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# Of Dice and Men: An Ethnography of Contemporary Gaming Subculture

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OF DICE AND MEN: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY GAMING  
SUBCULTURE

OF DICE AND MEN: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY GAMING  
SUBCULTURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Art in Sociology

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tabletop roleplaying is a dynamic and flourishing hobby that has become increasingly accessible to a wide variety of participants. The games themselves, as well as the gaming subculture, offer players a number of personal and social benefits that continue to enrich their lives long after they leave the table. Using Goffman's theories of Dramaturgy and Frame Analysis, this paper seeks to examine the positive impact of gaming in three key areas.

The first is an analysis of the subculture which includes the evolution of the games, the growth and diversification of the roleplaying community, and the current shift in stereotypes about gaming. The second section discusses the ways in which microcultural worlds are created, with an emphasis on the systematic alignment of group frames, different types of emotional and social crossover that occurs, and the conveyance of status. The final segment describes the processes that create engrossment and identification in the games. It focuses on the balance of the three frameworks used in fantasy creation, types of physical aids used to bridge fantasy and reality, relationships that exist between players and their characters, and the negotiation of role conflict that arises from maintaining multiple roles simultaneously.

The benefits players gain from roleplaying are diverse. It provides socialization and recreational enjoyment, improves role negotiation and impression management, allows players to experience elements that are beyond their reality, creates a safe environment to test new elements of identity, promotes creative problem solving, and builds critical thinking.

This thesis is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## I. Introduction

Since its introduction almost four decades ago, tabletop roleplaying has evolved from an eclectic hobby played by only a few thousand into a full-fledged subculture boasting several million members worldwide. The genre began in 1974 with the debut of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and the most recent market research conducted by TSR, the company who introduced it, estimates that over 20 million people have played this particular tabletop game alone. No longer reserved for the stereotypically underachieving, socially stunted young males playing in their parent's basement, this hobby has gained an increasingly diverse membership which has helped it move past the games themselves to incorporate a wide variety of cultural and social media that are based on gaming including game-specific music, literature, fashion, social events, and an extensive slang dialect. Gaming has also spawned or influenced many microcultural offshoots which blend and overlap with one another; from steampunk to cyberpunk, anime to cosplay, nerdcore to the Goth scene, each of these subgenres share gaming as a common link to one another. (Appelcline 2011:7) (Fine 1983:7)

While the size and influence of the roleplaying community continues to grow steadily, it remains a subject that has received proportionally little academic attention. Part of that gap can likely be attributed to the fact that while most people have heard of roleplaying games, they lack a practical concept of what an RPG actually is. To understand the importance of roleplaying and the culture surrounding it, then, it is necessary to first understand the basic structure and mechanics of the games themselves.

Simply put, all roleplaying games are systems of interactive storytelling. One person, called the game master, dungeon master, judge, or narrator, acts as the leader. They control everything in the fantasy world except for the actions of the players' characters, and must

describe in detail every relevant aspect of that world to the players. Most begin each game by creating a rough plot outline for their session and deciding on any significant external influences that the players will face. When the players encounter any other beings, whether friendly or hostile, it is the leader who controls their interactions with the party. The leader may even choose to employ a variety of props or devices to stimulate the five senses during his storytelling. By incorporating specific sounds, scents, and props they are able to further immerse their players into the fantasy world they are creating together. (Waskul and Lust 2004)

The players each design a character based on the guidelines and templates provided in the source books, and they have ultimate control over how their character responds to the world around them. There are no rules requiring the player to create a character that mimics their own traits; a young male is equally free to create a burly warrior or an aged sorceress as his character. The games also provide extensive sets of rules that determine what each character is capable of doing in any given situation, as well as what the probability of success will be. Dice are rolled to represent the concept of “random chance” or “fate” in the game. Roleplaying games are not competitive, they have no time limits, they are not scored, and they have no clear definitions of winning or losing (Waskul & Lust 2004).

Games range in venue from science fiction to fantasy, and the players interact using a vastly different media. Tabletop roleplaying takes place mostly in the mind of roleplayers themselves, and requires little more than dice, paper, and rulebooks to begin. Unlike traditional tabletop games, online roleplaying games such as World of Warcraft are played over the Internet and the characters interact with each other in a simulated world that is controlled by a network. Some games are acted out in live groups, and during these sessions the players wear costumes and bring props to help immerse themselves into their characters. These games are called Live

Action Role Playing, often abbreviated with the term LARPing. World of Darkness is the most popular game of this type and boasts tens of thousands of members worldwide.

By far, the most popular tabletop roleplaying game of all time is Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, which was first published as a cohesive set of rules by TSR in the 1970's. As the name suggests, D&D was originally set in a literal dungeon. As characters overcame obstacles,

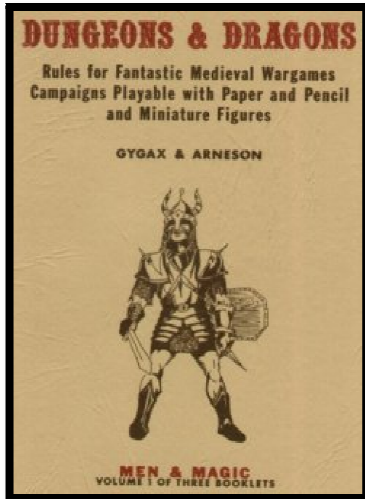


Figure #1, The original Dungeons & Dragons rule booklet released in 1974. (RampantGames.com 2006)

they would move to deeper levels of the dungeon. This progression granted them access to new powers and abilities, but also pitted them against more difficult challenges. During its decades of popularity, the game itself has evolved out of the dungeon and into multiple vast universes, each complete with indigenous races, governmental structures, and pantheons of deities. Though the rules and basic concepts remain unchanged, narrators are limited only by their creativity when deciding whether to run a mythical dragon-slaying quest or a 1920's film noir murder mystery.

## II. Statement of Problem

In the past, the sociology of leisure has often been overlooked as relatively unimportant when compared with wider issues but this misperception is slowly being remedied as an increasing number of scholars recognize the potential this field represents. According to Goffman (1974), leisure and play seem to be independent of basic needs and does not serve a clear purpose, yet is still deeply significant to us personally and socially. Although it is a leisure pursuit, gaming is both extremely important to those who play and extremely beneficial to their lives outside the dungeon. Roleplaying games offer their players a chance to safely explore their

developing identities, an escape from normal social pressures, a venue to hone social skills and build confidence, educational opportunities to pursue, and a system that rewards creative problem solving while promoting higher-level thinking skills.

Roleplaying is a very large concept to address when taken as a whole. In Shared Fantasy, Gary Alan Fine addressed three sociologically significant aspects of gaming; a generalized observation and description of the subculture, an analysis of the factors that influence the creation and navigation of the shared fantasy worlds, and the ways in which the participants negotiate the multiple roles and layers of boundaries they are required to maintain while roleplaying (Fine 1983). This study follows the same breakdown to demonstrate the various ways in which roleplaying impacts the gamer and shows that, contrary to many commonly held misconceptions, most of these are very positive.

Fine conducted his participant observation mainly of the Golden Brigade Gaming club in Minneapolis in 1977 and 1978, and his study is an interesting representation of the infancy of the subculture. In the 32 years since his work, however, there have been many changes as the subculture as well as the games themselves evolved. A secondary goal of this paper is to offer a much-needed update to his initial work, as well as an analysis of some of two major differences that can be observed and their significance to the gaming community.

The first is the changing scope of roleplaying games themselves. There are so many more options and venues available to gamers than there were at the time of his study, ranging from vastly diverse tabletop games to the explosion of computer based Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG's) such as World of Warcraft. The second is the changes to the demographics of the gamers themselves, particularly the changing role of women in the roleplaying community. When Fine conducted his study, only approximately 2% of the

community members were women (Fine 1983:41). Now, even conservative estimates place the number closer to 20%.

In a more general sense, the study of roleplay offers many important opportunities. First, by observing the deliberate and subconscious factors that influence the creation of fantasy worlds it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which we use shared symbols and inherited social assumptions to create meaning in reality. Kociatkiewicz (2000) describes this aspect of roleplaying as “a chance to hide the god of ourselves in the world of our own creation” (p73). This extends to the possibility of gaining insight into the ways that we negotiate separate roles in our daily lives, as well as the ways that we identify indexically linked knowledge that passes (or is blocked) between the different personas we portray at different points.

The value of being able to access an individual’s fantasies is immeasurable, and yet psychologists have long been unable to effectively guide the process. Roleplaying offers a unique solution to this problem, because “fantasies can reflect an individual's motives, needs, wishes, desires, or ambitions through their unreality” (Fine 1983:230). In the roleplaying setting the players reveal aspect of their fantasies in a friendly, nonthreatening environment of likeminded individuals. Fine (1983) observes is that "understanding of one social world provides sociologists with the tolls necessary to understand others, which may have no more than a tangential similarity" (pg 242). We are experiencing the adolescence of a subculture that will contribute to a greater understanding of how these types of communities form.

### **III. Theoretical Framework**

The culture that surrounds roleplaying, the ways in which the fantasy worlds are created , and degree to which the player immerses himself in them are all crucial elements to consider

when trying to determine the ultimate impact that gaming has on the lives of the players. When selecting a theoretical framework, Goffman's theories of dramaturgy and frame analysis were by far the most helpful in examining roleplaying as a whole. Certain elements could certainly be explained using various other theories, but they lacked the ability to unify all three areas of examination harmoniously. For example, the analysis of the changing role of women within the gaming community touches on various components of feminist theory such as Dorothy Smith's (1987) assertion that society ties women to the concrete world while encouraging men to pursue the abstract, but this theory is too narrow to effectively frame the observations of an entire subculture. Similarly, while it is important to note that phenomenology provides a valuable insight into one particular aspect of the second goal, specifically that certain unconscious "stocks of knowledge" about our world transfer into the fantasy worlds created during roleplay, its focus remains primarily on the ways in which an individual interprets their world while frame analysis and dramaturgy emphasize a reality based on group interaction.

Goffman chose to illustrate his belief that social interaction is conducted through the projection of roles by employing the analogy of theatre, observing that "all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify." (Goffman 1959:78). He referred to this theoretical approach as dramaturgy. According to this system, every interaction throughout the day is a part of a large and ongoing production . Our environment provides the setting to the play, and the objects are our props. Individuals are all actors, and each actor must play numerous roles that vary based on their settings and the presence of other actors. In addition to being actors, individuals are simultaneously members of the audience and observe the performances of other actors either passively or actively. While all these processes are taking place in the "front", Goffman maintains that there is also a "backstage" area that is completely

unobservable by other actors or members of the audience (Goffman 1959). It is in this quiet space, when no eyes are upon us, that we can strip ourselves of makeup and costumes, abandon pretense and roles, and simply exist as we truly are.

Impression management is the regulation of our roles, and often involves projecting certain traits that are desirable in a situation while suppressing others that are not. This requires an ongoing evaluation of the setting, audience, and other actors and may differ dramatically from one scene to another. For this reason, Goffman (1959) feels that the concept of self is not inherent but is rather the product of the scene in which the actor is participating. One of the fundamental problems with this method of social interaction occurs when two or more conflicting roles must exist simultaneously in the same social scene. Consider the confusion that would result when a “sycophantic employee” and an “edgy, aggressive coworker” attends a dinner with both the boss and fellow coworkers present. When the accepted definition of the situation has been discredited, the actors may pretend that nothing has changed if they find this strategy profitable to themselves or wish to keep the peace, or it can result in extreme discomfort and even confrontation.

This method of viewing social interaction is extremely valuable in explaining the ways in which different players and characters interact with one another. The relationship between the player and their character is directly analogous to the front/backstage concept of dramaturgy. Each character must respond to the same considerations that Goffman discusses for social interactions, such as setting and the presence of other characters. The players must also undergo this process among themselves as they play their characters. Successful and enjoyable roleplaying can only exist when the members of the group are all able to appropriately enact



impression management of both themselves and of their characters, even when the two come into conflict with one another.

