

THESIS

GAMING CULTURE, MOTIVATION, AND CATHARTIC EXPERIENCE:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING STREAMERS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

GAMING CULTURE, MOTIVATION, AND CATHARTIC EXPERIENCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING STREAMERS

With the rise of online, streamed entertainment and the resurgence of tabletop roleplaying games in popular media, it has become essential to examine participation motivations in the tabletop streaming space. To investigate play and community participation motivations I have drawn from my own decade long experiences in the tabletop space and initial observations of tabletop roleplay streams to inform interviews of seventeen active streamers. Interviews were further enhanced by both participating in a tabletop stream and observing streams online over the live streaming platform Twitch. Player relations to character and a desire to engage in game play emerged as motivations to initially participate in streaming roleplaying games. Once engaged in the broader tabletop community, players found themselves better able to express their ideal selves and, building upon psychological anthropological theories on cultural norm congruence, better fit into a community with new, alternative cultural norms that more closely aligned with players of marginalized identity. Player character relationship and the safety brought about by alternative cultural norms also allowed for the emergence of therapeutic benefits of play, through cathartic experience. The safety to express ideal selves, the comfort brought on by more closely aligning with the community's norms, and the relief of emergent cathartic experiences best explain player motivations to return to online streaming groups.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In their early years, tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG) received attention from a broad range of social theorists, including long form qualitative study (Fine 1983). Quickly, these varied approaches turned to studies on the emotional benefits of and clinical applications for roleplay (Starker 1979, Holmes 1980, Johnson and Quinlan 1980), including one early anthropological case study of the therapeutic benefits from such play (Hughes 1988). Modern theories of roleplay have remained focused on benefit studies (Coe 2017) or on applications of roleplay for therapeutic purposes (Mendoza 2020). Studies on benefits derived from roleplay have suggested that participation results in an increase in self-efficacy (Peng 2008, Bowman and Lieberoth 2018) and confidence (Bessière et al. 2007). The expanded social networks resulting from participation in roleplay communities has also been found to offset emotional regulation deficiencies by increasing the range of support systems (Cheung et al. 2015). Some players even report using tabletop games as a method of self-prescribed therapy when lacking accessible, relevant healthcare (Bowman 2010). These derived benefits may point to the functional uses of roleplaying games, but not to the motivational draw of initial participation. My research, which consists of interviews and observations in tabletop streaming communities, is concerned primarily with questions of:

(Q1) What motivates individuals to participate in the tabletop streaming community, both in the general roleplay games themselves and to the act of performing their characters to a live audience?

(Q2) What is the role of marginalized identity in drawing in players to roleplaying games and streaming communities?

(Q3) What causes members to return to these communities?

(Q4) What role does culture (e.g., community norms) play in shaping psychological and social processes of identity and well-being?

In each of these questions, the concept of personal motivation is central, as these are questions of why players choose to participate in specific communities, why they choose to perform for audiences, and what would make them choose to return to certain contexts and communities. Player motivation decisions are also to be taken in their social contexts, with socially motivated outcomes, where players are seeking community. To address motivations, I have turned to Snodgrass's (Forthcoming) utilization of Dressler's (2017) concept of *cultural consonance* in relation to socially learned and shared *models* of social value, where distress is related to an individual's ability to live up to (or not) dominant cultural ideals and expectations. Dressler conceptualized cultural consonance as "the degree to which individuals approximate in their own beliefs and behaviors the prototypes for belief and behavior encoded in shared cultural models" (2017, 50). In exploring how socially marginalized individuals strive to be consonant with alternative cultural models cum social ideals, I argue that tabletop roleplaying game streamers aim to undermine dominant models and, mediated by their internet activities, lessen the potentially stigmatizing impact dominant cultural ideals might have on players and audiences. Players may also be drawn to the space of roleplaying games themselves, irrespective of streaming, through the capacity to identify as a character, but also from the ability to draw benefits from identifying as an alternative self. These alternate identities, conceptualized here as *symplothes*, a joining of the player and character in a single identity (Banks 2015), allow for vicarious experiences through the use of character and for the generation of emotionally *cathartic* experience. That is, I suggest that gamers' and streamers' vicarious character-driven

experiences can be emotionally situated in personal feelings of distress in ways that they can be played out safely through the medium of character. The cathartic experiences are subsequently reflected back on the individuals' actual lives, generating emotional relief through fictive practice.

In anthropology, research has been put forth regarding psychological and medical benefits derived from adhering to or differing from cultural norms. In his research in Brazil, Dressler has found that failure to live up to the implicit expectations inherent in shared and culturally learned models that function as social ideals can lead individuals to experience distress. Expanding on this idea, Snodgrass (Forthcoming) has explored the benefits of *avatar* states, or projections of the self into secondary agents, in both spiritual practice and in online gaming communities. Of particular interest is the application in Snodgrass's studies in which individuals who, experiencing themselves lacking in reference to offline cultural ideals, found therapeutic benefit from offsetting this disparity by turning to alternate avatar identities. These alternative selves situated in unique socially normative structures offer reprieve from the expectations and burdens of the broader social context. In these alternative models, participants can feel safe in their own skin, so to speak.

Safety and free expression of valued personal traits is a common benefit of tabletop roleplay participation (Coe 2017), and the relationships developed through tabletop play can carry on into the real world, cementing alternative social spheres (Meriläinen 2012). The feeling of safety also happens to be a requirement for the generation of cathartic experience. Cathartic in this sense is the experience of emotion through the medium of character, often targeting specific experiences or emotions desired by the player through the use of story. Cathartic experiences can bring perspective to one's place in the world (Golden 1973), or relieve withheld emotions

associated with negative past experiences (Scheff 2007). These cathartic experiences are the cause for return, as players who might join games out of convenience or desire to seek safe communities find themselves well situated to have strong, positive emotional experiences through play.

In my Background Theory chapter, I discuss the histories and varieties of theories as they pertain to tabletop roleplaying, cathartic experience, consonance, and identity. While roleplaying studies have investigated each of these subjects to some degree, it is often done using differing terminology or only in passing reference to the topic. I will outline key areas related to the topic of role-playing games throughout the history of this play genre, including past examples of seemingly modern theory in early tabletop studies, or forgotten and misunderstood definitions such as those associated with catharsis. With these wide-ranging perspectives established, and using my own experience in the field, I synthesize differing definitions to create my own analytical framework.

In my Setting and Methods chapter, I identify my main field of study, Twitch, the systems being used during observations, and my key informant groups. The first key group is Forward¹, a streaming group focused on increasing diversity on Twitch and dedicated to widening the networks of other streamers, all while playing mostly shortened versions of tabletop games. The other group, Busker Quest, is focused on *story crafting*, engaging its community, and participating in a longer, multi-year game. In order to identify informants, I have relied on snowball sampling methods. In Benard et al.'s (2017) outline of the snowball sampling, research begins with interviews of one or two initial informants who are then requested to refer you to other, similar informants, repeating this process until the respondent

¹ To protect the identity of my informants, I have used pseudonyms for all groups and individuals associated with my fieldwork and interviews.

pool has become saturated and no new informants can be reached. The bulk of my data was collected through semi-structured interviews with informants. I was also able to participate in a livestream event and contributed to live chat interactions during observed streaming events. These data and new streaming experiences are enhanced by my own decade-long experiences in the tabletop community as both a player and game master. This overview will better frame the positions of my informants and that of myself as the researcher in terms of play and methodology.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the results of my study. Analysis, conducted by coding interviews and fieldnotes, is accentuated by key illustrative quotes from informants and integration with context, interpretation, and theory. Here I will examine the ways in which different informants recount their introduction to tabletop gaming and the streaming space, and the ways they used their initial experience to seek out better suited social spheres and play groups. Informants have also explicitly and implicitly discussed the cathartic benefits of play, and the ways in which they take in-game experiences as motivation and comfort in their daily lives. Through these examples I have developed a model of play which illustrates how failure to adhere to cultural norms causes individuals to seek out alternative models, how those new models afford them safety to explore themselves and confront their emotions, and the resultant catharsis which further draws players into tabletop gaming.

Throughout my thesis I expand on a growing anthropological literature on cultural norms, their impact on the well-being of community members, and the ability to create or participate in alternative communities with alternative norms which may mitigate broader cultural congruity (or lack thereof) with shared community norms. I introduce the concept of *cathartic play* as a method which uses the game character as a medium by which emotions are experienced and life

situations are dealt with in fictional spaces, leading to emotional releases that carry over into daily life. Catharsis is seen as a motivating factor for play and as the resultant benefit of the environment desired by those playing tabletop games. Part of the significance of this study also lies within the novelty of studies of streaming communities and new media, given their recent creation. Few studies have been conducted on live streaming platforms like Twitch, even fewer, if any, from a participant observational approach.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND THEORY

While little research exists on the role of tabletop games on streaming platforms, there exists decades worth of literature on tabletop games themselves. Theorizing tabletop games is bound to this history, as neurologist John Holmes was actively involved in both studying roleplaying games and contributing to their development (1980). I will show how this theory is complemented by catharsis theory, which treats relationship between players and their characters and how those relationships can be properly balanced for therapeutic purposes. Psychological anthropology has allowed me to better understand how the sociocultural environment necessary for cathartic experiences is created in the comfort tabletop streaming groups provide.

2.1 Tabletop Roleplaying

The systems that would become tabletop roleplaying games did not begin with roleplay in mind. In Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* (2012), he traces the origins of early tabletop gaming, starting as far back as 4,500 years with the rise of the Royal Game of Ur in Sumer. After several millennia, chess took a central place among European aristocracy to train commanders for the tactics of war in the 16th century. Through the ensuing decades, the game of chess would be modified and reconstructed to meet the needs of shifting wars. By the late 18th century chess had become wargaming, with the introduction of the "setting" as the modern battlefield, modern implements of war, models of soldiers, the introduction of probability and math to gauge the strength of fighting forces and their competition with each other, and the referee to oversee and rule on the game (Peterson 2012). Peterson expands his history in his later work, *Game Wizards* (2021), with the rise of modern tabletop gaming, beginning with H. G. Wells's game Little Wars

in the 1910s, a simplified and standardized set of easily accessible rules, wargaming became a viable hobby for the popular masses. Those who collected and painted historical military figurines could now convert their passive hobby into a game. In the 1960s the genre of wargaming and the available figures had begun to diversify. An insurance salesman, Gary Gygax, had become interested in the creation of medieval wargames infused with fantastic story elements in the vein of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Gygax's first foray into fantasy wargaming was *Chainmail*, a system soon picked up by Gygax's friend and occasional co-author Dave Arneson who would go on to host a large multi-year long game utilizing the *Chainmail* system called Blackmoor. In the world of Blackmoor, players controlled territory and armies, in the old tradition of wargames, but Arneson found himself having to deal with players who would send small bands of soldiers off to explore caves and dungeons. To address the growing desire of players to control individual knights, storm dungeons, and fight with dragons, Arneson and Gygax worked together on the rules of their new game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which focused on small bands of adventures controlled individually by players who faced off against monsters, solved puzzles, and thwarted evil (Peterson 2021). While the foundation had been laid, with players controlling characters following a narrative story, the new game still had many holdovers from its wargaming origins and there existed no rules for how one *plays* a character. Roleplaying was on the horizon but was not an inherent feature of the game itself.

In Jennifer Grouling's (2010) accounting of where the roleplaying features likely originated from, she makes note of the rise of interactive fantasy books in 1967. These choose-your-own adventure books addressed the reader in the second person and allowed for choices using multiple-choice options presented at the end of a narrative event. Depending on the choice, the player would flip to the respective page to see the result, either progressing the story or

seeing it end abruptly and having to start over. These choices led along branching pathways with multiple scenarios and differing endings. Though some narrative elements of *Dungeons and Dragons* may have arisen from these literary formats, as even Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), the company responsible for the creation and printing of *Dungeons and Dragons* at the time, released a series of interactive books based on the franchise, they do not parallel the interactive elements of a tabletop game. Tabletop roleplaying games have potentially limitless possibilities, within the agreed upon rules of the game. The only real limit is the creativity and resourcefulness of the game's players. As such, the idea of a tabletop roleplaying game having branching storylines is as difficult to explain, as the branches are not as finite as that required by the limited space of a book. Players are not given a list of options to advance the story, they are free to make things up, and when doing so are subject to the whims of dice rolls which may ruin their plans. The story paths arise from an ongoing negotiation between players and game masters, and their outcomes are dictated by chance.

