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Beyond the Meeple: TTRPG's Impact on WWU Students

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Beyond the Meeple: TTRPG's Impact on WWU Students

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DEDICATIONS

To my father, who always taught me that when it came to the things I love, I should never be afraid to dream big.

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ABSTRACT

The present study sought to develop a stronger understanding of the impact of Tabletop Roleplaying games (TTRPG's) on college students. Data from 17 one-on-one interviews as well as 18 survey responses from students attending Western Washington University were used. The qualitative data was coded using first, second and third order coding with the use of digital coding software Atlas.ti. Of the 12 codes found from the interviews, the "Beyond Part" and the "Player versus Character" themes were examined. My analysis found that players experience the impacts of TTRPG's beyond the table on both an individual level as well as on a group level. Furthermore the TTRPG's help players define their identity as far as gender, sexual orientation and other personal identities such as religion. In addition to exploring identity, players also found many therapeutic aspects through the relationship between them as a player and their character. The results found in this research add to the literature exploring the impacts of TTRPG's and are discussed in terms of their application to areas beyond the hobby as well as future research direction.

Keywords: TTRPG; College students; Character dynamics; Qualitative; Immersive gameplay; Identity

INTRODUCTION

The night is cold and the rain is heavy, your armor worn down from endless combat, your weapons dull from fighting. After your four year journey through the Arboretum of Knowledge you come upon a stone arch wedged on a gargantuan cedar tree. The arch leading into a seemingly endless hall of darkness has only one phrase etched on its capstone: "Only those of the highest quality research may find the treasures hidden within". You approach the stone arch and reach out your hand to the void. A deep croaking voice beckons you forth into the depth within. Roll for initiative...

Dungeons and Dragons first debuted commercially in 1974 (Fine 2002) and presented the first example of what was called a Fantasy Role Playing game (FRP). This idea would go on to spread into a larger category of games called Tabletop Role Playing games (TTRPG's) and would spread deep into popular culture amongst many subpopulations. However, not without first enduring a number of stigmas from a "nerdy" activity for outcasts to engage in, to a "satanic" ritual for those worshipping the devil (Bean et Connell 2023). Finally, it would become so popular as to inspire appearances in popular media such as *Stranger Things*, have shows devoted to it such as *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* and even have movies devoted directly to it such as the recent *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Amongst Thieves* film.

Throughout this journey of ups and downs, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), as well as TTRPG's overall, would go on to play a role in many people's lives in a variety of ways. Many of the ways that TTRPG's can and have impacted those who play has been explored by previous research which will be explored in the literature review below. However, the goal of this project is to add more data to the existing body of literature while introducing new ideas of existing phenomenon amongst player experiences, as well as form a balance between the positive and

negative effects of playing TTRPG's. Using the data of 17 in depth interviews I will explore two present themes found from coding interview transcripts that reveal more details as to how playing TTRPG's has impacted students at Western Washington University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to best understand what is already understood about TTRPG's and how it relates to the project I've written, I have divided this literature review into three relevant sections. The first of these will look at the history of TTRPG's. The second section will look at two studies that focus on how gender identity has been explored in TTRPG's. Finally, the third section will look at how TTRPG's have been used for therapeutic purposes.

Historical Background of TTRPG's

With the purpose of understanding how TTRPG's have impacted those who play them, it is important to first understand where they came from. Gary Fine's *Shared Fantasy* (2002) provides a comprehensive understanding of how TTRPG's have come about and how they have impacted the field of Sociology. The first half of this book provides us with a detailed history of the origins of TTRPG's. Fine traces this history down before the origin of the term TTRPG by writing about the popularity of game formats that preceded it.

War games and simulation games were common ancestors to Fantasy Role Playing, FRP, games which would go on to become the modern TTRPG. War games were represented by two groups, those who "simulate history through miniature battles" and others who "simulate history through board games" (Fine 2002). Both of these game methods were limiting in their scope of play which contributed to the emergence of FRP's. Simulation games had a similar shortcoming. However, in contrast to war games, simulation games were designed with the objective of providing educational benefits. They were designed to teach participants helpful concepts such

as training for a new job position. However, much like war games, simulation games fell short of gripping a wide audience given their relatively small scope of impact as far as entertainment. Ideas from war games and simulation games would go on to inspire FRP games in the form of the first of its kind, Dungeons and Dragons. D&D took inspiration from both aforementioned mediums and incorporated a more flexible medieval inspired setting that would later inspire many other companies to develop and change parts of the initial framework. All of this compiled together to form the modern world of TTRPG's, with common ancestry from war games and simulation games and branching off the first seed that was D&D. In addition to understanding a brief history of TTRPG's, I have provided a glossary with key terms relevant to how this paper talks about TTRPG's (Appendix C).

Gender Identity in TTRPG's

Given that a large aspect of TTRPG's is the capacity to build your own character from a set list of parameters and guidelines, many people have used this framework to explore aspects of their identity through gameplay. The impacts, implications and feasibility of this has been reviewed by many researchers that have developed a wide array of findings that detail how TTRPG's have shaped the concept of gender identity. For this literature review I focus first on the findings regarding the potential clinical applications of TTRPG's to support LGBTQ+ individuals. Gobble (2021) wrote about the impacts of stressors negatively affecting the lives of sexual and gender minorities, SGMs, especially after the pandemic. This article looks at how the environmental changes brought about by the pandemic particularly impacted SGM communities, leaving them with little space to process the stressors brought about by discrimination and internalized transphobia and homophobia. One space that SGM communities were able to find emotional refuge was through the participation in TTRPG's.

