

The *Critical Role* of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in *D&D*'s Resurgence

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ABSTRACT

Over the last five years *Dungeons and Dragons* [*D&D*] (Arneson & Gygax, 1974) has risen in prominence and popularity with a broadening of its player demographic. Though the game's resurgence has been widely discussed in non-academic outlets, it has been neglected in academic literature. While there are many factors motivating renewed and engaged play of *D&D*, in this paper we draw on our 2019 study of contemporary *D&D* players to present key contextual factors of the game's resurgence. Through discussion of our results, we argue that the influence of representations and trends in popular media, reduction of associated stigma, and impact of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) on increased game access, have led to the resurgence of *D&D* according to our participants and shed light on some key reasons for its success in recent years.

Keywords

D&D, resurgence, Critical Role, Twitch, YouTube, convergence culture, non-digital game, media, stigma, access

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, the tabletop role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons and Dragons* [*D&D*] (Arneson & Gygax, 1974) has risen in prominence and popularity with a broadening of its player demographic. Though there are many internal and external factors motivating renewed and engaged play of the game, in this paper we draw on our 2019 study of 20 Australian *D&D* players, both experienced and new to the game, to discuss contextual factors that have shaped how current players position themselves regarding the changing nature of *D&D* play, its culture and current social perception. Responses from our participants stressed that 1) the influence of media representations and trends, 2) the reduction of stigma associated with *D&D*, and 3) increased game access, have all contributed to the game's current popularity.

This paper therefore diverges from the current saturation of academic research on *D&D* that focuses on the application of *D&D* to educational contexts. Instead, we present an empirical account of the game's contemporary player experience and account for its resurgence through close examination of its play, players, and paratextual cultures. We contend that this deeper understanding of *D&D*'s modern resurgence confirms the continuing necessity and value of researching non-digital games in academia.

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT AND LITERATURE

Non-Digital Games

The experiences, cultures and associated impacts of digital games have been widely investigated in academic and non-academic literature. However, there is a notable gap in game studies research regarding the resurgence and place of non-digital gaming practices (Rogerson, 2018; Stenros & Waern, 2011). In our modern context, engagement and participation in non-digital games is becoming more popular with changing player demographics (Brand et al. 2017, p. 6). This shifting interest towards contemporary non-digital play invigorated the need for further academic research.

Non-digital games have continued to grow in popularity and critical attention in recent years, aligning with the larger trend of analog activities and media forms being in vogue (Rauch, 2018). Numerous non-academic outlets have been reporting on the financial success and increasing player affinities towards non-digital games (E.g. Biggs, 2019; Boycott-Owen, 2018; Duffy, 2014; Gibson, 2014). Notably, O'Connell (2019) indicated that tabletop games had a "global market value... estimated to be around 7.2 billion U.S. dollars in 2017 and was forecast to reach... 12 billion... by 2023" (para. 1). Berkowitz (in Boycott-Owen, 2018), a representative from *Hasbro, Inc.*, asserted that they were "continuing to see popularity grow for all types of face-to-face games" (para. 13). Many scholars have also called for further inquiry into the proclivity and play of non-digital games (E.g. Booth, 2016; Booth, 2018; Carter et al. 2014; Rogerson, 2018). Woods (2012) insisted that academic attention towards board games remained "relatively sparse" (p. 8), while Deterding and Zagal (2018) highlighted that interest in RPG studies was growing (pp. 7-9). As engagement with non-digital games increases, clearly evidenced by dedicated journals and investigation in this area, further research on their play and players must be conducted.

To obtain a more complete and first-hand understanding of the non-digital games resurgence, it is crucial to better understand their players. As modern player identities, motivations and experiences vary between digital and non-digital games and are undeniably different to what they were in previous years, it was essential to acknowledge and explore this in our study. Thus, our research aimed to address the current gap in scholarly literature which downplays the importance of non-digital games and their players. A significant example of this is *D&D*; a non-digital game whose community has risen to recent international prominence. Evolution of the game's play and players, combined with its modern popularity, made *D&D* an ideal case study for our research.

Dungeons & Dragons

D&D is a tabletop RPG originally published by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974. The pair created the game to provide more creative and character focused role-play experiences, which addressed the limitations of the then popular wargaming genre. At the time, wargames favoured engagement with tactical military formations and play rather than exploration or investment in individual characters; which was consequently at the forefront of *D&D*.

At its core, *D&D* is a long-form tabletop game where groups of players meet in-person to role-play their created characters who have diverse motivations, backgrounds and abilities. In every group, one player takes on the role of the ‘Dungeon Master’ (DM); a player that referees the game, narrates the story, and embodies the monsters and non-player characters (NPCs) the group encounters. Through the guidance of the DM, the players and their characters explore imagined worlds, overcome challenges, and build relationships; using dice rolls to determine the outcome of their actions. Although currently perceived as a harmless leisure activity, during the game’s growth period in the 1980s a common link was drawn between *D&D* and the Satanic Panic which would impact the game’s popularity, reception and player base for years to come.