Game master, or GM, refers to the ones who control the game's narrative and enforce or create the rules. In the past, as a holdover from the wargaming days of tabletop games, game masters were referred to as *referees*, owing to their technical duties of enforcing rules. *Dungeons and Dragons*, as a move to separate itself from its rising competition in the late 1970s, capitalized on a piece of growing nomenclature among west coast players and began to refer to its game masters as *dungeon masters*, or DMs (Fine 1983). While not all tabletop systems require a GM to run, they do require someone to organize the sessions and to familiarize themselves with the rules.

Markus Montola (2008) defines the creative interdependence of tabletop roleplaying games with three rules: world, power, and character. The "world" aspect dictates that the stage of

the game, the world in which players play, is in a perpetual state of construction and reconstruction, as it is tied to the negotiation of game participants. This negotiation is situated in an established “power” hierarchy, most of which involves a game master at the top for whom final judgement about the admittance of new aspects of the world is reserved, and the players, who by interacting with the world and through the creations of their character make changes within the world. The game master is the narrator, the players are protagonists. Last is the rule of “character” in which players must have a proxy, the character, through which they engage the story and the world. Without players and their characters there is no game. Montola defines the relationship resultant from these rules as kind of “formal make-believe” (Montola 2008, 24).

Tabletop roleplaying games take different temporal forms depending on the desires or needs of the players. The basic temporal unit of the tabletop game is the session, the time allotted for gathering and participating in the game as one continuous event. Game sessions are ideally held at regular intervals, often weekly, and last several hours. The importance of the game session is in its use within the community of tabletop gamers, it is the unit by which game times are discussed and planned. Players measure the length of long tabletop games in both years and by number of sessions, they discuss availability for meeting for next session, and in summarizing the previous play experience refer to the event as last session. Summaries of the last game session are often given by a GM at the beginning of the new session and serve to set the tone and act as a reminder of previous events, as game sessions are often a week apart, if not longer.

In its shortest form, tabletop games can be *one-shots* where players engage in a self-contained story that begins and ends in a single session. These are not intended to be expanded into a continuous narrative and there exist tabletop systems meant to be used solely for one-shot sessions, such as Grant Howitt’s (2018) bear themed TTRPG, *Honey Heist*. Similar to one-shots

is the *short-shot*, a narrative with more than one session, but which does not meet an arbitrary threshold to be considered a campaign. The *campaign* is the basic form of tabletop roleplaying. Campaigns do not have any requisite number of sessions but consist of a long narrative story played with the same or slightly differing players and characters. Campaigns may be as short as a few weeks or months, but more often last years. In streaming contexts, campaigns may also have “seasons” like television shows where story arcs are played out and finished before going on hiatus, eventually returning to the same campaign with a new narrative drive.

Researchers have been following, and even contributing to, the rise of tabletop roleplaying games since the inception of the genre. 1977 saw the completion of a project that John Holmes, a neurologist who had taken an interest early in the development of *Dungeons and Dragons*, had begun a year prior with permission and assistance from Gygax and TSR. Holmes’s Basic Set was a rewrite of the D&D rules in a condensed form with an accompanying set of dice, which while required to play the game had until then been sold separately. The Basic Set served to make the game approachable for the average player, but also made the rules and game pieces more affordable (Peterson 2021). Holmes also recorded his experiences over four years of participating in tabletop roleplaying games as a publication in *Psychology Today* (1980) where he mused on the purpose of the genre. To Holmes, participation in tabletop gaming allowed for the free expression of a player’s “idealized alter egos and their less-than-ideal impulses” (1). Holmes even refers to the act of playing a roleplaying game and its collaborative nature as a “shared insanity” (4) in that it suspends the notions of reality and allows for the group to believe in fantasy. In these spaces players were free from the shackles of society and no longer bound by the nature of reality. The enjoyment of the fantasy of roleplaying only exists, in Holmes’s view, because of the desire of the players to extend themselves outside of this reality, but also to do so

with their trusted friends. The utility of tabletop games lay in doing what one wished they could always do *with* those they had always wished to do it with.

Gary Allen Fine produced an early longform qualitative study on tabletop roleplaying in his book *Shared Fantasy* (1983). Fine saw one type of identification emergent in tabletop gaming. While Fine notes the ability of some players, even at times those who savor the roleplaying aspect of tabletop gaming, to treat their characters as a tool, a means to winning a game, this is more the antithesis to identification than a form of it. When treating the tabletop experience as a game to be won, players tended to be more reckless in their play, running headlong into dangerous situations without regard for the well-being of the character. This style of play was of fleeting interest to Fine, who only treated it with a few lines. Then there was identification *with* the character, where the player was invested in the success of the character, as opposed to the success of the game. This style of play involved more roleplay, well thought out choices, and a deep desire to keep the character alive. Such players saw themselves in the game, identifying with the morality of their character and being more affected by the random nature of games like *Dungeons and Dragons* in which a character's actions and survival were beholden to dice rolls. The lines between character and player were blurred. Players imposed values, actions, and abilities that the player had onto a character which had traits that either enhanced those abilities or offset their weakness. Players who tended to be shy or awkward could overcome these shortcomings by increasing the charisma of their character, giving them natural charm that could be used in-game. Inversely, characters with low intelligence may still find themselves miraculously solving intricate riddles and puzzles if their player was able.

This exchange of information and talent between character and player is most commonly referred to as “bleed” and has come to also include emotional, relational, and even physical

exchange (Bowman 2013). For some, bleeding into and out of the character has become the goal of TTRPG play (Bowman 2010).

Kapitany *et al.* (2022) have defined tabletop roleplaying as a kind of “pretensive shared reality” (3), an imaginary instance in which multiple participants collectively engage, and which is bound by normative behaviors, where participants can construct the boundaries and rules of engagement. While engaged in these games, players can suspend reality while maintaining a grounding in it and can collectively define and agree on an alternate reality. As an example, one can maintain an understanding that jumping from a high window will cause death in everyday life, but we can collectively understand that within a pretensive shared reality jumping from a window simply causes us to fly. This is similar to Holmes's earlier use of roleplay as a bounded shared insanity. This suspension of disbelief and collective engagement allows for the bleeding effect, which Kapitany *et al.* examine in cases of character death. The death of a player's character is a notable example of the game bleeding back out into the player, where the grief and sadness associated with the death follow the character outside of the game.

In Heidi Hopeametsä's study of a 24-hour long roleplaying game called *Ground Zero*, a scenario which situates a handful of players as survivors of a nuclear explosion stuck in a bomb shelter in the 1960s, she found that participants' most positive experiences came from their intense dedication to character and their negative emotional experience during the event. Participants had spent months prior to the event studying 1960's American news, culture, and dress, even meeting weekly to watch old films together. Though *Ground Zero* is a bit more extreme than the typical TTRPG in terms of preparation, a study by Mikko Meriläinen (2012) showed that 78% of his 161 TTRPG participants regularly thought about, discussed, and mentally replayed events in TTRPGs between play sessions. In *Ground Zero* participants were

more likely to experience anxiety and negative emotions during play, some even reported crying when thinking about the event days later. However, the negative emotions were framed alongside and interpreted with their positive outcomes, of realigning the player's views of the world, the importance of interpersonal relationships, love, and their utility in overcoming distress (Hopeametsä 2008). Similarly, in Meriläinen's (2012) TTRPG study, 78% of respondents said that they at least occasionally gain introspective benefits from roleplaying games, using the game to reflect on their own emotional states. Women especially had a high rate of reporting viewing the roleplaying space as safe, having the ability to experience negative emotions safely, and work through those emotions in the game. Meriläinen refers to tabletop games as "mental pressure valves" for participants, safe outlets for positive and negative emotions.

Kapitany *et al.* (2022) suggest social utility as the primary motivator, where in players seek to experience collective joy, reinforce their relationships, and safely explore the self. Coe (2017) similarly traces motivation to the desire to become a part of, and grow more intimate, with a group. Increased intimacy allows for free expression of ideals and stress relief, stress relief increases well-being. The gained benefits of stress relief also become reasons for continued participation. It helps them escape realities and experience ideals. Ultimately this is a process of becoming, the players using the medium of the game to more closely approximate their ideal selves utilizing close, safe relationships. Coe also notes a bleed effect in his benefit analysis and categorizes it as "learning", the ability to be driven by curiosity as opposed to needs. Players can develop problem solving skills that then translate to their life by bringing experiences learned in games back into their everyday lives. This is the bridge between game and reality. The power and awareness of these effects by the TTRPG community is highlighted by Bowman (2010) who

notes some of her participants have turned to tabletop play to substitute for therapy when it is either inaccessible or unaffordable.

From the onset of TTRPG research there has been a consensus on the therapeutic benefits of roleplay associated with a suspension of disbelief and the necessity of a safe environment to act on ideal desires. Players project their ideal traits onto their characters and experience a bleeding of realities as they impose their own skills and knowledge onto fictional characters and reap the benefits of living out their ideals and growing in their capacity to handle stress. I have witnessed and heard similar effects to those reported here, but I see the desire to pursue safe environments as taking precedent over creating relationships or seeking stress relief. True, in safe environments relationships must be forged and stress relief can result, but the types of relationships pursued are those which allow for the free expression of idealized traits and the greatest emotional relief is derived from the vicarious processing of emotions through an idealized self.

2.2 Catharsis

Utilizing the term “catharsis” to describe emotional experiences has undergone changes in its theory and practical use over the last century. When it was first brought out from theatre and philosophy and introduced into therapeutic practice through psychodrama it emphasized the purifying effect of emotional expression through creative forms (Moreno 1940). In its original form, by which Aristotle coined and used the term, it represented the healing an audience received from observing a play unfold (Aristotle *Poetics*). However, taking a cue from the vagueness with which Aristotle first defined catharsis to describe the purifying effects of theatre, psychologists in Vienna in the 1920s began to apply the same term to the benefits actors received

from participation in the practice of acting. In describing the psychodrama and its healing effects, J. L. Moreno distinguished between “secondary” catharsis and the catharsis of the actor, or a “primary” catharsis. “It (the psychodrama) produces a healing effect -- not in the spectator (secondary catharsis) but in the producer-actors who produce the drama and, at the same time, liberate themselves from it” (1940: 209, parenthesis in the original). Similar to Aristotle’s purification, Moreno’s catharsis was a liberation. In Moreno’s psychodramas, patients acted out their past traumas and syndromes in a theatre of spontaneity, sometimes to an audience of other patients. Moreno noticed that while patients who acted on stage were receiving the liberating benefits of catharsis, some spectators were receiving benefits as well. The observers who benefited were those who were able to either relate to the events portrayed on stage or whose presenting symptoms were like the actor’s, meaning they were those who were best able to feel themselves represented by the performance.

Theories of catharsis regarding a common audience, of theories regarding the average theatre attendee’s experience as opposed to Moreno’s clinical settings, also tended to focus on the *kinds* of emotions experienced in catharsis. These purgation theories of catharsis began in the 1850s with Jacob Bernays and his work *Outlines of Aristotle’s Lost Work on the Effects of Tragedy* which treated catharsis similarly to that of a medical purge, and which emphasized the emotions of fear and pity. Leon Golden (1973) traces similar theories of mental health back as far as the 16th century when medical practitioners were seeking ways to cure or treat mental illnesses in similar ways to physical ones. To Golden, the problem with narrowing down a “truer” definition of catharsis lay in not going back far enough, thus he pulls from early Greek definitions of catharsis and defines it as “intellectual clarification”. In this theory catharsis has the effect of clarifying the viewer’s position in life through the observation of a theatre which

closely approximates the viewer's life trajectory, hence its association with Greek comedy and tragedy.

