

Uninformed Consent in TTRPGs: Communicating Expectations to Avoid Nightmare Game Master Horror Stories

Abstract: This article offers a qualitative analysis of social media such as Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube regarding the abuse of power by a dungeonmaster (DM) in tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) gameplay. It uses NVivo to analyze stories documenting “nightmare dungeonmasters” (NDMs) in order to better understand what players mean by that term. The data is coded for themes such as power, abuse, boundaries, and consent. The first half of the article deploys critical discourse analysis regarding passive/informed consent and the violation/maintenance of social boundaries at the TTRPG table. The second half of the article aligns the stories related in the first half with safety tools that are seen as applicable for avoiding NDM behaviors and their correspondingly negative gaming experiences. Tools are sourced both from this primary research and also from a literature review. The spirit of ethical research within the gaming community serves its reader by supplying them with a better understanding of NDM phenomena, as well as safety tools that can be employed on behalf of player boundaries.

Keywords: game master, tabletop role-playing games, consent, safety, boundaries, violation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dominant discourse within tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) community often provides a lot of stories, advice, and criticism surrounding the role of the Game Masters (GMs) to help them run their games at home (Chatterjee et al. 2017; Mandall et al. 2013). Despite this abundance of GM-focused media content, and the numerous papers written on the role and best practices of the GM (Axner 2012; Bisogno 2022; Connell 2023; Bowman 2013; Dashiell 2022; Edwards 2001; Fine 2002; Lasley 2020; Yamamoto 2021; St. Jacques and Tobin 2020; White et al. 2022), horror stories of players dealing with Nightmare GMs (NGMs) are prevalent within the TTRPG community. These stories range from GMs forcing their players into scenarios to fit their desired narrative to GMs violating the boundaries that were previously set by the players. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each story, it is evident the GMs and the players often differ in terms of their set expectations (White et al. 2022, 53), thereby making it difficult for the group to provide informed consent for the game.

Establishing expectations before play is not a new concept in the TTRPG community but it is often limited to broad considerations of personal triggers and boundaries with inconsistent usage of safety tools, like the X card or a session 0 checklist (Reynolds and Germain 2019, 3-4). So, when observing how the safety and agency of the players are balanced by their GM, alongside group objectives for play or larger narrative structures, it becomes evident from the persistence of NGM stories, how we communicate our expectations amongst each other has not been given enough attention. Concerning as it may be, the consent we provide to our fellow players to take part in an improvised performance with them is often uninformed because the expectation for the anticipated play varies drastically from person to person.

Consent and the considerations we have for the consent of TTRPG players is the gap this issue of the International Journal of Roleplaying seeks to fill. As such, our capacity to provide informed consent in our roleplaying experience requires further consideration as well. To this end, I posit the consent we provide to our fellow players when taking part in TTRPGs can only be considered informed when the GM and the players adequately harmonize and understand their separate expectations for the game. As will be illustrated in the stories I present, all too often we fall into the assumption everyone is on the same page and this assumption opens TTRPG players up to NGM scenarios. As such, greater consideration needs to be given to how we harmonize the group’s collective expectations.

In this article, I show the present necessity for the TTRPG community to acquire greater understanding of how to set expectations in advance. To do this, I perform a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020) as part of a discourse analysis on 303 Reddit stories regarding NGM power abuse and their (mis)management of TTRPG players. I first observe Foucauldian discursive formations within the subreddit communities I

gathered these stories from to show an understanding of what sharing NGM stories provides.

I then apply interactional sociolinguistics to help distinguish the boundaries between a malicious NGM and a well-intentioned NGM. Using the work done in interactional sociolinguistics, I exemplify instances where expectations of the players were thwarted by the GM's rigid adherence to their understanding of the role. This will provide my claims with substance when considering GM versus player expectations. Afterwards, I expand on these perspectives and present the multiple issues that arise inhibiting the GM and the players from understanding each others' expectations for the game. Drawing on William J. White et al., and Steven Dashiell, I make it transparent how the role of the GM is perceived by the GM and players alike. Then, I conclude with an overview of pre-game considerations for garnering an understanding of the group's expectations. This will include a theoretical onboarding process and trial run for GMs.

1.1 Disclaimer

This article is not meant as a call-out of gamemaster (GM) behavior. I take a neutral standpoint centering responsibility for understanding the group's collective expectations and synergy evenly on everyone involved in the game. To differentiate the GM role from other players, I will refer to the GM as the GM and everyone who is considered a player, not in the GM role, as the players. When I refer to everyone at the table, I will call them the group.