Originating in the USA, the Satanic Panic was a mass hysteria and “one of the purest cases of moral panic” (Cohen, 2002, p. xvii) stemming from several false allegations made against day-care providers that claimed evidence of satanic ritual abuse against children (Smith, 1989). Though the claims were eventually discredited (Allen & Midwinter, 1990), this hysteria transformed the initial curiosity surrounding *D&D* and its players into unrelenting moral panic and fearmongering. This unease was most notably proliferated by Patricia Pulling and Jack T. Chick. Pulling, who believed her son had committed suicide as a result of *D&D* play, founded *Bothered about Dungeons & Dragons* [BADD]. BADD was an advocacy group that published information internationally, promoting misleading beliefs about the game. Pulling (in Waldron, 2005) argued that *D&D* used

demonology, witchcraft, voodoo, murder, rape, blasphemy, suicide, assassination, insanity, sex perversion, homosexuality, prostitution, satanic type rituals, gambling, barbarism, cannibalism, sadism, desecration, demon summoning, necromantics, divination and other teachings... [to provoke] adolescent suicide and murder, or played a major factor in the violent behaviour of such tragedies.

In alignment with Pulling’s exaggerated claims, Chick (1985) contrived a religiously charged tract titled *Dark Dungeons*, warning against the play of *D&D* in alignment with his Christian values (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). Views like Pulling and Chick’s were mirrored largely in public discourse and media of the time (E.g. Adler & Doherty, 1985; Brooke, 1985; Scheele, 2003; Schnoebelen, 1989; Shuster, 1985 as cited in Lancaster, 1994) which propagated harmful and inaccurate representations of, and perspectives towards, *D&D* and its players (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).



Figures 1, 2 and 3: Pages 20, 21 and 22 of Chick’s (1985) *Dark Dungeons* tract that shows religious animosity towards *D&D* play.

Despite this negative portrayal of *D&D* in the media, scholars sought to validate and test whether these claims had any legitimacy. Many scholars conducted empirical studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s that found no significant correlations. Research by Simón (1987), DeRenard and Kline (1990), Douse and McManus (1993), Leeds (1995), and Carter and Lester (1998), collectively found no correlation between satanic practices and *D&D*, and no correlation between the game and emotional instability within its players. This asserted that *D&D* play and players were “not as extreme as some stereotypical descriptions might have suggested” (Douse & McManus, 1993, p. 508). Lancaster (1994) hypothesised on the underlying role of stigma and said that though “role-playing games are no more dangerous than movies or novels...the danger may lie in the people with whom a person associates when playing a game” (p. 77). In our research, stigma surrounding *D&D* play and players was re-examined in consideration of the game’s resurgence.

As indicated above, the representation and discussion of *D&D* in casual, commercial and academic literature has varied over its current 45-year lifespan. Having survived the initial vitriolic condemnations and associations with teen suicide during the infamous Satanic Panic of the 1980s (Alimurung, 2019, para. 11; Martin & Fine, 1991, pp. 107-108; Romano, 2016, para. 17), the now “wholesome pastime” (Alimurung, 2019, para. 12; Melamed, 2018, para. 11) is often applauded for its numerous pedagogical and social benefits (Cook et al. 2016; Cross, 2012; Wright et al. 2017, p. 1).

Throughout the last 45 years, *D&D* has altered its rulesets and content to cater to its transforming player base. Although “role-playing, character customization and real-life improvisational storytelling has always been at the game’s core ... how those ideas are interpreted by the game system has changed drastically edition-to-edition” (McElroy, 2014, para. 2). *Wizards of the Coast* (WOTC), *D&D*’s current publishers, released the fifth and latest edition of the *D&D* ruleset in 2014, aligning with the game’s perceived resurgence over the last five years. They summarise that “the core of *D&D* is storytelling. You and your friends tell a story together, guiding your heroes through quests for treasure, battles with deadly foes, daring rescues, courtly intrigue, and much more” (WOTC, 2019, para. 3). The publisher’s acknowledged focus on creativity, inclusivity and social engagement has revived the game for a broader demographic and helped distinguish it from other criticised game communities. Since then, *D&D* has disassociated itself with its previous stigmas and has been able to renew its reputation as “far and away the most popular tabletop RPG in the world” (Hall, 2019, para. 4). This stark juxtaposition begged deeper questioning into why attitudes towards, and representations of, *D&D* had changed. Though *D&D* has received academic attention previously, there is an absence of research that details reasoning behind the game’s modern resurgence and popularity. Below is a brief overview of relevant literature and discourse that has contributed to our current understanding of *D&D* and its players. It serves as a foundation on which our own research extends.

