group play their campaign, I took a moment and looked around the space (see figure 6). There were four groups set up this evening, all of whom were playing D&D simultaneously. As I looked at the other groups, and back to my own, I realized that I had become a part of a D&D community of practice. As players
engaged at their tables, they would also get up and go to other tables to chime in or see what was happening. Often, a player from one table would call over to another to explain a funny or exciting moment that had just taken place. Other times players would ask other tables for clarifications of rules. Although we were playing four different campaigns, we were all interacting as one community of practice. Sharing ideas, laughs, hardships, and just generally being there in the moment together. This was more than a game, it was a way people put themselves out there to meet others, to build a community of practice in their lives that they felt they were a part of. People were talking to each other at a point in time where we all had devices we could engage with and talk to others with – we were actually having conversations and getting involved in each other’s lives in person. It is this that makes D&D stand out as more than play, more than pleasure, more than a leisure activity.

Figure 6: Weekly D&D Night
It was 11:00 AM on a Sunday morning when I arrived at The Forge to start a new campaign with Shiop and his friends. As discussed in chapter 2, this campaign would introduce us to a game world created by Shiop that continued even when we as players were not engaging in it. In order to do this, Shiop took detailed background information from the characters we had created, added some of his own details from the world he had created and used this to have events continue in the game world throughout the physical world week we as people were living.

Shiop would send us messages about events that were going on that impacted our characters, and then on Sunday mornings at the beginning of our session he would provide us details of what had happened in the world that week. This was a unique setting and what made it impactful was that we were each playing a character that we had developed with a background, ideologies, and familial connections, etc., and that was incorporated into the game world we were playing in. This speaks to the ways in which players construct game worlds and narratives not only though the act of playing, but in the ways they bring those narratives into their everyday lives. In his work on post-battle reports, Kirschenbaum (2009) looks to the ways players would construct post battle reports following their engagement with board wargames. Board wargames involve players using paper, pencil, boards, tokens, and dice to recreate historical battles. Players use strategy coupled with the randomness of dice rolls to simulate these battles. Kirschenbaum shows that following these games (which take place largely through tables,

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statistics, and dice rolls) players would then create narratives based on the outcomes, adding imagery and attributing actions to actors that only existed as tokens on a board – in what he describes as a “hybrid of fiction and the real world”\textsuperscript{138} or Juul would define as “half-real”\textsuperscript{139} In these ways TTRPG players also create half-real narratives that mix their character’s in-game actions and remap them onto their selves in order to create these histories of action told both in first and third-person stories. Players would tell these stories to their friends and other game players they met, switching back and forth between themselves as human-in-the-real-world and themselves as character-in-a-game.

Starting a campaign like this involves a learning period as players navigate how to interact with one another as people in a shared space, as players of a game, and as characters in a game world. This often includes a “session zero” or an introductory moment in time when the players meet each other and introduce themselves while also introducing their characters in the game they will be playing. Sometimes this would also include players building their characters together – often when there were newer players who did not know how to do so. In that way, this campaign started as almost every campaign I have been apart of throughout my time in the field, and afterwards in games I have played for pleasure does – the DM asks each player to introduce themselves (as the character they would be playing throughout the campaign). Below is a transcription of this process.

Renaldo: I’m a ranger dwarf named Flint Briskbadger. Uh, He is lawful neutral. Um, where to begin? Backstory and everything?
Shiop: Yes, yeah go ahead.
Renaldo: Okay a little bit of backstory, So Shiop did fill me in that there is a giant war that happened way, way in the long ago. But the village I come from apparently, they had no idea about it.

\textsuperscript{138} Kirshenbaum, (2009): 368.
Shiop: Nobody knows.

Renaldo: Okay, so there's a lot of, we'll just say, religious debate that's always going on in the village, and I guess on the high end its not really a debate. Its a, my character had differing opinions, that got to the point where he um, first he was like arguing with the government, local government about things, and kinda getting shunned. And uh arguing at the dinner table with family, uh and now his family is kind of like "just shut up and get back to regular dwarf life" you know? And so the only solace he had was his work as a ranger, but he noticed that just to avoid conflict at home, everyday he was working further and further from home. And now he has no idea how to get back home. So I am homesick, because I love my little village, but I'm carrying on my quest, on my own at this point. So he is a ranger, a wanderer. So these are features and traits now, so a natural explorer, specifically in forests, because he is a mountain dwarf, uh where the forest is halfway up the mountain. Fighting style, archery has +2 bonus to attack, Um, his favourite enemy are beasts, so I can understand the beast language and track them easily. Uh, dark vision, dwarven resilience and stone cutting. And just because my charisma was already really low and I was looking at the instruments that I could bring along with me I have some bagpipes. I know I'm not going to make friends with them, but...

Shiop: Renaldo Fairweather which city are you from

Renaldo: Uhm, oh no I didn't write it down.

Shiop: Your character comes from the city of, well it’s not really a city, it’s The Rolling Hills, which is halfway up a mountain.

Renaldo: Alright I have written it down. And so I guess that is Flint.

Dirk. Good to meet you Flint.

Shiop. Brorouk, could you give us a bit about your character and where you come from and all that kind of stuff?

Brorouk: So I am being Lannin Jecht today. And I am kind of a fairy, Fey creature type thing, from the Land of Mest as it came in on my phone, or Mist.

Shiop. Country of the Windago, City of the Mist.

Brorouk: Which is kind of an ancient town, it’s known for having like, ancient magics in it. It tends to birth guardian spirits, and fairies of that kind.

Renaldo: I'm so sorry, what was the creature, or sorry type, what are you?

Brorouk: I haven't said that yet.

Renaldo: Oh okay, sorry sorry.

Talve: What are you? Dude that's racist.

(everyone laughs)

Brorouk: What did you do?

Renaldo: Oh no, okay I'll stop.

Shiop: Doesn’t matter man.

(everyone continues to laugh)

Brorouk: So I am playing a, I used a Tiefling cause it’s the closest we got to supernatural creatures in fifth ed.

Renaldo: Okay

Brorouk: And I am a druid
Talve: Sorry what was your name again?
Brorouk: Lannin Jecht
Talve: Lennin?
Brorouk: L A N N I N
Talve: I N.
Shiop: Oh she's writing this down, this is a good right-hand man
Talve: Secretary yo (laughs).
Brorouk: And So basically, I'm a guy in a pretty nice lookin', uh, leather armour suit. Like well tailored, not necessarily expensive. And I got a really conspicuous giant Iron helmet.
Shiop: Oh that's sweet
Dirk: Sweet
Brorouk: So you can't really see anything into it. Um, main things, I guess if we're going over proficiencies and stuff, because I'm a magical creature I am fire resistant. Also, I have dark vision. Um, I used to be a soldier, which is kind of, eh, I used to work as a guard basically, at Mist, and then I got kind of sent out to you guys for reasons I'm not sure about, but its apparently important. So I'm here to keep you guys safe and healthy.
Shiop: Alright, and now Dirk, your character.
Dir.: Alright, so my name is Eldon Goodearth. That's E L D O N. I am a halfling druid as well, from the small town of Brighton, which is in The Country of the Rolling Hills as well, so we come from the same country. And I am an old soul. When you see me I have long matted hair. Honestly, if you are a Tolkien fan at all, I'm kind of modelled after Radagast
Talve: Radagast?
Renaldo and Dirk (simultaneously): The brown
Talve: Not in the movies though
D. No (laughs). Um and so I'm, just, I have an extremely close connection to animals, wildlife, nature. Um, that always comes first for me. I'm always worried about how what we're doing might affect the natural world around us. I speak to animals. And if we're going over proficiencies and stuff like that. I'm lucky, so I get to reroll my attack roles, ability checks, and saving throws that are ones, which is awesome. And then I'm also brave, I have halfling nimbleness, and I am naturally stealthy. So, hopefully I'll be moving around out of sight. That's basically me, um, I'm just a spellcasting druid that loves animals.

Here, Renaldo can be seen giving their introduction as themselves talking about the character they were going to play, while Brorouk and myself are giving our introductions as though we were the character. This is quite common in Renaldo’s case, as when first starting a game players have not had the time to really get into playing this new identity. The practice of going around the table and describing one’s character allows players to express who they will be playing as but can also work to set the tone of the game itself. Seeing how people describe their characters,
what kinds of characters they are playing (whether they are serious, silly, or somewhere in-between) and how much time is allotted to this activity can work to set the pace and level of engagement, or seriousness, that players will be expected to uphold. In this situation shown above, there was quite a bit of joking around going on as players described their characters, effectively lightening the mood of the game. What can be seen here also though is that there are differences in peoples’ comfort level with the game – where Renaldo is a new player and so is simultaneously working through the rules of the game, the mechanics of his character, and how to play in a roleplaying game group, others like Brorouk have a good deal of experience with the game and seem more laissez-faire with the sharing of their basic character details (in Brorouk’s case this entailed intentionally holding things back because his character was meant to have a mysterious backstory and he was roleplaying that from the moment we sat at the table). This game was also made up of people who already knew each other, some having been good friends for some time. This meant that we could spend more time joking around and asking questions about the game as we were already comfortable with one another.

In this chapter I will look at the ways players build characters and roleplay those characters throughout TTRPG sessions to show the impact that these in-game identities have on the players involved. Playing an in-game character that one has constructed often involves making decisions through that character’s eyes, attempting to put oneself in another’s shoes. However, that other person is a character the individual has constructed and has imbued with certain traits, ideologies, personality types, etc., that they view as being meaningful or that they think make up an interesting character. Players build characters for a variety of reasons (they represent an identity they value, they think they are cool or funny, they are modeled from another character they have identified with) and looking at these characters and how players roleplay
them in group settings can help us to understand why players come together in TTRPG groups to roleplay. There is a great deal of meaning being made during group roleplaying and this chapter seeks to unpack that using identity theory inspired by Erving Goffman, amongst others. Finally, this chapter will look to the ways identities are expressed, controlled, stereotyped, and excluded in the imagined community of gaming and how players navigate these socio/cultural spheres of interaction as they get involved with TTRPG groups.

**Getting Involved: Roleplaying a Character**

The level of investment players put in to playing a character is dependent on many factors. I have identified 6 factors throughout my experiences playing in different groups in a variety of settings including people’s homes, game stores, restaurants, and on university campuses. These factors include (1) the level of experience of the player, (2) the level of attachment the player has to the character, (3) the points of connection between player and character (such as similar behavioural traits or moral alignments) (4) the level of comfort the players have with one another, and specifically the level of comfort the player has with the rest of the group, (5) the level of investment the player has in the current campaign, and (6) the individual’s personal preference when gaming. On top of all these factors, we can also look and see that roleplaying is not measured in terms of full immersion and no immersion. Rather, players engage in roleplaying at a variety of levels of involvement that can see them occupy the role of ‘player’ without identifying as the character, identifying as the character for short periods of time as they engage in the game, but then switching back out often, and finally fully roleplaying, taking on the identity for the duration of the session. These levels of roleplaying are often augmented by the use of accents, key phrases the character is known for, and various levels of cosplaying. Here then I will provide examples of these different factors affecting roleplaying, to further clarify the ways people roleplay characters in TTRPGs.
CHAPTER 4 – IDENTITY PRODUCTION THROUGH ROLEPLAYING

The difference seen in how characters were described above is an example of factor (1) the experience level of the players involved in the game. By this time in my fieldwork, I had played approximately 300 hours of *Dungeons & Dragons* over a period of 8 months, along with having read the Player’s Handbook, Dungeon Master’s Guide, and the Monster Manual. This had led me to be a fairly proficient player, who was quite adept at getting into character. Brorouk was in a very similar position to me, having played the game for years, often citing rules and game experiences from older editions of the game. As for Renaldo, this was his first time actually playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, although he had been playing other games such as *Magic: The Gathering* for many years, and so this was a learning experience for him. Throughout this campaign over the next few months, Renaldo would become more comfortable with his character, and would speak more as Flint than as himself during gameplay. This is the first step in taking on a character identity, and is often a strange process to get used to – thinking and acting as the character rather than as oneself playing the game. Often to do this, players must pretend as though they do not know certain pieces of information and are encouraged to avoid talking about the rules in the books, or about things outside of the game world.

The phenomenon of talking about the game while playing it and referencing game theories and information characters would not know is called “metagaming” and is a roleplaying game faux pas. If we look back to the discussion of Bateson’s work from Chapter 2, we can see that people must in some sense discuss that they are playing a game and therefore define the magic circle. Following this, crossing those boundaries can be frowned upon depending on the play group. People are quite aware of what frame of social interaction they are in at all times as

140 Citing older versions of the game (i.e. “In 3.5 there is a rule that allows you to do x.”) was quite common amongst players who had been playing the game for many years, and worked to show their level of expertise.
they play and they often must continue to work to uphold those frames in order to produce a
game world and magic circle that they can act as their character within. As players roleplay their
characters in game, crossing over these barriers is viewed in a variety of ways depending on the
game they are in. Some groups barely ever outwardly roleplay their characters, some speak in the
third person about their character and describe their actions as such, while others try and actually
speak as though they are the character. Mizer looks at the importance of space in these moments,
and specifically the intersections of physical space, virtual space, and social space to understand
the ways that our actions have consequences across spheres. This frame switching then is
monitored by players constantly as they move across different time streams (in game and out of
game).

Navigating these play styles becomes part of the process of learning the play with new
play groups. After the introduction of our characters, it was time to start playing, so Shiop took
over and gave us our opening narrative. Two hours later we had finished our first session of
Shiop’s campaign, and had begun to learn more about who our characters would be.

This process of introducing one’s character is often the first step in taking on a character
identity. To look at factors (2) and (3) then, I turn to the process of building a Dungeons &
Dragons character, which is a detailed process that can often take hours depending on the level
of detail and backstory the individual wishes to include. During the character creation process
players will come up with every part of that character’s identity, often going into detail about
physical appearance, behavioural traits, family and friend relationships, and backstory (which is

141 Mizer, N. “A Life Well Played: Gary Con and Gaming as Commemoration.” Dissertation Chapter Submitted to
the Journal of American Folklore.
142 Mizer, N., 18.
used to tell the story of that character’s life up to the point of the start of the campaign). This can also include either drawing a representation of one’s character, or making a miniature\textsuperscript{143} that will be used to represent one’s character on the battle grid. Throughout my time talking to TTRPG players I was often told about the character construction process, as well as how enjoyable it was. On more than one occasion I was told that character construction was something done for fun, with some participants telling me that they had many characters built that they had never used, and that they did not have any plan for. For these people, character creation was a way to express themselves, and to construct identities based on themselves, others, and famous or beloved characters and people. Here is an example of one conversation where a woman, Konah, explained her character creation process.

Dirk: So when you create a character, do you tend to include traits that you hold, or that you like, or that you don’t like? What approach do you usually take?

Konah: Um, it varies because I've done a lot characters. Like sometimes I'll get an idea from a show I'm watching or from a book I'm reading, sometimes, a lot of my characters have like, not all of the same traits that I do, but I'm not a particularly a good actor, so I like at least having them somewhat, like relatable to who I am, or else I find it difficult to figure out what their motivations are. So yeah, sometimes I'll just come up with an idea from something I've seen, or sometimes I'll, I've tried a few different types of characters. I like to play around with it a bit, but I do like to keep it somewhat relatable to myself.

Here, Konah explains that she gets inspiration for her characters from television, books, etc., but that she also includes traits that are similar to her so that she can relate to the character in some way. This allowed her to play the character more “accurately” as she found it easier to “know their motivations” and therefore think as they would. These early steps of character creation are important, as they dictate how the character will be portrayed in the game for at least the first

\textsuperscript{143} Making miniatures is a common practice amongst tabletop roleplaying gamers, and can be as simple as buying a pre-molded miniature and painting it, as detailed as modeling the miniature from clay and then painting it, or, as is becoming more popular, 3D printing a figure and then painting it.
few sessions. However, much like our physical-world identities, characters are often changing slightly, as they grow alongside the development of the story being told through play.

The development of character identities occurs rather slowly, often taking many sessions to have minor changes in character identity. Unlike the complex identities that we as humans hold and present throughout our daily lives, character identities tend to be more static. This is due to the process of character creation, and that the player is expected to have a fleshed-out character identity when arriving to the first session. Along with producing a detailed identity for one’s character, the player also decides on an ‘alignment’ that will dictate, to some extent, that character’s decision-making process and how they behave in the game world. The fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons* Player’s Handbook (2014) describes alignments as such:

> A typical creature in the worlds of *Dungeons & Dragons* has an alignment, which broadly describes its moral and personal attitudes. Alignment is a combination of two factors: one identifies morality (good, evil, or neutral), and the other describes attitudes toward society and order (lawful, chaotic, or neutral).\(^{144}\)

Therefore, players have nine alignment options to choose from, and these help to define the character’s identity and how the player will act and make decisions as that character in the game world. The level to which players actually follow these alignments is largely based on the DM and how they choose to run their game. Some DMs will give bonuses (‘inspiration’ in D&D terms\(^ {145}\)) for “playing their alignment”, whereas others see alignments as unrealistic, understanding identities and moralities to be more fluid. In the various games I have been a part of, I have seen many different ways of playing alignments, but the most common sees them used as a guideline rather than as a hard and fast rule. Playing a character identity though, even when

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\(^{144}\) Wizards of the Coast (2014) 122.

\(^ {145}\) Inspiration is an in-game mechanic in *Dungeons & Dragons*. If the player does something the DM deems to be noteworthy or outstanding then they may grant the player inspiration. The player can then use this inspiration to reroll dice to give them extra chances at success in the future. The inspiration is a finite resource for players.
alignments are considered to be guidelines, often sees players making decisions because “this is what my character would do” which works to reinforce the identity that is already written for that character.

Playing a character takes a lot of thought and effort, and this goes for DMs as well who must play all of the non-player characters (NPC) that appear throughout the campaign. Sometimes these characters are quite generic, and require little roleplaying effort, whereas others have greater depth and require an investment from the DM similar to that put forward by the players. In an excerpt from an interview below, Mize Tarrendoom talks about her experiences creating characters, and the differences that arise when playing NPCs as a DM.

Dirk: So when you are playing a TTRPG do you have a certain type of character you construct?

Mize Tarrendoom: A lot of the characters I’ve made that are kicking around waiting to be played are based on something in my personal life that I wanted to explore. Like an insecurity or something like that. Like, Corina, the character I'm playing in Gigrid’s campaign, she has like, it’s like a whole lot of her questioning if she’s really a good person, and how her choices are affecting others, like that. So, whenever I make a character there are pieces of me stuck in there that are going to come from me, and then other parts that are made up. So they are layered enough to explore something that I want to explore.

Dirk: Do you find there are certain aspects of yourself that show up more than others?

Mize: Sarcasm.

Dirk: Sarcasm, okay cool.

Mize: Yeah, especially a lot of my NPCs. I don’t know like, I’m a cautious person when I'm playing, like "I don't know if we should do that." So some of the characters I’m trying to create are more impulsive. I often end up being like the mom of the group, which is also the same with my group of friends. Like, maybe lets not do that thing. So that tends to happen with my characters. So I'm trying to be the character that makes a decision and other players are like "no maybe don’t do that thing."

Dirk: So, how much, when you are playing an NPC or you are playing a character you’ve made in another campaign, how much do you try to role play your character?

Mize: Depending on the character, like if they are a merchant or something, like, I'm sure I’ve played the same character like 6 times. Like, there’s a merchant, better do the merchant thing. Here you go. But If I’m playing a character that’s important to the story, then I try to roleplay more. Like lately playing Alia recently, like I have notes about how she feels, what her priorities are, so I'm trying to act as her. So characters that occur more get more effort put into them.

Dirk: When you are roleplaying do you tend to look at it as a character you are roleplaying, or is it you.

Mize: I am very much a person that is like "I'm doing this" I’m not like "they do this" Like I am very much a person that’s like “I am this person for now.” Its harder as a DM because I have to jump back
and forth, but like when I’m playing a character that’s doing something important, like when I'm being Alia, I am Alia in this moment. How she’s feeling is how I'm feeling in the moment.

As Mize shows, the level of commitment put into a character depends on the role that character has in the story and also how important the character is to the person who is playing them. As with Mize’s NPC Alia, great detail was put into playing her, including having notes about her feelings and priorities to make sure she can consistently play her accurately. Later on in Mize’s campaign, which I was a part of for one year, Alia became an even more important character and was part of our group, almost like another player character (PC). This meant that Mize had the commitment of playing an in-depth character who was important to the campaign, as well as running the campaign as the DM.

