International Journal of Role-Playing

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Dedicated

to

Dr. Matthew M. LeClaire

(1989-2018)

"In 2018, Dr. Matthew LeClaire received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and began a position at Coppin State University. Matt was a rising star in the bullying and juvenile delinquency field. This work reflects his commitment to the art of symbolic interactionism and his subcultural curiosity.

Dr. LeClaire was elected to be incoming chair of the Society for the Study of Social Problems' Crime and Juvenile Delinquency Division and bestowed a university-wide UNLV teaching award for his outstanding work that went well beyond the classroom. But most important of all, Matt was that once-in-a-lifetime kind of friend and peer mentor, of which I was honored to be one of.

I leave you with something Matt said to me once which embodies just who he was—as a mentor, scholar, and activist. 'You can't put a price on shaping young lives. Don't let anyone's lackluster acknowledgement make you think otherwise.'"

—Shekinah Hoffman
October 30, 2020

Editorial:
Retrospective, Challenges, and Persistence

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1. RETROSPECTIVE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE IJRP FROM 2006 TO 2020

The editorial team of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* is delighted to announce our 10th issue of the publication. The journal was envisioned in 2006 and established soon after to provide a space for scholars and practitioners to dialogue within the emerging field of role-playing game studies. The first issue, edited by Anders Drachen, was published December 30, 2008. In the "Introduction," Drachen writes,

> *The International Journal of Role-Playing* is a response to a growing need for a place where the varied and wonderful fields of role-playing research and development, covering academia, the industry and the arts, can exchange knowledge and research, form networks and communicate. (Drachen 2008)

By its very nature, role-playing is often an embodied, interactive, and experiential medium. Given its unusual space within academic study, a space for researchers, artists, and industry professionals to share knowledge became crucial in advancing the field. Although the annual publications affiliated with the Knudepunkt conference serve a similar function for Nordic larp, those books also include materials such as theoretical treatises, manifestos, documentations pieces, and more recently, advice for players (Nordic Larp Wiki, 2020). The website Nordiclarp.org also contributes to the role-play discourse, publishing opinion pieces alongside quasi-academic popular articles. In the United States, *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* (2012-2015) attempted to bridge the gap between leisurely and scholarly writing, including one section for popular pieces and another for double blind peer-reviewed articles.

Ultimately, the need for a consistent peer-reviewed publication exclusively committed to academic work on role-playing games became pressing. Scholars in this field around the world have produced an impressive number of papers, theses, and dissertations since the release of that first issue of IJRP in 2008, many of which rely upon the wisdom of the authors published in this volume among other excellent journals such as *Analog Game Studies*, the landmark anthology *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (2018), and the popular literature generated by practitioners. The scholars in our field can benefit from a rigorous process of review not only for their academic credentials, but also for their professional growth and the development of their academic skills.

Thus, the field remains informed by discourses unfolding within role-playing communities, as is evident by the amount of citations in academic articles that reference the above-mentioned popular publications among others. However, under the leadership of J. Tuomas Harviainen

from 2011-2015, as well as our current editorial board, the *International Journal of Role-Playing* has narrowed its scope over the years and now focuses exclusively on scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. While the editors do consider articles from non-academic practitioners, we have focused our attention on obtaining quality, informed reviews from our growing cohort of passionate and engaged scholars in the field.

In this edition, we have also changed our layout structure for greater readability and accessibility. We give thanks to the hard work of Drachen, Markus Montola, and Harviainen for establishing this journal, as well as to all the authors, reviewers, and layout designers past and present.

2. CHALLENGES AND PERSISTENCE

Due to this focus on rigor as well as other painful challenges, Issue 10 of the *IJRP* has been a long time in the making. We began shepherding full-length articles through the review process in 2017. Since that time, we were able to publish shorter conference-length papers for Issues 8 and 9, but this current issue has been a labor of love for the editorial board, not to mention our exceptionally patient authors and reviewers.

Issue 10 has faced other unusual and painful challenges. The author of our first fully accepted article for the issue, Matthew M. LeClaire, tragically passed away on September 21, 2018. The editors have been working with Matthew's former supervisor at University of Nevada Las Vegas, Andrew L. Spivak; his colleague, Shekinah Hoffman; and his parents, Guy M. and Mary Jo LeClaire; to ensure that all parties are informed and approve of the publication. His parents graciously agreed to write his professional biography for his article, which also features a touching memorial. We are in their debt and humbled to have the honor of carrying on Matthew's legacy and sharing his passion for scholarship with the world in a small way by publishing his work in our journal. We have dedicated this volume to Matthew, where Shekinah has shared the profound influence Matthew had on her life and the lives of others.

In addition, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the events of 2020, with the challenges of the global pandemic; uprisings against police violence; public advocacy for institutional reform and civil rights for Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC), immigrants, trans, and nonbinary folks; the economic crisis; catastrophic natural disasters due to climate change; and growing uncertainty about the future of democracy in the USA, UK, Belarus, Hong Kong, India, and elsewhere. We send our gratitude for the persistence of our authors and reviewers during this often unstable and devastating period of history and renew our commitment to providing a quality publication channel for scholars in our field.

3. ISSUE 10: SOCIAL DYNAMICS WITHIN ROLE-PLAYING COMMUNITIES

The strongest commonality among the six articles of this issue is an emphasis on *social dynamics within specific role-playing communities*. These communities cover a vast range of activities that fall under the label "role-playing," including traditional tabletop games, indie benefits, some articles discuss problematic behaviors within communities, such as in-group stigmatization of certain members, status jockeying, and the perpetuation of sexist and racists practices that make participation difficult for people who are not White, straight, cis male, and middle- to upper-class.

Taken as a whole, this issue represents a fascinating glimpse into the interpersonal

dynamics within several past and present analog play cultures. We begin with Aaron Trammell and Nikki Crenshaw's "The Damsel and the Courtesan: Quantifying Consent in Early *Dungeons & Dragons*," which examines the discourses of early tabletop role-playing communities through the lens of critical gender theory. The authors review discussions in 1975 in a fanzine called *Alarums & Excursions* on two controversial player-generated classes for *D&D* (1974): the Damsel and the Courtesan. The article demonstrates how misogynist tropes and the objectification of women were reinforced by the game mechanics within these classes. Importantly, they unpack discussions within the fanzine community as women and other members of the community pushed back against these stereotypes, arguing that the perpetuation of sexist tropes may have been exclusionary to women since the inception of modern role-playing games.

An excellent complement to this piece is our next article, "Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-playing Games." In this work, Steven Dashiell provides an excellent analysis of the socio-linguistic dimensions of rules discussions in tabletop groups. Dashiell posits that practices such as "rules lawyering" and "gamesplaining" reinforce tabletop gaming as a male preserve: a space within which men can perform otherwise problematic or aberrant behaviors due to the alibi of play. Dashiell argues that these practices further alienate women and players of color by reinforcing a form of "nerd" dominance, within which White, middle-class cis-men use the rules and game lore to jockey for status. This behavior sets the tone for others who enter the space to either adopt the problematic behavior or leave. This article demonstrates how the sexist and racist behavior within role-playing communities still persists within these exclusionary practices, despite growing awareness and progressive activism in recent years. This work is especially important when considering the huge influx of new players into role-playing communities inspired by the online streaming actual play communities such as *Critical Role* (2015-) and difficulties they might face with their sense of belonging.

Shifting from intragroup to intergroup dynamics, William J. White's "Indie Gaming Meets the Nordic Scene: A Dramatistic Analysis" analyzes a public conversation between key figures within two indie role-playing subcultures that have developed somewhat independently. The discussion took place at the Italian conference InterNosCon in May 2010 between the American Ron Edwards, who moderated the Forge indie tabletop community, and the Swede Tobias Wrigstad, one of the founders of the Jeepform collective, a specific subset of freeform role-playing emerging out of the Nordic countries that emphasizes social realism in role-play. The panel had been expected to be controversial, given Edwards' (2004) theoretical emphasis on the rules of a particular RPG determining its gameplay outcomes weighed against Wrigstad's (2008) emphasis on the autocratic power of the game master and otherwise flippant rejection of most play-cultural norms of RPGs, writ large. White applies Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad as a means to analyze the rhetorical moves made by each participant, which either differentiated their position from the other or emphasized their role as participants within a larger dialogue of play. This interaction is particularly interesting with reference to the previous papers in that it describes the perspectives of keyfigures who have influenced and shaped these parallel "indie" discourses as alternatives to more traditional games.

Transitioning to American boffer larp, in "Live Action Role-playing: Transcending the Magic Circle," Matthew M. LeClaire explores how *Dagorhir* players create characters and build community. Using symbolic interactionism, LeClaire's participant-observer ethnography emphasizes that, even within a primarily combat-focused game, players can explore different aspects of identity through the fictional framework. In spite of this identity exploration,

LeClaire observed how some players may not connect these character aspects to off-game growth in their self-concepts in spite of the corresponding behavior within the two frames that he observed. He also discusses the ways in which group members reinforce belonging within the *Dagorhir* community through social bonding, as well as the way players are given names and labels to signify their role in the group. However, LeClaire describes how some of these labels may reinforce social hierarchies and factionalism within the community, e.g., referring to combat-focused players as "stick jocks" and participants who role-play their characters as "flurbs." Such labeling can reinforce in- and out-group behavior within larps, where players may stigmatize other participants with a different play style than their own and group themselves accordingly. This work is also especially interesting with regard to the concept of the *alibi* of play, as some participants within the subculture LeClaire interviewed seemed unable or unwilling to view their characters as influential to their own personal growth..

Shifting in tone, we have two pieces pertaining to interactions within role-playing games as they pertain to player skill acquisition or demonstration. The first article with this focus is Matthew Orr, Sara King, and Melissa McGonnell's "The Influence of Role-playing Games on Perceived Social Competence." The authors conducted 6 qualitative interviews with tabletop players and analyzed how gaming may have impacted positively their participants' perceived social competence. Their data is presented here along four major themes: Content Focus, Social Focus, Creativity Focus, and Identity Focus. While exploratory in nature, this research offers a foundation for future studies related to how gamers view their participation in role-playing communities and what sort of personal meaning and/or growth they might experience within these groups.

Our final paper discusses the performance of the skill of teaching by professional instructors in both in-game and off-game spaces. Juliane Homann's "Not Only Play: Experiences of Playing a Professor Character at College of Wizardry with a Professional Background in Teaching" presents rich qualitative data obtained from 9 participant interviews. Homann's research seeks to understand the relationship between labor and play by discussing with teachers their experiences playing professors in the Danish-Polish blockbuster larp *College of Wizardry* (2014-). Homann applies several useful concepts from the study of work and leisure to larp. Notably, she connects *spillover* with *bleed*, where qualities or habits of work life spill over and are exercised in the frame of leisure. Homann also discusses *compensation*, where players seek out leisure activities that involve certain experiences or skills that they are not able to perform at work. These concepts are helpful in understanding player motivations, as one might assume that participants might prefer to do activities wholly different from their work life; indeed, many players perform labor activities in fiction that are quite similar to their professions as *first-* and *second-order* labor (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). Ultimately, while play can feel liberating for participants, many larps require them to engage in forms of labor that may or may not feel stressful. Homann gives us terminologyand examples of this phenomenon, helping us understand the relationship between the professional social frame and role-playing as a leisurely social activity.

As a whole, we remain pleased and humbled by the quality of work and determination demonstrated by everyone in this process. We hope these studies move our field further in its investigation of the social dynamics within leisure role-playing games.

—Sarah Lynne Bowman, Evan Torner, and Bill White
October 29, 2020

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The Damsel and the Courtesan: Quantifying Consent in Early *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: This essay is a history of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974-) fans in the 1970s *Alarums & Excursions* fanzine community. It offers a historical analysis centered around the way these fans performed hegemonic masculinity through the rules they constructed for two character classes: the damsel and the courtesan. An analysis of these two classes shows a community eager to use game rule algorithms as a way to center sexuality in their play. We argue that these communities provide evidence of how the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset provided a boiler-plate for game rules that support the norms of hegemonic masculinity and have influenced the culture of toxic masculinity in game algorithms today.

Keywords: Dungeons & Dragons, Alarums & Excursions, cultural history, representation, algorithms, masculinity, trpgs, tabletop, role-playing games

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1. INTRODUCTION

The story that has been told about the development of role-playing games often starts with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 and cascades forward from there. Despite the fact that it is well documented how *Dungeons & Dragons* and the role-playing game genre in fact emerged from a complex network of hobby designers and players (Peterson 2012), the game's popularity is frequently attributed to the efforts of *D&D*'s putative authors, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. Gygax, specifically, is fetishized by the media. For example, game news publications like *Polygon* frequently document the latest developments of the Gygax estate, the "geek news" web site *boingboing* has highlighted those portions of Jon Peterson's history of *D&D* that deal most specifically with Gygax (Doctorow 2014), and *Wired* ran a feature-length article dedicated to "The Life and Legacy of Gary Gygax" (Kushner 2008).

If we relied upon this media discourse to understand the success of *Dungeons & Dragons*, we would be inclined to attribute the popularity of role-playing games to the singular efforts of Gygax and his close collaborators. In other words, we would know role-playing games to be the historical invention of a handful of determined and visionary white men. This "great man" style of game history has been critiqued by game scholar Laine Nooney. She writes, "Our sense that videogame history is 'all about the boys' is the consequence of a certain mode of historical writing, preservation, memory, and temporally specific affective attachments, all of which produce the way we tell the history of videogames" (Nooney 2013).[1] But the

1 The media archaeological approach that Nooney takes here has been criticized for its reductive tendencies by Jaakko Suominen (2016), who categorizes it as a "pathology." (555) Because the approach taken in this essay might be also considered a work of media archeology, it is worth noting here that the authors would differ with this characterization. This essay has more in common with Foucault's later work on genealogy than his earlier work on archeology. Specifically, this work details the continual reemergence of hegemonic masculinity as a subjectivity in the players of *Dungeons & Dragons* and by extension other games which have borrowed its mechanics. We track the descent of this subjectivity over time through the mechanics of consent, specifically.

problems of this narrative go far deeper—they extend also to a historical mode of storytelling that completely obscures all voices, objects, and events that sit at the margins of society.

What if a history of role-playing games began with the communities that played the games as opposed to the designers who published them? There are hints of such historiography in existing work. For example, Jon Peterson's (2012) influential *Playing at the World* casts game design as a bottom-up community driven practice, despite attempts to read it as specifically valorizing Gygax and Arneson. Nick Mizer's (2014) cultural anthropological explorations of role-playing game play center the engagement of players at the table as opposed to foregrounding the experience of game designers. And, of course, Gary Fine's (1981) classic *Shared Fantasy* offers a close sociological reading of role-playing game players in the late 1970s; he interviews Gygax but doesn't regard his claims as necessarily authoritative.

Despite these important strides forward in understanding the community-driven design practices of the early *Dungeons & Dragons* scene, there is little historical work that attempts to address the cultural dynamics of early role-playing game communities. This article makes a contribution to that underexplored avenue of investigation. Importantly, this essay deviates from a good deal of orthodoxy in role-playing game studies scholarship. Although we discuss the way that consent is quantified and implemented as a rule in *Dungeons & Dragons*, we make no claims about the experiential nature of consent as a mechanic in role-playing games. The important work on how game mechanics do and do not evoke sexuality has been discussed in great detail by others such as Eliot Wieslander (2004), Ashley Brown and Jaakko Stenros (2018). This essay takes an agnostic stance toward the phenomenology of embodiment, sexuality, and play and focuses instead on the circulation of algorithmic representations of hegemonic masculinity through *Dungeons & Dragons*. In this sense, we draw on Stuart Hall's (1980) sentiment that these representations might be accepted, negotiated, or even dismissed by their audiences. (136-8) For better or worse, the brand of *Dungeons & Dragons* has become almost synonymous with role-playing games in popular culture. We are interested in how some rules capture the essence of hegemonic masculinity, and the discursive impact of these rules.[2]

Like Michael Saler's (2012) historical work on how science-fiction fans replicate and reinforce ideology, or the historical readings of role-playing games that Aaron Trammell (2014, 2016, 2018) has advanced, this essay works within the field of role-playing game studies to consider a critical, cultural, and feminist reading of an early role-playing game community. Like Saler and Trammell, this essay uses fanzines as a primary source to consider how these communities negotiated hegemonic masculinity. Documentation that explores the reception of the homebrew Damsel and Courtesan classes from *Alarums & Excursions* [*A&E*],[3] the largest fanzine community devoted to *Dungeons & Dragons*, helps us to understand how fans understood their own identities and learned to better understand the identities of others as part of a process of slow and negotiated cultural change.

This essay argues that the culture of hegemonic masculinity within the *Alarums & Excursions* community—even as they criticized specific individuals as "male chauvinist pigs"—

2 Steven Dashiell (2017) has written about how the practice of rules lawyering in role-playing games furthers systems of hegemonic masculinity at the game table. Nick LaLone (2019) and Matt Barton (2008) have written about the influence of *Dungeons & Dragons* on computer role-playing games. This essay connects these two arguments reads *Dungeons & Dragons* as an influential popular medium that models hegemonic masculinity with its systems.

3 *A&E* citations will be included in the footnotes of this essay whenever used. They will follow the following format: Author Name, *A&E* issue #, Month and Year, Page Number(s).

effectively *validated* and *normalized* efforts to engineer and implement quantitative mechanics of negotiating consent in role-playing games. This validation, we suggest, has affected how consent in games is treated today, and deserves re-examination.

2. ALARUMS & EXCURSIONS AND METHODS

In 1975 Lee and Barry Gold played *Dungeons & Dragons* (1973) for the first time. Later that year, Lee would send sixty copies of her fanzine *A&E* to friends around the country, beginning the print run of the longest running *Dungeons & Dragons* fanzine in history—one that continues even today. The articles printed in *A&E* would prove to be highly influential among role-players, and several of its contributors would become noted game designers in subsequent years (Mason 2004), showing how the creative energy of fans could be incorporated into a feedback loop with designers, thus co-constituting the game industry.

We consulted a private archive of *A&E* fanzines to conduct the historical research in this essay.[4]

A&E was born out of the Los Angeles science fiction fan scene in 1975. Inspired by her experience playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, community buzz about the game in other fanzines, and the publishing traditions of science fiction fans, Lee decided to found a fanzine dedicated to role-playing games. *A&E*, Lee wrote in the introduction of its first issue, is a cross between an amateur publishing association and a fanzine.

The division between fanzine and amateur publishing association is undoubtedly complex. Fanzines, as Gold intends the term, were usually single-author collections that are distributed by mail to a relatively small intimate network of subscribers. An amateur publishing association, in contrast, is a network of fan authors and readers who would collect and collate submissions from each other for distribution to each other. *A&E* is a hybrid of the two models, because although its contents were crowd-sourced through its affiliate, Gold was particularly diligent in editing its contents, and managing its economic solvency herself (Figure 1).

2. The fanzine will cost
   a. Contributors - postage only.
   b. Non-contributors -- postage plus
      1) nothing if you had a contribution of at least four pages in last issue.
      2) 35¢ if you had some contribution in last issue
      3) 75¢ otherwise.
   c. The zine is not available for trade except to other D&D publications.
   d. Due to variability of cost, we are not offering subscriptions but you may send a check for a lump sum and we will deduct costs until the money is almost all used up and then notify you.

Figure 1: An example of the administrative work behind an issue of *A&E*.[5]

Lee Gold's hybrid model was a space of radical conversation amongst its constituents. Readers of *A&E* were also writers for *A&E*.[6] One popular way of understanding fans, and fan

4 As of this writing, issues of *A&E* are only available for purchase from Lee Gold directly.

5 Lee Gold, *A&E* 1, July 1975, 1.

6 Although *Dungeons & Dragons* creator Gary Gygax often chose to publish his thoughts through Dragon, the magazine published by TSR hobbies, he would occasionally publish within *A&E* as well. Those publishing in *A&E* were so keenly invested in the understanding and development of *Dungeons*

culture broadly, is advanced by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2005). Jenkins argues that fans operate through grassroots channels, often challenging the logic of media producers in productive ways (Jenkins, 2005). The plurality of hats and roles taken on by fans in the publication were so notably diverse that it makes little sense to juxtapose the fans publishing *A&E* against those like Gygax who had graduated from the world of small-distribution fan publishing (in *Diplomacy* fanzines) to the world of medium-distribution business management.

Recognizing the intimate relationship between fans and industry helps to better contextualize the work of Lee Gold and her cohort at *A&E* against the master narrative of Gary Gygax as game design genius. This lens reveals how gamers and designers are often one and the same. It helps to show how the political views of designers and fans in this space were the result of long-standing discussions and hard fought social battles. Gamers in 1975 and 1976 were actively engaged with problems of feminism and intersectionality that are still being negotiated within the gaming community today. *A&E* moves us away from a history of heroes and villains toward a history of slow and negotiated collective change.

Following Foucault, we employ genealogical methods that offer a way to recuperate a lost perspective of the past, to descend through the accidents, errors, and falsehoods which have yielded that which we value today. This sort of historical genealogy can be deployed to reveal invisible structures of power. According to Foucault, the method of genealogy "seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations" (Foucault 1984, 81).

The "hazardous play of dominations" is a key focus of our method. We work from moments of contention and conflict in the historical record in a deliberate effort to reveal invisible systems of subjection. Thus, our work offers a glimpse into how consent and masculinity were negotiated by this early player community, so that we can better reflect on how these issues are negotiated by players today.[7]

3. CASE STUDY: THE DAMSEL AND THE COURTESAN

One such moment of contention was the discussion surrounding the articles about "the Damsel" and "the Courtesan" presented in *A&E*. The Damsel and the Courtesan were two optional character classes that players could choose to play or that Dungeon Masters could incorporate as NPCs with which to confront players.

As fan creations appearing in a fan publication, the Damsel and the Courtesan were not official or authorized additions to the game. Rather, they were articulations of their authors' particular visions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, offered in order to share those visions with fellow players with some communicative intent—even if only provocation. Certainly, the charges of "male chauvinism" that were levied against the authors did not seem to faze them much. Thus we mean to suggest that the Damsel and the Courtesan are not so much indicative of the overarching culture of *D&D* fans as they are indicative of how fans at the time reacted to and managed provocatively sexist material. By analyzing the snippets of discourse which follow

& Dragons that they would publish exposés on the game's mechanics, offer modifications to help adapt the game to their play-style, and even share their own home-brew games to for interested players. To consider the fans publishing in *A&E* as occupying a single category such as "consumer," "publisher," "author," or "designer," would be inaccurate.

7 Our work here complicates Eliot Wieslander's (2004) argument that sex mechanics are underdeveloped in role-playing games by drawing attention to how early rules introduced sexuality to role-playing games within the context of hegemonic masculinity.

our analysis of the mechanics, we present a grassroots-level account of how masculinity and consent were negotiated by the designers and players in the *A&E* fan community. The rules for the Courtesan appeared in the 1975 November-December issue of *A&E*.[8]

The author of "The Courtesan" was Dick Eney (1932-2006). Lee Gold described Eney to us as being known for his argumentative nature and his track record for publishing provocative articles in the community.

In describing a rationale for the Courtesan character class, Eney writes:

> I remember Lee Gold commenting once that she wouldn't allow Characters to loan each other items free unless they were lovers. That's a slight hint that there is an aspect of the Dungeon which has escaped regularization so far: our Characters' sex lives, or rather the various means we have to simulate these. Naturally, since everything in the Dungeon has a probability table to go with it, we ought to have something for this too: and it might be a Good Thing to allow them to set up special relations with other Characters in a regular fashion. Thus three new draft rules for your consideration, covering the three essential aspects of making Love as well as War; or, *Dungeons and Debauchery!*[9]

Eney thus advocates for a game-mechanical sensibility around love instead of war and notes that sex is actually a somewhat repressed aspect of role-playing games where the focus is often set on ways to combat other characters.

But Eney's seemingly sex-positive intentions stand in contrast with his employment of a number of explicitly sexist tropes that present women less as partners in a consensually sexual relationship, and more as objects to be interacted with in the game. It is consistently implied that courtesans are intended as NPCs to be patronized by male player-characters.

For example, the mock advertisement for the business called "Marilyn's Magic Massage" (figure 2) presents an idealized and hyper-sexualized female body who may be one of 15 woman available round-the-clock to offer services such as "bikini baths" in "complete privacy." The tag line, "Maybe there's a branch in *your* dungeon," is addressed to the reader both as Dungeon Master (here is a resource for play) and as player-character (here is a titillating service of which your character can partake).

