

**Magic, Adventure & Social Participation:
Tabletop Role-Playing Games and Their Potential to Promote Social Inclusion and
Citizenship.**

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Abstract

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG) have faced stigma since their inception in the 1970s, and this stigmatization persists to some degree today, arguing these games teach anti-social behaviours. On the other hand, academics have argued for the benefits of game play. These contradictory discourses have led to the question: What are the learning outcomes associated with tabletop role-playing? This study analyzed qualitative semi-directed interviews with nine individuals who have identified themselves as having experienced hardships on which TTRPGs have had a positive effect. Experiences identified by the participants included incarceration, social exclusion, gender transition and mental health-related challenges. It was found that all participants experienced, to varying degrees, social and societal isolation related to their hardships. However, TTRPGs had perceived benefits—for example, self-development, skill development and achievement—which went beyond the gaming context, and had an effect on different aspects of the participant's lives. I argue that TTRPGs provided a context which acted as a liminal space, helping players transition away from social and societal isolation towards a form of social participation. This suggests that TTRPGs may help players engage in citizenship. This study expands on current RPG research, by looking at the actual experience of playing these games and the long-lasting impact they can have on players.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	iii
“You start in a tavern...”—Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Book of Time—Literature review	6
1.1 Theorizing roleplaying games	8
1.2 What are TTRPGs?	13
1.3 The public’s reception of TTRPGs	20
1.4 TTRPGs as leisure and social participation	30
1.5 Leisure as a tool for social participation	32
Chapter 2: Drawing the Battle Map—Methodology	39
2.1 Recruitment	39
2.2 Data collection	44
2.3 Data analysis	45
2.4 Ethical considerations	46
Chapter 3: Meet our Adventurers—Participants’ experiences and the importance of TTRPGs	49
3.1 Participant’s experiences	49
3.1.1 Incarceration	52
3.1.2 Social exclusion	57
3.1.3 Gender transition.....	64
3.1.4 Mental health-related challenges	68
3.2 TTRPGs, escapism and safe spaces	73
Chapter 4: The Player’s Handbook and More House Rules—How players Characterize game play	79
4.1 Game mechanics	79
4.2 Narrative structure	88
4.3 TTRPGs as a liminal space	95
Conclusion	104
Chapter 5: You’ve Levelled Up! —How TTRPGs can facilitate social participation.....	106
5.1 TTRPGs and community	106
5.2 TTRPGs and self-development.....	111
5.2.1 TTRPGs and skill development.....	112

5.2.2 TTRPGs and achievement	119
Chapter 6: “So, what do you want to do now?”—Discussion.....	124
6.1 Overview.....	124
6.2 Citizenship and TTRPGs	126
6.2.1 Resources	127
6.2.2 Roles	129
6.2.3 Relationships.....	131
6.2.4 Responsibilities	132
6.2.5 Rights	133
Conclusion	135
6.3 Limitations of TTRPGs.....	136
6.4 Future research.....	138
Bibliography	142
Appendix	184
Appendix A – Recruitment Poster	184
Appendix B – Interview guide.....	186
Appendix C – Coding List	187
Appendix D – Consent Form	188
Appendix E – Information Letter.....	190
Appendix F – Non-Academic Sources	192

List of figures

<i>Figure 1. A character sheet, an open D&D player's handbook and a set of dice. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 30, 2020.</i>	2
<i>Figure 2. A set of D&D dice. The D20 is featured in the centre. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 28, 2020.</i>	16
<i>Figure 3. A Character sheet that has been marked up through play. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 30, 2020</i>	17
<i>Figure 4. Back and front cover of a worn copy of the pamphlet Dungeons and Dragons created by the advocacy group BADD. Picture by The Escapist, n.d.</i>	24
<i>Figure 5. A section of the pamphlet Dungeons and Dragons by the advocacy group BADD. Picture by The Escapist, n.d.</i>	25

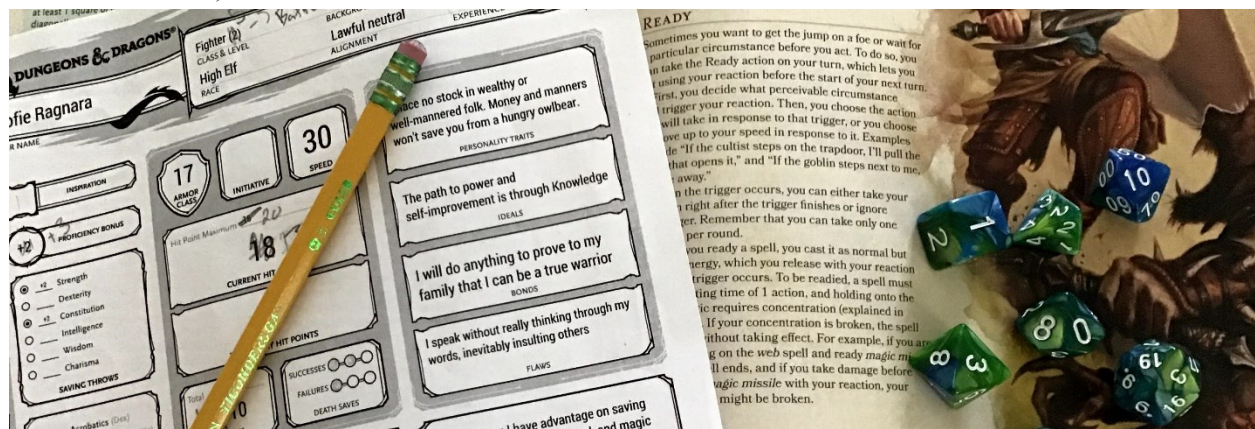
“You start in a tavern...” —Introduction

Well, maybe not a tavern...this research began when I came across an article titled, “Dungeons & Dragons Prison Ban Upheld” (Schwartz, 2010). The article outlines how a three-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit upheld a ban on the game Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in a Wisconsin prison. The case revolved around a prisoner named Kevin T. Singer and the prison administration. Singer argued that D&D promoted rehabilitation and prevented gang activity, while prison administration argued that games like D&D promote “...competitive hostility, violence, addictive escape behaviours, and possible gambling.” (Singer v. Raemisch, 2010, para. 5). It was concluded that “Singer failed to demonstrate that there was a genuine issue of material fact as to whether the D&D policy was reasonably related to Waupun's legitimate penological interests of maintaining safety and security and curbing gang activity” (Singer v. Raemisch, 2010, para. 7), and the ban remained. de Kleer (2017b) states that games like Dungeons and Dragons within correctional institutions are not unusual. In fact, the game has been banned in other institutions as well (de Kleer, 2017b).

Having never played tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), like the one shown in Figure 1, and having a minimal understanding of the game, I was eager to learn more. I threw myself into the extensive collection of TTRPG podcasts and YouTube channels like *Critical Role*, *Join the Party*, and *I am Hear* (Critical Role, 2018–2020; Gurlge, 2019–2020; RPG Cast, 2018–2019). Shortly thereafter, I had found myself a group of friends who wanted to try TTRPGs. I built myself my first D&D character, Zophie Ragnara, a princess Elf fighter who had escaped from her kingdom and a life of tradition in search of adventure. TTRPGs even became a part of my work life when a friend began weekly lunchtime sessions of *Blades in the Dark*,

which doubled as a potluck lunch. Unfortunately, due to busy schedules and conflicting responsibilities these game sessions came to an end, but gave me the necessary experience to understand the game mechanics and develop my own relationship to the game genre. With fresh game experience, I asked myself: Why are these games so important for incarcerated players?

Figure 1. A character sheet, an open D&D player's handbook, and a set of dice. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 30, 2020.



Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit a sufficient number of formerly incarcerated participants to answer this question, so I broadened my scope to include individuals who have faced difficult and challenging life experiences in general. While this was not the original focus of this research, it is nonetheless important and interesting as it allows us to reflect on the way popular culture can help some overcome adversity. TTRPGs, like D&D, became the victim of a moral panic in the 1970s and '80s (Martin & Fine, 1991). It was popular belief that these games encouraged violent, criminal and suicidal behaviour (Martin & Fine, 1991). Early research on the topic of TTRPGs attempted to combat the general public's misconceptions, and found that these games generally offered benefits for players, such as improved cognitive and social skills (e.g., Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983; Schneider, 1972). While creators of TTRPGs fought against the stigmatization of these games—and it has since subsided (Kushner, 2017)—the current ban of

TTRPGs within correctional institutions makes it evident that this stigma and misconception of TTRPGs still exist today.

While research on role-playing games (RPG) continues to be developed, current research tends to focus on newer forms of RPGs such as video games (e.g., Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Kircaburn, Jonason & Griffiths, 2018; Sublette & Mullan, 2012). RPG scholars have also demonstrated a growing interest in live action role-playing games (LARP), a type of RPG where the participants physically act out their characters (Bowman, 2010). Literature on TTRPGs is often buried within research addressing RPGs as a whole (e.g., Bowman, 2010; Deterding & Zagal, 2018; Schalleger, 2018). And literature specifically on TTRPGs is recognized as being limited and often outdated (Rivers, Wickramasekera, Pekala & Rivers, 2015). Additionally, contemporary research focused on the potential benefits of TTRPGs is often set within a therapeutic context and not within a leisure context (e.g., Cook, Gremo & Morgan, 2016; Daniau, 2017; Gutierrez, 2017; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). While it has been recorded that leisurely play of TTRPGs is like therapy (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013), there is little research on the meaning and importance of leisurely TTRPG practices for players.

During this study, it became clear that there is an appetite for this type of research: from participants, to the game shop owners who displayed the recruitment posters, to other members of the community, many reached out to me with curiosity and support for the project. Although this is a serious academic research project, it is for the above-mentioned reason that I have made an effort to create something that is also accessible and interesting for the TTRPG community.

The main research question I ask is: What learning outcomes are associated with tabletop role-playing games? The expression “learning outcomes” is often found within discussions about education and the workplace. Learning outcomes can be understood as, “sustainable changes in

knowledge, skills, or attitudes as a result of engaging in learning activities” (Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans & Donche, 2016, p. 1114). Kyndt et al. (2016) add that learning outcomes go beyond a theoretical understanding, and individuals actually learn how and under what circumstances to apply this knowledge. While TTRPGs in the context of leisure are not formal learning activities, they can be considered as informal learning, which can be understood simply as knowledge gained through everyday life experiences (de Mora, 2019; Werqui, 2010).

In light of this, I propose three main goals: 1. To better understand the learning processes and types of knowledge relating to tabletop role-playing game participation; 2. To better understand the inherent features and role of these games in relation to overcoming difficult life experiences, and; 3. To better understand the meaning that participants come to give to these practices, in their lives. It was surprising and heartening to discover the impact of these games, with many participants expressing that the games “had changed their life.” For these participants, TTRPGs were more than a simple momentary escape. TTRPGs were a way to make friends, to participate, and become a part of social life.

Throughout this paper, I hope to take you along on my quest of discovery. Chapter 1 begins by answering the question on many of your minds, “What are TTRPGs anyways?” Through this discussion I demonstrate how TTRPGs are viewed by the general public and academics, and what the available research says about these types of games, and the questions they open up.

Chapter 2 outlines the methods used in this research. This was a qualitative study, which used semi-directed interviews with nine TTRPG players who self-identified as individuals for whom TTRPGs had a positive impact on their challenging or difficult life experiences. This

chapter provides further information on the field of research, selection criteria, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3 acts as a more thorough introduction to the nine participants of this study. This chapter describes the participants' challenges and experiences, and suggest that although the types of challenges were diverse, participants shared a common experience of social and societal isolation related to these challenges. I then discuss the importance of TTRPGs as a form of escapism and safe space for participants.

Chapter 4 discusses the ideal TTRPG as described by participants. Participants described games which offered flexibility in the way characters could be played and actions made. The story's narrative also proved important for the participants. In this chapter I also share how these qualities of TTRPGs allow players to engage in exploration of themselves and the world outside of the game. Finally, I demonstrate how these characteristics of TTRPGs resemble that of a liminal space which transforms the individual.

Chapter 5 discusses the benefits participants report gaining from their TTRPG experiences. These benefits include skill development, a sense of achievement and validation, and community. I then discuss how these benefits lead players to become social participants and more specifically regain their citizenship as understood by Rowe (2015).

The conclusion of this paper synthesizes the research findings. I discuss how this research contributes to the field of TTRPG studies and the field of criminology. Finally, I provide suggestions for the next steps in TTRPG research.

Chapter 1: The Book of Time—Literature review

Role-playing games (RPG) are believed to have first emerged in 1974 and continue to grow in popularity today as new games and systems are developed (Bowman, 2010). In 2015, RPGs were the fastest growing segment in the hobby market with a 67% growth rate between 2013 and 2015 (ICv2, 2015) and have continued to grow by 18% between 2017 and 2018 (ICv2, 2019) within North American markets. While RPGs remain the smallest category within the hobby games market from 2013 to today, RPGs have the biggest growing sales (ICv2, 2019). In 2018, RPGs made \$65 million, with Dungeons and Dragons remaining the top RPG (ICv2, 2019). Recent literature on RPGs, however, has focused mainly on computer and online gaming, addressing worries of violence and aggression, sexism, or possible social and cognitive benefits related to these games (e.g., Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Kircaburn, Jonason & Griffiths, 2018; Sublette & Mullan, 2012).

There has also been a growing interest in LARP (Bowman, 2010). LARP adds a physical element to game play by requiring players to physically act out their characters' actions (Daniau, 2016), and usually involves elaborate costumes (Bowman, 2010). LARP is a global trend as demonstrated by a 2014 LARP census which received responses from 29,751 participants from 123 countries/territories in 17 languages (Vanek, 2015). In Denmark, where LARPing is particularly popular, LARP has even become a classroom tool (Clasper, 2017). Literature on LARP is generally new, and remains focused on understanding and describing the practice (eg: Bowman & Standiford, 2016; Cox, 2018; Hellstrom, 2012; Simkins, 2014).

While new forms of RPGs have emerged, TTRPGs remain relevant today. D&D has been translated to over a dozen languages, and is available in over 50 countries (Kushner, 2017). It is

estimated that over 20 million people have played D&D (Kushner, 2017). Additionally, the creation of D&D brought about a surge of TTRPG game creation throughout the 1970s and 80s, which continues today (Ewalt, 2013; Lancaster, 1994). While TTRPGs remain relevant, the available literature is often outdated and no longer representative of the TTRPG community. Additionally, current research generally focusses on the characteristics and possible short-term gains of the game, but not the importance and meaning of TTRPGs for players. There has even been a call for “more attention to the experience of playing games rather than simply interpreting their surface features” (Henry Jenkins as cited by Newman, 2008, p. 143) which has yet to be answered. This research would allow for a better understanding of the social and cultural impacts of these games. This type of research is also valuable to the field of criminology as it can contribute more specifically to the field of cultural criminology and the study of subcultures. TTRPGs can be considered a more loosely bound subculture (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 1972). Although not considered a criminal activity, TTRPG practices can be conceptualized as a deviant practice as demonstrated by the heavy criticism it received during the moral panic, and more recently demonstrated by the U.S. court decision to ban these games from correctional facilities.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining current research on video gaming, a robust field of research, and how this can relate to TTRPGs. I then move to describe what TTRPG practices are and how they are played. I then present how TTRPGs have been received by the general public, how they appear in public discourse and how academic research has approached these practices. Finally, I move to define TTRPGs as leisure practices and describe how such forms of leisure can be understood as social participation.

1.1 Theorizing roleplaying games

While there is little research on TTRPGs, they are considered to have inspired the creation of many popular video games (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013), which have been the focus of a lot of research. For this reason, research on video gaming may help provide some insight on TTRPG practices and the analysis which will follow. The first at home video game console became available in 1972 with the Magnavox Odyssey (NMAH, n.d.). Today, over two billion people play video games worldwide (Anthony & Anthony, 2018). As a leisure activity, playing video games have been associated with improved positive moods (Russoniello, O'Brien & Parks, 2009; Ryan, Rigby & Przybylski, 2006) and reduced stress (Russoniello, O'Brien & Parks, 2009).. Like TTRPGs, our understanding of gaming and its larger impact has been rather tumultuous. Research has generally been focused around the themes of violent video games, video game addiction, academic performance, and education.

Early on, research related to video games has focused on their potential negative consequences (Prot, McDonald, Anderson & Gentile, 2012). It has been found that violent video games can be a risk factor for increased aggressive behaviour, cognition and affect, and reduced empathy and pro-social behaviour (Anderson et al., 2010). Greitemeyer & Mügge (2014) define violent video games as games “in which the predominant goal is to harm another game character” compared to pro-social games “in which the predominant goal is to benefit another game character” (p.1). TTRPGs, like many video games can be considered violent, or to at least host violent content. While the overarching goal or quest in TTRPGs often relates to saving the world (Ewalt, 2013), there is often violence as players work to kill the “evil” characters (Martin & Fine, 1991). It has also been found that most top-selling video games do contain violence (Dill, Gentile, Ritcher & Dill, 2005). The main concern regarding violent content in video games is the increase in aggressive behaviour and decrease in pro-social behaviour. It has been found

that playing violent video games can cause immediate increases in aggression, as demonstrated in Anderson, Gentile & Buckley 's (2007) study where participants who played violent video games were more likely to blast a louder sound in their opponent's headphone. This demonstrates that exposure to violent content while gaming may cause individuals to act in aggressive ways while playing, like intending to hurt an opponent with a loud noise. TTRPGs, however, are generally cooperative and not competitive (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983), so it is difficult to theorize this type of aggression emerging between players. Playing violent video games has also been shown to have negative long-term effects. For example, children who played violent video games exhibited more aggressive verbal and physical behaviour five months later (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007). Another study found that children who played more violent video games were more likely to be involved in aggressive and delinquent behaviour (Anderson & Dill, 2000). In these examples, aggressive and anti-social behaviour is expressed beyond the game space and has an effect on the individual and the world around them. Violent video games have also been found to cause feelings of anger and hostility in the short term (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005) and over time can even lead to the development of aggressive personality (Barthlow, Sestir & Davis, 2005). It is believed that violent video games can prime aggressive thoughts and increase positive attitudes toward violence in general (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Funk, Baldacci, Pasold & Baumgardner, 2004; Kirsh, 2004). We see here how violence in these games can have negative long-term effects on an individual's emotional state and cognitive functioning, which affects their emotional and overall well-being. That being said, an interesting argument has also been made that publication bias may be leading to an overestimation of the relationship between video game violence and aggressive behaviour (Anderson et al., 2010).

Some research suggests that video games can encourage pro-social behaviour and be a space for positive social interactions (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Kahlbaugh, Sperandio, Carlson & Hauselt, 2011; Smyth, 2007). For example, Hussain & Griffiths' (2008) study found that one in five gamers found interactions in the gaming world to be more satisfying and pleasant than offline socializing. It was even found that some participants developed a sense of comradery and friendship through online gaming (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). While TTRPGs are generally played in person, these interactions occur within a gaming context, like in video games, and allow for a variety of interactions. Additionally, TTRPGs are generally cooperative games, which could also foster a space for comradery and friendships to form. Video games have even been used to reduce loneliness and increase social participation in elderly (De Schutter, 2011; Kahlbaugh et al., 2011). As a cooperative game, TTRPGs are very much social, and require the active participation of all players in order for the game to function, meaning these games could have similar effects as video games in reducing loneliness and increasing social participation. Like video games, TTRPGs can become a space for positive social interactions.

Beyond offering a social space, video games have also been used to improve social skills. Ducheneaux and Moore's (2005) study demonstrated how massive multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPG) have helped players learn social skills such as how to meet people, manage small groups, coordinate and cooperate with others, and participate in sociable interactions with others. Video games have also been associated with teaching basic social skills and improved leadership (Beardon, Parson & Neale, 2001; Parsons et al., 2000; Yee, 2004). As forms of RPGs, MMORPGs and TTRPGs both require the players to inhabit a world filled with a variety of characters, both player and non-player, with whom they must interact to fulfill their quests. Like

in MMORPGs, these interactions within TTRPGs could similarly present opportunities for players to practise these pro-social skills.

Concerns have also emerged regarding the impact of video game practices on an individual's responsibilities and other activities. For example, studies have found negative correlations between screen time and school performance from young children up to post-secondary students (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007; Cordes & Miller, 2000; Cummings & Vandewater, 2007; Rideout, Foehr & Rogers, 2010). The most significant concern is related to the amount of time spent playing video games, compared to time spent on schoolwork and other responsibilities or what are considered more productive activities. Studies have found teens play video games, on average, 13 hours a week. TTRPGs, can also be a time-consuming activity as an average gaming session is four hours (Long, 2014). This time does not include preparation work involved in creating a character or preparing a campaign. The time commitment required to play TTRPGs could interfere with other activities and responsibilities like has been seen with video game play. However, TTRPGs are not as readily available as video games, due to the fact that game play relies on the presence of all players, and requires preparation by the players, meaning game play must be planned.

Video games have also been associated with addiction. Video game addiction can have negative consequences on a variety of aspects of an individual's life. For example, video game addiction can negatively impact family, school, occupational and psychological functioning (Anderson, Gentile & Dill, 2012; Lemmens, Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Mentzoni et al., 2011). What characterizes an addiction is essential an interruption to an individual's well-being and normal functioning (Anderson, Gentile & Dill, 2012). Stockdale & Coyne (2018) suggest that many of the risk factors associated with video game addiction are the same as any other type of

addiction. Data related to pathological patterns of play suggests video game addiction is rare, but a real phenomenon (Stockdale & Coyne, 2018). This suggests that video game play is not an inherent risk of addiction. While TTRPGs share some of the same qualities as gaming which are believed to make them addictive, such as gradual increases in difficulty level and reward, like video games, addiction to these practices is likely not due to the game itself but other factors related to the individual.

While video games have been argued to be disruptive to normal functioning and responsibilities, such as in the case of school performance, they have also been found to provide beneficial learning. For example, many have touted the educational and skill acquisition benefits of video games. Video games are believed to be good teaching tools because they are attention grabbing, actively involve the player, set clear objectives, provide feedback and reinforcement, and offer adaptable levels of difficulty (Gentile & Gentile, 2008). TTRPGs have many of the same features, possibly making them effective teaching tools. Video games have been used in schools to teach specific subjects such as math, reading, and biology (Corbett, Koedigner & Hadley, 2001). Video games have also been used to teach about health and lifestyle (Kato, Cole, Bradlyn & Pollock, 2008; Lieberman, 2001). For example, one study showed significant improvement in knowledge of asthma and self-care behaviours in children who played the game *Bronki the Bronchiasaurus* (Lieberman, 2001). Here we see how video games actually become a tool to meet educational goals and help learn to fulfill responsibilities such as personal care. Video games are used to teach in a variety of contexts, such as the military, work and school (Buckley and Anderson, 2006; Prot et al., 2012). TTRPGs could similarly be used in these contexts as teaching tools, as like video games they can be adapted to present a variety of themes.

The data on video game use can be conflicting, demonstrating both positive and negative impacts of these games. All video games are not the same, there are a variety of genres and ways to play which each have their own benefits, and sometimes negative consequences. As Gentile (2011) suggests, video game play has five dimensions: amount of game play, content of play, context of the game, structure of the game and mechanics of game play. These five dimensions help determine the type of benefits and negative consequences a game may have. Similarly, TTRPGs come in many different shapes, and player engagement varies, which can have an effect on the outcomes of playing, both negative and positive.

1.2 What are TTRPGs?

D&D is considered by many researchers and practitioners as the first RPG (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983; Martin & Fine, 1991; Waskul, 2006) and the catalyst for other popular game formats today (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013). Many RPGs are considered similar in that players inhabit a fantasy world and control characters they either choose or create (Bowman, 2010). The most significant differences between RPGs are the platform they are played on and game mechanics. Today, there are many different forms of RPGs available, one of the most popular forms being those on virtual platforms (Daniau, 2016). Many of the most popular video games are considered RPGs, like *The Legend of Zelda* titles, *Final Fantasy* series, and *Pillars of Eternity* series (Game Designing, 2020). RPGs played on a virtual platform can appear in the form of single-player games, group games and MMORPG (Daniau, 2016). Some theories explain the popularity of video games, due to the interactive and challenging nature of these games (Vorderer, Bryant, Pieper & Weber, 2006).

Key Terms

Campaign: A campaign is a series of sessions joined together to form a larger narrative. It is played with a consistent group of characters.

Session: A session is a meeting between individuals to play a TTRPG. A session usually lasts 4-6 hours and generally consists of a full storyline.

One Shots: A one-shot is a TTRPG game that only lasts one session. These session include the complete narrative.

GM vs. Adventurer vs. Player: The game master (GM) is responsible for describing the environment and narrating the outcome of the adventurers' actions. TTRPGs generally only have one GM. The adventurers are the other players who each control a character in game. There are typically 5 adventurers (Camp, 2020). Players refers to both the GM and adventurers.

Party: A party refers to the group of adventures as a whole.

LARP is a second form of RPG gaining popularity. Some theorists believe that the physical presence required byLARPs can create an embodied and even visceral experience, not possible with other mediums of play (Harviainen, 2016). LARP games can range from only a few to a few thousand players (Daniau, 2016). Popular LARPs include *Vampire: the Masquerade* and *The Dance of the Dawn* (Hodara, 2015). These leisurely forms of role-playing can also be found in activities such as cosplay, which first gained popularity in the 1990s in Japan and has since migrated to the western cultures (Runnebaum, 2019). However, other forms of costume play in western cultures have been popular since the 15th century with costume parties and masquerade balls (Runnebaum, 2019).

While TTRPGs have inspired other forms of RPGs, TTRPGs remain unique in comparison to its sister games. For example, TTRPGs are considered more interactive than video games which generally have predetermined storylines (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013). While discussing video games, Gygax, the original co-creator of D&D, pointedly stated in an interview,

“There is no intimacy; it’s not live[...] It’s being translated through a computer, and your imagination is not there the same way it is when you’re actually together with a group of people” (Gary Gygax as cited by Schiesel, 2008, para. 6). TTRPGs, also known as pen-and-paper RPGs, are as the name suggests, are played around a table with no more than a pen and paper, unlike virtual RPGs played on gaming systems where every course of action must be coded, and LARPs played in large spaces with elaborate props and costumes (Bowman, 2010). In comparison, TTRPGs are generally confined to the table, and can be played simply through verbal description (Bowman, 2010). As Ewalt (2013) states about TTRPGs, “It’s more about the journey than the destination...” (p. 10), unlike most virtual RPGs which are generally goal based. Gygax shares a similar sentiment stating,

The essence of a role-playing games is that it is a group, cooperative experience [...] There is no winning or losing, but rather the value is in the experience of imagining yourself as a character in whatever genre you’re involved in [...] You get to sort of vicariously experience those things (Schiesel, 2008).

Various authors agree and have shown how TTRPGs are an exercise of imagination where players explore unique imaginary worlds, completing quests and adventures (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983; Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). While many of the first RPGs, such as D&D, were set in a fantasy world (Bowman, 2010), today you can find RPGs which fit into almost any genre such as science fiction (Giuliani, 2019), western (Girdwood, 2018) and horror (Boehm, 2020). For the purpose of this paper, however, I will be characterizing RPGs simply as fantasy worlds to include all of these different types, defining fantasy worlds as the worlds created through TTRPGs (Fine, 1981).