Goffman also developed the theory that frameworks determine how we perceive the environment around us. There are two primary categories of frameworks: natural and social. Natural frameworks are used to define concepts such as the biological or physical sciences. They do not require social interpretation of the stimuli, and are “purely physical”. Social frames, however, provide the background and context for understanding events taking place between humans. These frames are extensive and variable between individuals and situations. An excellent illustration of the differences between the two primary frameworks is that of a coroner being asked about a corpse. When he is asked what the cause of death was, his answer is a simple and factual recounting of the natural process that terminated life functions. On the other hand, if he is asked what the manner of death was, he must provide a meaningful social answer involving method and possibly intent (Goffman 1974:24).

Primary frameworks allow the users to interpret and make sense of an infinite number of concepts, occurrences, and symbols that are encountered throughout daily life. Within these broad categories, smaller mini-frameworks govern certain domains of stimuli. Work and play can both be considered sub-frames. Within the sub-frame of play are specific forms, which would include roleplaying to a gamer. Goffman goes to great lengths to discuss the implications of categorizing things in the frame of play, particularly emphasizing how our interpretations of situations are keyed to the frames in which we place them and the ways that their placement can alter the meaning of various activities (Goffman 1974:43). For example, Goffman draws on the work of Gregory Bateson to illustrate how fighting is often mocked through play. If those involved and observing did not place the actions within the framework of play, mock fighting

could easily be misinterpreted and have very different consequences. Playfulness, like fantasy and daydreaming, is considered by Goffman to be another form of make believe (Goffman 1974:52). Roleplaying requires its participants to operate in multiple exclusive frames simultaneously, balancing their understanding of the natural world with the social constructs they create within the game. Furthermore, they must alter their framings of to incorporate fantastic elements such as magic, advanced technology, or alternate worlds. Gamers also experience an extremely high rate of frame oscillation, choosing to shift their reference frames to enhance the experience. They must find an appropriate balance between accepting the game as playful fantasy to reap the benefits of a leisure activity and willingly suspending that framing during parts of game play to elevate the dramatic or suspenseful elements (Goffman 1974:350).

Another way in which frame analysis serves to better understand the roleplaying process is the concept of frame alignment. Frame alignment occurs when individual frames become linked in congruency and complementariness. (Snow et al. 1986) This is more commonly referred to as “getting on the same page” and produces frame resonance, a catalyst that aids a group in making transitions from one frame to another and maintains comparable levels of involvement among group members. In roleplay, it is crucial that the members of the group are able to shift their framing simultaneously to avoid unpleasant conflicts between the players and the characters. Goffman (1974:346) states that in a group “one person’s impropriety can create improprieties on the part of others... whether the individual maintains too little or too much involvement, he will have reason to manage the show of this involvement in order to minimize its disruptive effect on other participants.” If the majority of the party are deeply engrossed in an emotionally charged scene, choosing to frame it in a more realistic way to increase their level of

personal involvement, but a few other players are framing the situation in a very playful manner and cracking jokes then the experience becomes less enjoyable for everyone involved.

#### **IV. Methodology**

My interest in roleplaying stems from my 20 years of membership in the gaming community, adhering to the methodological admonition to “start with what you know”. I have gamed at least one night a week since 1990, and I hope that this will still be true 20 years from now. This commitment to the hobby is evident in my methodology. To capture a diverse sampling of roleplayers and the impact that their involvement with the gaming community has on their lives, I engaged in multiple forms of data collection. My longstanding participation in the community was important to this process because of the tightly knit, sometimes even exclusive, nature of gaming circles which can make it more difficult for “outsiders” to gain access to the members.

##### **A. Participant Observation**

Like Fine, I chose to use of participant observation as my primary methodological tool. This approach allows the flexibility, descriptiveness, and holistic perspective necessary to address such a multidimensional and qualitative topic. Many critics of participant observation are quick to point out that the presence of a researcher will alter the behaviors observed. Though I agree with this statement, it is important to note that the observations of someone participating in the activity are far less disruptive than passive observations made by an outside observer. During the gaming process, the individuals involved are all acting out roles and effectively displaying elements of their shared fantasy. Since all participants are equally engaged and exposed, no one person feels in danger of being stigmatized as “behaving foolishly” or of allowing too much of

themselves out in the open. An outside observer jeopardizes this balance and increases the risk of altering the behavior of the participants through their presence.

I began collecting data on April 15, 2011 and continued until October 15, 2011. The observations primarily covered three separate gaming groups, and one that was a combination of members from all three. No participant was present in more than two groups. Regardless of the size of the group, each game session averaged between 5-8 players. I participated with around 25 gamers on a regular basis, but interacted with approximately 30 additional participants during the 6 extra “one-shot” games which occurred at conventions. All participants involved in the games were notified about my research and I obtained written consent from each. They were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identities, and if they declined I assigned their character's name instead. My research will be open and available to all participants.

The first game I observed was Dungeons and Dragons. This was the first true roleplaying game released and has maintained its position as the most popular tabletop RPG. It is set in a medieval fantasy world, and incorporates extensive amounts of magic and mythological



creatures. A division has recently occurred within the Dungeons and Dragons gaming community. Wizards of the Coast released a new version that drastically altered the system of play in an attempt to appeal to the online gaming crowd. This revised

Dungeons & liber.com 2011)

system is known as 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, and has been highly unpopular. Due to the open gaming

license regulations, WotC has also authorized Paizio's rights to continue publishing new material

based on the 3.5 edition by introducing a revision called Dungeons and Dragons: Pathfinder. This system has attracted more of the "core" tabletop gamers and many speculate that it will become the dominant system. For this reason, I focused on the Pathfinder revision of Dungeons and Dragons and engaged in 20 sessions for approximately 80 hours of observation of 8 players

The second game was based on H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos and was set in 1920s America. It had a strong pulp noir theme combined with elements of gothic horror, blending realistic settings and characters with supernatural forces to produce an unsettling alternate reality. In this game the characters are encouraged to solve mysteries and investigate elements of the hidden realm of horror, but as they learn more about these ancient evils they also face great consequences. With each new power and arcane secret the character gains, they begin to lose their grasp on sanity. In this system, players must carefully track their sanity in addition to their hit points or magic points. This game received the majority of my time, and I logged 40 sessions with this group for an approximate total of 160 hours of observation of 11 players

The third table-top game was BattleTech, which is based on a dystopian future dominated by enormous human-piloted fighting robots called BattleMechs. I chose this game because it originally developed as a war game simulation played on a board, and the roleplaying element was added later as the franchise became more successful. This game is based exclusively in the science fiction genre, with no magic or alternate races (elements commonly found in fantasy roleplaying). The other interesting feature of this particular game is that while the technology is all more advanced than what we can currently produce, it is all based on existing science and is thus very much within the eventual realm of possibility. This more realistic style drew a different type of gamer, and the 7 players in this group gamed 15 times for approximately 60 hours.

The final game was a post-apocalyptic adventure set in a world similar to that of the Mad Max series. I personally designed the campaign for this game with Fine's work on the gamer vs. role-player in mind, and a more complete description of the setting can be found later in this paper. This campaign avoided the use of magic and fantasy in favor of advanced technology and science fiction. The characters were criminals who were placed in cryogenic stasis and awoke with the personality of the actual players controlling them implanted in their minds. Although there were elements of the created role of the criminal that had to be acted out, so too must the player incorporate their own beliefs and tendencies into each scenario. I guided this game as the narrator rather than a player for 5 sessions, approximately 20 hours of gaming. Several of these sessions were recorded. The players for this game were drawn from all three of the other gaming groups and of the 23 individuals involved, 18 volunteered to be interviewed as well as observed.

In addition to the participant observation of tabletop roleplaying games, I also spent time observing a genre of gaming known as Live Action Roleplaying (LARP). In this type of game the players wear costumes, use props, and act out their roles with the rest of the group. Everything from conversation to combat is simulated during these sessions, and it is considered extremely faux pas to "break character" outside of the prescribed boundaries. I attended two LARP sessions while at conventions, each lasting around 4 hours. Both



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were extremely large, with participation in excess of 100 players each. Of these, 7 volunteered to be interviewed.

I, with the assistance of my wife, also hosted two “Murder Mystery” parties, each of which lasted approximately 3 hours. During these events, each guest was given a premade character and they were expected to adopt that role for the duration of the evening. They have their own secrets and agendas, and as with LARPing, costumes and props were encouraged during these events. The primary differences between these events and traditional LARPing are the simplification of the rule systems and that the scenarios are limited to single session games. While these are not strictly classified as roleplaying games, I found that they enjoy a much wider range of social acceptance.

The third type of roleplaying game I used for participant observation was a board game called Arkham Horror. I hosted 8 sessions, each with 6 players and lasting approximately 3 hours. There were 14 individual participants, and 6 of them agreed to be interviewed. Arkham is



a complex board game that combines many of the elements of roleplaying but does not require a dedicated narrator or game master. Each player chooses a character from a premade pool, complete with background history as well as unique abilities. The characters must travel around the city of Arkham collecting spells, equipment, clues, and allies in order to prevent an evil deity from awakening. The game now has several expansion packs that can be purchased to add new characters and monsters to keep the quest interesting for repeat players. Arkham is very much like a game

developed in the 1980s by Milton Bradley called “Hero

Quest”. Many RPG community members were indoctrinated into the hobby through Hero Quest, and Arkham can similarly be thought of as a “gateway” game.

In addition to my participant observation of various types of games, I also gathered data on the gaming subculture by attending 6 conventions promoting RPGs and other gaming elements. During his study, Fine attended two such gaming conventions, but wrote very little on them. Conventions are an extremely significant part of the gaming culture today, and they provide an excellent opportunity to observe gamers in their natural element surrounded by their peers, yet not confined to the context of gaming.

Conventions directly facilitate gaming by scheduling various RPG sessions literally around the clock (many boasting that players can game for 48+ hours continuously if they so desire), allowing the play-testing of new games, and by organizing large gaming events such as 100+ player LARP sessions that would be impractical in residential settings. I participated in at least one gaming session per convention I attended. I made the group members aware of my research, obtained written consent from them, and assigned each player a pseudonym.

These conventions also feature public forums designed to explore a variety of gaming-related topics. These range from highly technical debates of system rules to costuming tips to social issues relevant to the community. Some sample titles include "Nerd Love: A How-To for Gamer Couples", "An Analysis of Religious Themes in the Pathfinder Pantheon", "How to Create Mind-Blowing Dungeons", and "Girl Gamers: A Survival Guide and Support Session for Women in RPGs". I attended approximately 30 forums, and obtained verbal consent and contact information from each presenter involved.

While the gaming and forums are extremely important parts of any convention, perhaps the most valuable thing that they offer is the wide variety of cultural elements central to the



gaming community. Specialized merchants, guest speakers, artists, and musical performers are all selected for their appeal to the gaming subculture. For a few short hours, an otherwise obscure group becomes the norm, and everything from fashion to slang carries with it an undertone of roleplaying.

The only national convention I attended, DragonCon, had around 40,000 attendees and completely filled 5 large hotel complexes. It is one of the largest in the country and draws fans from many different genres and subgenres, including gaming, anime, steampunk, cyberpunk, science fiction, fantasy, nerdcore, horror, apocalyptica, goth, and others even more obscure. I attended 10 forums during this event with attendance ranging from 30 to 300, and obtained 3 interviews. The scale of the con made it very difficult to obtain an accurate count, but it is safe to state that there were no fewer than 500 artisans, 100 authors, and 75 musical groups present.

