OUT OF CHARACTER:

Issues of identity, acceptance, and creativity in tabletop role-playing games

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by

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ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented on modern table-top role-playing games and how they offer anthropologists a new way to approach issues of creativity, identity construction, social interaction, and the nature of play in American culture. In these games, players continuously challenge and redefine aspects of personal identity, social paradigms, gender identity, and reality construction. This thesis is exemplified by the interactions of two separate role-playing groups in Muncie, Indiana, as well as multiple interviews with gamers from many different areas. This idea is also clearly reflected in the interactions of role-players, both in their own personas and in character. Multiple layers of roles, in both the fictional world and within the social group of the players, are created, accepted, adapted, and discarded during the course of an average game.

Gamers’ voices are emphasized, rather than game play itself, in order to explore how gamers feel and think about their play. Both Ludology and Carnival are explored as possible ways to approach the subject. Play in general allows individuals and/or small groups the creative space to form new strategies to enact personal and cultural change in the reality outside of the game; while tabletop RPGs allow players the liminal space to explore different aspects of their personal identities, even as they create an outlet for challenging social strictures. Negative cultural labeling of these games as deviant and subversive has created the illusion of secrecy that helps the games to function in this manner. The importance of both play and narrative become obvious when speaking to gamers about their hobby; allowing the gamers to form a sub-culture based on the shared experiences of the games. And it is in these shared experiences that the gamers find the power to alter their real-life self images, and experiment with change.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.
~Shakespeare

1.1) Thesis Statement:

Geek. Freak. Dweeb. Looser. Misfit. Those are some of the kinder descriptions often applied to people who are involved in role-playing games (RPGs). Darker labels for the games, and the players themselves, have also been used at various times: dangerous, criminal, unstable, cultic, satanic, deadly (Carroll and Carolin 1989; Pulling with Cawthon 1989; Caywood and Hicks 1991a, 1991b; Lancaster 1994). Yet, everybody role-plays (Lancaster 1994). How we represent who we are depends in large part on what social situation we find ourselves in at any given time. Culture helps us to define the labels and categorize behaviors expected in various situations. At school we are the Teacher, the Student, the Friend. At work we are the Employee, the Boss, the Co-worker. At home we are the Parent, the Child, the Sibling, the Grandchild, or Grandparent. We take part in, and influence, social reality through our presentation of these different roles at given times. This ‘role’ then becomes not just how others perceive us on the surface, but how they perceive who we are. It applies not just to a mask of
behavior, but to our identity in relationship to other. This is the core of the dramaturgical theory of identity formation, and is now a widely excepted idea (Goffman 1959, 1974; Lancaster 1994; Myhre 1998). But to be an active player in a fantasy role-playing game, to identify yourself as a ‘gamer’, is considered by most in contemporary America to mark a person as socially backwards and ‘geeky’. This thesis deals with the implication of tabletop role-playing games on concepts of creativity, identity, and acceptance. “Play is more than a form of entertainment, it is the attitude/mood motivating our search for personal identity. Our ability to experience play frees us from strictures of everyday interactions, allowing us the liminal space to shape the social worlds defining our identities” (Myhre 1998:1). This idea is clearly reflected in the interactions of role-players, both in their own personas and in character. Multiple layers of roles – in both the fictional world and within the social group of the players – are created, accepted, adapted, and discarded during the course of an average game.

Play in general allows individuals and/or small groups the creative space to form new strategies to enact personal and cultural change in the reality outside of the game (Huizinga 1950; Lancaster 1997; Myhre 1998). “Through non-sense, we unmake a sense of self, while making a new sense of reality – in open air, as play” (Lancaser 1997:568). This is especially relevant to the types of fantasy role-playing games that this thesis focuses on. Exploring the fictional worlds and identities of the games can lend to real life skills of self-reflection, critical thinking, and creativity (Mello 2006:188).

Most role-players not only seem to consider themselves ‘out-of-the-box’ type thinkers and creative problem solvers, but also credit the game for encouraging these traits. Players seem to mark this creative thinking as separating the game – and to some
extent game players – from the main culture. Gamers often imply, and sometimes state outright, that mainstream American culture dislikes creative influences and often labels them as unacceptable. This belief has a basis in the way non-players often refer to the games and those who play. Negative cultural labeling of these games as geeky, deviant, and subversive has, in some ways, helped to create the required ‘secrecy of play’ (Huizinga 1950) that allows these games to function as both creative outlets and liminal spaces. The surface rejection of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) by the dominate culture has allowed the gamers to form a sub-culture based on the shared experiences of the games (Fine 1983). And it is in these shared experiences that the gamers find the power to alter their real-life self images, and experiment with personal and social change.

This is another important area that this thesis will explore: that of the shared experiences of tabletop role-playing games (in this paper, RPG will refer to specifically to tabletop role-playing games unless otherwise noted). RPG players function in a dual state; that is, when playing, a gamer co-exists within the game-world and the real-world simultaneously. In order to better contextualize the dual-realities of the games – real-world identities with fictional personas – certain questions must be addressed. What are the acceptable boundaries for role taking within a game, or within a player group? How ‘real’ are the roles taken? And why is the participation in role-playing games often either disregarded or demonized by the larger culture? In order to begin to look at these issues, some discussion of how modern role-playing games originated and operate must be undertaken.
1.2) Evolution of a Game: What Kind of a World Do You Want?

In 1970’s there was a group of hobbyists who would get together to play strategy board games. They specifically enjoyed war games, often played out on detailed model landscapes with miniature figurines representing the soldiery and weapons. These strategy war-gamers would recreate definitive and/or epic battles from history and epic literature, and play them out according to set rules. Eventually the gamers began creating their own battles, often in fictional settings. Ultimately, idle speculation of what it would be like to be one of the miniature soldiers, to live through the battle, became the core of a new game: *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) (Schick 1991:18-19).

Two strategy-war gamers, Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax, created the original D&D game as a box set in 1974. It was released under a small company called Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) (Fine 1983; Holcomb 2000; Schick 1991). The first incarnation of D&D was not far removed from the miniatures and strategy war-games that the creators often played. It incorporated many elements from a strategy miniatures game called *Chainmail*, and it was limited in what kinds of characters a player could create. Because it relied on the rules from *Chainmail*, it restricted how and when characters could move. Interestingly, though the rules for battle and movement were strict, the game failed to properly outline the rules for how to actually interact during play, leaving a somewhat sketchy outline of exactly how the game was played (Schick 1991:19-21). These gaps in the structure of the rule system quickly became a strength of the game, allowing a kind of free flowing adaptation by players for creating their own scenarios for play. Soon the printing of the *Grayhawk* supplement for D&D removed the last of the *Chainmail*...
elements from the game, opening the way for non-war-gaming players, and creating the first official Fantasy Role-playing Game (RPG) (Schick 1991:20).

D&D has undergone several reinventions since then. One of the most notable was the publication of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2nd* Edition (AD&D) in 1989. AD&D 2nd Edition was, arguably, an attempt to make the game more palatable for non-players. For years, the game had been criticized by various groups of people for being seditious, cultic, satanic, and for leading to criminal behavior among teenagers (Carroll and Carolin 1989; Caywood and Hicks 1991; Lancaster 1994). Groups such as B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons) claimed that playing D&D could lead children and young adults to commit suicide or murder (Pulling with Cawthon 1989). Many religious leaders, predominantly Fundamentalist Christian, stated that the game encouraged occult practices and eventually led to Satanic worship among its players (Pulling with Cawthon 1989).

TSR attempted to both address these fears and expand the D&D player base by the creation of AD&D 2nd Edition. The new rules eliminated references to demons and/or devils from the core rule books (Ward 1990:9). This edition of the game also put more limitations on player options for more archetypical ‘negative’ characters (Ward 1990:9). Because of this, it could be argued that the game became more ‘good vs evil’ in its design, and toned down the capacity for players to explore morally gray situations. The new rule system attempted to encourage heroic character types for players, and marketing strategies become slightly more focused on attracting female players (Ward 1990:9; Schick 1991; Wizards of the Coast 2003).
It could be argued that these changes had major ramifications for RPGs in general, and for D&D specifically. The changes were not always accepted among established players, and many of the new rules were subtly reversed in following supplemental books (Wizards of the Coast 2003). The dampening of the play of more free form games could also have contributed to a greater reliance on ‘table rules’ and smaller, self-generated rule supplements among many players (Schick 1991:26-27). And yet, the changes did not placate the anti-game groups, and many of them continued to push for a complete ban on all role-playing games (Pulling with Cawthon 1989).

Perhaps because of the changes to D&D, other RPGs already on the market began to find a larger audience (Schick 1991:31). Of significance to this thesis was a new game created in 1991 by Mark Rein-Hagen called *Vampire* (White Wolf 2008). At a time when D&D was arguably trying to subtly weed negative and/or ‘dark’ characters from its system, *Vampire* allowed players to create a demonic vampire character and explore a modern world where demons, mages, vampires, and other sinister creatures prowled the night. Perhaps learning from D&D, *Vampire* stressed more of the group narrative and storytelling components of RPGs, including referring to the game referee as the ‘Storyteller’, as opposed to the D&D title of ‘Dungeon Master’. Cooperation between all players was stressed in *Vampire*. In D&D, the relationship between a Dungeon Master and the other players could become confrontational, as some Dungeon Masters tended to believe it was their ‘job’ to kill off the characters. However, in *Vampire*, the Storyteller’s ‘job’ was, in theory, to simply facilitate and guide the production of the overall story for all characters, whatever the outcome (Myhre 1998; White Wolf 2008).
Vampire also slightly differed from traditional D&D in emphasizing the nature and personalities of the players’ characters as a driving force of the game rather than the completion of a task. This resulted in a new emphasis on in-game politics and character development and skills. Vampire marketed well to gamers and quickly found a female audience, an area that TSR had not been able to attract significantly. Rein-Hagen soon co-founded White Wolf Gaming Studio, which produced several other game systems including: Vampire: The Masquerade, Werewolf: The Apocalypse, and Hunter: The Reckoning. These games were interlocked in a fictional reality called the ‘World of Darkness’, which was a reflection of the present-day world, seen through the eyes of the creatures who must hide their existence from everyday mortals (Rein-Hagen 1991; White Wolf 2008).

In 1995 TSR attempted to revitalize the Dungeons and Dragons gaming system by publishing D&D 2.5; however the market had moved on and was now filled with RPG titles and systems. By 1997, TSR was near bankruptcy. The company and the D&D gaming system were bought out by TSR’s former competitor, Wizards of the Coast – publisher of the collectible card game Magic (Wizards of the Coast 2003).

Wizards of the Coast released D&D 3rd Edition in 2000, and then D&D 3.5 in 2003. These editions saw not only the reinstatement of demons, devils, assassins, and monsters as player characters, but also revamped the rule system. The new rules allowed for a mixing of races and classes, and added applications of skills and feats – so that players could better specialize their characters, and the games began to emphasize the same type of detailed character development that had been successful in the White Wolf games. The 3rd Editions also saw the creation of a new method of using dice during play.
that relies primarily on a twenty-sided die. This is known as the d20 system, and was released on an open license. Wizards of the Coast allowed anyone to create and publish games and supplements on this system. Therefore, any d20 game will theoretically work in conjunction with D&D 3rd Editions. As an example, Sword and Sorcery games (published by White Wolf), and the d20 Modern games (Wizards of the Coast) can be used as either supplements to a D&D campaign, or can be run as independent games. This expanded greatly the fictional world that players could create for a D&D game, and opened new possibilities for play (Wizards of the Coast 2003).

As is obvious here, there are a multitude of fantasy role-playing games on the market today. It is quite common for any relatively popular science fiction or fantasy movie, television show, or book to be released as a role-playing game. The game systems change and evolve on a macro level as new books are published, and on a micro scale as playing groups create their own worlds and their own rules, and alter published materials to fit their particular needs.

1.3) Rules of Engagement: How RPG’s Work

_The game offers endless possibilities and a multitude of choices – more choices than even the most sophisticated computer game, because you can do whatever you imagine._

~Players Handbook (Cook et al. 2003b: 4)

What does it mean that players can ‘do whatever they imagine’? That players can create their own ‘rules’? How does a person, or group of people, create their own ‘worlds’? In short, how does this kind of game function?

Tabletop role-playing games are, at a basic level, a very loose set of rules which give instructions for creating an imaginary environment and allowing game players to
explore and interact with this environment through fictional personas, referred to as *characters*. In doing this, the players tell/experience a story with their characters as the central figures of the narrative.

The player’s attention focuses on her character. … Because the character is the player’s primary locus of authority so far as the unfolding story is concerned, her decisions for the character and her playing-out of the persona are important for creating a feeling of involvement or immersion in play – and this feeling is crucial for achieving flow (Holcomb 2000:63).

These players create and adopt personas that are interesting to play, fun to watch, and offer possibilities for character development. These fictional personas are called Player-Characters (PCs). PCs are created by players in many ways, but almost all systems have some sort of chart or ‘character sheet’ that allows players to keep track of character information (Cook et al. 2003b). These ‘outlines’ of the fictional persona are constructed according to very specific rules which differ depending on the game system being used (see appendix B). For purposes of this explanation the D&D system will be used as a general model.

Players often first choose a race and class (in RPGs, the term *race* often denotes species: such as elf, halfling, or human; while *class* is similar to a vocation or archetype: such as fighter or magic-user). Players then roll dice to create basic ability scores, or ‘stats’, which determine things like strength, dexterity, and charisma for the character (Cook et al. 2003b:8-10). These scores will be used to determine the outcomes of interactions in the fictional world – and will change over the course of a game as the PC both encounters difficulties and gains ‘life’ experience.

Players also create back-stories, or personal histories, for their characters. These stories will help the player to decide how the character will respond to stimulus in the
world. Generally, these back-stories begin as basic concepts of who the character is, and where they came from. As the game progresses, players often adapt and expand these backgrounds to both fit the game-world and to find a rationale for the character’s participation in the adventure (Myhre 1998; Cook et al. 2003b:4). Characters require motivation to take the risks and dangers that are often a part of the game/adventure. Without this motivation, a character can become unwilling to take the risks involved in the game, and fail to fully participate. This can cause the character to derail a narrative by refusing to help other PCs, or even by actively trying to convince other characters to not take on adventures. With this in mind, finding proper motivation for PCs can become an important aspect of the game (Cook et al. 2003a). This motivation is often created between the PCs back-story and plot manipulation (a greedy character will be offered riches, a family-orientated character will be shown how they can save a loved one, a noble character will be shown how people will die if the adventure is not taken on). If the proper motivation for a character can not be generated, the player might allow the character to leave the group and/or die, and create a new persona that better fits the group or situation.

As the game is played all encounters, obstacles, monsters, and events that PCs experience in the fictional world are given a numeric value. The combined amount of the experience points (XP) collected is used to judge when the character has ‘leveled’, or gained in abilities from simply ‘living’ in the world. When ‘leveling up’, rules are used by players to add to the skills and abilities of their PC according to the nature of the character (Cook et al. 2003b:58). This allows the character to grow and develop both in personality and in technical aptitude.
Here again it should be noted that gamers usually mean something very different from novelists by the term ‘character development.’ Where a realist novelist means the growth and maturation of a character over the course of the work, gamers instead mean the creation, detail, and enacting of an alter ego who will be interesting both to play and to observe (Holcomb 2000:66).

It should be noted that the ‘playing out’ of the character is an important difference between a character in a novel and a PC. Though PC’s do ‘mature’ and change over time – sometimes radically – this happens in a very different way from scripted characters. PC’s are created independently of the storyline; they ‘develop’ through interaction with other players as much, or more, than from plot advancement during the game. This means that in many ways PC’s are separate from, and independent to, the game they exist in. In fact, players often refer to ‘bringing in’ a character to a game, reinforcing the idea that the character is independent to any specific fictional world.

The environment and any entities that PCs encounter in the course of play are created and controlled by a different kind of game player – a sort of game referee. This player is most commonly referred to as the “Dungeon Master” (DM), the “Game Master” (GM), or the “Storyteller” depending on what game system is being used – for purposes of this thesis, this game player will be referred to as the Game Master (GM) regardless of the game system used.

In RPG games, the fictional world is created and/or defined by the GM. These ‘worlds’ can be simple, consisting of nothing more than a small dungeon that players will raid in a single game session with no larger setting or plot. This kind of play is often referred to as a ‘dungeon-crawl’. Or they can be huge, multi-continent landscapes filled with different races, cultures, and societies, surrounding complex plot lines that can take years to complete. There are no real limitations applied to world creation, though there
are specific rules (depending on which gaming system is being used) that determine how things like weather, terrain, and climate can affect PCs in the world (Cook et al. 2003a). Plot creation is also left solely up to the GM. There is, however, a general understanding that it should be possible for characters to overcome any puzzles or obstacles created (Cook et al. 2003a).

Again, what is meant by plot development to game players is somewhat different than what the term means to traditional novelists. The ‘plot’ is both the goal of the game and a general idea of how the PCs can accomplish this goal – but it is also the ability to adapt the game and the flow of narration to the acts of the PCs, which the GM has no control over. It is up to the PCs to decipher clues and overcome obstacles to complete the goal, if they wish. It is not required that PCs complete the tasks set forth by the GM.

In this sense, RPGs are not at all like ‘regular’ games – as there are no real winners or losers, rules are at best a loose agreement between players and subject to change during play, and game play comes to an end only when most, or all, of the players agree that they have finished a particular game. Generally speaking, most players agree that the game has ended when the storyline has come to an obvious conclusion (in Western narrative terms. Most often this is when PCs have fulfilled all of the main plot goals, but not always).

There are also very few actual materials that are truly needed to play a tabletop RPG. The accouterments that are required for most game systems are fairly simple. Most systems require only books (optional), character sheets, and dice.

Most gaming systems have a few books referred to as ‘core’ rulebooks. These books offer instructions on how to create worlds, the rules for character generation, and
instructions on how to play both as GM and PC. These books also provide rule structure for how to use any magic, weapons, vehicles, and basic physics that are needed in the game. Though most players who become serious about the hobby will eventually buy their own set of ‘core’ books, casual players will often just refer to more advanced players’ books and knowledge. Further supplemental books, offering more PC choices for character specialization and new rules for world construction, are often published—but they are not necessary for play. Often times each member of a gaming group will buy one or two of these books depending on personal interest in the subject matter and they will be openly shared among the group.