Additionally, I understand ethical considerations must be made in how scholars allow for the information they gather online, like account names, quotes, and story links, to be made public in their academic work. In these cases, there is usually cause for concern that the information provided might come back to harm the original posters. However, considering the common practices online Reddit communities have in anonymizing the information they give, like changing the names of key characters, telling it as something that happened to a friend of theirs, or purposefully using throwaway accounts to post anonymously, I do not deem it necessary to avoid citing and quoting the sources as they are publicly available.

Finally, I acknowledge I cannot be certain all of these stories involve the players using safety tools as only a few commented on doing so.

2. TRAITS OF A BAD GM

When fans of TTRPGs think of what a GM should be, we imagine them in a more active role (Bisogno 2022, 75). This is a set expectation everyone in the TTRPG scene has for the role of the GM (75), to be more involved in the game than a computer would be. Eccentric personalities, like Matthew Mercer or Brenna Lee Mulligan, often come to mind when we consider the ideal GM. Imagining a passive GM suggests an individual who is apathetic and provides no greater detail or imagination than what the game module provides them. GMs do not just statically run the world and react to everything the players do. They are tasked with keeping the pacing of the adventure, setting and maintaining the tone of the game, teaching new players the rules, providing consequences to the players' decisions, socially including all players, delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes, creating a comfortable environment, doing voices for the non-player characters (NPCs), and painting vivid ideas of the setting for the players (Bisogno 2022, 74). These expectations cannot be done passively, requiring much time and effort from GM. As such, the GM's role is expected to be an active one.

GMs, like the players, also understand they are expected to be in an active role (White et al. 2022). How they approach this call to action varies based on a range of predispositions such as demographics, experiences, personal tastes, synergy with the players, and political affiliations. Such aspects of their lives impact their creative agenda for the game and play heavily into what actions they think are acceptable in their role. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for there to be a lot of assumptions on the GM's part that might lead to them acting as an NGM.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's conception of discursive formations, rules and practices governing a specific group's production of knowledge (2002, 34-43), I observed their creation of, and occurrences within, the subreddits. The Redditors who posted on these sites were using them for the freedom of expression they would be granted on Reddit. More specifically, they were using these subreddits as a media site to voice the injustice they experienced from the power their NGMs abused. In doing so, they collectively created a communal judgment of qualifiers for what makes an NGM.

Within the subreddits, it is commonly accepted that an NGM is a GM who turns the play of whatever respective TTRPG, they are running into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, which the players have not consented to nor desired. After reading and analyzing the Reddit stories, on the topic of NGMs,

I compiled a list of common actions and themes, see next section, surrounding NGM activity from discursive formations qualifying them as such.

Initially, I separated these stories into four categories of the creative agenda (Bowman 2013, 12). These are narrativism, simulationism, gamism, and immersionism. The intention was for these categories to help isolate different realms of the creative agenda where we find the NGM at odds with the players. NGMs in the realm of narrativism are at odds with the players over narrative disputes. With gamism, they are having rule disputes. With simulationism, they are employing contentious worldbuilding and having disputes over consistency. While with immersionism, they are having social disputes that place tension on immersion (Bowman 2013, 12-15).

Regarding conflict in narrativism, NGMs tend to spotlight their ideas for the story they are creating, such as favouring non-player over their players' characters, and actively seeking to kill off player characters. For conflict in gamism, NGMs adhere to the rules so strictly it stunts player agency and creativity, and break the rules at their leisure to disadvantage the players. For conflict in simulationism, NGMs often recreate sexist, racist, ableist, or religious propaganda in their campaigns, often under the guise of maintaining their ideas of realism. Finally, for conflict in immersionism, horror stories include instances of NGMs becoming heavily intoxicated at the table; flirting with or making sexual advances on players they have real-world feelings of attraction for; punishing players they dislike for bigoted or personal reasons; bullying or belittling players; and triggering the players with themes in-game.

While most of these are inexcusable, it is often assumed all these acts are done out of malicious intent on the NGMs part. However, based on my review of the Reddit stories, I put forward the notion that not all NGMs adhere to this toxic image. For instance, a potential causality in many NGM stories was a recurring pattern linking NGM activities to miscommunications within the group.

For the purposes and scope of this essay, I found it most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism. I observed that group expectations for their story are often the most contentious for NGMs who do not mean harm to the players. As such, we can observe here examples of NGMs who made mistakes so we can learn how to best mediate them for the future.

