"Why Do You Play *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D]?": Investigating Motivations for Play in Non-Digital Games

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation investigates contemporary player motivations in the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D] (Arneson & Gygax 1974). Over the years, there has been significant and consistent academic interest in the motivations of digital game players (e.g., Bartle 1996; Dalisay et al. 2021; Herodotou et al. 2015; Kordyaka et al. 2019; Martin et al. 2021; Yee 2007). However, attention must also be directed towards understanding motivations for play of non-digital games (e.g., Kamm 2019; Leorke 2018) as they continue to grow in prominence and popularity (e.g., Booth 2018; Sidhu & Carter 2020; Whitten, 2021). Drawing on data collected from an ongoing research project into the contemporary play and players of D&D, I discuss my preliminary findings which highlight creativity as a key motivator for play—a factor often overlooked or minimised in digital gameplay motivation models (e.g., Kahn et al. 2015; Yee 2007).

RELATED WORK

As the influence of D&D is widespread (e.g., LaLone 2019; Voorhees et al. 2012; Zagal & Deterding 2018) there has been significant research conducted on the game in various fields of interest. Gary Alan Fine's (1983) foundational ethnography of D&D play and players in the 1980s remains pivotal and is widely referenced when outlining social dynamics or motivations in games. Contemporary D&D literature shows attention toward areas such as D&D's immersive play experiences (e.g., Mizer 2019; Sidhu & Carter 2021; Wouters et al. 2021), related media representations and modern resurgence (Chalk 2018; Sidhu & Carter 2020a, 2020b; Stanton & Johnson 2021), and critical consideration of the game's present inclusivity (e.g., Cote 2020, 190-197; Jones 2018; Jones & Pobuda 2020; Stang & Trammell 2019; Stokes 2017; Trammell 2014). Scholars have also investigated D&D's rulesets and structures (Dashiell 2017, 2018) and educational potential (e.g., Carter 2011; Garcia 2020; Sidhu et al. 2021; Wright et al. 2017). As public and scholarly interest in the game rises, it is important to investigate what motivates play of the 48-year-old non-digital game.

There is a substantive body of interdisciplinary work that investigates play motivations (e.g., Bartle 1996; Bostan 2009; Demetrovics et al. 2011; Herodotou et al. 2015; van Reijmersdal et al. 2013). A widely referenced model in game studies is Nick Yee's (2007) *Motivations for Play in Online Games* which offers ten key motivations behind

play categorised into three different groups: *achievement* (including advancements, mechanics, and competition), *social* (including socialising, relationship, and teamwork), and *immersion* (including discovery, role-playing, customisation, and escapism). Though broadly applicable to most games and players, a notable limitation of Yee's model is that creativity is not explicitly acknowledged nor included as a key motivator for gameplay. Although proceeding research by Nick Yee and Nic Ducheneaut (2019) acknowledges creativity more explicitly, the implicit focus on digital games and gameplay motivations—rather than games as a whole—limits the understanding of creativity that is put forth. In recent years, there has been deeper interest in the design, application, and experiences of creativity in both digital and non-digital games (e. g., Baisheva et al. 2017; Green & Kaufman 2015; Hall et al. 2020; Inchamnan et al. 2014; Fukui et al. 2020). As academic attention towards creativity in games continues to expand, my own research into the contemporary play and players of D&D adds to this nascent field of interest.

RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS
Qualitative data was collected from current D&D players in interviews and extensive gameplay observations (n=20, 13M, 7F, aged 18 – 34), focus group discussions (n=14, 9M, 5F, aged 24-55), and an online survey (n=354, 172M, 153F, 23NB [Non-Binary], 6 No Answer, aged 18-63). To investigate the key motivators of contemporary D&D play, participants in each research method were asked to respond to the open-ended question "Why do you play D&D?" Open coding and axial coding methods were then used to analyse the data (Charmaz 2006).

Amongst many other factors that cannot be adequately explored within the scope of this abstract, I found that creativity was repeatedly referenced by participants to be a core part of D&D's contemporary appeal, as well as one of the main motivations behind their current play of the game [Interviews/Observations: n=14, 70% | Focus Groups: n=10, 71.4% | Survey: n=122, 34.5%]. Notably, responses identified a difference between creativity in D&D and creativity in other games and mediums. For example, one survey participant (29F, DM/Player) articulated that "[D&D] allows me to scratch an itch for exploration and creativity that no digital game can even come close to." Similarly, one interview and observation participant (28F DM/Player) highlighted the importance of unplanned creativity in games stating that "when I play D&D, I have the unique experience of being creative and spontaneous without the rigidity of needing to be perfect." Mentioning the collaborative nature and environment of D&D play, one focus group participant (33M, DM/Player) responded that "there are very few spaces for adults as far as safe social spaces," but D&D gives players a chance to "test and try all sorts of ways of being in that space with very minimal repercussions." Unlike many of its digital game counterparts that are usually guided by predetermined systems, rules, and codes, D&D's flexible ruleset and design gives players greater agency over the game worlds they inhabit. This affords them the opportunity to be more creative in their natural play of the game which, as evidenced by my data, is a prominent factor of the game's modern appeal.

CONCLUSION
Though there is considerable existing research into play motivations, preliminary data from my ongoing investigation into contemporary D&D play and players suggests that creativity is a key motivator for gameplay. While there is robust academic interest in designing *for* creativity, there is less focus on examining the diverse expressions of creativity *in* play. By encouraging discussions about how creativity is conceptualised and experienced differently in digital game environments in comparison to non-digital game environments, a richer understanding of creativity in games and play will be contributed to future player motivation research.

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