

Rolling Together: Intergenerational Dungeons & Dragons, Onboarding, and Infrastructures of Care

Chelsea Russell, Michael Nixon

University of Toronto Mississauga

3359 Mississauga Rd, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6

chelsea.russell@mail.utoronto.ca, michael.nixon@utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

This paper examines intergenerational tabletop role-playing, focusing on Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), as a site where pleasure is collaboratively produced through co-authorship, yet constrained by uneven access to rules literacy, familiarity, and interpretive norms. We present the results from a survey of 227 respondents to an exploratory survey that then led to follow-up interviews.

Most participants played D&D, with the main motivation of bonding. Other major motivations were creative expression and community building. Particularly in the context of intergenerational play, strategic onboarding practices are common, including progressive rules disclosure, visual aids, and “session-zero”.

We argue that intergenerational D&D produces intersectional pleasures through the lived intersection of age, communicative norms, platform literacies, relational roles, and access to care at the table. The paper proposes infrastructures of pleasurable inclusion as a lens for analyzing how groups design conditions for shared joy, and how those conditions can falter when support remains unevenly distributed.

Keywords

tabletop role-playing games; Dungeons & Dragons; intergenerational play; pleasure; intersectionality; onboarding; accessibility; safety tools

INTRODUCTION

Pleasure is often treated as self-evident in games: something games deliver by virtue of well-tuned mechanics, engaging fiction, or compelling aesthetics (Juul 2010; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). An intersectional pleasures framing invites a different starting point. Pleasure is neither neutral nor evenly distributed. It is made, negotiated, and sometimes withheld; shaped by the entanglement of identity, embodiment, social roles, and access to interpretive resources (Ahmed 2010; Hall 1997; Gray 2014). In this paper, we approach pleasure as an analytic object: not merely an outcome, but a process, a social accomplishment, and, crucially for intersectional analysis, a set of conditions some participants can access more easily than others (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are a particularly generative site for this inquiry. Unlike many single-player or asynchronously networked experiences, tabletop role-play requires ongoing alignment: participants coordinate what is happening, whose turn it is, what counts as plausible action, and what forms of risk or emotional intensity are welcome. The pleasures of TTRPG play are therefore deeply relational, emerging through co-authored narrative, shared attention, performative collaboration, and collective problem-solving (Fine 1983; Bowman 2010; Zagal and Deterding 2018). Yet these same dynamics make pleasure precarious. If players cannot readily access the rules, the fiction, the table's communicative norms, or the affordances of play technologies, "fun" can become unevenly distributed (Shaw 2015; Ruberg 2019).

This paper focuses on intergenerational Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) as an especially vivid case. Intergenerational tables operate across differences in age, life experience, media repertoire, and cultural memory; these differences can intensify both pleasure and friction (Volda and Greenberg 2010; De Schutter et al. 2013). Intergenerational play can be joyful precisely because it creates opportunities for bonding, storytelling, and shared ritual across age-based social boundaries, echoing how games mediate family intimacy and chosen-family connection (Aarsand 2007; Shaw 2014). At the same time, it can foreground mismatches in pacing preferences, tolerance for rules complexity, technical confidence, and expectations about the "right" way to play. Intergenerational D&D thus makes visible the infrastructures that allow pleasure to happen, as well as those that quietly make pleasure harder to sustain.

The paper is situated in game studies, but it is deliberately interdisciplinary in its points of contact. It draws from feminist and queer affect theory to ask how pleasure becomes socially patterned; from cultural studies and intersectional scholarship to examine whose comfort is treated as ordinary; from HCI and accessibility research to understand tools, formats, and sensory accommodations; and from learning theory to approach onboarding as participation rather than simple instruction. This disciplinary positioning matters because the object of analysis is not only a game system, but a social arrangement around play.

In our study, we ask:

- What pleasures do intergenerational D&D groups report, and what restricts those pleasures?
- How are pleasures mediated by onboarding practices and infrastructures of care, including accessibility supports and safety norms?
- How does "intersectional pleasure" surface through generational dynamics, relational roles, and differential literacies such as rules, narrative, platform, and media literacy?

The paper makes two contributions to game studies. First, it develops the analytic lens of infrastructures of pleasurable inclusion: the practical, social, and material supports through which groups distribute access to enjoyment. Second, it provides empirical grounding through a survey of intergenerational TTRPG play, highlighting how pleasures such as bonding and co-authorship co-emerge with constraints such as cognitive load, time, fatigue, and interpretive mismatch.

RELATED WORK: FROM SHARED FANTASY TO INTERSECTIONAL PLEASURES

This project sits at the intersection of five bodies of scholarship: TTRPG studies and co-creative narrative; pleasure and affect in play; intersectionality in game studies; intergenerational gaming and family or chosen-family play; and onboarding, accessibility, and safety infrastructures.

TTRPGs as social worlds and negotiated fictions

TTRPGs are frequently described as collaborative storytelling, but scholarship has long emphasized that the “story” is inseparable from the social structures that produce it. Fine’s *Shared Fantasy* (1983) remains foundational, showing how tabletop RPGs operate through layered frames: the real-world social group, the game’s formal structures, and the diegetic world of character action. Meaning is generated not purely through rules or fiction but through talk, social relationships, and the ongoing negotiation of what counts as legitimate play.

Subsequent work in RPG studies builds on this insight in several directions. Bowman (2010) highlights how role-playing supports community, identity exploration, and collective problem-solving. Zagal and Deterding’s *Role-Playing Game Studies* (2018) positions TTRPGs as transmedia practices shaped by design cultures, player communities, and platform ecologies. Across this scholarship, one recurring claim matters for our argument: pleasure is co-produced. TTRPG enjoyment depends on social coordination and shared interpretive labour.

This co-production has particular implications for intergenerational play. When a table spans participants with different cultural reference points, experiences with fantasy genres, comfort with improvisation, or familiarity with procedural systems, the “shared fantasy” must be actively built. Intergenerational play makes the negotiations Fine describes more visible because agreement cannot be taken for granted. The question becomes not only “what story are we telling?” but also “what do we mean by fun, risk, and good play?”