The most basic TTRPG gameplay happens around a table, and consist simply of a rule book, a set of dice (Figure 2), character sheets (Figure 3) and a pencil. Some players also opt to use miniatures – small figurines to represent the characters – and maps to provide a visual representation of the game play. The rule book provides the necessary information to create a character, the rules of play, and other details related to monsters, magical items and other goods. The character sheet is used to keep track of all relevant information related to the character such as their base characteristics, the items they hold, and their strengths and weaknesses. The dice are used to determine the success of a player’s actions. For the purpose of simplicity and clarity, I will be mostly referring to D&D throughout this paper. I am using the example of D&D as it remains popular today and is arguably the most recognizable TTRPG, in addition, most other TTRPGs have been inspired by and follow similar mechanics to D&D (Bowman, 2010).

Figure 2. A set of D&D dice. The D20¹ is featured in the centre. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 28, 2020



¹ D20 refers to the 20 sided di. Each die follows the same naming convention. For example, the 6 sided die would be known as the D6.

Figure 3. A Character sheet that has been marked up through play. Picture by Anne Goodall. June 30, 2020

Fighter (2) *→ Battle Master Sage*
CLASS & LEVEL

High Elf
RACE

Sage
BACKGROUND

Lawful neutral
ALIGNMENT

PLAYER NAME

8800
EXPERIENCE POINTS

Zofie Ragnara

CHARACTER NAME

STRENGTH
10
0

DEXTERITY
16
+3

CONSTITUTION
13
+1

INTELLIGENCE
16
+3

WISDOM
12
+1

CHARISMA
8
-1

INSPIRATION

+2 *3*
PROFICIENCY BONUS

+2 Strength
 Dexterity
 +2 Constitution
 Intelligence
 Wisdom
 Charisma

SAVING THROWS

Acrobatics (Dex)
 Animal Handling (Wis)
 +5 Arcana (Int)
 +2 Athletics (Str)
 Deception (Cha)
 +5 History (Int)
 +3 Insight (Wis)
 Intimidation (Cha)
 Investigation (Int)
 Medicine (Wis)
 Nature (Int)
 +3 Perception (Wis)
 Performance (Cha)
 Persuasion (Cha)
 Religion (Int)
 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
 Stealth (Dex)
 +3 Survival (Wis)

SKILLS

17
ARMOR CLASS

30
SPEED

Hit Point Maximum *18 20*

18 *13*
CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total *12*
2d10
HIT DICE

SUCCESSES
 FAILURES
 DEATH SAVES

PERSONALITY TRAITS

I place no stock in wealthy or well-mannered folk. Money and manners won't save you from a hungry owlbear.

IDEALS

The path to power and self-improvement is through Knowledge

BONDS

I will do anything to prove to my family that I can be a true warrior

FLAWS

I speak without really thinking through my words, inevitably insulting others

NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
<i>2 attacks</i>		
<p>Rapier: Melee weapon Attack - +5 to hit, reach 5 ft, one target. Hit: 1d8 + 5 piercing damage</p> <p>Dart: Ranged weapon attack - +5 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. Hit: 1d4 + 3 Piercing damage</p> <p>True Strike: Cantrip - Range 30 ft. concentration up tp 1 round. Gain advantage on your next attack against target before end of your next turn.</p>		
ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING		

PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

Common, Elvish, Draconic, Dwarvish

Alphonso's letter w

Sassy clothes

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

EQUIPMENT

Rapier *899*

Studded leather *5150*

Dart (20) *158*

Shield

Scholars Pack *+ Holyday Book*

Fishing tackle

Book on fighting techniques

Spell book *magic jug*

FEATURES & TRAITS

FEATURING

Fey Ancestry: I have advantage on saving throws against being charmed, and magic can't put you to sleep.

Dark Vision: I can see in dim light within 60 feet of me as if it were bright light, and in darkness as if it were dim light. I can't see colour in the darkness, only shades of grey.

Trance: I don't require sleep. Instead I meditate deeply, semiconsciousness, for 4 hours a day. After resting in this way I gain the same benefit that a human does after 8 hours of sleep.

Fighting style: Dueling - When wielding a weapon in one hand and no other weapons, I gain +2 bonus to damage rolls with that weapon

Second Wind: on my turn I can use a bonus action to regain 1d10 +2 hit points. Once I use this feature I must finish a short or long rest before I can use it again.

Action Surge: On my turn I can take one additional action on top of my regular action and a possible bonus action.

How does a game unfold? As described in the *D&D Player's Handbook*, TTRPGs are generally played best with fewer than 12 players, where one player, the GM, acts as a storyteller and guides the other players, adventurers, through an imaginary world (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). The GM is usually responsible for creating the general plot, playing the roles of secondary characters, and narrating the results of players' actions (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 2013), while also applying game rules and ensuring group coherence and the game's progression (Daniau, 2016, Fine, 1983). The other players become both authors and audience to the story (Ewalt, 2013) by interacting with the world set out in front of them (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). TTRPGs generally use a mathematical mechanic which allows the game to function through statistics and the randomization of dice rolls (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978; Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983). Different game systems use different sets of dice, for example, D&D uses 7 types of dice (4-sided die, 6-sided die, 8-sided die, 10-sided die (2 types), 12-sided die, and 20-sided die) while *Blades in the Dark* only requires the 6-sided die. The outcome of nearly every action taken in D&D is determined by the number rolled on the die in combination with the character's predetermined strengths and weaknesses (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). For example, a player will roll a die to determine if they have successfully attacked a monster, and then roll again to see how much damage they have inflicted with that attack. Another example would be when a character attempts to convince a guard to let them through. A player may do a charisma check to see if they were successful in convincing the guard.

Players keep track of game play with the use of character sheets which describe a character's attributes, skills, appearance, as well as other elements such as belongings (e.g., money, weapons, spells, other objects). Players generally create their own characters to their liking; however, these features can also be chosen at random through dice rolls (Wyatt, Schwalb

& Cordell, 1978). A player chooses their character's race (e.g., Elf, Dwarf, Human and Halfling), which will play a role in the character's identity by providing certain traits and skills which are natural to that race's culture and ancestry (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). Second, the player will choose a class for their character (e.g., Barbarian, Druid, Monk, Fighter and Wizard). Class relates to the character's vocation and will determine certain talents and tactics which will be used by the character (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). Players will also randomly generate ability scores (e.g., Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma) for their characters by rolling dice; the character's success in actions will depend greatly on their ability scores, as these alter the statistical probability of success (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978).

Players also have the option of providing a description for their character by outlining their appearance, personality traits and a backstory (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt; Fine, 1983). Players also choose their character's alignment (Good vs. Evil and Lawful vs. Chaotic), which provides a moral compass for their character's actions and identity (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978).

Each of these elements plays an important role in how a character will interact with other characters and the world in which they are placed. As these characters navigate this fantasy world and overcome challenges and gain experience, they can grow and develop new capabilities (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). The characters' successes and failures during the campaign provide a history and a context for the characters individually and the party as a whole, and provides new storylines for future sessions (Ewalt, 2013). As Ewalt (2013) states, these elements provide depth to the imaginary world and "breathes life into a collection of numbers and rules" (p. 12).

The *D&D Players Handbook* states that game play generally consists of three elements: exploration, social interaction, and combat (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). Bowman (2010) adds that these games must include puzzles. TTRPGs are uniquely cooperative and not competitive—although there are exceptions—which differentiates them from most other non-RPG games such as board games (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983). Additionally, TTRPGs have been described as “essentially social experiences” (Darvasi, 2019, para 3). Game play usually begins when the characters are given a quest, and set off on an adventure, coming across different characters, puzzles and villains. TTRPGs are played in sessions, which usually end in the successful completion of an adventure (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). Some players choose to play a full campaign, which will consist of multiple interlinked sessions to form a full story (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978), while others may simply choose to play a one-shot game and begin a new story, or a completely different game system the next session.

1.3 The public’s reception of TTRPGs

It proved difficult to pitch D&D, a game with no winners or losers, to game companies, so Gary Gygax, one of D&D’s co-creators, decided to create his own company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) (Kushner, 2017). January 1974 the game titled *Dungeons and Dragons: rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns playable with paper and pencil and miniature figures* was released (Kushner, 2017). Although not an immediate success, the game slowly spread to colleges and high schools across America (Fine, 1981; Kushner, 2017). Today, D&D and other TTRPGs are played around the world. While recognized today as a success, D&D, and RPGs in general, faced serious challenges when they became the victim of a moral panic.

As described by Ewalt (2013), D&D slowly grew in popularity, and in the 1980s hit the pop-culture scene in the worst way possible (Kushner, 2017). TTRPGs became the victim of a

moral panic incited by fundamentalist religious groups (BBC News, 2014). RPGs quickly became villainized within the media and interpreted as dangerous to youth (Ewalt, 2013). These games became associated with notions of satanism, murder, suicide and crime (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Lancaster, 1994; Martin & Fine, 1991). A 2016 study, however, has found that violent acts committed by RPG players are related to factors other than game play (Inholes, 2016). A notable case, which is believed to have ignited the moral panic against D&D, is the disappearance of a young James Dallas Egbert III in 1979 (Haberman, 2016). Egbert was a gifted 16-year-old student at the University of Michigan who was an avid D&D player. A private investigator hired by Egbert's family shared with the media his theory that D&D caused Egbert to become delusional—unable to tell the difference between fantasy and reality—and had gone on a quest (BBC News, 2014). In reality, Egbert had been struggling with his mental health and had run away. Egbert did eventually come home after an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Sadly, Egbert's mental health did not improve and he died of suicide a year later (BBC News, 2014). Other cases which have been linked to D&D include the murder of 18-year-old Mary Towey in 1984 (AP News, 1985), the murder of Lieth Von Stein by his stepson in 1988 (History, 2019), and the suicide of Irving Lee Pulling in 1982 (Isikoff, 1983). TTRPGs were believed to have corrupted the minds of these young people, causing them to commit these horrible acts (Dempsey, Dempsey & Pulling, n.d.). While RPGs have been accused of negatively affecting players' emotional stability, leading to suicides and crime, early research by Simón (1987) suggest that there is no correlation between individuals who play RPGs and emotional stability, or suicidal and homicidal tendencies.

This misunderstanding of D&D was perpetuated by the 1981 novel *Mazes and Monsters* (Ewalt, 2013), which quickly became a made-for-television movie starring a young Tom Hanks.

The story is described in the book's blurb as "Four university friends, obsessed with a fantasy role-playing game delve into the darkest parts of their minds and carry the game one terrible step too far" (Jaffe, 1981). The novel's plot revolves around one of the players who begins hallucinating that the game is real and eventually commits suicide (BBC News, 2014). Later, video games were similarly portrayed in the 1999 film *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg, Hamori & Lantos, 1999). In addition, D&D was often portrayed by the media as dangerous, most notably an episode of the American television investigative news program *60 Minutes*, which heavily criticized the game using what was later found to be incredible information (Ewalt, 2013). Like the detective in Egbert's case, the *60 Minutes* episode and other news sources claimed that some children become obsessed with the game and begin to believe the game is reality leading them to commit crime, suicide and murder (60 Minutes, 1984).

In 1983, an advocacy group titled Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) (Lancaster, 1994) was formed, which aimed to educate law enforcement, schools, parents, and churches about the "negative aspects and direction of the D&D books" (Dempsey, Dempsey & Pulling, n.d., p. 1). A pamphlet published by BADD (Figure 4 and Figure 5) states that D&D is an introduction to occult religions, leads children with late-schizophrenia towards bad moral behaviour, and its high emotional involvement causes depression in children, which can result in violence, murder, suicide, and mental health problems (Dempsey, Dempsey & Pulling, n.d.). An analysis of the pamphlet reveals that many excerpts used from D&D published works have been edited to appear more sinister, often omitting contextual information. Quotes from various sources have also been edited or removed from context, and the studies mentioned are often conducted by individuals without relevant credentials and lack any contextual or verifiable information (The Escapist, n.d.). BADD often cites the violent scenes in D&D as damaging to

players, however, while it is true that TTRPGs can be violent, they are unique in that that they are also pro-social and cooperative (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983), as Waskul (2006) states, “This is what the game is all about; teamwork, cooperation and survival...” (p. 30). Additionally, although there are opportunities to play more anti-social characters, it has been found that 80% of individuals choose to play “good” and “lawful” characters, while those who chose “evil” or “unlawful” alignments tend to ignore these negative traits, playing as more neutral characters (Martine and Fine 1991).

Figure 4. Back and front cover of a worn copy of the pamphlet *Dungeons and Dragons* created by the advocacy group BADD. Picture by *The Escapist*, n.d.

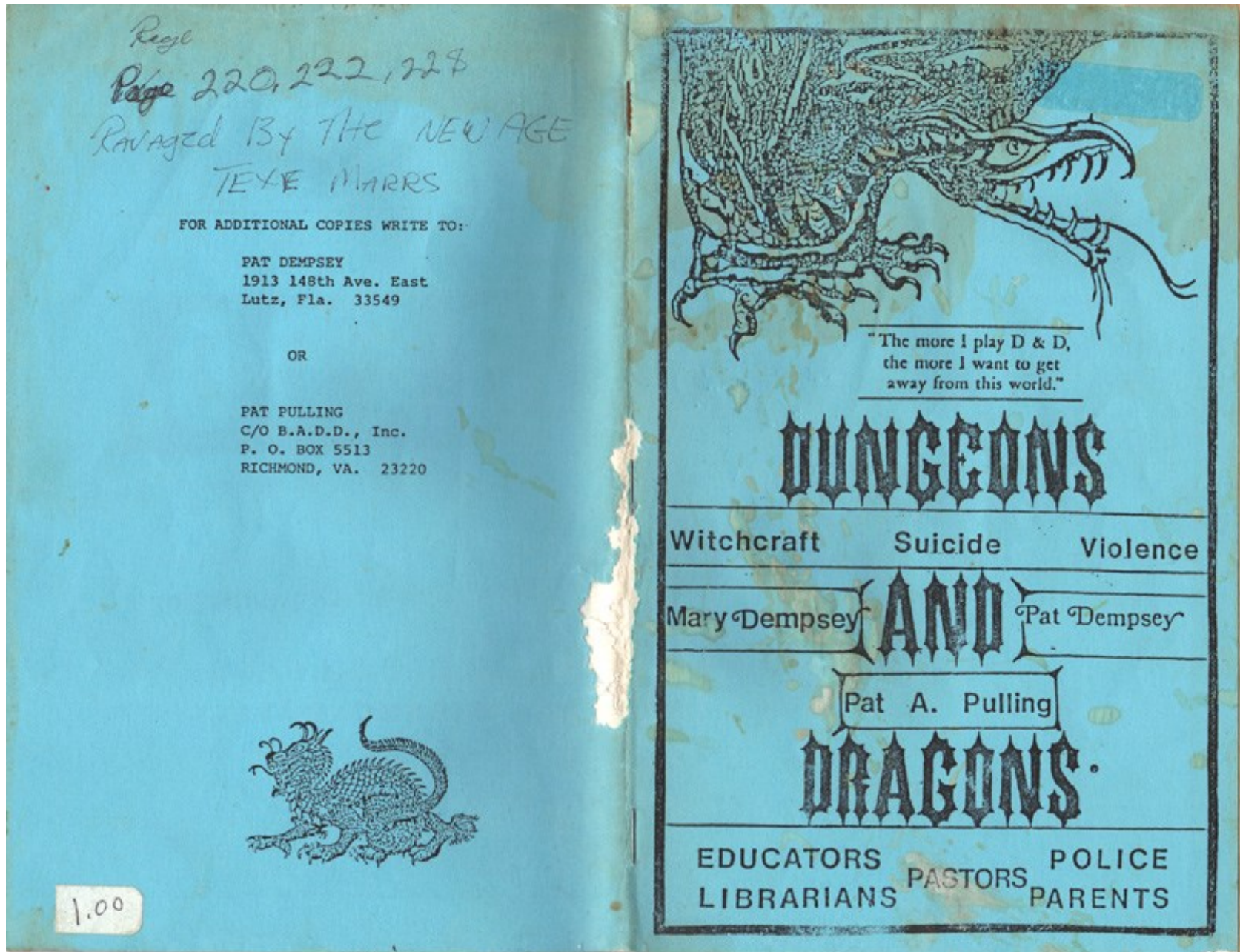
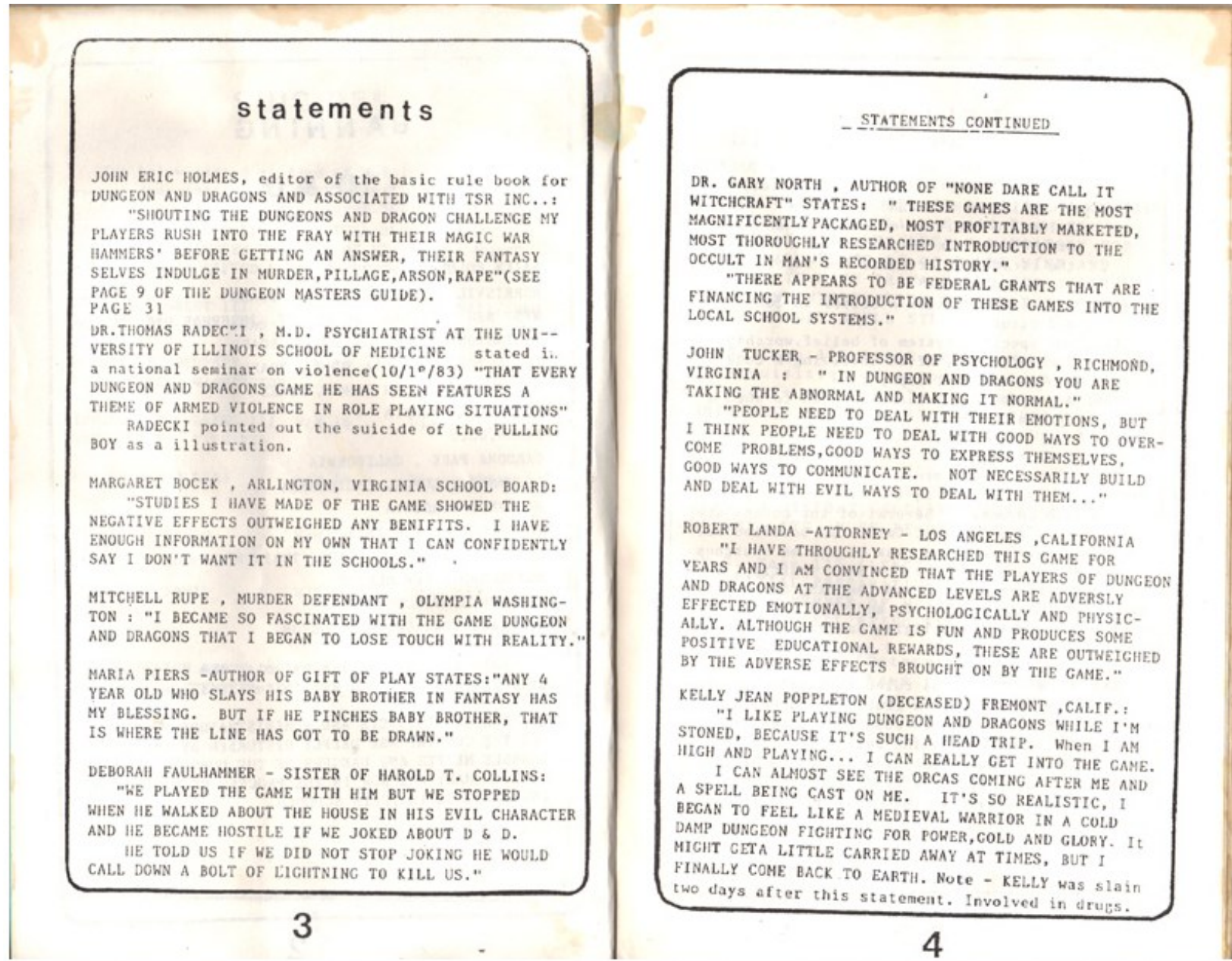


Figure 5. A section of the pamphlet *Dungeons and Dragons* by the advocacy group BADD. Picture by *The Escapist*, n.d.

While critics have accused D&D of influencing children to become deviant and anti-social, research has shown there are many positive social benefits to TTRPG game play. TTRPGs have been used in a therapeutic context to help players accept and further develop their relationship with their personal identity (Coe, 2017; Blackmond, 1994). Additionally, TTRPGs have more generally been used in the context of “social rehabilitation” (Blackmon, Grzyb & Gardziejewska, 2015; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). TTRPGs in this context are used to assist individuals in developing skills and behaviours needed to help them better navigate social situations and become more integrated within the community. TTRPGs are thought to resemble the real world in many ways by forcing characters to “deal with the rules of society, adapt to environmental changes, manage priorities, and assume the consequences of their actions” (Daniau, 2016, p. 439; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Waskul, 2006). Like in children’s imaginary play, RPGs provide a safe space for individuals to practise and learn new social strategies without the fear of real-world consequences (Bowman 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Through the case of a 15-year-old male who had difficulty regulating his emotions and responding to others appropriately, Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) demonstrate that players are able to progressively learn from their negative behaviours and employ corrective measures to better their interactions both within the game world and outside the game world. More specifically, some skills developed by players include cooperation, compassion, sympathy, communication, self-awareness and empathy (Blatner, 2007; Bowman, 2010; Stover, 2005). Cooperative and communicative skills can be learned and developed through group problem solving which occurs throughout the game (Joyner & Young, 2006; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013), while other skills such as empathy, sympathy and compassion can be gained through a player’s experience as a character. As a challenge, many individuals choose to play characters opposite to

themselves (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1983; Headley, 2019), which allows them to engage in an exercise of thinking differently than what they are accustomed to (Bowman, 2010). By taking on the role of a different person, this exercise allows individuals to experience the thoughts and feelings of different characters in different situations (Joyner & Young, 2006).

For example, role-playing is often a tool used within a therapeutic context. Role-playing can be found in programs such as Dance and drama therapy. Dance is said to be a healing experience which helps individuals develop new skills, both physical and interpersonal, and learn to communicate their feelings (Brockway, 1997; Frigon, 2010; Seibel, 2010). Similar to dance, theatre programs such as “Geese Theater UK,” use drama techniques to help participants learn new skills, such as general communication skills and more specific skills like job interview skills (Bowman, 2010; Heard, Mutch, Fitzgerald, Pensalfini, 2013). Dance and drama therapy have been shown to develop an individual’s self-esteem, identity and confidence in skills, and positively affect their motivation to change (Brockway, 1997; Heard et al., 2013), leading to transformation (Johnson, 1982). Role-playing is also seen in more traditional rehabilitative programs such as cognitive behavioural therapy which employs role-playing and rehearsal as a technique (Braswell & Kendall, 1988; Milkman and Wanburgh , 2017; Kaplan, 1982). Individuals engage in role-play in order to rehearse new lifestyles, learn to identify and change thinking processes and gain new social skills (Braswell & Kendall, 1988; Milkman and Wanburgh , 2017; Kaplan, 1982).

Role-playing games have also been used to help teach and refine skills within a variety of other contexts (Bowman, 2010). Ewalt (2013) describes how “The U.S Army employs game designers in the Simulations Division at its Command and General Staff College [whose events resemble] highly moderated role-playing games, a cross between D&D, fantasy football and high

school model UN” (p. 43). Many educators also use existing RPGs, such as D&D, to teach students skills such as math and vocabulary (Mello, 2006.; Ewalt, 2013; Betz, 2011). It has been argued that role-playing has three functions of scenario building, problem solving and skill training which make it ideal for educational, workplace and military settings (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1981). Certain role-playing activities, such as process drama, are used within the classroom setting to help students learn skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork (Blatner, 2007; Weltsek-Medina, 2007). The military uses role-playing as a training tool to assess military officers and intelligence personnel (Gluck & Rubenstein, 2007). Role-playing is also used in the workplace to teach skills which range from serving a customer and using a cash register to leadership and management skills (Gluck & Rubenstein, 2007; Joyner & Young, 2006). In general, in play or education, RPGs have been reported to assist players in developing a variety of cognitive skills, such as a larger capacity for attention and concentration, complex thinking, and creativity (Bowman, 2010). Schneider (1972) explains that the variety of obstacles tackled within game play help individuals develop systemic and critical thinking skills. Bowman (2010) suggests that as characters solve puzzles - in order to move along in the story - the players develop new ways of thinking. Couture (1999) adds that TTRPGs also allow players to develop and practise their artistic creativity while they create the storyline, and intellectual creativity as they solve puzzles. Couture (1999) adds that both of these forms of creativity are useful in everyday life. Betz (2011) states that creativity is essential for quick and out of the box thinking used to solve unique problems both within the game world and outside the game world. Researchers have found that players often cite RPGs for aiding them in their successful navigation of various out of game situations (Bowman, 2010; Mello, 2006; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Joyner & Young (2006) state that RPGs are effective tools in teaching as they provide an

active learning experience which is shown to be more effective than traditional classroom teaching techniques. RPGs are also fun, which provides motivation for learning (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013; Joyner & Young, 2006), and allows players to engage in unconscious learning (Owens & Steen, 2001).

In recent years there has been a slow shift away from a negative image of TTRPG players as boundaries begin to blur between geek and mainstream culture (Cohen, 2014). A geek is generally understood as an enthusiast, often of obscure media (McCain, Gentile & Campbell, 2015). Geek culture includes a variety of activities such as RPGs, cosplay, and video games in addition to interests in science, technology, and engineering (McCain, Gentile & Campbell, 2015). What was once considered nerdy or geeky has hit the mainstream market quite successfully. Some examples include top grossing superhero movies, the newest wearable technology such as Apple watches, and the new fashion style, “geek chic,” which has been a reoccurring style on the runway (Buxton Smith, 2018; Cohen, 2014; Lane, 2018 McCain, Gentile & Campbell, 2015; Woo, 2018). In this ever increasingly complicated and technological world, researchers believe that the association of geek and knowledge has led to the acceptance and even embrace of geek culture (Bodner, 2018; Cohen, 2014; Lane, 2018; Woo, 2018). Lane (2018) states, however, that although geek culture is “cool” on screen, individuals characterized as geeks and nerds in real life are not as accepted. Lane (2018) shares a statistic that suggests American parents would rather their children be athletic and receive poor grades than be labelled a “nerd.” Ewalt (2013) also remarks that although TTRPGs are no longer understood as a satanic practice, portrayal in modern television shows such as *Community*, *Stranger Things*, and *The Big Bang Theory* (Ewalt, 2013; Bartyzel, 2020), or even in Disney’s 2020 animated feature, *Onward*, tend to “signal outsider status” (Ewalt, 2013 p. 4).

1.4 TTRPGs as leisure and social participation

Leisure is understood by most as any activity conducted during free time, and is said not to be essential to life (Chen & Chippendale, 2018; Gross, 1961; Stebbins & Elkington, 2014). While not essential to life, it has been identified as an important activity, even since Antiquity, when Plato and Aristotle wrote about leisure as being essential to wisdom and happiness (Rudnik, 2005). Leisure should be pleasurable, and engaged in by choice (Card, 1983; Gross, 1961; Pedlar, Yuen and Fortune, 2008; Stebbins & Elkington, 2014). Leisure activities come in many forms, such as sport, spiritual activities, play, arts, entertainment, resting, and more (Rudnick 2005). Drawing on these definitions of leisure, as an activity done in free time which is enjoyable and engaged in by choice (Card, 1983; Chen & Chippendale, 2018; Gross, 1961; Pedlar, Yuen and Fortune, 2008; Stebbins & Elkington, 2014), I am defining TTRPGs as a leisure activity.

