

Masculinity at the Table: Untangling the Male Preserve in Indie and Mainstream Gaming

Abstract: With the rise in popularity of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) comes a larger and much more diverse population of gamers being exposed to the misogyny and sexism prevalent in mainstream gaming systems, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), through a *male preserve*. These values and practices can create unpleasant experiences for players of marginalized communities. We hypothesize that the differences in values and practices between mainstream and indie games allow indie games to serve as a space away from the male preserve in particular, which is characterized by a numeric overrepresentation of straight, White men, and a value system that benefits masculinity over femininity. We further hypothesize that through the process of bleed-out, players can gain a stronger sense of real-world agency when challenging discriminatory behavior. We investigated these hypotheses through semi-structured interviews with tabletop RPG players ($n = 9$), asking them about their experiences with tabletop RPGs and associated gaming communities. Qualitative analysis revealed themes of violence, racism, rebellion, and confidence, and suggests that players are interacting with narratives, characters, and game mechanics in order to form resistance to aspects of the male preserve that they find unappealing.

Keywords: gender, male preserve, tabletop role-playing games, mainstream vs. indie games, fantasy racism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) are becoming increasingly popular among the general population, and this growth can reinvigorate the genre while also exposing some of its concerning themes. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) is regarded as the foremost modern-day tabletop RPG (Yessler and Craig 2024, 3). In a snapshot of 2021, *D&D* represented 54% of all campaigns being run on the online role-play platform Roll20, while the second-leading game, *Call of Cthulhu*, only made up 12% of all campaigns (roll20app 2021). Clearly, the tabletop RPGs market is top-heavy, with *D&D* far overperforming any other tabletop RPGs (sometimes called TTRPGs). While other titles are popular, their target audiences are much smaller than the *D&D* player base. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we will be classifying *D&D* as *mainstream*, and all other tabletop RPGs as *indie* given their comparatively small market share.

The smaller scale of indie tabletop RPGs can be beneficial, however. Games catering to a smaller player base can represent specialized themes, stories, and values within their systems. Often created and funded by the gaming communities themselves, indie games need not cater to the broad public, and thus have the unique opportunity to provide a safe space for those who

experience marginalization in mainstream gaming (Usman et al. 2026). Indeed, indie spaces often serve as a refuge for individuals working in creative genres (e.g., music, film, digital games) seeking to go beyond dominant modes of creativity (Freeman and McNeese 2019). The present work explores dynamics in indie and mainstream games using interview-based research methodology that allows for the discovery and description of complex themes.

Tabletop RPG players have often been stereotyped as White, straight, and cisgender men, and because of this prototype of the *gamer nerd*, tabletop RPG spaces serve as a male preserve (Dashiell 2020). The male preserve, coined by Dunning (1986), describes a space numerically overrepresented by men where masculine norms and values are dominant and often divergent from conventional social norms (Dashiell 2020, 28). In these spaces, traits that are associated with masculinity, such as aggressiveness, are valued over traits associated with femininity, such as compassion (Eagly et al. 2020). While the male preserve characterizes various spaces, with research often directed towards sports (Dunning 1986), it is expressed somewhat uniquely within gaming communities in part because stereotypes of geeks and nerds can be seen as antithetical to masculinity (Dashiell 2020, 28). Dashiell labels this phenomenon as *nerd masculinity*, in which elements of masculine discourse, such as dominance and male superiority, are employed with an emphasis on intellectual ability rather than other hegemonic masculine traits (Dashiell 2020). This “masculine power fantasy” (Carlson 2020, 39) is unwelcoming and exclusionary to anyone outside the intended audience, creating a power imbalance favoring White, heterosexual cis-men (Dunning 1986, 80). As explored later in this article, mainstream gaming creators have claimed these imbalances in their game structures are necessary for preserving historical realism (Carlson 2020).

Behaviors such as sexism and homophobia are perpetuated and left unchallenged in male preserve spaces (Dashiell 2020; Allen 2024), creating “an echo chamber of normalized misogyny and racism” (Carlson 2020, 39). This normative context has the effect of making the gaming space hostile towards minority players. By role-playing characters that successfully challenge in-game oppressive systems, however, players can gain momentum to stand up to real-world systems of oppression (Kawitzky 2021). According to Usman et al. (2026) this process may be similar to drama therapy, which invites individuals to practice resolving conflicts in a safe context before attempting to play out these strategies in the real world (Lim, Carollo, Chen, and Esposito, 2021).

Characters’ emotions, thoughts, and actions can manifest out-of-game through *bleed-out*, a concept originally explored by Boss (2007) and Montola (2010, see also Bowman 2013, 25; Hugaas 2024). This gives players the opportunity to gain a sense of agency, or a feeling of control over their actions and their consequences (Moore 2016) through gameplay. This experience is also referred to as emancipatory bleed, in which players can gain real-world confidence and agency through bleed-out (Kemper 2017). In Kemper’s autoethnographic work, she explores the transformative possibilities of role-playing such that players can benefit from the liberation and confidence that their characters gained in-game through intentional steering during play and post-game self-reflection. This could in turn foster player engagement in protesting real-world injustice (Usman et al. 2026), which may take the form of challenging the male preserve within gaming spaces. In mainstream gaming culture, however, speaking out against discriminatory behavior is often met with negative repercussions (Braithwaite 2000; see also Dodd et al. 2001). Therefore, such transformation is limited within mainstream tabletop RPGs, and we argue that indie tabletop RPGs serve a vital function in this regard.