Even in the 1980s, there was doubt about the validity of using catharsis to deal with anger. Scheff and Bushnell (1984) called the use of the term catharsis in association with expressing (in the attempt to purge) anger unwarranted. Despite continued, popular efforts to cure aggression through catharsis, this method has a long-standing history of never working. One issue Scheff and Bushnell take with aggressive catharsis studies is that they rely on participants acting aggressively, thus riding themselves of the emotion. According to the studies, to act on violent impulses and to not feel relieved of aggression is to have proven catharsis theory wrong. Even modern discussions of catharsis theory hinge on such models (see Bresin and Gordon 2013 for catharsis via striking punching bags). Scheff and Bushnell see these studies as missing the point of catharsis, as originating in larger-than-life scenarios in the theatre. They argue that cartoonish or stylized violence is more reflective of the types of violence likely to bring about a cathartic experience, not realistic or real acts. Participants should engage in or observe over-the-top, unrealistic versions of their emotions to benefit from catharsis. Cathartic experiences should be “more akin to anger recollected in tranquility than realistic violence” (Scheff and Bushnell 1984: 240).

Catharsis requires an “aesthetic distance,” one in which the participant is perfectly balanced between knowing the event is fictional and remaining emotionally invested in it, between rational and irrational. Within the perfect balance “there is a double vision; one is both participant and observer” (Scheff and Bushnell 1984: 253). Scheff and Bushnell argue that within western society, to publicly display a negative emotion, such as anger, is considered a social taboo. Being caught displaying negative emotions can lead to the development of other

negative emotions, which begins a feedback loop. If one expresses anger, they become ashamed, and that shame can make them angry. For the aesthetic distance required for catharsis to occur, the participant must be convinced that the observers of emotions are accepting of them. Catharsis is the “reexperiencing of past emotional crises in a context of complete security: in the safety of the theater or the therapist’s office” (Scheff and Bushnell 1984, 239). A cathartic environment must above all be and feel *safe*.

Anthropologist Jane Wellenkamp (1988) borrowed, in part, from Scheff in her studies of the Toraja of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, emotional expression and catharsis. In Wellenkamp’s view catharsis is closer to purgation, strong emotional outbursts, which if repressed may bring harm to both the ritual participant and the local population. Catharsis is defined broadly, and specific examples vary wildly in their level of emotional outburst. The opening example given by Wellenkamp is that of crying during times of grief, but the Toraja also warn that excessive crying can lead to similar problems to the lack of crying, headaches, illness, and misfortune. Another example of catharsis in the Toraja is that of *ma ‘maro* rituals which involved possession by spirits and gods, and the compulsion to “use swords, knives, and other objects in attacks against themselves and others” (493). While cultural encouragement to cry and mourn may create the safe environment for catharsis, proposed by Scheff, it lacks the theatrical aspects required to fully realize the aesthetic distance. The rituals of possession and expression of violent impulses more closely approximate the theatrical in that it frames the act in larger-than-life supernatural powers and removal-from-actions accomplished by being beholden to another power that create a more exaggerated emotional expression, and therefore catharsis. Other anthropologists in the 1980s appear to have been inspired by Scheff as well, referring to his expansion of catharsis theory, which is applicable to ritual practice, but without much attempt to

define his theories, apply them beyond reference, or to expand upon them. Even Lutz and White's (1986) literature review, *The Anthropology of Emotions*, only refers to Scheff's work being used in anthropology at the time, without mentioning what the theory is, how it is being used, or by who. Another, modern literature review on mental health in Nepal, written by cultural psychologists and anthropologists, treats the catharsis theory in much the same way, mentioning it in the abstract, yet never defining it or making explicit reference to the theory in the actual paper (Pham et al. 2020).

The turn away from catharsis, aside from fleeting mentions, is not the fault of any one discipline. The social sciences moved away from examining catharsis in the late 1970s, and from using it as a theory shortly after. The problems plaguing catharsis theory in the 1990s and 2000s were the same problems Scheff was addressing in the 1980s; there was a pervasive idea that catharsis was simply acting on an emotional impulse (typically aggressive impulses) in order to expel it. Scheff (2007) notes that the heavy reliance on studies involving acting on aggressive impulses to discredit catharsis have a deep seeded misunderstanding of what catharsis even is, highlighted by the fact that catharsis does not require behavior. Catharsis is vicarious. Taking catharsis back to Aristotle's theatrical roots, the one receiving cathartic benefit must be at some distance removed from the acts which cause the catharsis to occur. This is not to say that aggression *cannot* be addressed in catharsis, but that it needs to in some way be distanced from the subject. Bing and Kim (2021) demonstrated that participation in Taekwondo, with its ritual practices, performative structure, and observation of teammate's demonstrations, adequately creates the distance necessary for catharsis and decreases aggression in participants by offering a safe, healthy outlet.

In my own work I frame catharsis as a purifying *and* clarifying experience. Acts of catharsis are not purgative; catharsis does not eliminate or rid one of the emotions associated with the triggering event. Catharsis can put an event into perspective, offering a new means of framing an event to lessen its impact or clarify the emotions surrounding it. Catharsis is not an explosive expulsion of negative emotions; it is a hyperbolic expression of felt experience that can be used to confront emotions rather than to escape them. An individual may never be able to “get rid of” powerful negative emotions associated with trauma, and some negative emotions may be reoccurring even after confronting them, such as those associated with being discriminated against, but they *can be confronted*. Catharsis may not be the cure-all, eliminating treatment purposed by proponents of the purgation theory, but it has healing and clarifying effects.

2.3 Cultural Consonance and Psychological Anthropology

Cultural consonance, as broadly defined, is congruency with socially learned *models* or *frames* of meaning that serve as cultural ideals (and establish social norms) against which members of a community are measured. Dressler has defined cultural consonance as “the degree to which individuals approximate in their own beliefs and behaviors the prototypes for belief and behavior encoded in shared cultural models” (2017, 50). In his application of these thoughts to Brazil among Afro-Brazilian communities, Dressler has found that failure to live up to the implicit expectations inherent in the cultural models that serve as social reference points individuals can suffer distress. In Dressler’s analysis, cultural *dissonance*, or the lack of cultural congruity with shared models of a valued ideal, is shown to be associated with physical symptoms of heightened blood pressure and overactive immune responses. What is most notable from Dressler’s (2017) research is the association of cultural dissonance with generalized

distress, and how failure to live up to cultural norms leads to negative mental health outcomes. Within the consonance framework, failure to live up to the overarching cultural models brings about discord with the community and distress in the individual. Using this theory, Snodgrass (Forthcoming) has explored the benefits of avatar states, in both spiritual practice and in online gaming communities. Of particular interest is the application in Snodgrass's studies in which individuals who, lacking in comparison to their offline cultural models and frames of reference, found therapeutic benefit from offsetting this disparity by turning to an alternate cultural model.

In his study of Afro-Brazilian evangelical communities, Dengah (2014) suggests that participation in religious communities offers alternative cultural models that to which groups dissonant with dominant, mainstream cultural models can more easily align. Alignment with alternative models, with more readily accessible norms is associated with lower distress, even when controlling for socioeconomic status. In the Afro-Brazilian context of Candomblé, another researcher, Seligman (2014), found that those who came from more marginalized backgrounds, women and homosexual men, were more likely to become Candomblé spirit mediums. Mediums affix their identity to a new self and embody that self in ritual. Moments of clarity are seen as moments of closeness to the *orixás*, the spirits that preside over and possess the mediums in ritual. These new identities give meaning to the difficulties of their marginal selves, and to their inability to live up to societal standards. These improved mental states and associated embodiment constitute and loop into each other, forming the basis of the medium's resilience. In a broader context, it is by adopting a new cultural framework wherein one is no longer stigmatized or bound as tightly to broader cultural norms of self that distress can be relieved.

Seligman's theories also have implications for the concept of *bleeding* prominent in TTRPG theory. The positive benefits associated with Candomblé are gained from the

embodiment of spirits which either compliment or contrast the practitioner's history and disposition. One medium embodied a calm, elderly male spirit to offset the practitioner's anxiety and heightened emotion expression, another embodied a war *orixás* and found relief for his aggressiveness in ritual dance and display. These new identities give meaning to the difficulties of their marginal selves, and to their inability to live up to societal standards. This identity shift is then cemented and reinforced in the embodiment of postures, mannerisms, and ways of being associated with the *orixás*, and with the process of possession. These improved mental states and associated embodiment constitute and *loop* into each other (in Seligman's terminology), forming the basis of the medium's resilience. In a broader context, it is by adopting a new cultural framework wherein one is no longer stigmatized or bound as tightly to broader cultural standards of self that distress can be relieved. It lends itself to a model of culture in which social structures can be used as tools of mental relief.

Seligman suggests this theory need not be bound to religious experience. In the instance of depression and diabetes, the diagnosis of diabetes may lead to depression through the negative social stigma linking diabetes with poor selfcare, lack of self-restraint, and association with obesity. The ensuing depression therefore leads to lethargy, overeating, and results in the stigma coming to fruition, cycling back or "looping" endlessly (Seligman 2014). Without the need for biological measurements, one may still suggest from studying Seligman's work that this hypothetical individual would benefit from participation in a group where their diabetes is not a sentencing to obesity and poor health, where they are instead valued for their struggle for the newfound affliction.

In my own work, I expand parts of the consonance model by suggesting that the desire to create a space in which diverse streamers can be more consonant leads to a motivation to create

such spaces, or to become a part of diverse spaces, to undermine the dominant models. In doing so, I suggest that my informants are creating alternate consonance models, much in the same way Dengah's (2014) evangelical or Seligman's (2014) Candomblé informants have. Tabletop gaming and streaming communities offer safer spaces that allow for the free expression of participant's idealized selves, through the implementation of a cultural model with which these realized selves more closely align.

To explore and test these theories I have turned to the ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Through my field work and on analysis of my interview transcripts I came to see the use of catharsis theory in understanding the tabletop experience, turning to Scheff and Bushnell (1984) and Snodgrass (Forthcoming) to test and confirm my own findings.

CHAPTER 3: SETTING AND METHODS

In the tradition of anthropological research, this study is presented as an *ethnography*, a qualitatively collected case study account of group social practice, beliefs, and behaviors. Most of my data was collected through interviews and observations of live streams, but included participant observation, wherein I joined in the cultural practices of my informant group. I was invited to participate in a tabletop livestream, where I went through the same application and selection process familiar to many would-be streamers hoping to connect with a new community. Through early observations I drafted an interview protocol, testing it and confirming the language used with first three interviewees. Two groups of streamers were selected from my early pool of interviewees, one chosen for its focus on diversity and its inconsistent cast of players, and another for its consistent, long running campaign and emphasis on story. Both informants and groups are given pseudonyms and identifiable information has been suitably changed or removed to protect informant identities. The number of total interviews was chosen based on Hennink et al. (2017)'s estimations that sixteen is sufficient to reach thematic saturation, rendering further interviews unnecessary to get at the core cultural beliefs on a given subject. While qualitative in data collection, I have employed a mixed methods approach to analyze the deeper cultural desires to participate in tabletop streaming. I have conducted a systematic analysis of the themes generated from the coding of interview transcripts.

3.1 Core Informant Groups

Group one, Forward, was chosen for its representation of a more loosely knit community which focused on one-shot games utilizing a wide range of indie games, like the collaborative world building game *The Ground Itself* where players take on the role of a location and tell its

story over time (Pipkin 2019), and mainstream systems, like the more traditional d20² based *Cypher System* (Cook 2015). The core members of this group were the producers of the streaming channel, Dabby and Roze, who began the channel shortly before I began my fieldwork in order to bring a greater representation of minority communities to the streaming space. Players on Forward are inconsistent, owing to the one-shot oriented nature of the channel. Players often participate for a single session, playing a single character, and those that return play different games, with different characters, and most often among different players. There is no set number of Forward members, as the number, demographics, and games vary week to week. The only consistent members are the producers, who are more often producing the shows behind the scenes than playing in them. The intentionality of increasing diversity in streaming and rotating cast of players and characters has led Forward to be heavily diverse, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The ages noted in my observations ranged from eighteen to thirty-six, with some room in the upper direction as ages are not shared as part of the stream and dependent on publicly available information or estimates on my part. Players and GMs on Forward one-shots are requested to apply for positions, meaning they consist either of individuals with no prior relation or who know each other in passing. The application process also allows for the producers to ensure high diversity while also reaching outside of their own social circles. These one-shots, as they exist on Forward, are not composed of players who frequently play together. In my observations and from the informal interviews with the producers and some players, it appears that the primary function, where it is explicitly mentioned, of the channel is to network streamers. While players may express having fun in the play experience,

² D20 refers to the twenty-sided dice required to play the game. D20 based systems use twenty-sided dice as their means of establishing probability and random chance in the game, using the numbers rolled to determine the outcome of desired actions.

the time before and after the stream, outside of audience view, is largely dedicated to talking about other streams members participate in, chat platforms streamers can network through, and invitations to stream elsewhere. The beginnings and endings of the streams themselves are also dedicated to “plugging,” sharing information about the individual streamer’s own projects or social media accounts in the hopes of increasing support and followers. Forward is also a good channel for exposure, as it is the largest channel of the three observed, with almost two thousand followers and a similar number of viewers during streams.