The article then describes a number of game mechanics that only make this relationship more clear. As courtesans would gain experience they would earn titles (figure 3) that only serve to highlight their explicit connection to sexuality: "Jillflirt," "Painted Hussy," "Pleasure Wench, "Temptress," and "Joy-Bringer" are among the various titles given to the courtesan.[10] "Advancement" signaled that the courtesan had become a more practiced and higher class prostitute, as level titles such as "Fair Cyprian" and "Hetaera" signify.

Finally, rules are also included for how the courtesans should misrepresent herself to others when seeking to earn money, "When negotiating Courtesans will misrepresent themselves as being 3-6 levels (D4 roll +2) above their actual level."[11] This rule tells the Dungeon Master how courtesans operate: They lie about their social status in order to earn more money from the john.

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8 Dick Eney, *A&E* 6, November-December 1975, 25-32.

9 Dick Eney, *A&E* 6, November-December 1975, 25.

10 Dick Eney, ***A&E*** 6, November-December 1975, 25.

11 Dick Eney, *A&E* 6, November-December 1975, 25.

Figure 2: A comedic banner framing Eney's Courtesan class.

Eney's rules for bringing sexuality into the game, in other words, were less about raising sexuality as a point of conversation, or play, and were instead a set of algorithms for transforming the female body into a robot of sorts. Sex and sexuality are not described here as facets of the role-playing experience. Far from it, they are instead new ways in which an idealized male player can be said to exert his gaze on women in the game world. Eney's Courtesan is more of an interactive sex toy than she is a woman with agency.

The algorithmic sexuality of Eney's Courtesan is different than the scopophilia that Michelle Nephew (2006) critiques role-playing games through. Nephew draws on film theory to explain that role-playing games commonly foreground the sexuality of women because they are made in a large part for men to consume. While we agree with this reading of role-playing games generally, we read Eney's robotic Courtesan as a simulation. She is more than the object of the male gaze: she is the embodiment of it.

0	Jillflirt	20,000	Temptress
1200	Flower Girl	40,000	Fair Cyprian
2400	Painted Hussy	60,000	Joy-Bringer
4800	Pleasure Wench	90,000	Hetaera
9600	Songstress	125,000	Adventuress

Figure 3: Advancement titles for progressing in Eney's Courtesan Class.

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3.1 "Making Out": Maneuver Rules

This is made clear by Eney's rules for how players might interact with the courtesan. This is a fascinating turn, as Eney draws attention to the ability of games to represent sexuality by developing game mechanics that perform this work, while at the same time reducing sexual interaction to that of a set of numbers. Despite the ways Eney's algorithm works to flatten sexual encounters to one of numbers and not compassion, it is visionary insofar as it saw sexuality as a sphere of human interaction as equally compelling as combat.

The rules that Eney proposed for "making out" work as follows: Players choose a target that they aim to make out with. They then calculate the difference in their Charisma statistics (for instance a character with a Charisma score of 11 who tries to make out with a character with a Charisma score of 13 has a two point difference) and use this difference as a positive or negative modifier for their saving throw. In the case of the example in parentheses, if the character with a lower charisma was targeted by the other character, they would add two to their saving throw stat making it that much harder to resist the advance on the roll of a twenty-sided dice.

When making out with other players, this logic becomes especially invasive. Eney writes, "Player characters, having free will, may choose to roll twice; if so, they resist seduction by a saving throw on either roll." Free will—the difference between human-ness and object-ness—is captured here as an extra die roll. Although we ought to give Eney some credit for considering that a second player may desire more agency when deciding to opt out of a sexual encounter, it is concerning that this sense of agency is reduced to a second roll of the dice, and not something more fitting like a conversation.

The idea that consent can be captured by the roll of the dice implies that in the algorithmic space developed by Eney, consent was simply a number to be draped upon one of the hollow puppet character bodies included in the game. The implication that consent could ever be represented as a die roll underscores the degree to which objectification permeates most early role-playing games. For example, one Dungeon Master, the editor of a well-regarded codification of *D&D* rules and a practicing psychologist, described making a female player roll to see if her female character was still a virgin despite the importuning of another player and could thus successfully interact with a unicorn.[1]

The mechanics and rules of role-playing games, to the degree that they utilize dice and resolve encounters, transform all bodies—player and otherwise—into objects within the game

1 John Eric Holmes, 1980. "Confessions of a Dungeon Master." *Psychology Today.*

world. The crucial question that we must ask of the algorithms in games is where has the player been given agency over their own body, and where has the game's machinic logic denied the player agency.

The way that agency is allocated is more clearly accessible in the algorithm provided in Eney's article related to the intensity of a make-out session (figure 5). Here, a six-sided dice is used to determine how a courtesan's interaction in a sexual encounter will escalate. Implied here is that the courtesan's body is not her own given that the difference between a conversation and going "all the way" revolves only around a roll of the dice. This bizarre rule codes intimacy as the result of mathematical negotiation and not affection, dialogue, or bodily capacity. The benefits to "morale" and "confidence" as well as other positive effects accrue, of course, to the PC john, becoming greater as he achieves more intimate sexual congress.

Table A. Encounter Intensity -- Effect

Intensity	Morale	Confidence	Benefit (rule 2)
1. Conversation	0	0	5
2. Flirtation	+1 on 4-6 on D6	0	7
3. Light snogging	+1 on 2-6	D6 roll -3*	9
4. Heavy petting**	+1 on 1-3, +2 on 4-6	D6 roll -2*	11
5. All the Way**	+ half a D6	D6 roll -1*	13
6. Mutual Satisfaction**	+ D4 roll	D6 roll	15

Constitution drops as morale increases, point for point.

* Never less than 0.
** Requires privacy. Return to quarters or pay for a room.

Figure 5: Eney's rules for "making out" in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Some context for these rules must be considered. Just as Eney and Konklin both identified as men, many (but not all) of the folks playing with and experimenting with these rules were also men. In this study we counted the number of women publishing in *Alarums & Excursions* over the course of the first year and found that the number consistently dropped with the publication of each issue. Although the reduction of sexual relations to that of an encounter with an object is concerning, to say the least, there is also a question of whether these rules may have worked as a boundary object through which homoerotic desire was negotiated. Because reducing sexuality to an algorithm where one has no control over their body is such an extreme form of dissociation and objectification, one is left to wonder how these rules were used in practice. Consider a scenario where a male Dungeon Master uses these rules as a way to negotiate a sexual encounter between a female NPC in the game and another male player. Reducing sexuality here to mathematics allows both presumably heteronormative players an alibi for what could otherwise be seen as an exercise in gender bending and playing with sexuality.

Reducing sexual encounters to a set of numbers allows players to play with sexuality in a way that avoids the dangers of intimate encounters of the body. At the same time, it furthers a discourse of objectification that pervades the logic of role-playing games. At the time, in the seventies, it was a somewhat radical departure from the rules which constrained

wargames to consider the mechanics that lay beneath human intimacy and not human warfare. Similarly, these rules must be read as the byproduct of a time where sex, culturally, was the focus of a conversation around "free love." And some feminists, like Andrea Dworkin (most famously), were entertaining a conversation that questioned the social value of men and even pornography. Feminism at the time was sensationalized by the media, based on this work, as being anti-men and anti-sex, and thus somewhat stigmatized culturally.

3.2 The Damsel

The fan community did not embrace the Courtesan with open arms. One fan, the notorious Samuel Konkin III, agreed with the premise that *Dungeons & Dragons* ought to provide players with an opportunity to role-play love as well as war. To this end, Konkin also devised a character class—The Damsel.[2] The Damsel was the typical Disney princess. Konkin critiqued Eney's Courtesan for not being, well…courtly enough, and developed the damsel as a lawful counterweight to the roguish courtesan. Unfortunately, Konkin's Damsel fell prey to many of the same sexist and reductionist pitfalls that Eney's Courtesan was subject to.

Samuel Konkin III (1947-2004) was a Saskatchewan transplant living in Los Angeles with strong libertarian and anarchist beliefs. Where Dick Eney's writing was often grounded in militaristic and conservative philosophy, Konkin was ultimately very idealistic and left leaning. Konkin edited and published several political zines like *New Libertarian Notes*, *New Libertarian Weekly*, and *New Libertarian* magazine in addition to his contributions to *A&E*. Konkin's work as a fan was often explicitly political, such as a drawing he published in

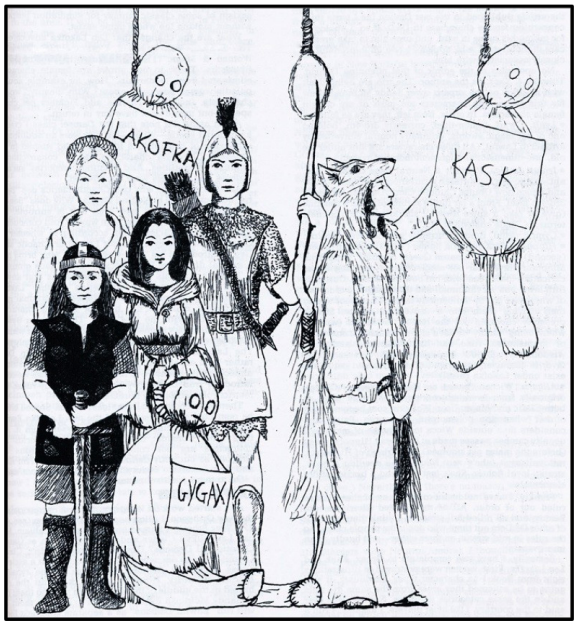

Figure 4: An illustration by S.C. McIntosh published as the cover of Samuel Konkin III's Clear Ether within *A&E* 19. It depicts feminist pushback toward the *Dragon* editorial team.

A&E featuring several women in the fan community hanging effigies of Gary Gygax, Len Lakofka, and Tim Kask (figure 4).[3] Konkin often incorporated themes of social justice into his

2 Samuel Konkin III, *A&E* 7, January 1976, 39-42.

3 Samuel Konkin III, *A&E* 19, February 1977, 63.

writing.

The Damsel was a counterpoint to the courtesan. It was a class for women who embraced stereotypes of purity as opposed to stereotypes of sexuality and duplicitousness. Despite Konkin's well-meaning objective in creating the damsel, she was nonetheless an exaggerated stereotype of femininity. In playtesting the character, Konkin ran a character named "Cheerlieder," who was unable to find a suitable mate in the party and who held the lantern while the other characters brandished sword and steel.

For us, the most problematic characteristic of the damsel was her sense of honor. Not only did Konkin's damsel play into stereotypes, the rules implied that she was again supposed to reduce her own identity to one of sexuality:

> Damsels choose death before dishonor (in classic sense), yielding their chastity only to males married by Cleric. The damsel then becomes a "consort" and may raise children. Failure to maintain [honor] (including submission to rape without suicide!) drops the damsel to a courtesan. Clerics may *absolve* (neutral) courtesans to damsel status—but only for sincere repentance.[4]

Konkin not only equates purity with virtue and chastity in this passage, but he also suggests that suicide is an appropriate response to rape. By proclaiming that a victim of rape is expected to "repent," he is playing into a rhetoric of victim blaming. He also insinuates that the damsel's main (and perhaps only) use is a sexual one. Like the courtesan, the female body, in the case of the damsel, is again reduced to that of a sexual object.

Konkin would struggle in his writing to articulate the female body's relationship to sexuality. He would consider the possibility of including male damsels. He writes, "Male Damsels? If some group wishes to go 'gay,' and remain lawful, it could be conceivable that a gay damsel could make fourth level, and higher toward Gay Vampires, etc. However straights will be utterly repelled and immune. Lesbian damsels are undetectable unless they deliberately turn-off males."[5] Not only does sexuality persist as the defining characteristic of the damsel, but Konkin limits the degree to which gay men can pass as a damsel and suggests that we understand gay women by observing the degree to which they reject the advances of men. Through his writing Konkin reifies the idea that women are sexual objects, and even suggests that gayness is problematic in a women only if she resists a man's advances (thus challenging the essentialization of her as an object).

In the context of this period Konkin may have had good intentions. His clumsy acceptance of gayness as an acceptable sexuality shows that unlike many others in the community who were explicitly homophobic, Konkin held progressive values and wanted to include a greater diversity of people in the hobby. That said, Konkin's depiction of the Damsel was just as, if not more, dehumanizing that Eney's Courtesan. Konkin's writing reduces women to a sexual stereotype of purity while Eney's reduces women to that of a stereotype of vice. Both flatten the representation of women in *Dungeons & Dragons* and regulate character and intimacy with a set of mathematical equations. As noted above, these equations would then continue to circulate within tabletop and computer role-playing games over time. But while the algorithms that governed intimacy in games crystalized in these misogynist frameworks, the player community was able to negotiate and manage any feelings that were hurt through conversation.

4 Samuel Konkin III, *A&E* 7, January 1976, 40.

5 Samuel Konkin III, *A&E* 7, January 1976, 41.

4. DISCURSIVE ACTION WITH MALE CHAUVINIST PIGS

Our aim in this essay was to excavate moments of historical conflict in an effort to reveal the invisible forms of subjection at play in the community. Through our research, the fan conversations around these character classes revealed to us that while the community was discussing new rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* on a surface level, they were truly interrogating their deep-seated beliefs, stereotypes, and biases on a deeper level. For this reason, we end this essay by returning to these conflicted conversations as a way to better observe how the community was itself negotiating the currents of hegemonic masculinity flowing through it.

The community was deeply involved with conversation about the damsel and the courtesan. Many questioned the degree to which these characters offered an accurate representation of sexuality. In the excerpts analyzed below, it is clear that many considered Konkin and Eney to be MCPs, or Male-Chauvinist Pigs (the 1970s equivalent of the MRAs or Men's Rights Activists), for the ways that they so brazenly engaged with female sexuality in their writing. Even conservative Dick Eney was concerned with how Konkin connected suicide and rape through a game mechanic. Despite these differences, the community continued to publish, but over time many of the women who contributed to *A&E* dropped out; we have provided in this essay a good deal of circumstantial evidence to support the argument that this is a consequence of the objectification detailed in this essay.

The fans who discussed the politics of inclusion with Samuel Konkin and Dick Eney, were surprisingly civil. As they negotiate the politics of bodies, algorithms (for them, rules) and sexuality, they offer polite but firm pushback on the points that are most concerning. It is imperative on us, visitors to an earlier time from the future, not to judge the Damsel and the Courtesan by our present moral standards as much as to recognize ourselves in this earlier moment of gamer culture where things were somehow more naïve. Writing now in a post #metoo world, we must revisit the past remembering that the politics of popular culture were, at that time, understated. To this end, we must recontextualize this essay with player accounts drawn from players themselves living through their moment.

We end this history with some snippets from the conversations players had with one another about the Damsel and the Courtesan in *Alarums and Excursions*. As Gold, Eney, Pierson, and Sherna critique the problematic tropes of these classes, they also find space to critique the absurd. They wonder how long it takes to lace armor in the bedroom, tease the MCPs in their lives for their abject ignorance, and even find time to acknowledge and accept the queer folks in their community and lives. It is important to remember that the folks participating in these discussions saw these as private conversations occurring within the private boundaries of community. These conversations were never expected to be observed by researchers from the future; they must be read as naïve friends communicating and negotiating radically different understandings of gender, sexuality, and consent at a time when misogyny stood as the dominant cultural paradigm.

> *Lee Gold wrote to Samuel Konkin:*
>
> Like your Damsel character, but I sort of object to the MCPism of it all, particularly the fact that a damsel loses honor after rape unless she commits suicide. Seems to me that isn't medieval but Victorian mores, hence highly anachronistic. //By the way, removing plate armor in medieval days usually took a good hour and even leather armor about

ten minutes minimum.[6]

Dick Eney wrote to Samuel Konkin:

Damsel unable to use her wiles unless she is dressed revealingly is Bad Stuff, but might be justified by the pleas that some grossly evident attraction is needed in a rushed situation (That would indicate that you've never seen how good a pretty girl can look in armor or other protective gear, but let it pass.) But then you go on to have these attractions also destroyed when she does something that shows high intelligence, and to that I can only say, *oink oink oink!* **

** Mighod, mandatory suicide after being raped? One seldom thinks of the medieval church as more liberal than faaans, but bedamned if it isn't in this case.[7]

Dan Pierson wrote to Lee Gold:

Were-armor is a good idea. I'll have to include some. I agree that Courtesans need not be female; I also accept homosexual lovers.[8]

Sherna wrote to Sam Konkin:

Your Damsels are a really fine satire, although I might choke a bit at anyone actually trying to play one. (On the other hand, I do have a[nother] Unique [character class], called a male chauvinist pig. . .)[9]

Reading these candid messages today, we are struck by the ways that the community engages Samuel Konkin's Damsel with an earnest dialogue about how it was problematic. The community takes great care to participate in restorative social justice, trying to explain to Konkin what he got wrong and what made his character class profoundly unfun for a diverse group of players. What's more, in the snippet above there is even an inspiring note of acceptance for LBGTQ characters. Even though some of the mechanics the *Alarums and Excursions* community developed were toxic to their community, it's important that we recognize that these players were in explicit dialogue with these challenging cultural tropes. Although they struggled to make sense out of cultural practices of consent, they also worked together to raise their consciousness about negative representations of women in games.

Nonetheless, the presence of a kind of hegemonic masculinity is a key feature of the *A&E* discussions about the Damsel and the Courtesan.

Research on hegemonic masculinity grows out of sociological theory that identifies patterns of action amongst men. Historically, work on hegemonic masculinity predates the now more contemporary (and meme-able!) work on toxic masculinity. Sociologists R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt explain that hegemonic masculinity is less about forceful subordination, but instead small and invisible patterns that add up to societal

6 Lee Gold, *A&E* 8, February 1976, 9.
7 Dick Eney, *A&E* 8, February 1976, 42.
8 Dan Pierson, *A&E* 8, February 1976, 51.
9 Sherna, *A&E* 10, April 1976, 54.

force, "Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendency achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion." (832) Importantly, the concept did not imply that all men perform hegemonic masculinity, nor did it imply that all masculinities were hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinity is a structural problem; it is reinforced by people of all genders at all times in our society.

Although the impact of hegemonic masculinity remains relevant to scholarship on identity today, writing on digital culture—and games more specifically—tends to utilize the related concept of toxic masculinity more frequently. To some extent, this is due to the alignment of games and computational technologies with geek culture, and the recent work on toxic geek masculinity best defined by media scholars Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017). For Salter and Blodgett, the identity policing which occurs across lines of gender in geek communities is what comprises the performance of geek masculinity (11-12). Geek femininity exists only in absence to the hegemonic presence of masculinity in geek communities, and the microaggressions through which geek culture is gatekept are precisely what make geek masculinity toxic.

The culture of masculinity in games relates to a set of deeper questions about what is taken for granted about player and avatar. We argue that the assumption in these contexts is not just that games are designed for a stereotypical male player, but that they are constructed in a way that aims to provide this player with a masculine power fantasy of unlimited agency. In the open worlds of role-playing games specifically, the masculine player is presented with a veritable buffet of bodies that they are encouraged to interact with. As this essay will show, rules were engineered to manage these interactions (and their consequences) through dice rolls, charts, and tables. Thus, we argue that quantified systems of consent are an example of a system that reinforces hegemonic masculinity.

The unique idiosyncrasies of hegemonic masculinity within the context of *Dungeons & Dragons* is precisely what make the *A&E* community so fascinating to study. The *A&E* group offered homebrew rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* and offered a different approach to gameplay than that advocated for by Gary Gygax in *Dragon*. The above research on *A&E* shows a community working through the messy and conflicted space of ideology as it discusses and debates how consent and gender should be approached in character design.

5. CONCLUSION

This essay focused on homebrew classes in the *A&E* community as a way to consider the lived cultural politics of role-playing game fans in the 1970s. This focus offers a way to observe a historical parallel to the toxic masculinity which persists within gamer communities today. The Damsel and the Courtesan offer examples of how the early players of *Dungeons & Dragons* took for granted the ways they performed and reinforced hegemonic masculinity. This led not only to the stereotypical architecture of these character classes, but it also reinforced a more insidious belief in the ways the value of quantification for game design. Despite the concerns we may harbor from our critical reading of *A&E*, we ultimately feel that the *A&E* community merits further study as a space of radical discourse. One of the great strengths of role-playing has been its ability to bring people from radically different walks of life together around a game table, and the class design of The Damsel and The Courtesan shows them doing just this. The case study described above, however problematic, is also a real story of real friends working difficult cultural problems that still arise today.

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Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-playing Games

Abstract: This paper examines the nature of conversations that occur at gaming tables in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) and the degree to which gendered communication impacts how individuals participate in gaming sessions. There is a host of research discussing barriers for women and minorities in terms of full representation and interaction in gaming and "geek" spaces (Garcia 2017; Reagle 2015; Stang and Trammell 2019). I assert that one rationale for this limitation is the domination of gaming spaces by men, particularly middle-class White men, and the subculture that comes along with this demographic. Dunning (1986) discusses the concept of male preserves, how sports in particular create subcultures that prize behavior and language that are associated with men and embodied in the male form. I discuss how the TRPG table is a male preserve, encouraging a level of dominance that colors table talk and acceptable norms (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2014). The masculine nature of the discussion style of this table talk is more difficult by subaltern groups because of the clear association with "stereotypical" gamers, commonly White and male, and this difficulty is demonstrated in various ways (Bowman 2013; Hendricks 2006; Ilieva 2013). I surmise that while diversity has always existed and proceeds to improve in tabletop gaming, the subcultural elements of a male preserve remain difficult to uproot.

Keywords: masculinity, discourse, sociology, inequality, gamer characteristics, tabletop RPGs, role-playing games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite evidence to the contrary, the gaming subculture has overwhelmingly been perceived as a male space (Vermeulen, Bauwel, and Van Looy 2017). Past characterizations of role-playing games in popular culture have highlighted stereotypical examples of particularly White men and have correlated exceling in role-playing games to a lack of interest in more physical activities, reinforcing the gaming nerd stereotype (Kendall 2000; Kendall 2011). While women and racial minorities have always been present at the gaming table, the preponderance of belief stemming from stereotypes and social stigma have coalesced into a system of norms that both centers and privileges what is considered "nerd" or "geek" behaviors commonly associated with White males. As such, other populations have employed prefixes and suffixes (PoC gamer, gamer girl) to clearly pinpoint the convergence of their differentiated identities (Witkowski 2018). While research has looked at the demographics of who is participating in tabletop role-playing games and examined the erasure and inclusion of populations from gaming materials, there is a lack of in-depth research on the nature of the interactions at the game table; nowhere near the amount of public facing critical work on the topic. (Garcia 2007; Long 2016; Stang and Trammell 2019).

This paper examines the subcultural space of role-playing games through the lens of Eric Dunning's (1986) male preserve. Using this sociological concept allows for the examination of two distinct aspects of the discussions at the table, otherwise known as "table talk." First, if the role-playing subculture, and specifically the gaming table, is a male preserve, then there is a style of discussion that actively privileges men, particularly the stereotypical White male nerd. The white male nerd is characterized as "a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication" (Lane 2018, 1). Elements of dominance are demonstrated through a display of knowledge acted out via *gamesplaining*

and *rules lawyering* – the discursive effects of mechanics recitation from memory, arguing over game mechanics, and a draconian adherence to established game rules. These elements prize knowledge over experience and can serve as barriers to those who do not perceive themselves as having sufficient command over information related to the game. These knowledges inherently create a space of unequal cultural capital, as rulebooks in tabletop role-playing games can prove expensive, with complicated and extensive rules that take time to comprehend.

Second, the male preserve has a degree of "hooliganism" that is allowed at the table. While this discursive hooliganism can be displayed in various ways, in games a character "acts out" in a manner that could be interpreted as crude, crass, or inappropriate and would spark a discussion in a more socially conscious culture. The reticence to apply contemporary social norms to gaming worlds (e.g. discussions of race, feminism, sexual assault), but to frame these conversations as comedy or in-game behavior can lead to uncomfortable situations for a diverse gaming population, as in depth conversations can be interpreted as "ruining the fun," and treated as some form of "bad sportsmanship." In game, this can result in characters doing inappropriate things (e.g. non-consensual sex or treating an NPC of a different race poorly), and then those actions breaking into humor, comments, and commentary centered around the act at the gaming table.

Overall, the discussion in this paper challenges, in part, the idea that representation matters. The act of bringing individuals to the table must be understood as secondary to a consideration of what is happening at the table. If the gaming table is a male preserve, then the discourses occurring could be understood as masculine and catering to the dominant idea of what is a "gamer," regardless of the demographics of the table. The indoctrination that occurs in the gaming subculture is what needs to be examined, and a fundamental shift of "who" is at the table makes little difference if the aspects of dominance persist as valued aspects of role-playing gamer culture.