Leisure activities have been found to have many benefits for their participants. In particular, leisure has been shown to have a positive effect on health, self-esteem, and quality of life (Chen & Chippendale, 2018; Rudnick, 2005). Conversely, a lack of leisure activity is associated with a diminished sense of well-being (Caltabiano, 1995). Active forms of leisure such as sport have been shown to bring benefits of physical fitness and stress relief (Caltabiano, 1995; Gallant, Sherry and Nicholson, 2015; Lengfelder, Slater and Grove, 1992; Pantelis, 2014). More “passive” forms of leisure such as spiritual activities and resting have also been shown to bring benefits such as a physiological response of relaxation and a positive mood (Caltabiano, 1995). In general, leisure participation has been found to satisfy an individual’s psychological needs, which in turn has a positive effect on physical health, mental health, life satisfaction and personal growth (Caltabiano, 1995; Chen & Chippendale, 2018; Passmore, 2003).

TTRPGs are an alternative form of leisure to other more popular or well-known forms of leisure, like sports (Kraus, 2018). Many people are dusting off their dice and creating new groups and programs geared at playing TTRPGs. Some examples include: a man who created his own D&D club for his daughter, the neighbourhood children and their parents as an after-school activity (Jahromi, 2017); One elementary school in Edmonton, Alberta created a D&D club for students to have an outlet outside of sports (Kraus, 2018); In the United Kingdom, it is not uncommon to find a themed D&D night at a restaurant or bar (Barnes, 2018); Fans can even participate in “A FOUR DAY GAMING VACATION FOR GEEKS” (D&D in a castle, n.d.). Finding a group in your area to play with can be as simple as a quick Google search with results popping up from sites like Facebook.com, Meetup.com and Reddit.com. In addition to play, a quick search will also find you a large catalogue of blogs, forums and websites dedicated exclusively to TTRPGs.

In addition to play becoming more and more popular, there has also been a surge of media related to TTRPGs, such as podcasts and streaming channels. Some examples include, *Critical Role*, *Join the Party*, *The Adventure Zone*, and *Critical Role* (Williams, 2018). While not as common, books intended to be consumed for pleasure and not for game play have also been released, like Ewalt’s (2013) *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It* or Kushner’s (2017) graphic novel *Rise of the Dungeon Master: Gary Gygax and the Creation of D&D*. TTRPG, are not only a game to play for leisure, they are now available to consume through video, podcasts, and even books. Once something to hide from others (Ewalt, 2010), TTRPGs have become a “cool” pass time (Alimurung, 2019).

Although TTRPGs are evidently becoming a growing pass time, there is little research on this type of leisure. Martin & Fine (1991) describe TTRPGs as controversial leisure, which is

seen to cause harm. A 1986 article by Creasey and Myers, titled “Video Games and Children: Effects on Leisure Activities, Schoolwork, and Peer Involvement” demonstrates that games comparable to TTRPGs were previously not even considered a leisure activity. Today, video games are considered leisure, but not necessarily acceptable forms of leisure or to be encouraged. Popular opinion views video gaming as unproductive, anti-social and uncreative (Newman, 2008). One influential child psychologist even dismissed these types of games as “a colossal waste of time” (Newman, 2008, p. 1). Only recently have academics warmed to the idea of researching the benefits of this type of leisure (Newman, 2008). Research on leisure activities in general, however, continues to be focused on more traditional forms of leisure such as sports and art and less so on pop-culture practices, such as TTRPGs (Truong & Gaudet, 2020).

1.5 Leisure as a tool for social participation

As described above, leisure can have many benefits—and while it is true playing TTRPGs may not help you become big and strong like Thokk, your Half-Orc Barbarian—they may provide other gains such as community building and belonging. Leisure activities provide individuals with an opportunity to develop friendships in a natural way (Pantelis, 2014; Pedlar, Yuen and Fortune, 2008). Unlike obligatory interactions, like school or work, leisure activities are seen to be more beneficial and offer the opportunity for problems to be discussed and for the individual to self-disclose and receive emotional support (Caltabiano, 1995; Smallfield & Molitor, 2018). Leisure activities have also been used as a form of intervention to assist individuals who experience social isolation by providing them with a social network, or more broadly, to become social participants (Coe, 2017; Smallfield & Molitor, 2018).

Social participation has been conceptualized in many ways. Historically, social participation was understood more as democratic or civil participation (Cicognani, Pirini, Keyes,

Joshanloo, Rostami & Nosratabadi, 2007; Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Henderson & Ilona 2010). Social participation is also often conceptualized as volunteerism (Couton & Gaudet, 2008). Most recently, the understanding of social participation has expanded. Couton & Gaudet (2008) characterize social participation as time spent supporting others outside of the market and state. Gaudet (2011) suggests social participation is involvement in social activities outside of paid work. Tomioka, Kurumatani & Hosoi (2016) understand social participation as the simple involvement in a social group. I am choosing to use Cicognani et al. (2007) understanding of social participation as involvement in social activities through formal and informal social networks. Some examples of social participation include political participation, volunteering, engagement in sports events, neighbourhood associations, and hobby groups – like TTRPGs (Cocognani et al., 2007; Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Tomioka, Kurumatani & Hosoi, 2016).

Understanding social participation as both informal and formal participation allows us to bring all of these definitions together into one cohesive understanding of social participation. Formal participation is related to interactions with an organization (Ertas, 2013; Van Groenou & Deeg, 2010). Examples of formal social participation include volunteering, and political engagement. On the other hand, informal participation includes interactions within an informal setting (Ertas, 2013). Some examples of informal participation include helping friends, or meeting a group of work colleagues for a beer after the work day. According to this understanding, social participation can happen within varying contexts and varying levels. It can also be helpful to see social participation within a continuum or scale, like the one used by Aw et al. (2017). Aw et al. (2017) provided five different levels of social participation: 1) marginalization and exclusion, 2) ‘comfort-zoning’ alone, 3) seeking consistent social interactions, 4) expansion of social networks, and 5) giving back to society.

Researchers have identified certain conditions, or indicators, which help predict an individual's level of social participation. Some of these indicators include education, health, and employment (Van Groenou & Deeg, 2010). A common denominator between these indicators is the accessibility to social groups. In these social groups, individuals are able to build relationships and discover new interests and initiatives. While these researchers see indicators which predict social participation, we can also see in their explanations a social process which leads individuals to discover new ways to participate and encourages them to expand their level of participation. For example, schooling and employment help individuals discover interests and encourage community and social engagement (Gesthuizen, 2006; Wilson, 2000). Within school, an individual is surrounded by peers who come from different backgrounds and interests as well as a variety of groups and clubs, which exposes them to new ways of participating. Additionally, education and employment can provide individuals with resources that grant them access to other forms of social participation, such as income, qualifications, and skills (Van Groenou & Deeg, 2010). While the indicators of education and employment provide a social space for individuals to discover new ways of participating, poor health can greatly restrict an individual and their ability to participate. In fact, poor health is a leading reason of lack of social participation in elderly (Bukov, Maas and Lampert, 2002). We see here how feeling unwell can lead individuals to isolate themselves as they simply cannot engage in social activities due to their physical limitations. While participation in hobbies can be itself, an example of how education and employment can initiate a social process which leads to new engagements, hobbies themselves can bring a diverse group of individuals together, where different forms of participation can be shared, leading to even more ways to participate.

Social participation can be very beneficial for individuals. The most discussed benefit of social participation is the creation of relationships and expanded social networks (Cocognani et al., 2007; Tomioka, Kurumatani & Hosoi, 2016). Social participation is said to have positive effects on an individual's sense of belonging (Cocognani et al., 2007; Gaudet, 2011; Henderson & Ilona, 2010). Cotterell (1996) suggests that this increased sense of belonging can strengthen an individual's social identity, while Gamson (1992) suggests that participating in social movements can strengthen an individual's personal identity and lead to self-realization. Other benefits of social participation include more social support and positive emotional outlooks, less stress, and a sense of usefulness (Cohen, 2004; Herzog, Franks, Markus & Holmberg, 1998; Hunter & Linn, 1980).

Some authors have made a common link made between social participation and citizenship. Gaudet (2011) suggests that one of the functions of social participation is to guarantee the right of citizenship. It is even suggested that social participation be identified as a foundation of citizenship rights within policy (Gaudet, 2007). Couton & Gaudet (2008) add that social participation is vital to social citizenship. (Couton & Gaudet, 2008). Cicognami, et al. (2007) similarly equate social participation to active citizenship. These authors suggest that citizenship goes beyond political or democratic action, but includes different forms of participation such as caring for a neighbour or visiting a friend. Social participation is seen as having a positive effect on an individual, their community, and society (Cicognami, et al., 2007; Couton & Gaudet, 2008). For example, Couton & Gaudet (2008) suggest that social participation, such as volunteering, can become a space where individuals not only feel included but can encourage social justice. We see how the individual receives a sense of belonging, which can support their well-being, while also giving back to the community, which supports the well-

being of the community and society (Cicognami, et al., 2007). Social participation can be seen as an act of citizenship, by bettering society, as well as a way to gain citizenship, as individuals gain a feeling of belonging.

Citizenship has been conceptualized in many ways, but in its basic form can be understood as membership to a group (Beaman, 2015) which bestows on the member a set rights and responsibilities (Faulks, 2000; Turner, 2001). Marshall (1950) first conceptualized citizenship as a legal or formal membership to a nation-state. Marshall's (1950) definition of citizenship suggests everyone who possesses this status is equal in terms of the rights and duties granted by the status. This idea of citizenship evolved from the 18th to the 20th century to include the concepts of civil citizenship, political citizenship, and social citizenship. These ideas were meant to ensure "individual freedom and equality before the law," "political power and political practices...with respect to a given political community," and members "share basic rights and welfare" (Beaman, 2015, p. 850; Faulks, 2000; Gerhards & Lengfeld, 2015).

More recent understandings of citizenship have evolved to include four dimensions: formal legal status, rights, political participation, and a sense of belonging (Bloemraad Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2008; Bosniak, 2006). Researchers have expanded on the idea of citizenship to include not only rights, but societal belonging (Beaman, 2015). Glenn (2011) states that social rights are necessary, but not sufficient for individuals to enjoy what he terms substantive citizenship. Substantive citizenship is understood by Glenn (2011) as a sense of belonging which is recognized by other members of the group. The concepts of differentiated citizenship and multicultural citizenship also emerged, suggesting that certain marginalized groups should receive special recognition, and group-specific rights (Castles, 1997; Young, 1989). These concepts of citizenship are meant "to address the issues of individual and collective difference"

(Beaman, 2015, p. 853). While other forms of citizenship generally focus on legal status, cultural citizenship focuses on the individual's societal inclusion and belonging (Pakulski, 1997; Stevenson 2001). Beaman (2015) suggests that although individuals may be legal citizens, they may not be fully included in the citizenry. Cultural citizenship can be understood as the right to be different from the larger community, without compromising the right to belong (Rosaldo, 1994). Pakulski (1997) adds to this, stating cultural citizenship includes "the right to symbolic presence and visibility (versus marginalization); the right to dignifying representation (versus stigmatization); and the right to propagation of identity and maintenance" (Pakulski, 1997, p. 80).

While RPG players have been stereotyped as "anti-social male teenagers" (Curran, 2011) it has been found that individuals who engage in RPGs, such as World of Warcraft (WoW), experience less loneliness and social anxiety while playing compared to time outside the game (Martončik & Lokša, 2016). TTRPGs have also been described as a comfortable place for more introverted individuals to come and socialize and participate in community (Bowman, 2010; Ewalt, 2013). TTRPGs have even been used to help patients suffering from depression to meet their social needs (Adams, 2013). While TTRPGs are played in smaller groups, the TTRPG community as a whole is rather large, ranging from smaller community groups who hold events in local libraries, to more global events like D&D in a Castle, which welcomes players from around the world (D&D in a castle, n.d.) . TTRPGs specifically have been identified as a natural gateway to friendships (Choi, Kim & Lee, 2007; Ewalt, 2013; Fine, 1981; Fine, 1983). Adams (2013) suggests the RPGs provide players with an opportunity to grow a larger more active social network. Ewalt (2013) even describes the RPG circle as his most important interaction.

Many blogs, podcasts, and threads discuss how TTRPGs have helped players become more connected and escape social isolation (Gilsdorf, 2018; RPG Cast, 2018; Shea, 2019).

While literature on TTRPGs describes many social benefits, and through online blogs, podcasts, and threads we have seen that players attest to these practices helping break social isolation and build relationships, we have yet to study how these types of practices can encourage citizenship. While there are some studies which discuss these themes, such as Truong & Gaudet's (2020) article describing how young adult's costume play in Japan can be a tool for cultural citizenship, literature examining pop-culture activities, like TTRPGs, and their broader connection to concepts such as citizen is lacking. This is the contribution this research offers.

Chapter 2: Drawing the Battle Map—Methodology

To answer my research question, I made the decision to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants who have self-identified as TTRPG players and who have undergone difficult or challenging life experiences. This allowed me to gain in depth qualitative data on the meaning of TTRPGs for these players. The following sections will detail the research field, the preparation for the field, the selection criteria, the role of the participant and researcher, the data collection, the analysis of the data, and the ethical considerations.

My methodological approach was inspired by grounded theory and constructivist assumptions. However, it is important to recognize that my research question itself was inspired and influenced by mostly positivist literature on this topic. Additionally, my participants were clearly knowledgeable of current research and discourse on TTRPGs and used similar language while speaking of their own experiences and reflections. Nevertheless, my ontological and epistemological positions can be described as constructivist: I understand the nature of reality as subjective, and the nature of knowledge as built through collaboration between the participants and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This research uses individuals' perspectives and socially constructed realities to develop knowledge on the topic (Glesne, 2010). Additionally, like in the way the participants' own experiences inform what they share, my own experiences can have an effect on the data collected, the interpretations, and what is identified as significant (Brown, 1996; Guba & Lincoln 1994).

2.1 Recruitment

Recruitment was done through the use of posters (Appendix A) shared in local Ottawa game shops and online gaming forums and groups (e.g., Facebook and Reddit) for localized

groups in Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal. Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa/Gatineau are all within Canada's top 6 largest cities. Toronto and Montreal being the two largest cities in Canada (Pariona, 2019). These cities host a variety of locally based online groups and forums dedicated to TTRPGs in addition to conventions featuring TTRPGs. This online presence and organization of events related to TTRPGs shows that there is an active and vibrant TTRPG community in these cities.

Although recruiting efforts were centred in these cities, the recruitment material was shared by the public to areas outside of these regions, most notably the United States of America (US). Through this snowball effect, I came into contact with a potential participant who fit the selection criteria and whose experiences were deemed valuable to this research topic. With approval from the ethics committee, the individual was included in the study, and the possibility to include other individuals outside of these regions was opened. Participants were successfully recruited from the Ottawa and Toronto regions, and two participants located in different states within the US. One of the US participants had the experience of playing TTRPGs in the US carceral system. No participants were successfully recruited from the Montreal area. In total, I interviewed seven participants living in Canada and two living in the US.

Participants were selected with the intention of creating a diverse sample in light of the length, diversity and depth of participants' experiences, and diversity in regard to participants' demographics such as age and gender. The "length, diversity and depth of the experience," refers to the number of years engaged in TTRPG practices, the frequency of participation in TTRPGs, the kinds of games engaged in, and finally the types of challenges faced. Participants' experiences with TTRPGs varied greatly. All participants have played D&D, while certain players have further expanded their game repertoire. Two participants have even created their

own unique game systems which are now or will be available to the public. Nearly all participants have played both the roles of GM and adventure and one participant who had not yet played as a GM intended to in the near future.

The recruitment of participants occurred in a two-phase process. The first phase of recruitment asked for participants who have been previously incarcerated and have played TTRPGs during this period of incarceration, after this period of incarceration, or both. It was important for me to prioritize this selection criteria as individuals with this type of experience are difficult to come by. The second phase of recruitment asked for participants who identify themselves as having undergone a hardship or life challenge, and who perceive TTRPGs as having a positive effect on these experiences. Hardships and life challenges were explained to the participants as experiences, or conditions which have led to negative or difficult life experiences as defined by them. This allowed me to examine different types of experiences which shared similarities around overcoming adversity. In addition, it was required that participants have played TTRPGs for a minimum period of one year. The minimum period of one year was chosen to help ensure that players had some experience in playing, while allowing for a diversity in the level of experience. The one year minimum allowed for those who have just begun playing to participate and those who are well experienced to share their unique perspectives related to TTRPG practices. New players are able to better share their first impressions of the game while more experienced players are able to provide a fuller and more reflexive impression of the game.

Age and sex were not significant when selecting participants; however, an effort was made to ensure diversity in these two categories. That being said, it was required that participants be 18 years of age or older. It is important to recognize that recruitment efforts likely were done

in a context where male participants were most present to answer the call for participants. Although more women are playing TTRPGs than in the past (Kane, 2018), women can be deterred from gaming shops as many female guests on the podcast *I am Hear* have expressed, game shops can be an uncomfortable space for women, which prevents them from frequenting these spaces (RPG Casts, 2018-2019). Women have commented on inappropriate and uncomfortable comments related to their appearance and gender, and uncomfortable stares from men in the store (RPG Casts, 2018-2019). It is important to note that there were no other women present during my visits with the exception of one location whose manager was female. Recruitment efforts also occurred online, which may have helped reach a female audience.

Table 1. Participant information

Name	Gender	Age	# years played	Challenges/Hardships faced
Brandon	Transgender Male	23	1	Brandon identifies as Transgender
Andrew	Male	26	8	Andrew has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.
Ashley	Female	30	3	Ashley has experienced the death of her younger brother and experiences mental health challenges related to depression and anxiety. She also reports difficulties socializing and making friends.
James	Male	32	22	James describes being bullied in school and a general difficulty socializing with other children.
Jessica	Female	32	14	Jessica has experienced depression in university and social anxiety throughout her life.
Daniel	Male	37	23	Daniel has been the victim of domestic abuse, has experienced homelessness, and experiences mental health challenges related to depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Daniel also reports experiencing many other life stressors such as challenges receiving support as a single father.
Adam	Male	39	31	Adam describes being bullied and difficulties socializing with other children.
Susan	Transgender Female	51	38	Susan has been incarcerated, experienced a childhood with a father who was a drug dealer and identifies as transgender.
David	Male	56	44	David describes experiencing a traumatic car accident at age nine, which has left him "with no emotion." He also reports experiencing PTSD.

In terms of gender diversity, three of nine participants identified as female. Additionally, two of the nine participants openly identified as transgender, one of whom identified as a transgender woman and the other a transgender man. Although it was a concern that gender diversity would be difficult to attain, this study has included individuals with a variety of gender identifications, helping to meet the diversity often favoured in theoretical sampling (van den Hoonaard, 2008). Theoretical sampling is a useful tool in developing the analysis of a study as it can spark new insights by forcing the researcher in new directions (van den Hoonaard, 2008).

In the context of this particular study, for the majority of participants' game play began after their difficult or challenging life experience. It is important to note that many of these challenges and difficult life experiences occurred or began during childhood. As discussed above, TTRPGs have been used with children as a form of therapy to overcome a range of issues, related to social challenges and identity acceptance (Blackmond, 1994; Coe, 2017; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Through my research I wanted to include these types of participants, whose challenging experiences began before their TTRPG experiences, to better understand the role of TTRPGs in relation to their difficult or challenging life experience. Participants' experiences were varied, however, some similarities were present. Only one participant, Susan, had been previously incarcerated. Additionally, two participants, Susan and Brandon, identified as transgender. Some participants identified themselves as non-neurotypical. Many participants also described difficulties related to social interactions. Additionally, many participants identified themselves as victims of bullying. Some participants also reported struggling or having struggled with mental health. Other experiences and challenges identified by participants are the loss of close family members, unstable family lives, being victims of abuse, and physical health problems. Many of the challenges and experiences mentioned by participants were interrelated.

2.2 Data collection

Data was collected between June 2019 and January 2020. Qualitative semi-directed interviews were conducted, with an interest in understanding the role and importance of TTRPGs for the participant. A semi-directed interview is one in which the interview guide consists of open-ended questions which are meant to act as a prompt for discussion rather than a formalized list of questions (Given, 2008). The use of semi-directed interviews encouraged an open-ended and flexible discussion with the participant (Van Den Hoonaard, 2012). This allowed the participant to decide what was most important to convey, while at the same time providing the participant with prompts which helped ensure homogeneity between the data (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Interviews varied in length between 90 and 120 minutes. Due to technical difficulties, two participants agreed to be interviewed a second time to replace lost data. All interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were conducted both in person and over Skype, depending on the participant's availability and location.

The interview guide (Appendix B) was continuously being drafted, as new questions for further exploration emerged during the interview process. Some questions which emerged were related to character characteristics, and more specifically character flaws and how these flaws were interpreted by the player, and other players around the table. Interviews focused on three major themes: the participant's most marking experiences as a TTRPG player; the participant's difficult or challenging life experience, and; the place of TTRPGs during this time and the effect of TTRPGs on the individual and their life. The first theme was meant to explore what elements of TTRPGs are significant and why. The second theme was meant to explore the place of TTRPGs in individuals' lives during these challenging or difficult experiences. The third theme was meant to help the participant reflect on if and how TTRPGs may have had an effect on them

and their lives. The interview guide served as a prompt for participants to discuss the above-mentioned themes. The nondirective approach used, allowed participants to guide the direction of the conversation (Rogers, 1945). This allowed participants to focus on what they found to be most important. Some individuals focused more on the importance of the mechanics of the game, while others focused on the narrative aspects of the game, and others the social quality of the game. Participants generally required little prompting to share and discuss their experiences.

2.3 Data analysis

Analysis of the interviews was done using interview transcripts. Transcription entailed listening to recordings of each interview and transcribing verbatim what had been said. An inductive, bottom-up approach was used, in which the themes were derived from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 49). Once transcribed, the qualitative data analysis software QDA miner was used to conduct a thematic analysis, also known as a vertical analysis, of each interview in order to uncover the narrative given by participants. This vertical analysis consisted of coding the data, which involved labelling and organizing the data into various analytical levels (Guetterman, Babchuck, Howell Smith & Stevens, 2019). This involved a careful reading and annotation of each transcript to identify keywords which synthesized the ideas and concepts touched upon during the discussions with participants (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 140). During the interview process, I also took note of certain emerging themes between participants, which became a reference point during the coding process. A horizontal analysis was then conducted, comparing the interviews to each other in order to identifying reoccurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 140). Keywords were then merged together, or further split in order to create categories and larger themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 49). Finally, links were identified

between the various categories, which assisted in the formulation of the theoretical analysis (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 52).

When coding was complete, three main categories emerged: Life Challenges, Game Play, and Benefits of Game Play (a full list can be found in Appendix C). The category Life Challenges consisted of the various challenges and experiences participants identified throughout the interview process. The category Life Challenges helped set the context in which these participants played, and what role TTRPGs could potentially have to help alleviate these challenges. The Game Play category outlined the important aspects of TTRPGs as identified by the participants. The category Game Play included the subcategories: Character, Challenge, and Structure. The Game Play category was used to identify which qualities of the game were most valued by participants and how these qualities had a positive impact on the participants' challenging experiences. Lastly, the category Benefits of Game Play, included any benefits participants expressed they had gained through playing TTRPGs. The category Benefits of Game Play included subcategories such as "Escapism," "Education," "Community," and "Achievement." The category Benefits of Game Play provided information on what concrete gains players reported from TTRPGs and the larger impact of these gains on the participant's life. These categories informed my theoretical analysis which I will discuss in the following chapters.

2.4 Ethical considerations

As this research deals with human participants, it was essential to gain full ethics approval from the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board* at the University of Ottawa. In addition to these procedural considerations, other considerations needed to be made

both in the field and while writing (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The various ethical considerations made during this research project are described below.

As this research deals with potentially vulnerable populations, it is important to make ethical considerations in order to protect the identity of these individuals. In order to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were selected for each participant by randomly selecting a popular baby name from the decade of their birth using a popular baby name website. In addition to providing pseudonyms, it was important to exclude any other identifying information related to their role-playing such as character names and campaign titles. It was also important to exclude any identifying information related to their difficult or challenging life experience, for example the name of a specific prison or institution. The only individuals who had access to this information were my supervisor and me. The creation of transcripts, coding, and analysis were all done by me, limiting the number of individuals who may have had access to the raw data.

Although certain participants, who consider themselves community leaders, offered to have their identities revealed, the decision was made to maintain their anonymity. One such example was a participant who hosts a podcast and wanted to share the recording of his interview with his audience, speaking about the importance and role of TTRPGs in his life. Much thought was put into the decision to not share the recording for this purpose. It was suggested to the participant to instead create a new audio recording discussing the questions asked during the interview and his answers. This decision was made due to the fact that the promise of anonymity was made within the consent form and information letter (Appendix D & E) signed by the researcher and participant. All participants have requested a copy of the study once published. If they choose to, they will be welcome to identify themselves as participants in this study at that point.

As interviews touched upon difficult or challenging life experiences, participants were offered contact information to their local mental health resources. Because the focus of the study was not the challenging or difficult life experience but rather the role and importance of these practices, most of the discussion focused on the effects of TTRPGs in relation to this experience, instead of on the experience itself, further limiting possible discomfort for the participant.

This research includes a variety of sources, many of which are not necessarily academic or scientific. It was important to include these sources as they help inform and fill some of the gaps which academic research has yet to examine. A final ethical consideration was made to make it clear to the reader which sources are not strictly academic or scientific presented in Appendix E.

Chapter 3: Meet our Adventurers—Participants' experiences and the importance of TTRPGs

Before I can begin discussing the meaning and importance of TTRPGs in these participants' lives, it is important for me to first tell you about their challenges and experiences so you can better understand the context in which these players began playing, and developed their practices. This will also bring me to define the types of adversities participants experienced before and since they began playing TTRPGs. Although the challenges they faced varied, all participants experienced some level of social and societal isolation. During these experiences, TTRPGs had an important place for the participants by providing them with safe spaces in which to escape, learn, and grow. Through this chapter I will highlight the participants' various experiences and challenges which they credit TTRPGs for having a positive impact.

3.1 Participant's experiences

Across all participants, two main experiences emerged: social isolation and societal isolation. Social isolation is often defined as the lack of meaningful relationships (House, 2001; Lincol, 2000; Machielse, Meeusen & Hortulanus, 2005). Relationships can exist at different levels, such as family, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances (Gallie, 2004; Steinert & Pilgram, 2007; Machielse et al., 2005). However, it is not the simple existence of these relationships that protects from social isolation, it is the quality and degree of support received from these relationships (Machielse et al., 2005). Indeed, meaningful relationships are said to provide such things as attachment, a sense of security, reassurance of worth, opportunities to provide nurturance, and opportunities for guidance (Weiss, 2009; Heller and Rook, 2001). In contrast, societal isolation is an inability to participate in all aspects of society (Machielse et al., 2005).

These aspects of society include such things as cultural events, leisure activity, employment, and volunteer activities in which a “normal” person is said to engage in (Mechielse et al., 2005).

Some argue that a correlation exists between societal and social isolation as those who are more active in the community tend to have larger and more supportive social networks (Berkman and Syme, 1979; Fischer & Phillips, 1982; House, 1981). It is important to note that social and societal isolation are not permanent states and can vary throughout social contexts and an individual’s life (Mechielse et al., 2005). An individual may feel comfortable when with their family, but feel socially isolated when at school or in public. Additionally, an individual may feel comfortable spending time alone from time to time without feeling socially isolated.