The article discussed how many queer individuals were wrestling with internalized stigma towards their own sexual orientation. However, through positive experiences in role playing scenes that showed compassion and kindness towards individuals with queer identities “the player may turn this compassion toward the self” (Gobble 2021). In this way, engaging in role play with other individuals playing queer characters and having those characters be welcome and accepted in-game, players could find comfort and reconcile with their own personal identities. This project aims to look further into how TTRPG's can positively impact the SGM community as well as how the participants interviewed in this study utilized TTRPG's for gender exploration.

Davies (2021) further outlines how players use TTRPG's for gender exploration by discussing the ways in which groups will adhere to written rules and guides when it comes to creating a world that fits the narratives they wish to tell. This article relates more to the concept of agency over the overall narrative by discussing how TTRPG rulebooks determine the lore of the world players exist within. Through a deep analysis of various rulebooks, Davies concludes that the authors of rulebooks often make it clear the role that gender and sexuality are intended to play in the worlds they write. However, since TTRPG's are a more versatile tool that can be modified by those playing it, some individuals choose to ignore those aspects in favor of creating a narrative more fitting for them and their group. This functionality of TTRPG's of being able to be changed and modified to the needs of the group are what has made it such a great tool for individuals to explore their own identities through the game.

In regards to this project I will also explore the ways people use and manipulate the game in order to fit their stories as well as how queer narratives and spaces have similarities in structure with the collaborative storytelling of TTRPG communities. Additionally I provide

further insight into how queer individuals are interacting with TTRPG's in order to further the depth of knowledge we have in that area as well as to provide additional evidence towards catering TTRPG's and associated spaces to LGBTQ+ individuals.

TTRPG and Therapeutic Benefits

Finally, another important concept to understand for this research project is how TTRPG's have been studied and used for therapeutic applications. Many researchers have looked into this concept in order to understand if TTRPG's have a space in therapy and counseling or if they fall short of it. Amongst those is Bean and Connell (2023) who looked into the rising trend of using TTRPG's and RPG's for therapy and counseling. Their research, similar to this project, looked first at the history of TTRPG's and their rise in popularity up to contemporary times. Acknowledging the widespread recognition TTRPG's have received, the article then explores how they have been used for therapeutic purposes and what outcomes stemmed from this application. The study concluded that there were a number of areas in which TTRPG's could help those who play them. These benefits ranged from problem-solving and decision making, all the way to confidence, communication and emotional intelligence.

Stemming from this same idea Slaughter and Orth's (2023) research makes the case that TTRPG's have the potential to incur many positive outcomes when used in the clinical setting. This particular paper looked directly at a case study performed on a group of adults, given that no research before had looked directly at programs actively implementing this method. Through this research the goal was to evaluate the feasibility and results possible from incorporating TTRPG's into group therapy. Results found preliminary support for the case that TTRPG's can have major benefits in a clinical setting. The scope of my research project develops more of the individual and personal therapeutic benefits rather than the larger organizational applications of

TTRPG's in order to ensure available literature is focusing on both small and large scale implications. However, the potential for clinical application is discussed in the conclusion of this project.

METHODS

This research project was conducted by surveying and interviewing Western Washington University students who had had experiences with TTRPG's. In order to recruit students for this research project, a number of sampling techniques were employed. The first of these was using word of mouth from various online sources. A poster was designed to be distributed through various social media accounts as well through school program newsletters. After spreading information via this poster, those who filled out the survey would be emailed with information on next steps as well as asking for any other students who would be interested in partaking in the project in order to incur a snowballing effect. I used these approaches to collect a diverse and wide sample while attending to the fact that the community is tight-knit, leveraging previous connections in order to gather further participants.

In total there were 18 survey responses and 17 interviews. Amongst the survey participants, in order of quantity, the gender identities of respondents were women (9), non-binary (5), men (4), trans men (2), genderfluid (2), agender (1). The racial distribution was, in order of quantity, white (16), Hispanic (2), Asian (1). The average age of the survey participants was 20.66. Two thirds of the respondents (12) had completed their second or third year of education at WWU, the rest were either in their first year or just having completed it (6). Less than a third (5) of the participants identified as heterosexual, with lesbian (4) and bisexual (4) being the second most common followed by queer (3), asexual (2), gay (1) and pansexual (1). The average time having played TTRPG's, in years, was 4.61 years, excluding 3 respondents

having played over 10 years and two respondents having played less than a year. A table outlining all the demographic categories of the participants whose quotes were used in this study can be found in the appendices (Table 1).

Participants were instructed to follow a link to a survey that had questions revolving around general demographics as well as quantitative questions to analyze levels of TTRPG experience (e.g. Total time spent playing TTRPG's, TTRPG's played, classes and races played, etc.). After filling out the survey participants would receive an email with details on how to schedule a one on one interview. The interview would be held over Zoom and transcribed using Zoom's automated transcription service. Participants were told their identity would remain confidential and their responses, if used, would be provided with a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity. The interview was made up of a series of in depth, open-ended questions that would cover opinions and detailed experiences the interviewee has previously had with TTRPG's.

After the interviews, all responses were coded for common themes. This process started with first order open and thematic coding, looking through all the data gathered finding common themes and ideas present in the interviews. This took place as transcripts were reviewed and corrected for accuracy against recordings of the interviews. One of the themes identified in this data was derived as an "in vivo" code. This refers to a process of "qualitative data analysis that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants." (Manning 2017). Following this, using the digital coding software Atlas.ti, a second order coding was run, pulling quotations from the interviews that matched the themes identified in the first round of coding and looking for further commonalities within the data. Through this dual-level coding process I can perform a thorough analysis of the data that works well with an ethnographic methodology which pulls on both deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña 2012; Van Maanen 2011). Once primary

codes were identified, a third order coding was performed looking for themes and subthemes within the codes identified. At every stage of coding I met with my advisor to check for coding bias and reliability.