Character sheets are a second necessary item for tabletop RPGs (See appendix B for examples). These sheets can be created by players, downloaded from the internet, or photocopied from the materials in the rulebooks. Character sheets are nothing more than one or two sheets of paper that list all pertinent information about the PC. These sheets have different designs depending on the information needed for the game system. Usually the sheets include basic information about the fictional persona – such as the species, race, and gender of the character; the necessary ‘physical’ statistics (stats) and skills; and sometimes a brief note about background and/or personality. Technically, character sheets relay all the game information that any player would need to play that PC (Cook et al. 2003b). However, it seems to be taken as vaguely rude, or lazy, to attempt to play a PC created by another person for longer than a single game session or two (though this tenet does not seem to apply as strictly to acting GMs).

The last element of almost all tabletop RPG play is dice. The dice used for role-playing games are many-sided, often beautifully colored, pieces. These dice, along with
the shorthand language players use to refer to them, are perhaps the most widely recognized – and scoffed at – images of tabletop RPG play among non-gamers.

Dice are used in the games as a randomizing element. The games would be less interesting for players, and less dangerous to PCs, if there was no risk to characters involved. Risk and the unexpected are part of the draw of any narrative, and RPGs are no exception. In most game systems, dice are used to add that risk, to allow for an element of luck and for chance inside the game-world (Cook et al. 2003b:5).

A standard RPG die-set comes as a group of seven to ten dice. These are not quite the same as the standard six-sided dice that come in an average board game. A basic RPG die-set consists of: one four-sided die; four six-sided dice; one eight-sided; two ten sided; and one twenty-sided. It quickly becomes obvious that using and talking about such dice becomes confusingly number heavy: Did you say four (4) six-sided dice, or for six (6) dice? This problem has lead to the development of a shorthand code that game players use to refer to dice. Broken down, this code is simply the number of dice used, followed by the word ‘die’ (often shortened to ‘d’) and the number of sides on the die to be used. Therefore, one six-sided die would be referred to as: 1die 6, or just d6. As a further example, the standard RPG die set would be written or spoken like this: 1d4, 1d8, 1d20, 2d10 and 4d6. Therefore, if a player were being told by a GM to roll 5d6, the player would roll five, six-sided dice.

This shorthand is also present in the way that gamers talk about rules. Players will often judge the risk/reward of taking an action to their character by the size of the dice used and the value needed. As an example: if a PC is attempting to hide, many elements would affect whether the attempt is successful. How many other people are
present, if it is night or day, if anyone is actively looking for the PC – all these things can influence how easy or difficult a task like hiding can be. The GM will describe the area and the challenge and set a numeric value for difficulty (either from the rule book, or more often as a judgment call). If the player feels that the reward is worth the risk of failure, they will ‘roll for it’. If not, they will most likely change their mind and the character will back away from the challenge.

If the player rolls, they will total any and all dice used, and also add in any ‘bonuses’ that come from skills or physical means; i.e.: a physically small character might get a bonus to any hiding, or a character who has trained as a thief might get a bonus to attempts to pick locks. If the total number (of die roll and bonuses) is higher than the number set by the GM, the attempt is a success and the narrative continues with the character’s action. If the number is smaller, however, the attempt fails. The GM will adlib a consequence of that failure that will be more or less related to how hazardous the attempt was and how much the character failed by; i.e. the lower the number, the more extreme the failure. This leads to the number one being the ‘bad-luck’ number on most dice. To roll a one, then, becomes an automatic and unarguable failure in many cases. Therefore, rolling a one on any die is often referred to as ‘botching’ a roll. Botching a roll can, sometimes, lead to consequences for characters that can cause their deaths.

It is perhaps interesting that dice attract the most superstitions from gamers. Almost all gamers interviewed for this project have some superstition involving their dice. Sometimes it is about who can and cannot touch them, sometimes it requires keeping them in a special place. Some players will only play with a certain set, or a certain color; others buy specific dice for specific games. There are literally as many
superstitions for dice as there are players. Almost all players report that they do not actually believe the superstitions work…yet they follow them anyway.

At the surface, an actual tabletop RPG session is little more than a group of people who sit around a table, surrounded by books and papers, and tell a story to each other. “Participants in role-playing games, or RPGs, are engaged in a complex process of group narrative; they are the authors, narrators, characters, actors, readers, and audience of a text that can be both experimental and product-orientated” (Henry 2003:1). But it is more than that, as well. It is an acting group, a puzzle hobbyist group, a social gathering, a creative outlet, and a liminal space where identity becomes fluid and culture becomes a fabric that can be, to some extent, removed or changed like any other garment. The end product is a story…but it is also a group of shared experiences and identities that exist in those who experienced and remember the narrative. And it is these issues that this thesis will attempt to explore in subsequent chapters.
Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1) Description of the Research Field

This study took place over seven months in 2007. The data for this thesis was generated by both participant-observation of two role-playing groups, and by interviews with various RPG players. Some of the players interviewed (n=7) were active members of the participant role-playing groups, while the additional players interviewed (n=9) were located through other sources and had no significant contact with the groups. Though the playing groups used for participant/observation were comprised of only males, the total interview population, generated from gamers both inside and outside the two playing groups, included four female gamers. Interviews with all gamers were both structured and impromptu. Because not all group members were interviewed, and not all interviews were with group members, both the interview population and the gaming group population will be described separately. In order to maintain confidentiality, all informant names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

2.2) Population of Study: Interviewed Players

For this study sixteen players were interviewed, four females (age range 23-43) and twelve males (age range 20–52). All players defined themselves as Caucasian when prompted. Five players were currently living in states other than Indiana. All others were
living either in Muncie, Indiana, or in the surrounding area. The relationship status of the population varied widely, including: married, divorced, engaged, involved with a significant other, and single. In almost all cases the spouse or significant other of study participants did not role-play. Although female participants reported their spouse/significant other playing more often than male participants (two of four, as compared to a single male report). One of these females, however, stated that though her husband had once played, he was no longer involved in any game. Two of the players interviewed (one male, one female, no relation) had children. The female player ‘has no problem’ with her children playing tabletop and live action RPGs with peers. The male’s child was too young to play. Religious affiliations of players also varied, with most players reporting Christian backgrounds and beliefs, ranging from Catholicism to Baptist, though a small number stated that they were Jewish (n=1) non-denominational (n=2), agnostic (n=1) or atheist (n=1). There was one player who reported a background in Satanism, though he also stated that he was no longer practicing. Employment also varied within the population: Twelve of the participants work in the service industry in various jobs; including restaurant work (n=6), computer servicing (n=4), and banking (n=2); at least three of these held salaried positions. One is a teacher. Two are currently unemployed, and employment status for the remaining player is unknown. Education levels were also diverse, though all participants reported having at least some college credit. Most participants had earned/were completing baccalaureate degrees, three had achieved/were finishing graduate degrees, and one reported doctorate work. These statistics could be flawed because of the way subjects were recruited. Recruitment began
on a college campus and built through the players’ personal contacts. This could have biased the demographic profile of the sample.

2.3) **Research Design:**

The interviews consisted of both structured and unstructured interviews for all participants. Seven of the players interviewed were members of the two gaming groups where I was a participant-observer and lived in or around Muncie, Indiana. The other nine participants came from contacts outside of the gaming groups. All sixteen players were interviewed from one to three times using standard questions, depending on participants schedules and willingness to continue the interview process (see appendix c), while within the playing groups numerous impromptu interviews took place before, after, and sometimes during games sessions. Three of the non-gaming group study participants were players I had once played with and had agreed to participate in the study, but had moved out of state before the study began. These interviews were completed through e-mail. Four non-group participants were gamers who were introduced to me by other players. Three of these subjects, though they lived locally, were also interviewed through e-mail by their request. One was interviewed in person multiple times at her home, and became a key informant. The remaining non-group participants were players I met at a gaming convention and only had contact with on-line. They lived outside of Indiana. Again, these interviews were done by e-mail and, in one case, over the AOL Chat application (AIM).

All structured interviews with both gaming group and non-group participants that were done in person were conducted at the place of the player’s choosing. I began these
interviews with a list of questions and with permission used a digital audio-recorder during the session (see appendix C &D). In general, formal interviews lasted one to two hours each.

Unstructured interviews happened sporadically with all stud participants and were impromptu in nature. Though most of these took place before or after a game, such informal ‘chats’ also happened in conversations over shared diners, over cell-phones and, rarely, over chat applications on-line. Due to the unscheduled nature of these sessions they were rarely audio-recorded, though I was usually given permission to take notes during discussions.

A third type of interview was also employed with gaming group participants. Every few weeks I would, with permission, instigate a discussion about a role-playing topic among my playing group. The resulting group discussion among these same three or four players was either recorded digitally, or more often, I simply took notes.

The Participant/Observation Groups

For the purposes of this study I was a participant-observer for two separate role-playing groups. One of the groups consisted of five ‘core’ or regularly attending members. The second group started with five members and expanded during the course of the study to seven members. One of these new members had never played a tabletop RPG before. None of the members of either group had ever met any of the members of the other. My use of these two particular groups was a case of simple convenience. The first group (Group One) was my personal weekly gaming group that I have played with, off and on, for several years. They had agreed to work with me on this thesis since I had first mentioned it months before. All the players of this group were well known to me
(with the exception of one person who was new to the group). I was a full participant in this group – including creating and running several different characters, joining in arguments over rules and actions, and sharing in conversations both before and after games. I also ran one small campaign as GM during the course of the study.

The second group (Group Two) consisted of players I had never met before. A player in this group happened to work with a friend of mine. When this friend found out that I was interested in talking to gamers, he shared my e-mail with the player, and the player invited me to observe their group. I was welcomed into the group and they did not mind my taking notes, but I was also asked not to come until an hour after ‘start time’ (the first hour of ‘play’ is generally out of game conversation between players) and most players generally left immediately following each session. The group indulged me by allowing a few questions during the standard break taken during every game session.

Each group met once a week for several hours. By coincidence, both groups were playing the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) game system at the start of the study. Though Group Two would continue to play D&D for the full time I observed, Group One moved through D&D, Marvel Superheroes, and had begun a Werewolf campaign as my study ended. Over the course of the study, I was present at all game sessions for Group One (22 total), and most sessions for Group Two (18 total). Each game session lasted several hours, and well over 180 hours of actual game play was observed over the period of the study. There were also many hours of formal interviews and informal discussion with the members of these groups.

For Group Two, three players agreed to participate in formal interviews. These were completed during game sessions when players were not required to be at the table,
or during session breaks. For Group One, four players agreed to formal interviews, and these took place outside of game sessions. However, there were several occasions of informal interviews with the gamers of both groups during session breaks, meals, and other times when active play was suspended.

This research design – of a known group, and an unfamiliar group – worked out better for my data generation than I had expected. Having both the fully participant experience and a mostly observational one each week allowed me to personally experiment with my areas of observation. Between both playing groups I collected a pool of seven informants who would indulge me in more formal interviews.

**Composition of the Participant/Observer Groups:**

In general, the players that were involved in these groups were in their twenties (three exceptions), and unmarried (with one exception). Both groups consisted of members that lived in or around Muncie, Indiana. All players in the groups, except for myself, were male. Six of the twelve members of the player groups were actively attending Ball State University, two were not attending any college, and the schooling status for the remaining four is unknown. Ten of the players in the groups work in the service industry in various jobs; including restaurant work, janitorial work, computer servicing, and banking. One is currently unemployed, and employment status for the other one is unknown. This data is most likely not a fully representative sample of the makeup of most gaming groups – possibly because of the way in which the groups were recruited. Both initial contacts were male students at the university and further contacts were recruited from this core sample.
2.4) Literature Review

Modern role-playing games have been categorized by various authors as folkloric, as performance art, as hobby, as collaborative writing, and as a sub-culture (Holcomb 2000; Henry 2003; Fine 1983). Though previous studies have focused on the use of role-playing in teaching, psychology, and in online gaming worlds, there is a lack of substantive literature in anthropology about tabletop (non-video/non-online) RPGs. The majority of the articles and theories about role-playing have been produced by the gamers themselves and published in gaming magazines and websites. There are a few scholarly works that offer some insights into the nature of the games. One of the first ethnographies written on the subject was by the sociologist Gary Alan Fine (Fine 1983). In the book “Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds”, Fine argues that RPG’s represent a developing sub-culture, stating that:

…merely indicating common activities, culture, and segmental importance is not sufficient to show the existence of a subculture. Three additional features need to be considered. For a subculture to exist one must be able to cite networks of communication through which common information is transmitted. Second, one needs to show that gamers identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture. Finally, the subsociety must be identified as such by those outside the group, which increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity. …The features of fantasy gaming (size, economic significance, shared culture, social network, identification, and external response [to stereotyping]) taken together indicates that fantasy role-playing is an urban leisure subsociety with its own distinctive subculture (Fine 1983:23, 38).

Though in many ways Fine’s work on modern RPGs remains the model for investigation of the subject, it is not the only way to consider gaming. Folklorist, and self described gamer, Jack Holcomb describes role-playing games in folkloristic terms, though not only as folklore:
Role-playing games can be viewed as generative grammars for constructing stories, in some ways similar to the structures studied by oral formulaic theory – but while the formulae explicated by Lord help the teller construct a single more-or-less linear narrative, transforming the role-played story into a single line of narration denatures it. … However, I do argue that RPGs fulfill a folkloric function, or, more properly, adapt elements of what Richard Dorson calls ‘mass culture’ to fulfill a folkloric function (2000:7).

Liz Henry, in Group Narration: Power, Information, and Play in Role Playing Games, also emphasizes the group narrative aspect to the games, stating that, “participants in role-playing games, or RPGs, are engaged in a complex process of group narrative; they are the authors, narrators, characters, actors, readers, and audience of a text that can be both experimental and product-orientated” (2003:1).

These statements offer different ways to approach the subject. However, these approaches lack specific attention to the social/cultural aspects of the experience. There are two newer works on RPGs inside the discipline of Anthropology that attempt to deal with the cultural aspects of gaming. In 2006, Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games, was published. This collection of essays by social scientists and anthropological researchers who also happened to be gamers offers new insights into the nature of games and gamers:

In spite of the growth of fantasy games and gaming culture, there has been little systematic investigation of fantasy games in contemporary social life that attends to the cultural and constructionist dimensions of fantasy gaming as a leisure activity. … In fact, we see fantasy gaming as a fluid, unstable category that is somewhat difficult to map – it is made up of multiple genres of games and gaming subcultures that overlap in some ways, yet differ in others. We need to say something less ambiguous than this, however. Broadly speaking, fantasy gaming is grounded in shared worldviews, lifestyles, tastes, and affinities, as well as collectively-imagined selves/identities (Williams 2006:2).
A final work that impacts this project is Brian Lawrence Myhre’s 1998 thesis, *Virtual Societies: A Journey of Powertrips and Personalities: A Dramaturgical and Ethnographic Study of Winnipeg’s Original Live Action Vampire the Masquerade Role-Playing Game Community*. This work is important to this thesis because it offers both a deeper understating of the study of ludology – the study of play – as well as a way to approach the often schizophrenic experience of attempting to examine the simultaneously experienced multiple-realities and identities of gamers at play.

2.5) **Theoretical Perspective:**

Perhaps not surprisingly this thesis will be heavily dependant on the theory of roles. A good way to approach the concept of persona and role-playing is through a dramaturgical framework. The theory of dramaturgy was first put forth by sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman framed the interaction of people through a theatrical explanation. According to Goffman, each person approaches social interactions through a set of expected behaviors, or roles, which are generated by societal norms. Therefore, to be a student, you behave as a student – you dress, conduct yourself, and react in social situations according to a standard set of expectations of ‘students’ in that society. In essence, dramaturgy states that to be a student you *act* like a student, and others respond to you as a student (Goffman 1959, 1974). In this way you *become* a student.

Roles, then, become more than a simple ‘mask’ of behavior that people can ‘wear’ and abandon at will. They are less based on individual impulses and more on responses to societal expectations (Goffman 1959:16). You have no choice about when you take on many roles. You have no choice about when you become an aunt or uncle,
for example. Yet, the understanding of what these roles should comprise – how you should act as an aunt, or a teacher, or a friend – comes from the culture you have been raised in. Therefore, according to dramaturgical theory, these roles not only become the core of your identity, but also could be considered a cultural schema:

Certain propositions are considered traditions or social routines. Through practice, some of these routines are internalized by the actor and become personal beliefs. The combined beliefs of a person makes up their world view. These beliefs affect our behavior by helping us interpret the behavior of others, effectively ‘setting the stage’ for social interaction. … In this stage propositions become a part of the operating individual, connecting them to a larger meaning system [or cognitive frameworks] (Myher 1998:18).

These cultural schemas, or cognitive frameworks, define how we interact on multiple levels. Those who share a cognitive framework will generally share common definitions of physical reality, social reality, and traditions, i.e.: culture. “These traditions are shared between people through a subtle system of symbols, associations and shared histories. Their meanings are metacommutative…” (Myher 1998:19). People communicate on different levels at the same time. “Cultural and social knowledge is exchanged between people through blatant public presentations or surface structure, and through relationship-dependant, subtly expressed, deep structured private metamessages” (Myher 1998:20). Metacommunication then, is all of the symbolic, emotional, and ‘commonsense’ messages included in a surface statement within a given culture. Or, metamessages are carried by the cultural framework that a person, or group, is functioning within. The word ‘hot’ to an American carries not only the literal, surface message of temperature, but can also convey associated, deep meanings depending on where you grew up and the context of the message. So “hot” can refer to temperature, but also can mean: ‘sexy’, ‘pretty’, ‘wanted’, ‘interesting’, and ironically, ‘cool’.
People can, arguably, work within multiple sub-cultural frameworks simultaneously. You can be a scientist and Jewish, while still being American; a brother and a son, within the framework of your family. We must often play multiple roles within a cultural framework at the same time. Goffman defined these sub-cultural frameworks as ‘metaframes’ (Goffman 1974; Myher 1998:23).

The roles that each person takes on everyday are a continuum of identities, where the appropriateness of both the role and the ‘acting out’ is judged by larger consistent social requirements (Myher 1998:24). According to dramaturgic theory, we declare to others what role we are in at any given moment through subtle ‘keys’, such as body-language, facial expressions, the way we use language, and more (Goffman 1974:45). These ‘keys’ also announce whether we are being serious or whether we are playing. This becomes important because a misreading of keys – a misunderstanding, whether by accident or intent – of just what role and response is expected can cause the loss of involvement in the social act.

When people play, however, normal social rules for interaction are put aside for the duration of the game. “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count” (Huizinga 1950:12). This allows the very act of playing to give people the separation from societal strictures needed to explore their personal identity and more. “As a metaframe, play is the primary frame that people use to alter social schemata and consequently, other interaction frames” (Myher 1998:40). Lancaster makes a similar statement about the nature of Carnival.