Group two, Busker Quest, was conceptually different than Forward, but compositionally similar. Focused more on community engagement and artistic pursuits, Busker Quest maintains an ethnically diverse cast, with white-American, Asian American, and Afro-European players represented. While a smaller channel than Forward, the Busker Quest group maintains a steady five members, GM included, with the same players returning each week to reprise the same roles. The main tabletop game on the channel is a single, multi-season campaign with a consistent cast of players and characters. The channel itself was also host to the producer’s creative tabletop roleplaying pursuits which include the designing of in-game items, discussion of other systems or games, and work on the producer’s own in-progress tabletop roleplaying system. The producer of the stream and owner of the channel, Semla, recruited players from within her own network of creative content producers, some of which were themselves developing tabletop roleplay systems. The system used during the main Busker Quest campaign was *Dungeons and Dragons*, though with creative interpretation of the rules by the GM and with loose enforcement for enhanced storytelling. The ages of players were also closer than those of Forward, ranging from nineteen to early thirties, though the latter age was only suggested to me and not openly given. By the end of my fieldwork, Busker Quest was ending its second season,

thirteen months after its first stream, with plans to move on to another tabletop system. This channel is the contrast to Forward in that it is a consistent campaign played among friends over a longer time. The channel is smaller as well, only around three hundred followers, and has fewer plugs for content outside of the channel, though they are present.

There was also a third channel observed early in my research as a means initially engage in the community, and which hosted a short-shot campaign in which many of my early informants played. This third channel, Myths and Monarchs, focused more on science fiction themes than the Tolkienesque fantasy typical of many streamed tabletop games. The channel's producers were diversely gendered white-Americans, and only one, Paris, participated in the observed game and later participated in an interview. The game itself was fashioned after the common media troupe, free-range children, which typically consists of coming-of-age stories about pre-teens in the 1980s who find themselves entangled in adventure without the supervision of their parents in the vein of Stephen King's "The Body" (1982). This divergent genre is of note as, in my interviews, two of the four players mentioned how the system itself contributed to their own exploration of alternative childhood narratives. While not necessarily representative of the channel itself, all but one of the players in this short-shot identified as non-binary and represented white-American, African American, Asian American, and Afro-European ethnicities. In all, of the groups I observed, I was able to interview both founding members and producers of Forward, Roze and Dabby. From Busker Quest I was able to interview the founder and GM, Semla, as well as three of the four players, the missing member proving difficult to contact even with the assistance of Semla. Of the Myths and Monarchs channel, I was able to interview all members of the campaign I observed, as well as one of the channels behind the scenes producers, Lyon.

3.2 Ethnographic Setting

The live-streaming platform Twitch has served as my main research setting. Twitch, founded in 2012, was the most viewed live streaming platform in 2020, generating over 5 billion hours of views in the second quarter of 2020 (Stream Hatchet 2020). Viewership and engagement have only increased since the onset of COVID-19 in spring of 2020. Twitch reached an all-time high average viewership of 2.48 million in April 2020 and an all-time high maximum viewership of 6 million in June 2020, a trend which continued, setting another record at 6.5 million viewers in January 2021 (Twitch Tracker 2020b).

My communities of interest are tabletop roleplaying streamers. Tabletop players began to fully exploit the utility of the streaming platform in 2013 after one of the most prominent tabletop systems, *Dungeons and Dragons*, successfully began their own series of streaming events after finding success in playing live in front of audiences at conferences (Bilsland 2015). It was later, in 2015, that tabletop streams would begin a steady ascent to popularity with the introduction of the Critical Role stream, which would reach the highest tabletop stream viewership at 110 thousand in June 2020 (Twitch Tracker 2020a).

This data as well as my own fieldwork was affected by the then ongoing quarantine brought about by the rise of COVID-19 in the United States. My own fieldwork and interviews began in October of 2020, during the ongoing lockdown. While my interviews continued well into spring of 2021, when some COVID-19 restrictions began to loosen, my work was still done entirely online. I conducted interviews primarily using the conferencing software Zoom, and I used the social media platform Twitter to reach out to potential informants and schedule interviews. During my own streaming participation, I utilized the online chat service Discord for

discussion regarding the stream's production, to conduct informal interviews, and on one occasion to obtain one of my formal interviews. This diverse suite of online communication platforms is also reflected in the utility of technology to maintain social relations during the pandemic, and of the applications for using online services when lacking other methods of communication with informant populations. The necessity of this technology also allowed me, in part, to gauge its dependence among my informants all of whom were playing their tabletop games online despite many of them originally playing in person before the pandemic. My own insight gained from my prior decades worth of tabletop roleplaying experience, and my then recent shift to online play which had begun before the pandemic, allowed me to better understand my informants' experiences and frame my interactions through personal struggles adapting to online play. Having already adapted to online play, I was also able to take to the video calls and online chat interactions necessitated by the pandemic more quickly, without which this work would have been impossible.

3.4 Data Collection

The core research method featured in this thesis, which is core to anthropological inquiry, is participant observation. Online streams of the core informant populations were observed for detection of themes in practice and for the collection of exemplifying scenes. During the observation of streams, I participated in the role of an audience member, able to engage through the audience chat. One stream, observed early in my field work through *Myths and Monarchs*, took place at the end of a campaign and consisted only of audience participation, with the members of the stream answering audience questions about the game and responding to feedback in real time. I was able to pose questions about the tabletop system in use and members feelings

about it while gaining group responses. A typical stream observation lasted three to five hours, with variation depending on the stream's purpose, system of use, and participants. In my fieldwork I observed fifty-five hours of streams across three streaming channels, covering a total of fifteen sessions comprised of six one-shot sessions, the entirety of a short-shot campaign, and six sessions of the second season of a, at the conclusion of my observations, still ongoing campaign. While these hours are in consideration of the live viewings I participated in, I have also referenced video-on-demand (VOD) recordings of observed streams for clarification, looking back at the six sessions from the ongoing campaign during my thesis writing. These VODs were made publicly accessible on their respective channels after the stream had concluded. In the spring of 2021, I also actively participated in a one-shot tabletop stream in order to gain insight into the experience of the population and to conduct informal interviews around the streaming experience. The stream in which I participated required around ten hours, spread across two pre-session meetings and time before and after the stream itself, but not including the many text-based conversations throughout the weeks leading to the event. While the event itself was short and plagued with technical difficulties on my end, we spent a half hour before and after discussing streaming projects, lighting, and networking for future work. During participation and observation, I conducted typical anthropological methods, as outlined by Emerson *et al.* (2011), of field jottings, written notes, and audio recordings for data collection.

Interviewees were selected through “snowball” sampling. One original informant was selected as a “seed,” by reaching out to members of my own roleplaying communities to identify potential participants in the role-playing streaming community. Once the seed informant was interviewed, I requested them to refer me to other streamers they know. This method is repeated until the desired number of interviewees is reached, with the sample becoming increasing

random the more layers away from the seed informant one goes before concluding the interviews (Bernard et al. 2017). This snowball method had similarities and has been compared to another method of sampling, respondent driven sampling (RDS), which branched away from snowball methods to create more methodological rigor and better estimate the population representation of the sample (Heckathorn 1997). Gyarmathy et al. (2014) consider the difference to be more superficial, as their studies of RDS and snowball sampling showed similar population representation and significance in their estimations. McCreesh et al. (2012), in estimating the randomness of samples generated using such chain-driven sampling methods, conclude that it is better than convenience sampling for reaching a representative sample, but inconsistently so. While my snowball sample may not be representative of the entire tabletop streaming population, it proved useful in its originally intended use, reaching hidden populations within a community such as racial and sexual minorities (Bernard et al. 2017).

3.4 Data Analysis

Guest et al. (2006) suggested that code saturation can be reached in as few as nine interviews, with the upper end being closer to twelve, but also found that the most common codes can be identified in a single, thorough interview. Hennink et al. (2017) found similar results, with ranges from one to sixteen interviews finding code saturation, but further added the importance of *meaning* or conceptual saturation. From the view of Hennink et al., though an exhaustive list of codes can be reached relatively quickly in interviews, more may be required to bring about a full understanding of the codes' meanings. The range for meaning saturation was also wide, ranging from four to twenty-four interviews. In conducting my own interviews, I aimed for the upper end of code saturation, sixteen, and ended my fieldwork with a total of

seventeen interviews. While this might not be within the range of Hennink et al.'s (2017) meaning saturation, Weller et al. (2018) suggested that meaning saturation is an issue of the ways in which interviews are conducted. During their work, it was some of Weller et al.'s smallest samples, only ten participants, that presented the most saturated themes. Weller et al. noted that the higher saturation came from open-ended interviews with more thorough prompts and probing by the interviewer. To this end I have turned to person-centered interviews, a type of semi-structured interview, in the tradition of Levy and Hollan (1998), where questions alternate between emphasis on how the individual is situated in the culture and how the individual perceives others and the culture. Probing and follow-up questions are important in this form of interviewing, as the interviewer and respondent together pursue emergent topics and themes. This more open-ended approach led to interviews of widely varying lengths, from twenty-eight minutes to an hour and fifteen, with an average closer to forty-five, with a protocol of only nine questions (see appendix 1 for the complete interview protocol). Interview questions were aimed at uncovering participant's motivations for play, difference in play online and offline, and how players relate to their characters, the role of the audience in streaming, and emotionally heightened play experiences. These questions were refined in a series of initial interviews with members of Myths and Monarchs.

All audio recordings were transcribed and then deleted to ensure the privacy of my informants, then the transcriptions were coded for themes using MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2021) software. To gain a better general understanding of the possible saturation of themes as it is across streaming channels, interviews were randomized when entered into MAXQDA to avoid the clumping together of players from the same channel. Coding was undertaken in the grounded theory methods of Strauss and Collins (1998) in which the transcript text was evaluated for

themes line by line, coded into concepts, and concepts were merged in larger, overarching categories. Each new coded concept was compared to existing concepts to create new categories or placed into relevant categories where applicable. From this method one hundred and two concepts were coded and sorted into twenty-nine categories covering a total of five hundred and sixty-six coded segments across seventeen interviews. Saturation of themes was reached by the fourteenth interview, falling within the range expected by Hennink et al. (2017) of one to sixteen for core themes. Generated themes can also then be analyzed by their saliency in the response pool, how often they are repeated across all seventeen interviews.

3.5 Summary and Conclusion

My research, set in the online spaces of online video calls and the streaming platform Twitch, aimed to discern the motivations for participating in roleplaying games and the benefits derived from participation. I have turned to the traditional ethnographic field methods of observation, participation, and interviews to gain a more holistic understanding of the tabletop streaming experience. Two main groups were identified for continued observations, Forward, with a diverse and ever-changing cast of players, and Busker Quest, with a consistent play group and campaign. Observations and conversations with members of another group, Myths and Monarchs, served as the foundation for my interviews and later observation. To gain more clarity I have also employed a mixed methodology, coding and analyzing the themes generated from interviews. These methods serve as the basis by which I participated with and analyzed the cultures of tabletop roleplay streaming communities on Twitch, discovering the cathartic use of roleplay through grounded approaches and refining it through theory. To explore these topics in

the following discussion have pulled direct quotes from informants which exemplify the generated themes and theoretical categories derived from my participant observations on Twitch.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

My interactions with informants led me to three core themes: character, marginalized identity, and catharsis. Interviewees, as players of tabletop games, were eager to share their character experiences, often detailing the ways in which that character resembled themselves or differed from themselves in ideal ways. Players also discussed how these characters, and the opportunities afforded to the streamers through their platform, allowed them to increase diversity in media and become a source of representation they had wished to see. Informants also felt at odds with the cultural ideals of broader society: they were not the cisgendered, heterosexual, white males that they perceived as mainstream ideal western identity. In order to create a safe place, and to obtain congruity with alternate cultural ideals compared to those shared by mainstream society, these players banded together through streaming and weeded out players who might sow discord and bigotry. In the process of creating safer places for diverse streamers, the community, through the medium of tabletop gaming, became an ideal space for facilitating cathartic experience.

