

PLAYERS IN CONTROL:  
NARRATIVE, NEW MEDIA, AND *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

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by  
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To name all the people who make *any* given project possible would require more pages than this thesis currently spans. I would, however, like to thank first and foremost Tom for reminding me to breathe, eat, sleep, and whatever else I needed to be reminded to do while finishing this project, and for reminding me that yes, indeed, the end does eventually come.

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PLAYERS IN CONTROL:  
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ABSTRACT

Scholars who study learning in video games draw direct parallels to tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* in terms of the underlying principles that enhance learning. In fact, tabletop RPGs have formed the statistical, and sometimes creative, basis for many of the most popular role-playing video games to date, so why is it that tabletop RPGs have been largely neglected in favor of the video game variety?

This study takes a close look at how one particular group of players of *Dungeons & Dragons* engages the game as both a game and as an act of narrative creation. Their interactions can reveal something about how storytelling has changed in response to changes in technology and how this contributes to learning within various domains. In conducting this study, the author observed the group play and also became a participant in the experience to better understand how this group functions.

Observation and interaction with these players show that they create stories that are not confined by the traditional boundaries of narrative, such as having a beginning, middle, and end. These stories are not confined to a single method of communication; the group takes advantage of music, films, objects, and even an online forum to expand their narratives across multiple media. The members of this group collectively and actively write their stories, all the while remaining aware that they are in fact creating a story. They challenge each other to improve and collectively work to become better, smarter role-players and narrative writers.

## **Introduction**

I remember finding, as a small child, a gallon-sized freezer bag full of brightly colored dice in my parents' closet. I was familiar with the white, six-sided dice with black dots, as these were commonplace among my favorite board games, but the blue dice with white numbers that counted far beyond six fascinated me. Some counted to ten, some to twelve. I even found a comparatively large black die with white numbers that went all the way to one hundred. I could not for the life of me imagine a game that would need all these different dice, so I asked my parents what they were for. They explained that they used these dice in a game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, that “adults” played. Upon hearing the word “dragon,” I immediately wanted to play too, but they insisted I was far too young yet to play, but that they might teach me when I got older.

My parents never did teach me to play, but I have some memories of being sent to bed while they stayed up playing with some friends. Instead, I had to wait until I was a teenager (an adult in comparison to my mindset when I first discovered the varied dice) and some of my friends got into tabletop role-playing games (tabletop RPGs) to learn how to play. I didn't even learn *Dungeons & Dragons* at first. I learned a completely different system, made by a different company. By then, I understood the basic concept behind role-playing, learned the games (there were several different ones we played), and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Role-playing became a part of my life, one that simply won't go away, no matter how hard I try.

Allusions and direct references to role-playing games (especially *Dungeons & Dragons*) appear in innumerable places. Texts (I use this term very loosely) often characterize this game as one played by maladjusted teenage boys seeking an outlet for



their nerdy ways. Even video games that take their basic structure from the system set up by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson make fun of the stereotype of players, as seen in the comedic short at the end of the credits to the game *Summoner*, published by *THQ*. With this kind of press, many people find it hard to take this game seriously. Those that dare to consider the serious implications of this game find talking about this with non-players extremely difficult because of the sheer magnitude of the specialized vocabulary involved in playing and discussing the game.

In one sentence, enough acronyms and abbreviations can be thrown around to make people's heads spin. When one hears "I crit on my d20 roll to hit that NPC, and he will also take 2d6 con damage," what reaction can there be beyond, "huh?" Herein lies my difficulty. I take this game quite seriously for the implications it has in exploring how we learn and how we can encourage others to learn, but without the context to understand a sentence like the one above, what hope do I have in making some of these ideas make sense?

So before I even really get into discussing the value I see in a game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, I want to start by explaining how the game works while defining some of the important terms that will make discussing concepts easier later. To describe the game in one sentence, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D for short) is an incredibly complicated version of make-believe. As a little kid, my brother and I would assume the roles of some of the characters from our favorite comic book, go outside, and have adventures with these characters, pretending to see hostile "humans" in the "woods" (our favorite comic was about elves) and hiding from them. D&D works essentially the same way, though often the acting out part gets substituted for sitting around a table in someone's house or a comic/game shop and simply explaining what a character is doing. Each

player assumes the role of a character he or she designs. This character is referred to as a *player character* or PC. PCs interact with each other as the players talk to each other (as my brother and I would talk to each other in the manner we figured our characters would talk). PCs can also interact with characters that are *not* PCs (as my brother and I would talk to the “humans” we “saw” in the “woods”). Rather than having to imagine the responses from these characters, as my brother and I had to, another person stands in to take on the role of these *non-player characters* or NPCs. This person, in D&D, has the title of *Dungeon Master*, or DM. The DM is responsible for assuming the role of every NPC; this includes allies, monsters, villains, random townfolk, and pretty much anyone else one can think of who is not a PC.

The DM, often, takes on the responsibility of also constructing the world in which the players interact. He or she determines what the world is like (how technologically advanced people are, what the political landscape looks like), what people are in that world, and what important events are happening in the world. This last part affects what actually happens in the game. The group of PCs, or the *party*, learns about what is happening in the world and they decide what to do about it. This leads them on *adventures* (like my brother and I hiding from hostile “humans”), encountering innumerable NPCs, friendly and hostile, that engage with the players, make suggestions of possible courses of action, and generally work towards completing storylines the DM has thought of for the players to work through.

This is not to say that things always go as the DM plans. In fact, this rarely happens. A “good” DM makes multiple plans, many possible paths for the players to explore so that in the end the *players* dictate what the story ends up being. The players, interacting with each other and the DM collectively craft a story that ideally all find

interesting and satisfying. Often, players decide to take a path that the DM never anticipated and he or she has to come up with something on the spot (people for the players to interact with, problems to solve, in general things to do).

Try to visualize the situation for a moment. The DM (I'll call him Jim) sits on a couch with a coffee table in front of him. Three of his friends (Alex, Sam, and Charlie) sit around the table (as the players), either on the floor or on another couch. On the table in front of each player lie sheets of paper with numbers filled into blank spaces, and dice with varying numbers of sides, ranging from four sides to twenty, lie nearby each person. During the time that the group plays, or the *session*, each player and the DM explain what each character (the assumed personas) does in game.

For example, Jim introduces a scene by explaining that the party (the group of PCs as played by Alex, Sam, and Charlie) is having a couple of glasses of ale at a local bar (a classic beginning) when a farmer comes rushing in crying for help as he collapses onto the floor of the bar. At this point, Jim assumes the character of this farmer and recites what the farmer would say. Alex, taking on the role of a law-abiding citizen, says that he would be happy to help the farmer and narrates what his character actually says to the farmer as well as any pertinent physical adjustments (like saying that his character would rush over to the farmer to help him stand). Play continues as Sam, and Charlie each in turn describe what they would do and what they would say in this situation.

As this hypothetical group illustrates, the action of the game is imagined, not seen in any real tangible way. The closest the game ever gets to visualization is during combat. When players engage in combat with each other or NPCs the DM will often set up the scene on a map overlaid with a grid of one inch squares where each square represents five feet of space. On this map the DM will place miniatures (little figures,

generally metal) that represent each character in the scene, PCs and NPCs alike. Often the DM will also include obstructions like trees, rocks, and the like that impede movement and vision. Combat often relies on this map for accuracy in determining how far a character can move in a single turn (combat is turn-based), who he or she can see to attack, which enemies are threatening which PCs, and so on. Even within this real-world set up, the players must still imagine each of the actions taken, whether that is the swing of a sword, the cast of a spell, the shot of an arrow, or any of innumerable other possibilities open to characters during combat.

Returning to the group of Jim, Alex, Sam, and Charlie, suppose for a moment that their characters decide to help that farmer. The farmer states that his farm was ransacked by a bunch of roving bandits and asks the characters to hunt them down. The characters decide to help, track them down and combat ensues. Jim declares the beginning of combat through a signal phrase, “Roll initiative” (there are variations, but generally they have the same key word, “initiative”). Dice come into the picture of the game. The players each roll a twenty-sided die. The short hand is to say *d20*; any die can be identified by its number of sides, designated by *d#*, where the # is the number of sides on the die (d4, d6, d8, and so on). The number each player rolls determines the order in which the turns go (Jim would roll for all NPCs involved in the combat). Whoever has the highest “initiative” (as determined by the die roll), declares his or her action first. Most actions during the combat require some roll of a d20 to determine whether the character successfully executed the action. Say Alex goes first in the combat and he decides to try to hit one of the bandits. He would declare that he is trying to hit the bandit, roll his d20, and based on that result and certain statistical properties of the character he tries to hit, Jim would tell Alex whether or not he succeeded. If he succeeds,

then he rolls more dice (generally something other than a d20) to determine how much he hurt the character he hit. Play continues in this general fashion until the battle is over (whether that be by killing all the enemies, the player characters all dying, coming to an agreement with the enemies, or any of innumerable other possible ways of ending a fight).

A game session ends when the players along with the DM decide it is. Often sessions last several hours (in my experience it is usually somewhere between four and eight hours) depending on time constraints on players as well as what the DM has prepared for the players to encounter. Sometimes sessions end because the players have explored everything the DM had prepared, and sometimes the players will end the game at a place that seems appropriate because they have to leave (like ending a session before a complicated combat that they expect to take at least an hour when they have really only a half hour or so of scheduled time left). Beginnings and endings are not always consistent, though some groups of players make a point of designating a regular day and time to play. In the end the people involved determine the bounds of the game in terms of how long they play and what happens as they play. Through this (admittedly sometimes complicated process), the players and the DM together create stories that can vary in complexity, nuance, and length, depending on the temperaments and interests of the players.

This leads to my central question of the value of a game played in this fashion. Through my own experiences of playing this game and many others in high school and college, I noticed some of the important aspects of narrative creation, considerations of character and plot development for instance, having an important role in the way the players engaged with the game. I noticed that when my friends would talk about what

happened during a combat sequence (that relies heavily on die rolls to determine what succeeds/fails) they rarely, if ever, mention what happened with the dice. They hardly ever talk about what numbers came up on what kind of dice (rolling a 20 on a d20, for instance); they simply explain what happened “in-game,” that is what effect these die rolls had on the game world itself. They would say something like “I shoved my wooden scabbard into the Prince’s chest, paralyzing him” (yeah, something that actually happened in a combat) rather than “I rolled seven d10s to impale the Prince with my wooden scabbard, got five 10s on the roll, enough to succeed on this difficult task” (a more accurate representation of what actually happened in that situation playing *Vampire: The Masquerade*, a game that relies on rolling d10s to determine outcomes instead of a d20 like D&D).

I want to explore this phenomenon that happens when players create stories in this manner. I want to take a serious look at this unique method of creation. I am especially interested in the ways in which the players, of necessity, must be aware that they are engaging in the act of narrative creation. When I play a video game like *Final Fantasy* (of the RPG genre), I don’t really *have* to take into consideration the fact that I am creating a story with the characters given to me. While, as video game scholars have pointed out,<sup>1</sup> video games encourage a more active engagement with the text in comparison to traditional print media and television, they still cannot really compare with the kind of active engagement that happens when a group of players sit around a table together and talk to each other about what happens, even arguing about the viability of certain events or actions. In tabletop RPGs, players narrate what actions their characters take, and in so doing must consider what kind of character he or she is. I can play *Final Fantasy* without ever really considering what each character is like and instead focus on

what I need to do to get through the game and find out what happens. Even if I do consider what a character is like, this does not have any bearing on what actions I take with that character since the programming of the game itself dictates what actions that character is capable of (generally based around the personality of the character in question).

I compare tabletop RPGs to video games here because of the common terminology and associations drawn between them (especially in terms of the development of RPG video games from the tabletop variety, alluded to above). This connection extends into a larger examination of narrative in a new media context within which conversations about popular culture narratives have relevance for role-playing narratives as a single form. To consider the connections in practice, I have conducted an observational and partially participatory study involving one group of players of D&D. I do not mean to have this group represent all groups who play or even what a “typical” group might look like. In fact, my study suggests instead that this group is exceptional in the ways they play this game. They demonstrate the *potential* of D&D to encourage awareness of and agency in their acts of creation as well as vividly demonstrate the impact of new media in contemporary narrative creation. I call this study partially participatory as I eventually joined the group as a player (at their request) and draw on my own observations of myself as well as the other members of the group to discuss the embodied experience of playing D&D.

I begin by discussing the literature that surrounds tabletop RPGs, what has, and more importantly what has *not* been discussed directly concerning these games which leads to the conversation about stories embodied in a culture of new media, and the implications games within this culture have for learning. In the second chapter, I present

the important observations that came out of this ten-month investigation, drawing out the places where the players demonstrate active involvement in narrative creation as well as how the players (and I) experience the game phenomenologically, within, and as a part of, the body. In my final chapter, I draw on the literature to read my own observations and discuss the ways in which this group has created their own unique narrative form that responds to the shifting demands of the new media society of which they are a part, and I further discuss what this new narrative teaches us about learning in this context.



## **Chapter One: Literature**

### Role-playing Games: Current Scholarship and Limitations

Current scholarship surrounding role-playing games has shifted from a sociological perspective examining the players and the effects of the game on those players to examining the narratives they create. Gary Allan Fine set the precedent for future scholarship with his extensive sociological portrait of fantasy role-playing in *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. His account (originally published in 1983) focuses on the ways in which members of a role-playing group construct the world of their games as a social act, examining the groups as a sub-culture. As he states, his first goal in his work is to “analyze and describe a contemporary urban leisure subculture” (1). He then suggests that this analysis can lead to an interesting perspective on the formation of cultures, as each group of gamers, in essence, creates its own culture. His decidedly sociological perspective has been pervasive in scholarship on role-playing games.<sup>1</sup> In more recent years however, scholars have attempted to move away from this emphasis on the players as a cultural group.

The shift away from the sociological has led to a focus on the idea of collaborative authorship focusing most especially on the storytelling that occurs during any given session of a game. Some, like Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, in his article, “Dreams of Times, Times of Dreams: Stories of Creation from Roleplaying Game Sessions,” focus heavily on how the players construct narrative worlds. He has a definite interest in “telling a compelling story,” but is especially interested in how players take control of world-creation (as opposed to the referee of any given game taking the lead) (73). In this

manner, he still teeters on the sociological, providing some interesting insights into group dynamics and how they develop. Others, like Daniel Mackay, in his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, focus very directly on the narratives that groups create. Mackay established the role-playing text as a “performance,” drawing heavily on performance theory from theatre. One of the unique features of this performative narrative in Mackay’s estimation is its fleeting existence: “The role-playing game exhibits a narrative, but this narrative does not exist *until* the actual performance. It exists during every role-playing episode . . . It includes all the events that take place in-character, nonplayed character backstories, and the preplayed world history. It never exists as a code independent of any and all transmitters” (50). Until the players actually gather together and construct the events of the session (the “episode”), the story does not exist as such. While certainly true to a great extent, this view reduces the narrative to the session itself, to the exclusion of all the factors *around* the session that influence its creation. To some extent, Mackay addresses this, acknowledging the importance of the rulebooks to any game for successful sessions. This focus (separate from collaborative authorship) has become an interest for other scholars in this conversation.

Rather than examining the interaction among players, Daniel Punday’s article “Creative Accounting: Role-Playing Games, Possible-World Theory, and the Agency of Imagination” breaks down the authorship of role-playing narratives into an interaction and combination of objects; the fact that everything a character encounters has been statistically defined (e.g. the character sheet with all the characteristics for any given NPC) allows for the freeform construction of narratives with disparate elements. Punday calls this “tactical manipulation,” which covers everything from mundane actions within a particular scene to actual combat strategies. In Punday’s view, the rules that categorize

everything in the world are what make this a unique kind of narrative creation. He focuses mainly on *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (AD&D, the second edition of the game) because he views this as really the starting point of the phenomenon. He explains the importance of this development, “a regularized statistical definition allows objects from a variety of textual worlds to be combined and compared” (122). He goes on to explain how one particular supplemental book for AD&D, players know how to compare the powers of Egyptian gods to Greek gods (122). With this system of rules, players could conceivably encounter a Greek gorgon one day, and then travel to another place and fight H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulu. This allows for active agency in constructing narrative worlds.

While Punday’s analysis of the way in which the rules system of D&D (the later editions still operate based on this basic principle) is incredibly useful for this study (being focused on D&D), his claim that this is how all RPGs work is problematic in that it does not distinguish between the two main categories of tabletop RPGs: rules-heavy, and rules-light. Cason Snow provides a very succinct summary of the difference between the two kinds of systems in his overview of the games. Rules-heavy games (which D&D certainly qualifies as) “have a large number of rules for many situations and can have multiple resolution systems for different tasks”; in contrast, rules-light games “are, usually, short in length and have minimal and streamlined rules for conflict resolution; indeed, often the rules for conflict resolution are the same regardless of the type of in-game conflict” (66). He also explains how the latter focus more on the stories, rather than, say, combat as many rules-heavy games are. In a rules-light game, where the statistical system is barely there (if there at all), the narrative likely does not structure

itself around this system. Again, since I am looking at a rules-heavy game, Punday's analysis still has great significance, but it should be viewed in light of its limitations.

Punday's analysis in conjunction with authors focusing on the performative sessions sets up a problematic binary, however. With Punday, the rules, the books, are more important than what happens in the sessions. The rules facilitate the creation; what happens when players sit together and actually play is seemingly only an extension of their interaction with these texts. At the other end of the spectrum, Kociatkiewicz exemplifies the view that the rules are secondary to the performance of world-creation. The discussion sets up the two loci as hierarchical (either rules are more important or the interaction is more important). Even authors like Mackay that acknowledge both tend to favor one over the other. Mackay does, however, make gestures towards a different view of the narrative, one that is more comprehensive, with implications for the larger discussion of popular media.