In these descriptions of character building,

we can see the importance of building a character identity that one can identify with. Both Mize and Konah explained to me that they wanted to have certain points of connection to their characters such as moral standpoints and identity traits so that they could think as their character, or develop a part of the identity in a safe play setting. For Mize, developing a character sometimes meant adding in features of herself and features that she would like to see more of in herself. Having a playful disposition and being in the magic circle allows people to take these identities and play with them, try them out, and see how others respond. For Mize, she expressed often feeling as though she was overcautious and acted as a “mother” figure to whatever group she was a part of. Then Mize tried to challenge these feelings of needing to be overly secure with characters in game by constructing a character who would act on impulse and would take risks regularly. Players are then using these in game character identities to navigate their own physical world identities and develop them.
Along with factor (3) then (the points of connection between character and player) which is shown in these examples, we can also see that the level of attachment players have to their characters can influence roleplaying. As players develop characters a level of attachment begins to grow between the player and that character (in many but not all cases). This attachment can be influenced by the amount of work that is put into building that character, how long the character has been played, and also the story that the character is involved in. In my discussions with Konah, she described this phenomenon in terms of the characters she has played in different campaigns.

Dirk: Do you find you build a connection with characters you play?

Konah: I would say yeah. Like when I have a character I'm enjoying seeing what's happening with them, Its kind of like I want to have a good story with that character. Like I've had various lengths of other ones, like with that ranger character I find I don’t have the need to play anymore, or like I had another druid character, an elf druid from a pathfinder campaign, and we played that one for about a year too, and I feel like I'm done with her too. Because I feel like I've told a story with those characters. Whereas with Irene I feel like I haven’t had a chance to tell a story with her yet.

As players roleplay a character, they often become more and more attached to that character as the storyline develops. This, along with the interactions they have with other players and the characters they are roleplaying, can foster growing attachment. As players become more attached to characters they are more likely to get involved in roleplaying as they now care more about how the character interacts in the game world. As well, with Konah, she wanted to see the characters she made have a detailed story and felt that she had not done a character justice until she had told a story with them.

As players build characters, and as their attachment to these characters grows, they also become more connected with the other players in their campaign. Groups of players form in many different ways, as has been discussed in previous chapters, but to recap the main types of group formations I encountered during this fieldwork were groups of already existent friends,
meetup groups (open online calls for players), and finally drop-in groups at stores and other events or locations (where the group meets weekly and anyone can drop in and play). As can be expected most players in meetup groups and drop-in groups that I engaged with did not roleplay their characters early on in their time with said group, but once they had been going to the same group week-after-week for some time, they often started to roleplay more. There were a few exceptions to this, and most notably from one older gentleman Karn Tolaria.

One evening in the spring of 2018, I went to my weekly Adventurer’s League session of which I had become a regular member of the group and was quite friendly with all the weekly regulars. This week however, there was a new player – Karn. Karn was a middle-aged man who told us openly of his career in the military and his great love of TTRPGs. He had been playing for many years and was somewhat of a self-expressed expert on all things TTRPG. He joined in our session and brought out a beautifully hand-painted miniature of a dwarf with a great axe and a mug of ale. The miniature was cast of metal, which was popular in the past of tabletop games, but has become less popular due to cost. We began playing with the light roleplaying we engaged in, and then Karn spoke up and shocked most of us. Karn had fully gotten into character, speaking as one would expect a rough and tumble, battle-hardened dwarf to. For the rest of the session he continued to only interact in character, stopping only to ask people to only refer to him as his character and not as Karn. The roleplaying to date in this group was not as in-depth as other groups, and so this caught many of us off-guard. Karn however, had been playing TTRPGs for years and was involved in his character identities to the extent that he wanted to act only as that character during game time. This, of course, is the exception to the “level of comfort” factor that influences roleplaying, but as Karn was a skilled player, with an in-depth knowledge of these games and of his character, he was willing to roleplay even though he was a
stranger to all of us. Later on, Karn would take over DMing these sessions, and would push the
players to roleplay more and more.

When it comes to friend groups that play roleplaying games though, there is a greater
chance that people will try out things they may regularly be uncomfortable with. In the groups of
friends I interacted with players were often much more likely to roleplay their characters, and
when people felt awkward or they made mistakes, the group was very supportive and often
laughed those occurrences off. Comedy and lighthearted joking was common amongst groups of
friends I played with, and this can be seen in an excerpt from one session with the University
Campaign group. The group started out as an open call for a weekly gaming group and quickly
we all became friends, hanging out outside of our weekly gaming sessions. In this excerpt,
players can be seen to be rapidly switching in and out of character, shown by the use of quotation
marks around their speech. Here, one of our NPC friends had been injured and we were
drastically seeking help for her. However, Gerkan, who was always coming up with silly out-of-
the box ideas, decided to use this opportunity to further his business interests. Mize is the DM in
this campaign and is roleplaying a Djinn (a genie with limitless magical powers).

Gerkan: (spoken in a mock Russian accent) “So you said somewhere with magic, no? But, I have
some friends”

Chandra: “Anywhere, yeah”

Gerkan: “Yeah. Let’s see, would you rather the Djinn or the Demigod?”

Chandra: “You must have some very powerful friends. Whichever one is available. We need to get her
there as quickly as possible.”

Gerkan: “Alright”

Sagrir: Friends is a loose term.

Sin Kakov: “J’amié[^146], how’s it going?”

[^146]: J’amié is the name of the Djinn we are engaging with
Gerkan: Over the earpiece\textsuperscript{147} I'm like "J'amie are you there?"

Mize: "Daven?"

Gerkan: "Ja, this is me."

Mize: "What do you need?"

Gerkan: "So, well, I do need help with something, but also I have another business proposal"

Dirk: (Laughing) Are you pitching to him right now?

Sin Kakov: I'm going to hit you in the back of the head

Sagrir: Do we know what time zone we're in, like, are we just waking him up, out of the blue?

Gigrid: Do they have time zones in there?

Sagrir: Well, probably not

Sin Kakov: I mean, it’s just the sky

Sagrir: I don’t think time is a thing on that plane

Gerkan: "If I give him a good proposal he might be more willing to help us"

Gigrid: “You could just ask.”

Sin Kakov: “You know what, just go, I want to hear this now. Just go.”

Gerkan: "So the business proposal, would you like to hear it?"

Mize: "Of course, you're business is always welcome with me Daven"

Gerkan: "Okay, so Amazon Primē\textsuperscript{148}, its pretty popular, no?"

Mize: "Yes, many deliveries"

Gerkan: "Jah, well I'm thinking it will be more popular if its more easily accessible"

Mize: " And how would you do that?"

Gerkan: "I'm sure you have some friends in the other planes, no?"

Mize: "Yes, we've been working out a trade agreement."

Gerkan: " Well I have some other friends in other planes as well, So I was thinking we could open some shops in the other planes"

Mize: "Well daven, that sounds like a good idea. But you said you had something else"

Gerkan: " Do you have a basin of beginnings"

Mize: "There is only one basin of beginnings and that is in the plane of creation. You can enter through this plane though"

\textsuperscript{147} In this campaign the characters found earpieces that allow us to communicate with one another and with certain magical beings such as the Djinn J'amie.

\textsuperscript{148} In the game world Daven (the character played by Gerkan) invented a cross world distribution network called Amazon Primē
Here, players can be seen roleplaying their characters most of the time, only dropping out of character to comment on what is going on in game. As we were all close friends at this point, much of this is done jokingly, and often players would use roleplaying specifically to try and make one-another laugh. When this campaign began a year before, none of the players roleplayed their characters other than the DM when she was playing certain NPCs. After a year of play we had become comfortable with one another, and attached to our characters and the storyline, leading us to get more involved in the roleplaying aspect of the game.

Factor (4) and (5) can both be seen here then, as players become more comfortable roleplaying as their connection to the group grows, as well as their investment in the campaign. It is much harder to roleplay in a game world that you do not understand, nor have any investment in. As players make the world their own, seen above when Gerkan tries to make a business deal to bring Amazon Prime to the D&D universe, they become more invested in the world itself. Their characters are now represented in the world in ways that are meaningful to them, seeing that their actions affect the world they are in. This feedback promotes player involvement in the game, further producing involved roleplaying.

The final factor (6) in roleplaying engagement is personal preference. Of course, when it comes to game play people engage in different ways due to different behavioural and identity preferences. Having engaged with over 50 players in gameplay, it is clear that some people play TTRPGs to become involved in characters or stories, whereas others are there for the strategy/war-gaming aspects of the game, and finally others are trying something new either to meet people or to get involved in a new game and do not have a desire to roleplay. There is certainly no one way to play TTRPGs, and it is obvious that personal preference for gameplay largely affects the way players engage. This does not mean, of course, that attitudes towards
roleplay do not change over time as people get more involved in the game worlds in which they are involved. However, throughout my time in the field I began to see the spectrum of roleplaying the more I came to interact with different groups. Some people just do not desire to take on another identity – for them, playing in the world as themselves is the fun part, not taking on another identity and roleplaying. Others do not look at the game as one which has an imagined game world, and look at it more as a set of puzzles to be solved, with combat more like Chess or Risk, where the pieces on the board are just that, pieces. But for those who do roleplay, their character’s identities provide them with the chance to try out something new, or to express some trait they either have and want to exaggerate, that they would like to have, or that they would not like to have but are interested in. To understand this, I will turn to the bulk of literature on identity production and expression to theorize about how in game identities affect real world identities, and vice-versa.

Identity Production and Expression

To understand the ways in which in-game character identities and real-world identities interact we must first understand how identity is constructed, and how the performance of such identities affects the performer and the world around them. To elaborate then, from Goffman’s influential work on performance *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), we can see a person’s identity as arising out of their daily performances in various social settings, which are influenced by, but also influence, discourses. As Goffman stresses, individuals choose their performances situationally depending on a variety of social cues, and these performances change from setting to setting making up the various selves that an individual may present throughout their daily interactions. As individuals perform, they construct an identity, which is constantly being (re)created through the act of performance. These performances are influenced by a variety of factors including the individual’s beliefs, ideologies, and histories, prominent discourses
(which shape the way we perform by marking what is socially acceptable and not in a given situation) and others’ performances. Identity, then, should not be looked at as a singular phenomenon that an individual owns, but rather as a series of meanings and descriptions that individuals are represented by in society. \[149\]

Goffman’s work focuses on the ways that individuals perform different roles as they move from one social setting to another. A variety of factors exist in these settings such as the norms and standards of performance in that given society, in that given setting, and with the people who are present. An individual’s social status, race, class, gender, health, and ability all come into play for participants, weighing in on how a given individual will perform. People must weigh these factors against one another to determine where they exist in various social hierarchies, and then to achieve a desired outcome of how they wish the other parties involved to view them. This individual’s performances will then also have an affect on the other parties, influencing how they will continue to perform in that interaction. Thus, a feedback loop is created where participants in an interaction will continually read each others’ performances and modify their own based on that. Therefore, the act of performance of a role in a social setting requires continuous monitoring of various cues – showing that the performance of a role is far from selecting one and presenting it.

As individuals come to acquire roles and perform them in society, these roles come to affect that person’s sense of self – or identity. As individuals perform, their conceptions of self change, showing that identities are fluid rather than static. However, as one performs a specific role over a long period of time, that may come to have a more stabilizing effect on their identity,

leading to more static conceptions of certain aspects of one’s identity. Along with these daily forms of performance that build one’s identity are also ritual forms of performance that are more regimented and are referential to certain cultural identities. As Kaeppler (2010) argues in her work on ritual performance, rituals are often conceived of as ancient and traditional, and therefore performances that are associated with these rituals are conceived of in the same way. Rituals include the performance of formal acts that have not been encoded by performers, but are rather referential events that mark an individual’s belonging to a certain culture.\footnote{Kaeppler, A. L. “Interpreting Ritual as Performance and Theory,” Oceana 80, (2010):263-271.} Therefore, unlike everyday forms of performance, ritualized performances are markers of some set of cultural practices. They serve to mark the performer as a member of that culture that exists as one in a long line of performers. This ritual performance has the effect of both reinforcing the existence of that culture and its norms, while also producing a cultural identity for the performer. The combination of these various forms of performance work together to create a socio/cultural identity that may be both fluid and static, and that comes to affect how individuals continue to perform in future interactions.

These ideas of identity production are largely influenced by Erving Goffman’s early work, but authors such as Weigert (1986), Butler (1993), Heyes (2007), and Burke and Stets (2009) have come to develop these theories of identity production, to help understand this complex process further. As Weigert argues in his 1986 work “in a symbolically transformed world, identities are imposed without the individual’s consent and create a reality that provides a sense of belonging or alienation”.\footnote{Weigert, A. J., “The Social production of identity: Metatheoretical Foundations,” The Sociological Quarterly, 2(27), (1986): 165.} This helps us to develop our understanding of identity production from that solely focused on the intents and actions of the individual, to placing the
individual in a social setting where their actions in the world are perceived and labeled by others, further broadening the way we understand identity to occur. Taking this movement towards the social impacts on identity production another step forward, we can look to Cressida Heyes, who argues that “discipline functions to consolidate identities by managing the body’s movements, its surface, and even our lived experience”. In this way we can see that the individual exists in a social setting that they learn the norms and standards of, and then perform based on those – therefore constructing a set of identities that fit in the society. From looking at this evolution of identity theory from the 1950s on, we can see that identities are complex phenomenon that are constantly being negotiated between the individual and the society they are a part of.

If we hope to understand how identity production occurs in this sphere of tabletop gaming then it is important to first discover the discourse(s) that exist in various tabletop gaming settings in order to determine what is considered acceptable behavior, and also quite importantly, what is not. As Judith Butler shows in her work from 1993, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act but as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it makes.” As Butler explains, performativity is not the singular act, but rather a description of the process of performance, affect, and response. It is the loop through which discourses affect performance, and then performances (re)produce discourse. This makes understanding and further talking about a culture and its norms and practices a difficult activity, as the discourses of any given society or culture are in a constant state of flux, dependent on the performances of individuals in that given society or culture. Now, of course, some discourses

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become more stable over time, as they are continually reproduced – which can produce the sense that they are absolute, or that they are static/unchangeable. When this happens, it becomes even more difficult to perform in a way that challenges the norm, and attempts to do so are often met with resistance. We must be aware of this when approaching the study of culture/society through an engagement with discourse, as to the individuals living in these spaces discourse often feels unchallengeable, absolute, or as though it is not constructed, but naturally occurring.

Uncovering what discourses exist is often not something one can approach directly, but is rather learned as one spends time in the culture or society being studied. It is the performing in the society or culture, and reading the responses to one’s actions, that gives us information of the discourses present. In terms of tabletop roleplaying then, I will address some of the norms and standards of identity in terms of the self and of the character played in order to lay the groundwork for understanding the processes through which in-game and out of game identities are formed and how they affect one another over time. This presentation of these norms and standards are my own, and were influenced by my roles as researcher, newcomer, and to some extent outsider. Having some background in gaming before I began this research meant that I already understood some of the ways to perform in game stores and during game play, but having never played a TTRPG before there was still plenty for me to fumble.

Open and Accepting Game Groups
Looking back to my first days in the field, it was apparent that I was a newcomer to those I was playing with. One of the first observations made was from a game store event I attended early on in my fieldwork. It was at the Adventurer’s League, but what really set this form of play apart from other drop-in games is that players record their in-game expeditions and achievements on log sheets so that the same player can go to different groups and use their same character.
Without this system in place, players would be able to construct very powerful characters, and there would be no way to know whether or not they actually had achieved what they were presenting. The log sheets (see Appendix B) include the player’s DCI number, the DM’s DCI number, and then a series of stats from before and after each session including experience points, gold, downtime hours, renown, and the number of magic items owned. These can then all be tracked by the DM of any session of the Adventurer’s League, making it so that players can go anywhere in the world that this format is offered and just sit down and play.

As I joined this group, I explained a bit about my research, and then we jumped right into gameplay. The players around the table were very welcoming and took time to explain rules and story elements whenever it was appropriate. I was caught off by the welcoming nature of everyone there, as game stores are sometimes presented as insular and as playing host to pretentious gamers that do not like outsiders. However, the players were quick to explain that they loved the game they were playing and wanted to share it with as many people as possible. This, I argue, is one of the first discourses I encountered – creating an open, welcoming environment of gameplay where experienced players teach new players. This welcoming nature was repeated at every game I joined throughout my time in the field, which is most certainly due to the fact that I was mainly joining public games, or friend group games, where people were expected to be welcoming to newcomers to some extent. Of course, this acceptance was afforded in some capacity by my race, class, gender and position as a researcher. As a white man coming from a middle-class family I am well versed in ways to perform in these settings I was coming into and was generally accepted on the very basis that I looked similar to many of the other players I was engaging with. This is not to say in any way that the people I was interacting with showed themselves to be prejudiced (except in a few interactions when some sexist behaviour
was witnessed that will be presented shortly). Rather, I think it is important to note that I am coming from a specific set of privileged positions that influenced the ways I was welcomed into the groups I was joining throughout this research.

Accepting new players was often a point of pride for groups I joined in these game stores and public gaming communities. Groups would discuss the ways they welcomed people in and how many new players they had gotten into the game throughout their tenure as a group. At one new session I joined on a Sunday evening at Hometown Sports Pup the DM proudly exclaimed to the room (where there were two large groups playing) “this week we have 3 new players joining us!” and ensured that we would all be welcomed into the group and that there was always space for newcomers, even if they had to start a new table. For many of the players I met, being able to share the hobby with others was an important element of the game itself. As the game requires a group of people to play finding schedules and personalities that match could be difficult at times – along with finding people who were willing to commit to a campaign that could last months or even years. Welcoming new players meant that players would have people to play with and also new ears for their stories of the game. From my experiences in the field I think it is clear that the TTRPG imagined community is an open and accepting one.

Character Roleplaying and Table Dynamics

An important way that we can see discourse in these gaming settings is through the roleplaying of a character during gameplay. Groups often have their own ways of roleplaying characters, and as a new player joins a group they must quickly learn what is normative roleplay for that given group. This spectrum of roleplaying, as discussed above, creates a learning experience for new players, who may roleplay as they have in past groups and then will be checked by the members of the current group until they are performing in similar ways. This
discourse of roleplaying monitors both how characters are roleplayed, and how players are to perform in a game setting. When new players join a group there is often an introductory period where they must learn how the other players are roleplaying and this is most often done through observing their in-game interactions. Players will watch as others “get into character” (take on the character identity and perform as that identity rather than themselves) and then will behave in kind. However, some players who are confident in their roleplaying, have been playing for a long time or consider themselves regular “game players” will not wait to read the table and will instead jump into their character role completely. This can lead to problems among players as some players feel uncomfortable when others roleplay “too hard” (they perform their identity solely as that character, speaking directly to others as though they were that character while putting away or ignoring the physical-world they are all inhabiting).

One evening I joined a game with Nikham Pahrel and some mutual friends we had made at The Forge and another game store in town. Nikham had approached me before the game to tell me that he was excited to roleplay his character who he described as having multiple personalities that were subject to change after each rest he took. This meant that whenever he took a rest in the game-world he would roll a six-sided die (D6) and would match the number rolled to a numbered list he had created with 6 different character identities on it. Nikham explained that his character had suffered serious trauma and had separated parts of himself into different personalities that he would then jump between randomly. For Nikham this was a great exercise in roleplaying ability as he had been playing the game for many years and held a strong “game player” identity which he often performed through expressions of expertise. However, when we sat down to play and Nikham promptly yelled at a newer player (in character) that he was the Sheriff (one of his six identities) and would lead this investigation we were on, the other
player was startled and did not know how to respond. After the game that player approached me and explained that they were upset with how Nikham had spoken to them, even though they realised that he was playing a character and was attempting to speak to their character, not them. At the beginning of the next session, we had an open discussion of roleplaying preferences in order to make sure everyone felt comfortable during gameplay.

Knowing how others play is a learning process that takes place during the first 1-3 sessions that players come together, and often continues to develop over time as players become closer with one another. “Learning the table” is a way to describe the process of understanding dominant discourses prevalent in that particular gaming setting and can include styles of humour, political alliances, socio-cultural norms and standards, and views on a wide array of topics. Included in this discourse are conventions for metagaming, table talk (talking about things other than the game itself) and the mechanics of gameplay such as dice rolling, tracking character advancement, and when and how players take turns decision making. These vary from group to group and are most commonly dictated by the DM who not only tells the story but monitors rules and player behaviour. Often, new players to a group are given room to make mistakes with the DM and other players politely explaining how things work at ‘this table’. From time-to-time however, discrepancies arise as new players express their knowledge of the game and expertise as a game player. This can lead to disputes between new players and DMs, or other players, most commonly when ‘house rules’ are being used. House rules lead to most of the disagreements that I saw arise during gameplay, usually because a player does not agree with the house rule. To players whose expertise in the game is of great importance to their identity, house rules lead to a

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154 House rules are DM specific rules that supersede rules in the Players Handbook or Dungeon Master’s Guide. House rules are promoted by the rulebooks themselves, and are most often used when the DM has a preference for how a certain aspect of play should go, which is counter to the rules outlined in the book.
conundrum, as their understanding of the rules no longer fully applies. As game players attempt to express their expertise to show their position in the imagined community, being challenged due to the application of a house rule can lead to disputes over the legitimacy of such a rule.