4.1 What Character Means

The exploration of character identity, and the extent to which players can meaningfully relate with characters, has been fertile ground for research in roleplay. Van Looy et al. (2012) have distinguished relationships between characters in games from those in literature, plays, or films by focusing on the unique situating of the audience in player experience. In roleplaying games, the roleplayers also constitute their own audience, creating a *monadic* relationship, wherein the character and the audience are one, as opposed to traditional *dyadic* theatrical or

literary relationships where the character or actor is separate from the viewing audience. In the roleplaying game context, the player is the performer and audience, the agent and witness to the action on stage. This merging of audience and actor into player allows for “wishful identification” in which players project desired traits onto their characters, either by creating an idealized avatar or by performing desired traits in roleplay (Hoffner and Buchanan 2005). These ideal, fictive selves also allow for the exploration of social taboos with fewer potential actual-world consequences (Van Looy et al. 2012), the testing of alternative identities (Li et al. 2013), and the enacting of alternative cultural success models which diverge from real world expectations (Snodgrass Forthcoming).

To gauge the extent to which players can meaningfully relate with a character, I initially turned to Jamie Banks’s (2015) model for studying the relationships between character and player, developed from her studies of the online roleplaying game World of Warcraft. Banks’s model, divided into categories of character as *object*, *me* (the player), *sympio*, and *other*, suggests that as a player moves along the spectrum from seeing their gaming character as an *object* toward seeing the character as a distinct self-motivated *other*, they increasingly emotionally invest in their character. Character relationships further along this spectrum are considered meaningful for this study, particularly in the category of *sympio* which is situated between seeing the character as oneself and seeing them as a distinct other, by their increased identification as the character, and the increase in emotional exchange through the vicarious character experience. One difference in my own findings lay within Bank’s four categories, that the character as “other” did not seem to exist among tabletop streamers. Certainly, criteria were met, such as the use of third person language, talk of playing in certain ways dictated by what the character wants or would do, and instances of players discussing what a character has done or

will do, as if describing an agentive being. However, of import is also how players choose to identify themselves in relation to their characters. Characters acting out of line with the player's temperament or possessing abilities and acting in ways attributed more to the character than the player, may be more closely related to wishful identification and identity experimentation. The character is ultimately a vehicle used to experience and interact with the world, but the motivations behind how players treat those characters, or how they see them, is what differs and affects what they get out of those relationships. This is an observation most similar to Fine's (1984) tabletop research in which he noted that no matter how much players discussed character actions in the third person, or how they acted in line with the character's ideals and desires, there existed a grounding in reality that made it impossible for players to fully convince themselves that the character was autonomous and distinct from the self. No matter how players described their relationships with their characters, they were sure to note the aspects of themselves that they injected into and vicariously lived through the character.

It has been useful for this study to synthesize Bank's (2015) categories into something more akin to *object-plus-me* and *me-plus-ideal*, an expressed self. Characters in tabletop games are expressions of the player made real, an ideal hyperbole. The removal of the "other" more closely aligns with my own observations and those of other tabletop roleplaying researchers such as Fine (1984), that no player can fully conceive of a character as not a part of themselves. There is an aspect of the other expressed in character, in that players and characters cannot be the same being. To be a character, players must create characters who in some respect are different from themselves, and often are made intentionally so, but the degree varies. The "object" category did not fit well with tabletop roleplayers, as players are inherently part of the character, even when they only treat them as objects to be used. In my research, players were unable fully to utilize a

character as a simple tool without still living out aspects of themselves in hyperbolic or idealized ways. The amount of desire expressed in the character is not as directly relevant in this study as much as it is important to note that tabletop players situationally occupy all the Banks (2015) categories and have invested parts of themselves into the character. This constant bleed effect enables traits to be exchanged bidirectionally between player and character.

To illustrate these ideas, consider Rune, a new streamer and member of the Busker Quest group, who describes herself as an introvert and diagnosed with generalized anxiety. Rune plays out an ideal self, unrestrained by perceived shortcomings. In her words:

[My characters] help me explore certain aspects of myself, like my sense of curiosity. They help me explore being brash and doing things that I would normally be more wary about doing.

Rune's characters are outlets for her curiosity, brash ideal selves, and a means to experiment with idealized ways of being outside of her normal, cautious self. Another player, Fig, expands on the same use of character, highlighting how different a character may be while still retaining the core self.

[My characters] are absolutely expressions of myself. I often joke that every single character I play is a little bit too much like me, because it is so hard to separate yourself from a lot of the characters that you play. The very first character I ever made, when I first started getting into tabletops, she's kind of what I always wanted to be, a super tall, buff, Tiefling³. She's just really happy and helpful. At the beginning, I was like, that's what I would always love to be,

³ Tieflings are a racial category in *Dungeons and Dragons* which, in the lore of the game, originated from humans forging pacts with devils resulting in human descendants with traditionally devilish appearance such as horns, tails, lack of pupils, and more recently non-human skins tones such as red or purple.

except I don't like to talk to people, and I'm not buff and tall. So, I got to play a version of myself. Then, later down the line, a lot of my characters tend to be loud, outgoing, a little in your face. I've always wanted to try and be that kind of person. But in real life, I'm kind of an introvert. So, a lot of my characters are absolutely versions of myself or versions of myself that I would want to be. They are expressions that I wish I could do. They are visually what I wish I could be. Reality is reality, but I have the option of a fantasy world where I can live out the more extreme versions. I played in a campaign where I play 100,000 bugs and you think, 'how can I relate with that?' They're just a little greedy, but ultimately, they care about their friends. Of course, I want wealth, give me all of the wealth, but also, I care about my friends. They're still part of me and all the weird and unrelatable characters that I play.

Both Rune and Fig lament the inability to realize their ideal selves in reality. In Rune's case, the limiting factor is her self-restraint and fear of her own impulsiveness. For Fig, their limit is an issue of unattainable physical characteristics, height and muscle mass. Though differing in the exact idea expressed, both Rune and Fig share the desire to be something else, a longing for an impossible self. There is no one tabletop roleplaying system which can specifically tailor to each ideal, temperament or physical, but it is the permission granted by roleplaying systems in general, to express one's perceived flaws and overcome them temporarily, that provides Rune and Fig an outlet for their insecurities.

Players also created *hyperbolic* expressions of self, highly exaggerating their existing personality traits. Another interviewee, Welf, is a recent arrival to streaming, but a long-time professional Game Master (GM), who organizes tabletop game sessions and manages the story

and world of the game, and *Dungeons and Dragons* supplement writer. Welf more often plays characters both on and off stream, having a broader experience as both player and GM. Welf was open about being attached to their characters, and in seeing themselves played out in fiction.

I like to play my characters in terms of similarities. I would say, flaws or personality traits, or aspects of backgrounds. For example, I used to powerlift so, I can bring some of that knowledge into how I play this character. I like playing a character who has anger issues and trust issues, because I've dealt with that before. I take their flaws to an extreme in a way that I have probably done in the past as a person, but feel more comfortable navigating in a fictional space now. You know, I like playing a character who's just super queer and really big into performing being like a bard because I like music, and I like acting so I can channel that energy in the character.

In Welf's case it is a character cast from their own flaws and past self, brought into an alternative, fictional environment to be renavigated and contextualized. The character is expressed as a self-but-not-self, me but different, me but *more* me. Flaws are not just similar, but extreme, fictive representations.

Take another response by Rune to a probe about how their character might be different themselves:

A fair amount of my characters are wildly impulsive or- You know what, though?

That's untrue. I relate to not knowing what I'm doing. But they're just extra that.

Yeah, extra oblivious.

Initially Rune wanted to distinguish herself from the character but found herself unable.

Even at their most distant, her characters were simply more herself. In the same way

playing a character completely removed from the self, a character as an “other,” is seemingly impossible, so too is it impossible to play only yourself. Tabletop roleplaying games are stories, stories with plots, plots with driving forces which are driven to an end. To generate plot, players are put into unrealistic situations, or in the very least situations which the player is not likely to experience in the same way. In the most popular of tabletop games, *Dungeons and Dragons*, the backdrop is that of a Tolkienesque fantasy. Even if a player were to play themselves, magicless and powerless in this fantasy world, they would still need to act as the version of themselves that they imagine they would be if they were surrounded by the fantastic. They are themselves reacting in ways they can only imagine to imagined things in an otherwise impossible scenario. One can only, at best, act in ways they hope that they might in a similar situation, never fully themselves but an expression of the self.

Characters are certainly extensions of self, and may be used to express an ideal self, with Rune’s increased confidence or Fig’s buff Tiefling characters. Characters that express an ideal self may bring joy to the player through the act of play, or increase the players confidence outside of the game, but they can also be used to experiment more thoroughly with identity. The effect of bleed indicates a cross contamination of player and character, parts of the player bleed into the characters, and the character bleeds back. In the case of Melba, a transgender woman, she was better able to express herself more freely through tabletop roleplaying games during a time in her life when her identity had not yet been fully explored.

I started playing D&D Around the same time that I was learning more about myself, especially of what my actual identities are, how I identify. The first character that I made, was female, which is something I thought at the time was

super daring. I was like, ‘oh my gosh, I'm actually doing this.’ Playing characters like that, and consistently every week being able to go in and play an identity that I actually wanted, even though I at the beginning felt super reserved and didn't want to talk about it outside of the game and was going through early stages of my own transition. It helped a lot, and it helped change me.

Playing tabletop games gave Melba confidence in herself and in her decisions to proceed with her pursuit of her identity. Now, it is unlikely that playing tabletop games was the sole factor for Melba's eventual gender transition, but it gave Melba a space to truly express herself for the first time when she needed it most. Melba's experience represents not only one of the allures of tabletop games, the ability to express an ideal self, but the benefits derived from it, changing through experimentation.

Only one interviewee, Gaz, when asked how they relate to their characters, initially answered solely with as an *object*. Gaz is a producer of their own channel, Idyll, which focuses on increasing the representation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) communities in tabletop roleplaying spaces by helping bring new streamers to the fore. Through their Discord, Gaz distributes guides for producing streams and raises funds to help new streamers afford the equipment needed to stream. Not only is Gaz pursuing a career through Idyll, but they also work as a professional GM, wherein they run tabletop roleplaying games for paying customers, and writes supplemental material in the form of campaign settings, overviews of a fictional worlds with history, lore, and important NPCs that serve as the backdrop for a campaign. In their streaming career and as a professional GM, Gaz often opts not to play and instead takes on the role of the “forever GM,” a colloquial term for someone who finds themselves always serving as the GM, willing or not. To Gaz, tabletop roleplaying is both an opportunity to explore

collaborative storytelling, but also a source of income. They talked of players as actors, themselves as a producer, and the audience as consumers. When discussing the types of characters they play, Gaz admitted that it is not often they have the chance, and when they do, it is as a guest on another stream.

When I'm a guest character, I basically ask the GM if there's any role they'd like me to fill. I try to essentially be a tool for the for the GM to further the story. But, more often than not I just like coming in and causing chaos. You know, not in an annoying, disruptive, breaks the game way. It's like, 'Okay, y'all are being too cautious. Y'all are being too tactical. This is grinding to a halt. I'm just gonna run in there and just get this show going.' I also have a rule of essentially, the player should know everything, the characters don't need to. So, because consent and agency again, I don't want to Leroy Jenkins the thing without all the players being okay with it.

Gaz outright opts in to the “character as object” category, a phenomenon not common among the other tabletop streamers I interviewed, with only four (23%) of informants mentioning similar relationships with their characters. While three informants were coded similarly, only Gaz was explicit, and all four were also coded as having some part of themselves represented and expressed through their character. There was always a spark of a desire to play a character other than for utility; Gaz wants to “cause chaos” in their games. It is also not an issue of Gaz never projecting themselves onto the character, but an issue with how they have changed over the course of their work as a professional GM.