Carnival, then, is the occasion for remembering, interrogating, and playing with the history of systems of domination. … Intentionality and identity are caught up in playful equivocations that are simultaneously productive, destructive, and
instructive. Abandoning the self-conformity of our own contours, our own horizons, we try out other bodies, other horizons, all possible worlds (Lancaster 1997:566 - 567).

Therefore, once a person or group has triggered the necessary social keys to state that ‘this is play’, they step aside from the requirements of everyday social strictures of ‘sense’ and ‘sensibilities’ and paradoxical ideas can exist simultaneously. Gregory Bateson pointed out that the blatant or surface communication of a bite is aggression. Normally an aggressive act is responded to with hostility. However, if the play metaframe has been keyed, the ‘bite’ becomes a playful nip, and is responded to with amusement (in Myher 1998:43). Lancaster makes the same argument with transvestite behavior in Nicaragua. Normally cross-dressing would be a cause of judgment and concern among that society, but when the spirit of Carnival is evoked – when ‘I’m playing’ has been keyed – then others will laugh and joke with the actor, and no stigma from the behavior seems to carry over outside of the game (Lancaster 1997:560). Myher argues that this shifting between frames of reference, from play to not-play, is important in the study of RPGs, where the player is simultaneously themselves, and the character; of this culture, and of another; in this world, and somewhere else; both real, and fictional (Myher 1998).

Role-playing games, much like Carnival, provide the players with creative outlets, with social interactions, and with the liminal space to both change personal identity and challenge cultural norms. However, like many activities that contain the potential of modifying cultural norms, there is a distrust of the hobby within the dominate culture. In examining role-playing games the theoretical perspective needed must not only deal with the nature of identity and play, but also touch on narrative creation and the concept of
cultural acceptance. The best ways to approach these issues is less through a focus on actual game-play, and more through the ethnographies of the gamers themselves. The games exist only because of the players, they exist only because they are played by individuals. They are experienced only through the imaginations and voices of those who play. In order to better understand the games in these terms, an agent orientated approach to ethnography will also be applied.

Michael Herzfeld’s stance that ethnographers should take an ‘agent orientated’ approach is appropriate for these issues. He argues that proper ethnographic understanding can only come from the ‘agent’ of the culture, and not from the ethnographer’s interpretation of that culture. This is particularly relevant for studies such as this, where the ‘voices from below’ often remain silent by choice and because of labels imposed by the dominant culture – in this case, where participants in games often suffer accusations of ‘getting lost in fantasy’, or ‘loosing touch with reality’. Yet Herzfeld (2001) states that:

…while an anthropologist would normally assume that reality is a contingent product of social experience (‘it’), this clashes with the prevailing realist common sense that creates a sharp and absolute distinction between reality and fiction. … Indeed, anthropological writing itself has benefited from a critical appraisal of its own peculiar claims to ‘realism’. Yet the distinction between the real and the fictional, like that between the material and the symbolic, is itself an important part of social reality and cultural myth that guides, in many cultures, the appreciation of media representation and academic discourse alike. The trick, for the anthropologist, is…in the terms of an older canon of literary theory, to “defamiliarize” obviousness (2001:304).

Using Herzfeld’s perspective to inform and bound the required ludic theory, one can attempt to approach the subject matter as both a gamer and an ethnographer. In this way, an effort can be made to ‘defamiliarize’ the familiar and interact with individuals as
agents – to, in essence, attempt to allow gamers to explain the game – while maintaining the concepts of creativity, identity, and cultural acceptance on a broad scale.

“The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid” (Huizinga 1950:8). Huizinga said this in his work, Homo Ludens. This is very much the case when one is studying gaming ‘in the field’. The games can easily move between play and seriousness depending on what situation the characters find themselves in at any given moment. But that is not the only fuzzy boundary in RPGs. Identities flow between characters and players; and conversation flows between ‘real world’ and ‘game world’ concerns without pause. “…[T]ransforming the role-played story into a single line of narration denatures it” (Holcomb 2000:7). Keeping this in mind, the attempt must be made to apply ludic and dramaturgical theory to game play, while endeavoring to maintain the idea of the ‘flow’ of player ideas and beliefs. For these reasons, this thesis will be focused more on the players than the game play, itself.

2.6) The Insider Problem:

My first exposure to RPGs was in the 1980’s, when I was five or six. My older brother had begun playing this game called Dungeons and Dragons with his high-school buddies, and the group soon started playing at our house. I became a sort of mascot to this older group, and learned to play from watching them. My friends and I began playing using my brother’s books and dice – an odd combination of tabletop RPG and live action ‘make-believe’. We had very little concept or concern for what the actual rules were, though that came as we got older.
I’ve been playing off and on ever since. I have watched with interest as the hobby evolved and new RPGs developed. Sometimes I played, sometimes I did not – my participation often depended on if I had the free time, the energy to devote to the game, and whether I could find a group to play with. This last requirement was, in fact, often the most significant hindrance to my playing. And though my interest in RPGs as a hobby waxed and waned, my curiosity about them as a subject continued. RPGs seemed like a natural area for me to study for this thesis.

This does, however lead to an ‘insider problem’. Though, in my experience, the outsider problem and issues of culture shock have been repeatedly described and discussed in anthropological literature, I could find much less discussion of the insider problem. One of the works that focuses on these issues is the book, Occidentalism: Images of the West, edited by James Carrier (1995). When an anthropologist does research on a social group that they are a part of, a different set of challenges apply. If it is a group that they belonged to long before they joined anthropology, they do not approach with the built in ‘distance and objectivity’ (whether real or imagined) that seems to come with the position of ‘exotic other’. Instead, they face a new set of challenges and problems. Sometimes it is as simple as not wanting to write about a part of your own identity, about who you are as a part of this group. There is also the basic embarrassment in making public things that the group just does not discuss with ‘outsiders’. The insider problem can also be as complex as a kind of ‘cultural blindness’ created by familiarity and comfort with social systems. This can lead the researcher to simply miss interesting and telling patterns of behavior, because they are normal to the researcher. This is especially true in the case of patterns that might have a ‘negative’
aspect. To admit it about your sub-culture is to admit it about yourself. Because of this, there could easily be an urge to simply not see the pattern at all. Herzfeld’s (2001) call to “defamiliarize obviousness” and turn the anthropological eye toward the known, can be a difficult task.

As fully an insider, it is difficult to know what your audience does not know – to know when you are taking information for granted. This can cause difficulties in the writing process, as you try to decide what dialogue and symbols need explaining, and which do not. Looking for material and literature to find ways to help with these issues can be frustrating. There are anthropologists who have dealt with aspects of their own culture, but usually in an unfamiliar sub-culture; i.e.: Danger, Duty, and Disillusion: The Worldview of Los Angeles Police Officers, by Joan Barker, is an excellent ethnography of an American sub-culture – yet even though the author was dealing with her own American culture, she was still an outsider to the police department, and dealt with the same outsider kinds of problems.

As more people attempt true insider anthropology, new and better ways to deal with these issues will develop within the discipline. This has already started within the gaming sub-culture, as most professional articles seem to be being produced by social scientists who are also gamers (Williams et al. 2006; Myhre 1998; Holcomb 2000). Their work has guided my own study of tabletop RPGs. And as more ethnographies on RPGs are produced, we learn not only more about gaming, ludic theory, and identity, but also about ‘insider’ ethnography itself.
Chapter 3

Identity in Gaming

“When I role-play I want to do just that: build an interesting character and be that person for awhile.” Beth Kinderman (female role-player and author for Gamegrene.com)

“This is not a game, Marvel!” – said by one player to another, in character, during a game session.

“And just what happens when these everyday suspensions of the normal break out? What happens when people play act? What might it imply to get ‘carried away’ by an act, a mask, a dramatic moment? Are we transported, as it were, bodily, to another space? Do we live, if only for a moment, that which we do?” (Lancaster 1997:568)

3.1) Ethnography and Role-playing

“Okay, so you round the corner and you’re in another hallway. It’s about twenty-five feet down to another door.”

“Damn. Okay. I go to the door. Is it like the others?” asks Spencer, who is playing a Tefling named Caliban.

John, the acting GM nods. “It’s that weird black stone, but there’s, like…” he starts sketching in his notebook. “There’s a different symbol on the front.”

“Different like how?” another player, Simon, playing a dwarf named Nik, asks.

“Just wait,” John says, still sketching.

“How far behind us are the mages?” Simon/Nik asks.

“Far enough,” John answers. “Just wait.” A few seconds later he lays the notebook on the table. “The door looks like this.”

On the paper is an intricate star pattern with a mark in the middle.

“What another crystal?” Spencer/Caliban asks.

“Yes,” John answers. “And, Ellis, you’re misting again.”

Jamie, who is playing a fighter named Ellis, has been talking about a movie with Aaron. But now turns back to the table “What? Again? Why?”

“It has to be the crystals,” Caliban/Spencer says.
“Well, yeah, but why? I don’t have a drop of magic. Why the hell am I going all misty all the time? It’s beginning to freak Ellis out.”

“Worry about it later. We need to get that door open now. Or we’re gonna die bloody.” Nik/Simon says, half standing to lean over the table.

Doing ethnography on role-players can sometimes be a rather difficult chore. It’s not the interviews; it’s trying to take notes on the actual game-play. It is difficult to try and capture the essence of what is happening as players sit at the table. It is not unusual to have half the table fully invested in the game and deeply in character, while the other half are chatting about movies or books or work. It is not unusual for a player to jump between personas: for a player to be talking as themselves, then in character, then as themselves – all within the same sentence. For these reasons, issues of identity as character and identity as player will be presented separately.

3.2) Character Identities: Who do you want to be?

Arguably, there is a difference between character creation and character construction. For purposes of this discussion, character creation will refer to the creative process under which a player decides on the nature of the fictional persona he or she wishes to play; on how players develop habits, personality, behavior traits, and rough outlines of personal histories for their characters. Character construction, however, will refer to the mechanics of the game; the number driven statistics of the character, the assignments of ‘skill points’, the process of ‘leveling’. Though both processes are required for ‘character development’ within the game, the focus here will be less on rule driven aspects of the

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1 Because of the sometimes acronym and jargon heavy nature of RPGs I have included a brief glossary of terms used in this paper in Appendix A.
characters and more on how players create, become, and maintain these alternate personas.

Characters can be derived from either a creative process, or a constructive one.

I try to come up with a vague idea of the kind of character I’d want to play and something that would make him unique. Then and only then do I figure out how I can make that concept fit into the rules. Occasionally, though, I do come up with a rules-based character first and then try to figure out specific things about him from nothing more than his choice of weapon, for example. Each way can produce very fun characters to play (John – personal interview).

If the player is inspired and has an idea for the type of character he or she wishes to play, then the player creates the character first. When creating a character, most often the player will begin with a core of an idea, a chunk of back-story, an accent, or even an odd behavior that they want to play out.

There is also a challenge to making an enjoyable and memorable character. …The best game I ever played was a Dungeons and Dragons campaign in which I played an elf who lived on the outskirts of town, and in Robin Hood fashion robbed from the "rich" (anyone really) to give to the poor (himself) and posted wanted signs about himself, in hopes of cementing his infamy in the songs of bards across the lands. Caryll was brash, ignorant, arrogant, heroic in his own mind, ego maniacal, and slightly poetic. This was a character that I had a great time playing, and the other players enjoyed playing with [him] to a certain extent. Even if they hated him for getting him into all kinds of trouble, they had to laugh at how he did it (Aaron – E-mail interview).

Having a unique character that you’ll enjoy playing is definitely the most important part of making a good character; not how powerful he is or what his maximum damage per round is (John – E-mail interview).

Characters with quirks and strange abilities or just fun personalities are way better than standard heroes (Tim – personal interview).

It should be noted that most gamers interviewed for this project emphasized the individuality of their characters, rather than their prowess. Characters that are remembered, and therefore played again, tend to be those that have remarkable
personalities that enrich the game world and enhance the narrative. Besides, a unique character is more fun to both play and to watch.

The core of the new persona is then expanded by the construction of the character sheet. (If a player is feeling uninspired, characters might begin at this stage, as blank character sheets are filled in with numbers and lists of equipment.) As ‘stats’ are generated and skill points assigned, the player begins to flush out some other aspects of the nature and personality of the character. Personas and behavior traits are also ‘fine tuned’ to deal with what characters have ‘chosen’ to carry with them – players might impulsively give their character something that just caught their eye in the rule book, like a stationary set. Players then must come up with a reason the character might be carrying a stationary set – an explanation that can create new personality traits or eccentric behaviors; i.e.: an illiterate character might have the set for an entirely different reason than a rogue who is known for his forgery. And in certain game systems, weapon choices can say a lot about a character’s persona.

Pieces of back-story are often generated to explain how the character gained these items and/or achieved certain skills and abilities. Though generation of any back-story is not necessary to character creation, it is in some ways difficult to avoid. Even the most rigid and archetypical character will be ‘played’ at some point, and will have to respond to in-game stimulus and other player-characters. Like a ‘real’ person, in-game personas respond to their environment in generally consistent ways. Even players who have little interest in creating detailed character personas will often explain these PC ‘personality traits’ to other players by generating bits of a personal history or cultural norms for their character – which will expand and change as the game continues.
An in-game interaction highlights this gradual back-story building and character development. At the third gaming session for group one (early in this campaign) the players were exploring an ancient temple. At this point the players were still ‘finding their characters’. John was acting as GM for the campaign. A member of the group, Aaron, was playing a barbarian-elf named K’van. Aaron had not bothered to create any particular history for K’van, other then a general announcement that he came from the forest and carried a very large war-hammer. Inside the temple, the PC’s encountered a large stone statue. After examining the statue carefully and finding nothing, most of the other PCs moved on to other areas of the temple. K’van, however, began hitting the statue with his hammer.

Simon to Aaron: “What the hell are you doing?”
Aaron: “Hitting the statue.”
Aaron: “I hit it again.”
Simon, sounding irritated. “Why?”
John: “You see a little glow. But nothing else.”
Aaron to Simon, out of character: “Because I can. And it’s pissing you off.” To John in character: “Hit it again.” [note: for the first time the words come out in a stilted accent that will mark K’van’s speech from now on.]
John: “It’s glowing now, getting brighter. You can hear a whine starting to build. Like a mosquito too close to your ear.”
Aaron: “Hit it again.”
Spencer: “It’s gonna blow, dude.”
Aaron: “I know [no accent]. I hit it again [accented].”
John: “It’s bright now. Bright, like, sick orange. Like that. And getting louder.”
Aaron: “Hit it again.”
John: “You’re just gonna keep hitting it, aren’t you?”
Aaron: “Yes. Hit it again.”
Spencer: “Just how stupid are you?” [note: this is not an insult, but one player looking for clarification about persona traits from another.]
Aaron: “Pretty stupid. He’s pretty dumb. And I think he’s kinda like a magpie. He likes shiny things. And this thing’s just getting shinier. He’s pretty excited about it.”
Simon: “He’s gonna die.”
Aaron: “No, he won’t. I think that maybe his tribe, like, worshiped shiny things and rocks. This is just awesome for him. But he knows it going to blow.”

John: “What’s his intelligence score?”

Aaron: “Nine.”

John: “Yeah, he’s smart enough to understand that the whine is not a good thing. You’re lucky. I was going to make you roll for it, dude.”

Aaron: “He’s not retarded. He just likes glowing rocks.”

John: “So what are you doing?”

Aaron [with K’van’s accent]: “Hit it again.”

As this demonstrates, characters finish the process of generation in actual game play. As the game is played, the characters slowly come into their own as players “find” them in much the same way actors speak of “finding” their part.

This means that you play as your character, you are not making choices by what you know, but what your character does. The best way is to make someone you would have fun pretending to be. Once you have that character in your head, you can act like him a lot easier (Tim – personal interview).

Finding a character usually happens over the first few game sessions as that character faces new experiences and decisions. Eventually, gamers stop speaking of ‘finding’ characters and instead talk about ‘getting into character’. Generally this happens as the new ‘fictional’ personas begin to settle into patterns of behavior. The players become more sure of how characters react and think. They no longer have to consider persona behavior, but simply respond automatically as that persona. The ‘fictional’ personas become, in many ways, ‘real’.

You have to put yourself in the character’s shoes and act as they would, speak as they would speak. Sure, I might not want to charge headlong into a pack of bloodthirsty orcs, but my half-drunk barbarian might love doing things like that. It’s a good chunk of the fun in the game, taking on different personas (John-personal interview).
In this way, in-game characters become a persona that is distinct from and separate to the out-of game persona of their player. This distance between the two separate personas becomes even more defined as players begin to expand characters that they can easily ‘get into’.

Getting into character basically means no metagaming. Everyone should have a basic understanding of the basic idea behind their character and being in character means problem solving the way your character would. If you are an analytical person but build a barbarian, you wouldn’t think your way through a conflict, you would pick up rock and bash in heads. It also means ignoring information that you know but your character wouldn’t (David – E-mail interview).

Metagaming is the idea that characters should not have access to the knowledge of their player. That, while in-game, the metaframes of reference used by the ‘real’ player must be replaced by the metaframes of the ‘fictional’ character to the best of that player’s ability. The player, while in character, must react through the fictional persona’s needs, experiences, culture, and personal history in order to create the necessary ‘flow’ that allows full involvement in the game. In simplest terms, though the player might have participated in several campaigns and know many of the GMs tricks, the character should only know what it has direct experience of within its ‘life’. Therefore, when faced with something like a door while in a game, a player who has a lot of gaming experience might look at the GM and say, “I know this door is trapped,” and yet have their character open it anyway. Not because they want to risk their character, but because the character does not have the experience to know the door is trapped.

The concept of metagaming covers player knowledge not only about the ‘real’ world of rule books and dice, but also about the narrative experienced by the character.
While sitting at a table, a player might overhear a GM give information to another player. It is allowed for the player to ask “did I hear that?” meaning should his character have access to this information. However, if the GM tells the player that he did not, it would be considered ‘cheating’ for the character to act on the information in-game. Therefore, game play becomes a balance of out-of-game understanding of the narrative flow and plot requirements, and in-game character experiences. The player must enjoy and become involved in the experience of the game, or they will never create the necessary immersion; at the same time the character must act out of its own personality and experiences, or the flow of the game can be compromised.

In this manner… performance is multiply transversal. It effects a rapid shuttle between shifting subject matters:…between the real and the imaginary, between the given and the improvised. … it represents a profound equivocation. It takes up a space between. Contrary, even antagonistic intentions are held in suspension, but nothing is canceled out. Not only are multiple intentions refracted through a given gesture, but moreover many possible selves – and others – are always in play (Lancaster 1997:563).