3. NGM HORROR STORIES ANALYSIS

To begin the review process, I scoured through hundreds of NGM stories on Reddit and copied each one to a Word document that laid out their issues with the NGM in an extensive enough manner to be a proper story. The subreddits these stories were sourced from include: r/AmItheAsshole, r/DungeonsAndDragons, r/DnD, r/rpg, r/rpghorrorstories, r/dndhorrorstories, and r/CritCrab. The stories I included for this analysis involved any stories where the NGM turns the play experience into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, in a manner the players have not consented to nor desired. Understanding this was a broad criterion for inclusion I also excluded stories based on other criteria.

I excluded stories based on three lacking areas I deemed vital for me to get comprehensive information out of an experience with an NGM. I first excluded stories with a word count less than 100, so I could ensure enough context would be given to get a proper understanding of the Redditor's experience with the NGM.

I then excluded stories where the Redditor indicated they disliked the GM for reasons unrelated to the game. Some Redditors indicated they subscribed to problematic ideology, either through referencing the NGM in a bigoted manner or using problematic terminology in their description of people. For example, one story was titled "What could there be more worst than a Simp DM?" (BunnySar 2021) indicating problematic ideology as the term "Simp" is used by the incel community to insult men who are nice to women and treat them respectfully. In these instances, I felt the need to contest their claim, as the issues they had with the NGM seemed more to come from the problematic ethos the Redditor presented themselves with rather than any actual fault on the part of the GM.

Finally, I excluded stories lacking relevance to the NGM stories they claimed to be. In these stories, it seemed more like the player was upset with the outcome of the game rather than the GMing style. An example of this would be the posts "AITA for buying our Dungeon Master new minis for Dungeons and Dragons?" (dungeonsandminis 2019) and "AITA For Inadvertently Driving Off My Dungeon Master?" (TheGreatMightyFool 2023) where the Redditors were inquiring if they were in the right or the wrong about a conflict with their DM. It seemed unanimous in the comments the Redditors were being toxic, immature, and not communicating their expectations to the DM. There were about fifteen such Reddit posts and they were dismissed by the subreddit community, where it was pointed out the GM was not an NGM, the player was the problem. After the stories were compiled, I uploaded them to NVivo14 to begin the coding process.

I applied a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. Being familiar with the language used in these NGM stories, I had some pre-set terms and categories in mind, these being the controlling GMs, unclearly communicated boundaries, and vindictive NGMs. I used these ideas to deductively code a starting point for organizing the stories as I saw their pre-defined categories. I then immersed myself in them and realized several considerations I had yet to make could be used to further organize my categories in subcategories. These being: the concepts of railroading, Mary Sues, and joining games as a stranger. I used these to further inductively code the stories into the areas of the creative agenda I thought they fit best.

For example, I thematically coded NGM stories into the area of narrativism based on if the story involved the players having issues with the way the NGM was handling the narrative while using terms like railroad and Mary Sue to identify such stories. I coded stories as gamism based on if there was contention with the GM changing the game in unfair ways or breaking the rules. I coded stories as simulationism if the NGM was inconsistent in the information they gave the players about the world or had instances of contentious world-building, like sexism and racism. While I coded stories as immerisionism when in-game elements were negatively influenced by out-of-game social dynamics. Afterwards, I organized my codes to see the connection between the different themes. Though, as I mentioned for the scope of this essay, it is most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism.

A Word Frequency Query acquired the keywords used in these stories that indicated certain themes. The keywords used are often regarded as terms for literary criticism, or at least derived from terms for literary criticism, but are used by the subreddit communities in the context of a TTRPG story to implicate the NGM's power in influencing the story unfavorably both in and outside of the game mechanics. As such, I found it best to use them in creating themes for different instances of NGM activity. For instance, DMPC, DMNPC, Mary Sue, Gary Stu, and self-insert are all words that can be searched to observe when a NGM has created a character in the campaign who is taking the spotlight away from the players. Approaching these stories from the position of interactional sociolinguistics, a subfield of anthropological linguistics concerned with language's role in constructing and sustaining cultural practices (Günthner 2008, 53–76), we can see how these terms are all derived from the literary analysis term of "Mary Sue" as a character, resembling the author or favoured by the author, inserted into the story. It was this present use of terms derived from and for literary analysis within the subreddits that prompted me to use my narrativism category as a basis for this article.

Other search terms I used deductively included, online, internet, stranger, and found, as they can be searched for to examine parts of the stories indicating the player and the NGM did not know each other ahead of time. This approach exemplifies common themes within NGM Reddit stories and gives a good indication of how often these occurrences are a contributing factor to an NGM story.