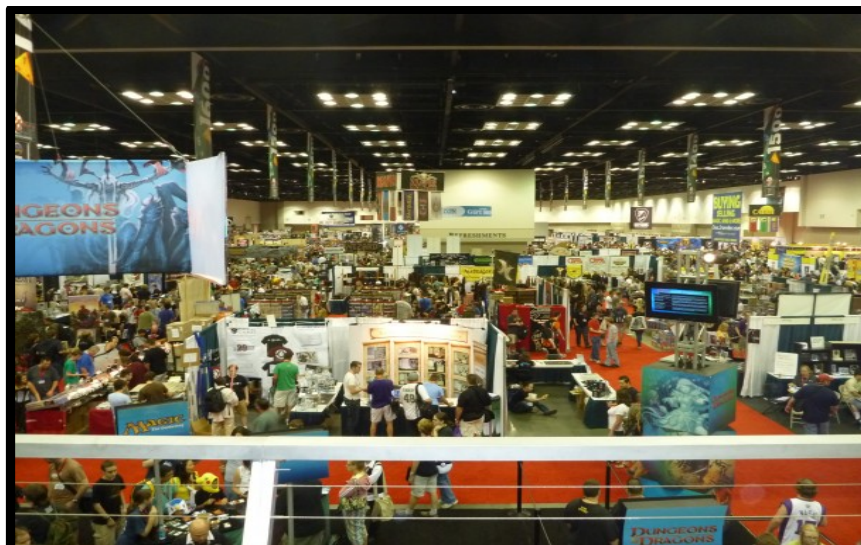


Figure #5, One of the many vendor rooms at GenCon. (Living Dice.com 2010)

The regional conventions, Tokyo in Tulsa and Anime Festival Wichita, were much smaller but still drew a sizable and diverse crowd. Attracting 4,000 and 2,000 guests respectively, these conventions still drew from a broad base of cultural influences. I observed

elements from gaming, anime, steampunk, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and apocalyptica throughout both events. I attended 16 forums between the two, each with approximately 30-50 in attendance, and took 4 interviews. These conventions had 5 bands, 9 authors, and approximately 150 artisans.

The three local conventions were each very small, and while they each had at least some focus on gaming their overall focus was much more genera-specific than the larger events. GlitchCon, with 350 attendees, focused primarily on science fiction. The Oklahoma Steampunk Convention attracted almost 800 steampunk fans. The Kansas City Gaming Convention was exclusively gaming-centric and had almost 600 in attendance. There was minor influence from anime and apocalyptica observed at each. Between these, there were 4 musical acts, 5 authors, and approximately 75 artisans.

### **B. In-Depth Interviews**

I also conducted 40 in-depth interviews of gamers I encountered either at the gaming table or at gaming conventions. Each interview consisted of 26 structured question-and-answer responses and then allowed for free-form discussion if the participant wished to elaborate or volunteer additional information. The demographic information collected for the interviewees can be found below on Table 1.

#### **Demographic Information Collected from Interviews**

*Table 1*

<b><u>Gender</u></b>	<b><u>Age</u></b>	<b><u>College</u></b>	<b><u>Conventions</u></b>	<b><u>Relationship</u></b>	<b><u>Years Gaming</u></b>
M	30	Graduate	3	Single	17
M	33	Graduate	6	Married	24
F	29	Some	2	Single	9
F	29	Some	6	Married	12

M	25	Graduate	4	Married	27
M	30	Graduate	3	Married	12
M	32	Graduate	4	Married	18
M	43	Graduate	6	Married	22
M	44	Graduate	6	Married	22
F	33	Graduate	6	Married	2
M	36	Graduate	6	Single	24
M	30	Graduate	2	Single	1
M	44	Graduate	2	Long Term	12
M	27	None	1	Single	6
M	22	None	1	Single	4
M	23	None	0	Long Term	4
F	33	Graduate	0	Long Term	16
M	34	Some	0	Married	19
M	32	None	0	Single	17
M	34	None	1	Single	14
M	26	Some	1	Long Term	11
M	36	Some	0	Long Term	21
F	34	None	0	Single	10
F	22	Graduate	0	Long Term	1
M	23	Some	0	Single	4
M	25	Student	0	Single	14
M	30	None	0	Single	7
M	29	Some	0	Married	14
M	24	None	0	Long Term	7
M	30	Some	0	Long Term	13
F	32	Graduate	0	Married	1
M	29	Graduate	0	Married	12
M	26	Graduate	0	Single	8
M	30	Some	0	Single	13
F	27	Graduate	1	Married	1
F	33	Graduate	2	Long Term	18
M	32	None	0	Married	17
M	31	None	0	Married	16
M	30	None	0	Married	16

### C. Autoethnography

While participant observation and interviews represent the majority of my data, I have also augmented these results with perceptions and interpretations drawn from my own extensive

experiences within the community via the autoethnographic method of research. As a long-time gamer involved with several gaming circles, I had the opportunity to view their members interacting with society as a whole. I attempted to make observations relevant to my study as they arose in informal settings. The degree to which gaming influences its participants ensures that conversations about gaming and the gaming culture can occur in almost any environment. This type of information was only used as a supplement to fill occasional data gaps or to clarify certain topics.

## **V. Interpretation of Results**

When discussing the benefits that a hobby such as roleplaying has in the lives of its participants, it is important to consider how much impact it has on their lives as a whole. My research has shown that even gamers with only an average involvement still invest 4-6 hours each week playing various RPGs, while those who are more deeply involved may average closer to 12-15. Another important consideration is the strength of ties between gaming group members. While gaming certainly does not represent the extent of the social lives of the players, the members of a long-term gaming circle spend a great deal of time together and do grow extremely close. During my interviews it was not uncommon to hear people refer to their primary group as their "gaming family". Also, I frequently observed groups of people who lived in different areas that made plans to attend conventions together. These groups might only meet in person a few times each year, but they still developed strong ties to each other and clearly considered their long-distance friendships socially significant.

The importance of gaming can also be seen in the financial allocations made by the players. While traditional tabletop RPGs require very few materials to play, there is an extensive

realm of gaming accessories and supplements for the players to purchase if they are so inclined. These items range from practical additions such as new campaign books, replacement dice, and game maps across the spectrum to status objects like gemstone dice, customized miniatures, and expensive 3-D dungeons. Additionally, attending gaming conventions can be quite an investment. Gaming convention passes range from \$50-\$150 per person for a weekend pass, and then the player must then pay for a hotel room for 3 nights, which averaged \$99 per night at the 6 conventions I attended, as well as any travel expenses required to reach the convention. This does not include the money that is spent on merchandise, costumes, and other purchases made during the event. It is not uncommon for gamers to make attending one of the large national or regional conventions their annual vacation, and members of the same gaming groups will often attend together to share the expenses.

With these factors in mind, I examined the three aspects of gaming that Fine used in his study. My focus, however, was the social and personal benefits that the process of roleplaying has on its players. The first area is the influence of the gaming subculture itself. This includes the art, music, fashion, and other cultural influences that stem from gaming and its associated subgenres. It also includes the demographics of the gaming community, as well as the state of the games themselves. The second area is an exploration of the ways gaming groups create the microcultural systems and fantasy worlds in which the games take place. This offers insight into processes like social crossover and the conveyance of status that help shape the player's interpersonal relationships, both on and off the table. The third area, engrossment and identification, includes several important elements of the gamers relationship with themselves. The balance of frameworks, role negotiation, and role conflict are concepts that roleplayers must

subconsciously employ on a daily basis, but which take on a unique tangibility in the context of gaming.

### A. Analyze and Describe the Subculture

According to Fine, the gaming community meets the criteria required to be considered a legitimate subculture: it displays segmental importance, shared ideas, opportunity for interaction, identification, and recognition outside the community. Furthermore, it is a community that is experiencing a considerable amount of growth and change. We can see the major changes occurring in four forms; the growth in the size of the community, changes in the scope and structure of games themselves, an increase in the amount of women participants, and a radical shift of stereotypes.

First, the number of participants in roleplaying games has drastically increased over the 30 years. In an interview in 1979 with Gary Gygax, then the president of the largest gaming manufacturer in the world, he estimated the number of players at approximately 300,000 (Fine



1983:15). More recent surveys indicate that D&D had an estimated 20 million players worldwide, with a monthly total of 6 million players

visual tabletop RPGs were played at 11. (MTV.com 2011) (Fantasy Magazine 2009).

While I have been unable

to obtain more current statistics, it is easy to see that the number of gamers has grown exponentially.

To satisfy the ever-growing popularity of roleplaying games, the RPG industry has expanded to become a serious financial enterprise. According to one survey conducted by Wizards of the Coast, the average adult Dungeons & Dragons player spends between \$12 and \$14 each month on roleplaying materials, and extrapolates that around 3% of the U.S.'s 313 million population are monthly players. Using those estimates, somewhere between \$112 and \$114 million are spent every month on that one gaming system alone. In 1999, Wizards of the Coast was purchased by Hasbro for an impressive \$325 million. These numbers have only gone up since the survey, and seeing the scale of the monetary investment that accompanies this hobby offers a different perspective on the popularity that it enjoys.

The number of games on the market has gone through a comparable explosion. The book *Designers and Dragons* is a comprehensive guide about the giants of game design. It covers the largest 61 game designers, and the majority of these companies produce a variety of different roleplaying games. Also, there has been a recent trend towards “indy games” produced on a small scale or without commercial license which makes it impossible to accurately determine the number of role playing games currently in use.

This trend began on August 10, 2000 when Wizards of the Coast released the *Player's Handbook* (PHB) at GenCon 33. The PHB came with the D20 open gaming license, which granted legal permission for other publishers to write gaming material that could be used with Dungeons and Dragons as long as they followed certain protocols. Several companies immediately converted their gaming systems to be compatible (*Designers and Dragons* 2011 365). Now, instead of developing completely new systems to provide the framework for a

module, a designer could develop products that support the D20 system. It became easy for new products to be produced. "In a hundred ways, third edition and the D20 Trademark Licenses changed the industry." (Appelcline 2011:288).

The roleplaying games themselves have also undergone both fundamental and structural evolutions. In the beginning, most gamers were introduced to the hobby through their participation in the war gaming community. Today, most gamers have little or no experience with traditional war games. The fantasy worlds have become much more intricate and have expanded to incorporate any reality the players can invent. Where once the setting was always a literal dungeon filled with creatures from Tolkien-esque fantasy lore, now game settings can include a space station orbiting some distant moon, the comic book city of Metropolis, or even the present-day University of Arkansas campus.

The increased flexibility is even more significant in the amount of freedom it gave the players in their choices of characters. Early games offered a scant handful of generic options: a fighter, a priest, a thief, or a wizard. Modern games offer a virtually unlimited selection of character classes, races, species, and supernatural inclinations. The robust world creation has resulted in pantheons of deities that players can choose to worship or defy, political factions to manipulate, and even social causes to champion. Many games even offer the players the option of playing themselves, complete with rules to translate their natural talents and weaknesses into their character's statistics.

From these changes, a necessary third evolution came about in the way that characters interacted with the fantasy world. When D&D first emerged, there was virtually no plot and no need for complex roleplay. Morality was rigidly defined in terms of good and evil, and the group of adventurers were always on the side of righteousness. On the rare occasions when players



interacted with non-player characters, their nature could be quickly determined by names such as "King Trueheart, the Wise" and "Scytharax, the Bloodthirsty". These campaigns followed what is now called the "hack 'n slash" method because the characters relied almost exclusively on that tactic to resolve negotiate their environment. The characters had purely adversarial relationships with almost every being they encountered, and the only strategies required were how to avoid the traps and slay anything in their path.

This mindset was so prevalent that Fine tested his gaming group by having them encounter a group of 20 children in a dungeon. It was such a shock that the group could not decide how to proceed. There was a serious argument in which many voted to just kill them and move on, while the rest argued that killing innocent children was not something they were entirely comfortable doing. In the end, the group allowed the children to depart unharmed with a warning that if they ever saw them again they would be cut down (Fine 1983).

The shift away from this old format and into the modern methods of play is one of the most vital changes to increasing both enjoyment and engrossment for players, and it originated with M.A. Barker's Empire of the Petal Throne. His was the first system to treat the world as a navigable, interactive space that was as important to the characters as the dungeons. These worlds have complex cultural systems, complete with gods and theological outlooks. Dungeons and Dragons alone has several hundred deities. While the majority of systems embrace the usual good versus evil, some are based instead on law versus chaos while others use more esoteric systems such as technocrats versus traditionalists.

Now, each world is truly a rich creation that incorporates as many types of reality as the narrator and players can imagine. It is common, for example, for players to invent entire histories of the lives of their characters, chronicling their childhoods, their relationships with their parents

or other key figures, and important events that shaped them into the "person" they are now. Many narrators will incorporate difficult moral choices into their campaigns that are intended to test the characters, and the players themselves have infinite freedom to respond to these situations by choosing to be good or evil, chaotic or lawful, or any shade in between.