The pervasive role of the male preserve in mainstream tabletop RPGs goes all the way back to their origins. The tabletop role-playing game genre took inspiration from wargames designed predominantly by men, whose design choices assumed that players would likewise be White, heterosexual men (Allen 2024). Previous research has noted consistent themes of racism and

sexism that began with early systems and continue to exist today (Trammell 2014; Stenros and Sihoven 2015; Stang and Trammell 2015; Garcia 2017; Trammell and Crenshaw 2020). Hegemonic ideologies are deeply rooted within the systems themselves, making it difficult to avoid them in play (Yessler and Craig 2024). Further, marginalized players and designers have been pushed out of mainstream game spaces through hostility, reduced mechanical and narrative play possibilities, victimization, villainization, and violence both in- and out-of-game by the systems themselves and those who use those systems (Berge 2021; Berge 2023). These players have sought refuge in indie tabletop RPGs, even as mainstream game companies make efforts to remedy these issues, to varying degrees of effectiveness and with mixed success (see Carter 2020; Eric 2021; Cote and Saidel 2024).

Indie games fundamentally offer a safe playspace for players and designers to create alternatives to mainstream philosophies and mechanics (Latorre 2016). Designed by and marketed towards specific audiences, indie games allow players the freedom to explore their ideas with practices and conversations that protect the psychological safety of the players (Bowman and Hugaas 2025) without the vestiges of the male preserve (Berge 2021; 2023). These options and safety practices provide more creative control over characters and narratives than is allowed by mainstream tabletop RPGs. One way these differences materialize is in safety mechanics, or guidelines built into systems designed to protect players' psychological safety (Reinbold 2021), which also foster community values of safety by forefronting consent in gameplay (Bowman and Hugaas 2025). While indie games often outline these mechanics in their rulebooks, the most recent core rulebook for *D&D* released did not include any explicit mention of safety mechanics (Wizards of the Coast 2024). Further, the dice-dependent mechanics, specifically in regards to seduction in gameplay, centers the male gaze and positions sexual interactions as comparable to combat encounters in which consent can be won or lost on the basis of a dice roll (Trammell and Crenshaw 2020, 16-17). This is but one example of how mainstream designers are constrained by inherited mechanics and storytelling conventions.

In addition to the creative opportunities afforded by indie tabletop RPGs, their varied playstyles can also offer alternative forms of conflict resolution to the combat-focused mechanics of *D&D*, circumventing the dominance and violence inherent in the male preserve. For example, the tabletop RPG *Masks* (Conway 2017) replaces physical damage from conflicts with Conditions, such as Angry or Scared, which allow players to role-play their emotional aftermath (as cited in Berge 2021, 185-186). Similarly, tabletop RPGs that provide tools of resistance to oppressive social institutions within the game world directly confront the male preserve. The tabletop RPG *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018), for example, explores existential threats to queer communities within its games by setting up a hostile post-apocalyptic world where players collectively protect their communities (as cited in Kawitzky 2021, 133-134).

Given the structures of indie games that allow for values of non-traditional gamers to be represented in-game, we propose that they serve as refuge from the male preserve. We further hypothesize that through the process of bleed-out, players can gain a stronger sense of real-world agency needed to stand up to discriminatory behavior by playing characters that resist systems of oppression in-game. Both as a cause and consequence of these dynamics, an emphasis on masculine norms and values, homogeneous representations, and unchecked misogyny and racism will be more prevalent in mainstream games (i.e., *D&D*) compared to indie games. We investigated these hypotheses through semi-structured interviews with university students who are currently playing tabletop RPGs by asking them about their experiences with tabletop RPGs and associated gaming communities. Through this study, we seek to form a better understanding of the male preserve within tabletop RPG spaces, to explore how players respond to pervasive marginalization in these communities, and to investigate the role of bleed-out in shaping player interactions.

2. METHODS

This study was approved by the Lewis & Clark Institutional Review Board (IRB approval #2025-01).

2.1 Participants

9 participants were randomly selected from a pool of 33 respondents to a screening survey. Survey recruitment was posted around campus, sent to all academic departments, and distributed through the Lewis & Clark Gaming Society. Eligible participants were Lewis & Clark students ages 18 and older that self-reported they had played a tabletop RPG 2 or more times in the last 3 years. Two respondents were excluded from the pool for not meeting these criteria. Demographic information was collected at the time of interview via a Google form. All participants were between 18-22 years of age ($M = 19.67$). Gender and sexuality were reported by open text response (see Table 1). While nearly all ($n = 8$) participants identified as queer, this was an unintended result of convenience sampling. Eight participants identified as White or Caucasian and one identified as mixed race (Hispanic or Latino and White or Caucasian). 1 participant indicated they had attended a presentation where information regarding the theoretical basis of the study was presented at an on-campus research symposium, potentially exposing them to related literature and the purpose of the study before participating in the interview.

Table 1. Self-reported gender identities by participants. Response order is presented in alphabetical order to protect participant anonymity.