Based on my review of the Reddit stories, there are a few exceptions to the commonly assumed image of a toxic NGM. While there does appear to be countless stories of NGMs being petty towards the players, violating their boundaries, and going out of their way to emotionally harm them, a considerable number of NGM stories boil down to a difference of creative agenda and an NGM who is statically adhering to their expectations for how they run the game despite concerns brought up by their players. Here, I do not intend to excuse such behavior, rather I show disparities between these instances where an NGM story could have been avoided by communicating expectations from all parties involved more thoroughly.

Now, I draw on the information I synthesized regarding the type of NGM interactions that occur based on diverging expectations for the players. I address different aspects of the creative agenda and instances where the NGM acts in a manner showing a contrast between their creative agenda and that of the players, making it a nightmare scenario. I first observe instances of poorly communicated expectations. I then examine concerns on both the NGM's and the player's part for fear the players might be ruining the game. I conclude this section by considering different themes of a controlling NGM that did not overlap with malicious intention.

Over the course of my analysis, I found 76 NGM stories explicitly indicated the expectations of the GM and players had not been properly communicated and varied greatly. A typical example of broad communication of expectations: "After a few weeks of prep-time for the DM to write the first session and general storyline, we finally met up for a session 0. We rolled our stats, introduced our characters and got the general gist of the lands we be playing in." (Rubber_ducky25 2020). While differing expectations are almost always a staple theme for an NGM story, as the players should not be expecting it to be a nightmare scenario, the fact the stories indicate points of contention surrounding poor communication of expectations reflects a greater need for the GM and players to synchronize their expectations for the play they are giving consent to.

There were two categories of voiced concern I investigated regarding the NGM stories. The first was concern on the NGM's part their players would be ruining the game. The second was the concern on the players part that they themselves would be ruining the game. In 19 of the stories, it was explicitly mentioned the NGM vo-

calized concern their players were ruining the game while in 24 stories it was mentioned the players themselves were concerned they might be ruining the game by bringing up issues with the NGM, whether they chose to do so or not. A couple of examples of the players feeling the social pressure deterring them from voicing concerns: "I just kept trucking along because I cared about the DM and did not want to hurt his feelings" (b3llamor3lla 2022); "About 30 minutes later I felt kind of bad. Not for the DM but for the other players who I probably ruined their game" (ryanxwonbin 2020); "I wasn't enjoying it, but nobody else at the table brought up any issues with it, and I didn't want to be the one ruining other people's fun, so I just shut my mouth and went along with it" (MarionberrySouth6010 2022).

It should be noted in most NGM stories the game becomes a nightmare scenario quickly and damages the relationship between the NGM and the players well before the narrator has a chance to consider bringing the issue up to the NGM. So, from this limited perspective, we can observe the hesitation in the player based on the implicit social expectations of the table.

Furthermore, it will be helpful to give a tally of the remaining themes. There were 132 stories where the players indicated the NGM was controlling, either through unfair limitations, DMPCs, or railroading; a practice that forces the players to go down a certain storyline as chosen by the GM. The following numbers don't add up to the 132 stories due to partial intersection of the observed themes. Within the 132 stories, there were an overlapping 73 instances of the NGM imposing an unfair limitation, 82 instances of the NGM using DMPCs, and 68 instances of railroading. 21 instances included both DMPCs and railroading. While 74 of these instances included notes of conduct that indicated malicious or problematic intent on the NGMs part, the other 58 instances indicated the controlling behaviour was not planned to intentionally upset the players.

There are some instances where amends were made from non-malicious mistakes on the NGMs part: "... unlike a majority of posts on here we are still all friends, nobody's feelings got hurt, and we all can talk to each other..." (Minigiant2709 2020); and "We apologized and owned up to the different things we did wrong. He invited me back into the campaign with open arms and we are doing our best to make amends" ("Toxic DM or is it me?" 2022). Additionally, there was explicit mention of unintentional instance of NGM being controlling "...the DM felt that we really needed a healer, so he gave the party 'a literal heal-bot' (his words, not mine). This turned out to be a warforged cleric character, who became a bit of a DMNPC for a while there. Though it wasn't the DMs intention, it was clear that is what she turned into." (_Thespian_ 2021).

This evidence suggests, despite no harmful intentions, the NGM scenarios came about from group members expectations being in contention with one another, partially due to a lack of communication. In following section, I provide greater detail on the types of expectations players and GMs alike have for the role of the GM. I continue drawing from my NGM story analysis to indicate where greater consideration needs to be taken regarding the collective expectations of the group.

4. EXPECTATIONS OF THE GM

In these NGM stories, there are instances where expectations were not communicated well. Due to this oversight, the players did not have the best idea of what they were consenting to. In one instance, a group of players came together for the purpose of the NGM playing out a fantasy novel he was writing (ThrowawayfanficDM 2023). This was not made apparent until several sessions in and by then the players felt cheated and railroaded through a story of the NGM's creation. This example is a larger consideration of narrativism and somewhat existential to the campaign. This manner of miscommunication can also happen on a micro level and be considered to overlap with contention in simulationism.

