DUNGEONS & DRAGONS & FIGURATIONS: A D&D PLAYER'S PLACE
WITHIN A SEA OF MEDIA OBJECTS

Jules Marcel Patalita

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Committee:

Joshua Atkinson, Advisor

Vivian Miller
Graduate Faculty Representative

Lara Lengel

Radhika Gajjala

ABSTRACT

Joshua Atkinson, Advisor

This dissertation looks to study the potential impacts and influences of media use and consumption on how individuals play *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D),* a popular tabletop role-playing game. Now enjoying its 7th consecutive year of record profits, *D&D* has grown alongside a wave of *D&D* media, with the traditional board game taking on new digital forms that alter how players can now interact with the hobby. Utilizing media theories such as figurations, Medium Theory, the Magic Circle, and the concept of media worlds, this paper looks at both the media objects being consumed and what influences they left with their user. Interpretive focus groups were used to collect testimony from groups that played *D&D* together, examining individual impacts and how groups as a whole negotiated their media use while playing. When looking at media consumed, it appears that the most common Uses by participants included Entertainment, gathering Information, or finding Tools to use during gameplay. Overall, Tool media were the most frequently utilized, although the physical distancing required by COVID-19 was cited as a factor in this widespread use. Demonstrated by the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts model, the major influences discovered were increases in the user's Game Knowledge and a decrease in the level of Rules-Adhesion, or how strictly the written rules of the game were enforced. Other findings included participants changing the style in which they played *D&D,* basing changes off the habits of players they watched online or strategies found to become "better" players. This study also suggests further implications of the theories used. In particular, the study of the "alpha media object," media capable of impacting the user, the other media objects surrounding it, and even the figuration model as a whole, leaves

several questions for future scholars to examine. In this study, that alpha media object was the

podcast *Critical Role* (2015), a show so popular that it has begun to impact not just players, but

the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* itself; the larger implications of the alpha media object,

however, can be extended to the study of any media ecosystem or user.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In middle and high school, my entire world revolved around the theatre program offered

after school. The fun of slipping into a character different than myself, the rush of performing in

front of other people, the social joys of being surrounded by like-minded people, these were the

bits and pieces that made each play and musical the highlight of my semester. After graduating,

however, I went to college and theatre became a distant memory as I now had to focus on

collegiate coursework within my major. The need to perform never left though, and in my

Sophomore year I was introduced to *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), a tabletop roleplaying game

where me and my friends pretended to be fantasy adventurers every Sunday and tried to save the

world from evil. Being able to embrace this character I had created, feeling the energy of

improvisation and performance from myself and everyone else at the table, was the closest

substitute I have found since for the hole that theatre left behind. For my undergraduate and my

Master's program, my social life revolved around playing *D&D* until eventually I had to move to

another state to pursue my Doctorate. Now in a new town without a group to play with, a close

friend recommended a few *D&D* podcasts he thought would entertain me until I found a new

campaign to join.

That was how I first discovered the hit podcast *Critical Role* (*CR*), and I fell in love.

Seven professional voice actors led by their peer Matt Mercer, this group of nerdy friends play

Dungeons & Dragons weekly for audiences of hundreds of thousands. Not only did the podcast

serve as entertainment for me, as I could sit back and enjoy the adventures of their small group

trying to save the world, but I could also use it as an example of how I could play *D&D*. It is

easy for me to claim that this media ecosystem has affected the performance and gameplay of

players within it because my own personal actions as a *D&D* player have changed as I have

consumed more and more *D&D* media online. Some of it is specific actions, such as copying the

way that a certain Dungeon Master (DM) online tracks initiative during combat, or how Matt

Mercer says "How do you want to do this?" as a player gets the killing blow on an enemy. In

this case, I watched someone that I felt was a good example of a DM and found that habits he

showed would help me run more efficient, more exciting combat encounters. Some of these

changes, however, were smaller and are more difficult to recollect. Reading posts of Reddit

about horror stories players have had, whether it be about DMs ruining the fun of a group with

self-indulgence or players who hog the spotlight and don't give their peers a chance to shine, has

slowly given me a list of behaviors and traits that I try to avoid while playing. But the way that I

learned each new behavior changed how I absorbed the message; watching a stream on Twitch

allowed me a chance to watch the footage as almost a lesson more than entertainment, while

reading an online post unconsciously made me self-examine my actions while playing,

comparing horror stories to past experiences and seeing if I had exhibited the same qualities as

the mentioned 'bad players.'

Much like how certain behaviors are learned as children for socializing or specific

behaviors are learned for certain places (be quiet in libraries, but yell all you want at a sporting

event), *D&D* is a site where these learned behaviors are exhibited by its players. It is the

environment around a person where these behaviors are learned. Whether that be the people or

the media in that environment, both impress onto the person a frame of how one should act, how

one should respond to certain conditions. It was not just in my own experience that I noticed

these impacts, but also people around me. For example, one DM I played with watched copious

amounts of a *D&D* podcast called *The Adventure Zone.* Since listening to this podcast, as well

as playing several sessions with them, I easily noticed details in their campaign, from the way

they described characters to the manner in which they had built challenges and combat for the players, that resemble how the DM of *The Adventure Zone* did the same tasks. Another friend has similar viewing habits, but he listened to the podcast *Critical Role* instead. I actually had the chance to play in several campaigns he ran, one before he started listening to *CR*, and a few after. It is safe to say that there were noticeable changes in the way he ran his games after beginning the podcast, behaviors as a DM he learned from consuming this media that affected how he performed as a DM. While both of my friends have learned behaviors from listening to *D&D* podcasts, they still had different media environments in which they received this media, and the differences between the two shows as well as the DMs of the two shows is apparent in the differences between the way my two friends conduct their games.

On the other hand, a third friend also DMs a campaign in which I used to play. He was the newest of the three friends to be a Dungeon Master, and he did not consume *D&D* media outside of the games he was a part of. In his case, much of his learned behavior as a DM came from observing the DMs of the groups he played in during past games. As someone who played with him in some of these games, the people in his environment he learned from were a bit more competitive while playing *D&D*, focusing on creating strong fighters and a weekly battle between the players and the DM for control. Having played in these games, and then my third friend's campaign, it is obvious what behaviors he learned: while the two friends who view podcasts played *D&D* as more of a narrative, role-play driven game, the third DM was combat focused and spent much less time and effort on story moments and character motivations. All three may have been performing the same role as a DM within the game of *D&D*, but the manner in which they did it is radically different based partially on the media environment they lived in.

It was with these four individuals, myself and three of my friends, that I began to further question how media consumption impacts the manner in which a person plays *D&D*, if specific learned behaviors could be traced back to certain sources or how expectations of players were raised by their history watching podcasts. Within the last few years, the amount of *Dungeons & Dragons* content being created online has exploded, with podcasts, YouTube channels, and online communities popping up as the game has seen its peak in popularity. My interest in this phenomenon was twofold. First, I wanted to better understand how *D&D* players, myself included, were finding their experience playing *D&D* impacted by the media surrounding them across various platforms and sites. Secondly, I wanted to illuminate which *D&D*-centric media were being most commonly consumed by players, thus helping me better understand which media were influencing audiences and in what ways. Therefore, this dissertation stands to examine how the media ecosystem surrounds *D&D* players, how specific media objects within that environment function, and finally how the player is impacted by this media. This introductory chapter will summarize the various parts and pieces of this study. I will briefly explain how the game *Dungeons & Dragons* works, go over the rationale of why this study's importance is growing yearly, preview the key theoretical concepts and relevant literature, preview the methodology and methods of the study, examine the research questions that guide the entire project, before finally briefly describing the chapter breakdown of the rest of this paper. This study started from me merely observing that three of my friends and myself all seemed to perform the role of Dungeon Master differently, then me connecting that these differences may have sprung from differences in media consumption. My dissertation looks to illuminate the manner in which *D&D* players' experiences playing *D&D* is influenced by the

media they consume, if certain media impact gameplay in specific ways, and how the rise of interactive media (such as streaming platforms like Twitch) has changed how *D&D* is played.

Dungeons & Dragons

Before going any further, it is vital to explain the site of examination: *Dungeons & Dragons*. Although a pop culture phenomenon from the 70s, the game itself is almost obscured by its wide-spread attention. Many people know that *D&D* exists, but the average person would have difficulty describing it in any real detail. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a Tabletop Roleplaying Game, where a single person functions as the Dungeon Master and a small group (generally between 3-7) serve as players. The DM serves as a referee, director, narrator, and worldbuilder all at once. Each of the players create their own unique character, complete with their own abilities, backstory, and personality traits; part of the fun of playing *D&D* is the freedom and agency it provides in allowing its players to make any kind of character they want. *D&D* first came into existence as an offshoot of the now mostly-forgotten "wargames," games played on massive maps with units representing different infantry and cavalry. While versions of this existed back during ancient times in China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, the genre truly took off in Europe. "The game was prescribed for Prussian officers, but the rules were so complex and tedious that some officers were reluctant to play it. In 1876, Colonel von Verdy du Vernois produced a simplified version of the game that removed dice and delivered more authority to the umpire...This role was an early forebear of the dungeon master" (Laycock, 2015, P. 33). Gary Gygax, the creator of *D&D*, was deep into the culture of wargaming and first created *Chainmail,* a medieval wargame that served as the predecessor to *D&D*. Only later would he slowly add different fantasy elements to the traditional wargame, most of which were taken straight from Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*. "The *Chainmail* fantasy supplement demonstrated that the models

of simulation on which war games were based could be applied to anything that the human mind could conceive. As Ethan Gisldorf explained, 'The trolls and fireballs may be fanciful, but they behave according to a logical system'" (Laycock, 2015, P. 39). This concept of fanciful yet logical would be the basis of D&D from its birth until today.

In terms of gameplay, *Dungeons & Dragons* plays out in a similar fashion to the Improv rules of "Yes, and..." where one is expected to take what their partner said and add to it. While playing *D&D*, the DM will describe a setting, a person, a situation, and the players are then free to say how they would respond to what they are told. Here is a hypothetical situation.

> DM: "Surrounding you on all sides is a vast green forest. You hear the sounds of birds, insects, and other little woodland creatures around you."
>
> Player 1: "I'd like to look around and see if I recognize this part of the woods. After all, I grew up near this area."
>
> Player 2: "I want to search the area to see if I find any wolves or bears or animals that might be dangerous."
>
> DM: "Ok, let's see if either of your characters notice anything around you. Both of you make Perception checks."
>
> Player 1: "13."
>
> Player 2: "Uh, I got a 18."
>
> DM: "Ok. Player 1, unfortunately everything you see looks vaguely familiar but not enough to place yourself. Player 2, you actually see, out of the corner of your eye, a pair of gray wolves sneaking through the brush, both of them fixed onto your group."
>
> Player 2: "I shout out 'Look out everyone!' and point my bow in the wolves' direction to take a shot."

"Checks" in this case refer to the DM asking the players to roll dice to determine how successful they are at a task. Dice, generally a 20-sided die, are used in the game as a mechanic to stop it from turning into a session of total make-believe and give it structure. The player will say an action they wish to attempt, and the DM will decide how high of a number they must roll on their die to succeed at that task. A simple action, like jumping over a small creek, might only require a 10, while something difficult, wrestling a bear to the ground, may be 20 or higher. Note in this example that, rather than simply stating if the numbers rolled by the players were successful, the DM narrates what happens within the story rather than just dry data. "When I say that a gunshot misses a player's character, the Storyteller says, 'You hear the drywall crack behind you like a bat and taste plaster in the air when the shot lands behind you'" (Hindmarch, 2010, p. 50). This is an important role of the DM, as it allows players to more easily enter the fantasy frame of the gameworld, while also keeping the game itself more interesting.

The importance of the rules and structure within the game cannot be over exaggerated. Many remember games of make-believe as children, but these were generally most effective when a child plays alone or with imaginary friends. These scenarios typically fall apart when multiple parties begin trying to control their joined fiction realities together as the conflicting visions of actors contradict. This devolves quickly into scenes of "I cut his head off." "No, I block it and set you on fire." "No, I chop through your shield and you die before you get the spell out." "No, you don't!" Not only is this frustrating, but nearly impossible when upwards of six participants are all interrupting one another. Hence the need for rules to dictate the action. "In many face-to-face games, RPGs in particular, structure comes through density of rules, defining the in-game characters' possible and impossible actions with charts and tables. RPGs are an interesting case, because in theory a game-character's actions are limitless" (Wallis, 2010,

p. 77). Someone cannot simply say "I cut your head off." They can say "I'll try to cut your head off" and roll their die, hoping that luck is on their side. This format has been tweaked, but never outright changed throughout the 45 years and several different editions of the board game that have been released. A final important note is that "traditional tabletop RPGs, while they often exhort players to roleplay and tell stories, don't generally provide a structure to shape them; their rules are concerned more with determining the success or failure of individual actions" (Costikyan, 2010, p. 10). So while the rules are vital to keeping play organized and structured, creating the environment for a game rather than make-believe, it is the DM and the players that are responsible for forming a narrative story around the rolling of dice and adding of numbers. *Dungeons & Dragons* needs both the story and rules to operate.

This is a basic summary of how *D&D* functions as a game. Again, the most important aspect of the game is the back and forth communication between participants, particularly the DM describing events and environments to the players. While maps, grids, and miniature models of characters and monsters are helpful for many players, the game can easily be played without them. I myself have played *D&D* within the 'theatre of the mind' (playing without visual aids and using your imagination to visualize the narrative) as many times as I have on an actual tabletop with visual elements, and I've found that there is little difference in terms of gameplay. Perhaps this is why the game is able to be played in so many different forms, from in-person events around a table to battles on digital maps that track each player's responses to games played on Zoom calls with the game being played completely verbally. Now that *D&D* is a bit easier to understand, it is time to move to the rationale of this study, and for me to explain why 2021 is the perfect time to understand *D&D*'s place amongst an interactive media ecosystem.

Rationale

Perhaps the most important aspect of any budding research is the most dreaded of questions: why? Why are you researching this? Why is this worth the time and effort to examine? So what? This project has two elements to it, the examination of how media ecosystems affect performance/behavior and the specific site of *Dungeons & Dragons* within these ecosystems. First and foremost, the media ecosystems created online are not a new phenomenon, nor are they undiscovered ones. Unfortunately, almost all of the past literature and a percentage of contemporary writings look at media through the perspectives of the Broadcast Era. The issue is that technology has rendered many of the assumptions from that model obsolete, so now it is vital that Media Studies begins to examine how media function within this modern, online era. Of research into the contemporary model of communication and media, most of the research of this type focuses heavily on the biggest and most popular social media sites on the internet, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; this has only increased during Donald Trump's presidency, as his rise to political power and the consequences that followed revealed to many the power of these online communities. This study, while acknowledging the work done on these sites, looks at other, equally viable sites for media ecosystems to influence their users. The focus will be digital platforms and interactive media related to *D&D* and gaming, due to the fact that these spaces have grown in size and profitability in recent years. Perhaps the best example of an interactive platform dedicated to gaming and players is Twitch, which describes itself as "where millions of people come together live every day to chat, interact, and make their own entertainment together" (About-Twitch.tv, n.d.). Twitch is an online platform where content creators (or streamers) live-broadcast themselves, with most of the streamers on the site play video games during their broadcasts while feature streamers cooking,

making art or other hobby work, and the equivalent of talk shows as the streamers serve as a sort-of radio host.

Viewers on the site can search for content through featured channels on the homepage, by channel name, the game being played, or through larger categories such as Games, IRL, music, and esports. What sets a Twitch viewer apart from a YouTube user or the audience in a movie theatre is the live-chat function. To the side of the Twitch layout is a chat bar for the audience to chat during the broadcast. What makes this live chat feature stand out so much is how it changes the dynamic of communication between producer/receiver. Not only are viewers able to talk amongst one another, reacting to and commenting on the streams they watch live, but the streamers themselves can see this chat, allowing them to read the dialogue around the product they are currently creating. In some cases, viewers can even play online with the streamers they watch, using online resources such as Discord to talk in real-time. This changes everything we know about the relationship between creator/consumer learned from other media. This is nothing like watching television and talking to your partner on the couch and, while closer, is different from commenting on a YouTube video because of the live function of the chat. This multidirectional communication between the streamer and viewers, as well as between viewers and viewers, makes Twitch unique amongst broadcast-style media. Much of the literature within Media Studies is still rooted within the Broadcast Era, when primetime television was the greatest indicator of mainstream media. In particular, key concepts, like media worlds (which will be discussed later), were developed during the height of broadcast media and long before interactive media platforms. As Couldry writes on media worlds, he often describes how the means of media production are a barrier that separates producers and consumers, yet for $100 I can afford the equipment necessary to create my own video footage and use the internet to

distribute it instantly to millions of possible viewers. Times are changing and it is becoming clear that Twitch and similar interactive media are the future. As such, new literature is necessary to revise older concepts that still have theoretical relevance, but to place them within a modern context.

The other important factor for the relevance of Twitch and other digital gaming spaces to academic study is the growing popularity and economic value. Bought by Amazon in 2014, "just seven [years] after its initial launch, Twitch boasts a valuation of about US$3.79 billion" (Fortney, 2019). Having the biggest company in the world, owned by one of the richest people in the world, as your parent company is a massive sign for the longevity of the platform, but the real strength of Twitch is the number of users it brings in. Even ignoring COVID-19 and the fact that people are stuck inside, Twitch receives huge numbers of visitors daily as streaming becomes a bigger and bigger part of online viewing each year.

> In 2014, Twitch accounted for 40% of the live streaming traffic in the United States and 1.8% of all internet traffic, second only to Google, Netflix and Apple. In 2017, it surpassed legacy network ESPN in audience size and live streamed more content than ESPN, WWE, and ML—combined. By 2020, the number of esports viewers worldwide will grow from 380 million to 589 million, according to research firm Newzoo (2019).

This is viewership competing with both online services such as YouTube and traditional broadcasting giant ESPN and other television networks. Between its massive daily traffic, the surprising revenue, and its ties to Amazon, it is clear that Twitch is no longer a rising platform online, it currently stands as one of the most popular sites online as well as a site with growing need for additional academic research. While Twitch itself is referenced in this paper, it is not one of the major media objects examined; rather, it serves here as an example of the rising

importance of these types of interactive digital platforms, both in terms of their financial power and the popularity of gaming spaces online.

But now I move towards the secondary site of investigation, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Culver reports that "*D&D* is more popular than ever, and it's easier than ever to get a group together to play — even while practicing social distancing amid this coronavirus pandemic" (2020, para. 3). It is easy to see why, given the rise in Zoom's popularity alongside the need for people to stay socially distanced. Even before COVID-19, though, *D&D* has exploded in popularity over the last decade from the release of the newest 5th Edition of the game (simplified in many ways, making it leaps and bounds the easiest, most accessible version of the game yet), to the depiction of *D&D* in television series such as *Community* and *Stranger Things*. When I attended the Midwest Pop Culture Association 2021 conference, a fellow panelist at the event told me he often taught Games Studies courses and that while *D&D* was a game known to a few members of the class, this year he noticed that half of the students were playing *D&D*. But recently, *D&D* took a step towards mainstream notoriety beyond anything it has seen since its introduction. A Twitch-channel known as *Critical Role*, a weekly show where actors play *D&D* in a years-long campaign, has quickly become one of the most prominent examples of the game today. Now into its third season, *Critical Role* decided to begin a Kickstarter in 2019 to try and earn funds to create a short animated series based off of their original season. The results were staggering. "The team behind the web series had wanted $750,000 to fund the endeavor. With 33 days remaining in the crowdfunding campaign, "*Critical Role*" has raised more than $7.3 million from 53,000 backers. It is now the most-funded film/video project in Kickstarter history" (Whitten, 2019, Para. 19). As of its end, this Kickstarter project was the fourth highest earning

project in the website's history, with $11.3 million. That series, *The Legend of Vox Machina* (2022), debuted on Amazon Prime Video on January 28th, 2022.

D&D has not been this popular since its initial boom in popularity during the 80s, and signs point towards this trend continuing. More people are playing the game now than ever before, and third-party creators are using the game as a site for their own creative projects. Yet with this surge of activity and interest from society, academia seems to be falling behind in this regard. While many studies have looked at *D&D*, mainly in the past, most of these studies look at the human element of the game. These ethnographies into groups, studies of players, examinations into the social world of *D&D*. Many of these studies are fascinating and have important findings, but within Media Studies, the interest in *D&D* seems considerably smaller. With the intersection between *D&D* and interactive media, however, there has never been a better time to examine both growing fields together, analyzing the influence that both sites have on one another. To better understand this study, I will next go over the key concepts informing the rest of the dissertation.

Preview of Key Concepts

While *Dungeons & Dragons* may be the site of observation, this study will be focusing primarily on media. This means studying the media ecosystem around the *D&D* player, the individual media being used by the player, and especially the interactive media platforms (such as Twitch) being used. The end goal is to better understand how these various media impact the manner in which individuals experience *D&D*, the way they think about the game, as well as how they actually play it. It was Meyrowitz that said "Media that segregate situations will foster segregated behavioural patterns. Media that integrate situations will foster integrated behavioural patterns" (1994, p. 62) but that concept is much more interesting when considering it

in context with the connections between different media platforms. Different mediums will create separate behaviors in its users, the reader of a book will take away different skills than someone watching television, but what about separate media with similar content? In the case of this study, would a *D&D* player viewing others playing on YouTube, a player watching a *D&D* stream on Twitch, and a player reading posts on a *D&D* Reddit post take away similar learned behaviors about how to play *Dungeons & Dragons*? Clearly the three players will learn different behaviors in terms of media literacy from the three different platforms, but how will their performance as *D&D* players be affected by the three different mediums? Meyrowitz was not concerned with content in his writings, but with the form of the media and how it affected the societies that utilized it; in a similar vein, ignoring content in case by making it near-identical for each, will these mediums foster separate behaviors into the three players, or will they take away 'integrated behavior patterns?'

This study will rely on three theoretical concepts for its conclusions: figurations, Medium Theory, and the Magic Circle/media worlds. Figurations, from the work of Coudlry and Hepp, are media ecosystems categorized by a group of people with a shared interest/purpose using media objects in their environment, each part coming to influence one another over time. In the case of our site, the figuration of the modern *D&D* community is created by the players of the game as well as the producers of content, the playing of or at least interest in *D&D*, and the means of which to play the game and absorb *D&D*-related content. This theoretical concept is the foundation of the dissertation, with the assumption of the *D&D* figuration being the starting point for the study. Coming from Joshua Meyrowitz's frustration with traditional Media Ecologists, Medium Theory analyzes a medium by breaking it down to its base components, then using this perspective to better understand why a user would choose that specific medium over

another. In the case of this study, this theory will be used to understand how specific native elements of a medium cause it to impact its user or other media in specific ways. In this step, interactivity will be an attribute especially analyzed, as its presence within most media platforms has led to the most radical changes to the average person's media environment. Finally, the dual concepts of the Magic Circle and media worlds. The Magic Circle is the concept of a liminal space where Play occurs, a "place" removed from reality marked off by players where the real world ends and the gameworld begins. Media worlds, coming from other works of Couldry, is the concept of a binary that separates the real world and the media world, with barriers such as the means of production and the implied hierarchy of media producers over normal viewers. These two concepts have seemingly little to do with one another, but I join them together because both center on concrete barriers that divide the real world from the "other" world; in both cases, however, recent literature has found holes in these barriers that allow for both sides to influence and impact one another. These concepts will then serve as a model for how adjacent objects can pass through barriers to impact their surroundings. The goal is to use this new perspective to better understand how the media objects around the *D&D* player impact their experiences playing. I will go into much further detail on each concept in Chapter Two.

Of the media being analyzed through this study, the one that is perhaps of the most interest is Twitch. As stated previously, its popularity has exploded in the last few years and its acquisition by Amazon is only one of many signs that the platform will only continue to grow in power and importance. Yet even the manner in which Twitch functions is unique. While in a traditional media system a transmitter sends a message to a receiver in a one-way communication model, Twitch finds itself swimming against this flow with its live chat function of the site making it possible for viewers to speak and interact with the streamer/producer of the media.

This, in turn, creates several possible dynamics between the streamer and the viewer. First, and on the simpler end, Twitch recreates the producer/passive consumer dynamic of normal television, where the streamer creates content that is viewed by the audience passively. Unique to cases like the live chat function, there is producer/active consumer, where the audience members are able to discuss with one another or even the streamer through the chat; these discussions are designed to be relevant to the stream taking place, analyzing the action happening or the streamer's gameplay. An interesting dynamic possible through Twitch is the ability for the content producer to obtain perspective on the product from the audience as it is being created and aired. With the advent of the internet, entertainment companies have been relying on fan reception for years, looking at hashtags and various posts to see how audiences respond to new content. With Twitch, however, the streamers are able to see what their audiences think about their content live, and due to it being a live performance (unlike a film or television) they are able to adjust their actions or product to fit the audiences' needs. Overall, Twitch stands out among contemporary media platforms, possibly being a glimpse into the future of interactive media.

Overview of Methodology

While the media objects and their influence are a major component, this study is primarily concerned with the experiences of *D&D* players, making the focus of the project a deeply personal one to the participants involved with data collection. Given the nature of lived experience and the difficulty in examining the subconscious impacts of media on said experiences, the true work of the project will come from extracting meaning from the stories and testimony of players. As such, I bring an Interpretive methodology to guide myself through the various stages of this study. While all scholars working within the humanities understand how

important the human element of their research is, "interpretivists prefer to examine 'social realities,' which they believe develop as people collaborate in making sense of the communication they encounter, in deciding how to respond, and in performing that response (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 11). Guided by Interpretivism, my primary concern throughout this dissertation will be examining how participants' stories have been touched by outside factors in their lives, whether or not the participants themselves were aware. By first understanding the media ecosystem that surrounds the player, it will be much simpler to interpret the lived experiences of the participant as they describe how they have responded to this outside influence, as well as how it has come to affect the way that they play.

Going hand in hand with Interpretivism, the method for data collection in this study will be a select number of focus groups and interviews, focusing on the experiences of the participants with consuming *D&D*-related media and how it affected their actions and performances as players. While it would be faster and easier to obtain bulk data on the subject from questionnaires and surveys, Meyrowitz (1994) is quick to state that "surveys are not particularly useful in medium theory since the point is often to examine types of structural changes and sources of influence that are out of the awareness of most people" (p. 70). Due to the invisible nature of media's influence on the user, asking participants to go into detail on the subject would most likely gather a remarkable amount of nothing but confusion or half-hearted "It really doesn't influence me." Interviews have been a historically successful method of researchers to make their participants see through their self-imposed blinders and be able to formulate thought out answers based on what the researcher is looking for rather than the first answer that comes to their mind as they fill a survey out. Guided by my Interpretive methodology, I believe that these focus groups and interviews are the most direct way of

gathering data about the lives of my participants and truly exploring how the *D&D* media they consume impacts their experience as players. Now, with an understanding of the key theoretical concepts and the methodology of this study, I can finally move onto the most important aspect of the study: the research questions.

Research Questions

Though the scope of this study may sound large, it is actually a rather straightforward venture. In fact, the entire dissertation can be broken down into my two research questions.

1. What *D&D*-based media are players consuming?
2. How does the media ecosystem surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons* players change the way players interpret and understand the game?

Examining these two questions, each has an important role. The first question looks at what media is being consumed by players, but the more important aspect of this is illuminating media's role within the study. While I want to know what media players are most commonly using to consume *D&D*-based content, this question is focused more on what purpose is each media generally used for. Is there a specific platform or form of content (video, text-based posts, live streams, audio podcasts, etc.) that is linked to a specific need for players? The second question focuses more intently on the player-aspect of the study. While the media-aspect is definitely present within Research Question 2, it is clear that this is the question concerned with the lived experiences of *D&D* players. In what ways does the media consumed by *D&D* players slip through the barriers between the real world and the game world? How does this impact the experience of these players/users or change their expectations of the game? Understanding which of these media are impacting how they play *D&D* is the final part of this question, and the entire reason for illuminating the media use of this community. The ordering of the two

questions, as seen here, is intentional and important because Question 2 highlights and fills in blanks left by Question 1.

While the other elements of this introductory chapter are important to the study overall, the key concepts and the methodology and the methods, all of these aspects serve the core of the study, the research questions. The key theoretical concepts discussed, from figurations to the media worlds, all bring important guidance to the study of media's impacts on digital players; the Magic Circle will be a key theory in better answering Question 2 and how the real world and game world impact one another. The methodology and methods chosen both directly contribute to the gathering of participants' own lived experiences, a requirement for both Question 1 and 2. To only further this, both research questions are deeply rooted within the Interpretive methodology, as both ask questions that cannot be answered empirically. Instead, it will be necessary for me to interpret the data collected, grounded within the theories discussed, before discovering any type of findings. Now that the research questions of this dissertation, the driving force of the entire study, have been discussed, I can move onto a review of the chapters that will make up the rest of this paper.

Chapter Descriptions

This dissertation will be divided into six chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter will be the review of literature, where I will go over the key theoretical concepts of the paper: Medium Theory, figurations, and the Magic Circle/media worlds. By examining how each theory functions, I will provide context as to how it will be utilized within this specific study. Chapter 3 will concern the methodology and the methods of data collection. Guided by an Experiential, Interpretivist methodology, I will conduct a series of focus groups and interviews to better understand how groups and individuals who consume *D&D* media have their

gameplay experience impacted by the media objects surrounding them. Chapters 4 and 5 will be concerned with the actual findings of said focus groups and interviews, going over the data collected as well as discussion over the relevance of the data; while Chapter 4 will focus on the media objects and their uses, Chapter 5 will examine the human element and how players are actually impacted by said media. Finally, Chapter 6 will be the conclusion. In the conclusion, I will tie back the findings of the previous chapter to the research questions and bring this study to a close.

Conclusion

Dungeons & Dragons has been an important aspect of my life since 2013, and with each passing year I spend more of my waking hours on it. Playing it, discussing it with others, and especially consuming media related to it. My favorite of the bunch, *Critical Role,* has defied expectations of how popular a *D&D* podcast can grow, with an average of more than a million views per YouTube video and hundreds of thousands of live viewers as new episodes debut Thursday nights. It is obvious that the show has had an impact on the *D&D* community, from the number of new players coming into the scene to "The Matt Mercer Effect" (I will approach this in detail in a further chapter, but essentially it is a sore spot in the *D&D* community where players' expectations of the game have been raised unrealistically high from watching *CR*) that has been named after the show's DM. But if this podcast is influencing the manner in which people are playing *D&D*, what about the other *D&D* media circulating around this community? Are Reddit posts, YouTube videos, and Twitch streams changing player's expectations of the game? What learned behaviors are individuals naturally picking up from viewing the manner that others play the game? All of this falls under the scope of this study. In this introduction, I have laid out the basics of this project, the rationale for why this research is important to

contemporary Media and Game Studies, previewed the theories and methods that will assist this project, gone over the research questions that sit at the heart of this investigation, before finally describing the chapters that make up the rest of this dissertation. This study started out with the simple observation that different members in my group played *D&D* differently, then grew until it became a study looking to connect everyone's differing styles to the types of media they consumed. The goal is to understand this growing relationship between *Dungeons & Dragons* and interactive media before it explodes even further into the mainstream.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Perhaps the most difficult step in any great academic venture is finding the right tools for the job. A scholar can have the clearest insight, the most complete data, the most brilliant of ideas, but none of this will come to a respectable conclusion unless the proper theories and concepts are used to illuminate the rest of the project. Thus comes the literature review, an extensive examination of past works to determine what can function as a stepping-off point for new study, making sure to avoid the pitfalls of the past and using other scholar's insight to fuel one's own. Before this, however, comes the most important step for selecting a theoretical tool: understanding what it is that one is trying to discover. The concepts used must correspond to the goals of the paper; after all, no one would use a spoon to dig a hole or a shovel to eat soup. For this study, the research questions focused on illuminating the impact of the media environment constructed from interactive media platforms utilized by *D&D* players as well as demonstrating why certain media are used over others. For this, theoretical concepts centered on analyzing media and media environments will be crucial. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2016), two writers who are quoted throughout this chapter, find themselves in a similar position to me, investigating how "the deepened interrelatedness associated with the wave of digitalization defines a new kind of media environment different from earlier media environments. We need therefore to develop the right analytic tools to grasp what is distinctive about this environment, and our relations to it" (p. 55). They also understand, especially with how ingrained in our lives most media has become, that it takes specific tools to understand how that environment affects us, generally in a manner so subconscious that we do not even process that it is happening.

The manner in which *D&D* players use various media, as well as why, was one of my major concerns, so a more thorough understanding of these media was essential. It was key, if I

wished to examine media ecosystems as a whole, to be able to break down specific pieces and understand the parts making the whole. Another scholar I quoted, JoseVan Dijck (2013) says that understanding the base components of a media is necessary to understanding it completely. This was especially important in this study, given that much of the data analyzed concern the same subject, *D&D*, making the differences come down almost entirely to the medium used to consume said content. This posed a challenge, more so than various studies looking at content moving to a different media. This was not quite as simple as reviewing a book being transformed into a movie, as "'any sort of narrative message (not only folk tales)...may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties'" (Herman, 2004, p. 51). If I was studying narrative, then this project would be simpler, as the analysis would look at how the change of medium from book to film affects the story shared. Unfortunately, the process I undertook is a bit more complex than this. I was not just looking at moving a story from a medium to another, but a series of contents across a large ecosystem of dozens of potential media. This was about choices. While the relationship and differences between film and text has been the subject of much literature over the last century, this study went down a less-traveled path, especially given how much of it examined digital media and platforms.