Foundation of *D&D* Literature

Gary Alan Fine’s (1983) ethnographic work, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, set the precedent for academic enquiry into RPGs and remains a popular theoretical understanding of *D&D* play. Fine’s research excelled in describing the sociality of players and their “intense, exclusive, and sometimes manic involvement” with RPGs (Dayan, 1986, p. 1219). He did this by applying Goffman’s (1974) parameters of frame analysis to game play: the idea that natural frameworks (or frames) identify events that transpire as natural occurrences, while social frameworks identify occurrences as being socially influenced or driven (p. 22). Through this lens, Fine (1983) concluded that *D&D* players consciously navigated between their social and natural frames more rapidly, in order to construct shared meanings and values during

their gameplay and role-play experiences (pp. 194-200). Though Fine's application of frame analysis is still widely adopted in game studies research (E.g. Deterding, 2014; Harrop et al. 2013; Harviainen, 2012; Lin & Sun, 2011; Mason, 2003), there are limitations and weaknesses evident that our own research addresses and builds upon.

The primary weakness of Fine's research is that it does not focus on establishing the context that informs and influences the players and play of RPGs, which is where our research is situated. As Dayan (1986) notes, "we know where and how one plays. We do not know what is being expressed through playing, either individually or culturally" (p. 1225). Further, the players and play of *D&D* in Fine's context are starkly different to modern examples. Fine (1983) makes a choice to focus on "the hard-core gamer" (p. 47). At the time, these players were primarily young unmarried males that "read deeply in science fiction, fantasy and history ... [and] disregard[ed] many of the normative requirements of conventional society..." (Fine, 1983, p. 46). Fine (1983) even said that

the absence of females [in RPGs] is not an accident of fate, nor is it something that will likely change rapidly. Because of the attributes of females, the structural characteristics of the game...and the needs that the game serves for men, females will not constitute a large percentage of the gaming world in the near future... (p. 71).

These outdated views on the 'gamer' identity label and gender demographics in games have not been updated to reflect contemporary gaming cultures and have since been demonstrated as incorrect (Bryce & Rutter, 2005; Jenson & de Castell, 2010, pp. 53-54). Additionally, Fine's commentary cannot and does not account for the impact of digital progression on the play and players of non-digital games (Jenkins, 2006). His research should thus be viewed as a historiography of *D&D* play during its tumultuous origins, rather than the cornerstone of *D&D* literature. As the sociocultural context has changed, the player demographic has transformed, and the normalisation of games as an authentic leisure pursuit has been validated, the play and players of *D&D* need to be re-evaluated in academic research. *D&D* must now be considered through its current cultural cachet in the wake of the changed societal and technological landscape, which is what our research aimed to achieve.

Current State of *D&D* Research

A review of contemporary *D&D* literature shows interest in areas such as comprehensive historical documentation (Peterson, 2012), critical consideration of the game's present inclusivity (E.g. Jones, 2018; Trammell, 2014), and examination of *D&D*'s immersive experiences (Mizer, 2019). As mentioned previously, most current research into *D&D* leans towards an instrumental approach. One of the earliest academic commentaries of this nature was from Joy C. Kennedy in 1982. She observed that playing *D&D* had a positive impact on the literacy and reading habits of players, "since the game involves such intensive reading on the part of its participants to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to play" (Kennedy, 1982, p. 596). The promulgation of similar research that examined *D&D* for its educative potential and pedagogical applications, continued throughout the 2000s and 2010s. More recent scholars offer *D&D* as a morality building tool, suggesting that the game functions "as an engaging, interactive 'moral training ground'" (Wright et al. 2017, p. 1) that promotes increased moral reasoning. Both Carter (2011) and Cook et al. (2016) demonstrate the pedagogical and curricular application of *D&D* in formalised learning environments, finding that students benefitted from the creative collaboration facilitated by *D&D* play. These findings align with Wells' (1999) conception of collaboratively created knowledge, Charmaz's (2006) discussion of co-constructed experiences, and Gee's (2007) model of game-based learning.