I don't have any attachment to them anymore, because a lot of times those characters end up becoming *one shot*⁴ characters, or it's a very small series where we're streaming for at most 10 episodes. I only get to be this character and be in that character's shoes for at most three months. There's a sort of disconnect as well, especially with safety tools and a lot of that stuff. I think that for me personally it's made that bleed happen less and become more of, I am me the player and this is my character from almost a third person perspective. I no longer think 'no, this character is me.'

The key is "anymore;" Gaz admittedly used to play with an eye toward projecting themselves into the character but has changed due to added layers which separate them from the initially immersive experience. Gaz is a staunch advocate for the use of safety tools. Often referred to as "safety toolkits," safety tools are systems put in place by the GM of a campaign, or required by stream producers, which add layers of consent to a campaign. The most common of these systems, which has stood the test of time since its release in 2003, is Lines and Veils (Edwards 2004). Lines and Veils, the system Gaz most commonly uses, requires players and GMs to list off topics that they wish never to be brought up in a campaign, *lines* that should not be crossed, and topics that can be vaguely mentioned but not explicitly described, as if hidden behind a *veil*. These systems let players know what topics they can explore with their characters, what stories the GM can create in their campaign, and it creates a safe atmosphere for all parties to better be able to focus on the story. In the case of Gaz, the focus on TTRPGs as a source of income, the layers created by safety tools, and the mounting responsibilities of being a forever GM having to

⁴ Characters only played for a single session, then not played again.

focus on managing story beats, players, all with the added pressure of the audience to perform one's best has seemingly created an insurmountable barrier to identifying as their characters.

Despite seeing their own characters as tools to be used for the advancement of the production, Gaz also recognizes the phenomenon of *bleed*, and its unavoidability in tabletop games.

There's a lot of bleed and nobody's amazing at telling whether you and your character are one in the same or they're separate. Especially with strangers, you cannot assume if someone's in distress, that if their character's in distress that they're not also emotionally in distress.

This is what Gaz recognizes as the typical cultural use of characters in their environment, to use the character as a vehicle for the self. The dangers of bleed and the reality of character identification is also something Gaz is keenly aware of in their professional GMing, as they GM game systems that deal with sensitive topics, such as abuse and assault. At the time, Gaz was running sessions of *Bluebeard's Bride*, a horror game based on the folk story of Bluebeard, a man who forbids his new bride from opening a locked room in their house which secretly hides the bodies of his former wives. This tabletop rendition of Bluebeard is much the same, focusing on Bluebeard's abusive and murderous tendencies, while the players collectively play as the new, trapped bride (Beltrán, Kelly, and Richardson 2017).

Roleplaying traumatic experiences is nothing new; Moreno (1940) detailed how in the mid-1920s psychiatric physicians prescribed the acting out of trauma as a therapeutic treatment. More recently, Hopeametsä (2008) collected and analyzed debrief forms from LARP players of a nuclear survivor game. In the game *Ground Zero*, players take on the role of 1960's Americans during an alternative history where the Soviet Union launched nuclear missiles into the United

States. Hopeametsä (2008) reported that players enjoyed the stress and anxiety of participation, but the debrief allowed them to interpret their emotional experience. Some players reported crying days after the event, but none reported the experience as negative. The negative emotions were framed alongside and interpreted with their positive outcomes, of realigning the player's views of the world, the importance of interpersonal relationships, love, and their utility in overcoming distress. While confronting trauma in a controlled form can be therapeutic for some, if brought about unexpectedly and without consent, it can have an inverse effect. As Welf recalled, detailing problems in the TTRPG sphere:

Because this is a hobby with a history, history comes up. You know, I think like a year ago content warning for descriptions just mentioned sexual assault. I guess you know the whole thing with the designer for *Dungeon World*, in his actual play he had an NPC [Non-Player Character] sexually assault a PC [Player Character] and like laughed about it, basically. I don't think he registered it as assault when he did it. I really don't like to watch the clip. It was so uncomfortable.

Though, as Welf mentions, the introduction of taboo topics like sexual assault were not uncommon a year prior to my fieldwork, the scene had begun to change. Welf mentioned that a rift had begun to form between the “old guard” and the new players brought on by the influx of COVID era players. With the growth and changing of the community also came consequences. The designer mentioned by Welf ended up losing their stream and many then-in-the-works contracts because of the incident. While taboo topics in tabletop games persisted, as noted by Gaz, the streaming space had begun to crack down on unacceptable behaviors. Consent, consumable content, and the safety of the community were taking center stage.

Even in the most blatant of character-object relationships, the player was unable to avoid using the character to outlet some aspect of themselves that needed to be released. Gaz is not just projecting themselves onto the character, they are projecting a hyperbolic self. The character self is more expressive, more chaotic. Gaz themselves is often preoccupied with consent, in and out of gaming, even saying that the safety tools in tabletop games could have broader applications to real world relationships. Character boundaries are determined and set by players in the real world. Outside of the game, Gaz is not one to break down a door simply because their friends are taking too long to open it, but their characters are. Gaz's characters are Gaz's inner chaos manifest.

Banks's (2015) categories of player avatar relations may better describe character relationships in video games but their use in tabletop roleplaying games is better seen as describing aspects of a complex, situational relationship. While seeing characters as fully realized "others" may be impossible, characters are never *only* the player. Characters are an embodiment of their creators wants and intentions, even when intended to only be story tools, and therefore can only be partly an "object." Different from a hammer used to install a nail, the character is the both the idea of hammering and the hammer. Characters are realized designs, at best the ideal tool to accomplish their creator's goals. Players are not only like one who use a hammer, but the one who invented it. Players have an intellectual investment in their characters.

Characters may at different times and in contexts be varying amounts of each category, but they are best described as more closely approximating Banks's (2015) *symbiote* in all their forms. To Banks, as a symbiote "the player does not merely 'wear' the avatar as a mask or costume, rather both player and avatar engage in cooperative processes of becoming more alike, usually toward an ideal self. In other words, players these PARs [player avatar relationships]

craft ideal or alternate personas (e.g., sober, brave, strong, happy, social, independent) and use the avatar to practice being that persona” (2015, 14, parenthesis in the original, square brackets content added by the author). In tabletop roleplaying games the line between player and character are constantly being blurred, with no clear distinction between where, or even how, one ends and the other begins. These expressed selves are chimeric, composites of the players’ flaws and ideals viewed at a distance. Players are immersed in the play experience through their extensions, the characters, but with one foot remaining outside of the fantasy space through an understanding that these traits are hyperbolic or ideal, not possible for the player in reality. The character is a means by which the aesthetic distance of tabletop games is achieved, drawing the consciousness of the player into fiction, immersed by the injection of self into story and distanced the by ideals players dream to achieve.

4.2 Marginalized Identities and the Haven of Diversity

In my study of streamers and their draw to particular streaming communities, games, and even in the intentional construction of communities, I have heard of the need to increase diversity in these spaces. Informants lament the seemingly white dominated tabletop spaces but have found within these streaming communities opportunities to expand social networks and bring inclusion into previously closed spaces. Discussing their history with the white dominated space as a non-binary, black streamer, an informant, Dabby, discussed the difficulty of entering these then restrictive communities:

The thing with TTRPGs is that they were very, until recently, dominated by cis white males and too often targeted to cis white males. The channel we were with had built a fan base based off of that. Even the name of the channel, before

they've changed it up to become a bit more politically correct, even the title was based on 'this is for cis white males.'

However, Dabby was also drawn to the streaming community by its initial promises for increased diversity. In part, to be a part of that expanding diversity, but also in order to find a space which offset some of the greater cultural expectations of the white tabletop player.

Personally, up until last year, I didn't think I needed anyone to represent me to be into anything. I thought, if I'm into it, I'll be into it regardless if there's black people in it. But one day, I watched the first TTRPG with a black player that was a main player, and in that moment, it hit like, oh wow, actually seeing someone like me playing this actually means a lot. Now I kind of want to play instead of just watch. So that's when I started playing.

Dabby's experience brings attention to the draw of would-be tabletop players to the streaming space where they find a community in which they can better approximate the ideal. In the model of the good streamer, this ideal includes diversity in both ethnicity and gender, one which can speak to a marginalized community of tabletop gamers and offset the dominant cultural model of the cis, white player. The increased diversity of streamers draws in increasingly diverse streamers, which seek to undermine the current tabletop consensus. To accomplish this, Dabby sought out another streamer he had worked with and who, being queer, had also expressed dissatisfaction with the current system which was seen to favor white heteronormative conventions in streaming as more legitimate. Together they formed the channel Forward which seeks to give diverse streamers a platform through short, one game shows, also called one-shots. In doing so, Forward becomes a space not only of alternative cultural ideals by creating a diverse

community, but also one which acts to undermine the dominant cultural model by increasing the presence of diverse streamers on the platform.

The drive to see oneself represented in media was a common topic among informants, being discussed as benefit of tabletop streaming in 41% of interviews. Increasing diversity is both a motivating factor for starting to stream, but also a motivation to stay. Players like Rosca see opportunity in their fortunate induction into the tabletop streaming community. Initially inspired by listening to tabletop podcasts⁵, Rosca became a player in the offline sessions of a soon to be influential streamer. When the streamer began to formalize his production, he brought Rosca along as a trusted player. Rosca seized the opportunity to increase diversity within the space, explaining that after they started streaming, they began to reflect on what their character *should* be:

Well, every character that I ever put on camera is going to be black. Period. I, myself, am black, my characters will be black, or at least representative. Having an audience really reinforced that in me, because growing up I didn't see fantasy characters that looked like me. If somebody somewhere sees my show, and they are also young and black, I want them to feel that solidarity, which is a sentiment that is 'I'm not alone.' There's a lot of black TTRPGers that are the same way.

Rosca also reflects on what the dominant cultural model tabletop community had thus far commonly been, exclusive of non-white characters. This is also a reaction to the “old guard,” the originators of the TTRPG genre and their lasting influence on the games.

Playing a black elf is a message to those seen to be in control of tabletop systems, that there is no right way to play.

⁵ Tabletop podcasts are prerecorded tabletop sessions that lack the live, audience driven content of streaming in exchange for having the option to edit the recording and a less stringent schedule.

Welf, an interviewee invested in the success of the TTRPG community as a professional GM and author, is all too familiar with the prevalence of discriminatory behavior that still pervades the TTRPG space. In Welf's own words:

There's a discourse is still going, everything about the Gygaxes, the old guard, TSR, whatever you want to call it. There's so much drama, that as a newcomer coming into the scene, I was like, 'Holy fuck, y'all hate each other.' A lot of it is rooted in racism, problems that people have had with welcoming others to the party. I was very surprised to learn about predatory business practices, as well as the white ignorance and dudes being dudes in the worst way. I am surprised, though I shouldn't be, by the amount of people I have to block. There's definitely fascists in this hobby. One-hundred percent, I'm not even exaggerating, straight up white supremacists. Like the that death metal dude who made a TTRPG talking about keeping America white. He's a game designer in the hobby, still getting work.

The "death metal dude" Welf is referencing is Varg Vikernes, a former death metal artist turned TTRPG writer, who wrote and self-published the roleplaying system MYFAROG. Vikernes's (2020) system focuses on representing the author's beliefs in game form, allowing the players to only play one race in the game, the fair haired and skinned northern Europeans, the *Thulean*, the ones favoured by the gods. Other races are available, just not to play. The dark-skinned, "semi-human" (5) *Arbi* race are depicted as animalistic predators that have come to destroy the *Thulean* ways of life. The tan skinned southerners, the *Khemetians*, are tolerated by the *Thulean*, but are limited to only being merchants, outlaws, or slaves. The two gender options, male and female, also have varying stats, with women being more charismatic but weaker than their male

counterparts. The book also makes sure to note that women who engage in warfare are also likely to die, as only one group of *Thulean*, the Fairlings, allow women to fight and "this means that the women die sooner than the men, because they are physically weaker than the men. Consequently there are fewer women than men amongst them" (Vikernes 2020, 8). Despite Rosca's acknowledgement that the TTRPG community is aware of the book, and its controversy, it continues to receive updates and is currently on its fourth edition.