This coding resulted in 12 codes total, one being an In Vivo code, and two codes being broken down into subcategories. In addition to the qualitative measurements of these codes, they were analyzed in relation to each individual respondent's experience to gauge impact as well as quantity. A table was designed outlining all the codes and quotations within each one, found in the appendices (Table 2).

ANALYSIS

Although there were many themes found throughout these interviews, as was detailed in the methods section, two of these themes helped to best highlight the impacts TTRPG's have on an individual player. The first of these is a theme that I have termed "The beyond," that encompasses the various ways the game impacts players beyond the time spent at the table. The second major theme centered on the player versus character relationship, encompassing the nuances and interactions between a player and the game context, specifically the character they are portraying. Together, I argue these two themes provide an in-depth image of how TTRPG's extend beyond a "normal" game experience into something much more impactful and potentially life changing. In the following sections I will highlight the ways individuals talked about and discussed their game experiences and relationship to the TTRPG Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) in the contexts of these specific themes. Through that analysis I will demonstrate the impact of TTRPG's, like D&D, have on individuals' identities, relationships and sense of self, both inside and outside the gaming spaces.

The Beyond

The first theme in the data that highlights the impact of TTRPG's on those who play them is "The Beyond". This was an in vivo code that started as a quote from Mal, a third year student who has played TTRPG's for roughly seven years. Mal explained that "There's the game. But then the beyond that part - I don't know. Like I said I got to know people better through playing D&D with them." Although this quote does not provide a lot of insight into what "the beyond" might be, it sets up the stage for what later became a consistent theme amongst players' experiences. This "beyond" part, mysterious and undefinable, began to take form as a representation of when the game would extend its impact beyond the time players spent sitting at the table. The impacts of this "beyond" part took on a variety of shapes but became most prominent around two sub themes that I call "beyond the self" and "beyond the one."

Beyond the Self.

Within this theme a number of respondents specifically discussed an experience that I have termed "beyond the self". Which occurs when players were impacted on an individual level beyond the time spent around the table. These impacts ranged from small changes in behavior all the way to altering an individual's life course. Regardless of magnitude, the impact stemmed from an individual's either long term or single interaction with a TTRPG. In an interview with Kaz, a fourth year student, they noted the impact TTRPG's had had on their life and how someone could be impacted by the stories they play out. Kaz mentioned that although a lot of people claim that they can be detached from the stories they enact, oftentimes they do things that reflect parts of their "real" personality even though they are in the game. They followed this idea by stating the following:

“I don't think you can fully separate yourself from any fictional world that you choose to enter. I think, in a- in a way, it will- It will continue to define you and will let you see parts of yourself that you weren't expecting”

This quote does a great job representing how attached players can be to the characters they create, a theme that came up often in my interviews. In a TTRPG an individual will often be playing a character that is varying degrees of different from who they are as a person in the “real world.” However, as shown by this quote and echoed by other participants, it is often very difficult, if not impossible, for players to remove themselves fully from a character they are playing. This phenomenon of deep connectedness to one's character opens up opportunities for the player to explore their personality in smaller and more specialized increments, consciously or unconsciously. Characters test their strength and bravery when fighting a dragon, or their wit and brains when outsmarting an ancient wizard, even testing their mercifulness and compassion when sharing their spoils with the local village. All of these interactions, often common in activities such as videogames and board games, can have an even more profound impact on a player within the context of a TTRPG because of this inseparable connection and autonomy players have over their characters.

Therefore, when the time comes to give the Amulet of Health to the ailing village elder and the character hesitates because their brother too suffers from the plague that has struck the village, the player then learns, through this roleplay, just how important family is to their character and perhaps to them as well. In these gameplay moments a character's actions can often reveal the player's true values in what I call “personal exploration through gameplay.”

Other respondents highlighted how this connectedness to gameplay can then lead to changes in perspective well beyond the table. Nina, a fourth year student who's been playing TTRPG's for less than a year, pointed out how they often see things in their life through a D&D

perspective. Specifically, that they find themselves conceptualizing events or situations in gameplay terms associated with the game. To explain this, Nina described the game's dice-rolling mechanic, described in the introduction section above, and how they have applied that to their day to day framework. Nina noted,

“I think it does kind of give me an interesting conception of how things play out. It's not just like always because I made it happen that way. Sometimes. It's just how the dice rolls, you know. I think I have, like a better understanding of like chance, being like a major part of how things just happen in real life. And so I think that I actually blame myself for things less.”

Through this quote the depth of impact that comes from applying in-game logic to day to day life is highlighted. The life of a college student is often one filled with uncertainty, from tests, constant assignments, oftentimes work, and holding a social life, lots of unexpected situations can and often do occur. A significant reason people state they love playing TTRPG's is because it allows for an escape from the stressors around them. However, even for individuals just getting into TTRPG's, such as Nina, they can provide drastic changes to “real world” problem solving and stress relief. Thinking of life as a series of dice rolls seems outlandish, given that we hardly consider taking a test “rolling for intelligence”, or overcoming a stomach ache as “rolling for constitution”. However, this is the way the world works within TTRPG's and in game this allows characters to not place the blame of their misfortunes on themselves but rather cosmic forces that manipulate the roll of the dice, letting them focus more on the solution rather than the setback. Allowing this ideology to permeate into one's day to day experiences can change the way they approach problems, even if no physical dice were rolled. In this way, something that originated as a game now has an everlasting impact on the perspective of the player. However, this only encompasses how TTRPG's have helped players on an individual level. TTRPG's have also had an impact beyond the table in multiple individuals together, changing group dynamics in temporary and permanent ways.