‘Gamer’ – Game Player Identity Discourse

Through my interactions with game players in a multitude of settings I found that quite often experienced players took any chance possible to share their knowledge of the game with others. Expressing expertise in game play was common amongst D&D players and seemed to be tied to the “gamer” identity. The identity of ‘gamer’ is often closely associated with being experienced, knowledgeable, an expert, and in some cases as being a “true” player of the game or the medium itself. The “gamer” identity has been examined at some length in studies of video games as this identity has been the site of great contention in the community. The gamer identity has been at the centre of the #Gamergate phenomenon, where certain groups of game players considering themselves “true” or “real” gamers attempted to argue that the video game medium was occupied largely by men who were more dedicated to the culture.

Expressions of expertise and the “gamer” identity are often found in competitive gaming where players will often poke fun at one another, or will challenge each other while explaining

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how they will win the game played. Often hanging around game stores can lead to observing these interactions, as players will go back and forth debating the effectiveness of certain abilities, strategies, or game elements, sometimes bypassing gameplay altogether. With D&D however, experienced players will talk about past sessions they have been in, “overpowered” characters they have created, or ways they “broke the game” and made their DM struggle to keep up with their in-game abilities. In terms of video gaming, there are certain types of games that seem to be associated with the “gamer” identity such as militaristic, fighting, tactical, or competitive games.

Discussing past gaming experiences or memories of specific games is an important way that players work to identify themselves as people who play games. In Helen Thornnman’s (2011) Ethnographies of the Videogame we see the development of the personal narrative as an important element in the construction of gaming identities which work to “position the speaker as authoritative”. Here Thornman is drawing on the concept of narrative as being an “ontological condition of social life” and that through these narratives gamers can come to prioritize certain elements of gaming culture imbued with dominant socio-cultural and political narratives of the society or culture in question. Thornman then goes on to discuss the ways in which these gaming narratives told by players work to make their experiences public, while also

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156 Players will often discuss how something is overpowered or OP when the character or monster of focus is more powerful than the average character or monster of that level. This often occurs with player characters when someone uses their in-depth knowledge of the rules to create a character the combines certain features or abilities that make the character more powerful than that character would usually be. Throughout my time in the field, it was an almost daily occurrence to have someone describe their most recent ‘character build’ and how they managed to put together different features, abilities, spells, etc. to make something that “breaks the game” (when the game is made much easier, to the point of no longer being any challenge, because of an overpowered character).


situating them temporally in order to construct linear developments of one’s gaming experiences. These narratives work to show the ways the “gamer” is constructed over time through their histories of purchasing, playing, discussing, and performing games. These stories of a history of gaming were common with my participants who would often situate themselves as game players through historical narratives. In what follows we can see different scenarios where participants discussed their gaming histories with me starting with Asnah Anna.

Asnah Anna: Alright, well I remember when I was little walking up to the gas station renting nintendo, original nintendo. And renting snow bros.

Dirk: Oh yeah, I remember that game

Asnah: And obsessively playing it with my father. He would wake up early on Saturday with me, and we'd eat our breakfast while he would curse at the game, I was still too little to curse at the game. And because we only rented it on the weekends it took us like 2 months to beat. So that was like our little ritual. Yeah, so thats one of my favourite memories of games.

Dirk: So did your family play a lot games together when you were a kid?

Asnah: Um, the video game part was kind of a new thing. Because, not very well to do, so like things we would do would be like camping, board games, or playing cards together. So family time was normal, but just not video games.

Dirk: I get that. So what kinds of board games did you play together?

Asnah: The standard ones like monopoly, sorry, snakes and ladders.

Blordom Firewhirl had this to say about his start into RPGs

Blordom Firewhirl: What threw me into RPGs might have been video games. I think I was about 8 when I was given an Xbox for Christmas and it came with Fable. Classic RPG.

Dirk: Oh, I love that game.

Blordom: And you start having “okay it would be nice if I could do other stuff.” So you try other RPGs, JRPGs, and stuff like Final Fantasy and all that stuff. And eventually you get to Dark Alliance 2, happening in the Forgotten Realms. Read a bit more about Forgotten Realms on the Wikis, pretty much everywhere, and you think hey D&D is actually a board game. I could try that board game. And then you see online okay there's this game, so you check the Player's Handbook and all that stuff. Look up the store, make your character, and then walk in. And that's how you get hooked.

Dirk: And that's where it all started?

Blordom: Yep.

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Many participants focused on their parent’s role in their gaming, being the ones to facilitate gaming either through the purchase of games, or through sharing in their gameplay. Drijomvos Zyngodeku included his family in his historical narrative, looking at the ways they impacted his gaming as he explains here.

Drijomvos: I wouldn't consider myself starting more deeper roleplaying, what I would say tabletop, until I was in between second and third year of college. That's when I first started D&D. As with RPG light, which is what I call video games, would be Pokemon when I was really, I mean I'm trying to remember what age, but yeah my parents didn't get it until I was older because they thought it would be too distracting or something. So I didn't get it until I was about 12. I always wanted to since I was like 7 years old to go into that. And I would just imagine myself exploring that world like “this is sweet.” Like I say what separates one from lighter to deeper it's like your own experience of it. One you can just put away. The other one like D&D, it's an experience you have with other people and at the same time you can build that camaraderie.

Dirk: So, gaming was something you were always interested in then?

Drijomvos: As much as I would have liked to as a kid.

Dirk: Were games always something you had access to when you were a child?

Drijomvos: In some way or another yeah to some extent. Pretty much I had, that I had some access to them.

Dirk. And what about your parents? Were they supportive of that? Did they play games themselves?

Drijomvos: It's very, I want to say oxymoronish. It's not, and this is not when I say oxymoron I don't mean hypocritical, it's kind of a support and non-support at same time. My parents are very much like you have to get a good education to get into the world, but also we want to have our kids have some sort of fun in some way. So, I was you know their first born and so they're kind of making up the rules as they go along. Like for my dad with gaming he remembered the Atari first coming out. And he was like that's interesting for the first couple hours but it wasn't until the Sega Genesis when he was able to play the first like hockey games that were all two-dimensional and he was really into that more. Or like when golf came out. Like he remembered when they first put bird sounds in there and how it was so realistic. But that's as far as he's gone into video games or anything like that.

Dirk: What about your mom and she get involved at all

Drijomvos: I don't think she's ever gotten involved with games at all.

Dirk: Did you ever play games with your parents in any way

Drijomvos: With my dad play video games every once in awhile but it was mainly you know hockey games or golf or whatever. I remember actually later you know when games like Who Wants To Be A Millionaire things like that came out we would play those together.

Along with these narratives where players focus on their family and their experiences gaming as children, players will often speak of specific games or locations where they played those games
creating a publicly visible set of experiences tied to places and that work to mark them in some way as game players as seen in this interview with Stuldil Darksword

Stuldil Darksword: So, in grade 2 I had a friend, Matt, who had a brother who was much older, um, he was like 21. His brother played D&D. At the age we didn't play, but he sort of showed me the whole thing. I was really into the fantasy aspect of it, and everything. And the dice, I liked the dice as a kid, and my son does now too. So, actually I remember being, um, we went to the game store and we wanted to buy just the polyhedral dice and stuff, and they were like "there’s this new game out, do you want to try it out?" And we were like "yeah we'll demo it". So, they take it and we played, and It was, you know, a fun game, but we're like "nah, we just wanna buy the dice" and so that game was Magic\textsuperscript{161}, when it first came out. And I'm thinking "If I bought that deck, it would have been worth…"

Dirk: Yeah, oh my god

Stuldil: Yeah, but I'm sure I would have destroyed it or lost it, so at least that was, yeah. But that was Magic. So that was around the time I was starting to get into it. And I liked making my own worlds and stuff like that. Never really played, like I played a couple spin-off, like board games like Dragon Quest. Played that game. But then it wasn’t until high school, grade 9 or 10, it was still second edition, before 3rd edition came out, my friend wanted to play. I'm like “yeah okay, lets play.” And then he set up a campaign, and we started playing that. Then we went into raven loft, they were really fun. I loved it. It was all friends then so we really jived well. Every time it only lasted like 4 or 5 sessions and then we got bored and everything, and started a new one. So there's no sort-of, long campaign, but it was a blast. At the same time I got into things like Warhammer 40K, and started getting more into that. In College he moved to London, So I was in Hamilton at the time. So stopped playing, didn't have the same group of friends. And then I think it was around 2010, um, I started wanting to get back into it, so I started looking for a group in Hamilton, and there was a place called Hammer Games and they were starting a 40k Dark Heresy Role-playing game,

Dirk: Okay, okay.

Stuldil: So, I just joined up. So, a bunch of people I didn’t know, its at one of the guy's houses, and I had a blast. So I played a few of those, played Repent, I think that's what its called. Its basically like a zero-roleplay dungeon crawl, old-school dungeon crawl, but its sort of like Tiamat on steroids.

Dirk: I get ya’

Stuldil: Um, then started doing that. And then with the wife, starting to have kids, slowed down. And then moved to Ottawa here, and my wife and kids were in Mexico for 6 weeks, and I was working nights, and I was just looking for, I was just looking at, I didn't really know anyone here. So I was looking for things to do, and I started looking for uh, I play board games a lot too, so Kessel Run when it was at the other location.

Dirk: Yeah I remember it down there, it was a nice location.

Stuldil: Yeah, so they had, they were like "yeah, there's this group you can go on the Facebook and check." So that was when, I think it was Tom, I don't know if you met Tom, probably not,

Dirk: No I don't think Tom was there when I...

Stuldil: So he was running that, and he was like "there's space for an adventure league" and I was like "okay, whatever I'll do that". And that's when I started here.

\textsuperscript{161} Here Stuldil is referring to one of the most popular tabletop card games of all time \textit{Magic: The Gathering}. 
In these excerpts we can see the way these game players use narratives of their gaming histories to describe their experiences of getting into gaming in somewhat of a linear fashion. With Stuldil we see the description of a history of gaming marked by certain unique moments attached to specific games or places and how those impacted him. This was similar for Blordom and Drijomvos who both looked to the RPGs they played as children as their entrance to this world of gaming. This linear progression is examined by Thornman as a gendered practice of “logical progression” where linearity is tied to causality and one’s personal history is looked at as a progression influenced by one’s life events.  


This construction of oneself as having a history of gaming through these historical narratives situates the individual within the imagined community of game players as legitimate, knowledgeable, and to some extent as though they belong. This presentation of the experienced game player identity is common in gaming groups and circles, but is sometimes challenged by members of those same groups who are themselves experienced, but dislike the posturing that comes along with the presentation of such an identity. Within this culture of gaming then, the presentation of ability marks an important discourse, but one with multiple ways of being read. Members must then read the way others present themselves as gamers in any given gaming setting, seeing if expressions of expertise are welcome or not. Importantly, many of the players I engaged with did not use the term “gamer” to refer to themselves, but would actively use terms such as “game player”, “fan”, “nerd”, “geek”, or “enthusiast” to show their connection to gaming, fantasy, sci-fi, etc., in a deep way.
Fan, Geek, or Game Player—Expressing Shared Interest at Game Nights

The next discourse I look to here is that of performance before and after gaming sessions. This is the discourse of being a fan, game player or geek and how one expresses those identities on a daily basis. Much of the appeal to being a part of a gaming community of practice is that one can express their interest in various aspects of the culture openly with others who share their interests. People can ‘geek out’ on games, pop culture (comics, movies, television shows, books, YouTube channels, or relevant forums) and the ways they express their fandom. This comes out in people sharing their experiences, preferences, and their artistic forms of expression. There is often an exchange between members of these communities where fans/geeks/game players will ask one another whether they have seen/played/heard of/interacted with a specific game/tv show/movie, etc. and will then discuss the thing in question while providing opinions, recommendations, and comparisons to other media. This act can work to create bonds between members of the community as they come to learn of shared interests, but can also work as a form of ‘gatekeeping’ where members test one another’s legitimacy as a member of the community. There is a level of posturing that can occur within this engagement, often seen in discussions of gameplay strategy where players will ask one another “what is your favourite class to play?\(^{163}\)” or “what deck do you play?\(^{164}\)”. Here players will exchange information about their preferences for playing the game, showing their interest, skill, and level of involvement in the game in question. This is not always a posturing exercise and can be difficult to determine, as at some points this is just a way to discuss shared interest in the game. Whether or not a judgement of

\(^{163}\) Referring to the Dungeons & Dragons character classes (Wizard, Ranger, Fighter, etc.)

\(^{164}\) Referring to Magic: The Gathering card decks that are often structured around a specific play mechanic or theme.
ability is being included in this act is often left up to the interpretation of the individuals involved and the often undisclosed intent of the person asking the question.

Along with sharing interests through open discussion of preferences and play styles, many people I interacted with in these communities had different ways of expressing themselves artistically (writing, drawing, crafting, playing music, etc.) and would share these artistic expressions with those they were playing with. Often players would draw characters based on their description (including a woman who would ‘hang-around’ The Forge and offer to draw peoples’ D&D characters) would paint terrain and miniatures, would cosplay as their favourite characters, or would craft items related to game play (as seen in the case where a man showed up to Wednesday night D&D at The Forge with a newly 3D-printed dice box in the shape of a 20-sided die). Feedback was almost entirely positive, with members of the community often getting excited about these various forms of ‘fan art’. How players express their game player identity is informed by this discourse and was stable across the different game stores and gaming groups I participated in.

This discourse of fan expression was heavily affected by online culture, as many of the participants I engaged with spent large amounts of time online either playing games or looking through forums and social media applications. These participants found communities online that were made up of people who shared their interests and would post open topics of discussion, as well as their artistic expressions, for other members of those communities to see and engage with. In a modern gaming world, players are members of online and physical communities simultaneously, having their performances affected by both. The imagined community of fans/geeks/game players spans in-person groups at stores, friendships, online spaces, and various
other settings to create normative ways to perform and these were clearly readable in the game
store communities focused on here.

With these discourses outlined, it becomes important to analyze how people incorporate
their performances in gaming communities into their identities through an understanding of how
they present themselves as someone who plays games. What we must augment this analysis with
however is the role of character identity performance. It is quite important to recognize the effect
that others’ perceptions of our performances have on our identities, therefore making it important
to understand how both other game players, and non-game players, perceive tabletop gameplay
and the performances of the individual both during, and outside of, gameplay. The labels these
‘others’ give us as we perform come to be incorporated into our continual negotiations of
identity, producing a complex set of identities that we navigate on a daily basis. In what follows I
present two examples of gameplay where players are going back and forth between their own
identity as game player and their character identity to show the ways our in-group interactions
during gameplay work to (re)produce identity. I start with an excerpt from The University
Campaign and will follow this up with an excerpt from Hometown Sports Pub.

**Producing Identities During Play**

In this excerpt we see one player, Gigrid, making an attack against an enemy that goes as
well as it possibly can in terms of in-game success. Gigrid is playing a character named Avoril
Lavange who is a “Bard” (a spell-casting class that uses music, rhythm, or poetry to cast spells)
who is an international “pub-step” sensation known for their supportive role in the party. Bard’s
are often supportive players in that their abilities are used to either “buff” (increase ability) or
“nerf” (decrease ability) other PCs, NPCs, or monsters to allow the offensive characters to be
more effective. Gigrid was a skilled role player who “got into” their character during gameplay
and used accents, singing, hand and body movements, and facial expressions to bring the character to life. Along with their supportive role, Gigrid had bad luck when it came to rolling dice in combat and never did much damage to our in-game enemies. In this scenario where a new player, Chandra Nalaar, had joined the game, Gigrid rolled a 20 on their D20 which is considered a “critical success” and allows the player to double the damage they would inflict (a number determined by rolling more dice). This leads to elation amongst the group and to the furthered development of Gigrid’s identity both in and out of character as in this moment Gigrid is shown reinforcing their “bad luck” rolling dice as this is the only time something like this has happened. Along with this, Gigrid is further cemented as a key in-group member as other’s explain Gigrid’s position to Chandra, and celebrate the achievement as one connected group.

Gigrid Casklash: Okay I'll make an attack against which ever one is stunned. (Exasperation)

Chandra Nalaar: Nat 20

Dirk. Nice

Gigrid: You better believe I'm going to fifth level smite! Okay, so

Gerkan Willowcrusher: That's 6 D8

Chandra: Oh my god!

Sin Kakov: Here you go, you deserve this (hands Gigrid extra dice).

Mize Tarrendoom: He never does damage. (Speaking directly to Chandra who was a newcomer)

Chandra: Oh jeeze.

Gigrid: This is... The highest damage I've ever done as Avoril with like an actual physical attack was like a 10.

Chandra: Okay so like how are you getting there?

Gigrid: We'll see.

Chandra: No like, are you shooting an arrow?

Gigrid: I have a whip that I can get close to and then get away from.
Chandra: Oh from like right here (points to spaces on the play mat).

Gigrid: Yeah.

Sin: He has a 10-foot reach.

Gigrid: I have a 10-foot reach so I don’t have too get close.

Sagrir Gratsk: Does Avoril have a pithy one-liner for us?

Gigrid: Well give me one second, I need to figure this out. Wooh! I’m so excited you guys. Okay so 1 D8, for each spell level higher than first to a max of 5 D8. So…

Sin: Oh it shouldn’t be max 5, is it actually max 5 D8?

Gigrid: Yeah.

Sin: Oh okay, so just do 4th level then, cause you get 2 to start.

Gigrid: Okay so I get 5 D8, uh…

Sagrir: Times 2

Gigrid: I need 2 more. I'm so happy, this is the highlight of my life. I was literally hoping I would get this. (rolls dice) Oh Shoot!

Sagrir: That’s a lot, that's like 3 ones.

Gigrid: That's a lot of ones. Ohhhh, oh wait that’s not a 1.

Mize: That’s a D4

Sin: Yeah he also gets 2 D4

Gigrid: Okay so 3, 6, 10, 18, 24, times 2, 48, plus my Dex which is 3, so 51. I've never done this much damage. I’m so pleased. Look at me go.

As we can see in this except, Gigrid is performing their role as Avoril when they dictate their actions such as “Okay I’ll make an attack against which ever one is stunned” or “I have a whip that I can get close to and then get away from”. In these statements Gigrid is speaking of themselves as Avoril using the first-person “I” to dictate their actions. Then Gigrid switches their role from playing a character to meta-game discussion when they openly discuss the mechanics of the game as they say “Okay so 1 D8, for each spell level higher than first to a max of 5 D8”. In this statement Gigrid has stepped out of their
role as Avoril and into that of “individual playing a game” where they can openly discuss the game itself. This happens seamlessly as players will switch in and out of character rapidly as they play, dictating actions, discussing mechanics, speaking in the first person as their character, etc. Finally, Gigrid shows the real world impacts this interaction is having on them when they say “I'm so happy, this is the highlight of my life”. Gigrid did not actually see this in game achievement as “the highlight” of their life, but was making a statement about both their character Avoril, and themselves as a game player where Avoril was doing something extraordinary in the game world that could very well be considered the highlight of that character’s life, while also expressing happiness that they as a player had made a successful attack – especially given the long series of failures in making attacks in the game. Gigrid here is developing their identity as their character Avoril and as “game player” as they celebrate their success in and out of the game, while simultaneously developing their identity as group member as both they, and other players, describe their positions in the group to the newcomer Chandra. These moments of identity development in play happen frequently and when strung together over multiple gameplay sessions work to create an identity impacted by group play, character development, and individual successes or failures.

The second excerpt I include here is from a session at The Hometown Sports Pub weekly game. In this session my character had gotten lost in the previous session but had been brought back by some mysterious forces. The rest of the party had seen me disappear, were worried, and then continued on with their adventure into a haunted house. I had found my way back and entered the house to attempt to rejoin the party who were currently engaged in combat. Once I helped them out in the fight the party seemed unsure of my
return and began to question me on what had happened. Here we see the players roleplaying their characters as they clearly know as players outside of the game world that my character was killed in the previous session and was brought back to life by the DM so that I could continue to play with the group. Since then, another new player had joined and so some in-character story work had to be done to fill in our plot holes.