2. RACE AND GENDER IN GAMING

Contemporary issues have been noted as signaling the inherent gender inequality that is present in the fields of entertainment and gaming. Concurrently, research and discussion has examined how role-playing games have handled the issue of race and gender in their subculture. Women and racial minorities have rarely been presented as integral or mainstay parts of the gaming community. As Salter and Blodgett (2012) note, the "silencing of marginalized voices is part of a larger trend in the hardcore gaming public. The digital representations of women and other marginalized figures within the public are rarely rich or complex" (411). Women and minorities in role-playing games are commonly portrayed in submissive, secondary, and unremarkable ways, making more complex imagery and rare and noteworthy (Long 2016; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2018). The role-playing game community suffers from the power of a stereotype that persists outside of the subculture but is also internalized within its confines. Thus, "there is agreement that the majority of players are male, and almost unanimous consensus that game players are young, and along with these there is evidence that players may have a tendency to be white, pale-skinned, middle-class, educated, and with poor social skills" (Curran 2011, 45). The acceptance of this stereotype allows for the subculture to center White men for two reasons: 1) it reflects what is seen as the dominant population among role-playing gamers, and 2) game masters can use White men as the common antagonists in games as well, reducing any possibility of being

perceived as sexist or racist by designing adversaries that are members of minority groups. Recent discussions, however, have discussed the ways in which other groups, such as the drow and orcs, have been used as discriminatory substitutions which allow for permissible racism and discrimination as these groups come from "evil races" (DiPlacino 2020; Limborg 2020). Wizards of the Coast has decided to change much of its past behavior and mythology, as understandings and portrayals of these groups are promised to change (Marshall 2020).

3. GAMER MASCULINITY

As an outgrowth of feminist theory, men's studies have deeply interrogated the question of masculinity, and the effects of masculinity constructions on the lives of men. Contemporary masculinity arguments operate from a critical theory model, demonstrating how masculinity is reified through the social world, and how expressions of masculine ideals can be harmful to both women and men. Prominence surrounds the theories of Raewyn Connell who defines masculinity as a collection of configured practices that are understood as best embodied by men. Connell also suggests the existence of hegemonic masculinity, an idealized sense of how men should behave in Western society representing a near-impossible litmus test for all men. Hegemonic masculinity penalizes a more feminine performance; the less "manly" one is, the more likely they are to be critiqued. While most will not achieve the romanticized and epitomized ideal of male behavior, it remains as a guidepost that situates behaviors of men in all aspects of society.

Nerd masculinity, or acts associated with those Western society refers to as nerds, strays far from the hegemonic ideal, but still retains power. The stereotypical imagery associated with the nerd has evolved in the ensuing generations. Once thought of as a "broken" form of masculinity accentuating characteristics such as meekness, passivity, and awkwardness, the concept of nerd masculinity has grown to be seen as a relevant and acceptable example of how manhood can be displayed (Almog and Kaplan 2017; Bendele 2019; Gruys and Munsch 2020). A key factor involves those performing a nerd masculinity still hewing to elements of hegemonic masculinity. Scott Kiesling (2007) theorizes that masculine discourse has four components: dominance, heterosexism, gender difference, and male superiority. Common discussions in nerd subculture touch on all of these elements, as there is a significant amount of gatekeeping that occurs to establish the embodiment of nerd masculinity as very White and very cisgender male (Kendall 2000).

While the nerd is a marginalized masculinity, the stereotype does possess some measure of power. For one, nerds are stereotyped to be intelligent, having a greater command over intellectual fields that are not common among either other men or the general population. This provides a level of parity in the nerd's masculine presentation; that which they lack in physical prowess or knowledge of sports is made up for by brilliance in their area of focus.

4. MALE PRESERVE

It was the study of sports that led Eric Dunning to develop the idea of male preserves. Overall, Dunning believed that in some social spaces, dominated by men, a set of norms and values reign as dominant that not only privilege men, but may exist independent of conventional social norms. As a result, actions, topics of discussion, and behaviors that might be seen as unacceptable, lewd, or deviant elsewhere are coded as perfectly fine in the male preserve. Dunning initially looked at the area of sports, where men engage in a much more physical,

raucous, and uninhibited manner that would be for the most part inappropriate in other parts of the social world. However, not only are these social performances accepted by others in the male preserve, those who are not a part of the subculture dismiss and compartmentalize the behaviors as part of the experience.

A critical function of the male preserve, according to Dunning, was a space where men "could bolster up their threatened masculinity and, at the same time, mock, objectify and vilify women, the principal source of the threat" (Dunning 1973, 12). Men are given free purchase in the male preserve to denigrate women and other subordinated groups (such as gay men) without fear of being labeled as sexist or homophobic. The male preserve, then becomes a "non-player character" space where social hiccups that would cause scrutiny elsewhere are simply dismissed as "boys will be boys"; a social circumstance where one can blow off steam and not be saddled by judgement of one's fellows, because while it is not a space where "everything goes," there is more leeway to express oneself.

As Dunning notes in his research of rugby clubs, some of this leeway might be expressed as public nudity and lewd acts to other men. In the space of the male preserve, men are provided insulation from claims of homosexuality because the behavior can be attributed to the uniqueness of the circumstance (and likely the presence of copious amounts of alcohol). Regardless, actions (unless they are extreme, such as sexual intercourse with another man) are beyond reproach because they are dismissed as all in good fun, and products of the subculture. Indeed, men who were more sedate, non-participatory, or critical (and as such, adhering to more contemporary norms and values) would be under significantly more scrutiny than those who behave in a more bawdy manner (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2014).

Using Dunning's theory as a model, I argue there is something of a *geek male preserve*, a subculture that is created (in the gaming space) that provides a similar freedom from normative behaviors as seen in Dunning's more sports-centered examples. While not as physically involved as a rugby club or sports bar, there is a performative misogyny that is present both in sports settings and gaming settings. These spaces both assume a lack of female presence and capitalize on the dearth of women and femme gender expressions through discursive acts, what Kiesling (2007) would characterize, in terms of masculine discourses, as gender difference and male superiority. In geek settings, this allows for less critique of the objectification of women and a reinforcement of historically sexist portrayals and storylines populated by women. Moreover, when "having a laugh," humor can center on explicitly sexual and lusty actions, conversations that would be otherwise muted by social norms.

I would further argue that in the geek male preserve this reinforcement of a man-centered and male-dominated space means the behavior will occur even when women are present. When called on their behavior, some will dismiss their actions as "what happens" in geek spaces, and an assertion that the behavior as always been similar. In effect, geek spaces employ the same "boys will be boys" idea Dunning saw in his study of sports subculture. The overarching discursive style permeates not only conversations around gaming and geek activities, but the activities themselves. Women, and increasingly people of color irrespective of gender, must commonly adapt their behavior in this geek male preserve, as the subculture appears to be highly resistant to change regardless of increased diversity.

5. SCAFFOLDING DISCOURSE

An idea supporting the notion of gaming space being a male preserve is the language which is used at the table. Hendricks (2004) began the conversation about the talk around the table: how

individuals represent themselves and how that conversation expresses immersion and power relationships among players and game masters (GMs). "The GM and the Players cooperatively construct the game, which includes a complex negotiation between the GM, the Players, and the rules" (Hendricks 2003,72). A role-playing game, with individuals around a table either physically or virtually, involves several types of conversation occurring at the same time in the conceptual space of the game: as Trammell (2020) notes, "once a common communication infrastructure can be identified, key actors can be located within that infrastructure" (189). While some of the conversation might not be germane to the game, e.g. side conversations about pop culture references as Hendicks notes in his work, these conversations would not occur if it were not for the game (Hendricks 2006). While a multi-level discourse involves a panoply of conversations between multiple people, not all conversations at the same have the same level of importance. In his foundational work, Fine (1983) theorizes that all gaming occurs on a multi-level structure, involving the social aspect of people playing a game, the gaming aspect of the players, and the imaginary/role-play aspect inhabited by the actual characters.

It is in that gaming aspect that James Paul Gee would contend gamers see the process of gameplay in terms of game mechanics. As he argues, "game mechanics are what you can do with things in a game. So, gamers see the game world in terms of verbs (actions): crates are good for breaking, ledges are good for jumping, shadows are good for hiding, and so forth" (Gee 2015, 33). In the sense of role-playing games, this speaks to the declarations a player can make about what a character is going to do, and how possible this can be within the confines of the game reality. The communication of these game mechanics around the table constitute what I call *scaffolding discourse*, where players engage in a conversation with the game master relating what their character does, and the mechanisms that allow the character to do this. For example, if a character says they want to get to a second floor of a building but needs to fly, then the player would indicate "I am going to cast a fly spell." Or if the character attempts to lie, he is instructed by the game master to roll a die to initiate a Bluff check. Scaffolding discourse is important to the role-playing game, because it moves the action of the gaming table along. The more scaffolding discourse that occurs, the more play that is possible between those at the gaming table.

Scaffolding discourse, then, is a very distinct form of discussion, and what theorist Deborah Tannen would refer to as report talk. Men, according to Tannen, are socialized to communicate in this report talk, as there is greater prestige in this manner of communication than rapport talk, which Tannen theorizes as the means women are taught is preferable in communication. "The act of giving information by definition frames one in a position of higher status, while the art of listening frames one as lower" (Tannen 1990, 139). The nature of scaffolding discourse is the consistent question that hangs over the gaming group: *What are you going to do*? Players are required to continually narrate their actions and work through the mechanics of these actions. Scaffolding discourse is centered on talking and communicating "to" someone, and not necessarily an interchange of information or listening. As Tannen (1990) describes in rapport talk, the method of discussion women are more commonly socialized to employ, the focus is on listening rather than talking. Rapport talk is "a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences" (Tannen 1990,76). This is not a function of scaffolding discourse.

What is, interestingly, not required in this scaffolding discourse is a rationale or justification – the why of the action. The premise of scaffolding discourse requires individuals to outline the steps they go through and deal with the repercussions. Further, scaffolding discourse is

highly technical and filled with jargon that is buttressed by a significant knowledge of the game. Lack of familiarity with scaffolding discourse can be overwhelming to new players, and those who are not used to the intensity associated with this type of report talk. Scaffolding discourse, by its very nature, is not only demanding, but requires some sense of alacrity. If one is not quick with responses and functions, an individual can be accused of slowing down the game and sullying the gaming experience of those around them. This unfamiliarity can result in negative comments from other players, and further imply the dominance of those who have a greater comfort for the game overall, through the scaffolding discourse they seemingly master.

6. DOMINANCE IN SCAFFOLDING DISCOURSE

Sociolinguist Scott Kiesling notes that men, in communicative circumstances, have the advantage of an expectation of dominance. "Men are also more likely than women to be positioned by others as having authority and power before any interaction begins" (Kiesling 2007, 662). Therefore, men are naturally expected to assert authority lest they refrain from doing so, meaning the male gamer begins any interaction from an assumed position of power before he opens his mouth. Value, thus, is in report talk rather than rapport talk. Dominance in conversation is then an aspect of male privilege; an unrealized set of affordances providing for simply being male. The ability to automatically assume dominance in communications would be very useful in a role-playing game. This is because, according to Montola, "as role-playing games are seen as communication constructs, information is the basic building block of the imaginary game world" (Montola 2009, 31). Scaffolding discourse, and the purposeful discourses at the gamer table, express the bartering of information, and as such, dominance in these types of conversations becomes vital in the assertion of manhood.

Kiesling points out that "there are many different kinds of power that men may use to create dominance, and there are therefore many corresponding ways to perform this power" (Kiesling 2007, 665). The role-playing game is a multi-leveled discourse, and strategies to preserve the embedded structural power can occur in any of these conversations at the table. Stang and Trammell (2019), for example, note how descriptions of the female monstrosity perpetuate sexist tropes in game settings and the discussions surrounding them. During the discursive circumstance of scaffolding discourse, two of those ways men may display dominance is through *gamesplaining*, where a player corrects or instructs another player with less knowledge on a topic, and *rules lawyering*, or the circumstance where players argue over interpretation of the governing policies of the role-playing game.

7. GAMESPLAINING

An assertion of male dominance, evident when individuals who either lack experience with the game or the discourses surrounding gameplay display inadequacy, can be distilled into what I call gamesplaining. Gamesplaining, derived from mansplaining, results when an individual actively corrects an individual who is erring in game play or scaffolding discourse. Thus, if an individual is either doing or explaining something incorrectly, another player has the ability to step in and "assist" the incorrect player. While this manner of exchange may have helpful connotations, the interaction is rife with dominance overtones. The player who is wrong is slowing down the process of the game; moreover, the player is incorrect in how they are proceeding, and damaging the flow of what is considered appropriate gameplay. To

take the moment and insert a course correction, as it were, allows for an individual to do three distinct things. First, the interceding player is modeling behavior and the idea of correction as a component of collaborative play. Second, the player implies dominance; they know more than the player they are "helping." Third, the player displays their overall knowledge and skill to the entire table through this corrective action. The power dynamics of gamesplaining are shifting, as being more knowledgeable than any other given player is not an absolute: "the status of a participant as 'more knowing' or 'less knowing' is fluid, shifting as the interaction proceeds" (Hendricks 2003, 80). It is possible that someone in the midst of gamesplaining could overstretch their knowledge, and as such, find themselves the recipient of the same discursive tactic used against them.

The nature of gamesplaining reinforces "how particular rhetorical constructions of skill and virtuosity in connection with 'gameplay' were inflected by gender ideals and subsequently came to reinforce and imprint norms of masculinity" (Kirkpatrick 2017, 465). Men, and moreover, stereotypical White male gamers, through use of technical and practical knowledge are in a better position to dismiss alternative arguments and reinforce their opinion. Quite simply, being a male provides the gamer several affordances as discussed above. First, he is more likely to be trained in report talk, which is the elevated method of discourse at the game table, and thus the one most likely to be accepted by his peers and the game master. Second, he recognizes the benefit of dominance in these discourses, and uses discursive tools (e.g. louder voice, sarcasm, historical narratives) to stress the validity of his comments. Lastly, this mechanism of gamesplaining can take the form of disagreement and collective knowledge of the gaming system, quickly devolving into what is commonly known as rules lawyering.

8. RULES LAWYERING

While most role-playing games have a comprehensive set of governing rules, the nature of role-playing games, and the infinite possibilities in how actions can be done in the role-playing scenario, engender the gaming table as a space where guiding principles and written rules can be interpreted differently by any two players. Montola (2009) reminds us that "no participant of a role-playing game can have access to all information present in the game." Therefore, players must rely on the written rules and cogent interpretation of those rules to provide precedence for any gaming action that might be up for debate (31). In every game setting there are those who have a specific interpretation of the gaming rules and believe that in order to preserve the relationship between the game master, the players, and the game itself, a clear understanding of the rules must be reached by all persons who participate. The rules lawyer is defined as a player "who interprets rules in an overly literal sense or in such a way to significantly reduce the thematic or logical aspects of a game" (Berman 2011,187). Often the real-life impact of a rules lawyer is seen as negative, and there are resources and articles online that discuss ways game masters and players can "handle" rules lawyers (Attansio 2020; Heinz 2018). Even Gary Gygax, one of the founders of *Dungeons & Dragons*, was critical of rules lawyers, saying "never hold to the letter written, nor allow some barracks room lawyer to force quotations from the rule books upon you, if it goes against the obvious intent of the game" (Gygax 1979, 230).

While being a rules lawyer is sometimes seen as a negative, and to be referenced as one is interpreted as derogatory, the power of the report talk and dominance embedded in rules lawyering as a discursive feature in scaffolding discourse provides esteem to those who employ it. In other words, "another way to view rules lawyering is as a means of reinforcing masculine

power, thriving at the game table, a field of practice where one's years of experience codes as a badge of honor" (Dashiell 2017). Berman (2011) notes that while rules lawyering is at times seen as negative, the technique "also displays cleverness or exploits carelessness by one's opponent" (187). In this manner, rules lawyering is not only about being correct to sustain play, but, similar to gamesplaining, serves as a mechanism to assert dominance over others at the table through cunning: "Rules lawyering, conversely, pushes the game structure and rules to the fore, calcifying the power of the social structure" (Dashiell 2017).

Technically, the game master has the final say on the interpretation and disputes that would arise in scaffolding discourse; however, "much of the game master's social power in the arbitrations concerning the state of the game world is derived from this information access" (Montola 2009, 32). While game masters are expected to have a considerable command of the information and the application of rules in scaffolding discourse, they are not infallible, and as such, the interpretation of the game master is seen as just as valid as any player at the game table provided said player has demonstrated a knowledge of the rules. Moreover, rulebooks and errata are information any player could have, and when coupled with experience, rules lawyering could become a circumstance in any game.

9. GAME SPACES & RACE/GENDER DISCUSSIONS, BLEED IN DISCOURSE

A concern, given the implications of dominance in scaffolding discourse, involves the degree to which embedded discursive techniques make their way into other types of communication at the gaming table. The complex, multi-level conversations are happening simultaneously, and shifting instantaneously through the types of communication that occur in the frames of play Fine described. The discourses at the table are not necessarily dependent on the game, but only occur because the game is in session. One could easily recognize that scaffolding discourse is game-dependent and would be out of place without the context of the game. However, the intra-player conversation, like the pop culture references Hendicks (2006) mentions, represents discussions between players that may take on the report talk markers seen in scaffolding discourse.

Sarah Lynne Bowman (2013) discusses the concept of bleed, or "the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and vice versa" (4). While a critical component for understanding internalizations and their impacts on players and their characters, Bowman's concept of bleed becomes useful in understanding how the dominance that is evident in scaffolding discourse might impact other discourses that are occurring at the gaming table. As stated before, gamesplaining and rules lawyering are useful because of their ability to assert authority of a player over others at the table, supported by a professed superior knowledge of game systems. This dominance could, in theory, bleed through to more mundane conversations among people at the table, or into the narrative factor of play led by the game master. In her research, Bowman (2013) describes circumstances where "participants described 'alpha' or pack hierarchical behavior with regard to rules disputes and other contested areas within the game, resulting in leaders emerging and dominating play" (3). The bravado here could be the result of successful gamesplaining and rules lawyering, which gives the player implicit permission to disrupt game proceedings with shows of power. Therefore, not only does the dominance of those savvy in the male preserve bleed over into other discussion, but so too the submission of those populations who are disprivileged in the preserve of the gaming space by not embodying the stereotypical middle-class, White male gamer.

10. PLAYING THE GAME – BUILDING A BETTER GAMER

Participation in the male discourse, for subaltern populations, poses its own perils. Women, for example, are particularly targeted in the gaming world. The stereotype of the "gamer girl" persists in the subculture, and while many examples refute this idea, constancy of the image in the male preserve causes harm to women. As Harrison, Drenton, and Pendarvis (2017) note, "female gamers struggle to gain a foothold in gaming due to the socially and culturally constructed masculine dominance of the field. Female gamers engage in cultural reproduction of stereotypes while simultaneously coping with the practices of masculine dominance" (61). In effect, as a byproduct of participation in the male preserve of a gaming subculture, women reproduce the types of communication encountered in scaffolding discourse, employing gamesplaining and rules lawyering when circumstances permit. However, the question could be raised as to how effective these communications could be, when not buttressed by the dominance that is a socially constructed component of their male counterparts. In gaming circles, research has shown that the female gamer voice is open to more criticism and critique (Kasumovic and Kuznekoff 2015). This suggests that while a female gamer can attempt to engage in report talk methods during scaffolding discourse, the inherent privilege that comes along with the embodied male form and voice reduces the effectiveness of her dominance at the game table. Neither women nor minorities can afford to be wrong in terms of gamesplaining or rules lawyering: "Women and minorities, often outnumbered at the gaming table, might demur from rules lawyering behavior because of their internalized marginalization coupled with a sense of what capital they might lose if proven wrong" (Dashiell 2017).

Moreover, many women and minority groups have to come to accept systems that implicitly and explicitly push a misogynist narrative. As Trammell (2018) notes:

> If women were to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, they had to accept much of the masculine baggage that came along with the game. Patriarchal authority and knowledge structures had to be accepted and taken for granted, homosocial representations of masculinity were everywhere in the game's rulebooks, and martial prowess was the definitive mode of conflict resolution and self-worth (144).

Thus, operation in the male preserve of role-playing games does not only involve modification of discursive patterns to be effective, but also a passive acceptance of a game with a structural system that is rooted in male power and the subordination of other groups. As discussed before, Wizards of the Coast and other game developers are making efforts to change the mechanics of gaming systems to address sexist and racist circumstances. Yet, the problematic components adding to support of dominance as a discursive feature in gamesplaining and rules lawyering are embedded in the subcultural capital; changes of rules will have a slow effect, if any.

It should be noted that the strategies discussed in this paper are not universal; they will not be present in every game and at every gaming table. Tabletop role-playing involves a mesh between player characteristics, gaming culture, and social culture (e.g. country, region) that could provide an experience where gamesplaining and rules lawyering are muted, modified, or nonexistent. Ad hoc or "pickup" gaming at conventions, for example, might not exhibit this behavior blatantly due to overall unfamiliarity between players. However, I must stress this circumstance is not about a phenomenon occurring at every gaming table; moreso these behaviors in scaffolding discourse are a social circumstance that could, and are more likely, to

occur in tabletop role-playing games because of the subculture surrounding the male preserve. Further, because the behaviors of gamesplaining and rules lawyering are an acceptable form of "hooliganism" in scaffolding discourse, these comportments are less likely to be challenged or discouraged if they do occur at some point in a gaming experience.

11. CONCLUSIONS: ADAPT, FRAGMENT, OR EVOLVE

Communication and discourse play a critical part of the role-playing game experience, and as Fine (1983) argues, "because gaming fantasy is based in shared experience, it must be constructed through communication" (3). The notion of the gaming world, and the subculture that surrounds gaming, is complicated by the real and imaginary nature of the conversation. As Ilievia (2013) notes:

> Role-playing language is different from everyday language because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are fictional. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavor to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one; the knowledge of that world is outside the range of the individual live memory and is unavailable to players' biographic experience" (28).

The discourse at the table discusses a world of fantasy, and as such, individuals may feel certain liberties and freedoms are afforded their characters regarding actions that might be deviant in the contemporary social world. However, considering there are multiple types of conversation occurring at the game table, these liberties may bleed into other discourses, notably as discussed in this paper, into the scaffolding discourse that is central to actual play of the game.

The argument of the presence of misogyny, racism, and discrimination in games being proportional to reduced participation of minority groups in role-playing games has been discussed in research but appears to be a false assumption (Schott and Horrell 2000). The player demographic is diverse: for example, as Curran (2011) has noted, "although [gaming] is still perceived as a hobby which is almost entirely dominated by male youths, almost 40% of all game players are women" (46). Moreover, evidence demonstrates women and minorities have always played a part in gaming, though this participation has been masked by the larger representation of the stereotypical young, White men. While there are scant academic sources indicating the demographics of early play, primary sources from women note early participation (Garcia 2017; Hepler 2019; Vermeulen, Bauwel, and Van Looy 2017). Perhaps, I argue, this is an incorrect nexus of the question, as the presence of women might be secondary to the amount of social compliance that is required of gamers, which does not erase their participation, but masks it.

A limiting factor of visibility of more diverse play was the result of outspoken sources involved in the highest levels of role-play development. Salter and Blodgett (2012) remind us that "the gaming publics remain a contentious area where identity, as viewed from the outside, is continually negotiated and bounded by the many groups" (413). However, as this paper argues, the social norms of gaming publics are increasingly moderated by norms and expectations set by what could be understood as a male preserve, with report talk and dominance expressed through gamesplaining and rules lawyering in scaffolding discourse.

Women and minorities are present, but as a matter of course are expected to act in ways that allow them some measure of agency in the gaming space (Gray 2017). As such, their presence is only clearly visible when their behaviors and actions are transgressive, as they have been "going along" with the social expectations of gaming as a subculture which places value, or a subcultural capital, on these behaviors at the gaming table. Trammell (2018) directly asks us: "If all players have to accept the customs of masculinity that come along with the game, it's important to question the degree to which players still have agency" (144). Simply being "at the table" does not inherently change culture. The degree to which a more macro sense of a male preserve has changed, or can change, with structural changes to games or player demographics will be clear only in time.

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Indie Gaming Meets the Nordic Scene: A Dramatistic Analysis

Abstract: This paper examines video recordings of a panel presentation by game designers Ron Edwards of the United States and Tobias Wrigstad of Sweden at an Italian gaming convention in May 2010. The paper uses a dramatistic perspective to explore the discursive dynamics of their encounter, which represented contact between role-playing game designers from different traditions that were driven by similar imperatives and goals. It establishes the context of their encounter, summarizes the video recordings that document it, and uses the "dramatistic pentad" developed by rhetorician Kenneth Burke as a tool for reading the multiple levels of narrative and interaction that emerge as each speaker presents their perspective on the development of the different communities of play for whom they speak. It identifies an important dynamic within their speech as being how orientations toward differentiation or toward integration manifest in different ways. Ultimately, the encounter between Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad provides access to different ways of thinking about the relationships between role-playing communities over time and in space: as instances of differentiation or as parts of a larger dialogue.