In this passage by Lancaster, we can begin to see and define the hazy sense of multiple selves and realities that can be generated in aspects of RPG game-play. While involved in the flow of the game, players create between them the ‘space between’: between reality and fiction, and between self and other. Here, they can move about ‘free’ of social/cultural rules and roles. Like any carnival practice, RPG’s offer a brief window where cultural norms are, on the surface, suspended. Yet, game-playing also involves a deferral of self that would seem to, in some ways, exceed the ‘common’ carnival experience.

To further explore this suspension of self, we must investigate the question of how ‘real’ the personas created for game play are. From the way in which characters are
derived, it becomes obvious that the fictional personas are in some ways both a part of the players, and separate from them. Though players drive character personas in both development and continuation, characters drive action in the narrative, and are responsible for their own decisions. This separation of identities is what might keep players from being held responsible for negative character actions, such as murder or betrayals. The only time this is not true is when a character can not get along with other Player-Characters (PCs) within the game. If the character causes enough conflict to interfere with narrative progression, the player will either be asked to ‘tone down’ the character, or perhaps make a new character. If the player refuses both options, that character might not receive the subtle help that PCs often get from GMs, and/or might be abandoned, betrayed, or possibly killed by other characters.

Because characters are responsible for their own decisions, reactions from in-game actions focus on the character, not the player. This separation only makes the question of the ‘realness’ of game personas more complex. Yet players seem rather bored by this type of question, and it is easy to suspect that they see a subtle attack on their maturity and stability when asked about the topic. It is often an accusation of non-players that gamers ‘get lost in fantasy’, that they ‘loose themselves’ in the characters and can not get back to the ‘real’ world (most gamers will argue that this is not possible). Perhaps because of this, it was required to ask about the ‘reality’ of characters several times in several different ways before the gamers would begin to answer in detail. Yet, even these later responses about the ‘realness’ of characters, gamers respond with oddly ambiguous answers:
I really don't look at whether my characters are real or not, simply whether I can handle acting like them. I see it more like playing a role in a play, and I just put myself into character like that. I usually don't say "well [my character] would do this here" I generally just break a door down or eat fish or whatever. It's a different state of mind really, and it gets you thinking in different ways. And I think every character, no matter how different from the actual player it might be, reflects at least a slight part of that person's personality or they couldn't play it (John – E-mail interview).

…[You] come up with a concept, and flesh the character around it. By the time it’s done, it is its own person (Tim – personal interview).

How real are [my]characters? Completely and totally real. So real in fact that if I die in game, I would die in the real world as well. [note: this is a sarcastic response, based on anti-game sentiments; specifically, this comment probably relates to a religious anti-gaming tract Dark Dungeons published by Chick LLC: 1984]

How do [I] define the ‘realness’ of [my] characters? My characters are only real in the sense that I can never really play a serious character, because I, as a real person, don't really know how to be serious for extended periods of time.

Are they not ‘real’ at all? Well, they do only exist in my brain, but my brain is real, so you decide (Aaron – E-mail interview).

Huizinga (1950) when speaking of ritualistic role-playing for religious rites might help to overcome this ambiguity: “The identity, the essential oneness of the two goes far deeper than the correspondence between a substance and its symbolic image. It is a mystic unity. The one has become the other” (1950:25). Huizinga argues that within the scope of play a person can become, in a very ‘real’ way, someone or something else entirely.

Lancaster argues the same effect can happen in expressions of Carnival:

…identity, like hermeneutic knowledge, is a matter of locating a self by way of the other. Identity, then, is not self-identical. Experience is not a receptacle. … any… kind of self/identity – relies on physical explorations, carnal transpositions, corporal learning, and practice. Transvestics and other kinds of body-play are absolutely necessary to secure stable genders – but they also carry the danger that play always implies: a game can, at any moment, run away with the players. In engaging the world and each other, subjects make themselves… (Lancaster 1997:571).
Seen in this way, the player is the character, but only for the duration of play.

I saw two worlds before me. The first was the bland, beige concrete dungeon of my …classroom…. The emerging second world was an exciting, yet frightening series of dark chambers accessed only with the light from one hand held torch. … my hair stood on end and adrenaline coursed through my very real, bi-worldly veins (Mello 2006:177).

However, when the boundaries of the play are broken, ether by time, or by location, the play ends and the character returns to its fictional state. “In ordinary life, ambiguities and crossovers…are held in check. Routine practices constellate narrow and habitual relations between self, others, world” (Lancaser 1997:570). The ambiguity of identity that was let out and expressed in the game, is again suppressed as the game ends. The character is ‘real’ only during game play, yet the identity of the character is ‘real’ at some point. You behave as that character, and so others respond to you as that character, and so you are that character – but only during the game. This ‘real’/‘not-real’ identity expression leads to the ambiguous responses of gamers to the question: how real are your characters. Characters are both very real… and completely fictional.

Yet the lessons learned through the self-reflective nature of character creation are retained in the ‘real world’. At least one female non-group gamer interviewed2 described how she had a learning disability that interfered with her ability to write and spell. She related that in playing the game, she could ‘be smart’, she could solve the puzzles and face the challenges, and be valuable to her playing group because of her cleverness and intelligence. She said that she carried some of the feeling with her, back into the ‘real

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2 Though the playing groups used for participant/observation were comprised of only males, the total interview population, generated from gamers both inside the observed RPG groups (n=7) and players not in either group (n=9) included four female gamers.
world’. She felt smarter because she realized that, though she was often judged by her writing skills, they were not an accurate measure of her intelligence. She, the player, felt smarter because of the life experiences of her characters (Betsy – AIM chat). “When experimental learning takes place within a subculture that has its own values and norms, such learning may be translated into various forms of cultural, social and human capital, having application not only in the subculture, but outside as well” (Mello 2006:175).

Therefore, gamers can carry with them into everyday life the things that they learn while in the game, both about themselves and about culture. Because of skills learned during game-play, they might be better able to apply creativity to problems, to see themselves as different from how they are viewed by cultural standards, and may have self-reflective tools that non-players might not possess. Taking on new characters – playing with identity – can offer gamers insights about themselves, their gender roles, their expectations, and their value to their social groups. But characters are not the only ‘alternate’ roles that gamers play while at the table.

3.3) Player Identities: Characters within the group:

Players not only take on the alternate persona of their in-game characters, but also assume, adapt, and play out roles within the real-world, out-of-game player group. These roles are also shifting, and any group member can take any role at any time. These tend to fall into set group archetypes that are often acknowledged by gamers. The most obvious of these player archetypes are: ‘Rule-lawyers’ (or resident experts), Troublemakers, and Game Masters (GMs). These identities shift between gaming group members, and are often taken by people who would, arguably, not associate themselves
with that type of role outside of the gaming group. Contrarily, archetypes that are too close to everyday life might be avoided within the gaming group; i.e.: in one gaming group I had contact with, a player who worked as a manager and controlled details and schedules all day had no interest in ever taking a GM role (GMing). In another case, a player who was unfailingly polite and deferential to others, would often, at the gaming table, become a troublemaker, looking for ways to irritate other players. In a third case, the ‘resident expert’ for the game, the person everyone turned to for rule clarification and instruction, was the only group member who had not finished his college education.

These roles are not permanent, either. The player who knows the most about the gaming system, the ‘rules-lawyer’, might change as different gaming systems are employed. Also, a ‘rules-lawyer’ might choose not to be the resident expert for a given game or session, offering books to other players instead of verbal answers. The group ‘troublemaker’ might change depending on a player’s mood, on their enjoyment of the game, and narrative; and their emersion not only in their own character, but the characters of other players. If they find a player has become to ‘stale’ in character choices, always playing to a ‘type’, the troublemaker player might target that player for teasing outside of the game. The troublemaker might begin mocking the player’s skill at role-playing, or mimicking the character itself outside of the game. In-game, a troublemaker might intentionally set-up situations that will morally challenge other characters, forcing players out of their comfort zones. Though ‘troublemakers’ can distract from the game and the narrative, they can also keep the time spent out of game lively and help maintain the aspect of Carnival for the game session. Much of a game session will be spent in
laughing, both at things happening in-world and at things going on at the real-world table.

Fun is part of the game, and Troublemakers help to ensure its presence:

Laughter – deep visceral laughter – resonates throughout the Carnival experience. ...[T]his inspired laughter erases the distinction between seer and seen, performer and audience, laugher and laughed at. Such laughter is the very medium of Carnival connectivity, its carnal form of sociability. This laughter is felt, intimately and viscerally, but is also shared and universal. ... All the popular genius of Carnival, all its mastery of visual tricks and physical games, come to so much funny playing, so many ways of trying things out (Lancaster 1997:568).

3.4) The Role of the GM:

Perhaps the most obvious and well known identity within a gaming group is that of Game Master (GM). Because of this, a somewhat deeper investigation will be made into this role. Any player can choose to be Game Master, and a good GM can usually attract a number of players. Though there are many aspects to this role, the remainder of this discussion will concern itself with the most obvious – that of authority within both the gaming group and in game play.

3.4 – 1) GM Authority: Die and Find Out:

“Hey Spence? Can you go? Can your character go [to heaven]? I don’t know – out of character – I don’t know where a Tefling [part demon] who’s not evil would go when he dies?”
Spencer: “I guess I’d… I don’t know. I’d probably go [to heaven].”
John (acting Game Master): “Hey, now. It’s my decision,”
Simon to John: “So where would he go?”
John smiled: “Die and find out.”

This interaction, among others, sparked my interest in the nature of authority in table-top role-playing games. Because the GM creates the worlds, develops the plots, and has final voice on rules (i.e. the ‘physics’ and ‘natural laws’ of the game), it is common to simply equate the GM with the concept of ‘god-like powers’ in the game.
Even the title ‘Game Master’ grants a symbolic clout to this player. The authority of a GM is summed up in the D&D rulebook: *Dungeon Masters Guide*: “The power of creating worlds, controlling deities and dragons, and leading entire nations is in your hands. You are the master of the game – the rules, the setting, the action, and ultimately, the fun. This is a great deal of power, and you must use it wisely” (Cook et al. 2003a:4). Seen only in this way, the balance of power in the game-world, and by extension at the table, would seem to be firmly weighted in favor of the GM. Yet, there are times when GMs wielded authority – and times and ways in which they are subject to it.

3.4 – 2) GM vs. PCs:

As stated before, RPGs are collaborative group narratives, and the final product is the story. “In order for such a narrative construction to be successful, it’s necessary for the GM and the players to both visualize a shared world within which the narrative takes place and to extend themselves into this world” (Hendricks 2006:39).

All players will take the role of a PC at various times, and this is where most players begin their RPG gaming career. There is no limit to how many PCs can be in any game, though if the numbers get too high a second GM might be brought in to help manage the players. A player who is in a PC role is expressly responsible for their character: i.e. for keeping track of the characters personal information such as bonuses, penalties, equipment, spells and spell effects, and other facts and rules needed by that character. Ostensibly, this is to keep game play moving by having all relevant information at hand on their turn. It also reinforces the notion that a player has sole control over their character, even above GM influence. A GM will rarely take time out of
a game to quibble over a character stat given by a player about his or her character. GMs trust PCs to report valid information, and there seems to be surprisingly little intentional cheating on the parts of the PCs. PCs have very few other responsibilities to the game beyond their character (although there are some responsibilities to the group).

Contrarily, a GM has the general responsibilities of creating the game-world and controlling it, but has no say in specific PC actions. Therefore, the GM, despite being the creator of the plot, has little influence in how that plot progresses. GMs not only manage the game-world and all creatures that PCs meet, but they are also expected to supervise game groups. GM responsibilities to the group include: setting up meeting times, contacting members if games are canceled, starting games sessions, ending games sessions, adjudicating issues between players and PCs, and GMs bear the brunt of teaching new players. Also, the fact that the GM can not ‘die’, that they ‘know all’, and that they can create traps and monsters to thwart and kill PCs, can sometimes create an undertone that the GM and the PCs are in someway in competition with one another.

All of this can be somewhat isolating for the GM. In both the study groups the GM had a specific chair at the table. In Group One, this seat was in the corner and bordered by a tall, heavy shelf on one side and a large, flat platform on the other. The Group One GM was, to some extent, physically isolated as well as separated by his role. In Group Two the GM sat at the head of the table, in the only chair that had extra padding and armrests. The table and chairs were positioned in the room so that the rest of the group was blocked by two adjacent walls. This configuration meant that while the group was at the table, all but one of the players had little to focus on except the GM – while the GM would have to physically turn around in order to see anything other than his players.
In both groups, though PC players occasionally changed places, the GMs always took the same chair, even when the player taking the GM role changed. The player taking over the GM role would physically move to sit in the GMs chair for that game session and every one after, until someone else became the GM for the group. During the study, Group Two shifted through three different GMs. When the third new player took over the GM position in the middle of a game session, the player leaving the GM role was ‘greeted’ back to being a PC by a player who said, “Welcome back to this side of the table”.

With the added responsibilities, and the slight symbolic distance from the group, it is maybe not surprising that not all players have the desire to take the role of GM, or that those who do GM can grow tired of the position and wish to ‘just play’ for awhile. My data suggests that only just over half of all RPG gamers show any desire to take on a GM role in a game (9 of 16).

3.4 – 3) It’s Good To Be The GM:

How far does GM authority extend? According to general understanding, the GM’s authority does not extend beyond the game. He only has power while at the table, and only within the game. Yet, the GM adopted an executive role within the gaming group even outside of play – though the authority was limited to areas that touched on game play.

Both gaming groups in this study had communal funds that were collected weekly. For Group One, this was called the ‘pop-fund’, and was to buy soda for the group to consume while playing. For Group Two this was the ‘pizza cash’, and was
used, not surprisingly, to order pizza for the group. Both GMs were expected to contribute to the funds when able (like every player) – yet the GMs were the first to be asked what kind of drink they wanted, or offered the first vote on pizza toppings. Also, GMs were consulted for the timing of every session break, and the groups officially only stopped playing when the GMs ‘called it’. This gave GMs almost exclusive control of the duration of every game session. This is not to say that players’ attentions did not wander and that players did not occasionally leave early or arrive late – the group schedules and interactions were in no way rigid or controlled. But any ‘official’ time of stopping and/or starting was at the discretion of the GM (though often based on group desires). The GMs often (not always) decided who made the pop runs (requiring leaving the game site) or met the pizza deliveries (requiring leaving the table). This had the effect of meaning that a GM need never run an errand or leave the table unless they volunteered. Also, GMs had the final say as to whether a game session should be canceled, or the date and/or time changed, though group input on the decisions was encouraged. These expressions of authority followed the GM role for the group, not the specific player filling that role.

Within the game, GMs also have the tacit ability to cheat… sort of. “Do you cheat? The answer: the DM can’t cheat. You’re the umpire, and what you say goes. As such, it’s certainly within your rights to sway things one way or another to keep people happy or keep things running smoothly” (Cook et al. 2003a:18). If a GM suspects that a player may be ‘fudging’ reported die rolls, they can demand that a player role dice on the table, in full view. However, the same demand can not be made of GMs. In fact, GMs will often keep rolls secret from other players in order to heighten plot suspense. This
leads to the unspoken fact that GMs can easily cheat. However, this ‘cheating’ does not have the same negative connotations as PC cheating. GMs most often use this capability to change rules or alter die-rolls to help a character who has had a run of ‘bad luck’, or to save a group of characters who have gotten themselves in over their heads. Yet, this ‘cheating’ must be kept to a minimum, or the tension of the game and the thrill of the narrative will be compromised. If this happens, players will loose interest in the game, and the GMs plot will end.

3.4 – 4) The Players Strike Back:

Something that has not yet been discussed is the application of authority by non-GM players. Oddly, the authority that PCs represent in the game seems to be mostly focused on the narrative function of the game. Because the GM technically has no control over player actions, PCs are free to thwart the GM’s plot, either intentionally or unintentionally. Players can miss clues that the GM has presented. Characters can refuse to follow instructions given by the GM. Or they can consider a monster too dangerous and leave, rather than moving on and finding a necessary bit of information. This type of attempt to circumvent elements that were designed by the GM to obstruct characters and lead them through plot development can derail the GM’s planned narrative. Because the game is based on narrative construction, interfering with any plans the GM has made as far as storyline is concerned could have lasting ramifications for the next game sessions.

Group Two had a moment when the party, finding a challenge entirely too difficult and the potential damage to characters too great (a discussion that took place in front of the GM), simply abandoned the storyline. The failure of the PCs to take on the
challenge stymied the planned plot, and the GM turned over the GM responsibilities to another player. The players were apologetic, not having known that the dangerous storyline had been so important to the overall plot. Yet, this suggests that players have the potential to show displeasure at a GM and/or other players by intentionally derailing plots – either by ignoring obvious hints, or killing important non-player characters created to pass along information to the party.

One of the most obvious affects of PC authority in narrative terms is the creation and development of subplots in the game. Because GMs have no authority to control the actions of PCs in the game world, the PCs can wander off on ‘side trips’ for various reasons. Often these episodes are based on character back-stories that were created by PCs without GM influence: i.e., a player might want his character to check on family, or fulfill a promise made in a previous game. These little adventures can often become seeds for larger stories. GMs are expected to adapt plots and improvise with these PC actions. Just such a side trip became a main plot twist for Group One when a single character left the main storyline and decided to return home to see his father. The GM was forced to adapt to the character’s actions, creating a sub-plot that would engage all players for several game sessions before moving the game back to the original plot. This case is an example of how player decisions, through character interactions with the game-world, can affect the ‘flow’ the overall narrative. It is obvious that by moving characters in certain ways and at certain times PCs exert control over the pacing and development of the overall narrative that, in some ways, equals the authority of the GM over plotlines. Therefore a certain amount of balanced duality in the authority attributed between GM and PC aspects of the game can be roughly outlined, as seen in table 1.
Contrasts in Authority between GM and PC in RPGs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Master</th>
<th>Player Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General:</td>
<td>Specific:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(world, general rules, managing group)</td>
<td>(character, stats, responsible to group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overrule:</td>
<td>Argue:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(final decisions, ability to ‘cheat’)</td>
<td>(debate rule, debate outcome, group can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sometimes overcome GM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor:</td>
<td>Direction:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Plot, twists, conclusions)</td>
<td>(choices, pacing, actions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>Sub-plot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

It becomes obvious that the GMs primary concern in the game is the creation of the overall narrative; while the PCs are focused on events. Through this layering of focus, both ‘sides of the table’ generate between them a form of joint-controlled reality construction – a shared group experience, which creates a narrative.

3.5) Narrative and Control

It can be easy to loose sight of the fact that tabletop RPGs are primarily concerned with constructing a narrative. Players experience this story, and advance it, through their characters senses. In order for this process to work, the group must be able, to a certain degree, to become more invested in the fictional world and personas than in the ‘real’ world for the duration of the game session.

