

Queering the Third Place: Dungeons & Dragons at Your Friendly Local Game Store

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INTRODUCTION

I started working at a Friendly Local Game Store (FLGS, for short) the summer after I graduated high school; it was my first job, and provided me with a new sense of community, specifically through working D&D nights every Wednesday. At D&D nights in my shop, players were a good mix of men, women, and gender non-conforming folks. They'd yell, laugh, move their hands, and wildly interact with each other and the game table. I'd played D&D before, but never outside the structure of my own family and friends and communities I already knew. When folks came up to the counter to buy new dice, looking like best friends, many would tell me that they'd just met each other that night. D&D seemed, in my shop, to be something almost magical. They are oriented around pleasure, play, and ephemeral experiences and social performance.

Six years after leaving my employment as the FLGS, as a doctoral student, I returned to my roots with several years of intentional ethnography oriented around these research questions:

RQ1: How has the D&D community transformed in the past decade, and what changes led to this transformation?

RQ2: What is the role of the FLGS in community building, and how are diverse identities supported—or not supported—at D&D nights?

Through a long-term ethnography of the space, combining my years of auto-ethnographic experience with current and more intentional ethnographic methods, I have explored how your FLGS is (probably) hosting a deeply queer and deeply complex community building night at least once a week.

METHODS

Methodologically, this project was a combination of grounded ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and auto-ethnography. Grounded ethnography in this case constitutes a social immersion in the space of D&D nights at the FLGS, in which I

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entered the community with the goal of understanding their practices and cultures through both observation and participation.

The formal ethnographic portion of my research has been conducted at five different friendly local game stores throughout southern California. In addition, I conducted extensive interviews at Gen Con, the largest tabletop gaming convention in the United States, where I was able to speak to D&D players who are active in their communities throughout the US, which took place in Indianapolis in early August, 2024. My main interaction was as a player in games, but I also regularly took the role of Dungeon Master (DM) when there was a scarcity of people willing to lead games, which became a regular issue. As a DM, I had much more power to shape the experience of players and make sure players were using inclusive language. In ethnographic research, that type of control is generally frowned upon, with the researcher ideally acting as an objective observer. In this case, however, I found that serving as the DM allowed me to see just how flexible players can be, as an almost experimental method, and my observations when in that role were just as valuable as when I was just another player at the table.

Because of the methodological approach, any results from this study can not be generalized to wider analog game cultures and will focus on U.S. cultures of public tabletop roleplaying. This does not limit its potential impact, but rather serves to provide an example of one mode of potential cultural transformation. In this case study, players have worked together to slowly build an inclusive community out of an exclusive one, and that modelled potential of active community change could be valuable for a broad range of gaming and fan cultures.

EMERGENT THEMES AND TRANS-FORMATION OF THE THIRD PLACE

Throughout this process, I identified many themes that merit full and further research: such as whiteness, the scarcity of tangible community, neurodiversity, ephemeral community values, rejection of source material, and digital third spaces, just to name a few. The most exciting transformation of D&D in public, physical space, however, has been a rewriting of norms around gendered and gendered performance, in which gender is socially understood as performed and unattached to physical markers of identity. We are witnessing the rewriting of a social space that has traditionally been associated with a specific subset of white, cisgender, middle class, heterosexual men, into one in which gender is deeply related to play and transforms not only the individual understanding of gender, but the social discourses of identity (Ruberg, 2019). I argue that D&D at the FLGS functions as an ephemeral and queer third place, where the moments of togetherness and performance form new senses of queer belonging (Muñoz, 2009).

D&D AT THE FLGS

Through D&D at the friendly local game shop, players can walk into a room full of strangers and come out with a legion of new best friends. They can experiment with their identity and live in someone else's shoes for a couple of hours a week, and they can share this experience with others. Despite the wide loss of game shops during the height of the pandemic, there is a massive demand for a physical space in which to exist with other nerds, many of whom are queer, neurodiverse, and looking for a place to belong. D&D nights are a complex and ephemeral social space in which players

shape the community to fit them, and in the process can find social belonging (Trammell, 2020). Through changing politics of representation in RPG and a proliferation of popular media about D&D, new players have been brought into the community and forced it to be more inclusive, in all senses of the word.

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