Drijomvos Zyangodeku: So, may I ask a question? What happened to you?

Dirk: Honestly, I'm, I'm so happy to see you all. I don't know what happened. I was standing in the room, everyone was, you guys were there, all of a sudden things started going grey,

Asnah Nama: (Laughs)

Dirk: And she wasn't there. So things started turning grey like the color was seeping out of the earth or something. And I started to see myself, kind of, pull back from all of you and you guys couldn't see me anymore and I just kept going back, and back, and back away from everyone. I have no idea what happened and luckily I was able to concentrate myself back to where we are now. It was a very horrendous experience.

Fusama Rankrukdafk: And what did this?

Dirk: I don't know what it was

Fusama: Um, I think I'm still unconcious

Konah Sternwolf: Yeah, we're both still unconscious and you're going to have to tell us again.

Dirk: So I'm telling (pointing) you, you, you, and you.

Fejac Mekelda: Yeah, okay.

Dirk : So that's all that happened.

Drijomvos: Okay

Fejac: So that's, um, worth consideration.

Dirk: So, what, did you guy's see anything?

Asnah: You just disappeared.

Fejac: Yeah

Asnah: Your light went out.

Fejac: You were just gone

Dirk: I did not do that. Like it happened to me.
Asnah: Okay, I'm nodding suspiciously.

Fejac: Time to make a buddy system.

Dirk: Please, somebody tie a rope to me

Asnah: (Laughing)

Dirk: I don't ever want that to happen again.

Asnah: We'll tie you to Brad (the donkey)

Fusama: We've all been to other realms, okay. It happens. No judgements.

Dirk: Woah, you're a planeswalker? What?

Fusama: You know, it happens to the best of us.

Asnah: So she showed up by the way, she's looking for her father.

Fusama: I'm Percy

Dirk: Nice to meet you Percy.

Asnah: She's very nice, she's been helping us.

Dirk: So she just showed up in the house?

Fusama: So did you guys like, go to university together?

The players in this situation begin to question my character creating a scenario where they are unsure of my intentions now as they delve further into a haunted house where things are never as they seem. When Asnah says “’Okay’ I’m nodding suspiciously” she shifts from her in game response as her character of “Okay” to then describing her character’s actions “I’m nodding suspiciously” to show that she (as her character) does not trust me fully and is becoming concerned with the scenario. Fejac then quickly follows this up in character by saying “Time to make a buddy system” which makes everyone laugh but works to also support Asnah’s distrust of my character. Finally, my character is introduced to Fusama who was not in the party before my character was killed and then was there when I returned. In order to fill in this plot hole I ask “so she just showed up in the house” as I look for an explanation to be offered. Instead of some elaborate detailed description of how Fusama came to meet a group of adventurers in an old
haunted house, she simply asks “so did you guys like, go to university together?” This pokes fun at the trope of groups of adventurers who have never met coming together in D&D to go on elaborate quests while sidestepping the need for detailed backstory. This allows the party to “laugh it off” and instead just jump back into the game and continue playing.

In this excerpt most players are solely talking through their character role, barring Asnah’s description of her suspicious nodding and Konah stating that her character is unconscious. We then get into our character roles in an attempt to create a gameplay situation that is focused on the story. This works to build our group connections as none of us actually knew each other before we started playing this game. We leaned into our characters to build connections with the other players helping to develop our in-group identities. As my character was initiated into the group in previous sessions but now was returning in a suspicious way I struggled to feel accepted by the group as they were wary of my intentions. Our in-game character identities are not easily separated from our physical world identities as we come to be known by others through these characters. In this given scenario this is exaggerated as we all independently came to this game night not knowing one another, so we were learning who the other players were through our in-game interactions, our discussions about the game while out-of-character, and then as we chatted during our break and after our sessions. Having this in-game identity as a way to connect with others creates a buffer zone where players can open up to a new group of people they have never met before, allowing them to perform in front of strangers with few possible social ramifications.

In the two excerpts above players are shown developing in-character identities that have impacts on them as players. As players roleplay characters in gaming group settings they switch back-and-forth between multiple identities rapidly and use multiple forms of speech to do so –
first-person (in character and out of character speech), third-person (describing the character and their actions), table-talk (completely unrelated to the game at hand), metagaming (speech about the game itself). These forms all move seamlessly into one-another during gameplay with players rarely ever struggling to understand what context a person is speaking in. As these forms of speech around gameplay move so seamlessly and freely so do the identities that are being constructed through our gameplay acts. Players come to build characters that are impacted by their physical-world identities, and that also impact their physical-world identities. Players navigate social settings, group membership, roleplay, friendships, and in-game and out-of-game achievements and failures and come to incorporate these into their understandings and notions of self. When one roleplays a character over time that character identity and act of roleplaying come to have real impacts on their identity as a whole. These impacts are carried with them as they continue on in the physical-world.

Players would often site in-game interactions as shaping the way they have formed thoughts or opinions on a variety of topics showing that these interactions as in-game characters shape the way we interact in both the in-game world and physical world. It was common amongst the participants in this study to talk about past in-game experiences using first-person pronouns, describing events as though they happened to them rather than as a character. This melding of past experiences between in-game character and physical-world person works to build an identity that has been derived from interactions as someone other than the individual’s physical world self. Discussions of past in-character interactions are combined seamlessly with the actions of the individual playing the game to create unified memory focused on sets of experiences between these multiple “roles” the player navigates. As these roles are incorporated over time into their identities we can see that they have long lasting and meaningful impacts. As
people work through identities in and out of games, it is important to examine the ways the gaming culture itself affects and is affected by important identity markers in our society. Here then I will specifically discuss gender, as there has been a tumultuous history of gender expression in the gaming world.

**Gendering Games**

As we look at identity production in TTRPGs, we must also look to the ways that social realities/phenomenon are represented in the gaming world. In this I mean to examine how expressions of masculinity and femininity occur in gaming contexts, how race, class, and gender norms/stereotypes are (re)produced in gaming contexts, and how modern consumerism both affects, and is affected by gaming culture. These questions are ones that many game studies scholars have approached in other gaming contexts (mainly video gaming) and that I consider to be integral to further understanding identity production in these gaming groups. As Fine (1983) showed us in his work on tabletop gaming, at that time the gaming world was a heavily gendered place, with surveys of gamers showing that women made up anywhere from 0.4%-2.3% of the tabletop gaming market. This low level of female participation in tabletop gaming has a variety of possible explanations, but one important factor is that at this time gaming was largely seen as a male/boy thing to do. Gaming was associated with war – as D&D had only recently been developed out of a combination of war games and fantasy storytelling. Gary Gygax, one of the two developers of D&D, was open in the past with his beliefs in biological determinism, stating publicly that “women’s brains are wired differently…the reason they don’t play is that they are not interested in playing.”

With the developers of games being open about their views on...
gaming being a male activity, there certainly was not a generally accepting atmosphere for women to come and play games in. Now, it must be stated that surveys do not reach all of the participants in a given activity, and it is quite likely that more women were playing tabletop RPGs than was recorded, but the point that is also to be taken out of this is that the gaming world was most certainly carrying certain ideas and expectations of who played games based on gender.

In a current gaming context, scholars have come to look at the relationship between gender identity and gaming as being rather problematic. As Shaw shows us, “the industry rarely recognizes members of marginalized groups as gamers” and this therefore leads to a lack of portrayal in popular games. However, it is not just portrayal in games that is enough to include other marginalized groups in the gaming world. Games are marketed towards the male population, with representations of gameplay often including certain groups (white men). As Evans and Janish show in their work from 2015 in response to the controversial #gamergate phenomenon, “gamer gaters operated under a false binary of either one as a true gamer (male, masculine, hetero) or one as a feminist woman trying to be a gamer.”

The gaming market is quite obviously gendered, but it is more than that as well. In many ways, gaming has become a way for groups to assert themselves and their beliefs/ideologies about gender, race, and class norms, creating an “us and them” environment in some cases.

The #gamergate controversy speaks to a movement/conspiracy within the game industry that claimed there was corruption in the gaming industry – specifically in gaming journalism,

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and that feminists were attempting to undermine the gaming industry.\textsuperscript{167} This sprung up after many years of women pushing to have more inclusion in the game industry, especially in the realm of game development. The number of women in the game industry has been steadily increasing for some time, and at the point in time when #gamergate occurred women made up almost 50\% of game players, but only 22\% of people employed in the industry.\textsuperscript{168} Some of these increases in women’s participation have been met by hostility amongst gamers. In 2012 feminist video blogger Anita Sarkeesian proposed a web series on Kickstarter focused on sexism in the video game industry and received death and rape threats in response that continued for years afterwards.\textsuperscript{169} In late 2014 game developer Zoe Quinn came under harassment for supposedly engaging in a sexual relationship with a game reviewer from the popular videogame website Kotaku, with individuals claiming she did so in order to receive positive reviews for her game Depression Quest. Quinn began to experience high levels of harassment from this, leading to actor Adam Baldwin linking two videos attacking Quinn along with the #gamergate tag.\textsuperscript{170} Baldwin’s large following on Twitter ran with this #gamergate tag and subsequently used as an anti-feminist tool of sexism which spawned “web sites, reddit subthreads, additional 4chan and then 8chan threads, and a sustained online movement”.\textsuperscript{171}

The #gamergate movement represents a specific type of online hate campaign that appears amorphous as there is no specific group with representatives pushing the campaign forward. However, the movement is simultaneously located in many spaces across the internet.

with members showing support through their use of the hashtag or their willingness to engage in
debates, hate speech, and harassment against those they take issue with. #Gamergate represented
a difficult moment in the gaming industry, as women, LGBTQ+ folks, people of colour, and
other marginalized groups attempted to assert their right to be considered gamers, and (largely)
white men asserted their self-ascribed ownership over the medium. This assertion of men’s
ownership over gaming spaces is quite familiar to female players as is shown by Bonnie Nardi
(2010) when she discusses the experiences of being a woman in a male dominated sphere. I take
this lengthy quotation from her ethnography of World of Warcraft as it accurately portrays what
these spaces look like regularly.

[T]he social space was maintained as one in which males set the rhetorical tone. Sexualized,
homophobic language was normalized in text and voice chat (although stopping short of
what would probably take place in a men’s locker room). Male players casually mentioned
things like blow jobs and buttsex. They spoke of raping, or being raped by, mobs or players
in battlegrounds and arenas. They used words such as douche bag, pussy, cunt, and pimp.
The term gay was a generically derisive (and liberally invoked) adjective. Males called
players fag, faggot, or homo if displeased or as a joke. Male players sometimes taunted other
males by referring to them as “little girls.” I label this discourse “male” because it was
primarily (though not exclusively) males who engaged it.172

Nardi refers to these spaces as the “boy’s tree house”173 in which women are allowed and often
welcomed, but in which they have no ability to monitor the discourse, rule make, or be
considered a leading member. At the time of #gamergate these began to be challenged openly,
problematic, and importantly, addressed by the game developers and studios responding to
hate speech in their games openly. At this point in time the battle rages on over women’s place in
the gaming world, as game companies are being exposed for sexist practices and producing
environments where men use their positions of power to sexually harass and assault women.

Contestations of gender in the gaming world are more prominent in certain game types (such as online war gaming) but as Winn and Heeter show, gaming is also gendered because society is gendered. What they mean by this is that gaming occurs in our society and is therefore subject to the impact of social phenomenon such as differences in gender, class, and race. What Winn and Heeter are arguing in their work on gendered gaming is that identification with a specific gender, race, or class affects many aspects of one’s life, such as their involvement in leisure activities. Women are therefore less likely to play games, as they on average have less leisure time than men, and their leisure time is of a different type. As women are more likely to have a greater amount of responsibility at home, along with having a career, they are in general less likely to spend whatever leisure time they have gaming. In a study they performed on gendered gaming, Winn and Heeter found that women undergraduates reported spending on average 16 hours more per week on obligatory activities than men did.\textsuperscript{174} This stark difference in leisure time has important effects on how and when people can play games, and so as we look at the gendered nature of the gaming world, it is important to understand the lives of game players outside of gaming activities, as there are important implications to be found there.

Now this perception that women are less likely to be “gamers” because they have less time for games also carries with it problematic perceptions of who can hold the “gamer” identity and what forms of gameplay are seen as legitimate. Winn and Heeter show the disparities in the amount of gameplay hours men and women reported and attempted to explain this through an explanation of time spent on obligatory activities. However, other research on this topic has shown that women spend more time playing games than was previously presumed. In their research on the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) *Everquest 2*

Williams, Yee, and Caplan were given direct access to consumer data by developer Sony Online Entertainment. In this data the authors found that the average game player age was 33 years old, and that “adults and women logged the most hours of gameplay”. The common perception of “gamer” is of the young white male, but in fact these are not the people spending the most time playing online games. Along with this, in a study of female game players in Brazil it was found that 61 million of the 80 million internet users in the country played some form of online game. Of this population 47% were women, and 51% of these women were in the age range of 40-49. It is clear that women are playing games in large numbers, making up nearly half of the game playing population. However, the games they are playing are not always those considered to be part of the “gaming culture”.

As discussed above, the “gamer” identity has been tied closely to certain forms of gameplay – tactical games, war games, first-person shooters, fighting games, etc. However, much of the game market is made up of other games such as life-simulators, puzzle games, and the generically titled “casual game”. Much of what makes up our perceptions of who plays games, what games are valued in gaming culture, and what it is to be a “gamer” is constructed through representations of games and game players in media (including in the games themselves). Cote (2018) undertook an analysis of gender representations in the popular gaming magazine *Nintendo Power* by looking at issues published between 1994-1999 and recording all gendered representations. Cote found that 87% of player representations in the magazine were male, with 33 of the 72 issues having no female representation and 3 of 72 having no male

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175 Williams, Yee, & Caplan (2008): 999.


representation. In this time period gamers were being imagined almost exclusively as male, making it hard for female players to identify with the community. This perception of female game players has continued on but has certainly been waning heavily in recent years. Unfortunately, this waning has been largely due to perceptions of women playing the “real-games” that “gamers” have used to gatekeep in the past, rather than recognizing that other forms of gameplay are also legitimate. Even so, approximately 40% of the video game market is made up of female players and this has resulted in increased recognition in dominant video games.

As the game market becomes increasingly populated by women, some perceptions have remained such as that the “gamer” identity holds more cultural capital for men (especially teenage men) than it does for women. This has been furthered by the work of female “gamers” who play publicly online on streaming sites such as Twitch.tv. Popular female “streamers” have made it easier for women to open up about their gaming as they can positively identify with others in those positions. This is also true for tabletop gaming with popular web-series such as Critical Role where a group of 3 women and 4 men come play D&D on a weekly basis. Critical Role has been impactful on the D&D community with most of my participants watching or listening to it, and many in the community finding the representation to be reassuring. As was discussed above, D&D and tabletop games were not always a space for women, and so as women are increasingly portrayed as being a part of the community it becomes easier for other women to see themselves represented and to also get involved. In regard to this PhD research project, there were a total of 62 participants with 21 being women and 41 being men. These participants were evenly spaced across all of the groups I played in, often with a ratio of 4 men to

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180 Paaben, Morgenroth, Stratemeyer, (2017): 426
2 women per group (except one group which was made up solely of men). There were all female groups that I witnessed playing at a few game stores, but I was unable to join these groups due to scheduling conflicts. These trends followed in the game stores for others not playing games, with approximately 66% of the population being male depending on the game being played (*Magic: The Gathering* had a much smaller female population than D&D).

Continuing on with gendered gaming, Adrienne Shaw examines the role of identity in gaming, and how gamer identities are constructed through video gaming activities. As Shaw shows, individuals may hold multiple identities that arise out of the various social settings that they interact in on a daily basis. As certain identities such as ‘gamer’ come to be associated with certain meanings, peoples’ performances in those activities are altered to accommodate those meanings. As individuals become members of specific groups, this also influences their interactions within certain social settings and with media. We can then see that gender effectively shapes play practices, as gaming is presented as a gendered activity, and people identify as being a member of a specific gender category. As was discussed earlier in terms of identity production and performance, the more individuals perform certain roles in certain settings, the more those roles come to be expected ways to perform. Discourses of gendered gaming are then reproduced as people perform gendered roles in regard to gaming. However, what can also happen is that these discourses can be challenged as people problematize and challenge these expectations by performing different roles, or by taking part in traditionally gendered activities as a member of a different gender category. As was stated earlier, norms and

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identities are not inherently static, and thus are subject to change based on how people perform in society.

With D&D, players are able to perform character identities different from their own, allowing them to express certain elements of themselves or to try out identities different from their own. This was quite common in the groups I joined where players would often start off building a character that shared some traits they considered to be important to them and emphasizing those through roleplay. As players became more comfortable roleplaying they would often create characters that were different from them in order to give themselves a challenge while roleplaying, to emphasize a trait they saw humorous in some way, or to try on an identity they were curious about. Gender switching was very common in these scenarios as most players I engaged with had at one point or another played a character whose gender was different from their own. This afforded people the ability to present an identity they were either interested in or had not experienced and took place for a variety of reasons. Some people would play differently gendered characters from themselves as they liked to challenge norms of gender expression, while others worked to reinforce gender norms through their portrayal of stereotypically masculine or feminine characters. Others still would do so for sexually charged interests where female and male characters would be hypersexualized and played in these ways. In all campaigns I played except one, players at some point tried on different gender roles through the playing of their characters.

As players take on different gender identities, they must navigate the difficult topic of essentializing discourses and this was clear in the games I played with gaming groups. Players were open to critiquing others when they played characters that essentialized a gender (both masculine and feminine) including when players would play hypermasculine or feminine
characters of the gender they identified with. This was welcomed by most players and often ended in jokes about the player in question “reinforcing gender norms” or “not being woke”.

Along with this a few players chose to play gender neutral characters and would challenge players who arbitrarily tried to gender them based on actions they took or because of the player’s physical world identity. Finally, a few players I engaged with used this ability to gender swap to reinforce their gender transition in the physical world. This proved to be powerful for those individuals as they could present a character that held the identity they did in the physical world without the constraints of time that it takes to physically transition. As individuals physically transition there are often regressions caused by mistaken identity or misgendering from others that can cause great pain. Being able to present an in-game identity that is in-line with one’s desired social identity can work to reinforce that identity as players present that way to others in game over extended periods of time.

On one Sunday afternoon I joined in a D&D game with a group of players at a private residence that I had been invited to through a mutual connection with another participant. I arrived early and chatted a bit with the DM and a few of the other players. We all sat down to construct our characters together (commonly referred to as a “session zero”\textsuperscript{182}) and as we began to discuss what characters would be playing the DM made a quick announcement. As this was his “home game” he had a few important house rules that he expected us all to follow. First and foremost, players were not allowed to play a character of a different gender than their own physical world gender. His reasoning for this was “that it confused him when he was trying to roleplay” as he “had troubling picturing people as a different gender than their own real-world

\textsuperscript{182}A Session Zero is a gaming group meeting where the players of a new campaign first come together to discuss their character ideas, create their character sheets, and discuss the logistics of the campaign including when the regular meetings times will occur.
gender”. Two of the players responded that they were hoping to play a character of a different
gender and he asked them politely not to. Our group was made up of five men and two women
and therefore our party in-game would be the same. Shortly upon entering the game world the
DM used in-game NPCs to make some sexual comments towards one of the players such as
“Wow, you have a beautiful body” to which the player responded in character “I’m wearing full
armor, how can you tell?”. After that session scheduling conflicts prevented me from returning,
and from later contact with the female participant I was told that she had also dropped out of the
campaign due to it “not being for her”. Scenarios like these are fortunately not the norm in the
majority of gaming groups I have played in, as gender discrimination and sexual harassment are
becoming less common in the imagined community of gaming.

Conclusion
The tabletop gaming communities of practice in Ottawa examined here provided people
with many ways to navigate their own developments of identity as they interacted with other
players and roleplayed their characters. The development of a character is an involved process
that most players put thought into. Choosing specific identity traits for one’s character is an
intimate process that often sees players imbuing characters with traits they value about
themselves and want to emphasize, or that they are intrigued by and want to explore further.
Players learn to play their characters over time as they act as that character in their play group
and make decisions using what they consider to be that character’s morals, ideologies, abilities,
and emotional responses. Simultaneously players are joining communities of practice as they
play a game in a group setting in public spaces such as game stores and online. These group
interactions also involve identity production practices as players present specific identities to the
other members of the group and read their interactions to navigate the social environment. As
players are roleplaying while they are interacting in these public spaces they are presenting
multiple identities to the other players (their own physical world identities and their in-character identities) and I argue that the simultaneous presentation of these identities impacts the identity construction process over time. Players present both out-of-game and in-game identities as they play TTRPGs and they move rapidly between these identities, often with little to no indication they are switching frames of interaction. This works to have long-lasting impacts on that player’s position in the group, their friendships with individual members, and their future presentations of identities.