Another important change to the way roleplaying games were conducted was the introduction of living campaigns. For the past fifteen years, players have the option of joining a centrally coordinated society that monitors game play. As long as the players and narrators adhere to the requirements of the society and log their information accurately, they may take their characters with them to new locations and transfer them into different gaming groups. While this does place some limitations on the player and the narrator, using the system allows for an unprecedented level of integration between gaming groups and is incredibly popular at conventions or for gamers who travel often.

### **1. Change in Demographics**

To study a subculture of people that tend to be somewhat reclusive and extremely plugged into virtual circles is a truly difficult task. In an attempt to capture a rough image of gamer demographics I have taken personal information from each of the forty people interviewed during this study. The diverse nature of roleplayers and the limited availability of reliable, widespread data collection methods has resulted in gaps in several categories. There is one category, however, that has changed so dramatically that it can be seen on absolutely every survey I have encountered. This is the emergence of women in roleplaying. This particular topic is both exciting and complex, and could rightfully merit an entire thesis on its own. Though I was not able to dedicate the level of exploration that it deserved at this time, I have chosen to include my incomplete analysis because it is too important to the overall state of the roleplaying

community to omit. I sincerely hope that future research into the extent and motivations for this shift will occur.

Dr. Fine mentioned that at the time of his study Gary Gygax estimated that 10-15% of gamers were likely female, but he believed that was a gross over estimation (Fine 1983). Dr. Fine offered his own estimations regarding the participation of women in tabletop roleplaying.

“In the judges guild journal surveys only 2.3% of the respondents were female and in the space gamer survey the figure was even lower--.04%. These figures are probably not gross underestimations. At origins '78 the major national convention, approximately 95% of those in attendance were male. In the Dragon's referee list only 3.8% were female.” (Fine 1983:41).

Wizards of the Coast conducted a survey in 1999 of 20,000 households and found 19% of gamers were female. In 2004, the largest gaming convention in North America, GenCon, reported that 23% of attendees were female.

To increase the amount of information, I asked gamers from unrelated circles to give me the names of people they regularly gamed with and their genders. My surveys had 9 women respondents out of 40 (22.5%). Of the 347 extra group members listed by these gamers, 119 were women (34.3%). During the Kansas City Gaming Expo, I went from room to room at different times to count the number of women present. I found that this number ranged from approximately 12% to 20% depending on the time. I also discovered that 20 of the people interviewed stated that they



at MavenCon.  
(2012)

routinely roleplayed with their spouses or partners. Of these, 6 mentioned that when childcare was not available during a scheduled game it was the mothers that most often had to stay at home with the children. If we extrapolated these numbers, it is possible that without children we could see an increase by as much as 18%. That would place female attendance just over 28%. While the exact numbers may vary, the trend is clear. The subculture is starting to include more women participants.

### **Gender Within Gaming Community**

*Table 2*

<b><u>Source</u></b>	<b><u>Year</u></b>	<b><u>Male</u></b>	<b><u>Female</u></b>
Judges Guild	1978	97.70%	2.30%
Space Gamer	1978	99.60%	0.40%
Gary Gygax (TSR)	1978	85-90%	10-15%
Dragon	1978	96.20%	3.80%
GenCon XI	1979	95%	5%
WOTC Survey	1999	81%	19%
GenCon SoCal	2004	77%	23%
Interviews	2011	77.50%	22.50%
KC Gaming Fest	2011	84%	16%
Network Lists	2011	65.70%	34.30%

Fine offers three explanations for the lack of involvement of women in roleplaying: characteristics of women, the process of recruitment in the gaming world, and the reactions of men to the presence of women (Fine 1983:62). His first point addresses what he considers inherent differences between women and men. While he does not directly state that women are incapable of creative thinking, detail orientation, and long term concentration, he makes several comments that strongly suggest these shortcomings and offers quotes that do state it outright. While there are many theories that explain the creation of gender roles ranging from the biological to the psychological, they do not call into question a woman's innate capabilities for high level cognition and thus their ability to enjoy fantasy roleplaying games.

That said, there are some tenets of feminist theory that, if true, could lower the chances that women would become interested in roleplaying games in the first place. It states that early childhood socialization encourages young men to pursue self-realization and express creative talents while young women are encouraged to find personal fulfillment in the accomplishments of their husband and children while ensuring that all the requirements for running the household are met. In the corporate and academic world, men are likewise encouraged to concentrate on abstract theory while the practical application often falls to the women. In addition to these trends, feminists feel that our culture socializes women to discourage aggressive behavior (Applerouth 1965). If a man is assertive and dominant, he is praised as a high powered professional. When a woman in the same position displays comparably aggressive tendencies, she is often stigmatized and derided. Applerouth (1965) maintains that this creates an environment in which women are pressured to be submissive to men and not to explore their aggressive sides.

Fine's second point, that the methods employed by roleplaying circles to recruit players restricted access to women, is also no longer an issue. Years ago, information about roleplaying was much more limited. Materials were often shared within gaming groups and many people only learned about the new hobby through invitations from friends who played. While I do not agree that this prevented women from becoming involved, it is possible that it might have made it more difficult for them if they did not know people who were already participating. One important factor in resolving this has been the internet. It is an instant source of information about gaming, providing everything from digital copies of the rule systems to social networking groups to allow new gamers to find a local gaming group to join. If an area does not have a local

gaming group that appeals to the woman, the internet gives her the opportunity to log online and join a group of people thousands of miles away via video chat.

The third reason that Fine gives for the lack of female participation is the undesirable reactions of gamer men to the presence of women. He suggests that because most men who engage in roleplaying games are socially inept, they tend to behave in inappropriate ways when women join the group. This assumption is a reflection of the negative stereotypes that have always surrounded the gaming community. The only basis I have found for this is that roleplayers are almost always of above average intelligence. The young men in this group may be less socialized with women during adolescence, the time period where many players are introduced to the hobby. It is no more appropriate to categorize gamers as unattractive, socially inept, and emotionally stunted than it is to categorize athletes as brutish, unintelligent, misogynistic meat heads. Throughout my research, I have not found a single man who says he dislikes gaming with women. On the contrary, most are very vocal about their desire to see more women in the gaming community and genuinely enjoy the women in their gaming group. Monk Gamer adamantly stated that “I like playing with girls... having women play brings a whole other element to the game that you just can't get with a bunch of guys sitting around the table, and they really add to the social interaction.”

Shelley Mazzanoble's Confessions of a Part Time Sorceress provides an invaluable perspective on the changing role of women in the gaming community. She is an employee of the largest gaming company in the world, has written numerous books, and writes a well-known column focusing on gaming and women participants. In this book, she documents her own entry into the gaming culture and her movement through the social community. By her own description her book is one part confessional and one part how-to guide (Mazzanoble 2007:2).

Her point is simple. While the majority of gamers are men, gaming has much to offer both sexes and women can find it just as enjoyable and engrossing as men do.

## **2. Changes in Stereotypes**

Gamers are often stereotyped as young men who are social misfits and can't function in the real world. Many further typify them as highly intelligent under achievers with poor hygiene and unappealing physiques. When I began gaming in the 1980s, the people who participated in roleplaying games were the "weirdos", the "freaks", and the "nerds", and it was considered shameful to be involved with the hobby. While gaming may still be considered nerdy hobby there has been an enormous rising trend of "geek chic" that has made it socially acceptable, even desirable, to be considered a nerd.

The reason for this shift in perspective is simple. The individuals who began gaming decades ago have graduated from college and entered the workforce, and they are applying the knowledge and skills gained from roleplaying in unique ways. Many of the people involved in the early gaming culture were highly intelligent and benefitted from the skills they honed in roleplaying games. Over 30 years later, these individuals have gone on to become a large group of successful and wealthy "nerds" that are now between 40 and 60. This has inspired many trends that cater to the hobbies and interests of those in this group. Additionally, many older gamers passed their interest in roleplaying to their children, thereby encouraging the next generation to grow. As roleplaying has gained in popularity and social acceptance the games themselves have diversified to appeal to broader genres. More and more people are finding something of interest in gaming, which in turn increases its popularity and social acceptance. Gamers are no longer the misfits and underachievers- we are excelling in our professions and becoming trendsetters!

This trend has given rise to several new subgenres, each with their own distinct style yet often overlapping with one another. Geek chic styles play on many of the iconic gaming symbols



"Geek  
londe

of the past. Bands that identify themselves with this style will often incorporate old Atari sound effects or 8-bit musical themes from Nintendo soundtracks.

Roleplaying is referenced in clothing with examples ranging from dice-shaped purses for women, humorous shirts, and even the incorporation of fantasy costuming accessories into daily outfits. The

style also boldly accentuates aspects of stereotypically nerdy dress such as huge thick-framed glasses,

awkward ties, inappropriate combinations of colors and patterns, and obviously homemade accessories.

Mainstream media is capitalizing on the trend by producing television shows and movies that glorify the quirky, socially awkward personalities over the typical protagonists. Shows like *The New Girl* and *Big Bang Theory* as well as movies like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* are meta-geek smorgasbords of nerdcore music and fashion filled with countless references to traditionally nerdy themes such as comic books, video games, science, and roleplaying. Two of the most iconic staples in nerd culture, the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises, have been completely reimagined and marketed to a new demographic. The explosion of big-budget movies based on comic books and graphic novels, including the new *Batman* and *X-Men* franchises, as well the those based on fantasy novels, like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Song of Ice and Fire* series, are all prime examples of the growing acceptance that the subculture is enjoying.



For these reasons, many of the old stereotypes no longer apply. The newfound acceptance that nerd culture is enjoying is a particularly positive step forward now, when a variety of factors have undermined the traditional methods which young people used to form their social identities. They include the decline of a cohesive national identity as well as the reduced emphasis placed on identification based on race, gender, or religion. As society moves away from these categories, research shows that hobbyists are drawing more of their identity from membership in the sub-communities to which they belong (Fine 1983). The evolving cultural perceptions of gamers has given much-needed confidence and acceptance to a group of young people who would have been ostracized in the past, and has made the benefits of roleplaying accessible to a broader range of participants while limiting its drawbacks.

### **B. The Creation of Microcultural Systems**

The next area to examine is the way in which microcultural systems are created during roleplaying games. In theory, a shared fantasy world should be completely unlimited, as unfettered by logic and judgment as our dreams. Since it can be readily observed that the worlds players construct tend to adhere to certain basic structural themes, it is clear that shared mental constructs exist that are so deeply rooted in our perception of reality that we subconsciously transfer them to alternate realities as well. Harold Garfinkle summarizes this in his explanation of ethnomethodology, stating that "... members of society must have some shared methods that they use to mutually construct the meaningful orderliness of social situations" (Garfinkle 2002:5). In addition to understanding the methods required to balance the often conflicting frames of shared fantasy worlds, it is also necessary to examine the way that the players negotiate their dual roles within those frames. Social crossover, and particularly the conveyance of status, is a very common side-effect of this duality and just as in the real world it can have

both benefits and consequences. Finally, to illustrate a portion of the background work that is required to narrate a new game, I have included a discussion of the fantasy world I created for one of my participant observation games. It is only the skeleton of the world, and does not include any rule-based considerations.

Many people take for granted certain basic facts about the world around them. Players, likewise, will echo these unspoken assumptions when creating fantasy worlds. Strictly speaking, there is no reason that a new world must exhibit these characteristics yet almost all roleplaying games have them in common. Regardless of the gaming system, fantasy realms tend to follow basic laws of physics, rely on biological concepts such as life and death, experience time in a linear flow, and contain some form of good vs. evil morality. These congruencies are pieces of the players' primary frameworks of reality, and it is this framework that generates many of the shared symbols that the gamers bring with them into their fantasy worlds. Without these overlapping shared symbols, fantasy roleplaying would not be possible. "Each gaming group interprets, defines, and transforms elements within its society. Their gaming world is a transformation of mundane shared realities." (Hughes 1988:5).