Welf's vagueness in discussing Vikernes is reflective of the general tabletop response, to ignore it for the sake of one's own mental health. Elsewhere in the interview, Welf mentioned the necessity of "curating" their feed, controlling the media and social media content they are exposed to, as becoming a part of the tabletop community has only increased the amount of bigotry they face. 53% of interviewees mentioned a strong desire to make the tabletop space safer for marginalized groups, and 29% of interviewees mentioned that streaming communities help to weed out negative influences. To thrive, those groups must turn inward, removing the hindrance from their lives by shutting it away when they can. This is not to say that members of more diverse TTRPG groups ignore the bigotry within the larger community, they are very aware of it, but that they proactively shrink its available space in the public consciousness by burring it down and drowning it out with their own accomplishments. The goal is to increase representation by becoming that representation. The two means of creating that safe place for marginalized communities, one in which they are not only part of the social model but normalized within it, lie with forcefully becoming the representation, and with intentionally removing bigotry from the space.

Welf echoed these dual means later the same response:

You can just block or mute someone. You can just not interact with someone's Kickstarter. You can just unfollow someone's Twitch channel. You can just straight up do all that. I've learned to do that for myself. That has helped my experience be leaps and bounds better than I would than what it would be if I weren't doing that. I can't stress enough how valuable being a part of diverse communities of people from marginalized backgrounds has been. So many amazing projects by amazing designers with women of color, non-binary people, trans people, queer people, indigenous people, black people has been incredible, right? There's so much stuff out there that's amazing.

As Welf mentioned in their response, despite the increased ethnic representation being the most common benefits of tabletop streaming mentioned (53%), 35% also mentioned the utility in increasing gender and sexual diversity.

One informant, Malva was adamant that despite the recent increase in diversity in tabletop communities, some groups were still being overlooked, like players with physical disabilities. Malva mentioned that some groups were already well represented, citing large streaming communities of black players and the high prevalence of streamers with mental health issues being represented positively. Another issue is the lack of represented marginalized communities within represented communities, like the lack of black trans streamers. Malva also notes that it is a problem more overlooked than intentional:

I see a lot of panels and games, with all black casts that are completely cis het.

Even within the black community, there's been a struggle to really embrace and empower the trans, black trans, and non-binary community. I don't think that

that's a specific issue with any one person in our community. I think that the effort is there, the desire is there, it just hasn't happened.

The desire to create a more diverse stream need not be motivated solely by increasing the representation of one's own identity. Dabby, when discussing the ways in which he used his most recent character to make the community more accepting by having his character's parents be gay, "I thought that was a really fun, nice way to let people know that this is a thing. People are gay. There are gay couples. Families with gay parents are a thing." Dabby wanted to normalize not only being gay, but having same-sex parents, to challenge the perceived status quo of the dominant hetero-normative culture model.

Increasing diversity increases representation and opportunity. To create spaces that can be diverse, they need to be relatively safe. As Gaz put it, "we wanted to create a safer space because I will never say anything's a safe space. No place is 100% safe." There is a desire to make marginalized identities seen and felt within the white tabletop community, to give them a creative outlet previously denied them because they did not fit with the dominant cultural model of what a tabletop player ought to be. Safety is born of intentionality. The safety inherent in being normalized is born out of intentional diversification of streamers. The safety is also born out of the implementation of safety tools, in having your boundaries heard and respected.

Players join tabletop streaming often out of convenience, being invited into the space by friends or professional contacts (53% of interviewees). Players of marginalized identity also seek to capitalize on the opportunity to increase diversity in media, reconstructing normalized identity. The utility of the streaming community lay in its small-town feel, everybody knows everybody. Threats to individual safety can be more easily addressed and removed through collective effort. As Malva puts it, "That's where I think that the community can be small,

everybody knows each other. If there's even the slightest bit of stink on somebody, it can really have an effect on their career, and there are times when that is absolutely appropriate.” These are spaces where members from marginalized communities achieve congruity or “consonance” with alternative cultural ideas, that is, with restructured cultural models that more readily accept members from diverse cultural backgrounds, increasing the felt safety of players.

4.3 The Cathartic Conditions of Roleplay

Some research has expanded on the benefit model of roleplay studies by exploring the relationship between motivation for play and benefits derived from engagement, suggesting the two are intertwined (Adams 2013). In a series of essays distributed to academics attending a roleplaying game conference, Rob McDiarmid (2011) proposed sixteen player motivations for participating in role playing games. Sarah Bowman (2018) would later refine these motivations with, one of her categories emphasizing cathartic experience derived from immersion in the gaming experience. Catharsis described by Bowman simply as “experiencing emotions through the character” (387) is similarly described and expanded upon by one of my respondents, Roze:

Catharsis is an incredibly powerful tool. You can find it in a lot of tabletop roleplaying games that are held between close friends and confidants. You will find that this catharsis does come out now and then, as people are reflecting issues in their characters with issues that they have. As the DM it's your job to make sure that they get that catharsis. Obviously, this is something that would need to be discussed in the group. You would need to be quite close; you would need to have the correct safety tools in play just in case. That is one of my joys as a DM, being

able to watch people allow themselves to be vulnerable, or watch people deal with these various different things and then come out better for it.

Players are seen to process and “deal with” personal distress through the playing of a character experiencing similar difficulties. The greater the emotional connection between player and character, the greater the ability to live experience vicariously through the character. As the character’s experiences and emotions are fed back into the experience of the player without direct risk of harm, as implied by Roze’s mentioning of the need for “the correct safety tools,” the vicarious experience can be a cathartic one. The character is a means by which emotions and experiences are played out without direct consequence to the player, focusing most often on hyperbolic or ideal expressions and desires. For Roze, this experience of emotional release is not incidental either, rather it is intentionally sought in the experience, and even consigned to the duties of the one running the game, the DM.

This desire for cathartic release is central to the motivation for participation in tabletop games. Though one may infer the experience of catharsis and deep character connection to require similarly intimate spaces, the connections and relief are not completely lost in streaming contexts. Rosca, had been playing with the same streaming group for a few years when she opted to play a character relating to traumatic experiences in the past. In her retelling:

When I was younger, I had a back injury and I had to quit dancing. Then I had a character who had an injury who had to quit her performative career. At the same time, I was playing that character, I lost my job in the middle of the pandemic.

That ended up like having this weird dual process of, ‘Okay, let me deal with this trauma my teenage years and then the thing that I’m going through right now.’

That really, really fucking sucks. Also, the career that I had, I got my degree in it,

I was about to go out for a big promotion. I had an interview two days before I got furloughed. Just, it all came together. But then, playing that character throughout 2020, having my friends both on camera and off camera. That was just like, the thing that I needed to remind me that, you know, if this character is okay, and she is surviving, and she has all her friends, and I have all my friends, I'm going to survive too. It's not the end of the world. There's always new opportunities. You're doing something new right now, you've got thrown into a situation too. It's just a nice little constant reminder to have in the back of my head.

In Rosca's context, her game took place among friends that she had played with for a few years, though now on a live stream online. As I noted with Roze earlier, the goal and the appeal of the tabletop game is in part its ability to elicit cathartic experiences. Rosca's case shows that, despite knowing that they were being witnessed by hundreds of anonymous onlookers, they were able to achieve the experience of emotion through the gaming experience, in part in overcoming trauma from her past injuries, but also in circumstances which befell them even after the campaign, a longer series of games which may be years in the making, had already begun. Though, as noted, this emotional experience was only in the safety of trusted friends, a found community of members which share not only a collective interest in tabletop games or streaming, but also in increasing diversity in the broader tabletop community. This player experience, in both instances, the dealing of past trauma through character, and the realization that if their character can overcome difficulty by facing new challenges with friends Rosca can too, perform the cathartic functions of clarifying and purifying experiences. Rosca's clarifying experience, of realizing through their character that they were not as disadvantaged as they had feared because of their community, also gave rise to a purifying relief. Rosca also gained tools to

deal their ongoing crises, as well as future problems, through the reinforcement they have now have echoing in their mind.

As was the case with Dabby and streaming partner, there is a dominance of certain cultural norms in the tabletop roleplaying community, white, cisgender males, that persists into the streaming communities. The dominant culture model of the white male as the archetypical roleplayer was undermined, in Dabby's case, by the witnessing of alternative possibilities, which had gone previously unquestioned in his earlier experiences as a viewer of tabletop streams. Having come to understand the lack of black representation, and inspired by the growing diversity of streamers, Dabby entered the streaming space. On finding the streaming community still reflective of the dominant culture model, Dabby set out to right it by creating an alternative model, propagated through his own streaming connections and growing channel, and set out to undermine the dominant model with an alternative one. Not only is the realization of dissonance important, but it precedes the construction or seeking out of alternative models in which members would be more consonant. These alternate communities give members a sense of belonging, of merging with a more resonant community, in which members feel more secure. In that security members are better equipped to explore the possibilities presented by the tabletop roleplay genre of gaming, the merging of player as character necessary for the cathartic experience mentioned by Roze, the same emotional relief and potential confrontation with trauma noted by Rosca. My informants, as streamers and as members of marginalized communities are seeking out alternative cultural groups in response to pressures felt by dominant cultural norms; in doing so they find consonance in these alternate communities where they foster a sense of belonging and safety from bigotry, or more so a freedom to be their ideal selves. Free to pursue themselves, these streamers are open to explore past trauma and current distress,

relieving their distress through the medium of synthetic characters, expressing themselves and their ideals through characters that are better adapted to cope.

In the catharsis framework, tabletop roleplaying games offer an ideal level of character immersion most like the aesthetic distance required in the Scheff and Bushnell (1984) model. Players are immersed through their ideal and hyperbolic self-expression manifest in their characters yet grounded in reality through safety tools and game constraints. In the Scheff and Bushnell model, players must also feel safe, to not be ashamed of their choices for fear of rebuke or ridicule. In the TTRPG communities studied, safety was of the utmost priority. Directly, safety was maintained through safety toolkits, limiting the choices of the players and GMs by eliminating topics from the story, or by making them less explicit, to increase the collective enjoyment of the players. Indirectly, streamers have focused on making their communities more diverse, increasing the representation of marginalized communities and fashioning alternative consonance spaces where minority populations are normalized. The streaming community shares information and maintains a constant vigil, removing harmful elements or burring them out of site. Players are made safe to more freely express themselves and their ideals.

Players enter into the tabletop community to express themselves and their desires through a collective narrative and their personal characters. Players who find themselves able to participate in the streaming community do so with the intent to meet fellow enthusiasts, increase their play networks, or even to promote themselves and their tabletop businesses. My informants also prioritize increasing diverse representation as a motivation for joining streaming communities. What players find on participating in tabletop roleplaying games are the benefits of safe expression and the tools to express their ideals more easily. These benefits are amplified within streaming communities. Safety tools are encouraged and comfort is negotiated, threats are

removed through communal effort, and players are encouraged to be their ideal selves, to represent their ideal community through play. The well-managed, streamed tabletop campaign is incidentally aligned with Scheff and Bushnell's (1984) requirements for aesthetic distance and cathartic experience. Players are equipped the tools needed to confront their traumas and emotional experiences in the safest environment with people they trust. Players are aware of the benefits they receive from this form of play and pursue it even they have mixed feelings. As Rosca framed the experience:

I wholeheartedly believe that TTRPGs are a form of therapy, which some people have mixed feelings about because you shouldn't drag somebody into your therapy session. That may be true, you absolutely shouldn't. But I think that what I mean by that is, the idea of taking this part of yourself that maybe you don't always like or maybe you're not that confident about and putting it into a character. In seeing that bit of yourself overcome triumphs, and triumph over evils, and take down *big bads* [i.e., challenging opponents], and defeat monsters, you know, change the world, it helps in a weird way. It makes you idolize that part of yourself and see that you can be great, even with this thing that I think is a flaw, or this thing that other people have told me that they don't like about me. If somebody can go out there with that flaw and slay a dragon, I can wake up in the morning and go throughout my day and live my life. I think TTRPGs are a way to play characters in a way is a way to foster like, self-love and appreciation.

Rosca's example also fulfills the last condition of Scheff's (2007) cathartic experience, that the event be dramatized to cement the distance between the participant and the event. Rosca's characters are not only living their lives while embodying flaws Rosca perceives in

themselves or in their life, but their character is also overcoming evil and slaying dragons while also balancing Rosca's burdens. This working through of real problems with fantasy means allows Rosca to better live their life with an altered perspective, clarity brought on by the catharsis of roleplay.