When scholars address the narrative that arises out of role-playing sessions, they cannot avoid engaging with a different locus of creation, though they spend little time critically examining this space, if they address it at all. This space is the space between role-playing sessions, characterized by concerns for future sessions as well as memories of sessions past. Anytime a scholar writes about a role-playing narrative (about "what happened in-game") he/she must engage in a new kind of narrative creation; he/she becomes a part of the narrative the players have created. Mackay highlights this moment briefly, addressing how the narrative becomes an aesthetic object once distilled into the cohesive story in players' memories. He approaches a critical examination of this space, recognizing the shift from performance to "consistent, uninterrupted story" in which the "the players, game system, and inevitable digressions of in-character play that occur

during a session are frequently minimized in the telling” (122-123). This space where the memory distills down into a “flattened” view of what happened, lies apart from the system and design (the rules) as well as the sessions themselves. This reconstruction of events draws attention to the space that exists in between game sessions, where the act of creation does not actually stop (though scholarship often suggests that it does). Written accounts of sessions past are only one manifestation of this, and Mackay point towards others, though he *only* points toward them, mentioning them in passing and not stopping to examine their effect on the overall view of the process of creating narrative in the role-playing environment.

When Mackay draws attention to these “extraperformative” acts of creation, he also invokes a complex view of these narratives that places them firmly in the context of discussions of narratives within the larger frame of popular culture. After providing a “flattened” account of what happened in one of the narratives he focuses on throughout his book, Mackay explains, “As I retell the story, I rarefied years worth of role-playing performances, extraperformative conversations and character planning, and forms of expression related to the role-playing performance, such as Wesley’s short story ‘Aerothane’ or Neal’s drawings of Kurgo, into a short account of events” (126). He recognizes that what happens between game sessions (beyond the memory act) affects the narrative within the sessions, but he characterizes them as “extra” or “related,” rather than as an integral part of the process. In light of his own characterizations of the role-playing experience, this is problematic. He describes role-playing worlds as “*imaginary-entertainment environments*: fictional settings that change over time as if they were real places *and* that are published in a variety of mediums (e.g., novels, films, role-playing games, etcetera), each of them in communication with the others as they contribute

toward the growth, history, and status of that setting” (29). Part of the unique appeal to a role-playing game is this interplay between texts. Granted, here he refers explicitly to the interaction players have with published materials that create settings, and many groups opt for creating their own world from scratch, the point is still valid. These players, even if the setting itself is a unique creation, draw on the published materials for inspiration and reference (as Punday clearly discusses in his work), but they also *create* in different media, not just the interactions within sessions, but also stories, art, etc, as Mackay shows through the above example of his group. Mackay was not the first to call attention to the interaction of media, but he is one of the few to recognize that it plays a role in role-playing.

### Multiple Media and Multiple Narratives

Writing in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan observed the way in which media technologies extend the human body and come together to form “hybrid” media. With the electric age speeding up human interaction with media, McLuhan states that “for the first time he [sic] has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body. Apparently this could not have happened before the electric age gave us a means of instant, total field-awareness” (47). This instant awareness has allowed people to consciously observe the properties of media themselves, instead of the content of that media (which is after all but another medium). McLuhan goes on to explain how the coming together of multiple media only serves to heighten this kind of awareness: “The hybridizing or compounding of these agents [media] offers an especially favorable opportunity to notice their structural components and properties” (49). When people stop to examine the ways in which the media themselves interact, their understanding goes

beyond the “content,” beyond the “meaning,” to examine something quite different that defines what McLuhan dubs the “electric age” (4).

McLuhan observes that technologies affect the ways in which people think, and the electric age has placed an emphasis on *effect* rather than the *content* of media, moving our thinking towards newer forms of media. As he states, “Concern with *effect* rather than *meaning* is a basic change of our electric time, for effect involves the total situation, and not a single level of information movement” (26). Again, humans in the electric age perceive things in an instant, and when that instant involves multiple media, something new happens: “The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born” (55). The new age demands a new kind of media that feeds off our ability to perceive the media *qua* media, and not merely as a by-product of the attempt to create meaning. Media interact with each other and create new forms of hybrid media, and it is this very concept of the hybrid media and the change in perceptions that it represents that acts as a point of contact for an ongoing conversation about the demands of audiences upon these newer forms of media.

Returning for a moment to Mackay, his “imaginary-entertainment environments” reflect in many ways this move towards a convergence of media, a connection that lies not only with RPGs, but with other forms of popular culture as well. Briefly, Mackay’s discussion of the role-playing experience highlights the ways in which the performance does not exist in a single medium. As he states, “role-playing game performance is itself an archipelago of other art forms” (64). Here he references drama, and literature, and performance, etc, but his archipelago image applies to more than just role-playing. James Paul Gee, using a different metaphor, describes the way in which video games (linked in many ways to the role-playing experience) is a manifestation of McLuhan’s hybrid

media. He explains this in reference to one specific game, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*: “The experience of playing a game like *Castlevania* is closer to living inside a visual symphony than to living inside a book. And the symphony is not just visual, just composed of images, but it is composed, as well, of sounds, music, actions, decisions, and bodily feelings that flow along as the player-virtual character team act in the game world” (*Good For Your Soul* 20). The different components that Gee identifies in this passage provide a way to look at what can constitute media in this new age. He goes beyond the media separation of text, image, and sound to include more: “indeed, multimodality goes far beyond images and words to include sounds, music, movement, and bodily sensations. Video gaming, as we will see throughout this book, is a multimodal literacy *par excellence*” (*Learning and Literacy* 17-18). “[M]ovement, and bodily sensations,” “actions, decisions, and bodily feelings,” all describe media within a role-playing context as well as a video game context. The connection between these two forms is the fact that they are both *games*. These games exist as hybrid media, multimodal media.

McLuhan examines games as their own kind of medium, a medium that according to other scholars has a different relationship to narrative than do other media. McLuhan states that “it is the *pattern* of a game that gives it relevance to our inner lives, and not who is playing nor the outcome of the game” (242). This is an extension of his idea that the “medium is the message” (7). What happens in the game (the narrative) is not nearly as important as the structure of the game itself. As Steven Johnson explains in *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, “far more than books or movies or music, games force you to make *decisions*. Novels may activate our imagination, and music may conjure up powerful emotions, but games force you to decide, to choose, to prioritize” (41). Herein



lies a fundamental difference in narrative. The narrative of a novel (a product of the mechanical age as McLuhan sees it) emphasizes the content, the imagination. Games emphasize the decisions one has to make and the *effect* of those decisions. The very structure of games revolves around the process of making decisions. Game scholar and designer Ian Bogost quotes Sid Meier, creator of the *Civilization* series of computer simulation games, that gameplay is “a series of interesting choices” (45). Viewed in this way, games are a medium fit for the electric age, as effects are more important than meaning, but not all games are equal in this manner.

As we have shifted into a new age, our games have shifted too. Baseball, for instance would be a game that comes out of the mechanical age, the age of print and industrialized society. It is “a game of one-thing-at-a-time, fixed positions and visibly delegated specialist jobs such as belonged to the now passing mechanical age, with [its] fragmented tasks and its staff and line in management organization” (McLuhan 239). The shift to the electric age necessitates a different kind of game, a game that reflects the shift to “a culture that assigns roles instead of jobs” (McLuhan 17). No more can we view things sequentially, but rather in their totality. This, combined with the emphasis on decisions leads Johnson to argue that games lie separate from narrative entirely:

There are layers to a narrative, to be sure, and they inevitably revolve around a mix of the present and the future, between what’s happening now and the tantalizing questions of where it’s all headed. But narratives are built out of events, not tasks. They happen *to* you. In the gameworld you’re forced to define and execute the tasks; if your definitions get blurry or are poorly organized, you’ll have trouble playing. You can still enjoy a book without explicitly concentrating on where the narrative will take you two chapters out, but in gameworlds you need that long-term planning as much as you need present-tense focus. (55)

On some levels I would disagree that this *isn't* narrative, merely a different kind of narrative from one of novels or movies. The focus on the present and the future,

however, is an important aspect; the focus is reflexive. Rather than saying that games *aren't* narratives, I would say they are more active, participatory, and meta-narratives. Gee discusses this aspect of the narrative of video games as “embodied stories”: “stories are embodied in the player’s own choices and action in a way they cannot be in books and movies. . . . When I talk about a person’s embodied experiences in the world (virtual or real), I mean to cover perceptions, actions, choices, and mental simulations of action or dialogue” (*Learning and Literacy* 79). Gee makes the claim that the focus on the level of action does not remove the narrative element; it simply engages with the narrative in a very different way. The “audience” for this narrative (the player) is as much a part of the creation as the “author” (the game designers). Gee in fact goes as far as to identify two *different* stories at work in a video game: the designers’ story, and the “real-virtual” story created by each individual player and his/her path through the game (which is deeply individual). He identifies video games as “a new form of performance art co-produced by players and game-designers” (*Good Learning* 86). Games in the electric age act as a medium in which audiences become authors, examining the totality of the situation at once, entrenched in multimodal expression, a hybrid medium.

### Narrative and Games in the Age of New Media

Gee’s image of “co-produced” narratives marks a change in the expectations of consumers of popular culture, a change that McLuhan attributes to the age of new media. McLuhan had not yet seen the participatory medium of video games when he wrote *Understanding Media*, but his observations retain importance, as the observations of Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*. As Jenkins explains, “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make

connections among dispersed media content. This book is about the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system” (3). He focuses on the idea of “*participatory culture*” in which producers and consumers no longer operate in isolation, but rather “as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (3). Media are converging in Jenkins’s estimation, and idea reminiscent of McLuhan’s hybrid media, but with ambiguous operating conditions. Where McLuhan viewed new media coming in and displacing the old, Jenkins views old and new media as coexisting, requiring a whole new paradigm that takes into account the expectations of both the mechanical age as well as the new electric age of new media. One thing that McLuhan and Jenkins agree on, however, is the effect of new media on cultural structures. McLuhan observes, “technology now begins to translate the visual or eye man back into the tribal and oral pattern with its seamless web of kinship and interdependence” (50). Jenkins has an incredibly similar sentiment, “As we have seen, the age of media convergence enables communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception” (26). People no longer hold themselves in isolation in an age of total field awareness, but have not as of yet quite figured out how to fully enact this convergence. The producers, listening to the demands of consumers begin to look more like consumers as the traditional consumers begin to dictate content, and even structure of the media they engage with.

Across the board, media in the electric age have become more demanding of consumers in response to the shift in perceptions (and demands) coming out of the communal, total field awareness of new media. Johnson notes how television narratives demand more out of their audiences than have in years past (multiple, interconnected plots, complex social structures, etc), spurred by an interest in audience participation, at

the *very* least at the level of determining what one thinks *should* have happened (think reality television) (106-107). This same concept guides Jenkins's examination of the *Survivor* franchise, but he frames the situation in a way that emphasizes the convergence tendency: "*Survivor* is television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued" (25). This is a far cry from the "passive" culture of television past. Here Jenkins brings together two incredibly disparate media, television and Internet. *Survivor* is a television program, but it also has a deeply engaged fan culture on the web. The media collide in interesting ways as the show's producers try to meet the demands of their most avid fans who spend a great deal of time trying to "decode," if you will, the show as it airs (or more satisfyingly, *before* it airs) on network television. The franchise is a community, and the fans have a great impact on the show, just as the show itself has a great impact on the lives of the avid fans. Franchises like *Survivor* have the beginnings of what could be viewed as the next step beyond McLuhan's hybrid media. Rather than a text existing in a multimodal medium (singular), it exists *between* several media (plural), with no one medium being able to tell the whole story.

Jenkins's concept of "transmedia storytelling" pulls together the demands of the age of new media with the unique aspects of video game narrative to provide a view of the RPG narrative as a product of the age of new media. Jenkins defines the concept of transmedia storytelling as "a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making" (20-21). The retribalization of our culture in response to instantaneous media has led to media that "depends" on communities. These stories cannot exist without their

communities, just as no RPG narrative can exist without the players to enact them. Kociatkiewicz's study of world creation in RPGs echoes here in the increasing importance of a community. Additionally, as storytelling becomes focused on creating worlds, "we are seeing the emergence of new story structures, which create complexity by expanding the range of narrative possibility rather than pursuing a single path with a beginning, middle and end" (Jenkins 121). This brings me back to my contention with Johnson about games not being narratives. In the context of storytelling coming in different flavors (as Jenkins's statement suggests), games appear as another flavor, with a structure built on actions, on "tasks," as Johnson put it, rather than a sequence of "events" (55). Johnson even refers to tasks being completed in a "gameworld"; the designers of the game have created a *world* with which the players interact, and in this way games are also an act of "world making." RPGs, as a form of game enter into this discussion as the DM of a D&D game often creates entire worlds from scratch, and the interaction among players creates a narrative that does not necessarily hold to a beginning, middle, and end format. Mackay's discussion of "imaginary-entertainment environments" brings up implications in terms of hybrid media and transmedia storytelling, as RPGs extend beyond the sessions themselves and into other formats (such as short stories). In this way, RPGs, like video games, operate in a fashion that expresses the shift from concerns of meaning to concerns of effect, of structure, of co-production.

Transmedia storytelling extends McLuhan's concept of hybrid media as our culture continuously shifts to meet the demands of the people within the culture and thus demands constant conscious attention, which brings increased importance to both narratives and games. As Jenkins points out, "convergence refers to a process not an endpoint," and transmedia storytelling acts as one step in the process (16). Media must

constantly change, and the place we are in now is very different from the place we were in when either McLuhan or Jenkins wrote. In an age constantly in flux, we must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the modes of communication and especially narrative available to us. Jean-François Lyotard, in his analysis of the current state of knowledge and society, argues that “the observable social bond is composed of language ‘moves’” (11). Everything that is said has an effect, but whether or not the effect contributes to the development of society (and forces it to move away from entropy) relies on the effect of a language “move” being more than reactionary: “a countermove that is merely reactional is not a ‘good’ move . . . . That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected ‘move’ (a new statement)” (16). Within this context, narrative provides the greatest opportunity for new moves as “the narrative form . . . lends itself to a great variety of language games” (20). The more, and different, games we play, the better chance we have to displace the old system through new moves. This is one reason Lyotard comes to the conclusion that “Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (19). In the context of the new electric culture, the age of new media, the language games we play reflect the social bond, which is shifting. In the unstable conditions that leads Jenkins to state that participatory culture operates “according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands,” narrative takes on added importance (3). As Lyotard explains, “What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond” (21). Narrative instructs society as to what rules govern its interactions, and as McLuhan notes, games provide a means for society to maintain awareness: “They [games] are a kind of talking to itself on the part of society as a whole. And talking to oneself is a recognized form of play that is indispensable to any growth of self-

confidence” (243). As discussed previously, games too are shifting in reaction to the new age; the shift towards a communal, multimodal society has led most obviously to the rise in video games, but it has also arguably led to the rise of tabletop RPGs that even more so than video games, blend the concepts of narrative and game.

Convergence culture calls attention to the importance of the hybridization of game and narrative that constitutes the *entire* experience of tabletop role-playing. Jenkins describes how the convergence of media gives power to consumers of media as they increasingly blur into the role of producer: “It [convergence] also occurs when people take media in their own hands. Entertainment content isn’t the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels. . . . When people take media into their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative” (17). When the audience becomes an author, a co-producer, of the text, it encourages the continued shift towards transmedia. Jenkins echoes McLuhan in his view of the power of the hybrid: “The crossings or hybridizations of the media release great new force and energy as by fission or fusion” (48). The last piece, “as by fission or fusion” really describes the current trends in media. Not only does convergence as Jenkins discusses it involve the coming *together* of media, fusion (as the multimodal video game exemplifies), it also involves the spreading out of the narrative *across* separate media, fission (as his extensive discussion of the *Survivor* franchise clarifies). RPGs at first seem only to enact the fusion culture as they bring together various texts and human interaction into a single session, but the in-between space that has been oft neglected (the space between sessions) acts as a site of fission, where the story expands out beyond the bounds of a single medium. Mackay very briefly (in the custom of only barely recognizing this space) even provides a glimpse of how the

role-playing experience itself is shifting in response to the convergence culture. He describes how “Once the role-playing session begins, most activity is communicated via the spoken word. However, note passing between players, or between the player and gamemaster [generic equivalent of D&D’s DM], is common,” and that some groups also use notes to record what characters might do between sessions; however, he also observes that “increasing access to E-mail is taking over this last function” (52). This is the first and last time Mackay makes note of how technology is changing the experience. The use of email in this fashion demonstrates the players “tak[ing] media into their own hands” as well as how the experience is dividing into new technological mediums. The story no longer exists in one medium or blend of media; it exists *between* media, especially in the space *between* game sessions. McLuhan states the fission and fusion of media “release great new force and energy,” and returning to Lyotard, this new force and energy may be the very new moves that he insists are essential to the social bond. Tabletop RPGs, by blending media and expanding out into new ones perhaps act as one new force, new form, new language game, that has arisen out of the age of new media, but currently the scholarship does not take in the total field of the role-playing experience.

### Reflective Play as Active Learning

Gee and other scholars in game studies have written extensively about how video games encourage a new kind of learning through the kinds of play that they encourage; this kind of play is also at work within the tabletop RPG experience as Gee and others have called attention to. McLuhan discusses how the new media forms arising out of the electric age call attention to themselves and how games act as society’s method of talking with itself, of examining itself; electric age games then represent how society talks to



itself in a new way, a way that calls attention to this very act of reflection through the visibility of the medium at work. Gee, in his work with video games, examines at length how the structure of video games encourages the reflection McLuhan discusses and what implications this has for the way we understand learning in this new age, suggesting that playing games, especially good video games, teaches people to learn in ways that are more fit for the world we live in today than traditional methods of education that have arisen from the mechanical age.