Since the game takes place on a purely imaginative level, it is critical for the players to be able to envision the world around them so similarly that they can all interact within it effectively. The descriptions of the narrator provide the lens through which all other participants may view the world he is creating. He describes every scene and what the characters perceive. The level of these descriptions can vary greatly; in some cases a somewhat simple scene can be described in intricate detail, or an incredibly complex scene might be described only in passing. By drawing on common primary frameworks and shared symbols, the narrator is usually able to communicate his vision in a relatively efficient summary.

The fantasy framework is much more fluid and is often specific to the subcultures to which the participants belong. "Each gaming group interprets, defines, and transforms cultural elements in its sphere of knowledge into the cultural framework of an imagined society" (Fine 1983:2). When someone says the word "elf", it can call forth many varied images based on the listener's sources of reference. You might imagine a tiny, plump cartoon creature that lives in a tree and makes cookies. Around the holidays, you might envision one of Santa's little helpers wearing green and a funny hat. If you have a background in high fantasy you might picture a tall, slender creature with pointed ears and unearthly beauty. However, the D&D version of an elf is different from all of these and it is important that all the players in the group, regardless of any other concepts of an elf they might have, can instantly conjure the proper image to fit the story.

A good example of the way a roleplaying group must learn to suspend their out of game concepts can be seen in the rules for mutations found in many apocalyptic settings. When a creature is exposed to radiation, they roll dice to determine which random mutation they will receive. Unlike the devastating effects of radiation that occur in reality, game-based mutations tend to be at least somewhat advantageous to the player. The guidebook addresses this dichotomy by explaining that, "The rules for mutations here and in D20 Future present fantastic, story-driven options that allow amazing and inhuman abilities. They are not even close to a realistic examination of mutation. They aren't meant to be. That's because realistically, most mutations are negative, unpleasant, or lethal." (Cagle et al.2005:40).

If a scene is misinterpreted by multiple participants it is the narrator's task to clarify the events. "There is often confusion as to the precise situation; as a result of this confusion a player may announce that his character will do something that is appropriate given his understanding of

the situation but which has negative consequences based on the referee's understanding." (Fine 1983:107).

As a gaming group spends time together, each participant's fantasy frame subtly realigns to become more compatible with those of the other participants. Over time this contributes to the flow of game, allowing for more actual play time and a more engrossing experience (Hughes 1988). This phenomenon can be easily observed at conventions. Players and narrators who have never gamed together form a group, then spend the weekend together around the table. The rate of play is unusually slow and choppy in the beginning because the group must stop frequently to clarify scenes or debate interpretations of rules, but as the weekend progresses the players develop a feel for the new narrator and their fellow players. The flow of the game becomes more natural, there are fewer misunderstandings, and scene transitions take less time as the group's fantasy frames slowly adjust towards a common shared fantasy. This is the reason that, despite the diversity available at each convention, gamers will often find a group they enjoy on the first day and stay together throughout the weekend.

This phenomenon is very valuable in settings other than the gaming table. Everyone has met couples, siblings, or friends that are so close to one another that they finish each other's sentences and seem to anticipate the other's reactions. This is an example of people who have spent enough time together that their world views are more in sync than with the people who do not share such intimate relationships. In professional environments, this is commonly referred to as "being on the same page" or a group of people "being in the zone" together, and it is highly desirable for productivity. Gaming is a wonderful and pleasurable way to hone this skill by helping players identify the steps in the process, practice the deliberate alignment of a group frame, and then learn to apply it in new situations.

## 1. Social Crossover

In addition to the ways that the physical world crosses over to influence the shared fantasy realms, the social worlds of the players also find their ways into the game. Although social crossover is strongly discouraged by roleplayers, 39 of the 40 gamers interviewed stated that they have experienced instances of inadvertent carryover between in game and out of game emotions. When asked about this, Saul Gamer responded that “It happens all the time! Players get mad because of something that happened with their characters. I can think of times when spouses got angry about things that happened in game. Not me and my wife, of course, but other people. You're not going to interview her next, are you?” This is certainly not exclusive to roleplayers. Any time a person must shift between roles in their life there will be some overlapping emotions because the transition is not a clean-cut, absolute change. A woman who has been deeply frustrated at work all day will not instantly shed those feelings when she slips into the role of mother at home, and the comfort her family provides will linger when she returns to the office the next day.

Social crossover represents a real danger to the engrossment and enjoyment of a roleplaying group because the characters they play can vary drastically from the players' true personalities and they are free to engage in actions the player would never consider outside of the fantasy world. A player who has chosen to play an evil character, for example, may decide steal a valuable article from another party member. The player controlling the victim must then choose if they are going to allow their anger at the theft to impact their actual feelings towards the other player, or if they will only allow their character to be angry with the other person's character. Similarly, emotional strife between two players can cause unprovoked animosity between their characters in game. During my observations, one gaming group experienced a

great deal of tension when two of its members ended their romantic relationship but tried to remain friends. The players worked very hard to behave politely out of game, but the strength of the negative feelings they were suppressing caused them to lash out violently at one another through their characters even though there was no reason for them to be at odds. This quickly destroyed the frame for the whole group, and was only resolved when one player removed themselves.

One of the only times when social crossover is openly permitted in game play is the party's initial meeting. Most characters are designed with a background history that includes personality characteristics, moral alignment, and specific quirks or fears. As unique as each character is, for the game to function they must meet, join forces, and cooperate with one another to attain goals. While some narrators require the characters to play out the characters' initial meetings and explain why they chose to work together, many skip this part of the story to save time. In gaming, the term "PC Glow" is used to identify the characters that are exclusively player-controlled. If the group encounters a new character who the narrator states has the PC glow, then he is often integrated into the group quickly and without question so that game play does not have to slow down. This is also common when a character is killed and the player must re-join the party as a new character. Rather than allowing the story to grind to a halt while the narrator fabricates a plausible scenario to explain the addition of the new character, or else neglecting the player for hours until the party reaches a point when a new character might realistically join them, many gaming groups will temporarily sacrifice realism in favor of smooth game play for everyone.

Social crossover seems most difficult to control in romantic relationships. Players who are involved with one another often play characters that are closely linked, either romantically or

as family members. If their characters are not together, they might occasionally become involved with a non-player controlled character (NPC), but it is extremely rare for the character of a player in a relationship to become romantically involved with the character of another player who is not their partner. Several interviewees remarked these in game relationships that conflict with real world relationships often spell trouble. "Oh, I have seen it happen. First her character was screwing another player's character and the next thing you know she was screwing the other character's player. Eventually, she left her husband for the other guy," Dave Gamer recalled. This problem arises much more often in LARP games, where there are actual physical interactions and the lines between fantasy and reality can blur more easily.

The exception that I have consistently heard to the problem of conflicting in and out of game romances is a LARP game called Legend of the Five Rings. In L5R, the social system relies heavily on arranged political marriages so the players tend to place very little actual emotional weight on who their in game spouse may be. As a result, there tends to be virtually no emotional crossover.

Status is a very specific type of social crossover that plays a large role in the dynamics of gaming circles. In the roleplaying community, status is derived from several sources but is usually tied to the player's ability to facilitate flow and engrossment for other people. The person's skill as a gamer, their involvement within the community, and their natural charisma are all factors that contribute to their overall status within the group. To a certain extent, status will transfer from the player to their character. Fine (1983) observed that "In practice this means helping high status characters while letting low-status characters fend for themselves." (p.156). In games such as World of Darkness, the rule system grants experience points to players in addition to their characters based on their role playing ability, their participation in the game, the

office they hold within the group, and their involvement in activities that promote the community. These experience points determine when and how a character can advance in the game, and are a good example of the ways that status can directly transfer between player and character. Status is also important because it creates legitimacy of interpretation. When a discrepancy arises in the way a particular scene is understood by the players or the narrator, it is the player with the most status who can most easily realign the frame. Other gamers recognize that the high-status player is both skilled and experienced, and therefore they are more likely to accept to their interpretation of the scene as the most accurate.

"The most obvious example of status in the gaming world is the power and prestige accorded referees... More to the point, outside the game this individual is likely to have high status." (Fine 1983:154). The narrator is always given a high status for several reasons. First, running a game is very complex and requires a tremendous amount of preparation work. Many players refuse to run games for this reason, and even most experienced narrators need to switch between running games and playing in them to keep from being overwhelmed. Second, designing both a world and a plotline for the group to navigate takes a great deal of creativity, and the narrators often draw on personal experiences, dreams, and other intimate details to add depth to their story. Placing the results on display and allowing the players to interact with it requires both courage and confidence. Finally, narrators are accorded extra status because they must maintain an almost flawless comprehension and recall of the extensive rule system for the game. (Fine 1983). The narrator must be able to quickly and accurately apply rules to new situations, settle disputes, and in order to maintain the fabricated frame of role playing. If the narrator doesn't understand the rules, then game play will slow to a crawl and the frame will shatter.



## 2. Creation of a Fantasy World

During the course of my research, I took my turn running a campaign and attempted to document some of the various non-rule based factors that must go into world creation before the characters ever sit down at the table. To begin, I choose a game genre that would influence every other decision about the game world. The genre is effectively the largest framework from which everything else is drawn. I chose to create a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world because a number of factors in the real world that suggest our society is in for a dramatic change, and I felt that presenting this possible future would be particularly evocative for the players during this time of upheaval.

To further define the setting, I exaggerated several of the social issues that are threatening society in our world. The overall mood in the campaign is one of hopelessness. People kill each other over the few remaining resources. Those who have much seek to enslave those that have nothing. Pockets of advanced technology exist, but the owners hold onto it and keep it away from the masses.

One of the defining characteristics of this genre in literature and movies is the struggle to balance personal survival with a loss of humanity. I drew on the recurring struggle of the protagonist in the classic genre film "Mad Max", in which he must choose whether to watch the cruelty and injustice around him but remain safe, or to get involved and take a stand against the darkness knowing it may require great personal sacrifice. The characters in my game are repeatedly put into this situation. Unlike many traditional fantasy settings, evil is not overt in my campaign. The scenes are designed to be morally ambiguous and to put the characters in situations that seem to have no clear "right answer". The opportunity this presents for the

characters to debate ethically thorny situations is an element that I value very highly in roleplaying games.

I chose the D20 Modern rule system for three reasons. First, it is extremely flexible, with several optional rule sets that can be added or removed to influence the flavor of the game. There is a magic system, for example, but since my campaign does not involve magic I simply omit that section. Second, its open gaming license allows anyone to publish content for their games, making the most prolific game system in circulation and one with which virtually every gamer is familiar. Finally, the damage rules are structured to create the possibility of severely damaging a character in almost all conflicts. In many games, players rush into battle because they know their character will almost always survive. In the D20 system, an experienced warrior can be killed by a farmer with a pitchfork under the right circumstances. I believe that this is much more realistic, and it contributes to the overall sense of wariness and danger in the world.

### **Background**

The U.S. government captured several dead cybernetic organisms and managed to reverse-engineer certain part of the technology to advance cybernetic technology on Earth. Through these advances, scientists discovered personality mapping technology which could replicate personalities and implant them into donor bodies. Most of the donor bodies belonged to convicts who had been sentenced to death. Once the technology was perfected, project "Legion" was launched to prepare for possible doomsday scenarios. Unfortunately, the minds of the test subjects could not withstand the shock of being placed in a strange body, so every test subject attempted suicide within weeks of awakening. This inability to adapt resulted in failure after failure, and of the initial 36 test subjects only one survived. The survivor was a software programmer, but was otherwise unremarkable. Upon careful examination of his life, the only

difference he exhibited was his passion for roleplaying games. Psychologists determined that years of actively taking on drastically different roles had encouraged a certain mental flexibility that allowed him to survive such a dramatic paradigm shift. Legion began screening their test subjects for roleplaying experience and the tests became successful. Gamers that survived the mental strain were implanted into donor bodies augmented with cybernetics and placed in cryogenic stasis.

### **Characters**

The players each control the body of a cybernetically enhanced death row convict with their own personalities implanted. Since the personality is their own, it is easy to understand the character's motivations and allows them to feel deeply attached to the character from the beginning. Cybernetic enhancement and highly developed bodies allow them to have strength, dexterity, and endurance that far exceeds what the player could ever attain in the mundane world.