By extension, I mean that each player, who exists in the real world, must become more identified with the character he plays, who exists in the fantasy world, so that the boundary between the two worlds is more blended. Otherwise, the resulting narrative can be disjointed, with conflicting interpretations of how the world functions on a social, cultural, and even physical level (Hendricks 2006:96).

When the players become immersed in the continually unfolding story and world, they achieve what Jack Holcomb calls ‘narrative flow’ (Holcomb 2000). Sean Hendricks
states that this is accomplished through the use of specific language (2006:42). It begins by referencing images that are known by all players in order to create a similar mental image of what the fictional world should be. This “shared vision” is helped along by use of pop-culture references such as movies and television shows, that all players are familiar with so that the fictional world can be ‘seen’ in more or less the same way by all players (Hendricks 2006:96).

RPG play offers an ability to explore identity that is just not possible in the ‘real’ world. In the group, a player can cast aside common patterns of behavior and try out new expectations. While in-game it does not matter what race they are born into, what gender, what nationality, what socio-economic status. RPGs offer players ways to better explore who they are now, and who they want to be, both in character and within the gaming group. “Rather, it might be better to say that playful practices put us at the fulcrum of a phenomenological vector, into a position from which we might spring in any number of different directions. To play act, to play at Carnival,… is to explore those possibilities” (Lancaster 1997:572).

Now that we have discussed the creation of characters and the acceptance of those identities within RPG games, we can look at larger issues of the acceptance of the role-playing games, and role-playing gamers, within the larger framework of the mainstream American culture.
Chapter 4

Acceptance

Thus, in my mind, and in the minds of most who have come out of this background as I have (occultism and Satanism); there is no doubt that Dungeons and Dragons and its imitators are right out of the pit of hell. No Christian or sane, decent individual of whatever faith really should have anything to do with them.

~William Schnoebelen

The evidence in these cases is really quite impressive. There is no doubt in my mind that the game Dungeons and Dragons is causing young men to kill themselves and others. The game is one of non-stop combat and violence. It is clear to me that this game is desensitizing players to violence and also causing an increased tendency to violent behavior.

~Dr. Thomas Radecki

Such imagery is so oppressive that numerous individuals in the hobby either downplay or completely hide their involvement to avoid the negative social stigma attached to the hobby. Many gamers are like secret agents; they simply don't discuss their hobby in mixed company. For this reason, it's difficult to get a true representation of what the gaming hobby looks like as a whole.

~Lisa Clark-Fleishman

4.1) They’re Just Weird: Mainstream view of Gamers

“They’re just weird, you know?” The statement comes from a student in class with me. She is a non-gamer studying a group of collectible card game players. Knowing what she is studying, I asked her if she had a few minutes to talk to me. As soon as we get to the students lounge she starts telling me of her trip to a local gaming store. Her
statement is about a group of gamers she encountered there. I ask her why she thinks that they were ‘weird’?

She responds that the gaming store was “strange”, and that the gamers – including RPG gamers – were playing in a “dark and dank” backroom that she had not realized was even there on her first trips to the store. She thinks that the gamers dress “funny”, and that they just “stare” at her as she wanders the room. She laughingly questions their ability to “talk to girls” and obviously thinks that the gamers are somewhat socially awkward. She leaves the impression that the whole experience has made her uncomfortable. Her impressions of gaming remain rather negative as we continue to talk briefly a few times over the semester. Eventually we turn in our final projects and I ask her what conclusions she has made about gaming. She tells me that in her final project she has found that gamers use the games as a way to cling to childhood and escape the responsibilities of adult life.

The image of geeky, immature, anti-social and mentally unstable gamers is often repeated in mainstream American culture. For example, take an episode of the fictional Fox television show, *Bones*. In the episode, “The Superhero in the Alley”, the two lead characters – anthropologist Temperance Brennan and F.B.I. agent Seeley Booth – interview a group of role-players. Physically unattractive by Hollywood standards, these players are gathered in a dark room, are dressed in costume, are listening to heavy-metal music, and answer only to their character names. They are both socially maladjusted and overly aggressive during the episode. On leaving the interview, the fictional anthropologist and agent have the following conversation:
Anthropologist Brennan: “I don’t like to judge an entire subculture, but those people gave me the creeps.”

Agent Booth: “That’s because they are creepy. What I mean is those kids at the store weren’t your good old harmless ‘tutor you in math’ geeks. They were the, uh, you know, set the school on fire geeks. Dark nerds. Columbine nerds.”

Anthropologist: “Columbine? You think…[the players are] actually capable of murders?”

Agent: “I think they get high, they play these games, they lose their grip on reality, and, you know, they start to believe that they are these characters.”

(Original Airdate: 2/8/06)

This interaction is representative of the way gaming in general, and table-top RPG gaming in particular, is presented in American pop-culture. This is the image that gamers are faced with continually. As a gamer, because of your enjoyment of a hobby, you are suddenly subject to the labels of “dark nerd”, of “Columbine nerd” – and the presupposition of the both the want and ability to commit mass murder that is invested in that phrase. But this reference is not unique in its negative portrayal of gaming; anti-gaming sentiments have a long history in America.

These games are not only the favorite topics of TV movies. The Associated Press and United Press International, between 1979 and 1992, carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games. Almost all named only Dungeons & Dragons, even though there are several hundred such games on the market, and among their manufacturers are more than a dozen companies beyond the desktop publishing level. These articles contained 51,182 words in 2,197 paragraphs.

These paragraphs were divided into four categories: those favorable to gaming, those unfavorable to gaming, those neutral (stating they existed, describing them accurately, but without value judgments, etc.), and those paragraphs not mentioning them at all, even by inference. Those in the last category were discarded. Based on the remaining paragraphs, each of the story was tabulated as having a majority of pro-game paragraphs, anti-game paragraphs, neutral paragraphs, or with no category having a majority. Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game. Those three pro-game stories were all from UPI, which is a considerably smaller wire service than AP (Cardwell 1994: 157).

Faced with these negative stereotypes and preconceptions it is hardly surprising that most gamers tend not to publicize their involvement in the hobby, even though the
number of players has increased dramatically. In his 1983 book, *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine estimated the number of American game players at roughly one million (1983:26). By 2000 Jack Holcomb, in his dissertation, *Playing Popular Culture*, reported that “according to a market research summery published in early 2000 by Wizards of the Coast, the most successful producer of RPGs, about 5.5 million Americans play or have played a role-playing game…” (2000:1). GenCon Indy, just one of many gaming conventions in the United States, drew in over 26,000 players in 2007 (www.gencon.com). There are also GenCons in Paris, Australia, and the UK as well.

With numbers of this size, it is somewhat confusing that RPG gaming is still so often maligned by the popular news, media, and culture. These games have inspired best selling novel series, popular computer games, and films (Schick 1991:33). They have been used as tools, both in teaching and in psychotherapy (DiGigcomo 2006). Most large bookstores include a role-playing section on their shelves, and there are stores devoted to the hobby in most cities (e.g.: a use of the “find-a-store” feature on the Wizards of the Coast website turns up over 45 stores that carry and/or feature gaming materials within a 50 mile radius of Ball State University). Yet, even with the prevalence of RPG materials, players seem to feel that both they and the games are often ignored and/or maligned by the dominant culture. The question becomes both: why do these attitudes still exist, and what is the affect, if any, of this negative stereotyping on the gamers themselves? In order to investigate these issues a brief discussion of the history of the anti-gaming movement in the United States must be undertaken.
4.2) **Misadventures and Misrepresentations: a brief history of the anti-gaming movement.**

On August 15, 1979, James Dallas Egbert III disappeared from his Michigan State University dorm room. The sixteen year old child prodigy simply vanished in the clothes he was wearing. There was a search, but as there was no sign that there had been any crime, it was limited and turned up very little. His family hired a private detective, William Dear, to find their missing child. While investigating, Dear discovered that James Egbert had talked about playing a “strange” new game, *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Dear quickly formed the opinion that James and his role-playing friends would go into the steam tunnels running below campus to play this D&D. It was moody down there. Dark, hot and damp – with long, twisting tunnels that could go on for miles. In Dear’s opinion it was the perfect place to play this kind of game. He even received an anonymous call that validated that the game was played down in the tunnels – but the caller went on to say that Egbert had never been seen there (Dear 1984:50).

Nevertheless, Dear theorized that the boy had wandered into the tunnels to play D&D one night, and simply gotten lost. Or possibly he had been killed, either by accident or by his own hand, driven to desperation as he slowly lost touch with reality.

Another idea could not be completely rejected: Dallas might actually have begun to live the game, not just play it. *Dungeons and Dragons* could have absorbed him so much that his mind had slipped through the fragile barrier between reality and fantasy, and he no longer existed in the world we inhabit (Dear 1984:45).

The press ran with the story. Before long, all that most people knew of role-playing games were that they were something that strange, overly intelligent boys played in dark, lonely places. The hobby quickly became regarded by most as an activity that
led its socially maladjusted players to lose touch with reality. This is an image that has plagued the role-playing community ever since. Today, even many gamers will tell you that anti-gaming movements started with some role-player who killed himself in the steam tunnels.

The only problem is that very little of the story is true.

James Egbert did disappear into the steam tunnels on August 15, 1979. What is not often reported in the story is the fact that the boy had been suffering from some mental issues – including intense academic pressures, adjustment problems, confusion over his sexual orientation, and a rapidly growing drug problem (Dear 1984). He went into the tunnels that night with the full intention to commit suicide. However, he failed in the attempt. When he woke up the next morning he went to a friend’s house. As the police search intensified, Egbert fled campus, running from house to house, until he was out of state\(^3\) (Dear 1984).

In the meantime, Dear had discovered that Egbert played D&D. Dear admittedly knew nothing about this game, and so he began to ask James’ friends… who also knew almost nothing about RPGs, as none of them had ever played the game. There was no gaming group among James’ friends. There were no gaming materials among James’ possessions. The closest Dear could get to confirming that Egbert played at all was one person who said that the boy had tried to join his gaming group, but had been asked to leave because of his drug use (Dear 1984:132). Though Egbert reportedly talked about

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\(^3\) James Egbert would eventually make his way to Louisiana where he would make a second suicide attempt. This attempt would also fail. By mid-September, Egbert contacted Dear and asked him to call off the search. Dear picked the boy up, and agreed to keep the story quiet. The false news reports went unchanged. James Egbert attempted suicide a final time on August 11, 1980. Unfortunately, this time he was successful (Dear,1984, 332).
the game “constantly” (Dear 1984:13), as far as anyone could determine he was at best only an occasional player once at school, and he rarely played a single RPG while on campus. Yet, perhaps because the game was so unfamiliar, it became much more the focus of Dear’s investigation than the drug use and mental issues. And as the press repeated Dear’s conjecture as fact, more non-players became worried.

This worry over RPG’s was fed by Rona Jaffe’s 1981 book, *Mazes and Monsters*, a fiction novel obviously based on the incorrect news reports of James Egbert’s disappearance. In the book – made into a television movie, *Mazes and Monsters*, in 1982 – a young college student begins to lose his grip on reality, led into a mental breakdown by obsessively playing RPGs. It ends as he is locked away, calling all his friends by their characters names and unable to escape the fantasy world he has created. The moral was clear: role-playing games are dangerous.

Again, this novel and the following movie were the first, and in some cases the only, exposure that many Americans had to RPGs. Some parents, teachers and communities began working to ban what had been presented in popular media as a dangerous activity. Of course, as the games fell into societal disfavor they became more attractive to teens who wanted to be rebellious. TSR, the maker of *Dungeons and Dragons* at the time, reported sales of the game increasing, and, deciding that ‘any publicity was good publicity’, never publicly responded to any of the growing concern over these “deadly games” (Caywood and Hicks 1991a, 1991b; Cardwell 1994:3).

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4 Egbert himself claimed to have gone into the tunnels two-hundred times, and implied that he sometimes played D&D ‘down there’. However, RPGs are not played alone and Dear’s own inability to find anyone who had played with Egbert would suggest that this was less than accurate (Dear, 1984: 312).
The commotion over role-playing games might have lost momentum at this point, if not for another ‘gifted’ student by the name of Irving ‘Bink’ Pulling. Bink was an active role-player who often played with his ‘talented and gifted’ classmates. On June 9, 1982, Bink Pulling shot himself to death with his mother’s handgun. Without a doubt the Pullings must have been devastated by the suicide. It is, perhaps, understandable that the grieving mother would look for a cause for this tragic event; that she would need something to blame. That something became RPGs (Pulling with Cawthon 1989).

The suicide seemed to shock the Pulling family, despite Patricia Pulling’s own account of her son’s odd behaviors: such as running around on all fours and howling – though there is evidence that these accounts changed over time, and that at the time of the suicide Patricia Pulling might not have had any idea that her son was suffering from mental issues (Stackpole 1990:10). Eventually Bink’s mental state had decayed far enough that he was reportedly linked to the killing of his family’s pet rabbits and a neighbor’s cat (Stackpole 1990:10). Though Bink Pulling’s mother might not have known that her son was in trouble, his classmates obviously did:

[Bink Pulling] had trouble ‘fitting in’ and became dejected when he was unable to find a campaign manager when he ran for school office. Shortly before his death, he wrote ‘Life is a Joke’ on the blackboard in one of his classes, one classmate said. … ‘He had a lot of problems anyway that weren’t associated with the game,’ said Victoria Rockecharlie, another classmate of Pulling’s in the Talented and Gifted program (Washington Post: 13 August, 1983 as reprinted by Stackpole 1990:9).

Pulling’s mother, however, had decided on the cause for her son’s odd behavior, social isolation, and eventual suicide. The game had done it to him. Patricia Pulling stated that Bink had been playing the game only hours before his death, and that, “…[he] had received a death curse the day he died” (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:9). This curse,
according to Pulling, had caused Bink to begin fantasizing about killing. It was his mother’s firm belief that Bink had committed suicide to keep himself from acting on the D&D curse and hurting another person (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:9-10).

The seriousness with which Patricia Pulling’s claims were taken by many people is somewhat surprising. What Pulling was asserting was analogous to a parent saying: “My son killed himself because he played chess and was cursed by another player” or “my son played basketball and became homicidal because he missed a basket”. In 1983 Pulling founded the anti-gaming origination B.A.D.D. [Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons] (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:11). Pulling also took a 48 hour course and received her private investigation license. She then declared herself a specialist in ‘Cult Crimes’ and an expert in role-playing games and was used as a witness in possibly as many as three trials, though the accounts vary (Stackpole 1990:2-3; Pulling with Cawthon 1989:90). By her own admission, Mrs. Pulling had only played Dungeons and Dragons a few times over the course of one month in order to achieve this expertise (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:9). [As a comparison: I have played RPGs of various types for over fifteen years and would not consider myself an expert in all RPGs.] As an “expert”, Pulling also held seminars and training groups for police to better prepare them to deal with teens who had been led into ‘cult crimes’ by participating in these games. These seminars were still going on at least into the early 1990’s (Pulling with Cawthon 1989; Stackpole 1990:2-8).

B.A.D.D. may have had a limited membership, but it found an ample audience and many adherents. In the early 1980’s some segments of American society underwent a ‘moral panic’ later named the “Satanic Panic”. The Satanic Panic of the 1980’s began
with the publication of several personal accounts of adults who had supposedly recovered repressed childhood memories of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of satanic cults. The number of ‘victims’ rapidly mounted; the stories that they related becoming stranger and more complex. Eventually theories were generated of large, satanic conspiracies who wanted to corrupt children and commit human sacrifice. Patricia Pulling and B.A.D.D. offered the explanation of how the Satanists were accessing and recruiting American children through the use of role-playing games. Pulling and various ‘cult victims’ were interviewed in the mainstream media warning the public of the existence and dangerous connection between the games and cults (Stackpole 1990:1; Pulling with Cawthon 1989:12).

The two separate moral panics of Satanic cults and dangerous role-playing games dove-tailed neatly into one another and quickly became entangled. By the late 1980s the ‘Satanic Panic’ was passing. Its ‘official’ ending was marked by an article authored by F.B.I. agent Kenneth Lanning. In this article, Lanning stated that there was no real evidence of any satanic movement of any size in America (Lanning 1992). In Lanning’s experience as an investigator, there had not been a single documentable satanic murder, and there was no evidence of any ‘cultic’ abuse of children by Satanists (Lanning 1992). Such ‘memories’ of abuse were often fantasies that were not based in reality, much like the satanic cults themselves. Though firm belief in the ‘Satanic Conspiracy’ (and its RPG connection) continues to this day in some extreme Christian segments of American society, the general public became much less interested in and worried about what was now perceived as a ‘boogieman’ that held as little, reality as the monster in the newest horror movie.
Role-playing, however, was a different matter. Role-playing is undeniably real. It happens. The games exist. The dice exist. And the players exist – often in the local high-school or university. This threat was real. Also, at a local level, leaders and law enforcement agencies had already received anti-gaming materials in the form of pamphlets and seminars given by B.A.D.D. and its ilk. It was already ‘common-sense’ that gaming was bad; the hobby of role-playing had become stigmatized as something ‘good’ kids just did not do – something ‘normal’ people had no interest in. Therefore, if you were interested in playing an RPG, by definition you were in some way not ‘normal’.

The focus of anti-gaming shifted away from cultic fears, and instead became centered on the ‘moral’ and ‘psychological’ damage that role-playing games could do to young minds. Anti-gaming sentiments now touted a link between games and crime that became enmeshed in the way mass-media portrays RPGs and gamers in general. The games were declared by some to cause suicide among players. Lists were distributed of people who had committed suicide “because of the games” (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:88-89). However, these lists often included deaths where no name, location, or date, were provided for the protection of the family (Pulling with Cawthon 1989:88-89). Interestingly, Paul Cardwell actually went a long way to negating these rumors as the author proved numerically that, by available statistical evidence, gamers were actually less likely to commit suicide than non-players (Cardwell 1994:4).

Perhaps more disturbing were the lists of ‘gamers’ who had participated in murder, ‘proving’ that the games were dangerous to society (Schnoebelen 2007:3; Pulling with Cawthon 1989:88-90). Though there is little doubt that many of these crimes did indeed happen, and it is entirely possible that the perpetrators did play RPGs, to suggest a
causal link between the games and the crimes is a far stretch. Often times the true motives in the crimes had nothing to do with the criminal’s game playing habits. The murders were most often motivated by the same things that motivate non-gamer killers: money, drugs, mental problems, and passion. As a contrast, a football star who falls under suspicion for his wife’s murder does not cause anyone to declare that playing football should be banned and those playing it are in need of mental evaluations. The fact that he might have played cards once a week with the guys would most likely hold no particular importance in an investigation and reporting of the crime. Yet a history of involvement with RPGs is often needlessly lingered over by both law enforcement and popular media if a gamer should unfortunately commit a crime (Clark-Fleishman 2003).