Gee characterizes the learning that video games encourage as “active, critical learning.” Briefly, he states that “For active learning, the learner must, at least unconsciously, understand and operate within the internal and external design grammars of the semiotic domain he or she is learning. But for critical learning, the learner must be able to consciously attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate those design grammars on a metalevel” (*Learning and Literacy* 32). When he writes about design grammars, he means the “principles and patterns” that govern the experience of playing the game (internal design grammars) and the experience of interacting with other players of the game (external design grammars) (*Learning and Literacy* 28). By semiotic domain, Gee refers to “an area or set of activities where people think, act, and value in certain ways”—an area like video gaming, bird watching, physics, anime, or many other such ‘domains’” (*Learning and Literacy* 19). In working towards an experience within a semiotic domain that is active and critical in the way Gee describes above, the environment must be conducive to learning the grammars and manipulating those grammars.

This is the same concept that other game studies scholars have looked at in different contexts, and in the case of David Williamson Shaffer, this context connects

video gaming to the overall concept of play as discussed by Lev Vygotsky, Johan Huizinga, and even Gee in a different frame. Shaffer notes in *How Computer Games Help Children Learn*, “If you watch young children play, in fact, it often seems that more of the game is about deciding the roles and rules than about acting them out” (23). The rules are important, or to use Gee’s terminology, the “grammars” are important. In fact, the rules are often more important than actually playing the game. The game does not actually exist without rules. Shaffer quotes psychologist Vygotsky, “who argued that ‘there is no such thing as play without rules’” (23). This is one of the defining characteristics of play itself. Huizinga, too, asserts this defining nature of play. Without rules it is not play: “All play has its rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play . . . . Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over” (11). What Shaffer additionally asserts is that for children, for anyone really, the pleasure of the game is in defining the rules of that game, rather than the game itself. This goes back to what Gee discusses in terms of video games. When people play video games they are learning the rules involved in interacting with that world. This is a necessary first step in his discussion about how video games help people learn. Shaffer’s observation about the “roles,” as well as the rules involved in play gets at the social and learning function of play and connects to Gee’s discussion of how the mind understands the world around it.

Gee connects the concept of play and games to how the human mind works in *The Social Mind*. In his introduction, he makes the connection explicit, drawing out the connection in more detail through the body of the text: “What is in our heads are rich networks of associations . . . . cognitive tools with which we get into and ‘play’ social ‘games’ or, put another way, ‘act out’ social roles. These ‘games’ are always serious

matters in which power, status, and solidarity ('social goods') are at stake" (*Social Mind* xvii). What Shaffer observes in small children, Gee claims, is exactly what adults do on a daily basis. Adults seek to define the roles and rules by through which they function within the world. This is why Huizinga ascribes to play a social function; all play has importance: "All play means something" (1). In a social context, Gee asserts that play creates the associations by which the mind itself functions. This is part of the reason why video games work as such good learning structures. Huizinga's work in the social function of play fits nicely with Gee's description of the connectionist theory of the mind. Gee explains that what are often considered abstract concepts don't exist as such (that is as separate pieces of information), rather the mind extrapolates these concepts from the base experiences (the embodied experiences) of everyday life, on demand as a person needs a concept (*Social Mind* 42). Only through lived experiences do people build the connections necessary to understand abstract principles, and society as both Gee and Huizinga suggest, is structured as a series of games that actually create these associative structures. This is, in part, why Gee posits that meaning is, in part, *socially* constructed (*Social Mind* 10-11).

For Gee, and for Shaffer, the idea that people learn roles through play contributes to the social function of play as well as the cognitive function of play. Players do not simply act out roles, they explore what these roles mean, a concept incredibly important in the larger context of new media society as McLuhan notes that we live in a society that "assigns roles instead of jobs" (17). Going back to Shaffer's discussion of games, he explains that people play games, "They are running simulations of worlds they want to learn about in order to understand the rules, roles, and consequences of those worlds. They are learning to think by examining alternatives in play, and from those experiences

they are learning what it might mean to be . . . real and imagined characters in the world” (24-25). As people learn roles, they learn to think. This is one more reason why video games work so well at getting people to learn. Gee discusses at length the ways in which the roles presented to players of video games work in such a way as to get them to *want* to learn that role. He identifies the importance of learning roles to active, critical learning in what he calls the “Identity Principle” of learning: “Learning involves taking on and playing with identities in such a way that the learner has real choices (in developing the virtual identity) and ample opportunity to meditate on the relationship between new identities and old ones” (*Learning and Literacy* 222). This is much the same concept that Shaffer discusses. Learners have choices, but more importantly, they are *aware* that they have choices and as Gee put it “have ample opportunity to meditate on” these choices and how they relate to the person playing.

Gee insists that for learning to happen, “the learner must be able to consciously attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate” the rules and roles he/she encounters (*Learning and Literacy* 32), and by virtue of being play, games encourage this kind of meta-level examination. As Huizinga examines the nature and function of play, he asserts that play is by nature a meta-cognitive act: “Genuine play possesses besides its formal characteristics [like rules] and its joyful mood, at least one further very essential feature, namely, the consciousness, however latent, of ‘only pretending’” (22). For players to truly play, they must know it is a game. This connects to McLuhan’s characterization of games as reflective actions on the part of a society, and draws the line between the games people play and learn through and the “roles” people “play” as they go about their business in the world as Gee discusses in *The Social Mind*. Thus, the more players are cognizant of the fact that they are playing a game, the more they can make

choices and attend to those choices. Since games are focused greatly on learning the rules, the more a player is aware that it is a game, the more he/she can then manipulate and affect the rules system at stake. This is the very heart of active, critical learning as Gee defines it. Video games, as a medium born of the world of convergence culture and the electric age in which media draw attention to themselves as media, utilize this function of play as the very basis of their nature as entertainment. They are a reflective medium, and thus encourage active learning.

Gee and Shaffer, while working with computer and video games, extend their discussions beyond this medium; their work applies to games at large through the underlying theories of the mind and of play, but more directly, they both relate their work to tabletop RPGs, and thus their concepts and the issues of learning at stake for video games are equally at stake in tabletop RPGs. Video games and tabletop RPGs share a culture and a way of thinking, as evidenced by both Shaffer and Gee directly referencing *Dungeons & Dragons* within their discussions. Shaffer, when setting up the idea of the importance of rules and of roles explains, “In a game, players are assigned particular roles—“white” and “black” in *Chess*, “dwarf fighter” in *Dungeons & Dragons*, “It” in *Tag*—and playing a role means following some set of rules for behavior” (23). Shaffer draws links between several different kinds of games, and not all of these from the electric age. He emphasizes the importance of roles by uniting play as a single concept that spans types of games. Gee, keeping different kinds of games separate from one another, still links *Dungeons & Dragons* with video games. Gee even directly links his discussion of learning to games that share a category with video games: “Much of what is true of video games is equally true when comparable games are played face-to-face with no digital technology involved, whether this be *Yu-Gi-Oh* [a collectible/customizable

card game] or *Dungeons & Dragons*” (*Good Learning* 19). While Gee explains that technology makes a difference between these games, the basic underlying principles of learning that these games promote do not necessarily depend on this kind of technology, and as Mackay’s observation about email suggests, games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are headed towards integration with technology, closing the gap between the two kinds of games. By virtue of the already apparent connections between the two kinds of games and the fact that convergence culture suggests that the gap will get smaller as games adapt to the demands of their audience, it becomes important to examine tabletop RPGs with the same critical eye that Gee, Shaffer, and others have paid to video games.

### Line of Inquiry

When Gee discusses “Why Game Studies Now?” he approaches his inquiry into video games from the standpoint that they represent a whole new art form. This new art form, he states, requires a different kind of analysis than previous art forms: “As a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, video games will challenge us to develop new analytical tools and will become a new type of ‘equipment for living,’ to use Kenneth Burke’s (1973) phrase for the role of literature” (*Good Learning* 83). If narrative acts as a means to codify the rules of the new media age (or any age for that matter), and all language acts are really language *games*, with moves and countermoves (as Lyotard observes), then video games indeed would act as a new “equipment for living.” In fact, from this perspective, *all* games that operate according to the paradigm of the new media age should operate in this manner and should be subjects of analysis. Working from Gee’s observation, tabletop RPGs, especially, deserve attention because as Mackay observes “Contemporary computer,

video, and virtual-reality games have borrowed and adapted key structural and thematic concepts from commercially marketed role-playing games” (159). In his analysis, Mackay expected that RPG scholarship would actually act as a paradigm for video game analysis and provide the tools that Gee would need to conduct his analysis (159). By virtue of the fact that Gee had to make his call for “new analytical tools,” it becomes clear that this is exactly how it *didn't* happen. Critical attention to video games has developed quite separately from scholarship on tabletop RPGs. They certainly operate on similar grounds, but diverge at several points. If video games were simply the next step past tabletop RPGs in the development of media in our culture, then why would it still be a lucrative enterprise as the recent release of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of D&D can attest to? My initial answer has always been that video games have been a divergent path, rather than a progression of, tabletop RPGs, but the why question still lingers.

When I first began studying role-playing games critically, this question always nagged at me, “why, with all the advanced technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at our disposal, do gamers still insist on sitting down and playing tabletop RPGs?” Looking at the cultural shifts in technology and culture around the rise of tabletop RPGs suggests one answer to this question, but raises the central inquiry of this project. As new technologies have ushered in a new age of interaction, it has called for a new kind of narrative. McLuhan wrote looking forward to see how the electric age would change the way that people think and interact, moving again towards a kind of tribalism, and Jenkins provides an idea of what exactly that shift has meant in terms of audiences’ demands of their stories. One major shift has been towards a kind of storytelling that does not remain fixed in one medium, but rather extends out in many. Somewhere between when McLuhan called attention to the shift and when Jenkins discussed its implications and

extension as transmedia storytelling, role-playing games were developed and rose in popularity (despite at first being fairly entrenched in only one medium). Mackay provides a more comprehensive look at the role-playing experience than most and explains how this experience also extends into several media, which makes it appear to be very much a product of its age and the shifts in consumer expectations that go along with it. My question is, what does the role-playing narrative look like now? If audiences demand a more complex narrative, one with a transmedia emphasis, then to what extent does the role-playing narrative reflect this ongoing shift and what can we learn about the shape of new media narratives from an examination of this narrative form that takes into account all the spheres of creation as essential pieces of the process? Further, how does this shift affect the way we view learning within this context, as Gee examines within the domain of video games?



## **Chapter Two: Observations**

### Process of Research

In an effort to explore the potential of D&D, I observed a group of players as they played during the summer of 2009 receiving consent additionally to conduct audio recordings of the sessions. The group consisted of five white males between the ages of 25 and 34. The group plays once a week at the home of a couple of the players who live together (who are brothers) and sessions usually last about five hours, extended or shortened as necessary for schedules and game concerns. All the players in this group know each other from growing up in Kirksville, Missouri, and have been playing together in Columbia, Missouri for several years.

Throughout this process, I observed interactions on an online forum the group set up for maintaining a record of what happens in their games and any other pertinent (or amusing) information they feel like including. The group suggested my looking into this very early in my observations during the summer. The forum itself is divided into several different sections, some devoted to detailing information about various locations in the game world, others devoted to discussing what could and/or should happen during the game, and in fall 2009 a new section was created specifically to discuss information pertinent to each weekly session, each session having a thread devoted to it.

Additionally, in January and March 2010, I conducted interviews with each group member, asking questions concerning their perceptions of their process of playing the game as well as asking them to tell me what happened in previous games (to examine the ways in which different players remember their experiences of the game).

Finally, beginning in August of 2009, at the behest of the group itself, I began playing with them, having created my own character to play during the sessions. This process has allowed me to examine the experience of playing the game from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on how I internally engage with the game, all the while still observing and taking note of relevant moments during the sessions that continue presently.

My decision to engage in a participant-observer study is two-fold: as a study of a creative process, it allows me to focus on how people *do* engage with this experience, and within the field of study that examines role-playing games, the participant-observer study has been the norm for discussions of experiences within game sessions. Rather than relying on the research that has already been done and their observations at a time quite separated from my own (Fine for instance was writing in the 1980s, and while Mackay and others have been writing more recently, still the technological changes over even the past five years have been such that their work still has a “dated” feel to them), conducting a new study that takes into account my particular situated context provides a snapshot of the experience at this particular moment in time. Additionally, while looking at the work of authors such as Fine, Mackay, and Kociatkiewicz, the prevalence of this particular method becomes clear. Each group of players experiences role-playing differently, and the participant-observer paradigm for study resists the move to generalize about “players.”

### Game Play

To help visualize the various situations I will discuss, I want to provide a brief synopsis of how people actually play *Dungeons & Dragons*. There are two classifications of

people participating in a session of D&D: the players, who take on the roles of characters (PCs) they create for the story (or carry over from a previous story), and the DM who sets up the world in which the story takes place, creates the outline for the story itself, controls non-player characters (NPCs) and enforces or bends the rules as needed for the smooth conduct of play. Strictly speaking, the DM does not play the game; he or she referees it, but with the group I will be referring to, the DM also has a PC involved with the story.

The group generally sits around a table (though the table is optional) with pencils, paper (including the character sheet which has all the vital statistics for the players' characters on it), and dice of varying sizes and shapes. Additionally there is generally at least one set of the core rulebooks for the game. These consist of the *Player's Handbook* (PHB), the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (DMG), and the *Monster Manual* (MM). Players generally only reference the PHB during play, but the other two provide important information for the DM. There is a plethora of supplemental books published, which may or may not be used by any given group (this decision is left to the DM), but the core three books are considered canon for pretty much every group.

In play, each person says aloud what his or her character is doing or saying. Actions that require more effort than say opening an unlocked door or saying hello to a friend, require the player to roll a 20-sided die to determine whether the PC succeeded or how an NPC reacted. The result may be affected by various rules and statistics kept on character sheets or other charts. The players and the DM together create a story in this way by interacting with one another, limited only by what the group determines are the boundaries of play.

## Overview

### *Continuum of Engagement*

As one would expect, each group member exhibits a different level of active engagement with the process of narrative creation across varying media, and of the five group members (I exclude myself from this assessment), the DM, Vince<sup>1</sup>, and the player Saru most frequently discuss the story of the game in meta-narrative terms. As DM, Vince has created the world in which the group plays and plans out adventures for the player-characters to explore. As such, his responsibilities to the group have led him to take considerations of plot development especially seriously. Saru, as a player, meticulously considers the development of his character's personality and this leads him to speculations on courses of action that would lead his character down the path he sees for his character, even leading to a revision process of sorts at one point during play.

Javer, one of the senior members of the group in terms of how long he has been playing the game in Vince's world, also participates in conscious narrative development, though not with the consistency of Vince and Saru. Javer takes advantage of the online forums to detail events in the lives of his many different characters he has played that do not play out during game sessions. Max, the youngest member of the group, sporadically has moments of intense involvement in the narrative (especially early on in my observations) followed by spells in which his only interest is if something like combat happens. Additionally, Max is the administrator of the online forum, managing its setup and making changes as they become necessary and/or desired. Dusty, the eldest member of the group, shows the least participation of anyone in the group. He is often like Max in his interest in combat, but with periods of more sustained interest in the story. He also

does not interact on the online forum as the other group members do. The following diagram provides an overview of the spectrum of involvement as I see it:

Vince/Saru-----Max/Javer-----Dusty  
More Active----- Less Active

### *Arenas of Engagement*

While each of the players may generally fit into the continuum I have set up, depending on what is actually happening, an individual may shift along this continuum into more or less active engagement with the creation of the D&D narrative. In looking more closely at the players' involvement, I look at different kinds of situations that contribute to the overall experience. Different players take active roles in creating an immersive environment, whether through ambience or embodying their characters, than those that often take active roles in the evaluation of sessions either after play or in preparation for the next session. At some point, every member shifts to the more active end of the spectrum as the group authors their ongoing narrative in multiple forms within and between their play sessions.

### Creating an Immersive Environment

Everything surrounding the playing of the game itself somehow relates to the game. The one exception that proves the rule is food; during a game session, the group often eats dinner (usually pizza, but expanding out into other forms such as sandwiches, Chinese food, etc). Other than this, the entire experience is focused on the session itself. The table is covered in D&D miniatures, maps, dice, character sheets, and other accoutrement related to the game. If the television is on, it is because it is being used somehow in conjunction with the game and the same is true of music. All the things

within the room where everyone sits relate to the game and add to the immersive environment. The players take active roles in creating this immersion and demonstrate how they experience this immersion in the extent to which they embody their play.

### *Immersion Through Multiple Media*

Some players, like Saru, are actively engaged no matter what the situation, but other players have specific niches that they prefer to be the most actively engaged in, and these concerns incorporate and expand the use of multiple forms of popular media as a part of the group's narrative. For Max and Dusty, their niche involves the various non-story aspects to the experience that create ambience for the game sessions. Dusty started the tradition of having musical or sound effect accompaniment for scenes within the sessions, and Max has taken this over to a large degree, but Dusty is most involved when it comes to having the right visuals for the scenes in the form of having correct miniatures and correct maps for battles. D&D, compared to other role-playing games, is highly combat intensive, and most of the rules for D&D are specific to concerns about combat. During most combats, the DM will set out a map of the battlefield, consisting of a grid of one-inch by one-inch squares. Each square represents a five-foot by five-foot space in the game world, and most characters take up one five-foot space. To show where each PC and NPC is in combat, most groups use miniature figurines of their characters and their antagonists. The grids can be blank, but often the maps include drawings of various terrain elements to show where the characters can and cannot move to/through (e.g., some maps will include black spaces to indicate where holes in the ground are compared to the surrounding spaces which might be brown or gray). Other terrain elements can be

added, like trees and rocks, to complete the picture and allow for a better understanding of what/who the characters can and cannot see.