Keywords: rhetoric, freeform, jeepform, tabletop, role-playing games, indie games, TRPG, the Forge, discourse analysis, Kenneth Burke, dramatistic pendad

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking aspects of the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) hobby during the first decade of the twenty-first century was the emergence of a TRPG "indie scene." This scene self-consciously positioned itself as an alternative to the existing conventions of design, publication, and play as they had developed through the last quarter of the 1900s, drawing inspiration from similar "indie" efforts in comics, music, film, and digital games (White et al. 2018, 78). As Appelcline (2014) notes, online TRPG discussion sites that were associated with this scene allowed participants to come together and talk about "new ways to design games, to produce them, and to publish them" (130).

And while like D&D itself, "indie games" had their origins in a Middle American context—that is, as the product of a predominantly White cis male English-speaking middle-class hobby culture (cf. Fine 1983 as well as Peterson 2012 for a description of the early TRPG hobby)—the online nature of the scene's constitution meant that it could potentially both attract international participation—beyond the United States, that is—and make connections to other self-conscious communities of play within the broader role-playing hobby.

However, the precise contours of these Internet-enabled cross-cultural communication flows are not well-explored, despite the on-going efforts of Nordic and North American live action role-playing (larp) communities to apprise themselves of the activities of other larp groups outside their borders (e.g. Vorobyeva 2015 and Algayres 2017, respectively). A recent survey of TRPG history (White et al. 2018) centers on North American developments, although it does acknowledge the existence of "strong local traditions of TRPGs" in countries such as "Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the Nordic countries, Brazil, and Japan, among others" and offer hopes for "a more integrated future" as the Internet enables more and more international connections (83).

This article thus seeks to examine an episode of cross-cultural encounter within the TRPG hobby in order to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of such encounters. Specifically, it examines a videotaped discussion between an American indie TRPG designer and a Swedish

freeform[1] designer, both of whom were invited guests at an Italian gaming convention in 2010. It adopts a rhetorical perspective in order to make sense of each man's contribution to the discussion as an attempt to offer to each other and the audience a discursively constructed image of the RPG community, its history, and its prospects. The extent to which those offers were acknowledged and then either taken up or contested can be taken as an outline of the horizons of a discourse centered on indie TRPGs.

To that end, this paper "reads" the videotaped panel discussion through the lens of rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's *dramatistic pentad*, which offers a method of rhetorical analysis that focuses on understanding discursive performance as enacted via a "grammar of motives" (Burke 1969). In other words, by paying attention to both the act of speaking and what is said as comprising *drama*—as performing or relating narratives—one is afforded an index of speakers' understandings of their own intentions and the constitution of the world around them. In line with Burke's ideas, this method thus takes the performativity as well as the content of the speech as points of access to the worldview or perspective that informs the speaker's utterances.

Ultimately, the resulting analysis provides a point of entry to understanding the indie TRPG scene as a kind of *participatory culture* (Jenkins 1992).

2. DIBATTITO CON GLI OSPITI INTERNAZIONALI (DEBATE WITH INTERNATIONAL GUESTS)

2.1 The Pendad and the Panel

Twentieth-century rhetorical scholar and philosopher of language Kenneth Burke's *dramatism* is a mode of rhetorical criticism in which identification, rather than persuasion, is seen as the key function enacted by speech (Burke 1969). In other words, instead of a neo-Aristotelian emphasis on showing how rhetors make a case via appeals to reason, the audience's emotions, or their own credibility, the Burkean approach asks how speakers engage via language as symbolic action in the construction of a world-view in which they ask their listeners to participate or with which they ask them to identify, using language as "a tool with which subjectivities (and agency) are constituted and reconstituted" (Fox 2002, 368). In doing so, Burke anticipates later efforts to develop dialogic models of rhetoric, such as *invitational rhetoric* (Foss & Griffin 1995), that similarly de-center persuasion as a central motive for rhetorical engagement.

In Burke's dramatistic model, a speaker in offering their worldview provides access to an understanding of the causal or motivating principles that explain how or why things occur, who is responsible, and what features of the environment or those acting within it are consequential. Burke identifies five such elements—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—and refers to them collectively as the *pentad*. "These are terms," notes Nelson (1983) "to be applied to different aspects of a [speech] event only after close examination. . . . For instance, in one case a speech may constitute the act and a television camera may serve as an agency used carry that speech to millions of individuals. Yet in another circumstance the speech itself may be viewed as the agency through which a particular plea is made" (63).

In other words, a speaker by speaking narrates, performs, or enacts the elements of the pentad and their interrelationships at multiple levels. First, a speaker's utterance presents that

1 **Editor's Note:** In the Nordic countries, freeform refers to a type of tabletop/larp hybrid that involves some degree of physical enactment but is held in neutral spaces such as classrooms with minimal costuming or set design.

view of the world that the speaker invites listeners to share or partake of in some way, either in recognition of its consubstantiality with their own experience or in acknowledgement of its legitimacy as a perspective that could be appropriately or justifiably held by some other. At one level, then, dramatistic analysis reconstructs the speaker's utterance as a model of their world.

Second, the speaker's utterance can itself be taken as a moment of dramatistic action, enacted within the specific context of its utterance as scene. In other words, the larger discourse within which a given utterance takes place enacts a scenic function that serves as the context of all speech acts within it.

To be sure, accounts of a given speech act created through the lens of dramatistic analysis "tend to feature or stress the pentadic element which seems most important," usually on philosophical or ideological grounds (Nelson 1983, 64) It is therefore important methodologically, in creating a dramatistic account, to pay attention to the extent to which that account emerges from the speech-act itself, and how much is an interpretive reconstruction of the speech-act and its context through the "terministic screen" (Burke 1966, 45) of the analyst's own language. Rather than imposing a new interpretive scheme upon the words of another, the dramatistic analyst seeks to discover the underlying logic of the speaker's account of the world and its context. In doing so, the assumptions and ideological commitments embedded in the speaker's account, and from which it proceeds, are made more clearly visible and available for examination in discourse.

Thus, to the extent that the rhetorical reconstruction of a speech-act via dramatistic analysis has value, it lies in its ability to encourage "critical and substantial reflection about the situated relations of discourse to reason, character, and community in human action" (Fleming 1998, 184, quoted in Rountree and Rountree 2015, 351).

2.2 The Elements of the Pentad

Burke identifies five elements that typically shape discursive utterances. (1) The *scene* is the setting invoked by the speaker. It is understood as a "container" within which the other elements of the pentad operate, and can include any sort of background relating to time or place, such as *society, the environment,* or *modern times.* (2) The *act* is the activity, action, or behavior that is of central concern to the speaker. Any verb counts, says Burke, as long it has "connotations of consciousness or purpose." Acts are willed or volitional, not mere motion. "Profession, vocation, policy, strategy, tactics are all concepts of action," he says (Burke 1969, 14). "*Tao* and *yoga* are similar words for act," he adds (15). (3) The *agent* is the actor who is performing the act with conscious or deliberate intention. Agents have motives; things merely act. "If one walks determinedly against a bitter wind, for instance, he feels very definitely that this wind is an *act* against which he is acting, but he does not necessarily feel that the wind is a *person"* (Burke 1969, 119). (4) The *agency* is the tool or instrument that enables the agent to act. An emphasis on agency is philosophically pragmatic, being concerned with the means available to a given end. (5) The *purpose* is the reason, rationale, or end toward which the agent is presumed to act. The teleological character of an emphasis on purpose lends itself toward philosophical mysticism, i.e., "those forms of speculative and religious thought which profess to attain an immediate apprehension of the divine essence or ultimate ground of existence" (Burke 1969, 287).

Given that there are five elements, there are thus ten pairwise combinations of elements (scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, and so forth, all the way to agency-purpose). Burke

calls these combinations *ratios*. In any given utterance, certain ratios will be more prominent than others, as they come to the forefront as explanations for what has occurred—and thus as points of contestation or critique. "The ratios may often be interpreted as principles of selectivity rather than as thoroughly causal relationships," Burke (1969, 18) says, as when the times are more suited for the daring than for the cautious (a scene-agent ratio). Sometimes different ratios are linked, e.g., the agent, in acting according to her nature (agent-act) produces changes in the situation (scene-act) and thus make the world more congenial to herself (scene-agent). Sometimes they offer ironic contrast: "One may place 'fools' in 'wise situations' [scene-agent] so that in their acts they are 'wiser than they know' [act-agent]" (Burke 1969, 18).

2.3 The Panel in the Pentad

2.3.1 A Speaker's Ethos as a Mode of Intellectual Engagement

As a preliminary move in the analysis, and as an example of the application of the pentad, the context of Edwards and Wrigstad's *dibattito* can be established in pentadic terms, as Table 1 illustrates. At this level, the *agent-agency ratio*—that is, the relationship between the speakers and the source of their credibility or authority—presents itself as a central interpretive question. What, in other words, establishes these two international guests as authoritative speakers?

Table 1: Burkean Pentad of InterNosCon 2010 Panel

Element	Description
Scene	InterNosCon 2010, an Italian gaming convention focusing on story-centered "indie games" of the sort emerging from the North American TRPG scene in the 2000s
Act	Speaking on a panel in front of a small, engaged audience of Italian gamers
Agent(s)	Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad, international guests of honor at the convention
Agency	Their experiences of play and philosophies of design
Purpose	To discuss, not debate, important aspects of role-playing games

The centrality of the agent-agency ratio is made clearest at the moment where, in Part 12, Edwards pushes back against Wrigstad's complaint that Edwards has appended "for you," to some opinion that Wrigstad has vouchsafed. Calling attention to the way that the scene privileges them as speakers, he uses that to problematize the authority they are granted except insofar it emerges as a product of their particular experience, saying:

> If Tobias and I were sitting around in these same chairs with no particular arrangement among the chairs, and we were all talking together, then I don't think me interjecting, 'For you,' would be necessary at all. But the fact remains that . . . we are sitting up here at a special table, the camera is trained upon the fronts of our heads and the backs of your heads . . . and this backed by economics: I did not pay to come here, you did.

> These features create imbalances that can affect the perceptions of authoritative talk. So it is my sensitivity to that issue, and it may be an oversensitivity, that leads me to want to focus on that story [of] where-I-come-from aspect of what we've said. (Narrattiva Video, Part 10)

In Edwards' view, who they are and how they came to be that way matters. They represent different communities of play, North American "indie games" of the sort produced by participants at the Forge on the one hand, and the freeform larp/tabletop hybrid games promulgated by the group known as Vi åker jeep, or jeepform, on the other. Edwards is able to mention games that he knows his audience will be familiar with (Jared Sorensen's *Inspectres* 2003 and Jake Norwood's *The Riddle of Steel* 2002) and is familiar with those mentioned by the audience (Eero Tuovinen's *Solar System* 2008). Wrigstad is less familiar with those games, and is more willing than is Edwards to be critical of particular touchstones of TRPG play ("The World of Darkness sucks balls," he asserts; Edwards is willing to allow that some play groups may find something of value or interest in White Wolf's World of Darkness game setting).

The agent-agency ratio is also at stake in the little bit of online commentary on the videos that exists. In one of Moreno Roncucci's announcement threads, I happened to comment on the first four videos by saying, "I think it's interesting how the encounter between the two men is less a confrontation than a juxtaposition of two different trajectories through the recent history of role-playing. Ron advances a vision of an increasingly pluralistic role-playing meta-culture in which silenced voices are once more unfettered, lost tribes are brought into the fold, and an on-going conversation permits experimentation and mature judgment. Isn't this ultimately what the Forge is supposed to be all about? Similarly, Tobias talks about a movement toward designs that are compact, narrowly focused, and thematically resonant. If that's not a description of jeepform, I don't know what it is" (White 2010).

One forum poster named Matthijs reacted to my contemporaneous summary by saying with heavy sarcasm, "So what you're saying is here we have [two] white guys (i.e., privileged dominant males from western societies), telling us that history so far has naturally and inevitably led us to the pinnacle of gaming evolution, which they represent? ;) [winking smile emoticon] All we need now is for one of them to say that we now know everything there is to know" (Holter 2010). In the face of dismissive replies to this post, another poster defended Matthijs, "Ok, Ron apologists, we get it, no one should dare point out that his being a white male (an extreme version from what I can tell) colors his opinions and how he presents them (like by presenting them as facts instead of, you know, opinions) . . . Ron does say things of value, but a lot of times his opinions are colored strongly by the fact that he's a straight white male (as are his games and theories for that matter). Basically, his words should be taken with a grain of salt, and pointing that out isn't trolling" (Hearns 2010). The fact that this poster accuses Edwards of exactly the thing he attempts to distance himself from in the panel speaks to the resonance of this agent-agency ratio in this speech act.

The event-level agent-agency ratio can be understood more fully only by moving down into the individual rhetorical performances of Edwards and Wrigstad. Although not a debate *per se,* the panel offers a contrast between the two positions that emerge from the different perspectives offered by the interlocutors as they enact their identities in front of the audience of Italian indie gamers. At the level of performance, the self-presentation of each speaker as a speaker—what ancient rhetoricians would call their *ethos*—is an obvious concern. It is by means of this sort of performance that the speakers attempt to construct personae for themselves in interaction with each other, the translator, and the audience.

In examining each man's interactive performance of self, we begin with a concern for agency in Burke's terms, since the means by which each speaker seeks to engage with the audience and with each other is an important element of a speaker's ethos. To characterize the agency of each speaker, I will draw upon philosopher Steve Fuller's model of *interdisciplinary interpenetration* (Fuller 1993), in which he attempts to describe the ways that scientific communicators interact across disciplinary boundaries. The framework he develops, however, is analogous to the case in Ravenna, in which adherents of different intellectual positions address each other in order to establish the points of contact and points of differentiation between those positions.

Fuller creates a typology of interdisciplinary interpenetration by characterizing the communication dynamics at work between disciplines, or more precisely, from one disciplinary center towards another. That characterization rests on two sets of distinctions, the first a difference in communication style that Fuller calls either Sophistic, or oriented toward persuasion, on the one hand, or Socratic, or oriented toward dialectic, on the other. In the former, a speaker finds it important or necessary to emphasize the common ground between her and her audience, to minimize the differences between their positions. In the latter, a speaker opposes "spurious consensus" (Fuller 1993, 61), emphasizing points of disagreement between himself and his audience. The persuasive speaker, Fuller implies, engages in arguments "only as part of a general plan to motivate action," while the dialectician argues "so as to reach agreement on a proposition" (Fuller 1993, 60). In classical rhetorical terms, what Fuller calls persuasion is *deliberative* while dialectic is *forensic,* or truth-seeking. However, for our purposes the important feature of this distinction is that persuasion is difference-minimizing, while dialectic is difference-amplifying.

The second dimension, Fuller says, "concerns the direction of cognitive transference. . . Does a discipline engage in persuasion or dialectic in order to import ideas from another discipline (I), or to export ideas to that discipline (E)?" (Fuller 1993, 61). He goes on to explain that "the distinction corresponds to the two principle functions of metaphor . . . respectively, to test ideas in one domain against those in another ('negative' analogy), and to apply ideas from one domain to another ('positive' analogy)" (Fuller 1993, 61). The interaction of these two dimensions produces four contingencies, as shown in Table 2, which Fuller (1993) calls "interpenetrative possibilities" (61), but which are equally appropriately understood to be modes of intellectual engagement.

Table 2: The Interaction of Communication Strategy and Intellectual Function (after Fuller 1993, 64)

	Intellectual Function	
Communication Strategy	***Negative Analogy (Evaluation)***	***Positive Analogy (Application)***
Persuasion (Difference-Minimizing)	Incorporation	Sublimation
Dialectic (Difference-Amplifying)	Excavation	Reflexion

The modes of intellectual engagement (see Table 3) thus emerge as ideal types describing how a speaker occupying a particular intellectual position, or speaking for a particular discourse community, may make claims about relevant ideas in relation to that position. And while Fuller uses these modes to characterize discursive formations related to the interaction of scientific fields and specialties, they are arguably applicable in any situation in which particular agents (in Burke's sense) are associated with particular sets of ideas, and discourse about the relationships among those ideas takes place.

Incorporation (P-) involves a speaker who straightforwardly adopts ideas identified as being from elsewhere to address some problem the speaker faces and usually imagines is shared by the listener. For example, the *Quick Primer for Old School Gaming* (Finch 2008) describes four "zen moments" that are taken as lessons emerging from reflecting upon the way that *Dungeons & Dragons* was played prior to the 1980s that can make fantasy role-playing gaming more fun.

Sublimation (P+) is essentially a claim that differences between interlocutors are "natural extensions of one another's position" (Fuller 1993, 63). For example, in an online discussion thread about designing RPG character skills, a poster offers a schema that comprises eight different categories of character action (e.g., attack, defend, move, etc.) that "could be of some use when it comes to balancing character skills/powers/items/special abilities" since "whenever a GM makes a player roll the dice or a mechanic is called up to solve things, it's about one of these options" (WarriorMonk 2018).

Table 3: Modes of Intellectual Engagement (after Fuller 1993)

Label	Mode	Description
P-	Incorporation	Difference-minimizing evaluation. Showing how ideas originating from outside are relevant to problems in the speaker's intellectual domain.
P+	Sublimation	Difference-minimizing application. Showing how ideas from the speaker's intellectual domain are relevant to problems outside it.
D-	Excavation	Difference-maximizing evaluation. Showing how ideas originating from outside the speaker's intellectual domain are problematic within it.
D+	Reflexion	Difference-maximizing application. Showing how ideas from the speaker's intellectual domain are problematic but seeking nonetheless to retrieve, retain, or otherwise extract intellectual content from them.

Excavation (D-) is error correction, as when larpwright Mike Pohjola's (2003) "Turku Manifesto" argues that gamist and dramatist styles are inferior to simulationist and eläytyjist (character immersion-centered) styles of live-action role-playing.

Reflexion (D+) is "both *reflexive* and *reflective*," according to Fuller (1993, 62), implying

a kind of self-regarding introspection that interrogates the conceptual foundations of an intellectual project. Torner's (2016) *Analog Game Studies* piece on uncertainty in role-playing games includes a reflexive moment, identifying his concern for transparency in RPG design as the context within which his remarks on uncertainty should be taken (142). More to the point, Torner and his colleagues offer analog game studies (and *Analog Game Studies*) as a reconstitution of game studies, a "hack" that is "not so much a 2.0 as a 0.5" (Torner, Trammell, and Waldron 2016, 3) that shows "how the field's marginalia have been important and central to the dialogue of games in the 21st century all along" (5).

3. RON EDWARDS IN THE PENDAD

3.1 Ethos: Discourse in Irenics

In using Fuller's ideas to characterize the agency of the international guests of honor at the InterNosCon 2010 panel, it quite quickly becomes apparent that Edwards engages in the panel via the mode of sublimation. His communication style is highly accommodating, and his approach is irenic—aimed, that is to say, at peace or reconciliation.

Numerous examples exist. Early on in the panel, he attempts to reframe Wrigstad's objection to his point about the multiplicity of design efforts in early *D&D* as agreement about the value of dialogue in producing design, though Wrigstad doesn't wholly accept that characterization. As it proceeds, Edwards continues to try to identify points of consensus, as when he attributes the claim that the "current design culture has recovered and celebrates the origins of role-playing" to both Wrigstad and himself. Additionally, he is dismissive of the notion that there is conflict between tabletop RPGs and other sorts of games, such as MMORPGs and CCGs. He is very interested in seeing the North American "indie" TRPG scene and the jeepform movement both as proceeding from similar impulses in reaction to the same orthodoxy about RPG play and design, both derived "primarily from the connections among us as people," and interested in "producing . . . genuine theme" that speaks to those playing the game. Even when Wrigstad says that it's important to "focus on our differences," Edwards is willing to concede that "reflection is absolutely crucial."

Table 4 thus shows how the other aspects of the pentad can be assigned when sublimation is taken as the rhetoric of agency in Edwards' performance on the panel.

Table 4: Burkean Pentad of Ethos of Ron Edwards

Element	Description
Scene	A panel at InterNosCon 2010
Act	"Already agreeing" with Tobias Wrigstad and an audience of Italian indie gamers
Agent	Ron Edwards, proponent of the claim that "system does matter"
Agency	Rhetorical mode of *sublimation*, in which jeepform and the "indie scene" are argued to be related manifestations of a singular reaction to conventions of 1990s TRPG play
Purpose	To advocate for the most inclusive and diverse possible conception of what role-playing is or could be.

The concept that lets him minimize the differences between Wrigstad and himself, as he attempts to point out on several occasions during the panel, is the idea that "System Does Matter" (Edwards 1999), which he had proposed over ten years earlier in counterpoint to the then-prevailing wisdom that TRPG rulesets were less important than the skill of the Game Master (GM) in running the game. Edwards can expect that his audience of Italian indie gamers will be aware of this, and aware as well of the online discussion site for indie TRPG design, publication, and play called the Forge that hosted conversations elaborating the implications of this claim. However, even when drawing upon this source of authority, Edwards is willing to accommodate Wrigstad's reluctance to accede to the claim that system does matter. "Now perhaps the use of the word 'system' has its own legacies in different places that makes it difficult to use," Edwards tells Wrigstad. "I am not wedded to the term, I only use it in that construction because I am rebelling against the idea that the techniques do not matter because the [game master] is just going to give you the story anyway" (Narrattiva Video, part 10). Thus, even though it would be reasonable to posit that "System Does Matter" could be taken as Edwards' agency at the speaker level, such an interpretive move would draw attention away from the sublimating mode of intellectual engagement within which the idea that System Does Matter is deployed.

Burke (1969) views this sort of slipperiness at the operational level as offering a salubrious interpretive flexibility. "Since the five key terms can be considered as 'principles,' and since the margins of overlap among them permit a thinker to consider the genius of one term as 'substantially' participant in the genius of another," he says, "the ambiguity of the substantial makes it possible to use terms as points of departure" (53). Or, as Nelson (1983) puts it, "Sometimes the components interact so intimately that they actually overlap" (64). In this case, the effect of interpretively "forcing" System Does Matter away from agency and closer to Edwards-as-agent highlights what Burke might call their consubstantiality: it calls our attention to the way that Edwards identifies himself with the claim that system matters, and the subsequent discussions at the Forge and elsewhere elaborating that proposition.

It also directs our attention to Edwards' purpose as agent in this pentadic configuration. What, in other words, are the consequences of believing that System Does Matter? The answer is larded through his talk during the panel, and has something to do with a broadened range of possibilities for TRPG play that is fully apprehended by an ecumenical discourse community. For example, as the panel began, he referred to a restoration of the creative ferment in TRPG culture during the 1970s, and attributed it to the dialogue facilitated by the Internet and indie publishing as a movement (Narrattiva Video, Part 1). He found it laudable that a game group might be able to weave together an "indie" game system and a 1990s-era game setting to produce a play experience they would find rewarding, without having to engage in gamer identity politics over how to "do it right" (Narrattiva Video, Part 2). He appreciated that "we are avoiding a [subcultural] identity politics problem with jeep versus tabletop" without having "to call one the advanced way and one the retrograde way" (Narrattiva Video, Part 10). And, near the end of the panel, he even called for a looser understanding of what it means to engage in game design:

> We could be talking about designing and playing better role-playing games. We could be talking about breaking that and making a different thing, rather than absolutely defining the distinction between those two ideas. I'd rather not do that. I think that there is a productive dynamic between saying I am making a

> better role-playing game and saying, no, I am making something different. Rather than knowing which one you are doing, perhaps it is better to recognize that there may be a difference between the two but—but it is a dynamic relationship over time with many different games. Someone could have been trying to make a better role-playing game, and what they did opens up the door to something completely different, or someone could have said, "Oh, no, I am completely different, I am not making a role-playing game," and what they do inspires someone to make a better role-playing game. We don't know. We don't know. Just let that be dynamic. Let that—relax about that. (Narrattiva Video, part 11)

3.2 Logos: Edwards Agonistes

The agent-purpose ratio that emerges at the level of the speaker's ethos for Edwards connects his ideal of System Does Matter with a teleological vision of TRPG community in diversity. There is some irony in this that makes itself apparent when moving from this ethical level characterizing the speech-act to the narrative that constitutes the *logos* of Edwards's talk. That is, despite his commitment to comity on the panel, Edwards reveals that he has often been subject to vituperative feedback for claims he advances, and that the response to the implications of System Does Matter—particularly those regarding the existence of different aesthetic priorities in TRPG play—was among the most severe.