Pleasure, affect, and the politics of fun

Game studies has often treated fun as the central design goal or experiential outcome of play, frequently tying it to challenge, flow, or mastery (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Koster 2013; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). This approach can imply that pleasure is a largely individual psychological state that emerges when mechanics, difficulty curves, and player skill align. Affect theory suggests a broader account: pleasure is socially oriented, historically situated, and politically patterned.

Ahmed’s work on “happy objects” argues that happiness becomes attached to culturally sanctioned objects, activities, and orientations; people are guided toward what they are expected to enjoy, and deviations from normative happiness can be framed as failure (Ahmed 2010). Berlant (2011) similarly describes attachments to objects that promise enjoyment while also constraining flourishing. Applied to games, this means that players may be expected to enjoy particular genres, tolerances of violence, forms of banter, or rituals of mastery even when those norms distribute comfort unevenly (Taylor 2006; Shaw 2014).

Queer and feminist game scholars have shown how “fun” can mask structural exclusions: what counts as pleasurable for some players may feel hostile, inaccessible, or merely exhausting to others (Ruberg 2019; Chess 2017). Russworm (2017) and Gray (2014) demonstrate how dominant game cultures often attach

pleasure to racialized and gendered tropes, or to aggressive social styles, in ways that marginalize players who do not fit those expectations. A focus on pleasure therefore requires attending not only to what is joyful, but to the conditions that determine who can experience ease, agency, and safety in play.

Intersectionality in games: beyond representation

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000) is often mobilized in game studies to analyze representation, harassment, labour inequity, or identity-based player experiences (Gray 2014; Shaw 2014; Ruberg 2019). This work is crucial, but TTRPGs demand an extension: intersectionality also operates through roles, responsibilities, and relational positions at the table. Even within a demographically similar group, differences in age, disability, language use, neurodiversity, expertise, or social confidence intersect with power dynamics such as GM authority and cultural capital (Zagal and Deterding 2018; Harper 2018).

In co-present play, intersectionality becomes tangible through micro-allocations: who feels comfortable taking narrative risks, who performs the emotional labour of smoothing conflict, who becomes responsible for explaining rules, who names content boundaries, and who carries the cognitive load of keeping systems and story aligned (Taylor 2006; Stang 2019). These patterns mirror broader structures of social inequality even when the group imagines itself as egalitarian or “just playing.”

Intersectionality is thus not only about who is represented in the fiction, but who can move through play without friction, whose interpretations are treated as legitimate, and whose comfort becomes the assumed default. Recognizing these dynamics enables a more robust account of pleasure: not as shared equally, but as structured by access, authority, and relational position.

Intergenerational play and the social life of games

Intergenerational gaming research often emphasizes games as a vehicle for bonding, learning, and shared leisure, particularly in families. While much work focuses on digital games, the underlying insight travels: intergenerational play often functions as relationship maintenance, not simply entertainment. It can also involve asymmetries in expertise and authority—parents teaching children, children teaching parents, or mixed-age friends navigating different tempo, tactile, and communicative preferences.

For TTRPGs, intergenerational dynamics are especially interesting because the game’s content is co-produced at the table. Intergenerational play is therefore not just sharing a pre-made game; it is sharing authorship, negotiation, and affective tone-setting. These dynamics remain underexplored relative to digital contexts, especially when considered through intersectional pleasure rather than instrumental benefits such as education, therapy, or skill-building. Intergenerational play can be understood as a site where pleasure and restriction are co-designed through everyday table practices.

Onboarding, literacy, and communities of practice

Onboarding is not just getting new players to understand rules; it is a process of cultural induction into what kinds of play are valued. Learning in games has often been theorized via situated learning and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger

1991), where newcomers move from peripheral to fuller participation through supported engagement. Gee (2007) similarly frames games as learning systems in which players develop situated meanings and literacies through doing rather than through abstract instruction. In TTRPGs, onboarding includes procedural literacy, narrative literacy, and social literacy: how to collaborate, share spotlight, read tone, handle disagreement, and decide when rules are binding or negotiable.

Intergenerational contexts amplify onboarding stakes because differences in literacy can be mapped too quickly onto age-based assumptions. Older players may be presumed resistant to rules or digital tools; younger players may be presumed impatient with slower pacing or less interested in narrative coherence. Such assumptions can misfire. The key analytic move is to treat onboarding as a site where pleasure is distributed: teaching strategies can either gatekeep fun behind mastery or reframe rules as scaffolding for agency.

Accessibility, safety tools, and infrastructures of intimacy

A growing body of game studies, HCI, and RPG community discourse treats safety tools and accessibility supports as central to inclusive play. Safety tools such as content boundaries, check-ins, and debriefs can reduce the burden on any single player to manage discomfort privately. Accessibility supports such as visual aids, shorter sessions, simplified mechanics, or high-contrast sheets can make the shared fiction more legible and less fatiguing. These practices are sometimes framed as constraints, but a pleasure-centred account suggests the opposite: care infrastructures can expand who gets access to enjoyment by reducing preventable harm and friction.

Ara Wilson’s concept of the “infrastructure of intimacy” is useful here because it insists that intimate relations are not only private feelings but are also shaped by material-symbolic arrangements that organize relational life (Wilson 2016). Intergenerational D&D is not intimacy in the narrow sense of romance or family alone. It includes friendship, chosen family, pedagogical care, and shared leisure. Wilson’s framing helps clarify why the material details of play—tables, character sheets, lighting, VTTs, scheduling, norms for checking in—matter to the production of togetherness.