Dusty's highest level of involvement in the experience comes when combat happens and the maps and miniatures come out. Dusty always checks the map, has Vince describe the terrain they are fighting on, and compares the description to the map at hand. If he doesn't like it, he will change it. When I asked Dusty about why he is so involved in this process, he explained "I kinda like havin' something else besides just your mind to use, 'cause otherwise, you'd be wanting to sit there with your eyes closed the whole time, which is kinda hard to do when you're in a big room with a bunch of other people" (Dusty Interview 2). For Dusty, the experience should be immersive, and since the interaction with other players is important to him, as he explains at an earlier point in his second interview, the visuals allow him to stay involved with the group and not sit with his eyes closed, trying to imagine the whole thing. One aspect that Dusty is greatly concerned with is miniatures. For him it is important to have a model for one's character that at least to some degree accurately represents what the character is like, but while Dusty may be the most adamant about *having* miniatures, *all* the players express interest in this particular level of ambience.

At the very beginning of the group's first session with their current characters, the players demonstrate the significance placed in miniature as they pick the miniatures they would use for their characters, a situation leads into an extended discussion of why Saru should not, even temporarily, use the same miniature for Aedros as he did with his previous character, Ahmere. Dusty argues with Saru to the greatest degree, explaining that Vince has a lot of miniatures that Saru could pick from that don't look like Saru's old character. Vince seconds the notion stating that he shouldn't use the Ahmere miniature,

“because it’s Ahmere” (05/26/2009).<sup>2</sup> Vince suggests that at that point, that model has been permanently reserved for Ahmere and should not be used for another character. Vince ascribes to the miniature its own special, situated significance within the overall narrative of the world, and the narrative becomes inscribed on the miniature that is “Ahmere.” Saru protests, claiming that he does not like any of the miniatures Vince has available. Quickly however, Saru actually finds one that he likes for representing Aedros, but even this miniature is “just a *proxy*” because Saru intends to go out and purchase a miniature specifically for Aedros, something he in fact does (05/26/2009).<sup>3</sup> The phrase “just a proxy,” in of itself reveals an interesting distinction in this situation. Miniatures, in the strictest sense, are *all* proxies for the actual fictional character each person embodies, and yet the players in this instance indicate that it goes beyond this. For Saru in this instance, it is more than just having a miniature to *use* to represent his character; he wants to *own* the miniature that represents his character. For Saru, the miniature has more meaning than the situated narrative meaning; the figure is an extension of his identity, his being-in-the-world of Vince’s campaign world, *not* a proxy. In the meantime, Dusty and Vince are more concerned about using a miniature that represents one character to represent another, and at the same time confirm the assertion that the Ahmere model is *not* a proxy, it *is* Ahmere, and extension of Saru and an extension of the group’s narrative.

Max, meanwhile, has really found his niche within the group (aside from running the online forum) in running the music for each session. Together with Dusty, at least early on, the two would collaborate to keep a running soundtrack for each session. Max explains in his second interview that it is an interesting phenomenon in that their particular music collections complement each other; they have different kinds of music in



their collections that suit different situations. In incorporating music from various sources, the story extends beyond the single mode of expression represented by the interactions of the players. Suddenly the narrative is multimodal in a more obvious way than the group's interest in miniatures belies. Music has become a narrative element for this group, and as Max and Dusty go back and forth in musical selections they remain engaged in the sessions, interested in creating the right mood for each scene.

At one point early on, the group enters a bar and Max calls to Dusty for some "dive bar music," suggesting that the current accompaniment did not fit the setting, which leads into a discussion of Dusty's musical choices. At Max's call for new music, someone asks what was wrong with the music that was playing, and Max replies that the music was "a little high end" (06/02/2009). To be fair, the bar was called the "Rusty Hinge" and Dusty was playing soft mandolin music. Vince states that he likes the music even if it doesn't actually fit the scene, which prompts Saru to get involved in discussing reasons why such refined music would be heard in bar of such ill repute. Eventually, Saru and Dusty come up with a story involving an amateur musician who got a gig playing at the "Rusty Hinge" without really knowing what kind of establishment it was. As a result, a fairly haughty mandolin player was playing ill-suited music when the players walked into the bar. By creating this elaborate story, the group actually sets Dusty up to engage in probably his most actively involved moment in the game up to that point.

The characterization of the mandolin player, drawn from the disparity between the music Dusty played and the description Vince gave of the bar, leads Dusty to go and find a scene from the movie *Animal House*, which he then plays as his way of telling Vince exactly what his character, Rastan, is doing. By this point in the scene, Max's character

has been talking to the musician, trying to learn more about him, offering the mandolin player a questionable drink his character received at the bar (the bard refuses). The scene Dusty plays from *Animal House* comes during the toga party where a young man sits on the stairs of the party house, playing a song that starts, “I gave my love a cherry,” accompanying himself on the guitar with several women sitting around him listening. One of the main characters (played by John Belushi) comes down the staircase, dressed in a toga, and out of nowhere grabs the man’s guitar and smashes it against the wall, completely destroying all but the very end of the neck of the guitar, which he hands back to the young man, saying “Sorry,” and walking off. Rather than describing this scene, or even simply referencing it, Dusty waits until he has the scene queued up and gets everyone’s attention asking them to watch the scene. His explanation amounts to “This is what happens” (06/02/2009). The other players don’t even question the use of the scene to represent Rastan’s actions, but Vince certainly inquires as to *why* Rastan felt the need to smash the young man’s mandolin, which gets the group embroiled in another conversation about how the music in the scene actually sounded (good or bad), but leaves completely unsaid the interesting tactic of using that scene. Though Rastan was not wearing a toga in the “Rusty Hinge,” the scene from *Animal House*, by being the representation of Rastan’s actions, became a part of the unfolding story. Dusty’s appropriation of this scene demonstrates one way in which the authors within this group take Jenkins’s convergence “into their own hands,” to construct their immersive environment (17). Dusty has taken a kind of ownership of this scene, where the toga-wearing college guy no longer belongs solely to *Animal House*, but now is an extension of Dusty and the narrative he’s created in this session.

### *Immersion Experienced Through Embodiment of Play*

The extent to which players embody their experiences acts as a measure for the level at which they experience the immersion the group works towards. In terms of embodiment, Saru is the exemplar. He time and again chooses to physically express his character's words and actions rather than express them verbally. This is not to say that the others do not engage with the game in this manner, but Saru does so most consistently. He shows the level to which players can experience the game with and through their bodies. He gets so involved in the game at times that he seems to be the dominant personality in the game. When challenged, his response is often "Well, forgive me for role-playing" said with an air of indignation. Saru's actions reveal clearly what Gee means when he writes about how embodied experience involves "perceptions, actions, choices, and mental simulations of action or dialogue" (*Learning and Literacy* 79). For Saru, every session is an embodied story in this manner, as Saru consciously chooses his actions and portrays these actions to the other players in such a way that the line between player and character becomes blurred.

In one clear example of Saru embodying his character, Aedros, Saru converses with Max about a course of action Max's character is considering. During this conversation, Saru embodies the personality of Aedros expressed through his tone of voice, posture, facial expressions, and gestures. In brief, Saru and Max discuss the viability of Max's character, Elyse, attempting to rescue an NPC named Carlos from execution. Elyse set Carlos up to be arrested for a murder she committed (with Carlos's help), but feels bad about doing so. In the moment where Aedros greets Elyse, "Elyse, how are you?" Saru's voice takes on a patronizing tone, suggesting a subtext somewhere

along the lines of “well, look what the cat dragged in” (06/09/2009). As Saru begins to speak, he straightens up in his seat on the couch, crossing his arms in front of him and smirking at Max. When the conversation turns to the possibility of getting involved on Carlos’s behalf, Aedros explains how he would hate to see “a lovely flower like yourself” get hurt, and Saru leans forward, uncrosses his arms, and with one arm gestures towards Max, continuing the patronizing tone and including gestures in its expression (06/09/2009). Additionally, every time Aedros uses the phrase “lovely flower,” which happens at least twice, Saru cocks his head slightly to one side and looks Max up and down as though he were checking him out, a physical expression of the male gaze as it happens in the imaginary scene. This of course presents that Aedros is in fact looking at Elyse in this manner, rather than anything between the players. Still, the line between Aedros and Saru blurs as Saru immerses himself in the imaginary scene.

As a player myself, I can more readily and deeply discuss how I experience immersion through my internal and external embodiment of my character, Kaelyn. My embodiment of my PC as I interact with other embodied characters, like Aedros, also serves to show how powerful the immersion effect can be. To describe this, I go back to an extended altercation between Kaelyn and Saru’s character Aedros. Kaelyn and Aedros have conflicting outlooks on life that came to a head in a situation where Aedros took a prisoner (for no strategic reason) and, due in part to Kaelyn’s objection to the situation, feigned killing the prisoner rather than revealing that he had set the prisoner free. Kaelyn had explained to Aedros that if he harmed the prisoner she would never speak to him again, and as a consequence, not use her magic to treat his injuries (Kaelyn’s main role in the party is to heal wounds). Aedros led Kaelyn to believe he had killed the prisoner, so Kaelyn refused to speak to Aedros or heal him without significant

prodding by the rest of the party (personal notes). Neither character was willing to take the first step to resolve the situation.

In all, the fight between Aedros and Kaelyn took five sessions to resolve, during which time, Saru could never be sure that Aedros would be healed after a fight, and during these five sessions, the ways in which Saru and I embodied our characters demonstrate the level of connection between player and character during play, even while players separate the two sets of emotions. Despite the fighting that happened during role-playing, I personally was never angry with Saru. I knew logically that Saru was not trying to upset me as a player, but this did not stop me from experiencing all the frustrations Kaelyn felt during this period. When the prisoner tried to kill herself and Kaelyn rushed to save her life, the pace of my heart quickened, for fear of not being able to save her. I felt the blood rushing to my face as Kaelyn confronted Aedros about the prisoner's freedom. Later, after Aedros released the prisoner, making it look as though he had killed her, again I flushed with all the anger Kaelyn felt at the situation, and I even found myself on the verge of tears as I said the last words Kaelyn spoke to Aedros for the duration of the fight. Every time the situation called for Kaelyn to confront the necessity of healing Aedros and the party's frustrations with Kaelyn's position, I felt my heart pounding in my chest and my body tensing while I explained again and again why I, as Kaelyn, refused to use my divine magic to save the life of one with so little respect for it himself. Even when Saru and I went into a different room for the private conversation that essentially resolved the situation, I felt the urge to grab Aedros and shake him to get him to come to his senses (thus was Kaelyn's view on the situation). To be clear, in this situation, I did not want to grab *Saru*, the person standing in front of me at that moment; I wanted to grab *Aedros* the non-existent personality portrayed through Saru. As always,

Saru embodied Aedros, from the smirk on his face indicating that, despite the fact that Aedros at the time was bleeding a great deal, he was amused by the situation, to the way, in fact, that Saru actually held his side where Aedros had been cut deeply in the preceding battle that acted as the final straw that led to resolution. Feeding off of each other, Saru and I experienced the fight physically as much as we did mentally.

Once Saru and I had resolved our inter-character dispute, we also both physically felt the relief of the release of the tension. As we talked during his first interview, which was conducted only a few days after our private conversation that settled the problem, we reflected on how nice it would be to have our characters not fighting. Saru mentions at one point that he often felt like the conflict compromised his ability to enjoy the sessions at times, since he felt that his character was always in imminent danger of death. He explains, “I’m glad to have that resolved and I think, I think it, it panned out nicely, I think it’s resolved nicely” (Saru Interview 1). We both agree that it was a tense situation at times, trying to work between what we wanted as players while staying true to the personas of our characters, and we were able, at that point, to even laugh a bit about the situation, while discussing our characters’ perspectives on the situation. After the fact, Saru and I look back on the situation with an eye that can see the value in such an intense role-playing experience. As Saru describes it, “It’s a very good, player-player interaction, character-to-character interaction, uhm, and I think we’ve *both* been playing our characters perfectly as they would--it *fit*” (Saru Interview 1). We both embodied our characters and in the end constructed our own immersive mini-narrative that involves the on-going relationship between Kaelyn and Aedros.

### Players Evaluate Sessions Using their Online Forum

As Saru's comments above demonstrate, players do not simply leave everything on the table when they leave a session. The space in-between sessions is a space for reflection and a space for projection. The players within this group routinely, throughout the week between sessions, extend the discussion of the story in various ways. My interviews with the players acted as one way to reflect on past events as we discussed the role-playing experience and those that see each other regularly will also talk about it, but the group has gone well beyond this to incorporate the advantages that electronic media bring into their experiences. In February of 2009, Max set up the group's online forum which allows the group to have interactions that previously depended on the players seeing each other during the week between sessions. Now, with the ability to post conversations online, I can have ongoing discussions with Saru, someone I hardly ever see outside the living room of Dusty and Vince on game night. In between sessions, the players use the forum to discuss many things that vary from their plans for upcoming sessions, codification of their memories of past sessions, to even critiques of what happened.

### *Critique After Play*

The online forums afford the players and DM the opportunity to discuss with one another in detail what could have/should have happened, going beyond mere assessment of things going well/poorly, venturing into a critique of decisions made. Sometimes these discussions are rather benign, as when the players discuss Vince's decision to have certain members of the rival party (the NPCs who acted as recurring antagonists for a while) attend my character's birthday party to which they had been invited ("2010-02-15

Monday”). Sometimes, however, the conversations get incredibly serious. During the first session I participated in as a player, the party encountered a spider demon. During the session, a great debate ensued as to whether or not to attack said demon. After Vince’s PC instigated conflict with the spider demon without full party consent, Max’s character, Elyse, died in the ensuing battle. On the forums, the group engages in an extended discussion of what went wrong in that particular session, determining, in fact, that Elyse should *not* have died.

Max, upset by the fact that his character died fighting a monster he did not want to get into combat with in the first place, starts the “Greetings from Joysey…” thread through the fictional character of “Jerry,” whose sole purpose in life is to make sure the rules of D&D are fairly and equitably enforced. As “Jerry,” Max lodges several complaints against specifically Vince and his conduct during the encounter. Essentially, Max contends that Elyse’s death should be undone because Max never wanted to be in the fight and Vince’s PC engaged the demon spider without a group consensus while being, by Max’s standard’s, ill-prepared to fight the creature despite taking time to specifically prepare for that encounter. Vince promptly responds to Max’s concerns point-by-point, justifying every decision he made, both as DM and as his PC Raneas. Max provides no counter-rebuttal for a few days until he posts the rules for how poisons work in combat, “secondary damage from poisons is taken a minute after exposure, not the following round” (Reply #2).<sup>4</sup> At this point, Vince realizes the mistake that happened during the battle (Elyse had been poisoned several times and the accumulating secondary damage killed her), and confesses, “This certainly would have changed things, and I apologize for that. Ellyse [sic] probably shouldn’t have died. Its kind of late to go back now...um...oops?” (Reply #3).<sup>5</sup> If this goof had been caught during the session



(especially right after the battle) a “ret-con,” or “retroactive continuity,” would have been in order, in which the DM decides to change how something happened within a session for any of a number of reasons related to consistency, in this case, consistency with the rules system. Elyse’s death would have been undone, but because this did not come to light until several days later, with almost an entire session having transpired afterwards (Elyse died towards the very beginning of that session), it was not feasible to actually undo the death. The forums, however, provided a place where this dispute could be settled without taking time out of game sessions to argue, and Vince and Max came to some sort of agreement on how to move forward that they have kept between the two of them.

The forums also allow the group to discuss what could and/or should happen *after* major events (rather than what should have happened *during* the event). For example, during the Sharholme battles, in which the group plays out the epic final chapter for their high-level party of characters, created prior to the characters I have thus far been discussing, Saru’s character, Ahmere, dies while fighting Death King Vitas (the major antagonist). On the “2009-11-11 Wednesday” thread, Saru and Vince discuss the repercussions of Ahmere’s death, especially in terms of the decision as to whether or not Ahmere would allow himself to be brought back to life after striking the killing blow to Death King Vitas from beyond the grave. At first, Vince declares on the forum that the NPC Aesara resurrected Ahmere after the battle (a posting that has been deleted since he and Saru decided that that is not what happened), leaving Saru with the response of “Oh wow, so I’m alive? Damns” (Reply #7). He goes on to explain that while death is not necessarily his first choice, the “retribution right there at the end would definitely be enough for Ahmere to kick back and say, ‘ya, I think I might just chill with Aelor [his

god] up here for abit'' (Reply #7). He goes back and forth with Vince on the board, with Vince explaining that if Ahmere didn't want to return to life, no magic could compel him to do so and Saru suggesting that it would be "more epic-hero-esq" for Ahmere *not* to return (Reply #11). Only two days later, Saru's post indicates that a decision has been made, but Saru won't reveal what that decision is, preferring instead to let it be revealed through the next session (Reply #14). The forum provided a medium through which Saru and Vince could consider various angles of the situation to determine what would best fit the situation story-wise. Vince and Saru reflect on the implications of what has happened within the battle, using these to inform their critiques of the possible ways in which that story could go.

### *Collective Work Towards Satisfying Sessions*

Saru and Vince discuss at length what would be an appropriate end to the encounter at Sharholme, but the whole group got involved when it came to planning out that encounter (which took several sessions). In this planning, and in planning out other aspects of the sessions, the players take a form of creative control, suggesting courses of actions for both their specific characters as well as other PCs and even NPCs/antagonists. They also use the forum, now that it is available, to speed up the process of creating new parties as they can discuss their intentions so as to create a party of characters that are compatible both in terms of skills and personality. Vince works *with* player ideas to create truly collaborative experiences that meet, and sometimes exceed, the group's expectations. The forums allow Vince nearly constant access to the wishes of his players, allowing him to adapt the game to the group's changing needs and desires.