> Some of you may associate me with controversy on the Internet for one or another supposedly heinous thing I have said or written at one time or another—everyone suddenly put on their neutral faces. Everyone suddenly went, "Oh, no, I would never think that about you, Ron." I see you. I don't care because when I proposed that in role-playing as a hobby we actually see profound differences in priority, astonishingly profound differences in priority that made all the diversity of sports just one thing, and that the presence of these different priorities at the table—or excuse me I should say, the presence of the different priorities among the group—is an extraordinary source of incoherence and dysfunction, the reaction to that I got ten years ago was astonishing. I was the devil. The devil. This was the worst thing anyone in role-playing had ever heard. I was divisive. I hated the hobby, obviously. I was breaking up not only groups but my group, this person would say. "You—my group! You are trying to break it up! How can you do this? You're evil!" This was terrible. (Narrattiva Video, Part 11)

Edwards offers this story not to endorse it; he wants his listeners to recognize that the motivations ascribed to him by others during the period he describes were inanely implausible. Table 5 recapitulates this narrative thus far.

If Edwards can show that the fear that motivated the claims of his accusers was baseless, then their accusations lose their force. Thus, he must disconnect the act of accusation from its ostensible purpose and show it to be rather a product of something else, in this case the scene-act ratio—in other words, the motivating force that stems from the material influence of an agent's circumstances (see Burke 1969, 3-7). Specifically, Edwards invokes the notion of "geek social fallacies" that produce dysfunction in "the constellation of allied hobbies and subcultures collectively known as geekdom" (Suileabhain-Wilson 2003), of which the TRPG

community is one. Edwards puts it this way:

> But to sit down and say anybody and everybody, any game any time, let's just do it, we all know what good role-playing is, we're all gamers together so we must want to do it all for the same reasons—it is a legacy of the subculture. It is rooted in geek subculture, that to identify personal differences in why we want to do this, and to group up for a particular game with a particular group of people because we agree on one way to do it, on one particular priority—geek subculture says that is rejecting and bullying other people. Rejecting them, you must hate them, you must not want to play with them. So a great deal of what has happened with Forge discussion, and I suspect has been happening in jeep, is to reject the sense of victimization, the sense of certain social fallacies which characterize geek subculture. (Narrattiva Video, Part 11)

Table 5: Burkean Pentad of Ron Edwards's Narrative about the Reaction to System Does Matter

Element	Description
Scene	The "geek culture" of TRPGs
Act	Accusing Ron Edwards (me) of divisive devilry
Agent	Opponents of "System Does Matter"
Agency	Internet discussion
Purpose	To save their gaming group from feared dissolution

In general, these fallacies are assumptions about the operation of friendship that are said to be common within "geek culture," a term that may be taken as referring to "'communities of practice' . . . oriented to certain media forms and genres" (Woo 2018, 15) such as superhero comic books, science fiction and fantasy literature and films, and games like *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. They are said to cause conflicts within geek social circles when taken to an extreme degree, amounting to excesses of tolerance for offensive behavior, conflict avoidance, expectations of group loyalty, and lack of social selectivity.

Table 6: Burkean Pentad of Ron Edwards' Counter-Narrative

Element	Description
Scene	Role-playing discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s
Act	Advancing the controversial notion that different creative priorities exist in TRPG play
Agent	Ron Edwards (I)
Agency	Internet discussion
Purpose	To promote the rejection of "geek social fallacies" as applied to TRPG groups

Thus, Edwards can expect his audience to accept that the fear of having a role-playing group break up once its members acknowledge that they may have different play preferences is an unreasonable fear emerging from "geekish" misconceptions about social dynamics.

This provides an opening for Edwards to suggest a countervailing narrative that is both more plausible and more congenial to the Italian indie gamers of which the audience comprises, as Table 6 summarizes.

4. TOBIAS WRIGSTAD IN THE PENDAD

4.1 Ethos: The Panelist as Pugilist

Wrigstad, for his part, comes right out and says that he thinks it's important to focus on differences because such a focus forces people to identify the reasons for their beliefs. In presenting himself to an audience that is relatively—but not entirely—unfamiliar with the gaming tradition he represents, he emphasizes the critical evaluation of certain TRPG tropes by members of the Swedish freeform scene, and the similar critical response to the conventions of Swedish freeform that produced the jeepform movement. Wrigstad thus clearly employs *excavation* as his mode of intellectual engagement. Table 7 summarizes this ethos.

Table 7: Burkean Pentad of Ethos of Tobias Wrigstad

Element	Description
Scene	A panel at InterNosCon 2010, an Italian indie gaming convention
Act	"Battling, or agreeing with, Ron Edwards"
Agent	Tobias Wrigstad, Swedish freeform gamer and "jeepwright"
Agency	Rhetorical mode of *excavation* in which "rules, tables, dice, dragons, and New York" are rejected as unsatisfying
Purpose	To advocate for focused game design of the sort practiced by Vi åker jeep

To a great extent, Wrigstad relies on his difference from his audience as the source of his credibility. He speaks from, and for, a community of play that is different from that of his audience, and he is a far less well-known figure to his audience. His ability to be critical of gaming tropes upon which he must expect that his audience still relies depends to some extent upon what White (2008) calls "xenomancy": that is, "how we offer ourselves and interpret others as strangers" (22) in dialogue with others involves "an interplay of threat and resource in interaction" (7).

4.2 Logos: We Come By Jeep

Moving down from the ethical level of self-presentation to the "logo-narrative" level of world representation (see Table 8), Wrigstad's story of the emergence of jeepform retains its focus. Interestingly, where Edwards presented a personal narrative, Wrigstad presents a communal one, showing how jeepform was a product of the Swedish and to a lesser extent Danish

freeform scenes that came out of Scandinavian convention play in the late 1990s and early 2000s in which, first, "rules, tables, dice, dragons, and New York" (Narrattiva Video, Part 7) were abandoned as unsatisfying conventions of tabletop gaming, and then, later, the similar abandonment of larp conventions such as props and costumes as well as a certain linearity of scenario design. And while he does talk about satisfying play as having something to do with staying in the moment, ultimately Wrigstad emphasizes the psychological aspects of play as a key feature of jeepform design. "We realized," he says, "that a really, really big part of what a game is, is what's happening between the players as opposed to what's happening between the characters." That is a great thing to understand, he adds, "because then you start making games that are trying to reach the players through the characters" (Narrattiva Video, Part 8). This "metaplay" of what happens between the players is as important as the "actual play" of what happens between the characters, he concludes (Narrattiva Video, Part 9).

Table 8: Burkean Pentad of Tobias Wrigstad's Narrative of Jeepform

Element	Description
Scene	The Swedish convention scene in the 1990s and 2000s
Act	Creating "jeepform" as a style of play
Agent	Jeepform gamewrights, like Tobias Wrigstad (We)
Agency	Abandoning unsatisfying conventions of tabletop and larp play
Purpose	To create games that facilitate something happening to and between the players

5. CONCLUSION

In this interpretive examination of a moment of dialogic encounter between figures associated with different TRPG communities of play, an important insight that emerges is how themes of differentiation and integration manifest in different ways at different levels of speech. This motif emerges in contrasting ways when Edwards and Wrigstad are compared. For example, they differ interestingly in the agency through which they constitute their ethos, with Edwards adopting the integrative mode of *sublimation* and Wrigstad adopting the differentiating one of *excavation*. On the other hand, Edwards offers a narrative in which his association with the claim "System Does Matter" sets him apart from the geek subculture that resists this claim while Wrigstad presents jeepform as a communal evolution stemming from shared desires about the kinds of games the community wanted to play.

This analysis also provides some sense of the way that otherwise localized hobbyist scenes such as "indie" TRPGs and jeepform games are able to connect across international borders via reference to specific cultural products—games, in this case—as positive or negative touchstones of identity and affiliation: the indie TRPG *Inspectres* versus *Vampire: The Masquerade*, for example.

Ultimately, the value of Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad lies in its heuristic ability to focus attention on different levels of narrative and interaction in order to attend more closely to what is being offered in discourse with others. And the encounter between Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad provides access to different ways of thinking about the relationships

between role-playing communities over time and in space: as instances of differentiation or as parts of a larger dialogue.

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Live Action Role-Playing: Transcending the Magic Circle through Play in *Dagorhir*

Abstract: Individuals interact with one another and develop themselves in accordance with these interactions. One group within this complex system is live action role-players (larpers). Larps are a variant of play that combine the "role-playing" of games, such as Dungeons & Dragons, with the "live action" aspects of sports. Using symbolic interactionism as its paradigmatic orientation, this study examines how the magic circle is reinforced and challenged through the development of in-game characters and their effect on the out-of-game self. The respondents of this ethnography participate in a larp called Dagorhir (1977-), which puts an emphasis on live action combat rather than role-play. Participants are part of the Las Vegas realm of Dagorhir, Barad'Dun. Players view Dagorhir as a full contact sport mixed with martial arts; role-playing and character development is encouraged, but not necessary. I observed, interviewed, and participated with this group over the period of six months. Even in a combat-oriented larp like Dagorhir, players get to choose names, weapons, clothing, fighting techniques, and other ways to develop their in-game characters; this ability establishes a connection between leisure larps and edu-larps.

The themes that emerged from coding show different aspects of self and social interactions that are affected through in-game character development: Larp Segregation, Reflection of Self, Critique of Self, and Evolution of Self. Players develop terms to label each other and other larpers, as well as create different social networks to further bonding within play. Many of the players recognized how they developed their in-game characters, but some failed to see how their characters facilitated personal change outside of the larp. Though some participants choose characters that reinforce who they are out-of-game, others choose characters to emulate attributes they believe they lack out-of-game. While participants often perceived their in-game characters and their out-of-game self as separate entities, this study was able to observe ways in which they are connected.

Abstract: Live action role-playing, larp, identity, boffer, combat, Dagorhir, social bonding, symbolic interactionalism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Individuals interact with one another and develop themselves in accordance with these interactions and history (Mills 1956). One of the groups within this complex system is live action role-players (larpers), who create a basis for interaction within a new historical narrative. While some larps take place in realistic social settings, other larpers create fictional worlds that exist parallel to our own; they incorporate aspects of fiction and the arts into play. Fictionally-based games occur in a myriad of worlds where individuals can choose characters ranging from Orcs fighting in Middle Earth to struggling sub-species of humans surviving through the zombie apocalypse. The purpose of participation varies between forums and between individuals; this purpose extends to the forum of virtual reality and virtual gaming (Yee and Bailenson 2007). In sports larps, players can focus on role-playing (narrative aspects) or focus on live action combat (gaming aspects) (McDiarmid 2011; Bienia 2012; Kim 2012). Due to the wide variety of larps available, most participants are able to find one that suits their individual preferences and motivations. The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals develop in-game characters and how these characters connect with their out-of-game self.

The respondents of this ethnography participate in a larp called *Dagorhir* (1977-). Players view themselves as fighters and frame *Dagorhir* as a full contact sport mixed with martial arts; players fight for their realm and fight for their own advancement (Söderberg, Waern, Åkesson, Bjork, and Falk 2004). Players create intricate networks that are "realm" and "unit" based. On the macro level, players fight for the realm where they are geographically located in real life. On the micro level, players fight for units that they create through friendship and kinship networks. In the regard to social networks, *Dagorhir* is similar to Amtgard, in that they a structured around realms and individual play (Budai and Hammock 2014). But

unlike other larps like Amtgard, in-game character selection and development offer players no special abilities or items; with *Dagorhir*, you can choose to develop a character, but the emphasis is on combat.

Despite putting emphasis on combat, players are presented with decisions involving garment choice. Players regard clothing choices as regulatory—the rules state that players have to dress in accordance with the time period of *Dagorhir*—and do not correlate their decisions as part of character development. Ambivalent members who do not believe character development is necessary, argue that their characters were developed secondhand to their combat style. I claim that all of the choices a player makes are meaningful, having layers of context that can be subtle, rather than perfunctory. Whether or not players want to do so, they develop a character through the decisions they make. These decisions affect their game play as well as their trajectory out-of-game. Larps are observed as leisure activities, but have only recently been assessed for different educational properties (Bowman 2014). Past research has found that the arbitrary boundaries of larps are challenged by participants developing themselves while creating characters (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). I propose that the conscious and subconscious development of an in-game character extends beyond the boundaries of *Dagorhir* and affects the player out-of-game.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of larps vary between cultures, but are frequently traced back to *Dungeons & Dragons* and RAND corporation simulations (Fatland 2005; Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Contemporary role-playing games have existed for approximately 40 years now. Role-playing games can be played in a variety of ways, which is demonstrated by their multiple forms. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) discuss how role-playing games have evolved past board games and larps to include online and video games; though considered virtual reality, cyber gamers invoke some of the same processes to develop characters as individuals who larp and each format still has a central focus on the concept of "play."

Huizinga (1949) discusses the importance of play. Play is biological; both humans and other animals do it. Play is also psychological; humans do it for the element of fun. He describes play as not being "real"; play is freedom from what is ordinary by creating what is fantastical. From play, we learn competition and understand other individuals' roles in society. Huizinga continues by describing how play occurs in "the magic circle." The magic circle is the boundary where play can occur and be appropriate; the circle establishes a new world that exists outside the time and space of ordinary life, but within a perimeter set by players (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Caillois (1961) critically builds on Huizinga's understanding of play and competition by describing play in four forms: 1) competition, 2) chance, 3) role-playing, and 4) altering perception. Sutton-Smith (1997) advances the work of Caillois and establishes rhetorics of play. Forms and rhetorics of play help to guide player's in-game development and interactions within the context of the magic circle.

Contemporary forms of play expand larps beyond the physical boundaries of the magic circle (Raessens 2006; Malaby 2007). Copier (2005) examines larp through play and applies the concept of the magic circle. The inside of the circle represents the outside of normal life. From this process comes questions like: What does it mean to enter the game? How does play begin and end? The answers are determined by the individuals in the circle. The magic circle provides the boundaries of different larps, which operate in different periods in time and with different themes using multiple forms of play. Spatial expansion of gaming contributes to

temporal and social expansion, which argues for a more critical assessment of the magic circle (Montola 2005). The idea of the magic circle has been subsequently critiqued for its overly formalist approach. Consalvo (2009) asserts that the magic circle is challenged on the basis that it cannot be completely detached from the real world.

Rules from the real world still guide interactions within the magic circle. Researchers have concluded that the combinations of strong character development and technological advancements have collapsed the borders of the magic circle; the role-playing becomes intermeshed and the magic circle is broken (Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011). The distinctions between player, person, and persona intertwine in the phenomenon of *bleed*, making aspects of larp life and day-to-day life difficult to compartmentalize (Bowman 2013). Challenges to the magic circle have pushed for more examination of the concept, expanding the scope of how play occurs. Stenros (2012) re-conceptualizes the magic circle as only one of three boundaries: 1) the psychological bubble, 2) the magic circle, and 3) the arena. This new format is able to introduce state of mind, action of play, and the special site when addressing criticisms of the magic circle. Research on play and gaming are increasingly necessary as larp expands and becomes more popular.

Individuals who participate in different role-playing games are frequently stereotyped. The basis for larp stereotyping originated from moral panics, stemming from the occult and diversity backlash (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015). Curran (2011) describes the contemporary stereotype for participants:

> The image of role-playing gamers depicts them as anti-social male teenagers who are largely more interested in technology than their own personal appearance, believing that they are highly intelligent and imaginative, passionate about topics that are uninteresting to peers, and consequently persecuted by some of these peers. (Curran 2011)

Stereotypes contribute to ideas that individuals who participate in any role-playing deviate from the general population in accordance with Merton's Strain Theory (Curran 2011); individuals who feel social strain retreat into role-playing games to empower themselves. Players use role-playing as an escape; individuals detach themselves from the world around them and create new identities in order to establish a new form of social capital. Because they are pushed out by other social groups, these individuals are seen as more likely to "snap," but this is not the case (Curran 2011). Advancement from tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) to larps has assisted in the dissipation of old player stereotypes and has paved the way for larps like *Dagorhir*.

3. DAGORHIR'S SOCIO-HISTORIC CONTEXT

Bryan Weise, also known as Aratar Anfinhir the Stormbringer, founded *Dagorhir* in Maryland in 1977 (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Weise had never been involved in larping or any other forms of role-playing games prior, but was influenced by reading *The Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien. Internal conflict between founding members over a legal contract caused a faction of *Dagorhir* members to diverge and create a new game called *Belegarth*. Weise created the "Counsel of Seven" to assist him in enforcing rules and regulations as the game grew in popularity, but an additional dispute led to the creation of a similar third game, *Amtgard*. A piece on *Dagorhir* aired internationally in 1981 and was seen by Beowulf the Dreamer, who

contacted the council to start his own group (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Soon, "tribes" were being created all over the nation. These "tribes" later became formal "realms" and would attend annual tournaments, such as Ragnarok. Ragnarok is held every year at a different location and had 1,627 participants attend in 2014 (Dagorhir Ragnarok 2017).

The emphasis that *Dagorhir* puts on live action combat has progressed elements of misogyny, which alienate women from participating. This becomes a similar issue with the representation of people of color within larping communities, where white men are largely represented (Holkar 2016). Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley (2015) examine *Dagorhir* and the prevalence of hyper-masculinity. The combat aspects appeal to the male demographic, but some women also participate; women participate in smaller numbers and tend to gravitate towards one another, making a group with a stronger bond. The aspect of *epic glory* that Martin et al. (2013) discuss describes how men in combat larps fight to win; this mentality tends to perpetuate gender inequality and causes women to participate to a lesser extent. While women lose power in these dynamics, men continue to enjoy the benefits of their status; they occupy positions of power within their realms that allow them to make decisions on behalf of the group. The problems associated with marginalized populations do not dissuade some individuals from participating in *Dagorhir*.

The history of *Dagorhir* is one of change and adaptation. Weise founded the game because he knew there were others like him who would appreciate the combination of fantasy and combat (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). *Dagorhir* provided an outlet for individuals who wanted to act out events in Middle Earth, rather than just read about it. The branching of *Dagorhir* into different larps reinforced the public's desire for activities such as this; over 100 realms exist across the nation and other realms exist in Canada, Britain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Germany, Australia, and Japan (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Though *Dagorhir* focuses on combat, the fantasy element is still a central theme that pulls in new members.

4. PARADIGMATIC ORIENTATION

I utilize the symbolic interactionist thought in order to observe and document how players ascribe meaning to their in-game characters. This interpretive paradigm came out of The Chicago School with symbolic interactionism as its main theory (Rock 2001). George Herbert Mead developed symbolic interactionism in order to conduct a micro-analysis of groups within society and the individuals who create these groups. Symbolic interactionism argue the following: 1) Humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings these things have for them; 2) No thing is inherently meaningful, as humans learn meaning through interaction; 3) The meanings of things change through interactions with others and experiences with those things; and 4) the meaning of things depend on the context of their occurrences (Blumer 1969).

Herbert Blumer (1969) explains, "The symbolic interactionist approach rests upon the premise that human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of defining the situation that confronts him." The ontology of the interpretive paradigm is that the social world is a meaningful one and utilizes pragmatism; it assesses the truth of meanings through practical applications (Rock 2001). Researchers, specifically ethnographers, utilize observation and group interaction, which allow them to derive meaning through application. Shalin (1991) discusses how objects and actions have different meanings to different people at different times. Though it is important to understand the immediate context of objects and actions, it is also necessary to examine the historical significance to see where meanings originate. Symbolic interactionism, though rooted in

sociology, can be applied to a psychological level when addressing elements of self.

I conducted this study to observe how basic levels of character development affect participants and the concept of the magic circle. Symbolic interactionism provides a foundational understanding of observation that facilitates a social and psychological understanding of the research group and how they develop senses of self through their characters. New elements and meaning are always being introduced because *Dagorhir*, like the social world, is constantly evolving and changing. I utilize the "logic-in-use" frame, which focuses on the process of inquiry (Rock 2001) to understand actors and guide the study in order to observe deeper meanings employed by *Dagorhir* participants. By using symbolic interactionism as a guide, I will be able to observe how players interact with one another, how in-game characters interact with one another, and how players interact with their own character.

5. METHOD

Much like society, *Dagorhir* is composed of many geographical realms located across the nation. The Las Vegas realm is called Barad'Dun. Barad'Dun meets twice a week; Wednesdays at 6:00PM and Saturdays at 12:00PM. I began recording observations when I was introduced to the group by my gatekeeper, Judge; before then, I had no contact with the group. I attended both meetings, which ranged from 2 to 5 hours each meeting. Along with attending meetings, I went to additional functions, such as weapon building sessions held at the homes of different players. The individuals of the realm were my informants and the unit of analysis for the observations and interviews that were collected over a span of six months; this time frame is appropriate for the amount of hours spent with participants at weekly events (Lutz 1981; Hammersley 2018). The group is so small that I was able to converse with everyone at least once (N=18); no identifying or demographic information was documented in order to protect participants. Interviews were conducted with members that attend the most practices and their names and pseudonyms were changed to protect their identities. I drew from interactions, but my focus was primarily on observations of the group that were supported by questions asked in interviews. This research was approved and supervised by the Institutional Review Board of UNLV.

The informal rules, formal rules, lore of *Dagorhir*, weapon regulation, and realms are all overseen by a non-profit organization. Realms come together for weekend tournaments; these tournaments are composed of competitions, crafting, combat, and leisure time. Players give meaning to different elements of themselves through evolution of their characters at practice and at tournaments. Though the game is combat-oriented, these individuals come up with elaborate background stories that intertwine with other individuals in their realm. The purpose of the current study is to examine the interactions between members involved in *Dagorhir* and observe the process by which they ascribe meaning to their in-game characters and interactions. I want to know how individuals develop their character and the effect that character development has on the individual outside of the magic circle.

5.1 Tools and Data

In order to observe how individuals develop their characters and themselves, I conducted observations, interviews, and regularly interacted with the members of Barad'Dun. Observations and participation are necessary to derive themes from the group and their interactions, as well as create lines of questioning for the interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews

to obtain a deeper understanding of their idea of the larping world and their characters. Grubriun and Holstein (2002) explain that the life-cycle of in-depth interviews is dependent on receiving responses and observing actions that reinforce themes. Some questions are only appropriate at a given moment, so it is important to remain active within the group to take advantage of these instances. I relied mainly on informal conversations with the group and players in order to help guide the semi-structured interviews.

I entered my interviews with key, pre-selected questions in an attempt to make them structured interviews. Later, I adapted these into semi-structured interviews so that I could implement questions derived from observations and to keep the respondents active (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006). Framing questions in this manner made members of Barad'Dun more receptive to being interviewed. The dialogue was furthered by the sharing of experience and subtle joking. When one respondent talked about the murder of her friend, I believed that it would have been inappropriate to share one of my experiences because it might have undermined her own. The noting of subtle cues (i.e. her eye contact and change of tone) allowed for me to reach that line of questioning at an appropriate time.

I used thematic analysis to analyze my data as a method. Under thematic analysis, I record my observations and interviews to derive themes through coding (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 1999). This process was repeated until themes were saturated and reinforced by data. For example at one point, a player named Burr discussed why he had created a monster character; some of the same reasons were discussed in Inferno's interview. Notes from observations and informal interviews were cross-examined with the semi-formal interviews. I looked for key words and terms to derive themes from the codes.

6. FINDINGS

The contents of the current study allow for an examination of group interactions in *Dagorhir* and the relationship between players and their characters. Barad'Dun's emphasis on combat develops a contentious atmosphere for those who focus their time on character development. Group attitudes against character development segregated members; this subsequently detached players from their characters. Seasoned players were able to recognize the importance of character development as it related to personal growth; character development changed players out-of game, challenging the boundaries of the magic circle (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). Interviews and observations built upon the attitudes conveyed by players, establishing four themes: 1) larp segregation, 2) reflection of self, 3) critique of self, and 4) evolution of self.

6.1 Larp Segregation

An element of what I observed was how larpers interact with one another and individuals who participate in other larps. Even in this small sub-group, I was able to observe segregation. Depending on the larp players participate in, they are seen as either "stick jocks" or "flurbs"; this extends to other larps, such as Amtgard. One respondent stated:

> Like I, I describe myself as a stick jock; it's just kind of a classification. There's another term "flurb" which can be kind of derogatory because, what it is, is someone who plays a game for the role-play aspect instead of for the fighting; people who prefer, like magic or just prefer not to fight as much.

Stick jocks are players who participate for the live action combat aspects of the larp, while flurbs participate for the role-play aspects; these terms are used by players to describe one another, but can be used as derogatory terms. The context of the terms changes depending on how players identify themselves. Because *Dagorhir* is combat-oriented, many of the members identify as stick jocks and joke about flurbs.