Through my analysis, I identified four main types of experiences named by participants as challenges they have faced: incarceration, social exclusion, gender transition, and mental health-related issues. It is important to clarify that these experiences were named by the participants themselves and do not necessarily encompass the full breadth and complexity of the experiences they have lived and the social conditions and power relations at play. Analytically, I consider these shared experiences as examples of social and societal isolation, as described above. While these may not all be common experiences, they are nonetheless important to study because such experiences exist within our society and are often lived by those considered the most vulnerable. While statistics on social exclusion remain limited, it has been globally identified as a significant issue and there is a new effort to measure the prevalence of social exclusion across the world (Statistics Canada, 2017). Between 2017 and 2018, Canada held 38,786 adults in provincial and territorial or federal custody per day (Malakieh, 2019). While Canadian statistics on transgender topics lack, a 2014 study believes that one in 200 Ontarians is transgender (Scheim & Bauer, 2014). Lastly, the Canadian Mental Health Association states that

in one year, one in five Canadians will personally experience a mental health problem or illness (CMHA, 2019).

Each of these groups has been historically marginalized. For example, those who have been incarcerated are at high risk of experiencing homelessness, have trouble finding stable employment, experience negative health impacts related to incarceration and face heavy stigma within their communities (John Howard Society, O’Gardy & Lafleur, 2016). Those who experience social exclusion are less likely to receive services in their communities to deal with their health or educational needs, and experience a lower sense of self-worth (Statistics Canada, 2017). While those who are transgender are vulnerable to poverty, stigma, violence and harassment, and mental health challenges (Scheim & Bauer, 2014). Lastly, individuals experiencing mental health challenges may experience impoverishment due to an inability to maintain employment, and are at high risk for other diseases such as cardiovascular diseases (World Health Organization, 2012). This is not an exhaustive list of the types of vulnerabilities these groups face. This echoes Aw et al.’s (2017) discussion of the first level of social participation, marginalization and exclusion, as these experiences are examples of how these groups do not receive needed support, and at times are actively discriminated against, leaving them uncomfortable engaging in social participation, or at times simply inhibited from participating. There is also a growing online discussion regarding players who face similar challenges and their participation in TTRPGs (e.g., Artingstall, 2019; Bamboa, 2018; RPG Cast, 2018–2019; Codega, 2020; Grayson, 2019; Hornet Staff, 2017). While these experiences may not encompass the general population’s experience, these groups are particularly vulnerable, and have potentially found solace in these games, which make TTRPGs all the more important to study in this context. Additionally, these experiences may help teach us more broadly about

experiences of social and societal isolation. I will now introduce the participants and the various experiences, beginning with Susan and her experience of incarceration.

3.1.1 Incarceration

The first type of experience is incarceration. This relates to experiences of being confined in any carceral institution, such as jails, prisons and halfway houses. While there is little information on the prevalence of TTRPG practices in this context, de Kleer's articles and other short documentaries which outline D&D practices in prison and the banning of these practices demonstrates that these practices do exist within the correctional setting (de Kleer, 2017a; de Kleer, 2017b; Localish, 2019; Waypoint, 2017). Here, we will focus on Susan's experiences. Throughout this discussion you will note that Susan is a unique participant not only because she is the only participant who has experienced incarceration, the original focus of this study, but she is the only participant to have spoken of living three of the four identified experiences: incarceration, social exclusion, and gender transition. While Susan identifies as a transgender female, she found herself within male institutions. Having first entered the carceral system at the age of 18 and exiting around the age of 29, Susan states:

I did, um, probably five or six years on the instillation plan. I got in trouble for one thing. I did a crime, I got out, then I re-violated probation and I went back in, and a couple years later I did something else stupid, and got out, and violated probation, and went back in. I spent a grand total of about five or six years.

While incarcerated, Susan, who started playing TTRPGs around the age of 13, describes her relationship with staff as "generally neutral but bad at times." She describes the relationship between her peers as an "emotional abuse society" in which everyone is out to get each other. This hostile environment is illustrated through an incident where another individual instigated a

fight with Susan, which resulted in Susan suffering a broken jaw. Inmate-on-inmate violence is not an uncommon event in correctional facilities (Stephan & Karberg, 2003). Additionally, it is not uncommon for those who feel unsafe in their surroundings to become socially isolated (Machielse et al., 2005). This is the case for Susan who describes how she generally avoided others and stayed in her cell. Some theorists believe that the harsh conditions of incarceration can lead to deviant and maladjusted coping techniques which can have a negative effect on positive social interactions and relationship building (Blevins et al., 2010; Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958). Other theorists believe that these types of behaviours are actually brought into the institution from the inmate's life outside the prison (Giallombardo, 1966; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Schrag, 1961; Wheeler, 1961). Either way, the carceral setting is generally understood to be a dangerous one (Lahm, 2008), creating a space where individuals may feel socially isolated.

While incarcerated, individuals are physically removed from larger society, which can constitute societal isolation. In addition to experiencing societal isolation on a larger scale, societal isolation can also happen within the institution. Activities within the institution are often limited by regulations, budget, and available material (Gallant, Sherry, and Nicholson, 2015; McIntosh, 1986). In Susan's experience, she was not particularly interested in the available activities, as she states, "The choices are penucle, the weight room, or watching TV. Those are your only real choices and I didn't want to do any of those." The lack of available activities of interest can be cause for societal isolation as the individual in question simply has no interest in the available activates and does not participate.

Susan, however, does describe three times when TTRPGs were made available to her during her time in the carceral system. The first was in an institution where the game was well established, and the group of players took Susan in, taught her the table rules and helped her

build a character. Unfortunately, not long after, Susan was moved to a different institution.

Although she only had the opportunity to play once, she says, “Those guys were really cool [...]

They were explaining to me the particular rules for their table and were willing to help me get a

character all set up. Yeah, they were pretty mellow people and they were really helpful.” Another

instance where Susan attempted to play TTRPGS, she formed her own TTRPG group, created

her own game material from scratch, and began to play. Susan describes her group comprised:

The guy in the cell next to me was a player and, uh, another guy that was in the joint was his best friend and my, um, cell mate was interested in playing because he didn't have anything better to do. So, me and that one dude got together and spent some time thinking out dice and reinventing charts and tables and within the next day we had the 4 of us playing.

Lastly, Susan explains the group's gaming schedule:

Oh yes, the game was completely scheduled around lock-ups and eating time.

You know, we'd get like two hours of game at most before we had to be locked

down and counted, and after the lockdown and count we could go game again,

and after that we would have to go to dinner, and after dinner there's another

lockdown and count. We were squeezing in hour and a half to three hour game

session at a time twice a day.

de Kleer (2017b), explains how some institutional regulations ban TTRPG materials, such as six-sided dice and game books. de Kleer (2017b) describes how players have found creative ways to work around these regulations such as creating origami dice or spinners, using a deck of cards, or simply avoiding six-sided dice by creating twelve-sided dice labelled 1–6 twice. Individuals have

even managed to create miniatures from Chapsticks or foam circles punched out from flip-flops, and maps from other game pieces such as Scrabble tiles and Trivial Pursuit wedges (de Kleer, 2017b). Like Susan, de Kleer (2017b) explains that incarcerated players invest time in hand making many of their handouts such as character sheets, maps, and manuscripts (Poor & Woods, 2017). About creating game material, Susan states:

First off, they didn't allow us to have any books so I recreated a lot of information. Like I said I've been a dungeons master since, like, 13 so I have a lot of the charts and tables memorized. So, I recreated the masters guide and player's handbook with all the charts and the spells. And I created dice with cards and, um, so we put together the supplies to play.

Susan describes her time playing in this institution as, "You know, the best actually. As a game master and the level of play I saw and the story line I developed, it was the most intense enthrusting [sic] game ever." Unfortunately, however, like in the case of Singer v. Raemisch (2010), Susan states that her game came to an abrupt end. She states, "Instantly, with no warning [...] Yes, they took materials and immediately shuffled inmates. [...] Same morning. They took my stuff and they shuffled. No warning [...] and there was no longer interaction between the four of us, and it ended."

Susan also played while in a halfway house, where the staff and peers were more supportive of the practice. She describes how even non-players came to sit around the game table to simply listen to the storytelling. About her experiences of playing while incarcerated, Susan states, "Yeah, while I was playing I wasn't there. It was a type of freedom." She continues and states, "We want to have fun. We want to have a good time. We want to tell a story. Yeah. Some of the best game groups I've ever played with were those three game groups." de Kleer (2017b)

does state that there are a significant number of correctional officers who are quite lenient towards RPG practices, allowing some discretion towards an individual's game materials which are generally considered contraband, such as dice. de Kleer (2017b) states that some correctional officers, themselves players, assist incarcerated individuals by intervening when their game material is about to be seized. As one former correctional officer states, "I always encouraged these groups and always took time to explain what they [the inmates] were up to, to any curious staff" (Jeremy George as cited by de Kleer, 2017b, para. 34). That being said, Susan's experience of having the game dismantled appears to be the most common (de Kleer 2017a; Idaho Department of Correction, 2014; Singer v. Raemisch, 2010)

The effects of incarceration are understood by many academics to follow individuals once they have left the institution. Individuals who are incarcerated often lose meaningful relationships and social interactions (Windzio, 2006), which can lead to social isolation both within and outside the carceral system. Additionally once returned to free society, individuals who have been involved in the carceral system often continue to be societally isolated as the stigma related to incarceration prevents them from participating in society, for example these individuals often have difficulty finding housing or employment (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014; Solomon, Dedel Johnson, Travis, & McBride, 2004). Stigma can work as an inhibiting factor to social participation, as this labelling process mitigates recognition of qualifications gained through education, and restricts access to certain opportunities to participate socially or societally (Page, 1984). Incarceration has many negative effects on an individual and can lead to experiences of social and societal isolation both within the institution itself and in relation to life outside the institution. This isolation is inherent to the institution, and can also be exacerbated by the characteristics of the institution such as strict staff, lack of

enjoyable activities, and access to family and friends. TTRPGs may be an avenue to help these individuals build social connections and skills to help them meet their needs and contribute to their communities. This is echoed by Susan who states, “I have to say that, I think being able to play at the halfway house really did help. I mean, I was reintegrating into society and maintaining a hold on one of my personal interests.” Bret Perlas was incarcerated for 20 years and is featured in the short documentary *Dungeons and Dragons: Former Prisoners Play with Young Professionals | More In Common*. He adds that TTRPGs acted as a “life simulator” to practise skills such as listening skills, having structure, and being intentional (Localish, 2019). Others featured in the documentary state that it is an escape, an opportunity to try different ways of being, and in this particular case, gives them access to a network of “successful individuals” such as individuals with doctorate degrees or who own their own start up companies (Localish, 2019)

3.1.2 Social exclusion

The second type of experience is social exclusion. Social exclusion occurs when the individual is unable to participate in the different elements of society, such as social, political, economic, and cultural life, in meaningful ways (Duffy, 1995; Hills, Grand & Agulnik. 2002; Hirschman, 1975). Societal and social isolation are understood as a lack of participation, while social exclusion is understood as not only the lack of participation, but the inhibition of participation. For example, social isolation within the carceral setting may be experienced by an individual who “chooses” not to participate in social activities, such as sports, while social exclusion would involve an individual who is unable to participate in social activities because they have been placed in solitary confinement.

In this category are Andrew, James, Adam and David. All four participants are male, and range in age between 26 and 56. These participants' life experiences do differ greatly; however, they all share the same challenge of social exclusion. Participants have perceived this social exclusion to be due to factors both internal, like being "socially awkward," and external to themselves, like being bullied. Many participants have also quoted a combination of the two. Andrew and Adam connect this to mental health: Andrew disclosed his diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Adam although undiagnosed felt as though he too would be diagnosed with ASD. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition: DSM-5 (DSM) characterizes ASD as persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is important to note, however, as Tashiro (2017) rightfully points out, that social awkwardness is not the same as autism.

Personal characteristics such as a lack of self-respect and self-confidence, low self-esteem, shyness, introversion and poor social skills can be factors, leading to social isolation (Asendopf and Wilpers, 1998; Machielse, Meeuwesen & Hortulanus, 2005; Pepleau & Perlan, 1982). While every participant reported on some level having low self-confidence and self-esteem as well as identifying as shy and introverted, they most often spoke about their challenges regarding their social skills. Adam reflects on his difficulty navigating social situations and his relationship with others. He remarks on the division he saw between himself and others, stating, "The line of jealousy [...] I want that thing but I have no...like, how did you even do this, like, I don't understand how you act in this space. I don't get it." Similarly, James states:

I guess you start viewing people more like things than real individuals, because they're all interacting with each other and you hate all of them, but they behave around each other in ways they don't behave around you. So maybe while you're

not in detention and you're off in the distance you can almost, like, study these strange things that you hate and kind of get a sense of, or try to understand what makes them different with each other and not with me, kind of thing.

For many participants, TTRPG helped them develop these social skills. As Adam states, "So what happened is this structured, um, play time, um...gave me the ability to figure out getting social space..." This can be seen as an example of informal learning. Other participants report that it is the opportunity to try out new ways of being that helped them develop these skills. Social skills require that an individual constantly adjust to changing social situations and structures and comply with the established norms and values in that particular context (Billington, Hockey & Strawbridge, 1998). These norms and values correspond to different verbal and non-verbal social expectations, such as using appropriate greetings, questions and comments, facial expressions, and eye contact (Tower, Bryant & Argyle, 1978). While Ashley describes how as a child she had difficulty making friends and declared "Social skills suck, I don't want them," she later in life was forced to develop these skills through her customer service job. She learned:

You can't ever really say no, the customer is always right. There's a lot of how to...you always redirect you never...and you are always kind of in the wrong.

And I carried a lot of that with me with varying levels of dysfunction.

We can see here that Ashley did not have the necessary skills to adapt to changing social contexts as she only used her "customer service" skills which are inappropriate outside of a customer service role, and this consequently led to what she described as "dysfunction" in her life and relationships. Researchers have found that those with strong social skills are generally seen as warmer and friendlier and more socially attractive (Machielse et al., 2005), while

difficulties socializing and failing to meet social expectations can make it challenging for individuals to form and maintain positive relationships (Tashiro, 2017). Susan provides an example of her social isolation related to her inability to master social protocols when she describes this realization, “Oh god, that's why they were beating me up [because of me] not having any...not having any shield or filters.” David also experiences social isolation, and explains his difficulties forming relationships when he states, “I’m not a bad-looking guy but I have the social skills of a rock. Socially awkward...that would be generous to call me that.”

While David and Susan both provide examples of social isolation, Andrew provides an example of societal isolation when he describes how he is unable to enter a shopping situation with comfort and confidence. Unsure how to behave in a store, Andrew fears being accused of shoplifting and therefore walks around the store with his eyes down and hands visible on his chest, making a conscious effort to present himself as not a shoplifter.

Participants have also experienced social exclusion through bullying. James and David both describe being bullied throughout their childhood. James describes his bullying as being partially related to his indigenous heritage. Growing up in a majority white community, James likely felt the effects of his status as a marginalized population (Brown, 2003). David describes being bullied due to a large scar on his face caused by a tragic car accident at age nine. Nearly every participant in this study has stated they were bullied at some point. Although bullying can happen in any context, at any age (Ramsay, Troth, & Branch, 2011; Smith & Brain, 2000; Smokowski 2019), participants report experiencing bullying while of school age. Bullying is a common problem, one study estimates three quarters of adolescents have been victims of bullying (Juvoven, Nishina, Graham, 2001). Participants described bullying as both psychological or social and physical. Researchers have demonstrated that bullying can take many

forms such as physical aggressions, and verbal aggressions like name calling, and relational aggressions like rumour spreading (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Randall, 1996; Ortega & Mora-Merchan, 1999). Hickson (2011) describes bullying as different for everyone. Participants often described TTRPGs as providing them control and power which they may not experience outside of the game. James describes the type of games he played when experiencing bullying:

...we were giving each other way too much power way too quickly, it was kind of a child's power fantasy. Somehow by level 5 the wizard would have an army of iron golems and the rogue could sneak attack a dragon and, I guess, maybe as a group of kids when we're dealing with bullying one way or the other, I guess maybe this power fantasy kind of gives you a sense of security. You know, there's a world out there where no one can hurt you, you're invincible and so overpowered, would probably be the simplest term to describe how these games went. Cuz often times when there was an artifact weapon of incredible power, of course, we happened upon it right away, of course, the army of orcs was hopeless against us because we had somehow enslaved an entire dragon, that sort of thing.

Kuykendall's (2012) research found that some victims of bullying are more passive while others react more provocative and angry, like James who reflected on his violent response to bullying and how this affected his relationships with others when he stated, "Thing is, when you fight and you win, you end up making less friends because now there's people who are afraid of you, and the people who don't like you." Being bullied also had an effect on the participants' emotions and feelings towards others. Some participants report being angry all the time, feeling resentment

towards others, or a sense of misanthropy. These feelings caused by the bullying led individuals to socially self-exclude themselves and experience some level of social isolation.

Social exclusion can be contextual (Taket et al., 2009), as many participants describe good relationships with a small number of friends and family. Others, however, experienced this social exclusion on a larger scale. David described his relationship with his family:

I'm just not part of their life. You look at that picture of the poor boy standing outside watching the family eat dinner, well the poor boy is me and that's my family. And that's how I've felt my entire life. It is what it is. I try to deal with what I'm given. It's hard when...I have no safety net and no support.

David explains that this lack of relationship with his family is caused by both his and his family members' emotional damage resulting from the tragic car accident. David expresses that the accident left him emotionally reclusive and states, "After my accident my emotions were behind a wall." David also spoke of a difficulty forming meaningful relationships with others in general, he states, "Um I was...I don't know if I've ever had a best friend. Cuz I'm me, right. So..." Like David, Daniel experienced social exclusion from his family. Daniel reports both emotional and physical abuse throughout his life. This abuse caused him to form a poor relationship with his parents and to be socially isolated from them at times. Additionally, this abuse also caused him to experience societal isolation. Daniel experienced societal isolation when he was not provided with the appropriate materials to participate at school, and not brought to his extracurricular activities.

While the above examples are socially situated, researchers have found that geography also contributes to social exclusion (Taket et al., 2009). Many participants report having lived in

small towns or rural areas, located far from others and the amenities of big-city living. This geographical isolation may lead to fewer opportunities for social participation. This isolation caused some level of social and societal isolation for participants. For example, Ashely describes how living in a small town, she was not aware of anyone who had similar interests to hers, which made it difficult for her to form connections with others. While education and employment help expose an individual to new interests and groups, which can open up opportunities for social participation, living in small rural areas may limit these possibilities. Adam describes how living in a rural area made it difficult to build friendships with the other school kids because he was only able to see them during school hours. These are examples of social isolation, Andrew, however, provides an example of societal isolation. Andrew lives in Ottawa, and he was previously limited to walking as a form of transportation, which in turn limited his access to the community and its amenities. Andrew describes how his mother would generally worry about him travelling on foot, causing him to feel guilt and leading him to stay at home. Due to his lack of transportation and general confinement to his home, Andrew was societally isolated as he was unable to participate in societal activities like TTRPG clubs. Geographical constraints leading to social exclusion is reminiscent to some of the same challenges faced by individuals who are confined to a correctional institution and unable to participate in regular day-to-day activities or form and maintain relationships with family and friends outside of the institution.

Those who face challenges related to social exclusion can also experience social and societal isolation. This can be caused by personal weaknesses, outward forces such as bullying, and physical geography.

3.1.3 Gender transition

The third type of experience identified by some of the participants as challenging is gender transition. Although there is no clear definition for the term transgender (Weiss, 2009), I am defining a transition as any change in an individual's gender identity, as defined and identified by them. Brandon and Susan both shared this experience. Susan's interview focused mostly on her experiences with the carceral system, due to the original focus of the study, however, some elements related to her transition were discussed. Brandon underwent a Female to Male transition (FtM) while Susan underwent a Male to Female transition (MtF). Brandon and Susan differ greatly in their age, as Brandon is 23 while Susan is 51 years of age. Additionally, Brandon lives in Canada, while Susan lives in the US.

While their demographics differ greatly, Susan and Brandon do share common experiences. Both Brandon and Susan mentioned a type of "confusion or uncertainty" about themselves at a young age. Research has shown that many queer people experience feelings of confusion or feel different before they come to identify as queer (Eliason & Schope, 2007; Green, 1985). In addition to expressing uncertainty and confusion about his identity before his transition, Brandon also describes these types of feelings during his transition. He states, "I think the biggest kinda challenge is, what if I'm wrong...Right. What if I'm not trans but like...I try to not ask myself that question because it doesn't matter, I don't think..." These initial feelings of being different may lead some individuals to feel socially and societally isolated as their queer identity may not be recognized or represented within their world. For example, some schools refuse to recognize and teach about other sexual orientations, and queer individuals may even be exposed to negative and violent messaging towards their identities (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Owens, 1998). This can be understood as non-conducive to cultural citizenship, as it does

not respect queer individuals' right to be different, and their right to be included. Essentially in these examples, queer identities are being ignored, and even ostracized. These experiences may leave individuals feeling a sense of loneliness or social isolation (Owens, 1998). Questions of identity are not unique to those who identify as transgender. Participants who experienced social exclusion also described some feelings of confusion and at times denial related to their identity and how they define themselves. Ashley offers an interesting example of this when she talks about a comment made by one of her doctors, she explains:

[...] some years ago, before I really started playing TTRPGs and the doctor was like, "Among other things, you're trying too hard to be normal you need to embrace that you're a nerd, try playing, like, Dungeons and Dragons," and I was like, "I am normal and don't need to do that, thank you."

Ashley spoke a lot about struggling to be "normal," and recognizes how this took a toll on her mental health, similar to how individuals who identify as queer can experience struggles with their mental health when unable to freely identify (Jones, 2016).

Researchers have also found that there can be a level of intimidation related to the coming out process, as individuals are unsure how others will react (Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997). Studies have found that the coming out process can at times strengthen or end a relationship (Galupo, Krum, Hagen, Gonzalez & Bauerband, 2014). While Brandon worried about others' reactions, he generally received positive responses to his coming out as transgender. He does, however, express that he was disappointed by his parents' reaction, who did not react negatively, but reacted more in worry. Although it was not a negative reaction, he states, "I just want them to be happy for me." Researchers have found that this hesitant reaction by certain family members is not unheard of (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Although

Brandon was fortunate to have nearly all positive reactions to his coming out, negative reactions can cause social isolation for the individual coming out, as they lose relationships with friends and family who do not accept the individual's new identity.

Individuals who identify as transgender can also experience societal isolation. It is well documented that transgender people can experience a significant amount of harassment, violence and mistreatment (James et al., 2016). Brandon reports never experiencing these negative interactions, however, he does fear them. Commenting on the disbandment of a transgender advocacy group she created, Susan poignantly says, "Most transgender people have time to survive not enough time for proper advocacy." Research has demonstrated that transgender individuals face many social and political challenges, such as receiving government documents which reflect their proper gender identity, which can act as a hurdle to finding and keeping employment, receiving proper medical care, or even obtaining a library card (James et al., 2016; Weiss, 2009). These challenges can lead to societal isolation as the individual is unable to participate in regular activities like going to work or borrowing a library book.

Transgender individuals are considered vulnerable to stigmatization and discrimination (Fiani, 2018). This can additionally result in social isolation as the individual is unable to form and maintain positive relationships through this stigmatization. Similarly, research suggests that those who experience social exclusion through bullying are often targeted or stigmatized because they are perceived as different (HHS, 2019) and hold some level of stigma within their peer group. Like in the case of incarceration, this stigma can lead to fewer instances of social participation as individuals are simply blocked from participating.

While the coming out process and identifying as transgender can bring social consequences, transgender individuals can also struggle with the outward presentation of their

gender identity to society (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Both Brandon and Susan described these challenges but in different ways. Susan states that she knew she was transgender from the age of nine; however, she was not able to present as female. For example, Susan describes how her father made fun of her for not being “manly.” Susan says TTRPGs provided her with the opportunity to express herself and her gender identity when those opportunities were not available to her outside of the game. Brandon, on the other hand, is outwardly presenting as male but is concerned about his ability to present as such. He states, “That’s been a big challenge. What other people think of me, but also how I think about myself and how confident I am in my way of presenting.” Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull (2019) describe how it takes a conscious effort for transgender people to reach identity verification, when others properly perceive the individual’s gender identity from their behaviours (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Powers, 1973; Stryker, 1980). Brandon described how some of his characters allow him to maintain some of the more feminine aspects of his identity while still maintaining an outward masculine presentation. When talking about one of his female characters, whom he describes as a “crafty grandma,” he states:

I love sewing and, my grandma taught me how to knit, crochet and taught me how to sew, and I also learned how to cook from my mom and my grandmother. So, it was just kinda like this, “yes, I’m a boy, but [I’m] also these feminine things I’ve been brought up with and enjoy doing.” Like, I still want to be able to, like, to stay in touch with that feminine side in me. Like, I’m not identifying as a woman...right, like, she’s an external way of keeping that part of me with me.

Social and societal isolation can result when the individual’s gender identity is not properly perceived. For example, surveys have found that some transgender individuals express fear of

backlash when using their gender identity's assigned bathrooms (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). This is an example of societal isolation which can occur when the individual is not recognized as their gender identity. This type of societal isolation related to identity can similarly be applied to individuals who are or have been incarcerated. The carceral system is believed, by some researchers, to strip the individual of their own identity and impose on them the stigma of "criminal" (Jones & Shmid, 2002; Sykes, 1970). This imposed identity of criminal can be outwardly presented through a prison uniform or ankle bracelet or be more discreet such as a criminal record. It is difficult to present otherwise as these identifiers follow the individual, similar to those who identify as transgender, making it difficult to find employment or housing, and can cause negative relations with others who discover their criminal past.

3.1.4 Mental health-related challenges

The last type of experience identified by the participants was related to mental health challenges. Within this category are individuals who stated they have been diagnosed with a mental disorder, and characterize this as their major challenge. Participants in this category include Jessica, Daniel and Ashley. Although David and Andrew discussed experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety, respectively, they did not frame their challenging experiences around mental health issues and therefore are not included in this group. The participants who find themselves in this group share many similarities. First, they are all of similar ages, ranging between 30 and 37. Additionally, all three participants' most severe symptoms, which led to their diagnosis, were experienced in their twenties. Research suggests that those aged 15 to 24 are most likely to experience mental illness (CAMH, n.d.), while 67% of the Canadian population reports experiencing depression and anxiety (CMHA, 2002). All three report that they have or are battling depression and anxiety. Ashley and Daniel both shared experiences which they identified as marking and having had an effect on their mental health.

Ashley shared the death of her younger brother from cancer, and Daniel shared some of his experiences including domestic abuse, homelessness, and struggles to receive social assistance as a single father. Daniel also reports struggling with PTSD after witnessing a young person commit suicide while Daniel was on duty at work. Jessica did not share any particular experiences or events which she linked to her mental health struggles.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) (2010) identifies some symptoms of depression as disinterest in previously enjoyed activities, change in appetite, lack of energy, poor concentration, and feelings of worthlessness and helplessness. We can see here how mental health challenges, just like poor physical health, can have a negative impact on an individual's ability to participate. Participants reported experiencing a combination of symptoms such as panic attacks, over sleeping, nocturnal behaviours and more. When their mental health challenges were the most severe, Ashley and Jessica shared that they also struggled with suicidal thoughts, which for one participant led to an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Ashley describes it as, "Every so often I would have the annoying, 'you should die, that would be better, dying would be better than this.' Which would be hard to get rid of." The PHAC (2010) states that those who experience depression are at high risk of suicide.