In late October and early November 2009, the group staged the Sharholme incident discussed before, but the planning stages of the battle began as early as August. Max started a thread titled “One does not simply walk into Sharholme...” on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. He begins:

I’m pumped to kill Death King Vitas...

will Sasha [NPC] be redeemed??? (doubt it)  
will we have to kill her???(i’m thinking second to last boss or DKV [Death King Vitas] phase one)

finally Ahmere [Saru] gets to use his character to its full potential.

Max presents his high expectations for the upcoming sessions (as yet not actually scheduled) and spurs on further conversations with questions for the group to consider. These questions revolve around Saru’s character Ahmere, whose sole purpose in life by this point in the narrative is to destroy all evil, undead creatures, over which Death King Vitas rules. Sasha had been Ahmere’s companion before being captured and corrupted by Vitas, and since Ahmere has sworn to destroy Vitas and rescue Sasha, Max’s questions revolve around the unfinished business between Ahmere and the party’s main antagonists. The overall discussion that ensues involves a great deal more than plot considerations involving this one character.

What follows is an extended discussion of what the players expect from the upcoming battle(s) in terms of difficulty and strategic plans to successfully kill Death King Vitas with minimal loss of life. Max writes later,

you [Vince] could have something involving Sasha either during one of the vitas phases or maybe the encounter beforehand. i think it would be cool to have multiple big bosses in there, both to add flavor to the whole operation of the lich king and to add to the epicness of attacking the place in general (plus more phat lewts). (Reply #2)

While Max still focuses on the plot point of Sasha, he also engages with the shaping of the battle by suggesting to Vince some ideas of challenges that the party could face, while expressing his anticipation of the experience. His last comment about adding to the “epicness of attacking the place in general” really shows the extent to which Max desires this encounter to go beyond what they’ve been experiencing, providing Vince with what he would see as living up to the anticipation of a battle that has been more than a year in the making.

Other player speculations focus on tactics (generally working with knowledge that their characters have in-game). Saru, for instance, voices concerns about their ability to heal damage that their characters take in battle and then proposes his solution to the whole problem in his August 14 post to this thread (Reply #3). Vince, in his first contribution to the discussion, also gives some ideas on how to make the characters feel safer about the healing capacity available to the party (Reply #4). Later, Javer finally sounds off his ideas in terms of tactics on September 12:

i like the idea of this being a multi-national effort with an adventurer sent to help however they can in the attack. what we could do is when a demon jumps us, we just set the appropriate level npc characters to deal with it, and we just keep running for the throne room (theyre always in the throne room) (Reply #15)

One thing to consider when reading Javer’s take on the situation is his focus not just on the strategic value of his idea, but also on his concerns with how this fits into the setting of the world. This falls into line with the thinking of his character, Rose, who previously in this game had spear-headed a multi-national summit to address issues of ongoing wars that hampered any effort to resist and destroy Death King Vitas, a person the party considered a bigger threat to all nations involved than their inter-squabbings. The summit failed miserably, but Javer here expresses the direction in which he would like to

see the politics of the world go, even as he considers the immediate concerns of an upcoming battle. Javer actively connects the battle to the overarching story in which his character is involved.

This thread (that consists of eighteen separate posts) is one exceptional example of the ways in which players bring together their efforts towards the most satisfying experience possible. More week-to-week planning happens on the “Game Sessions” forum, though generally this tends to be more benign than the high-powered showdown in Sharholme. One fairly typical example of this is the “2010-03-22 Monday” thread under “Game Sessions” where the players (myself included by this point) engage in a discussion of the next course of action after having defeated a powerful enemy with a great deal of treasure. Vince begins the planning discussion by suggesting that the party should sell the treasure, but not at the capital where they have been: “It would be good to see these foreign markets and what they have to offer, and Raneas [Vince’s PC] wants to slowly and discreetly begin distancing himself from the empire” (Reply #10). Vince brings in his character’s motivations in considering courses of action, but he also brings up motivations for other characters, like how my character, Kaelyn, would prefer someplace close because the party left her “daughter,” a young red dragon, with an older red dragon the group planned on fighting and killing (for many, complicated reasons). The longer the party left her there, the more dangerous the situation would become because, as I wrote, “Who knows what Blazecoil [the older dragon] may think of an extended absence,” suggesting that the life of Kaelyn’s daughter may be in danger (Reply #11).

Vince presents two possibilities for the “foreign markets” he references and the group then engages in a discussion of the pros and cons of each place. The group

considers many aspects of the two places suggested, including the complications of bringing Saru's character into a gnomish city when his character has a history of being belligerent and violent towards people who are incredibly short (as gnomes are). While this is a constant source for amusement for the group, as Max's single contribution "lol@Aedros in a gnomish city" alludes to, it also raises logistical questions for the group (Reply #12). Saru himself explains quite well the concerns the party has for bringing Aedros to a gnomish city: "what do you think he's gonna do? Throw kobolds at every gnome he sees/insult every gnome he sees? Ok well he might insult some gnomes, but how is that any different then [sic] his normal interactions with most people we run across? Aedros is a curmudgeon, that's what he does" (Reply #13). He alludes to an incident in a previous session in which Aedros did, in fact, "Throw kobolds" at some gnomes (kobolds are short reptilian humanoid type creatures that attack any intelligent creatures they see and consume the meat of the kill). Without the board, this conversation would have happened in person, and likely have taken an hour or so out of the session to discuss the nuances of what everyone wanted to do or thought should be done. By speeding up these discussions, the group can spend more time actually playing when they congregate each week. Planning happens as much within the sessions themselves as it does on the online forum, yet for all their planning, sessions still manage to not go as planned (of course, what can one expect when the DM who controls the antagonists is privy to player machinations and a part of the planning process?).

Another way in which the online forums have sped up the play process, allowing more time for role-play through the group's ability to plan new characters on the forum, as they did for the first time with the current party of characters. On April 23, 2009, Javier started a thread on the forum titled "new characters?" to get thoughts on what kinds

of characters everyone wanted to play in the new game. In his first post in this thread, he declares his idea for his current character Aldred: “im sure i want to play a dwarf barbarian. ive decided his name is Aldred Hardraada.” The other group members (excluding Dusty as he does not participate on the forums) put forth their ideas in this thread for what kind of character he would like to play in the new game, and Vince provides his thoughts on the setting, where the party would be from within his game world. Interestingly, by the time the first session in late May began, Javer’s character was the only one that remained essentially unchanged from the original concepts presented on the forum, and even the setting that Vince posted had changed slightly.

This thread also shows the continuum of activity for the players as it manifests on the boards. Javer starts the thread, but his writing is quite sparse, just a few sentences in his first post and a couple more in a post later on. Max contributes only once to this thread to say “yeah probably going duelist. going to read up on it more” (Reply #1). This is fairly typical of Max’s participation. As I mentioned before, Max is the administrator of the forum, so he posts frequently, but his posts tend to be quite brief, as this example shows. His posts on the “Sharholme...” thread were uncharacteristic, only further providing a glimpse of how important that encounter was. Saru and Vince by far contribute the most to the discussion. Saru posts five different character ideas with extensive commentary on each and later responds to Vince’s thoughts on his ideas. Vince posts his thoughts on what the setting will be and his thoughts on what everyone’s character ideas are, even expanding on the background of Javer’s character (based on the post, Vince and Javer discussed this privately). He also introduces his initial concept for the PC he would play (which is radically different from the character he currently plays). All the ideas discussed on the forum thread develop as the players actually play the game

sessions. The players do not create their characters entirely separate from the play sessions themselves, but the extension of the discussion onto the new medium of the online forum allows them to do more creation ahead of time than would be possible without it.

The players themselves recognize the shift in how quickly characters were created for this party in comparison to games past. The forum is only a little over a year old, which means that this party of characters is the first that this group created since the creation of the boards. During the interviews, I asked each player how and when they created their characters for the previous party. In response they explained that the vast majority of the first session with their characters was spent actually making the characters. Unanimously, the group explained that the first session with a new party is by far the most boring of the experience because the story takes so long to get going. When I observed the first session with the current group, in fact, Vince even mentioned “this one’s probably gonna get started pretty slow, ‘cause we’re startin’ a new game” (05/26/2009), and yet when he and I were reflecting on this during his interview later, he noted that it got started far more quickly than games in the past (Vince Interview 2). In this context, more than in any other, the effect, the speed, of the electronic medium has a tangible, memorable impact. The online forums have provided a place for the group to collect their thoughts on the directions in which they would like to see their stories unfold, whether through critiques of what happened, what should happen, or planning out what they expect to happen, even to setting up the very seeds of the beginning of a new narrative.



### Choices Construct Multiple Narratives

Steven Johnson draws a very thick line between stories in games and stories in other media (55). He does not characterize game stories as narratives, yet when we take into account both Gee's discussion of embodied actions, embodied *stories* with McLuhan's discussion of *effect* rather than meaning, then the difference does not seem as though one is narrative and one isn't. Rather, games and novels (as an example) create different *kinds* of stories. This group of players, however, also shows how *both* kinds of stories come out of their role-playing experiences. On the level of a game, their narrative is bound in embodied action, in tasks to complete, in courses of action to decide; however, because they do not also have an advanced video game engine rendering the results of their choices, their actions, they are also responsible for creating the *effects* of those actions, which in turn move towards a more traditional view of "narrative" as Johnson would see it. On this level, the group creates multiple kinds of narratives, narratives of the actions they take, bound up in the decisions they make, and narratives of the events that happen as a result of those actions. The group constantly moves back and forth between these two kinds of narratives.

### *Course of Action Debates Construct Narrative Acts*

Gee describes the building blocks of any narrative as "story elements," and for a game like D&D, these story elements are not confined to the statistical rules (or codes in the case of video games) that govern play (*Good Learning* 84). For these players, each and every act, decision, and choice presented to them makes a difference within their narrative world and thus constitutes a story element, building their collective narrative. Because these acts are the foundation upon which their world stands, the players spend a

great deal of time discussing what would be the appropriate course of action in most situations. I have discussed this phenomenon in brief earlier, but it deserves further examination in terms of what actually factors into the decisions that these players make and how this then builds their stories.

I want to consider first a very short discussion the players have about how the story should unfold; it demonstrates the kind of situations in which such a consideration would arise, as well as points towards the complex justification that underlies the final decision in most cases. In this particular situation, Vince, Dusty, and Saru discuss briefly what action an NPC would take. Max's character has been captured while trying to steal from the NPC and Vince presents two options: the character could just kill Max's character, Elyse, or he could imprison her to torture and interrogate her. Dusty weighs in by presenting the options in terms of what the NPC thinks (which only Vince can determine); if he thinks one way, Elyse lives. If he thinks the other, then Elyse dies. Saru, on the other hand, presents his idea in terms of what "makes most sense . . . from a game play standpoint" (06/09/2009). "Game play" here turns out to have two different meanings, one which Saru articulates directly, but also one that goes unsaid and is likely a major determinant in Vince's decision. On the surface, Saru references actions taken previously in the game (in previous sessions in fact) that would provide motivations for the NPC to want to interrogate her, but what he does not mention (but must be taken into consideration) is the fact that this is the third game session with these characters, and if Elyse dies, the party does not have the resources to employ magic means of returning her to life. If Elyse were to die in this situation, then Max would have to create a whole new character. So, from a narrative standpoint, both Dusty and Saru give justification for why the NPC would be interested in keeping Max's character alive, but also from a game play

stand point, it would be in the best interest of the story not to kill off one the protagonists in the third episode (this is not that kind of a show). By the time Saru has finished his extensive explanation of why the NPC might not kill Elyse, Vince has already made his decision and pronounces it by simply turning to Max and saying “All right, All right, you wake up,” indicating that the NPC decided not to kill her (06/09/2009). At the root of most discussions like this one (especially ones that involve the possibility of death), the DM and the players must take into account both interests in the story, that of the internal consistency (what would make sense for the character to do) as well as what makes the most sense in terms of moving the story forward. The interplay between these elements is intricate, as even this simple example shows. The choice does not always lie in the hands of the DM, however. Sometimes the choice is with a player, wherein personal motivations get added to the mix to make the process more complex.

A couple hours later in this same session, for instance, Max faces another awkward situation, but he has to decide his course of action, taking into consideration Elyse’s safety, her morality (not to mention his own), and the viability of taking any action. In escaping from the NPC mentioned above, Max’s character kills him with the aid of another NPC, a young boy named Carlos. Afterwards, Max’s character decides to frame the kid for the murder and the local guards arrest the boy. The debate comes in when Max considers that Elyse is not really an evil person, and he feels bad about framing Carlos, so he considers options open to him to save the boy. Several players present options, but in the end he decides that he cannot save the boy. During the conversation between Elyse and Aedros discussed earlier in terms of Saru’s embodiment, Max comes to a conclusion about the situation: “I hate to see him uh, go down like this, but I kinda, better him than me” (06/09/2009). The various conversations leading up to

this moment serve to demonstrate how difficult saving Carlos would have been, and in the end Max makes the decision that protecting the life of his character (who is still badly wounded from the encounter) is more important than the morality of his character. Dusty in fact (in a moment where he shows active involvement) provides two different solutions, one that could save the boy but put PC lives at risk, and one that does not save the boy but could make Max's character feel less bad about it (06/09/2009). Max declines both plans. The outcome of this particular situation leads Vince to declare that he feels that the characters "have started to come into . . . their own" (06/09/2009). He has no preference as to what decision Max comes to, but he notes how important decisions like this are for developing the characters within the narrative.

While the simpler example creates a narrative act simply in terms of "character lives" or "character dies," Max's decision creates a narrative act more along the lines of "Elyse will not risk herself for another" or "Elyse *will* risk her life for another." The narrative act Max creates in this situation, in which Elyse sets up that she will not put her own life at stake for another person even if he helped her out of a difficult situation, sets the pace for the acts that follow. An NPC act can be fleeting, having consequences that do not extend beyond the scene in which they happen, yet player decisions often get to the core of what Gee discusses when he says that "good role-playing games" make one think deeply about the values one upholds (*Learning and Literacy* 51). This is what Gee means when he explains that video game stories are "stories [that] are embodied in the player's own choices and action in a way they cannot be in books and movies" (*Learning and Literacy* 79). The immediate *effect* of Max's decision is that Carlos is executed. Another effect, coming far later in the narrative is that Elyse is approached by the

assassin's guild (personal notes). The far reaching consequences of one decision on the part of Max form the story, shape the narrative, that the group is collectively a part of.

### *Effects of Actions Create Narrative Events*

The story-elements that Johnson sees as the building blocks of "narratives" are the events that "happen" (55). These events cannot happen without actions, and as Vince and the rest of the group are responsible not only for their actions but for discussing the consequences, they simultaneously create narrative *events* as they take narrative *actions*. Sometimes, these narrative events happen during a game session as soon as they can be related, though most often these narrative events happen later, between sessions, often appearing on the online forums or in sessions much later. Every decision a player or Vince makes creates a narrative event that affects the overall story and the successive events and actions that take place later.

After sessions are over and the book closes on each session's actions, the players construct the actions again in their minds, often removing recognition of many of the "game" aspects and instead focusing on the "story" aspects, turning these narrative actions into narrative events. The characters no longer "do" anything, but the *events* "happened." The combination of Vince's immersive and extensively created world (that has been in development for more than 10 years) and a group of players that has been more or less consistently playing together for approximately the past five years, leads to the development of the world's own folklore and oral history.<sup>6</sup> With the creation of the boards, the players, and especially Vince, have been shifting this oral history onto the boards, creating a kind of grand narrative of the world and their adventures. The ways in

which the group engages in this recollection varies greatly however, often in relation to who is writing.

The most elaborate and complete narratives come unsurprisingly from Vince, who chronicles the entire history of the recently retired party of characters in the “Plot Recap” thread. Vince started this thread to bring all the players up to speed on everything that had happened to those characters leading up to the (at the time) imminent battle with the Death King Vitas at Sharholme. Vince begins from the very first session: “So it all began at graduation,” and begins describing how various characters were introduced to the story, always using character names. Vince only ever names one player (someone who does not game with the group anymore), brought about by the fact that no one can remember the name of the rogue character the player originally played. Since the character died quickly, no one now knows what the character’s name was. Throughout, Vince maintains a narrative tone, focusing on major events rather than the minutia of various sessions: “[Lorien] then sends the party into the mountains to the north to find the tomb of an ancient dwarven lord called Ranathor Ironlord. Lorien desired a magical orb which Ranathor was said to possess which allowed him to look out into the world above from his underground lair. He gave the party a magical key to open the gate” (Reply #2). Vince retells the events of more than a year’s worth of role-playing on this thread. While he does provide extensive details of the actions, they are reconstructed as events, such as the meeting with Lorien above being constructed from a series of actions the players took in regards to how to interact with Lorien and their decision to actually go into the mountains. Vince is not alone in this kind of recreation, however.

Players also provide recaps for bygone sessions, but these are often far more sparse. Max created a forum titled “Game Sessions” to accommodate weekly discussions

of what has gone before and what is to come for each week, and he even takes the lead in providing very brief overviews of what happened in these sessions. The value in Max's brief synopses lies in the way they more closely imitate the way in which players would discuss with one another, in-person, the preceding events. The very first thread on this forum, the "2009-10-20 Tuesday" thread, provides a good example of how Max describes sessions on the boards. This thread deals with the very beginning of the Sharholme battles, and Max explains briefly what happened after many people had already left (since the session ran really long that night):

After you guys [Javer, Saru, and myself] left, the sorcerai [Max's characters], Keldor [Dusty], and Kael [NPC] went to check out the dragon yard. We suspected there would be a dracolich there given the rampant undead infestation in the area. We also knew it would be tough to fight there because it could repeatedly inhabit / possess the bodies of the dead dragons there after death and continue to fight us (as a proto-dragon i think vince said?).

Anyway, Dusty and Kael went in there sneaky style to check the area out and some worms came up tremors style. We decided it would be best to high tail it and did so. Upon leaving, the draco-lich did make an appearance and chased us briefly in the air ship before veering off to head toward sharholme. So we got that to look forward to.