Understanding the challenges of this dissertation, as well as its goals, it was clear that the theoretical concepts used must aid in understanding both individual medium, focusing on why a user would choose it over another, and larger media systems, especially in regards to how these systems impact both the users and singular media within them. Looking back as I analyzed how these media environments are created, altering the world and users it interacts with, I will first briefly go over Media Ecology, a sub-discipline of Media Studies focusing on media's greater social impact. Not only does this set an excellent foundation for the study, it also paves the way

for the first theory that will be majorly used: Medium Theory. The work of Meyrowtiz (1985), Medium Theory seeks to break a medium down to its bare components, examining these base attributes to better understand the media's function, as well as giving insight as to why a person would use it. Clearly a perfect match for the goal of analyzing why a *D&D* player would choose specific media, Medium Theory was an easy fit into this study. Another theory chosen for its immediate relevance is the concept of figurations, coming from the work of the previously mentioned Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2018). The study of figurations is the study of an individual's place within a media ecosystem, created to meet a specific want or need, and through it an understanding of both the ecosystem and its impact on the user. Again, a tool that perfectly fits the goals of this study. Finally, the chapter closes with a review of two concepts I have joined together: the Magic Circle and media worlds. The Magic Circle is a concept from Performance Studies where a player knowingly steps into a different "world" as they play a game. Media worlds are an explanation as to why the "media world" is separated from the "real world," and the social power held by the former. While these two concepts are quite different in terms of focus and use, both come from a place of assuming that concrete barriers divide these binary worlds; in analyzing these barriers, and through this understanding how they are not as impenetrable as first imagined, a better insight into how media can penetrate and impact the experiences of *D&D* players was gained.

Dungeons & Dragons

Before continuing to the theoretical concepts that will guide this study, I found it imperative to first demonstrate an understanding of contemporary *Dungeons & Dragons* literature. As Deterding writes, "Like much fandom research, RPG scholarship is characterized by intense para-academic scholarship and aca-fandom" (2020, p. 9). While the study of *D&D*

has matured greatly since the game's inception in the 70s, the fact remains that the majority of

D&D literature came from a Psychology or Sociology discipline (Bowman, 2018; Jones, 2017;

Garcia, 2017). Whether it is the 90s, the 2000s, or even the last decade, most academic study on

D&D has focused on the players themselves from a psychological perspective. I believe that this

is an unfortunate side effect of the Satanic Panic of the 80s, when opinion leaders waged war

against *D&D* claiming it led to suicide and was based in Satanic worship. As such, many of the

studies of the 90s (and even more recently) focus heavily on researching what psychological

effects the game had, and how socially and emotionally healthy these players were; and while

many of these studies testify that *D&D* is not a harmful activity, the amount of literature spent on

this topic only further pushes the stereotype that something is different or wrong with these

players (Martin, 1991; Lancaster, 1994; Douse, 1993).

That being said, and luckily for this study, *D&D* literature has also come from the fields

of Media and Communication Studies, although at a slower pace and oftentimes mixing with

Games Studies into a similar interdisciplinary effort that I have attempted. Even just recently,

works have emerged that examine the "Actual-Play" podcast (where viewers watch someone

play a tabletop game live for entertainment) and its role within the *D&D* community. Some

authors focus on how these podcasts bring elements of inclusivity to the game (Stanton, 2021),

while others examined how these podcasts and other media objects have led towards a more

diverse and inclusive community (Sidhu, 2020). Paul Scriven published *From Tabletop to*

Screen: Playing Dungeons and Dragons during COVID-19 (2021), where he discussed how

many players saw the move from face-to-face games to virtual meeting as a negative through the

lens of Sociology.

Today, *D&D* has risen in popularity as a site of analysis as Games Studies grows as a discipline, especially the study of analog and board games which continues to separate itself from the study of video games as its own unique field. When examining contemporary *Dungeons & Dragons* research, regardless of discipline, there are four sources that seem to lead the current discussion. The first is the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), which has annual International conferences that has led to dozens of excellent *D&D* studies being made available to scholars. Several of the references found within this paper come from the DiGRA conferences and range in topic from interpersonal communication to the transtexual nature of games to Stanton's paper on *D&D* podcasts (Cao, 2018; Egliston, 2015; Stanton, 2021). The *Analog Game Studies* journal is another leader in contemporary *D&D* literature, coming from a Game Studies perspective that focuses entirely on traditional physical games; with nine complete anthology volumes, this journal is an excellent publication and focuses on several sites including disability representation, allowing special needs children into gaming communities, and the enforcement of game rules (Trammell, 2020). Beyond this, two anthologies stand out as two of the best in the last few years, *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (2012) and *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (2018). While *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens* is a decade old at the time of writing, it stands out as a project created by members of DiGRA in an attempt to consolidate *D&D* literature and allow interested researchers to pool their resources and ideas together. The anthology also covers a variety of topics from roleplaying video games to the performance of being a DM to how neoliberalism and multiculturalism impact gaming communities. *Role-Playing Game Studies* is the newer of the two and almost serves as a precursor to my own dissertation. The collection examines a variety of *D&D*-centric topics ranging from different disciplinary-perspectives, how

interdisciplinary methods achieve specific results within *D&D* studies, and the many different forms that role-playing games come in.

　　　Of the existing literature, there are three papers that most benefited this dissertation, especially in the early stages. The first was *The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies* by Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal (2020). Serving as the introduction to *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* the essay examines the history of role-playing game research and how "RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – play, roles, games, and media culture" (p. 14). It was here that I questioned the multiple dynamics at play with role-playing games, while wanting to further push the media-perspective. Not only does the essay situate current research relating to *D&D*, it provided me an initial perspective for my own research. *Digitising Boardgames: Issues and Tensions* (2015), coming from the 2015 DiGRA conference, was another important article in the initial stages of this project. Examining contemporary attempts by companies to create digital versions of existing board games, the eventual conclusion was that board games and digital games had specific attributes that made each attractive to players for different reasons, but that these attributes must either be renegotiated or altered when moving from one medium to another. Reading this was how I first began to question how moving to digital would affect my own favorite game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and how digital media may impact the traditional board game. The final paper that truly began this dissertation was Marinka Copier's *Challenging the Magic Circle: How Online Role-Playing Games are Negotiated by Everyday Life* (2009), where she disagreed with the running theories that "according to the game studies concept of the 'magic circle', games proceed within their own boundaries of time and space, absorbing players utterly into a separate world set off from ordinary life" (p. 160). This essay may focus more on online RPGs such as *World of Warcraft*,

but many of her conclusions play an enormous part within my dissertation; not only does she question the Magic Circle (as I will further in this chapter), but she recognizes that gaming culture and one's personal life impact the role-playing games a person plays. Copier's findings may not come from a Media Studies perspective, but they have the same goals as my own, to better understand the influences from outside the game-world that impact players as they play. None of these three articles are from my discipline, but each one led me in the direction of my eventual research questions. It was encouraging to see the growth of *Dungeons & Dragons* related literature just in the last decade from a variety of disciplines and sources, giving me further motivation to contribute something meaningful to this conversation.

Media Ecology

Before going into a deep analysis of the three major theoretical concepts this study will be relying on, I think it is important to look at one of the major sub-disciplines that inspired many of them: Media Ecology. Marshall McLuhan is one of the most famous media scholars, and the father of Media Ecology, which this study will reference but not overly rely on. McLuhan (1994) summarized his general view of media's role as a shaping device, shaping both the individual and the society who used it. "This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium-that is, of any extension of ourselves-result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves" (p. 7). McLuhan saw media as extensions of the human being, with telephones extending how far our voices could carry and how far our ears could pick up sound. More than this, however, he focused on the social changes occurring from large leaps in communication technology; he divided all of human history into Oral Society, Literate Society, Post-Printing Press, the Electronic Age, and the Current Age of New Innovations. While McLuhan is easily the most famous Media Ecologist, he is not the only

one. There are many other notable authors within the field, but many of their works stand by the basic principles found in McLuhan's early works. Another media ecologist, Walter Ong, focused heavily on the shift from oral history to an alphabetic one in his work *Orality and Literacy*, where his claims that all modern language simultaneously comes from and perverses the written word, the alphabet being so deeply ingrained within modern society that it is impossible to separate it from the way we speak today. A final pillar of Media ecology, Neil Postman (1985) writes that "politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been largely transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death" (p. 4). Looking more at modern day technology than Ong, Postman was concerned with how television and other communication technologies were adding entertainment aspects to nearly every level of society, a trend that troubled him.

Clearly the founders of Media Ecology were all concerned with the bigger picture in their work. As it is fairly easy to pick up here, many media ecologists focused their attention on a macro-view of media's impacts on society, rather than a more micro-view of the individual interactions. Instead of examining how a television affected the day-to-day activities of a single household, McLuhan and the others would focus on how that medium altered the lives of everyone within that demographic. While this would be considered by some to be greater work, able to explain a social phenomenon rather than the story of just one family, this dissertation went in a different direction. So much of the work that comes from Media Studies is looking at this bigger, seemingly-grander picture, macro-level studies that hope to analyze the conditions of millions, to the point that I believe Media Ecology was saturated with this scale of literature. Instead, this study took a micro view, focusing on smaller communities and individuals. After

all, a community is composed of individuals and I feel as though this is somewhat lost with study after study ignoring the people that create the groups being examined. It is for this reason that Media Ecology served as more of a foundational background for the other theories being utilized here, rather than a leading discipline. McLuhan, Ong, and Postman all did incredible work and highlighted important factors in the mediated construction of our current reality, but they focused on such a macro scale that relating the work directly to this site would prove more difficult than it was worth (especially with more recent scholars in that field producing more relevant literature since).

There are, however, two important writings from McLuhan that held important places within this study. First, McLuhan views games as "media of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our immediate inner lives" (1994, p. 237). Seeing games as one of many legitimate forms of media within society, and "like institutions, are extensions of social man" (p. 235). Perhaps even McLuhan would see the value of this study, examining how platers of a game, itself a media, is impacted by the other media surrounding it; but while McLuhan's validation of the importance of games is helpful here, one of his core concepts from his breakthrough book *Understanding Media* was vital to the manner in which I examined specific media and media platforms. One of the more micro-focused theoretical concepts from his book was McLuhan's classification of media as hot or cold. In his words,

> A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition
> is the state of being well filled with data...Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low
> definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information...Hot media are,

therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by

the audience (p. 22).

McLuhan understood how important participation, or interactivity, is in the make-up of a

medium. Given most media's purpose is to convey some form of communication or information,

it was obvious that this needed to be one of the core elements of a media to examine. On the

other hand, to have participation as the other, as an equally important attribute of a medium,

demonstrates the importance that interactivity has in determining the very identity of that

medium. It was clear at this stage that interactivity would play a vital role in analyzing the

media associated with this project.

Looking at Media Ecology, I saw a discipline centered around examining media's impact

on society as a whole. By focusing on the greater impacts a communication technology has on

people, past scholars have elevated the importance of their work as they seek answers for social

trends more than thousands of years in the making. While there are elements of McLuhan's

work that proved enlightening for this study, much of the literature in this field is simply too

macro in its scope to have a place here. Fortunately, I was not the first scholar to take issue with

this trend. Meyrowitz also took umbrage with the oversaturation of macro-view media studies

and went on to cultivate the first theoretical concept of this review.

Medium Theory

Again, while Media Ecology is a foundational element of Media Studies, and has served

scholars well for decades, its greatest issue has always been its macro view on media. There are

few theories as good as Media Ecology at examining the greater social impacts of a

communication technology, but I required the ability to analyze media's impact on a smaller

scale. This study examined the impact of media (and in particular interactive media technology)

on *D&D* players in terms of how the overall media ecosystem around the user has lingering

impacts on their experience with *D&D*. Separate from this, but definitely related, I need to

illuminate which media were being utilized by the average *D&D* player, for what purpose a

specific medium was being used, and why one medium was chosen over another. To better

understand both of these phenomena, a more thorough understanding of the individual media and

platforms used by *D&D* enthusiasts was necessary. Media scholar Van Dijck writes that "all

platforms combined constitute what I called the *ecosystem of connective media*" (2013, p. 21),

but places importance on the fact that a change to any part of the ecosystem would affect the

entire system. As such, it was vital to have a tool that can properly examine individual media,

their base components, how it could interact with other media, and perhaps answer why a user

would choose it over other technologies and platforms.

So, what was the best way to understand these media objects? Silly as it sounds, the best

theory for understanding the nuanced elements of a medium is the Medium Theory, first written

on by Meyrowitz. Medium Theory arose from Meyrowitz's frustration at media scholars'

insistence on describing media's place in shaping society as a macro-unit, "but they do not tell us

much about the ways in which media reshape specific social situations or everyday social

behavior. For their part, most of the situationists are more concerned with describing situations

and situational behavior as they exist in a society rather than analyzing how and why situations

evolve" (1985, p. 33). It was clear that a new theoretical construct was needed for media

scholars looking at a smaller scale than many previous scholars, one that could do a better job of

analyzing individual media and their impact on individual users. And so, Meyrowitz created

Medium Theory, noting

I use the singular 'medium theory' to describe this research tradition in order to

differentiate it from most other 'media theory.' Medium theory focuses on the particular

characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media. Broadly

speaking, medium theorists ask: What are the relatively fixed features of each means of

communicating and how do these features make the medium physically, psychologically,

and socially different from other media and from face-to-face interaction? (1994, p. 50)

Going off this early definition, Medium Theory was the perfect supplement to this research. The

ever-growing media ecosystem surrounding everyone has been discussed for years by scholars,

but this study wanted to know specifically why certain users choose certain media. Hence,

Medium Theory was best utilized here because "on the micro level, medium questions ask how

the choice of one medium over another affects a particular situation or interaction (calling

someone on the phone versus writing them a letter, for example)" (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 51). It is

important here to make the distinction that, while Meyrowitz generally preferred the macro view

for his own research, this study focused on micro-level Medium Theory analysis. Not only does

this differentiate this work from those that came before it, this form of Medium Theory is just

better for the purposes of this project. In this section I will go over the basics of Medium

Theory, highlight how the native attributes of a medium affects its use, relate Medium Theory to

interactivity, go over the debate of whether media is progressing towards replicating face-to-face

(FtF) communication, before finally examining possible weaknesses of the theory.

The Basics of Medium Theory: Core Attributes

As mentioned before in Meyrowitz initial definition of Medium Theory, the aspect of the

theory that allows a scholar to make judgements on choosing a medium over another is its

attention to the basic components of the media, the native elements that make it what it is.

"Medium theory focuses on the characteristics of each medium (or of each type of medium) that make it physically, socially, and psychologically different from other media...Medium theory also examines how communications through a particular medium or type of medium compare and contrast with face-to-face interaction." (2008, p. 1). This last point about face-to-face communication will be discussed further in a later section, but for now let us focus on the characteristics of the media. This can refer to a variety of aspects, from how passive or active the user is forced to be by the media, to the types of content that are available on that medium. Another important aspect is how technologically advanced the media is, ranging from face-to-face conversation all the way to Virtual Reality content. Van Dijck writes that "the development of technology - hardware, software, and design - was intricately intertwined with changing user experience and a restyling of content" (2013, p. 24), so the distinction of how advanced the medium is also comes into play. After all, the more advanced a medium is, the more time and effort it may take a user to learn how to use it. According to Meyrowitz, "a medium that is in short supply or that requires a very special encoding or decoding skills is more likely to be exploited by an elite class that has the time and the resources to gain access to it. Conversely, a medium that is very accessible to the common person tends to democratize a culture" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 16). The simpler the medium, the more people can easily access it, but a medium that requires a high level of learned behavior to operate will have substantially fewer users overall.

Understanding how Medium Theory focuses on native aspects of a medium and how these aspects factor into the choices made by human users, the theoretical concept is an important tool in helping illustrate why people may choose to use a specific medium over another. By using the micro view of Medium Theory one can understand what traits of a media

make it better or worse at serving the needs of its users. In 2022 there is an obvious oversaturation of media across the board, giving users more than enough options for any possible need they would have, so the selection process of picking one media platform over another tells something about the needs and biases of the user as well as tells something about the native attributes of the media used. Perhaps someone uses Reddit to post about their *D&D* campaign because it's their most used media (meaning they understand the process of using the platform and posting there) and Reddit has a mobile app that makes creating text-posts relatively easy; on the other hand, the same person uses YouTube to watch videos explaining difficult in-game mechanics for *D&D* because the audio/video format makes it easier to learn than going back to Reddit to read a text post there.

Going off this, we can already look at several examples of media that lend themselves towards a certain use, due entirely to their base components. Looking at the difference between video games and board games, a handy example for this study, game designer Kevin Wilson (2010) was tasked with adapting the famous video game *Doom* into a board game. Looking back at his experience, he notes trends he saw in both media: "Video games: Good at real-time, Orchestrated soundtrack, Instant gratification, Lack of human interaction, 2D (visual elements only). Board games: Poor at real-time, Sound effects difficult and expensive, Slower playing experience, Face-to-face (very social), 3D (tactile elements)" (p. 91). By analyzing these basic elements that make up the experience of playing a video or board game, one could make a judgment on which a user was more likely to use given their needs, biases, or previous experiences. Most of these differences between board and digital games, however, come down to differing native attributes of the two media, differences between cardboard pieces and computerized images. Many enjoy analog media for its comforts, for the more traditional

manner of its production and consumption, but "electronic images and sound, however, thrust themselves into people's environment, and the messages are received with little effort. In a sense, people must go after print messages, but electronic messages reach out and touch people" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 84). Some may see this as a negative, but it is neither good nor bad. It is simply a factor of digitized communication. Especially given the subject matter of this paper, it is important to understand the base differences between digital media and older, more established analog media.

Role-playing games are a medium (according to McLuhan, at least), one traditionally based around a physical board and face-to-face communication between several people at once. Being able to analyze the way in which *D&D* then changes when brought into the digital realm is an important first step. Many of the components of the computer as a canvas for other digital media have already been discussed. An important factor of online media, however, is the way in which it affects the user's perception of space. "The boundary between the private embodied 'here' of the computer, tablet or phone user and the public 'out there' of the audience for a particular communication may be blurred, weakening our sense of an offline world which is not part of the online world, and irreducible to it" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 91). When a user enters a chat on Twitch, they feel as though they have entered a shared space with other users; this sense of "being there" is aided, of course, by the ability to live chat with other users in the room, but it is undeniable that many computer users find themselves feeling as though they have gone somewhere while remaining seated at their desk. Perhaps Meyrowitz was correct when stating that "when Electronic media begin to provide the same information once available only when participants meet in the same place at the same time, then electronic media begin to

reshape the meaning of 'place' itself" (1985, p. 114). This will be explored in greater detail in later chapters, but let us focus on the role interactivity has in media for now.

Interactivity

Now much more prevalent in media than at the time of McLuhan's work thanks to the rise of the internet, interactive media is becoming the norm rather than an extra feature added to a platform. We discussed previously how a medium can affect how the user views the space around them, but interactive media can affect the perception of time, as "interactivity here represents a further development of the media's ritual categories of 'reality' and 'liveness,' whether in the form of 'live chat,' or 'live interaction' with an interface that stands in for the media system itself" (Couldry, 2003, p. 109). This development has occurred quickly, within the last decade especially, as even in 2008 Couldry was caught off guard by asking if "'interactivity' simply mean[s] an increased ability to make viewing choices, or access information, within option frameworks that are already fixed" (p. 188). Further, he writes that "the ultimate convergence of all communication forms within one broadband service accessed through one medium (whether television, or perhaps, the computer) will clearly have major implications for 'the media'...More importantly, digital media are likely to involve much higher degrees of viewer interactivity than earlier forms" (p. 188). It is almost funny how if he had just waited another year or two before releasing his work, this would have become commonplace knowledge.

That is not to say that the concept of digital interactivity was or is completely understood. Edward J. Downes and Sally J. McMillian, in *Defining Interactivity: A Qualitative Identification of Key Dimensions* (2000), notes that many scholars had drastically different definitions for the term. Some of the constants she is able to pin down through interviews, however, included the

fact that most participants found themselves stating that most communication through a computer was somewhat interactive, that interactivity could occur in either one-way or two-way communication, and (most importantly) that interactivity was a spectrum with some platforms being more or less interactive than others. In 1997, Aaserth writes that interactivity within a digital space would be giving more power to the computer, making it almost like an equal partner in a conversation, "caused by nothing more than the machine's simple ability to accept and respond to human input. Once a machine is interactive, the need for human-to-human interaction, sometimes even human action, is viewed as radically diminished, or gone altogether" (p. 48). Again, this was written almost two and a half decades ago, but Aarseth underestimated how far Artificial Intelligence would progress, or misunderstood the direction that this technology would go. His description of interactive electronic media sounds closer to Siri or Alexa, but not necessarily any forms of contemporary communication technology. This does bring up the important topic of the limits of computers. As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) write

> A common misconception about digital interactivity is that it offers players a broad and expressive range of interaction - that a computer can mimic any medium and provide any kind of experience. In fact, the kind of interactions that a participant can have with a computer is quite narrow. Interaction with a home computer is generally restricted to mouse and keyboard input, and screen and speaker output (p. 87).

The two authors were discussing video games specifically, but their critique of the limits of computer technology is relevant in this setting as well. The computer, while a wonderful technology that allows for a plethora of media platforms and different forms of content, is still a

piece of technology that must be negotiated with. To truly understand interactivity, the center of focus must be the user itself, the human being behind the screen.

Let us go back to the example of Twitch's live chat function, which I would describe as interactive because users can chat in real-time with other viewers or even the streamer. "The online 'chatroom,' whatever is said there, is a form whereby the 'liveness,' and implicitly the 'reality,' of a broadcast can be confirmed by linking it to 'real people's' talk, as the program happens" (Couldry, 2003, p. 109). This interactivity has little to do with the ability of the machine to speak back to us, rather the technology is able to hold a functional conversation in real-time (I stress again for importance) that users can use to interact with other users.

While there is still some confusion on exactly what interactivity is, or what it means for the future of communication technology, Couldry (2008) is able to get at the two main draws of interactive media, the personalized nature as well as the ability to produce and broadcast your own content, when he says

> not only will particular software allow individuals an interactive, personalized
>
> information and entertainment service, either through their own individual selections or
>
> through 'personalised' browsers, and so on, but the decentred nature of Internet
>
> communication means that it has the potential to be genuinely interactive (p. 189).

Here, we see benefits of interactivity being an attribute of a media object, the platform tailoring content based on the user's past preferences and the ability for users to broadcast their own content onto the platform for other users to consume. Going back to the previous example, Twitch as a media platform is designed with both of these goals in mind, showing a high level of interactivity, or participation as McLuhan would have phrased it. When using Medium Theory, interactivity was among the first components of a medium to be dissected and analyzed. The

question remained, however, of why interactivity is so valued in a medium? Why are people so drawn to it? Looking at Meyrowitz's writing surrounding Medium Theory, perhaps the answer is because it makes any platform more closely resemble the "optimal" communication form, face-to-face.

Face-to-Face Communication

Let us return to Meyrowitz and his claim that "Medium theory also examines how communications through a particular medium or type of medium compare and contrast with face-to-face interaction" (2008, p. 1). Meyrowitz (1985) studied the trends that occurred within the history of media as well as the writings of Paul Levinson, and he found that

Levinson's Theory gives substance to our intuitive sense that one form of media is better than another. The addition of voices to the telegraph, or sound to silent movies, or color to television, he suggests, is perceived as an 'improvement' simply because the medium becomes less like a medium and more like life (p. 121).

From a certain perspective, this makes sense. Many of the technological advancements within communication technologies in the last 150 years do seem to follow a trail towards realistic face-to-face discussion. Let us use Meyrowitz's first example here, the telegraph. An improvement of the letter, the telegraph allowed people to communicate with one another across great distances in almost real-time, a massive step over the written letter which had to travel and could take days, weeks, even months to get to the recipient. Then came the telephone, which added the human voice to the ability to speak in real-time, another step forward. Today, perhaps the Zoom call is the newest move in this direction, with both the voice and the face of the speaker being transmitted to the other caller. Each new technological leap here has made the process of

communication more and more similar to a normal conversation, but with the digital benefit of occurring regardless of the physical space between the two users.

Now it is important to remember the users during all of this talk of media, as they are still the ones who must utilize the technology. After all, "all forms of 'interactive' text demand a physical body with which to interact. When we use the now–common interface that consists of a mouse and keyboard as input device, and the computer screen as display mechanism, it is easy to forget the body whose eyes perceive the screen, and whose hands and fingers manipulate the mouse and keyboard" (Utterback, 2006, p. 218). This ties back to the human element of the figuration as well. But it is clear that not everyone agrees with this view of media as a placeholder, a substitute, for FtF, as Couldry explains that "there is nothing in principle wrong with certain centres of communication emerging for certain purposes and under certain limited conditions. Communication cannot be all face-to-face dialogue or interactive co-production. There is an unavoidable role for 'scatter; or 'dissemination'" (2003, p. 138). Clearly, not every communication technology is attempting to recreate FtF discussion. The fact that so many scholars believe so, however, shows that this is either a wider-reaching concept than first envisioned, or is simply a case of cherry-picking examples. If it is apparent that certain media are favored due to their similarity to FtF communication, that may demonstrate trends pointing towards Meyrowitz being correct in his assumptions.

Drawbacks to Medium Theory

While Medium Theory has a multitude of strengths, many of which perfectly fit within the goals of this paper, it is not without critique. Interestingly enough, much of this criticism is from Meyrowitz himself, although this has to do less with issues he takes with the theory, and much more to do with the manner in which scholars are utilizing the concept. He complains that

"one dimension that is missing from the first generation of medium theory is a detailed attempt to link this theoretical perspective with analyses of everyday social interaction. My own medium-theory work involves a reformulation of role theory that can address the influence of media" (1994, p. 58). An issue with many macro-level studies is that they can leave out the experiences of the individual, being so concerned about looking at a society or community that the people making up said community are overlooked. To avoid a similar pitfall, interviews and focus groups were utilized within an experiential methodology to ensure that the individual user was always at the forefront of analysis.

Another issue that can arise from using Medium Theory, the "greatest problem" according to Meyrowitz (1985), was

> that ultimately they provide more of a perspective for studying the effects of media on behavior than they presented a detailed theory. The insights, observations, and evidence they collect point to the need to study media environments in addition to studying media messages, but they do not form a clear set of propositions to explain the means through which media reshape specific behaviors (p. 22).

There are several important factors to unpack from this. I agree with Meyrowitz in that Medium Theory is more of a perspective, a conceptual theory, than a theory. That does not mean that it is any less useful, just that it needs to be supplemented with other literature and perspectives. He does address, however, that the theory by itself will not answer all of the most pressing issues within Media Studies, but rather that Medium Theory is "about tendencies rather than absolutist mechanisms, about interactions between media and society. Most Medium Theory, rather than advocating a simple causal view, describes how the characteristics of a widely used medium foster, enable, and encourage certain communication patterns while discouraging others" (2008,

p. 5). So no, Medium Theory by itself will not tell a scholar the social impact of media, but it can help understand why an individual would choose a certain media over another. Given that this isthe exact role selected for it within this study, I believe that it was perfectly placed here.

Wrapping Up Medium Theory

Medium Theory is among the lesser utilized theories within the Media Studies discipline, yet I believe that it can function within almost any project focusing on media or communication technology. Arising from Meyrowitz's (1994) frustrations at media scholars, many coming from McLuhan's Media Ecology, that only focused on the social without paying attention to specific impacts, Medium Theory "focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media" (p. 50). Examining these native attributes, it is possible to begin explaining user preferences for one medium over another. In general, bias is a difficult concept to articulate simply due to how personal and complex of a process it is; yet with Medium Theory, looking at what makes that medium unique is what allows for scholars to better understand the media selection process of the individual. The theory is also able to provide insight into why interactivity is such a widespread phenomenon in media platforms lately, and why it draws so many users to it. Having an interactive hand within the communication process allows the user to have a feeling of live-ness with their consumption, as though they were there in that time and space as the events before them occur. Going off this, while it may still be a contested one, it is clear that certain attributes of face-to-face communication are considered positive traits to find within communication technology, including interactivity. While it is not an absolute rule, there are many relevant examples, such as sound being added to film, that point towards a preference by users. Finally, understanding past criticisms of Medium Theory allowed me to better utilize it in the proper manner. Meyrowitz (1985) was concerned with the macro-

view taking over Media Studies, but for his own theory his worry was that it could only "provide more of a perspective for studying the effects of media on behavior than they presented a detailed theory" (p. 22). Taking a micro-level view of the interactions between media and users (and avoiding the first pitfall here), this study looks to use Medium Theory as a single element among a handful of theories and concepts. Therefore the theory, or perspective if that is what Meyrowitz would prefer it to be called, did not need to do all of the work itself as it merely needed to give perspective on user preference for the rest of the project to follow, making it an excellent fit here. Through an understanding of the components making up a medium, one can better understand its function, as well as why a user would prefer it over other media. In this study examining the choices *D&D* players make in deciding their media consumption, as well as how the greater sum of said consumption impacts their user, what theory could prove more useful than Medium Theory?

Figurations

For this study on how media, especially ecosystems of multiple media coming in multiple formats, the perfect starting point was the major theoretical framework: figurations. Coming from the work of sociologist Norbert Elias in 1939, Couldry and Hepp recontextualized the theory to fit within the media-rich world we live in today. They (2016) summarize the concept of figurations

> as patterns of communication in which something distinctive is at stake emerges through
>
> the interrelations between three dimensions: relevance-frames, constellations of actors,
>
> and the communicative practices, that have, as their basis, a particular ensemble of
>
> objects and media technology. These dimensions are relatively autonomous, but because
>
> each is involved in the situation in which action occurs, processes of acting together

generally tend to reinforce them, and stabilize patterns of association between them. (p.

67)

While it may only highlight the components, this quote provides the perfect summary of

figurations and how they are formed: a group of people with a shared interest/purpose using

media objects in their environment, each part coming to influence one another over time. This

can be seen in everything from Sports fans viewing habits and online communication, to

academics utilizing online databases and using social media to spread awareness on issues, to

Dungeons & Dragons. A quick note, I have used these components of the figuration listed above

but changed the wording slightly for ease of use. Relevance-frames, the shared action or interest

of people within the figuration, can and will also be referred to as a shared interest or shared

purpose. Constellations of actors, the human element of figurations, can be understood as

individuals or people for my purposes. Finally, the "the communicative practices, that have, as

their basis, a particular ensemble of objects and media technology" was shortened to media

objects; this refers simply to the media, media platforms, and various communication

technologies that people use within the scope of the figuration. The definitions above

demonstrate both what the figuration is, as well as the components that create a figuration (which

will be examined in more detail further along). For an easy to follow metaphor, think of a

figuration as the Solar System, with the Sun as the human user and the planets as media objects.

Each object sits within the figuration in a specific place, orbiting around the user, influenced

both by the pull of the user as well as the position of the other objects circling the same person.

It is with all of these heavenly bodies working together in harmony that makes that specific

figuration.

The predecessor of the theory I used, Elias (1978) sees figurations as a way of addressing and understanding the issues with Sociology, "the processes and structure of interweaving, the figurations formed by the actions of interdependent people" (p. 103), which Couldry and Hepp (2016) paraphrase as "the social world through its increasingly complex ways of interweaving human beings in relations of interdependence" (p. 59). Admittedly, Elias' concept is strengthened with an understanding that the individual is just as important to understand as the society they live within, but his approach did not focus nearly enough on the impact of media on society and needed to be retuned for the 21st century. Couldry and Hepp (2016) summarize their view of Elias' work by writing that

> they are constituted by the interdependencies and interactions of the involved individuals...the boundaries of each figuration are defined by the shared meaning that the individuals involved produce through their interrelated social practices, which is also the basis of their mutual orientation to each other (p. 63).

Going back to the first quote of this section, Couldry and Hepp highlight the three important aspects needed for a media ecosystem to be a figuration: people to serve as the subjects and inhibitors of the figuration, a shared action or interest, and (the important element added onto Elias' work) objects. It should be noted that figurations are somewhat of an undeveloped concept, even according to Couldry and Hepp. As such, this study also looked to further develop and strengthen the theory of figurations with this work. In the following section, I will first go into detail examining these three components of figurations, go into detail on the power media objects hold in terms of Naturalization, before finally analyzing how media objects within figurations affect one another.

Components of a Figuration

The human element is the most straight-forward of the three components of the figuration; that is not to say, however, that it is simple to understand the individual. A social theory cannot be that relevant if the most important aspect of a society, the people living within it, are ignored, yet people can be difficult to truly analyze. Anderson believed that there were multiple ways of understanding the individual, depending on one's goals and methodology. For my purposes, I have used his model that breaks the individual down into a being with three key elements: identity, subjectivity, and agency. An individual must be a cohesive person who can react to their surroundings and choose actions or reactions to what they experience. While it is difficult enough to define what an individual is, understanding the actions of a person can be even more challenging. Anderson (1996) writes the only way to do so was "to observe and explain the action aspect of the self from this vantage point is to typically deconstruct individual discourse in order to find the socially charged meanings that motivate the self's thinking" (p. 83). For Anderson, the individual was the one who responded to the social pressures and frames surrounding them. For the figuration, the individual is the one who consumes and produces media, who interacts with the shared interest, who is impacted by the objects within the figuration. Combining the assumptions of the figuration with Anderson's writings, I use the situated model of the individual, who creates "his or her means of expression in the resources of culture and society" (p. 89). As we continue to discuss the other aspects of the figuration, as well as relating the theoretical concept to the rest of this study, the individual will always be at the heart of that discussion. Throughout this paper, though figurations are a tool for studying society and social world-making, the individual user/creator/player is treated with heightened importance over the collective whole.

With an understanding of the person within the figuration, let us move on to the next part, relevance-frames, or the specific shared interest or action.