	Free Text Response	Number of Responses
Gender	Cisgender female	4
	Cisgender male	1
	Female	1
	Nonbinary	2
	Nonbinary/transmasculine	1
Sexuality	Asexual	1
	Bisexual	3
	Demisexual	1
	Homosexual	1
	Queer	1
	Queer, asexual	1
	Prefer not to answer	1

2.2 Measures and Procedures

In-person, 90-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview questions addressed their experiences with tabletop RPGs, their own communities, and larger tabletop RPG communities. The full list of questions can be seen in Appendix A. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's audio transcription. Preliminary analysis was conducted using an incorporated data- and theory-driven manual. Further analyses were conducted using team-based coding involving iterative-inductive and theory-based methods.

2.3 Coding and reliability

For preliminary analysis, each interview was reviewed and analyzed by two coders. Agreements between the coders were used to assess themes, revealing themes of violence, fantasy racism, recusance, rebellion, creativity, freedom, confidence, and agency. These themes were used to organize final coding results.

Substantive coding used team-based coding methods proposed by Cascio et al. (2019). This method involves open and axial codes through iterative-inductive methods, followed by theory-based thematic analysis and organization. Each round of coding was conducted by independent coders and followed by team discussion to form agreements on coding decisions. Twice, codes were collapsed based on similarity and subsequent independent coding used the condensed codebook. Coders discussed coding decisions until consensus was reached. The final codebook, including only codes that were used during analysis, is included in Appendix B. The process was conducted using Taguette, an open-source qualitative coding resource.

Reported results include themes identified during preliminary analysis and data from substantive coding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Violence as Value

Almost all participants ($n = 7$) discussed the emphasis on violence in the tabletop RPGs they have played. Themes were described as militaristic by players in roles of both game master (GM) and player character. Participants noted violence in *D&D* ($n = 4$) more than in indie games ($n = 2$) and nonviolence in *D&D* ($n = 2$) less than in indie games ($n = 6$). Some players ($n = 2$) expressed feeling that combat in tabletop RPGs is important to them and that some indie games — specifically *Masks* (Conway 2017) and *Root* (Wehrle and Ferrin 2018) — did not provide a strong enough system for them to explore this aspect of gaming, while others ($n = 3$) reported a heavy focus on violence and an emphasis on *power building* (designing characters to be as strong as possible) were unappealing features of tabletop RPGs.

This emphasis on violence in tabletop RPGs is a characteristic of the male preserve as it demonstrates a value system that benefits brute force over other forms of conflict resolution, an imbalance which reifies patriarchal distributions of power (Dunning 1986). Nonviolent methods of conflict resolution serve as a form of resistance against hegemonic masculinity and the male preserve (Berge 2021). Our data suggest that indie tabletop RPG players appreciate the freedom to break away from the constrained narrative possibilities of mainstream games.

3.2 Community

Responses regarding representation in the community were fairly consistent, with interviewees noting ample representation of queerness ($n = 9$) and neurodivergence ($n = 6$), and a lack of representation of people of color ($n = 7$). When asked what identities they associate with the tabletop RPG community at large, one participant responded they associated queerness with gaming because of their personal experiences, but that larger communities, like the *D&D* subreddit, are predominantly comprising heterosexual White men. While players seem able to find queer communities with which to engage, racial diversity appears to be limited. However, these results may be attributed to the sample context, as 69% of the student population at Lewis & Clark is White (“Data USA: Lewis & Clark College” 2022).

Another consistent theme across interviews was maintaining a safe community at the table ($n = 8$). Players discussed the ability to be vulnerable for emotional in-game events, the establishment of safety agreements before playing, and guidelines for kind and collaborative behaviors. These safe spaces also allow for players to challenge the male preserve without fear of backlash.

3.3 Fantasy Racism

Multiple participants reported forms of fantasy racism, which include villainization, victimization, and negative stereotypes of non-normative characters (Berge 2023), in both mainstream ($n = 3$) and indie games ($n = 3$). One player noted one of the reasons her family stopped playing *D&D* was discomfort with “speciesism that was . . . kind of racist.” Two players described their experiences with interpersonal conflict concerning discrimination against certain groups. One stated, “We’re all fantasy racist against the [French] cats, basically.”

The simulation of fantasy racism (Berge 2023, 7) permeates through game systems and into the fantasy world without player consent (Yessler and Craig 2024, 4) and thus reinforces the male preserve within these spaces. The intertwined systems of power are best studied holistically. Indeed, Crenshaw (1989) underscores the harmful consequences of examining marginalization through frameworks that fail to consider the nexus of systems of oppression. Thus it is important to recognize the role of racism within the male preserve as described by Dashiell (2020, 27-28). For some of our participants, normalized racism allows for problematic ideologies inherent to the male preserve to be practiced in indie and mainstream spaces alike. However, for others, fantasy racism pushes them to seek alternatives within the indie gaming genre.

3.4 Recusance and Rebellion

A prevalent theme across the interviews ($n = 8$) was *recusance*, which characterizes actions or characters in-game that relate to anarchy, illegality, or moral ambiguity. Tabletop RPGs commonly use dystopian settings as a framework for play in which players are empowered to foment revolution against delegitimized, oppressive institutions (Kawitzky 2021, 132; see also Levitas 2008). Indeed, many participants mentioned rebellion ($n = 6$) when asked about common themes or forms of conflict in campaigns.