Max lays out the characters involved, what their plan of action was, and how they executed it. Max doesn't include a great deal of details in his synopsis, but what he does give is more than sufficient to get a feel for what happened in that situation. He gets into some technical details when discussing the groups plan and concerns about a "dracolich," and possibly later a "proto-dragon," but Max sticks to the important points (of which the dracolich was a part) of what happened. He even goes beyond the actions to discuss motivations, what the characters "knew" that affected the choices they made. They "knew it would be a tough fight in there," so when danger presented itself, they "decided it would be best to high tail it and did so." Certainly, during the session itself, this

particular incident would be viewed as a series of “tasks” that require the players to be thinking ahead (as the statement about character knowledge here indicates they were in fact doing), but here, on the boards, the actions are now events. They are over, and while Max is still certainly considering future endeavors (“we got that to look forward to”), he doesn’t *have* to, and this experience takes on a form far more closely resembling what Johnson calls narrative, a narrative that has sprung from the effects of the decisions the players made.

Perhaps the best indication of how narrative acts turn into narrative events is not the group’s recollections, but their use of the online forums to look sideways, if you will, to consider events that would occur simultaneously with other events. The forums allow a certain amount of role-playing to happen directly on the boards during periods of downtime. In a practical sense, downtime is time that passes quickly within the story with minimal role-playing. Groups use downtime to move their stories along, and the forums allow the players to better keep track of what exactly they want to happen during these periods. Since so little active role-play is involved with this particular arena of play, the focus is almost entirely on events, as players are not faced with imminent decisions in these instances, but rather they elaborate on what they would like to happen in the most active form of shared creation of narrative in Johnson’s sense.

When the battle with Death King Vitas took place with the group’s older party, their newer party started six years of downtime (a record for this group), and in the aftermath of the destruction of Sharholme, Vince starts the “6 Years” thread to encourage his players to think about what happens to the retired party during the rest of the six years (after they fought Death King Vitas). To start the flow and to inspire some discussion, Vince posts a rather lengthy story involving the progeny of two of the players’ characters



(Javer and Saru's characters conceived twins the night before the battle that killed Saru's character). In response to the story of the attempted assassination of the three-year-old twins, Saru quickly posts his reactions and how he sees Ahmere responding to the situation, his soul inhabiting a sword by this point (his ultimate decision on what to do concerning resurrection). One particular part of this post captures the tone of this kind of narration and how it moves away from the action and more into description: "Perhaps with time Ahmere becomes more distant emotionally. Being a sentient sword, wielded by a golem wondering the wastes for undead to kill probably isn't the best way to maintain ones human-ness" (Reply #3). Max follows suit, but takes a different tone about the whole thing, contemplating what his characters would do (by this point Max's main character, Pristina, has a friend, Jessica, that always travels with her):

An idea of mine, and maybe this could be done in Tharce, would be for Pristina to open her own adventurer's or maybe just sorcerer's academy. I think it would be cool to run something that could both serve to defend the area, but be a little more neutral and out of the royal hierarchy. Is there any forested area in Tharce? Maybe Dusty could do something similar there too and make a fucking sweet tree castle 😊 Anyway, P&J are looking for something with some flavor to it. (Reply #4)

Max explains the overarching ambitions of his duo of sorceresses, linking them to the recent events as Vince laid them out in explaining how the academy could "serve to defend the area." Saru, at the bottom of this thread takes a turn to considering possible plot points that could come out of the situation, especially after Vince describes how the area around Sharholme is still a haunted and diseased place: "So I'm thinking quest hub with Ahmere as the main quest giver?" (Reply #12). At this point Saru has stopped engaging with the thread in terms of considering downtime events and shifts back to planning future sessions. Narrative creation itself has ended, but the beginnings of new creation begins at the same time with this. Neither Javer nor Dusty actually engage with

this thread. While Dusty's non-involvement with the boards entirely excludes him from this discussion, Javer makes the choice to answer the question of what his character does by describing it elsewhere.

Although Javer's character in the retired party was a paladin named Rose, in response to Vince's call for what the group's characters would be doing during downtime, Javer posts full scenes about what Rose's *father* does during this period (as her father, King Respen, was Javer's character prior to playing Rose). These scenes follow the traditional format of narrative prose, and demonstrate Javer's most active level of involvement in the story. He creates an entirely new adventure for Respen in the thread "Respen," chronicling what the character encounters after he wanders away from his kingdom, his wife (whom he's discovered no longer loves him), his two children, and his two grandchildren. One short dialogue shows how Javer constructs these scenes as prose quite different from the musings Max and Saru post to "6 Years":

As he reflected Respen swirled his wine, "But I think, in this current quest I'm on, to chart this southern continent and explore its potential riches is worthwhile. Especially if there are more dragons to be found. That fight with Akmosith brought out the adventuring blood in me! Although it is possible I am not the best choice as a cartographer."

Raffle laughed ruefully, "Agreed, I've seen your handwriting and it is indeed atrocious."

"Money is certainly a factor but really its about the close brushes with death. When one more hit would have killed you if not for displacement. But you cant always rely on magic... I left all my royal lands to Anleer and my noble lands to Rose."

"Then you don't intend to return I take it"

"No, I'm going on walk-about." Respen smiled.

In his second interview, Javer explains how the forums allow him to create stories to reveal new and different aspects of Respen's character that he does not get the chance to show through role-playing. He states that it allows him to play a character that is "too powerful" to continue playing within the sessions themselves. In this way, he

demonstrates the full extent to which the players can extend their role-playing experiences into a new, electronic medium, and how that medium allows the players to construct new narratives in reaction to the events that take place within sessions.

### An Act of Creation

These observations provide a glimpse into the complex nature of the role-playing experience as this particular group experiences it across three venues of interaction. Even as I write out the context surrounding each situation above, I too am extending this conversation into the print medium, engaging in the act of memory making. I have tried to distill down a transmedia storytelling experience into the linear progression of a single medium, but hopefully the interconnections between the pieces remain intact. The difficulty in trying to capture this aspect of the role-playing narrative speaks to the importance of its difference from other forms of narrative. Acts of creation occur simultaneously within, without, and around the role-playing sessions to such a degree that ignoring one piece would be to the detriment of the others. As the discussions, memories, and sessions I have participated in with this group contribute to the overall narrative experience, so too does this very examination, placing this project within the realm of this “imaginary-entertainment environment.”

## **Chapter Three: Conclusions**

### Introduction

In observing and interacting with this one group of players, I am resisting the move to generalize. The players' experiences are unique and individual to their group, their community, and especially their place in time. Their situated experiences at this particular moment provide a snapshot of convergence culture in action. In Henry Jenkins's work, he clarifies that he looks at specific franchises not as a general view of the trend he identifies, but rather "as demonstrations of what is possible to do in the context of convergence culture" (258). This group performs a similar role in the larger discussion of new media narratives. They demonstrate "what is possible to do" with *Dungeons & Dragons* "in the context of convergence culture," and what is possible has great significance for our understanding of narrative as it reflects a new culture and society has ever-changing demands. Marshall McLuhan marked a shift from a "mechanical" age to an "electric" age and how human thought adapts to new ways of living. As Jean François Lyotard discusses, narrative acts as the "quintessential" form of collective knowledge, and as numerous scholars from Jenkins to James Paul Gee have discussed, narrative itself has shifted to the new ways of thinking and the new collective knowledge that comes with it. This new narrative demands a great deal more activity on the parts of both author and audience.

Vince, Dusty, Max, Saru, and Javer, a group of regularly playing gamers, show how they negotiate this new narrative demand in their construction of their own unique multimodal, transmedia storytelling experience. They demonstrate a conscious

awareness of building more than “just” a story; the players create a world, a “symphony” as Gee would put it, that draws on individual and group interests. As active participants in this authorship, they engage in the kind of reflective play that Gee insists is necessary for play to really engage in active, critical learning, and if as Lyotard states, “The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers” (14), then this particular new form of narrative, acting as both game and story-creation, becomes a new lens through which to view how people engaging with new media learn to make choices. Gameplay is, in the words of Sid Meier, “a series of interesting choices,” and the combination of choice, of full control, and narrative structure within D&D sets up a new learning environment that deserves further, more in-depth examination than is here possible (qtd. in Bogost 45).

#### Players Create a Multimodal, Transmedia Storytelling Experience

Both within the sessions themselves and as a part of the ambiguous space between sessions, the group integrates various media into their narrative, demonstrating the “fusion” and “fission” that McLuhan uses to describe hybrid media. The integration of multiple media within the sessions characterizes the experience as greatly multimodal, McLuhan’s fusion, while the extension of the players’ experiences onto the online forums exemplifies the transmedia aspects of the experience, the fission.

#### *Music, Video and Objects Create Narrative Fusion*

The players fuse together music, visuals, and even objects in complex ways within their sessions to create their ongoing narrative. Max and Dusty, in their insistence on having the right music for the right scene/situation perform a convergence in

appropriating other forms of popular culture and “take media into their own hands” (Jenkins 17). Both players describe the importance of the music as lying in the “immersion” that the music encourages; Dusty even gets into a discussion of what movies would be like if they didn’t have sound and explains that the role-playing experience would be “less visceral, less cathartic” without the music (Dusty Interview 2). This explains why he and Max discuss the musical selections as they play, as with the issue of what constitutes “dive bar music.” The players experience the scenes with many senses rather than a select few.

Dusty goes further with his appropriation of popular culture in his use of a scene from *Animal House* to explain his character’s actions. The full sense of Rastan’s demeanor and how he experienced the situation is conveyed through a few seconds of video and sound that no amount of words spoken could convey as clearly. His playing of the scene incites discussion of exactly how to incorporate the movie scene into the scene in-progress, and eventually the group has a fully formed scene of which *Animal House* and the song the musician in *Animal House* plays is a part. The toga-wearing John Belushi is as much a part of who Rastan is as any actions Dusty might declare he does.

The most interesting instance of multimodality comes in the form of the miniatures and their role in the narrative. Not every player places the same emphasis on the miniatures, but those that have an investment in them (in this case, Vince, Dusty, and Saru) make the physical objects as much a part of the story as the music or the movie. I return to the discussion of Saru’s wanting to use “the Ahmere model” for his character, Aedros, in the first session (05/26/2009). Vince and Dusty insist that Saru should not use the figure that he used for his previous character. As Vince put it, Saru “just shouldn’t use it ‘cause it’s *Ahmere*” (05/26/2009). The model doesn’t *represent* Ahmere; it *is* Ahmere.

After a year-and-a-half of play with the previous party, of which Ahmere was a member, the miniature at this point is inscribed with the narrative of that character. That model is a part of the narrative of the old party and has situated significance in this context. Saru's reaction to this debate of "it's just a *proxy*" also contributes to the view of not only the Ahmere model as an extension of the narrative, but *all* the models (for PCs at least) as extensions of the narrative. The proxy is the temporary stand-in, and by identifying the Ahmere model (or the model he eventually settles on) as a "proxy" for Aedros, he indicates that the permanent figures are *not* proxies for their characters; they *are* their characters (as Vince pointed out). As each player is *also* their character, to an extent, the models act as an extension of the player into the narrative world. The miniatures act as a medium in this context, as they act to extend the players' bodies into the narrative. Fused together with music to set the scenes and the occasional film clip to represent a scene (*Animal House* was the first, but certainly not the last), the miniatures create a multimodal experience within the confines of the game session.

### *Online Forums Create Narrative Fission*

In a true act of extension of the role-playing experience, the group as a whole has transferred a great deal of narrative creation to the forum, foregoing extensive descriptions of things in sessions, dividing the story itself across various media. Vince takes great pleasure in being able to "rant" about his world, as he put it in his second interview, through the boards, and as I have discussed extensively, the players take advantage of being able to plan things out and in general "it's a way to think about the game between game sessions" as Javer describes it (Javer Interview 2). The game doesn't end when the session ends, thanks to the forum, and in fact this is exactly the

reason why Dusty does *not* participate on the forums: “It’s my separation from actually playing it. It’s, it’s enough of my real life devoted to the uh, role-playing fantasy stuff. Meh, I get enough of that. Five to, you know, seven hours a week, that’s enough for me” (Dusty Interview 2). For Dusty, expanding the experience into the realm of the internet would lead to *more* involvement than he wishes to devote to the game, so he forgoes interacting on this level of transmedia.

As Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling as a place where the consumers must track “down bits of the story across media channels” and keep those who fall behind up to speed, so too could he describe this group’s narrative in this manner through their interactions on the forums (21). Players will have conversations on the forums that Dusty is not a part of and then at the beginnings of sessions, the group will catch him up on what happened over the week on the boards. One particular instance highlights this. When Vince prodded his players to contemplate the six years of downtime, he included some events that happened in his world, specifically the attempted murder of the twin children of Javer and Saru’s characters (“6 Years” Reply #2). While this event did not necessarily directly affect Dusty’s character, Keldor, one would expect that, considering Dusty and Vince are brothers and currently live together, Dusty would have some concept of this event taking place. When the group convened at the next session and Vince asked Javer specifically if he had seen the post (a concern because Javer was having Internet connectivity issues at home), Dusty reacted with great surprise to the whole incident. For a moment he was confused as to why everyone else knew about the event, but quickly realized that it must have been posted to the forum. In response, in this case to both Dusty and Javer being unaware of what happened, Vince took time to recap the events (which were certainly significant to Javer, whose character was the mother of



the twins). Because the players, with the exception of Dusty, interact on the forums, the narrative progresses on the forums and creates a transmedia storytelling experience for the group.

### D&D Structured Around Reflective Play

In D&D, the players maintain a high level of awareness of the game as both game and story as they strive to create an immersive world through a personal identity within the world and their choices of what to do and how to act within that world. As Gee explains, this kind of reflexive interaction works towards a kind of learning not accessible through traditional means employed in schools.

### *Identity Formation Encourages Reflective Play*

For many members of this group (myself included), being/playing our characters is more than simply stating what they do; we must negotiate with our real-world identities as they interact with a world that presents challenging people and situations. When Max debates with himself and the other members of the group about what his character should do about the young NPC named Carlos that helped him out of a dangerous situation, Max seriously considers how he feels about the situation, and the group as a whole discusses its implications. Max draws a line that his character will not cross that proves to be an extension of his real-world identity in this situation. As discussed previously, Max decides at one point to allow Carlos to take the rap for the murder of a magistrate that Elyse committed (admittedly with Carlos's help), citing the "better him than me" argument as justification (06/09/2009). This doesn't end the conversation, however, and everyone except Javer discusses the pros and cons of the decision Max makes, and

(again) whether or not Elyse should try to save Carlos. When the conversation turns to the shift in Elyse's alignment from good to neutral because of this situation, Saru starts suggesting that perhaps Elyse should continue down the path she's on and become truly evil: "The question is whether you want to totally destroy his soul before he dies so that he comes back as, like a fucking undead or something, and getting *extra* evil points by like showing up and somehow --." Max interrupts at this point to draw the line of what his character will do: "No. I don't see myself cashing in on the *extra* evil points. I'm not gonna tell you to *torture* the kid or something" (06/09/2009). In terms of Gee's Identity principle, Max and Saru demonstrate the extension of Max's identity as Elyse in using "you" and "I," rather than "Elyse" or "she." Max draws the line as to what *he* is willing to do, which translates into what *Elyse* is willing to do in this situation. The phrase "I don't see myself" alone is telling. It isn't a matter of Max not seeing *Elyse* doing this, becoming truly evil, but rather *Max* not being able to go down that path.

In discussing this particular moment with Max several months later, he connects himself fairly directly with his character and reflects on the Carlos decision from two different points of view, that of the story and his character within that story, as well as from a personal view of himself as Elyse, which shows how the play was then and continues to be reflective for Max. I asked him during that interview if he liked Elyse, as a person; if he were to meet her in real life, would he get along with her? In his answer to this question, he explains, in part, why that threshold he set up in talking with Saru was so important: "I don't think that I could play someone that I like genuinely *hate*, because I don't think I would enjoy it as much. I could probably pull it off, but it's not necessarily something that I would *want* to do enough to, like, put myself into that" (Max Interview 2). In this light, Max's morality plays a role in how Elyse develops. She

cannot develop in a way that would jeopardize Max's view of her. He eventually comes to the conclusion that yes, he does like Elyse, however, he makes a caveat that brings back the decision about Carlos: "I think I do like her. Uhm. Uh, it's tough to say in what exact capacity. Obviously, like when. The whole thing with setting that kid up [Carlos]. I thought that was *awesome* in sort of a story sense, not so much as in a moral sense" (Max Interview 2). In terms of the unfolding story, Elyse setting up Carlos to take the fall for the magistrates murder was exciting; it added another layer to Elyse's character, but Max personally objected to the action. While in this instance it did not actually change the decision Max made, in his reflection, he makes judgments about that particular situation, allowing him to consider himself and what he would/should, can/could do. As Gee explains, "A good role-playing game makes [him] think new thoughts about what [he] value[s] and what [he does] not" (*Learning and Literacy* 51). Max's personal investment in the morality of his character causes him to pause and reflect on his personal values, and though his character may not have acted in accordance with those values, he can articulate what those values are.

Max's personal dilemma with Elyse and Carlos is not the only instance where players demonstrate their connection to their characters and reflect on the implications of their characters' actions in terms of their real-world identities and values, and in each case the players demonstrate the reflective kind of play that Gee insists is important for learning, and is characteristic of creating stories in the electric age. As Johnson comes back to several times, with games, the emphasis is on choice, even when discussing identity (41). Max had to *choose* how Elyse would deal with the moral concern of framing Carlos, just as Saru and I, when our characters were in conflict had to decide exactly how we could work towards resolution. My and Saru's constant conversations

with each other to make sure that we kept character conflict contained within the narrative inevitably led to conversations to make clear which objections were personal and which were character-based. Personal objections are hard to work around; character-based ones can be negotiated. My objections to Kaelyn healing Aedros were character-based, so when the opportunity arose to have Kaelyn actually heal Aedros as a step towards reconciliation, I chose to sacrifice a bit of the authenticity of Kaelyn's character for the benefit of our group and of the story. The choice became a consideration for which I valued more, my personal character's "realistic" portrayal, or the good of the party and the advancement of the story. I chose story over my character in this instance (though this is by no means a universal choice among players).