> Each figuration has certain relevance-frames. By this we mean that the people involved
> in a figuration have a common orientation to a shared 'purpose,' whether it be as a
> family, a group of friends, a collectivity or as users of a particular digital platform. The
> relevance-frames of a figuration express its social meaning as a distinct way of acting
> together. (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 66)

When looking at communicative technology, both the range it can be accessed as well as the number of possible users makes it necessary to find a way of enclosing borders around a figuration to keep discussion of it possible. An example of this could be an online blogging platform where users post daily messages, or people using the ESPN website to keep track of live scores during a sporting event. It is vital, however, to keep this shared purpose at a manageable size. To prove the importance of these relevance-frames limiting the size of a figuration, imagine a project studying the internet as a figuration. There is little productive analysis that would come from such a project, as this would create a grouping involving almost half of the world's population. Of these billions of people, there are millions of different actions and goals being accomplished by using the internet, tens of millions of different technological conditions affecting each user's experience, etc. It is simply too large of a grouping to find relevant data linking all of these users together, demonstrating the importance of having a factor to limit the size of a figuration. By finding and understanding a commonality amongst humans within a single figuration, however, the size and scope can be made into a manageable scale; this also gives a more foundational reason to link "individuals that share a certain meaningful belonging that provides a basis for action– and orientation-in-common" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016,

p. 168). Even going back to Elias, this need for a commonality to link individuals together was

necessary for the creation of a figuration. Couldry and Hepp linked this shared interest to the

content of the media itself, writing that "media contents become important resources for defining

collectivities when media contents become the 'topic' around which those collectivities are

constructed. This is especially evident in media-based collectivities such as fan cultures that are

predominantly defined by a shared enthusiasm for certain media content" (Couldry & Hepp,

2016, p. 175). While this project, as well as Couldry and Hepp's book, focuses on the media

itself and its place within the figuration, it feels foolish to ignore such a constant with the use of

said media, especially when we find that the content itself is the shared action within the group.

After all, the shared action (for the purposes of this study) was the playing and interest in

Dungeons & Dragons, itself both a media and content for other media platforms.

This is not to say that a common interest is enough to classify a group as a figuration, as

that ignores the other important elements that make up the figuration. It can be easy to look at a

hobby group as a figuration, but Couldry and Hepp (2016) warn of this, arguing that "instead of

understanding each and every fan culture necessarily as a single community, we might do better

to understand it as a complex figuration of figurations that link up different local groups in a

range of interdependent activities" (p. 171). While one could make the argument that every fan

group is a figuration, theorizing them as links together within a larger figuration is an easier

argument to make. This makes more and more sense when one looks at the interrelated nature of

any fandom; *Star Trek* fans, the classic example, do not only watch *Star Trek,* they also watch

Star Wars and play *D&D* and consume other 'nerdy' media. In this way, one can see

impressions of other fan cultures within the *D&D* community, itself an offshoot of the fan

culture surrounding *Lord of the Rings*. By understanding how figurations interact with one

another, in turn creating larger and greater figurations, one can better understand the scale of media that influences media users within any one figuration.

This brings us to the last key element of a figuration. For the focus of this study, as well as within the literature of Couldry and other authors who will be cited, the more important aspect of the figuration concept is the objects that exist within it and influence the human users. These objects that Couldry refers to here are mainly media, or communication technologies used to consume media such as televisions, computers, and mobile phones. This can also refer to media platforms, such as Twitch, YouTube, Reddit, or Facebook. It is important that a scholar "always makes a clear analytic distinction between objects and human actors" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 64). This is vital because humans have agency. Yes, clearly the media ecosystem and the societal pressures that surround them impact various aspects of their life and how they frame their own existence, but humans decide for themselves what they want to do and how they wish to do it. Objects, media objects in the case of this conversation, carry the biases and purposes of those who create and use them, but they never move beyond being an object, a thing to be acted upon.

Learned Behavior and Naturalization

Within this theoretical concept, it is not just the media that is of concern, but also the way in which they impact their audience. As Couldry and Hepp (2016) put it, "each figuration is based on certain practices that in turn depend on an ensemble of objects and technologies" (p. 67). These practices can be frames for how a person views the social world, but often pertain specifically to media use. What needs to be noted about these frames is the manner in which

each figuration is based on certain practices that in turn depend on an ensemble of objects and technologies. Put another way, each figuration is based on certain distinctive

practices of communication and a related media ensemble…through the interrelated

actions of such practices that individuals construct figurations: that is, figurations

involve ways of doing certain things together, or in coordination, very often with and

through media. The communications that arise around those practices contribute to the

overall meaning of the figuration. But we cannot understand the practices of such

figurations without the objects and technologies we use in relation to them. While not

necessarily a constitutive feature of figurations... figurations typically come together with

certain objects and technologies (p. 67).

To settle a controversial matter quickly, this is not in line with the century-old concepts of Media

Effects and the Hypodermic Needle model of yesteryear. Coudlry and Hepp (2016) are not

claiming that media objects within figurations have the power to change the way that their users

think and act. Rather, "each of its actors not only acts but interprets, and those processes of

interpretation are themselves often complex'" (p. 58), and that media objects are able, over time

and in correlation with other media, to guide how the user believes that a media is supposed to be

used, to frame behavior in context within that figuration. It is this last point, guiding how the

user believes media should be used, that Meyrowitz (1985) gets at when he writes that "new

media, therefore, not only affect the way people behave, but they eventually affect the way

people feel they should behave" (p. 175). While many would call this media literacy, and to a

degree it is, it is just another demonstration of learned behavior on the part of the user being

subtly influenced by the media objects around them. Spending time on Reddit 'teaches' a user

how to post, what is appropriate to comment and how; it is a form of teaching media literacy. So

not only do the objects within the figuration inspire action and bias within the user, they do so in

a coordinated fashion with other objects orbiting the same figuration, and thus impact and help define what that figuration is.

Relating to the ability of media objects within the figuration to influence action and learned behavior, one of the most powerful aspects of the media ecosystem surrounding the individual is Naturalization. This is the way in which media is normalized as "certain forms and material aspects of media use, over time, have come to be so basic to everyday action that they seem 'natural'" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 32). Any technology seems novel when it is first released, but it never takes long for it to simply slide into a normal aspect of our lives; look at how within two decades the internet transformed from the greatest technological leap in human history into an everyday luxury for millions that we carry in our pockets. Van Dijck (2013) picks up on this, writing in awe of YouTube and stresses how noteworthy it is that she sees

"people's ubiquitous acceptance of connected media penetrating all aspects of sociality and creativity...This gleeful acceptance of YouTube's evolution by an overwhelming majority of users points to a deeper cultural logic that affords media platforms the power to shape sociality and creativity" (p. 129). Whether it is the nature of the medium used or the humans that use it, Naturalization occurs with enough time to almost any communication technology, making its presence among the figuration more difficult to extract. It is, after all, so easy to forget that the media objects around us have an impact, given the way they seem to almost become part of the background in our lives; hence the need to understand how the process of Naturalization occurs so that these media can be focused on properly.

How Media Interacts with Media

What must next be addressed is the manner in which these media objects all work together to create a larger media ecosystem centered on its user. An important note to start on is

the way in which new media enter figurations, and through this society. Media do not take turns in a single spotlight, with one medium being the single most important before it is replaced by a new one, "it is rather a continuous and cumulative enfolding of communications within the social world that have resulted today in ever more complex relations between the media environment, social actors, and therefore the social world" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 34). The radio did not disappear after the television came into popularity; instead television grew more popular and influential while radio stuck around and found itself a different, but still existing and influential in its own way, niche within social use. Meyrowitz (1985) explains this himself by stating "the addition of a new medium to a culture alters the functions, significance, and effects of earlier media. The telephone, for example, has surely affected the function and frequency of letter writing" (p. 19). A larger point needs to be made here, specifically about how older media are affected by the wave of newer technology entering the same space, especially digital media interacting with analog. Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) writes that, with the rise of the computer, many of these older media were digitized; while the content stayed the same, the form and associated behaviors of the older media are often discarded, meaning that "the digital revolution placed old media in a different context, both in terms of their cultural function and in terms of how they were approached" (p. 30). Understanding how each medium affects those that came before and after it is crucial in analyzing the media objects within any single figuration, let alone a more global ecosystem. An easy example is the invention of the television. While it may not have driven the radio to extinction, it dramatically changed how people utilized the radio from a major source of entertainment in the family room to a more background media for information and music.

So much of the issue comes from the fact that it is increasingly difficult to factually state where the influence of one medium ends and another begins, as "the flow of media inputs is so dense that we receive many of them, perhaps even most of them, in a state of distraction similar to that in which we take in billboards along a highway" (Couldry, 2008, p. 10). I say increasingly difficult here because it seems that society becomes more mediated with each passing year, communication technologies becoming more and more necessary to coexist with others. Much of what we have discussed so far focuses on how the multiple media all intermingle with one another, but looking at the other side is also crucial as certain aspects of the figuration "cannot be grasped any more except by focusing on each medium in relation to other media in the form of social interdependence that build around those media interrelations" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 217). An important aspect of media objects, especially for this study, is understanding that not every person within a figuration is utilizing the same media. It is vital to understand that

> it is less the single medium that matters here than the whole media ensemble, the dynamics of which can however vary hugely: having access to certain media may become fundamental for becoming a member of this collectivities, or media may affect the communication that takes place within collectivities." (2016, p. 175)

When looking at how media influence the human user, one must be able to analyze both the individual media as well as the collective.

Van Dijck (2013) analyzes the issues with understanding where and how the influence begins, as well as the connected nature of media, when she writes about

> distinct platforms as if they were *microsystems*. All platforms combined constitute what I called the *ecosystem of connective media* -a system that nourishes and, in turn, is

nourished by social and cultural norms that simultaneously evolve in our everyday world. Each microsystem is sensitive to changes in other parts of the ecosystem: if Facebook changes its interface settings, Google reacts by tweaking its artillery of platforms; if participation in Wikipedia should wane, Google's algorithmic remedies could work wonders. (p. 21)

While her focus is centered more on the online communities themselves, Van Dijck makes an important point in the second half of this quote. Because these media all act as points within a larger ecosystem, any change to a single one of these microsystems affects all the other parts of the "ecosystem of connective media." Going back to the metaphor of the planets in orbit, if a single planet's rotational path around the sun is affected even slightly, this shift will be felt by the other objects in orbit, perhaps subtly (the gravitational pull shifting from the rogue planet throwing off the path of other orbiting planets) or perhaps catastrophically (the rogue planet crashing into one of its neighbors). Van Dijck (2013) goes further in explaining that to understand this greater collection of media microsystems, one must deconstruct them down to their base, natural components. Only then can we "combine the perspectives on platforms as techno-cultural constructs and as organized socioeconomic structures. But disassembling platforms is not enough: we also need to *reassemble the ecosystem* of inter-operating platforms in order to recognize which norms and mechanisms undergird the construction of sociality and creativity" (p. 25). This method will be crucial in better understanding the media ecosystem surrounding *D&D* players online.

A final point of these linked media objects needs to be addressed, how a user is able to function within each separate microsystem. As mentioned, part of the Naturalization of media is the ability for learned behaviors, specific to that medium used, are quickly absorbed by the user;

but how does this process work for a figuration with possibly dozens of different media and media platforms being used? Luckily, many scholars have studied this exact phenomenon, as Van Dijck (2013) points out that "the interoperability of microsystems is dependent not only on the compatibility of algorithms and formats, but also on a shared processing logic" (p. 163). For these interconnections of multiple systems, it is not enough that they simply have a common theme or content. This may be a core element of a figuration, but not enough for the average media ecosystem. No, in these cases the "shared processing logic" here denotes the need for the basic performance and use of a media to be similar enough to neighboring platforms that the average user should be able to go from one to the other without too extreme of a learning curve. As a generalization, Meyrowitz (1985) makes the point (about social behavior, but the message easily translates to this site) that "the more distance there is between two or more situations, the more an individual's behavior can vary from one situation to the next. Conversely, the less distance there is between situations, the more similar the behaviors in them" (p. 50). If two media are similar to one another, the distance between them decreased due to similarities in the layout or the method of consumption, the behaviors of that medium should be more alike in terms of use and user-accessibility.

The more that two different media have a "shared processing logic," the more that the behaviors needed to operate said media will be similar to one another, and thus the easier it is for a user to effortlessly use both. While this helps us understand how individual media may operate, Meyrowitz (1985) also claims that "(1) behavior patterns divide into as many single definitions as there are distinct settings, and (2) when two or more settings merge, their distinct definitions merge into one new definition" (p. 46). We understand already that each individual media, or setting in this case, has its own unique behaviors, but Meyrowitz takes another step by

adding that merging two different media will create new behaviors, separate from both of the two existing protocols that come naturally from their host media. The average *D&D* player may use Twitter and YouTube, both of which function differently from one another and take different behaviors and skills to navigate and consume; but by using both together, by merging these separate places together into a new single experience, a new form of behavior is created for the user to adapt to. Understanding both the actions necessary and the learned behaviors of single pieces of media, then using this as a jumping off point to theorize and analyze how they function together, was one of the main techniques throughout this study, both for better understanding figurations and media framing of the user.

Concluding Figurations

Let us go back to our original definition of figurations, which Couldry and Hepp (2016) summarize as

> patterns of communication in which something distinctive is at stake emerges through the interrelations between three dimensions: relevance-frames, constellations of actors, and the communicative practices, that have, as their basis, a particular ensemble of objects and media technology. These dimensions are relatively autonomous, but because each is involved in the situation in which action occurs, processes of acting together generally tend to reinforce them, and stabilize patterns of association between them. (p. 67)

This is the figuration, an environment created by an individual with a shared, specific purpose surrounded by relevant media objects. In the case of our site, the figuration of the modern *D&D* community is created by the players of the game as well as the producers of content, the playing of or at least interest in *D&D*, and the means of which to play the game and absorb *D&D*-related content. This last point does not just mean the dice, rulebooks, and other materials necessary to

play *Dungeons & Dragons*. No, the objects within the figuration of *D&D* culture are also the media related to *D&D*, as well as the platforms that host or transmit this media, platforms like Twitch and the weekly broadcast of *Critical Role* or Reddit posts of users archiving stories from past *D&D* games. All of these parts are vital to creating the collective of *D&D* culture, in making the community what it is. For without the players and content creators, there is no human agent and therefore no culture. Without the shared action of *D&D*, there is no link between the countless individuals within the figuration breaking it apart. Without the media influence, while the community would still exist, it would be much different, perhaps even unrecognizable, than what exists today.

This section has gone over a significant review of the literature surrounding the concept of figurations, as well as an analysis over the aspects that will become most relevant to this study as it progresses. Looking back, the "media object" element of figurations proved to be the chief part of examination throughout this dissertation and its findings. Through the objects themselves, the manner in which they naturalize their presence in the user's life, how learned behaviors are made easily apparent to said users, as well as how the different elements of different media mix together inside larger media ecosystems; the analysis of these media objects within the figuration of *D&D* enthusiasts relied heavily on examining the ways in which all of these aspects of media presented themselves in a user's experience.

Magic Circle/Media Worlds

But let us finally move onto the final of the three major theoretical concepts I used within this dissertation: the Magic Circle. It was with this concept that this study most directly attempted to tie itself to the discipline of Game Studies, which has found and utilized the Magic Circle successfully in the last couple decades. With origins in Anthropology and Performance

Studies, the Magic Circle is a place (which can be physical, temporal, mental, or combinations of the three) where the real world disappears and the world of the game, the sport, the activity emerges and thus the rules of the game world take precedent over the real world. A classic example of this is the boxing ring: to run up and punch someone is illegal under normal circumstances, but it is normal practice within the Magic Circle of the ring. Much like how Couldry places barriers between the real world and the media world, real life and the Magic Circle are separated by an invisible wall, keeping the two separate. Yet in recent years scholars have debated if the wall surrounding the Magic Circle is ironclad or if it is a permeable membrane that allows both sides to influence one another. In this section, I will be linking the Magic Circle with another theory, Couldry's Media Worlds, which focuses on the ways in which media production places barriers between the "real world" and the "media world," before trying both back to this study as a whole.

So what exactly is the Magic Circle? Coming from the concept of liminality from Archeology and studies of Indigenous people's rituals, the Magic Circle is a concept that play occurs in a specific time and place that gives it meaning as play. Explained further,

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga, 1955, p. 10)

Summarized, the Magic Circle is a 'place' or 'time' or 'situation' where it is acknowledged by all participants that play is occurring, that anything occurring is not 'real' but simply play. The Magic Circle itself can come in many forms. It can be a boxing ring, a tennis court, a football field, a physical place where games are held. It can be Thursday nights at 8 PM, when a group of friends agree to meet and play *D&D* every week. It can be a look exchanged between siblings walking to the car, leading to an impromptu race. As long as the participants agree that "something" triggers the move to play, it can be considered a Magic Circle. It is important to highlight here that all participants agree that play is happening. Going back to the example of the boxing ring, it is not a boxing match if one person sees it as sport but the other sees it as a fight.

Making the Magic Circle

Game scholars Salen and Zimmerman (2004) explain this that "to play a game is in many ways an act of 'faith' that invests the game with its special meaning - without willing players, the game is a formal system waiting to be inhabited, like a piece of sheet music waiting to be played" (p. 98). An important factor of the Magic Circle is that it does not actually exist; it is an imaginary concept, one that only functions if 'willing players' wish it into existence. Relating here to our site, *D&D*, the Magic Circle almost functions as a pseudo-make believe. "Like many social worlds (acting, storytelling), fantasy games produce a 'make-believe' world set apart from the everyday world. By playing fantasy games, participants implicitly agree to 'bracket' the world outside the game. Yet ultimately all events are grounded in the physical world" (Fine, 1983, p. 183). Fine here simply confirms what others after him realized, that make-believe, truly the foundation of the Magic Circle, is a conscious agreement by the participants, with all parties unanimously deciding to set their play apart from the real world. Salen and Zimmerman (2004)

see the Magic Circle, at times, as being more of an unspoken social agreement than another world, claiming that "the magic circle is fluid, but when most players play a game, especially a game where other players can be seen face-to-face, they respect the rules and play the game from beginning to end. Why is face-to-face interaction important? A game is a kind of social contract. The presence of other players is important to maintaining the authority of the magic circle" (p. 269). Again, we see how important the social element is to the integrity of both the Magic Circle and the game itself being played.

Another important element, specifically added by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) to their writing, is that it is a closed system, one that is separate from the real world. In their book, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, they believe that

> The fact that the magic circle is just that – a circle – is an important feature of this concept as a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility" (p. 95).

While I will disagree with this point in short order, it stands that much of the traditional literature on the Magic Circle sees it as a separated place, one that is unattached to the real world the players came from. It is this concept of two worlds, divided from one another, that takes us to a similar, but almost entirely unrelated theory: media worlds.

Media Worlds

 It is here that we move from the Magic Circle to Couldry's theoretical concept of media worlds, a more direct link taking a Performance theory and applying it to the Media Studies

discipline. Coming from sociologist Émile Durkheim's concepts of the binary between the divine and the profane, Couldry's concept of the media world places it opposed to the real world, with the media world being both the narratives of media as well as the process and people involved with the production of said media. Going back again to the example of Twitch, the elements of the media world of a Twitch stream would be the streamer, the video/audio of the stream itself, the layout of the platform the user must navigate, the live chat and the messages shared between viewers, and the game being streamed. All of this makes up the media world, but it is not why Couldry was interested in it. No, what piqued Couldry's (2008) interest was "that the division between 'ordinary' and 'media' 'worlds' is grounded in the special role the media have in framing the social. This remains important. However, what also makes this division so effective and pervasive is the way it is reproduced in countless local forms: through language, as just analysed, and through actions" (p. 48). Couldry places a greater social importance on the media world, as it has a much greater ability to influence and impact its audience than a typical person from the ordinary world could, bringing me to my next point.

The Hierarchy of Media Over the Ordinary

With all of the power and resources available to it, one can understand why Couldry (2008) places

> a hierarchy between two constructed terms- 'media world' and 'ordinary world'- which is continually reproduced both symbolically and through the practical details of how information is made and circulated. This hierarchy is registered in many practices. Some (such as the language patterns…) are so anal as to be barely noticeable: the way we talk about media people or places in the media, for instance." (p. 178)

Clearly, Couldry has a point that the media world, itself in control of the messages transmitted through it, created a loop where it claims itself as the more important world, the world more worth listening to, and therefore becoming the more influential world as its audience begin to frame their experiences around messages and content from said media world.

The overall effect of this is that the media world, and the people within it, are seen as more important, as greater than the real world, the ordinary world.

> It is 'common sense' that the 'media world' is somehow better, more intense, than 'ordinary life,' and that 'media people' are somehow special. This is not based either on fact or on a cultural universal, but rather is a form of consciousness ultimately derived from a particular concentration of symbolic power. (2008, p. 45)

Through the media repeating over and over that "this is how you should act, this is how life should be," like the learned behaviors picked up through repeated use of a medium, this influences the user more and more over time, subconsciously absorbing these micro-messages and learning the frames suggested to them. It is made clear by Couldry (2008) that this is intentional, done so both with purpose and frequency, as "the media/ordinary division underlies, for example, the frequent contrast between 'media people' and 'ordinary people.' Like the sacred/profane distinction, it seems effectively absolute, a naturalised division of the way the world 'is.' Yet it too is socially grounded" (p. 15). Much of the reason why we see those in media (actors, celebrities, content creators, etc.) as more important is because "we misrecognize the fact that they are only mediated versions of the social world (and its people). We regard as somehow special those who, but for appearing within the media, would be interchangeable with ourselves...the other side of this is to regard ourselves as 'merely ordinary', by comparison"

(2008, p. 56). This reinforces two simultaneous messages: that they are important and that we are not.

This power of media, the power to be a media person, is entirely social. There is nothing making that true, other than the media framing it as such. Couldry (2008) himself states that "the boundary between 'media; and 'ordinary' 'worlds' is not just physical; it is a social and symbolic boundary between two orders of things, two orders of people. If the media are 'there' with you, you must somehow be 'important'" (p. 141). For an example of this, let us go back to *Critical Role,* the *D&D* podcast taking Twitch and the entire *D&D* figuration by storm. There is no such thing as a professional *D&D* player. Some people, *Critical Role* included, may find ways to monetize their play or discussion of the game, but there are no leagues of *D&D* players or tournaments to win prizes from. It is a game, a hobby, that does not keep a score, so there is no objective way to be better or worse at the game than others. Yet fans will treat the cast of *CR* like *D&D* celebrities, as examples of how one should play the game; they have been practically deified by the community, to the point that the "Matt Mercer Effect" is a contested point within the figuration that will be addressed in detail in later chapters. It is safe to say, for now, that the platform the show provides has turned the cast, in the eyes and minds of its audience, as paragons of the game. This is the power of media worlds and the aura of importance it bestows. Perhaps this leads to yet another reason why interactive gaming platforms are so important in this regard. Howard Rheingold (1993), a communication scholar that inspired Couldry, sees the democratic advantages of this technology, as this technology allows average people to work around media conglomerates when "every citizen can broadcast to every citizen" (p. 14). If anyone is able to broadcast themselves, does this give any person the ability to become a media

person? Or will this slowly tear down the pedestal that media people have found themselves on, as the common person is able to become their peer?

It is not just the social implications that media people are more important, however, but also the fact that they have access to greater resources and audiences than the average person.

"The difference of symbolic resources between those outside media institutions and those within them is real. There is a real difference in terms of ability to make yourself heard and have your account of social reality accepted." (2008, p. 20)

This feels a bit obvious to say, but it is an important point. Though there is no difference between myself and a celebrity in terms of DNA, intelligence, etc., they have the ability to have their voices reach untold numbers of people while my own is limited to the people I know and can interact with. President Barack Obama has more than 129 million followers on Twitter, giving him a level of influence magnitudes greater than I could ever dream of having. It is not that some higher power has made President Obama better or more important than me, but because "he intervenes, not in media texts, but directly in 'media spaces,' the quite specific physical spaces where media attention is concentrated" (2008, p. 167). It is the social influence as well as the increased resources that create binaries between ordinary people and media people, the ordinary world and the media world.

Boundaries Between Binary Worlds

As mentioned previously, Couldry (2008) goes into some detail about the separation between the sacred and the profane, how barriers must be constantly reinforced socially to keep the two apart, but then compares this to the "parallel to the separation of media production from the rest of society" (p. 15). He is firm about this barrier between the two worlds as

Media production is both part of the social world and apart from it, separated by a

naturalised, and therefore normally absolute, boundary. It is the absoluteness of that

boundary that enables almost the whole social world (in all its complexity) to be taken for

'merely' an 'ordinary world,' when compared with the 'media world.'" (p. 119)

To Couldry, there are two factors that separate the twin worlds. The first is the social

importance awarded to media people, those who are able to find themselves existing within a

media world. As much as every child dreams of growing up to be a star, of every athlete dreams

of playing in a professional league, of every artist to have their work seen by millions, it is a

small number of people who can claim to be figures within the media. These celebrities stand

out, evaluated in importance by the media stage awarded to them. The second factor reinforcing

the binary is the means of media production. The cameras and microphones, the lighting needed

for a well-lit shot, the platform to transmit and broadcast, the knowledge and experience it takes

to create; it is an expensive and complicated process to make content for a greater audience.

There is a reason, after all, why the production companies that make films have billions of

dollars at their disposal and are forced to regularly spend upwards of $100 million to make a

single movie. For the average person, having a digital camera in the 1990s was about as close as

one could get to having the resources to enter the media sphere.

Holes Forming in These Barriers

Here, we see the link between the Magic Circle and the media world: both describe a

binary between two worlds, related but untouching. The subject matter of the two, however, is

radically different. While the Magic Circle is used to analyze play and performance, media

worlds were first introduced by Couldry to illustrate the social power that media held over its

audience (especially in relation to physical spaces seen within media content). But there is

another link between the two concepts, one that will take the bulk of this review's interest moving ahead. Let us go back, for a moment, to Fine's quote about fantasy worlds being set apart from the real world, paying specific attention to how he finishes his thought.

> Like many social worlds (acting, storytelling), fantasy games produce a 'make-believe' world set apart from the everyday world. By playing fantasy games, participants implicitly agree to 'bracket' the world outside the game. Yet ultimately all events are grounded in the physical world. (Fine, 1983, p. 183)

Even when discussing how separated the "make-believe" world is, he firmly commits that the physical world, the real world, grounds and guides the events within the fantasy. Again, what connects the Magic Circle and media worlds are twofold. First, already explored, is the shared concept of dual worlds, a 'real world' and then a secondary one with some perceived importance. The other commonality between the two is that while both originally were written as having a concrete barrier between these two worlds, additional literature or technological advancement has seen scholars finding holes in these 'impervious' walls. Game scholarship has begun critiquing the Magic Circle as completely removed from reality just as the rise of interactive media challenges Couldry's concepts of how removed the media world actually is from the ordinary.

So let us examine how holes are beginning to appear in these previously-thought concrete barriers. Beginning with the Magic Circle, one of the most outspoken critics of the theory is Jesper Juul (2008), who is concerned with the "conventional criticisms of binary distinctions" involved with discussion around the concepts of the circle and the real world. To him,

> playing a game not only means following or observing the rules of that game, but there are also special social conventions about how one can act towards other people when

playing games. The concept of the magic circle is useful to describe the boundary at

which these rules and norms of game-playing are activated. The magic circle is a

description of the salient differences between a game and its surrounding context. It does

not imply that a game is completely distinguished from the context in which it is played.

(p. 60)

Juul makes an excellent point in this quote, that previous literature wrote about the absolute

barrier between the Magic Circle and the real world without taking into account that real life has

an effect on those playing a game. Author Marinka Copier (2009) argues against the Magic

Circle because it "hides the fact that digital play is a material practice which is deeply anchored

in everyday life...in order to discuss the relation between fantasy and reality, scholars have opted

for a counter-rhetoric that includes breaking or blurring the boundaries between the inside and

outside of a game" (p. 166). The example they use is the buying of in-game resources in real

life, such as gold for *World of Warcraft* or the lootbox system that has become popular in the last

five years. There are clear and obvious examples where the real world touches the game world

within the Magic Circle.

Returning to Salen and Zimmerman, they point to another site where the real world and

the Magic Circle affect one another: fan-made content. This is not discussing artifacts such as

fan-art or fan-fiction (although one could clearly make such an argument), but about fan-created

modifications to existing games, or cases where players use tools within the game to create new

levels or challenges. Copier (2009) summarizes the duo by stating that content "such as

computer-mediated and analogue role-playing games, player-generated mods [modifications]

and hacks, level editors and tools designed for players, games created open-source systems,

games that are played within and across multiple platforms, and self-organizing social networks"

(p. 167) is important for keeping continued interest in a game/community and is healthy for the growth of computer games. Even this is ignoring the fact that players bring knowledge from the real world into the game, specifically knowledge of said game. Video game companies for years have released guidebooks to help players through the game, pointing out strategies or where secrets are hidden. In 2022, these books have grown almost obsolete as digital platforms allow users to share knowledge among one another. Taylor (2020) writes that "whether through chatting and collaborating in-game or the collective knowledge building or sharing that happens outside the game (on websites, in places like Discord, and others), digital play is interwoven with the social (p. 110). Watching Twitch streams of others beating the game, going to YouTube for videos showing exactly how an enemy was defeated, reading a Reddit post explaining strategy in minute detail, modern media platforms have allowed for a multitude of manners for allowing people to permeate knowledge through the barriers surrounding the Magic Circle.

Perhaps one of the most relevant examples of these holes within the Circle is social context, hinted at in the Juul quote above. Trying to reformulate the concept, Juul (2008) writes that the Magic Circle can actually be broken down into three circles, with three separate, yet interconnected frames of viewing a game, each with its own motivation (p. 63). First is the innermost circle, the game as goal-oriented with the desire to win as its main drive. Second is the game as experience, where desire for an interesting game will motivate players to change how they play, such as handicapping themselves against a new player to make the outcome more exciting. Finally, in the outermost circle is the frame of games as a social, normal context, where players are driven by a desire for management of social situations, like purposely losing to a child or one's boss to maintain social standings. A perfect example of this is seen in *Impacts of Tabletop Role-Playing Games on Interpersonal Communication*, which found

in a situation of one game, player A has tried to let his character hamper and impede

player B, because player A's girlfriend was distributed [sic] to personate player B's wife

in the game. He can not accept that his girlfriend formed a couple with another man, even

it [sic] is only an avatar. (Cao, 2018, p. 3)

Even within the Magic Circle, Player A was unable to work past the outermost frame of the

Magic Circle, as he could not let someone else have even a fantasy relationship with his

girlfriend.

Much of Juul's (2008) issue with the Magic Circle is that he believes it more context

driven, less of a perfect circle cut off from the real world and more of a puzzle piece needing to

fit into place. He writes that

this makes it easier to talk about some of the details surrounding games: a puzzle piece

has different interfaces on its sides. Seen as a puzzle piece, a game may or may not fit in

a given context...We can then analyze how a game fits into a context, no longer arguing

whether games are separate or not. (p. 63)

This theory of Juul's was wonderful for this study for two important reasons. First, it recognizes

weaknesses with the original concept of the impenetrable Magic Circle. Second, and just as

importantly, it brings to the front of the conversation the concept of figurations, and the

importance of the surroundings to any media object, as well as how a human user will interact

with it. More traditional literature and scholars may be satisfied to call the Magic Circle a closed

system, "but in games we find players happily creating and negotiating the magic circle, the

boundary around the games they play" (Juul, 2008, p. 64); and it is difficult to argue with the

actual people within the gaming figuration.

While scholarship may not have found as many holes between the real world and Couldry's media worlds, rising technologies have done just as fine of a job. Couldry (2008) himself even writes that "the media's framing and other functions result in the symbolic hierarchy between 'media' and 'ordinary' 'worlds.' But the actual segregation of the media production process helps reinforce that symbolic division" (p. 54). Going off this, if the segregation of the production process were to erode, so too would the barriers between the real world and the media world. Couldry does mention in his book *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* (2008) that companies often exploit these slight gaps. The main subject of his discussion of media worlds, the real-life street used as a setting for the show *Coronation Street*, has become a tourist attraction as fans of the program flock to walk the same cobblestone as the television stars. In this physical location, which exists within both the real world and the media world, the street functions as a semi-liminal space that is saddled between the two. While this could serve as a hypothetical bridge joining the two worlds, this is not what I refer to when I say that holes form in the barrier separating the two. I am referring to a rise in available communication technology.

It is vital to note here that Couldry wrote on media worlds during the time of broadcast dominance, where programmed television was the most popular medium of consumption. With the rise of interactive media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch, anyone can be a content creator, especially with how relatively affordable recording equipment is becoming. Twenty years ago, a regular person could buy a camcorder, but it was obviously inferior in terms of quality to what professionals were using. In 2022, I can buy a 4K webcam, shooting with the same picture quality as many professionals, for $60. With this, one of the greatest barriers

protecting the media world, the previously enormous economic cost of entry, has all but dissipated.

Going again back to Twitch, this interactive streaming site alone raises too many questions about the rigid binary between the two worlds. In this one platform, normal people have the ability to chat live with streamers as they broadcast, allowing a level of interaction between media person and audience similar only to the live audience of a talk show; in both cases, the host (of sorts) is able to interact with individual audience members if they choose, or merely sit back and allow the audience to interact with one another as they react in real time to the events of the stream. Here we see the distance between the media figure and normal person decreased greatly, perhaps more so than any other media environment before. An ordinary person also has the ability to broadcast their own stream for their very own audience. Even if someone had the opportunity to be part of a live crowd, they never would have been able to use that to get themselves the position of hosting their own talk show. Yet with Twitch, all one needs is a computer with a camera and a microphone and they can become a bonafide media person. Couldry's issue was not that he was incorrect at the time of his writing, merely that he finished his book only a handful of years before the broadcasting age gave way to the rise of the internet, making much of his original theories outdated. In this one single platform, Twitch has decimated the walls between the ordinary world and the media world by allowing its users an untold level of interactivity. Discussed in detail in the section on Medium Theory, interactivity will be an important facet of media objects moving ahead in this study, using it in context with all three of the theoretical concepts in this review to better understand users' experiences within the *D&D* figuration.