These results suggest that players feel a desire to engage in recusant and rebellious play against the hegemonic structures that have oppressed them in real life. This in-game resistance can reflect and provide relief from real-world oppressive institutions through play (Kawitzky 2021; Usman et al. 2026). Players and game masters may be drawn to rebellion and anarchy in games as a way to engage with and directly challenge fictional stand-ins for these institutions. Participants reported that engaging in resistant play relieved emotional tension from real-world struggles and restrictions ($n = 5$). It is therefore possible that through emancipatory bleed, this emotional relief could influence real-world action both within and outside the tabletop RPG community.

3.5 Freedom and creativity

Participants who played tabletop RPGs as characters and GMs appreciated the creative freedom of storytelling, character creation, and worldbuilding present in both indie and mainstream games ($n = 6$). One player noted experiencing more narrative freedom in indie games than in *D&D*, saying, “I think there are a lot of positives to games that are not *D&D* because they allow for more creativity.” Out of seven GMs, four reported preferring to use original worlds and narratives rather than the ones provided by game publishers. Thus, our participants actively transform both *D&D* and indie games to explore narrative possibilities on their own terms.

3.6 Confidence and Agency

All ($n = 9$) participants reported feeling they gained confidence through playing their characters or being a GM. One player said she learned to be more self-assured through playing characters and telling stories as a GM. This player expressed that the process of creating characters and narratives requires her to be more assertive. She stated, “I think that really translated a lot into my my [sic] real life, my personal life, being able to ask for what I need better, being able to talk to my players and my friends more broadly in a more assertive way.” Other players reported being able to work through self-hatred and being “more able to sort of take up space.” This aligns with our hypothesis that confidence and agency can be cultivated by playing tabletop RPGs through bleed-out.

Standing up to racist and sexist remarks is crucial to challenging the male preserve but is often met with social consequences (Dodd et al. 2002). Bleed-out from certain forms of role-play might help players cultivate a sense of agency to overcome this tension (Kemper 2017; Usman et al. 2026). Our results suggest players are experiencing a form of emancipatory bleed, thus forming confidence through the games they play. As many of our participants belong to marginalized groups, it is possible that their role-play experiences could help prepare them to stand up to real world discrimination.

4. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Tabletop RPGs have risen in popularity, with many people turning to games for fun and escapist play. However, mainstream gaming has a long history of racism, sexism, and homophobia, fostering a male preserve in many gaming communities. This creates a hostile environment for players with marginalized identities, but research investigating resistance to this status quo is limited. We hypothesized that indie games offer a unique opportunity to challenge the male preserve. Results from the interviews demonstrate players report greater emphasis on masculinity in mainstream than indie games. However, the characteristics of indie, that is, being created by players with an emphasis on freedom and creativity, are important to players regardless of the system. We further hypothesized players would gain a sense of agency through the process of bleed-out. Results from our interviews support this conclusion, with many reporting gaining confidence and assertiveness through gameplay.

One limitation of our research is that our participants largely do not interact with mainstream tabletop RPG communities. Research regarding how players with marginalized identities interact with the larger community is limited (Braithwaite 2000; Allen 2024), and should be explored in future research. Further, our sample was mostly White, queer, young adults from a single college, which limits the generalizability of these data. Additionally, we did not use the term “male preserve” during interviews to examine how players reported their experiences without being explicitly prompted to think about their experiences of marginalization and/or privilege in tabletop RPGs. Future research should ask players about the male preserve directly to form a better understanding of players’ experiences.

The original title of the paper was “Masculinity at the Table: Indie TTRPGs as *Refuge* From the Male Preserve in Mainstream TTRPGs” (emphasis added). This implies a passive interaction between player and game, with the game providing a space away from the male preserve regardless of engagement with the system. Through interviews with players of both mainstream and indie games, it is clear that creating space away from the male preserve is not passive at all; it is an evocative interaction between players and game mechanics to form resistance against the aspects of the male preserve that players find unappealing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Question

1. Experience: Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with tabletop role-playing games?
 - a. What games have you played/are you currently playing?
 - i. What made you choose these particular games?
 1. In games you've chosen not to play, what aspects are unappealing?
 - a. What games have you not played but are interested in playing?
 - i. What is appealing about them?
 - ii. [if just played D&D] - What do you like about the game? What do you not like?
 1. What has drawn you to D&D?
 - iii. [if just played games other than D&D] - What do you like about the game(s)? What do you not like?
 1. What has drawn you to these games? What do you find appealing about them?
 - iv. [if played both] -
 1. What do you like about the game(s)? What do you not like?
 2. What game(s) do you like most? Why?
 3. What differences have you observed between D&D and non-D&D games?
 - a. Differences in the community?
 - b. Differences in mechanics?
 - c. Differences in conflict resolution?
 - d. Differences in themes?
 - b. What is your usual role in these games (e.g. game master, character player, etc.)?
 - i. [if player] - What types of characters have you played?
 1. What do you feel you have in common with your characters?
 2. What characteristics do your characters have that you wish you had/had more or less of?
 - a. Tell me more about _____.
 - b. What characteristics and behaviors do you feel you have adopted from the characters you've played?
 3. What types of interpersonal conflicts do your characters experience?
 4. What types of internal conflicts do your characters experience?
 5. What do you feel have you learned through playing your character?
 6. What themes are common in your campaigns?
 7. What are the central forms of conflict you experience in-game?
 - a. What is the role of the players within the conflict and the storyline?
 - i. What do you like about these tropes? What do you not like?
 - ii. What is your typical role in these tropes?