#### *Course of Action Debates Encourage Reflective Play*

In discussing identity, the conversation inevitably comes back to the idea of decision-making. As a game, D&D relies on the choices that are the very building blocks of the experiences and even the identities of the players, as seen above. When the players discuss courses of actions both during and between sessions, they demonstrate the self-reflective nature of their role-playing experience, enhanced by the transmedia elements of their play. This manifestation of reflective play further serves to show the extent to which the group, as a function of the game design itself, must constantly be aware of the duality of the game *qua* game and the game *qua* story.

Within game sessions, the players are constantly bombarded with the choice of what their characters will do, and as the course of action debates detailed previously show, these choices require the players to consider their actions on multiple levels. When Vince had to decide how an NPC would deal with the capture of Max's character, Vince

took into consideration the consequences, the *effect* of his choice both in terms of what it would mean for the game and what it would mean for the story. His choice was two-fold as he reflected on this duality and decided in favor of keeping the character alive. His choice meant the story would continue for Max's character and it also meant that Max did not have to recreate, make a new identity, which Vince would then have to introduce into the story. In this instance, the demands of the game and of the story worked together to influence the choice that Vince made. Later when Max made the decision to set up the NPC Carlos to take the fall for his character's actions, Max had to weigh concerns of morality in whether or not it would be right for Elyse to allow someone else to be executed for her actions against the very real complications of her current condition ("badly injured" as Vince put it) and lack of resources (06/09/2009). Pragmatically, Max's character had just escaped from an incredibly life-threatening situation and hadn't had time to recover, and as discussed before, Max felt that his ultimate choice worked well within the overall story of his character if not within his own line of morality. Considerations of himself as a player affected the extent to which Elyse traveled down the amoral path she was on, but did not stop her from walking it at all.

Because resolved actions cannot be undone in a tabletop RPG, players must exhibit a higher level of consideration for their actions, both before and after, than they do in video games. While the group debated whether or not to fight the spider demon that killed Elyse, the argument dragged on because everyone understood that the risk involved in this situation was quite high, and *despite* the fact that Elyse, according to the rules, should not have been killed by the demon's poison in that fight, the story still proceeded as though she had. The game as a *story* would not handle such drastic changes at that particular moment. Partially due to the goof with the rules, the players continued

debating the choices they made on the forums on the “Greetings from Joysey...” thread wherein Max voiced his concerns through the character of “Jerry” (as discussed in the previous chapter). Because the risks are higher in comparison to playing a video game (while still mitigated in that Max was of course not personally at risk at any point), the players are understandably preoccupied with the choices available to them, especially in life or death situations. This kind of situation does not often happen in video games.

While certainly glitches happen while playing video games (I can think of several instances in which a glitch has forced either myself or someone I know to have to start a game over from the beginning), because players always have the option of restarting from a previous point, their choices do not have the same significance as they do in a role-playing environment. Saru says it best on the forum, after the group has figured out that Elyse should not have died when she did and likely would have had a chance of surviving afterwards if given the chance: “This is why I’m ALWAYS trying to slow people down before death rolls and such, there is usually something that can always be done. / So let’s just learn from this... maybe if we sweep this under the rug fast like with an understanding of the mechanics so it doesn’t happen again, Jerry might be convinced to overlook this” (Reply #8). The Jerry comment aside, Saru’s sentiment about slowing down speaks greatly to the importance of careful attention and a critical gaze in “sticky” situations. His comment also brings up another important facet of this particular situation: because of the controversy, now the *entire* group understands how poisons work and how to combat them, information that they then transfer to later situations. Since that incident no character has been truly threatened by the effects of poison (though not for a lack of trying). The online forums enabled this conversation to happen without taking up valuable playing time to do so, and the reflective actions of those in the

discussion (Max in his critiques, Vince in his responses and eventual acceptance of fault, and Saru at the end with the moral of the story) serve to enhance the experience for all.

The added risk to this game compared to other kinds of games makes every choice, every decision incredibly important to consider, and this structure sets up the players to constantly shift between action and reflection. This creates the two kinds of narratives that make up the experience, those embodied within the players and their actions (the kind this experience shares with video games), and the kind that comes after and in-between (the kind it shares with more traditional stories, though adapted for its own needs). Within this choice-based narrative, the players create a world all their own that constantly makes new demands on the players, demands that are similar to yet also distinctive from the demands made on players of video games.

#### Choice-Based Narrative Formation Creates a New Learning Environment

Returning again to the statement from Sid Meier about gameplay being a “series of interesting choices,” stories constructed around these choices (as Gee explains in terms of video games) demand something different of their players than the linear narratives (physically speaking in terms of strict print media) of the mechanical age. The reflexive act of constantly examining choices and consequences embeds the narrative within the actions and experiences of the players who act as both authors and audience for the stories to a greater degree than is possible even with video games. They engage with the narrative on all levels of what one would consider the traditional view of the writing process, yet at the same time this process has changed as it adapts to the changing demands of the players.

*Nonlinear, Choice-Based Narrative Process Demands Constant Attention*

Returning again to McLuhan's characterization of hybrid media as generating "great new force and energy," as well as "a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born," the multimodal, transmedia storytelling experience of D&D fulfills this expectation of a hybrid (48, 55). The new form calls attention to itself and its creation as the author and audience have not yet become jaded by its existence. Despite being over thirty years old, role-playing keeps changing and morphing in response to changes in those who play. For this group, the combination of open-ended role-playing and the extension of the story into the electronic medium generates a narrative that is both unending and nonlinear. The combination resists the move to section off the experience, to view the experience as "complete," "finished," and over and done with.

In the world that Vince has created, no story (or rather, very few stories) ever actually end. As mentioned before, Vince has been developing his world for over ten years, and the core players of this group have been playing together for five or so of those years. With any given party, the characters may encounter NPCs that were long ago the characters of present or former members of the group. When Vince announced on the forums that the group would no longer role-play the old party after the battle at Sharholme (the "2009-11-11 Wednesday" thread), he also provided his perspective on the stories of their characters:

we can probably consider the old characters retired as primary player characters. That is not to say however that their stories have all been told in full. I would very much like for the ongoing events of my world to continue playing out and for time to continue passing therein indefinitely. Ahmere, Rose, Pristina, Jessica, Keldor, and Eric all remain important characters in the overall story, and they could enter play in



"guest appearances" in the way Aesara, Respen, Kael and others have done. Whether your character lives or dies, or even if you stop playing, your character is likely to live on in the legends of my world. (Reply #15)

In Vince's world, in the stories that the group creates, time passes and things change, but the people within the world do not simply disappear, and in this way the stories never really have an end. Even if characters die, Vince states that the "character is likely to live on in the legends of my world." Because it is a "world," an "imaginary-entertainment environment," as Mackay would put it. The narrative doesn't end, nor does it really have a beginning. Everything starts already always in motion; previous parties affect future parties. Each group of characters chooses their own path (though Vince certainly suggests some good ones to take). The unending aspect of this narrative which contributes to the non-beginning aspect of the experience contributes to the non-linearity of the overall structure.

Rather than expounding on the virtues of how player agency allows the group to follow a non-linear path through any given storyline they engage with (a topic covered well in other places), I turn my attention to how the transmedia characteristic of this group's narrative allows the players to unfold the events in a nonlinear fashion. On the online forums, the players create pieces of the overall narrative out of order of the historical "timeline" of events. Javer's threads about his character Respen provide the best example of this. He starts the stories during the six years of downtime that follow the showdown at Sharholme; however, his narrative continues into the future of this world, as he has already determined that Respen will be gone on a spiritual journey for at least forty years (personal notes). By the time Respen returns to his home country, his wife will likely be dead, his children possibly as well, and his grandchildren will certainly be fully adults. While Javer has not written about what happens when his character returns,

he continues his character's story well into the future, past where the current party is in history. The future unfolds before the present, and in the truest sense of the phrase, Javer extends himself and his role-playing onto the boards to achieve this. The unending, nonlinear stories that come out of this group's experience draw attention to the time and space in-between sessions and their importance for understanding the structure of this new narrative form, and in the process, the active awareness its newness demands contributes to the ways in which the players construct a learning environment within this structure.

#### *Members as Both Active Teachers and Active Learners*

My previous discussion about Saru's commentary on the "Greetings from Joysey..." thread anticipated the ways in which each member of the group acts as learners in this environment. Rather than learning from some external program, as is the case with the video games Gee and other game scholars discuss, these learners engage with each other, and thus continually shift between the roles of teacher and learner. This dual role stems greatly from the structure of the narrative around choices and the complex nonlinear relations that constantly force the players to evaluate and re-evaluate every decision they are faced with. Gee discusses how learning best happens at the edge of one's competency, "If learning always operates will within the learner's resources, then all that happens is that the learner's behaviors get more and more routinized, as the learner continues to experience success by doing the same things . . . it is not good for developing newer and higher skills" (*Learning and Literacy* 67). This group of players constantly pushes themselves towards the edges of their competencies, without which the

game play would become boring. In doing so, the players must become better players and the DM must become a better DM. They teach each other throughout this process.

The Sharholme events most clearly demonstrate the lengths to which the members of the group will go in order to challenge themselves. In the “One does not simply walk into Sharholme...” thread (discussed several times now), the players, Max and Saru most especially, discuss ways to make the encounter harder/more interesting than encounters in the past. Max, in his opening post, for instance states:

i think this would be a good time for vince to take his D&D encounters to the proverbial next level. it could mean a lot of things. doesn't necessarily have to be harder, but perhaps a gimmick or twist could be introduced to the fight. also, we expect to have aesara and respen with us [recurring NPCs], but there could be some other pressing business either during the encounter or elsewhere in the castle that could demand their attention, splitting us up? or something like that to mix things up.

In this section, not only does Max suggest ways to challenge the players (like not having NPC allies they expect to have), but calls out this event as a way to challenge Vince as DM. In this particular situation, all involved, the players and the DM, must work at the edges of their competencies to pull off an exciting and satisfying final chapter. The players contribute ideas, and Vince decides what to include and what not to include from those contributions. At one point in this thread, Saru suggests that “perhaps at one time he’s [Death King Vitas] invulnerable if he stays in a certain area, so someone (Rose?) has to sit there and keep him put, while the rest of us run around doing ‘something’ to temporarily remove his buff,” an idea Vince actually adapts and includes (Reply #1). Vitas indeed was invulnerable for a time until the party figured out how to remove his protection. Vince also adapted the “splitting us up” idea that Max mentioned before, not removing Aesara and Respen, but essentially cutting the group in half, forcing them to defend their stronghold while still attacking Vitas (personal notes). Vince often

incorporates player ideas in new and different forms to keep the players guessing, but these ideas also reveal the extent to which the players ask for challenges and are aware of the concerns Gee raises about routinized behaviors.

As the players state what they expect during the battles at Sharholme, they also explain what they do *not* want to happen in terms of what has routinely come before. Saru expresses the greatest concern that the battle with Vitas would turn out to be another run-of-the-mill boss battle for his character. Ahmere, as a character, generally has the same attack pattern unless something about what he's fighting changes this. As Saru points out, this has not often been the case: "I hope Vince is able to pull out some more interesting twists other than just 'this guy hits hard, really really hard' type of encounter" (Reply #1). As the group discusses elsewhere (and as I have brought up before), the concern for healing in this battle (or lack there of as Vince explains it) would mean that something simply hitting really hard would not provide much of a challenge to the party. This is where Saru's suggestion of possible invulnerability enters the picture, as discussed previously (Reply #1). Additionally, Ahmere's attack pattern, as Saru sees it, gets old, and if the boss is different, then the battle would change: "But ya, I hope Vince is able to put something together thats more intricate then 'charge, full attack, shit lay on hands, full attack, full attack, dead'" (Reply #1). Here Saru lays out the entire battle plan for Ahmere as it has traditionally manifested, while simultaneously challenging Vince to develop an encounter that would force him to go beyond this. By presenting alternatives, Saru, in essence, teaches Vince some tactics to use to achieve this, which Vince then proves that he's learned by adapting them within the actual incident at Sharholme. Vince is generally open to working with player ideas, but also uses player ideas to figure out what *not* to do.

Part of Vince's tactics in challenging his players involves doing exactly what they don't expect. This is part of the reason why he and I decided that during the Sharholme incident I should play antagonists (as I did not have a character with the older party and was by that point participating). As I wrote on the "Sharholme..." thread "It's not just the DM you know really well that you are playing against. If I am controlling a character, then you have to deal with enemies that are far harder to predict the strategy of" (Reply #14). The group had been debating back and forth about what I should do in the situation. Their biggest concern was inter-personal tensions (between players) by having players attacking players (a legitimate concern). In the end, the added challenge won out along with simplifying the situation for Vince (not having to control so many characters), and I controlled three separate antagonists. Knowing that I would play antagonists, while not knowing which ones (Vince and I kept that to ourselves) added another layer of mystery for the players as they were never quite sure who exactly they would be fighting against, me or Vince (or in some situations a combined effort of the two of us). Vince also has a tendency to take what players say that they think Vince is going to do and do something else. At one point in an early session, Saru states in detail how he thinks Vince is going to develop a minor plot point involving Javer's character and Vince responds "You start calling things like that, you just give me incentive to *not* do it. It's what you do. So you should shut your mouth if you think you know what I'm gonna do" (06/09/2009). Vince doesn't want his players to anticipate his every move, so he varies what he does based on what he knows his players will expect. He challenges his players and himself, contributing to the learning of all, by incorporating player ideas in certain situations while going totally against those same ideas in other situations.

### Conclusion: Role-Playing Narratives Reveal How Players Construct Meaning

James Paul Gee discusses the importance of the story-creation aspect of video games in answer to the question of “why game studies now?” While explaining why the ability to combine and recombine “story elements” is profound, he presents three different answers, but in the context of the current discussion, his second response provides the most insight: “Humans find story elements profoundly meaningful and are at a loss when they cannot see the world in terms of such elements. We try to interpret everything that happens as if it were part of some story, even if we don’t know the whole story—and, in fact, in life we rarely know the whole story” (*Good Learning* 85). This answer goes beyond the realm of video games. This response encompasses the very structure of stories as we experience them in the age of the electric light, instant communication, and the coming together of various media into new forms of narratives. To study how one constructs a narrative within a situated context is to study how one creates meaning within that context.

As I began this chapter, I return now to the fact that this group is unique in their experiences and the narratives they create are unique to their situation and their time. Despite this, their work is worth looking at for the ways that it can provide clues to the manner in which this group constructs meaning within a new media context. Daniel Mackay anticipated to a degree the importance electronic communication would have as the years passed since he wrote in 2001 about email replacing hand-written notes and face-to-face communication within the role-playing experience, but he failed to see the significance of that intersessional space in which email inserted itself (52). This group of players has demonstrated time and again that this in-between space is as important as the sessions themselves. This is a trend that Jenkins observed with the *Survivor* franchise, as

the Internet discussions became as important to the fan base as the show when it aired (25). The narrative is breaking out of the bounds it has been traditionally been placed within. Play is marking off new areas within which to function, and as McLuhan suggests, the players are creating a new kind of meaning, one that, in the case of games, reflects something about the society from which the game arose, as the society engages in a discussion with itself (243).

The conversation that this group of D&D players has with itself and with the larger society adapting to the electric age suggests a shift in the way people understand units of meaning. The players create nonlinear, multimodal, unending, and transmedia narratives, stories that cannot be contained, by media, time, or within the traditional confines of a beginning, middle, and end. This forces the players to constantly attend to the narrative, a reflexive understanding of their own creative process that encourages learning based on decisions. Lyotard claims that “The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers,” and this kind of narrative creation provides a glimpse as to how exactly this type of ruling class will continue to be in power (14). “Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge,” he states, and this group of players create narratives that spread the “customary knowledge” of choice-based experiences through the variety of arenas open to them, adapting as needed to the inevitable changes that come with time (19).

#### Further Research

As a complex narrative experience, *Dungeons & Dragons* cannot be examined for all its implications in a single project. Just as this one group’s narrative cannot be contained within a single medium, so too cannot a study and exploration of their

experiences be contained within a single text (perhaps even a single medium). Many pieces have gone undiscussed with the hope that in the future I will be able to return to them and consider them in greater depth. This focus on the narrative form and its intersection with current media trends is situated to this specific time and place in ways that other pieces are less so. This is not to say these other aspects are *not* situated (as parts and functions of the narrative experience they are necessarily affected by all that affects the overall structure), but their significance transcends their situated place.

Among the topics I would like to further explore lies the creation and function of folklore within this group, as their extended play over several years has created a unique oral culture within their group and within their narrative. Additionally, and perhaps most especially, I would like to discuss the pedagogical implications of this new form of narrative. As Gee, Johnson, and others have done for video games, I would like to look towards a pedagogy for tabletop role-playing games. Lyotard's concern for narrative and for language games in general lies in their implications for our understanding of knowledge and learning in the "postmodern" age (xxiii). This current study serves as a starting place for that larger project, for one must critically examine and understand the narrative form before that form can be transferred. I see great potential in the structures that *Dungeons & Dragons* promotes, especially in how this particular group has developed them, to increase learners' engagement and understanding, and further research would start where this work ends to discuss this multimodal, transmedia storytelling experience in terms of what we can learn about how we can learn and teach in the electric age.



## End Notes

### Introduction:

1. I will discuss this more in-depth in the next chapter.

### Literature:

1. Authors frequently work within a framework that examines both sociological and psychological implications the experience has for players. For examples of such scholarship see Wayne D. Blackmon, “Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult,” Kurt Lancaster, “Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide among Players as Critics Claim?” and Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, “Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing.”