Summarizing Circles

Finishing this section off, the Magic Circle and media worlds are two theoretical concepts that hold potential for a greater understanding of how media objects impact both the other media as well as the people within figurations. The Magic Circle, a concept more than a theory, stands that "all play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 10). Media worlds, on the other hand, are Couldry's (2008) attempts to understand "that the division between 'ordinary' and 'media' 'worlds' is grounded in the special role the media have in framing the social" (p. 48). At first glance, the two concepts may seem too far removed from one another to function as a combination. After all, media worlds origin comes from Couldry's examination of how media frames reality for the viewer, impacting the manner in which they see both society around them as well as how they should properly behave within it. The Magic Circle has nothing to do with social power, it is a theory set within the confines of liminal spaces. It is important to see that the two concepts come from radically different views, and are traditionally utilized to analyze radically different subject matters. Yet the two theories both hold value within this study as they both examine a binary created by people, one through media and the other through play; the goal here is to find a manner in which to properly use the strengths of both. By understanding how the barriers around both the Circle and the media worlds have been poked full of holes in the last decade, it is easier to understand (on a conceptual level) how influences from outside the *D&D* figuration are able to step into the experiences of the *D&D* player. These two theories and their growth give a roadmap to understanding our site of interest, even as they come from opposite ends of the humanities,

especially with the added benefit of tying the concept of interactivity to yet another core

concept of this study.

Conclusion

As I stated before, one of the most difficult steps in any study is selecting one's tools.

For every study there are hundreds of possible theories and methods to choose from, for every

topic of interest one could find dozens of tools that could potentially fit. Only through a

thorough review of relevant literature can one grasp what may or may not be an appropriate

theory to lead a project with, and this can only come after settling on the exact goals of the

scholar. For a moment, let us return to the research questions of this dissertation to analyze how

well the theories here fit the goals of the study.

1. What *D&D*-based media are players consuming?
2. How does the media ecosystem surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons* players change the way players interpret and understand the game?

This dissertation is concerned with illuminating the *D&D* figuration, mapping out the various

parts and pieces of this wide-spread media ecosystem while examining how these media objects

impact the individual and how they alter the experiences of the individual while playing *D&D*.

Looking at the research questions above, it appears that the three theories covered in this chapter

are well suited for their task. Medium Theory is designed to break a medium down to its core

attributes, thus making it possible to better understand how that medium functions and why a

user would choose it over another. Figurations are a perfect model for this study, analyzing the

connected media environment centered around a user's specific purpose; this concept is

essentially the baseline for how this project will function, with the individual being a *D&D*

player and the specific purpose being the exploration of *D&D*-related media. Finally, the Magic

Circle and media worlds demonstrate that the world as we know it can be broken down into a binary of "real" and "make-believe/mediated," although I understand that these two worlds are constantly touching, affecting one another in significant ways.

These three theoretical concepts all find themselves perfectly suited for the goals and interests of this project, but perhaps more fortunately they seem to resonate with each other as well. The best pairing of the three, Medium Theory is an excellent supplement to figurations. The concept of the figuration revolves around the media objects within a person's life, but this study wants to know specifically why certain users choose certain media. A possible issue with figurations was that it can be macro in its approach, looking at the bigger overall picture and possibly ignoring the smaller details, such as the individual at the heart of the figuration. Both of these problems were easily satisfied by the inclusion of Medium Theory, which is able to break down single media down to their base parts; not only did this allow for a more micro view of any one media object, it allowed me to understand its intended uses and pros for any potential user. While the figuration as a concept understands that a media object within orbit of others all affect each other, Medium Theory is far better suited at coming to an answer as to why specific effects occur, what attributes a medium possesses that makes these effects more or less likely to occur. In short, Medium Theory is able to analyze the individual medium while the figuration can examine the whole of a media ecosystem, making the two a powerful combination.

On the other hand, the figuration is also well-suited towards working alongside the Magic Circle and media worlds (with figurations and media worlds both coming from works of Couldry). Both the Magic Circle and media worlds have the traditional stance that their secondary world, the world of the game or the media world, is separate and removed from the real, ordinary world; but the figuration sees that the objects revolving around the user impact

their perception and behaviors related to those objects. Within the figuration is an ocean of media, each altering and affecting the objects around it, which in turn alter and affect those around it. It is a clear foil to the concepts of two worlds divided completely. Yet I have already addressed that the barriers between the ordinary and the imagined are not concrete, there are holes that allow for both sides to affect one another. But what is it that allows certain media to cross over this membrane between the two? Going back to Medium Theory, perhaps it is the element of Interactivity that gives users the power to move and act within the media world. If it is revealed that the media platforms within the figuration with the most impact on their surroundings and users are those with interactive elements, this would certainly be one of the major findings of this study. If so, this revelation was only possible with the insight that came from combining the three perspectives of the theories discussed.

This chapter looked at the three major theories that will focus the investigations of this study, while framing them in perspective with Media Ecology, the discipline that paved the way for both Medium Theory and figurations. The tools of a study must match the goals of a study, and all three of these theories allow for the closer examination of one's place within their media ecosystem. With all three of the concepts discussed here, the perspective of the individual, the experiences of the user was paramount to uncovering how *D&D* players are affected within their figurations. The next step was to decide the methods best suited for unpacking these experiences.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Keeping the goal of this dissertation in mind, the methodology that will guide the project

was not one of the many established, but rather one that came from the parts and elements of

others. The methodology of this study is an Interpretive, Experiential view, focusing on the lived

experiences of participants and interpreting those experiences through the lens of the key

theories from the previous chapter. Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor (2019) describe the

main assumption of Interpretivism as

> The realities (note the plural here) of communication are unique, simultaneous, and local
>
> phenomena. In other words, reality is prolific and emerges between humans through
>
> their symbolic activities of expression and interpretation. Instead of trying to resolve the
>
> single, objective truth of communication reality, interpretivists prefer to examine 'social
>
> realities,' which they believe develop as people collaborate in making sense of the
>
> communication they encounter, in deciding how to respond, and in performing that
>
> response. (p. 11)

Going hand in hand with the theory of figuration from the previous chapter, Interpretivism sees

reality as a personal concept, one unique to the individual and their experiences. Depending on

the society people live in, or the media ecosystem around them, the realities of two people can be

radically different, making the process of examining any one person's reality that much more

important. Couldry and Hepp (2018) believe that "whatever its appearance of complexity, even

of opacity, the social world remains something accessible to interpretation and understanding by

human actors, indeed a structure built up, in part, through those interpretations and

understandings" (p. 5). It is through the interpretation of human experience that something as

complex as macro media ecosystems can be understood; perhaps it is more accurate to state that

it is only through the interpretation of human experience that something so complex can be understood, as I believed that this was the best suited tool for the job. This view, again more of a focus or concentration than a concrete methodology, was influenced in part by three established methodologies: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Heuristics.

Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Heuristics

Let us first look at the methodologies that influenced this approach before going into more detail about how it influenced the methods of the project. First, probably the most popular of the three, is Phenomenology. Perhaps a bit too basic of a definition, but I agree with the statement "Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to unmask the obvious" (Welshire, 1982, p. 11). Going into more detail in his book *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches* (2017), Joshua Atkinson states that the basic tenets of Phenomenology assume that "reality is socially constructed and shaped in part by the perspectives that people bring to the negotiation of meaning. Researchers engage with people in order to explore the social institutions and interactions that have shaped their understanding about topics and issues in the world" (p. 35). The focus of the paper was the experiences players have had with the media objects in their life, which comes with the struggles of attempting to communicate data that was mainly subconscious, internalized opinions and biases. Fortunately, one of the benefits of Phenomenology is that it puts into concrete words the nonverbal internal dialogue people have with themselves, illuminating hidden and subconscious biases. "A good phenomenological text can make us suddenly 'see' something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experience and may transform our practices" (Given, 2008, p. 616). Another great aspect of the methodology is that it can function to interpret "how we experience novel ways of interacting with others and the world through computer mediated devices, social network technologies, new

media" (2008, p. 616). Yet there are elements of Phenomenology that hold it back within this dissertation, with other methodologies having certain advantages. Specifically, Phenomenologists can focus on the social pressures created by the world, but can ignore material pressures and the impact of technology within that same world. This is not to say that Phenomenologists are blind to the material world, "but there is clearly more emphasis on negotiation, discourse, and co- construction of meaning" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 31). While this is not an inherent weakness of Phenomenology, attention to the material world is an attribute that leads to the inclusion of another of the following methodologies.

Hermeneutics is another of the methodologies being utilized for its core assumptions. In particular, Hermeneutics is the methodology directly associated with the act of interpretation, the viewpoint that "reality is socially constructed, in part through the interpretive frameworks adopted by people to understand the texts and phenomena around them. Researchers engage with people to understand their interpretive processes and strategies" (2017, p. 35). While it can be difficult to differentiate the two, the important difference is the mentioning of understanding interpretive processes. It is not enough to simply document the experiences players have had with virtual call software, these experiences must be interpreted into a workable hypothesis by the researcher. In terms of data collection, an interview would create a moment to give both the interviewer and participant a chance to understand both people's backgrounds and how they view the site of analysis. As Given (2008) puts it, "the interpretive event is affected simultaneously by prior experiences with the topic and the audience with whom the topic is being explored. The meaning that is made, therefore, is not prethought (sic), but is brought forth in the event of participating in dialogue with another" (p. 387). Given the invisible nature of the

subconscious biases created through media use, this interpretive process was more necessary here than the average study.

The possible issue with grounding myself with a Phenomenological/Hermeneutic methodology was that this study, while basing its data and findings off the experiences and interpretive frameworks of participants, was inherently concerned with the material. The entire study was focused on the mediated experiences of participants, so a methodology that takes material objects into account was important. Therefore, I also brought to this study the methodology of Heuristics, which brings the material component of the world back into focus. Heuristics assumes that "reality is socially constructed, yet shaped by the material aspects of the world. Personal experience is a primary component of intersubjectivity. Researchers examine the role of experiences with the material world in the negotiation of meaning" (Given, 2008, p. 35). By having a methodology where the material world around the participant was inherently questioned when collecting data, the biases of the communicative mediums they use was simpler to dissect. Going even beyond this, Heuristics fit in well with the research tools and methods chosen, as

> it is not concerned with discovering theories or testing hypotheses, but is concerned directly with human knowing and especially, with self-inquiry...it explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research. (2008, p. 389)

While covering many of the same points as the other two methodologies, Heuristics separates itself with its attention to how the material affects the lived experiences of participants, the very subject of this investigation.

Experiential, Interpretive Methodology

So what exactly was the methodology of this dissertation? What made it more than simply a combination of three established methodologies? All three of my methodologies resemble one another, with similar views of reality and foci on the experiences of participants; but it was in the subtle differences and slight changes to how each view experience that gave each one a place within this study. While Phenomenology is perhaps the first that scholars think of when discussing lived experience, Hermeneutics places a strong emphasis on the process of interpretation, and Heuristics highlight the effect that the material world has on how people interpret their experiences. All three methodologies have historically been used in studies similar to my own. Many Game scholars using phenomenology to examine video games utilize Merleau-Ponty to study how in-game features try to mimic human physiology (Farrow, 2013) (Crick, 2011) (Rush, 2009). Scholar Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2012, 2015) has released several articles in the last decade that use Hermeneutics to study the performance of the video game itself, both how the player plays the game and how the game functions as a challenge that must be re-interpreted regularly as player action affects it. In a study of peoples' experiences within two different forms of communication, one of which being a rising technology, all three bring important elements that blend together to form the foundation of my project. Yet unlike these mentioned articles, I had a need for elements of all three methodologies.

With such a flexible plan must come a flexible methodology to match; so rather than tying this dissertation down to the limits of several methodologies, I utilized a wider Interpretive lens, one as flexible by design as the rest of the project. All three of these methodologies exist under the umbrella term of Interpretive, but highlighting them in turn was my manner of extenuating the individual attributes of each that are favorable for this study. This way, the

strengths of the three established methodologies could be utilized without having any limitations or fundamental assumptions skewing data collection. I considered this to be the greatest strength of a flexible design. The methodology of this project looked to interpret the lived experiences of participants, taking into account not only their individual background but also the impact of the material, mediated world in which we all live. Going back to the discussion of the individual in the last chapter, Anderson (1996) defines the situated model of the individual as one who creates "his or her means of expression in the resources of culture and society" (p. 89). Within this interpretive methodology, the clear goal was to illuminate through the participants' experiences in what manner their identity had been shaped and impacted by the cultural and media objects surrounding them. The next step was detailing the methods for data collection and allowing said methods to be shaped by the Interpretive perspective of the study. The selection of methods was deeply entangled within the selection of methodology, as methodology is the researcher's "view of the world that stands as the methodological foundation for a researcher as they begin to ask questions and study a particular phenomenon" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 29). As such, the methods themselves were shaped by the Interpretive methodology. The focus groups and interviews conducted in this study were not simply a normal focus group or interview, but Experiential, Interpretive-focused interviews and focus groups. The focus of the methodology was always the inherent goals and focus of the methods.

Methods

By creating and utilizing a methodology that places the experiences of people's lives at the front and center of knowledge building while also taking into account the material world's influence on perception, the methods used in this study focused on the participant and experiences navigating within the figuration of *D&D*. As such, I needed methods that do the

best job of unpacking and interpreting lived experience, clearly calling for a Qualitative tool.

Some methods were immediately excluded, including surveys which "are not particularly useful

in medium theory since the point is often to examine types of structural changes and sources of

influence that are out of the awareness of most people" (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 70). These

methods needed to allow for a deep interpretation of the experiences of *D&D* players, looking in

some cases at the invisible biases of participants. It is here that I will state that, while it was not

one of my primary methods, elements of autoethnography were utilized in this dissertation. As a

D&D player since 2013, my interest in this study first came from my interest as a member of the

D&D community. I believed that my own experiences with the game and its surrounding media

were a starting point for my hypotheses going into data collection. That being said,

autoethnography alone was not enough for this study. While autoethnography is a valid research

tool when combined with relevant theory, it works best when used alongside other methods of

data collection to offset "the need to deal explicitly with the validity, reliability, and legitimation

of autoethnography within the dominant research culture" (Wall, 2008, p. 40). Alone, personal

stories can be discarded or seen as personal bias, so why include them? As Carolyn Ellis (2000)

alludes to in her own writing, autoethnography can add a human element to cold data as well as

bring interviewer and participant closer to one another; not only this, but writing from a personal

place can allow scholars to craft more emotionally satisfying work, papers that come across as

more interesting and engaging to their reader. So as an addition to other methods (and not as a

substitute for), my own personal experiences are mentioned throughout this dissertation, but only

to show examples that coincided with cited theories or with other testimonials.

Therefore, as its main method for data collection, this study utilized semi-structured focus

groups and Respondent interviews for data collection, as defined and explored by Lindlof and

Taylor (2019). Of all the various varieties of interview possible, semi-structured was the most likely to allow participants to freely tell about their own experiences without feeling pressure from me to fit their answers to my needs. As a quick note, all of these focus groups and interviews were done over virtual call to eliminate any health concerns due to COVID-19. This study looked to uncover the experiences of the participants, so the main strategy was to inform participants about the focus of the study, then simply allow them to tell their own story with minimal interference or guiding from me. I believe that by explaining the goals of the study, but then allowing them to respond and speak openly, I was the most likely to record their honest experiences playing *D&D* without my expectations influencing their answers. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) describe the interpretation process as going "beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent...interpretation recontextualizes the statements within border frames of reference" (p. 235). As such, I did not need the participant to come to the conclusions of this study alone. I could later interpret their testimony and come to my own findings later; but for this step, it was vital that they were forthright with their own experiences, rather than being led by me during the conversation.

As for why I chose a Respondent-style of interviewing process, the reason was simple: it is the form most likely to allow participants to "interpret meaningful dimension [sic] of their lived experience" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 229). It is an intentional open-ended style of interviewing that gives the participants great freedom in answering honestly, without being guided towards an answer by the researcher. To go into further detail, let us look at the goals of the Respondent Interview and see how perfectly they align with the goals of this study. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) summarize Paul Lazarsfeld when they state the intent of this form of interview is

(1) to clarify the meanings of common concepts and opinions, (2) to distinguish the

decisive elements of an expressed opinion, (3) to determine what influenced a person to

form an opinion or to act in a certain way, (4) to classify complex attitude patterns and

(5) to understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act. (p.

229)

Each one of these five points highlights the intent of my methodology. As such, this model of

investigation was applied to both my focus groups and my one-on-one interviews.

At this point, I feel I should explain why focus groups as well as interviews were utilized.

Simply put, each one focused on a different aspect of my research. *D&D* is a group activity,

requiring two people at a minimum; to truly understand the experience of playing, as well as

understanding how that experience is affected by media, it only makes sense that groups were

asked. In this case, these focus groups were not simply a gathering of random players, but a

group that played *D&D* together, a party and their DM. Not only could I ask questions about the

impact different media have had on the gameplay within the group, I could also look to see if

specific members, those consuming more or less *D&D*-related media than the others, affected

other members' experiences. The goal of the individual interviews was to focus more heavily on

the individual's experiences within the *D&D* figuration, to explore their consumption of related

media. It would have been rather boring for the other members of a focus group if I went into

detail asking several questions about the type of podcasts a single participant views, so these

inquiries were better served with a one-on-one session. With these interviews, I was able to ask

repeated questions about individual experiences, rather than a more group-focused perspective

from the focus groups. I also planned to use these interviews to record data from content

creators, people who live broadcast themselves across media such as YouTube and Twitch. For

all of the questions this study has concerning media consumption, it seemed just as important to take the experiences of content creators into account. Again, this was merely a way of finding a broader range of relevant experiences to collect using tools for specific needs.

Alongside these interviews, the sites of study themselves were also analyzed. This does not just mean related media such as Reddit posts or YouTube videos, media platforms such as Roll20 or Twitch, but also the medium of *Dungeons & Dragons* itself. Utilizing figurations and Medium Theory, it was not a study of just the differences between two communication methods, but specifically the native attributes of each medium. Why is a specific medium so popular amongst *D&D* players? Is it a specific feature of the medium, or the openness of the layout that invites use within the community? Does interactivity make more of a difference than other native attributes when classifying media? How are the media affecting those orbiting around it within this figuration? As discussed previously, while these theoretical concepts are the perfect lenses for this process, it was the presence of an experiential methodology that focused all parts of the study on the correct subject. While Meyrowitz and others may have been more concerned about societal change on a macro scale, I looked at the experiences of individual people, and my methodologies saw that the lived experience of subjects was always the chief priority.

Once data was collected, Grounded Theory was used alongside our theoretical concepts to create categories and hypotheses based on these findings, based on patterns found in participants' answers. This seems obvious by the interpretive nature that has been stressed during this chapter, but it was impossible to determine the findings of this study until each participant was interviewed, each focus group allowed to speak about their experiences. It was difficult to know in advance what types of answers would be gathered during these interviews, and planning too much in advance could have brought about the danger of leading the interview;

this would normally be a risk to the interview data due to me influencing the participant, but given that the focus of the study was their personal experiences and views of *D&D*, this behavior held more potential to deride the study than normal. As such, my goal was to go into the interviews as neutrally as possible, taking care to lightly (if at all) guide participants through the process. The decision to wait until after data was collected before categorizing did not just come from Grounded Theory, but also my methodology. Going back to *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods,*

> the interpretive event is affected simultaneously by prior experiences with the topic and the audience with whom the topic is being explored. The meaning that is made, therefore, is not prethought, but is brought forth in the event of participating in dialogue with another. (Given, 2008, p. 387)

Fueled by this methodology, it was impossible to predict how participants' experiences could be interpreted until I actually sat down and spoke with them, so it was better overall to leave the interview only semi-structured.

Sample of Questions

Below I provided the basic guide I followed for focus groups and interviews. While a few of these questions come in multiple parts, most of them were intended to allow the participant to continue the conversation in whatever direction they saw appropriate, or to allow me to pick up a topic they may have breezed past. Again, the entire point of this method selection was to allow the participant to explain their experiences with as little input or steering from me, while emphasizing the interpretive element as we both discussed the answers the participant provides. Looking at the questions themselves, all relate in some capacity to the manner in which the media consumed by the participant impacts their experiences playing

Dungeons & Dragons, all while keeping the participant's individual experiences as the focus. While certain aspects of the study are not mentioned by name within the interview guide, such as the Magic Circle or figurations, the answers provided by the participant were interpreted and data relevant to those theoretical concepts were applied in the fourth and fifth chapters. Question Four of the focus group section specifically could be used to investigate if outside media had an impact on certain members of a group, which relates back to the Magic Circle and how new literature understands that the real world can influence play within the Circle. The first section are general questions that were asked in some form for either focus groups or interviews, with the second being focus group-oriented, and the final section being dedicated to questions while interviewing a content streamer one-on-one.

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me how you all started playing *D&D*? How do you all play together? What does that look like?

2. What media does the group use when you play together?

3. Has interactive media impacted the group's experience playing? Does it affect anyone's immersion in the game, or their sense of Flow?

4. Does anyone here feel as though they've used more/less *D&D* media than other members of the group? Does this impact your experience playing with the others? Does anyone feel like it changes if it is a player or a DM in terms of their media-consumption affecting the rest of the group?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about how you first started playing *Dungeons & Dragons?*

2. Tell me about how you typically play *D&D*?

3. Do you play *D&D* online? If so, can you tell me about that? Have you found differences when playing online versus in person?

4. Do you consume *D&D*-related media when you aren't playing? Do you use different media or media platforms for specific purposes when looking at *D&D* content?

5. How do you think interactive media, such as Twitch, has affected the *D&D* community? What about your specific *D&D* community?

6. Has the content you've enjoyed impacted the way you play or view the game?

7. When playing, do aspects of your real life or social life with other players influence how you play with them?

Streamer Interview Questions

1. How did you get started on [platform]? What attracted you to [platform] over a different platform? What type of content do you stream?

2. How does the interactive nature of [platform] impact your experience as a streamer?

3. Do you have different experiences streaming depending on the type of content you stream? Is a stream dedicated to *D&D* different from one on something like *Fortnite*?

4. During streams, do you interact with the audience? If so, what do you talk with them about? How do you interact with them, with what means?

5. What media do you enjoy when you aren't streaming? Do you watch other streamers? Does the media you consume impact you as a content creator/streamer?

6. As a content creator, what media do you use to broadcast, to advertise? Do different media have different roles or uses?

7. Have you collaborated with other streamers before? What was that experience like?

Relating the Interview guides here to the research questions of the entire study. Research Question 1 (What *D&D*-based media are players consuming?) was illuminated by Focus Group Questions 2 and 4, Interview Questions 3 and 4, and Streamer Interview Questions 1, 3 and 6. Some of the questions from this section related to either of the research questions, while others highlighted other aspects of the study. Research Question 2 (How does the media ecosystem surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons* players change the way players interpret and understand the game?) was the major inquiry of the project; Focus Group Questions 3 and 4 as well as Interview Questions 5-7 all questioned how the player's experience was impacted by the media surrounding them. Regardless, all of the questions here had definitive purpose towards the goals of this dissertation and were important in better understanding *D&D* players' relationship with the media around them.

Sample

For finding and selecting participants for these interviews and focus groups, I utilized a combination of criterion, convenience, and snow-ball sampling, with criterion sampling being how I chose apt participants and convenience/snowball sampling being how I found volunteers. The question of "Who?" would be my target participants was clear the moment the project began because they are called out by name within my research questions: *D&D* players. When looking at the experiences of people within the figuration of *D&D* communities, who else could be considered? This is a community that increases in numbers and influence with each year, and one that has outgrown the stereotypes of groups of overweight men sitting in a basement. According to Wizards of the Coast, 2020 was their seventh consecutive year of growth and the company claims that now more than 50 million have played *D&D* (Wieland, 2021). This means

that while it should have been easier than ever to find players as research participants, it became

more challenging to find a sample pool that properly represents an increasingly diverse player-

base. Going back to the same article, Wizards of the Coast conducted a player survey at the end

of 2020 and found that 60% of respondents identified as male, 40% as female, and less than 1%

as nonbinary (2021). While that sub-1% may not seem impressive, it is important to remember

that this is a gender minority. Based on a study by Dr. Bianca D.M. Wilson (2021) at UCLA,

there are approximately 1.2 million nonbinary people in the United States. And given that the

United States Census Bureau has the United States population at 332.9 million, that means that

nonbinary people make up about .36% of the United States' population, which makes that less

than 1% representation within *D&D* one that fits within current demographic information.

Overall, while I wish that the data on gender showed more equality among these three groups, I

still found this ratio to be one worth celebrating. Given the legacy that *D&D* has as a male-

oriented game, a stereotype that began in the 80s and continues to this day, it was encouraging to

see female players having such a strong presence within the current community. While the data

collected likely was not enough to determine if a particular demographic point had an impact on

the findings, I made an effort to have a range of participants in terms of gender, race, age, and

experience with *D&D*; factors beyond this, such as sexuality, marital status, income, and religion

were not important to the study.

As such, this study utilized a Criterion sample, with the criterion for selection obviously

being an active interest in and having actively consumed media around *Dungeons & Dragons.*

This means people playing *D&D*, watching podcasts of others playing, reading posts online

about *D&D,* using platforms to enjoy or produce *D&D*-centric content, and otherwise having

consumption habits centered on the game. Past this, I lacked the resources to advertise this study

efficiently or to pay participants; therefore, this study had to use convenience sampling. While some participants were found online by advertising the study through Facebook, many of the participants I questioned were people I knew. I have come to play *D&D* with several groups of people in the last decade, many of which I know are active players and consumers of various *D&D* media. Some are even streamers themselves. Those people were the best resource I had in finding participants that fit the criteria necessary for this sample and were the first option for focus groups and interviews. Finally, snowball sampling, as additional participants were found by asking previous volunteers to recommend their friends, other people they play with. In one case, the participant Ashton was found as a member of a focus group, only for me to realize halfway through that they were a content creator for TikTok; of course, this led me to asking them for a secondary, individual interview to focus on this aspect of their media habit. Thus, snowball sampling. Luckily, I did not need a large number of participants before data collection reached a theoretical saturation, so these strategies were more than enough to find an adequate number of volunteers.

Conclusion

Since the early days of Game Studies, a player's experience has always been at the heart of gameplay. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) write that

> The play of the game is something that only exists as an experience. It is possible to consider the logic of a rule system, to consider the game formally, without understanding how that rule-system will be experienced. However, in framing games as **PLAY**, we must consider not only the rules, but also the rule-system has a context designed to deliver a particular experience of play for the game's participants. That experience might be a social experience, or a narrative experience, or an experience of pleasure. Looking at

games as experiential systems means looking at them as participation, as observation, as

a mental state, as bodily sensation, as emotion, as something *lived*. (p. 104)

Coming from this perspective, I knew from the beginning that the lived experience was the most

important factor to consider in this study. As such, I was quick to utilize an Experiential,

Interpretive methodology to focus on the goals of the study: understanding and interpreting how

D&D player's lives and gameplay are impacted subconsciously by the media they consume.

Looking at the impact of media has been a point of contention for decades within Media Studies,

from scholars 100 years ago afraid of all-powerful propaganda to worries in the 90s that violent

games cause school shootings. While this level of media effects was disproved decades ago, it

was clear that consumed media frames the experiences of the user, impacting them slowly and

subtly over time. Such subconscious influences are generally invisible to the user, thus making

the process of interpretation from the researcher necessary; it is almost impossible for the

participant alone to come to conclusions about how their experiences have been affected.

The methods of this study match this goal, as respondent-centric interviews and focus

groups allowed the participants to do most of the talking, guiding the process as I helped them

explore their own lived experiences. Focus groups have, appropriately, focused on group

dynamics, looking at how media consumption has impacted the group's experience playing

D&D together. Interviews centered more on individual consumption habits and their reasoning

for the selection of a medium over another. Some interviews were conducted with content

streamers, with these focusing on the act on content creation and how outside media affects the

process of media production. A criterion sampling was used to find participants, with the

necessary quality being that they play *D&D* and consume related media on a semi-common

basis. I have compiled a list of questions to serve as a guide for these focus groups and

interviews, but this was far from a strict schedule. Each participant responded differently when prompted, and the goal was always to remain as flexible as possible. The end result was me interpreting their experiences within the *D&D* figuration together, with insight and input from both parties.

These findings then inspired the findings of the study, discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 focuses on the media objects consumed and utilized by participants, first examining the media itself and then the various Uses for their utilization. Certain media objects, such as *Critical Role*, are especially highlighted for their popularity and the note-worthy testimony of players about their use. Chapter 4 then concludes with a description of Uses Categories, labeling each Use as either Entertainment, Information, Social, or Tools. The two most popular were Entertainment and Information, strangely intertwined as common Uses of many of the same media. Another important category are the Tools media, a necessity for virtual game sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This media chapter immediately leads into Chapter 5, which focused on the actual impacts of said media objects. Looking first at Player Characteristics I created, these characteristics will help categorize how different individuals interact with *D&D* and will be important for measuring certain media influences. While some impacts are specific to one media object, the majority of these impacts are seen across broader media consumption. Perhaps the most common influence was participants changing aspects of their playstyle, either enforcing rules less or trying more unorthodox actions or even changing the fundamental ways they played *D&D.* The chapter also examines how figurations came into play, revealing that many participants' figurations most closely resembled those of the other members of their group while also demonstrating that digital communication technology allows marginalized players to

find more success joining games. Finally, I discussed the "alpha media object," media objects so influential that they impact each other element of the figuration with its presence.

The tools of any job must reflect the work being done. This is true from everything from masonry to hunting to academia. Throughout this project, the goal of understanding how media has impacted the experience of players was at the front and center, with research questions, theory, methodology, and methods all being chosen specifically to fit this goal. As such, in this section I have gone over the methodology of the study, an Interpretive, Experiential methodology focusing on the participant, as well as the methods, focus groups and interviews that allowed the participant to explore how the media surrounding them has impacted the way that they play and enjoy *Dungeons & Dragons.* The questions for said interviews were chosen for their relevance to the research questions, as well as their ability to direct the participant to think internally about their own lived experiences relating to *D&D* media. With the tools properly chosen, and the methods of research carefully constructed, there was nothing left to do but begin the process of data collection and then finally interpretation.

CHAPTER 4. MEDIA

Now with an understanding of the literature surrounding this study, the theoretical

categories involved in analysis, and after selecting the perfect methods to collect the required

data, the task of sifting through said data to uncover my Findings began. Due to the volume of

said findings, however, they will be split into two chapters, this one focusing on media and the

next looking at influences within figurations. To begin with, I will go over my participants,

showing the individuals that make up each focus group and brief demographic information. I

will be quoting my participants throughout the rest of the dissertation, so I believe it will be

helpful to readers to be able to see who each individual is and what focus group they are a part

of. After this will be an examination of the media consumption of *D&D* players. Not only will

this examine the objects themselves, but also for what purpose they are being used. First, I will

analyze the most commonly reported media objects utilized and consumed by my participants;

Critical Role, the only content popularly reported, will be discussed first, followed by various

platforms that are important to the figurations of many players. While this will focus on the

testimony of participants, there will be hints of Textual Analysis as I felt as a researcher that it

was imperative to better understand the objects being discussed without blindly following the

data collected. Next will be categories to sort the various Uses that players have for said media,

divided and sorted into Entertainment, Information, Tools, and Social Uses. This will look at

why these media are being consumed by players, as well as better understanding the common

Uses for *Dungeons & Dragons*-centric media as a whole. Finally, the chapter will conclude with

a summary of the media objects at play within this study, setting the stage for the following

chapter to discuss media impacts.

Review of Research Questions

Before continuing too far, I believe it is best to start this chapter by revisiting my Research Questions. They are, after all, the heart of the dissertation and the reason why this labor has happened at all. When trying to study how online media impacts users who play *Dungeons & Dragons*, I set out with these two Research Questions.

1. What *D&D*-based media are players consuming?

2. How does the media ecosystem surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons* players change the way players interpret and understand the game?

This chapter will be focused on how my data collection answered these two questions, looking at testimony from participants and the greater trends we see emerging. Research Question #1 will be answered in two parts. The first section will look at who these players are. In the case of this study, this will examine the participant pool for my Focus Groups and Interviews. The second section will then actually answer RQ#1 by analyzing the platforms and media objects being consumed by *D&D* players and what purpose they are being consumed for.

The Participants

Before reviewing the findings of this study, it is important to reflect on who made these findings possible: my participants, who will be identified throughout this paper by pseudonyms they chose for themselves. Clearly the people that this dissertation hopes to study fall into an easily-described category, *Dungeons & Dragons* players and fans. Through my data collection, I completed six focus groups composed of active campaigns with the DM and players, as well as six interviews with players, content creators, and content consumers. All together, I met and spoke with 35 participants. As stated in Chapter 3, I utilized a Convenient, Criterion sample of

any *D&D* players I was able to interview. This task was made more difficult as I only conducted focus groups with groups that were already playing *D&D* together in a campaign, not simply six random players who had never met. Due to the nature of convenient sampling and my limitations, the diversity of the participant pool is less than I had hoped, but not as homogeneous as I initially feared. The majority of my participants were from the Midwest region of the United States, with nearly half of the pool coming from Indiana. That being said, four of the participants live in Europe, two were Indians currently living in the Midwest region of the United States, and Focus Group E were Americans currently living as instructors in South Korea. This sample is also mainly male, with only four participants identifying as female and two as nonbinary. The participants are also predominantly White, although some identified as African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Indians. While clearly not a diverse participant pool, this convenient sample represents four different ethnicities and four different nationalities. Of the shortcomings however, the one I was most concerned about is the lack of women and nonbinary participants. It came up in multiple interviews I conducted, but *D&D* players themselves (especially female and nonbinary players) are quite aware of the stereotype that *D&D* is an activity for men; it is worth stating that, as will be discussed later, this stereotype was perpetuated over the years by existing players unwilling to allow new, often-marginalized players from entering the community. Luckily, in recent years this inequality has begun to dissolve due to both new players entering the community and digital tools enabling marginalized players to find their own spaces (more on this in the next chapter).

Focus Group A- Jim's Group

Focus Group A are a group of college friends that still play together after graduating. Jim and Lilia are dating and live together, while Jim, Derek, and Lance all were roommates for years.

This campaign started in the Summer of 2020 and they now play virtually using Discord after most of the members moved.