The party is awakened in a bunker and the AI tells them that an apocalyptic event has destroyed the civilization they knew, and gives them a set of instructions that will help rebuild society from the ashes. The party is also given incentives to follow the instructions. The AI constantly monitors the activities of members and downloads their memories into an archive. Each member has a back up body that will be activated in the event of an untimely death as long as they are acting in accord with their assignment. Most importantly, every gamer in the program has a clone of their own body stored in cryogenic stasis. If the characters follow all the instructions given to them and complete their missions, they can have their personalities implanted back into an identical body of their own genetic code which would permit children to be conceived with their own genetic structure.

## **Description of Area**

The nearest settlement to the bunker is Cratertown, which is built in the bowl of a bomb blast. Most of Cratertown is built on the roofs and upper levels of buildings and connected by an extensive system of catwalks and bridges because the irradiated debris on the ground is still very dangerous. The elite live as far from the ground as they possibly can, while the poor live closer to it. The lowest level of the city is another community that is run by mutants, many whom have developed a natural resistance to radiation. This aspect is my critique on large cities where the poor are often confined to inner city slums, with rampant crime and a police force that rarely venture in.

## **Economics**

I spent a great deal of time trying to decide how to create an effective currency system in a ravaged world. The medium would need to be backed by something more tangible than the word of an institution, but it must be carefully managed to remain effective. Cratertown employs a system of money based on the exchange of goods. Whenever someone enters the town, they are allowed to put items they own in what is essentially the equivalent of a town-operated pawn shop. The guard estimates the value of the items and gives the individual 80% of the value in credits. If the individual brings back the same amount of credits within thirty days, he gets his items back. If not, his items are auctioned off and the proceeds go to the town.

These are some of the main factors that are required world creation, but there are also hundreds of small details that must be arranged as well. The narrator must know whether there is an functioning oil pump in the town, if there is a mutant faction planning an uprising, and if the madame at the brothel is spying for the mayor. These seemingly trivial details may or may not ever come out in game play, but they must be in place because if the world does not functionally

integrate then it will not make sense. If, for example, the mayor is paying the characters to steal 100 gallons of gasoline from another town but the town has its own oil well and refinery, the assignment becomes illogical and meaningless. Once the party realizes that, the frame will fracture and the engrossment will be compromised.

### **C. Engrossment and Identification**

The third and final segment of research concerns the ways that gamers experience engrossment and identification. These elements, more than any others, address the ways that gamers process their relationships with the game world as well as their characters on an intrapersonal level. Through frame analysis, we see how gamers must align different frameworks to create and maintain engrossment, as well as some of the tools they use to enhance immersion in the game. Next, an examination of the different ways players create characters reveals some important relationships between the two in the mind of the gamer. Finally, we explore how maintaining multiple roles simultaneously can result in different types of role conflict, as well as some of the ways that addressing these issues can benefit the gamer in their daily life.

#### **1. Creating Engrossment**

According to Fine, role players will only create and participate in what they find engrossing. In order to be engrossing the constructed fantasy must appeal to the player on three distinct paradigmatic levels. "The resultant artifact comprises three interrelated systems of meaning; the shared mundane reality (the base culture), the system of rules which structure the game universe, and the content of the game/fantasy itself." (Hughes 1988:5). All three levels are subject to interpretation and often conflict with each other, resulting in disputes that can be difficult to resolve since they are occurring in different frames. The three levels must be in balance and when any is lacking it inhibits the frame and engrossment.

First, the symbols must appeal to the player's sense of what is realistically possible. It draws largely on the primary frameworks of nature and science. These frameworks provide a cultural database of knowledge that gamers tap into to provide meaning for a situation and facilitate a more congruent interpretation of the fantasy world. Since the gaming experience relies on the narrator's ability to describe what is taking place in a scene, shared frameworks allow a complex situation that might otherwise require hours of explanation to be summarized into a succinct description. (Fine 1983). There is no need to explain to the group that an arrow shot from a bow will move in a forward direction and be subject to both inertia and gravity, nor must the narrator explain how a spaceship is able to fly in space. The players know that these things are within the realms of possibility and can fill in the gaps with information they already possess.

If the narrator ignores these underlying foundations it can upset game play. In one game I observed, the narrator was describing a scene in which he intended for the party to watch helplessly as the villain escaped on a train. One player, however, decided to run beside the departing train and make the risky jump onto the back car. The narrator had not prepared for this possibility, and rather than incorporating the player's completely possible action into his story he simply declared that the player was physically unable to attempt it. This utterly violated the primary frameworks shared by all the players, and resulted in the frame breaking down.

The second level is composed of the system of rules that govern the limits and probabilities of actions. Rule system create a buffer between the levels of reality, which is full of limits, and fantasy, which by definition is limitless. The rules help to direct the session into a cohesive adventure instead of a collective daydream. Without carefully defined rules, the

rewards will become high while the risks become minimal, a situation that is ultimately unsatisfying for participants.

In addition to the carefully ordered rules, roleplaying also attempts to quantify the concept of random chance or "fate" through the use of dice rolls. This can include a myriad of uses including simple pass/fail rolls, percentile chance rolls, and rolls to determine random locations. For example, when jumping from a bridge into a river there is a chance that the

character will land well, bob to the surface, and swim safely to shore. There is also a chance that they will injure themselves in a bad landing, strike a submerged rock, or become entangled. A character that jumps from a bridge that is only 10 feet above a placid, deep river will almost certainly succeed, so the narrator might ask the player to roll percentile dice with only a 1%



chance of failure (rolling a 1). If that same character jumps 30 feet into a large, fast moving river is

not have enough  
m n.d.)

possible that they will be okay, but is a much riskier proposition. To reflect the changing probability of success under those circumstances, the player might roll a d6 with success represented by either a 5 or 6. If the character leaps from a 100 foot suspension bridge over rocky rapids, it is extremely dangerous but there is always the chance of a miraculous success.

This situation might require one roll of percentile dice with a 1% chance of surviving the initial attempt (rolling 100). The player might then be asked to make a separate roll of a d20 to determine if they were injured. Rolling a 1 could represent a broken neck, 2-10 could represent a

broken leg, 11-19 a broken arm, and a 20 the miraculous avoidance of any injury. The narrator would then ask the player to roll again to determine if they were able to swim to shore, basing the difficulty of success on the results of the previous roll. Waskul & Lust (2004) observe that "Dice rolling maintains an element of tension and uncertainty, a key characteristic of play." (pg.335).

Intricate knowledge of the rules is not required for new players at first as long as the other participants can fill in the gaps. Over time, though, most gamers find that understanding the rule system greatly increases their enjoyment of the game. That said, placing too much emphasis on the minutia of the system can impair engrossment as well. As with all systems of rules, roleplaying systems are sometimes left open to interpretation. Although the rules are laid out as carefully as the authors are able, there is no way for one person to anticipate the infinite number of scenarios in which their rule will be put into practice. Creative problem solving is at the heart of roleplaying games, and gamers love to find unique and unexpected methods of reaching their goals. For this reason, there is a general understanding that under the right circumstances the narrator has the authority to choose how a particular rule should be interpreted, or even if a rule will apply at all. Players who obsess over finding loopholes in the gaming guide's wordings or enforcing "the letter of the law" as opposed to the intent of the particular rule are disparagingly referred to as "rules lawyers." This can ruin a game just as quickly as a lack of understanding of the system."Players and referees often argue and bicker about a logical point or a technical nicety in the rules, as each attempt to dominate the other in a continuous struggle for influence." (Fine 1983:106). Finding the balance between the two extremes creates the most exciting and enjoyable gaming experiences.



There is one notable exception to the rules framework. From time to time, situations arise in which the dice rolls are seriously hampering the storyline of the game. At these times, there is an unspoken agreement among players to allow for a little bit of subtle manipulation of the numbers, provided it is not overt or overly exploited. Most players also acknowledge that the narrator is free to adjust dice rolls in the interest of the story if he deems it necessary, but if his not discreet about it or only uses it to hurt the party then the players will become upset. When asked about this practice, Bluebeard Gamer replied that "Rule number one: the DM is always right. Rule number two: for clarification, please see rule number one! If the DM occasionally changes dice or allows a player to reroll, that isn't cheating... he's got a story he's trying to tell."

This attitude is based on a social contract between the narrator and the players. The narrator will weave an epic in which the players will control characters that are the central to the events unfolding. It is important that this remain the focus of both parties or an attitude of hostility will emerge between the players and the narrator, or between the characters and the world. The narrator's purpose is not to "win" by defeating the characters, nor is it to enforce his superiority. Similarly, the characters goal is not to thwart the narrator's plans in favor of their own. When this kind of adversarial relationship develops, Fine (1983) writes that "In disputes the players usually selfishly out for their characters, try to convince the referee that they are correct- by means of references to history , the rules, or common sense. The referee in turn tries to assert his authority which he derives from his position and from the fact that players are sharing his fantasy." (pg. 107). A good narrator is one who creates an engrossing story in which everyone is allowed to participate. The narrator agrees to play within the existing rule system and not significantly alter it without justifiable cause. Narrators who have experience with a group

develop trust and credibility, and they can get away with making minor alterations that a less experienced narrator could not.

The third paradigm is that of fantasy itself. This framework largely suspends disbelief, which often brings it into direct conflict with the first framework and requires negotiations through the rule system. Roleplaying embraces concepts that are not considered possible in the mundane world. Magic, for example, is one of the most fundamental elements of the fantasy framework (Fine 1983). The main difference is that the fantasy framework is not as widespread in mainstream society. While primary frameworks are constantly being developed through our everyday activities, the fantasy framework draws from a much smaller base of experience. For most people, this is composed of exposure to certain types of media such as movies and novels, fantastic stories passed down through oral tradition, information gained through various religious sources, and dreams. Of the three frameworks, this is by far the most fluid and has the most opportunities for reframing. For this reason, it is the most heavily influenced by the game itself and is the framework that shifts most to match the frameworks of the other gamers the longer they play together.

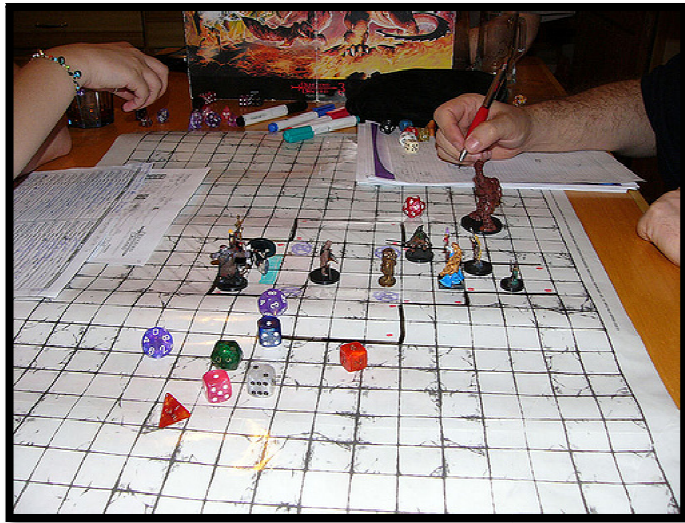
A player does not require the narrator to explain why he is able to fly in an airplane; his primary framework tells him it is possible as well as what the general limits are for that mode of transportation, and so unless something challenges these understandings he does not dwell on it. When a player casts a spell on himself that allows him to fly, however, it requires a greater amount of thought. What seems like a simple and unbounded concept suddenly must be defined in terms of possibilities. How fast can he move? How high can he levitate? How long can he maintain the spell? All of these questions must be standardized or this basic act of fantasy can unbalance the game. One player might envision magical flight as a slow, graceful floating as it

was portrayed by in the Wizard of Oz for Glinda. Another in the group might pattern his concept of flight after Superman instead and believe he should be allowed to fly into space and reverse time. Purely on the fantasy level, both of these interpretations are equally possible and accurate.