Other than educative media coverage (Darvasi, 2018), casual and commercial discourses have been concerned with anecdotal experiences of inclusion (McGrane, 2018), as well as hypothesising into reasons behind *D&D*'s burgeoning popularity (E.g. Alimurung, 2019; Melamed, 2018; Newitz, 2019). Many progressive organisations have also been established to encourage *D&D* play worldwide. An international example is *Game to Grow*, an organisation launched through a successful crowdfunding campaign that aims to "provide therapeutic and educational gaming groups that contribute to the growth of communities... [and] promote an understanding of the power and benefit of games across the world" (Game to Grow, 2019). Although these examples and studies contribute to more instrumental applications of *D&D* and game studies research, there remains a lack of sustained research that delves into the clear resurgence, popularity and appeal of the game for modern players.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on our qualitative study of 20 *D&D* players (7F, 13M, aged 18 – 34) with varying levels of experience (ranging from 2 months to 19+ years) across four different playing groups over five months (May–September 2019) in Sydney, Australia. To our knowledge, there is no significant difference in how Australian *D&D* players engage with and discuss the game compared to their international counterparts. Our study could have been conducted elsewhere with an engaged *D&D* population and likely yielded similar results. However, as there were time restrictions on completing our data collection, geographic parameters were upheld for participant selection. Our primary aim was to contribute a deeper understanding of the renewed popularity and prominence of *D&D* play from the perspective of current players. This was supported by our overarching research question: "What are the factors contributing to the resurgence of *D&D* play?"

In order to adequately address our primary aim and research question, only participants who were currently playing in a substantial or continuous fifth edition campaign, or since 2014, were selected. As both the play and rulesets of *D&D* have changed significantly since its inception, this ensured that the data collected from participants was contemporary and aligned with the game's current resurgence in mainstream media; an established focus of our research. This also facilitated a relatively recent and accurate portrayal of player engagement, motivations, and experiences, which had not been explicitly discussed in contemporary scholarship. Moreover, the sample size of 20 total participants corresponded with the finding that qualitative data collection often reached saturation within the first 12 participants (Guest et al. 2006). These parameters refined the focus of our research and helped develop a more considered and valuable contribution to academic discourse.

The focus on determining key contextual factors of *D&D*'s resurgence also required selection of appropriate methods. As the transformative play of *D&D* occurs in a liminal game space that mirrors the imagined spaces of virtual gaming worlds, data collection methods were derived from two key works; *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff et al. 2012) and *Game Research Methods: An Overview* (Lankoski & Björk, 2015). Both semi-structured interviews and participant observation of gameplay were implemented, and participants were involved in pre-play interviews, observations of play sessions, and follow-up post-play interviews. The interviews and observations were targeted towards understanding player histories, motivations to play *D&D*, experiences playing, and engagement with *D&D* paratexts. The combination of these methods garnered qualitative insight into the rich player experiences of *D&D* and identified explicit contextual factors contributing to the game's resurgence. Once data was collected, a combination of open coding, axial coding, and memos were used to analyse findings in both individual participant responses and playing group data sets. Triangulation between the data collection

methods and analytical approaches resulted in a symbiotic and temporal relationship with data, allowing for continual re-evaluation of our key research findings which are discussed in-depth below.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS OF *D&D*'S RESURGENCE

To gain a thorough understanding of *D&D*'s modern resurgence, participants were asked targeted questions throughout data collection. In the pre-play interviews, two questions (among others) prominently uncovered factors contributing to the game's resurgence: "What do you think about the way *D&D* is presented/discussed in the media?" and "Do you think there is a resurgence happening in *D&D* play? Please explain." Any further clarifications regarding the resurgence were addressed during the post-play reflections and varied depending on the participant's previous responses. Discussed below, participants referred to three key contextual factors that helped them explain the resurgence of *D&D* play. These factors were: (1) the influence of media representations and trends, (2) the reduction of stigma associated with *D&D*, and (3) increased game access.

The Influence of Media Representations and Trends

Our first key finding arising from data collection was the influence that media representations and trends had on increasing participants' interest and desire towards *D&D* play. In alignment with Gerbner's (1969) media cultivation theory, Duck et al. (2000) argue that media representations "have the potential to play an active part in shaping and framing our perceptions" (p. 11), which has similarly been applied in the study of game paratexts (Consalvo, 2007). Furthermore, the current media trend of nostalgia has directly influenced the production, consumption and popularity of certain media representations and platforms (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012; Lamphere, 2017; Rothman, 2017; van Der Heijden, 2015). The participants in our study were very cognisant of how media representations of *D&D* had changed over time; from overt stigmatisation in *Mazes and Monsters* [Film] (1982) and *Riverdale* [Netflix Show] (2017), to more positively skewed portrayals in *Community* [Television Show] (2011) and *Stranger Things* [Netflix Show] (2016). The results detailed below, highlight examples of media mentioned by participants that were believed to have impacted the modern prominence and popularity of *D&D* play, as well as their own desire to play.

Results

All responses received from the twenty participants only identified and praised media that presented *D&D* and/or its players positively. In total, six participants detailed the game's representation on *Critical Role* [Twitch Stream], six mentioned *Stranger Things* [Netflix Show], four brought up *Community* [Television Show], three discussed *The Adventure Zone* [Podcast], and a reference was made to *Friends at the Table* [Podcast]. Both traditional and emerging mediums were discussed, but the most common responses referred to *Critical Role* or *Stranger Things*; two shows from emerging mediums that positively represented *D&D* play and respectively embodied the current popularity of the fantasy genre and nostalgic media.