Beyond the One.

The next sub-theme that stemmed from “The Beyond” theme is what I have termed “beyond the one.” This theme encapsulates times when the game had an impact on groups of players or the overall group dynamic beyond play. The sub-theme had two sides that must be explored; the expected, and the unexpected impacts of TTRPG’s, both capable of having positive and negative impacts on players. For example, a number of respondents discussed intimate group connections as a positive outcome that stemmed from table-top roleplaying. To this point Nikolai, a genderfluid, queer, second year student, talked about the often difficult ordeal that coming out can be. Living in communities where diverse sexual identities are not fully accepted can result in individuals shutting out parts of themselves in order to conform. This masking occurs in many facets of their life and generally makes part of someone’s personality invisible (Remedios et. Snyder 2018). In contrast, TTRPG’s often play a role in helping people be “seen” by others by allowing them to roleplay as characters that represent parts of themselves that they often mask due to stigma related to those identities. Over time players can comfortably present more parts of themselves that may not often come out in their day to day lives, creating a smoother, less invasive way for players to get to know each other in a more deep and meaningful way. Nikolai described this process when they noted:

“I think that it- I think that like getting to see people play out those stories, especially people who have been kind of uncomfortable talking about their own experiences directly in the past, just for whatever reason, it's really cool to get to see like how people- how people put their own experiences onto characters, and use that as a way to like work through elements of their identity and how they reconcile them in the real world, because again, it's just like it's a great way to get to know something about a person without it having to be a weird or overly personal conversation. ”

As Nikolai’s experience highlights, oftentimes people have various aspects of their personality that they don’t put on display for everyone to see. Whether it be small parts of themselves that

they're self-conscious of, or identities that their community does not accept. Even with the best intentions of inclusivity, asking people about these hidden aspects directly can be an awkward and unfruitful conversation. Beyond asking for someone's pronouns, a practice that has become much more common now (Jiang et. al 2022), people seldom like to lay out all their emotional baggage for people to see. However, knowing those deep and hidden parts about someone can become the foundation for a strong and supportive friendship. TTRPG's therefore come in to resolve the issue by providing a fun and welcoming alternative for people to get to know each other on a deeper level that does not feel invasive or awkward, consequently helping to form meaningful and profound relationships amongst players.

However, what if there's tensions in the group? What if individuals need a space to talk over negative emotions that may be weighing down friendships or relationships? In some situations this can resolve over a cup of coffee or over a long counseling process with a therapist. However, some individuals have even found TTRPG's as a useful tool to process tense relationships. Inej, a fourth year student, was telling me about the various obstacles between expressing interest to play DnD and actually scheduling out a time to sit around a table and play. In telling this story, they explained how two friends made continuing to play particularly difficult:

“I had 2 friends who were dating when we were playing the game, and you know they made characters that hate each other, and then, you know, a couple of months later they weren't dating anymore and I'm not saying it was the DnD but I'm also saying you know it. It was giving us a really interesting platform to like work things out.”

Inej's group experience demonstrates how TTRPG's can impact not just a single individual but group dynamics between multiple players. Although this later resulted in Inej's group dissolving from this experience, among other factors, it highlights how emotions felt in game can both reflect and impact events occurring outside the table. This can be attributed to the freedom of

play that comes inherently with TTRPG's. Because of the TTRPG structure your character can be whoever you want them to be and do relatively anything you can imagine, the decisions you take become much more personal. You are no longer playing the game's rules but rather acting on your own personal impulses, consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, when a tense scene comes up and your character yells at another, a question arises. How much of that was you, the player, angry and how much was it the character's anger? Let's illustrate this better with an example of a much more common game.

Imagine you are playing a game of Monopoly, your friend lands on your property and is forced to pay you rent. You can put on your acting cap and pretend to be a greedy landlord as you take their fake monopoly money, or you can be extremely apologetic as the game "forces your hand." In both scenarios the decision is not the player's, but rather the dice and set of rules set by the game. However, this is rarely the case in TTRPG's. Although there are rules that give direction for the players to interpret dice rolls and figure out what actions to take, the possibilities are mostly limited by the imagination and agreement of DM and player. Therefore, when two characters are being mean to each other and perhaps even acting out scenes of anger and frustration, it is difficult to remove the influence of true anger or frustration coming from the player. In this sense, players who are having difficulty or troubles outside the game may find that TTRPG's help them channel their emotions into scenes in game where it may feel less "real" while still leading to real consequences such as relationships ending and people drifting apart. This is one example in which what can often be a difficult conversation to have, is facilitated through role play even without being particularly intentional about it.

Exploring the positive ways that TTRPG's can impact players is a great way to understand why they should be more widely used. However, it is also important to acknowledge

the negative consequences that can come from interacting with such an emotionally captivating medium, especially when they are often unexpected. When playing TTRPG's it can be easy to dive deep into the character you are playing, this is often good as it drives the story forward and allows everyone to get comfortable with roleplaying.