If pleasure is an affective terrain shaped by intersectional dynamics, then safety and accessibility are not separate from fun; they are part of the conditions that make pleasure sustainable. Intergenerational play provides a clear lens because differences in energy, sensory tolerance, life schedule, and comfort with improvisation may be pronounced. A table that uses breaks, visual summaries, or explicit boundaries is not merely accommodating someone; it is designing for shared pleasure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY AS PLEASURE-WORK

To connect this scholarship to our central claim, we treat intergenerational D&D as a site of pleasure-work: the distributed labour through which players and GMs create conditions for shared enjoyment across difference.

Pleasure is relational and infrastructural

In D&D, pleasure is rarely private. Even moments that feel individual—rolling a critical hit, solving a puzzle, delivering a dramatic line—depend on group recognition, pacing, and alignment of expectations. A player’s success is pleasurable because others respond to it, validate it, and fold it back into the shared world. Similarly, a moment meant to be humorous or poignant succeeds only when the table collaboratively sustains the emotional pitch.

Pleasure therefore emerges through spotlight distribution, turn-taking rhythms, pacing choices, genre agreement, and the social labour of attunement (Taylor 2006). These are not passive or accidental. They are continuously produced through routines, artifacts, norms, and conversational practices that allow play to hold together (Fine 1983; Stang 2019; Carr 2018). When these infrastructures operate smoothly, pleasure can appear effortless; when they fail, the fragility of shared fun becomes visible.

Roles, literacies, and embodied constraints

Intersectionality is often operationalized in demographic terms, but in tabletop play it also unfolds through roles, literacies, rhythms of attention, and embodied constraints. Age intersects with role authority (GM versus player), scheduling flexibility, tolerance for cognitive load, sensory needs, and familiarity with particular media repertoires such as actual-play conventions, videogame heuristics, or fantasy tropes. These intersections shape who experiences play as effortless, intuitive, or natural, and who experiences it as work, negotiation, or strain.

For example, a GM may hold narrative authority, a younger player may hold technical authority with digital tools, and an older player may hold cultural authority around genre conventions or long experience with earlier editions. These layered forms of expertise constitute distributed and uneven knowledge that shape how players inhabit the game (Zagal and Deterding 2018). Embodied constraints—attention cycles, fatigue, discomfort with improvisation, hearing or visual access—also intersect with identity and role. Seeing intersectionality this way allows us to analyze not only who is included demographically, but who can move through the game space without extra labour.

Onboarding is a politics of pleasure

Onboarding practices determine how pleasure is made available. Teaching rules as needed, modelling actions through plain-language narration, offering pre-generated characters, or using analogies to familiar games are tactics for redistributing access to fun (Gee 2007; Lave and Wenger 1991). These approaches minimize cognitive load, preserve agency, and allow newcomers to participate meaningfully before mastering the system. Conversely, dense front-loading of rules, rigid insistence on correct play, or failure to scaffold decision-making can gatekeep pleasure behind procedural competence (Koster 2013).

Onboarding thus functions as an infrastructure of pleasurable inclusion or exclusion. It determines whose intentions are foregrounded, whose mistakes are tolerated, who can improvise confidently, and whose playstyle the group adapts to. In intergenerational contexts, where literacies and comfort levels vary widely, onboarding is not merely instructional. It is a continuous negotiation of authority, generosity, and shared imaginative possibility.

Infrastructures of pleasurable inclusion

Bringing these strands together, we propose infrastructures of pleasurable inclusion as an analytic lens for understanding how intergenerational D&D tables distribute access to joy, agency, and ease. This lens foregrounds the conditions under which pleasure becomes possible, rather than treating pleasure as an automatic effect of rules or narrative design. It draws on scholarship that treats affect as relational (Ahmed 2010), pleasure as structured by orientation and habit (Berlant 2011), and access as an infrastructural arrangement rather than individual accommodation (Puar 2017; Gerling et al. 2016; Wilson 2016).

- Translation infrastructures include analogies, cross-game references, plain-language narration before introducing rules, session recaps, and modelling interpretive moves. These practices synchronize participants' imaginative frames and reduce misalignment.
- Cognitive infrastructures include progressive disclosure, cheat sheets, simplified mechanics, pre-generated characters, visual summaries, and character-sheet supports. These reduce cognitive load and allow players to engage with the fiction without being overwhelmed by rule density.
- Temporal infrastructures include breaks, shorter sessions, pacing norms, predictable combat and story rhythms, and flexible scheduling. Temporal design shapes whose bodies and life rhythms the table accommodates.
- Affective infrastructures include safety tools, content boundaries, check-ins, session zeros, and debriefing rituals. These practices distribute emotional labour and make explicit whose discomfort is recognized.
- Material and platform infrastructures include battlemaps, minis, digital character sheets, virtual tabletops, assistive devices, lighting, seating, and accessibility-friendly layouts. These arrangements mediate how easily players can visualize, manipulate, and interact with the shared world.

Taken together, these infrastructures position pleasure not as a universal given but as a situated achievement. Some tables cultivate inclusive infrastructures by design; others rely on unspoken norms that may inadvertently privilege the quickest readers, the most assertive speakers, or the most rule-literate and tech-fluent players. By attending to infrastructure, we shift the analytic focus from individual preference to conditions of possibility: who gets to experience pleasure without extra labour, whose enjoyment depends on scaffolds, and whose friction points become invisible or normalized.

These theoretical commitments lead us to treat the survey not as a measurement instrument for stable population rates, but as a way of mapping how players name and arrange pleasure, friction, and support across a wider set of cases than an interview-only first phase would allow. The empirical analysis therefore returns to the three guiding questions introduced above: what pleasures and restrictions are reported; how onboarding, accessibility, and safety mediate those pleasures; and how intersectional pleasure becomes visible through generational dynamics, relational roles, and differential literacies.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument and procedure

Phase 1 used an online Qualtrics survey to map how intergenerational tabletop role-playing groups describe pleasure, onboarding, friction, and care. The instrument began with a consent item and then asked whether respondents had played a tabletop RPG intergenerationally in the previous 24 months. Subsequent items included multi-select questions about group composition, system, setting, session structure, motivations, onboarding practices, accessibility supports, safety norms, and challenges; Likert-style items about onboarding frequency, perceived helpfulness of supports, cognitive load, enjoyment, and relational outcomes; and open-ended prompts about bridging practices and moments when generational difference affected rule calls, plot direction, or character choice.