Discussion

Critical Role is a long-form, actual-play *D&D* show that has been live-streaming weekly since 2015 to hundreds of thousands of collective viewers on the platforms Twitch.tv and YouTube. The playing group consists of "a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors that sit around and play Dungeons & Dragons" (Geek & Sundry, 2015), navigating archetypal fantasy obstacles such as defeating dragons and journeying across vast unexplored lands. Participant responses indicated that the show's high-quality production value and noteworthy depiction of social fun and fantasy tropes,

cultivated a burgeoning interest in *D&D* play that they believed contributed to the game's resurgence. In 1983, Fine characterised the interest in fantasy pursuits like *D&D* as limited to hard-core gamers: players that did not meet or adhere to "many of the normative requirements of conventional society..." (p. 46). In 2019, *Critical Role* held a live show in Los Angeles, titled *The Search for Grog*¹, which sold out thousands of seats within in a matter of hours. The popularity and viewership of *Critical Role* (and therefore *D&D* by association) by both players and non-players from varied demographics and experiences, was something that Fine (1983) could not account for in his research; but is now acknowledged within ours.

Taylor², a *D&D* player for over 19 years, expressed his excitement towards *Critical Role* saying that it was "just amazing. The amount of culture and following fandom is growing exponentially because it's just so fun." He proposed that the show's fun and unedited portrayal of playing *D&D* with friends, prompted increased interest in the game. Building on this, DM and player Morgan, indicated that the widened appeal of *D&D* was derived from the "quality of [*Critical Role*'s] stream." Morgan articulated that the show had increased audience interest towards *D&D* in a way that enticed both experienced and unexperienced viewers to want to play the game themselves. However, this has also resulted in the wider "Mercer-Effect." This term, derived from the name of *Critical Role*'s DM Matthew Mercer, is used within the community to describe the "unrealistic expectations of new *D&D* players who believe their games will be similar to *Critical Role*" (Girdwood, 2019).

In a different line of thought, DM Lee ruminated on the general appeal of fantasy-based content like *Critical Role*. He stated that "fantasy has become more mainstream. Starting with *The Lord of the Rings* films to, most notably now, *Game of Thrones* ... *D&D* has been able to ride that wave in a great way." Lee positioned the growth and concrete presence of the fantasy genre as a factor that was pivotal in repopularising *D&D*. Although it could be argued that consumption of fantasy media is undoubtedly driven by personal tastes and inclinations, Cox (in Barrett, 2012) hypothesised that the emergent trend is a result of the current social, economic, and political climate. Cox (in Barrett, 2012) further stated that the fantasy genre is "very appealing in politically-charged and economically precarious times. The real-world is morally murky and troublingly complex, so the black-and-white worlds of traditional fantasy can be a calming antidote to that" (para. 6). In a societal context where the collective regression of basic human rights (Triggs, 2019), increased surveillance (Zuboff, 2014), and election of morally grey 'leaders', are just some of the turmoil ridden concerns that our participants endured, it was no surprise that fantasy media presenting a narrative of hope, like *Critical Role*, dominated participants responses regarding the resurgence of renewed interest in *D&D*.

Of equal interest and discussion for participants was the influence of nostalgic media. *Stranger Things* is a science-fiction Netflix series set during the 1980s that follows the disappearance of a young boy amid the supernatural events occurring in a small fictional American town. In comparison to *Critical Role*, *Stranger Things* does not focus on representing the actual-play of *D&D*. Rather, it stylises *D&D* as an intellectual tool and significant plot device that prompts the protagonists to comprehend supernatural elements, inciting major story arcs and character growth (Chalk, 2018, para. 37). Participant responses discussed how the nostalgic representation of *D&D* in *Stranger Things* sparked greater mainstream attention. New player Rae confirmed that *Stranger Things* "really bought the resurgence of *D&D* into the mainstream." Her implication about media influence aligned with Gerbner's (1969) cultivation theory, which was also exemplified in other responses. Uma, a player who was introduced to *D&D* only 6 months prior to data collection, linked the game's inclusion in *Stranger Things* to the motivation behind her play. She explained that *D&D* was "hipster cool

again in popular culture,” which prompted her initial interest in the game. The reach of this influential representation is substantiated with the knowledge that after the release of each new season of *Stranger Things*, heightened interest in *D&D* was tracked (see Figure 4). This was further supported by the fact that *WOTC* had reported increased online sales in both print and eBooks that grew 53% from 2017 to 2018, reflecting interest potentially directed from the show and other paratexts.