Jim- 24 male, he/him, Indiana. Dungeon Master of the Group.
Derek- 26 male, he him, Indiana
Lilia- 27 female, she/her, Indiana
Lance- 27 male, he/him, Indiana

Focus Group B- Markus' Group

Focus Group B is another group of college friends that play together post-graduation. It is worth pointing out here that Focus Groups A and B know one another and are two separate roleplaying campaigns being conducted within a single larger friend group. It might make sense that these two groups, whose members began playing *D&D* together in college and many living together as roommates, are likely to have similar styles of playing tabletops in general. It is understandable that they could also have similar opinions on media usage within the game, given their shared history as early, impressionable players. This group plays together virtually over Zoom, with the campaign starting around 2019.

Markus- 26 male, he/him, Indiana. Dungeon Master of the Group.
Chris- 34 male. he/him, Indiana
Jefe- 26 male, he/him, Indiana
Lance- 27, male, he/him, Indiana
Tom- 26, male, he/him, Indiana

Focus Group C- Adam's Group

Focus Group C is a group of mostly-strangers who met online who started this campaign together in November 2020. Adam and Will are childhood friends, Ashton and Juan-Luc are dating and live together, while the others all found Adam online either through other *D&D* games or in posts looking for groups to play with. Helena called Adam "the lynchpin" that holds

the group together. This group uses the most media during gameplay, with Discord, Roll20, and D&D Beyond all being used regularly.

Adam- 27, male, he/him, Virginia. Dungeon Master of the Group.
Ashton- 26 nonbinary, they/them, England
Pipp- 27 male, he/him, England
Will- 29 male, he/him, Virginia
Helena- 18 nonbinary, they/them, Finland
Jean-Luc- 26, male, he/him, England

Focus Group D- My Group

This group is actually one that I DM for. All of the players are friends I made during school and all of us knew one another before the campaign started. In addition to this, Meera and Charlie are married, while Charlie and Hank knew one another from their previous school before starting the same program as everyone else. While several members (none of which took part in this study) have come and gone, Sid was the oldest player starting in early 2019, with Dan joining a few months later, then Charlie and Hank joining together in fall 2019, Frederick joining in the spring of 2020, and Meera being the latest edition in fall of 2020. This was the first campaign for each of the group members and began as a face-to-face game before COVID and people moving led to the game being held virtually over Zoom.

Meera- 29 female, she/her, India
Frederick- 30, male, he/him, California
Charlie- 27, male, he/him, Michigan
Sid- 28 male, he/him, India
Hank- 27 male, he/him, Virginia
Dan- 30 male, he/him, Indiana

Focus Group E- Algust's Group

Focus Group E has the highest ages of my six groups and also has some of the most experienced players. Malik was the common link that brought the party together, knowing everyone else from work (Hurgrim, Tallstag), from playing in a band together (Algust, Cyrus), and is Kushim's brother. Originally starting out in fall 2018, the group moved to virtual games because of COVID and "out of convenience," using Roll20 and Discord to play online.

Algust- 45 male, he/him, Indiana. Dungeon Master of the Group
Cyrus- 34 male, he/him, Indiana.
Tallstag- 52 male, he/him, Illinois
Malik- 41 male, he/him, Michigan
Hurgrim- 41 male, he/him, Florida
Kushim- 46 male, he/him, Michigan

Focus Group F- Paul's Group

Starting this campaign in January 2021, Focus Group F are all Americans currently living in South Korea on teaching assignments. Paul and Matthew were High School friends, and Matthew works with Sophie, Jorge, and Jayne. Due to Paul living in a different city, they use Discord and D&D Beyond to connect with Paul while the other four generally meet in-person and play together.

Paul- 36 male he/him, Louisiana. Dungeon Master of the Group.
Sophie- 31 female, she/her, Indiana
Matthew- 36 male. he/him, Louisiana
Jorge- 28 male, he/him, Pennsylvania
Jayne- 28 female she/her, Indiana

Interviews

Finally we have the six individuals who participated in one-on-one interviews rather than focus groups. For many, this was due to them having a unique perspective on this project, but most had groups where the participant could not manage other members' schedules in time for a focus group to be conducted.

MJ- 28 male, he/him, Indiana

MJ is a long-time fan of *D&D* and other tabletop games, but currently cannot find a group to play with while working and starting a family. Instead, he has increased his consumption of *D&D* media to compensate for not playing.

Norman- 28 male, he/him, Indiana

Norman has been playing *D&D* and other tabletops for about eight years and plays in multiple campaigns, most of which meet in person. He has also been a Twitch streamer in the past, where he would play video games live, but has been unable to since finding a more demanding job.

Kolok- 26 male, he/him, Indiana

Kolok has played tabletop games since he was a child, now participating in numerous virtual *D&D* games as both a DM and player. He occasionally streams game sessions on Twitch, but sparingly.

Ashton- 26 nonbinary, they/them, England

After meeting Ashton in Focus Group C (a case of convenient sampling benefiting the researcher), I asked them for an additional interview after discovering they had a TikTok channel with 21,000 followers.

Kevin- 28 male, he/him, Indiana

Kevin was one of the players in my first *D&D* campaign and has the most DMing experience out of my participant pool. Kevin has run many in-person and virtual campaigns and sporadically streams himself on Twitch painting miniatures for *D&D* and other tabletop games.

Jorge- 28 male, he/him, Pennsylvania

Jorge was another case, like Ashton, where I discovered him talking to a focus group but wanted to hear more of his experiences. A relatively inexperienced player and DM, first playing a tabletop game in 2015, Jorge focuses on optimizing his knowledge of *D&D* and his character

builds while trying to maximize the fun of his fellow players. His consumption habits warranted an additional interview to better understand how and why he consumed media within the figuration of *D&D*.

Media

Now that you can see the 35 individuals who made this study possible, let us move onwards towards the media objects at the heart of this study, and at the heart of each participant's figuration. Looking back at my Research Questions, media is clearly the most important aspect of this dissertation as I set out to understand both the media being utilized by *D&D* players and said media's impacts. For now, let us focus on that media, the content, platforms, and various digital media that a normal *D&D* consumes regularly. This section will start with an overview of participants' responses to what media objects they consume and use, then the examination brief analysis of certain prominent media objects, starting with media content before moving to media platforms. Not every media object reported will be examined here, only ones that were popular across all groups or whose usage stood out. In some cases, there are specific attributes of that media which will be discussed in greater detail, while others look more to explore the general facets of said media. Following this will be a set of categories I have created and will later outline, these designed to sort the Uses that players have for the media they consume. Looking at examples from the media objects analyzed, participant testimony will uncover not just the Uses a player has for *D&D* media, but why certain purposes arise over others.

Key Media Objects

With an understanding of the participants, let us turn our attention to those very media they reported consuming and using. To make this clear, this is not a list of every media object

that participants use (that would be exhausting to read and write), but rather a look at the *Dungeons & Dragons*-centric media they consume. This is media that either focuses on *D&D*, media used to play *D&D*, or general media use that has a purpose tying back to *D&D* directly. Through my interviews and Focus Groups, my immediate observation as participants listed the *D&D* media they consume was that the majority of answers I heard were the same across all groups. Out of my 35 participants, these are the top five most used media.

1. Discord - Mostly Tools use, used by 24/25 participants

2. *Critical Role*/Actual-play Podcasts - Mostly Entertainment and some Information use, used by 18/35 participants

3. YouTube - Near equal Entertainment and Information use, used by 18/35 participants

4. Roll20 - Only Tools use, used by 15/35 participants

5. D&D Beyond - Mostly Tools use, used by 13/35 participants

Looking at this list, several results grab my attention. Perhaps the most surprising is how three of the top five most used media are those being used as Tools. As I pointed out a moment ago, it is worth repeating that Tools media were the most universally shared media amongst groups. By that I mean that if a single member of a group was using a Tools media, it was almost guaranteed that the rest of the group would also be using it as well. If the DM of a group uses Zoom to virtual call during a session, every member of the group also uses Zoom for the same purpose out of necessity; I believe that this is the primary reason for the strong numbers across all participants for this participle category.

Beyond this, *Critical Role* stood out among all of the popular media objects as the only stand-alone media content. Each of the other most common media objects was either a platform for users to upload content onto, or an in-game Tool (and because of the group dynamic, these

stood above most other media use just due to a group's universal use). The reason for the inclusion of these platforms, rather than the individual content being consumed on said platform, comes from the responses from focus groups. In cases where I asked about media consumption habits, most people told me about the platforms that they used and less about the exact individual content. Some participants did name off specific content, such as certain YouTube channels that they watched. In these cases, however, the specific content was usually not popular enough among the entire sample pool to be constructive as a stand-alone object. In fact, I had originally made a media object category for "Podcasts" before consolidating it with *Critical Role* into a single category for two reasons: because the ratio of different Uses was near-identical between *CR* and non-*CR* podcasts, and because *Critical Role* alone was more popular of an answer than all other podcasts combined. On the next page is Figure 1, a series of pie charts showing each of the most popular media objects reported by participants, highlighting the various Uses associated with each and the ratio between uses (Entertainment is blue, Information is orange, Tools are gold, Social is gray).

Critical Role

Beginning this section is possibly the most popular *D&D* content in the world today: *Critical Role* (*CR*), the only popular media object that stands alone as its own content, not merely a platform for the content of multiple creators. As mentioned previously, few of the popular media used by participants were considered content, with most answers listing off the platforms used to consume said content. I emphasize this again with purpose, however, to demonstrate the importance and popularity of *Critical Role,* the single example of individual content with enough

Figure 1. Graphs of Media Objects Reported by Participants and Their Media Uses
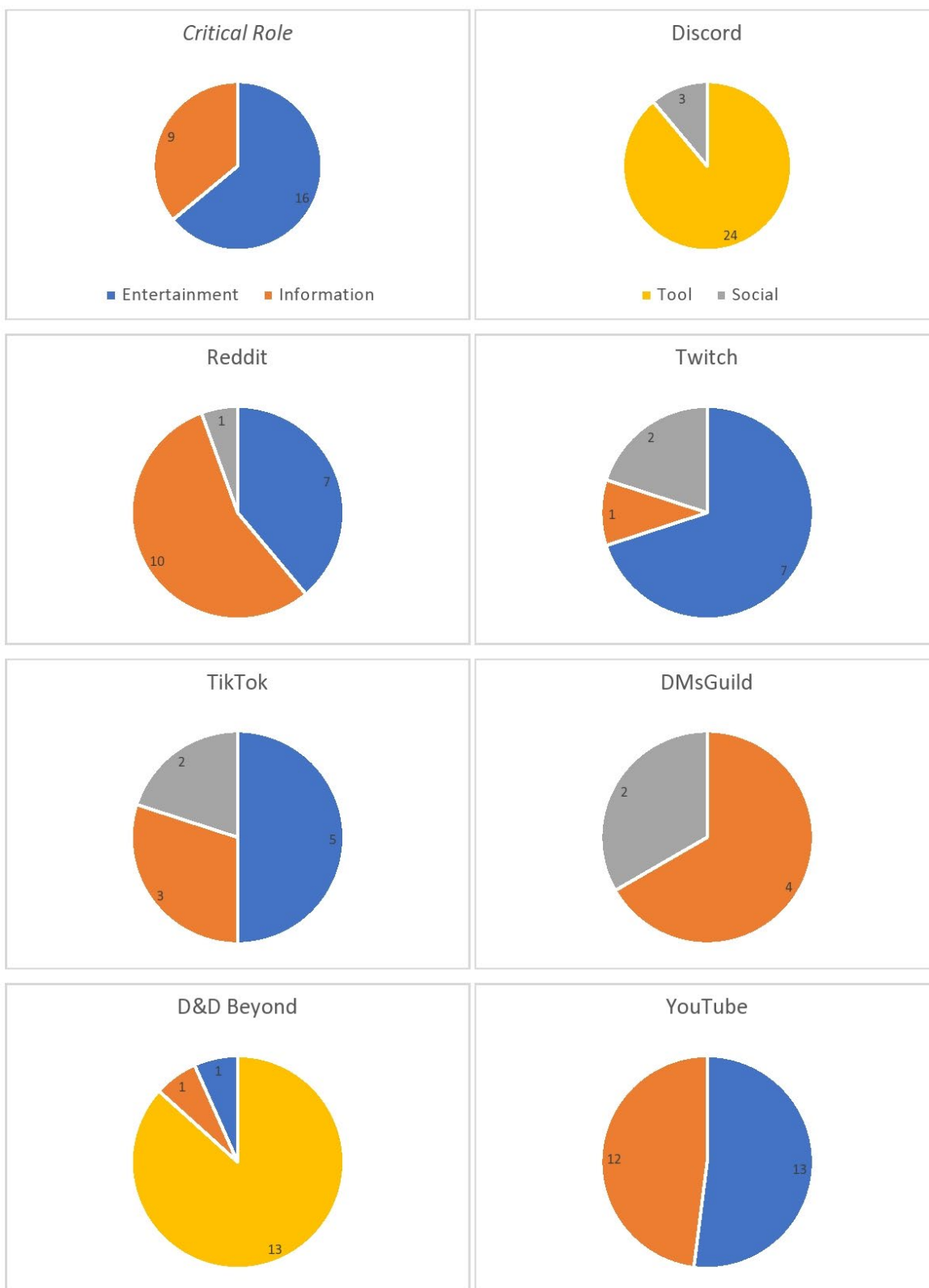
widespread use to be included in this discussion. Briefly referenced in the rationale of this study, *Critical Role* is a weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* podcast that started in 2015 that only seems to grow more and more popular by the year. With a cast entirely made up of professional voice actors, Dungeon Master Matt Mercer leads his friends/castmates through three to five-hour long *D&D* sessions which are streamed on Twitch before making its way to YouTube and platforms for podcasts. While certainly not the first "Actual Play" podcast (a term for podcasts where the hosts play tabletop games), *CR* is undoubtedly the most popular and may be responsible for the trend taking off (Whitten, 2020). Starting as an ordinary *D&D* game, played at the kitchen table among friends, the cast of eight were placed in front of the camera and success quickly followed. That original season ended after 115 episodes, the second season lasted 141, and as of 2022 is barely begun its third. When the first episode of the newest season was released on YouTube, the video had 77,000 views after only the first hour. Beyond video content, *CR* have also become their own stand-alone company, started an international merchandise store, formed their own nonprofit charity organization, created their own game publishing brand, and are in the early stages of making their own video game.

Most impressively, however, is their three-year attempt to create an animated series. Begun in 2019, "the team behind the web series had wanted $750,000 to fund the endeavor. With 33 days remaining in the crowdfunding campaign, "*Critical Role* has raised more than $7.3 million from 53,000 backers. It is now the most-funded film/video project in Kickstarter history" (Whitten, 2019, para. 19). Eventually reaching $11.3 million, the show was soon bought by Amazon Studios for two seasons, with the first episodes releasing on January 28th, 2022. Not bad for a group that refer to themselves as "a bunch of nerdy ass voice actors sitting around and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Critical Role*'s impact on the overall *D&D* community is

difficult to gauge, although many journalists seem to agree that it is a substantial one. Many

credit *CR* as one of the factors that has led to *D&D*'s seven consecutive years of growth, with

even employees of Wizards of the Coast claiming that "for the first time in our research, it used

to be that friends and family were the number reason someone joined D&D…Now, the number

one reason is 'I saw someone playing online and I joined'" (Whitten, 2020, para. 21). And while

most participants told me that friends were the ones who got them playing *D&D* for the first

time, a few people (many of whom were newer players) said that watching podcasts like *Critical*

Role inspired them to pick up the game. Pipp told me that "I never really thought about *D&D*

before. It was *Critical Role*. And then I only watched about 50 episodes of season two, because

that's when I started watching it. And then I was like, 'I could do this.'" Drawn in by

recognizing the cast as voices from his favorite video games, watching *CR* made Pipp realize

that *D&D* was a hobby that interested him, serving as his first real exposure to the tabletop game.

This perfectly leads this discussion towards demonstrating how the media object functions as a

gateway media, leading new players and viewers towards actually playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.

CR as Gateway Media for Playing D&D

   While I will discuss the Matt Mercer Effect and other ways the show influences its

players in the next chapter, *Critical Role* seems to have another impact; for some, the podcast

has had the effect of making the game look approachable and encouraging viewers to try playing

for the first time. The cast of *CR* treat their game as just that, a game, rather than a competition.

This sense of fun fills the program and alongside the comradery of eight friends spending a night

together, *Critical Role* succeeds by simply making *D&D* look like an enjoyable game to play

with friends, having fun and laughing for an evening surrounded by dice. The fact that the show

also features three women in important roles, one of whom (Marisha Ray) was even being

appointed the Creative Director of the company, as well as many people of color as guest stars shows the growing diversity in the community and can serve as positive representation of marginalized players. Perhaps the biggest factor that makes *Critical Role* such a fantastic gateway media object for players, however, is the simple fact that the cast is constantly making mistakes in-game. When one generally watches a professionally-produced media product, the end result that viewers see is flawless. Editing and other post-production techniques mean that most media showcase only what the creator wants us to see, wiping away mistakes so that the audience will never know better. With *CR*, something recorded live and barely-edited before release on YouTube, all of the mistakes made while playing are presented before the audience, with no effort by the cast to hide them. Not only does this aid in making *Critical Role* useful as a learning tool, it also makes the game feel approachable to a new player.

A 31-year old woman from Indiana, Sophie told me that watching *CR* gave her the confidence to try playing *D&D* after struggling with it in the past. She had experiences with unsupportive DMs who tried to get her to quit playing, saying that the game was too complicated with too many rules for her to learn. "I was never having fun. And everyone was like, 'Oh, it's just too hard for you.'" It is clear by listening to her story that she, like many, suffered from the sexist beliefs about the game held by the older veterans she tried playing with. This criticism stayed with her even when playing other roleplaying games after these early games, making Sophie still carry the belief that she was not able to play a system as rule-heavy as *D&D*. But then she found *CR*, where she watched the players make mistake after mistake, whether it be not understanding a new ability they had, not knowing a rule that had not come up, or simply having trouble adding 18+5 and trying not to slow the game down while they did mental math. For Sophie, it was these mistakes that made the players more relatable, and more importantly their

mistakes gave her the confidence to want to try *D&D* again. As she put it, "I started watching

Critical Role. And I was like, 'Oh, no, I could do this. Like, my friends and I, we can do this.'"

After all, if these seven could go live on the internet and make mistake after mistake but still

have fun, then she could too!

Listening to her, it was clear that this was a big moment for Sophie as a player, in terms

of achieving a goal as well as overcoming an emotional hurdle that had lingered for years due to

bad early experiences with the game. As a viewer myself, I can confirm the number of mistakes

often made on *CR* and I agree with Sophie's take that these come together to make the game feel

more natural. I have never sat down to play at a table where someone did not, at some point,

forget a rule or make an error of any kind. It is part of the process of playing any game,

especially one with as many rules as *D&D*. These mistakes can actually enable better learning

of the system (a facet of the podcast I will address in the Information Uses section below), as

seeing what errors the cast made enforces to viewers how simple such a mistake can be and how

to avoid specific mistakes in the future. These mistakes clearly made the show function better as

both a gateway media and an informative guide to learning *D&D*.

Platforms

Here I will go over in greater detail a few of the popular platforms commonly utilized by

D&D players. Again, I will examine the platforms themselves and their role within a *D&D*

figuration, not the content that one can consume on said platform. Overall, I would actually say

that this wide range of available content is the reason why these platforms are so popular to

begin with. Looking at the graph of popular media and as I will discuss in further detail in the

Uses section, players consume a wide variety of media objects for just as wide a variety of

reasons. As MJ explained to me, each channel on YouTube that he watched or each separate

Twitch stream he joined fulfilled a different need he had. He saw this variety of potential

content as a positive for these platforms, saying that

> they each kind of have their own little niche that they satisfy, whether it's going over like
>
> some neat aspects, keeping up with the latest releases from wizards, theory crafting and
>
> min-maxing character class combinations, or what have you, playing with spells. All of it
>
> makes for a nice cornucopia of media.

It is this exact need for a variety of content, not just between Uses categories but even within

categories, that makes platforms such an excellent media object for active *D&D* players. These

next sections look at three of these platforms that I found worthy of increased scrutiny, either due

to how they functioned within a figuration or because of their specific use by *D&D* players.

Discord

The single most-popular media object among my sample pool, Discord is an online

platform that allows users to create "servers." "Servers are filled with text channels (where you

can type to talk to other people) and voice channels (where you can voice-chat with others). You

can also share videos, images, internet links, music, and more" (Delfino, 2021, para. 4). As a

platform, users can join as many of these servers as they wish so that each server can be for a

different purpose or different game, perfect for a *D&D* player involved in multiple campaigns.

Ashton showed me that they were a part of more than 20 different servers, each a separate

community they interacted with regularly. And while Discord has the tools to be an excellent

virtual call software with good audio/video settings, this alone would not separate it from the

other virtual call platforms such as Zoom or Skype. No, the facet about Discord that seems to

make it so overwhelmingly popular with *D&D* players is the server's ability to record

information and posts. Lance told me how important Discord has been when running a campaign during the pandemic, saying that

> I use Discord to share excerpts, content with the players, and a way to communicate through role play especially if we are out of game. Discord itself can be managed into various "channels" that you can edit however you like. They're simply sections on discord that I use to share important information, relevant quests and knowledge, keep track of what the players decide to do, etc. It helps to note what occurs so we can review the archive later on. It may hold old rules or items we've forgotten, etc.

Through this quote, we see that much of what draws Lance to the platform is its ability to organize and record information during gameplay that can be reviewed later by himself or his players.

Due to the nature of *Dungeons & Dragons*, campaigns can run from anywhere between a few months to years. Especially with a game that is so dense with narrative, there is a tremendous amount of information one must remember from session to session. Whether it is conversations held, treasure earned, the amount of gold the party is holding, or the name of a Queen met months ago, it is the small details that are so important in-game but are so difficult for a player to remember. With Discord servers, however, anything posted stays recorded on the channel it was posted in. Not only does this allow a DM or players to keep records of important events within the game, but with separate channels within the server (similar to separate tabs open in an internet browser) this information can be organized. As Ashton put it,

> everything that we put on there…we can find it again, we can pin messages on there. Anything that we've typed in, the loot that we've picked up, we can all access that at any

time. So it's just a lot easier than something like Zoom, where you pretty much lose

things unless you save it to a different system.

Here they make a direct comparison to Zoom, perhaps the most popular virtual call software in the world since COVID-19 began; but while Zoom is excellent for transmitting audio and video, its chat feature cannot record information after a call has ended, so anything shared in the chat feature is lost afterwards. With its ability to record information and enable video calls, Discord showcases why it attracts more *D&D* players than other similar platforms.

Another popular feature of Discord, according to Derek, is that the platform "has a lot of really cool features, it has some dice roller mods on it so you can just type in any dice rolling command." Discord has a tool for users called "bots," where small, simple code can be implemented within a server. As Derek (and many others) mentioned, one common bot used are dice-rollers. When a user types the appropriate code into a channel, generally something akin to "!roll 1d20+13," the bot will automatically post the results of the die roll directly underneath. Not only do some players enjoy this for the simplicity, especially when rolling many dice at once and the math gets more complicated, but many DMs also appreciate how this verifies that players are being honest about their rolls. It is impossible to lie about one's results when your failure is digitally recorded within a second of you entering the command. Beyond this, there are bots that play music at the command of the DM, a task difficult to do normally in a virtual call without ruining everyone's audio. Some bots are connected to third-party platforms such as Roll20 and D&D Beyond and are clearly designed for tabletop players, while others help the party schedule their next session.

Going back to Meyrowitz (1994), it seems that it is the core attributes of Discord that make it the most popular media object among my participants. Medium Theory pushes scholars

to examine "the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media" (p. 50) to find how it is different from other media, as well as why a person would use it. We see now that it is these particular characteristics that push Discord above its competition. All that is strictly necessary to play *Dungeons & Dragons* virtually is a call feature for audio; but in 2022, players know that their media objects can be better suited for the specific task of playing *D&D* and look for more. Discord's ability to retain information and the utility of bots makes it a more appealing platform for *D&D* players compared to Zoom, which has neither of these features. With characteristics that make it well-suited to the task of enabling *D&D* sessions, a relatively low level of knowledge necessary to use it, and a wide range of uses besides just playing *D&D*, it is unsurprising to me that we find Discord as the single most used media object, as well as the most common in-game tool, in my sample pool.

Roll20

Meyrowitz' Medium Theory often compares media and their core attributes to FtF communication, and no *D&D* media better represents the journey to recreate FtF communication better than Roll20, a virtual tabletop simulator. On its homepage, Roll20 promotes itself to its audience immediately by stating

> Welcome to Roll20! Roll20 brings pen-and-paper gameplay right to your browser with a rich set of features that save you time and enhance your favorite parts of tabletop games. Video and voice chat, shared images, music and sound effects, and built-in support for hundreds of rule systems make Roll20 an award-winning virtual tabletop loved by over four million players. Take the full tour! Create an account, make or join a game, and let the adventure begin! (Login).

The services offered by the site are a blueprint of how most virtual tabletop simulators function. On a basic level, Roll20 allows a DM to create a digital grid map then place tokens to represent players and monsters across the board, all while also featuring a video/audio chat feature and a text-based chat box to the side. Adam was a loud supporter of the platform, telling me that "Roll20 is so useful for detailed maps and it's good for having everyone together seeing the same thing while we are remote." While technically all that is required to play *D&D* is a voice-chat system so that all participants can speak with one another, many participants find this experience less satisfying than other methods of playing the game. When playing in the "theatre of the mind" style, audio communication is the only necessary component. This can, however, lead to confusion in combat, which can be one of the more complex aspects of gameplay, between having to keep track of enemies, allies, one's own character, and the distances between different characters (as many spells and weapons in *D&D* have exact distances that they only function within). Both DMs and players alike can quickly grow tired of repeatedly asking "How far away am I from the Dragon? Am I within 60 feet?" With the visual element of map available on virtual tabletop simulators like Roll20 this is no longer an issue, and gameplay more closely resembles FtF games where real maps and miniatures are prepared.

The downside to platforms like Roll20 is that they require time and effort to learn. Meyrowitz (1998) wrote that multiple forms of media literacy exist, and those using Medium Theory must understand the multitude of variables that alter how a user interacts with a media object. One variable he listed was "relative ease/difficulty in learning and decoding and number and types of stages to mastery" (p. 104). In the case of Roll20, the platform exhibits a high difficulty to learn with various stages of mastery from basic use to utilizing all of the tools the site has to offer; regardless of the eventual stage of use, the virtual simulator takes great effort to

learn. It is not as simple as when I bought my first map, a dry erase grid that I could quickly

scribble and erase on as the situation of the game changed. This is a digital service and any

digital service requires some level of knowledge to properly operate as a user or, even more so, a

content creator. A DM with a lesser knowledge of the site could just create a grid and place

tokens on it representing different characters, a user can also create detailed maps with custom

terrain, background music, and even set up dynamic lighting that limits a player's vision of the

map to what their character in-game can see. Obviously, some of these features are easier to

integrate in the game than others. In my Focus Groups I have seen differing opinions on Roll20,

which has come up in all of my first three groups; this last fact alone is proof to me that,

regardless of if players are using the platform or not, Roll20 is a major figure within many *D&D*

figurations at this time. Of my six focus groups, two tried Roll20 and decided it was too

complicated and took too long to learn, and two groups happily used the site while agreeing that

the platform had a difficult learning curve but that it was worth it in the long run. Markus, the

DM of Focus Group A, stated that the platform was "too much work" to convert over to when

his group had already gotten used to using Zoom and Microsoft Whiteboard as their virtual

channel. A player from Focus Group A, Derek had similar views. When he is DMing in other

groups, Derek does not use maps often, as his style of playing is based more in the "theatre of the

mind" type of tabletop game. So to him, who already does not see as much value in maps as a

DM, the learning curve of ROll20's software was enough to stop him from trying the platform at

all. He also brought up the issue of a paywall, which appears to be a common issue in many

online *D&D* resources.

Focus Group C, on the other hand, are fans of Roll20. As a group with members playing

in three different countries (the United States, England, and Finland), they can only exist as a

single campaign due to digital technology allowing them to see and hear one another. Even beyond this, Focus Group C is the most technology-heavy group I have interviewed, as they utilize several different online tools and platforms as they play. Roll20 is used by Adam, the group's DM, as well as Jean-Luc and Pipp who use the site for other campaigns they DM for. To this group, the visual of the map is necessary for immersion into the game. As Ashton points out, and going back to my earlier comment about precise distances in combat, they don't have to "break character to ask if I'm 30 ft. away" at the beginning of each of their turns. I can see how the visual aid of the map not only enables immersion in this mechanical sense, allowing Ashton to focus on playing their character and roleplaying rather than worrying about imaginary distances, but also in assisting players' imaginations by creating a game where sight and sound are linking them to the game they are playing. Or as Adam put it, players can get into the heads of their characters thanks to the platform.

As for difficulty, Adam believes that Roll20 is easy to use "once you use the features…." Before this, he admits it was a difficult task. Pipp, who pays for the account that Adam uses, taught himself how to use it over the course of his first campaign DMing and then helped Adam figure it out in this campaign. For Adam, he was running this campaign in a "theatre of mind" style until his plans became too complicated for him to fully convey to the players in a fully-verbal fashion. For him, the process of learning the software, even with help from his friends, was frustrating to the point of almost giving up several times. It took hours of YouTube videos and online tips to fully understand how to use the many tools available to him on Roll20, but he believes now that the effort was worth it. Judging by the enthusiasm I saw from his group as they discussed the different features on the site, it seems that they agree with his stance. Adam

also explained that he experimented with other virtual tabletop simulators in the past, but that they were generally expensive or were even more difficult to learn than Roll20.

Roll20 also has the issue, the same issue has DMs of in-person games, that creating a complicated battle map for a specific environment is time consuming, and must be done in preparation for the game itself as it is too time consuming to occur mid-play. It also means that a DM is forced to either ensure that players fight in that location (which can lead to a potential lack of agency from players attempting to change the story) or must discard their work and improvise as players do something expected and combat occurs in a different place (which can be frustrating, lead to feelings of the DM's time being wasted, or a sub-par battlemap being made on the spot). Sounding frustrated, as Kolok put it, "it's so annoying to have a bunch of rooms that you have to populate with stuff and you put a lot of time into it and then they might never see half of them…but it's just even more painful to use Roll 20 system to do it." Going back to my dry erase grid map, the advantage of that product is the flexibility of it. While the maps are rarely that detailed, which could break immersion for certain players, the ability for me to erase and redraw a map for whatever location my players arrive in allows my players more agency as their combat is not tied to a location I created outside of the session.

One of my participants, Kevin, who is both a smaller Twitch Streamer and an experienced DM, also uses Roll20. As someone who has played *D&D* with Kevin for almost 10 years, both of us being new players in our first campaign together, I can say that he is the type that works hard to produce visuals in an attempt to immerse his players into the game. Just the fact that he runs a Twitch channel solely about painting miniatures for play speaks to this, but I have also seen him create enormous 2'x2'x4' terrains as battle maps that were only used for a single four-hour session. For him, the aesthetic of the game is clearly an important factor for his

style of DMing. Funnily enough, he reports that he barely knows how to use Roll20 besides the basic features he has learned. While many participants I have spoken to showed hesitation or outright refusal to pay for an online *D&D* service, Kevin claims that paying for the $10 Pro Subscription on the Roll20 site makes his job easier with more features at his disposal, including a library that lets him save character tokens that he would be using on every map. One important note that he made, which lines up with comments from other DMs, is that making a virtual map on the site "takes just as much effort" as a tabletop map for FtF games. Between finding the proper digital file to use as the map's base, tokens for every PC or enemy, background music, dynamic lighting, and everything else, Roll20 does not make the map making process simpler for DMs simply because it is virtual. It is merely a different skill set that must be acquired. Going back again to Meyrowitz, a variable that seems to truly embody the Roll20 platform is the level of difficulty it takes to decode and master this platform, skills and knowledge specific to Roll20 itself. While creating a map of similar quality for a FtF game would require either artistic skills or the resources to purchase miniature terrain pieces, the virtual map must be constructed through the software available on Roll20; clearly the knowledge to operate this software is the hurdle that stops many from using the site, as many of my participants have stated that it is too much work to learn when there are simpler ways of achieving similar results. I believe that Kevin's use of Roll20 goes back to how I introduced the platform, as his interest is preserving the visuals he enjoys from playing with miniatures and a battlemap. While Roll20 is clearly not perfect as a tabletop, its purpose as a virtual simulator is good enough that it fulfills the needs Kevin has as a Dungeon Master, even if it requires additional effort on his part.

A final interesting observation about Roll20's Use by participants is its link to Discord. In both Focus Groups that utilize Roll20, and three individual interviews, sessions held on

Roll20 used Discord for its audio component, but used Roll20 for its gameboard and video. While it is not shocking to see two Tools media objects used simultaneously, the fact that each user of Roll20 commented on also using Discord is significant. According to Kolok, the reason for Discord's Use alongside Roll20's comes down to the virtual tabletop's audio quality: "It's pretty garbage." The response was the same from each participant familiar with the site. Roll20 was perfect as a gameboard to virtually play on and use as a visual guide, but the quality of audio was so poor that even users with weaker computers were willing to run both Roll20 and Discord together in an attempt to fix the issue. As discussed, *D&D* is a game that relies almost completely on the transfer of information from DM to players; anything that disrupts this flow of information, such as audio cutting in and out mid-sentence, is a huge hindrance to gameplay. Going back again to Medium Theory, it is clear that the core attributes to Roll20, such as the virtual tabletop and ability to add immersion to combat virtually, makes the site an appealing one to players. It is just as clear, however, that the high level of skill required to master and decode the platform is off putting to many users who do not want to take the many hours, as Adam did, to master it. Participant testimony has also demonstrated that the site's attribute of poor audio quality is just as defining in its Use, or rather in how it must be supported with other media objects to fulfill its purpose.

D&D Beyond

Now we conclude this section by examining D&D Beyond, the fifth most popular media object amongst participants and the only one on the list officially made and operated by Wizards of the Coast. As the only official *Dungeons & Dragons* media used by participants, that places another layer of importance onto the platform. According to the site,

D&D Beyond makes playing the game easier. The official toolset gives you free access to

the basic rules of D&D and guides you through character creation. Manage your D&D

campaign and use your digital character sheet to roll dice and play online or from your

kitchen table! (*How to Play D&D*, n.d.)