One game activist, Michael A. Stackpole, began a correspondence with convicted murderer and former gamer Sean Sellers, asking him if he felt that his participation in RPGs was responsible for his murdering both a store clerk and his parents. Though Sellers has become a Christian and is a believer in the Satanic conspiracy, he had this to say about his crimes: “Personally, for reasons I publish myself, I don’t think kids need to be playing D&D, but using my past as a common example of the effects of the game is either irrational or fanatical” (in Stackpole 1990:28).

4.3) Gamer Responses

Do I think that RPG’s make my life harder? Not really, only dealing with the immaturity of those who do not understand and wish to judge us accordingly (David - E-mail interview).

Sometimes, people look at you as if you have three heads when they find out you RPG. They have a misconception of what it is and what kind of people do it (Betsy - E-mail interview).
The only negative impact RPGs have had on my life is that when someone finds out that I play Dungeons and Dragons, I have to explain how the game works to them, and whatever else they want to know. It’s somewhat hard to explain many aspects that makes a game like Dungeons and Dragons fun, it’s much easier to understand by actually playing the game itself. Most of the time people just respond with an "Oh." and look at me weirdly.

I like RPGs and pretending to be something that I cannot be in real life. I do enjoy swords, but I do not want to hack people up with them. I know the difference between the in game worlds of the RPGs that I play and the real world. I work a normal job at a credit union. I do not look any stranger than I can help, I was just born that way. Every now and again I do proclaim to have rolled a natural 20 when I do something amazingly well, but only when someone who would get it is around. I do not worship Satan, nor have I felt inclined to, before I role played, or after I started playing. The only people that role playing influences adversely are those who are also affected by violent movies and video games, and that rock and roll music. I feel that I am a pretty normal well adjusted person who likes to play RPGs (Aaron – E-mail interview).

These quotes were representative of the responses received for the question: *Do you think that playing RPGs makes your everyday life more difficult in any way?* Gamers did not report finding any part of the game dangerous or negative when asked, and almost all responded that the thing that makes life difficult in relation to the game was the way in which non-players react to the game and game playing. Two reported that significant others disliked their playing, finding it “childish” or “weird”. Others said that parents and peers complained that playing was “a waste of time” or interfering with social life (a common and paradoxical complaint since gaming is a social activity). One said, “My folks think that my RPing is a horrible waste of time and energy” (Betsy – E-mail interview). There were also several players (n=4) also reported that significant others who do not play can become “jealous” of the game; though generally it was felt that this was because it is free time that the player chooses to spend away from their significant other. At least one player said that his fiancé was angry with him at the time because he had told her of a new character he wanted to make: a romantic swashbuckler who
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attempts to flirt with every female he can find. His fiancé was angry that he would “spend his time trying to screw pretend women”. The player went on to explain to her that he was not planning any such action, it was “just a character”. He also tried to explain to her that sex rarely comes up in actual play. It was more the nature of the character that the player was describing, not the activities of the game. When asked if that explanation helped, he laughingly responded that “she didn’t buy it” but that he had agreed not to create the character and she would get over it soon.

All the same, most players said that most family and friends who knew of their hobby tolerated it as well as they would tolerate any hobby that can require significant time investments. It seems to be felt among role-players that it is misunderstanding of the nature and the function of RPGs that causes much of uneasiness between gamers and non-players. Gamers seem to feel that people react in a negative way because of ignorance and fear of the game.

…they [non-players] don’t understand it. Don’t know the terms. All they know is the scary stuff. Like Harry Potter. People haven’t even read the books but they hear it’s about witches and wizards so they jump on it. People condemn it because they’re scared of it. … They don’t even bother to find out about it. … It’s easier to ban it than find out about it. … The easiest thing would be to sit in on a game or to read the damn book, but that would take time… [and it’s quicker] to let other people do the thinking for them (Wanda – personal interview).

Another player said that the media helps continue the ignorance.

I think the main reason people have a problem with RPGs is that they do not understand them. Most of what people have ever heard about RPGs is related to some news story about people who took the game too far. They don’t realize that most gamers are just normal people who enjoy RPGs as a hobby. No one wants to do a news story about that because it is boring, but when an individual takes the game too far, that’s exciting news. So basically bad press is why I think RPGs scare people (Aaron – E-mail interview).
Aaron’s response is interesting for a different reason as well. In his response he speaks of “people who took the game too far”. Yet when asked specifically if they felt that is was possible for someone to take the game ‘too far’ – if the game really could have a negative affect on a normal, well adjusted person – all players answered with unequivocal rejection of the idea. These conflicting sentiments seem deeply rooted in gamer world-views. Gamers had no hesitation to say that the game could be taken “too far”, but that it could not cause this effect. It was almost universally suggested that only a person who was suffering from mental or addiction issues might have trouble and take the game too far – but this was almost always modified with statements that it was the same way certain people could be swayed with any activity, game, or even religion.

After a game session one evening, the conversation turned to possible negative affects of the game on people. After some talk, I asked the question of what exactly was meant by “taking a game too far”? How does a player ‘take the game too far’? There was a noticeable lag as the group came up with an answer, which was significant as most of the questions asked were answered without much hesitation. When the group replied it was prefaced with statements like, “You know, they say gamers commit murder…” or “You know the stories of how gamers will, like, trash a church” [emphasis by author]. It is interesting that the gamers could not speak with any of their own authority of just how the game could be ‘taken too far’, and that they listed crimes as signs of this phenomena. This could show that negative images of gaming in mainstream culture have had an affect on the way gamers think and speak about the games. Like the dominate culture, gamers, too, regard a sign of ‘taking a game too far’ by commitment of a crime that often has nothing to do with the criminal’s gaming hobby at all. More so, the gamers themselves
get this information from anti-gaming groups, and through popular news and media, i.e.: repeating “They say”, and “The story is”, while involuntarily verifying to themselves that these are indeed cases of those who ‘take the game too far’.

It is also interesting that among gamers there seems to be no real belief in the idea that a person could become ‘lost in the fantasy.’ There was no fear that a player would simply become so involved in the game and the in-game persona that they would be unable to escape and would lose mental grasp of the ‘real-world’. This could be in part because the personas played are felt to be an extension of the players themselves in many ways, and so one simply cannot get ‘lost’. Another reason might be the actual facts of play itself. The games can have periods of intense concentration and role-playing – but these are interspersed with session breaks, arguments about rules and die use, and conversations about work, movies, and other real life issues with other players. Add in the inevitable interruptions by non-players and cell-phones, and there is little actual time in which to loose yourself in fantasy.

In fact, it is the disturbing and sometimes jarring nature of non-play interruptions that might lead to another stereotype of gamers: that they always play in basements, dirty backrooms, ‘steam tunnels’ or other dark, musty places. The game requires the involvement and participation of all players in the narrative in order to create and maintain a level of realism. As each player agrees to believe in the created world and characters, they forge between them the suspension of disbelief that allows players to become invested in the story. “…[P]laying-out of the persona are important for creating a feeling of involvement or immersion in play – and this feeling is crucial for achieving flow” (Holcomb 2000:63). As non-players come in and out of the area of play, they
break the concentration of the players – who become embarrassed by the acting out of characters, or simply by the fact that they are playing at all (i.e.: behaving immaturity). As the flow of the game fails, the involvement in the game stops for all players.

The players’ immersion in the fictional reality can take quite some time to recreate once it has failed. During an observed game session with group-one, a non-player entered the room where the game was taking place. Play hesitated with her entry, then continued as she sat down at a computer, her back to the playing group. One player, while in character, used the word “thingy”. The non-player commented: “Really, Jamie, all those years of school and you can’t find a better word than ‘thingy’?” The player responded, “I’m playing a fifteen-year old who grew up on the street. He uses the word ‘thingy’.” Both the gamer and the non-player were embarrassed by this episode, and the non-player immediately left the room. However, the flow of the player and of the game as a whole had been broken. The players became too self-conscious to fully immerse themselves into the game. They were unable to ‘get into character’. They were now too aware of how they would look to outsiders to properly play. This game session limped along for another hour before the GM ended the session early.

This incident reflects that players suffer from a certain level of risk from outsiders when they are playing. There is the obvious risk of exposure and embarrassment. Many players change both voice and speech patterns for characters, either tonally or by adopting accents; and some change body language. These affectations help to key other players in on both who is speaking (player or character) and they also help add to the realism, creativity, and fun of the game. However, the embarrassment of being caught doing this by a non-player could potentially be extreme. This is especially true of players
who are ‘running characters’ of different genders, or with extreme political or moral beliefs. In one case, a player in Group Two played a female prostitute for several games sessions. He admitted to me that the risk of embarrassment if caught “being” this person by someone who “does not understand” was a cause of concern for him – though not enough to make him give up the character. “I like her, she has spunk. She’s a survivor. But, yeah, it’s not something I would just share, you know? Just talk about with anybody. It’s not like I want it to get around work or anything” (Dean – personal interview).

Non-players might also hold players responsible for character actions they happen to witness – such as a theft, murder, or rape that the character commits. This could cause the non-player to judge the player. Though other gamers know that this act is not reflective of the player, the non-player is not in on the game. Failing to join in the Carnival attitude of play – and the liminal space it inspires – the non-player could take the game actions out of context, and cause difficulties for the player in real-life (Lancaster 1994). This often leads players to ‘tone down’ or slow games while non-players are within hearing range. Players feel the need to restrict character actions to more socially acceptable patterns, which leads to the loss of the character persona as ‘real’. This, in turn, disrupts the flow of the game for all participants.

Players also risk the loss of an entire game session because of outsider interruption. As in the above example of the non-player questioning the player about character word choice, the invasion of the ‘real-world’ could be extreme enough that the required ‘flow of play’ – the metaframe shift from ‘real’ to ‘game’ world – might not be able to be recreated (Myher 1998:43-44). When players loose the element of suspense and emersion that play requires, plot development and action is denied. At such times the
game becomes more boring and frustrating than involving to players, and the narrative will not advance (Holcomb 2000:63). This makes it useless to continue trying to play at all in that session. If this happens, the players not only fail to benefit from their chance to play for the week, but also lose the time that they have invested. The players must go another week without advancing the story or further developing their characters.

Because of these risks, gamers might pick areas for establishing play where interruptions can be kept to a minimum, or where most interruptions will come from fellow players. This will lower risks of embarrassment, and the consequent failure of the flow of play. This ‘secrecy’ of players is not unusual within any form of play:

The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a ‘secret’ out of it. This is for us, not the ‘others’. What the ‘others’ do ‘outside’ is no concern of ours at the moment. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently (Huizinga 1950:12).

This, then, might be what gives rise to the popular belief among non-players that gamers always play in basements, backrooms, or ‘steam tunnels’. The nature of play itself, the creation of liminal space that it heralds, insists on a certain separation from the everyday world – and from non-players. This separation enhances play for the gamers, both at the table, and in everyday life, where gamers become “secret agents” not speaking of their hobby to non-players. For these reasons, the stereotype of gamers ‘hiding’ their ‘immature’ play in dark places is still strong in American culture today.

From this discussion, it is clear that the views of gaming from both the anti-gaming movement and the dominate culture has affected the ways in which gamers think of themselves and of the hobby as a whole. Yet, ironically, it is possible that the anti-
gaming movement is part of the reason that RPGs both developed in the way that they have, and have become so popular with so many people. In the early days of the hobby, gaming was neither frowned upon nor particularly judged as ‘dangerous’. Many teachers and principals, like those at Bink Pulling’s school, encouraged game play among students as both a creative outlet and for mental improvement. As such, the games were slowly becoming absorbed and altered by cultural norms (see AD&D 2nd ed. chapter 1.2).

Arguably, the remnant of this absorption of RPG can be seen in such things as managerial training that uses role-play to stress leadership techniques, or psychological therapies that use role-playing as therapy.

However, because of the ‘moral panic’ of the 1980’s, role-playing became maligned by the popular news, media, and culture. As such, play of the games was forced to become more covert, and the players became more guarded about speaking of the hobby in mixed company (Clark-Fleishman 2003:1). For this reason, the games were subject to much less pressure by mainstream cultural forces to develop in specific ways. Perhaps if the games had remained in the ‘mainstream’ role-playing would have altered into something that would not interest players very much.

Sometimes I sit in managers meetings and we have to do these role-playing things. And I know that if these people knew that I really role-played, that I play D&D, that half of them wouldn’t look at me the same way, and the other half would think I was, like, a devil worshiper or something. And I still have this urge to tell them, “you’re not doing it [role-playing] right and nobody is going to get anything out of this” (Wanda – personal interview).

There is also the fact that the secrecy that is fostered on players might actually facilitate the game. As Huizinga said, games often need the impression of exclusivity and secrecy in order to be considered true ‘play’:
Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1950:13).

Seen in this light, the separation between RPG players and the dominate culture could be a deceptively positive force for gaming, giving the hobby the freedom from cultural norms that allow the game systems a chance to develop and change without influence from societal strictures. The negative attitude of the dominate culture toward gaming also creates the illusion of ‘difference’ and ‘secrecy’ for the players. This, in turn, helps the players achieve the liminal space needed to explore new – and sometimes less culturally acceptable – aspects of their personal identity, confront stale world-views, and challenge social norms.

Contrarily, this perception of the ‘dangerous’ nature of the games could also be evidence for the fact that the games are creating the necessary distance from social strictures to create a true liminal state. Seen in this way, RPGs could be considered as imperfect expressions of Carnival on a local, limited scale.

Humans take on animal forms, and people become fantastic creatures… Saints walk among savages, alongside an occasional beast…Images pile up: not as a composed and singular picture, but as a work in progress; as an unfinished process of experimentation, excess, and play… (Lancaster 1997:567).

Though these words were written about the physical sights and experiences of Carnival, they could as easily describe the feeling of the games and the imagined worlds that are created and experienced by gamers. It must be stated that actual gaming is much less excessive in presentation than a true Carnival. However, the liminal state of challenge
and change that is invoked during play could easily be considered an echo of Carnival. Perhaps it is telling that the games developed and remain highly popular in the Midwestern states—places that have limited access to any kind of mainstream or large-scale Carnival-style festivals.

This attitude of challenge and change that accompanies RPG play could also help explain mainstream society’s continued discomfort with, and disregard of, gamers. As people who consistently induce alterations of personal identity and regularly question cultural norms as a hobby, it is perhaps not surprising that gamers find themselves grouped with others who challenge cultural norms. The censures of using negative labels and ignoring the existence of those who do not conform to cultural judgment have often been used ‘to make those people behave’. And like many other socially unacceptable groups before them, gamers often find that the positive aspects of games and gamers are often ignored by the outside culture. Many of these positives—such as pleasure, fun, laughter, teamwork, art, creativity, and self-reflection—are similar to aspects of Carnival; and like Carnival, the experience of gaming can confuse and unsettle those who are not in on the play.

I don’t regret playing RPGs at all. I think RPGs have definitely given me some tangible benefits. I’m a more creative thinker now than I was before because I look for unusual solutions to solve problems that arise. I’m also more curious; part of any RPG is exploration, and that desire kind of seeps into you as you play. You want to know more about what is going on around [you]. Also, D&D improves teamwork skills—no seriously, it does. The game forces you to work with others to accomplish tasks. One of the things you learn early on playing RPGs is that characters that work alone, die alone—and quickly (John—E-mail interview).

Gamers, like other sub-cultures, have also responded to mainstream cultural stereotypes by claming them as positives. As a specific example there is the title of
‘geek’. Gamers will often identify themselves as geeks. “Some 4 million people play D&D regularly. Many of them laugh at the common suggestion that fantasy gamers are geeks: Of course they are, they say” (CNN.com in Winker, 2006: 147). This was no less true of the gamers interviewed for this study (14 of 16). However, of more interest was how gamers defined the term ‘geek’.

...generally, [I like] fantasy, "math", and other things "normal" people consider "geeky", so I just go along with the stereotype. Anyway, video games were considered "geeky" in the early 90's when I started playing them, and now look. Playing certain video games like the Halos or Guitar Heroes is now popular and socially acceptable. Maybe one day RPGs will cross the borders of Geekdom and enter the realm of Cool. I think one reason that RPGs are seen as "geeky" is that they require players to be creative and use their imagination in front of others, which can be quite embarrassing for people (Aaron – E-mail interview).

Though gamers’ definitions of ‘geeky’ are much like general definitions (i.e.: liking math, science fiction, fantasy, and games), gamers include the idea that creativity is looked at as ‘geeky’, that creativity is not always an appreciated trait in most American culture. “It challenges some people’s version of ‘correctness’ by pretending to be someone you aren’t; but it’s simply a healthy exercise of the imagination (which is sorely lacking in today’s society)” (John – E-mail interview).

Just how creative is RPG gaming? What kinds of creativity are found in RPGs? And do gamers find that the very American values of creativity, individuality and freedom of thought, tend to be discouraged in mainstream American culture? It is just this exploration of gamer applications of creativity and its function in table top role-playing games that will be dealt with next.
Chapter 5

Creativity as an Element of Gaming

“Conditions for creativity are to be puzzled; to concentrate; to accept conflict and tension; to be born everyday; to feel a sense of self.”
   Erich Fromm

“Creativity is gaming.”
   John (E-mail interview)

5.1) Creativity at the Table

   Individuality and creativity are usually considered to be applauded qualities of personal identity in American culture. Perhaps not surprisingly, role-players label themselves as creative people. They also credit the game for encouraging this trait.

   Excerpts taken from e-mails from two role-players, John and Aaron demonstrate this.

   Creativity is gaming. [All] games were created by people that had imaginations and had some idea to express in a different way. … In terms of RPGs, creativity is absolutely necessary; otherwise, you wouldn't be doing anything. You have to imagine everything that's going on, or nothing is going on (John – E-mail interview).

   Creativity in gaming is the most important thing when it comes to keeping a game fresh and enjoyable. Having a campaign with lots of different twists and new things that players have not seen before is more fun than the standard kill dragon, take treasure campaign. Characters with quirks and strange abilities or just fun personalities are way better than cookie cutter heroes (Aaron – E-mail interview).
Gamers consider creativity to be an essential part of everyday life and culture. Most of those interviewed (14 of 16) reported having other “creative” hobbies, including song writing, painting, costume creation, and film making. A smaller but still significant number of interviewed players said that they had once had a desire to pursue a career in a field they defined as creative such as special-effects artist, videogame creator, or documentary film maker – yet these dreams had been either temporarily side-lined or abandoned altogether because of a lack of money, education, and/or time (10 of 16).

While it is obvious that creativity has an important place in most gamers’ lives, there is often a double edge to how gamers talk about creativity within the larger culture.