Here I posit a hypothetical for this manner of micro miscommunication. If a GM were to proactively ask a player what they would like to avoid during play and the player simply says depictions of gore, neither the GM nor the player have a good idea of what they are consenting to, as each topic is a spectrum (Reynolds and Germain 2019, 3-4). The GM might be a big fan of horror movies, and the player is sickened by the thought of blood. So, what constitutes gore for the other person is extremely different from what they both imagine it to be. Later in the game, a description of a villain attacking the player's character might involve the GM saying how their arrow pierces through the character's arm and blood trickles down their sleeve. The player then feels ill and betrayed by the GM as they had voiced their expectations. However, the GM didn't think their description included gore, given their predisposition, and may believe the player is upset they took damage. This begins causing tension within the group.

Misunderstandings like this are common occurrences in NGM stories, as shown by 76 occurrences of poorly communicated expectations. Miscommunication of what to expect, regarding setting, theme, commitment, and performance, result in a lack of unified understanding of what each player wants from the game and is detrimental to the longevity and enjoyment of play. In one instance, "All Aboard The Dragon Age Railroad,"

after the NGM had made several attempts to challenge the morality of the Redditor's character, the player decided to begin roleplay their character immorally. This,

...at first pleased the DM, but did not please them when I started having my character stop resisting the demon all together and make a powerful blood pact with it. The DM expected my "good guy" PC to continue fruitlessly resisting temptation and not agree to a deal which would make my character extremely broken and OP by allowing them to use Blood Magic (essentially mind control). ("All Aboard The Dragon Age Railroad" 2019)

It was only communicated afterwards that the NGM had certain expectations in mind for the player's character progression, though it should have been made explicit on the NGM's part so the player could consent to play their character this way.

Much like the earlier gore hypothetical, issues that arise from this might be avoided by including some upfront examples about what the GM and players consider to be their expectations for roleplay. This would help them understand each others' expectations explicitly before any harm occurs. However, when the GM and player are unfamiliar with one another, they might not think to have a deeper conversation and just state some basic boundaries. So, even if safety tools are used, if they are used without explicit intention, greater conversation, or consideration, then boundaries become vague and assumed. The lack of understanding for each others' expectations made it difficult for the Redditors to provide informed consent and the group did not make the effort to acquire a better understanding than what they assumed to be universal.

Misunderstandings are not limited to boundaries surrounding themes but includes each of the above-mentioned items involve the GM being an active contributor: pacing the adventure; setting and maintaining the tone; teaching new players the rules; providing consequences to the players decisions; socially including all players; delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes; creating a comfortable environment; doing voices for the non-player characters; and painting a vivid idea of the setting for the players. New TTRPG players are not going to know how many aspects of running the game goes into being a GM or how the GM's role works in general. For example, one Reddit story involves the player being upset with the Dungeon Master for intentionally putting them in combat with monsters that were a much more difficult challenge for them than they could reasonably survive (Senior-Meat-5671 2023). It also did not help they were in a flooding room. The Redditor makes note of how there was "No way to escape, no way to talk ourselves out of it, I lost 2 rounds trying to open a door that wouldn't, and we got TPKed like that. I was frustrated because she'd DMed before, and played dnd for years, so she was supposed to know how CR worked and how dungeons worked..." We can see that there is also a deviation in our collective expectations for the game resulting from a lack of fluency in the games' mechanics, not solely on the part of the players but also on the part of the GM.

In many other NGM stories, the players do not initially know the NGM, as they have either not played with them as GM before or the game is what brought them into similar social circles. There are two examples of this that would be good to introduce and substantiate this concern. The first story involves a couple who join a D&D campaign where "Everyone brought on was a stranger to DM and to on another..." ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover..." 2021). They decided to join because they wanted to take part in a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) campaign to overcome their social isolation during Covid. Everyone in the group takes the proper safety precautions as they note "We go through content warnings and such before we start the game. We discuss how to navigate toeing boundaries, crossing boundaries, etc. Everyone's pretty cool with most things" (2021). Things seem to be going well until the NGM invites their friend to play with the group, which everyone was initially okay with. From there the sessions grow increasingly less fun as the NGM heavily favours their friend, allowing them to get away with bullying the other players in character, and prioritizes their roleplay opportunities over the rest of the group. This story ends with the NGM's friend quitting the game and villainizing the Redditor to the group.