Usable as an app or through browser, D&D Beyond is designed to assist players in the actual

playing of *D&D* itself. Character creation, its most common use among participants as well as

its most advertised, is one of the most challenging parts to begin playing *D&D*, yet the toolset

streamlines this process as much as possible to make the process as quick and painless as

possible for new or veteran adventurers. When playing, a person can then use their new digital

character sheet rather than a paper copy, an aspect appreciated by participants who noted the

frustration of losing a character sheet (and with it, years of campaign information and treasure).

With D&D Beyond, a player has access to their character information wherever they go as long

as they have a smartphone or computer nearby.

The site also has databases of every item, ability, monster, and character option thanks to

it being an official *D&D* product. The downside is that content on the site is linked to whatever

rulebook that content was first released in and information not found within *The Player's

Handbook*, the first and most basic of the rulebooks, is behind a paywall. Much like buying a

physical rulebook, a D&D Beyond user must buy each rulebook electronically through D&D

Beyond if they wish to have access to the new content on the site. Several participants

complained about this feature, believing that buying the physical books should at the very least

give a discount on digital content. This paywall is the main reason why I personally do not use

D&D Beyond because with how expensive the physical rulebooks were to originally buy, it is

difficult to pay the same price for a digital version of the same product. This was the exact

complaint of Pipp, who was frustrated that if he already had "some physical books, I feel like I should have gotten a digital certificate. Like, it makes no sense to require separate purchases at full price." If one is willing to pay for additional content as it releases, however, the site is an excellent source of Information in-game as it can pull from every available *D&D* resource, even the homebrew content made by other D&D Beyond users.

D&D Beyond is a great Tools media object for *D&D* players, but more than the site itself I find myself impressed by its marketing and operation. It seems to me that whoever is in control of D&D Beyond understands the current *D&D* community well. While the toolset is made for individual use, the site understands that *D&D* is a group game. If a user has a "master" level subscription, $5.99 a month, they can share their library of digital content with other users in their party. For example, Pipp in Focus Group C has a master subscription, so whatever digital rulebooks he buys for his account can be used by the other members of the group on their own accounts. Not only does this help mitigate the issues of cost and paywalls, this furthers the group-dynamic of the game as well as encourages D&D Beyond users to sign their entire group up on the site.

This is not the only smart marketing move on the part of the toolset as it latched itself onto a familiar media object, *Critical Role*. As *Critical Role*'s second campaign began in early 2018, the cast announced that D&D Beyond was going to be the main sponsor of the podcast. With the site's logo at the bottom of the screen throughout each episode and advertising skits done at the beginning of the show, D&D Beyond was a big part of *CR* for the three-year run of the second campaign. For D&D Beyond to become the main sponsor of every episode of *D&D*'s most popular podcast for three years is an enormous advertising opportunity, one that comes from an understanding of the important media objects within a community. In fact, Pipp stated

that the only reason he uses the application is because he heard about it watching *Critical Role.*

This link to *CR* led to much of the success of the toolset, which now sees itself as one of the most

popular Tools media used by players today. While I believe that the platform would have

eventually succeeded on its own merits, it is undeniable that its introduction and demonstration

throughout the 141 episodes of *CR*'s second campaign led many new users to the site.

Again, that is not to dismiss the attractive attributes the toolset has available for players.

According to participants, the best features of D&D Beyond are the ease of finding and sharing

information, the ability to quickly make characters, and specifically keeping track of spells

during gameplay. One of the struggles of *Dungeons & Dragons* compared to many similar

fantasy games is the amount of information the player is responsible for. Video games take

away the burden of information and rules-processing from its users; with a tabletop game like

D&D, the players are responsible for understanding all of the abilities of their characters and the

vast information that comes with it. This is one of the biggest shifts for video game players

coming into *D&D*, but also one of the benefits of using D&D Beyond. As Paul describes the

app, "the way the character sheets and stuff work on there is just so convenient, and also a little

video game menu-y." To be able to look down at a screen and quickly see all of a character's

options and have multiple modifiers automatically added together for ease takes much of this

burden of knowledge off of the user. One can also click on any abilities and, rather than try to

remember the exact wording, read from the app exactly what their character can do. From

experience, in the middle of a 3-hour boss fight, the difference between "I have darkvision so I

can see in the dark" and "I have Devil's Sight so I can see in nonmagical AND magical

darkness" can mean the difference between glorious victory and a party being wiped out. As I

will highlight when discussing spells, exact wording is extremely important in *D&D*. This also

calls back to media literacy, where Meyrowitz (1998) created the variable for "unidirectional vs bidirectional vs multidirectional" (p. 104) information flow. While many *D&D* resources give the player information, a unidirectional flow, D&D Beyond allows a player to also input the information about their own character (health, level, inventory, etc.). This is one of the few tools reported by participants that allows for this back-and-forth transmission of information, something that both makes D&D Beyond more unique as a platform and more attractive to potential users.

Going back to the feature I first highlighted, multiple participants spoke on the ease of character creation using D&D Beyond, which I will say again is one of the most time-consuming elements of playing *D&D*. Yet I heard both new and experienced players tell me how easy this process was using the toolset. When Pipp is DMing and a new player is having difficulty making their character, he immediately sends them to the site. "If a player is like 'I don't understand this,' I'm just like 'here is a link,' takes them straight to it, they know exactly what that thing does." Even for a more experienced player, this task can be difficult, as Jayne discussed how she still occasionally struggles by saying "Yeah, I'm not super versed in a lot of things like these guys are. And I try to make interesting characters so D&D Beyond is like, it helps me a lot. It'll do things automatically." On the other end, Jorge, a very knowledgeable player, takes advantage of this ease of character creation the most, telling me that he often makes characters just for fun, both to pass the time and to see how powerful of a character he can craft. Either way, this would most likely not be such an idle hobby of his if D&D Beyond did not allow for him to so easily make character after character on his phone.

Finally, many participants told me that their favorite part of using D&D Beyond was how easy it was to keep track of their spells while playing. Spells in *Dungeons & Dragons* come with

a list of information from its level, the range, casting time, if it requires concentration, the components necessary to cast said spell, the duration, and that does not include whatever the spell itself actually does. As I stated before, exact wording is important and the difference between a spell with a range of a 10 ft. cube vs. a 10ft. cone is an important one. For most characters capable of casting, it is not a matter of memorizing a single spell; rather, most of these characters are capable of casting anywhere from five to 25 different spells in a day, some of which may change depending on the day. For most, the only answer is to have the exact wording of each spell ready in advance. As Sophie shared with me, this was one of the hardest parts of playing her first magic caster.

> I was having a lot of trouble, like, flipping through all my spells, because I have spells across like three different books, three different physical books. And so figuring out what I wanted to cast in the next round was really, really difficult for a while. And I ended up just having a tab open on my phone of every spell that I had available to me, which is a lot of tabs. And so with [Paul]'s D&D Beyond account, I made my character for John's campaign and in the last game, I just pulled up the spells. And even though we were playing mostly in person, just having the spells there on my phone to go through made it so much more streamlined from a caster specific point of view. The spells make it way, way easier, even playing in person.

This behavior of having dozens of tabs open on a phone is one I have done myself countless times, behavior also reported by other participants as a hurdle to playing magical characters in-game.

With D&D Beyond, however, a single application can hold all of this information rather than having to jump between multiple sources to find the exact wording on a spell in the middle

of a round. Not only does this make an already-challenging game easier, Paul pointed out to me

that for one of his players, D&D Beyond helped with accessibility issues. One of his newer

players in a different campaign had severe AHDH, to the point that it was difficult for this person

to play *D&D* because he could not remember how all of his spells worked. With D&D Beyond,

however, Paul was able to keep track of this player's spells, how they work, and was able to find

the information needed in the moment without slowing down the game or making the player feel

embarrassed. In this light, perhaps D&D Beyond is an even more important media object than I

first assumed. If the toolset can enable those who may have previously had difficulties playing

the game for reasons involving information-retention, it may also assist in bringing new,

marginalized players to the *D&D* community.

D&D Beyond ends this list of popular media objects at the #5 spot, yet it is the only

media on the list that is officially sponsored and produced by Wizards of the Coast. Everything

else is a third-party using the *Dungeons & Dragons* Intellectual Property or is a platform hosting

D&D content. The popularity of the toolset is surprising to me given that it is clearly helpful to

players but can only be considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Returning to Meyrowitz, the

variables that most seem to affect participants' response to D&D Beyond seem to come from the

level of relative ease of use to master and decode, as well as the bidirectional flow of

information. The level of skill mastery being so low with the application is clearly a driving

point that many users praised the toolset for, but I believe few understood how the ability of the

application to give information on the game while also receiving information through character

creation is just as important in its popularity. It does ask the question if other media objects

produced by Wizards of the Coast would be as popular. Looking at Roll20, would an official

Dungeons & Dragons virtual software eclipse the popularity of the existing tabletop simulator?

Or is there something specific to D&D Beyond that has allowed it to grow into such a comfortable position within many players' figurations? Regardless of its popularity or how it came about, it is clear that D&D Beyond has established itself as a stable element in the *D&D* community, as well as within the figuration of many players. Paul may have said it best when he took the stance that "as long as there's civilization and internet, I will never not use D&D Beyond."

Here we draw our examination of the media objects to a close. I find myself still looking at D&D Beyond, at how it serves three different functions for players. While most see it as a tool to utilize, two participants also stated they used the application for fun or for looking up information when not playing; going back to the easy-of-access to exact wordings on spells, as well as the speed in which a user can create a character, it is understandable how the site could be used in various ways. So far in this chapter, I have analyzed the participants as well as the media objects that are fundamental to Coudlry and Hepp's redefining of said figurations, but it has done little to explore why these objects are used, or how they are used. To better understand the figurations of players, the purpose of their usage must be uncovered. In this next section I will go into detail about the Uses for media I have created to categorize media consumption within this study.

Uses Categories

To better understand the reasoning behind a participant's use of the previously discussed media object, this section will be categories to sort the different Uses that media has for *D&D* players. These categories are for coding the various ways that players use *D&D* media and what result they are trying to get from their consumption. I want to immediately note that most participants gave multiple uses for the media they consumed or utilized, and most objects were

used in different ways by different participants. For example, Sophie told me that she often watched *D&D* videos on YouTube, but that she saw it as both a form of entertainment and a way of learning more about the game. These categories, as well as the entire concept of categorizing the Uses of media users, comes from the Uses and Gratification Theory, which looks "to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs" (Ruggerio, 2000, p. 3). To rephrase this in a fashion more suited to this dissertation, "Why do people become involved in one particular type of mediated communication or another, and what gratifications do they receive from it?" (2000, p. 29). By better understanding why a person uses a media object, I can better understand the figuration surrounding them and how different media objects influence the user and one another. Ruggerio (2000) understood the importance of Uses and Gratification Theory as the digital movement began, because "as new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis" (p. 14). With thousands of possible media objects a *D&D* player could use, the fact that most participants were consuming or utilizing the same dozen, with generally similar purposes, speaks to the importance of said media within this study. As such, I feel it is vital to better understand why a participant chose to Use a specific media. So, doing my best to consolidate uses as much as possible, these are my categories of Media Use: Entertainment, Information, Tools, and Social. While these categories resemble some of the categories used in traditional Uses and Gratification Theory literature, my four categories do not descend from these categories and were instead created to fit the trends found in the data collection of this specific study.

Entertainment

My first category for Media Use is Entertainment. By Entertainment, I mean that the reason the participant consumed the media was one of leisure, relaxation, that enjoying the media was the main purpose for seeking and engaging with the media text. Entertainment use may be the most obvious, given that *Dungeons & Dragons* is inherently a game of leisure. For Norman, it is about being able to enjoy more of his hobby. As he phrased it,

> The reason I consume so much *D&D* content is purely out of joy. Between major products like *Critical Role* or more minor ones such as *Dungeons and Daddies,* the entertainment value is so high. The stories are unique and you never know what's going to happen next. Even the books offer a level of excitement that I don't really get from other series.

Norman's media Usage was heavy with Entertainment media, as he looked to continue his love of these types of stories outside of gameplay.

Kevin had a similar reasoning for watching *D&D* content for Entertainment. To him "if done well, it's every genre of entertainment. It's got comedy, drama, improv, action. It's honest entertainment in a lot of ways. It exists in the human moments of entertainment, not the polished studio moments." This unpolished, on-the-cuff nature of *D&D* does lend itself well to organic Entertainment, as both creator and audience often do not know what will happen next. And among all of the variety Kevin notes in this Entertainment, *Dungeons & Dragons* sits at the center as the commonality. For many, they simply want to enjoy more content about their favorite hobby, and given the nature of *D&D* as a hobby, it is unsurprising that so many participants report high levels of Entertainment consumption. That being said, Entertainment was (by a slim margin) the most commonly cited use by participants as to why they consumed a

piece of *D&D* media, whether looking at individuals, groups, object-by-object, or even looking at uses across group members.   This will be a discussion point shortly, but a seemingly-contradictory trend rose from data collection: in many cases, a media's main Uses reported were often split between Entertainment and Information, and in many cases a player cited both simultaneously as their reasoning for consuming a media object.

Information

The Information category is media usage with the purpose of trying to learn more about *Dungeons & Dragons.* Information was the second most common Usage reported by participants, coming just behind Entertainment, and is perhaps the most diverse, open category; with *D&D* being as deep and diverse of a game as it is, there are many ways that one can go about "learning about *D&D."* Before uncovering why media is an effective tool for learning about *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is important to understand some basic facts about the rules of the game, particularly how they change every decade. *D&D* has had several different "editions," or rule sets since its release in 1974, with the current one being Fifth Edition, or 5e. Older editions of the game are generally phased out by Wizards of the Coast over time, as they begin to solely make new content for whatever the newest rule set is. The idea is that each edition can fix problems from the previous, as well as the obvious financial benefits for the company. 5e first debuted in 2014, a year after I began playing, and has been going strong since; in fact, many of the changes that came with 5e (simplification of certain rules, overall lower numbers being added regularly for easier math, a new sense of inclusivity) have been credited as being part of the rise in popularity in recent years. When I began playing *D&D*, I was taught how to play 3.5, a rule set from 2003 that is still popular in the community today. Although they are both versions of *D&D,* 3.5 and 5e are incredibly different from one another in countless ways to the

point that I found 5e to be confusing when I first started playing it regardless of it being simpler overall. This is where media ties back in. *The Player's Handbook*, the main rulebook for *D&D* 5e players, is 316 pages long and someone trying to enter the hobby for the first time will find getting through those 316 pages a tiring feat. Even worse, like many other games, many of the rules and instructions are difficult to understand without context. Much like trying to learn a sport or many skills, *D&D* is best understood by skimming the rules and then diving into the activity. Learning by doing is another way to phrase it. Unfortunately, this is not an option for many new players, those who do not have a group of established, veteran players helping them navigate the hundreds of rules, many of which are unique to certain classes of character or specific monsters. But with digital media as an available option, players in 2022 have so many more ways of learning the game than just going through *The Player's Handbook,* and video-platforms such as YouTube and Twitch allow a viewer to watch other playing, learning the game through context and by viewing the performance instead of reading about it.

For an individual looking to learn more about *D&D*, media objects are often a faster way of quickly gaining Information. Players looking at online forums (such as Giants of the Playground and Reddit) to find more powerful character builds, watching videos on the most powerful Wizard spells to learn, studying a podcast to find new ways to be a better DM, all of these were examples given to me throughout my interviews. There is also so much knowledge about the game that is not within *The Players Handbook.* Philosophies on how to play the game, suggestions on which spells and which abilities pair well together, how to more effectively create combat encounters as a DM, there is so much that goes into playing *D&D* that one cannot find within a rulebook. Markus describes his viewing habits as mainly focusing on this Information media

I don't often watch others play *D&D,* but I spend an absurd amount of time researching on Google, Reddit, and giantstips *[sic]* forum. There are so many options in *D&D* that new things I want to incorporate into my game or the character I play always seems to come up.

With the game as open-ended as it is, with countless different ways of playing the game, it would be impossible for a single text to offer every option available to players. Hence, the explosion in recent years of Information media objects, videos and guides to imparting not just information, but opinions and perspectives on the performance of the game. For Jorge, it comes from labeling himself a perfectionist as he told me "I always want to do things efficiently. And I think there's a lot of reward in understanding how something works and doing it well." For Jorge and Markus, this desire to understand the game to a greater capacity is reward enough.

Shockingly, it is clear that many of the media objects reported as having been used for the purpose of gaining Information were clearly originally intended for Entertainment Use. I will go into greater detail further down, but the podcast *Critical Role* was obviously created as an Entertainment podcast, one that drew viewers in with humor and an engaging cast. Yet as discussed, many participants told me that (regardless of their original purpose for watching the show) they ended up gaining Information about how to play *D&D* better from watching the podcast. Amid all of the media objects within my participants' figurations, there is a clear and strong link between my first two Uses categories. To further prove this point, all five of the media objects whose most popular use was for Entertainment had Information as their secondary. Of the media objects primarily used for Information, however, only one was also frequently used for Entertainment purposes. Another interesting observation was that many participants told me that in cases where they used a media to gain *D&D* Information, this act of learning was still an

enjoyable process for them. Tallstag, a player from Focus Group E, revealed that even seeking

information about *D&D* was as relaxing as playing the game itself, stating "whether I'm looking

for instructions, things that show me how to run the game better or give me ideas, it's all an

escape. Or not an escape necessarily, just calms me down." A player from the same group,

Hurgrim noted that while he often watches YouTube videos that provide Information about the

game, he watches them more for Entertainment, because it interests him due to its connection to

the roleplaying game he loves. Jorge seems to agree with these two in many ways, as most of his

media consumption was some form of Information. Yet he found this entertaining, stating that

learning more about his hobby is "really fun for me. And I think a lot of people separate

watching rules videos versus watching fun campaign videos, but for me the rules videos are the

fun, that is the fun for me." Perhaps these players are lucky they are playing in the digital age, as

gaining more Information on *D&D* was once much more difficult.

When one is first trying to approach *D&D*, many often begin with the rulebooks.

Wizards of the Coast titled their main rulebook *The Player's Handbook* for a reason, after all.

Again, the game itself is complicated enough, the *Handbook* is more than 300 pages long, and

getting ready to play for the first time can be intimidating. With media, however, one can slowly

learn the rules while being entertained by whatever media object the Information is packaged

into. The phrase "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down" comes to mind. Adam

jokingly told me that "you don't learn *D&D* from a fucking book, that's for chumps. You learn it

from a meme." But within the context of *D&D*, it makes more sense that Information is so often

paired with Entertainment to make it more palatable for viewers. I believe that the linkage

between Information and Entertainment comes from this tendency to mask education with

entertainment (something seen in education and News for years), as well as going back to

Tallstag's and Jorge's comments that learning about their hobby is enjoyable. When multiple

individuals all state that the act of learning is tied to Entertainment, it is difficult to not see a

direct tie between them; a tie that is even more apparent when looking at how the most of the

popular media objects in this study share a mixed Entertainment/Information purpose.

Critical Role as Education

As I mentioned previously, and looking back to the media objects graph, *CR* has a

surprisingly high rate of Information Use from my sample pool. Of the 18 individuals who

consumed *Critical Role* content, 10 reported Entertainment Use, one reported Information Use,

and the other seven reported a mixture of Entertainment and Information as their reason for

watching the show. Of all the media objects, these Uses were the ones that surprised me the

most. For a program with the clear intention of being entertainment, those Uses are more diverse

than I assumed going into this project. So what is it about *Critical Role* that makes it such an

informative tool for players? What about the podcast is responsible for its wide-spread

popularity? Here I will go into a deeper analysis of *Dungeons & Dragons*' most popular media

object, hoping to better understand how a podcast with a longer run-time than all of *The

Simpsons* can be a way for players to learn about *D&D*.

It is clear that the importance of these liveplay podcasts as educational tools for new

players should not be underestimated. According to Nathan Steward, a senior director of *D&D,*

"Over half of the new people who started playing Fifth Edition...got into D&D through watching

people play online" (DeVille, 2017, para. 3). While this type of media has been praised by many

as helping fuel *D&D*'s current rise, most of this has been accredited to the podcasts for raising

the attention on the game itself, or for showing how entertaining roleplaying games can be.

What is not being discussed in detail is the manner in which these shows, by having real-time

demonstrations of people playing the game, teach would-be players how to play *D&D* in a better, more entertaining fashion than going through the hundreds of pages of rulebooks. A large hurdle in getting into many tabletop communities is the density of rules and the complexity of ingame mechanics. By giving people a form of entertainment that can simultaneously ignite their passion for gameplay while demonstrating general and specific rulings throughout an episode, liveplay podcasts are one of the best answers online at this time to help break through this barrier and let more people easily enter into the fandom.

As popular as *Critical Role* is as a form of entertainment, many participants spoke on this unintentional function for these types of Actual Play podcasts: they serve as effective tools in teaching viewers how to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. While the performative aspect of *D&D* is something that many look to replicate from *CR* (in the next chapter I will discuss this in the form of The Matt Mercer Effect), the show is instead educating its audience on the mechanical side of playing the game. While this may not have been the intended purpose of these *D&D* podcasts, it is clear that many people feel educated on the rules of the game as a result of watching them. Malik, a 41-year old man from Indiana who played older editions as a child but struggled trying to rejoin the community decades later, told me that "how I learned how to play 5e was listening to somebody play it on a podcast." One of my participants, MJ, perhaps summarized best why these podcasts work so well in teaching the mechanics of the game when he said

> when it comes straight down to the mechanics, and you know, the strange circumstances in which players might try to haggle with you about the way things should work, and which way to roll with the decision based on that is definitely comes from watching it played out…So really just through the nature of them playing and observing the way that they play, you, you begin to develop an understanding of how the rules work. It's just

like, really, it's just like anybody that watches any professional sport for long enough is

going to kind of start to get the hang of how it's supposed to be playing

For MJ, it was both the combination of the length of *Critical Role,* the range of seeing characters

grow from Level 2-20, and seeing the game played in context that made it such a useful tool in

learning the ruleset. Looking at other testimony, these seem to be some of the major reasons

why other fans of the show agree.

Agreeing with the point on context, Algust, DM for Focus Group E, said that it was the

fact that events were happening "in the sequence" of the game that made it easier to place rules

to how they functioned within live gameplay, that this "format kind of solidifies the game

process in a lot of ways." It is the fact that they are playing the game (the context for the rules),

going over the rules as disputes occur (again, in the context this would happen in a normal

game), and making mistakes that must be addressed (in context) that makes these podcasts

almost a perfect tool to understand how the 300+ pages of rules fit into the semi-structured game

of *D&D.* Much of this ease-of-understanding seems to come from the video/audio format of *CR*

itself. Going back to Medium theory, Charlie stated that a reason he enjoyed *CR* was because "I

just like to see what different abilities characters can do in action, rather than reading it in a book

or online or something." For many, it is easier to learn visually than it is by simply reading the

material, in a similar fashion to having a teacher work through a complex problem instead of just

looking through a textbook.

As I mentioned in the previous section on *Critical Role* as gateway media to *D&D*, one

of the aspects of the podcast that make the game seem approachable and make it an excellent

Information media is the amount of mistakes the cast makes during gameplay. At the start of

Critical Role's second campaign, all seven of the players chose to make characters dramatically

different from their firsts, both in terms of personality and gameplay. This meant for several episodes, the cast themselves had to relearn how to play 5e, as again many rules are specific to certain classes, and many struggled to relearn the same game from this new perspective. I imagine it was frustrating for them at times, especially as they made mistakes in front of live Twitch audiences. As an audience member new to 5e, however, this was a godsend because they had to spend so much time in each episode going over the exact wording of rules and having to repeat basic gameplay mechanics regularly. MJ told me that one of the many reasons why he learned so much from *Critical Role* was because "you also got to see them make the same mistakes that the average player would make. And then also learn from it…seeing those events unfold, be explained, refereed on the spot, again, just also solidifies the understanding of the game." Instead of the podcast progressing quickly through the mechanical side of gameplay to return to the more entertaining aspects, the cast stops often to make sure rules are enforced properly, furthering the learning that an audience member can enjoy as they have multiple instances throughout the show to pick up how rules work within specific contexts throughout a campaign. Between the mistakes made to be learned from, as well as the long nature of the program and how it allows one to view the performance of *D&D* within the confines of a real game, it is clear that *Critical Role* can be a source of Information for any player trying to learn more about how to play the game.

Critical Role as Education for DMs

That is not to say that it is only players learning from the show. Another specific Use I heard from several participants was that watching *Critical Role* did not teach them basic mechanics as a player, but rather as an example of how to function as a Dungeon Master. In fact, Jorge said that the primary reason that he watched *D&D* content in general was "DMing advice,"

as at the time he was a fairly inexperienced DM and wanted to see examples of the performance

of the DM. Markus, in a similar situation, found himself tweaking the way he DMed after

watching *Critical Role.* When he first started enjoying the podcast it was simply entertainment;

but as he continued watching, as a relatively new DM, watching Mercer gave him inspiration on

worldbuilding and narration as he was still figuring out his own style. As he put it,

> when I first started out DMing when I didn't have a lot of experience with it, watching
>
> him …gave me a lot of inspiration in my own game. So I watched it a lot for that purpose
>
> especially when I was first starting out. I don't so much anymore now because I've kind
>
> of found my own style of gameplay. Today, as a more experienced DM, the show has
>
> again become just entertainment."

I find it interesting how the purpose Markus had viewing *CR* changed three different times,

going from entertainment to a form of information or education and then back once more to

entertainment as he outgrew his need to learn from Matt Mercer. Unlike the other two, Will was

already an experienced DM, but reported watching *Critical Role* for the specific purpose to

watch someone besides himself DM. As the person in his group always stuck being the DM, he

relished the opportunity to watch someone else, telling me that it was "sort of cool to see a

couple tips and tricks every once in a while and be like, 'Oh, I could add that.'"

Now, much like Markus, I began watching *CR* before I had tried DMing and was only

functioning as a player in past campaigns. Like him and other participants, the podcast was first

offered to me as entertainment, an enjoyable series to watch as a fan of *D&D*. Quickly,

however, viewing *CR* took on multiple Uses for me, one of which (like Markus) was taking

inspiration on DMing. Even when I watch the podcast now, more than three years after I began

watching it and playing as a DM, I still find myself watching Mercer and wondering if I can

integrate some of his techniques into my own games. Other times, I will watch the players of

CR, looking to see if they can help me become a better player, a more creative fighter, or a more

helpful veteran to newer players at my table. In short, my experiences with the podcast mirror

those of most participants. It is the show's ability to showcase the performance of *D&D*, its

accidental role as a teaching opportunity for those unfamiliar with the rules, that has made *CR* so

popular, as well as how it has become a way for new players to enter the game for the first time.

Information Use was the second most reported purpose that participants accredited to

their media consumption, a fact that makes sense given the density of the game's ruleset and the

multiple elements that compose the game. This can come in different forms, whether it be

players using online forums to create more powerful characters, or watching YouTube videos on

tips for DMs on how to make roleplaying easier for their players. Again, this is the broadest of

the four Uses categories as what constitutes Information for a *D&D* player can take as many

forms as the game itself can. Much of this section has focused on *Critical Role*, but this is not

because it is the most important Information media; rather, its extended discussion is due to

CR's importance within the *D&D* community overall as well as the surprising nature of the

Entertainment podcast as a form of learning. But while this section focused on Information

found outside of game, the next looks at media with Uses that focus on in-game action.

Tools

Category three is Tools, media being Used by players during the actual play of *Dungeons*

& Dragons, such as virtual call software, online dice rollers, digital maps, and other online aids.

Tools media objects were the third most common overall. Being critical of this, I find it unlikely

that this Usage would be as prevalent if I had not done my Focus Groups during the COVID-19

pandemic. Lance himself told me that, as a DM who uses multiple digital tools during

gameplay, "it partially started because of the pandemic when we couldn't play in person" before he began to more naturally incorporate these media objects into his regular use. Clearly the risk of infection has pushed many formerly face-to-face *D&D* games into virtual spaces, but that should not take away from the widespread use by participants of these Tools media. Several of my Focus Groups were playing across great physical distances, a factor unrelated to COVID-19 that would still necessitate the Use of these types of media. Interestingly, while Information and Entertainment Uses were generally linked together in many media objects, most Tools media were almost exclusively Used for the purpose of Using them as Tools. This makes sense when thinking about the purpose these media objects were built for. Look at Zoom, a virtual call software and a common Tools used by groups trying to play digitally during the pandemic. Zoom is great for its intended purpose, allowing users to see and hear one another in real-time to hold conversations and meetings. Beyond this, however, the software does not have many other uses, due to its design and features. A site already explored, Roll20 allows a DM to create a virtual battle map and place characters and enemies across it, everything that a face-to-face DM would need to make a map for players during a session. While the Roll20 may have tabs for "Marketplace" and "Community," all 15 of my participants that used Roll20 stated that it was only for Tools Use. Out of the four categories, Tools is the Use that is most isolated from others in that primarily Tools media have the least secondary Uses as well as those secondary Uses having a low percentage of the overall Use.

This is not the only attribute that makes this category stand out. Tools Use is an interesting category not only because every focus group recorded high uses of Tools media, but also that each group utilized the same Tools. Whereas many groups had multiple members using the same media objects independently of one another (or sharing content between members in

some cases), when a campaign takes place over Roll20 every member of that campaign uses

Roll20 to play. Logistically this seems simple enough, a group cannot all play virtually together

unless everyone uses the same software to connect. Clearly these in-game media objects are

well-suited for their purpose in getting each individual on the same page, as Adam (a fierce

proponent for face-to-face *D&D*) described the digital platforms he used as "a lot of set up but it

pays for itself in the end when the game runs smoothly and everyone is on the same page." Yet

even for other Tools media objects, those designed to aid in the playing of *D&D* rather than just

facilitating a virtual call, most groups with a single member utilizing this type of media saw

each member also begin using it. For example, D&D Beyond is a popular software (one that

will be discussed more deeply soon) designed to assist players mid-game. This is software

created for an individual to use, and yet I only had one Focus Group that had a single member

using D&D Beyond. In two other groups, every member of a party used the software in-game.

While it is only an observation here, there is an obvious trend that these Tools objects tend to be

shared amongst an entire group playing together. Perhaps this is the reason why of the top five

most popular media objects, three are Tools Used by players during gameplay.

Social

　　　　As with most digital communities, *Dungeons & Dragons* also has media dedicated to

Social Use. The Social media objects in this study are those used by participants to connect

with other people. Fascinatingly, given the way in which social media platforms have

dominated the public perception of online communication, Social Use was the least used of the

four categories in this study. In fact, of my 35 participants, only six individuals reported having

used *D&D*-centric media for a Social purpose. In the only four cases where a media object was

given the specific Social Use by a participant, Social was never the most common Use; Social

Use was

always the secondary or even tertiary Use. These cases were generally a single person talking

about a Social Use they found in a media that others had previously spoken about using for other

purposes.

So why would I build a fourth category on a Use so rare within my sample pool? First

and foremost, because social media has become such an important element in digital

communication that I would think it was neglectful of me to omit it from discussion. Second, I

think that Social Use of media is much more common than my data suggests. I suspect that

almost all *D&D* players use some form of social media, but simply that they are not using it for

D&D-related reasons. One participant, Norman, even told me that while he uses TikTok, he

goes out of his way to avoid *D&D* content on the platform. "I take in so much *D&D* content

from other things, maybe have one where I don't take in as much." This is a case where

individuals are choosing among the different media objects in their day which ones are and are

not being utilized to pursue their *D&D* hobby. Third and finally, because I believe that

participants are engaging in Social behaviors on these platforms but do not internally register it

as such. While many of the platforms used by participants are media platforms with social

elements, such as Reddit or Twitch, many of these participants are focusing on the initial purpose

that brought them to Use that platform.

An easy example is DMsGuild, a website where users can upload, share, and even sell

their "homebrew" *D&D* content (original content made by the user) such as quests, campaign

guides, and other DM resources. Several participants mentioned using the platform to find

missions for their campaigns or to find inspiration to make their own content, but two mentioned

the Social element of the site. Kevin spoke on the collaborative nature of the *D&D* community

and that platforms like DMsGuild gave him the chance to interact with the other content-creators

online, mixing and matching material to let everyone improve as Dungeon Masters. He stated that

> At its core, *D&D* is about telling a story TOGETHER. Just as superheroes are the new
> gods of myth, *D&D* is the community coming together in the light of a fire to tell stories
> that inspire and reassure. D&D Beyond and other platforms that allow you to share your
> new story bits, your addition to the tale, are crucial. It's about keeping the story alive.
> Stories are woven together, with everyone adding strands. Adding our bits and pieces
> helps make us feel a sense of community with people around the world's biggest
> campfire.

While these sites are clearly focused on *D&D*, Kevin makes an excellent point that there is a tie between Information and Social Use if the user is conscious of the collaborative nature of said Information. Many participants mentioned using platforms similar to this for the purpose of learning about the game from others' homebrew content, but failed to notice the Social nature of many of these exchanges. In many cases, however, I believe that these media objects were being used by said participants as only a source of Information, neglecting the Social element as they failed to offer their own content or criticism in exchange. In future studies, this Social Use could be highlighted as a way of giving further introspection to participants on how they utilize media and if certain Uses are happening unconsciously.

Conclusion

One half of my findings, this chapter focused on the *D&D*-related media objects commonly reported by my participants as ones used regularly. While *Critical Role* may have only been the 2nd most used media in the study, it is clear that it stands out as the most important media object within most figurations. Not only is it one of the most popular *D&D* media in the

world today, it's impacted other common media within this community and is even hailed by some as a reason for *Dungeons & Dragons* explosive growth in recent years. The fact that it is the only media content, rather than platform, to be discussed should speak volumes to the size of its influence within the *D&D* community. Beyond this, platforms such as Discord and D&D Beyond demonstrate the universal appeal of many media platforms designed for in-game use by players. Many of these platforms had more focused Uses by players, but that only demonstrates the success of these media in achieving their intended purpose. This flows directly in the Uses categories I have created to sort the different purposes many players bring to different media objects. While Entertainment was the most common Use for these media, Information was a major shared Use for each Entertainment media. Perhaps not the most common Use overall, Tools media objects stand out from the rest as the most universally utilized; even taking the pandemic into account, the fact that every group interviewed utilized some form of Tools media is significant. To only add to this importance, three of five most popular media objects in the study are Tools media, only further demonstrating the need for *D&D* players in 2022 to have these sorts of digital tools available.