- ii. [if game master] - What types of campaigns have you run?
 - 1. Do you prefer to run campaigns with already established worlds and/or narratives or create your own?
 - a. Why do you prefer this over the other?
 - i. What leads you to creating your own stories rather than using the pre-established narratives?
 - b. [if using pre-established worlds/narratives] Can you tell me a little bit more about the worlds and/or narratives you use?
 - c. [if creating their own worlds/narratives] Can you tell me a little bit more about the worlds and/or narratives you create?
 - i. Can you tell me more about your experience with using pre-established systems to tell original stories?
 - 2. What themes are common in your campaigns?
 - 3. What are the central forms of conflict you use in your game?
 - a. What is the role of the players within the conflict and the storyline?
 - i. Why are you drawn to these particular tropes?
 - b. What is your usual role within the conflict and the storyline?
 - 4. What do you feel you have learned from running campaign(s)?
 - a. What characteristics and behaviors do you feel you have adopted from the campaigns you've run?
2. Community:
 - a. What is your typical role within the gaming communities you are a part of?
 - b. When you think about tabletop role-playing gaming communities in general, what do you typically think of?
 - i. What behaviors are common or expected?
 - ii. What behaviors are deemed appropriate?
 - iii. How do these behaviors differ from what is accepted or expected in a larger social context?
 - iv. What identities do you associate most strongly with tabletop role-playing?
 - 1. Gender? Race? Sexuality?
 - 2. What identities do you feel are less commonly represented within tabletop role-playing?
 - c. When you think about your own tabletop role-playing gaming community, what do you typically think of?
 - i. What behaviors are common or expected?
 - ii. What behaviors are deemed appropriate?
 - iii. How do these norms and behaviors differ from what is accepted in a larger social context?
 - iv. What identities are represented within your own gaming community, both current and in the past?
 - 1. [if current and past are different] How so? Why do you think that is?
 - v. Have you experienced conflict within your community?
 - 1. What types of conflict have you experienced in your community?
 - 2. How has your community handled these conflicts?

Appendix B: Coding Manual

Code	Definition
Experience with TTRPGs	
Prefer Mainstream	Participant reports preferring <i>D&D</i> games over indie games. <i>Example:</i> When asked which system they like most, one participant stated, “D&D because numbers.”
Prefer Indie	Participant reports preferring indie games over <i>D&D</i> games. <i>Example:</i> “I like the magic side of it so that depending on whether I want magic, I’d go to D&D but like mechanics wise, I think I prefer <i>Root</i> .”
Indie Games Played	Participant reports having experience playing an indie game. <i>Example:</i> “I was in a role-playing club and we played <i>Monster of the Week</i> .”
Mainstream Played	Participant reports having experience playing <i>D&D</i> . <i>Example:</i> “I’ve played mainly D&D.”
Started Playing TTRPGs with Mainstream	Participant reports that the first TTRPG they played was <i>D&D</i> . <i>Example:</i> “My first experience was just with my family of four like in middle school; I think we started our pre-made D&D campaign.”
Bleed	
Character Similar to Player	Player reports sharing traits, experiences, or feelings with character. Also includes players creating characters that resemble themselves in some way. <i>Example:</i> “I’m always [playing] someone who is very nice. Because I feel that way about myself.”
Identity Exploration	Explicitly playing characters that embody traits that are not as apparent in the real world, represent identities that are not visible in popular culture, and explore characteristics/identities that are often othered (Kawitzky 2021, 131). <i>Example:</i> Participant described having themes of faith exploration, what it meant to belong to certain groups with certain stereotypes, and the internal struggles of value systems and self-concepts.
Bleed-Out: Confidence and Agency	Player reports experience of gaining confidence from playing their character through bleed-out (Bowman 2013, 25; Leonard and Thurman 2018). Includes increases and/or improvements in improvising, ability to take up more social space, self-advocacy, extraversion, building self-image, and self-improvement. <i>Example:</i> “[I’ve gotten] a little bit more confident and outspoken than I am in general. Which is something that I think I’ve gotten better at through playing these characters.”
Emotional Relief	Player reports the ability to release emotions in-game, particularly in ways they desire to in the real world (Carlson 2020, 42). Includes explicit mentions of <i>catharsis</i> . <i>Example:</i> “Lowkey [playing these stories is] kind of cathartic. So I feel like there’s a lot of like political things and it can kind of feel like oh my gosh like nothing’s happening and so it kind of feels like nice to be able to do something at least in a game.”
Escapism	Player reports TTRPGs being a break or escape from reality (Warmelink, Harteveld and Mayer 2009). <i>Example:</i> “I see role-playing as... a way to have fun outside... like severed from the world.”

Code	Definition
Accessibility	“Accessibility” refers to comprehensibility of rules, availability of game information, approachability of community, ease of making and starting a game, or cost. Differentiation between references to indie games or D&D and accessible or not accessible.
D&D Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “I guess it’s just widespread popularity yeah because everyone knows [D&D] that it’s so easy to get into it.”
D&D Not Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “D&D especially is a little intimidating to get into because there’s so much like resources you have to go through.”