The second story involves a stranger recruiting people, including the Redditor, from their discord server to play in a game they were the DM for (tom04cz 2023). The Redditor starts off the story by saying they were "a completely fresh player at the time, looking blindly for a game, DM reached out for me and i jum[p]ed at the chance." Amongst other in-game issues between the players that stood out, the DM included,

...a questgiver NPC who basical[l]y enslaved us and sent us on a wild goose chase..., saddled us sith a half shark, half man NPC which had the personality of a toddler and a penchant for injuring the party and ruining any chance of subtlety..., then enslaved us harder with shock collars, blamed the party constantly for circumstances evidently not under their control and also turned out to be invincible... (2023)

This story ends with the DM expressing he didn't have time for the group because he was the DM in another group he was playing with and cancelled the campaign shortly after. This specific example helps to illustrate the inability new players have to provide informed consent for their roleplay experiences as the Redditor also mentioned the "DM was also very lenient in letting us players make the most wack of characters. In hindsight i realise that was not good for someone as new as me, but at the time i relished it" (2023). In a similar manner, new players might approach the game just like a video game they have played except, while TTRPGs can be quickly committed to, they are not as easy to turn off. So, when they have already committed to the game, by convening with the group; making their character; coordinating schedules for weekly games; and starting the sessions, they often find themselves locked in a social contract they can't escape, lest they upset the rest of the group.

In the previous examples, we can observe how the NGMs are stunting the creative approaches characters are taking to the game through roleplay or narrative choices by either favouring certain players' experiences over others' or imposing their personal characters on the party. In part this could be a result of the expectations placed on the GM by the GM. It is common for GMs to hold themselves to the impossible standards they have seen online. Again, Matt Mercer and Brennan Lee Mulligan exemplify their GMing styles and GMs are comparing themselves to the point where the "Mercer effect" has been coined as a term describing a GM who strives too hard to replicate Matt Mercer's GMing prowess.

We might relate this to amateur writers comparing themselves to Stephen King. In "Controlling DM writes Fan-fiction about my D&D Character and Copies my Campaign." the Redditor notes how, when their NGM Jack was transitioning from a writer to a DM, "...the main problem [he] seemed to keep bumping into was that he wanted to have full control over his story. Whenever we did something that didn't align with his perfect world, he would throw a small fit over it and stop his sessions early so he could think of how to fix his plot" (ThrowawayfanficDM 2023). This shows that the failure to meet the expectations the GM sets for themselves often compels them to double down on their intention to run their perfect game.

In turn, we also get NGMs who are holding themselves to an impossible standard and ruining the game for the players because they are rigidly adhering to the rules, or their playstyle, or the story they want to tell so their genius will be recognized. White et al. (2022), note,

The balancing of all of these expectations and interactions seems to be the way to achieve the sense of wonder that arguably 'all games should aim for, and too few achieve'...The GM, in striving to offer hard but fair challenges to the players when playing as adversary, must resist the temptation to be provoked into 'unrestrained hostility'... that will quickly lead to the characters' destruction or otherwise hinder campaign development. Simultaneously, in pursuing a cooperative style of play, the GM must avoid demanding the excess of conformity that will rob the game of suspense, action, and excitement. Additionally, a GM seeking to flesh out the campaign world may 'attempt to enforce their predetermined concepts of plot and character development on players' and in doing so at the last extreme be unmasked as a 'failed novelist'... (2020, 53)

So, when the group has these expectations for how a GM is supposed to run the game (Dashiell 2022, 6), they can vary widely making informed consent impossible for everyone to provide unless their understanding of their own and each other's expectations synchronize. Oftentimes, GMs can feel judged or as though they have failed themselves or the players by not being capable of meeting the group's expectations. Maybe the players could not distinguish the GMs character voices. Or maybe the players were expecting there to be faster paced combat and the GM is moving too slowly. These can be things the GM is putting earnest effort into but the amount of talent they have for performance, or their executive dysfunctions can be putting a hard limitation on what they can provide the game.

These concerns are not the GMs fault, but they are still factors affecting the play experience for the group. In these cases, if the players require a certain level of competence with performance, pacing, etc., they might try to handle considerations for GMs similarly to considerations for a position being hired for.

5. COMMUNICATION FOR INFORMED CONSENT

As bleak as that idea may sound, it is all too often the case, as some of the examples I showed exemplified, that players jump at the chance to play a TTRPG simply because GMs are in short supply, and they don't want to run the game themselves ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover..." 2021; tom04cz 2023). While the full context of the social relations was not always provided, 133 of the NGM stories explicitly mentioned their NGM was either a stranger or casual acquaintance who they provided the position of GM to.