Much of the findings in this chapter went against my expectations going into data collection. I was shocked at the low number of reported Social Uses of these media objects, almost as shocked to discover the hidden importance of Tools media. Yet the clear popularity of *Critical Role* only confirmed my suspicions that the podcast had come to greatly influence not just the figurations of participants, but the greater *D&D* community. Following in this trial of thought, Chapter 5 will focus on the participants as players and the media influences reported by them. Much of that chapter will tie back directly to the discussions on media within this chapter,

building from this understanding of media and media Uses to better understand media influences

and how said influences are recognized by individuals.

CHAPTER 5. PLAYERS, INFLUENCES, AND FIGURATIONS

The last chapter focused on the media objects that dominated my Findings, but this chapter will further examine the players at the core of each figuration, as well as how said media impacts the individual. This chapter calls back to the media objects and their Uses in the last chapter and the two should be seen as twin parts of my Findings. While I could wax poetically on for centuries on each story told to me of how a player was influenced by a content creator, or how a meme they laughed at changed their perception of tabletop games, this section will look at the commonly-reported role of media consumption; each of the media influences will be those discussed by several participants, or by separate participants in near-identical ways that it is clear there is a link between their stories. Before this discussion, however, I will be going over Player Characteristics, traits placed on a spectrum to orient how different *D&D* players approach the game. These will be categorical characteristics that can separate the unique ways that different participants engage with *Dungeons & Dragons* based around the data collected from interviews and focus groups. Here I will also reveal my Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model, a model I have constructed to demonstrate visually the overall trends between *D&D* players and their media consumption. Next will come the true findings of the study, examining how the media consumed by players impacts their experience playing *D&D*. These influences range from those specific to a certain media object, such as The Matt Mercer Effect, to broader impacts that result from the relevance frame that *D&D* adds to a user's media consumption, such as changes to one's playstyle or the more inclusive nature of the community. This will mainly discuss impacts for individual players, but will also cover how groups are influenced as a unit near the end of the section. In the final section, I will return to figurations, the main theoretical concept of the study, and examine their part within this paper. This will illuminate how the

figurations of members of the game group resemble one another, how digital media have allowed inclusivity to spread further into the community, before finally discussing the newfound presence of "alpha media objects" with *D&D* figurations.

Review of Research Questions

Just as I did in the previous, I start this chapter with a review of the Research Questions that I hope to answer here. While Chapter 4 answered RQ1, which focused on the media objects being consumed regularly by *D&D* players, it is here within Chapter 5 that I approach RQ2:

- How does the media ecosystem surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons* players change the way players interpret and understand the game?

This question actually presents two challenges. The question appears to focus on how the media impacts the player; but to understand how media can "change the way players interpret and understand the game," we must first know the baseline from which these individuals interpreted and understood *D&D* before media consumption. It is from here that the changes to understanding can be reported and better analyzed. As such, the following section will look to categorize players' initial interpretation of *D&D* by classifying the ways in which they interacted with the game.

Player Characteristics

As stated, before beginning analysis of media impacts and figurations, it is important to point out assumptions going into my findings. First and foremost, while many of the concepts I will be writing about involve the actual gameplay of *D&D*, I did not watch any of my participants playing the game. As such, I have created categorical characteristics from which to classify individuals, characteristics based around the player themself that do not come from

gameplay. According to Mike Mearls (2017), a co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons* Fifth

Edition, the three pillars of *D&D* gameplay are Combat, Social Interaction, and Exploration. I

can attest, these three descriptions really do a fantastic job at summarizing what is perhaps the

most open-to-interpretation game being sold today. For a game with the inherent design model

of "follow the rulebooks as much as you need, make up as much as you want," the sheer amount

of variety a game of *D&D* can have is tremendous. Going back to the limitations of this study,

without actually watching these groups play together, categorizing them in this way is almost

impossible. Instead, I have created characteristics to apply to my participants so that I can not

only split 35 individuals into separate groups, I can also examine if any of these characteristics

either have an impact or are impacted by media consumption. A final note that all three of these

characteristics I have created are on a spectrum rather than a more rigid system for ranking, a

standard practice when working with Grounded Theory. While a player may be higher on one

spectrum than another, they will appear somewhere on each; no player can be at "0" or "100"

on any characteristic, instead demonstrating more or less of whatever traits said characteristic is

representing. And so, without delay, my characteristics for sorting Players are 1) Game

Knowledge, 2) Game Engagement, and 3) Rules-Adhesion. While I will be discussing them

each in detail below, these categorical characteristics will be an element of my findings in the

third section of this chapter. To finish this discussion, I will unveil the Engagement-

Consumption-Impacts Model, a model I have created that summarizes the bulk of my findings

through these characteristics.

Level of Game Knowledge

   This characteristic examines how much a *D&D* player knows about the actual game itself. The

                    broadest of the three characteristics, Game Knowledge can refer to many things,

including: the rules and mechanics of the game, statistics and information on different monsters and spells, an understanding of how to synergize different elements (such as class, race, spell selection, etc.) to create as powerful or specific of a character as possible, the history of the game and community, tips on being a "better" DM/player, history of the game, and so on. It is obvious here, but this is perhaps the most wide-open characteristic. It is difficult to narrow Game-Knowledge down further due to the open nature of *D&D* and how many facets go into playing the game. Ranging from "not very well-informed" to "very well -informed," Game Knowledge is a spectrum to rate individuals on the level of knowledge they possess of all of the above dealings of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Derek focused on a player's Game Knowledge when he discussed how he had

> played in campaigns where the players completely ran the direction of it through their own initiatives. Because they looked up that extra media they looked up extra tricks they could do as a player with their class or they looked up extra unique ideas are kind of outside of the box thinking that they researched.

In his eyes, it was the knowledge, the "extra tricks" that players learned that allowed them to further interact with the game as they played. Without taking too much away from my final section, some immediate trends were noticeable as this characteristic formed. First, generally the Dungeon Master (or players in the group who served as DMs for other campaigns) tended to demonstrate higher levels of Game Knowledge than non-DMs. Somewhat commonsensical, it is understandable that the person running a campaign needs to have a high level of understanding about *D&D*. Markus told me that as a DM he feels compelled to continue learning more and more about the game, saying "I'm constantly trying to improve the game I DM especially, so if I think I can find things to better flesh NPCs out or improve my world I'll spend days reading

through *D&D* books and threads." Just as commonsensical, more experienced players tended to exhibit higher Game Knowledge than newer or less experienced players.

More importantly to this study, however, was the general trend that this characteristic was more impacted by media consumption than the other two. As I showed in the Uses categories in the last chapter, much of the media consumed by *D&D* players was for the purpose of gaining information on the game; linking to this, it stands to reason that one's Game Knowledge would be a characteristic easily impacted by the consumption of said media. Even individuals watching a *D&D* video for entertainment can find themselves learning elements of the game, whether it be gameplay mechanics from watching others streams of others playing or learning about class abilities from a meme. For Tallstag, both are possible simultaneously as the content he views is "entertaining to me at the same time as being informative…. whether I'm looking for instructions, things that show me how to run the game better or give me ideas it's all an escape." Going back to the Uses categories, for many players there is a link between Information and Entertainment media, and for some the two are one and the same. Again, the next section of this chapter will go into deeper analysis of what this means for a person's level of Game Knowledge, but it is safe to theorize that its nature as the most media-influenced of the three Player categorical characteristics does stand out as important.

Level of Game Engagement

My second Player Characteristic is an individual's level of Game Engagement. This refers to a person's overall level of engagement with *Dungeons & Dragons*, both in terms of their participation during game sessions as well as their media consumption while not playing. For this study we will focus on Engagement through media consumption, as participants use media to engage with *D&D* further between game sessions. In-game Game Engagement is

difficult to speak on too specifically given the interview nature of my data collection, but participants' engagement and testimony during Focus Groups will be how I observe this within my sample pool. Some participants seem to spend a great deal of their free time enjoying *D&D* videos, podcasts, and online forums. Others only think about the game while playing and not at all afterwards. Kushim consumed the least *D&D* media from Focus Group E, something that the members of his group did not know until it was mentioned during our interview. It was clear that Kushmin enjoyed playing *D&D* as much as the rest of his group, but that "I don't consume a lot of media outside our gaming sessions…I don't really seek it out very much outside of our gaming sessions." It should be made clear that this Characteristic is not tied directly to media consumption. A player can have a high Game Engagement without consuming additional *D&D* media, but most of the participants with high Engagement did happen to have higher levels of media consumption. It should be noted that like the other characteristic, Game-Engagement is on a spectrum, so there is no way to be completely engaged or disengaged with *D&D.*

It is also worth noting that *D&D* is a difficult game to play, so one must have at least a certain level of engagement to even begin playing at all. A player's Game Engagement also seems to be a predictor of media consumption; the lower a person's level of Game Engagement, the less likely they are to consume *D&D* media when not playing. In Focus Group A, Derek brought this up when he said that "anyone that is going to go out and actively search for third party media…they are going to have a different and in a lot of ways a greater impact on all future games they play, because they're specifically looking up stuff that enhances how they play the game." In his eyes, it was the dedicated, Engaged players who went out of their way to consume additional *D&D* content because they wanted to be able to more actively take part in the game.

This will be important going into the next section of this chapter and will serve as the starting point to my later model.

Level of Rules-Adhesion

My final Player characteristic is observing one's Level of Rules-Adhesion, or how closely a person follows the rules of *D&D* while they play. As I have mentioned previously, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game of make-believe framed within a ruleset to give it structure. But I have also mentioned many times (and will do so many more within this chapter), there are countless ways in which one can play *D&D*, with no one style or method being more or less correct than another. I had this specific characteristic in mind when placing all three player categorical characteristics on a spectrum, as one's adherence to the rules is an impossible trait to concretely map. It is near impossible to prove to any degree if someone follows the rules as written based on the complexity of *D&D* and its inherently improvised nature. There is no right or wrong side of this spectrum to be on, it is merely different ways that different people play *D&D.* Some players prefer to play tabletop games with as few rules as possible, instead enjoying the process of deciding in each instance how the group should mechanically determine a challenge. Kolok comes from this mindset, stating that "if there's a rule that's making your party actively upset and not want to play the game or is hindering progression…bypassing it to keep the players engaged has never been a bad thing in my experience." This can be wonderful for players who have difficulty learning all of the official rules and prefer the Improv elements of the game, but at the same time this goes back to the example of playing make-believe with children. Having no rules to follow gives the game no structure and each decision made can feel like a whim of the DM, leading to both feelings of freedom and frustration. Lance had his own grievances about campaigns such as this when he told me "in an older campaign, the rules were

loosely followed because the DM wanted to create harrowing and epic experiences. They introduced a lot of home-brew mechanics that eventually became overpowered because they didn't follow the rules." He voiced that if specific rules were being ignored, it was the role of the DM to enforce this new ruling and to make sure it did not unbalance the rest of the campaign.

On the other hand, many groups try their best to follow the ruleset for each action taken. This rewards players willing to take the time to absorb the rules and mechanics of the game, and every action and reaction taken is made fair in the eyes of both players and the DM. But while it can lead to a more structured game, it can become a constrictive one. Adam's opinion was that

the rules in any game system offer structure and security for new DMs. If you don't know how to do something 9 times out of 10 there is a rule for it. But as time goes on and either you get comfortable with the group you are with or get more comfortable with the system you're playing you feel more comfortable making a judgment call that may be outside the rules.

With experience, according to Adam, comes the ability to structure gameplay without needing to return to the rulebook repeatedly (a trend that will be explored further in the next section). Stopping gameplay to search for the exact wording of a spell is important to make sure all rules are being correctly followed, but it can also pause the action during an exciting moment and upset the flow of the session. The derogatory term "rules lawyer" was created by the community to refer to the type of player who spends more time looking up and enforcing rules than actually playing, as these individuals can bog down the game for players who rank lower in the level of Rules-Adhesion characteristic. As described by Steven Dashiell (2020),

a rules lawyer is a player who argues and interprets the rules of the game during play. There are two dominant characterizations of this archetype. On the one hand, we see a

vociferous commentator who acts as a slog on the game. On the other, a crusader

challenging breezy rules interpretations with canon, providing stability and more

enjoyment. (p. 124)

While Dashiell does note that this presence at the table can be a positive depending on context,

many see it as a negative. Kolok speaks on the frustrating nature of this behavior when he told

me that "rules lawyering is an activity that's not fun for 99% of the people involved so if it seems

reasonable and viable for the character to do there's no reason to stop them especially if it'll make

things more interesting for everyone else." For Kolok, as a DM, there is no need to stop the

game repeatedly if the moment can be resolved in a faster fashion.

A player's level of Rules-Adhesion is generally an individual trait, coming to preferences

of the player themself, while also being impacted by the group one plays in. If a single player is

the only "rules lawyer" in a game of six, they may either have to adapt this tendency for the sake

of group cohesion or even find a different table to play at. Lance even described Focus Group B

as a campaign of "rule lawyers. Personally, that comes from us being high level characters (lvl

15) so we've been through experiences that made us need to know the rules so we don't break the

game." This group has enough experience that they do not feel limited by sticking to the rules,

but rather feel empowered by understanding how to interpret and act within the rules. Like the

other two, this characteristic will be discussed in greater detail in the final section, where these

classifications of *D&D* players will be combined with participant data to look for broader

findings. And like the others, there is no "correct" level of Rules-Adhesion, it all depends on

what is best for a group overall. As Kevin put it, "too strict and you crush fun and creativity.

Too loose and it becomes too inconsistent for players to work with." Regardless of if a player

has high or low Rules-Adhesion, it seems that consistency is important so that everyone playing understands the type of game being played.

This ends my discussion of my Player Characteristics, three categorical characteristics I have placed on spectrums to separate players from one another. Going back to Research Question 2, it is impossible to understand how a player's interpretation of *D&D* is shaped by media consumption if a baseline is not established. By classifying the levels of an individual's Game Knowledge, Game Engagement, and Rules-Adhesion, it is possible to compare and contrast different individual players from one another; this also gives me three Characteristics from which I can gauge the influences from a participant's media usage. And with that, I move to the discussion of said influences.

Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model

Before moving towards the impacts reported by participants, I wish to end my discussion on Player Characteristics by showing how all three interplay with one another in regards to media use. To do so, I have created a model to show the overall trends of media consumption and utilization impacting *Dungeons & Dragons* players, one that begins with my Player Characteristics, specifically levels of Game-Engagement. Individuals who have higher levels of Engagement with *D&D* are those most likely to consume additional *D&D* media. This is commonsensical but important. After all, if a person has no investment, no interest in the game then why would they spend additional time researching it or viewing related media? This trend does not stand alone, however, as it intersects with a series of observations that come together to what I have named the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model. The Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model actually involves all three Player characteristics, each coming into play at a different stage. As I said, the first step is that more Engaged players tend to have higher

rates of *D&D* media consumption than less Engaged players. Now, as players consume more and more *D&D* media, two trends emerge: players begin to show higher levels of Game Knowledge and lower levels of Rules-Adhesion. Both are impacts of media consumption discussed previously, so I will not waste more time repeating myself, but within the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model we see all three classifications at play, centering around the central node of media consumption.

Figure 2. Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model

High Level of Game Engagment

Higher Consumption of Dungeons & Dragons Media

Increased Levels of Game Knowledge

Decreased Levels of Rules Adhesion

Not only does this model perfectly fit within the trends observed through data collection, it also works in reverse as well. As I noticed in several Focus Groups, the member that seemed to show the least Engagement was often the one who consumed the least amount of *D&D* media. These less-Engaged people then also consumed the least media for gaining Information, leading me to assume that they also have lower levels of Game-Knowledge than their peers. To divulge a portion of the next section, I have also concluded that these players are more likely to have higher levels of strict Rules-Adhesion. It should be made clear that the Engagement-

Consumption-Impacts Model is not absolute; players can have high levels of media

consumption and gain Game-Knowledge while still maintaining high levels of Rules-Adhesion.

Highly engaged players can also demonstrate low levels of media consumption, as several

factors help determine an individual's media consumption in general which obviously affect

D&D-centric media consumption as well. The Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model,

however, is supported by my data across the 35 participants and I believe could be a starting

place for future research observing media consumption within certain figurations. I think that

Fandom Studies could utilize this model the most effectively, using the Engagement-

Consumption-Impacts Model to observe how initial interest in a community can lead to

individuals consuming further media on the subject and what community-specific impacts

reveal themselves. Perhaps other Game Studies research could use elements of the model in

examining how those within figurations with a single game as a relevance-frame are influenced

by additional media consumption. For now, while I believe that the characteristics surrounding

the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model are unique to the *Dungeons & Dragons*

community, this model both summarizes the findings of this dissertation as well as demonstrates

a new path that figuration research can move towards.

Media Influences and Impacts

In order to fully explain the role of figurations in and across these *D&D* groups, I will

first illustrate the media influences reported by participants. There were, of course, influences

from media utilization and consumption that were reported by a small number of participants,

but this section will focus on the broad trends found through data collection. In some individual

cases, participants reported no noticeable impacts from their media use; the vast majority of

participants, however, did confirm in interviews that they perceived some shift in their gameplay

or view of *Dungeons & Dragons* after viewing media focusing on the game. This general trend

was expected, but it is in the details that the results grow more interesting. While there were

many different answers to the question of "How did your media consumption impact your

playing of *D&D,*" I found that most impacts were reported by multiple participants, even across

different Focus Groups. There were a few impacts that only a single individual spoke on, but the

majority of answers were restated or confirmed by other players throughout the data collection.

As such, it is these more-universal influences that will be examined. This section will finish

discussion on my Findings by going through the most relevant impacts reported by participants,

examine how these fit within the categories and media objects discussed already, before finally

looking at how a *D&D* figuration changes with increased consumption.

This section will begin with the Matt Mercer Effect, an infamous trend in the *D&D*

community where inexperienced viewers let the *Critical Role* podcast inflate their expectations

of the game unreasonably high. After this will be a discussion of how playstyles were reported

as being impacted by media consumption; this ranges from changes to one's style of play,

loosening how firmly one enforces the rules, and even how veteran players are more willing to

think outside the box and try new options. Metagaming, or allowing outside information to

influence in-game decisions, will be the final topic of this section, as participants who consume

Information media often struggle to separate the frames of their experience from their

character's.

The Matt Mercer Effect

It seems appropriate to begin this discussion by going back to *Critical Role*, perhaps the

biggest media object in the *Dungeons & Dragons* community today (but as discussed in Chapter

4, the biggest media object within my participants' figurations). When talking about

assumptions of contemporary *D&D* players, the first answer that comes to mind is the Matt Mercer Effect, a phenomenon that has been slowly growing and raising both discussion and eyebrows at *Critical Role*'s position within said community. The Matt Mercer Effect is the raised expectations that players seem to bring after watching *CR*; in essence, they expect every DM to be like Matt Mercer and every *D&D* game to be just like watching the podcast. People watch *CR,* see the manner in which Matt Mercer and the cast play *D&D*, then expect the games they play to be the same. This can come in the form of expecting high level effects such as lighting and background music, realistic battle terrain and miniatures, long-term narratives that feel like Hollywood writing, and professional-level character voices and accents for NPCs. Chris told me that while he does not allow *CR* to change his expectations of playing *D&D* himself, he sees how the show could influence a viewer who has not experienced the game themselves. "I think the biggest thing with the Matt Mercer Effect is like, I sit there and I'm like, it'd be awesome to have a campaign like that…you get enveloped into the story because of the different ambient noises and stuff." Even as a casual fan of *CR* with heavy *D&D* experience, Chris understands how the glamor of the show can seem to dim what actual game sessions are like. A player like Chris with high levels of Game-Knowledge may understand what a "normal" session of *D&D* looks like, but a casual fan of *Critical Role* with low Game-Knowledge might lack the experience to know the podcast they are watching is not an average depiction of the game. Players with high Knowledge can recognize that *CR* is a professionally produced show and understand how a normal *D&D* campaign cannot hope to emulate many aspects of the podcast while lower Knowledge players do not have the same frame of reference, making them more likely to accept what they are viewing as a standard *D&D* experience. Those with high Game Engagement are also more likely to avoid the pitfalls of the Mercer Effect, given their

greater experience with the actual game itself, rather than just understanding it through a more limited or media-framed perspective.

Different DMs online have complained about this revealing itself in several different ways, whether it be raised expectations for the voices and accents of the DM's NPCs, the quality of battle maps and terrain, the writing of the narrative, or even just the style of DMing that focuses on long-term emotional growth and long segments of roleplaying. This last example is perhaps the most unfortunate, as everyone that plays *D&D*, especially DMs, have their own style for playing the game. I will go into greater detail on this in the following Playstyles section, but a DM's style of gaming is something unique that does not need to be compared to that of others. Even Mercer himself has weighed in on the Matt Mercer Effect and come to the same conclusion, stating that "the fact of the matter is our style of play is just that...our style of play. Every table is different, and should be!" (Mercer, 2018, para. 1). He goes on to note that, as a group of actors, they have both the skills and interest in playing games built around character exploration over dungeon exploration or focused combat. This is merely the way they enjoy playing.

As a reminder, *Critical Role* is a professionally made *D&D* podcast; it not only features top quality audio/video equipment, a custom-designed multimedia set, and hundreds if not thousands of dollars' worth of miniatures and terrain for exciting battle visuals, but also stars a cast of eight professional voice actors. Each member primarily makes their living off their acting chops and the quality of their voice, so it makes sense that they would excel in a game based partially around Improv and roleplaying. The success of the podcast in both video and audio form is also more understandable with a talented crew whose usual day-to-day consists of having to portray emotion without the audience seeing their face. Seeing this professionally created,

for-profit *D&D* product is almost enough to make a viewer forget that *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game, a hobby created for leisure. While it may be more than that for some people, the general purpose of the game as a leisure activity is to have fun. For viewers of *Critical Role* to expect what they see on *CR* to be the same experience as when they play *D&D* on a kitchen table is akin to teenagers trying to learn Soccer by watching a sports film; a professionally made product for audience entertainment is not going to be an authentic look at what that experience entails for the average person, it is a glamourization of the act that has raised expectations of the original game to levels that most players and DMs cannot reach.

The *Critical Role* Cast as Media Figures

Perhaps the most likely reason behind the Matt Mercer Effect, however, goes back to the Media Worlds theoretical concept. In Chapter 2, Couldry (2008) states that to a consumer, "'media people' are somehow special. This is not based either on fact or on a cultural universal, but rather is a form of consciousness ultimately derived from a particular concentration of symbolic power" (p. 45). This is due to their place within media. The subconscious hierarchy created by media frames itself as something better than the "ordinary world" and "ordinary people," creating a loop of sorts as the media world looks more important as it suggests to the user it is more important. It is not just a case where the cast of *CR* have become a form of celebrity status within the *D&D* community, a community generally unaccustomed to traditional celebrity figures, but they have become Media People through the broadcasting of their podcast streams. Logically, at least to the minds of the audience whose existence has been framed by media, the cast of *CR* must be better than the average player. If they were not, why would half a million people tune into their stream on a weekly basis?

The issue of *CR* as a collection of media figures is only worsened by the fact that, outside of their podcast, each member of the cast is already a media person in the form of voice acting. Sam Reigal is an Emmy winner for Directing in an Animated Program (*Sam Reigel,* n.d.). Matt Mercer has voiced characters as far back as 1988, with 407 actor credits on his IMDB page (*Matthew Mercer,* n.d.). Two of the most successful of the group as voice actors, Ashley Johnson and Laura Bailey starred as the leads in the 2019 Game of the Year *The Last of Us: Part 2*. Both women were nominated for the Best Performance at the 2020 Video Game Awards, with Bailey winning the award[1] (The Game Awards, 2020). When I first started watching *CR*, I immediately recognized the names and voices of three of the cast members. There was a moment of shock as I realized that the performers I was watching were also the voices from video games and shows I enjoyed as a teenager, and it would be fair to say that I was taken aback by the star power of the show. While it was not the reason that I grew to like the podcast, that previous association with them as actors did pique my interest further as I listened to their first episode. Given the links between the *D&D* fandom with the video games and anime communities the cast previously worked in, I believed that it was likely that many fans were also familiar with the actors going into *Critical Role.*

It was made clear during data collection, however, that this is not universal as participants were split on their reaction to the celebrity status of the cast. Two players I interviewed in Focus Group B, Markus and Chris, mentioned that while both had watched *CR* in the past, the voice actors' careers did not play a factor in them watching the podcast. As Chris phrased it, "I enjoy the content so it doesn't matter who's at the table." It was not the cast itself, but the *D&D* focus

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[1] Bailey was actually nominated for the same award the year before as well, but ended up skipping the second half of the ceremony (as well as the reading of her category) so that she could get back in time to play on *Critical Role* the same night.

of the podcast that drew him into viewing the show. Other participants did share my view on the cast's celebrity status, finding themselves engaging with the show because of the previous work done by cast members. Pipp, a player from England, was already consuming *D&D* media regularly when he heard about *Critical Role*, and he only gave the show a chance because he recognized the cast as voices from *World of Warcraft.* Another participant, MJ went further on the point that he had aspirations of wanting to be a voice actor as a teenager; so an element of his enjoyment from *CR* was "vicariously" enjoying the careers of these voice actors he already respected as they took part in his favorite hobby. While he said that the career status of the cast did not push him to watch *CR,* participant Norman did note that it was a good tool for drawing in "people who may not have been interested in *Dungeons and Dragons*, until they learn, 'Hey, one of your favorite voice actors are playing this game. Why don't you check this out?'" I believe that the *Critical Role* cast is aware of this status and often uses it to the show's advantage. Even the slogan of *CR,* proclaimed by Matt Mercer at the start of every episode, highlights this status: "Hello and welcome to tonight's episode of *Critical Role*, where a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors sit around and play Dungeons and Dragons." Regardless of how effective it actually is in bringing in viewers, it is clear that the status the cast has as preexisting media figures is an element of both the presentation and the success of the podcast.

I believe that this is an important element in prevalence of the Matt Mercer Effect; because they are not simply media figures from video games; they are now functioning as media figures within multiple platforms and have become celebrities within their communities. Going back to Couldry (2008) again, much of the reason we see media people as greater than us is that we are only allowed to witness "mediated versions of the social world (and its people). We regard as somehow special those who, but for appearing within the media, would be

interchangeable with ourselves...the other side of this is to regard ourselves as 'merely ordinary', by comparison" (p. 56). We only see the cast members of *CR* as professional actors or as famous *D&D* players, so we as audience members are conditioned to forget about their ordinary lives, the aspects that make them like us, and focus on the extraordinary elements that we witness through media, which are edited and professionally polished to make them look and sound their absolute best. There is no tangible difference between the cast and audience, merely "a social and symbolic boundary between two orders of things, two orders of people'" (2008, p. 141). It is this status of media figures, of being higher on this hierarchy of *D&D,* that makes viewers assume that what they are watching is better than their own games of *D&D*, that what they are watching is the correct way of playing the game.

But perhaps the greatest factor in the creation of the Matt Mercer Effect is the media platform that Mercer sits atop. "If the media are 'there' with you, you must somehow be 'important'" (2008, p. 141), so by virtue of him having a podcast, he must be an incredible Dungeon Master. After all, if he was not a legendary DM, why would someone have invested so many resources into giving him a platform online? More so, if I was just as good of a DM, why am I not broadcasting my *D&D* games to hundreds of thousands of viewers a week? By the logic of media worlds, Mercer's position within media is a sign that something about him is special and worth viewing, some facets of his skills as a DM are extraordinary enough to warrant his place on Twitch and YouTube. From Focus Group B, Markus and Chris said that they admire Mercer's style of play, even if they themselves cannot replicate it with their level of production value and the voices Mercer incorporates. Personally, I can agree with this. As a *CR* fan, it is easy for me to enjoy the podcast as entertainment while understanding that I could not play *D&D* in the same manner that they do, just as I can watch a game of fútbol without

expecting myself to match David Beckham on the field. Even in this statement, I notice myself placing Mercer in a position above me, my language clearly stressing that he is in some capacity a better DM than I am. Even as a scholar that understands how media worlds function, I cannot escape the influence that frames my experiences to believe that Matt Mercer is a professional icon of Dungeon Mastering.

It must be stressed again, however, that the hierarchy between the media world and the ordinary world, according to Couldry, is mainly symbolic. There is no real reason or law that makes the media world more important, more powerful, more special than the real world other than the fact that all media reinforce this belief; but this is exactly why the hierarchy exists and why it is so pervasive, because every piece of media works together to force viewers to accept this hierarchy. As Couldry (2008) puts it, "like the sacred/profane distinction, it seems effectively absolute, a naturalised division of the way the world 'is.'" (p. 15), and this division has been made apparent by media and media producers for so long that it seems to be an undeniable truth. This is not to say that media people have no power. Going back to Chapter 2, I wrote that the power of the media person is not just in their social status, but in their ability to influence others. I have, as of writing this, 290 friends on Facebook, my only social media account. Even if I have a friend share one of my posts, the largest audience I could hope to reach out to is realistically about 1000 people. Matt Mercer, on the other hand, has more than 747,000 followers just on Twitter, only one of the many platforms where he can interact with other users. The *Critical Role* Twitch channel has 800,000 followers, and their YouTube channel has 1,330,000 subscribers. The difference in the scale of how large our potential audiences are is immense, more than 1,000:1 comparing myself to just *CR*'s YouTube channel. This is also only counting subscribers and followers, which has to be dwarfed by the actual numbers of views that

all three of these accounts receive. The first episode of their second campaign has more than 13 million views, so clearly *CR*'s audience is larger than the statistics above.

The point I try to emphasize here is that so much of the power of Mercer and the *CR* cast come from the size of their audience and the influence that stems from this. Couldry (2008) believes that while symbolic power is important to maintaining the media hierarchy, "there is a real difference in terms of ability to make yourself heard and have your account of social reality accepted" (p. 20). Those with the ability to speak to the masses have their worldview accepted by the masses. This is the true origin of the Matt Mercer Effect. *Critical Role* as a program, the skill of these professional voice actors to do accents and roleplaying, the rise of *D&D*'s popularity, none of these are as important as the size of the audience available to Mercer. Again, each DM has a different style, every *D&D* group has a unique way of playing and interacting with the game, but these cases are confined to their immediate audience of whoever is in the room (whether that room is a physical or virtual one). In the case of Mercer's group, millions of people have watched them play, and thus millions have been introduced to this as a possible way of playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. Before *Critical Role* was a podcast, it was the same group of people playing the same campaign from their kitchen table. At the time, the Matt Mercer Effect did not exist, even though the same man was DMing in the same manner. The difference was the power of media to broadcast their game to a larger audience. Of course, once the game was viewed on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, the effects of the media hierarchy had audiences trained to accept *CR* and Mercer as better than the average *D&D* campaign; but it is originally the access to millions provided by communication technologies and online platforms that is responsible for the spread of Mercer's unique style of DMing that can since become a controversial phenomenon in the *D&D* community.

To perfectly illustrate my argument here, I asked Jorge about why he saw the *CR* cast as better *D&D* players by asking "What makes them better? Why are they better? Why do you see them as better *D&D* players than you?" Going back and rewatching the video of our interview, I forgot just how confused he looked as I asked him this. Jorge sat there, clearly thinking hard about how to answer me, dumbstruck by having to internally find a solution. After (and this is not exaggeration) more than 10 seconds of pondering, he shook his head in an unsatisfied manner and offered his best answer: "They have a platform. That's certainly a piece of it." As I brought up the concept of media figures, Jorge seemed to have a moment of recognition as I applied the concept to the *CR* cast, but even after this all of his answers of "why they were better" involved their large audience and the reach of their platform. While obviously not the only reason, it is clear to me that the mediated presence of *Critical Role* and its elevation of the cast into media figures is a major reason why inexperienced fans were buying into the Matt Mercer Effect.

Participant Accounts of the Matt Mercer Effect

For all that I have discussed the Matt Mercer Effect so far, I have discussed participant accounts of the phenomenon very little. The reason for this is, out of my 35 participants, only two had a personal experience with the Mercer Effect. It is clear that the Effect is known widely in the community, however, as most of my participants reported hearing of the Mercer Effect. While some were aware of it when I mentioned it, many brought it up themselves when discussing the impacts of *D&D* media. In particular, it was often referenced as one of the negative effects to come from the digitization of *D&D* or from the overall move of the community onto interactive platforms. Many participants told me about the Matt Mercer Effect and how it was harmful to *D&D*, how it instilled unrealistic expectations for the game, how it

glorified only a single style of DMing, how it made DMs' jobs more difficult having to fight the impression that the *Critical Role* cast had left. Yet, for all of the people who were aware of its existence in the community, and even more so for all the people who cited it as a negative growth within *D&D*, only two were able to give an example they had witnessed of it happening.

According to Kolok, a Twitch streamer and DM, the Matt Mercer Effect has popped up multiple times for him in the past. Years ago, in a Discord server designed for DMs to share ideas, a user stepped forward with the idea to start a liveplay *D&D* podcast, in a similar light to *Critical Role*. After talking to them, and getting feedback from other users of that server, it was clear to Kolok that this person was attempting to recreate *CR,* even down to the style of play shown on the podcast. In this same *D&D* server, both players and DMs would be able to leave reviews of one another, essentially giving individuals a rating as to how good or likable they were to advertise if someone should play with them or not. Kolok found that many of these reviews mentioned *CR*, and especially DM reviews would have references to Matt Mercer. Perhaps worst of all, Kolok had a campaign fall apart on him due to the Matt Mercer Effect. Only a few weeks in, the entire party complained because he was not incorporating elements they had seen on the podcast, such as props, background music, highly detailed maps; at the time, Kolok was a college student, and had neither the time nor resources for most of these, and found himself discouraged that this led to his entire party dropping out. This is a textbook example of the Matt Mercer Effect, as the players' expectations of what a "normal" *D&D* is like were so skewed by *CR* that anything less than a professionally produced experience fell flat for them. It was clear to me that, even more than four years later, Kolok was quite upset about the event, clearly equal parts frustrated at his players' behavior and disappointed that the game he offered was rejected. This latter emotion is an aspect of the Matt Mercer Effect that needs

further research. Due to the personal nature of *D&D*, especially the role of the DM which requires intense creative efforts and time spent, a feeling of inadequacy can arise from negative interactions with these unrealistic expectations set by *CR*.