However, committing too much to a character can also be very harmful, especially when that character behaves in an unfavorable way towards the world and other characters. In the same interview that was mentioned in an earlier paragraph, Inej described a scenario in which a player portraying a character could have negative impacts to the gameplay. They recalled a time when a party member was playing a particularly negative character and their performance inadvertently harmed the player group dynamic. They quote this player saying:

“‘because my character's moody and edgy. So like, I'm just gonna be really mean.’ And then people's feelings would get hurt, and we'd have to talk about it after the session like, Hey, like, it's not really fun for me when you're mean. ”

This player demonstrates how oftentimes getting very invested in gameplay can also have negative impacts on the experience of players. As I've mentioned above, players are often very attached to the characters they create and in turn place a lot of their own personal emotions into the characters they play. When a player creates a character that would act hostile towards the party it can often lead to the feelings of the players being hurt, not just the characters' feelings. This can often result in groups of players dissolving due to continuous negative experiences in game, which often affects “real world” friendships. In order to mitigate this, players must maintain consistent check-ins with each other and the GM to make sure that the players are having an overall positive experience, especially in times when the characters are not having the easiest time. Jesper, a third year student, highlighted the need for this by describing the emotional investment players can bring to the table. They recalled:

“we've had situations where, like 2 characters, have been mad at each other. But the players aren't mad at each other, and they both get kind of sensitive like. Am I annoying you? Are you mad at me? And they have to really clarify like, I know, you're very invested in this character, and I know they feel like a part of you, and like you're doing fine. This is not you personally, they usually have to clarify afterwards, like, if you characters are fighting, or something. ”

This is an excellent contrast to the scenario brought up earlier during Inej's interview. In the earlier example two players were experiencing internal turmoil in their relationship and brought that into the game, impacting their out-of-game relationship. In this example we see two players who don't have previous angers or tensions outside the table but through role play and gameplay some “fictional” tensions arise which develop into such strong emotions that the line between game and life become blurred. The latter situation provides a great example of how characters can become such strong vessels for emotions that players can become concerned for those feelings to bleed into their out-of-game friendships.

A more modern and common example of these “artificial” emotions developing into real emotions can be found through texting. Since text messages lack spoken word, tone and intonation must be interpreted, often leaving emotion and attitude to be assumed rather than known. If I ask my friend to hang out and they reply “I'm good”, it is up to me as the reader of the text to decide the tone I read that in. If I chose to interpret it in a dismissive and passive aggressive tone I may take offense to my friend's quick rejection of my invitation, even if their intended tone was more friendly. I then take this “artificial” anger from my friend and respond with my own frustration. Soon enough, we're both mad at each other over an emotion that was not even “real” to begin with (Nerea et. al 2018).

This grapple with artificial feelings that can emerge from powerfully emotional scenes serves as an excellent warning to the responsibility of both players and DM when it comes to emotional management. It is not only important to ensure the TTRPG experience is fun and

enjoyable for all those playing it, but even more so, it is critical that individuals choosing to undertake this venture are aware and comfortable with the emotional involvement that can come from it. This way, through consistent check-ins and open communication players can maintain in-game emotions at the table and even develop better ways to healthily communicate their emotions both during game and in their day to day lives.

Player versus Character Relationship

The second theme that can best help to understand the impact of TTRPG's was the "Player vs Character Relationship" theme. This focused primarily on the nuances and interactions between a player and the character they were playing. The character creation process, aside from the dice and playing in someone's basement, is one of the more well-known aspects of any TTRPG. Each player uses a set of guidelines with which to put together a character. Often the guides have a lot of space for creative freedom and are mainly there to provide gameplay mechanics to abstract ideas. In Dungeons and Dragons, a player may decide on a race and class for their character, then proceed to conceptualize that character through ability modifiers. This results in a player having an elven paladin whose main abilities lie in their intelligence and constitution. The selected classes, races, abilities and more, result in a playable character that can work as a vessel for roleplaying while still having concrete aspects that can be applied to dice rolls or other game mechanics. As Alina, a second year student, puts it:

"I'm always like character creation is one of my favorite parts, because you can create a being, and it can be a vessel, for, like whatever- whatever you want it to be like under your own thoughts and opinions, or sometimes you're like, you know what I kinda wanna like, I want to play someone who I think is very different from me. and see what that's like to like interact with "

Not only is a character the tool you use to determine how you can interact with the world around you, but it is also the medium that you use to perform. This performance can be true to yourself, a bit outside of it, or completely different. As shown by this quote, this can often be a player's

favorite aspect of TTRPG's. Due to the enormous amount of freedom you're allowed to have with your character, players can create someone that they are very emotionally invested in, turning TTRPG's into an area in which an individual can project parts of themselves without facing judgment or criticism, because that is the objective of the activity at hand. This central idea of the character and the player lays the foundation for what ends up being a number of unique interactions that rarely occur outside of a TTRPG setting. These interactions were so diverse that the theme itself resulted in a variety of themes, each with their own stories to tell. For this paper I break down the interactions and focus on how they relate to self-identity and therapeutic effects.

Exploring Gender and Sexuality

The first of these sub themes relates to how players used characters to consciously or unconsciously explore their own identity. As Hemlock, a fourth year, agender, queer student, put it best, "I'm not gonna say that the reason that I identify as non-binary is because I've played a lot of nasty little- men, but it didn't hurt." This quote sets up the stage for how players used their collective TTRPG experiences to feed their self-identity. This idea was echoed by other participants who also noted they used a character or compilation of character experiences to explore their self-identity. When D&D was first released nearly fifty years ago, it was designed to resemble medieval fantasy, a setting that was flexible enough to include elements of magic and mythology in it without feeling out of place (Fine 2002). This setting, detached from any semblance of what the contemporary world was like, could present an escape for players, a trip away from the realities of their world. Many participants expressed how they used the escape of TTRPG's to leave behind concrete concepts such as bills and homework, as well as abstract

ones, such as gender identity and sexual orientation. Jesper recalled a time when one of their players, their romantic partner, used TTRPG's to do just that:

“Everyone else plays pretty gay characters. My girlfriend only plays male characters. She's super feminine in real life. She's like very hyper feminine lesbian, but she likes- I don't know what it is. She says she feels like it's an interesting psychological thing for her where she likes to play male characters. I think maybe it's a sort of escapism”