### Observations

1. The names of the group members have been changed throughout for their privacy.
2. Dialogues within sessions are cited according to the date of the session.
3. Extended conversations are transcribed in the Appendix for context and reference.
4. Mechanical note: in combat, one minute equals ten rounds. In this situation, the party would have had ten rounds from her first poisoning to figure out how to save Elyse.
5. With all forum posts, spelling, punctuation, and formatting have been preserved where possible.
6. The ways in which the oral history of Vince’s world manifests within the confines of individual sessions deserves extensive treatment that does not fit well into the current discussion. Another project and inquiry could be devoted solely to the group’s

engagement with this oral history, how it is created, and what purposes it serves for both the players and the DM.

## **APPENDIX: Transcripts of Conversations**

### **Why SARU shouldn't use the Ahmere miniature: 05/26/2009**

VINCE: That's another thing we need to do, is decide what miniatures we're gonna use for everybody.

SARU: I might go and look to see if I can find a new one.

VINCE: Yeah, I got it. That's cool. I'll provide a proxy

SARU: I'll uh, [overlapping]

MAX: Get a proxy

SARU: Yeah, I'll uh, well I'll just proxy with Ahmere. I feel, like, weird not usin' it.

VINCE: What?

JAVER: He's got a bunch ah.

DUSTY: You can't play Ahmere.

JAVER: He's got a bunch of 'em.

SARU: Nah, I don't, I don't wanna use, like, a proxy that's not like [overlapping]

DUSTY: You're not playing... [overlapping]

SARU: mine. I'll just use *Ahmere*, it's a *proxy*, what's the difference?

JAVER: You wanna own your own model? [overlapping]

DUSTY: [referencing the Ahmere model] You're fuckin', you're squatting and praying [overlapping]

SARU: I *still*... feel... com....so... yeah, and what's? like I'm gonna be a freakin' kobold with like, crap stuck to my fur [Javer chuckles] or something.

JAVER: He's got a *bunch* a new ones

VINCE: Kobold? What? [overlapping]

DUSTY: Dude, he's got *ass* loads of miniatures, there's something you could find in there.

VINCE: Yeah.

SARU: I'm just sayin' [overlapping]

DUSTY: He's got a *bunch* that are duplicates, you could prob'ly *have* one. [overlapping]

SARU: I'm just sayin' [overlapping]

DUSTY: If you're really that worried about it.

MAX: [laughs]

SARU: I feel more *comfortable*, with Ahmere.

[pause]

VINCE: Whatever dude, we'll get you somethin' that [overlapping]

DUSTY: It's like a safety blanket. [overlapping]

VINCE: Ok, Ahmere's not that *bad* for your character though, but you just should prob'ly use the...wouldn't you rather use the *Eric* [similar model, NPC character]...I mean *really*? [overlapping entirely with the next line] cause then it's *not* Ahmere?

SARU: No, that doesn't really fit me.

MAX: Dude, just [overlapping]

VINCE: Why not?

DUSTY: Here, right here [slams his left foot onto the table] there you go.

SARU: Wha?

DUSTY: Just use that as your miniature.

MAX: That's you.

SARU: How 'bout I just use my cock? How, how would you like *that*?

DUSTY: You could do that. Just, then it wouldn't be Eric. [overlapping]

SARU: Let me whip it out for ya...

[DUSTY and MAX continue the train of thought while VINCE speaks]

VINCE: You shouldn't use the Ahmere just because it's the same one. That's exactly why you *shouldn't*.

SARU: Yeah, I was about to say...

MAX: [laughs]

VINCE: You shouldn't use the Ahmere model *because* it's the same one. I mean...

JAVER: You're gonna start saying Ahmere all the time.

SARU: No I won't! [overlapping]

JAVER: Just like he [VINCE] says Carhan [overlapping]

SARU: 'Cause I'm not a *dumbass*! [overlapping]

MAX: Yeah you will. You will.

SARU: No I won't

JAVER: You will. [overlapping]

VINCE: It doesn't. I don't *care* about that. You just shouldn't use it, 'cause it's *Ahmere*.

DUSTY: He's the DM, and he [VINCE] said Carhan all the time when it was supposed to be Eric.

[They start discussing other players' models for a short while. then VINCE brings out his collection of miniatures]

VINCE: These are pretty, pretty much my adventurery type miniatures. Any of these would be fine. There's a wide selection here. You shouldn't use the *fucking* Ahmere one.

SARU: I, I, it's a *proxy*. I'll get a new one. I don't...these are going...*this* would be a proxy, I'm...*not* seeing what the issue is.

VINCE: Do, do you intend to buy a new one for your character? [overlapping]

SARU: Yes! yes.

VINCE: all right.

SARU: I was just going to use Ahmere for like this game session.

DUSTY: Why, why don't you use a proxy that doesn't look like Ahmere?

SARU: Maybe because I don't *like* any of the proxies. [overlapping with VINCE] Oh my god, what's the freakin' deal.

VINCE: You haven't, you haven't even looked yet. [pause] Give it a chance man.

SARU: I'm looking! Wha..do you see what I'm doing? Do you see the looking?

VINCE: Yes.

DUSTY: [slams his right foot on the table, VINCE laughs] That's a right foot.

SARU: What the hell does that mean?

DUSTY: It's not Eric.

SARU: There you go! It's a right foot. It's *different*.

DUSTY: It's not Eric, it's not Eric

SARU: [looking at a miniature] This is kinda cool.

[pause]

MAX: [laughs]

DUSTY: See?

SARU: I like this.

DUSTY: Well look at that.

**The music at the "Rusty Hinge": 06/02/2009**

[mandolin music plays in the background. VINCE is describing the inside of the Rusty Hinge]

VINCE: And the door way in had rusty hinges.

SARU: Indeed.

JAVER: Of course.

MAX: We need some dive bar music here. Come on.

VINCE: It wasn't bad.

DUSTY: [mimicking the music line]

SARU: There could some guy playin' this on a fuckin'...

MAX: This is a little high end I think.

STEPH: No, because no one's listening to it.

VINCE: It's, it sounds, it sounds nicer than it prob'ly should, but it'll work.

SARU: Dude! It's some, it's some freakin' ahhh, up and coming bard tryin' ta, tryin' to make it big, his first gig, he got booked at the fuckin' Rusty Hinge, and he didn't know, he didn't know [VINCE agrees throughout] what it's like, so he's like, "oh yeah, I'm gonna go to a nice place, and he's like, playin' all this happy music.

VINCE: Yeah, there's totally some guy with a mandolin up there, tryin' to play but no one listens. You can't even hear it. That's out of self-preservation.

SARU: In case someone throws a bottle at him.

VINCE: He looks really pissed off.

DUSTY: I would.

VINCE: Yes.

SARU: Dude, potential party member right there. Could be you! [to STEPH]

STEPH: [chuckles]

JAVER: [chuckles]

SARU: eh? eh?

MAX: Fuck Raneas, let's get this guy.

VINCE: Raneas is *prob'ly* more useful than the bard, but maybe not at...

SARU: Bards can *heal*

VINCE: Maybe not at like level 2.

**Rastan as John Belushi in *Animal House*: 06/02/2009**

[VINCE and MAX converse about who is in the Rusty Hinge, and MAX's character converses with the mandolin player until DUSTY interrupts]

DUSTY: Here we go.

MAX: Wow. That's him ["him" being the mandolin player, directing attention to the television screen which is playing a scene from *Animal House*]

VINCE: He [the mandolin player] says, he says uh

MAX: That's him right there, that's what he looks like.

SARU: He's got a dirty mustache [overlapping]

DUSTY: That, you see, *this* is the guy that's actually playing the music here. This is what we're getting, at the Rusty Hinge.

[The scene from *Animal House* plays in which a young man sitting on some stairs plays a song on the guitar that starts, "I gave my love a cherry..." the players talk while the scene plays]

VINCE: yeah, this could happen.

MAX: [laughing] Please, someone do this.

DUSTY: [pointing at John Belushi on screen] That's me. That's Rastan dude. [MAX laughs]

VINCE: Are you gonna take the guy's mandolin and break it?

DUSTY: I take it dude. Like this. This is what happens. [VINCE laughs] Do I have to roll?

VINCE: [still laughing] Hold on.

SARU: [when Belushi smashes the guitar against the wall] Yes!

MAX: [laughing]

SARU: If he [Rastan] doesn't do that, someone should do it.

[The scene from the film ends]

DUSTY: There ya go.

VINCE: So uh, so why is [MAX laughing] it that you despise the mandolin player?

DUSTY: Didn't you *hear* it?

VINCE: No, no, this guy sounds better than that.

SARU: No, no, no, he can sound *good*. [overlapping with DUSTY]

DUSTY: It sounds just like him.

SARU: *But*, to *him* [Rastan].... this fuckin' barbarian from the north, [overlapping] dislikes it.

MAX: Yeah, it sounds like "I bring my love a cherry" or somethin'

SARU: Yeah, yeah, to *him* it sounds like that. And probably to this *audience* it sounds like that.

MAX: I could see that.

**The fate of the NPC Carlos: 06/09/2009**

[MAX has just framed Carlos for the murder of the NPC magistrate that MAX's character killed]

DUSTY: That's pretty fuckin' harsh MAX.

MAX: [laughing] it was so easy though.

SARU: Yeah, well, it was.

MAX: I didn't realize how well the story was. It was just all there.

SARU: Dude why do think I was telling you from the beginning. It just all played together.

[pause]

VINCE: [laughs] ahh.

MAX: Poor Daniel.

SARU: I think it was Carlos.



VINCE: [laughing still] yeah, yes it was Carlos.

MAX: Poor Carlos. Looks like a Carlos.

SARU: Dude Carlos is gonna be hung within like two weeks. [MAX and JAVER chuckle]

DUSTY: You should....

SARU: [interrupting] Dude! Are you gonna go to the fuckin' hanging and like smile at him? [VINCE laughs]

DUSTY: No, what you should do, What you should do

SARU: [laughing] Oh! That's so *evil!*

DUSTY: You know, what you could do to get back, to get back to being chaotic good is you could break 'im out. Or you can go in there, go into his prison cell and have sex with him before he dies.

VINCE: [laughs] I don't think that makes you chaotic good.

SARU: Well, breaking him out might,

MAX: Dude, dude, let's fuckin' save at the hanging, come on. That'd be amazing. [Javer chuckles]

DUSTY: That'd be pretty cool.

VINCE: I don't think the kid really warrants a public execution.

DUSTY: You, if you told Rastan what you did to that kid, *I'd* help you save him. You just have to have a good plan so we don't get caught.

SARU: Well there ya go, there's a way we can keep fuckin' Rastan from wandering the city.

VINCE: Well, the kid's *probably* being taken to the same prison that you got what's-his-name out of. What the hell's his name?

SARU: Uhh, Galen. Galen.

VINCE: Yes. yeah.

SARU: Galen the street urchin.

[pause]

MAX: [talking to Saru] I think later that day I'll go talk...I'll go look for you.

VINCE: Who's "you"?

SARU: Aedros. [pause] you can probably just go to the mage tower, and I'd be there.

MAX: yeah, ok.

VINCE: mmhmm. It seems to've been where you [Elyse/MAX], where you've been staying lately anyway

MAX: yeah.

SARU: Yeah obviously you're just gonna need to get a room up there.

MAX: yeah.

SARU: Dude, Rastin could uh....er...er... Raneas could probably, you know like, hire you as a bodyguard or something, and give you a room in there or somethin'. I'm sure that could be finagled and then you could stay there. maybe?

MAX: I'll talk to him about that.

VINCE: Carlos: sacrificial lamb [Saru laughs]

SARU: Me, as a player, all for savin' him, cause I'm not a fuckin' cold-hearted bastard, [VINCE laughs], *Aedros?* gonna be fuckin' hard to convince him.

VINCE: Yeah. Raneas has nothing to do with that.

MAX: yeah.

VINCE: He's keepin' his hands clean, or trying to anyway.

SARU: Ok, so you [MAX/Elyse] come find me?

MAX: Yeah.

[in what follows, everything in quotation marks is character dialogue as opposed to player comments]

SARU: "Elyse! Always a pleasant surprise. How ya doin' darlin'?"

MAX: "Good."

VINCE: Except that you're badly injured.

MAX: yeah. [VINCE chuckles]

SARU: "You, uh, look, uh, what happened to you?"

MAX: I'm like, "uh, some shit went down. But, don't worry, I got it taken care of."

SARU: "eh, Looks that way. Good to see you're still around... still amongst the living."

MAX: I'm like, "there should be a kid, uh, coming in here who's uh being booked for the..."

SARU: Well not in here, this is the mage tower.

[they discuss where the prison and mage tower are]

MAX: okay yes, so I'm sayin' "so there a guy.." yeah, "there's a boy named Carlos who's gonna be brought in here pretty soon for the uh, murder of magistrate Lucius."

SARU: "Really?"

MAX: "Yeah."

SARU: "I hadn't gotten wind of that" [VINCE chuckles]

MAX: "Yeah, it's kind of a re...recent..."

SARU: Did, did we know? Wait, did we...did...when... when we ordered him [gesturing towards Javer] to kill the magistrate's buddy...

VINCE: yeah...

SARU: Did we know it was magistrate Lucius? Did she explain that to us? I forget.

[They discuss that no one knew the magistrate's name]

SARU: I'll say "Oh *really*? That uh..."

MAX: So I'm like "So I don't know what kind of uh pull you have around there but, uhh..."

SARU: "That wouldn't have uh... *eased* your life anything would it? The death of the magistrate?"

MAX: "I'm sure it eases the lives of many [VINCE laughs]"

SARU: “Don’t know, but he’s prob’ly a dick. [VINCE and MAX laugh] Prob’ly deserved it. One of those”

MAX: “But uh, if you could do anything as far as keeping the situation clean, or maybe even uh..

SARU: “Clean? It sounds like, uh, I’m clean [VINCE chuckles], sounds like you’re clean”

MAX: “Well that, and and then if you can find *some* use for the boy rather than just simply having him put to death I don’t know.

SARU: “Well I’m not ultimately the one who decides these things”

MAX: “Maybe that would be beneficial.”

VINCE: You know that they might care a little bit more about this than they did the other one.

DUSTY: Dude! He’s fuckin’ wanted for murder of a magistrate.

MAX: [chuckling] yeah.

DUSTY: They’re not just gonna let him go for two-p’nce

[They all joke about the idea of buying the kid for two-pence]

SARU: I’ll be like, “You know, it sounds to me, like, *somebody* needs to be punished for the magistrate’s death. And I would *hate* to see a lovely flower like yourself –”

DUSTY: Just sneak into the cell and *fuck* ‘im and let ‘im die [VINCE laughs]

SARU: I’d hate to see a lovely *flower* like yourself –

VINCE: I love Rastin’s idea, really. That’s just tops everything I’ve heard

SARU: [overlapping VINCE] had to uh, had to be pruned for such a, maybe necessary act, so uh,

MAX: I guess you’re right. I hate to see ‘im uh, go down like this, but uh, better him than me.

SARU: Well uh, [VINCE laughs] well *always* better someone else than us. Always. *However*, I suppose if you wanted to do something...I could, *maybe* see what I could do, but you’d have to make it worth my while.

[They discuss how it would be nearly impossible to save the kid and then question how it was that MAX's character was ever considered a "good" character.]

SARU: It's been a nice, I think, kinda slow progression down to the, you know, uh, it's been good, it's been natural.

MAX: Apparently everything I did was kid's stuff up until now.

SARU: Yup, running with the big boys now.

VINCE: That was pretty hard core dude. You totally destroyed this kid.

DUSTY: [MAX is laughing] yeah.

VINCE: And you manipulated him in..into thinking you were gonna have sex with him, pretty much.

SARU: Yeah! Fuckin' brilliant!

VINCE: Fuckin' *evil*.

SARU: It's brilliant!

DUSTY: He *does* deserve to die. 'Cause you.. 'cause he was just livin' there [at the magistrate's house]...and you just...he...he was *very* easily convinced to let you go and help him kill people [laughter]. So, but I still think you oughtta go in there and bang this kid.

MAX: ahh. no. I don't think so.

DUSTY: Okay...

SARU: The question is whether you want to totally destroy his soul before he dies so that he comes back as, like a fucking undead or something, and getting *extra* evil points by like showing up and somehow –

MAX: No. I don't see myself cashing in on the *extra* evil points. I'm not gonna tell you to *torture* the kid or something.

VINCE: Well, uh, I think, I think our characters are starting to come in...into...

SARU: into their own?

VINCE: into their own, yes that's what I was lookin' for.

**Should Elyse be killed by an NPC:** 06/09/2009

[MAX's character has just been knocked out by an NPC magistrate]

SARU: Well, it looks like somebody *else* is gonna be in jail

DUSTY: Ugh [VINCE laughs]

MAX: or dead.

SARU: I'm gonna have to bail *them* out too.

VINCE: Well the question here, is would he just *kill* you, or, would he uh, have you imprisoned. That's the question.

[pause]

DUSTY: He *might* have you imprisoned so he can question you. But if he thinks you're working alone, why would he bother? He'd just fuckin' kill you.

[pause, VINCE inaudibly sighs while weighing the options]

SARU: I could definitely see him killing her, but I also think it makes more sense from, you know, also a *gameplay* standpoint for him *not* to kill her. 'Cause one of his peons, or whatever, just got killed, and he sees *her* in here now, so maybe he suspects *that*, and wants to...I dunno, I guess it depends on whether the guy's like, kinda lawful-y or what. He might want to make a show of her, you know.  
[overlapping]

VINCE: All right. All right you wake up with uh, you get...[rolls some dice] 7 of your hit points back.

MAX: Ok.

VINCE: You wake up, uh, like, tied up and racked to a wall.

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