The roleplaying of a character does not occur in a vacuum where the individual’s physical world identities have no impact, and therefore as players roleplay they are also inherently presenting parts of themselves to the other players at the table. This intimate and often personal act of roleplaying a character impacts that individual’s perceptions of self over time. The participants in this study were never able to totally compartmentalize their roleplaying identities from their physical world identities as when they play these roles they are still very much themselves, physically (or virtually) co-located in a social setting with other people they have physical-world connections with. The bleed-through of our physical and in-game worlds is inevitable as when people roleplay with others they open themselves up and show elements of themselves and ask others to respond to that. As players engage in group roleplay activities over time they come to incorporate these experiences into their senses of self. The act of encoding memories of gameplay and then recalling those memories as personal experiences works to reinforce these processes of identity production where the characters created by players come to be part of their understandings of self. Group identity and community connections are an important way that tabletop game players are making meaning in their lives and are challenging the loneliness and disconnection of a modern digitized world. Players seek out these forms of
interaction as they are looking to play a game they find interesting with people they can form meaningful relationships with. The fact that these communities of practice are occurring at a time when we have digital technologies that can make it so we never have to leave our homes to spend time with others shows that meaning is being made in these physical interactions that cannot be reproduced online. In the next chapter I will take this discussion up as I look to understand the formation of communities of practice in game settings and why they are so meaningful to those involved.
Chapter 5 - Friendship and Community Involvement

It was a hot and sunny day in early July 2018. I had just finished work at 4pm and had to get a move on as at 6pm I was going to be attending the weekly Adventurer’s League (AL) D&D game. I had now been playing in this group for approximately 6 months, and had spent time talking with the group members before and after sessions, as well as on non-game days. Every Wednesday I would make the 20-30 minute drive out to Orleans (a suburb East of Ottawa) to join the group for 3 to 4 hours of gameplay. I, along with a few others, often arrived early and left late just to hang around and chat. Today however, we had a much different plan. This Wednesday we had been planning for a few weeks to hold a “potluck dinner” where each member would bring different food or drink items to share with the group. A few members had approached the store manager and had proposed the idea of us bringing in food to eat in the store. As long as we cleaned everything up he was fine with this dinner happening here. So it was to be that on this sunny Wednesday evening in the middle of the summer, the 8 of us would transform the game store space into a dining room where we could eat, drink, and talk before we began our weekly game.

I drove out to Orleans and stopped at the grocery store nearest to the game store. I grabbed a few salads and some juice and pop and then drove over to the store. I was about an hour early for our regular planned time, but people were going to show up early this week and so I thought I would arrive early as well to help claim a spot in the store, move some tables, and set up chairs. The store was set up with a store front where board games, cards, and game accessories were sold, with a play area in the back of the store with 6 rows of tables (2 against the south wall, and 4 against the north). The south wall had one set of tables that was used for Warhammer games and so it always had game terrain set up and could not be used for D&D. The
other set of tables on the south wall was usually where our group played. The other side of the store was usually used by another D&D group, and then by players of the weekly *Magic: The Gathering* tournament. The store was therefore quite busy on Wednesdays, with D&D, *Warhammer*, and *Magic: The Gathering* all taking place at the same time.

As I arrived, I went back to our regular spot and a few *Warhammer* players had placed their bags on the table. I asked them if they were going to be using this table, and they said they were not, and that I could absolutely take the table. I set down my grocery store bags, and just as I turned to go grab my other bags from my car, a man came up to me at the table. I had seen him in the store on many other occasions as he was often there just hanging around, or engaging in *Warhammer* or D&D games. I had never talked to him, other than just a passing “hello” as we walked by one another in the store. This time though, he seemed quite serious. “Hey, are you hungry or what?” he said as he pointed to my grocery bags. “Oh, yeah (laughs) we are having a potluck tonight, it’s been approved by the store manager. I just arrived to set up early” I responded to him, thinking this was going to be a friendly interaction. Then he quickly responded “well you’re going to need to move, because I’m using this table.” I was a little taken aback by this, and I responded by saying “I’m sorry, I didn’t see your bags or anything on the table”. At this point he looked at me for a second and responded curtly “Yeah, they are over there (points to a different table) but my group is playing at this table tonight, I was in the store first.” Trying to avoid the confrontation I said “okay, will do” and left the store to grab my other bags. As I came back into the store the man approached me again and stated that I needed to move my stuff because that was his table. I was not sure what I had done to offend him here, so attempting to deescalate the situation I told him that was no problem, and took my bags to a different table.
This situation really surprised me, as I had not had many confrontations in game stores to this point. These confrontations did occur, as anytime groups of people come together they may clash for a variety of reasons – some of the growing pains of building a community. As well, in game stores there are often people who seem to struggle with social interaction in a variety of ways, and this sometimes comes out in the form of misunderstandings, offences, and arguments. In this case however, I really did not know what had prompted such a display of power as the regular in the store attempted to assert his authority and right to the space. However, this would be made clear to me soon enough.

Approximately 10 minutes after this interaction a few members of the AL arrived and were very excited that the potluck day was here. First walked in Blordom Firewhirl, followed shortly by Tath Treetail. Tath had been the first person to suggest that we have a potluck, as he raised rabbits for the purpose of food at his house outside of the city. He would be slaughtering some rabbits soon and wanted to share them with us as a group. Everyone in the group was excited by the possibility of this and agreed to come together to share in the potluck. Blordom had recently harvested some vegetables from his garden (he was an avid gardener) and had put a salad together with these homegrown and freshly picked vegetables.

As they came in and sat down, they asked why I had chosen to sit at this table tonight and not our regular spot. I proceeded to tell the two what had gone on with the other gentleman who had told me to vacate the table I had originally chosen, and as I told them this story Stuldil Darksword, Brovir Ruz, and Tivaumvit Vryavzivzomi came into the store. They all caught me explaining what had happened and as I explained the situation, I noticed Blordom became a bit agitated, and Tath and Tivaumvit nodded their heads seemingly aware that the other man often acted this way. As soon as I finished Tath said “yeah that guy’s an asshole, just ignore
him”. Then they all explained to me how he had previously been a part of this D&D group, but had been asked to leave after some unsavory interactions between Him and Blordom. As well, he was known for attempting to kill other players’ characters in game, and they had all been happy to see him leave. They assured me that I was in the right, and not to worry because I was a member of their group and I need not worry about him.

At this moment, more than anytime in my fieldwork, I truly felt like I was a member of a gaming community. Not only was I accepted into this group of people that I played with on a weekly basis, but I had also started to become a member of the in-store social dynamics. The workers at the store often chatted to me as I came in, other people in the store would say hello and I would watch them play their games for short periods of time while I waiting for something else. I was now a regular, a recognized face in the crowd of people that came to this store on a weekly basis. I had even had an encounter with a member of the community that many people avoided due to similar encounters. As I began to settle into this fact that I was no longer an outsider, we all began to take out our food items, plates, and cutlery to begin our dinner.

Dinnertime lasted for about an hour and a half, and in this time we talked about our game, about other aspects of geek culture (Pokèmon cards, comics, movies, games) and in general just relished in our time together. Everyone was in great spirits with lots of laughing and joking with one-another and talking about the delicious food we were all eating. Tath took a good amount of time to explain how he came to raising rabbits with his son, what the process entails, including details about his house/property and his opinions on being self-sufficient in terms of growing and raising food. By the end of our meal, we had all taken part in this act of social bonding so often discussed in anthropology – the sharing of food. This quite clearly was more than a group of people coming together to play a game, it was a group of people with
shared goals, with the desire to spend time together, and to grow as a group. We were actively building the community in the store by producing an environment of mutual involvement and the sharing of resources. As we all cleaned up together, Blordom announced that he would make this count as a “hero’s feast” in the game, creating this crossing of game world boundaries as our physical world actions affected the in-game world. A hero’s feast gives specific benefits to characters in the game, benefits that seemed to mirror the growth in our group outside of the game.

In this chapter I will show the ways that communities of practice are constructed and maintained around/through tabletop roleplaying games. The death of community life, and its subsequent rebuilding in new and unique forms has been discussed at some length by scholars including Robert Putnam (2000) Zygmunt Bauman (2001) and J.G. Bruhn (2009). Community, as defined here by Bruhn “includes relationships between a group of people, usually in a certain locale, that go beyond casual acknowledgement.”¹⁸³ These groups of people, as explained by Bruhn, often include the members sharing “common goals, values, and perhaps a way of life that reinforce each other”.¹⁸⁴ Community in this sense is quite simple to define, as we see it made up of groups of people coming together and sharing time and space with one another, to the extent that they come to care about and are considered to be a part of each others’ lives. Individuals in a community engage each other in more ways than one, and share details of their lives with one another. They are brought into one another’s lives to the extent that they come to care about each other, and share what many would consider to be “personal” information (information such as

relationship details, financials, religious or political beliefs, family backgrounds and interactions) and through this sharing of personal information become embedded in one another’s lives.

We can look to Bauman, who states this eloquently when he describes the price that comes along with being in a community – freedom.\(^{185}\) When one becomes involved with others in a group to the extent that they are considered a community, they then lose their freedom, read as autonomy, as they become further embedded in each others’ lives. This, Bauman furthers, explains the presence of a friction between security and freedom – in that as one becomes more secure through their involvement in a community (as communities provide security for their members as they may come to rely on each other) then freedom is sacrificed to some extent.\(^{186}\) This is important in showing what community does for its members, but also in showing what a community actually is. Communities are made up of members who care for one another, and that can rely on one another – that create a sense of security in one’s life as they are further embedded. The question then becomes – do communities exist in modern North America, and what do they look like?

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Putnam takes the reader on a voyage through the surge in community life that happened from the post-war period into the 1960s, to its subsequent collapse and finally to an image of what it looks like in 2000. What we see is that there was a surge in community and group involvement up until the 1960s as people had secure jobs and a great deal of leisure time to spend on the building of “social capital”. This however began to drastically decline as job tenure shortened, and part-time,
contract, and consultant jobs became more and more common. As we became less and less involved in community organizations and clubs this did not mean that we spent less time in social interactions, but that those social interactions were more with close friends at home, or in “hanging-out” style interactions, rather than in organized community groups.

Communities then appear to provide a great level of social interaction, that goes beyond the superficial sharing of one’s individual interests and activities. Community is not about coming together to hang-out and tell one-another about individualized activities, but rather is a level of involvement in each others’ lives that goes beyond individualized activity. Community as a term is now often used to describe small group gatherings around a specific individualized activity (i.e. book clubs, knitting groups, running groups, etc.). These groups, although providing sociality, do not lead to environments where people spend time not doing that activity. Without the books, knitting, or physical activity, these groups cease to exist. They are focused on one specific activity that the individual could do by themselves, and often does, while they provide a space for discussion of shared interests. Communities on the contrary, continue to exist without shared activities – they are groupings of people who care about one another despite differences, and often require people to compromise or sacrifice parts of their individualized selves to continue to be a part of community.

In this time, rampant individualization seems to have pushed communities to the outskirts of our societies. However, we see the term community used quite often to describe groupings of people both online and off. Online communities are championed as places where people can find meaning, and find others who share their interests to talk with. However, these online spaces

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exist as specialized groups focused on one topic or phenomenon specifically. They are places where people with individualized interests – interests that are held as identity markers – can come to engage with one another. These are spaces where people can express their expertise on a topic, share their knowledge, or learn from others. Importantly though, without those specific topics, these groups would most-likely cease to exist. As well, one of the key aspects that makes a community is involvement or embeddedness in one another’s lives. These go past mediated identities produced through online interactions. Identities are fluid and are constructed and presented as people move from social space to social space, but often when one spends enough time with a specific group, these identities may be seen as merging in critical ways. This merging of identities is not the revealing of a “true self” but rather the revealing of the different forms of self that an individual has learned to perform. The breaking of character we might say.

In online “communities” this important element is much less likely to occur as individuals can continue to only produce the identity they wish to portray specifically through the ability to edit what image is presented to the group. One can edit their speech which is most commonly in text form, and can present specific images of the self. Now, it is important to say that individuals may choose to present other versions of the self to these online groups, and with the development of video chat applications this has been furthered, as digital hangouts become more popular. But the image one presents is still controlled to some extent. However, in physical world interaction, this is much more difficult to do, and as the time spent with the same community increases, it often becomes more and more difficult.

Online “communities” can provide members with a great deal, but through this chapter I will show that physical world communities do provide forms of human engagement, shared experience, and embeddedness that is not, at this time, available online. There is a reason why
people continue to seek out in person interaction and community building in a time when online interaction is so easily accessible, and this is what I will seek to unwrap in this chapter. In the various gaming groups I was a part of through my research only a few could be defined “communities” in the way I emphasize above. This is important, as it shows that it is not the game specifically that creates the community, but the people and places that they interact in that do. D&D is not inherently a community building phenomenon – although it is a great way to build a group of people who come to be involved with one another. The gaming communities of practice I was a part of existed whether games were being played or not. They lead to interactions that had nothing to do with the playing of a game. They saw me going to just be in the community space, to be a part of each others’ lives. People shared more than just game time with one another, and became embedded in other ways. This has led me to being a part of groups even when my research was done – I was now a member of something even though I was not playing a game at all. Games, D&D specifically, are in this way not a form of community themselves, and I would never argue as such. But rather, they provide people with a reason to leave their homes, to interact with each other, to be a part of something outside of their individualized interests, in a time when people seem to be looking for in-person interaction despite the easiness of online interaction.

Community Building through Games

What is important at the outset of this chapter is to distinguish between a few types of community involvement that appear in the literature, and allow us to think of communities in different ways. This will include an important clarification of my use of “communities of practice” that is used in regards to the building of a community around a special interest but that becomes more than just performing those interests together. The first way we can come to understand community is as it was discussed above – this sense of relationships between people,
usually in one locale, that go beyond the superficial. This is a classic view of community which is largely linked to membership in a grouping of people in a specific place. These individuals come to be a part of something in which interdependence and joint commitment become the key focus. In this way, as Amit and Rapport argue, community is largely about a sense of belonging to some shared space. Importantly though, this sense of belonging does not need to focus on the same relationships and forms of interaction for all in that space. Members of a community may have different points of attachment to the community, with varying levels of attachment to one another. The community though remains interdependent in that members will support each other in times of need, and often have shared goals for the community as a whole.

The question, which I will step aside to answer at this point, is how is a community different from a group of friends. Groups of friends often embody many of the same aspects of community that I have discussed so far – they have deep personal connections, they are involved in each others’ lives, they come together to support each other in times of need. However, groups of friends are distinguishable from communities in a few important ways. Friend groups are, by definition, made up of people who consider themselves to be friends to some extent. They hang out and spend time with one another in each others’ homes, or at shared spaces (bars, parks, activity centres). However, what you do not find in groups of friends are members with a shared sense of belonging that are not directly involved in each others’ lives. Friend groups do not have members who share their spaces, who have collected goals, but who do not become a part of their lives in an in-depth way. In communities however, there may be members who are involved

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in the community, and who know each other, but who only engage with each other when in the shared community spaces.

Friend groups may have a shared space that they come to spend time in together – most often a public space or and individual’s house, but their friendships are maintained outside of those spaces, and in most cases have no inherent connection to those shared spaces. Friendships may form in a shared space, but then can often come to exist outside of those spaces through phone, text, and internet communication, and through time spent in various other locations. This phenomenon occurred quite commonly in the Ottawa gaming groups I was a part of, as people would come to meet at “game nights” (nights where any person in the community could come to play many different types of tabletop games) and then after playing for a few weeks or months with others at these game nights, would become friends with others and often move to playing in other locations (such as private residences). A few participants in this study were specifically known in the Magic: The Gathering community of practice for hosting tournaments at their homes, and would invite members of the game store communities of practice they had become friends with to these events. This of course did not mean that these friend groups were not a part of the community of practice, but instead should show the ways that friend groups exist as separate entities from communities of practice. They may cross over, as within communities of practice close groups of friends often form, which works to make the connection to the community of practice even stronger, but the group of friends is not synonymous with the community of practice.

Returning to communities then, we see that there is this form of community discussed so far, that is made up of people with a level of interdependence, who come to know other members of the community in a more than superficial way. Another form of community that is, I would
argue, much more prominent in our society at this current time, is that of the community of practice. Communities of practice consist of individuals coming together around a certain set of practices which they perform together, in the presence of one another, or that they share their experiences with. Margot Weiss discusses these communities of practice to some great length in her 2011 work on the BDSM community in San Francisco. These communities are constructed by, and maintained by, practitioners of BDSM who practice together and apart, but who share ideas, techniques, and technical information about the practice with one another. These communities are formed as individuals become practitioners and seek out others who do the same. As Macintyre (1984) shows us “to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point”. The relationships which form between practitioners, and across generations of practitioners, are not inherently community building, but as practitioners come together and form larger groups, and as their lives begin to intertwine, friendships begin to form, and they become interdependent in various ways, this brings us the community of practice.

Communities of practice therefore tend to form around practices that take a great deal of an individual’s time and effort, practices that people can grow in, learn, and develop themselves, while sharing knowledge with others. Mizuko Ito’s work has been instrumental in understanding these processes of developing social selves and communities of practice that form around “interest driven practices”. Ito addresses the ways in which "specific media practices are

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191 Macintyre 1984
embedded in existing social structures and cultural categories” and how youth adapt certain new media practices and forms of authorship to these social settings creating new forms of interaction.\textsuperscript{193} Ito stresses that it is important to understand the ways in which media and technology are “embodiments of social and cultural relationships that in turn shape and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression.”\textsuperscript{194} Benjamin Woo discusses these communities of practice forming around “interest driven practices” that we, to some extent, seem to be witnessing a “renaissance of” at this point in time.\textsuperscript{195} Practitioners are brought together quite easily through online forms of communication, and are able to set up meetings and groups through the use of online resources. These groups then form around a specific set of practices, influenced by general interests, and then can flourish as people spend time together performing these activities. My intervention here however, is that much less important to these groups of people is the practice itself. The general interest in say sports, crafting, or fantasy may be more of a social glue that ties people together, as they have more points of shared interest, but whether they are playing a game or not, the desire to meet in person is what I argue drives them. It is the drive to have genuine in-person connection that brings these groups of practitioners together. Without that, these practitioners could simply stay at home, watch online tutorials for information about how to better oneself in the practice, and then do so in private. However, many of these practitioners are coming together to share their experiences with one another.

In an interview with Konah Sternwold she had this to say about why she continues to play D&D in person.

Konah: Well first of all because you're in person, with other people, who like, you can interact with, and I feel like there’s something really great about that. Like that we miss a lot in today's

\textsuperscript{193} Ito, M., (2009): 4-5.
\textsuperscript{194} Ito, M., (2009).
techno society. So it’s really nice to just get in person with people and do something together where you’re cooperating together, learning new things, trying new things. So I enjoy that a lot. And I also like being able to tell a story with the characters. And I think, yeah, the main things are the meeting new people and interactions with people, and also the ability to do whatever you want in that world. And Like I was saying experimenting with new character traits, trying new things, seeing if they work. It’s like in a video game you can’t do everything, the world has an edge. And I mean sure like the dm tries to keep you on track, but you can solve problems in different ways. Like, in let’s say an old Zelda game, you couldn’t like dig a hole and hide in it and then when the monster comes out I’m going to like throw this spear up at him, like you can make different creative solutions to problems. So it’s like a video game without the boundaries.

Dirk: So why would you say TTRPGs are important for this?

Konah: I think it’s important as a way for people to connect, for them to explore their identities in a safe space, it’s a place where you can get together in real life with people. Like, and I think its even more important to make those real world connections with people in a world where everyone is so isolated. And I mean sure you can play online, but its not the same.

Konah, at the end of this comes to a key point I wish to build off, and that is that you can play these games online, and in many cases it would be easier to do so, but it is not the same as getting together in an in-person group and playing together. Konah starts off this point by saying that there is just something really great about being in person with other people and being able to interact with them. It is this physical-world connection with others that keeps communities of practice going. Although many practitioners do use internet resources to learn more about the practices they are engaging in, they then meet in-person to perform. In the Ottawa area there are many different game stores and locations that host weekly game nights of various types, whether they be D&D, MTG, or just generally board game focused, these groups provide members with a place to get together to practice, to take part in their favourite leisure activities, while also meeting others.