This experience noted by Jesper, shows the extent to which players use their characters to explore ideas such as gender identity. Jesper later pointed out that this experience of playing male characters does not take away from the “hyper feminine” identity of their partner but rather provides them an opportunity to experience this fantasy world from a perspective different from which they experience their day to day life. Hemlock and Jesper's experiences demonstrate the versatility and range of TTRPG's as both an escape of one's existing identities or a place to change them through those experiences. Both of these uses are equally important in terms of gender exploration since this process involves not just the exploration of oneself, but that of others' gender identities (Ashley 2019). TTRPG's can play both parts of this idea by manipulating the relationship between the player and their character. A player can view their character as an extension of themselves and use those experiences as a way to mold and shape their gender identity. Likewise, a player can explore the gender of others by using their character as a separate entity from themselves, through which they can observe different dynamics of gender. Understanding this aspect of TTRPG's helps to illustrate the impact they have on those who play them. Players can use their experiences whilst playing TTRPG's to spark conversation around gender identity and sexual orientation. Having this space available to grapple with their own questions around gender or even with larger concepts such as discrimination, was a need expressed by many participants. Having clubs and groups dedicated to this helped students gain access to tools and spaces necessary to engage in these conversations safely and productively.

However, the relationship between gender and sexuality does not end at the individual level. The structure around TTRPG's themselves is conducive to the exploration of these concepts, specifically sexual orientation. Many participants recalled how playing TTRPG's felt like a safe and welcoming environment to explore aspects of their identity. The best way to summarize how TTRPG's are able to create such a space was noted by Nina, a non-binary, lesbian student who recalled:

“I think that maybe part of just how that's set up is also how queerness can be community work. You know. In a sense, I think that we, you know, create language trying to describe our identity and our experience and it's very much like a community. It's like, it's individual work. But it's also very much a community effort, you know, like I can understand myself better because of queer culture and history and community that's been established and being able to find people who are like me and being able to learn about that.”

Nina's experience with the TTRPG community helps to demonstrate the qualities that make it such a welcoming and understanding space. The similarities between TTRPG and queer communities revolve around shared responsibility for the narrative at play. In a campaign, the responsibility of creating the story may seem to fall on the shoulders of the DM. However, as expressed by many participants, all players share responsibility for the adventures they go on, the decisions they make, and how it shapes the story being told. Together, party and DM, decide the narrative that gets told and the significance of it to those telling it. This mirrors the dynamic of the queer community. The semantics and words used by queer individuals are important in order to feel safe and accepted (Palkki et Caldwell 2018). Therefore, as Nina noted, the queer community shares an equal responsibility for creating and developing the narrative that defines the experience of queerness and the significance of that narrative to the members of the community. Through structure and membership responsibilities, TTRPG and queer communities find many similarities and both create spaces for people to feel welcome and accepted in the exploration of their identity. With those similarities in mind it becomes clear how TTRPG's have

a space to help people in their journey to explore and define their identity. Additionally, participants expressed how TTRPG's helped them reconcile with a myriad of abstract concepts such as grief, loss, frustration, and more.

Therapeutic effects of exploring the player vs character relationship

Having discussed how players can be influenced by their roleplay leading to impacts in their life beyond the game, and how players can use the game to explore aspects of their identity in a safe and comfortable manner, it makes sense that players could use TTRPG's to process many other emotions and circumstances. By using their story as a vessel, players can imbue into their character any number of things they would like to engage in or work through. Isaak, a second year western student who's been playing TTRPG's for over two years noted a commonality amongst their experiences so far:

“There's also a trend to like exercise your own demons through like- this is like problems that I've had in my own life- This is problems that like when I'm in character like, okay, this is something that I want that I don't either feel comfortable like with, or this is something sad in my life or something I'm working on. Let's shove it into this character and see what happens ”

Isaak's observation is reflective of many players' experiences. Other participants echoed this idea, talking about the various emotions and situations they processed through their character. The specific concepts varied depending on the player and their background but some notable examples were processing tense family relationships, religious doubt and trauma and grief over loss of loved ones, to name a few. Participants who talked about their experiences processing those concepts recalled finding great success through TTRPG's. As noted above, often the world characters find themselves in is vastly different from the players' day to day life. This clear distinction served as an easy way to detach oneself from the real world and having escaped the constraints they had as a player, the character is able to dissect the very real emotions of the person role playing. Whether it was defeating the evil wizard terrorizing the town, overthrowing

the greedy government taking the people's money, or simply having a day at the imaginary beaches of some fantasy world, characters underwent various emotions and overcame a number of challenges. These transformative scenes were merely words exchanged at the table, but the impact they had carried weight far beyond just words.

Although many of these threats and obstacles were not "real" and merely found in the imaginations of the party and DM, overcoming them provided resolution that even the players could benefit from. Participants cited specific moments in the campaign in which a scene they were in connected to their lives in one way or another. Their recollections of these moments resembled the way they would talk about memories in the "real" world as well. Hearing participants talk about these transformative moments with the emotion and detail they did showed just how powerful the moment had been, even if in reality it was an exchange of words amongst friends around a table. It became clear that the obstacle itself was less important and rather the act of overcoming something was what provided such therapeutic benefits for the players. David, a third year student, having played over four years of TTRPG's highlighted this idea when they noted "I can't fight a grocery store or I can't fight like an assignment for homework, but I can fight a dragon. ". A similar idea was echoed by Hemlock who mentioned "you know it feels hopeful, it feels satisfying like like maybe I can't end capitalism in America, but I can end it in Fandolin." Both Hemlock and David highlight how TTRPG's are used less as a way to directly fight what you may be struggling with, but rather to provide an imaginary adversary whose defeat can provide players with emotional resolution that gives them the mental space to process their emotions. All of these experiences come together to show the fruitful place TTRPG's can create. However, having explored the many benefits that can be found from TTRPG's, it is important to acknowledge how it can also end up going wrong.