The survey was distributed as an exploratory first phase rather than as a probability sample. Its purpose was to gather a wider range of table arrangements than would be available through interviews alone and to identify recurring practices for later qualitative follow-up. The project is situated in game studies and RPG studies, but its analytic commitments also draw from feminist cultural studies, affect theory, and infrastructure studies. For that reason, the survey is treated less as a mechanism for estimating population rates than as a structured way of eliciting how players name, arrange, and evaluate conditions for pleasurable play.

Sample and analytic subset

The survey results contained 227 response records after Qualtrics metadata rows were excluded. Of these, 225 respondents selected the consent item, while 2 did not consent and were excluded from analysis. Among consenting respondents, 178 answered “Yes” to having played a tabletop RPG intergenerationally in the previous 24 months, 37 answered “No,” and 10 left that item blank. The analysis focuses on the intergenerational “Yes” subset ($n=178$) but reports item-level denominators because many respondents completed only part of the instrument. Eighty respondents in the “Yes” subset completed the full survey. Early group-configuration items therefore have larger denominators (typically $n=146$ – 151), motivation and onboarding items have mid-range denominators ($n=100$ – 118), and later accessibility, safety, challenge, and enjoyment items have denominators around $n=78$ – 80 .

This available-case approach is preferable here to listwise deletion. A complete-case analysis would discard many respondents who answered the early substantive items before leaving the survey, especially group configuration and motivation questions. At the same time, we avoid treating every count as if it came from the full $n=178$ subset. Denominators are shown in text, tables, and figure captions so that it’s clear where the evidence is broadest and where it narrows.

Analysis approach

Closed-response items were aggregated descriptively. We do not use significance tests, predictive modelling, or percentage-heavy inference, because the sample is self-selected and item completion varies. Instead, counts function as orienting evidence: they indicate which practices and frictions recur across respondents who reached a given item. Open-ended responses were read thematically with attention to four analytic concerns derived from the theoretical framework: pleasures named by respondents; constraints and frictions; onboarding and bridging practices; and infrastructures of care, including accessibility and safety practices. The analysis

below therefore combines survey aggregation with close interpretive reading of respondents' descriptions.

FINDINGS

Overview of intergenerational groups

The intergenerational subset is heterogeneous. It includes family groups, chosen-family groups, mixed-age friendship groups, and public or community-based play. Respondents most often described medium-to-large tables, longer campaigns, and a strong reliance on D&D, but the data do not reduce intergenerational play to one household or family pattern. Table 1 summarizes the main configuration variables using available-case denominators.

Category	Responses
Systems played (multi-select; n=151 answered)	D&D (146/151); other systems/write-ins (28/151); Pathfinder (13/151); OSR/rules-light (8/151); Call of Cthulhu (5/151); Powered by the Apocalypse (2/151).
Group composition (multi-select; n=146 answered)	Other/mixed-age groups (64/146); chosen family across generations (59/146); parent(s) + adult child(ren) (43/146); in-laws/extended family (6/146); grandparent(s) + grandchild(ren) (5/146).
Age span represented (n=149 answered)	25–34 years (60/149); 15–24 years (42/149); 35+ years (21/149); 10–14 years (20/149); prefer not to say (6/149).
Group size (n=151 answered)	6–7 players (73/151); 4–5 players (59/151); 2–3 players (13/151); 8+ players (6/151).
Play context / setting (multi-select; n=150 answered)	In-person at home (80/150); in-person public venue (58/150); online video + VTT (58/150); hybrid (15/150); online audio-only (14/150).
Session structure (multi-select; n=151 answered)	Ongoing campaign (114/151); one-shots (41/151); mixed/varies (24/151); short arcs (23/151); other (1/151).
Respondent role (n=151 answered)	Player (67/151); both player and DM/GM across sessions (52/151); Dungeon Master/Game Master (32/151).

Table 1: Summary of intergenerational respondents using available-case denominators.

D&D as cultural touchstone and infrastructural platform

D&D was selected by nearly all respondents who answered the systems item (146/151). This pattern supports the paper's focus on D&D, but it should not be read as evidence that respondents only play D&D or that D&D is inherently better suited to intergenerational play than other systems. The same item also captured Pathfinder, OSR or rules-light play, Call of Cthulhu, and numerous write-ins. In this dataset, D&D functions as a cultural touchstone and infrastructural platform: it is widely recognizable, supported by published adventures and digital tools, and often available as a common reference point for people with uneven RPG experience.

Motivations: bonding, co-authorship, introduction, and inclusion

Among respondents who answered the motivations item (n=118), bonding or time together was the most selected motivation (73/118). Creative expression/storytelling followed closely (62/118), along with introducing someone to RPGs (59/118) and community building/inclusion (55/118). Mental health or wellbeing was selected by 41/118, nostalgia or sharing hobbies across generations by 28/118, cognitive stimulation or learning by 25/118, and convenience or holiday gatherings by 19/118. These responses position intergenerational play as relational and creative rather than merely instructional or instrumental.

The agreement items complicate a simple family-bonding reading. Respondents most strongly endorsed the claim that someone wanted to teach or share a beloved hobby (95/117 agreed, including 56/117 who strongly agreed). A smaller but still notable group agreed that TTRPGs would be enjoyable for older participants (62/117) or that educational benefits were expected (53/117). Fewer agreed that the explicit aim was to strengthen intergenerational relationships (39/117), with 59/117 selecting neither agree nor disagree. This pattern suggests that intergenerational connection often emerges through shared leisure and hobby transmission rather than being named in advance as a formal intergenerational objective.