In many of these NGM scenarios, the Redditors expressed how they were desperate to play a game and later regretted playing with people they did not know (“DM brings on-again-off-again lover...” 2021; tom04cz 2023). If we equate this to hiring someone in a workplace like lifeguards, paramedics, or teachers then anyone who expressed interest in the job, as unqualified as they might be, would be granted the power and authority to perform it. This immediate commitment on the players part often easily leads to an NGM scenario. As such, when TTRPG players consider who to pick as their GM, it is best to handle it as a candidacy rather than an immediate commitment on both sides. I provide several suggestions: a selection process, where potential GMs are given explicit expectations in advance; clarifying questions, with scenario-based considerations observing a more involved conversation on expectations with examples; and a session 0 trial run.

6. SELECTION PROCESS

The first consideration is to have any initial expectations for the GM to be made explicit. As I mentioned previously, 76 of the NGM stories I examined gave some broad considerations for what the setting, theme, commitment, and performance expectations would be like, but only seven discussed considerations of safety for the players and only three talked about the use of safety tools. While players are becoming more familiar with the considerations for triggers that need to be made during session 0, as it has become a popular practice of late (Reynolds and Germain 2019), new players and players who are self-proclaimed as “desperate” to be part of a game often overlook the nuance of the assumed expectations of the group. As such, the GM selection process needs to have expectations foregrounded.

A personalized list of wants and things to avoid should be made by each of the players and brought up in detail to the potential GM. This should also be the time when the GM puts forward their expectations to the players to ensure they also have a good understanding of what they are signing on to. However, this becomes challenging with players who are less familiar with the game. If a player is new to the TTRPG scene they might not have any experience with the bleed effect, which is a staple and often desired experience within the community (Bowman 2013, 20). The bleed effect is when the players’ real life emotional states, opinions, and relationships begin to influence their characters’ in-game actions and vice versa (16). As such, they don’t yet know what they don’t consent to.

New players, and players who don’t take the authenticity of their experience into account, risk giving their in-game boundaries and real life triggers a lack of consideration (16-21). After all, the assumption is if it is “just a game” then people should all know the implied nuances of each trigger. Juhana Pettersson makes a point in noting that once we understand what we, “can and can’t do, want and don’t want to do, it becomes easier to have good [roleplay] experiences and to co-create them with others...For the purposes of developing [this] understanding, [roleplay] experience needs to be paired with reflection and analysis” (2020). Unfortunately, new players will not have developed this understanding of themselves due to their inexperience with roleplay while even experienced players will not have developed this understanding about themselves if they have not reflected on or analyzed their roleplay experience.

Therefore, the expectations put forward by new players need to be drawn from their real-life experience with triggers, made explicit, agreed upon, and adhered to (Kemper et al. 2020), so as to accommodate any potential lack of self-understanding. The expectations of the role of GM, in particular, need to be put upfront to ensure everyone, including the GM, is on board. A longer conversation about the nuances of our triggers and accommodation needs would potentially benefit to this selection process. To do this, time for further clarifying questions needs to be accommodated.

7. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

When we don’t know what we don’t consent to, due to our lack of self-understanding, a generic Session 0 checklist will be confusing or overwhelming. It’s pertinent to include more explicit considerations and questions concerning broad and specific aspects of the game. Just because everyone has the same idea of what they want out of the game and what their boundaries are does not mean the GM is a good fit for the group.

As Pettersson explains, “I have severe dietary restrictions caused by illness. I know them very well but that knowledge only helps me if the organizers of the larp are willing to accommodate my issues. If not, no amount of self-knowledge will help me play that larp” (2020). Asking for proof of the GM’s ability to accommodate accessibility requirement should be the norm. Players should be getting field notes of their previous experience GMing. This might look like the GMs providing examples of how they could accommodate certain needs or providing stories from their previous experience as a GM to add merit to their accommodation claims. Another way of suss-

ing these considerations out can take the form of asking the GMs hypotheticals from our mechanical and social expectations to gauge their synergy with the players.