I witnessed players at several of the Barad'Dun practices preparing for larp events outside of *Dagorhir*; players would decorate elaborate costumes between sparing matches. In one instance, a member mocked other members for being flurbs because they were working on their costumes. This member's dedication to *Dagorhir* and identification as a stick jock changed the context of the term flurb. Though he is friends with the members and meant it as a joke, the term was used as an insult. Members who identified as flurbs would then respond by negatively referring to the instigating party as "just a dumb stick jock" who "did not understand the complexity of story lines."

Four other incidences occurred where members were discussing their characters in *Dagorhir* and other members would use the term flurb. Lex amended his character's story by marrying a fictional creature composed of tumbleweed; routinely, members would bring it up and call him a flurb. Though in each instance they were joking, they used the term flurb in a derogatory tense, relating back to the societal implication of any derogatory term. Derogatory terms can be used by members who identify with that group, but when used by a member outside of that group, the term is meant as an insult.

6.2 Reflection of Self

Ten respondents discussed how even small choices are reflections of the player. From garb to weapon, each choice tells you about the player. During a weapon building session, a member named Phantom stated, "The bigger the weapon, the better." His personal choice in weapons steers him towards two-handed red swords that have the ability to break shields. Other members commented that red weapons have advantages, but the way Phantom made his was incorrect. He would make them too large, making them harder to wield. Phantom did not care because his goal was to intimidate his opponent. Another member, Lich, uses a mace with which he swings and smacks the ground to disorient opponents. Lich and Phantom use two different weapons, but try to achieve the same intimidation.

Phantom's choice in weapon is a personal choice, much like how the characters developed by other players are personal choices. Burr stated, "I have been a very, very social person. I love talking to people, completely. I also love fighting. . . . I use to fight in my back yard with wooden sticks." His love for combat and outgoing nature has led him to develop his character as a "hat troll." Burr is known for going to tournaments and painting his whole body purple while adorning a large striped hat that hangs from the back of his head that flops past his shoulders. Four members commented about how individuals who developed monster characters, like Burr's character, were normally outgoing. This character choice also influences fighting style. One player stated in her interview, "People who play monsters tend to be lower to the ground and they will, I don't know, they just fight a little bit different."

Another member, Inferno, developed a werewolf character. Though he does not fight lower to the ground, he utilizes a werewolf's agility in combat. Inferno chose to be a werewolf because he believes it accurately reflects who he is. Off of the field Inferno is a nice guy, but on the field he becomes aggressive as the wolf part of him takes over. Inferno believes that people observe his good nature, but frequently overlook his aggressive and hostile tendencies. These

players have a strong sense of self and pick characters to reflect that strength; other players have an equally strong sense of self and transition through multiple characters to find an appropriate representation of self.

6.3 Critique of Self

Whereas a player's character choice says a lot about who they are, a player changing their character can sometimes say even more. Respondents reported how at tournaments, they are in character for the entire weekend. Though being in character is fun, it sometimes becomes overwhelming. Interacting with other characters becomes daunting when players are enacting a character with whom they no longer identify. Some players reported feeling uneasy at large events because of their character choice. Players from other realms would interact with them based off of perceptions of who their character was supposed to be, a character with whom the player did not fully associate. Interactions of this nature weighed on players of Barad'Dun and caused them to develop new characters that are more in sync with how they want to be perceived in-game.

A high ranking member of Barad'Dun, Omicron, discussed how originally his character was a jester. He thought it would be fun and enjoyed the wardrobe of the jester. After a few tournaments, however, he no longer enjoyed the character he had developed. Omicron stated, "He (the jester) did not fight that much and no one took him seriously." The problem with his jester character had stemmed from how other people interacted with his character; players assumed because he was a jester, he would be funny all the time. Omicron realized he was too serious for the character he chose, so he transitioned to a scarecrow. Through self-critique, he was able to change characters to one that was a better representation of who he was outside of the game. This made him more comfortable and relaxed in his interaction and fighting style.

Other players came to similar realizations as they transitioned through characters. Doom was originally an elf, but transitioned to a stone golem. His original character choice was influenced by his experience with a prior unit, The Kings Guard, which was composed of human and elf player characters. Once this unit was disbanded, he felt better able to explore his character options. Doom utilized an in-game process to develop a storyline where a witch was able to transform him into a golem. This adaptation of his character critiqued his previous affiliation, which allowed him to change into a more representative being. The elf was a character of utility and not an accurate portrayal of him. Doom said, "The golem was a stronger character and was more in line with my demeanor than the elf."

In both players, developing new characters led them to feel more fulfilled in their game play. Before, their characters trapped them into roles they could not occupy and shifted how they interacted with other players; they were trapped by their original character choices. The challenges of these roles led the players to critique and understand themselves to a greater extent, which was apparent to other members of the group. One participant remarked, "Yea, he [Omicron] was really unhappy as a jester. He got much better when he changed." Feeling comfortable not only affected the player, but also affected how they were perceived based on interactions their characters had within the game. Doom remarked, "The change made me happier and made me want to talk more with other people because I was excited about my character." Self-critiques allowed players to reconstruct their game play and evaluate what they wanted to achieve through their characters.

6.4 Evolution of Self

Dagorhir mandates that participants wear period garb when participating in tournaments, but developing a character is up to the player. A majority of the players who were interviewed reported that they were actually very shy and timid. These players used *Dagorhir* and their characters to step out of their comfort zone. Other players remarked that *Dagorhir* had no effect on them as people outside of the game; this mentality was indicative of players who identified as stick-jocks. Members who believed that they had not changed personally because of the game would still admit to becoming more outgoing and receiving valuable leadership experience. For example, Burr and Snazz both commented about how participation in *Dagorhir* increases leadership qualities by actively putting members in leadership roles; every player has the ability to assess situations in combat and direct other players accordingly. Players who recognize the potential to acquire leadership experience invest in opportunities, such as Burr and Snazz, while less aware members develop leadership skills secondhand.

An example of secondhand leadership is May, who was being pushed by his parents to be more active when he found *Dagorhir* at a local Renaissance festival. May stated, "I don't really have a character. I just do it for fun. I haven't really changed." He did not know that two other members had used him as an example for drastic change due to participation in *Dagorhir*. The members explained how when May joined, he was both timid and shy. Through months of attending practices, May became more vocal. Everything about him changed, from how he interacted with other members to how he positioned himself when fighting. May now regularly calls out flanking commands during fighting games. More than once, he called out orders to me and directed me to fall back. While May did not notice his own evolution, other players specifically created characters to develop traits that they wish they embodied out-of game.

Another member of the group, Salem, commented how she was shy, which caused her to develop outgoing characters in the many larps in which she participates. She also believes that people take advantage of her nice nature, which has also pushed her to develop characters who identify as strong females. When asked about her character, she responded, "Yea, my in-game character is a bitch. I'm really nice in real life, like too nice, like people take advantage of me sometime[s]. But my character in the game is . . . not nice, like she's . . . got a customer service smile on, but it's all fake." She actively uses her characters to develop strength and aggressiveness that she believes she lacks outside of the game. Salem participates in flurb-based larps outside of *Dagorhir*, where her character made her realize how much she did not appreciate physical contact with strangers. In her interview, Salem stated, "And so I got a customer for the tattoo stuff and I actually felt really uncomfortable touching him because he was a complete stranger and I didn't know him. And that was kind of the first time I realized that I don't like physical contact with strangers." Salem's many characters bring forth different attributes and realizations, all which help her evolve herself as a person outside of the game.

7. CONCLUSION

A combination of observation and interview supported themes that influenced members of *Dagorhir*. Four different themes were developed through coding. Manifest content revealed the reoccurring use of terms used to segregate players, as well as how they engaged with creating their in-game characters. Some players chose characters that reinforced who they were, while

others were able to critique themselves through character development in order to restore aspects of self (Kohut 1977). Regardless of whether a player acknowledged their choices, in-game characters helped develop the player outside of the game. Interactions between players and their characters further their development beyond play and the magic circle.

Symbolic interactionist thought allows for a better understanding of the members of Barad'Dun. Players get to define their position within the realm, which becomes the basis for their interactions. Their understanding of meaning is heavily influenced by their attitudes towards character development. The choices with which they are presented vary between players and situations, increasing elements of subjectivity and agency. Where some members are rooted in a stick-jock mentality, others fully invest in flurb behavior by developing their in-game character. The different ways to engage in *Dagorhir* are indicative of the way the larp was originally framed (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013) and allow for player to develop meaning within the game in multiple ways. I observed that even individuals with undeveloped characters were influenced by the play in larping. All members agree that they receive leadership experience and confidence, even if they do not recognize it directly.

Larps that emphasize role-playing perceive character immersion as necessary because it advances elements of play. The prevalent attitudes observed in this study reflect *Dagorhir* participants who are combat-oriented; though *Dagorhir* focuses on live action, the minimal aspects of role-playing still influence players. *Dagorhir* and other larps allow players to define themselves within the magic circle. The self is subject to social and cognitive construction (Harter 1999). Participants in the current study expand aspects of self on a psychological level through character bonding and play (Lee and Robbins 1995). They can be anything, anywhere, at any time; there is a larp for almost every preference. Even in a combat-oriented larp like *Dagorhir*, players get to choose new names and new ways to recreate themselves. Though some choose characters that reinforce who they are outside of the game, everyone has the ability to grow and evolve themselves through participation. Some members of Barad'Dun put little effort in their characters, while other players are perceived as flurbs; findings indicate that character development occurs regardless of investment in role-play.

The themes that came from my coding show different aspects of self that are affected through larping. Though seen as different themes, they are all connected. The magic circle and play allow for these players to step outside of themselves. Play allows them to change within the circle; the change in the player transcends the magic circle (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). Stick jocks, such as May, are more disconnected from this change, but individuals who identify as flurbs, such as Omicron and Salem, see how the player influences the character and vice versa. Players who develop characters as reflections, critiques, and evolutions of self are able to understand the complexity of the player/character relationship. Players and characters are perceived as separate entities, but they exist as one being. Different aspects of play bleed through the border of the magic circle as players learn from play and continue life outside of their larps. The findings of this study are specific to *Dagorhir*; future research on the topic of character development can expand on the findings of this study by exploring how character development occurs in other larps.

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—Guy M. and Mark Jo LeClaire
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A Qualitative Exploration of the Perceived Social Benefits of Playing Tabletop Role-playing Games

Abstract: This study explored the lived experiences of young adults who play tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) to gain deeper insights into the perceived social impact of tabletop role-playing games. Six young adults (3 men, 3 women) between the ages of 19 and 24 (M = 21.2, SD = 2.6) were recruited from role-playing communities within Nova Scotia, Canada. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to assess perceived social competence and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect detailed qualitative data about lived experiences with role-playing games. Responses on the SDQ indicated that participants had typical strengths and difficulties with respect to social competence at the time of the current study. The qualitative description indicated the emergence of four main themes related to role-playing games from the interviews: Content Focus, Social Focus, Creativity Focus, and Identity Focus. The themes present in the interviews are consistent with findings from previous case study research, suggesting that role-playing games may have the potential to improve perceived social competence, and further elucidate the lived experiences of people who play role-playing games in terms of why they engage with tabletop role-playing games.

Keywords: Role-playing games, social competence, qualitative, interviews, young adults, tabletop

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1. INTRODUCTION

Based on theoretical reviews of operational definitions, social competence can be generally defined as "effectiveness in social interaction" (Rose-Krasnor 1997) and is typically operationally defined in terms of rate of interaction, specific behaviours, and/or adequacy of performance (e.g., social performance in an experimental condition) (Cavell 1990). Research-informed models of social competence suggest that it is developed through social role-play in early childhood (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018; Howes 1997; Howes and Matheson 1992), fostering skills that allow children to develop relationships and empathy-related skills (Rose-Krasnor 1997), and that social role-play can improve the development of social competence in dynamic environments and increase prosocial behaviour (Howes and Matheson 1992). Models also suggest that well-developed social competence is associated with improved social navigation and resiliency (Rose-Krasnor 1997) and experimental studies suggest that poorly developed social competence is associated with psychological distress, behavioural concerns (Rockhill, Stoep, McCauley, and Katon 2009; Stepp, Pardini, Loeber, and Morris 2011), and diagnoses of psychological disorders (Cole, Martin, Powers, and Truglio 1996; Settipani and Kendall 2013).

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), sometimes called pen and paper role-playing games, are games typically played in-person in which players take on the role of characters who cooperate in a fictional world (White, Arjoranta, Hitchens, Peterson, Torner, and Walton 2018; Zagal and Deterding 2018). TRPGs have common components and characteristics, including an adventure that the players pursue (e.g., stealing gold from a dragon, planning and executing a heist, saving a king or queen), a setting in which the adventure takes place (e.g., Middle-Earth, Earth in the future), and a system of rules to govern gameplay (e.g., Dungeons & Dragons, Call of Cthulhu, Shadowrun) (White, Arjoranta, Hitchens, Peterson,

Torner, and Walton 2018). TRPGs also typically contain dungeons, which are labyrinthian locations within the setting of an adventure (e.g., a wizard's castle, a corporate HQ, a villain's underground lair), and wilderness locations, which are outdoor areas outside towns, cities, or dungeons that can contain challenges for players (White, Arjoranta, Hitchens, Peterson, Torner, and Walton 2018). Most TRPGs focus on high fantasy, with the first and most popular TRPG being Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) (Gygax and Arneson 1974). Recently, the popular press has reported anecdotal instances of TRPGs as successful social skills interventions as well as an increase in the use of TRPGs for social difficulties (Bartlette 2014; Burke 2017; D'Anastasio 2017).

Researchers have noted that TRPGs may be psychologically beneficial due to their similarity to therapeutic role-playing techniques that are often used as part of social skills interventions (Blackmon 1994; Bowman and Lieberoth 2018; Meriläinen 2012; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Zayas and Lewis 1986). Specifically, three studies investigated the use of TRPGs as part of an intervention. Zayas and Lewis (1986) investigated the use of a TRPG designed to help develop interactional and teamwork skills with young boys. Findings indicated that the group was able to overcome social skills difficulties after playing the game. In a case study, Blackmon (1994) reported on the interaction between a client's course of treatment for social difficulties and his involvement in an TRPG, noting significant improvement in his daily social functioning. Finally, Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) reported on an intervention in which clinicians used an TRPG as a group intervention for gifted boys who struggled socially. After completing the intervention, the boys demonstrated significant improvements in their social skills.

In addition to the previously discussed intervention studies, three studies have indicated the positive impact of engaging with TRPGs. Based on a survey of role-players, Meriläinen (2012) concluded that the opportunities that TRPGs provide could be used for personal and social skills development. Similarly, Daniau (2016) and Scott et al. (2016) found that TRPGs could facilitate the refinement of skills related to creativity, collaboration, and identity exploration.

Based on the encouraging results of previous case studies, small group interventions, surveys, and anecdotal reports, the goal of the current study is to assess whether TRPGs have an influence on players' lived experiences of social competence. The current study expands on the previous literature through the use of semi-structured interviews, obtaining rich information about the lived experiences of TRPG players. Results were expected to reflect the observations made in previous studies, such that a positive association would be found between involvement in TRPGs and perceived benefits to social competence. It was expected that if TRPGs were perceived as being beneficial to the development of social competence, themes derived from interview responses would reflect this. It was also expected that the results of the questionnaire would support the themes present in the interviews by suggesting that participants did not currently experience significant social challenges.

2. METHOD

2.1 Sample

Participants were recruited from the community of TRPG players in Nova Scotia, Canada using recruitment posters placed in gaming stores and shared on online communities for people who play TRPGs. Recruitment posters instructed potential participants to contact the researchers via email if they met the inclusion criteria and were interested in participating.

Participants were enrolled in the study if the met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were between 19 and 24 years of age, (2) they had experience playing TRPGs in the last year, and (3) they had experience playing TRPGs in-person.

Participants were six young adults (3 men, 3 women) between 19 and 24 years of age (M= 21.2, SD = 2.6). A seventh participant was excluded from the study due to a misunderstanding of the inclusion criteria. Based on the qualitative research guidelines provided by Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994), the sample met the minimum size requirements for qualitative, phenomenological research to achieve data saturation (i.e., no new themes likely to be detected with additional participants).

Participation was compensated with a gift card valued at $10. The study was approved by our institution's Research Ethics Board.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Demographic and Role-playing Habits Questionnaire

Demographic and role-playing habit information was collected using a questionnaire designed by the researcher for the current study. Demographic questions included age, self-identified gender, level of education, and employment status. Questions about role-playing habits focused on frequency of playing TRPGs, how many other people participants typically play with, and whether they use technology to play TRPGs.

2.2.2 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Information about participants' perceived strengths and weaknesses was obtained using the SDQ (Goodman, 2009). The original SDQ was designed to assess the overall well-being of children aged 3-16 years for the purposes of clinical assessment, outcome evaluation, epidemiology, community screening, and a wide variety of psychological research and has been widely used and is reported to have a high degree of reliability and validity (Goodman, 2009). The current study uses a version of the SDQ modified by Goodman (2009) for self-report for individuals who are 18 or more years old. The questionnaire consists of 33 items, 25 of which are three-point scales where the participant is asked to select not true, sometimes true, or certainly true in response to statements about themselves and eight of which are four-point rating scales, which have different responses depending on the content of the item. Responses are coded to provide scores for five scales: emotionality, peer problems, prosocial behaviour, hyperactivity, and conduct problems. Scores on each scale fall into one of three descriptive categories: normal, borderline, or abnormal. Scale scores can range from 0 to 10, with cut-off scores varying by scale. Scores on the scales are intended to correspond to the intensity of the associated descriptor.

2.2.3 Semi-Structured Interview

Qualitative information about participants' role-playing experiences was collected using a semi-structured interview. An interview guide was designed to obtain specific information about participants' experiences with TRPGs and how these experiences related to their perceived social competence. The interview guide consisted of three questions about the games the TRPGs the participants had played (i.e., "Why did you start playing tabletop

role-playing games?"; "which three games do you play the most?"; "which three games are your favorites?"), followed by seven questions focused specifically on the TRPGs noted by the participants, each with prompts to gather more detailed information if the participant's response was missing key details or if they did not answer the question that was asked (i.e., "What do you like about playing _____ ?", "What is the group you play _____ with like?", "When you play _____ are you usually a Game Master/Dungeon Master or a player?", "Describe your approach to playing/running a game when you play _____ ", "If you played as the player/GM instead of the player/GM, how would you approach the game?", "How do you feel when you play _____?", and "Why do you continue to return to this/these group(s) to play _____ ?"). These seven questions were repeated for each TRPG the participant noted during the initial three questions to ensure that as much detail as possible was gathered about their experiences, since different games can offer different experiences.

2.3 Research Protocol

Following the informed consent procedure, participants were asked to complete the demographic and role-playing habits questionnaire and the SDQ (Goodman 2009). Once both questionnaires were complete, the interview began. Interviews were recorded using a digital microphone and a computer. Interviews took between 20 and 60 minutes to complete. All interviews were completed individually and were transcribed immediately following each interview. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymize participant responses.

2.3.1 Statistical Analysis

Responses to the SDQ (Goodman 2009) were coded using the instructions from Goodman (2009). The results of the SDQ were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

2.3.2 Qualitative analysis

Interview responses were examined using qualitative description. Qualitative description is a method of analyzing written, verbal, or visual messages to make inferences from data in their context (Sandelowski 2000), like content analysis (Elo and Kyngas 2008). The aim of qualitative description is to attain a straightforward and unambiguous description of a phenomenon; the outcome of the analysis is a set of concepts or categories describing the phenomenon (Sandelowski 2000).

For the current study, the procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. Their procedure involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing found themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. Stages 1 and 2 were conducted through an initial reading of the interview transcripts by two authors. Once prominent themes were identified, a single author began stage 3, which involved re-reading the interview transcripts and coding the text using the initial codes generated by the research team as well as any new codes that were observed, while regularly cross-checking for consistency. Four primary themes with seven subthemes were identified in stage 1 and carried through stage 2 and stage 3 (i.e., no themes were eliminated). Codes were also sorted into broader themes and sub-themes and the relationships between codes and themes were identified. Stages 4 and 5 involved two authors meeting to review the coded data to determine the necessity of new codes or themes. Finally, stage 6 involved

a single author completing an analytic narrative by placing coded extracts into the context of their themes with two authors providing consistent input and feedback.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Data, Role-playing Habits, and SDQ

Collected demographic information is summarized in Table 1. Three of the participants reported that their highest level of education was high school/GED, two participants reported that college was their highest, and one participant reported that some university was their highest. Only two participants reported that they were employed full time or part time, with the remaining two participants reporting that they were employed casually or were a full-time student.

Table 1: Sample demographic details

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Employment
Aidan	24	Male	Secondary	Casual
Bill	19	Male	College	Full-time
Courtney	24	Female	College	Full-time
Dennis	19	Male	Secondary	Part-time
Estelle	19	Female	Secondary	Student
Fiona	20	Female	Some University	Part-time

Reported role-playing habits are summarized in Table 2. Half of the participants indicated that they had begun to play TRPGs approximately two to three years prior to participating in the current study, while the remaining participants reported that they had begun playing TRPGs between five and seven years earlier. Half the participants (n = 3) noted that they played D&D exclusively, while the other half mentioned that they played at least one other TRPG regularly. Most participants reported that they played with a regular group (n = 5). All participants reported playing in person with other players regularly and most participants reported that they did not play through the Internet regularly, with only one participant stating that they did.

The scores produced by the SDQ (Goodman 2009) are divided into five scales: conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, prosocial behaviour, and emotional problems. In the current study, most of the participant scores for each scale were within the average range and the average scale scores across participants were within the average range (See Table 3). One participant (Courtney) had a score that was in the abnormal range for the hyperactivity scale and a score that was in the borderline range for the emotional problems

scale.

Table 2: Sample role-playing habits

Participant	Years Playing	Play Frequency	Group Size
Aidan	5	>1-3 sessions a week	4-5
Bill	6	1-3 sessions a week	4-5
Courtney	7	3-4 sessions a month	4-5
Dennis	2	1-2 sessions a month	3-4
Estelle	3	1-3 sessions a week	5-6
Fiona	2.5	1-2 sessions a month	3-4

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The themes and subthemes found in the semi-structured interviews and the percentage of the total interview responses covered by each theme can be found in Table 3 and the percentage of individual interview responses covered by each theme can be found in Table 4.

Table 3: Percentages of total interview responses coded under each theme.

Theme	Subtheme	%
Content Focus		12
Social Focus		
	Social Context	16
	Social/Psychological Improvement	16
	Relationship Building	12
	Social Atmosphere	12
Identity Focus		
	Character Creation	8
	Taking on Roles	8
	Autonomy	8
Creativity Focus		8

Table 4: Percentages of interview responses under each theme for the participants

Participants	Content Focus	Social Focus	Identity Focus	Creativity Focus
Aidan	20%	60%	20%	0%
Bill	20%	40%	40%	0%
Courtney	50%	50%	0%	0%
Dennis	0%	66.66%	33.33%	0%
Estelle	0%	40%	20%	20%
Fiona	0%	50%	25%	25%

3.3.1 Theme 1: Content Focus

Content focus outlines the ways that the content of TRPGs influence how appealing they are to players. When reflecting on their experiences with TRPGs, several of the participants indicated that they were attracted to their favorite TRPG because of the content of the game (e.g., rules, settings). Participants also noted that their interest in TRPGs came from a pre-existing attraction to fantasy fiction. For example, when asked about why he started playing tabletop TRPGs, Aidan (age 24) reported, "I first started playing tabletop role-playing games . . . just because I liked the whole fantasy aspect." When discussing one of the TRPGs he regularly played, Bill noted "I like the mythos behind it more than maybe the game itself." When asked why she enjoyed *Dungeons & Dragons*, Fiona said "I'm a really big fan of the *Tales of Symphonia* and those type of games, so I found I could project that sort of gameplay, but in my own way." Similarly, Estelle noted "I like how creative it is, like, it's very fantasy oriented. You've got werewolves and vampires and all these magical items, spells. It's all very creative and very fun."

3.3.2 Theme 2: Social Focus

This theme outlines how social context can be a primary factor in convincing people to try playing TRPGs and how the social atmosphere of gaming groups, new and maintained friendships, and perceived social/psychological improvements can be primary influences on people's decision to continue playing. When reflecting on their experiences with RPGs, participants reported that their experiences with TRPGs were influenced by social factors and that these experiences influenced their social experiences outside of playing TRPGs.