These symptoms led to participants becoming socially isolated as they were no longer interacting or having positive interactions with others around them. Daniel describes how his condition deteriorated and he became removed from society, stating:

Um in my twenties I was really depressed right. Everything was going very badly as you can imagine, as I was describing, and I became so depressed and so despondent that um....umm...I was slowly giving up on life. It got to a point

where I think I was basically just getting sicker and sicker in bed. I wasn't leaving bed anymore.

While unable to leave the house and participate in the daily rhythms of society, like work and school, societal isolation was experienced by the participants. Ashley and Jessica both left their post-secondary studies due to their mental health struggles, Ashley describes her experience:

...I had to leave university because, mostly because I couldn't do the work anymore. My grades had dropped from like As and Bs to Cs. I would just paralysis [sic], I couldn't turn things in, I couldn't form full sentences. I was living in a miasma of self-hatred.

Research in the field of mental health has found that holding and maintaining employment or schooling when experiencing a mental illness can be difficult due to symptoms, such as the dysfunction of cognitive skills, impeding their ability to work productively and well (Buck, 2008; CMHA, n.d.; McIntyre, 2015). Ashley reports experiencing severe cognitive dysfunction, which she attributes to her diagnosed mental health disorder, expressing that she had lost her language skills and ability to write. This was particularly devastating as she had been studying to become a writer. For Ashley, TTRPGs became a way for her to return to creative writing without the pressure of being a necessarily "good" writer. She states:

And this was my attempt to come back at creativity without having, you know, inner editor and if I could, like, talk through it, I thought I could try doing something creative where, like, tropes are good because instead of it having to be super original every time [sic]. And I was just going to kickstart my creativity this

way and go on to real writing. And I have not gone on to real writing I've just gotten more into D&D.

Mental health challenges can impede an individual's ability to participate in day-to-day activities as simple as going grocery shopping or going to work, leaving these individuals societally isolated. This form of societal isolation, related to an inability to work and go to school or simply go out in public, has been seen throughout this discussion. Those who are incarcerated or identify as transgender are often blocked from gaining employment, or meaningful employment. Those who experience social exclusion may also face similar challenges. Andrew shared a story from his high school co-op experience:

It felt like the first co-op job I had was, like, very difficult to do because it required me, uh, bending over and lifting stuff, and I didn't really have the good motor skills to do that, and so they just basically sacked me in the worst possible way ever, instead of, like, saying "Okay, we can see that you're having a very difficult time with this, how about we just switch you over to something more better, more your pace," and instead they're like "You can't pick and choose your jobs."

Andrew has many symptoms and challenges related to his ASD, and shares how he understands he is different from others who are neuro-typical when he states, "People can actually sort of sense when people are autistic..." Andrew had trouble finding a job which meets his unique needs, and was poorly treated by the management at his workplace, likely due to his differences. An Ontario study found that people with ASD have the highest rates of unemployment, and one reason for these struggles is related to negative attitudes towards the individual with ASD who struggles to respond appropriately to social cues (Stoddart et al., 2013). Being different, in any

way—as demonstrated above—can make it difficult to participate within society in meaningful ways, leaving these individuals societally isolated.

In addition to struggling to participate in day-to-day activities, PHAC (2010) reports that mental health challenges have a significant impact on an individual's relationships, as social withdrawal is not an uncommon symptom of mental health challenges (Derntl et al.,2011). Ashley describes how her relationships were affected by her mental health challenges when she states, "I was just burning my friendships because I was just very bad to be around. Because of being, you know, being so anxious and I was lashing out and being nasty to people." This social withdrawal and disruption to relationships can lead to social isolation. In the same way that those who experienced social exclusion due to their perceived social challenges, Ashley was "difficult to be around." Not conforming to social norms and courtesies puts a strain on existing relationships and makes it difficult to form new ones, leaving the individual socially isolated.

In addition to being socially withdrawn, Ashley's social interactions contributed to her societal isolation, as she explains, many of her interactions with friends and family revolved around the same questions of her health. She states:

Cuz when you're working you talk about work, you go to regular things you talk about things, you're a regular at church and you talk about the sermon or whatever. But I was going so infrequently to things that, unless I was like talking about the weather to a person at the bus stop, most every time I saw people it was like "Oh, how are you doing? How's your life? How's your health?"

Unable to have the same types of conversations as others, Ashley found herself societally isolated by these conversations. TTRPGs, however, offered Ashley a social context in which she could participate and not discuss herself and her challenges, as she states:

I just ended up...being able to step out of that, and answer questions about someone else's life, or just not talk about my life at all, go fight goblins or frock or whatever monster of the week we're fighting this week was just a huge relief.

This type of societal isolation can also occur within the other challenges mentioned above. For example, Brandon shares – with perceived annoyance – a story about a girl who asked him if he had had “the surgery.” While the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) (2016) recognizes that curiosity and asking questions is a great way to learn more about what it means to be transgender, they also make the point that some questions are inappropriate, and ones which the average person would not be asked, or want to be asked. Brandon adds, “It’s just there’s a lot of education of people around me which sucks, because, just Google it, please.” As the NCTE (2016) poignantly states, “...when you ask about surgery, you are basically asking a person to describe their genitals to you, something typically out of bounds. You also wouldn’t ask just anyone to disclose their personal medical history.” It is a similar phenomenon for individuals asked about their criminal past. Individuals can experience societal isolation through their interactions with others and the topics of conversation.

3.2 TTRPGs, escapism and safe spaces

Participants have faced and continue to face many of the difficult challenges and experiences described above; however, every participant has described their TTRPG experience as an escape and safe place where they could momentarily escape from the stressors of life and act without the fear of repercussions.

It is no secret that TTRPG players play for fun, and that these games, filled with magic and fairies, act as a momentary escape from the outside world. As Fine (1983) explains, TTRPGs

offer an escape from the mundane and sometimes frustrating aspects of everyday life. In relation to the daily grind of life and her participation in TTRPGs, Jessica states:

I felt like I was regressing a bit. So, I think part of that was a self-defence. I need to find something to cope, to escape. So, I threw myself into the game. Like, more than I ever had before, and I think part of that was because I didn't want to regress too far.

While Jessica has faced challenges regarding her mental health, she has since established what can be understood as a traditionally successful life, becoming a young professional. Although she is proud and happy with her progress, she also felt as though she was losing the enjoyable aspects of her life, causing her to regress back towards a depressive state. For Jessica, TTRPGs are a momentary escape from everyday life and allow her to truly engage in something she loves. In addition to offering an escape from everyday life, TTRPGs also offer players an escape from themselves. One way in which participants have identified TTRPGs as an escape is in regard to their own perceived downfalls and struggles. For example, a player who feels socially awkward may play a character who is exceptionally social. RPG researchers have found that players will often play characters who have qualities the player lacks (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983; Nephew, 2006; Waskul, 2006). This was also a common theme across participants. For example, Adam describes one of his characters, “There was a Viking character that was just a big intimidating dude, that was, at that time, the person I wish I could be...that was more of a wish fulfilment type of engagement.” Related to an escape from self, researchers have also found that TTRPGs offer the player a sense of control or power which they may not experience in their life outside the game (Fine, 1983; Nephew, 2006; Schut, 2006). We can see how the participants experienced

a lack of control or power through their experiences, like in the case of bullying or mental health challenges. Adam speaks of the control he gains through the game when he states:

Well, playing any game gives you a mock sense of control because in that scenario you control some sort of figure, avatar, or such, right. But um, it's not like you've gained control over anything real, right. But for a while you feel like you have control over something. And even having control over something imaginary is more control than you had before.

While TTRPGs offer an escape through the adoption of a new persona, the social customs of the game also help an individual escape from their social reality. Researchers remark that TTRPGs offer a space where the player does not need to speak about their personal life outside of the game (Fine, 1983; Waskul, 2006). Fine (1983) remarks how he did not even know some of the other players' real names. Ashley's favourite character encompasses many of the forms of escape discussed above. Ashley describes playing this character:

She's fun to play, I just stop, I just get really excited about things, I get really gullible. [...] she gets, I get to just get excited about things. I get to just be like "done with this, I'm looking for spiders now," exit conversation, and like look for random things and, yeah. And be no-filters pretty much. She's high-damage caster so when we do combat, it just, everything she does feels like a power move, I feel awesome the whole time that we're doing it [...] I love that she is loved by the other people. She's so comforting to play [...] Because I've realized that she is a lot of my worst fears, and still everything is fine. She's accepted by her community, she's still useful and she's still not locked up. She's still worthwhile as a person and she's still awesome, I think that's comforting to spend time in that

headspace [...] It's at that psychological remove, so I can be like "Okay, I know that you're going through it, you'll be okay." [...] when my brain is going just straight down a death spiral, I can be like, yeah, even times when my brain is terrible, I'm not [Ashley] right now, I can be someone else step out of that brain space be in a different mental place for a while and just get a break.

Like most TTRPGs, this character offers an escape from the mundane world as she exists in a world of magic and fantasy. Related to escape from the outside world is an escape from conventional behaviours, which can be found within TTRPGs (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983). This character is able to ignore social conventions and simply say and do what she pleases. This also is an exaggerated quality which Ashley feels she lacks and is in the process of developing, as she moves away from her "customer service socialization." This character is also an opportunity for Ashley to feel power and control through her character's powerful abilities. What is interesting is that this character allows Ashley to step out of herself and examine some of her insecurities and see she is "still awesome." In general, participants described the adoption of a character as a safe way to try new personas and new behaviours without the risk of negative consequences from peers. Here we see the beginning of informal learning, as players experiment with and examine different types of characters and behaviours.

Participants have also described TTRPGs, as safe spaces for particular groups who are often underrepresented within the TTRPG community or marginalized within larger society. The idea of TTRPGs acting as a safe space for certain types of players is heavily present within online discussions regarding TTRPGs (e.g., RPG Cast, 2018-2019; D&D Compendium, n.d.; Gault, 2020). Some examples of these groups include new players, women, queer communities, and people of colour. Participants used the game table to create safe spaces for new players,

women, queer people, and more specifically transgender people. Some players have created spaces which are more inclusive of all identities, like tables who encourage women to participate but welcome men as well, while other safe spaces are more separatist (The Roestone Collective, 2014), like in Brandon's case. Brandon is in the process of creating a table which will exclusively feature transgender players. He excitedly explains:

So I'm really looking forward to creating this world and I have all trans people playing with me and it's just gonna be a lot of fun to take all those tropes about being trans and make fun of them and just gonna give them the space to like ...”you know what I'm gonna cut off my dick...there you go, home-brewed vaginoplasty... Great!” So, it's gonna be fun to give people that space.

While TTRPGs, however, are not inherently safe spaces: they can “become” such spaces. Susan describes how she used TTRPGs to play female characters as a way to express her female identity:

A lot of them may be not very memorable because of issues where game masters not properly rewarding role-play, looking down upon, “well you're weird you're playing a girl.” The rewards may not have been there but the opportunity to play those characters were there and that was a big opportunity for me.

While playing her female characters were not her best TTRPG experiences, Susan was still able to claim TTRPGs as a safe space in which she could express her gender identity. It is possible for individuals to refuse to accept these spaces as unsafe, and reclaim them, as is demonstrated by the “bold walking” movement (The Roestone Collective, 2014).

A safe space can be one of solidarity, resistance, refuge, and identity building (Day, 1999; Hooks, 1990; Kenney 2001; Myslik, 1996). These types of game tables allow these groups to explore ideas and concepts not understood by those outside their community, such as is the case for Brandon's table. In addition, they are a space where these groups do not need to worry about facing discrimination or insensitive and inappropriate remarks. TTRPGs which are safe spaces allow the participants to escape from the challenges they are facing outside of the game.

Chapter 4: The Player's Handbook and More House Rules—How players Characterize game play

The TTRPG market has grown significantly since the genre first appeared in 1974 with the game D&D (Bowman, 2010). Since D&D, new games and systems have been developed by independent game designers and large gaming companies alike. These new games and ways to play are made to suit the many different player preferences. Throughout this chapter I will provide an in-depth outline of the characteristics of TTRPGs as discussed by the participants, and the meaning given to these elements of the game. I will also demonstrate how these games are liminal spaces in the context described by participants.

4.1 Game mechanics

TTRPGs set out general rules and guidelines to play the game, but it is often up to the players to use their imagination to create characters, adventures, and novel problem solving. This flexibility has been described by the participants as essential because it allows the participants the opportunity to explore and develop new perspectives and new understandings of themselves and the world around them. This flexibility allows for reflection, exploration, and informal learning to manifest through the game within a leisurely context.

Although TTRPG systems provide a large set of rules, they are often not all strictly followed. It is commonly understood, even by the co-creator of D&D, Gygax himself, that game rules are to be considered more as guidelines which help build a detailed world (Fine, 1983; Waskul, 2006). Playing with “house rules”—the practice of altering, removing, or adding rules to the official game rules—is not an uncommon practice (Bergstrom, 2012). Participants often described how they used house rules to help a game move faster or allow for more interesting

plot lines to emerge. This flexibility regarding rules allows players to meet different needs through game play. For example, participants explained how when they were younger, or when they feel the need to release stress, they tend to play games which involve overly powerful characters, and games that are more combat oriented. For example, Jessica states, “And there’s the daily grind of going to work or whatever, school. That can be very draining and you’re just like ‘uhhh...I just want to kill some goblins with a sword...I’m gonna give this goblin my boss’ name.”” As described in the previous chapter, this type of game play can provide players with a sense of control and power they do not feel outside of the game. Fine (1983) states, it is up to the GM to exercise this flexibility to meet their players’ needs. Participants who take on the role of GM have even created their own game systems, meeting needs they did not feel were met by current systems. For example, Adam is creating a game which he believes provides players in-game motivation to tell and explore different types of stories. He states:

You know, Dungeons & Dragons assumes a top-down motivation. The characters are going to be killing monsters, they are going to be getting gold and they are going to get better at killing monsters for gold. Whatever you do, the game assumes you’re going to be doing that. But if the players want to tell a different story, a story of like romancing an elven scion and the drama of a human falling in love with an immortal creature, because that’s an interesting story... there’s no carrot at the end of that road to push the player down...uh, falling into a long-term relationship. You know, there’s no mechanical consequence. [...] so, you don’t need a bigger stick you need something at the end of the thing that [the players] care about.

The flexibility of the game mechanics allows GMs to engage in what Bergstrom (2012) describes as system creativity. Flexibility must also be afforded to character creation and actions. For example, in order to be allowed to play, James describes an agreement he made with his mother “[...] we had a little compromise. My character’s deity was always Jehovah.” Jehovah’s Witness is definitely not one of the religions listed along with Boccob, Kurulmak and Gruumsh within the D&D handbook, however James was nonetheless able to incorporate this into his character, and continue to play TTRPGs.

Fine (1983) states that games in which the GM limits player’s actions too much can lose their appeal and create a negative experience for players. This was a sentiment shared by all participants. Andrew speaks about the appeal of flexibility in TTRPGs when he compares TTRPGs to video games:

[...]video games never give you this sort of freedom to do, like, they always give you, like, binary choices at best: do you be a good guy or do you want to be a bad guy? But they always just, at the end of the day it’s always just a binary choice or like, three choices, it never boils down to like these multi-complex choices.

Hitchen & Drachen (2008) add that this flexibility is unique to non-digital RPGs, as it is the GM who facilitates the game and not a programmed system. TTRPGs can provide players with more agency in terms of the actions they can take, but can also provide meaning to every action, due to the game’s improvisational nature. Adam speaks about the importance of agency in the game when he states:

Like stories respond. Narratives respond. People respond. Reality responds.

There’s no action without reaction. Like everything has consequences. To the

extent if you can model that in a game is...is a mode of agency...it necessarily is because you're asked to make decisions to accept a consequence. So, if you remove a consequence, that's also removing agency. Because you're essentially saying that your decision didn't matter.

This idea of agency is similar to Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe's (2018) understanding which states that while choices are constrained, agency is present in the effects of their decisions made within these constraints. Miles and Hess (2014) add that not only should there be consequences, but characters should be forced to make difficult choices, and their actions should have significant and long-lasting impacts on the campaign, not only to drive the story forward, but because it allows the player to think and reflect on their choices and their own moral identity. One of the participants' most appreciated elements of the game is the creation of a space where anything seems possible. It is important to nuance this idea, however, as while the spirit of the game is meant to invoke imagination and pure possibility, the players themselves set limits and rules to the game. Whether it be a GM who makes a final call to allow the game to move forward, or the avoidance of certain topics to ensure the comfort of all players, these do create limits to the game play. Additionally, not all players always have the same possibilities. For example, Andrew described how as a new player he was discouraged from playing certain types of characters, and even assigned a new character. Daniel, similarly, as an experienced player feels as though he cannot play to his full capacity as it would not be fair and ruin the fun for the other players. It has also been noted how some female players have been limited in their play in the way their female characters are sexualized and treated within the game (RPG Cast, 2019). The game's spirit of pure possibility, however, allows players as a group to customize their game world to meet their unique likes and needs. In fact, a common need described by the participants was challenge,

which is aided by these limits created through the determined rules and conventions of game play.

While TTRPGs can offer a realm where anything is possible - including magic! – each action is accompanied by a reaction from the game world. It is up to players to negotiate with the “rules” of this fantasy world to accomplish their goals. As James explains:

[...]it's not whether or not this is possible, it's how do I do this. If I want to have my castle on the moon, it's not a case of, “well no matter how many stones I can carry I will never get there,” it's, “Okay, so what I'm gonna need to get that far is I'm gonna need a source of oxygen, I'm going to probably need a way to shift some local terrain...”

James cannot simply wish for a castle to be on the moon, but he can use the structures laid out by the game to create the conditions needed to build his castle on the moon. Fine (1983) describes this structure as logic, which makes the game playable, by allowing players to understand the cause and effect of their actions. Dyer (2014) adds that this logic, or inner consistency is what allows players to truly engage in an immersive experience. Theorists and the participants alike have described TTRPGs as a natural evolution from childhood imagination games to more structured games of imagination (Bowman, 2010). Mead & Morris (1934) suggest that these childhood games are a way for children to start understanding the social world around them, which we can understand as a form of informal learning. While like in childhood games, the social rules are much more lax, TTRPGs tend to react more consistently to players' actions. When talking about the infinite possibilities available in the game Ashley states, “The DM² lets

² DM refers to the name given to the Game Master

us get away with everything but is also the one who keeps being like ‘Also, by the way, have some consequences.’”

As Fine (1983) states, consequences are normally determined by the dice, which add an element of chance to the game. While characters have proficiencies and certain abilities, they must almost always roll the dice to determine the success of their actions, these are called ability checks³. Depending on the determined difficulty of the task, a player could be required to roll a particular number or higher to be successful in the action⁴. If the ability check is successful, the character overcomes the challenge, while if the ability check is unsuccessful the character fails the action. The dice determine not only if an action was successful or not, but can also determine to what degree an action was a success or failure. It is up to the GM’s discretion, but an action can have one of four outcomes: the character succeeds and overcomes the challenge, the character fails and makes no progress, the character fails and faces a setback, or the character rolls a “natural 20”⁵ and has instantaneous success and a benefit of some sort. The added advantage of a nat 20, however, is usually only used during combat and takes the form of a “critical hit” or instantaneous kill. Nonetheless, a nat 20 is statistically rare and this is why a nat 20 is so exciting. For participants, a nat 20 means excitement, and feelings of success and even pride, in that they accomplished a difficult or statistically unlikely feat. For Susan, a nat 20 means more than simply success, for her it means validation of her actions, as she states, “Well...it’s a demonstration that the gods move through the dice and reward...reward true

³ Depending on the level of difficulty of the action, an ability check requires a player to roll a certain number the d20, to which they can add a modifier determined by their characters predetermined strengths. These modifiers are predetermined during character creation. For example, a character may have a +2 modifier for strength-based tasks which means they can add 2 to any dice roll they make related to strength-based tasks

⁴ The easiest actions require the player to roll a 5 or more, while the “nearly impossible” actions require the player to roll a 30 – this means the player must have a +10 modifier and roll a 20.

⁵ A natural 20, or nat 20, is when a player rolls a 20 on the d20, without modifier.

heroism and righteousness. I had the right on my side.” Robichaud (2014), adds an interesting caveat, however, that no matter a character’s strengths and weaknesses, or good and bad luck, what is truly skillful is how players manage these different elements. Behind many of these nat 20s, participants described trying multiple solutions and rolling “poorly,” failing a roll, before coming up with a new and creative solution, for which they successfully rolled their nat 20.

In addition to allowing for challenge in the form of success and failure, for the participants, the dice add an element of realism to their game. As Jessica puts it:

There’s a certain element of realism when you have these rules. The nice thing about the dice rolling is the opportunity for chance. You know, a really well-built character can fall on his ass, or a poorly built character can crit. You know, a real life kinda story where sometimes shit happens, and sometimes you win and you’re not sure how.

Robichaud (2014) adds that no matter how powerful a character is, there is at least a 5% chance of failure every time the player rolls the d20. The dice can be seen to some degree to represent those factors of life which are out of our control. For White (2014), the dice not only add consequences, but serve as a third voice in the game, and create “a world in motion.” This element of realism helps make that informal learning applicable to the outside world.

Rules are meant to add both flexibility and structure to the game. While these games are imagination based and filled with magic and fantasy, as Bergstrom (2012) states, the rules are essential to provide structure to game play. This structure can provide meaning for the players through escape, success and validation, and agency. Although fantastical, the realistic element of these games can also mean hope outside of the game for these participants. Like in the example

from the previous chapter, Ashley describes playing a character who is experiencing many of the same struggles as she is, but she is able to step back and see this character, who is a reflection of herself in many ways, and say, “Okay, I know that you’re going through it, you’ll be okay.”

Without the realistic element to the game “being okay” may just be a fantastical idea.

When defining RPGs, researchers often include problem solving as an essential characteristic (Bergstrom, 2012; Bowman, 2010). Some participants admitted to playing more hack and slash games in their youth, but report developing their game play to involve more creative and strategic problem solving and narrative. For example, Susan admits to having played a more hack and slash version of the game until one day she came to a realization. She explains:

Oh gosh. I was about I think I was 23 or 24. And me and my sister and her friend were playing a game of Dungeons & Dragons in my room and it was a total useless game of murder hobos⁶ that were doing vile things for money, and it just dawned on me. What the hell am I doing, and I kinda quit for about a year before I was like, ya know it doesn't have to be that way. We can play differently. Yeah, game play really adjusted.

She later describes how she introduced the concept of a “bloodless victory” while playing with her brother and his children, where players would earn double the experience points for not killing anyone. While it may have been easier to simply kill the non-player characters (NPC), Susan states:

⁶ A murder hobo generally refers to a character who simply kills and loots, instead of following the narrative.

Instead they role-played sneaking up behind guards and potato sacking them and knocking them out. And using their brains to defeat the enemy instead of just outright murdering them which would have been the easier way to go, I have to say.

For Susan, this type of problem solving was used to help instill in the children the family's values. While this may be an example of a more formal or purposeful type of learning, TTRPGs have been shown to teach by nature. Bowman (2010) identifies different types of problems a player may encounter, such as tactical, social, political, and strategic. Participants often spoke with pride when describing their most absurd and creative problem solving. Some examples of creative problem solving include Brandon's use of social tactics:

We were going through this baroness' keep and we had to save someone in this keep and we convinced all the guards to form a union against the baroness. So, we were convincing them that their working conditions were shit because they were working on commission and if they unionized and revolted against the baroness, um... they would have better working conditions and stuff and that was a great time. We did succeed. We rolled successful checks for that one.

Another example of a novel solution was given by Jessica who needed to stop an NPC from discovering her other party members who were looking for incriminating evidence:

So, my character runs up to him and starts talking and it's not going well. I'm rolling poorly and he's like "I got things to do", and walks away. And I'm like...[to the GM] "There's a band, right?" And he's like "yeah" and he rolls and he's like "the music band is a band of gnomes." It just so happened we had

previously been at a gnomish village and learned some drinking songs. So, my character decides on a whim to roll a performance check and then start a flash mob of these gnomish drinking songs and start dancing on the stairwell to stop the guy from going up. And I rolled a natural 20 and it was just the best performance and it went so well. And then the guy got arrested, and then my character decided he would get a level of bard and then we became a band...my party started doing gigs.

These opportunities to problem solve present an opportunity to exercise brain muscles, but also for feelings of accomplishment and success. David explains how he particularly enjoyed one game which consisted simply of puzzles. He says, “But I enjoyed it because it was challenging. Not just challenging my character, but challenging me and the way I thought because they were all puzzles.” We can see here how, this creative problem solving is an opportunity for participants to challenge and better themselves but also feel a sense of accomplishment.

As Bergstrom (2012) states, the rules of the game are what add consistency and allow for this creative problem solving as players can predict the effects of their actions through the logic of the rules. At the same time, however, the rules and GM need to afford players flexibility in the actions they can take to allow for creativity. While some players described experiences with GMs who were too restrictive—like Susan who played with a GM who refused to let her throw her shield—all participants, who have taken on the role of GM, expressed the necessity for a balance between flexibility and rules.

4.2 Narrative structure

The second element of the game which was widely spoken of was the narrative. TTRPGs are generally either more narrative or combat driven. Most participants identified a preference

for a strong narrative campaign. This is also a common theme within RPG research (Hendricks, 2006; Waskul, 2006). Even participants who indicated a preference for more combat heavy games, still described strong narrative elements related to their character backgrounds or the campaign narrative. While the game mechanics offer structure in the type of actions that can be taken in the game (Hindmarch, 2007; Waskul, 2006), the narrative structure provides the players with the guidelines on how they should play the character and interact in the social world they will be exploring (Bergstrom, 2012; Fine, 1983; Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Such narratives are driven by two elements: the campaign and the character.

The campaign consists of the story which links the adventurers together and unfolds throughout game play. As Fine (1983) remarks, it is the GM's responsibility to begin the campaign's narrative, by providing a motive for the characters, which will drive the game forward. However, from that point on, the storyline's development is influenced by all players. Fine (1983) continues by stating one of the GM's challenges is to create a loose storyline or possible avenues for the players to follow, but ultimately it is up to the adventurers to decide which direction they want to take. James describes his thoughts of GMing, stating:

So, I kind of took a philosophy of, like, as a dungeon master I should not build stories, I build worlds. Because if I try to build a story the players are not going to do what they're supposed to do.

Other participants shared similar sentiments, stating that GMs who attempt to "railroad" or force the outcome of the campaign are considered poor GMs. While the GM is responsible for building the world, and can attempt to guide the adventurers in a certain direction, it is ultimately up to the adventurers to choose the path they want to take, influencing the campaign's narrative. This does not mean that the GM's role is irrelevant past that point, storytelling simply becomes a

collaborative effort between the adventurers' characters and the world the GM builds. For the participants, this means an opportunity to explore different stories, topics and ideas which are relevant to them. For example, Ashley explains how she uses characters and their stories to explore certain aspects of herself and her life, she states:

The characters and the stories that I want to engage with tend to be like, I'm dealing with a little bit of grief in my life, this character has lost their whole family; I have issues with feeling excluded, this person was literally locked away. It will be a thread that is happening in my life and I am going to explode it, I'm going to make it really big and I can deal with it in an overt way.