Gaming communities may be more accurately described then as communities of practice. These communities of practice are made up of people coming together around tabletop games in order to meet others while performing a fun set of activities. Not only are these then important forms of community, but they are in ways different from other communities of practice in that they involve play. Play, as has been discussed throughout at some length, is a disposition that
allows people the ability to perform in various ways within a “magic circle” where their performances can stay, and physical-world impacts are restricted to some extent. Although I have argued that this magic circle is made of mesh, in that it allows norms, standards, and consequences to flow through it more than a solid wall would, people are able to perform differently than they do outside of the circle under the influence of a great deal of discourses. Play allows people to open up to one another, as their actions have much less impact than they normally would. This makes gaming groups stand apart from many other communities of practice, and more in-line with BDSM communities, as the forms of practice occurring within them are somewhat apart from “regular” social life. In this sense then, we may be able to take this idea of a community of practice, and replace it slightly with Celia Pearce’s “play community” which she describes as “a group whose commitment to playing together transcends any specific game or its rules”. Importantly though, these communities of practice I describe appear to go a bit beyond the “play community” in that they continue even when games are not involved, such as the hanging out that occurs at games stores even when no games are involved at all.

I think it important, now that I have furthered this explanation of community, to look at how game communities of practices are actually formed. I turn now to look at a weekly gaming event in Ottawa, Ont., where I began to meet a great deal of people on a weekly basis who all came together around tabletop games. Every Sunday evening for the last 4 years, game enthusiasts and players have met at the Hometown Sports Grill to play a great variety of board

games and *Dungeons & Dragons*. This restaurant is a sports themed venue, with large televisions and projectors set up to screen live sporting events while serving alcoholic beverages, pizza, and other grill-style food. Two local Ottawa residents approached the restaurant and asked if they could run a weekly game night on Sundays from 6:30 – 11:30 where players could come, play games, and order food and drink. These two game enthusiasts, a father and daughter team, bring their own board games and name tags, and invite members of the community to come in and play board games for a few hours, and to meet others.

On my first visit to the weekly game night at Hometown Sports Grill I arrived about 30 minutes early, in order to set up and get an idea of the space. I met with Nelnu Helbakon as she was setting up for the game night, and she quickly welcomed me into the space. Nelnu offered me a nametag and told me that the D&D groups would be playing in the back of the restaurant in a private room usually reserved for private parties. The room had two large heavy doors that helped to block out the sound of the busy restaurant. As I walked in, I looked upon the long table that took up the majority of the space in this room. There were 2 chairs on each end (but room for 3) and 8 chairs on each side, allowing for a large group to have private dinners, or in this case game nights. I grabbed a seat and a waitress came in offering drinks and food. After ordering a beer, the rest of the players began to come in and grab their usual spots. The room hosted two separate D&D groups that each occupied one half of the table, with the DMs at either end. There were large televisions on the walls, which were at some points used to project maps or images for the campaigns. I introduced myself to Emer Shessad, Zuseim Reimmar, and Gricrern Skulldrifter who welcomed me into the group and were very interested in why I was there.

Emer turned to me only a minute or so after I sat down beside him and started asking questions about my research, what I had learned so far, and how one goes about performing a
study of D&D groups. We chatted for a few minutes, and then Nelnu stood up and called everyone to attention. This week in the group there were multiple new players, and this is where the group appeared to shine. They were very welcoming to the new members that came that week, helping them to feel as though they were a part of the group and to figure out how to play the game. Many new players would join each week who had never played D&D before, and so Nelnu had a binder of pre-made character sheets that she would offer to new players so that they could jump right into a game. Character creation was often a large barrier to entry to D&D and so this helped new players feel welcome as they could join the game with a fully created character. As we began to enter the game world through the descriptions of space and activity by Nelnu, I could see that this was a game world meant to welcome people into the game (proper) itself. Nelnu was a newer DM and held a slow pace in the game. She struggled to answer some of the questions about game mechanics and details that some players had, but other, more experienced members of the group would often field these questions. This meant that the gameplay overall was quite slow, with us getting through only a small amount of material in the session. Importantly however, this game served as a welcoming point for players who had never played D&D before, and wanted to see what this phenomenon was all about.

By the end of the night I had played with the group for approximately 3 hours, and had already felt welcomed in, along with the other new players. This was a different experience from Kessel Run, as although the players there were welcoming people, some of them would begin to get frustrated if the game moved too slowly, or if newer players asked too many questions. At Kessel Run one was, for the most part, expected to show up to the games having prepared themselves in advance. One should show up with a character developed, a general understanding of the rules, and with some basic game tools (dice, pencil and paper, Player’s Handbook, etc.).
This meant that many of the new players struggled to get over the barriers to entry in these spaces, as there was somewhat of a “sink or swim” mentality. This was not completely the case of course, as some members of the group were quite helpful to new players (specifically Tivaumvit and Blordom). However, at Hometown, all the members in this group were aware that this was a space for new players to come and try out the game without any background in D&D. It was this open-door policy that seemed to set Hometown apart from the other locations I went to.

What seems to appear in these instances is the construction of communities with different barriers to entry. One may come into the community, and join in the activity being performed, but whether or not one becomes a member is quite different. As Bauman argues, “community consists of people we trust, can rely on, and that often share interests or desires with us” and therefore it takes time and a general understanding of the norms and forms of interaction in the group to become a member of a community. These modern communities are not specifically about in-group and out-group distinctions however, and instead are sites of belonging. These sites of belonging are places where current members can welcome people in, or not, depending on the relationships that form between old members and newcomers. Whether or not someone embodies the normative forms of interaction that the community values can be the single most determining factor in whether or not that person becomes a member of the community. However, at some points those individuals who may not embody these norms may become members in the community as they are always present in that space – i.e. someone who is aggressive in their forms of interaction, who does not respect generally agreed upon forms of play in the group, or

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who does not respect the norms of monitoring one’s speech for excessive expletives or political incorrectness, but continues to come to the game nights or game store on a regular basis.

At some points there also may be the appearance of individuals in a community that are labeled as “gatekeepers”. Gatekeepers attempt to control information transfer within a group or community, and can work to stop some from joining a group. These gatekeepers are discussed quite prominently in online gaming forums and groups as they often challenge other members on their knowledge of the practice, or ask questions in attempt to “test” the person to see if they are a true in-group member. This gatekeeping has been discussed at some length in regard to the policing of women in gaming and sports communities, as they will be asked to “prove” themselves as real fans to men who assume they are the “real” fans. This was not very common in the gaming groups I was involved with but did appear a few times during D&D games.

Most prominently was a passive debate at an AL session at Kessel Run, where a long-time member of the group I was a part of, Brovir Ruz, tried to test the knowledge of a new member, Karn, asking him questions about the history of the area we were at in-game, and the class features of some classes in the game. In response, Karn, who had 30 years of experience in the game but was quite new here responded quite harshly, turning the questioning onto Brovir. However, this was then taken to an excessive point when Karn began to criticize many of the actions of Brovir. At one point Karn turned to Brovir and stated “its sad that you don’t know how to use a familiar, to you its just a class feature.” The direct calling out of another’s style of play, and of their choices in action, was often frowned upon, and the mood in the group reflected this for the rest of the evening. This type of testing of one-another in a community of practice

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199 Woo, B., (2018): 144
can be common, depending on the community one is in. In many of the *Magic: The Gathering* communities in the Ottawa area, players will test each others’ knowledge of cards asking them detailed questions about deck-mechanics\(^{200}\), older cards or sets, and sometimes even the lore of the game itself. In D&D communities however, this is much less common as D&D is not, for the most part, a competitive game. Players are expected to work together as a team, rather than against one another.

The formal organization of these games makes them susceptible to the phenomenon of mastery. Mastery, or the mastering of a specific practice, is achieved in D&D through extensive reading and understanding of the lore of the game itself, and of the mechanics of current, and past editions of the game. Being able to cite past editions’ rules and compare and contrast them with new editions is a common way that players will show their level of experience, and at some points come to test others. As Margot Weiss shows us, this form of mastery, and policing, of a practice is quite common in new forms of communities of practice.\(^{201}\) What often appears then in these communities of practice is some form of hierarchical participation - where newer, unexperienced players are less acknowledged than long-time members, or members with a level of mastery in the game. It is at this point that we can come to see a clear crossover between the literature focused on leisure involvement and communities of practice, as common forms of engagement in leisure activities involve the mastering of that activity, the expertise someone develops as they engage in the leisure activity over time.

\(^{200}\) How a deck, made up of 60 cards, works as one unit to win the game. Win conditions are a large part of this and entail the sequencing of cards that need to be played to win a match (done through reducing the other players’ life total to 0 from 20, or making them run out of cards in their deck by picking them up into their hand or putting them into a discard pile. Deck mechanics in *Magic the Gather* are of great importance to many players who attempt to make the most aggressive, manipulative, and overwhelming decks by combining cards in new and unique ways.

\(^{201}\) Weiss, M., (2011).
As discussed in chapter 2, leisure activities have become an important mode of self expression in modern North America, as our work lives become much more mundane, scheduled, and less identifying. Specifically in the case of Ottawa, a place with many government workers, the work one does is associated less with one’s identity, and is more of a way to pay bills. However, as the forms of employment are stable and regularly scheduled, this work force has a great deal of leisure time. Communities of practice, I argue, make up an important part of peoples’ lives as they are able to identify themselves with a community, rather than through their well-paying but often menial work. This was often the case for many of the individuals I engaged with through my involvement in these communities of practice, as people rarely ever discussed their work, other than having to be conscious of time as they worked the next day.

Outliers to this most certainly existed, and these were often found in the individuals that did not work in government positions. Tivaumvit would often tell stories of his work as an installer for a telecommunications company. His work brought him into the homes of many different people in the Ottawa area, and he would often regale us with stories of interesting interactions he had with customers over his tenure in that position. Outside of this however, people were largely focused on talking about anything other than work when they were at game nights, or as they were hanging around in the game stores. From time-to-time there would be passing remarks about one’s employment, but overall, people were there to focus on games, fantasy, or other leisure interests they had. Often sharing leisure interests in one sense meant finding other points of connections, occurring as players would discover they watched the same television series, read the same graphic novels, or played the same video games. These points of
connection worked as a social lubricant, making the group interactions more fluid, and leading to a sense of camaraderie.

The mastery of games was an important way that individuals came to express themselves as important members of the community of practice. Being a member of a group was a good start to this involvement in the community of practice, but being known outside of the individual group one was playing in was also of importance to some. Looking to The Forge, which had begun to build a sense of community by the summer of 2018, about 4 months after it had initially opened, the weekly D&D nights were not just a set of groups playing D&D but rather involved people talking across groups. The game night usually began around 6:00 pm, but included people arriving as early as 3:00 pm or 4:00 pm, so that they could socialize with others before gameplay started. Often, players would come to play casual games of MTG, have some coffee or snacks (sold in the store) and just chat with one another. Simultaneously, an important part of this time was used for preparing for the game. Players would be working on their characters by reading the books and asking each other questions about how to develop their characters further. New players would seek out help from more experienced players, taking the downtime before the game started to learn more about the game they were playing.

Members of the community such as Shiop, Rhireid Khonil, and Garith Fireflower were often around in these moments, helping others with their storylines or character developments. Most commonly, Garith, who was a long-time D&D and MTG player would express his knowledge of these games to others through helping them to build MTG decks or work on their characters. Kinkade and Katovich (2009) discuss this phenomenon of regulars who become in-store authorities often called on to answer questions and make informal rulings on games.
occurring in the store. In this sense the regular members become informal authorities in the store who help to maintain adherence to group standards in the shared public space. As these spaces are made up of a public/private dichotomy, where regulars come to consider them their own private spaces, but which are open to any individuals who want to come into them, a set of behavioural norms often forms in the store which is maintained by regular members.

Kinkade and Katovich look at these identities using a set of terminologies to describe different forms of interaction and belonging in a game store environment, with regulars, flashes (short term members who were exploitable or taken advantage of) and fish (new regulars who are seen as worthy of mentorship in the store). These identities however, like many attempts to codify identities, fall flat outside of quantitative methods, as in many cases throughout my fieldwork participants acted quite counter to any of these forms of identification. In-store identities were much more fluid than the “fish” and “flash” identities would prescribe. Members in this study were much more willing to accept any new members, were not hostile or exploitative to newcomers, and were not so quick to take advantage of people due to their lack of knowledge of the medium. In fact, the members of the communities of practice I joined were often looking to include new players as they recognized the positive impact new players had on the game stores where they spent their time.

As players spent more and more time in these stores, their identities as regulars did build though, and there was a greater sense of community connection that came along with this. Garith, who openly discussed his struggles with depression and a sense of belonging to me and

others at the store, expressed that he had begun to really feel as though he was a part of the community at The Forge. He had a place that he could come and hang-out, rather than being at home alone. On top of having a place to be, Garith also was able to show off the knowledge he had accumulated of these games. The expression of mastery in this way was not to gatekeep, but to help others, and in-turn help oneself.

Dhar (2011) has discussed the ways that leisure works as a coping resource for individuals suffering from heightened levels of stress. Leisure activities have been shown to be helpful for those dealing with high-stress levels from one’s work, but also from poverty and its many affects on individuals’ lives. Leisure activities inherently involve an element of choice, as participants choose which leisure activity to engage in, and then choose their level of participation, how they participate, and the connections they build through this engagement. Choice-making is therefore an important part of leisure activity, leading to the development of agency for those involved. This sense of agency is important for those struggling from stress and appeared quite often in the lives of the communities of practice here, as players would develop this agency through their roleplaying but also through their engagements with others in the community. Being able to express oneself in a leisure community of practice, amongst members who share common goals, can work well as a coping resource.

Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi (2013) look to deep leisure involvement as a way for individuals to cope with stigmatization and issues of social belonging through their study of furry fandoms. As they argue, “recreation and leisure participation provides a sense of community

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and social integration” which we can also see above through Garith’s increasing involvement and sense of belonging in the community at The Forge. This construction of an in-group association, the involvement in a community of practice, can help provide individuals with meaning in their daily lives as they have spaces where they may feel needed and involved in others’ lives. For Garith this was true, as before his involvement in the community of practice at The Forge, he had struggled greatly in the building of relationships, and with feelings of self worth. This sometimes became quite apparent in our interactions, as Garith would express feeling shunned and disregarded by people in his life, and this would culminate in expressions of self-hate. However, as he came to spend more time in the store with others around, these were mediated to some extent.

For those involved in leisure activities that at some points have been negatively stigmatized in our society, finding a community of practice that they can become involved in often drives people to become further involved in that activity. Performing in a group of like-minded performers, sharing in a set of experiences or a leisure activity can both work to further those individuals from society, while bringing them closer to one another. These communities of practice therefore provide individuals with a sense of belonging, meaningful interactions and performances, and relationships that may last for long-periods, and that can go beyond the location of the community of practice itself. As close relationships build among community members, as discussed above, they become more and more involved in one another’s lives. This can lead to the connecting of families outside of the communities themselves, and deep emotional connections and support networks. Throughout this research, this culminated in

\[^{208}\text{Mock et al., (2013): 111-112.}\]
\[^{209}\text{Mock et al., (2013): 114-116, 122.}\]
Tivaumvit asking me to join in a new campaign he was writing that would take place at his home. Tivaumvit described a campaign using the *Chronicles of Darkness*\(^{210}\) game rules, which would see us not in a fantasy world, but rather in Ottawa in 2018. Not only did this involve me going to his home to play, away from our usual place (Kessel Run) but also involved bringing my wife, a close friend, and my daughter, who all became close with his wife and children. As our lives grew to include deep connections outside of the game store, we began to see more and more of Tivaumvit and his family. His eldest daughter came to babysit for us a few times, and we went to social events together. These communities of practice go beyond the playing of a game, and come to include the joining of sets of lives into support networks.

**Social Capital**

The creation of mutual networks of support and obligation has been looked at in the literature on community building and social networking through the theory of social capital. Social capital, as explained by Robert D. Putnam (2000) arises from the cumulative social connections we build with those we come to know, and which are founded on norms of mutual trust and obligation.\(^{211}\) This general sense of reciprocity that exists in a society, according to Putnam, works as a social lubricant that allows individuals in a society to interact in smooth ways.\(^{212}\) We can see Putnam then bisect this concept into two forms, often viewed in the literature as opposites – bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital are those relationships of mutual obligation and reciprocity that form within a tight-knit closed group, actively defined as having in and out-group members. In contrast to this is bridging social capital

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\(^{210}\) *Chronicles of Darkness* is a 2004 set of storytelling roleplay rules, originally published by White Wolf, a game company famous for their 1991 game *Vampire the Masquerade*. Each *Chronicles of Darkness* game starts by choosing a monster type (werewolves, vampires, changelings, etc.) or humans, and then playing a roleplaying game as those characters. It is a “gothic horror” game and is often looked upon fondly by fantasy role players.

\(^{211}\) Putnam, R., (2000).

which works across group associations in a society to include all members.\textsuperscript{213} In their work on trust and corruption, Greuff and Svendsen (2013) take this understanding of bonding and bridging capital to stand for the existence of social trust and/or corruption.\textsuperscript{214} Trust is shown to be at the core of bridging social capital, and when existent in a society produces a healthy economy. On the other hand is bonding social capital, which the authors argue arises from closed networks often suspect of corruption and that are harmful to economies.\textsuperscript{215}

The concept of social capital can help us to understand how and why these forms of communities of practice can benefit the members long-term, while also showing us some negative outcomes of these forms of interaction. Social capital has been the subject of theorization for more than Putnam however. We can look to Bourdieu as well for an understanding of how social capital is a social class asset, one that accumulates for members of dominant social groups and works to form exclusive social ties. For Bourdieu, social capital exists within a series of types of capital, including economic, cultural, and social that are “actually usable resources and powers”.\textsuperscript{216} In this sense these forms of capital are accumulated by those in more advantaged positions and groups within society, leaving others explicitly without those forms of capital. Social capital in this sense works to form exclusive networks and reinforce class privileges.\textsuperscript{217} Social capital then may work as a resource where one can mobilize their connections to gain certain benefits allowed through those networks. This, of course, has


also been shown to have a downside, as inequality may also exist within these networks where some experience these connections as a drain on their resources – as excessive claims made on successful members of a community lead to burdens on membership within that group.\textsuperscript{218}

Another important way we can look at the concept of social capital is through its role in small businesses and family-owned firms. Social capital can work as both a form of competitive advantage for businesses, as they utilize community connections to promote their business, to garner support, and to build a network of regular customers loyal to the business.\textsuperscript{219} However, these close community connections and growth of social capital can work as a drain on the resources of the business – “negative social capital”.\textsuperscript{220} Through negative social capital, these relationships can become a liability for the business as members of the community make excessive claims on the business, receive discounts and benefits for being closely tied to the business, but without providing the business with any direct benefit.\textsuperscript{221} Small businesses and family owned firms must be cognizant of these relationships and what they do for the business in order to sustain themselves in an ever-changing market.

Social capital plays some significant roles in the context of communities of practice around tabletop roleplaying games as many of these relationships that form through gaming carry with them networking opportunities for those involved. Simultaneously, the gaming communities of practice in the Ottawa area I became a part of all relied on game stores and other local businesses to play at. These game stores benefitted from having groups of people that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{220} Lester, Maheshwari, and Mclain, (2013): 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{221} Lester, Maheshwari, and Mclain, (2013): 12.
\end{itemize}
regularly came to their store, but also suffered as D&D can be a difficult market to capitalize on after the initial sale of guidebooks and dice. As most of the materials are available online through either illegal means (forums offering .pdf versions of the books for free) and legal means (D&D Beyond and other websites/applications offer digital copies of the books and character sheets for a subscription fee). This meant that for some stores they had many people coming to their business but were not actually selling them anything. In this way that business was in a relationship with its players, where the social capital existent was unilateral at points, where attendees used the store’s resources (space, bathrooms, water, etc.) without giving anything back to the store.

The clearest example of this arose at The Forge where the store would hold weekly D&D nights that would see 20 to 30 people attending to play in the store. The store had some items for sale (dice, books, miniatures, chips, pop, and at some points baked goods) but also had items in store for sale for other independent artists (gaming themed memorabilia) and charity boxes where one could buy a chocolate bar with the proceeds going into a donation box. The store then struggled to actually sell much to the players, failing to capitalize on a prime resource – a large group of players. This worked in the case of The Forge as negative social capital, draining on the business. Social capital is an important way we can understand the depth of the relationships that form through these communities of practice, but must also be understood in the complex ways it exists both positively and negatively in these networks.