Creativity in our culture is very important. If creativity was stifled, we would all go mad seeing and hearing the same things over and over. Creativity makes life so much more fun. … Without creativity, laughter would die. Scary, huh? … [But] I believe that creativity is only partially accepted in our culture.

One prime example of this is pop music. … Pop music is safe and bland, in order to appeal to the masses. [It] rarely challenges the listener to think about what’s going on in the music. …Rarely do artists come along that deviate from the standard of pop music ever get any radio time, or …publicity from their record labels. Artists who choose their own paths instead of adhering to the pop music rubric may craft better music far and away, but don’t get the critical praise that they deserve compared to their pop music counterparts. Take music award shows for example. How often are artists that aren’t played on top 40 radio stations nominated, let alone win a Grammy? If cookie cutter pop stars within the music industry are the people who rake in all the praise, even when they don’t even write their own songs or lyrics, that would lead me to believe creativity is not valued as highly in the music industry (Aaron – personal interview).

Creativity is, to me, absolutely essential to being a well-rounded individual. I think society frowns on people that it sees as 'too' creative, but for the most part it's seen as a good trait (John – E-mail interview).

Why gamers perceive a distrust of creativity within the larger culture may have its roots in several sources. One of the most obvious might be found in the history of RPGs.
Segments of the larger culture have a documented history of mistrust and even aggression when it comes to role-playing games, and by extension, gamers themselves (see chapter 4.2). There were public book burnings of gaming materials. There were published documents – often perused by law-enforcement and other governmental bodies – that explained the ‘dangerous and corruptive’ nature of the game and offered strategies for ways to stop its growth in a community. There were movements to ban the games and materials from public places like libraries (Pulling with Cawthon 1984; Caywood and Hicks 1991b).

Yet, this history of distrust can only partially explain the gamers’ reactions. As in Aaron’s response, gamers seem to see this stifling of creativity not only in terms of RPGs alone, but in other aspects of culture as well. Much of this belief may emerge from what gamers see as the “cookie cutter” aspect of American life. Role-players seem to find in modern American culture a somewhat rigid pattern to life: Go to high-school, then college, if you can afford it. In college there might be some creativity – art classes, film classes – but then you ‘grow up’. Gamers seemed to feel that all but a few people are expected to eventually leave creative pursuits and career options behind as too risky or too unlikely, and get a ‘real’ job. Gamers see this part of dominate American culture as limiting. This, they believe, is the only life-path acceptable to most Americans; this is the only normal, sane, and responsible person’s life; a ‘standardized’, rational life. Gamers would state that most American’s feel that breaking the mold is ‘bad’. That being different is bad.

It [RPGs] threatens the social order that most people have. … ‘They’re being creative and not getting paid for it. I can accept you being a freak if you get paid
for it, but to just do it…’ It upsets people for some reason (Rita - personal interview).

One of the most important elements of a ‘normal’ American adult life and career is the potential to make money. By extension, all creative pursuits that do not provide monetary income can be interrupted by society as flighty, or childish behavior. To deviate from these social strictures and try and have a creative life for its own sake, to “break pattern”, is to be almost automatically subject to labels such as ‘immature’, ‘reckless’, and ‘dreamer’. If it continues much beyond schooling, the person risks being categorized as being strange, eccentric, or unstable.

Creativity is difficult for most people. They don’t really like it, do they? I mean, not that they’re against creativity, but it can make people nervous because you’re not doing what you should be doing, what they expect you to do… you break patterns, and that makes you difficult to control. …People pay lip service to creativity, but they don’t really like it in practice (Wanda – personal interview).

Therefore, gamers seem to find that the desire to play non-sport games as an adult is reason for suspicion by mainstream American culture. Yet, both Huizinga and Lancaster would argue that play is a necessary and vital part of both human culture and personal identity at any age:

Huizinga’s generalist anthropology traces the play-spirit through a variety of serious practices. ... The conduct of play brings together physical attention, mental alertness, bodily exertion, carnal learning, and tests of preformative competence. ... From Huizinga’s perspective, play embraces culture: it comes before it; lies beneath it; and it is spread out before it. If the play-spirit lies at the origin of aesthetics, art, myth, ritual, and religion, then is it difficult to think of any “higher-order” activity that is not infused with the spirit of play. Play is the very quality of action that both encompasses structure and makes it possible. ... Would it really be so outlandish to suggest that play is the “matrix of identity”...? ... It embodies practice at its freest and most creative (Lancaster 1997:569).
Yet there is also an underlining idea within American culture that play is a childish activity that can mark an individual as being ‘different’ if it is undertaken outside of acceptable ages and areas. This idea of being too old to play (or too old to create) is an issue brought up in ludic theory.

...[F]or the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. ... Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected to this, namely, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity all of its own (Huizinga 1950:8).

In RPG play, as in Carnival, the players create a liminal state of being, a place where the ordinary strictures of society are temporarily abandoned. In stepping aside from the ‘standardized’ life, the players find a freedom of expression, exploration and creativity that, in gamer perspective, is not often possible for them in mainstream American culture. This might create for gamers a link between mainstream culture’s rejection of the game, and a perceived mainstream rejection of creativity itself. John said that, “Creativity is gaming”, and “Gaming is creativity” could be similarly true for gamers. Rejection of the game, to players, becomes a wider rejection of creativity as a whole, a rejection of individuality, a push from society to become the ‘cookie cutter’ American – whether they want to or not.

Yet creativity, and creative play, is a necessary and healthy function of human behavior and culture that offers ways to explore personal identity and societal mores (Huizinga 1950; Lancaster 1997). It is through play, through the creative ability to be both reflexive and empathetic, that we grow as people. In this sense, play is not truly superfluous, nor is it truly restricted to children (Huizinga 1950:75; Lancaster 1997). It
exists in spontaneous humor and ribald teasing that breaks out between people (Lancaster 1997). It influences rituals and art. Play is a behavior that exists in all humans and must find expression, either in the RPG game or on the football field (Huizinga 1950:4, 20). It is not really a stretch to say that everyone plays in some way. It is reflected when people ‘brainstorm’ to solve problems, and in the conference room when people ‘bounce ideas around’. It is this ‘playing with ideas’ that allows imagination, invention, and creative problem solving in everyday life. It is in play that creative impulses are expressed, innovation happens, and inspiration is found. American culture approves of these traits. So why do gamers often report feeling criticized and judged as immature for playing?

An argument could be made that such judgments come from the Carnivalistic nature of RPGs – the liminal and identity blurring aspects of the games that goes beyond culturally acceptable areas of creativity and individuality as defined by ‘cookie-cutter’ America – where issues of identity, individuality, and creativity are usually expected to be firmly established by adulthood. To investigate this, issues of age and role-playing must be considered.

5.2) **Age and Creative Play: When did you start role-playing?**

As American grade schools cut more and more creative programs, children have even less time and fewer opportunities to express natural creative, playful impulses.

Despite strong public support for arts programs, and despite federal policies aimed at encouraging inclusion of the arts in core curriculum, such programs often fall victim to tight budgets and an emphasis on “tested” subjects (Arts in Education 2007).

Arts have long been a part of education, but advocates say such classes are first on the chopping block as schools face tight budgets and increasing pressure to perform on high-stakes academic tests. A Center on Education Policy survey released this year showed that more than 40 percent of districts surveyed have cut
time in elementary schools for non-tested subjects, including art and music (Deanna Martin 2008).

The limited supplies and class time are generally reserved for those who ‘have talent’ as judged by their teachers. Others must often find creative outlets alone, or with their friends. Some find these outlets by writing stories that they post on the internet; some by joining after-school community acting groups, or dance classes. And some begin role-playing groups.

The gaming environment allows for exploration of creative impulses. RPG gaming can involve interests in acting, writing, artistry, and occasional sculpture and costuming work. Young players can express creative impulses with peer groups and without outsider judgments. This reason for gaming could be supported by the fact that most players interviewed reported that they began playing in their early teens (mean age of 14) – though females reported a significantly later start in general (mean age of 19).

One player stated that he had begun playing at roughly fifteen. I started playing because the people that I met played; my current roommate has been playing since (he claims) he was six. It was an essential part of my friends’ life and naturally I simply joined. … Best part of the game is the camaraderie. It gives me something to do and an excuse to hang out with my friends, being social (David – E-mail interview).

Another player also started at roughly fourteen: [I’ve played] for 8 years. I first started playing Dungeons and Dragons after my church youth group leader invited me to join a game he was trying to get started. I was currently reading the Lord of the Rings trilogy for school and was… intrigued by the chance to create my own heroic [character] and live out my own epic adventures full of swords and ale (Aaron – personal interview).

Um…[I started playing in my] early teens, about 13 or so, best as I remember. It was just [my friend and I], as far as I remember. And maybe we got some others. And later we got some older guys that were in metal bands, from going to their shows that were [also] playing [RPGs] (Todd – personal interview).
I’ve been playing] since junior-high, around when 3rd Edition D&D first came out. A friend of mine brought me to a group that he had joined ran by his church’s youth group leader. The youth group leader taught me (and the other new players) how to play (John – personal interview).

The age at which most gamers begin playing tabletop RPGs could have other correlations as well. It is possible that another appeal to gaming is the expanding awareness of societal expectations that comes with adolescence. In modern American schools (which are often subject to overcrowding, constant testing, and under-funding) children might feel ignored and regimented – powerless in their society and pressured by teachers, parents, and peers. As children begin to realize the rigid pattern of behavior that will be expected from them over the course of their schooling the game may become a way to escape routines, express creativity, and feel distinctive – especially for adolescents who are not involved in sports.

You get away. You get together with friends and coworkers and yeah, you talk about your week – but you also just get away. You just get to get away. You get the opportunity to create something that you can talk about later. I think especially for me… I was that fat kid in gym class, so I never was big into sports but this gives me that kind of …it fills that kind of hole where people usually talk about football with each other (Todd – personal interview).

The creativity of the games allows players to express creative impulses and ‘freedom of self’ at a time when years of schooling and ‘standardized society’ are the norm.

It just feels more real sometimes – I mean, I wake up in the morning and it’s the same day every day. I have work and I have homework and none of it really seems to matter (Greg).

It doesn’t make a difference (Rita).

No. And everybody wants to feel important to their community. Everybody wants to make a difference (Greg).

(Greg and Rita - personal interview)
It can be difficult to be an ‘individual’, to stand out and/or to find creative outlets during years of schooling when standardized tests and making grades are typical. The teen years are ones that pressure American youth to display ‘difference’ and ‘individuality’, yet stepping outside of expected ‘standard’ behavior (including everything from manor of dress to chosen hobbies) can lead to an adolescent being labeled as dangerous or unstable by peers and/or teachers. Most people would chose to avoid such negative labels, but still find the need for creative expression. Role-playing games offer such an outlet. Often learned while in adolescence, gamers may continue to play as they age because the games allow for expressions of individuality, identity, creativity, and personal importance while working low-level ‘starter’ jobs and being ‘just one more face’ in a college classroom that can contain hundreds of students. The games offer to gamers a way to be more than a “cookie cutter” person – to express personal, individual identity traits that would be rejected by the requirements of mainstream culture; to challenge the way they see themselves and their culture; and to garnered the respect and acceptance of the social group (i.e.: other players) while doing it.

5.3) Gender roles and Role playing

There is a final social stricture that the creative aspects of gaming may help players to deal with. The tabletop role-playing game world seems to be primarily occupied by males. In all studies that I could find, male players outnumber female players (though this gender discrepancy seems to be slowly evaporating in more recent studies: Myhre 1998; Holcomb 2000; Williams et al. 2006). It should be noted that some of this gender discrepancy could be the result of what may have been inflated male numbers due to the way in which study populations of gamers are often generated, especially in early
studies done in the 1980s\textsuperscript{5}. Nevertheless, it is obvious that tabletop RPG playing always has been, and continues to be, primarily a male dominated hobby (Fine 1983; Schut 2006). When players are asked why they think the game is played mostly by men, there are a variety of answers. Players spoke of the fact that the games are based on war games; an area of interest that is assumed by most people to be more interesting to males than to females. Players also discussed the fact that the game is often learned from older players who are already a part of a shared social group (such as school classes). Most players learn the game in adolescence, a time when ‘friends’ are often of the same gender, making it less likely that females will have the opportunity to play. This could also help to explain a possible lack of racial diversity within the hobby in some areas.

There is, however, a specifically creative aspect of the game that may appeal to males more than females. American culture arguably gives women far more casual opportunities to express creativity than males. William Chafe states in his book, \textit{Women and Equality: Changing patterns in American culture}:

\begin{quote}
The notion that there is a woman’s “place” rests on the assumption that women will grow up with an almost automatic understanding that certain activities, manors, attitudes, and modes of relationship are appropriate to one sex, but not the other. Thus, almost by osmosis, women (and men) develop an interior sense of themselves as part of a larger category of people for whom certain activities are either expected or forbidden (Chafe 1978:8).
\end{quote}

Gary A. Davis, in the 1999 article, \textit{Barriers to Creativity and Creative Attitudes}, discusses how traditions and cultural expectations of behavior can stifle creative expression and thought (Davis 1999). M. K. Raina, in the 1999 article, \textit{Cross-Cultural Differences}, found that gender expectations can be one of these barriers, influencing

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{5} In the few gaming studies done in the 1980’s, populations were engendered from social networking, often in locations where females were less likely to be present. This leads to probable inflated male numbers, in my opinion.
\end{footnote}
creative expression in many different cultures: “Impact of culture on expression of creativity is reflected in the finding that ideas described by girls were generally in the area of arts, crafts, and communication, whereas boys dealt primarily with mechanical arts and agriculture” (Raina 1999:459).

This gender segregation of creativity affects American males as well. Men and women learn at young ages that some areas of study and practice are feminine and some are masculine. R.W. Connell in his article, *Teaching the Boys: New research on masculinity, and gender strategies for schools*, discusses in depth the ways in which concepts of masculinity and femininity are unconsciously taught to children.

...In a study of textbooks in American schools up to grade 8, gender patterns have persisted despite a resent shift by writers and publishers to nonsexist language. Representations of men have remained more stereotyped than those of women. ...this is a widespread pattern. Systemwide data on subject enrolment in New South Wales (Australia) secondary schools show a minority of subjects with marked gender differences in enrolment. They include physics and chemistry, engineering, and industrial technology, where boys predominate; and home science, textiles, and design, where girls do. This segregation does not arise by chance; these curriculum areas are culturally gendered. ...Academic subjects may also have strong gender meanings. It has long been recognized that physical sciences are culturally defined as masculine and have a concentration of men teachers. ...English, by contrast, is feminized. In the eyes of many boys, English classes are distanced by their focus on the expression of emotions, their apparent irrelevance to men’s work, the lack of set rules and unique answers, and the contrast with activities defined as properly masculine, such as sport (Connell 1996:216-218).

Therefore, an argument could be made that boys learn early that they are ‘logical’ while girls are ‘nurturing and creative’. This, arguably, engenders an environment where, because of the association of many creative subjects with femininity, males feel less free to act on non-career (non-money making) creative impulses and hobbies than females.
This is reflected in the fact that the ‘artistic’ realms are more valued for women as hobbies in America. If a woman has a creative urge, she can take up a number of hobbies without cultural judgment. She can paint, crochet, sew, or redecorate her home; she can take up dancing, or pottery, or any one of a multitude of creative outlets available. To facilitate this desire, she can take classes or tune into a number of television programs. If she’s feeling more aggressive, it is no longer embarrassing for a woman to do things like learn to work on her car, take kickboxing classes, or do woodworking. However, males who attempt some of these activities as a hobby run the risk of social judgment in American culture. As discussed before, many creative activities are defined by our culture as not being ‘masculine’ and men learn early to disassociate from these areas or risk being labeled as effeminate (Lancaster 1997). RPGs, however, may offer a way for males to indulge in more culturally defined feminine activities and express creativity without worries about loss of their masculinity. Simply put, RPGs might allow men not only a way to explore the actual creativity of acting and writing, but also experience characters who bear feminine qualities and/or are actually female. This could allow male players to explore not only their masculinity, but also socially defined feminine qualities without social repercussions.

Identity, then, is not self identical. Experience is not a receptacle. Like learning to see, or learning to walk, learning a gender or a sexuality – or any other kind of self/identity – relies on physical explorations, carnal transpositions, corporeal learning, and practice. Transvestics and other kinds of body-play are absolutely necessary to secure stable genders – but they also carry the danger that play always implies: a game can, at any moment, run away with the players (Lancaster 1997:571).

Because it is a game and can thus be defined as play and not reality – because the character is not them – males might feel free to explore aspects of their selves that would
jeopardize their masculinity in the real world (Lancaster 1997:559-560). Moreover, there is the repeated idea that the game is, at its core, a *war game*. Despite the fact that actual play in tabletop RPGs is often more concerned with character development and plot than conflict, the masculine aspect of *war game* might be reassuring to the males who play, especially males who take on feminine characters. For example, theoretically, if a male who is playing beings to feel too uncomfortable with a feminine persona he always has the option of picking a fight within the game to reassert the character’s more masculine traits. He can also abandon the effeminate character altogether.

In Group One, a male player was ‘running’ a female character. It was the first time the player had ever tried to play a female character. This character was a fighter, who often caused the playing group problems by picking fights with anyone the group encountered. It was somewhat unexpected, as the player normally played characters who were known for backing away from fights. Eventually, the GM stepped in to ask the player to ‘tone it down’ since the group was having problems advancing the narrative because of all the fighting. The player admitted that he was having trouble with the character, and dropped her in favor of a male. After the character switch, the game progressed much more smoothly for the group. Though the player never specifically said that he was having an issue with the gender of the character, it remains the only female character that he has attempted to play to date.

However, playing characters of a differing gender can also be a positive experience, as one male player stated:

I’ve played lots of girls. Some of my best and most powerful characters have been female. … I really don’t think that there’s a lot of difference between playing a male or a female character. I know some guys have a problem
with it, but it doesn’t bother me. The worst thing is when the GM is talking to you and you miss it because he says ‘she’ and you’re expecting ‘he’ or whatever. That can get a little confusing sometimes. And I know some guys have a problem with answering to ‘she’. … The biggest difference is what kind of attention you get from the NPCs [non-player characters] as a girl. That can be kind of funny, really (Tim – E-mail interview).