Indie Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “I think a lot of the other games are trying to be more accessible. Like you don’t need to know all the rules. You can just sort of go.”
Indie Not Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “Mostly it’s that front cost. I have a whole list of RPGs that I would love to do, love to try someday... also physical, like not necessarily even time and effort costs physical costs like Warhammer. I can’t afford that. College student.”
Complexity of Games	“Complicated” refers to high levels of difficulty of learning or playing a game, highly complex rule sets, or having to keep track of many things at a time during the game. Also includes mentions of math-forward mechanics (i.e., “number-crunchy” games). Differentiation between references to indie games, D&D, or TTRPGs in general, and whether the player likes, dislikes, or does not report an opinion about this characteristic of the game.
D&D is Complicated (Neutral)	<i>Example:</i> “Learning the mechanics of D&D can be very difficult for some people.”
D&D is Complicated (Dislike)	<i>Example:</i> “I wasn’t as into the whole like really nitty gritty like numbers [of D&D] and like having to figure out like a thousand different little mini rules as much.”
D&D is Complicated (Like)	<i>Example:</i> “I like the more complicated- you’re juggling a lot of rules and a lot of world and everything that’s going on at the same time, rather than the very simple, I like it more structured.”
Indie is Complicated (Like)	<i>Example:</i> One participant expressed liking an indie game because it was more complicated than D&D.
Simplicity of Games	“Simple” refers to low levels of difficulty of learning or playing a game or uncomplicated rule sets. Differentiation between references to indie games, D&D, or TTRPGs in general, and whether the player likes, dislikes, or does not report an opinion about this characteristic of the game.
Indie is Simple (Like)	<i>Example:</i> One participant said they preferred an indie game over D&D because “it’s not as complicated.”
TTRPG as Social Avenue	Relating to TTRPGs as a social function (Winardy, Septiana, Pranawati 2024). Includes mentions of social bonds, social outlet, community, and connection. <i>Example:</i> “I really like how much of an opportunity [D&D] has given me to be social.”

Code	Definition
System and Mechanics	
Dislike for Min-maxing	Refers to an extreme form of power building in which players place the minimum number of points into skills seen as undesirable while placing the maximum number of points into skills seen as desirable (Stark 2012). <i>Example:</i> “I think games that are like dungeon crawl just kill things and like it’s all min-maxing, getting as strong as you can just fighting things.”
Power Building	Characters are designed to be as mechanically powerful as possible (Berge 2023, 9). <i>Example:</i> “I think games that are like dungeon crawl just kill things and like it’s all min-maxing, getting as strong as you can just fighting things.”
D&D as Broad	Refers to observations of D&D catering to a large audience and D&D being all-encompassing in terms of themes, conflict resolution, or worlds, as well as observations of the game creators trying to make the system all-encompassing but falling short. <i>Example:</i> “So with like <i>Blades in the Dark</i> , for example, it’s built to be a heist game. And D&D is just very general and it doesn’t really allow you to do that very well.”
Creative Freedom	Player reports liking the versatility, flexibility, and adaptability of a gaming system. Includes mentions of liking the storytelling freedom within game, and a lack of rigidity in one’s ability to choose the direction of the game and narrative.
Appreciate Creative Freedom of D&D	<i>Example:</i> “[D&D is] versatile, more or less to an extent. And it allows me to basically do what I want with the world and with the game. Within reason.”
Appreciate Creative Freedom of Indie	<i>Example:</i> “I think there are a lot of positives to games that aren’t D&D because they allow for more creativity.”

TTRPG as Creative Outlet	Participant reports that TTRPGs provide space for writing stories, creating new characters for pleasure, storytelling, and other creative endeavors. <i>Example:</i> “One thing I do just kind of for fun on my own time it’s like going through and building a <i>Dungeons and Dragons</i> character sheet based on like I don’t know, like randomly deciding a class of race.”
Prefer Original Worlds/ Narratives	Player reports preferring to use original worlds and/or narratives rather than ones provided by game creators. <i>Example:</i> “Making the story and making up your world and making all of your little guys for your players to interact with is the fun part. If I was just saying, and here’s what happens in the story, that’s not fun for me.”
Prefer Pre-Established Worlds/ Narratives	Player reports preferring to use worlds and/or narratives provided by game creators rather than original creations. <i>Example:</i> “It’s easier [to] start out with an already established world.”
Homebrew Adaptations to D&D	Player reports making adjustments to D&D and/or using original narratives and/or worlds with the D&D system. <i>Example:</i> “I really like <i>Dungeons and Dragons 5e</i> because... I feel like it’s a well-developed system that you can adapt to lots of different types of stories. So there’s plenty of success homebrewing very rules in it [<i>sic</i>]”
Player Agency	Refers to reports of creative choices made by players, player-led campaigns, players of characters contributing to game-play decisions. Specifically in reference to players of characters rather than GMs. <i>Example:</i> “I really do like games which it’s not necessarily about like the game structure itself, but ones that encourage like character building and your relationship with your party and like character-driven plot things.”