The combination of these three frameworks create the basis for the roleplaying frame. While the game is in session, the player must manage two frames: that of the player engaging in the game, and that of the characters acting out their drama. Waskul & Lust's (2004) agreed, stating "A participant in these games must not only play the role of a fantasy persona, but the player as well." (pg.337). The participants must negotiate both frames simultaneously but separately. In the player frame, the participant is likely sitting in a room with 3-5 other players listening to the "table-talk" (out of game discussions taking place at the gaming table) around them, smelling popcorn in the microwave, and holding an icy Coke. The player is bound to the world around him even when deliberately trying to place themselves into the fantasy realms. To overcome the distractions around them and facilitate the transfer of consciousness from the mundane world to the roleplaying world, gamers employ numerous physical aids to help them feel immersed in their chosen fantasy. These gaming aids can be roughly divided into three broad categories: tools, stimulants, and sympathetic objects.

Tools are gaming aids whose primary purpose is to help the game's mechanics run more smoothly and keep confusion to a minimum. Maps, miniatures, and rule books are some of the most common objects found in this category. Maps and miniatures are used as reference materials to track the physical movements of the characters during moments when exact placement matters. While it may not be necessary to know exactly where each party member is standing as they walk around a tavern, it becomes crucial during combat situations. Weapons have limited ranges, spells have areas of affect, and terrain can alter visibility; during a battle,

each of these things must be taken into account when planning your strategy. In a fight that pits 7 characters against 20 goblins, it is impossible to keep track of each creature's changing position without some form of physical representation to consult. As Bluebeard Gamer recalls, this was one of the problems with early D&D. "Yeah I really like to use miniatures. Everyone remembers old school DnD because it was very



tools: paper, rule books.

difficult. The tactical plans never held because everyone forgot where they were over the course of the fight." Books are important for much the same reasons. It would be completely impractical to expect each player to have the entire contents of half a dozen large books perfectly memorized. Having a well marked Player's Handbook or Gamemaster's Guide to consult eliminates most arguments before they begin. With few exceptions, all roleplaying games rely on the use of tools to some extent as a means of reinforcing the rule system and providing a balance between the primary and fantasy frames.

Stimulants are types of gaming aids employed to stimulate the player's senses. These serve not only to cancel out many unwanted ties to the mundane world but to create a more vivid fantasy world in its place. Music, incense, and candlelight are a few common examples of stimulants that many gaming groups employ. The narrator might choose to play eerie music in the background of a campaign with a horror setting, or light the room dimly with candles to suggest the party's flickering torchlight within a newly discovered tomb.

Using altered speech patterns or accents for different characters is another popular method for enhancing the illusion of diversity. In one game, the narrator mimicked a Cockney accent for the gang of biker orcs, a cultured British accent when portraying members of the nobility, and a Southern drawl for several farmers. When the characters found themselves overlooking a tomb full of skeleton warriors, the players were eager to hear what accent he would use to represent the undead. The narrator, having not planned an accent for creatures made only of bone, paused for a moment to think. He then leapt to his feet, rapidly chattering his teeth and gesticulating wildly at his skeleton army. The group loved this little display and still laugh about it to this day.

The third category of gaming aids are the least commonly used in average game play. Sympathetic gaming aids are physical objects the players use to represent something tangible in game. Swords, costumes, and recreations of magical artifacts are good examples of these gaming aids. If a player is portraying a wizard, he might attend the game in flowing robes. His clothing does not have any actual impact on the running of the game, but it creates a link between the player and the character while also helping the other group members to see his character when they look at him. One player I interviewed brought a special rapier to the game whenever he played a certain character. He did not bring it to all games, or even to all games where he played a character that wielded a rapier. In his mind, that particular rapier was tied to the identity of that particular character, and he claimed having it with him was a tremendous help when trying to stay in frame. Even seemingly insignificant objects can make effective sympathetic aids if used properly. "I like to use parchment notes and letters in my games. Giving the players something tangible to touch and feel, something that looks ancient and worn... I think it brings another level of realism to the table," explained Thunderstud Gamer.

Another benefit to sympathetic gaming aids is that they provide additional legitimacy by displaying dedication to the hobby, which ultimately serves to bolster the player frame. One of the most difficult obstacles for some new gamers to overcome is the pressure of "gamer shame", which is the result of being socialized to associate roleplaying games with undesirable stereotypes. The more the other participants show loyalty to the hobby, the more those around them are able to lose themselves in the character frame without fearing ridicule and judgment. In that context, the act of wearing a wizard's robe is the equivalent of proclaiming "Yes, I am proud to be a gamer and I am not afraid to take a stand for what I enjoy!" Dice are the trademark icon for roleplaying games, and they are probably the most significant of all the gaming aids. On the surface, they are used as tools to represent the effects of fate on the actions of the character. The player rolls the appropriate type of dice, and the result is combined with the fixed representations of his natural attributes and skills to determine if he attained his goal. However, the majority of gamers see the dice as more than tools. Fine (1983) made the same observation when "on one occasion, a player brought a calculator that he had programmed to generate numbers randomly from 1 to 100, eliminating the need for percentile dice. After a few trials, everyone returned to using two ten sided dice because they felt they had more control of the outcome." (pg.98). Players often attribute qualities to the dice they use, ranging from complaints that a particular die "hates them" to superstitiously protecting their lucky dice set. If the player feels this way, then the dice are actually stimulants as well because they strengthen the connection to the fantasy world by acting as a conduit between the character and themselves. Finally, dice can fill the role of a sympathetic gaming aid. In the Empire of the Petal Throne, each deity is associated with a particular color. Any time a roll is required that directly represents the action or will of a deity, the narrator rolls dice whose colors correspond to the deity (Fine 1983).

## 2. Relationships Between Players and Characters

The relationship between players and characters is one of the most interesting components of roleplaying games. Every gamer interviewed acknowledged that a relationship exists, and that it can take several different forms.

"Let's say you have someone that plays an Elven necromancer, a lot. I mean, they play it over and over. I mean, they don't even try to play a fighter or bard. They just play an Elven necromancer over and over. Then you go to another game like Star Wars. Guess what? They don't have Elven necromancers. Well, what is the next best thing? A Sith Lord, over and over. It's like maybe he actually believes he is an Elven necromancer, or he wants to be." Monk Gamer

Fine believed that the two methods for playing a character are the "gamer" and the "role player". The "gamer" plays himself in another body and in another location, while the "role player" plays the role of whatever the character is embodies (Fine 1983). If a player is a wizard in the game, for example, they can either play as themselves with the powers of a wizard, or they can attempt to create a new persona and roleplay the character as they believe a medieval wizard would.

While I agree, at least in part, with Fine's assessment and description, the terminology is no longer appropriate because members of the community now often refer to themselves as gamers and it no longer carries any negative connotations. My research and the research of John Hughes indicate that Fine's division is an extreme oversimplification of the complexities that exist between a player and their fantasy Hughes suggests that characters are created using a combination of five different methods. Each method comes with different benefits and consequences, both in the game and in reality.

First, as Fine mentioned, characters can be played as the player. This means that the character has the same personality as the person controlling them. There is essentially no difference between the two besides their abilities and statistics. A player using this method would roleplay a Renaissance era knight or a Star Wars Jedi in exactly the same way because in

either case they are still simply playing themselves in those roles (Hughes 1988). This is very common with new gamers who have not been fully indoctrinated into the game. Since this method is the most simplistic and least engaging type of character, people within the gaming community may refer to them by the derogatory slang "roll player" (one who is focused on rolling dice) rather than a role player. A role player gets emotionally involved in the adventure and does not merely seek to "win". In contrast, the roll player approaches it like a traditional game with the goal of gaining as many experience points as possible in order to level up, kill the most monsters, and find the most treasure.

Second, characters can be played as what Hughes calls "aesthetic symbols". A frame of reference is used as a guide for the character or for limited trait selection, often based on a fictional character or an archetype generated by the player's perceptions of the role. The player will then attempt to act as he believes the fictional character would (Hughes 1988). Sometimes the fantasy frame is tapped in unorthodox ways, like pulling one fictional character out of their element and using it as a base in another alternate environment. For example, a gamer might play a medieval rogue with Han Solo as their archetype. In some cases a roleplaying character takes on a life of his own and becomes its own entity, with a personality so robust and distinctive that he can exist independent of the player that created him. Other players may then adopt him as their archetype.

In the third method the character can be portrayed as an exaggerated symbol, taking a quality that the player perceives themselves as possessing and exaggerating that quality in their character. Thunderstud Gamer, like most others interviewed, had observed this kind of personality crossover, stating " Mannerisms always leak through. My wife, for example, really is



a bit rogue-y. So if the game has any kind of roguish character, that's what she plays. If people play long enough they eventually find an archetype they like and stick with it."

The next method is using the character as a compensating symbol. This occurs when the player possesses a certain trait, but feels that either they do not have enough of it or they simply wish for more. If the player lacks a trait, then creating a character that possesses it can provide an opportunity to safely explore the differences by becoming a cognitive symbol. (Hughes 1988). Gamers themselves describe the fantasy environment as a safe place, free of judgment, which allows one to explore facets that might be detrimental elsewhere

When roleplaying a new character, the player must rely on some kind of reference point. If they play a character vastly different from themselves, they must somehow acquire these points of reference. In the real world, we have a lifetime of experiences to draw upon but in the fantasy world the player does not have that advantage. Rainbow Brite Gamer recalled one instance when a player lacked the necessary reference points to convincingly roleplay a new character.

"There was a guy in my group, a very experienced gamer, who tried to shake things up by playing a Holy Paladin. He just couldn't stay in character and gave up after the first game. When I asked him about his difficulties, he said he didn't understand what a Paladin would do in that situation, and couldn't even pretend to be that selfless and good natured. It's like he was completely unable to understand the motivations of a truly good person. I know him pretty well, and that actually kinda fits with his personality."

As the game progresses and new experiences are gained it is possible to develop the character in a way that is different from the player, but the process takes time and is rare.

During the interviews, I asked the participants if they could identify players in their group based on a log of their characters activities, every respondent replied that they could easily identify members from their group using only that information. Participants also remarked that they have observed similarities in the characters played in multiple games by players in their

regular group. “Sometimes I have known people who play the exact same character as the first time I met them and some play vastly different ones, but even the people who play those different characters will all have some common denominator, some personality trait that links the person playing to the character.” Jas Kettletipper Gamer.

As a final note, I found that one of the greatest inhibitors to frame strength is when players attempt to control multiple characters within a single game. Creating a harmonious interaction between two different roles is difficult enough to maintain, but attempting to split off a third role becomes exponentially more complicated. As the player becomes less able to immerse themselves in the characters, they also become less engrossed in the game. In D&D, for example, a hero of 6th level may choose to take a feat that grants them a follower who is only one level below their character. Although this represents an enormous advantage in terms of power (essentially doubling the character's firepower and providing them a dedicated protector), this feat is very rarely put into use. The advantages that having a second character offers the player does not outweigh the toll it takes on their overall enjoyment of the game.

### **3. Role conflict**

The final segment of my research examines the context in which people negotiate boundaries and resolve role conflict between their own personalities and their character's. It also explores how these boundaries can fail and why. Goffman (1974) observes that one problem that results from impression management occurs when two conflicting roles must exist simultaneously within the same social frame. You can see this type of conflict in the mundane world when two people are close friends, but one of them is also the other's doctor. In his professional role, the doctor may be concerned about the amount of red meat his patient tends to eat. However, as two friends enjoying supper together it is not appropriate for him to criticize his

friend any time he observes an unhealthy behavior. Roleplayers experience the similar kinds of conflict in gaming because they are required to maintain the two often-conflicting roles simultaneously.

Additionally, roleplayers can have difficulty separating events that occur within the fantasy world and events that take place in reality. The most common expression of this duality occurs when a conflict of character knowledge versus player knowledge arises. Just because the player is aware of something, it does not necessarily mean his character shares this information as well (Waskul & Lust 2004). Separating in game and out of game knowledge is one of the most difficult skills for new participants to master. "Metagaming", which is the term used to describe a player's refusal to enforce those boundaries on themselves, is one of the deepest taboos in gaming society and is considered just as unfair as lying about a dice roll or lessening the amount of damage your character has suffered. (Waskul and Lust 2004)

Gamers often have advance knowledge that could radically alter the actions within the game. A player that has more than a passing familiarity with the game system is likely to know the game statistics of many of the creatures they encounter, but their character is unlikely to be able to describe the creature in terms of easily definable statistics. "A player may know the hit points of an ogre because as a player you just read the Monster's Manual and are transferring that knowledge to your character." (Waskul and Lust 2004:348). If a monster has a very specific vulnerability, the character can unfairly exploit this based on the player's out of game knowledge. Similarly, if the narrator has a particular page open in the reference guide that references a specific creature, the players are expected not to use this knowledge to their advantage by preparing spells that would be uncommonly useful against it or purchasing specialized weapons.