What drove Uma’s curiosity, and others who were interested in *D&D* after *Stranger Things*, could be explained by Le Sueur’s (1977) anatomy of nostalgia. The existence and incorporation of nostalgia in texts shows a “longing for times of a simpler, more straightforward approach to life and its difficulties” (Le Sueur, 1977, p. 189). In *Stranger Things*, *D&D* is represented as a wholesome leisure activity that provides the protagonists with the skills to overcome their darkest challenges. It then makes sense that consumers of *Stranger Things* who have an interest in playing *D&D*, want the game to emulate that same role within their own lives. Golding (2019) conceptualises this idea of formative nostalgia, stating that “nostalgia looks backward. It seeks to empower the present with what has been lost to the past” (p. 14). The empowered representation of *D&D* in *Stranger Things* drove consumers to reconstruct their perceptions towards the game, inevitably contributing to its resurgence. In conjunction with *Critical Role*’s breadth and impact, it is clear that contemporary media representations and trends have influenced how our participants view the game’s resurgence and have increased their desire to play.

Reduction of Stigma

Another key finding from our research was how participants perceived a reduction in associated stigmas towards play and players of *D&D*. Goffman, an influential sociologist whose work on social frames underpins much *D&D* scholarship, theorised on the definition and concept of stigma. His work indicated that the term was originally used by the ancient Greeks to “refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the [person in question] ... but is [now] applied more to the disgrace itself than... the bodily evidence of it” (Goffman, 1991, p. 10). Goffman (1991) himself however, defined stigma as the possession of an attribute that made someone inherently different to others; a failing, shortcoming, or handicap that in extreme cases was thought to be bad, dangerous, or weak (pp. 11-12). The results below detail the perceived reduction of social, religious and game related stigmas directed at *D&D* and/or its players, proposed by the participants as an integral part of the game’s resurgence.

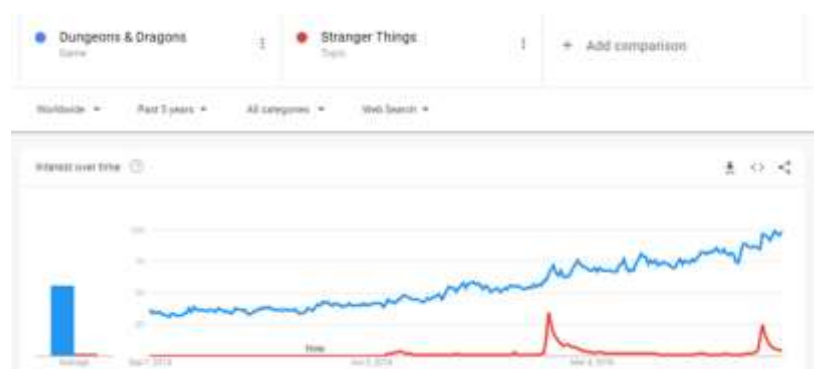


Figure 4: Google Trends graph showing the search popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Stranger Things* over the last five years. Retrieved November 30, 2019, from www.trends.google.com

Results

Three participants explicitly used the term ‘stigma’ to describe the declining negative perceptions towards *D&D*. Most participants discussed stigma without overt use of the term, opting for alternatives and variations such as ‘fear’, ‘perception’ or ‘view.’ Ten participants suggested that the social stigma of playing *D&D* had diminished in recent years, supported by the rise in positive media representations. Four participants noted the decline in religious stigmas, with three participants explicitly referring to the 1980s Satanic Panic. Lastly, two participants provided commentary on generic stigma directed towards leisure practices and characterised *D&D* as inherently different to other forms of contemporary gaming.

Discussion

Connected to the progressive media representations discussed above, there has been a notable decline in *D&D*’s entrenched stigmas. Throughout the game’s duration, *D&D* players have been implicated in social and religious media panics that have stemmed from negative beliefs and attitudes towards their participation in *D&D* (Peter et al. 2019, p. 248). Responses received from the participants suggested a correlation between the previously mentioned positive media representations, and the reduction of social, religious and gaming stigmas related to *D&D* play. Historically, *D&D* players were often viewed as socially stigmatised, stereotyped as ‘nerds’ or ‘geeks.’ These stereotypes and attitudes grew from the game’s elusive reputation – *nobody really understood what D&D was* – and thus, misconceptions about the game and its players were propagated through negative representations in news media and entertainment. Players were viewed to be “uninteresting, unnecessary to society, and ultimately undesirable” (Cross, 2005, p. 26). Participant Ash had experienced this stigma firsthand throughout his 15-year foray with the game, and cemented that prior to its resurgence, people interested in *D&D* “felt like they couldn’t even approach it [because it] ... would tarnish them socially.” Evidence of this social stigma was further attested to by other participants that were new to the game. Olive, a player for six months, indicated her initial hesitation in playing *D&D* “because it was stereotypically a nerdy loser thing... [and] everyone was taking the piss out of it.” Similarly, Lee “always assumed [that] *D&D* was that one step too nerdy of an activity” for him, despite his personal identification as a nerd/geek. However, participants noted that in recent years, stigmatic discourse surrounding *D&D* had been reversed. *D&D* had risen to prominence, through mass and popular media like *Critical Role* and *Stranger Things*, which consequently shed light on the previously misunderstood pastime.