Code	Definition
Violent Conflict Resolution	Violence is used to solve conflicts by non-player characters, and the expectation of the player characters is to engage in violence (Berge 2021).
Violence as Conflict Resolution - Indie	<i>Example:</i> “I’m just a fox in an adventuring party and we are going to go kill someone today.” (Made in reference to a <i>Root</i> campaign)
Violence as Conflict Resolution - D&D	<i>Example:</i> “D&D has an XP leveling system. It is designed for you to be fighting and killing things and if you want to do something that isn’t about fighting and killing things. It’s just not, the game just isn’t designed for that and you can make it work but it’s not that’s not what it’s meant to do.”
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution	Using nonviolent means of conflict resolution, demonstrating a belief that “defeated” is not the same as “killed” (prioritizing character story over domination; Berge 2021, 190).
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution - Indie	<i>Example:</i> “There is like <i>Blades in the Dark</i> . Everything is built around going and doing heists... most characters are not built for combat at all.”
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution - D&D	<i>Example:</i> One player noted the use of puzzles as a way of progressing the story in a D&D campaign.
	Refers to explicit reports of preferences regarding violent or nonviolent means of conflict resolution.
Like Violence in Game	<i>Example:</i> “Seeing them get to do some gratuitous violence against people that deserve it is always I forget the exact word, but fun to see.”
Dislike Violence in Game	<i>Example:</i> “This combat is like not the main focus. And it’s usually more deadly. We’ve had one player die twice. It’s just like less combat? Almost. Which is nice.”
Balance of Violence and Nonviolence	Player reports decisions surrounding when to use violent versus nonviolent means of conflict resolution. <i>Example:</i> “Generally, trying to figure out if we want to fight the thing or not is a lot of the thing.”
Fantasy Racism	
Fantasy Racism	A world that is perpetuated by those peoples and tropes that are considered “normalized” within fantasy, consisting of white, male, cisgender characters, exploitation and victimization of non-normative characters (Trammell 2014; Carlson 2020; Berge 2023). <i>Example:</i> “Same thing with the guy who hated snake people and I was a snake person.”

Fantasy Racism - D&D	Fantasy racism specifically observed in D&D (see <i>Fantasy Racism</i> for definition). <i>Example</i> : “I think my family pulled out [of playing D&D because] there is a lot of like weird racism with our speciesism that was like kind of racist like with like like [<i>sic</i>] terminology towards characters.”
Fantasy Racism - Indie	Fantasy racism specifically observed in indie games (see <i>Fantasy Racism</i> for definition). <i>Example</i> : “We’re all fantasy racist against the cats, basically.” (In reference to a <i>Root</i> campaign.)

Code	Definition
Community Experiences	
Political Conflicts in Gaming Community	Observations of conflicts arising in the gaming community between players surrounding political beliefs or ideology. <i>Example</i> : One participant mentioned experiencing conflict within their gaming community related to differing opinions related to abortion.
Conflict-based Group Schism	Conflicts that lead to communities splitting into subgroups (Bowman 2013, 8), including games ending completely (9). <i>Example</i> : “The campaign just kind of ended.” “I don’t speak to that person anymore.”
Conflict Surrounding Loyalty to Rules	Conflict arising because one or more (but not all) members of the group feel that rules, success, problem-solving, and “winning the scenario” are the most important aspects of the game (Bowman 2013, 13). Also refers to disputes over strict adherence to game mechanics or rules (Dashiell 2020, 31). <i>Example</i> : “There’s been a little bit of [conflict with] like how strict to the rules we are going to be.”
Collaborative and Cooperative Behaviors	Participant reports observations or experiences in- or out-of-game of players working together towards a common goal, making game decisions as a group, or teamwork. (See Freeman and McNeese (2019) for deeper exploration of collaboration in indie game design.) <i>Example</i> : “I like the group storytelling aspect of [TTRPGs].”
Competitive Behaviors	Participant reports observations or experiences in- or out-of-game of players engaging in power struggle, social hierarchies, rivalries, or aggressiveness. See Bowman (2013) for deeper exploration of competition in gaming communities. <i>Example</i> : “So here’s like, it’s better to work as a team... even though my family is very competitive.”
Safe Community at the Table	Observations of respectful, kind, and supportive behaviors out-of-game. Includes forming community agreements to maintain safe practices, using safety tools or mechanics, and intolerance for disrespectful, unkind, or unsupportive behaviors. <i>Example</i> : “I’ve just seen a lot of like being friendly and welcoming [in the community].”
Community Agreements	Explicit mention of forming community agreements via paper or online or having an organized conversation about comfort and concerns. <i>Example</i> : “Following that first incident in high school, we spent an entire session discussing how to handle this better in the future. We handmade a consent sheet together.”
Male Preserve in Communities	Refers to observations or behaviors related to the male preserve out-of-game. Dashiell’s (2020) definition of the male preserve in TTRPG communities is characterized by a numeric overrepresentation of men; valuing of traits associated with masculinity (See Eagly et al. 2019) and nerd (See Dashiell 2020); discrimination of marginalized identities; and a power imbalance that favors White, heterosexual, cisgender men (Dunning 1986, 80). <i>Example</i> : One player said that their group did not engage in rules lawyering but noted that it’s likely more common in larger TTRPG communities.
Hooliganism	Acting in crude, lewd, inappropriate, or offensive ways that would be unacceptable or condemned in more socially-conscious spaces (Dashiell 2020). Includes offensive goofiness, narrative hijacking, game attention hijacking, and offensive humor directed at specific people. Could be either in- or out-of-game. <i>Example</i> : “The necromancer probably she can be kind of abrasive and a little mean. So interpersonal in sort of perhaps making a joke at someone else’s expense and them not appreciating it.”