Males can also play female characters with distinctly feminine qualities, and be appreciated by their role-playing groups for their efforts. Dean, a self-described “typical guy” in Group Two, played a PC who was a female former prostitute for a full sub-plot of a campaign (six weeks). He played her to the best of his abilities and according to his personal definitions of ‘female’: including flirting with males in bars and being very concerned with any children the group met. Yet he never consciously attempted to caricature an overtly ‘womanly’ persona (i.e.: weak, needy, emotional), nor to overcompensate her ‘masculine’ (i.e.: aggressive, dominant, ambitious) traits. When asked how hard he found it to play a female persona, he said he was “…playing a character, not just a girl. It’s not hard.” His ability to manage a ‘realistic’ female character while in a group of male players was actually admired by other players and his reputation for good ‘role-playing’ seemed to increase.

Cross-gender play is not restricted to male players. Females interviewed⁶ for this study seem to cross-gender play more often than males (4 out of 4 females interviewed, while only 9 of 12 males). The same kinds of stigma do not seem to attach to female players who play male characters, as to males who play female. By this it is meant that females who take on a male persona for the length of a game seem to be less hesitant to play a different gender in public, and less concerned by the ramifications of being caught

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⁶ As discussed before, though the playing groups used for participant/observation were comprised of only males, the total interview population, generated from gamers both inside the observed RPG groups (n=7) and players not in either group (n=9) included four female gamers.
‘being male’. No female players ever expressed a concern of being ‘caught’ playing cross-gender, while several males expressed discomfort with this idea. This is most likely because the perceived risk of losing one’s ‘masculinity’ is both more damaging and more easily done than losing one’s ‘femininity’ in American culture. In this case, it could be argued that males risk more in cross-gender play than do females.

The differences in the social ramifications of creativity and cross-gender play among men and women might add another layer of understanding of the differences in gender numbers among players, but it is not the only possible interpretation. Kevin Schut, in his article *Desktop Conquistadors: Negotiating American Manhood in the Digital Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, argues that RPGs can offer men a way to try on and try out different concepts of manhood.

The field of contemporary masculinity studies has documented the constant turmoil that many men experience while trying to work out their gender identities. In other words, a large body of research argues that many men do struggle over exactly what it means to be masculine, and they constantly engage with their surrounding culture – including popular movies, talk radio, Playboy magazine, and PromiseKeeper rallies, among other components – in an attempt to negotiate these tensions (Schut 2006:116).

The games present a way for males to negotiate what can be contrary images of how males should act in American culture (Schut 2006). In the games, males can learn to adopt and adapt masculine traits to new situations and implement these skills in their real world identities (Schut 2006; Mello 2006).

5.4) **Play and Fun in the Game**

The creativity of the games, the *fun* that can be had while acting and puzzling and creating these worlds are often the primarily reported reasons my informants gave for
RPG play. The ability and space for free and creative expression within a receptive social group is most likely another draw.

Creativity is, to me, absolutely essential to being a well-rounded individual. I think society frowns on people that it sees as 'too' creative.... [Creativity] is probably one of the most important traits a person can possess, because it allows us to express things that me might otherwise not be able to. The games give me a chance to do that. Plus it's [creativity] usually a kind of stress relief, at least when I'm writing a story or something it relaxes me and makes problems seem more manageable. Plus, creative people can find new ways to solve problems that might not be obvious to a 'traditional' thinker (John – E-mail interview).

The liminal aspects of play, the space for self-reflection and change, are side-effects of play in general (Huizinga 1950; Lancaster 1997:568). This becomes a ‘freedom’ to change both personal identity and perceived societal definitions of things like what defines ‘male’ and ‘female’; or ‘self’ from ‘other’ (Lancaster 1997). Creativity and freedom are both highly desirable traits in American culture – yet, the play which both spawns and is produced by those traits is considered an irresponsible and childish activity – it is “superfluous” in a society that frowns on ‘wasting time’. This dominate paradoxical view of creativity could lead gamers to distrust mainstream cultural responses to creativity in general, helping to foster the sense of separation that gamers, as a sub-culture, feel from the rest of ‘cookie cutter’ society.
Fairytales do not tell children that the dragons exist, children already know that the dragons exist. Fairytales tell children that the dragons can be killed.

~G. K. Chesterton

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

~Robert A. Heinlein

(quotations found displayed in role-players’ homes)

6.1) **Play vs. ‘Ordinary Life’**

“Man, I so need to play! Seriously, I’m in a D&D hurting.” John announces this to the room as the role-playing group gets back together for the first time after a three month break. Most of the rest of the group laughingly agree – it has been too long and everyone is eager to play again. My own excitement about playing echoes theirs; for too long now I’ve been playing an extra role while at the games: player, character, and ethnographer. This last role has kept me from fully taking part in the games, from fully entering into the spirit of Carnival that they inspire – and I am more than ready to set aside the ethnographer and become a true gamer again. But this begs the question: Why?
Why is playing important to RPG gamers? Why do we continue the hobby despite social pressures, negative stereotypes, and peer judgments? In short, why do we play RPGs?

Some of the reasons have been discussed in this paper: to explore identity, to practice creativity, to challenge social mores and cultural labels. To be ‘free’, in the way of liminal, Carnivalistic freedom of play. To redefine a sense of ‘self’ outside of cultural judgments, and challenge world-views and ‘metaframes’ of thought. And, frankly, we play because it is fun. There is laughter in the play, and excitement and challenges to face without the threat of real consequences. It is an escape of the ‘normal’, and ‘dull’. Together, players form a group, a sub-culture of people where anyone can be talented and/or smart and/or important – no matter what real-world teachers, bosses, or peers say. A role-playing group is a place where we can put into practice ideas of individuality, of creativity and of self-expression in order to escape the standardized nature of much of American culture. The group is the core of role-playing. Without the players, there are no characters; and without the group, there is no game.

6.2) Gaining XP: Gaming as a ‘Shared Experience’

Table top role-playing games are not something that a person can do alone. They are group actives by necessity. You can not play the character if there is no one to interact with. You can not ‘explore’ the world if there is no one to create it. And you can not tell the story if there are no characters to move it along. The fictional world and the experiences had there become enmeshed in the groups shared history, and in each player’s personal identity. This is not to say that the players ‘loose touch with reality’, but rather that they pull individual lessons from the play to use in real life; and that, as a
group, players often discuss these narratives almost as a type of shared history. On an individual level a player takes the self-reflective skills learned through the playing out of the narrative with them into the real world. A player might learn to think of themselves as smart, despite a learning disability, or strong, despite a physical handicap. Or, as Mello states: “...ideal player characteristics facilitate the development of cultural capital (through game play) and social and human capital (in players’ rest-of-lives)...” (Mello 2006:178). But when speaking within the group, the narrative comes alive and the emotions and essence of the experience of the play can be expressed: this is what happened; this is what we did; this is how it felt. When with other players, game experiences, shared histories, are remembered and related, often in first person, i.e.: “I did that.” “When I killed the troll...” “When I exposed plot...” “When I saved your ass...”.

Each player has an equal effect on the narrative as each character’s actions affect the flow of the game and overall plot. So each player owns the story and the experience of the game; much as each person sharing a vacation would own the experience. This is yet another place where the reality of the game becomes ambiguous and difficult to define. The characters are ‘real’ only while in the game – yet the experiences of the game, the palate of human emotions sparked by game-play, are real, even away from the table. These shared narratives of experience lead to a certain trust among players that in turn helps create the atmosphere for play that the games require. And when the game is over, players are left with a story, a narrative of experience that is both real and fictional. To some extent, these experiences remain valid even outside of the game, teaching players much about themselves, and their world.
6.3) **Last Day: What it’s like**

It’s Saturday afternoon; my last day of official observation and I’m sitting in a basement. It’s a nice basement, fully furnished with a pool table, television, and computer. Players trickle in; Aaron wearing jeans and a Charlie Brown shirt of brown and yellow. Simon follows in button down plaid. John comes in wearing a football jersey – his team has a game this weekend, and he always wears his jersey when they have a game. John drags a wheeled suitcase in with him. Inside are books and dice and character sheets, folders full of old characters and maps, and enough pencils for a platoon of accountants. John unzips the bag and leaves it open in a central location. Aaron and Simon delve into the bag freely. Aaron has his own dice, but does not buy books. Simon does not even buy dice. John always carries enough supplies for anyone who shows up at the game. He keeps his personal dice separate from the shared dice, though, stored in a different bag. Generally, no other players are allowed to use those dice.

Spencer comes in after that, wearing his normal Goth black. Spencer used to LARP (live-action role-play) with a different group on Wednesdays, but has been out of that game for awhile. He’s told me that he’s beginning to miss it. He carries his own bag of supplies. His dice are in a coffee can this week, and I ask where his normal dice-bag is. He grins and tells the group how his car was broken into over the weekend. “I went into the parking garage and there were, like, dice rolling down the ramp and I thought ‘shit’.” He collected the trail of dice, following it back to his car. His RPG books had been pulled out of the car and flung around. Thankfully, he found everything. “Even all the dice, I think.”
John laughs, telling him that it’s obvious that the robbers were not role-players.

“You have, like, three-hundred dollars worth of books there.”

Spencer grins. “I had even more in the trunk. And that’s not the half of it. … I had over eighty dollars hidden… [in the car].”

“That’s a really bad spot, Spencer,” Simon says.

“Oh, yeah. A role-player would have found it. Would have thought to look [in the place where it was hidden]. I mean, it’s obvious.”

“Would have looked until he found something,” Aaron agrees with Spencer. “And that’s not a good hiding place. You were lucky.”

“Yeah. But I still have everything. It’s one of the few times I’ve been glad that people don’t understand my hobby, because if they knew how much they could have sold my books for on e-bay, I would have lost them all.”

Conversation moves on. Classic rock is playing on the stereo. The talk jumps from person to person, from subject to subject; moves between movies, and politics, and games, freely. John logs onto the computer to check out sports scores. A friendly kind of argument breaks out over internet censorship. It begins to get heated.

John (the acting GM) ends the argument by calling for the ‘pop-fund’, and three of the players make donations this week. John sends Simon to get the drinks, possibly because he was the one who started the argument. Players slowly gravitate toward the table, opening books and adjusting character sheets to reflect XP gained in the last game session. Conversation turns more toward the game, as John is asked for specifics on certain rules, clarification of plot points, and allowances on character leveling. While John deals with the questions of one player, the others talk about pretty much anything.
There are a lot of storytelling of previous adventures and former characters among the players now – a lot of “remember when X happened?” and “remember when I did this”. And there is quite a bit of laughter; laughter is very important to the experience of the game.

Eventually, Simon returns with the drinks, and John calls everyone over to the table. He takes his place in the GM’s chair; while the other players playfully jostle for favorite seats.

“Okay, guys,” John says. “Let’s play.”
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Carrier, James G, Ed.

Carroll, James L. and Carolin, Paul M.

Caywood, Carolyn and Hicks, Robert


Chafe, William Henry

Clark-Fleishman, Lisa
Connell, R.W.

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams

Davis, Gary A.

Dear, William

DiGigcomo, Richard

Fine, Gary Alan

Gencon.com

Goffman, Erving


Hendricks, Sean
Henry, Liz

Herzfeld, Michael

Holcomb, Jack

Huizinga, Johan

Lancaster, Kurt

Lancaster, Roger

Lanning, Kenneth V.

Martin, Deanna

Mello, Heather L.
Myhre, Brian Lawrence  

Pulling, Pat, with Kathy Cawthon  

Raina, M. K.  

Rein-Hagen, Mark  


Schick, Lawrence  

Schneebelen, William  

Schut, Kevin  

Stackpole, Michael A.  

Ward, James M.  
Williams, J. Patrick, Sean Q. Hendricks, Winkler, W. Keith

Winkler, W. Keith

White Wolf, Inc.

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Appendix A:
Glossary of Common Terms

**Backstory:**
Personal history or biography of a character. Can develop and change as a character moves through one, or several, games.

**Botch:**
To roll a 1, usually on a twenty-sided die. Often, rolling a one will cause a failure of PC actions within the game, and is referred to a “botching” the roll.

**Dungeon Master (DM):**
See Game Master (GM).

**Experience (XP):**
Points awarded to PCs for game-world experiences. Can be used to enhance and improve character stats. A way of representing the PCs growth and maturation as the game progresses.

**Game Master (GM):**
A player who fills a specific role within the gaming group. This player creates plots, worlds, and all things that PCs interact with while in-game. GMs also control all NPCs.

**Gamer:**
A person who plays games.

**Level:**
An expression of the development, advancement, and skills of a PC. A PC with higher levels has had more experiences and therefore is more skilled. A PC that has gained the needed experience points (XP) will be ‘leveled’ by a player to reflect the advancement.

**Metagaming:**
To bring outside information into the game-world. To not play your character, but to play from your own identity and knowledge. To fail to shift metaframe of reference from everyday real-world into game-world.

**Natural Twenty:**
To roll a 20 on a 20-sided die. Often used by tabletop RPG gamers as an expression of good luck or having succeeded. Also expressed as ‘Nat Twenty’.

**Non-Player Character (NPC):**
Non-player characters (NPCs) are in-game characters that are not ‘played’ in the same the way as a PC. NPCs are created and controlled by the GM and represent any and all persons that PCs interact with while in the game world. They can be as simple as a
tavern-wench who the PCs see only once, or as complex as a hero or bad guy who moves from campaign to campaign much as a PC can. NPCs are often the GMs ‘voice’ in the game, and are used by GMs to interact with characters directly. Though NPCs can provide information, help, or danger to PCs, they do not take a central role in the narrative.

**Player:**
Any person who is participating in a game at a given time. In tabletop fantasy RPGs a player can be either a PC or a GM.

**Player-Character (PC):**
The Player-character (PC) is the fictional persona that is constructed and enacted by a specific player during a game. PCs are the way that players experience and interact with the game-world.

**Role:**
Expression of identity.

**Stats/Statistics:**
In reference to RPG: stats are the representation of a player-character’s physical and mental abilities and skills – often listed by numeric means. A PCs stats are used to judge success or failure of character actions. PC stats often change as the game progresses and the character levels and develops.

**Storyteller:**
See Game Master (GM).

**Tabletop Role-playing Game (TRPG/RPG):**
A multi-player game where players create and act out fictional personas while exploring imaginary worlds, thereby creating a group narrative and participating in joint reality construction. Played while sitting at a table, and portrayed verbally by players.
Appendix B.1
Character Sheets – Dungeons and Dragons, V. 3.5 – page 1

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**Speed**

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**Skills**

- Appraise
- Balance
- Bluff
- Craft
- Concentration
- Craft
- Craft
- Decipher Script
- Diplomacy
- Disable Device
- Disguise
- Escape Artist
- Gather Information
- Handle Animal
- Heal
- Hide
- Intimidate
- Jump
- Knowledge
- Knowledge
- Knowledge
- Listen
- Move Silently
- Open Lock
- Perform
- Perform
- Profession
- Profession
- Ride
- Search
- Sense Motive
- Search
- Spellcraft
- Spot
- Survival
- Swim
- Tumble
- Use Magic Device
- Use Rope

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# Appendix B.1
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## SPECIAL ABILITIES

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## LANGUAGES

Initial language=Common + racial languages. +1 per level of spell learns.

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Appendix B.2
Character Sheets – Vampire: the Requiem

## Character Sheets – Werewolf: the Forsaken

### Appendices

#### Appendix B.3

Character Sheets – Werewolf: the Forsaken - page 1

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The image contains a character sheet from the game Werewolf: the Forsaken. The sheet includes sections for Mental, Physical, and Social skills, as well as other traits such asAttributes, Skills, and Physical Traits. The sheet also includes a section for the character's appearance and other relevant information.

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### Appendix B.3

Character Sheets – Werewolf: the Forsaken – page 2

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### Totem

**Attributes:**
- Power: ______
- Finesse: ______
- Resistance: ______

**Willpower:** ______
- Essence: ______
- Initiative: ______
- Defense: ______
- Speed: ______
- Size: ______

**Corpus:**
- Influences: ______
- ______
- ______

**Numiro:**

**Bonuses:**

---

### Gifts and Rites

**Gift List:**

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**Max Rank:** OOOOO

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**Rituals:** OOOOO

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Appendix C
Interview Questions by Topic

Three interviews were sought with each interview subject. At these interviews a general topic was be used to structure questions. Concepts of acceptance were covered in the first interview, art and narrative in the second interview, and identity in the third interview. This structure changed depending on subjects’ willingness to be interviewed multiple times – and direction of conversations.

Sample interview questions:

Interview one:

How long have you played RPGs?

How did you start playing, learn to play, get involved with playing RPGs?

Which games do you like best and why?

Do you DM? Why or why not?

What are your favorite books? Movies? TV shows? Do you play games and characters inspired or taken from those form of entertainment?

Why do you play? What’s the draw for you? (if fun, why is it fun? What does that mean?)

Do you think there is a negative aspect to gaming? Is any part of gaming dangerous?

Interview Two:

What makes a good DM?

A bad one?

What’s the best game you’ve ever played? Why?

What’s the worst? Why?

Do you ever write stories or draw scenes inspired by a game? If yes, do you finish the stories? Why, why not?

How important is the plot to a game?
What is the difference between a good game and a bad game? When it’s a good game, what does that mean?

What’s the best part of a game?

What’s the worst part?

Do you have any die superstitions, or rituals?

Do you think that they work?

**Interview Three:**

How do you make you make your characters?

What is the most important part of making a character?

How important is the back-story to your character – in creation and in game play? Does the back-story of your character change (get created) to match the game?

Does what happened to a character in one game affect the character in the next game, or do they come in as a blank slate?

What does it mean to ‘get in character’? How do you get ‘in character’?

What does Metagame mean?

Do you think that RPGs are ‘geeky’? If yes, what does that mean?

How important is creativity in your life? In everyday life?
Appendix D
Example Consent Form

Anthropological Issues in Gaming

The purpose of this research project is to allow the investigator to examine issues of art, acceptance, and identity in tabletop role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons and WhiteWolf Games. For this project, you will be asked to complete three interviews about your gaming experiences and your thoughts about gaming and role-playing. It will take approximately one hour for each interview, and you might be asked to be interviewed more than once. You might also be asked to fill out a questionnaire about gaming. In addition, you might be asked if it would be permissible for the researcher to observe and/or audio record a gaming session (with the signed permission of all group members).

All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as your name will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. All recordings of interviews and/or gaming sessions will be used for accuracy in this research project, and for the production of a graduate thesis and/or related articles. All recordings (interviews and/or gaming sessions) may be transcribed, and parts of the transcriptions may be used in publications, but your participation in this project will be kept confidential by use of pseudonyms in both transcriptions and publications. Any recordings, notes, and transcriptions made will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher’s home for at least three years before being destroyed, and will be accessible only to the researcher.

There are no foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent form and beginning the study, and at any time during the study.

For one’s rights as a research subject, the following person may be contacted: Coordinator of Research Compliance, Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070.

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I, __________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “Anthropological Issues in Gaming.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

________________________________
Participant’s Signature

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Date

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