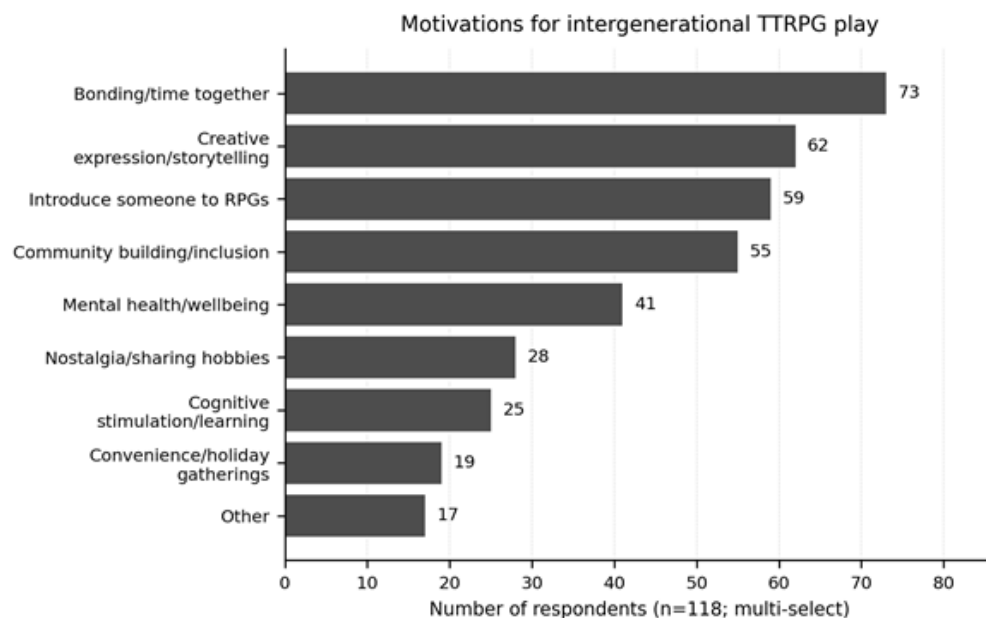


Figure 1: Motivations for intergenerational TTRPG play (n=118; multi-select).

Onboarding roles and teaching strategies

Onboarding was distributed across age and role rather than always flowing from older to younger participants. Among respondents who answered the onboarding-role item (n=100), older generation members were named most often as primary onboarders (35/100), followed by shared onboarding (31/100), younger generation members (18/100), external facilitators such as library staff or store DMs (9/100), and no onboarding needed (7/100). These responses matter because they resist a simple model in which older adults teach and younger players learn. Expertise at the table is situational: a player may hold social authority in the family, rules fluency in the game, or technical authority with a virtual tabletop.

The dominant teaching pattern was progressive disclosure. Among those who answered the teaching-strategies item (n=101), rules explained “as needed” was selected by 90/101 respondents. Other common strategies included visual aids (67/101), session-zero or expectations conversations (63/101), quick-reference sheets (52/101), digital aids (49/101), and house rules or simplification (43/101). Less common but still present were pre-generated characters (26/101), short tutorial encounters (23/101), and explicit safety tools (21/101).

Frequency items reinforce this pattern. Rules summarized at the point of use occurred always or most of the time for 62/100 respondents. GM modelling of in-character speech was always or most of the time for 50/101, visual examples or diagrams for 49/100, and plain-language narration before rules for 44/99. By contrast, breaks used for recap and understanding were always or most of the time for 31/100, and rule renegotiation for comfort levels was always or most of the time for only 22/100, with 28/100 reporting that such renegotiation never occurred. Intergenerational onboarding thus appears strongest around translation and rule timing, but less consistent around explicit adjustment of rules or pacing.

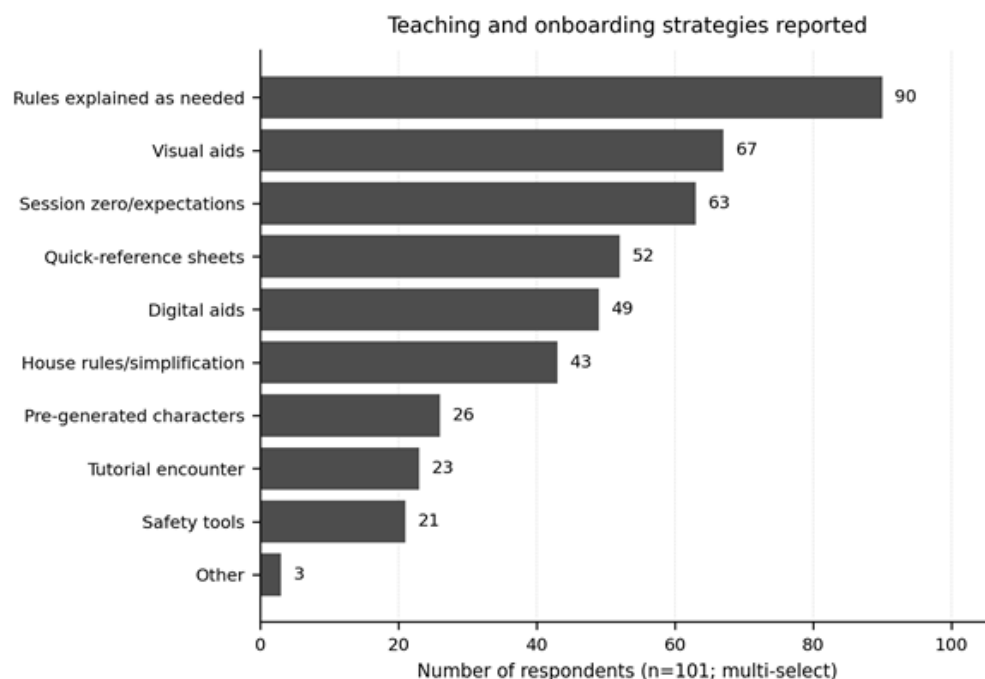


Figure 2: Teaching and onboarding strategies reported (n=101; multi-select).