The reduction of religious stigmas and panics were correlated with *D&D*’s broader media representation. Taylor, the most experienced *D&D* player of our participants, recalled a memorable conversation with his father surrounding the game’s religious stigma. During his first encounter with *D&D* in the early 1990s, Taylor’s father had told him to “just be careful when you play that because I’ve heard that there’s some sort of involvement with satanic cults.” The cautionary undertone and satanic implications in this response reflected the views of many parents, and society in general, towards *D&D* at that time. The embedded fear in Taylor’s anecdote was mirrored in Xanthe’s response. She similarly recalled that her friends would have to “hide their games” because of the game’s negative reputation, but emphasised that renewed representations of *D&D* in popular media had made it “very trendy” and “a lot more accepted.” Smith (in Allison, 2014) also explained that the negative beliefs and attitudes towards *D&D* had diminished because “the predicted ‘streets awash with the blood of innocents as a horde of demonically-possessed roleplayers laid waste to the country’ simply never materialised.” As geek/nerd sub-cultures, and thus *D&D*, emerged to their currently reinvigorated status, stigmas towards the game have reduced.

In the wake of positive and influential representations of *D&D*, participants were also aware of the stigmas that currently surrounded digital games and technological reliance; concerns once placed on their own stigmatised gameplay. DM Shannon commented that guilt and addiction narratives no longer applied to *D&D* play:

[*D&D* is] a huge stress relief. You can spend 4 hours just doing the stupidest shit and there's no guilty feeling that you get after binging 4 hours of Netflix, or playing a videogame for 4 hours, or ... even just sitting on the couch on your phone for 4 hours.

These stigmas, once prevalent towards *D&D* players, were now being directed at more digitally based leisure activities. What this indicated was that our participants negotiated their identity as *D&D* players in an oppositional stance (Kruse, 1993, p. 34) to current digital gaming culture and practice, highlighting the complex nature of modern gamer identities. This confirms the need for future research on gamer identities in non-digital games and their player communities, and suggests that the resurgence and appeal of *D&D* play for our participants was impacted by the reduction of stigmas previously associated with the game.

Increased Game Access

In addition to positive media representations and reduction of associated stigmas, increased access to *D&D* materials and paratexts was also proposed by participants as a key factor of the game's resurgence. To understand how *D&D*'s resurgence goes beyond this common argument of increased technological accessibility, Jenkins (2006) theory of 'convergence culture' was applied in our analysis and interpretation of results. Jenkins (2006) describes the modern phenomenon of convergence culture as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (p. 2). Jenkins (2006) reflected on the relationship between concepts such as 'participatory culture', 'collective intelligence', 'transmedia storytelling', and 'collaborative authorship', to explain how consumers and fans were now active agents in media consumption and creation, and "are central to how culture operates" (p. i). Through the lens of convergence culture, the results presented below help establish increased access to game materials and paratexts as another key factor of *D&D*'s modern resurgence.

Results

Responses stressed that there was increased access to *D&D* game materials and paratexts which supported the wider resurgence of the game. Seventeen participants mentioned the impact of new media platforms on their play and consumption of *D&D*, citing examples of 'Twitch.tv', 'YouTube', 'Podcasts', 'Roll20', and the Internet in general. Participants primarily used the term 'accessibility' to describe the ease and ability to view or participate in *D&D* related content on these platforms. Participants also described *D&D* as continually 'evolving', 'growing' or becoming more 'immersive', which related back to Jenkins (2006) concept of convergence culture.

Discussion

When questioned about factors contributing to *D&D*'s resurgence, almost all participants detailed the impact of greater technological access and various new media platforms on their play. Digital platforms and spaces such as Twitch.tv, YouTube, Roll20 and *D&D* Beyond were offered as examples of how potential players were more readily able to access and engage with *D&D* related content than in the past. Participant Ash stated that because of new media platforms, there was more access

to “all kinds of cool [*D&D*] stuff that used to be a lot of work to get.” Participants were using external digital platforms and paratexts to enhance their own *D&D* experiences, supporting our argument that *D&D*’s greater accessibility was facilitated to some extent by the proliferation of convergence culture. Observation of our participants also highlighted that the modern play and consumption of *D&D* was more hybrid than initially accounted for. Contemporary *D&D* play was not solely non-digital, as it had been previously. As Deterding and Zagal note (2018), *D&D* has “proliferated into myriad forms across cultures and media” (p. 5).