Because this paper makes the argument that TTRPG's can be used for benefiting individuals, it is important also to observe the ways it can be harmful and how to mitigate them. One major concept to help understand the risks of TTRPG's is that it is far more than a game. As I have discussed above, players have and do explore a range of emotions and concepts that can be very sensitive. Handling these concepts with care should be a constant priority. Equally so, understanding the demand of portraying those emotions can be very helpful to make sure the experience is enjoyable to everyone at the table. Tamar, a third year student who's been playing TTRPG's for over five years highlighted this drain when they noted their "character... who's gone through grief- conveying that emotion, is very taxing on the body. I learned. It's very taxing, especially if I relate with it too much ." This experience Tamar had helps to demonstrate how not only are players emotionally involved in the actions of their characters, but can also feel the drain that these emotions take to perform. This toll is then amplified further if the emotions connect to the player. What is most important about this experience is the implications of continuous role play of emotionally demanding scenes. Role playing a tearful speech given to a character's dying mother may be helpful to help the player process a recent loss they have experienced. However, if the character continues to experience tragic losses in game and the player is role playing these consistent scenes of grief, the emotions that were contained within the game may overflow into the player's life negatively affecting them. Impacting them not only through the potential reliving of the players real and painful emotions but also from the high levels of emotional labor. This can be mitigated through proper self-assessment of one's energy levels and emotions, as Tamar noted:

"the negative part is that when it's current, you are feeling those emotions, and sometimes you need to take a break. So you switch to a different character to give either that character a break or yourself a break from role playing and acting that character,"

This method of switching characters in order to relieve the emotional labor of playing particular scenes is a method echoed by other participants, specially those in multiple groups at the same time. Many participants noted that if done efficiently, this can help to take some of the weight off of doing consistent emotional scenes. However, participants reported on group efforts made to mitigate emotional fatigue. The most common of these were check ins after big emotional sessions and balancing of the tone and mood of the campaign. These two often went hand in hand as participants recalled meeting with their groups after particularly intense scenes in order to make sure all members were feeling good and to check if the tone of the campaign needed to be adjusted, temporarily or permanently, to ensure everyone's enjoyment. As these concepts came up during interviews it became very clear how having constant communication both about the campaign and the individual players' experiences helped everyone in the group build trust and improve their communication skills. It is important to bring up evidence of the potential downsides of TTRPG's because in order for it to continue to be a vehicle for positive impacts on those who play them, players and DM's alike have to make sure to keep the play space open, welcoming and understanding. If the group can relieve the concerns for emotional burnout and ensure proper communication is maintained within the group, then all of the positive aspects I've explored above can come through.

DISCUSSION

Throughout their nearly 50 year history, TTRPG's have undergone a number of changes, been adopted by various subcultures and populations, inspired many different forms of media, and been researched in a number of ways by many organizations and teams. This research project aimed to provide further detail into the existing literature, while introducing some new phenomena and considerations for future exploration of TTRPG's. My findings can be best

summarized by the two themes discussed in the analysis. I first explored the new phenomena I termed the “Beyond”, an aspect of TTRPG's in which the scenes played out by characters in a campaign had lasting impacts on the players' lives beyond the table. One sub-theme that arose was the impacts on the individual player, highlighted by participants' experiences where events in game would change their perspective on something in their day to day lives, impacting their thoughts and behaviors in the future. In addition, another sub-theme was how players were also affected as a group. This was noted by players' recollections in which their relationships to other members of the group were changed by role play experiences which shaped the way two or more players interacted with one another in their day to day lives. Both of these sub-themes were then explored in regard to instances where unexpected consequences led to more harm than good, showing how TTRPG's are owed more care and attention than a regular board game or card game.

The second theme explored was the dynamics around the player vs character relationship. These findings too were able to be divided further into sub-themes. The first of these sub-themes was how individuals used TTRPG's as a way to explore their self-identities. This was shown through participants' experiences about how their characters had helped them define and develop aspects of themselves, mainly revolving around their gender and sexuality. Through leveraging TTRPG's flexible character creation, players were able to develop characters of nearly every identity they could imagine, allowing them to explore their world through this new perspective. These experiences were used by players to both escape their own identities or redefine them. Additionally, players expressed similarities between the queer community and the TTRPG structure that highlighted some of the ways in which welcomeness of expression are fostered by both. The second sub-theme was how players used their characters and interactions in game to

reconcile with abstract and complex emotions. Participants highlighted the variety of ways in which their characters helped them overcome emotions such as grief, loss and frustration. The therapeutic capacity of TTRPG's was also discussed in terms of negative and unexpected aspects of role play. Players would experience emotional fatigue when roleplaying emotional scenes in character, impacting their lives outside the game. The analysis of both of these themes helped to create an in-depth understanding of how TTRPG's have impacted the lives of individuals who engage with them.

The impact and importance of research such as this can be explored in a number of ways. Of the various directions in which this data and results can be used, I want to draw attention to further research, large-scale implications, and future game development. First, further research can benefit from the findings of this study by using them as both a foundation for their chosen approach or to develop literature in any of the focus areas covered. I would suggest, given the small sample size used in this study, that future research focuses on expanding the demographics explored in this paper, maintaining the same scope for themes. Many of the participants in this project shared racial and gender identities, giving a very narrow and homogeneous sample from which to draw conclusions. Although many respondents noted that their experiences were representative of their peers, it would be helpful for further research to gather data from other populations across regions where TTRPG's have become popular, thus making the overall trends found more concrete and generalizable. However, this revolves only around how this project can impact research.