3.3.2.1 Theme 2 Subtheme 1: Social Context. Participants noted that their initial experiences with TRPGs often came about because of a pre-existing interest in TRPGs among their group of friends. For example, Estelle (age 19) reported, "It's something that my friend wanted to do." Bill stated, "Me and some close friends learned together and enjoyed it." Courtney said, "I started going because one of my high school friends moved up to the city." Similarly, participants also noted that their experiences in TRPGs were often influenced positively and negatively by social factors external to the game (e.g., arguments with friends, family hardship). Aidan noted, "When outside forces generally dampen your spirits. . . . I know

when my grandma died, I was not at all for *D&D*."

3.3.2.2 Theme 2 Subtheme 2: Social and Psychological Improvement. Several participants suggested that their experiences with TRPGs improved their social skills. For example, Dennis stated, "I've noticed that I'm a little more—I'm able to speak clearer almost." Similarly, Fiona also noted, "I think I used to be really shy," whereas Estelle stated, "I'm a lot more social, like I meet a lot of people through *D&D*. I was very antisocial before I started it and it's kind of helped me open up and get closer to people." Finally, Aidan said, "I'd say I'm a lot more social now. I was social before, don't get me wrong. But now, I'm just like, 'Hello, random person, how are you?'"

3.3.2.3 Theme 2 Subtheme 3: Relationship Building. When discussing what they had gained from playing TRPGs, participants noted that they had gained or improved friendships. For example, when asked whether she felt that she had gained new friends through role-playing games, Estelle said, "Yes, definitely," but also noted, "We get into a lot of fighting because we have different personalities. . . . So, it's a bit dysfunctional but we're always kind of on the same page in the end. We always work it out and end up having a good time." Bill reported, "I've really been able to hold onto my best friendships through role-playing games" and "I can account for a lot of my relationships through some sort of role-playing." When asked if she had gained friends from playing TRPGs, Estelle said, "Yes, definitely." Similarly, Fiona noted, "It's a great way to meet new people. I've met so many new friends from playing this and I find it's a really great way of connecting with other people."

3.3.2.4 Theme 2 Subtheme 4: Social Atmosphere. When discussing what their role-playing group looked like and what motivated them to continue playing TRPGs, participants suggested that the atmosphere of their role-playing group was generally positive. For example, Bill noted, "The group itself is very fun and playful and we take it very casually." When asked why she continues to return to TRPGs, Estelle said, "My friends. It was always a great time. It was honestly the highlight of my week every time I would go." Similarly, Fiona stated, "[They are] really friendly. We're all pretty good friends. Everyone's pretty chill."

3.3.3 Theme 3: Identity Focus

Identity Focus outlines how playing TRPGs allow players to feel autonomous while taking on novel roles using game characters that they have created themselves.

3.3.3.1 Theme 3 Subtheme 1: Character Creation. Participants expressed their enjoyment of creating new characters and trying to create characters that represented different parts of themselves. For example, Fiona noted, "I love my character. So, for me, I keep coming back because I want to see how her story unfolds." Courtney said, "The cool thing . . . is that you can play whatever you want whenever you show up, it doesn't really matter, so I've gotten to try a couple different things." Regarding how he made a character, Dennis said, "Since I know the rules a lot better, I know how to build a very powerful character just through the rules system. I hate to say that, but I know how to [min-max] a character to be the best one possible, so I believe it's like I could center myself to be the leader of the group because I could be the most powerful character, but being—saying that, I could just make a character that's just ridiculously smart or ridiculously funny."

3.3.3.2 Theme 3 Subtheme 2: Taking on Roles. Participants also reported that they enjoyed trying different roles to see how they could perform in a role that they are not used to having.

For example, Aidan said, "You can play so many different types of people in those games. Like, in one game I'm a female character who is a warrior and in another game I'm a small little gnome wizard." Bill noted, "I usually play a leader type character who is half decent at talking and I usually try to play a smart character." Dennis noted, "There's two sets of people I can be, almost. Like, I might interact with my friend right next to me differently and then my character would, say 'suck it' to their character."

3.3.3.3 Theme 3 Subtheme 3: Autonomy. Participants noted that they enjoyed the freedom that TRPGs allowed for them to exercise different parts of their identity within a safe space. For example, Bill noted that "I felt like I had control over the situations. . . . I found it fun." Courtney noted, "I like planning. Improv makes me nervous, so having that plan and having everything set out would be easier for me. . . . I'm kind of like that in real life too." Aidan said of his character's identity, "I would say pretty much the same as my personality, which is generally good hearted and semi-talkative."

3.3.4 Theme 4: Creativity Focus

Creativity Focus outlines the creative elements of playing a TRPG that appealed to the participants. Participants discussed the amount of freedom that TRPGs allow players to exercise when solving in-game problems and developing characters. For example, Fiona said, "The creative part of it I really liked. . . . It's kind of cool to me that you can create your own world or play within someone else's world." Dennis said, "I keep coming back and it's like, 'Oh, it's time to play this awesome character I've created and who I've more elaborated on as since the initial session and this character has this big long back story and fears and pros and cons.'" Similarly, Estelle reported:

> It kind of gives you the ability, because you control the character, because the character is kind of a personification of you in a way and it's how you would react in similar situations and I like how we get put in situations we wouldn't be put in in like, a normal life, and even if you haven't experienced things like spells, you can still work it out.

4. DISCUSSION

The current study sought to obtain a deeper understanding of the social experiences of role-players by qualitatively examining the lived experiences of young adults who play TRPGs and integrating quantitative assessments of their current perceived social difficulties. Based on information collected through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, participants' experiences are summarized by the overall theme Role-playing Games Are Appealing for Social and Personal Reasons. The four themes: Content Focus, Social Focus, Identity Focus, and Creativity Focus contribute to a detailed understanding of experiences with TRPGs. Based on these themes, conclusions can be drawn about the lived experiences of people who play TRPGS.

4.1 Social Competence

Based on previous studies that have examined the influence of TRPGs on social skills (Blackmon 1994; Meriläinen 2012; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Zayas and Lewis 1986), it was hypothesized that themes relating to improvements in social competence would emerge in

the qualitative interviews. The contents of the Social Focus and Identity Focus themes suggest that the participants in this study experienced a perceived improvement in their social skills after playing TRPGs as all six participants indicated that their social skills had been positively influenced by playing TRPGs. The improvements mentioned by participants (e.g., becoming less shy, improving friendships) are also consistent with accepted operational definitions of social competence (Cavell 1990; Rose-Krasnor 1997), in that participants reported that they became better able to achieve social success after participating in TRPGs. However, in isolation, these themes are simply anecdotal evidence of perceived improvement.

In addition to meeting the expectations set by previous studies, the results of the current study offer unique insight into the lived experiences of people who play TRPGs. In the relationship building subtheme, participants discussed instances of demonstrated social achievements, specifically the creation and maintenance of relationships, through their involvement with TRPGs. Social achievements were also discussed in the social context and social atmosphere subthemes, with participants suggesting that their involvement with TRPGs came about due, in part, to their acceptance within a social group and that their acceptance within that group has maintained due to their continued involvement with TRPGs. The successful use of social skills was also discussed, such as the use of empathy to solve in-game problems that was discussed in the taking on roles subtheme (Cavell 1990; Rose-Krasnor 1997). In the social and psychological improvement subtheme, participants noted that they felt that their ability to appropriately navigate social interactions had improved and that the skills they had developed through their involvement in TRPGs had helped them to make social achievements (e.g., forming and maintaining relationships).

4.2 Additional Themes

The themes found in the current study that go beyond reported improvements in perceived social competence expand on the results of previous studies by allowing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of young adults who play TRPGs. The themes outside of the broader theme of Social Focus reflect personal reasons for engaging with tabletop RPGs and their presence suggest that they are attractive to users for non-social factors as well (Blackmon 1994; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Zayas and Lewis 1986). Half of the participants noted that the content of RPGs played a primary role in their initial attraction to TRPGs and almost all the participants (n = 5) reported that TRPGs allowed the exploration of their identity. Finally, two participants noted that they engaged with TRPGs because they allowed them to exercise a degree of creativity. These subthemes suggest that, for some young adults, engagement with TRPGs may be due to the opportunity for identity exploration, engagement with the content of the game itself, and the open-ended nature of TRPGs, suggesting that the lived experiences of people who play role-playing games are consistent with observations made by Blackmon (1994) and Rosselet and Stauffer (2013).

4.3 Relation to Clinical Practice

Although the current study does not establish a causal relationship between engagement with TRPGs and social competence, some of the themes in the current study do align with clinical observations in the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) community. Clinical care providers have begun to use TRPGs to teach social skills to children, adolescents, and young adults with ASD, indicating that they have observed positive outcomes (Bartlette 2014; Burke 2017;

D'Anastasio 2017). Future studies should experimentally investigate the impact of TRPGs on social competence in clinical samples.

4.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Future Research

The limitations of the current study are related to the measures and sample. Interpretation of the interview data could have been influenced by the researchers' biases. However, to mitigate the potential for bias, experienced qualitative researchers were consulted when the interviews were coded and interpreted. Additionally, the SDQ (Goodman 2009) is more general than the social competence measures used in previous studies, making it difficult to compare the current study and previous studies. It is also possible that the effects of TRPGs noted in the qualitative interviews may not be exclusive to TRPGs, based on the tendency for social competence to develop through imaginative play (Howes and Matheson 1992). It is also possible that, given the amount of time between when participants initially engaged with TRPGs and the facilitation of the current study, it is impossible to determine if TRPGs were the only factor positively influencing the social competence of the participants. Finally, the sample of the current study was not a clinical sample, making the results difficult to extend to a clinical population. Future studies should adopt a more experimental approach to determine which component(s) of TRPGs may influence perceived and observable social competence. As well, comparisons should be made between typically developing and clinical samples using comprehensive measures of social competence in addition to comparisons of TRPGs to other forms of imaginative play (e.g., games of pretend, social role-play).

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the current study corroborate and expand on the findings of previous case studies through an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of young adults who play TRPGs. Participants' experiences with TRPGs suggest that TRPGs are appealing for social and personal reasons, including the content of the games, the allowance of identity exploration, and the design of the rules. These lived experiences also suggest that TRPGs have the potential to improve social competence, as the lived experiences of participating TRPG players contain themes that reflect improvement in social or psychological improvement which are supported by their responses to the SDQ.

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Not Only Play: Experiences of Playing a Professor Character at *College of Wizardry* with a Professional Background in Teaching

Abstract: This article investigates how participants that have played professor characters in the sandbox-style Nordic Larp *College of Wizardry* reflected on planning and conducting play-pretend lessons compared to their experiences of teaching in professional environments. Using the concepts of spillover, bleed, compensation, role conflict, and contrast, this article focuses on how such experiences can contain reversals of playful and serious motivational states. Data was obtained by interviewing nine participants from various countries: areas of subject expertise; amounts of teaching and larping experience; and levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary, and vocational). Qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2002) was used to evaluate the guideline-structured interviews via a category system developed from a theoretical framework, combining the research findings of Fenstermacher et al. (2009), Apter (2008), Banner (1985), Biddle (1983 and 1979), Staines (1980) and Kando and Summers (1971). The results of this investigation show that all interviewees drew on their professional teaching experiences for planning and conducting play-pretend lessons at *College of Wizardry.* Despite the fictionality of the setting, interviewees identified several parallels, such as approaches to teaching and an awareness for student/player needs. Playing a professor at *College of Wizardry* with a professional background in teaching provided an opportunity to explore and experiment, due to the absence of expectations present in professional settings. Educators larping their role enjoyed more liberty, yet also encountered familiar real-world stress factors.

Keywords: Larp, education, teachers, *College of Wizardry*, wizard, lessons, live action role-playing games, spillover, bleed, compensation, spillover

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1. INTRODUCTION

What happens when educators engage in a similar role beyond their professional work context: when they play a professor and give fictional lessons at a larp? In childhood, pretending to be a team of firefighters putting out a fire, pretending to be a doctor examining the heart rate of a patient, or pretending to be a vendor selling groceries seemed the most natural and carefree thing to do. Playing work-related activities adhered to our interests, skills, and role models. In doing so, we not only imitated how we observed adults performing these activities, but also allowed ourselves to pursue what sparked our curiosity, helping us familiarize ourselves not only with the norms of society, but also to understand how roles are related to and dependent on each other (Biddle 1979, 58 and Brown 2010). Yet we grow up, forget, and even devalue the power of play; we erroneously come to believe that play is a waste of time or a distraction from work best restricted to childhood (Brown 2010, 6-7 and 60; Stenros and Montola 2010, 25). In education, our output- and competition-oriented systems leave little room for practice, process, and passion. But what if we could temporarily escape these expectations and restrictions, and impose a playful change of perspective on a professional everyday role by adapting it for a larp?

Connections between work and leisure have sparked researchers' interests for a long time. Banner insists that "[w]e need to know much more about what work and leisure *mean* to people, and, also, *why* they do them. [...] What do they get out of their work and leisure activities?" (1985, 17; emphasis in original).

These meanings and connections have frequently been discussed with reference to *spillover* and *compensation*. Spillover describes a situation in which qualities or habits exercised at work

are transferred to and exercised in leisure (or vice versa), whereas compensation describes the engagement in a leisure activity to balance an unsatisfactory amount (or complete lack of) opportunities to engage in desired activities or to use meaningful skills at work (Kando and Summers 1971, 315-317; Staines 1980, 111 and Banner 1985, 15). The analysis of these concepts remains a relevant field of interdisciplinary inquiry – also within larp studies, where the concept of spillover is similar to the concept of *bleed*, describing the transfer of thoughts, emotions, relationships and physical state from a player to a character or vice versa (Bowman 2015).

Previous studies have used spillover and compensation to analyze connections between educators' work and leisure activities. Hecht and Boies, for instance, examined spillover in faculty members at a Canadian university, showing that participation in leisure activities is beneficial both for employees and their employers (2009, 424). Sorcinelli and Near provide insight into coherences between spillover, compensation, and an overall life/job satisfaction of university lecturers, tracing a reciprocal relation between their leisure and work activities unrelated to gender (1989, 75-76). In the primary and secondary education sector, Delle Fave and Massimini discovered that teachers mostly had optimal experiences while engaging in active, complex and demanding activities such as work (i.e. teaching), creative activities, and reading, which—as opposed to passive leisure activities—supported a development of competences and personal growth (2003, 338).

At the intersection of formal education and leisure activities, edu-larps attempt to fuse the casual setting and creative energy of leisure with the innovative pedagogical aims of a formal setting, thereby aiming to harness the interactive and immersive nature of larps as opposed to traditional ways of teaching and learning (Bowman 2014, 114). Various researchers in this field have highlighted that edu-larps have been effectively used in different subjects within primary, secondary and tertiary levels (c.f. Vanek and Peterson 2016, Kilgour et al. 2015, Kurz and Balzer 2015, Bowman 2014, Mochoki 2014 and 2013, McDonald and Kreizenbeck 2012, Robinson 2011, Hyltoft and Holm 2009, Harder 2007, Henriksen 2006). Researchers have also shown that using edu-larp as a method for teaching and learning provides a safe environment for exploring and practicing involvement in complex or controversial socio-political and cultural themes requiring teamwork, active participation, empathy, and divergent thinking.

Yet while several studies have been conducted by educators who themselves engage in larp and/or edu-larp, their own experiences of play-pretend teaching in a larp context have not previously been a subject of inquiry. Therefore, this investigation seeks to begin bridging this gap by providing an insight into how professor players at *College of Wizardry* with a professional background in teaching reflected on planning and conducting play-pretend lessons, concerning connections between work and leisure, elements of teaching, and role theory. The following description sketches a brief overview of the larp chosen as the focal point of this investigation.

College of Wizardry — created in 2014 by Dziobak Larp Studios and run by Company P since 2019 — is an international sandbox-style Nordic Larp. Players can be cast either as student or staff members attending a magical college, engaging in house competitions, stirring up and resolving teenage drama, and unravelling dark, mysterious plots (Dziobak Larp Studios 2016). On average, 135 players attend the larp, of which approximately 115-120 are cast as student characters and 13-18 as staff members, including professors (Šumar 2016). In-game (i.e. fictional) lessons represent a main element of the game:

> Each day at Czocha has six lesson "blocks" during daytime. The Professors each have their own speciality, and the three years have different classes. Classes are taught to Juniors, Sophomores and Seniors respectively, and most lessons will be taught to classes consisting of 5-20 students at a time. (Dziobak Larp Studios 2016, 8)[1]

The design document also contains a guide on "playing a professor," describing responsibilities and possibilities connected with this role, stating:

> How you teach is very much up to you, but the key words are:
>
> • Make it interactive (let the students participate—either by casting spells, working in groups, exercises, etc)
>
> • Make it interesting (make the students make choices—ethical choices, status choices, relations choices)
>
> • Make it usable outside class (teach them things they can use to create more play outside the classroom)
>
> • Make it playable (create a way for good students to be able to excel and bad students to be able to fail)
>
> • Make it special (in Invocation, summon creatures. In Mind Magic, practice mind spells). (Dziobak 2016, 25)

Another responsibility of professor players is to give and take house points on a scale of 1-5, which count towards the house cup awarded at the end of the game. Yet while professor players have many opportunities to create play, the game design draws attention to how play with student characters should be regulated, "The students are supposed to learn something about life too, right? So don't solve problems for them—create problems for them instead. Don't be a hero. Be a teacher" (Dziobak 2016)!

Thus, on the one hand, professor players are expected to be aware of how their in-game authority may influence and interfere with student players' plots. On the other hand, this creates an alibi for professor players, protecting them from a need to shepherd students or entertain players all the time. For while this makes the role of professor players similar to game masters (responsible for generating play, passing on information etc.), they are not NPCs (non-player-characters), but players that can pursue their own plots outside of lessons. As some interviewees' experiences will show, this ability is where both liberties and challenges arise.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

While a professional background in teaching is not required for playing a professor character at *College of Wizardry*, this investigation sought to interview those who had one. As a hypothesis,

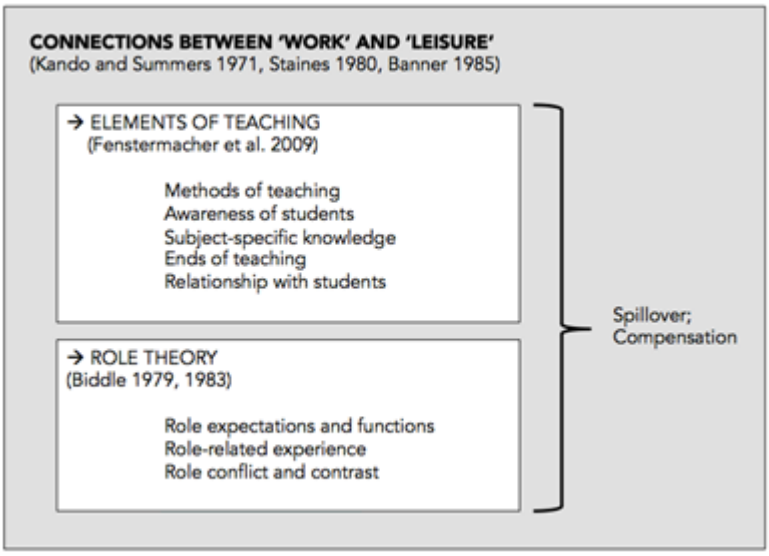
1 Whether players receive Junior, Sophomore, or Senior student characters is determined by their preference, not by their off-game (i.e. real) age, academic background, or level of larping experience (Dziobak Larp Studios 2016, 7).

it was assumed that planning and conducting lessons for *College of Wizardry* might enable new ways of learning about teaching, in that educators might identify and make use of similarities and differences in the work and leisure contexts of their role. Expert interviews were chosen as a qualitative method to conduct this investigation, since expert knowledge foregrounds the practical relevance of the interviewees' experiences (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2014, 13-14), where the term "expert" acknowledges a certain degree of professionality concerning the topic of investigation (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 12). Experts structure and influence a field of action for others and themselves through the meaning and relevance they identify in their experiences (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 13). Nine participants (five males, four females) from six different countries and across all levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary, and vocational) were interviewed, having different areas of subject expertise and amounts of teaching and larping experience. Two interviewees played a professor at *College of Wizardry* more than once. Due to the small sample size, this investigation is not representative.

Interviews were structured around a guideline containing questions about professional teaching experiences and approaches; aspects that contributed to the decision of playing a professor at *College of Wizardry*; aspects they identified as relevant for planning their play-pretend lessons; decisions made during the larp; and any similarities and differences that they might identify concerning teaching in a professional versus a larp environment. Interviews lasted for 45 minutes on average.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the interviews, representing "a method of successive, controlled steps of ordering and filtering transcripted material via a system of rules and categories" (Mayring 2002, 114-115). This was done by developing a system of deductive categories as outlined below, where spillover and compensation were used as overarching categories, since many parallels emerged regarding these work-leisure connections.

Figure 1: Category system for qualitative content analysis



3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As seen previously, this investigation centers on ideas of work and leisure, which require a critical examination.

3.1 Types of Work and Leisure

According to Gershuny (2000, 5), there are four distinct uses to which we devote our time: paid work, unpaid work, sleep, and leisure. He reminds us that:

> [o]ur work is more than just what we do in our jobs; it is also what we do without pay, in our households, for our families, and for the members of the wider community. And what we do for other people's livings is that we use *our* non-work time, to consume the products of *their* work. (Gershuny 2000; emphasis in original)

In other words, it is necessary to expand our understanding of work to include activities outside the job setting: activities characterized by their inherent need of having to be done (Banner 1985, 14). This statement mirrors Jones, Koulu, and Torner's argument that participation at a larp involves a lot of volunteering, which may not always be considered or be immediately visible as work (2016, 126). Conceptions of work and leisure, then, are subject to context and vary according to the people performing these activities:

> What is work one day may be leisure another. . . . [W]e cannot assume any given *form* will be defined as one or another consistently, even by the same author. The extent to which these definitions are situational or trans-situational must be an empirical question rather than a theoretical one. (Banner 1985, 14; my emphasis)

It is thus necessary for investigations of "work" and "leisure" to remain open for and include multiple perspectives of what these forms consist of, since they should:

> not [be seen] as a dichotomy, but, rather, as two pure types at opposite ends of a continuum. . . . Treating work and leisure as points on a continuum may help correct what appears in most of the literature to have been the forcing of a distinction that might not be nearly so clear and meaningful to most people. (Banner 1985, 14)

Thus, this investigation treated work and leisure as dynamic and subjective concepts, asking interviewees how they experienced planning and conducting play-pretend lessons at *College of Wizardry* in this regard (see section 4 for a visual overview of this spectrum).

Stebbins' concept of serious leisure offers another way of approaching and understanding different types of leisure activities. Casual leisure, for instance, is characterized by immediately intrinsically rewarding activities (2014, 4). The most complex forms of leisure however—serious leisure and devotee work—allow for little to no differentiation between work and leisure, describing a systematic endeavour to pursue fulfilling activities high in achievement and appeal as an outlet for skills, knowledge and experience (Stebbins 2014). Between casual leisure and serious leisure, project-based leisure is an intermediate type, involving a considerable degree of organization and skills, but is not intended or considered to be serious leisure or work (Stebbins 2014). These distinctions are important to consider, since people

reflect differently on their experiences even if they share a similar background and scenario — as is the case with the interviewees of this investigation.

Jones, Koulu, and Torner's (2016) choice to focus on larps as a form of (less visible) work can add to this understanding by offering an insight into the significant amount of planning, coordinating, and conducting that is involved in providing play (126, 132), thereby pointing out that this type of labour creates value (125). The authors specifically refer to how the design of *College of Wizardry* "requires the player to draw on additional skills beyond role-playing, such as putting together a lesson plan. . . and . . . [holding] extensive meetings outside of game or prepar[ing] lessons and materials, which in turn help coordinate plotlines in game" (130-132),

Considering the tasks associated with the role of a professor (see section 1), Jones, Koulu, and Torner (2016) argue:

> Preparing and teaching lessons would be an example of second-order labour. . . . Second-order labor serves the game experience at the cognitive and aesthetic levels, but would otherwise be remunerated outside of the larp context. . . . Indeed, it might be considered one of the key design features of *College of Wizardry* that nearly all player-characters are engaged in second-order labor such as studying or teaching, during the game. (128-129, emphasis in original)

3.2 Spillover and Compensation

According to Staines (1980), spillover and compensation describe "two general and competing approaches to the relationship between work and nonwork" (112).

Spillover describes a situation in which a trait, habit, skill, or activity that is developed and/or exercised in a work context is transferred into a leisure context or vice versa (Kando and Summers 1971, 315-317; Staines 1980, 111 and Banner 1985, 15). For this investigation, reflections on having exhibited similar or identical traits, approaches, and tasks in both larp and professional contexts were treated as indicators for spillover in professor players with a professional background in teaching.