As new media and technology continue to progress and converge, shaping contemporary gaming cultures and environments (Witt et al. 2011, p. 763), participants emphasised that *WOTC* had made a considered effort to reduce the barriers of entry into *D&D*. Most notably, the revamped fifth edition ruleset published in 2014 was widely acknowledged by our participants to have driven increased player interest towards the game. Along with flexible and easier to digest rules, *WOTC* had also released more financially and technologically accessible game materials, through platforms such as *D&D Beyond*, that endeavoured to promote greater inclusivity of player demographics both in and out of game. Linking the game’s increased access back to its resurgence, player Xanthe explained that *D&D* was “being swept up in this greater cultural trend of things becoming more accessible,” and Uma framed it as an accessible digital game alternative: “It’s...videogames for people who can’t play videogames.”

While increased access to, and accessibility of, game-related content was argued to be linked to *D&D*’s resurgence, our participants responses strongly suggested the relevance of Jenkins (2006) convergence culture theory. Though there are other examples, the criticality of *Critical Role* was repeatedly mentioned by participants and reveals successful convergence culture in action and the impact this has had on drawing more interest and players towards *D&D*. *Critical Role* embodies four distinct examples of media convergence to portray and promote the renewed appeal and resurgence of *D&D*. Firstly, the show’s participation in a traditional tabletop RPG was being broadcast on a live-streaming platform. The immense success of this initial media convergence, supported by the positive participatory culture surrounding the show, has resulted in dedicated transmedia storytelling and a secondary convergence. In 2019, *Critical Role* raised USD\$11.3 million on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter to create an animated show situated in the *Critical Role* player universe. While still in production, the animated series was co-opted by Amazon, bringing it to their *Prime* entertainment platform which will undoubtedly bring *D&D* to an even wider audience. This third convergence shows the role that media conglomerates play in producing content that is popular with audiences. Lastly, *Critical Role* is preparing to release an in-canon campaign setting published by *WOTC* themselves (*WOTC*, 2020). The theory of convergence culture provides explanation regarding how consumers of *D&D* have now become producers of *D&D* on a level unmatched previously and could be partially responsible for the resurgence of *D&D* play and content lately. The progression of *Critical Role* from a home tabletop game, to live broadcast, to mass-media partnered animated series, to in-canon campaign guide, exemplifies the prolific impact that convergence culture has had on *D&D*’s modern resurgence and popularity, echoing the sentiments of DM Lee who said that *D&D* “was really well suited to the way media was moving.”

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to present and discuss key factors that have contributed to our participants understanding of the contemporary resurgence and play of *D&D*. Using results from our 2019 study into modern player experiences and perceptions, we proposed that the influence of media representations and trends, the reduction of stigma

associated with the game, and the impact of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) on increased game access, all characterised our participants comprehension of *D&D*'s current resurgence. As our research was motivated by the identified limitations of available literature and discourse, this paper contributed valuable insight to both game and media studies about *D&D*, non-digital gaming practices, and the impact of media convergence. Of most significance, we addressed the current gap in *D&D* research by diverging from instrumental and educational applications of the game. Instead, we provided a renewed and richer understanding of the modern play and players of *D&D*. Our findings also contribute to the larger discipline of game studies. The findings detailed in this paper add nuance and depth to the discussion of complex modern 'gamer' identities (E.g. Martin & Martin, 2012; Poels et al. 2012; Shaw, 2012, 2013, 2014), a widely debated and continually evolving concept in both academic and non-academic discourse. In addition to this, although our research focused on *D&D*, we argued the importance and necessity of future research into other non-digital games and their communities as they continue to grow and garner popularity, and the role non-digital play has in players lives. Finally, our wider discussion of paratexts, media convergences and trends in relation to *D&D*'s resurgence highlights that the relationship between digital and non-digital cannot be extricated when engaging in wider discourses of media, emphasising the importance of researching non-digital games as a key facet of contemporary game cultures.

BIO

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ENDNOTES

¹ Attached is the link to *Critical Role*'s 'The Search for Grog' 2019 live show. Between 4:31:38 - 4:35:35 you can explicitly hear how invested the spectators are and begin to comprehend the enormous popularity of both *Critical Role* and *D&D* in 2019. This portrayal of the game and its players is fundamentally different to the *D&D* play and players described in Fine's (1983) context. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hi5pEHs76TE>

² Throughout the entirety of this paper, participants and their resulting data are referred to by pseudonyms. This is done not only to protect the identity of the individuals, but also in consideration of ethical practices regarding qualitative data collection.