Tabletop roleplaying games provide a medium ideal for cathartic experience, similar to the psychodramas of Moreno (1940) and the theatre of Scheff and Bushnell (1984). In the tabletop game, players and characters are a synthesis of real and ideal selves, which allow for the hyperbolic expression of self in fiction. The tabletop streaming community has intentionally fostered a culture which supports the expression of these therapeutic characters, and which filters out those who would threaten the safety of its members. It is only by merging theories on player-character relationships, the emotional effects of cultural norm congruence, and the ideal environments for creating cathartic experience that we can see why players return to and participate in the tabletop streaming community.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Studies of tabletop roleplaying games share considerable overlap with studies of computer base roleplaying games, as exemplified by my utilization of Banks's (2015) categories of avatar identification and Van Looy et al.'s (2012) monadic joining of the actor and audience. However, as Grouling (2010) points out in her comparison of tabletop games and choose-your-own adventure books, different mediums of story crafting are limited by the choices they can give to players. Players may be both audience and actor, but they are also co-producers, furthering investment in play. Players may identify with their characters, but since everything in tabletop games about character creation, from appearance to history, is player generated and imagined, characters are inevitably infused with parts of their creators. Players in tabletop games are not limited by what is programmable, like in computer roleplaying games, but by what can be imagined. Unlike computer games and guided book adventures, players can create themselves, or idealized versions of themselves, in the exact way they wish to be represented. Limitations on the creation of a character are limitations on the idealized self, and tabletop games are limited only by what rules are agreed upon at the table.

The players I have interviewed are a testament to the possibilities achievable through the tabletop character. Rune utilized her character to explore a bolder side of herself, to overcome felt anxieties in the real world through character. Similarly, Fig used characters to explore her ideal image of self, as a tall, strong, fiendish woman. Even Gaz who claimed to not use their characters as anything but tools still found an outlet in their characters for their chaotic impulses. Gaz even confirms Bowman's (2010) theory that players seek out "bleed" in participating in tabletop games, hoping to bleed into their characters and have their characters bleed back into

their daily lives. Melba exemplifies the bleeding back and forth of character identity in her use of character to explore her gender identity, which she ultimately embodied in her transition. In tabletop roleplaying games, character and player are often indistinguishable.

For my informants, that inseparability means streaming a version of oneself live for an audience. While over half, 53%, of my informants said that the audience adds pressure to their play experience, 53% also saw the platform afforded by streaming as a means to increase diversity in media. Dabby and Roze, after negative experiences in the tabletop streaming community, even joined together to create a space of inclusive streaming through their channel Forward. Dabby, inspired by his experiences seeing a black streamer for the first time, sought to become that same inspiration for others like himself. 53% of informants also saw the streaming community as being a driving force behind the creation of those safer space, seeing it as a benefit of their involvement, as well as their own contribution to the community. Welf even highlighted the need for greater diversity in the tabletop community, and a need for community vigilance against bigotry, pointing to the blatantly ethnocentric and racially charged tabletop system MYFAROG. Groups like Forward or Gaz's Idyllic become safe havens for diverse communities to express themselves safely and freely without the fear of cisgender white cultural norms dictating acceptability. Through the intentional safety of the streaming community, by means of supporting and lifting up creators of marginalized groups, the tabletop streaming community becomes a space to achieve consonance with alternative cultural ideals. In the tabletop streaming community scattered players are connected over vast distances, connected even more due to the rise of COVID and the subsequent boom of Twitch viewership. By connecting and concentrating safe, diverse spaces, tabletop streamers active construct alternative cultural norms, opposing what they experience as a white entitlement to tabletop roleplay content. These alternative

cultural norms are insulated by intentional removal and avoidance of bigoted content, fostering a community where members feel safe to express their ideal selves, freer from societal judgements.

Scheff and Bushnell (1984) also emphasized the importance of safety in his theory of catharsis. For Scheff and Bushnell, in order for a cathartic experience to occur, one needed to be able to express their emotions and desires freely, without the shame resultant from judgement. These diverse tabletop streaming spaces that have come together to resist dominant cultural norms have also succeeded in created a space in which players can enact an ideal self without shame. Scheff and Bushnell's catharsis also requires an aesthetic distance, a balance between immersion in a character and a grounding in reality. As mentioned above, characters in tabletop games are immersive, and they are parts of their creators manifest in fiction, but they are not the whole self. Characters are also not mistaken for the self, as was also noted in Fine's (1983) early tabletop studies. Characters are idealized, or more so hyperbolized and idealized selves, exaggerated to better express their embodied, idealized traits. This hyperbole of self in fiction is what Scheff and Bushnell (1984) point to as the ideal aesthetically distant self, ideal but surreal. With the injection of a personal struggle into the character or story, such as was the case with Rosca and her character's parallel to her own dance injuries, and the experience is ready made to be cathartic. Rosca, in the safe acceptance of familiar, inclusive players, was able to not only deal with the past trauma of injuries, but also their ongoing traumas involving job loss and financial insecurity. The problems did not disappear but were clarified and lessened by the knowledge that if they, as their character, could deal with similar problems, then their real-life problems may be manageable as well.

Players are then brought into the streaming space by the allure of pleasurable tabletop play experiences, but these communities they can find a purpose in diversifying the tabletop space and creating the diversity they wish to see in the space. Streamers stay because have found a means by which diversity in the media can be increased, and a means for them to because the change they wished to see. In doing so they create even more pleasurable play experiences, building safe communities that allow them to freely express their ideals. These alternative cultures with definitions of success that differ from the mainstream cultural norm also inadvertently foster the conditions necessary for cathartic experience through play. Participants in these streaming communities gain and then come to value another aspect of their space, the ability to confront distressful experiences through therapeutic play. The reason for staying and valuing these streaming spaces is thus multifold, giving voices to marginalized communities, in giving members safer spaces to express their ideal selves, and in giving them access to therapeutic play experiences they can take back into their off-stream lives.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. When/how/why did you get into TTRPGs?
2. Do you currently participate in any offline sessions? What is that experience like?
3. When/how/why did you get into streaming?
 - a. What was your first streaming experience like?
4. Have you ever DMed a game on a stream? What is that experience like?
 - a. Have you DMed offline? Is it different?
5. What types of characters do you typically play?
 - a. What are your characters to you?
 - b. How are they similar to you?
 - c. How are they different?
6. Have you, personally, changed because of involvement with TTRPG streaming?
 - a. Because of a character you have played?
7. What is the audience to you?
 - a. Have you changed how you play because of the audience?
 - b. Have you changed because of the audience?
8. What would you say is the current state of the online TTRPG community?
9. What is the best session you have ever been a part of?

APPENDIX 2: CODED THEMES TABLE

Category	Code	Total Codes	Transcripts Coded
	Best Experience is Offline	13	13
Types of Identification	Hybrid	13	12
	Describes Fellow Streamers as Friends	14	12
Benefits of Playing in a Streaming Community	Getting to Meet New People	15	12
	Collaborative Storytelling	13	11
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Keep Track of Players and NPCs	11	10
Types of Identification	Me	9	9
How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	Sees the Audience as Adding Pressure	9	9
Reason for Starting Streams	Was Invited by Another Streamer	10	9
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Manage Story Beats	10	9
Benefits of Playing in a Streaming Community	Push to Create Safer Spaces	11	9
Race in TTRPG Communities	Streams Increase Racial Diversity in Media	12	9
	Compare Streaming to Stage Acting	8	8
How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	Ignore the Audience	8	8
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Keep Audience and Players Engaged	8	8
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	Gain Increased Confidence	8	8
Reason for Starting Streams	To Augment Work	8	8
	Safety Tools	8	8
	Ignoring Game's Rules to Better Fit a Narrative	9	8
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Players - "Head Empty"	9	8
Character as Ideal Self	Character is Hyperbolic Self	9	8
Ways Players Relate to Their Characters	Character Based on Own Personal Experiences	9	8
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	Deepen Friendships	10	8
Reason for Starting Streams	Introduce People to New Indie Systems	7	7
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	Experiment with Identity	7	7
Reason for Starting TTRPGs	Watched TTRPG Actual Plays	7	7
	Working in Non-Streaming TTRPG Businesses	8	7
Transitioning to COVID Play	Missing Seeing Their Friends	8	7
Diversity In Streaming	More Diversity Needed	9	7
Diversity In Streaming	Wanting to See Oneself Represented in Streaming	9	7
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	Allows Players to Be Creative / Have Creative Outlet	9	7
Transitioning to COVID Play	Increasing Networks and Opportunities	10	7

	Was an Actor / Media Worker	6	6
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Narcissism	6	6
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Organizes the Stream	6	6
LGBTQ+ in TTRPG Communities	Streams Increase LGBTQ+ Diversity in Media	6	6
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Sexism	8	6
Transitioning to COVID Play	Doing Everything Online	8	6
Benefits of Playing in a Streaming Community	Weeding Out Undesirables	5	5
Reason for Starting Streams	To Have a Job	5	5
	Prioritizes Safe Environment When Choosing Groups	5	5
Reason for Starting TTRPGs	Brought in by Friends	5	5
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	"Emotionally Exhausting but Lovely"	5	5
Reason for Continuing TTRPGs	Overcame a Perceived Shortcoming Through Character	5	5
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character as Ideal Self	5	5
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character is Inspired by Media	5	5
How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	Adding to the Story by Engaging	6	5
Ways Players Relate to Their Characters	Character has Similar Temperament	6	5
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Racism	8	5
	Catharsis	8	5
Transitioning to COVID Play	Easily Distracted	4	4
Reason for Starting TTRPGs	To Act	4	4
Transitioning to COVID Play	Inability to Read Other Player's Emotions	4	4
Ways Players Relate to Their Characters	Character as Ethnically Similar to Player	4	4
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Anticipate Player Actions	4	4
	Learned to Play Over Time	4	4
Catharsis	Performative Therapy	4	4
Catharsis	Sharing Emotional Experiences with the Character	4	4
Reason for Starting Streams	To Emulate Actual Plays They Liked	4	4
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Assault	4	4
	Best Experience Streamed	4	4
Types of Identification	Utility	4	4
How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	Does Not See the Audience as Having a Real Relationship	4	4
	High Entry Cost	5	4
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Players & Host Cowrite Story	5	4
How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	Is Encouraging	5	4

Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Players - Share Responsibility with the Host	3	3
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character with Different Familial Composition	3	3
Race in TTRPG Communities	Only Players of Colour Can Play Characters of Colour	3	3
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Manage Stream Length	3	3
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Grooming	3	3
Catharsis	Bleed	3	3
Catharsis	Using Trauma as Character Design	3	3
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character with Vastly Different Temperament	3	3
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Issues with Pay in Mainstream Systems	3	3
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Players Using Each Other for Person Gain	3	3
Player VS Host (DM) Experiences	Host - Forever DM	3	3
	Tech Issues	4	3
Catharsis	Sad Cry	4	3
Transitioning to COVID Play	Opportunity to Increase Diversity	4	3
Ways Players Relate to Their Characters	Character Based on Someone the Player Knows	2	2
Ways Players Relate to Their Characters	Character with Similar Familial Composition	2	2
Reason for Starting Streams	To Keeping Players Engaged	2	2
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Murder Hobos	2	2
Experiment with Identity	Experiment with Gender	2	2
Bad TTRPG Experiences	Tokenism	2	2
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character has Different Financial Circumstances	2	2
Diversity In Streaming	Is Already Diverse and Inclusive	2	2
Transitioning to COVID Play	Increases Viewership	2	2
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character is Used to Fill a Role	2	2
Transitioning to COVID Play	Feels All Around Busier	2	2
	Has Therapy Background	2	2
Ways Players Separate Themselves from Characters	Character That Grew Up In Different Culture Region	2	2
Catharsis	Happy Cry	3	2
	How the Streamer Deals with the Audience	2	1
	Reason for Starting TTRPGs	1	1
Reason for Starting Streams	Accidently Joined a Stream	1	1
Benefits of Playing in a Streaming Community	Known Play Schedule	1	1
LGBTQ+ in TTRPG Communities	Lacking in Trans Streamers	1	1
Diversity In Streaming	Positive Mental Disability Representation	1	1

Diversity In Streaming	Lacking in Physical Disability	1	1
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