Perceived helpfulness of supports for older newcomers

Respondents who reached the support-helpfulness items generally rated visual and cognitive scaffolds highly. Visual aids, battlemaps, or minis were rated helpful, very helpful, or extremely helpful by 94/97 respondents; quick-reference sheets by 90/96; and house rules or simplified mechanics by 79/94. Digital tools were also often rated positively (75/97), but they had more mixed responses than visual aids or quick-reference sheets, with 22/97 rating them not helpful or slightly unhelpful. Safety tools and content check-ins were rated helpful or better by 70/96, while pre-generated characters were helpful or better for 61/96. The pattern suggests that material and cognitive supports can widen access to pleasure, but no support is universally experienced as enabling.

Bridging practices and moments of difference

Open-ended responses show that bridging is often described as translation, attunement, and expectation management. The single-practice prompt received 67 substantive responses. Respondents named analogies to other games, explanation at the point of action, suggestions from experienced players, visual aids, session-zero conversations, listening, and patience. Several accounts emphasized that the generational gap was not necessarily about rules as such, but about style, tone, and the assumptions players brought to the table. One respondent summarized the bridging work as “relating individual game processes and mechanisms to things the person already understands”; another described “working to keep communication open” while treating younger players as capable participants rather than simplifying the game for them.

The prompt about moments when generational difference changed play received 43 substantive responses. Some respondents reported no such moments, but others described missed contextual cues, old rules versus new rules, differences in genre morality, divergent seriousness or humour, and moments where older or more enfranchised players re-explained a rule when another explanation had failed. These accounts are small in number, yet analytically important. They show that intergenerational difference becomes visible not only in demographic terms but in interpretive habits: what counts as an obvious cue, a funny reference, a fair consequence, or an appropriate moral frame.

Accessibility supports and safety norms

Accessibility supports were present but uneven. Among respondents who answered the accessibility item (n=79), scheduled breaks or shorter sessions were most common (47/79), followed by turn trackers or initiative cards (37/79), visual summaries or icons (30/79), seating or acoustics adjustments (16/79), remote or online options to reduce travel or fatigue (14/79), large-print or high-contrast sheets (13/79), assistive technology or captioning (7/79), and other supports (5/79). Twelve respondents selected none. These counts indicate that accessibility is not a marginal issue in intergenerational play; it is part of how tables manage fatigue, sensory access, memory, attention, and shared orientation.

Safety norms were somewhat more common than accessibility supports. Among respondents who answered the safety item (n=78), session zero was selected by 50/78, check-ins during play by 37/78, debrief after sessions by 33/78, “Lines & Veils” or content boundaries by 19/78, “X-Card” or “Script Change” style tools by 10/78, and other practices by 4/78; 12/78 selected none. The open-ended impact item (n=27) emphasized session zero, private check-ins with the DM, large print for vision challenges, acoustics changes for hearing, and pre-session warnings before heavier material. These practices were rarely described as restrictions on fun. More often, they were described as the conditions that made participation easier, safer, or more confident.

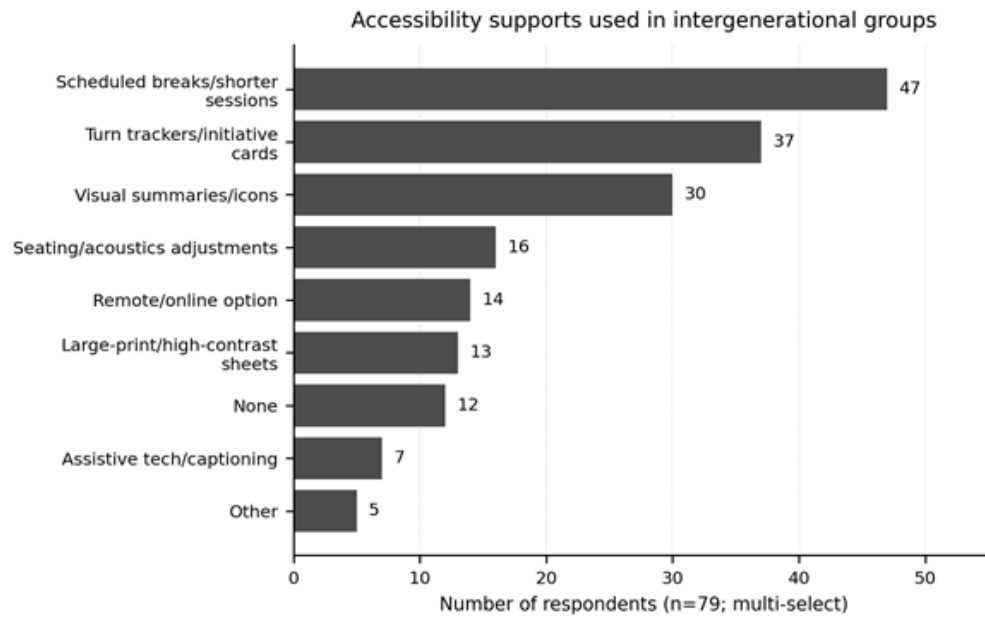


Figure 3: Accessibility supports used in intergenerational groups (n=79; multi-select).

Challenges encountered

The most common challenge was scheduling and time availability, selected by 54/79 respondents. Rules complexity or cognitive load followed (31/79), along with pacing or session-length fatigue (28/79) and different genre expectations or humour (28/79). Other recurring challenges included spotlight balance or talk-time inequity (21/79), hearing or background noise (21/79), trouble with theatre-of-mind or imagination (20/79), interpersonal tension or power dynamics (15/79), reading small text or visual strain (14/79), tech barriers (14/79), and content boundary concerns (7/79). Only 4/79 selected none. These are not merely practical obstacles. They shape who can remain oriented, energetic, audible, visually supported, and socially comfortable enough to experience play as pleasurable.