While it is often known and even discussed that the player knows things the character does not, the reverse is also true. The character has knowledge and skills that the player does not possess. When a character takes up a hammer and anvil, he might craft a fine sword if his skills dictate that he has this ability. The player is likely to know very little about how to actually forge a weapon, but this in no way hampers the character's success. Another way this can affect game play is that each character has an extensive background of which only a very small portion has been documented. This history contains a lifetime worth of knowledge relating to the lifestyle and profession of the character, but the player does not have access to that information. This is often resolved when the narrator gives the player a clue or useful fact because they deemed it reasonable to assume that tidbit would have existed in the character's memories due to their particular background. It is the narrator's responsibility to fill in these gaps whenever they are relevant to the progression of a scene or if the character's actions would differ if they were aware of a fact. For example, a character might consider using his iron sword to break down a door made of adamantine. If the character has any skill as a blacksmith, though, he would know that the sword will eventually break but the door will remain because of its unusual hardness. In a situation where the player is not aware of this but his character would be, it falls to the narrator to notify the player.

This can cause even more difficulties when roleplaying mental and social attributes. It is not particularly disruptive when there is a great discrepancy between the player's physical attributes and those of their character because they are never required to demonstrate their monstrous strength or catlike reflexes. When there is a significant difference in the player and the character's effective level of mental or social traits, however, it can potentially damage the integrity of a frame. To prevent this, the narrator has the option of policing the roleplay. If a

character seems to exhibit activity that is not reflective of his actual ability level, the narrator might declare that what the player is trying to do is impossible for him to accomplish. For example, if a character is supposed to have an extremely low intelligence but his player comes up with an elaborate tactical plan, the narrator might declare that the plan is beyond the comprehension of the character and thus he could not have created it.

It becomes a greater roleplaying problem when the player has the deficiency and the character is the savant. "The shared nature implies that relationships within a gaming group are constrained by the members perceptions for what variables cannot be transcended under any circumstances, for example intelligence or maturity." (Hughes 1988:5). Many characters who are supposed to be exceptionally charismatic or brilliant are often impaired by the natural limitations of the player. These are the most common problems because roleplaying games tend to require characters to act out social interactions in addition to rolling dice for a check. If a character forged a sword, the player would likely just roll dice to measure success. However, if a character was attempting to bribe a local official, he might be required to roleplay the interaction and then roll the dice to determine success. A combination of the two results, usually with a small positive or negative modifier applied, determines how well the player handled the situation. In most cases both are used as a form of denial of success. If the player botches the interaction or if he fails the roll, he fails the encounter.

This is interesting because the double chance for failure is not repeated in any other type of check. In one forum I attended, Monte Cook (perhaps the best known author of D&D material) mentioned that he prefers to allow the roll to supersede the actual interaction. He reasons that we do not require a player to be proficient with a weapon for his character to wield

it, so we should not require a player to be articulate for his character to be charismatic. While his logic seems to make sense, many of the gamers I have interviewed would disagree with him.

Another problem that arises is the ability to effectively step into a role that is drastically different from the primary role of the player. It is often difficult for some people to play characters that have different perceptions about the dichotomy between good and evil. While the majority of games involve the characters portraying individuals seeking to promote good in the world, there are also campaigns in which all of the characters are aligned with the forces of evil. It is often difficult for "good" people to alter their own moral frames enough to allow them to convincingly play evil characters. Narrators, who are routinely required to play the villains, seem to have more ease resolving this issue. Fine (1983) explains that "Although there is attachment between the referee and his NPCs, it is not like the identification that players have with their characters." (pg.224). Because narrators are called upon to play so many different roles in each scene they maintain an additional level of detachment from the characters they control.

While roleplaying is, after all, just a game, it carries a much greater impact than the average recreational game. "Because role-playing games necessarily involve impromptu discursive acting in circumstances that are mediated by rules of probability and chance, they create a unique set of social-psychological conditions that further distinguish them from games like chess or backgammon." (Waskul and Lust 2004:349). In no other game is it truly possible to lose oneself in the character. In chess for example, it would be absurd to say that one truly identifies with the knight. The identity of the player and that of the character can become entangled, and the role of the character also affects the overall person. The impact of the role may not cease when the dice are put away.

## VI. Conclusion

Roleplaying is a rich, complex hobby that is capable of adapting to the changes within gaming groups as well as the larger gaming subculture while still evolving to meet the needs of its individual players. Its continual growth and diversification are certain to continue as more people observe the positive impact it has on the members of the gaming community. Throughout my research, I have observed three primary areas that roleplaying benefits: it enhances social interaction and role management, it offers a safe avenue for self discovery and cognitive experimentation, and it provides an opportunity to hone critical problem solving skills.

The most common reason that roleplayers offered for their continued involvement in gaming was the opportunity it provides them to socialize with those with common interests and similar personalities. Player 2 Gamer laughingly stated that "I like gaming because I get to socialize with my people; people like me!" Gaming enjoys a very active subculture that supports its own music, art, and media. In addition to the traditional venues for gamer interaction, such as local gaming stores and school gaming clubs, members of the community can enjoy these at any of the hundreds of conventions that take place each year on the local, regional, and national levels. Although many focus strictly on gaming, most are multi-genre events that appeal to gaming as well as other commonly related hobbies. This gives attendees a chance to discover new authors, hear new bands, and meet new friends.

Thanks to the growing trends of "geek chic" and other pro-nerd sentiments, certain aspects are beginning to find their way into more mainstream culture as well. The fashion that is associated with the movement can now be seen on the runways of major design houses around the world. In the summer of 2012, at least 8 of the "blockbusters" slated for release are based on comic books or another staple of the culture. All of these factors have combined to scour away

old stigmas and stereotypes that have cast shame on roleplayers for decades and increased its appeal to a new generation.

On a smaller scale, roleplaying provide gamers with an opportunity to practice various social skills in a nonthreatening environment. Allowing the players to focus on a topic they can converse about confidently decreases social anxiousness and creates a commonness of purpose among the group. Perhaps because many gamers have faced obstacles in conventional socialization themselves, they are notoriously open-minded and accepting of a diverse range of socio-economic statuses, racial backgrounds, sexual preferences, religious beliefs, and ages. This results in a group that, at least initially, may only be linked by their shared hobby. The process of creating a shared reality together strengthens their common frames of reference and draws them closer together. Hughes (1988) observed that,

"Most of those interviewed noted their believe that roleplaying increased one's empathy with other people, largely through attempting to understand characters that one played whose personality was different to one's own. Several gamers mentioned that encouragement roleplaying provided to try out novel social strategies and the ease with which one could recover from role playing." (pg 4)

Contrary to the old adage, roleplaying gives the players a chance to make a new first impression every time they change characters. As the group members explore the shared fantasy world they are able to test boundaries, hone social skills, and practice impression management in an environment with relatively low consequences outside the game. Goffman (1959) describes impression management as the method by which we either induce, manipulate, or suppress our emotions or the emotions of others. This is not limited to the simple projection of what we perceive to be the correct emotional display for the situation, but requires a genuine attempt to experience the results. This difference can be seen in someone acting falsely excited about a coworker's promotion because it is expected of them, and the same person actually trying to feel



happiness for the coworker's good fortune. This can be accomplished cognitively by changing thought patterns, bodily by changing physiological reactions, or expressively by changing gestures or body language.

Some professions require very precise emotional control to succeed, and employees are rewarded for their ability to produce that kind of deep acting. You can see examples of this in the waitress who is able to establish a friendly rapport with her customers in spite of her aching feet, or the police officer who can master his fear in dangerous situations. This kind of work is known as “emotional labor” (Hochschild 2003). Roleplaying presents an excellent venue to train this highly desirable skill in a physically and emotionally safe space.

The second area that roleplaying benefits is the chance it provides for self exploration and cognitive experimentation. Many gamers find it enjoyable to experience another world without the stresses that society places on them or the problems that exist in their real lives. For a short time, they can exist as another person with another life in another world if they wish. "Within the game, one does not portray one's real self" (Fine 1983:56). Role management and the ability to resolve role conflict are some of the most important skills that gaming teaches its participants, and they translate easily from the recreational fantasy world to the practical mundane world.

Similarly, roleplay can offer participants the chance to cautiously test their own responses and the responses of others to new aspects of their personalities or preferences. It is possible, for example, for a person who is struggling with their developing sexual identity to explore those reactions in a low-consequence environment before jumping into it in the real world. By experimenting with the new roles, the player can practice how or if they want to represent those changes in various social interactions they may encounter.

Roleplaying also allows players to experience something that is normally beyond the scope of what is possible for them - sometimes because of the limitations of the player, and others because of limits of reality itself. A player may want to become a Special Forces sniper, though they personally lack the training or physical requirements to do so. Another player might wish to become a Jedi, however, which is not possible because it does not exist in our reality. While it is possible to play yourself exactly as you are in this reality, studies show that games tend to increase in popularity the more they deviate from everyday life (Appelcline 2011)

This does not mean that gamers are engaging in escapism because they are dissatisfied with their own lives. Players rarely create characters that simply have more money or social capital, such as a sports star or a dilettante, but prefer instead to become a wizard or a knight. They do not seek to create a new place in the world for themselves, they seek instead to create an entirely new world. The average gamer is no more acting out of personal dissatisfaction than those who attend plays, watch movies, or read fiction novels.

The third benefit gaming provides is the opportunity to engage in critical thinking and problem solving. Most gamers enjoy the challenge of working through puzzles and investigating mysteries. Roleplaying plots are often elaborate, involving clues and misdirection that the players must navigate using critical analysis so that the story can progress. Players are often presented with a problem which the narrator has decided several different approaches could address. Sometimes the players discover one of the narrator's intended solutions, but other times they approach the problem from a completely unexpected angle. The narrator reacts in turn to the new actions of his players by making any necessary adjustments to the plot. This is a very complex process because the narrator, who alone knows how all the pieces fit together, may have to put events into motion that the players do not yet entirely understand. "It builds creativity,

problem solving, analysis, and 3D thinking," commented Ren Gamer. "When the group arbitrarily decides to wake a young woman from a magical sleep, they don't realize they've accidentally freed the Avatar of an evil god and have just started a war!" Gaming also requires abstract thinking about theoretical problems. For example the party may have to ask "At what distance can you safely orbit a Black hole?" (Hughes 1988:4).

Critical thinking is something that often comes more naturally to some than others, but like any skill it can only improve with use. Gamers benefit from years of critical thinking and analysis that teaches them how to create alternative approaches to solving problems, skills which are highly desirable to most employers. Ben Gamer, who is an upper-level manager for a large corporation, said "We must all be critical thinkers! It is desirable in every aspect of life, and gaming teaches it beautifully. Corporations spend millions to send their top people on retreats to encourage this skill, and we gamers do it every week." Another interviewee explained that he believed that his background in roleplaying has been a major component in his professional success.

"I work in an environment where I am surrounded by people who are more qualified and more educated than I am, yet I outperform them consistently. The reason is gaming. I have extensive experience in abstract thinking and hypothetical scenarios. I can spot patterns and extrapolate reasonable predictions. I do what the greatest theorists in our country do in think tanks, and I have been doing it for twenty years." - Sol Gamer

Similarly, the military now employs many kinds of roleplaying games to train their soldiers and social scientists. These "war games" range from tabletop problem solving scenarios to elaborate, week-long camps in which the trainees must constantly maintain their roles while surrounded by paid actors and meticulously scripted plots.

It has been very gratifying to see how many incredible forward strides roleplaying has made since its birth. Based on the growth it has continued to show, there is no reason to assume

it will not continue to evolve and flourish in years to come. My sincere hope is that gamers in 40 years will look back at this snapshot of the roleplaying community, the way the games are played, and the ways it enriches the lives of those who enjoy it and marvel about how far things have progressed since my time at the table.



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