**Hanging Around**

One year after the beginning of the University Campaign, we came back together to begin a new “season” of the campaign. Many campaigns will take breaks from play for a few weeks or months in order to give the DM time to prepare new material, when schedules become
too busy, among many other reasons. Often these are then grouped into “seasons” or “chapters” of a campaign, involving a large story arc or set of events. For the University Campaign, we took a break over the summer, as the DM was moving back home to work. Throughout the summer, some of us had come together to play in a different campaign, run by Gerkan Willowcrusher. Gerkan had been the one to introduce us to The Forge, and this led us to start playing there on a weekly basis. Now that the school year had started though, we were back in our original play space, on campus where we had begun.

We met around 5:00 pm on Friday evening, ready for an evening of reuniting with our old friends (both our in-game characters and our physical world selves). As we all arrived, there was a great deal of catching up, asking each other about the upcoming school year, work, summer activities, and so on. Although some of us had spent time together throughout the summer, being back together in this space where we had begun brought with it an exciting feeling – being back with the people we had spent so much enjoyable time with the year before. The session usually started shortly after we met, but this time the first hour or so was spent chatting, joking around, talking about updates to our characters and what our characters had spent their time doing over the summer. To coincide with the break in the campaign, in game our characters had also experienced the passage of time. Before we began, Mize (the DM) had contacted us to ask us what our characters had been doing during their time off. We had each written back stories and so we shared these, while also just generally catching up about our own summer activities.

As we jumped into the game, the sense of excitement around the table was palpable. Mize opened up the session with a recap of what had happened last season. As Mize went
through our previous exploits, individual members would jump in, filling in small details.

Largely this was done for laughs or to rouse other members of the group.

Mize: And then, life continued as normal for a couple of days. You went to the forge\textsuperscript{222}, Davin blew up the kitchen.
Sagrir: Heh, a couple of days.
Gigrid: Merrick danced with Aliah ooooooohhhhhhh
(Collective oooohhhhhhh)
(laughing)
Mize: That did happen
Sagrir: We got cool new armor made, and weapons
Gigrid: Wait, we got new armor?
Sagrir: Well I mean, I got my armor made all pretty and shit
Gigrid: Oh I wish I had nice pretty armor too
Sagrir: We got inked
Gigrid: I also would have gotten inked too

Here the group discusses quickly some events that happened, but much more importantly is the jousting occurring when Gigrid says “Merrick danced with Aliah”. Here, Gigrid is referring to an event when one player’s character had a semi-romantic encounter with an NPC. For some time in the campaign, players had joked about how one player, Sin Kakov, had been awkward during interactions with one of the NPCs. Sin’s character Merrick had helped save her, and their relationship began to develop from there on out. Sin continued to emphasize that they were just friends, but a few members of the group (including myself and Gigrid) had joked about it turning into a romantic relationship. This childish joking about being interested in romantic relationships and turning an obvious friendship into something else continued throughout the campaign, and when brought up would garner a reaction from Sin, such as his face turning red or him stumbling over his words. As we came back to the campaign then, Gigrid was quick to bring this back up,

\textsuperscript{222} This is a literal forge in the game world, not The Forge the game store we had spent so much time at.
in order to play on these past interactions and see if Sin would still respond in the same way – he did.

An important part of the communities of practice I was involved in was this act of hanging around and not actually playing the game. Communities of practice may share a general form of engagement, in this case the playing of TTRPGs, but much of the time spent together involves much more than just that activity. As people come together in these communities and become a part of each others’ lives, the interactions move away from solely the practice that brought them together to involve other forms of community engagement. An important part of this is just generally being in each others’ company. As I have discussed to this point, much of community involvement starts from general shared interests in a leisure activity, practices, political goals, religious beliefs, etc., but comes to include deep involvement in each others’ lives and the sharing of spaces that the community exists within. In this section I will focus on this phenomenon of “hanging around” to look at the ways that members of the community enmesh themselves further in the lives of one another and in the community itself.

As Robert Putnam shows us in *Bowling Alone* (2000) it is not that our social worlds are non-existent, as we are still very much active social beings. However, our forms of sociality are much more focused on close friendships spending time in households and generally just “hanging out” rather than being involved in organized groups or activities. However, even these visits with close friends were shown to have waned over the last 25 years by Putnam and this has continued to be influenced largely by the massive growth in communication technologies. Zhong (2011), provides us with a look at the online communities and game worlds

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223 Putnam 2000 97
224 Putnam 2000 99
that make up a great deal of our social selves in a technologically advanced world which has been made smaller through online connectivity around the globe. Now, these online worlds can, and should, be viewed as social spaces where new forms of human relationships are being constructed.\textsuperscript{225} Woo (2018) argues as well that we are seeing a "renaissance of community-making as digital communications technologies further the deterritorialization of interest-driven practices beyond local peer-groups".\textsuperscript{226} With a growth in new forms of community building which have allowed us to not only create shared spaces online where individuals may find other like-minded people to share in their interests, we also see that these forms of interaction can help to build face-to-face forms of community. In fact, the most common way that the participants in this research found others was through online spaces used for group building.

Once these spaces were found, and these groups were formed, members became more and more comfortable spending time with others in physical spaces. Digital communications platforms such as Facebook, Discord, Whatsapp, and in general telecommunication text services (texting) all allowed these members to stay in touch with one-another throughout the week, between physical hangouts. In this time, I became a member of many ongoing chat groups, where members would discuss gameplay, share memes\textsuperscript{227} and jokes about D&D or other games and general “geek” culture, and would discuss logistics of meetups. Mizuko Ito et al., (2009) help to inform the ways we can look at media and technology and its affects on social and cultural relationships, arguing that they are “embodiments of social and cultural relationships that inform, shape, and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression”.\textsuperscript{228}

\textsuperscript{226} Woo, B., (2018): 60.
\textsuperscript{227} A Meme is a user generated textual joke or comment digitally added to an image.
fact, for Ito the norms, standards, and forms of technological communication that exist in any given society and culture are products of the social, political, cultural, and historic realities of said place.\(^{229}\) The way our online interactions are structured, and the forms of interaction that exist there are informed by, and in turn also come to inform, the societies and culture from which they are existent in. This argument works against claims of universal technological forms, as we must come to understand these technologies as being embedded in the society and culture, rather than separate or apart from.\(^{230}\)

Communication technologies are being used to structure friendships and hangouts in new ways, further connecting the lives of those group members that choose to stay in some form of continuous communication through the use of media technologies. As Ito et al. show us, we see new negotiations of “networked publics” which youth have been using and through which they are developing new social norms and literacies.\(^{231}\) As these forms of communication and “networked publics” are at this point no longer a new phenomenon, but have been occurring for over two decades, these gaming communities of practice that I became involved in actively employed these digital spaces. These spaces were quite normative in these groups. As members would join in-person, they would be asked for their usernames for the platform the group used to stay in-touch and would be welcomed into these spaces. It appears as if to be welcomed into a group one must be willing to engage both online and off. Groups are being structured through these in-person, and online, forms of communication and engagement making the social lives

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\(^{231}\) Ito et al., (2009): 12.
which once occurred in person and though telephone calls now an almost continuous form of engagement where one is always accessible to their social groups.

The welcoming into these digital communication spaces served as a way for a group to show, symbolically, the welcoming in of a new member to the group. As many of the groups I engaged with included the ability for individuals to drop in and play, once one had been to a few sessions and began to familiarize themselves with those in the group already, they were then invited to join these digital spaces. Often members would joke about becoming a ‘real’ member when they were invited to the Facebook chat group, and would express how they felt “on the spot” to add something funny or productive to the group. For the Kessel Run group who opened this chapter, this was apparent when Karn had shown up to 2 sessions and was invited into the Facebook chat group for the campaign and subsequently became Facebook friends with many of the members of the group. Not long after this Karn and I became Facebook friends, and he used this to recruit me and other players to join another campaign he was running. The connections were spreading much as they would in person, but through the use of digital communications technologies.

The play groups I was a part of would be active throughout the week, meaning that members were actively involved with one another outside of gameplay on a regular basis. This, I argue, makes up a form of friendship building and “hanging out” different from physical hanging out, but which involves chatting with one another while watching television, playing video games, making dinner, sitting in class or at work, or traveling on public transportation. Ito (2005) refers to this phenomenon as “the incorporation of technology mediated social orders” which see the building of social orders through both “physically co-located and electronically mediated
information systems”. For the participants in this research, this meant that when people came together in person they had a lot to talk about, because they had already been sharing details of their lives with one-another. People knew what each others’ points of interest were outside of the shared activity they were involved in, and therefore could use those to further build in-group connections.

Online chat spaces are not a new form of communication at this point, with chat rooms having been around for decades. Many of my participants grew up with the internet as an already readily available and easily accessible space in their lives. This meant that online communication was in some ways “second nature” to them, being a normative way that they interacted with friends, family, and often workplaces. This contributed to the sense of hanging out online that could occur quite often through these online communication technologies. Hutchby (2001) explains virtual communication as occurring within these online communities, which can be described as such due to the existence of behavioural norms of practice and specific in-group linguistic norms. Along with this, members of online communities come to build understandings of communicative sequencing, much as we do in verbal forms of communication. Online chat groups and forums have developed their own norms of interaction over time, heavily influenced by a combination of social norms and technological capabilities. These were seen in the chat groups of the gaming groups here, as they seemed to inherently understand sequencing and chat group norms – quite clearly something many of these members were well adept at.

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232 Ito, Okabe, Matsuda, (2005): 259
Here I include a brief section of the chat group for the University Campaign, to show the ways that these groups have a continuous flow of conversation quite similar to how a group of friends would engage in physical spaces. Here the group, which had set its title as “The Drunken Octopodes”235 was simultaneously discussing the busyness of the campus, the possibility of hanging out, leveling up, and whether or not the DM would kill us in the upcoming session.

Gerkan Willowcrusher: Warning the tunnels are infested with kids
Gigrid Casklash: I legit love kids
Gigrid: But there are too mang
Gigrid: Many
Sagrir Gratsk: Tunnels annoyed me today
Sagrir: Too much election stuff
Mize Tarrendoom: I’m not leaving my room
Sagrir: D&D in Mize's room I guess
Mize: Nope
(50 minutes later)
Mize: It’s your friendly neighbour hood DM reminding you that you are now level 8 and to figure out your shit accordingly!
Gerkan: Daven has figured out his shit and can cast his bizzars creatures now
Mize: What does that mean?
Sagrir: Literally just picked my new spell today 😘
Gerkan: The second level spell he made months ago
Mize: Oooooooo
Mize: Also if you could keep the google doc updated I’ll need it for tonights sessions
Gerkan: Well I shall be waiting in Southam if anyone’s not busy
Sagrir: But Southam is ick :p

235 During one session, the Rogue in our group (Rogues are known for being sneaky, untrustworthy, and are often thieves) played by Sagrir, had gone into a bar with my character and once drunk had convinced my character to change his lawful ways to become a morally questionable figure along with him. As we had this conversation we looked around the bar we were sitting in and saw a picture on the wall of seascape with an octopus. Drunkenly, my character went and stole the painting, and put it into our bag of holding. This led to a series of events which saw the painting hung in our house. Adding to this, was an ongoing discussion of the plural form of “octopus” and how to pronounce the word “octopodes”. Eventually, the name of the Facebook chat group was set to “Drunken Octopodes” to represent these interactions.
Gerkan: I meant Paterson
Gerkan: Shhhhh
Sagrir: Lmao
Sagrir: I could be there in an hour or so
Dirk: 2 things, what time are we meeting? And I’m levelling up now so I will put it in the google doc shortly.
Mize: 5 and lovely
Dirk: Lovely and lovely.
Sagrir: Dirk is lovely
Gerkan: Am in room 113
Gerkan: 112
Mize: It’s been two weeks since I’ve dm’ed and I’m feeling sadistic. Hope y’all are ready! 😊
Sagrir: Fuck
Sin Kakov: Yay
Sagrir: We shouldn't let her get like this
Mize:

I LOVE THIS MEME.

Figure 7: Meme From Group Chat
Here the group can be seen to jump back and forth between different topics, discussing logistics of hanging out and the game in general. As well, as members are engaging in real time on the groups, often they will type an utterance which is a mistake, to which others will refer to before the person can correct themselves. This is seen when Gerkan states “Well I shall be waiting in Southam if anyone’s not busy” to which Sagrir replies “But Southam is ick :p”. Gerkan quickly replies back “I meant Paterson” followed by a “shhhh” on the next line, commenting simultaneously on Sagrir’s quick response and his critique of the meeting spot. Chat groups augment the in-person experience, allowing players to engage outside of in-person meeting times, and require those in the group to understand these online forms of communication. Much like a group of friends spending unstructured time together, the chat groups were spaces where the building of in-group bonds occurred on a regular basis, and were much more than just spaces where people could plan for the next meet.

Although these in-group interactions through social networking platforms meant that the groups could maintain contact with each other when they were not playing, these technologies in no way made up for the face-to-face interaction which occurred when the groups would come together to play the game. Building relationships online has been found to build “online social capital” as shown by Zhong (2011) but was also found to not transfer into the physical world.²³⁶ I argue then that social capital building involves these forms of physical face-to-face hanging out found in game stores and other communities of practice. Having online connections and chat groups allowed these forms of connectedness to grow, and could bring members of a community closer by increasing the amount of time they spent interacting with one another, but this did not substitute for face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face gameplay and hanging out create the sense of

being with others that has yet to be replicated in online hangout spaces. Video chatting and hangouts have become more and more popular, and at the time of this writing the global Covid-19 pandemic has meant that many friend groups are only interacting through digital technologies. But the drive to be in-person and the sense of connectedness and belonging that come from it are different from that achieved in online modes.

Online chat groups that form around in-person groups and communities do work to augment the experience of in-person meetings in some important and interesting ways. As Ito (2005) shows us, we may come to describe our social lives as “techno-social” lives, in that our technologies come to augment our social engagements in a variety of ways. Communications technologies work to help us plan when we will meet, discuss ongoing meeting details (if one is late, where to meet, etc.), what we do while we are together (keeping in touch with others who are not present, sharing images and other media from our devices) and then keep us in-touch with those people after the co-located physical meeting has concluded.237 These forms of communication and social interaction have been continually developed as the technology available to us has developed. Now smart phone technology has become such an integrated part of our lives, our social interactions are structured around, through, and by these devices.

This works in tabletop gaming groups as many players use their smart phones, tablets, or laptops as devices to play the game with. The pencil and paper style of gameplay still exists for some, but in most of the groups I interacted with at least 50% of the players at the table would have a device that they used to play on. Along with this, all but one DM I played with over the 2 years I spent interacting with players in the field used a laptop or tablet as their main DMing

support device. Most used a laptop, as they could keep track of their plans, maps, character
details, and reference guides all in one place, rather than flipping back and forth between
notebooks and guidebooks. Blordom Firewhirl was the only DM in this time that I engaged with
who worked solely off pencil and paper, and by the end of my time with the group, he had
moved to his laptop. However, a few times he ran into technological issues and would have to
ask to borrow someone’s device, or just improvise. This also happened to Gerkan quite often,
who used his laptop to DM. His laptop would often run out of battery power, and he would have
to scramble to plug it in. On a few occasions when he had forgotten his charging cable, this led
to him having to use his smart phone to access a cloud server and then DM the rest of the session
using this device. Many players who had been playing the game for a long-time continued to use
pencil and paper, with printed out character sheets, but this was also not always the case as more
and more players moved to use applications that tracked character details. In some cases, players
would even use digital dice-rolling applications, making it so that they could come to the
sessions with only their phone, laptop, or tablet in hand.

Along with the techno-social effects occurring during in-person meetings, which included
showing others images of their characters, settings they imagined, songs that worked for a
particular setting, or memes/jokes that seemed to fit a specific in-game event, players were also
using digital communications technology to augment their gameplay experience outside of in-
person meetings. In a discussion with Geethik Marri, they explained that their group used
Discord chat at first to keep in touch with each other throughout the week. Following this, people
began to use this chat group during their sessions to discuss things with each other while others
were roleplaying verbally. There were multiple open lines of communication that would occur
then, as people would be sending the DM and other players messages digitally, while also
engaging verbally at the gaming table. For Geethik and his group, roleplaying was a very important part of gameplay, and as players left the in-person sessions, they would continue to engage in their chat group. This then turned to members roleplaying their in-game characters in the chat group. Geethik then explained that the group opened another channel within their Discord group just for players to roleplay their characters outside of in-person regularly scheduled games.

Technology in this way was used to augment the in-game interactions, as they came to take place simultaneously online and in-person, and then online when in-person games were not occurring. The moving of social life into these online spaces helps to form closer connections between these groups whose lives in many ways are separate from one another. As technologies change the ways community interactions exist in our daily lives, these online forms of communication serve the purpose of keeping us engaged with the other members of a community of practice, much in the ways a clubhouse or centralized meeting space would have done. However, members now are much closer to these forms of engagement as being physically co-located is not as necessary. Now, digital co-location allows members to engage at any time. However, this also means that some conversations that could occur in person over a short period of time may take place over hours or days, as members send a message, wait for a response when the others are available, and then respond again when they are available. Interestingly, as in-person meeting times would draw nearer each week, participation in these online spaces grew, and then after the meeting people would often be the most engaged in the group as they discussed what had happened during the sessions. Over the week engagement would wane, until the next in-person session got closer again. This can be seen to support Ito’s analysis of the techno-social lives of teens in Japan, as she found that peoples’ involvement through cellphones
would be used to prepare for the meeting, during the meeting, and then for a finite amount of time after the meeting.\textsuperscript{238}

Technologies help to support our in-person meetings in a variety of ways, before, during, and after the meeting. What we must also then look to are the ways that digital communication technologies are being used to substitute for in-person meetings. This was most obviously seen in the summer when Gerkan took over our University campaign as Mize went home for the summer. Come summertime, often people in these gaming groups would have more engagements throughout the week, including going on vacations. This occurred specifically as one member, Chandra Nalaar, would often accompany her family to their cottage outside of the city. In these cases, Chandra would use video chat software to still play in the weekly game as one person would set up a laptop at the table, as a digital representation of Chandra in that space. This worked reasonably well, but did not come without misheard statements and connection problems. A few members of the group would do this throughout the summer, and helped to maintain group cohesion as players could always be involved even if they were not able to be physically present.

The usage of digital forms of communication works well to help further develop group cohesion, and readily accessible technologies such as smart phones, tablets, and computers worked to augment social gatherings before, during, and after their scheduled times. The participants of this study showed on a daily basis how much these technologies worked to maintain connections, deepen relationships, and augment engagements, but what is clear is that they did not work as a complete substitute for in-person interaction. All these groups maintained

\textsuperscript{238} Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, (2005).
a weekly meeting, no matter how much time they spent engaging online with one another—and often time online together translated to closer connections when people were in person. This however was soon to change, as a global pandemic (COVID-19) came to impact the lives of everyone in our society. With government mandated social distancing and laws dictating how many people could gather in a group, people were forced to replace their in-person meetings with virtual hangouts using video, text, and voice chat services.

A few weeks into the self-isolation of COVID-19 some of the gaming groups I was still a part of began to discuss the possibility of playing online. Some websites offer online maps and entire systems for playing roleplaying games online, such as the popular ROLL20.net website. One gaming group decided to try out playing through the ROLL20.net system, and so we all logged on one Monday evening and started out. Immediately, the technical issues overwhelmed us all, as trying to get 6 people together on an unstable video chat application built into ROLL20.net failed miserably. We could not hear each other, then we could not see each other, and then the audio and video were so out of sync that we ditched the video chatting element and just used the map. This led us to use another popular video chatting application, Zoom, to hold video conferences. After an hour of trying to all get online together in a way that we could play the game and video chat, we were finally ready to game together. The game lasted about 2 hours, and brought with it a whole new set of problems such as who could talk when (bringing the concept of sequencing back into the fray) and how to follow a narrative and roleplay with others when you were not co-located in person.

A few weeks into my new virtual gaming experiences another group welcomed me into their session to watch them play that week. This group was made up mostly of members of the University Campaign, and as I had not seen them in some time we were able to briefly catch up.
The campaign was now being led by Geethik, with a new member, Blade, also joining in. Within the first 20 minutes of gameplay there were many instances of “Lag” as the players described it, where they would speak and then others would not hear it immediately, and then when they began to respond the original speaker would have continued speaking leading to people talking over each other, and then both stopping as people did not know who’s turn it was to speak. This is shown here in a theoretical transcript:

Player 1 (PC): Okay, I would like to try and jump over this gap.
Player 2 (DM): (long pause) Sounds good, go ahead an….
Player 1 (PC): But I’m just trying to jump in a careful way to make sur…..
Player 2 (DM): Okay yeah go ahead, what were you sa….
Player 1 (PC): Oh shoot sorry, you go ahead
Player 2 (DM): (Long pause)
Player 1 (PC): (Long pause)
Player 2 (DM): Okay go ahead and make an athletics check.