We might see in this line of questioning inquiries on how the GM would react to players doing certain actions. For instance, in the game of D&D there is a spell called Revivify which can be used to bring a dead character back to life. There is another spell called Counterspell where a mage can see another person trying to cast a spell as negate the effects of it. A simple enough question to ask would be: "If a player, as their character, casts Revivify on their dead comrade, would you have a non-player character cast Counterspell on them to have the comrade stay dead?" While this spell interaction is a mechanical part of the game, it is typically considered taboo for the GM to enact. Part of this is due to the vulnerable situation the players find themselves in where they would need to use a spell to revive a dead ally. The other part of this is because magic users in the game only get one spell per turn so by using Counterspell on a spell they cast their turn ends abruptly. So, in the first scenario, the GM is actively choosing to make a dead character stay dead. While in the second scenario, an overuse of Counterspell calls the point of the players' spell preparations and their safety into question during later encounters. While this act is considered taboo, there are those GMs who would still do it as it gives the game a sense of realism. For example, in the Reddit story "The DM literally countered half the party," as the name suggests the NGM "spammed counter spells and made half the party useless in a boss fight" (KefkaSircus 2019). This was not a fun game for the players involved. Some GMs might argue that if they don't have scenarios like this then they might feel like they are taking it easy on the players or not portraying evil characters in their game authentically. Getting the GMs answer to this question and then clarifying their reasoning will help you to decide if this is the kind of scenario you want to experience as a player, or if this is the kind of scenario the GM wants to allow.

Another question that might be asked is: "Would you allow non-player characters to steal items from the players' character?" This action might be seen as annoying and provokes paranoia on the players' part towards the GM. Whether this is something the group wants to make room for or ban entirely should be a consensus decision. An example of this proving to allow for an NGM scenario, "DM Ruins Campaign With His Disgusting Mary Sue DMPC Out of Spite," wherein the Redditor notes how the DMPC, played by the NGM, was causing trouble by stealing "whatever magic item, land, weapons,... etc that he wanted" (Dr_Frog_MD 2023). Due to the NGM protecting this character from every problem he would have encountered, the DMPC faced no consequences in-game for his actions. So, we can reason how asking simple questions like this ahead of time can aid in seeing if the GM is right for us or if they are not a good fit for the group.

From this story, we can also observe how the GM is not immune to the bleed effect, as shown by the need to ensure his favourite character always gets his way. So, it stands to reason, the way GMs say they will conduct themselves might differ from how they react to things the players do in-game when they are under pressure. My final suggestion for synchronizing expectations of the GM role is a trial run of the game where everyone can get experience playing together.

8. SESSION 0 TRIAL RUN

One theme each of the NGM stories, which provided such context outside of one-shots, had in common was the commitment the players made to take part in a long-term campaign, intending to span months, at the first opportunity they had. This might be in-part because GMs are in short supply and most people who are trying to put a game together require commitment, as commitment of time and energy is the only way a long-term game can happen. However, there was only one example I came across where the players had their GM run a one-shot for them to see if they were a good fit. Despite it still turning into an NGM scenario, the idea has merit.

Having the GM run a one-shot to test their capacity to perform the role of the GM and adhere to the set expectations of the group, should be another norm. This would give the players a chance to get comfortable with the GM and the way they conduct their game and the GM to become familiar with the players and how they act in character. At the end of the trial run, if anyone is unsatisfied with the game, if there are any red flags, or the group members don't feel like they can commit their time to a long session, then anyone is free to leave without a social contract binding them to continue a long-term campaign. To do otherwise may lead to experiences where, even if the GM is not an NGM, it might still feel like the players have committed to something too soon and now they are forced to participate as per their social contract, much like as we saw in MarionberrySouth6010's Reddit story (2022).

9. CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have shown the necessity for establishing expectations more explicitly on both the players and the GMs part. Drawing from the Reddit stories about NGMs, I showed that lack of clear communi-

cation remains as a problem we need to address for the future of TTRPGs, and the nuances of different kinds of NGMs. While I also went into detail with the nuances to be considered in our expectations for the role of the GM, everything leads to considerations for normalizing a more detailed GM selection process. This was all to show how we, the TTRPG community, might avoid NGM scenarios while giving power back to the group regarding stringent and confining social expectations.

Future work can look at bringing our understandings together more efficiently. The examples for the GM selection process I provided are rudimentary and require greater consideration for specific questions to ask, and early warning signs to look for during play, for the safety of the players. However, these ethical considerations may not be limited to the TTRPG community.

In many aspects of society, be it work, hobbies, social gatherings, we find ourselves locked in social contracts with power distributed between ourselves without always questioning why it is being done that way or considering who we are providing our consent to while engaging with them. Other avenues the academic community might expand on these initial inquiries might ask questions like: What expectations do we take for granted everyday, in relatively similar contexts like online gaming or digital interactions, that we just assume to be common sense? How might we design tools for online or in-person social planning that avoids nightmare scenarios with someone like the organizer? What might the Mercer effect look like in other contexts? Where might we find solutions to other areas of uninformed consent? Given how game spaces so often reflect reality, I propose we use game studies as a foothold for understanding the idea of consent in other social relations.

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