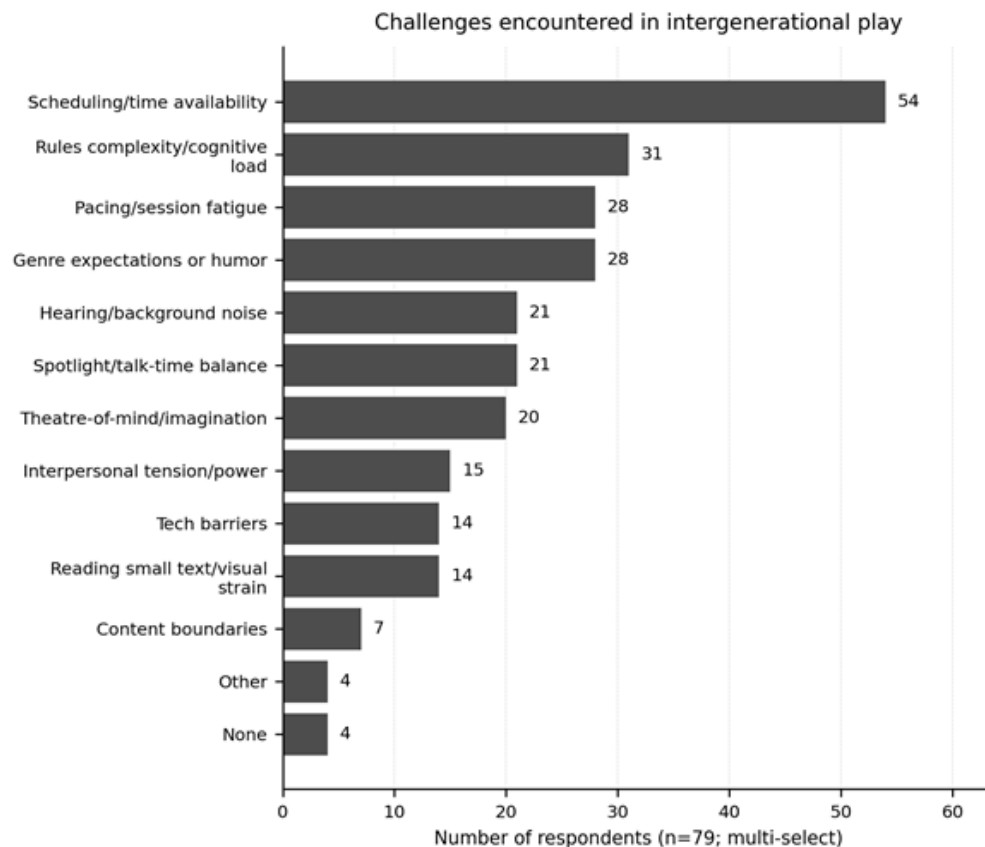


Figure 4: Challenges encountered in intergenerational play (n=79; multi-select).

Optional demographics and sample limits

Optional demographic items were completed unevenly and should be interpreted cautiously. Among respondents in the intergenerational subset who provided age text (n=76), entries ranged from 18 to 67. Country or region entries (n=75) were concentrated in the United States and Canada, and language entries (n=75) were overwhelmingly English or English-dominant. Disability/access entries (n=46) included ADHD, autism, dyslexia, visual impairment, hearing impairment, chronic pain, fatigue, depression, aphasia, and “none.” Race/ethnicity entries (n=57) were mostly white/Caucasian, though not exclusively. These uneven optional fields limit what can be claimed about intersectional distribution in the sample and point to the need for future designs that more systematically attend to social, cultural, economic, and gaming capital.

DISCUSSION

From counts to configurations

The survey results do not support stable statistical typologies, but they do support heuristic configurations: recurring arrangements of pleasure, support, and risk across groups. These configurations are not mutually exclusive; a single table may move between them across a campaign. They help condense the descriptive material into

an analytic vocabulary for the infrastructures that make intergenerational pleasure possible.

Configuration	Pleasure/support emphasis	Typical risk
Hobby-sharing / family-continuity tables	Beloved-hobby transmission, bonding, nostalgia, home play, and published-rule familiarity.	Risk of assuming one generation owns the hobby or that bonding will smooth over discomfort.
Chosen-family / community-inclusion tables	Mixed-age friends, public or community venues, community-building motives, session-zero norms, and explicit care practices.	Risk that “inclusive” labels hide uneven talk time, social authority, or conflict-management labour.
Agency-first apprenticeship tables	Progressive disclosure, quick-reference sheets, visual aids, plain-language narration, and rule explanation at the point of use.	Risk of gating pleasure behind mastery if scaffolds are inconsistent or withdrawn too quickly.
Hybrid / platform-mediated tables	Online video + VTT play, digital character sheets, remote access, and shared digital references.	Risk that digital tools become barriers through account setup, interface load, visual strain, or uneven platform literacy.

Table 2: Heuristic configurations of intergenerational pleasurable inclusion.

Bonding pleasures are real, but not automatic

Bonding was the most selected motivation, but the data do not support a sentimental account in which intergenerational play is simply good because generations are together. Bonding is work. It depends on who is invited, whose pace organizes the session, whose rules knowledge counts, whose humour sets the tone, and whose discomfort can be voiced without threatening the group’s image of itself as having fun. Ahmed’s account of happiness is useful here: when a group becomes oriented toward shared enjoyment, the person who names discomfort may be treated as the obstacle to happiness rather than as someone identifying a condition of possibility for better play.

The challenge data show why this matters. Scheduling, fatigue, rules complexity, hearing, visual strain, and tech barriers all appear in the results. These are not secondary to pleasure; they are part of its distribution. A table that ignores fatigue, noise, reading difficulty, or platform literacy may still be “having fun,” but that fun is likely easier for some participants to access than for others.