A character's personality and narrative backstory allows players to have influence on the campaign's narrative. Researchers suggest that character creation is an important aspect of TTRPGs and how they are played (Bowman, 2010; Bregstorm, 2012; Fine 1983; Hitchens and Drachen, 2008). Bergstrom (2012) adds that, compared to more simulation-based games, such as the ones used for educational and training purposes, characters in TTRPGs truly have their own place in the imaginary world, instead of simply holding a role. Fine (1983) and Waskul (2006) further expand on this idea stating that characters come alive with their own personalities and histories. Manninen & Kujanpää (2014) suggest that by providing a character with these different elements, the player begins to form a relationship with their character, and the character becomes like a "second self." Character creation can be a laborious process. About playing, Brandon says, "It doesn't cost much, just lots of time, tears and emotional labour." This helps us appreciate how, for the participants, creating these in-depth characters helps them build a strong emotional bond and understanding with their character, helping them become more immersed in the story and fantasy world. Creating and playing a character for Crandall & Taliaferro (2014), goes

beyond simply acting and talking like the character, but requires the player to feel and think like the character. Andrew describes an incident where he was forced to play a character he had not created. He states,

Yeah. Another character I disliked playing was an elderish fighter because he was mostly given to me instead of me creating him full cloth. Because the GM noticed that my previous character a warlock was using elderish blast too much and [...] and was like “no, you’re not allowed to play that character anymore. You’re gonna pay this character now, who is a more simplified version of this character. And it just felt forced. [...]but like, I didn’t feel a connection with this character. It was one of the worst campaigns I ever played in.

Character creation is a personal and arduous process, even at the most basic level. It is difficult to play a character with whom you have no connection. Researchers have found that many players will actually spend years playing the same character (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983; Waskul, 2006). Characters grow and change through play, and time spent playing a character is also time spent further developing the character (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983; Manninen & Kujanpää, 2007; Nephew, 2006; Waskul 2006). A character not only “levels up” through experience points⁷, but characters should also grow and change as they confront new challenges (Crandall & Taliaferro, 2014; Miles & Hess, 2014). This character growth is important in both driving the story forward and allowing the player to learn more about themselves through the character (Crandall & Taliaferro, 2014; Miles & Hess, 2014). The way in which a character grows and learns with the player allows for the continued informal learning growth even as a

⁷ Characters gain experience points which are allocated by the GM based on the character’s actions and successes. Characters can then Level up at different point intervals. For example, Level 2 requires 300 points, and level requires 900. As a character levels up, they gain new abilities and strengths.

player begins to master more and more game play and embodying their character, their roleplaying being more true to the character (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983). Like video games, the opportunity to play at increasingly more difficult levels can make TTRPGs great for learning, because players are able to play at a level which is not so easy, they get bored, and not so hard that it is beyond their abilities and they become frustrated and disengaged (Gentile & Gentile, 2008). The increasing difficulty levels keep a player motivated and engaged, by continuously presenting them with new challenges allowing them to develop their skills.

An interesting aspect of character creation is how players include elements of themselves into their character. Some participants even expressed that it is not possible to play the character properly without putting some part of themselves into the character. In other words, playing a character is not simply playing an “other,” it is also playing yourself, and for many of the participants, the character is meant to reflect part of yourself. As Daniel explains:

From my experience I feel people start building characters that try to get away from themselves. But no matter what they do, you can only see the world, including fantasy world, through the filter of your own mind [...] It is difficult to play as something totally different.

Researchers have also found that it is difficult to portray a character with whom the player cannot identify (Fine, 1983; Waskul, 2006). Fine (1983) adds to this, stating the game simply will not be successful or fun if the player cannot identify with their character. Bowman (2010) explains that some players choose to build certain parts of themselves into characters, while others find that these same elements of themselves unintentionally pop up into characters (Nephew, 2006; Waskul, 2006). Usually players realize in retrospect how their character builds resemble themselves. For example, Jessica describes a character which she created in an

alignment she thought she would not like, only to find out that she quite enjoyed playing him and that, “This character probably [has similarities to me] more than I realized when I first created it [...] he’s developing in parallel in some ways that I would have developed from childhood into adulthood.” Bowman (2010) states that while some players choose to play a character very different from themselves, the character often still shares some sort of trait with their player, for example moods, likes and dislikes, and personality traits (Nephew, 2006). Daniel describes an evil character he played stating:

So, his personality and his drive is not something I would say is an ideal match for me...but his choice of ability and his choice of, uh, tool set and how he plays is definitely enjoyable to me. He was a person who was an item crafter. He was a person who was about strategy and scouting and about making political ties and connections. So that definitely is, ya know, the me shining through that sort of character.

Crandall & Talieferro (2014), suggest that role-playing requires a player to play somebody new; however, it is impossible for a person to think and behave beyond what they know. Therefore Crandall & Talieferro (2014), state that players must instead role-play variations of what they would do, by filtering their thoughts through different lenses. Although a character generally has aspects of the player built in – not always consciously – it is generally understood in the TTRPG community that the character should not “be” the player (Bowman, 2010). As Daniel states, “The point of the role-playing game is to experience a different set of experiences and circumstances. Right. [...] If you were trying to roll play [yourself]...you’re not exploring that. Then you’re playing a game of therapy, right.” Andrew even describes the practice of creating a character

based on yourself as an “[unacceptable] form of character creation,” or “not to be good form, so to speak.”

One interesting aspect which participants have incorporated from themselves into their characters are flaws. Flaws are defined as any kind of handicap a player may have. Bowman (2010) provides some examples of possible flaws, such as physical handicaps like being weak or blind, or more social handicaps like a lack of empathy. Fine (1983) states that few players play “average” or poorly developed characters, and characters with flaws are more interesting and engaging to play. Gray (2019) adds that incorporating flaws into a character is seen as adding a level of realism to the game, and provides opportunity for advancement in the game by offering the character room to grow and evolve. Researchers have noted that compared to other games and digital RPGs, TTRPGs are unique in that they allow the character to grow and develop, and for the world to react to these changes (Bowman, 2010; Hitchens & Drachen 2008). Fine (1983) also believes that playing a character with its own hopes, fears, vulnerabilities, and personality allows a player to become more engrossed in the game. Participants described different character flaws, which had varying levels of effect on the game. Some flaws included smelling bad, being cowardly, having poor social skills, being a “dumb brute,” or having out of control magical powers. There is also a healthy online discussion regarding the best flaws to include into a character build (Gray, 2019; D&D Beyond, 2017; Miller, 2017). For the participants, the incorporation of these flaws meant different things, for some it was an opportunity to release tensions and act with complete disregard for social etiquette, while for others it is an opportunity to examine and experiment with what are generally considered negative behaviours and personalities, which are at times reflected in the player’s own behaviours. For participants, including character flaws can mean taking a step back and re-evaluating their own beliefs about

themselves and others around them. This can be seen as a learning outcome in the form of a new attitude.

4.3 TTRPGs as a liminal space

Through TTRPGs, players are able to experience new realities through their character and the fantasy world they inhabit, and are in turn able to explore different elements of themselves, strangers, and the world outside of TTRPGs. Participants spoke about how the game allowed them to safely explore different aspects of themselves and better understand their emotions and feelings. Crandall & Taliaferro (2014) suggest that through their characters' the experiences, players are able to learn about how they personally deal with emotions such as betrayal, disappointment, power and loss. Bowman (2010) states one way players may engage in self-exploration is by exaggerating a personal trait in order to further examine it. Many players spoke about exploring more negative aspects of themselves, or flaws, through the game, as Adam explains:

But having to, you know...being able to separate out that part of myself and putting it in a character and going "Oh, that guy's an asshole" is much easier than saying "Oh, I'm a bad person." It's taking a behaviour and saying, "Oh, that's bad behaviour." I don't have to...it's just behaviour. Behaviour changes.

For Adam, these practices have a special meaning, helping him separate himself from his behaviours and renegotiate his own understanding of how others view him and how he views himself. Jessica adds, TTRPGs offer a safe space to explore these different elements of one's self, "[...] in a context that it wasn't necessarily going to be judged poorly. Like it was actually part of the game if that makes sense." For participants, TTRPGs provide a space meant for exploration, which means they can engage in this process of exploration more freely and fully.

As Bowman (2010) states, this exploration is done more deliberately by some players, while for others it is more of a reflexive exercise which is induced by playing. These are examples of how TTRPG game play can be on the side of more intentional learning or more on the side of unintentional informal learning. While some learning opportunities are more intentional, they do remain informal as they are set in an informal learning environment, and not within a formal learning environment where the teaching is guided by someone else (Kynt et al., 2016). As Ashley explained above, she often plays characters which will “explode” a feeling or an experience she is personally having, she also states:

Usually I don't intend it this way and then after I game I'm like, “Oh I built that to deal with survivor's guilt, okay, that's happening.” Or like “Okay, so this character is about anxiety, okay, that's happening.”

For Ashley, TTRPGs mean a space where she can more fully understand her feelings, emotions, and experiences. Ashley adds that once she makes these realizations she is able to bring them up at her therapy sessions to further address. Similar to character creation, GMs can also explore elements of themselves through the world they create (Dyer, 2014).

In addition to allowing the player to explore different elements of themselves, TTRPGs allow the player to explore different ideas and concepts of their lived reality. During interviews, participants shared examples of characters who help them explore certain concepts, like racism, and campaigns which explore ideas like collusion and power. Bowman (2010) believes that, as a safe space, TTRPGs make players feel more open to exploring taboo ideas. Adam describes how he purposefully created the character of a racist elf:

I was playing a racist elf, like, on purpose. [...] [And then I read a book about how they got police officers to be Nazi prison camp guards] and I was like “Ohh, okay, I get it, that’s what I was doing with that character.” I was playing his trauma of being an immortal creature seeing his brethren die. [...] he was internalizing this anger and pushing it out into society magically, with a magical gun essentially. That’s why the character resonated for me. Like, I was doing it right. I was playing it correctly. That’s how people can be pushed down these roads [...].

It is important to note that some of the topics and questions addressed during game play may be uncomfortable or triggering for other players. Many gaming tables have developed and adopted tools to help players communicate these discomforts and allow the game to move on. One example is the “X-card” which players are encouraged to hold up any time they feel uncomfortable. Often, the GM will additionally have a conversation with the player to determine what type of content makes the player uncomfortable, and avoid it in future sessions. In addition to the X-card, is the “O-card,” which works similarly to the X-card, but signals that the players want more of this type of content in the campaign (Bristol, 2016). While Adam purposefully explored the concept of racism, other participants unintentionally create stories which resembled current events. For example, James explains:

I guess, especially when you’re running a game, you’ll be inspired by everything [and it] might start pushing you into a narrative which in some strange ways reflect things that are actually happening. Like in the current running campaign [the string of events led to] the no collusion jokes, and the party couldn’t help but think, “Oh no, we’re the colluding Russians in this case.”

Again, this shows how even though TTRPGs may be an “escape,” game play remains connected to their lives outside the game. Interestingly, multiple players mentioned exploring the concept of collusion through their game play. As demonstrated in the examples above, TTRPGs offer a safe space for players to explore different elements of themselves and their social world, such as justice, generosity, compassion, greed, selfishness, and other human experiences which are integrated into the narrative and fantasy world (Dyer, 2014), allowing the individual to grow and transform.

This exploration was made possible because TTRPGs represented a safe space, as described in the above chapter. The Roestone Collection (2014) states that TTRPGs are simultaneously a safe space, and a space where ideas and concepts can be challenged. A safe space does not equal a censored space, but is a space where personal identity is not attacked (Boostrom, 1998; Nephew, 2006). What differentiates a safe and unsafe space is the presence of fear of harm (The Roestone Collective, 2014). While the safe space allows players to engage in exploration without fear of negative repercussions, the escapism granted by TTRPGs allows the player to enter in, interact with, and explore a new type of reality. Bowman (2010), like many of the participants, believes that this escapism is different from that of reading a book or watching a movie as the player is the main character and can explore and interact with the world around them. Participants expressed that TTRPGs become a safe space for exploration by removing responsibility away from the player and onto the fictional character. Adam explains:

Yeah, cuz it kind of takes liability away from the person, because maybe this person made a very crass joke. But that wasn't me, that was [my character], he's such a jerk. The players might not put it on you too, they're like “Oh, you really role-played that character.”

Some participants also make a point to create characters which differ from themselves in obvious ways to create more removal between themselves and the character, like Jessica who states:

And I do like playing male characters as well. I don't know why...I think maybe part of it is the more your character is different from yourself the...I don't know, the easier it is to explore other concepts. Because...that's a thing with role-playing [...] Like you can explore different concepts without feeling self-conscious about it because it's like, "oh it's my character doing this". You use your character as a proxy. I think that's why I like playing a male character because it's another removal from who I am[...]

Playing a character allows for distance between the player and the character's actions. It can help eliminate players' social fears of being negatively judged, while allowing players to explore, challenge and question without insulting their own or other's identity.

Drawing from authors like Turner (1979), Atkinson & Robson (2012), and Lorenzi & White (2019), and this exploratory element of TTRPGs, TTRPGs can be seen as "liminal spaces." Researchers understand liminal spaces as ones which remove responsibility and the fear of consequences (Boyce-Tillman, 2009), and remove obstacles and inhibitions (Lorenzie & White, 2009). Through the use of a character and fantasy world, TTRPGs, like liminal spaces, offer an alternate reality in which players may safely explore different ideas and concepts not realistic outside of the game. As Daniel states, "It's the exploration of something you cannot do or society says you cannot normally do." Adam expands by stating, "Like, role-playing games are in some sense the safest of spaces. Its imagination, the opportunity to confront fears and things about yourself and things about humanity that you don't have the opportunity to." Boyce-Tillman (2009) states that liminal spaces are ones where the individual is encouraged to think

about society and reimagine it. Lorenzi & White (2019) add that liminal spaces are spaces with new ways of being and doing. TTRPG researchers have stated that exploring these elements allows players to imagine new realities for themselves and then re-enter their current social reality with new perceptions and strategies which encourage change in their life outside the game (Balzer, 2011; Bowman, 2010).

A liminal space is a transitional space that an individual passes through before reaching a new state. It is described by researchers as a space in which the individual is no longer who they were and not yet who they will become (Turner, 1979; Wels, Waal, Spiegel, Kamsteeg 2011). It is a liquid space which both transforms and is transformed by the individual (Land, Rattray, Vivian, 2014). Lorenzi & White (2019) add that this space encourages creativity and action which can lead to new knowledge and problem solving, in other words, a space for learning. Atkinson & Robson (2012) state that a liminal space removes the individual from their current social existence and places them in a new social context, with new values, habits, rules, structures, and identity. Although a liminal space is different from the individual's current reality, there are still similarities to their current reality (Boyce-Tillman, 2009).

Some studies have described how art, music, theatre, games, and mass media could act as liminal spaces (Lam, Phillips, Kelemen, Zamenopoulos, Moffat, & de Sousa, 2018). For example, Riches (2011) applies the concept of liminality to extreme metal music and “moshing,” and suggests these spaces allow participants to reject normative behaviours, such as gender norms. Additionally, Riches (2011) suggests that marginalized activities such as heavy metal and moshing helps individuals escape from the “nothingness” of everyday life and live a more authentic and distinctive experience. Kristiansen (2015) compares games, like chess and golf, to liminoid spaces, which have many of the same characteristics as a liminal space—such as an

alternate reality—but do not necessarily bring on a change. Turner (1979) also applies the concept of liminoid space to theatre, suggesting that theatre can provide the audience with alternative views. Additionally, more recent applications of liminality allow for short and repeated experiences in a liminal space which brings gradual changes to an individual's identity (Atkinson & Robson, 2012). TTRPGs can be conceptualized as a combination of elements of art, games, and theatre into a series of sessions, which suggests these practices could similarly be liminal spaces. TTRPGs can take many shapes depending on a variety of factors such as who is playing, the game mechanics, and the game setting. For example, Mello (2006) states that games which lean more towards hack and slash play may not have the same benefits as more narrative-driven campaigns. While they are not inherently liminal spaces, TTRPGs can be played in such a way that they become liminal spaces. Using the game qualities described above, I will explain how the style of game described by participants can be understood as a liminal space.

A first common element between TTRPGs and liminal spaces is, as Haring, Sorin & Caltabiano (2018) describe, “being in the flow” where individuals act with total involvement. About TTRPGs, Fine (1983) describes “engrossment,” which is when players temporarily “‘bracket’ their ‘natural’ selves and enact a fantasy self” (p. 4). This engrossment in the game helps players experience this alternate reality more fully. Many players described their best experiences as “cinematic,” “epic” and like a “real world you can walk through.” One unique case of this immersion was described by Daniel:

[...] the players were so into their characters, so into what's going on, so involved
[...] They were playing with an audio track and not another player. They thought
the little girl they were role-playing with was in the room with them [...] they are
so into what was happening that it wasn't until they realized like “Hey, hey guys.

I don't want you to do that," and they're like "I'm not doing that," "I'm not doing that," "well who's the character?" and they all look around like "Oh no..."

White (2014) states that immersion, or engrossment, in a game does not rely on the medium to simulate reality, but is within the player's mind, and relies on the experience of play. Some TTRPG campaigns are so engrossing that the participants describe having an audience of strangers gather around the game table to listen to the story. The audience becoming so engrossed in the story they cheer for the characters. Fine (1983) states that a good, memorable game involves high immersion which is built by strong narrative and heavy descriptions.

An additional element of liminal spaces is the removal of traditional hierarchies. As Turner (1979) explains, liminal spaces do not have a hierarchy, but are "communities of comrades." The narrative structure of TTRPGs allows for equal participation from all players, as they each help guide the story through their character's qualities and actions. Although the GM may at first appear as the authority figure of the group, like Fine (1983) states, unhappy adventurers will simply leave, making it essential the GM collaborate with players. Like in Atkinson & Robson's (2012) example of the school-aged children participating in an out of class intervention with an art therapist, the GM, like the art therapist, is not an authority figure but a facilitator who helps ensure the game runs smoothly. In addition to the lack of hierarchy between players, TTRPGs offer an alternate reality where the player may feel more power and control than in their life outside the game. Lorenzie & White (2019) explain that liminal spaces are meant to be places where conflict no longer exists and "unheard voices [are] heard" (p. 196). In combination with other liminal qualities of TTRPGs – like the creation of a new social reality and safe spaces – these games can be a space where biases and conflicts are put away and traditionally marginalized individuals can express themselves and are heard.

A liminal space is meant to remove the individual from their current social reality and replace it with a new social context (Atkinson & Robson, 2012). Lorenzi & White (2019) describe a liminal space as a space where “nothing is fixed,” a “realm of pure possibility” (p. 198). TTRPGs can accomplish this through the game narrative and setting, and character creation. The game’s narrative contributes to building a liminal space by placing players and their characters in certain contexts, often fantastical experiences they have not navigated before. Boyce-Tillman (2009) describes a liminal space as one where the individual can try on new personas. As described above, players can use their characters to experience, and experiment with different personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Land, Rattray & Vivian (2014) add that a liminal space can also be a space where new forms of discourse are used. As part of the role-playing aspect of TTRPGs, some participants chose to change their discourse, which can be accompanied by a poor attempt at an accent, as Andrew and Brandon shared. An interesting example of discourse is provided by Susan who plays a priest character. While describing a confrontation with a guard while escaping from a castle, Susan describes her character as saying, “You will stand aside sir, I am a priest on a mission and I will not stand for it, you must stand aside,” later adding, “the gods are with me today! You better back down.” Through her speech, we see how Susan exemplified the persona of a noble medieval era priest. When asked if she was a religious individual, Susan replied “no,” marking one difference between Susan and her character and the discourse used. Mussett (2014) suggests that limiting imagination is limiting critical thinking, but as described above, game play is open and flexible, limited mostly by imagination. This means that players are able to engage in critical thinking as they partake in these new experiences, and leave the game with new thoughts and interpretations of the world around them.

While individuals are meant to be engrossed in a new social reality when experiencing a liminal space, Boyce-Tillman (2009) states that the space must still foster a connection to the individual's "real life." Waskul (2006) describes how TTRPGs function through a shared sense of presumed realism which reflects outside life. Waskul (2006) shares the example of a character who jumps into a pool of water to get a ring, and explains how presumed realism would dictate that this character's success may be affected by the fact that he wore his armour before jumping into the water, inhibiting his ability to swim. In this case, the player would roll the dice to do a strength check and see if the character was able to successfully swim down to retrieve the ring, and back up, while wearing his armour. Realism is also believed to be inherently present within fantasy, as Coleman (1968) describes fantasy as a caricature of social life. Other researchers suggest that fantasy, and more specifically TTRPGs, are a transformation of personal experiences, games, films, books and more, into an alternate reality (Fine, 1983; Flatland, 2006; Hendricks, 2006; Hitchen & Drachen, 2008; Nephew, 2006; Waskul, 2006). In addition to this presumed realism, researchers, and the participants alike, believe that the dice add an element of realism in the form of unpredictability (Fine, 1983; Waskul, 2006). This realism is what allows players to take their in-game experiences, outside of the game and think critically about themselves and their social reality. This opportunity to think critically allows players to leave the game with new opinions, and points of view which can affect their behaviour and thoughts outside of the game.

Conclusion

For these players, the ideal TTRPG is a safe space which encourages creativity and exploration. Through TTRPGs, players can experiment with problematic or taboo behaviours and concepts while also exploring new ideas (Balzer, 2011; Bowman, 2010). These qualities

allow TTRPGs to be liminal spaces. Like a liminal space, TTRPGs allow players to be equal participants, experience new realities, and explore and discover new ways of thinking and acting outside of the game. By negotiating with the game mechanics, engaging in creative problem solving, and experiencing new realities through their character, players are engaging in informal learning. Through these experiences and challenges they develop new skills, knowledge and attitudes which can be used both within the context of the game, and outside of the game.

Chapter 5: You've Levelled Up! —How TTRPGs can facilitate social participation

As described above, a liminal space is a transitional space. This implies there is a change in the person. Indeed, players report a series of benefits gained, which they associate to their TTRPG practices, which can be understood as learning outcomes. I argue that TTRPG practices foster a type of social and cultural participation that can be understood as expressions of citizenship. TTRPGs provide players with a community, and through these games, players engage in self-development which is encouraged through accomplishment within the game and a sense a validation from the community. These skills have a lasting impact on the player, and affect how they see themselves and the world in which they live.

5.1 TTRPGs and community

TTRPGs create the opportunity for community building and inclusion. In order to build a community, there must first be an opportunity to interact and connect with others. As previously discussed, TTRPGs are by their nature an opportunity to socialize. For some participants, TTRPGs are a more comfortable social environment than other social contexts such as parties. Most participants mentioned how they often had trouble connecting with others around them due to a lack of shared interest, but TTRPGs acted as an easy conversation topic and gateway to meeting new people. Fine (1983) states that a shared interest in TTRPGs makes these games a natural space for community building. Common interests can be a useful tool in connecting individuals and was used by *Project Friendship* and *the Citizenship Project* to help integrate marginalized individuals into the community (Rowe, 2014).

Participants have reported meeting new friends through the game, either by joining clubs and participating in one-shot games and conventions, or by meeting friends of friends through

play. Many participants have even cited meeting their best friends through TTRPGs. Adam suggests TTRPGs “fast-forward” friendships, as he explains:

[...] in an RPG you're getting, you know, four hours a week of seeing their decision-making, and what they find enjoyable, and what food they like, and what music they listen to...it's a much more intense, um it's...the RPG experience for me fast-forwards friendships.

James provides an example of this while talking about forming a friendship with a player in his group:

I think we're becoming more so, because one of my players, the barbarian, I knew her but we weren't really close and didn't spend...kind of like a friend of a friend situation. But through the playing of the game [we've created a] much closer connection and it's...we spend all this time together getting to know each other [...].

TTRPGs offer a space where players can interact with each other on a regular basis and begin to form connections with strangers and strengthen connections with friends. Playing TTRPGs can be a very intimate practice, as players incorporate aspects of themselves through their character creations. Many participants have stated that as much as TTRPGs teach them about themselves, they also allow them to see and learn about the other players through the other players' characters and game play.

While TTRPGs help players build new relationships, some participants specifically cited using the game to maintain their existing friendships, like Ashley who says:

People just stopped doing things together. Which was part of why that particular group started doing D&D. Because we wanted to put it in the schedule, we are going to see each other [...]. That particular group we drive out [...] to meet on a Friday night [...] now we are doing a thing where we sleep over and then have like Saturday brunch which is both kind of still related to D&D and we actually get to talk and hangout, so that's been super great.

The game offers a social activity to do with friends. TTRPGs can also be played “long-distance,” through online tools like *Roll20*⁸ or they can simply be played through online video call platforms like Skype (Hall, 2015). During the current COVID-19 pandemic, there is even a larger cultural push towards digitizing TTRPG culture (Francisco, 2020). During the pandemic, the makers of D&D have even created a webpage with tips and tricks for playing online and remotely, with free material such as the starter rule book and premade character sheets (Wizards of the Coast, 2020). TTRPGs offer a social activity for friends and family to come around, both in person and remotely, to engage with each other and maintain their current relationships. These relationships, built and maintained through TTRPGs, help reduce social isolation players may experience by providing them with social connections which exist beyond the game table in the form of friendships and family relationships. The social bonds built through TTRPGs can be seen as examples of Aw et al.'s (2017) third and fourth levels of social participation: The third, seeking consistent social interactions, and the fourth, expansion of social network. By playing TTRPGs, participants begin engaging in consistent social interactions as they meet regularly to play. Social interactions existed beyond the game table as well, like for Ashley who shared how

⁸ Roll20 is a “virtual tabletop” which allows for long distance playing. The GM is able to create an account online and invite the other players to play. The platform allows the GM to create maps and other visuals to help with game play and includes a feature for players to roll dice.

in addition to playing with her group of friends, they had an online group chat where they talked about their characters and the campaign. TTRPGs also allow social networks to grow as the participants meet other players through their local game shops, conventions, or simply meeting a friend of a friend who joined the group.

Not all connections made through TTRPG-related activities necessarily lead to friendships, but even “less intimate” relationships can nonetheless help form a sense of community. According to Rowe (2014), community relationships involve different types of relationships from family and friends to neighbours. Andrew provides an example of how he has experienced community:

Because most of these are, like, random games I happen to join. I ended up becoming good friends with some of them to the point I see someone down the street, I recognize them as someone I played with, and that actually happened to me yesterday during free RPG day. I was getting back from [the game store] after having purchased some items and I saw one of my friends passing down the street and I waved to her and she waved back and had a short conversation before we felt the rain and were like “Okay, got to go.”