Humor at the Table	Players observing or participating in behaviors intended to be funny out-of-game. <i>Example:</i> “I think you go into the campaign with the expectation that you’re going to be a lot sillier...things are going to be a little nonsensical.”
Code	Description
In-Game Themes	
Recusance	Refers to in-game characters engaging in anarchy or illegality. Also includes mentions of characters questioning morals or engaging in morally questionable behaviors (according to player). <i>Example:</i> “[...] but you’re not necessarily within the law in any way unless you want to be, I guess.”
Themes of Rebellion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to revolution, uprising, or group dissent. <i>Example:</i> “The first one I played has some resistance going on against like an evil empire or something.”
Themes of Morals	Observations of narrative or world themes relating to ethics, justice, right versus wrong, or moral principles. <i>Example:</i> When asked what kinds of interpersonal conflicts their characters experience, one player said, “Generally, it’s like morals, if that makes sense. I always play very moral characters who want to do the right thing and the good, like the good right thing.”
Themes of Religion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to religion, cults, or crises of faith. <i>Example:</i> “Cults is a big thing. And generally... everything always has to do with some sort of religion or belief system.”
Themes of Humor	Observations of narrative or world themes related to comic relief, banter between characters, or satire. Campaigns described as funny, full of jokes, or amusing. <i>Example:</i> “Generally, I try to make [my characters] funny in different ways. I definitely make a lot of jokes. Especially when DMing.”
Themes of Politics	Observations of narrative or world themes related to political conflict, colloquial bureaucracy, or government. <i>Example:</i> “[There’s] usually like some sort of political power struggle.”
Themes of Queerness	Observations of narrative or world themes related to sexuality or gender outside of the male/female binary including (but not limited to) those identifying as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender, or nonbinary. <i>Example:</i> “I’ve been playing a lot of like nonbinary anarchists, basically.”
Themes of Colonialism	Observations of narrative or world themes related to colonialism, or one group exerting cultural, political, social, and economic dominance over another group or settlement. <i>Example:</i> “I think the military industrialization complex kind of shows up a lot and also like colonialism and its effects.”
Themes of Invasion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to forced entrance or infiltration over a group or settlement. <i>Example:</i> “The longest-running game that I had was focused around like an... otherworldly invader who’s sort of coming in and sort of devouring the gods.”
Themes of Oppression	Observations of narrative or world themes related to corruption, domination, tyranny, or dictatorship from institutionalized powers. <i>Example:</i> “The first one I played has [<i>sic</i>] some resistance going on against like an evil empire or something.”
Themes of Family	Observations of narrative or world themes related to familial relationships or conflicts. <i>Example:</i> “A common theme throughout all of my characters are like familiar familiar um conflicts [<i>sic</i>].”
Themes of Environment	Observations of narrative or world themes related to ecological awareness, protection, or conflict. <i>Example:</i> One participant reported liking the environmental themes of their TTRPG, <i>Wild Sea</i> .

Code	Description
Representation	
Representation of Neurodivergence	Refers to explicit mention of neurodivergence present in gaming community. <i>Example:</i> “We’re all nerds. It’s a lot of like queer neurodivergent nerds.”
Lack of Representation of Athletes	Refers to explicit mention of people identifying as athletes in gaming community. <i>Example:</i> “As far as I know, I’m the only athlete I’ve ever played with.”
Racial Representation	Refers to explicit mention of racial identities present in gaming community.
Lack of Representation of People of Color	<i>Example:</i> “I don’t see a lot of people of color represented.”
Representation of People of Color	<i>Example:</i> “Fairly evenly... fairly representatively represented and there was a lot of like East Asian and Indian kids there so it was, it was a decent... there’s a decent diversity there as well.”
Sexuality Representation	Refers to explicit mention of sexual identities present in gaming community.
Lack of Representation of Queerness	<i>Example:</i> When asked what identities are represented in her community, one player responded, “yeah, I guess straight.”
Representation of Queerness	<i>Example:</i> “Everyone’s gay. Everyone’s gay.”

Note: This manual only includes codes that were used in the final process of coding and that were applicable to the data. Certain codes, such as contrasting codes, are not presented in this manual if they were not assigned to any quotes in the transcripts.

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Alula Hirst is a Lewis & Clark undergraduate student with a B.A. in psychology. She focuses her research on queer and trans* rights, experiences, and stories alongside women's history. They have organized and presented in the Lewis & Clark Gender Studies Symposium as well as her capstone research paper published in the student journal *Synergia: The Journal of Gender Thought and Expression*. They have been in Dr. Diana J. Leonard's research lab since 2024, researching gender and social norms and roles in tabletop role-playing games and how they impact the play experience and narrative.

Wescott (Scooter) Flanagan is a Lewis & Clark graduate with a B.A. in psychology. Flanagan is a games enthusiast, playing and designing tabletop boards, miniatures, and role-playing games, and held the role of Lewis & Clark Gaming Society president for two years. He was a researcher in the Cascadia 9.0 lab, which studied serious video games as mediators of self-efficacy and agency in disaster preparedness. Flanagan joined Dr. Diana J. Leonard's social psychology lab in the fall of 2024, researching gender and social norms in tabletop role-playing game communities.

Diana J. Leonard is Associate Professor of Psychology at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. While working on her PhD in Psychology at UC Santa Barbara (2012, focus: intergroup emotions), she joined the Southern California larp community, where she later served as a storyteller and community manager. These experiences piqued Dr. Leonard's interest in the Psychological processes and impacts of larp and TTRPG. Blending practice with scholarship, Dr. Leonard applies social psychology theory and methodology to study role-playing games while also implementing roleplay techniques in the classroom to teach about social identity and intergroup relations.