A second aspect in which the themes explored in this paper can be used is in finding large-scale applications for the TTRPG framework, such as in clinical, corporate or educational settings. Some of the research discussed in the literature review showed how TTRPG's can be

applied to clinical settings given the results shown with mental health benefits. This project can provide further evidence for how TTRPG's may benefit individuals, especially when considering the field of gender and sexuality. Additionally, companies that are hoping to improve group dynamics and personality compatibility amongst teams of employees can leverage the flexibility of characters in TTRPG's. Using campaigns as a way to bolster team morale and group cooperation, companies can use existing or new TTRPG's that highlight aspects of their organization's aim and mission.

Finally, this project, and the themes explored within it, can help to guide how future TTRPG creators design their content. Many of the concepts explored in this paper show how TTRPG's can serve a purpose beyond the entertainment industry. However, these findings don't take away from the fact that people still use them as a fun and unique way to gather with friends or meet new people. Even as a source of entertainment whose impact may be purely for surface level enjoyment, TTRPG's and the narratives they help to tell should be representative and enjoyable to those who play them. Companies and organizations looking to produce content for the TTRPG community should do so with a research-based approach, ensuring their products are catering to the needs of their customers. TTRPG's, such as D&D, are becoming increasingly popular and as more literature is written about them, results continue to show how powerful they can be. This project aimed to add my own perspective to the current pool of literature, developing existing ideas and adding my own contributions, as a part of the beginning of what will hopefully be a long and fruitful journey for what TTRPG's become.

... You emerge from the depths of the dark caves within the cedar tree. Having presented your findings, in the most trying battle of the wits, to the ancient eldritch god of knowledge, you emerge victorious. You realize you find yourself, through the magic of the forest, at the top of a

cliff, looking out into a land unknown to any maps you've seen. You inspect your surroundings and set up camp. You cozy up for a long rest, full-knowing that beyond this cliff lies only more quests to complete, dragons to slay, dungeons to explore, and adventures to embark on. Eager with this knowledge, you succumb to sleep.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Table 1 - Code statistics

Code Name	Quotation Count	Notes
Character vs Player Relationship	180	Standard Code
Community	78	Standard Code
Covid	10	Standard Code
Escapism	65	Standard Code
Game Strategy vs Just Fun	144	Standard Code
Money and Expenses	35	Standard Code
Self-Identity	95	Standard Code
Stigma	16	Standard Code
Therapeutic Effects	83	Standard Code
The "Beyond" Part	113	In Vivo Code
Collaborative Storytelling	204	Split into 2 sub-themes
Relationships	143	Sub-theme of Collaborative Storytelling
Collaborative Storytelling	82	Sub-theme of Collaborative Storytelling
Emotional Responses	198	Split into 3 sub-themes
Environment	36	Sub-theme of Emotional Responses
Gameplay	106	Sub-theme of Emotional Responses
Intraplayer Interactions	84	Sub-theme of Emotional Responses

APPENDIX B: Table 2 - Pseudonyms and demographics

Pseudonym	Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Years Completed at Western	Number of years played
Mal	White/Caucasian	Woman	Bisexual	2	7
Kaz	Asian	Woman	Heterosexual	3	4
Nikolai	White/Caucasian	Gender-fluid	Queer, Bisexual	1	5
Inej	White/Caucasian	Woman	Heterosexual	3	6
Jesper	White/Caucasian	Woman	Lesbian	2	6
Alina	White/Caucasian	Trans Man	Gay	1	4
Hemlock	White/Caucasian	Agender	Queer	3	5
Nina	White/Caucasian	Non-Binary	Lesbian	3	Less than half a year
Tolya	White/Caucasian	Man, Non-binary	Pansexual	2	10+
Tamar	Hispanic/Latinx	Woman	Bisexual	2	5
Zoya	White/Caucasian Hispanic/Latinx	Man	Heterosexual	1	5
Pekka	White/Caucasian	Woman	Lesbian	>1	6-11 months
Wylan	White/Caucasian	Non-binary	Lesbian	>1	10+
David	White/Caucasian	Non-binary, trans man	Bisexual	2	4
Alexander	White/Caucasian	Woman	Heterosexual	3	10+
Isaak	White/Caucasian	Woman	Queer, asexual	1	2
Matthias	White/Caucasian	Man	Heterosexual	2	5
Genya	White/Caucasian	Genderfluid	Asexual	3	2

APPENDIX C: Glossary of Key Terms

NPC: Non-player character; characters in the campaign not controlled or played by players, often controlled by the DM.

GM: Game Master, also known as DM, Dungeon Master or referee; guides the group of players through the world they are in and is often the authority figure of what can and can't be done within the scope of the campaign, mediates the interactions between the players and the world.

Player: Often seen as the "real person" behind the character; the person who controls a character's decisions.

Character: The player's "pawn" in the campaign; often a character is the compilation of a player's imagination in conjunction with skill and ability scores that determine the character's capacity within the game.

Party: colloquial term for the group of characters; the party is often referred to as the group of characters portrayed by the players, the protagonists of the story.

DND: Shortened version of Dungeons and Dragons; D&D is the name of the first FRP game released in 1974 which led to the development of the TTRPG genre.

Campaign: a term used to refer to the collection of play sessions the group has undergone; the campaign is the compilation of all the party's experiences and often represent the story that the players are telling as a group.