Here, we see how through TTRPGs Andrew has been able to make the “street” somewhere where he encounters community, a place where he can come across someone he knows and have a quick chat. This is an opportunity for Andrew to be “part ‘of’ one’s community rather than simply living ‘in’ it” (Rowe, 2014, p. 10). These types of “sidewalk” interactions, although brief, are important in giving individuals a sense of belongingness and shared citizenship (Harper et al., 2017). Different levels of community can be built and maintained through TTRPGs. For

example, TTRPGs can help build and support the RPG community, the local community and even marginalized communities. The TTRPG community can be considered a rather large group. Online there are many forums, YouTube channels, podcasts, blogs, Facebook groups and more dedicated exclusively to TTRPGs. In addition, there are many live events related to TTRPGs ranging from one-shot games in local game shops and pubs to large conventions. Members of the TTRPG community are welcome to interact with each other by participating in, consuming, creating, and commenting on these different platforms. Daniel is heavily involved in the community, participating in, and helping run large events. In fact, when I met with Daniel, he had just gotten back from an out of country convention. While being active within the TTRPG community, Daniel also extends his experience and knowledge to his local community. For example, Daniel hosts a gaming event at his local library three times a year. TTRPGs can also be a space to build community for more marginalized populations. This can be seen through the examples of Ashley and Brandon who have made an attempt to create game spaces that are inclusive of and at times exclusively for marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community or women. Creating these safe spaces allows for these groups to congregate and share their experiences and challenges with each other. These spaces can in turn offer a place of communal support and understanding, which can be invaluable for marginalized individuals (Rowe, 2014). These examples can be seen as expressions of Aw et al.'s fifth level of social participation, giving back to the community, as the participants are actively involved, often through their own initiative, in sharing their knowledge and experience with the community and creating inclusive spaces and initiatives.

The communities supported by TTRPGs can assist in diminishing societal isolation by allowing players to be active in these communities, whether it be through participating in local

clubs or in an LGBTQ+ game. While TTRPGs do act as an escape from the social world, they can at the same time be an entry into the social world (Rowe, 2014). These small groups can help foster feelings of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation by allowing individuals to find others who are experiencing the same or similar experiences (Rowe, 2014). The relationships formed within these smaller groups can assist players in developing growing social networks which increases “social opportunities and participation” (Rowe, 2014, p. 15). In addition, these increased feelings of belonging can leave players more open to “life-affirming moments” (Rowe, 2014, p. 17). Lastly, these small groups offer a safe space where players can develop the skills needed to enter the larger community (Rowe, 2014).

5.2 TTRPGs and self-development

Through TTRPGs, players report having been able to engage in self-development which has built their self-confidence through skill development, achievements, and validation from others. Self-development can be understood as “the process by which a person's character or abilities are gradually developed” (McMullin, 2018, p.263). In turn, this self-development had an effect on the participants’ sense of self. Sense of self can be understood as an individual’s understanding or beliefs about themselves (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Sense of self has come to include various factors related to the self such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and more (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). These definitions strongly resemble that of learning outcomes in general, and self development becomes an overarching learning outcome from TTRPG practices. While Coley and Mead’s theories about the self are different, they are both based in a social context, where individuals reflect on and define themselves and their behaviour based on how they think others perceive them (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). As Fine (1983) states, RPGs can give players confidence in their abilities by testing them in fictitious worlds, which can produce

psychological growth and insight. It is also important to add that this testing of abilities is occurring within a social a context, where both players and their characters react to an individual's in game actions. In turn, self-development can help individuals become more social and active participants in the community (Rowe, 2014). This is therefore understood to be more so a social process rather than a psychological one.

5.2.1 TTRPGs and skill development

TTRPGs are generally played on a consistent basis, and offer the player the opportunity to continuously practise skills and grow their knowledge base. These skills are a more direct learning outcome gained through TTRPG practices. James states, “[...] if working out gave you a certain figure and you want to keep it, you keep working out. Much like the same, [...] D&D and RPGs are the tools that gave me these social and psychological skills, so I’ll keep playing to keep these skills refined.” Balzer (2011) has determined that theoretically games do have the potential to teach in their leisure form. While TTRPGs are not intended to help develop these skills, they can provide a space to inadvertently practice and develop them, as well as purposefully explore different streams of knowledge, as such they can offer a context for informal learning.

Learning opportunities can be found within actual game play and within the social circles built around the table. An interesting example of this knowledge gain and skill practice is given by Daniel, who recounts how he and his group calculated if it would be possible for his character to kill a monster by gliding from a certain height and putting a point into its eye, leaving the dice to simply determine if he hit the creature or not. Knowledge has also been shared through general discussion around the table. TTRPGs attract people from a variety of backgrounds (Waskul, 2006), for example, one of James’ groups includes a postgraduate engineering student,

a forensic scientist, a policy analyst, and an environmental scientist. These diverse groups allow for a sharing of information related to diverse topics, as demonstrated through Ashley's example, "[...]one of the players is an educator on LGBTQ+ issues, and they came and did an info session for us. We wanted to know about what she did, and we all learned and levelled up." This transfer of information also happens more informally, as Ashley describes interactions between the members of another group:

These are mostly players who didn't know each other, and we've been playing for 6/8 months and now before the game there's a bit of asking about each other's lives. One of the players is researching bees and we want to know how her bees are doing. Bumblebees, we're all fans of them now.

This is an example of informal learning which occurs not through the game itself, but through the context in which TTRPGs are played. Many players use the game as an opportunity to research topics and concepts in order to ensure accuracy in their game play (Balzer, 2011; Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983), while others share and gain knowledge with fellow players around the table. What we see here is this knowledge sharing is a communal activity. Daniel's group worked together to calculate the velocity of his character when jumping from a certain height, while Ashley's group "levels up" together, and becomes increasingly interested in each other's lives and interests. While many researchers have found that players report developing skills such as acting, synthesizing information, decision-making, leadership, research, writing and more through game play (Fine, 1983; Mello, 2006), what we see here is how skill development through TTRPGs is social and assists with social insertion.

More specifically, participants report developing interpersonal skills which can be understood as the skill set used to have a successful interaction with another individual (Mello,

2006; Tashiro, 2017). As previously described, most participants expressed an uneasiness towards social interactions, many of them calling themselves “socially awkward.” Fine (1983) considers TTRPGs as a supportive space where individuals can develop their interpersonal skills. Participants described TTRPGs as a space where they can experiment with different behaviours and see how others around the table—and their characters—react, helping them learn how to navigate through different social interactions successfully. The learning outcome here, goes beyond simply developing the skills and theory, but actually learning how and when to use these different skills.

Not surprisingly, participants reported gaining these types of skills through character adoption and team work aspects of TTRPGs. Participants described how they sometimes approach certain situations in the same way as one of their more adept characters would. This practice has also been reported by other researchers (Bowman, 2010; Mello, 2006). James shares an example of this through the way he approaches being comedic:

But I think a lot of it may have come from being able to test a lot of it. Because there’s sort of a fine line between an edgy sense of humour and just being crass and offensive, and I would like to avoid the latter [...] maybe you’re making those jokes because [your bard] was much better at this humour and so you start joking more like [your bard] did, in real life.

TTRPGs offer the opportunity to experiment with different behaviours and learn the consequences of these behaviours. This allows players to determine which behaviours yield the results they want and which ones to avoid in order to have successful social interactions. This all occurs within a safe liminal space, which allows the player to take

this new knowledge and apply it to their life outside of the game. In the example above, game play is a way to prepare for interactions outside of the game, and allows the player to feel comfortable in social situations and facilitate social insertion, which was otherwise seen as daunting. This new confidence in entering social situations in turn allows players to participate in and become members of their communities. In addition to comedic skills, participants also reported developing other interpersonal skills such as cooperation, compassion, sympathy and empathy which are integral to interpersonal relationships (Stover, 2005). Developing these types of skills allows the individual to feel more comfortable when approaching social situations allowing them to build stronger relationships and move away from social isolation. Here we can see individuals who were, “comfort zoning” alone, described as a state in which individuals are comfortable being alone and avoid social interactions, begin to move towards the third level of social participation, seeking consistent social interactions (Aw et al.’s 2017). As the individuals feel more comfortable in different social situations, they may feel more capable of engaging in everyday activities such as going to the store, or going for a drink with co-workers after the work day, leading them to be less societally isolated, and seeking consistent social interactions. We can even consider regularly playing TTRPGs as a way to seek consistent social interactions. This is particularly true for David, who feels as though he has very few social connections, and has joined a regular TTRPG group to gain this consistent social interactions.

Developing these interpersonal skills also helped participants further develop their sense of self. Ashley explains:

[...] through D&D I learned a lot more of, like, I learned a lot more how to be in charge of things, how to have a lot more tolerance for people not liking what I said, how to be a lot truer to myself instead of being customer service [Ashley]. And people still liked it, and people still found me funny, so, I got a lot better at almost every aspect of interpersonal stuff over the time that I've been playing.

By engaging in TTRPGs, Ashley not only became more comfortable interacting with others, she became more comfortable being herself with others. Similarly, related to playing different types of characters, Brandon states:

I feel it was a way for me to be more assertive and be like...just be more confident in game and that definitely translated to my real life. Whether those two are linked or happening in parallel...who knows, who cares. It happened and I feel like I'm in a better place now. I'm more myself which is really nice.

These types of qualities and behaviours are also validated by the other players. About her GMing, a role which requires her to deliver consequences to other players and at times make unfavourable decisions, Ashley states, "Being able to have something where people would tell me 'I had a good time,' or I was funny, or 'I enjoyed it,' or 'I want to bring my friends,' that was hugely beneficial." This liminal space allowed Ashley to move away from her customer service self, and see how others appreciate her opinions and views. Being able to be "one's self" can help the individual to not only feel included in a community, but be an active participant of this community, having a role and influence by sharing their beliefs, opinions, and thoughts. For Andrew, just having the opportunity to join the TTRPG community was a way for him to assert his independence, as he states:

Umm, I would like to say that they've impacted me for better [...] it made me broaden my horizons so to speak [...] um, it made me take dives or like risks. I mean taking chances and all that [...] Umm, like I think the very first few times I've actually played with other people were the first times I've ever made independent decisions for myself. Before I would basically follow what my mom did, or rather what my mom had set out for me [...] I never was doing it for myself, and I would always follow the whims of my mom [...] And so, and so, if like, and this is like one of my first few steps to obtaining independence [...] But personally I think it's just one of those stepping stones that I took for me to become who I am today. If I never had that chance back in the day, I wouldn't know what would happen to me.

Andrew asserts that he made the decision to go to a one-shot game, whether his mother agreed or not. With a bit of negotiation, for the first session Andrew was accompanied by his sister, who ultimately decided this was a safe space for Andrew. Andrew's particular choice in TTRPG practice, to join a community run one-shot which welcomes new players and works diligently to create a positive safe space for players, allowed him to begin asserting his independence, which has ultimately led the way for him to take bigger steps in his independence. Today, Andrew likes to bus all around the city on his own, meeting friends for a BBQ or simply exploring new corners of the city. For Andrew, making the decision to play TTRPGs has led to less social and societal isolation.

More specific to interpersonal skills are leadership skills. Leadership skills can be considered a "levelling up" from simple interpersonal skills, as Ashley and Jessica may choose to term it. Some characteristics said to characterize positive leadership are communication,

managing group dynamic, decision-making, conflict resolution, and goal setting, among others (Termaat-Mcgrath et al., 2010). One understanding of leadership skills is the need for an individual to not only successfully interact with others, but contribute to their community in some way or another (de Jongh, Wegner & Struthers, 2014). Expressing or engaging in leadership can be seen as an expression of the fifth level of social participation, giving back to society (Aw et al., 2017). The GM is the more obvious example of in game leadership, as the GM generally leads the story and helps manage the group dynamic. However, participants also report practising these skills in the role of adventurer by leading the group through campaigns or certain challenges (Bowman, 2010). As each character has their own strengths and weaknesses, each character is better suited to lead different types of challenges. Another way in which adventurers and GMs can develop their leadership skills is through teaching new players. Nearly every participant described how they generally enjoyed teaching new players. Daniel recounts one particular example where he helped a young girl:

The one guy had his young daughter at the table who was an archer, which is nice right, but I'm an assassin with a crossbow and I'll just be better because of the way I was [sic]. But what I could do was give her some of my kit and make her better. But she didn't know how to play. So, my character taking, her character aside and saying, "you can take this, this, and this. These are good strategies that will help you"...and by the end of it, instead of the first few rounds of combat where she felt redundant...She was like "Okay, you need to pick up the slack, if a monster comes down this hallway, I won't be worried about that one, you need to cover it." And she feels more responsibility and all I had to choose was I'll not shoot down this hallway I'll cover another angle.

Daniel is an exceptionally experienced player and GM. Using his leadership skills, he was able to teach the young girl how to play the game most effectively and make her feel as though she belongs in the group. When asked what he enjoys about teaching, Daniel replied, "...I enjoy seeing people benefit from that effort and I enjoy becoming better for it." What we can see here is how Daniel receives validation and a sense of accomplishment for his efforts when he sees others succeed. These teaching moments also provide him opportunities to learn and grow through these experiences. This is another example of learning outcomes that do not come from the game itself, but TTRPG practices. Through these actions, Daniel is additionally building a relationship with these new players and welcoming them to the community—perhaps even fostering a liminal space for these new players to be able to experiment and grow in.

While leadership skills are useful in game, they are also seen as important skills in successfully navigating through various aspects of life (Termaat-Mcgrath et al., 2010). Gaining these leadership skills can help players actively build relationships and create community. This is an incredible feat for many of the participants who described themselves as shy or socially anxious, deterring them from even approaching others. Many participants even made the comment that without TTRPGs, they would not have had the confidence to participate in this research. I believe that simple participation in this study can be seen as an act of leadership; individuals actively participating in a research study which could contribute to knowledge and understanding of their community.

5.2.2 TTRPGs and achievement

Like new skills, players can attain achievement through their TTRPG experiences. Players report experiencing achievements within the game world as well as outside the game world. A broader example of achievement related to TTRPGs is given by Susan who links her

successful reinsertion into society to the interpersonal skills she learned through the game. Susan has also founded a local transgender support group and local transgender advocacy group; the support group continues to exist today. As she describes it:

And I, I used a whole lot of my skills I learned gaming. Being the henchman player to my spouse who is the main leader. I'm the wizard to the king on the throne. We started two different transgender support groups in the eight years and one of them is still going, which is the actual support group [...].

These larger achievements are due in part to the skills gained through TTRPGs. Susan's achievements are also more largely related to community membership. She was not only able to become socially inserted, but became an active member in her local community, creating safe spaces and engaging in advocacy for other transgender individuals. This became her door into the social.

More specifically related to TTRPGs are in-game achievements, which include any successes that occur during game play. Examples of in-game successes include defeating a monster or completing a mission, as well as more personal successes like creating a first character. Jessica describes how she feels like she "levelled up" as a player after creating her first character from scratch. Creating a D&D character is not a simple task, in fact, the *D&D player's handbook* dedicates over 150 pages to character creation (Wyatt, Schwalb & Cordell, 1978). Most players start with premade character sheets. Balzer (2011) suggests that success gained in the game can build confidence which extends outside of the game world and lead to further success. These feelings of success which build confidence can be understood as learning outcomes in the form of attitude changes. These achievements can lead to a sense of validation from others, like James speaks about his GMing:

“[...] but at the end of every session the players are really happy, they’re excited, or they’re bugging me for plot hints and they’re telling their friends about this crazy D&D game that they had and, it does kind of, kind of really does build a sort of sense of self-worth I guess.”

In turn the player can reciprocate this validation to others, like Ashley who expresses admiration and pride in the other players when she says, “That’s the dream, of being able to play with people you really love and then see them do hilarious and amazing things.” These reciprocal relationships additionally help build a sense of community between the players. This validation given to each other within the group can be understood as giving back to the community, the fifth level of social participation (Aw et al., 2017), as players build each other up.

Out of game achievement encompasses any achievement that can be linked to participation in TTRPGs but the outcomes of this achievement are experienced outside of game play. One example of out of game achievement is earning money and recognition from designing and publishing games. For example, Brandon was able to earn extra credit for a game he created for class. Additionally, Brandon explains that his professor will be using the game in future courses and would like to publish an article with Brandon. Others have found paying jobs or volunteer work related to the game, for example running one-shot games, organizing conventions and other large-scale events, or working with school children, teaching them storytelling through D&D.

Ashley provides an interesting example of the intersection between in and out of game success. Ashley hosted a live-streamed 24 hour D&D session for a charity event. In addition to lasting 24-hours straight, the session featured an unruly number of players, 11 in total, 3 of whom assumed the role of GM. Ashley describes the success of simply having been able to logistically organize the event, “I was the DM and the team lead, and I did, like, tons of work in

prepping games, and paperwork, and logistics, and everything, and it all came together, it all successfully came together with just mayhem at the end.” The “mayhem at the end” she refers to is the final battle which she is particularly proud of:

We had so many more people, the combat was weighted for much smaller groups so we just massively ramped up the number of combatants, and we did that on the fly so there was that fear of, “have I made this a deadly combat?” and it balanced okay despite the fact that we were doing that completely unscientifically, and [another player] put it beautifully and won and completed their mission and just, yeah. The sense of like narrative closure and satisfaction was very strong [...] and being able to use things in unorthodox ways it was satisfying.

Most importantly, however, the event reached its goal, as Ashley states:

[...] cuz we were also streaming this, it was just an incredible, surreal experience with the combination of, like, so many people at the table, we’d done so much work to prep for this, people kept donating money and knowing we had, like, we had crossed over, we ended up raising over \$4,400 and about \$200 came in that last combat.

Ashley’s achievements in coordinating a successful gaming session and raising funds for charity are examples of both in game and out of game achievements which happened to intersect in this case. This is a great example of how TTRPGs can be situated in a larger community context, similar to how Daniel hosts community events at the library. How the game is played, and in which context, can have an effect on the influence of these types of practices on participants’ lives. In Ashley’s case, it was an opportunity to give back to the larger community through

fundraising. TTRPGs can be an opportunity for those who are societally isolated to become participating members of their community.

Chapter 6: “So, what do you want to do now?” —Discussion

6.1 Overview

This study originally asked: What learning outcomes are associated with tabletop role-playing games? In this study, I demonstrate the promise of stigmatized practices—such as pop-culture leisure, like TTRPGs—to assist individuals experiencing marginalization in becoming better integrated within their communities. While there is research examining the potential benefits of these types of practices, little attention has been given to the actual experience of playing TTRPGs and the long-lasting effects related to game play. While this research is not statistically generalizable, this study featured participants with a lot of experience and varied experiences. While, there are currently no statistics on the growing diversity of the TTRPG community, podcasts such as *I am Hear* help shine a light on this diversity (RPG Cast, 2019). This study represents diversity in the form of age, gender, sexual orientation and more. Participants’ experiences were varied, including incarceration, social exclusion, gender transition, and mental health struggles. Early research, such as Fine’s (1983) focused on the white, middle class, young adult, male player. Fine even states that his research focused on “die hard” players. The richness in experience presented in this study allows us to see how these practices play a role in overcoming a variety of hardships, and more than that, how these practices can help players become social participants beyond the game table. Additionally, we see how TTRPG practices can facilitate social participation at varying levels, including the highest level, giving back to society.

TTRPGs were experienced as safe spaces and as escapism. Beyond offering a momentary escape from players’ personal challenges and the mundane aspects of life, TTRPGs offered participants the opportunity to experience being someone different, and living different realities.

As a safe space, players were able to use TTRPGs to inhabit a fantasy world and act freely, without the fear of serious repercussions, which provided participants with a space to experiment in and learn from.

While TTRPGs can take many forms, the preferred type of play was described by participants as flexible while at the same time structured through the use of game mechanics, which ensure consequences to player's actions. This combination of flexibility and structure ensured a game that provided endless possibilities to game play, while providing a form of logic which was perceived as adding an element of realism to the game. The use of consequences within the game can also be seen as providing the players with agency and giving their actions meaning. Participants preferred a style of play which involves creative problem solving and more narrative-driven games in comparison to a more hack and slash type play. These narrative elements presented within the campaign itself and the character creation allow players to explore and experience new identities and realities.

TTRPGs which encourage these elements in their game play can be understood as liminal spaces. Like a liminal space, TTRPGs can be safe spaces which act as "realms of pure possibility," and allow players to experience new and unique social realities, while maintaining an element of realism. This in turn allows players to return to their current reality with new ideas which can bring change. Some of the changes, or learning outcomes, which the participants reported from their game play include the development of cognitive and interpersonal skills, a sense of achievement and a sense of belonging and community. These gains, however, go far beyond these singular items and the context of TTRPGs, they encourage social participation and larger changes within the individual.

6.2 Citizenship and TTRPGs

Finally, in studying these practices and how they have helped people, we are left with the impression and analysis that these practices are actually fostering citizenship in the lives of these individuals. To better understand and demonstrate the role these games can have for players, I will use Rowe's (2014) citizenship model to explore some of these facets. Like cultural citizenship, Rowe (2014) defines citizenship as, "a sense of belonging to one's community and society that is validated by others" (Yale University, n.d., para. 2; Ponce & Rowe, 2018). For Rowe, citizenship is like a spectrum, and is measured by the individual's strength of connection to the 5Rs: rights, roles, resources, responsibilities, and relationships (Rowe, 2014). This understanding of citizenship combines elements from many of the different definitions of citizenship (Ponce, Clayton, Gambino & Rowe, 2016).

Rowe's citizenship model was inspired by his work with social workers and people suffering from mental illness (Rowe, 2014). Rowe's understanding of citizenship is not only membership, as he states:

It's also about the ability to grow, learn, and exercise one's capacities and capabilities—to do the things you like to do, are good at, and value most—without undue restraints or deprivations that keep people from acting on their aspirations, or defeat the effort to even bother thinking about them (Rowe, 2015)

This citizenship model was created in order to encourage concrete actions and programs to help people with mental illness become "full" participants in their communities (Rowe, 2014).

Rowe's model has been applied to a variety of populations, including those who suffer from mental illness, homelessness, and incarceration (Ponce, Clayton, Gambino & Rowe, 2016).

Rowe discusses the idea of social recovery, where individuals who find themselves marginalized while facing challenges can achieve self-determination and become full members of society even as they continue to face these challenges (Rowe, 2014; Rowe & Davidson, 2016). Many of the participants interviewed continue to face the same and at times new challenges, but have still managed to connect with their community through TTRPGs. For example, Ashley continues to struggle with her mental health and is unable to work; however, she has been volunteering twice a week at a local game café, running one-shots. Proceeds from these events go to charity. While her mental illness leaves her unable to work, TTRPGs offer her the opportunity to participate in and give back to society through volunteer work.

Rowe's (2014) citizenship model features five foundational elements he has termed the 5 Rs. Through my data collection and more fully through my analysis, commonalities between the participants' TTRPG practices and Rowe's citizenship model emerged. Additionally, Rowe's model offers a more applicable understanding of citizenship compared to the other more theoretical conceptions. Rowe's model allows me to summarize and frame how TTRPG practices have helped players overcome adversity. I will now go through each of the 5 Rs and demonstrate how players have been able to meet each of these markers through their TTRPG experiences.

6.2.1 Resources

Very simply, "resources are the things we need to live our lives" (Yale University, n.d.). TTRPGs, admittedly, cannot directly provide food and shelter; however, they can help develop "a person's skills, abilities, and social networks [which are] also resources" (Yale University, n.d.). As outlined above, participants have reported that TTRPGs have helped them develop a variety of skills and abilities ranging from interpersonal to academic skills. Additionally, as an

inherently social activity, TTRPGs have helped individuals meet new people while also strengthening their current relationships, allowing them to develop strong social networks. Many participants described how they had difficulty making and maintaining relationships for a variety of reasons. TTRPGs offer a safe and comfortable space for players to meet and interact with others. These social interactions facilitated through TTRPGs can be understood as one form of social participation.

TTRPGs, however, can also act as an avenue to obtain more physical resources. For example, Andrew's friend from his TTRPG community helped him obtain transportation by sharing with him the fact that he is eligible for a discounted bus pass. Social networks allow individuals to receive strategic help from others in order to increase the individual's chances of meeting their needs (Harper et al., 2017; Rowe, 2014). TTRPGs can help a player grow their social network which can help them meet these other needs as demonstrated by Andrew. Additionally, TTRPGs can become a source of income, which can assist players in obtaining other resources such as food and housing. While Susan and Adam created their own games to publish, Daniel has found himself employment as a professional Dungeon Master.

In general, the social nature of TTRPGs and the opportunity to practise interpersonal skills helps players grow their social networks which can help them obtain other resources. In addition, there are also opportunities to use TTRPGs as a direct source to resources like income. It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations related to gaining a meaningful income from TTRPGs. While the potential for income gained may be low, other meaningful gains can come from TTRPGs such as roles and relationships.

6.2.2 Roles

Roles, or more specifically valued roles, are “roles that a person is proud of and that others recognize as important” (Yale University, n.d., para 1). Roles can be divided into many broad categories such as relationships, work, and education (Thomas & Wolfensberger, 1999). People also fill multiple roles at once and throughout their lives (Thomas & Wolfensberger, 1999). It has been found that giving back to and caring for the community is an important aspect of citizenship (Harper et al., 2017). Some important roles mentioned by participants include, teacher, community leader and friend. Relationships are often what provide individuals with their valued roles (Harper, 2017). An important role for Ashley is that of “big sister,” she explains how TTRPGs helped her play that role:

I am, a large part of my personality is being a big sister. Teaching and helping out younger people and being able to slightly scratch that same itch, or help out people, be helpful, be interesting, be entertaining, in like a low stakes weird older sister way, was just bomb to the soul. That has been so, so, so good. On so many different levels that has helped.

Daniel is also heavily involved in the community and supporting young people. As he states, he is a bit of a celebrity in his community. He has become a source of support for many youth in his community, he explains:

I enjoy helping people, right. So, I’m never going to turn down if somebody needs to talk to me...um there’s a series of youngsters. [...] there’s a number of youths or kids that I get messages and they’re like “Hey, I’m going through this trouble, what can I do?”, or “Hey, how are you feeling today? I hear you’re sick.” I don’t

want to say like adopted kids, but it's gotten to the point where I have a number of adopted friends and kids I have to worry about, so...

Daniel and Ashley are able to fulfill these roles directly through their involvement in TTRPGs and the relationships they have formed by running games, events, and through their jobs related to TTRPGs. The types of roles described above offer opportunities for both informal and formal participation as they can be related to an organization, or through informal relationships.

Roles are often also related to statuses (Yale University, n.d.). Another important role and status which participants have gained through their TTRPG activities is "employee". Many participants have found employment or volunteer opportunities through TTRPGs. Some players are not currently able to hold a traditional job due to their current mental health, or even due to the terms and conditions related to the social benefits they receive. TTRPGs have offered players the opportunity to contribute to their communities through volunteer work. Ashley states:

The D&D game that I run on the 1st and 3rd Thursday of every month, we share money [with a charity], it's open to beginners anyone can join. That just, that, when I was...cuz the other thing about being on disability, being on public assistance is the, cuz there's rhetoric about being a drain on society [...] Being like I'm a detriment to society or at the very least I'm not contributing. Through D&D I was able to be like, I am contributing, take that. It's a little thing but it's something I'm helping. I got that back through D&D.

These roles offer opportunities for formal participation, as they are activities related to organizations, such as organised public gaming groups and conventions. In addition to contributing to this public organised gaming group, she is also contributing to charity as part of

the funds raised from these events go to a local charity. Contributing to society through volunteering, employment, and mentorship is extremely important and valuable for a community (Yale University, n.d.). Thomas & Wolfensberger (1999) suggest that an individual must have the opportunity to exhibit key requirements of a role, such as position and behaviours. In addition to providing the necessary skills to become fully involved in the community such as the interpersonal skills and leadership skills required to successfully lead these initiatives, TTRPGs offer an avenue to make these contributions and take on these roles that both the player and community see as valuable.