Co-authorship as a pleasure engine and a site of friction

Creative expression and storytelling were central motivations, and this confirms a familiar account of TTRPGs as co-authored narrative. Yet co-authorship also introduces disagreement about what counts as good play. Some open-ended responses described differences in plot adherence, humour, rules editions, and moral interpretation. These tensions do not simply reflect age groups as fixed categories. Rather, they reveal how play histories, media repertoires, genre expectations, and table roles intersect. A younger player may hold platform expertise; an older player may hold rules memory from earlier editions; a DM may hold narrative authority; a newer player may bring expectations from actual-play media. Pleasure depends on how these forms of authority are recognized and coordinated.

Onboarding redistributes legitimacy

The strongest onboarding pattern is progressive disclosure: rules are introduced when they become relevant to action. This matters because it makes participation possible before mastery. In a mastery-first model, a newcomer must learn the system before becoming a legitimate participant. In the agency-first model visible across these responses, the right to play precedes full procedural competence. Rules then become supports for action rather than tests of belonging.

This is why onboarding belongs at the center of an intersectional pleasures account. Rules literacy, character-sheet literacy, fantasy genre literacy, and platform literacy are not evenly distributed across age, disability, classed leisure history, or gaming background. When a table offers visual aids, quick references, plain-language narration, and explanations at the point of need, it redistributes interpretive authority. When it does not, pleasure may quietly accumulate around those who already know how to read the system.

Pleasure as infrastructure of intimacy

Wilson's concept of the infrastructure of intimacy helps clarify why care practices are not peripheral to the pleasures described here. Intimacy is not only private feeling; it is organized through material arrangements, shared routines, and social supports. Intergenerational TTRPG play makes this especially visible. Session zeros, breaks, visual summaries, turn trackers, seating changes, large-print sheets, and check-ins are mundane arrangements, but they are also infrastructures through which people can remain present to one another.

This framing also guards against treating accessibility and safety as afterthoughts. The data show that respondents often experience these practices as pleasure-enabling. Session zero gives participants a way to align tone and boundaries before play; check-ins allow difficulty to surface without derailing the group; visual and temporal supports keep the fiction legible across different bodies and attention rhythms. Such practices do not guarantee inclusion, but they make inclusion a design problem rather than a matter of individual resilience.

Limitations

This survey is exploratory. The sample is self-selected, denominators vary across items, and the survey cannot show how practices unfold moment by moment at the table. It also cannot determine whether the observed practices are specific to TTRPGs or whether they correspond to broader intergenerational leisure practices such as board games, crafting, fandom, sports, church/community activities, or shared media-making.

Future research should therefore pursue interviews and play-session observations, compare TTRPG play with other intergenerational leisure forms, and more systematically measure forms of capital that shape access to play: disposable time, space, money for materials, transport, education, gaming history, digital-tool familiarity, and confidence in speaking at a table. The optional demographic fields in this survey suggest a sample concentrated in English-language North American contexts and with many white respondents. That limitation matters for an intersectional account. If pleasurable inclusion is infrastructural, then future work must ask not only which supports are used, but whose social and material conditions make those supports available in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational D&D offers a clear site for analyzing pleasure as relational, negotiated, and infrastructural. In the survey results, 178 consenting respondents reported intergenerational TTRPG play within the previous 24 months. Available-case item counts show that respondents frequently named bonding, creative expression, introduction to RPGs, and community building as motives for play. They also described constraints around scheduling, rules complexity, fatigue, genre expectations, sensory access, and platform barriers. Onboarding and bridging practices disproportionately emphasized progressive, intention-first scaffolding and communication-based care.

We propose infrastructures of pleasurable inclusion as a lens for analyzing how tables design conditions for shared joy across differences. This lens reframes onboarding, accessibility, and safety not as peripheral extras, but as central to the distribution of pleasure in play. Intergenerational tables make this visible: pleasure is not merely felt; it is actively made, maintained, and sometimes contested across the intersections of age, ability, literacy, authority, platform familiarity, and care.

REFERENCES

- Aarsand, P. (2007). Negotiating competence: An ethnographic study of gaming in family life. *Childhood*, 14(2), 165–184.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. Seven Stories Press.
- Bennett, C. L., et al. (2021). Toward centering accessibility in the design of virtual and augmented reality games. CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bowman, S. L. (2010). *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. McFarland.
- Carr, D. (2018). Methodology, representation, and games. In *How to Play Video Games*. NYU Press.
- Chess, S. (2017). *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row.
- De Schutter, B., Brown, J. A., Vanden Abeele, V., & Zaman, B. (2013). The domestication of digital games in the lives of older adults. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*.
- Fine, G. A. (1983). *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. University of Chicago Press.

- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gerling, K., Mandryk, R. L., Linehan, C., & Kalyn, M. (2016). Designing games for older adults: Developing play-based interaction methods for cognitive and motivational engagement. CHI 2016.
- Gray, K. L. (2014). *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*. Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (pp. 13–74). Sage.
- Harper, T. (2018). *The Culture of Digital Fighting Games: Performance and Practice*. Routledge.
- Juul, J. (2010). *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. MIT Press.
- Koster, R. (2013). *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (2nd ed.). O'Reilly Media.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2020). Feeling good about feeling bad: Affect, race, and video games. In J. Malkowski & T. Russworm (Eds.), *Gaming Representation*. Indiana University Press.
- Puar, J. (2017). *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press.
- Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. NYU Press.
- Russworm, T. (2017). Dystopian Blackness and the limits of racial empathy in games. In J. Malkowski & T. Russworm (Eds.), *Gaming Representation*. Indiana University Press.
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press.
- Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Shaw, A. (2015). The politics of representation in games: A content analysis of LGBTQ characters in video games from 1985 to 2005. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 948–968.
- Stang, S. (2019). This action will have consequences: Interactivity, affect, and ethics. *Game Studies*, 19(3).
- Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. MIT Press.
- Voida, A., & Greenberg, S. (2010). Family play with interactive board games: Coordinating across age and context. In *Proceedings of CSCW 2010* (pp. 161–170). ACM.
- Wilson, A. (2016). The infrastructure of intimacy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(2), 247–280.
- Zagal, J. P., & Deterding, S. (Eds.). (2018). *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*. Routledge.