For the players in the scenario, navigating lag becomes a whole new element to gameplay, as they must now try to navigate speaking order in a game where players and the DM will often speak at once, will cut each other off, or will make comments as others are role playing. Here though, speaking while others are speaking makes it difficult to understand what anyone is saying, and with an element of lag added often confuses players as to who should be talking. In these cases, players often deferred to the DM (in a position of authority over the game) to determine who should be speaking. Often the DM would be the one to direct who should speak.

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239 Lag or Lagging is a term used to describe the slow loading of internet connections. This term is used frequently in online video gaming to describe when a person’s gameplay, frame rates, and input command response time is slowed due to poor internet connection, over worked servers, or technical problems (such as the overworking of one’s computer’s processing power).
next. However, if the lag was really quite bad, or other factors such as background noise were persistent, players would all mute their microphones and then unmute themselves as a symbol stating “I wish to talk now”. Simultaneously players and the DM would use direct text-based messages to convey what they wanted or to comment on other events so as to not add extra confusion to the video chat experience.

Role playing through video chat is in no way a new development, as many of the participants here have shown. Participants would often reference games they played over Skype or other video chat applications with friends who had all moved away. For many, the gaming groups they formed in high-school or post-secondary education were able to stay active through video chat software. In one case, one participant explained that their gaming group played online over video chat, but once or twice a year they would all travel to a shared location so that they could all play together. This desire to still see each other in person continued even though they lived far away. The game they shared served as a device to bring the group together and to stay in touch with old friends. For many, games work as a social glue that ties members of a group or community together. Much in the ways that members of motorcycle clubs, bowling leagues, or yacht clubs join together around shared interests and then build relationships that continue to bring them back to the group, TTRPGs serve as a connective tissue that binds members together. The gameplay itself is important – people show up because they enjoy playing tabletop games rather than bowling – but if social connections, group cohesiveness, and a sense of community did not form then these groups would dissipate. I think this can be shown the most clearly as we look back to Hometown Sports Grill.

At Hometown, as described earlier, there were two styles of play occurring simultaneously during the weekly get-togethers. Some people were coming to play standard
board games, while others were there to play tabletop role playing games. The players that came on a weekly basis were those that played role playing games, and there is a simple explanation as to why – they were tied into a storyline, a campaign that continued week to week. For board gamers however, they could come to play a board game, and 30-90 minutes later (on average) that game was complete. This did not mean that board game players did not return weekly, but the crowd for board games was more fluid than the role playing groups. Role playing, with its various elements, ties people together. It immerses them in a world, allows them to build new identities as part of a group, opens people up to acting as characters in a story in front of others, while providing them with social connections that lead to ongoing communities of practice, the development of social capital, and most importantly I would argue, a sense of belonging with others. Unlike many other communities of practice, members of these tabletop role playing gaming communities are actively producing a story together, switching between multiple identities together, and rely on each other for the progression of the game. Because of this co-production element, members have a greater stake in the community overall and are therefore tied together through mutual obligation. Although communities may not look the same as they have in the past, these gaming communities of practice show the ways that individuals are coming together to form deep connections to one another, to build social capital and bonds of mutual obligation, and to feel as though they are a part of something important in their lives which provides them with meaning.
Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Throughout this ethnographic study of TTRPG communities of practice I have attempted to accurately portray a diverse set of people that create meaning in their lives through their shared involvement in these gaming endeavours. The lives of these participants have been presented through these ethnographic excerpts to show the ways in which identities are being constructed and relationships are forming through the shared act of storytelling and gameplay. My involvement in these communities of practice brought with it the formation of life-long friendships that have changed my life and the lives of those I engaged with. Most importantly I have attempted to accurately portray how important these communities of practice are to the participants who spent so much of their leisure time with me over the course of this research. These spaces in which game players interact often become homes away from home. They are spaces they belong in, and where they can be meaningful members who contribute to others’ lives on a regular basis. In this conclusion I will reapproach some of the key themes discussed throughout this dissertation while bringing them together in an attempt to finalize the argument I have made from the outset.

Beginning off this work I set out to tackle a few questions regarding the lives of TTRPG players and the communities of practice they inhabit in the Ottawa, Ont area. At first I set out to understand these games in and of themselves in order to detail the ways in which they impact theories of identity production, communities of practice, leisure and pleasure, and sociality. To clarify this, I argued that communities of practice as a concept outlined by Penelope Eckert (1989) can help us to understand the ways that tabletop game players come to make meaning in their lives, while also shaping the forms of interaction they engage in as they hang out and play games. Therefore I came to show that TTRPG communities of practice have a set of discourses
that are influenced by the communities of practice themselves, and the greater imagined community of games and fandom surrounding “nerd” cultures. I then tackled discussions of gender in gaming - focusing on #gamergate and the contestations over access and representation that have become quite prominent in the last 10 years. Along with these engagements it was important to understand the specifics of gameplay practices (including the rolling of dice, when to role play, metagaming, etc.) so that I could point to the ways that these groups had specific techniques that were shared across groups and came to impact the discourses in these gaming communities of practice.

Discourses influence the ways in which people perform and the identities they express in a given sphere, and are constantly being negotiated through these performances. This is an interesting phenomenon to look to in TTRPG communities of practice as we can see people actively presenting themselves in these spaces, while also constructing characters they play in the game worlds themselves. Two identities are therefore being negotiated at the same time, at varying levels of engagement. Players present themselves as community members, game players, newcomers or experts, etc., while also playing a character they have created that represents their preferences in regards to character identities - which often tells a great deal about themselves. As I have shown, players create characters that are meaningful to them for many reasons including representations of identities they desire, they believe themselves to have, or that they are interested in. Looking at why people choose a certain character to play can show us a great deal about the culture and society these players are engaging in, and the discourses at work in these gaming communities of practice.

I then argued that although most game players “hanging out” in game stores, community centres, libraries, restaurants, and their basements (or other areas of their homes) seem to be
focused on the act of playing a game, they are also engaging in a community of practice. The act of being a member of this community of practice was, I argue, much more important to my participants than the actual gameplay was. Although I engaged with players who were largely joining a group for the game, these individuals made up a very small portion of the participants. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed their desires to meet people and be a part of a community. It was quite common for these players to play games on their own at home either through solo play or online play. It was important for these groups that they were playing in person with others. This was obvious through people's practices of arriving early, staying late, and spending time together outside of scheduled game time. Even on days when no games were scheduled, you could still go to any of the stores in this study and find people “hanging out”. This also was made apparent by the special events presented throughout this work where people would plan dinners and events together that worked to further community involvement.

I argued throughout that communities of practice carry with them complex forms of social interaction, norms, and conceptualizations of identity and personhood that shape their interactions, social identities, and relationships outside of the game itself. This means that just like many other areas of our social worlds people struggle with expressions of gender, race, and class. They struggle with belonging to a group and making meaningful relationships. They struggle with their identities and how to express them. This was shown through the lengthy participant conversations that included expressions of how and why peoples’ identities were being influenced/affected by involvement in the communities of practice. TTRPG communities of practice are first and foremost about sociality and the ways in which people seek to maintain in-person connections at a time in which it is easier than ever to interact online. I attempted then to show the ways in which these communities of practice are different from online communities
in their ability to affect peoples’ lives outside of the specific spheres of interaction in question. In person communities of practice bring with them exchanges of social capital and personal connections that can travel outside of the practice itself to affect other areas of those participants’ lives. This study showed this in the ways that people came to affect each other's lives outside of the game spaces themselves. This of course does not mean online communities do not affect peoples’ lives (as it is obvious that they do) but that often these communities have a level of anonymity that go along with them, and/or stay within the online communities themselves.

In this work I also took on an in-depth discussion of play and games in order to theorize about the ways in which TTRPG communities of practice allow us to see culture being performed through an analysis of play and of the rules/structures of the game. I differentiated between games and play to show that people are not always playing when they engage with a game. Often games involve certain forms of labour that these participants engage in willingly and that they often take a degree of pleasure from. Play itself was described as a disposition that people switch into and out of throughout a gaming session showing the frame switching inherent in TTRPG practices. Game players are therefore navigating these complex spheres of interaction where they put on other identities, navigate social interactions, and build complex narratives and game worlds they come to make meaning in and through. This was important for the overall understanding of TTRPG communities of practice as it helps us to see the myriad ways that game players engage with these games including their levels of involvement that fluctuate rapidly. Players would spend their free time outside of game play working on their characters, writing stories, painting miniatures, and overall developing their practice in order to then share these with the other players. The game itself then affects other parts of the peoples’ lives and includes their involvement in these game worlds outside of the magic circle itself.
It was important to understand throughout this dissertation that games take on many forms and that they involve elements including play, pleasure, labour, and social interaction that show the ways practitioners in communities of practice develop and share their practices with others across space and time. Importantly in these TTRPG communities of practice role playing a character occupied a special space in that it often resembled acting related practices such as improv. Players had many different ways to role play their characters and would often discuss these practices and negotiate the level of role playing each group engaged in. One of the important elements I attempted to present here was that role playing could show us a great deal about group cohesion, comfort level, and the connections that had formed throughout play. I presented 6 factors that influenced role play in order to show how this phenomenon is developed/negotiated over time. These included (1) the level of experience of the player, (2) the level of attachment the player has to the character, (3) the points of connection between player and character (such as similar behavioural traits or moral alignments) (4) the level of comfort the players have with one another, and specifically the level of comfort the player has with the rest of the group, (5) the level of investment the player has in the current campaign, and (6) the individual’s personal preference when gaming.

This list was presented through the use of examples from the fieldwork in order to show how players choose to role play a character and how this also develops over time as players take part in TTRPG groups. It was my main argument then that character’s develop over time and that they allow players to express certain identities, or try out identities they may be curious about or intrigued by. As players engage in TTRPG groups they develop close relationships with the other players and this works to further group cohesion as they play through a campaign. Players were playing a game with friends around a table, working through a campaign together and learning
more about each other as they did so. However, they were also playing with identities as they played the game itself. They would take on the identities of the characters and role play them in greater depth as they became more comfortable in their groups. People would switch back and forth between their characters and their physical world identities, often with the intent of making each other laugh. The ability to play with identities in safe spaces was pointed to by participants as a safe way to try out behaviours, traits, selves that they may be interested in or aspire to. This worked at points as a self-monitoring project where players could present certain identities and read responses to learn more about what it was to present that way and how people would respond to those presentations.

In the case of this research project, these groups often existed at game stores and restaurants throughout the Ottawa area. These spaces hosted multiple groups at a time and often these friendships would develop across groups truly representing the development of communities of practice. Importantly these were not independent gaming groups occupying a shared space, but truly did become communities of practice that worked across groups, and often across locations. Players would move from one store to another, and would become regular practitioners of TTRPGs, along with other games, in the community spaces that existed. I found that as I moved from space to space I would encounter members I had met at other locations and would discover their active participation in the community through these meetings.

Communities of practice should be understood as spaces where multiple practitioners of a specific phenomenon come together over space and time to practice together, share ideologies, behaviours, and techniques of practice with one another. These practitioners become members in a community of practice that works across generations of actors and that develops these techniques within the community itself. Over time others may come to recognize the practices of
others as being referential of membership in that specific community of practice, further reinforcing the discourses of those communities. I have argued throughout this work that communities of practice are focused on the practice of their specific phenomenon, but importantly exist because people desire meaningful, in-person interaction and the development of relationships that come to be more important than the actual practice of the phenomenon itself. There are many resources available for people who wish to learn about the practices of a specific phenomenon, such as TTRPGs. There are forums, online communities, YouTube channels, books, blogs, and many more forms of information sharing that an individual can turn to if they wish to develop their practice. However, certain people seek out in-person interactions in these communities of practice because they desire more engagement than just developing their practices.

In this work I have used the ethnographic details gathered through 2 years of involvement in these communities of practice to convey the ways in which being a member of a community of practice is about more than developing one’s practices. Membership carries with it the building of important and meaningful relationships, the sense of belonging to a community, the development of a “home away from home”, the construction and development of one’s identities, and the memories that form both in game and out of game. I was struck early on by the ways in which members of these communities of practice would tell stories of their involvement in these communities often expressing excitement and elation about games they had played, people they had met, and how long they were able to maintain these connections. I met game players who had been playing the same D&D campaigns for more than 20 years and who had grown through these involvements. They had learned from game players when they were young
and were now passing on that knowledge to new players, while also forming close relationships with them that would extend beyond the magic circle.

TTRPG communities of practice are also an interesting phenomenon to study in that they almost seamlessly crossover with many other communities of practice. These communities of practice involve many different types of game players that all spend time in the same shared spaces, along with many other types of fandom and game involvement (including video games, comic books, anime). This meant that the communities of practice I engaged with over this period of fieldwork were at points amorphous and would include members engaging across differing practices. This was most commonly seen at game stores where members of the D&D community would join in with the MTG players before and after their sessions, or would hang out together when they were not playing. This is important as it helps to illustrate the ways that these communities of practice existed for more than the sharing of these practices, but were instead spaces that many members could come to be involved with one another.

One of the key ways I have attempted to show the impacts that these communities of practice have on practitioners' lives was through the examination of social capital. As players in the communities engaged with one another the complex and meaningful relationships they formed began to bring with them affordances in other areas of their lives. Members would provide each other with opportunities for employment, with favours and supports (working on people’s houses, sharing food, driving people around the city, and sharing knowledge). There were study groups that formed and involved students supporting one another in their educational endeavours. In one instance I observed directly, a member’s partner who worked for the government helped another member (who was previously unknown to them) work on their resume as they tried to apply for governmental employment. In one instance I was invited to join
a person’s business network on the popular website LinkedIn and when I did so was met by many other members of the TTRPG community who shared these business connections. All of these points of connection extended far beyond the playing of a game and marked the various levels of involvement in these communities of practice that people engaged with.

Through these representations of communities of practice I have shown that community life is very much alive in the 21st century, although it may look different at times from the communities presented in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*. TTRPG Communities of practice are actively occurring in our society, and we need to only look at one of these phenomena to see these thriving spaces of socio/cultural interaction. These communities of practice are fluid spaces where individuals come to find belonging as they are more deeply involved in the practices and their relationships extend through the membership. This membership affects people's identities, their social lives, their work and leisure times, and allows them to feel as though they are a part of something meaningful and long lasting. The separation from in-person communities that has occurred as the world has grappled with existence during a global pandemic has shown us truly how meaningful these communities of practice are to people. As I have begun to return to game stores I see groups of masked people getting together to play games and hang out just to feel that sense of community involvement again. These communities of practice managed to stay alive as people were living through the lockdowns and social restrictions presented to them over the last 2 years and are now beginning to thrive in-person once again. Members played online and stayed in-touch through the use of digital technologies, and are now excited to return showing this strong desire to be in-person.

As the lock down restrictions began to lift and game stores began to host weekly game nights again I decided to go to a few of the game stores I used to attend regularly to see how
things had changed. I walked into a familiar store late one afternoon and was immediately met by a participant I had originally met in the spring of 2018. He yelled to me from behind the counter (he was now employed at the store but hadn’t been before) and gestured for me to come over. We caught up as friends do and began asking about each other’s lives as we had come to know each other throughout my time in the field. He told me they were hosting D&D again and that many of the people who used to attend had begun to come back. In these moments I am reminded that these practitioners of TTRGPs are not just group members playing a game but really are members of a community of practice. The messages I have received from players I engaged with, and the stories they tell one another have reaffirmed this.

A few weeks after this Shiop called me out of the blue. I had not heard from him in almost a year, and as I picked up the phone I realized it felt as though no time had passed. We caught up with each other and after 30 minutes of chatting as friends do, he posed the question - “So when are we going to start playing D&D again?” Shiop has written a new campaign and would like to reunite our old group to start playing again. As we prepare for our new campaign I have realized that I have become a member of this TTRPG community of practice that exists in Ottawa and that I will continue to be a member long after this fieldwork and dissertation are complete. There are many dragons to slay, dungeons to traverse, and mysteries to solve as we go through these adventures together, finding belonging and making meaning along the way.
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Bibliography


Bibliography
### Appendix A: Character Sheets

#### Evendur Dundragon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
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### Armor Class

- **Monk - Lvl 1**

### Initiative

- 17

### Speed

- 30

### Hit Point Maximum

- 41

### Current Hit Points

### Temporary Hit Points

- D8

### Armor Class

- 17

### Personality Traits

- I feel tremendous empathy for all who suffer
- Logic - Emotions must not cloud our sense of what is right and true, or our logical thinking
- Goals - I entered the party to find the ones who might still be looking for me - the ones who murdered my father
- Traits - Now that I’ve returned to the world I enjoy its delights a little too much

### Skills

- The Tempest (Claws) - +1
- KI Points - +5
  - flurry of blows (1)
  - patient defense (1)
  - step of the wind (1)
  - stunning strike (1)

### Bookmarks

- Quarterstaff
- The Tempest's Pack
- Dart (10)
- Wandering Hits
- Stealth
- Dark Royal (500 levels)
- Winter Blanket
- Warm Clothes
- Cold Mail
- Hard Axe

### Other Proficiencies & Languages

- Common
- Elvish
- Herbalism
- Monk Weapons
- Wood Carving

### Equipment & Character Notes

- Grappling Hook
- Basic Potion (Max 20) x1
- Two-Handed Axe (1000)
- Other Staff
- Magic
- Thieves Tongs
- Water Skin
- Cure for Common Cold
- Colorful Flowers
Originally being born in Covale, Evendur's father was imprisoned when he was 11 years old. His father was a handyman who was once working in the capital, Cathana, and dropped a basket of tools off a roof which landed on an elf child and killed him. Although it was a clear accident, Taman Dundragon was sentenced to life in prison. Evendur's mother had passed away when he was young leaving him an orphan after his father, Taman's imprisonment. Evendur fled to Nivis and was a street youth for some years. At the age of 15 he joined a monastery. Devoted to a life of patience, compassion, and self mastery. Evendur found a place in the Order of the Eternal Light. Loosely associated with the Godless Sarennas, Evendur, the monastery provided Evendur with a place to study, train, and forge - teaching him to become a patient, powerful, and compassionate monk, well trained in the martial arts. A true hermit, Evendur leaves his study of martial arts only to conquer evil and help others. He has never forgotten his father and the horrible injustice he faced at the hands of the elves of Covale, and longs to someday be reunited with him. However, he fears that he might still be sought by those who imprisoned his father. As well, his hermitage has left him separated from society for so long, that now that he has rejoined, he enjoys lager a bit too much.
Evendur was very intrigued by what was heard during our discussion with whoever, or whatever, was in the portal. After returning from this, Evendur went home to rest, and the following morning decided that working would be the best way to keep his mind sharp for the upcoming research he would need to perform. Evendur then went to visit his father Alistair at his shop, and offered to join in his business. The two of them have been working together for the past 3 months doing repairs, building furniture, and doing odd jobs around town. As well, in the evenings Evendur and Alistair have become avid chess players, spending many hours in the pub drinking, chatting, and playing chess. Alistair is the more skilled player, but Evendur is picking up the game quickly.

Aside from his engagements with his father, Evendur has also been studying in the ways of the monk. After long deliberation, Evendur has decided to disassociate himself from Saranrae, as he has learned a great deal about himself throughout his travels and interactions with the other members of the party. Together, Alistair and Evendur built a training area behind Alistair’s shop, and Evendur has been training intensely with the Tempest. Knowing the Tempest’s past, Evendur has been building a connection with this weapon, attempting to learn it as well as he can. Understanding every inch of the weapon, how it flexes and bends, how it moves through the air, and how it is weighted, has inspired a whole new level of fighting on Evendur’s part.

(Totally not a big deal if this isn’t okay, but I was thinking that maybe with all of this training Evendur may have learned the skill “Deft Strike”. This skill is part of “The Way of the Kensei” which is one of the new Monastic traditions in Xanathar’s. It is based on the monk becoming completely in tune with their weapons. The weapon in many ways becomes an extension of the monk’s own body, allowing them absolute control over the weapon. Deft strike therefore allows me to add my martial arts die to my attack when using a weapon that I have trained intensely with if I spend one Ki Point.)

Finally, Evendur has been doing a great deal of reading when he is not training, working, or spending time with his father. He is trying to learn everything he can about his portals, the different planes of existence, and the Underdark.
### Appendix

**Appendix B: Log Sheets**

![Adventure Logsheets](image-url)

**Example Log Sheets**

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**NOTES:**
- [Add any additional notes or details here.]

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**Log Sheet Details**

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**Log Sheet Details**

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**Log Sheet Details**

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