Studies have even found that holding valued roles has a positive effect on a person's overall well-being (Menaghan, 1989; Spreitzer, Snyder, & Larson, 1980; Thoits, 1991). Wolfensberger (1983), also suggests that holding a valued role can assist with an individual's access to resources, while a devalued role can lead to fewer resources, stigma, abuse, and neglect. The opportunity to take on these valued roles helps shed other devalued or stigmatized roles these individuals may have previously held. For example, Ashley can now hold the valued role of volunteer instead of unemployed or struggling with mental health challenges. Role investment allows individuals to organise their different roles within a hierarchy and place different levels of investment into these roles according to their hierarchal positioning (Thoits, 1991; Wells & Stryker, 1988). While Ashley may still struggle with mental health challenges, she can prioritize her role as a volunteer.

6.2.3 Relationships

Relationships of all levels of intimacy are important, and those which enrich individuals form the basis of strong communities (Yale University, n.d.). As previously discussed, TTRPGs help individuals grow their social networks. Players can form varying types of relationships

through their TTRPG activities. For example, in addition to building relationships with other players, Andrew developed a relationship with the shopkeepers at his local game store. He explains:

Yeah, my first time at [the game shop] I kept quiet to myself. I do this thing that I do in shops, where I keep my arms close to my chest and I don't want them to do that thing where they are like "Oh, he's shoplifting" [...] But after a while, after they got to know me a bit more, I was like, "Hey, what's up?"

Andrew did not feel a sense of belonging when he started frequenting the store, scared that he would be accused of shoplifting, over time, however, he was able to build a relationship with the shopkeepers and take on the role of store patron, and become a part of the community. In addition, TTRPGs help build and maintain friendships. It is through TTRPGs that players can express pride in each other and validate each other. These relationships can help provide citizenship at a local and informal level and provide individuals with a sense of belonging (Glenn, 2011).

6.2.4 Responsibilities

Responsibilities involve responding to calls of action accordingly. Additionally, individuals should fulfill responsibilities which they feel are important (Yale University, n.d.). The roles which players identify as important and take on, provide them with a variety of responsibilities. These responsibilities can include: a GM having a game prepared to play with friends; players being available to offer support to others experiencing difficult challenges, or players contributing to larger society through volunteering and charitable work. This idea of responsibility can be linked to the earliest ideas of citizenship, like Marshall's (1950) definition which states all citizens have both rights and duties. While Marshall's definition may have

referred to legal responsibilities related to national citizenship, these responsibilities go beyond this simple role or status as national citizen, but are informed by the other roles an individual chooses to take on.

Rowe includes an interesting aspect to responsibilities, which are responsibilities “to and for the self” (Yale University, n.d.). Many players have reported TTRPGs as being therapeutic, an opportunity to care for themselves (Bowman, 2010). Many players have identified TTRPGs as being part of their identity. TTRPGs offer players an opportunity to do an activity they enjoy allowing them to engage in self-care by momentarily escaping from the stressors around them.

The roles which individuals take on through their TTRPG activities provide them with important responsibilities to fulfill for others and themselves. These responsibilities provide opportunities for both formal and informal social participation. Some of the responsibilities taken on are related to formal roles, such as Ashley’s responsibility to “give back” or “contribute” to society by volunteering as a Gm at a local game shop, or Daniel who is employed at a school and teaches storytelling through D&D. Other responsibilities are related to more informal roles such as friend or mentor, like Daniel who acts as a mentor to the youth in his community and cares for them by checking in with them and offering support and advice.

6.2.5 Rights

Rights mean that individuals “are empowered to know and advocate for their rights,” while also receiving these rights (Yale University, n.d.). This idea of rights goes beyond more traditional understandings of citizenship such as Marshall’s (1990), which simply involves the possession of these rights. While the game itself may not teach players about their rights, the game can help players build networks, which in turn can help teach and advocate for an individual’s rights. In addition, playing TTRPGs can empower players by providing them with

the necessary skills to seek out and advocate for their own rights. This type of knowledge transfer was particularly important for Andrew, who learned through a friend about his rights to a discounted bus pass. This new knowledge had a significant impact on his life, as he explains:

So, [my friend] told me that I could get a special discount. I went down and before you know it I ended up getting a bus pass for literally half the price that people would pay for a normal monthly pass. So, which meant I could ride the bus an infinite number of times, which made my commutes to [my gaming sessions] much more quicker, much more safer, than just walking. And so it basically broadened my horizons, so if I never went out to do role-playing I would have never discovered that [...] It's made socializing easier, it's made transit much more easier, and I don't think my life would have improved, I don't think my life would be the same without it. And I think I owe it all to just going down for role-playing night one time, only to find that it's been cancelled. But like, it was there that I discovered from my friend that I could get this monthly discount.

For others, like Susan, TTRPGs did not simply provide them with the opportunity for information related to their rights, but truly helped them gain the confidence and skills necessary to take action in advocating and knowing their rights. The development of her leadership skills assisted her in creating a transgender support group and a transgender advocacy group. The formation of these groups can be seen as a formal act of social participation, as they become organizations of individuals meeting with a particular goal, advocacy and support for transgender rights.

While playing TTRPGs does not directly empower players to know and advocate for their rights, different aspects of the practice can help players achieve this. Through the social

networks built and self-development gained by playing TTRPGs, players can have the opportunity to learn about, advocate for, and receive their rights. These rights include political, social, civil, and cultural rights and are understood as human rights by the United Nations. These are “rights relating to the workplace, social security, family life, participation in cultural life, and access to housing, food, water, health care and education” (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2008, p. 1). What Rowe emphasizes is that these individuals should be empowered to learn about their various rights, and advocate for their rights, which can be accomplished in a supportive and strong community setting through the sharing of information, and general support and feeling of belonging. As demonstrated above, TTRPGs can be a setting which builds social networks and encourages the sharing of information and builds strong supportive relationships which can help individuals learn about, advocate for, and receive their rights.

Conclusion

The benefits gained from TTRPGs go beyond the gaming table and TTRPG community. The skills gained, and relationships made through TTRPG experiences provide individuals with the opportunity to gain resources, take on valued roles, build meaningful relationships, take on important responsibilities, and learn and advocate for their rights. TTRPGs provide a context in which participants can both gain from and contribute to the communities around them. TTRPG practices provide learning outcomes which facilitate higher levels of social participation in both its formal and informal forms. This analysis, however, does not exhaust the discussion on how TTRPGs can benefit players. This is only a first step in understanding the types of experiences which can be lived through these practices. While these types of practices have been heavily stigmatized in the past, and to some degree continue to be today, these practices promise many more benefits for players, which requires further research.

6.3 Limitations of TTRPGs

While the participants of this study demonstrated how TTRPGs can be customized to meet various needs, it is also important to note that the benefits gained from TTRPGs are potentialities and not guaranteed. What has been described so far is the ideal TTRPG for these participants. Participants have also shared certain negative aspects that can emerge from the game. Participants described negative effects on their relationships, limitations of game mechanics, negative group dynamics, and negative cultural aspects.

For some, the game had a negative effect on their relationships with others outside of the game. For example, Susan cites how TTRPGs affected her relationships both inside and outside carceral institutions, she states:

Yes. It interfered with my relationship with my mother who thought I was going crazy. It interfered with my relationship with guards in the prison who thought the game was somehow threatening to the security of the institution, and they treated me negatively for it. I have been treated negatively by family members, who are religious nut bags, who were just certain that I'm worshipping the devil.

Damaging existing relationships is evidently counterintuitive to citizenship which requires the enrichment of relationships. Susan is also one of the most veteran players and would have lived through the TTRPG moral panic of the 1980s. Today, the influence of the moral panic is much less felt, as demonstrated by the younger players who have not reported experiencing this type of relationship strain due to the games.

There are also limitations to the mechanics of certain TTRPGs. Some players have cited the games as running too long, the time commitment being too significant or the rules being

difficult to learn. The game mechanics can also limit the type of stories that can be told. Adam explains:

Dungeons and Dragons assumes a top-down motivation. The characters are going to be killing monsters, they're going to be getting gold, and they are doing to get better at killing monsters for gold. Whatever you do, the game assumes you're going to be doing that. But if the players want to tell a different story, a story of like romancing [...] and the drama of a human falling in love with an immortal creature, because that's an interesting story...but there's no, like, you can do that in D&D, but there's no incentive to do that in D&D. Like, there's no carrot at the end of that road to push the player down. So whatever else you use D&D for...the tool kit that it represents is a tool kit to tell a particular kind of story.

Games that do not reward and encourage exploration and storytelling can eliminate the exploratory benefits of the game.

Another potential issue identified by players is the group dynamic. Group dynamics are important when playing TTRPGs, and David has had a particularly difficult time with this. Of his most recent group he states, "Do I feel wanted in this group? Like, I do the most damage. But why should I stay?" Poor group dynamic can negatively affect a player's feelings of belonging to the group. As previously discussed, this membership to the smaller TTRPG group can act as an entry into the larger community, but without this original sense of belonging the game can lose this potential.

Lastly, some players have identified negative aspects of the TTRPG culture, especially online. Many players have remarked how the community is largely composed of males, and a

particular lack of representation of non-cisgender, male GMs. Before playing TTRPGs, Andrew explored them through the internet and developed a particular understanding of the games. He explains, “The first time one of my characters died, [...] and I actually thought at the time that if your character were to die you’re no longer welcome at the table, that’s what I thought.” This lack of representation and negative conceptions of the game shared online could have an effect on new or potential players’ feelings of belongingness.

While players identified these potentially negative aspects of the game, they have often found ways to circumvent these issues by finding a new group to play with, hosting tables which are purposefully diverse and inclusive, and creating their own game systems. These actions have created safe and inclusive spaces where players have been able to explore and flourish and take important steps towards citizenship.

6.4 Future research

TTRPG research remains limited, and there are many more avenues to explore. Admittedly, this study and other academic research does not sufficiently examine the role of the GM, and the benefits and meaning of this role, but this simply means there is new and exciting research that still needs to be done on this topic. A limitation of the current study is the lack of consideration of social conditions such as age, sex, marital status, and social class. While some details were gathered through the research process, the richness of this data was lacking, in part because the project was originally more focused on the exploration of the meaning and impact of these games in relation to the difficult or challenging experience. Data related to social class and socio-economic conditions could have enriched the analysis on how these practices differ between social conditions, for example in terms of accessibility to these practices and the benefits gained from these practices. Furthermore, it would be interesting to expand analysis and

include Rowe's concept of citizenship, adding to the discussion on how citizenship is not simply attained by providing a marginalized individual with resources, but also requires the community itself to be welcoming of this individual (Rowe, 2015). Another important avenue of research needed is the further exploration of the meaning of TTRPGs for different marginalized populations such as the LGBTQ+ community, women, those struggling with mental health challenges and those who have been incarcerated.

While I was unable to focus on incarcerated individuals, I believe research related to TTRPGs in the carceral setting remains important. According to media sources, there is a considerable number of individuals who play TTRPGs within correctional institutions, and a growing number of institutions banning these practices. Some correctional staff and incarcerated players report benefits of these games while officials claim these games are dangerous. This suggests two different types of research must be done. One, research should focus on the relationship between TTRPGs and the carceral setting, further examining carceral institutions' perspective on these practices. Two, academic research should be done focusing on the experience of playing TTRPGs within the carceral setting.

An interesting theme also emerges through the few media sources which examined TTRPGs in prison. Media sources report that the TTRPG table is a space where racism and gang affiliations are put aside (Poor & Woods, 2017; Waypoint, 2017). Additionally, media sources report that players gain the same benefits described above of skill development and feelings of belonging through game play (de Kleer, 2017b; Localish, 2019; Poor & Woods, 2017; Singer v. Raemisch, 2010;). There is an interest and effort to study this topic by the general public such as de Kleer's Kickstarter campaign "Let's Play: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons In Prison," a documentary project on TTRPGs in prison (Kleer Creative, 2019a). Unfortunately, this project

has not yet come to fruition due to a lack of funding. The project organizer believes, however, that if the project had been backed by better promotional efforts it may have reached its funding goals (Kleer Creative, 2019b). In May 2020, Kleer Creative still expressed the intention to relaunch the campaign as soon as the right conditions for this project emerged again. Perhaps more academic attention on the topic could help “kickstart” important projects like this.

While it is important to recognize the limits of TTRPGs, it is also important to recognize their potential. TTRPGs are not a single point of entry into citizenship, but they can help players meet the 5 Rs both directly and indirectly. TTRPGs act as a supplement to other activities, institutions, and individuals in the player’s life, such as support from friends and family, social assistance, therapeutic or intervention-based programs, and participation in other activities, such as art, martial arts, and reading. TTRPGs can be an additional tool to help players reach full citizenship by helping them engage in self-development—through skill and knowledge development—needed to confidently participate in society. TTRPGs can also provide players with a community and an opportunity to strengthen and repair old relationships, as well as build new ones of varying levels of intimacy. Finally, these qualities of these gaming practices can facilitate participation in society, allowing players to meet the 5 Rs of citizenship.

Societal participation is not only good for the individual but the entire community. Social integration has been found to benefit communities by increasing creativity and economic growth (Putnam, 2009), and creating more resilient communities (Williams, 2014). Those who are more socially integrated also tend to demonstrate more altruistic behaviours (Brañas-Garza et al., 2010). While the correctional system may view TTRPGs as an escape or promoting deviant behaviours, TTRPG practices, in reality, could help incarcerated individuals integrate into the community and become full citizens. While Canadian Correctional Services’ (CSC) mission

focuses on their public safety role and assisting offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens (CSC, 2012), their 2008 transformation agenda item “enhancing correctional programs and employment skills of offenders” does hint at an interest in helping these individuals integrate into the community as not only law-abiding, but productive citizens (CSC, 2018). Additionally, CSC supports volunteer groups, programs and services which aim for the reintegration of offenders into the community (CSC, 2012). Could TTRPGs become integrated within the correctional setting, promoting Dungeons, Dragons & Citizenship?

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Appendix

Appendix A – Recruitment Poster

ADVENTURERS NEEDED!

We are looking for volunteers in the Ottawa area to participate in a study on tabletop role playing games (TTRPGs).

In many correctional institutions in North America tabletop role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* remain banned. However, articles by *The New York Times* and *Vice Media* have recently shed light on the importance of TTRPGs for individuals who have spent time in a correctional institution, helping break the stigma sometimes associated with these practices. The goal of our research is to better understand the experience and importance of TTRPGs for those who engage in them.

For the first stage of this project, we are especially interested in speaking with individuals who have played TTRPGs for some time and who have also experienced difficult situations in their lives to better understand the place and the importance of these practices in their lives. More specifically, we would like to meet individuals who are 18+ and have been playing TTRPGs for at least a year (like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, or *Homebrewed* games) and have been incarcerated in provincial or federal correctional centers. As a participant, you would be asked to take part in an interview lasting around 90 minutes, in French or English, detailing your experiences as a player or game master.

If you are interested in participating or have questions regarding this study, please contact Anne Goodall [REDACTED]. You may be asked to answer a few questions regarding your experience in order to determine eligibility and participant selection.

This study is supervised by Alexis Hieu Truong [REDACTED], Assistant professor with the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa



uOttawa



ADVENTURERS NEEDED!

We are looking for volunteers in the Ottawa area to participate in a study on tabletop role playing games (TTRPGs).

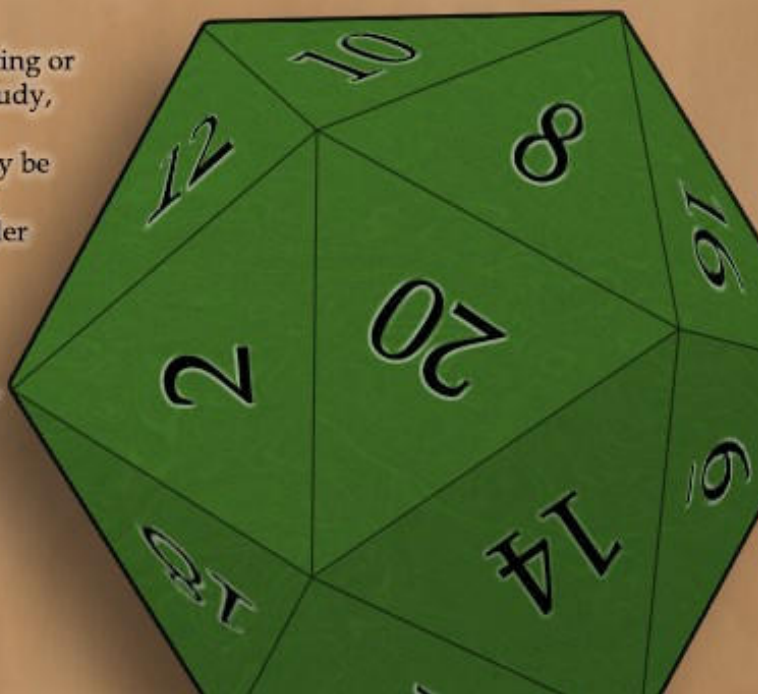
In many correctional institutions in North America tabletop role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* remain banned. However, articles by *The New York Times* and *Vice Media* have recently shed light on the importance of TTRPGs for individuals who have spent time in a correctional institution, helping break the stigma sometimes associated with these practices. The goal of our research is to better understand the experience, and importance of TTRPGs for those who engage in them.

For the second stage of this project, we would like to meet individuals who are 18+ and have been playing TTRPGs for at least a year (like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, or Homebrewed games) and for whom these games helped to overcome a challenge or difficult life experience. As a participant, you would be asked to take part in an interview lasting around 90 minutes, in French or English, detailing your experiences as a player or game master.

If you are interested in participating or have questions regarding this study, please contact Anne Goodall

██████████ You may be asked to answer a few questions regarding your experience in order to determine eligibility and participant selection.

This study is supervised by Alexis Hieu Truong ██████████ Assistant professor with the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa



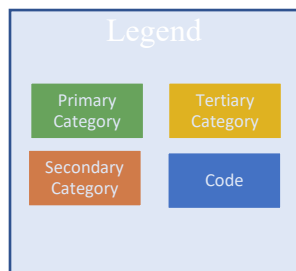
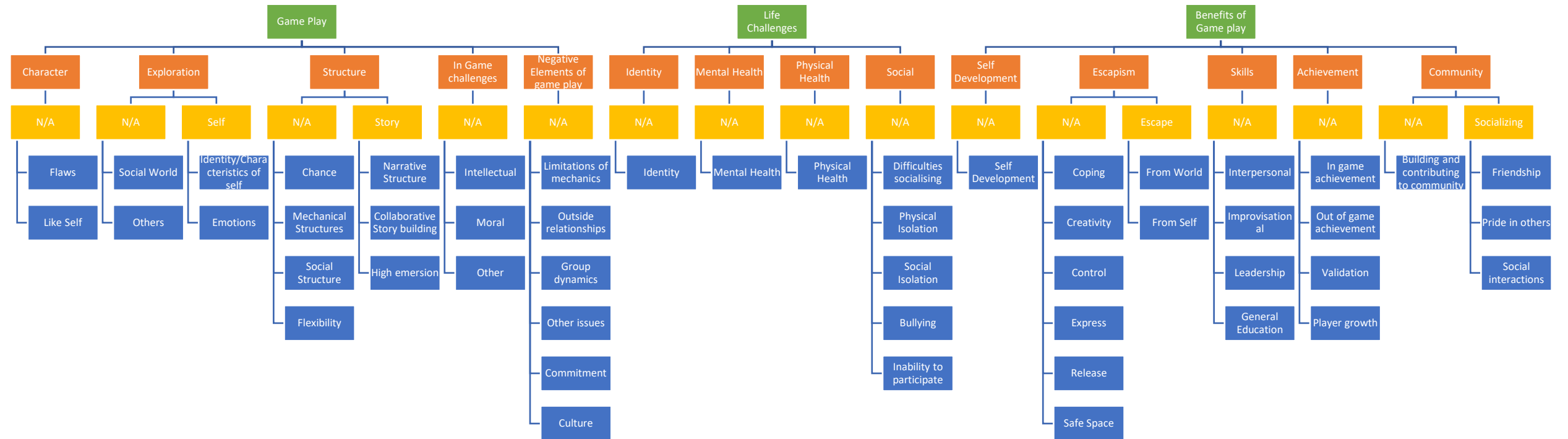
Appendix B – Interview guide

1. Can you describe your most memorable TTRPG experience to date?
 - a. Tell me about your first experience playing TTRPGs
 - i. What motivated you to begin playing TTRPGs?
 - ii. How were you introduced to these games?
 - b. Tell me about your most recent experiences playing TTRPGs
 - i. What are some of the most important things you've learned since you started?
 - c. Describe for me your first character/campaign you created
 - i. Describe for me your favourite character/campaign to date
 - ii. Where their types of characters that you played and disliked or would not play again? Can you give me an example?
 - d. Do you see similarities between you and your life and the characters and stories you create?
 - i. Are there also differences that you would note between you as a person and these characters and stories?
2. Can you describe for me your challenging experience?
 - i. Can you describe for me a day in the life during this time or the most difficult time?
 - I. Did/How did D&D change this?
 - ii. Did these practices interest you in this time of your life and why or why not?
 - iii. Did what originally attracted you to these games change during this period?
3. Looking back at your first experience and the time that has passed since then, did TTRPGs have an effect on you and your life? Can you give me some examples?
 - a. Have TTRPGs ever had an effect on your life outside of the games?
 - i. Has the game interfered with any aspect in your life?
 - ii. Have TTRPGs had an effect on your relations with other people outside of the games?
 - b. Have TTRPGs helped you learn something about yourself, or about the world you live in?

New Themes to explore:

- Character creation/process
- Game Mechanics
- Creativity
- Narrative elements
- Community involvement
- The social context TTRPGs are played in

Appendix C – Coding List



Appendix D – Consent Form

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Consent Form

Title of the study: The Importance of Tabletop Role-Playing Game Practices When Overcoming Hardships

Anne Goodall and assistant professor Alexis Hieu Truong (supervisor), of the Department of Criminology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa.

Anne Goodall:

Alexis Hieu Truong (Supervisor):

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Anne Goodall and supervised by Alexis Hieu Truong.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the importance and meaning of table top role-playing games for individuals who have overcome difficult situations in their lives. This study is led by Anne Goodall in partial fulfillment for the requirements of her Master of Arts Degree at the University of Ottawa.

Participation: My participation will consist of one interview lasting about 90 minutes during which I will discuss my experiences and practices related to role playing and my challenging or difficult life experience. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will be scheduled at my convenience in a public space with a private meeting room in a convenient location for me. It is possible that an interview be scheduled over Skype in the event that it is not possible to meet in person. If conducted over skype, a verbal consent will be asked and recorded at the beginning of the interview.

I may be asked if I want to contribute some of the material I have created as a TTRPG player (ex: character sheets, homebrewed games, etc.). These materials will be provided in the form of pictures or photocopies, original copies are not requested. These images will only be used for the purpose of analyses of the above mentioned study and will not be published in any material related to this study.

Risks: Although interviews will focus on the practice of role-playing games, they will explore the difficult or challenging experiences that I have identified as a participant to this research. My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information, and this may cause me to feel emotional or psychological discomfort or distress. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks by stopping the interview or taking breaks at any time if needed. All information I provide is voluntary, and I am not required to discuss or divulge any information I am not comfortable discussing. If I feel any discomfort or distress, and am in need of mental health support or resources, I can contact The Ottawa Distress Centre 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Benefits: My participation in this study will allow me to discuss and share my story and experiences as a role-player. In addition, my participation will allow me to help

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University of Ottawa
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Ottawa ON K1N 6N5
Canada



contribute to the growing academic literature and understanding of tabletop role-playing games.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purpose of analysis for the study **The Importance of Tabletop Role-Playing Game Practices When Overcoming Hardships** and that my confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Protection of Material: Some material I provide may be copyrighted. No Copyrighted information will be published in any published material which results from the above mentioned study.

Conservation of data: The data collected through this interview (recording, notes, consent form, and transcript) will be kept in a secure manner. All paper information will be kept in a secured cabinet with a lock, while electronic copies will be kept in a password protected computer, USB key, or hard drive and encrypted file. Data will be retained for 10 years.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions or provide my original TTRPG material, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will not be considered in the study. Recordings and other data in electronic format will be disposed of through secure deletion while any physical copies of data will be shredded.

Acceptance: I, _____ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Anne Goodall of the department of Criminology, Faculty of Social Science at the University of Ottawa under the supervision of Alexis Hieu Truong

YES O NO O - I agree to share my own personal game material for the purpose of the above mentioned study conducted by Anne Goodall of the department of Criminology, Faculty of Social Science at the University of Ottawa under the supervision of Alexis Hieu Truong.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

If I feel any discomfort or distress, and am in need of mental health support or resources, I can contact The Ottawa Distress Centre 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Ottawa Distress Centre: 613-238-3311

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E – Information Letter
Information Letter

Researcher:

Anne Goodall
MA Student | Étudiante MA
Department of Criminology | Département de criminologie
University of Ottawa | Université d'Ottawa

Supervisor:

Alexis Hieu Truong
Assistant Professor | Professeur adjoint
Department of Criminology | Département de Criminologie
University of Ottawa | Université d'Ottawa

Project Title: The importance and meaning of tabletop role playing games when overcoming hardships

Context: In many correctional institutions in North America, tabletop role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* remain banned. More broadly, articles by [The New York Times](#) and [Vice Media](#) have recently shed light on the importance of TTRPGs for individuals who have spent time in a correctional institution in the US. The goal of our research is to better understand the experience, and importance of TTRPGs for these individuals, and for others experiencing various forms of hardships.

Invitation: You are invited to participate in a project that will explore meanings and importance of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG) for individuals who have overcome a challenge or have lived a difficult experience. We will prioritize our interest in speaking with individuals who have been incarcerated. This project is led by Anne Goodall and supervised by Alexis Hieu Truong in partial fulfilment for the requirements of her Master of Arts Degree in Criminology at the University of Ottawa.

Participation: Your participation will consist of doing an interview with the researcher.

The interview will last around 90 minutes and questions will focus on your personal experience playing TTRPGs. Questions will be open-ended, and they will also explore the meaning you give to TTRPG practices and the place those practices have in your life. If new questions emerge after the interview, the researcher might ask you if you would agree to meet for another interview. You are free to refuse to do another interview. This will have no consequences on your ability to continue to participate in the research if you still wish to do so.

Interviews will be recorded (audio only). The content will be used in a way that prevents others from retracing the information to the participants. The names of participants will not be divulged to anyone. If participants are quoted directly in publications or presentations, pseudonyms chosen by the researcher will be used to replace their names and other sensitive information. Content from interviews will remain strictly confidential.

This research will only include a small number of participants. They will be chosen in light of the length, diversity and depth of their experiences, the diversity of participants in regards to age and gender, and of how their availability coincides with the availability of the researcher. By « length, diversity and depth of the experience ,» we mean the number of years since one started to engage in TTRPGs, the frequency at which one

participated in TTRPGs, the kinds of games they engaged in and the types of challenges they have faced in the past. By diversity of participants, we mean that we will be selecting participants with the intention of creating a sample coming from different backgrounds and with a variety of different experiences (i.e. the institution's level of security, type of institution, etc.) when possible. Please note that you may withdraw from this project at any moment and/or refuse to answer questions without any consequences.

Benefits: You may benefit from the opportunity to share your experiences as a tabletop role player. In addition, by participating, you will help contribute to the growing literature on the topic of role-playing Games.

Anne Goodall

Date

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