Compensation, by contrast, occurs when a person lacks or identifies few opportunities to exercise traits, habits, skills, or types of activity in their work context that they consider meaningful, thus seeking to make up for this in leisure (Kando and Summers 1971, 314-317 and Staines 1980, 111). In the current study, indicators for compensation were treated as experiences identified by the interviewees in which they felt they could not exhibit creativity and/or autonomy within their professional teaching context to a degree of satisfaction. However, it should be noted that spillover and compensation may occur at different times within the same individual performing the same activity (Kando and Summers 1971, 319; Banner 1985, 17), and that "the same leisure activity may be compensatory in *different ways* to *different individuals* depending on their work experience" (Kando and Summers 1971, 319; my emphasis).

It may thus not always be distinguishable for the researcher whether an interviewee transfers a trait, skill or habit to leisure despite already making use of a certain amount of opportunities to engage in them during work (Kando and Summers 1971, 313-314). Hence, connections between work and leisure should be understood as a complex set of possibilities, depending on a person's wishes, needs, and values, such that work and leisure may have different forms and meanings where spillover emerges as a *form* of work affecting a *form* of

leisure and compensation describes how a *meaning* of work affects a *meaning* of leisure (Kando and Summers 1971, 316-319).

3.3 Bleed

A sensation known to larpers as a state that strongly connects player and character in terms of in-game and off-game experiences is referred to as *bleed* (Bowman 2014; 2015). Bowman observes:

> Participants often engage in role-playing in order to step inside the shoes of another person in a fictional reality that they consider "consequence-free." However, role-players sometimes experience moments where their real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters and vice versa. (2015)

Thus, bleed may represent a kind of spillover in which a transfer of cognitive and emotional impressions occurs across layers of interactions and experiences. Yet while spillover and bleed share a common outlook, they differ in their focus of transferred items: while bleed focuses on emotions, thoughts, relationships and physical states (Bowman 2015), spillover is concerned with habits, skills and interests (Kando and Summers 1971, 315-317; Staines 1980, 111 and Banner 1985, 15). Furthermore, while bleed corresponds with contents crossing over between fictional and non-fictional frames, spillover only concerns non-fictional situations, i.e. daily life. Both concepts form relevant points of analysis for this investigation.

3.4 Motivational States and Reversal Theory

Besides the aspect of meaning discussed in section 3.2, motivation represents another important element to consider while analyzing similarities and differences in experiences. According to Apter (2008), motivation varies not only between people and situations, but also within a person: how we experience something can change from one moment to the next, or change between different times and circumstances in which we perform an activity. As such, Apter noticed that we never stay in one motivational state for long, but rather switch (or reverse) between two opposing states, since we cannot both be playful and serious at the same time, for instance. Apter identified four pairs of motivational states representing contrasting desires: serious vs. playful, conformism vs. rebellion, mastery vs. sympathy, and self-oriented vs. other-oriented. He cautions, however, that these should be neither thought of as personality traits nor as unusual or unstable levels of psychological fluctuation. Instead, reversal occurs naturally, either due to situational change via an external, mostly unexpected influence or encounter with a person, object, or event; due to frustration about wanting to get into a particular motivation, but not being able to do so; or in satiation when remaining in one motivational state before boredom or exhaustion ensues (Apter 2008). For this investigation, reversals between serious and playful motivations were considered particularly interesting in combination with the aforementioned theories.

4. DISCUSSION

On average, the interviewees had 6.5 years of professional teaching experience and 14 years of larping experience. The interviewees showed great variation in how they reflected on their experiences of play-pretend teaching in a larp context, as illustrated in the diagram below.

Indicators for spillover surfaced most often in interviewees' reflections on similar methods of teaching, awareness of students'/players' needs, and relationship with students, whereas indicators for compensation surfaced mostly in experiences of role conflict and contrast. As mentioned before, whether an activity is experienced as closer to "work" or "leisure" is strongly subjective and would be difficult to place within a black/white dichotomy, such that interviewees' experiences have been placed on a spectrum of whether they experienced playing a professor-character with a professional background in education as a more playful or a more serious activity. Please note that the following results and diagram are not representative. They show suggestions of how to represent and interpret the reflections of 9 people, where each experience is highly subjective and unique (Stenros and Montola 2010, 10), and should be considered as a snapshot in time rather than a generalization. They also include the possibility of erroneous interpretations from an outside perspective. Thus, the diagram represents an attempt at locating the interviewees' experiences in approximate relation to each other on the spectrum discussed in section 3.1 and the motivational states discussed in section 4.4.

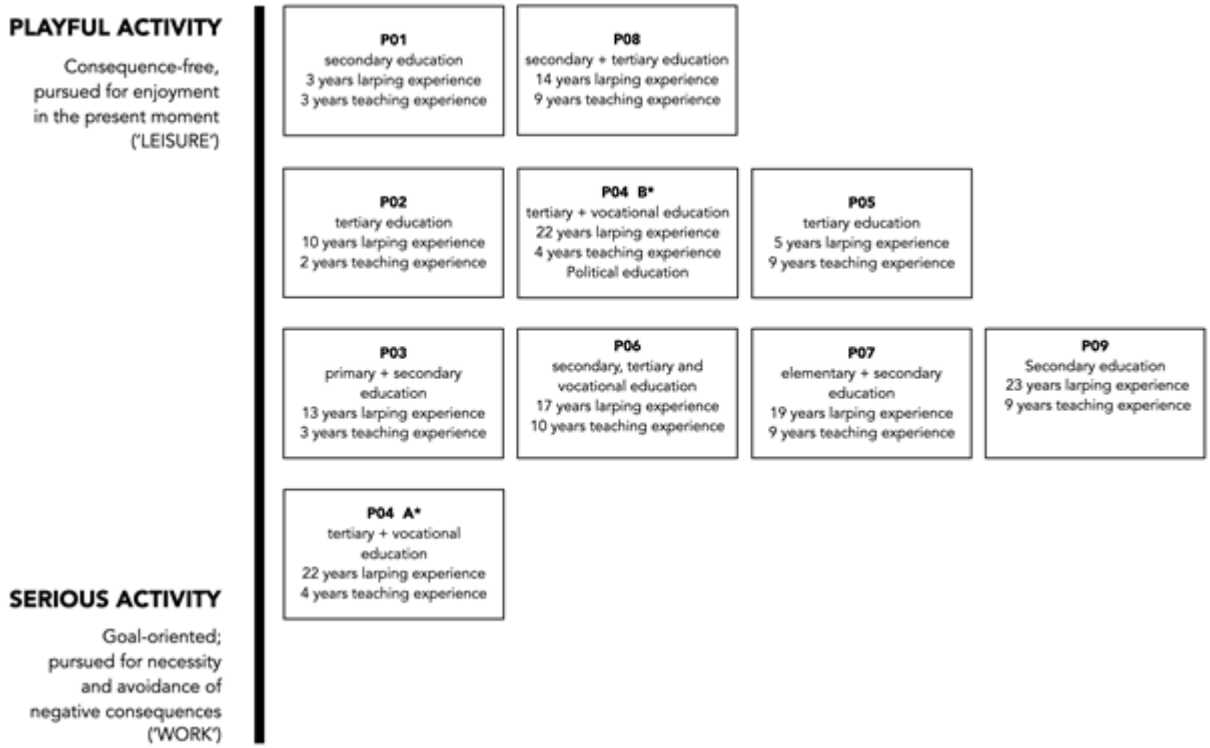


Figure 2: Estimated locations of interviewees' experiences of playing a professor character at College of Wizardry.

Playing a professor at *College of Wizardry* with a professional background in teaching was mainly experienced as a mixture of playful and serious activity. Two experiences (P01, P08) were located purely within leisure, though it is not possible to deduce that their experiences solely consist of casual leisure; while these experiences appear to have been mainly positive and fulfilling, the interviewees did perform complex tasks as highlighted by Jones, Koulu, and Torner (2016). Seven experiences (P02, P04 B, P05, P03, P06, P07 and P09) point towards project-based leisure, in that they were not identified as purely recreational, characterized by

a high degree of organization and commitment, but also not experienced as work (Stebbins 2014, 4).

On the one hand, these interviewees considered it to be an investment of time and effort in preparing and conducting the lessons that they feel should not be overlooked. On the other hand, they emphasized their overall experience of enjoyment and the aim to play their role in a different context for fun. This may represent a type of devotee work in compliance with Jones, Koulu, and Torner's (2016) findings that peoples' time and resources are needed to enable a larp in the first place. Some interviewees reported using edu-larp in their professional teaching and reflected that this might have make them doubly aware of their actions and their role. Interviewees P03, P06, and P07 especially highlighted the similarity of their role with an NPC, describing how they performed tasks usually characteristic of game masters—responsibility for generating play, passing on information, etc.—while simultaneously being player characters. Similarly, P03, P06, P07, and P08 stressed how providing play for student players was always at the forefront of their attention, thereby sometimes neglecting play for themselves—an ambivalent experience of paying to do work in one's freetime by adopting a responsibility to ensure a good experience for others (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016, 130). One interviewee had two profoundly different experiences,[1] of which one was described as having "felt a lot like working" (P04 A), whereas the other was "fun"; "more like leisure" (P04 B; see also section 4.4). Another interviewee that had also played a professor twice mentioned no profound differences in experiences. No pattern was discernible between the amount of experience in teaching and larping and the way in which playing a professor was identified as being more playful or more serious. This might be due to different personalities and the different backgrounds and frameworks of how education is organized at different levels in various countries.

4.1 Spillover

Indicators for spillover identified via qualitative content analysis were divided into two subgroups: a spillover of skills, traits, and interests from a professional teaching context to a play-pretend teaching context, and a spillover of activities and approaches concerning how lessons were planned and conducted. All interviewees' reflections showed indicators for both subgroups. Most commonly, interviewees expressed their motivation for playing a professor at *College of Wizardry* via their interest in experimenting with their role in a different context. All interviewees confirmed having profited from their skills and interests of their professional background in teaching to execute the role of a professor at the larp. The following illustrates an indication of spillover from a professionally taught subject to a fictional subject:

> I chose to teach Runic Magic. I have a background as a teacher in crafts and I thought that my experiences in crafts could give something extra to the students. I also used materials I had at work—at my real work—to prepare props that I brought to the larp. (P03)

Some interviewees stressed that a good relationship between their professor character and their student characters was as important to them on an in-game level as it was to them on an off-game level. Two of these reported that their ends (i.e. aims) of play-pretend teaching mirrored the values of their professional teaching. Conscious use of voice and body language

1 Hence, two different boxes were placed in the diagram: P04 A and P04 B.

also represented an item of transfer. Depending on the professor character that the interviewees chose to play, some of the interviewees identified parallels in approaches to and conceptions of teaching and learning, such as the belief in students'/pupils' ability to excel. Interviewees generally drew on several professionally acquired skills, such as spontaneity and flexibility, praising students, acknowledging their contributions, estimating group energy level, setting goals for the lesson, and encouraging students to actively participate. Two interviewees reflected on having relapsed into habits they exhibit in a professional teaching context.

Regarding spillover of activities and approaches for planning and conducting play-pretend lessons, all interviewees reported having used some methods of teaching that they also use in a similar form in their professional teaching context:

> I used the same method with the kind of homework that I gave and I used the same way of sequencing the lessons into smaller blocks, some of the same ways of working with topics and the same kinds of exercises, so, yes, I think there was a number of parallels (P08).

It is interesting to consider here that some interviewees reported using role-play as a method of teaching professionally. Lastly, several parallels emerged in how interviewees adapted their role to the play-pretend context, such as their unchanged understanding of their responsibility to be there as guides and supporters, both in-game and off-game, both at the larp and in their professional teaching context—especially during times of struggle.

4.2 Bleed

In accordance with Bowman (2015), some interviewees experienced bleed between their professor characters and themselves as professional educators and/or vice versa. These pertained to a general positive feeling as expressed by two interviewees, both in a professional and a play-pretend teaching context. Bleed as a negative emotional spillover from character to player was identified by one interviewee in terms of a dominant feeling of stress. Another indicator of bleed emerged in efforts to keep their own habits and perspectives as a professional educator out of their larp character. Another interviewee reported how the in-game feelings of their professor character affected them strongly on an off-game level:

> You do become the character, or I do. And one of the things was actually a negative experience that my character was very confused that the students didn't like me. And I remember that feeling a lot. And I'm actually not used to it, I'm usually seen as a pretty likable teacher, so not being liked actually was really one of the strongest emotions that I had to deal with during that larp. (P09)

It can thus be said that Bowman's observation of players experiencing different degrees of bleed (2015) can be supported in the light of these results—also concerning an interviewee with an opposite approach to the above, who reported relinquishing immersion into character while larping.

4.3 Compensation

Indicators for compensation were found in most interviewees, mainly in aims of using College of Wiz-

ardry as an outlet for autonomy and experimenting:

> I guess I wanted to test my creativity skills as well, because as a classroom teacher in my country, my curriculum and syllabus are pretty much fixed. I have a textbook to teach from, but at *College of Wizardry*, you don't really have a fixed syllabus, so you can pretty much decide what you want to teach. And I wanted to test my skills to see how creative and how interesting I can make my lessons. (P01)

Some interviewees emphasized enjoying the opportunity to relax and distance oneself from the usual demands they face in this role in a professional context. The opportunity to play a strict or unpopular professor was also experienced as a way to blow off steam by consensually treating student characters on an in-game level in a way that they would not find appropriate on an off-game level or in a professional setting. In addition, two interviewees emphasized that student players at *College of Wizardry* voluntarily and actively participated in their lessons, which was experienced as a welcome contrast to a lower level of student motivation and participation in professional teaching settings, e.g. as a result of mandatory attendance. Larping their role in a non-professional context reminded the educators of the intrinsic joy that they associated with teaching and learning interactions. They were free to let a lesson take its course, even if that resulted in an unforeseen change of initial plans and how the lesson ends. One interviewee remembered agreeing with students that an exercise may seem pointless, which would not be desirable in a professional context. A critical approach towards the traditional education system was also considered an indicator for compensation.

Particularly strong connections surfaced when examining interviewees' recollections of compensation regarding role conflict and contrast.[2] Interviewees expressed an attempt to redress an imbalance between work and leisure in terms of innovative ideas struggling against strongholds of tradition and limited opportunities for creativity and autonomy. All interviewees emphasized a role contrast in terms of class dynamics and an overarching end of teaching: whereas a professional teaching context intends to produce measurable learning outcomes, at *College of Wizardry*:

> The main purpose of the class is not to teach the student anything. It's to give them some situations or some reflections that they could use in their play outside the class. . . . as a teacher you are more focused on gameplay than actually educating. (P05)

Three interviewees experienced a direct link between having more space for improvisation and less responsibility towards students in terms of actual learning achievements. One interviewee emphasized how play-pretend teaching allowed them to focus on student players' interests and provide them with opportunities to express themselves, while another interviewee identified how *College of Wizardry* reminded them of their wish to meet with fellow educators more regularly. Contrast also showed in how interruptions of play-pretend lessons were not perceived as negative, since they provided additional chances for gameplay and allowed a professor player to step back and observe how student players let their characters react.

2 Role contrast does not always ensue in role conflict. If the contrast was not experienced as a source of off-game concern or a challenge that could not be resolved, a statement was categorized as role contrast. If, however, the contrast did present the interviewee with these stressors, the statement was categorized as role conflict.

Concerning indicators for role conflict, three interviewees reported that despite being aware of the need to award and deduct points for student characters' performance, they did not enjoy this part of their role. They also voiced critical thoughts towards grading work in a professional teaching context in general, thus finding their personal priority at odds with their role's duty, both in professional and larp contexts:

> I didn't like it very much in my game experience, giving points. . . . It was an engine for the whole game and also for the motivation of the students, so I wouldn't say that the organizers should skip this engine, but it would be better to tell the students beforehand that the giving of points is a very unfair thing, and that there's a lot of frustration included. (P04)

Some interviewees experienced difficulties in keeping their high self-expectations from their professional context in check, as this example shows:

> The greatest challenge was not being overly professional. You know, the sort of mindset that you get when you teach, that you have to deliver good classes, and you have to be a good teacher, and even when there's no formal evaluation you sort of expect it to happen. (P02)

The chance of misunderstanding the purpose of lessons at *College of Wizardry* for producing real learning outcomes was also highlighted. For two interviewees, the concept of bleed may apply as a form of role conflict, in that they remembered being simultaneously affected by off-game guilt and in-game enjoyment while bullying student players in-game despite having mutual off-game consent.

4.4 Motivational States

While this article cannot offer a thorough discussion of motivational psychology, Apter's reversal theory of motivational states can provide further insight into the interviewees' experiences. He identifies serious vs. playful, conformism vs. rebellion, mastery vs. sympathy, and self-oriented vs. other-oriented motivational states, which are never static labels but constantly fluctuating (2008). For the purposes of this investigation, particular attention was given to identifying a fluctuation ("reversal") of serious vs. playful states in key phrases of the interviewees. These should not be read as generalizations, but as examples or snapshots in time of the interviewees' motivational states when they reflected on the larp as shown in Figure 2.

P01's motivation can be described as dominantly playful at the time, including an indication that a reversal has taken place from a serious state:

> I definitely enjoyed myself, even if planning the lessons was a bit stressful in the beginning, when I wasn't sure what to do with my lessons, but in total I enjoyed myself thoroughly at the larp. So I would say it's all leisure. It's no work at all. (P01)

P02's reflection points towards a reversal which may have taken place more than once from the serious to the playful state and vice versa. Mastery and self-orientation may also be considered active, given the interviewee's reference to skill development:

> I think purely within leisure. I didn't think that the preparation for the larp as a professor was very different from the preparation for any other larp. Maybe it required slightly different things, but either way I could sort of write all my larp experience as not purely leisure, and I guess it would be true to some extent, because it does help you train lots of so-called soft skills. But I think I approached it as leisure, and what I took from it is of course mine, and I can reflect upon it, but I didn't treat it at as work, at any point. (P02)

P03 also shows indication of reversals from serious and playful motivations, closely connected to other-orientation:

> I saw myself as an NPC: first and foremost, I did not do this for my own experience, but for someone else. Which I thought was very similar to the work I do as teacher in real life. I did it for fun, but I definitely viewed it, at least partially, as work, and not leisure. (P03)

P04 discussed two profoundly different experiences of playing a professor. Their first experience traces stress to dominantly serious experiences, connected to a conformist motivation and other-orientation:

> I would say my first role as a teacher was at the Midterm Madness. And the Midterm Madness were about exams. And this setting was a lot of work, and really out-time work. Because it was a lot of giving grades to the students, and like I said before, I don't like giving grades to students in general, neither in the game nor out of game. So this was a lot of stress I was under, a lot of pressure. This felt a lot like working. (P04)

By contrast, P04's second experience can be described as a clear reversal from serious to playful, since this larp included fewer stressors than they associate with their workplace. Also, an indicator for a rebellious motivation surfaces in their critical questioning of the importance of giving points:

> The second time, when I was teacher for Curses, was more like leisure. This was fun. This was not about giving grades, and like I said, the points were not very important to me. I got the students very well with my narrative and this was fun. This is also what I'm doing in other role-plays when I play a character. I also played the teacher in my mother tongue, so it was easier to perform in a more subtle way. (P04)

While P05's account does not allow for many details on motivation, it points to a reversal from a dominantly serious state in their professional context to a dominantly playful state at the larp, calling it "somewhere between. And it was definitely a leisure experience as a professor in real life" (P05).

P06's account does not appear to have a dominantly serious or a playful motivation at the time. However, an indicator for mastery appears in playing the role as a kind of personal research:

> It was partially work, because as an academic I am also a role-playing scholar, so I also

> study larp as an object of inquiry. (P06)

Somewhat similar, P07's reflection indicates a balance of playful and serious motivation, combined with an other-oriented motivation:

> I wasn't there to work, but I realized the responsibility of the professor role. Both because I am a teacher, and because I had been playing this once before. I consider a professor player as kind of an NPC function, in that your first priority is not to have fun, but I think your first priority as a professor is to create play for students. And then to have fun. So I suppose in between. I consider that fun as well, playmaking, but it's complicated. (P07)

P08 also shows a playful dominant motivation, along with self-orientation in the motive of attending the larp: "For me definitely 100% leisure. I mean, I think that role-playing can be used in teaching, and in a sense that it can definitely be used wise[ly], but that played 0% role in me deciding to go, and that was definitely a great time." (P08)

Lastly, P09 also reflects what might be a balance of serious and playful motivation, including an indicator for self-orientation in the awareness that an activity can also be pursued for it's own enjoyment: "It was hard work, I can tell you that, I mean it was not a holiday, but it was still something I did for me. And it's also something that I got a lot of good energy out of: mental energy, just physically owed." (P09)

Apter's reversal theory can provide an additional insight into how larping one's professional role never simply just remains in a playful state of motivation: many interviewees experienced a role conflict at some point during their experiences. Yet while these contrasted highly in some regards, they also uncovered similarities in terms of teaching and learning interactions, whether real or fictional, that might have become less visible in professional contexts:

> One of the things that people really forget about when they're taught for teachers is that we're not just specialists within our languages and within our subjects, we're also classroom managers and leaders. . . . It feels like a huge untapped thing with the role-playing and the learning. I think we're only just getting started. (P09)

Thus, although the findings of this investigation reject the hypothesis that professor players with a professional background learn something new by larping their role and conducting play-pretend lessons, interviewees mostly agreed that it this experience reminded them of important aspects within a professional teaching profession (such as establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with their students/pupils), and that it can be used as a space for generating and testing new ideas for teaching.

5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

While it is not possible to generalize from a sample size of 9 interviewees and the experiences were as unique as the interviewees themselves, the results of this investigation confirm Banner's observation that individuals can show both spillover and compensation via the same leisure activity, depending on different circumstances (1985, 17), and that reversals between playful and serious motivational states occur (Apter 2008). Playing a professor character with a professional background in teaching required an adaptation of professional perspectives and

habits; although a professional teaching background was mostly experienced as an advantage, it also provided challenges that required individual solutions. To answer the research question on how educators reflected on planning and conducting play-pretend lessons at *College of Wizardry* concerning connections between work and leisure, it was found that all interviewees' reflections showed indicators for spillover of traits, skills, and activities, but also bleed of thoughts, emotions, and relationships (Bowman 2015). Most interviewees highlighted differences in terms of (welcome) role contrasts and conflict. Although the interviewees only pretended to teach in a magical environment, adapting their role for a larp context inspired them to critically reflect about the tasks, approaches, and aims of their role in a professional compared to a fictional setting, what might be considered items of good practice in both environments, and how the portrayal of the role is influenced by the framework within which it is played. As such, the interviewees made conscious decisions to create new approaches to a familiar role:

> I removed myself from the normal surroundings, the normal parameters of teaching, and tried new things, tried new parameters, new priorities. . . . I think it is a great learning experience when you take parts of the equation and change it to something completely different. (P07)

Indicators for compensation occurred in terms of wishes for more autonomy and creativity, for which the fictional setting provided an outlet. In these cases, play-pretend teaching was experienced as a refreshing change from the expectations that educators are usually expected to shoulder, such as the need to be accountable towards their institution, their students'/pupils' learning outcomes, parents, external monitors, evaluators, and accreditors. While this should not be misunderstood as devaluating professional standards in education, it invites questions about how a more risk-free environment of play-pretend teaching at *College of Wizardry* could, for instance, be useful for teachers in training to practice and experiment with their ideas.

To conclude, it can be said that playing a professor at *College of Wizardry* with a professional background in education is more than simply imitating one's everyday role. It can represent a deliberate way to explore opportunities, challenge, and reinvent approaches to teaching with varying degrees of similarity and difference to one's personal professional standards. Rather than dismissing play as childish, unimportant or irrelevant, the interviewees have re-interpreted and explored their professional role outside of their work context and have experienced this as a valuable experience to reflect on and perhaps to question, mock, value, and/or share their insights and experiences of this role. After all, what does one consider to be "good" or "bad" teaching? What kind of an educator does one (not) want to be? What does one consider important for teaching? Pretending to teach can point out (un-)desirable, changeable, and interdependent aspects associated with the role and the setting of teaching—experiences that can serve as important starting points for educational systems and global societies that increasingly depend on fostering empathy, changing perspectives, and collaboration to function well and to critically reflect on themselves. Although experiences of a larp are difficult to generalize due to their highly subjective nature (Stenros and Montola 2010, 10), this investigation represented an attempt to collect, analyze and contextualize some of these experiences to begin gaining an understanding of the meanings and motivations that may be attached to teaching when core elements of this activity and the role of an educator transcend the borders of their traditional context. Thus, while we may struggle to let go of

the efficiency-oriented attitude in becoming adults, it allows us to rediscover meanings and motivations that we associate with the activities that we perform.

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