Norman, another participant, says that he was in a local game store in 2019 where he could see and hear a table set up with a DM running a session for obviously new players. They had just finished creating new characters, the first step in any game, when the DM began to explain that "This isn't *Critical Role,* this is our game." Before they had actually started playing, the DM found it necessary to distance their campaign from the ones seen on *CR*, as well as the table's style of play from that of the podcast. This stood out to Norman, whose impression was that this local DM had to have dealt with the Matt Mercer Effect so many times that he was now forced to begin any adventure with this warning to deal with the expectations of his players. Was this the case here, or were both Norman and this DM under the impression that the Matt Mercer Effect is a larger issue than it actually is?

Again, most of my participants have mentioned, at some point, the Matt Mercer Effect and its negative impact on the *D&D* community. I go onto Reddit and usually at least once a week, I see someone posting about the Matt Mercer Effect, generally in the form of a complaint. But if it is this big of a problem, if *CR* has done such an awful task of unrealistically warping its audience's expectations, why do I only have one participant who has witnessed it himself (and then in Norman's case, from a distance and in passing)? A similar response came from Kevin, the streamer I previously mentioned. Out of all the people I talked to, Kevin has the most experience as a Dungeon Master. Although he only started playing around 2012, he has fully submerged himself into the *D&D* community, going as far as to become a For Hire DM at a local game shop running Adventure League (essentially official sponsored campaigns written and

distributed by Wizards of the Coast and then run by locals). Due to this, Kevin has DMed for

over 50 different individuals, but even he, the most experienced DM that I talked to, had only

heard of others suffering from the Mercer Effect, but never had the misfortune to be confronted

with it himself.

My interviews have led me to conclude that the Matt Mercer Effect is becoming a

buzzword in this community more than it is an actual phenomenon, essentially an occurrence

that has evolved thanks to mass communication into a myth among players. I think this has to do

with three factors: high Game-Knowledge of my participants, time passing since the debut of

CR, and the Echo Chamber effect. As I mentioned, players with high levels of Game-

Knowledge are less likely to be impacted by the Matt Mercer Effect due to their greater

understanding of *D&D*, using their own experiences to frame the podcast against a "normal"

D&D campaign. If more of my participants had been less experienced players, those with lower

Game-Knowledge, then perhaps more individuals would have personal stories about the

phenomenon. But while this could clearly be a factor, I believe it is more likely that the

continued presence of the podcast within the *D&D* community is more likely. *Critical Role*

aired its first episode in 2015, and it would make sense that the Matt Mercer Effect would be the

strongest in the early days of the show. After all, it was a new craze at the time, something

revolutionary that took an entire community by storm; so it stands to reason that in the first years

of the show's lifetime would be when this new style of DMing would be attracting its biggest

following, as well as having a greater effect on fresh audience members. In 2021, however, the

show has successfully integrated itself as a fixture of the roleplaying world. It has become an

icon with its own brand, charity foundation, Amazon Studios-backed animated series, and

millions of followers. While it is still a powerful influence in the *D&D* community, it is no

longer a novel one as audiences have adjusted to *CR*'s particular style of gameplay. The growth

of the Actual Play podcast has also dampened this, as there are now dozens of shows where

viewers can witness media figures playing their favorite Tabletop Role Playing Game online.

Critical Role, once a surprising tidal wave crashing into the *D&D* scene, has now become a

permanent landmark of the area, one that locals have become accustomed to. Yet people still

remember the initial storm and its impact on the community, bringing us to the reason why the

Matt Mercer Effect is still so widely discussed. This matches up with the timeline Kolok laid out

for me, where he stated that most of this, including the party that dropped out because they

wanted a more professional experience, happened around 2017, early in the rise of *Critical Role*.

The podcast's first campaign aired on YouTube between June 24, 2015 and October 25, 2017,

with the second campaign airing on YouTube on January 15, 2018.

An element of the Matt Mercer Effect that I have not seen discussed that came from my

data collection is when it is the players themselves, not the DM, who feel pressured by the

performances on *Critical Role*. This testimony came from Jorge, who told me that he enjoyed

watching clips of actual play podcasts such as *CR* or *Dimension 20*, but that he could not watch

actual episodes for any extended length of time because they made him feel self-conscious. He

stated, "I'm not that player" and that watching these "professional" players and DMs made him

feel insecure about his own abilities and performances at the table. Where this story grows more

interesting is how quickly Jorge's party then came in to defend him. In the two hours that our

focus group took, I do not think I am exaggerating to say that about 10 minutes of it was taken

up by various people at the table telling me, in a supporting but firm tone, that Jorge is the best

D&D player any of them had the pleasure of knowing. Jorge, of course, downplayed or was

embarrassed by these comments, and his humble nature was brought to the forefront during these

sections, but this discussion made me think more on this. Here I had a player who was clearly a pleasure to play with, someone that others flocked to be near, a player who I was told multiple times by each of the other four had improved the quality of their individual characters and the overall campaign with Jorge's contributions. And yet here was a man who could not stand to watch *Critical Role*, even after admitting that he enjoyed clips and highlights posted on YouTube, because of the deep insecurity that these professionally produced shows brought out in him.

This is a different side of the Matt Mercer Effect than I am used to seeing. Traditionally, the phenomenon is discussed as negatively impacting DMs specifically, as players with unrealistic expectations vent their frustrations about a campaign at the person running it. Somewhat fitting with this, Kevin claimed that *CR* gave him a sense of Imposter Syndrome, questioning his own DMing practices when comparing himself to Mercer with each weekly episode. As a player, Jorge is the first participant I have talked to who felt the pressure to live up to the standard of the programming he is viewing. I wonder why this is not a side of this Effect that more people discuss. Why is the assumption after viewing *Critical Role* that the DM of a game must live up to the standard of Mercer? So then why are more players not reporting their issues living up to expectations of the players of *CR*, seven trained professional actors? Again, perhaps the answer is that the DM, as the organizer and leader of a group, is held most responsible for the quality of the game they run; or perhaps this is a case where people naturally, when seeing an issue, point fingers at others before themselves. This occurrence, while interesting to me, is outside the scope of this dissertation and would require its own study to properly explore.

Within the *Dungeons & Dragons* community as well as my own Focus Groups, it is clear that the Matt Mercer Effect is one of the most famous impacts caused by *D&D* media. More of an issue with the rise of *CR* than it is today, the Mercer Effect told of new players assuming that all *D&D* games would be presented and played just like in an episode of *Critical Role*, leading to unsatisfied players and disgruntled DMs. Not only is this an inaccurate depiction of *D&D,* it showcases how the influence of media worlds and media figures can create a subconscious hierarchy that places the viewer at the bottom and the show's cast on a higher level, mainly due to the large platform the show provides. That being said, the testimony of my participants leads me to assume that the Matt Mercer Effect is not the widespread phenomenon that its notoriety within the community suggests. While some participants have clearly been impacted by its effects on people surrounding them, the vast majority know of its existence, can tell me about how it is a negative impact of *D&D*'s digital move, but have no personal experiences with it at all. I can say confidently that the Mercer Effect is an excellent example of how *D&D* media has influenced players in the past, but I believe that as the show continues we will see the Mercer Effect fade away as the podcast becomes a more stable element in the community. Looking at my Player Characteristics, I believe it is Game-Knowledge and Game-Engagement that are most related to the Mercer Effect; the higher one's Knowledge of *D&D*, and the more Engagement they have with the game itself rather than just related media, the less likely a person is to fall for the false assumptions implied by *Critical Role.* Yet, as the podcast moves into its seventh year since release, I find the impact of The Matt Mercer Effect lessened as the community grows used to its presence within individual's figurations.

Changing Playstyles

The Matt Mercer Effect is an impact of *D&D* media with widespread reputation in its community, an influence that most of my participants either brought up themselves or recognized when it was mentioned. Few individuals, however, actually had personal stories dealing with the Mercer Effect, making it more of a "boogeyman" than an actual phenomenon. When participants told me their actual experiences being influenced by *D&D* media, one of the most common answers was a reported sense of "empathy" with the playstyles of others. Playstyle here refers to the way in which a person plays and performs *Dungeons & Dragons.* This is a broad term that covers much of the act of playing *D&D*, but can include how a player decides to roleplay their character, if they are more interested in combat or social encounters, if they approach *D&D* as a game to win or a group activity to enjoy. Each person who plays *D&D* slightly differently, and thus each player has a unique playstyle to themselves; while many people playing together in a campaign may have similar playstyles as a result of playing together (or perhaps they play together because of that similarity), no two people approach the game in the exact same way.

As addressed in Chapter 1, "traditional tabletop RPGs, while they often exhort players to roleplay and tell stories, don't generally provide a structure to shape them" (Costikyan, 2010, p. 10). While the rules of *D&D* explain how interactions with rules work, or if certain actions are allowed to players, it does little to teach players "how to play the game." How do I roleplay with other players? How do I decide on a personality for my character? How do I balance my backstory and in-game mechanics while building my character in the first place? The freedom of the openness that tabletop games provide allows a person to play the game in whatever style they wish, whether it be to focus on roleplaying, combat, attempting humor, or anything else that

makes the game a fun experience. I stated in earlier chapters that each *D&D* player has their own unique style of playing the game, which comes from a combination of personality, learned behaviors, and outside influences (such as Kung-fu films, anime, or professional wrestling). Between these factors, however, I argue that the most important are learned behaviors. While some come from media consumption, most of these behaviors are learned when a player first begins playing *Dungeons & Dragons*; if a new player is introduced to a group of veteran players, that rookie is going to observe how the rest of the group plays and subconsciously think "This is how you play *D&D*" and model their playstyle after those around them. In practice, this is the same as any learned behaviors found in children, where the parents and environment around the child will greatly impact whatever social cues and behaviors will be taught unconsciously. Knowing some of my participants personally, I can see how many of their playstyles derived from the styles of those they started playing with originally, with some groups focusing on combat while others maximize social encounters and roleplaying.

There is no "correct" playstyle that all players should strive to copy, with dozens of different ways that one can approach *D&D*, the same way that there are dozens of different styles one could paint a canvas or play Soccer. With that being said, after a few years of experience playing, most *D&D* players have settled into what will be the foundation of their individual style of play, formed from the environment they first started playing in as well as what is most enjoyable for them on a personal level. The introduction of electronic media is the factor that alters this formula, one that has been stable since the game's release. In the past, physical distance was one of the biggest limitations to who someone could play *D&D* with. Especially in the past when the game was not as popular, it could be difficult to find a campaign unless there was a local gameshop or comic book store that advertised itself as a location to play at.

Oftentimes, one was forced to play *D&D* with whoever was close enough to your location, or whoever showed up in these public spaces. Due to this, players before the move to digital were limited in their opportunities to see how outside groups played the game differently. As a result, one may find themselves only seeing the same influences (the group one played with), and come to the conclusion that the group's manner of playing was the only playstyle option. In terms of *D&D* media, one was relatively limited to officially licensed products: spin-off fantasy novels, the *Dungeons & Dragons* (1983) cartoon, a few terrible Hollywood films, and little else.

Thus enters digital media, which has allowed players to share their playstyle with others, either in the form of text post descriptions or videos of groups playing the game. Forums such as Giant in the Playground, various subreddits such as r/DND and r/DNDnext, and even the forums on D&D Beyond, all allow players to discuss the game with one another over text; but while the topic of playstyle is approached more often on various subreddits, in general it is more difficult for text-based platforms to convey the actual performance that goes into playing *D&D*. It is with the rise of *D&D* podcasts and other live-play content that a viewer can truly watch how others outside their gaming circle play the game. Audio and video are better mediums for capturing performance for an audience, and the ability to watch someone playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with such convenience is a newer luxury to the tabletop community. By watching a *Critical Role* stream, either a new or experienced player can witness a playstyle different from their own, one they would not have had access to a decade ago. In this way, *CR* and other Actual Play podcasts can enhance one's understanding of the game, working in tandem with text-based media objects to provide a visual demonstration of the data being discussed on forums and other sites. This, along with the rise of countless other *D&D* digital media objects, has led to players reporting that viewing related media has opened them to other styles of playing *D&D*, ones that

would not have occurred to them if they had not had this direct view into how other campaigns function.

Impacts to Playstyle

A great example of media impacting playstyle was found with Lance from Focus Group B. When asked about if the content he had consumed impacted the way he played, Lance commented that it influenced him to branch out and try new things. According to him, the biggest results of his *D&D* media consumption was seeing others' perspectives on how to play *D&D*. With Lance, he found himself seeing that other players posting online about their experiences made him realize that many of them were focusing more on roleplay and playing a character than he was. He often found himself in campaigns where combat effectiveness was the major concern in making characters, as combat-focused games were the norm in the group he mostly played with. New players online, or people playing shorter single-session adventures on Twitch, seemed to put more importance into their characters. The players Lance watched had emotional connections with their characters who were seen as important and unique like a character in a story instead of a video game character who only serves as a proxy for the player's actions in-game. Lance said that he envied this, and in an attempt to recapture some of this "childlike imagination to them sometimes and I want to recapture that." Wanting to return to playing the game from a fresh perspective, he found himself changing his own playing style to adopt some of these habits he was witnessing. He wanted to play *D&D* in a way that was more similar to this, as these other players "in a way, get more importance out of that" style of play.

In a different focus group, Paul told a similar tale as Lance. As both a player and a DM, Paul had a style to the way he played. He described himself as one who paid strict attention to the rules, though not to the point of being a rule lawyer. While he defends his past behavior and

said that he was careful never to let this rule-heavy style stop others from enjoying the game, he changed his perspective on the game after consuming outside *D&D* media, especially hearing the stories of other players. He came to the realization that, while he may not have been doing anything himself to gatekeep others from playing *D&D*, this style of gameplay was not the best for playing with new, inexperienced players. Even if he was not purposely making the game less fun for others, listening to the stories of other players gave him "empathy" to the perspectives of how others viewed the game. To this day, though he does still try to stay within the rules as much as possible, he has changed his playstyle to accommodate more flexible styles of gameplay so that a wider range of players will feel comfortable at his table. Perhaps less dramatic examples, but other DMs that I spoke to often told me of similar experiences where seeing how others played/DMed was a way for them to evolve and grow as Dungeon Masters themselves.

For Focus Group B, it became a case where media consumption then informed the playstyle in which the group adopted. When talking about how his entire group used forums to research character builds to create more powerful characters, Markus did make the interesting comment that (while it was not required) utilizing resources such as this was important if every other member of a group was. His attitude was not one of pushing his own media habits onto his players, but of balancing the party. "If you have something where a lot of people are utilizing those resources, they're looking into it a little bit more than it does become a little more important to put in that level of effort or a little bit more effort than normal." Not only does this tie into the idea of a party needing a similar level of Game Knowledge and Game Engagement (characteristics that will be discussed shortly), but there is also a mechanical gameplay reason for Markus' thinking. With the Game Knowledge from these types of forums, a player is able to make a character much more mechanically powerful than a less-knowledgeable player could

hope to. In a group game like *D&D*, each member of a party in-game needs to be able to carry their weight; in situations where ⅘ of a party is optimized for combat, that single character is either likely to get themselves killed or risk the safety of the other four characters who must overcompensate. Out-of-game, this can lead to frustration on several levels and in-game can lead to a session being more challenging than intended. A personal confession: I was actually a player in Markus' campaign before I began this dissertation. While I was friends with all of the other players, my playstyle did not match theirs and I found using forums to make characters to be less fun than trying odd combinations. As a result, my character was always the least helpful and led to me realizing that my method of playing did not fit with this group, so we agreed to let me amicably leave the group.

Using this dissertation to reflect, I can see that my own media consumption has impacted how I perform *D&D*. I found a YouTube video years ago, analyzing the playstyle of Travis Willingham, a cast member of *Critical Role.* Across the nearly seven years of *Critical Role*'s run, we have hundreds of hours to look back on and one can see trends, habits in specific players' styles of playing. This video highlighted the fact that whenever the focus was on him, Travis would use this moment to push another player into the spotlight. Rather than have the moment for himself, Travis went above and beyond to make sure the others at the table felt they were having an exciting moment they could brag about later. The realization that Travis' playstyle was worthy of a third party creating an 11-minute video to praise what a kind, considerate player he was gave me pause. I began to reflect on my own playstyle and over time have worked to adapt the habits of Travis into my own gameplay, so that I can be just as supportive of a player to others in my own campaigns. While there are other impacts my media consumption has had on my approach to *D&D*, this is the one that stands out to me for two

reasons: it is the most obvious case where a piece of media influenced me, as well as the largest change to my overall playstyle. In fact, I often used this example during interviews to try and help guide participants towards finding their own media influences.

This discussion of different playstyles goes back to the Matt Mercer Effect. Clearly, this phenomenon shows that *Critical Role*, more so than most *D&D* media, has an impact on the playstyles and assumptions players have. One can see that this has led to many in the community, in particular early players and die-hard fans of the podcast, to assume that the playstyle the *Critical Role* cast have is one to strive for, that it is either the best or at the very least one to emulate. Not only is the Matt Mercer Effect harmful in that it has led to DMs being judged for not living up to a professional standard, it also leads to a homogenous view of one single playstyle being the correct one. In a surprising turn of events, Mercer's (2018) response to the trend is to condemn the very idea of it. Not only did he seem personally upset that his work was being used to harshly judge other DMs, he spoke against the idea that any DM should feel pressured to follow in his example, writing that

> Our style isn't for everyone! Hell, just scan the comments below to see how many folks don't like us, haha. I've played with many different players, ran games of many different styles and focuses, and I can tell you... there is so much fun variety to how a TTRPG can be played, they're limiting their chances to enjoy it by trying to 'play it just like us' (para. 4).

Not only does Mercer argue against him and the *Critical Role* cast being considered "better" at playing *D&D*, he ties back to the earlier point that *D&D* was designed with the intent of leaving as much to the DM and players as possible in terms of how they want to play the game. The rules are specific when limiting in-game actions, but are wide open in terms of out-of-character

decision making, roleplaying, and what style of game they wish to invest in. I myself have

played in campaigns with a strong emphasis on combat, where each unclear action was checked

in the handbook before proceeding to ensure it was according to the rules. Others have been

mainly based on roleplay and in-character conversations that saw the DM making up rulings on

the spot rather than "wasting time" to go through the rules and check. Most have been

somewhere in the middle, but each group's unique mixture of personalities, senses of humor, and

gameplay goals left it feeling genuinely different from the others I was a part of.

Perhaps this in turn impacts the types of *D&D* media those players would be consuming.

More combat focused, by the rules groups such as Focus Groups A and B are more likely to be

utilizing resources such as online forums for powerful character builds. Groups that prefer a

roleplay-heavy, character driven game may be the type to appreciate a podcast like *CR*, where

the cast of actors spends much of their efforts on long-term emotional storytelling and frequent

dialogue between players. Discussed in Chapter 2, a key element of the figuration is the

relevance frame, or specific purpose, of the user that brings them to that media ecosystem. It

stands to reason, then, that individuals within the same *D&D* figuration would be consuming

slightly different media based on their unique position as well as personal tastes/styles within the

game. It would make logical sense that those playing in different styles would have interests in

consuming different varieties of media based on the game to better suit their own playstyle.

Loosening of Rules After Media Consumption

Going back to my Player Characteristics, another trend in data shows a link between

media consumption and level of Rules-Adhesion. More common to Dungeon Masters than

players, I encountered several participants who discussed that seeing others play the game made

them care less about following the rules as aggressively. To give this some context, remember

that I explained the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a game of make-believe given structure

through its ruleset. With this design, Wizards of the Coast purposely created the game so that

these rules can be as important as a party wants, or as loosely enforced as the DM wishes. I have

been in campaigns where both players and the DM will not continue a battle until the exact

wording of a rule is looked up, while others have the DM making up a temporary ruling on the

spot to continue gameplay quickly and preserve the flow of the scene. Again, the playstyles of

individuals is just that, an individual trait. That being said, multiple DMs have told me that by

observing how others DM their campaigns, they have found themselves enforcing exact rulings

less and less, relying more on their memory of the rule or simply moving on to continue the

game. Kolok told me that watching others play tabletop games on Twitch made him see there

was fun to be had by not letting the rules slow down the game he was running, stating

> there was a time when I thought it was very important to stick to the rules very
>
> aggressively, to follow to the letter in the *Player's Handbook*. I haven't opened the 3.5
>
> *Player's Handbook* in three years…I have very much been given a perception that if you
>
> have a basic understanding of the rules, it doesn't matter if a fireball is a plus two or plus
>
> three.

For Kolok, seeing others play in a different style made him reconsider the manner in which he

was playing *D&D*, eventually coming to the conclusion that he and his players enjoyed the game

more, especially in the moment, if less importance was given to exact rulings.

Paul, another DM, had a similar experience after consuming enough *D&D* media to

witness how many different ways there were to play the game. While he told me that he was, up

until recently, a DM who tried to enforce the rules as much as possible, he realized that his style

of playing might "make other players feel stupid for not knowing those rules." Paul felt that his

style could lead to him "gatekeeping" others out of the hobby, and adjusted his playstyle to accommodate more inexperienced players. The DM for Focus Group D, Adam described himself to me as a "recovering asshole-style rules lawyer," and that watching others play the game on podcasts or reading about players' experiences online showed him that many had just as much fun without being as strict to the rules. As he eventually came to realize, "I was so concerned about the rules of the game that it stopped me from having fun with the game." Malik, yet another DM from one of my focus groups, told me that watching *D&D* podcasts taught him to see the rules as a tool to use when they were helpful, but to discard them when they were hampering his sessions. While this impact of media appears more specific to Dungeon Masters than it is to players, that makes sense in the context of a *D&D* game, where the DM is the one responsible for enforcing (or not enforcing) the rules. Given the number of DMs who noticed similar trends in their own gameplay, however, it is clear that this loosening of rules is a trend forming after digitally opening up to the playstyles of others.

Opening to Unorthodox Options in Gameplay

After discussing an impact that predominantly hits DMs, let us turn to a similar trend in players. When interviewing Kevin, he made an interesting observation about how he saw players impacted by consuming D&D media. He believes that the biggest impact by D&D media on how players interact with the game is simple: it makes them more creative and more capable of thinking up unorthodox options ingame. Kevin believes that extra time spent playing the game or viewing content about the game leads to players having "stronger imaginations" and being willing to try new things. One of the effects of *D&D*'s open, do-whatever-you-want design is that many new players find themselves, as Kevin puts it, "paralyzed by the freedom." There are simply too many possible actions in a game where one can do anything, so many

players in their first campaigns will play it in the same way as a video game, only trying time-tested options or those explicitly written out for them (such as "Attack," "Spellcasting," "Use Item," etc.). One player, Jorge, told me that the first time he played he had "a lot of analysis paralysis, I had a poor understanding of what I could do in the game at any given time" which he diagnosed as being "too scared to do things because I need to know what all of these skills do." This is an issue for many new players who are not used to being able to take actions in a game that are not written in a rulebook. Older players, or those who have consumed more media, understand the freedom implied by the game's design and play more flexibly. They have witnessed, either firsthand or through media, the various ways that one can play, including hundreds of examples of others trying actions not found in the rulebook; rather than being seen as cheating or breaking rules, however, this behavior is recognized as utilizing the open nature of the game and playing in a way intended by its creators. Therefore, these more knowledgeable players are willing to play in strange, unorthodox ways because they have seen others rewarded for doing the same. Going back to Player Characteristics, players with higher Game-Engagement are more likely to take advantage of these improvised actions that a player with a lower Engagement of the game. Jorge reaffirmed this for me, saying that after consuming more *D&D* material, he was a more adventurous adventurer in only his third session.

The testimony of other participants only confirmed this, when two different players unprompted said that consuming D&D content made them realize the freedom they had in the game. Tallstag, a player from Indiana, told me that media "does impact my gameplay in the sense that it reminds me anything's possible.…I think that sometimes I need help being reminded that because I'll box myself in." Another player, Jayne, had the same story when it came to her in-game style becoming more unorthodox. When she started playing D&D, she says she was

somewhat limited in her decisions due to presumptions coming from in, as in video games where a character can only act in ways programmed by the game. Due to this change, the shock of the large ruleset, and the openness of *Dungeons & Dragons*, she felt that "you have so many options, it limits you." Now that she has consumed *D&D* TikToks and other various media, she has seen the "weird ideas" that other players have and been inspired by them. Rather than getting bogged down by the enormous freedom she has, and struggling under the pressure to fully realize its potential, she has become brave enough to try her own weird ideas and believes that this "makes me a better player." I can empathize with Jayne's pride in herself, as I had a similar journey myself as a new player.

When I first started playing, in combat I did little more than have my character run up to enemies and attack with a dagger every turn. A year of playing and many trips to various *D&D* subreddits later, I began a dangerous fight underground by throwing itching powder at a group of approaching assassins. The DM, Kevin at the time, was shocked and had to decide for himself how to rule the action, as there was nothing in *The Player's Handbook* about it. Later, the veteran player at our table commended me, saying it was the first time he had seen someone using itching powder in combat before. Originally, I only did what I knew was allowed in the game, because I was unfamiliar with D&D as a whole and did not want to cheat. I did not understand the game itself enough to know what rules I may be breaking and I was not in touch with the community itself enough to recognize when it was appropriate to bend certain rules; but eventually, much like Tallstag and Jayne, I found myself comfortable with thinking of actions to take outside of the rulebook and enjoying the freedom of agency I finally had. This understanding, both of rules and when one is allowed to ignore them, can only come with experience. This experience can come from time spent playing or by consuming D&D media

and taking advantage of others' experiences, an option that is only easier today thanks to the digitization of the game as well as the wave of content created by the community. While Game-Knowledge can certainly have a part in this, I believe that it is Game-Engagement that is most heavily tied to this influence, as the more time spent engaging with *D&D* (either in-person or through media consumption), the more likely it is that a player will consider or act upon these improvised actions and take advantage of the free-form nature of the tabletop game.

When looking back at the various manners in which players' playstyles change from media use, it is easy to go back to my Player Characteristics and see how each comes into play depending on what kind of change is occurring. For Lance, who found himself jealous of watching inexperienced players seemingly having more "childlike wonder" about the game, I think what he was actually missing was when his levels of Game-Knowledge and Game-Engagement were low; before his experience and knowledge of the game had grown, each new encounter and discovery felt novel and fresh, something that disappeared as he grew to understand the game more. For DMs like Adam and Kolok, their increased media consumption led to a decrease in Rules-Adhesion as their Game-Engagement increased. This ties directly back to the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts model, showing a consistent trend for many more experienced, Engaged *D&D* players. Finally, participants who reported feeling the freedom to try unorthodox actions, or anything not explicitly stated in the rules, generally only felt comfortable doing so after their Engagement with the game had grown to the point that they understood the improvised nature of the game. This trend could also be accredited to those with higher Game-Knowledge as well, with some learning enough about the game through the media content or stories of others to the point that they learn how flexible the rules can be for the tabletop.

Closing this section, I have discussed the various ways in which participants found their playstyles impacted by the *Dungeons & Dragons* media they utilized and consumed. In general, these impacts seem to be minor influences, small and subtle enough that it was only after being questioned directly in interviews that said influences were even noticeable to the individual; this is as expected, however, as contemporary scholarship on the impacts of media have shown repeatedly that media's influence on the user are often on the subconscious level. Yet in terms of what impacts media could have upon a *D&D* player, altering their playstyle is one of the more dramatic as one's playstyle is the most direct way in which they interact with the game itself. Whether it is Kolok who has learned to lower his level of Rules-Adhesion after years of media consumption, or Lance jealous of players on Twitch with lower Game-Knowledge than him having a better time, or Jayne realizing while browsing TikTok that she has the freedom in-game to act outside of the rulebook, all of these participants found their playstyles changing in some capacity post-media. Continuing to another impact that surfaces during gameplay, the next section looks at metagaming, or how some players with high Game-Knowledge struggle to keep their personal knowledge separated from that of the character they play as.

Avoiding Metagaming

Another impact of media consumption within *D&D* is an increased risk from players of an age-old issue within *Dungeons & Dragons*: metagaming. A problem rather unique to roleplaying games, metagaming is the practice of letting outside information (information known to the player, but not known to the player's character within the narrative) influence the decisions a player makes. In practice, this could be telling the other players what the weakness of the monster is, information their character does not know but the player does after reading through *The Monster Manual*; it can also come from building strategies around knowledge that has not

come up within the game yet and clearly comes from out of game, such as knowing the range of certain spells and using that to plan for a battle against an evil wizard. In both examples, the player is choosing actions to take ingame because of information they know, but the character does not. The problem is that this disrupts the narrative element of *D&D*. While this is acceptable behavior in most other games, it is considered by many to be cheating within *D&D*, where the extra challenge is that the player and character must remain separate from one another. As Fine (1983) puts it,

> the character identity is separate from the player identity. In this, fantasy gaming is distinct from other games...The pieces in chess ('black') have no more or less knowledge than their animator. However, Sir Ralph the Rash, the doughty knight, lacks some information that his player has (p. 186).

After reading the various rulebooks, I know more about the monsters and challenges within the game than my character does. I know the exact ranges of spells and the differences between each color of dragon, information that Rydal the Barbarian does not have. I have to ignore this information while playing *D&D*, as it is assumed that a player makes decisions from the perspective of the player's character, not the player themself. As a game that uses roleplaying as a major component, metagaming disrupts the narrative frame surrounding the game. Not only does this impact the story being told, most players find this to be a mild form of cheating.

Imagine a scenario where a thief has scouted ahead of a group in a dungeon, telling the slower and less stealthy members to wait until they return. Then, out of sight and earshot, the thief is grabbed by an enemy, their mouth covered as they are pulled deeper ahead. The other players sitting around the table can hear the DM describe all of this, and can see the nervousness on the face of the thief's player. Any of them will wish to have their characters run after the

thief, trying to save them; but the dilemma, and what Fine referencing, is that their characters, trapped in the Frame of the fantasy narrative, have no idea this is happening and would have no reason to loudly run ahead when told moments ago to wait. It may be difficult for the rest of the players to sit there and wait as their friend's character is dragged off into the dungeon, but doing otherwise would bleed the frames of the game in a negative way and would most likely be discouraged by the other players. The thief's player would probably rather have their character killed off by this unseen enemy than know that metagaming was responsible for the character's life continuing.

The problem that arises is that as media consumption increases, most players' Game-Knowledge increases as well. With this extra knowledge comes added difficulty in not metagaming, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Two different members of the same group, Tallstag and Hurgrim, both expressed the difficulty of not letting outside information impact how they reacted in-game. Hurgrim specifically seemed to have a hard time with as his character was a low-intelligence barbarian who knows far less about monsters and spells than the player himself, so when roleplaying "I just have to mentally separate that out." In fact, Hurgrim would at times purposely make poor choices to further remove the temptation of metagaming, as he believed that these (obviously poor) decisions would be what his character would do in that moment. Charlie, a player from Focus Group D, said he exhibited similar behaviors when he told me that "I don't think my knowledge should interfere in the game" and that while playing his character Greggorious, he would often purposely make a less-effective decision because the optimal play would require knowledge from outside the game. Constantly during sessions, he had to remember "It's [Charlie's] brain, not Gregg's. And Gregg's an idiot." Yet another player, Lance, gave me similar answers in that the biggest struggle after researching more about *D&D*

was not letting it affect his in-game decisions and not metagaming, whether it was intentional or unintentional. For players with high levels of Game Knowledge, this is often a struggle regardless of character or class.

Going Back to the Magic Circle

The presence of metagaming within *D&D*, and my suspicion that it would be a relevant element of my findings, was the major reason why the Magic Circle was one of the core theoretical concepts of this study. Going back to our earlier definition of the Circle as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 10), the Magic Circle is a physical/temporal/imaginary space which is set aside and dedicated to the act of playing/performing within. Going further into my point, Salem (2004) wrote that "to play a game is in many ways an act of 'faith' that invests the game with its special meaning" (p. 98), here meaning that if one does not act in good faith within the game, its meaning is lost. Just as with any game, whether it be *D&D* or soccer or chess, cheating in any capacity takes away from this "special" nature of the Magic Circle and the game itself. While soccer and chess have explicit rules to stop this, *D&D* is less specific on the nature of metagaming and it is more of an expectation than a rule that "participants implicitly agree to 'bracket' the world outside the game" (Fine, 1983, p. 183). All of this goes back to Salem and Zimmerman (2004), who wrote on the Magic Circle as "a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world." (p. 95). As I spoke on in Chapter 2, however, this is no longer seen as an accurate depiction of the Magic Circle. *D&D* may wish for it to be true, but it is clear now that outside forces are easily able to penetrate within the barrier of the Magic Circle. In this case, knowledge and perspective from the media consumed by *Dungeons & Dragons* players.

Again, it is worth repeating that only within a game like *D&D* is a concept such as metagaming even possible. In most games, using knowledge brought from outside the game is encouraged. Poker players are expected to have an understanding of card probability, chess players should have knowledge of tactics and strategies, and any professional boxer will watch hours of footage on their opponent in an attempt to better counter their opponent within the ring. It is specifically with *D&D* and other tabletops that using information outside of the current game is frowned upon; which is frustrating, given the wealth of information available today to a player looking to consume media online about the game. Going back to Juul's (2008) reconfiguration of the Magic Circle into three interconnected circles, he made the distinction that each circle, or ring around a bullseye, brings a different motivation in playing said game. Starting in the center and moving out, Juul's circles are goal-oriented (a player trying to play a game for the sake of winning), challenge-oriented (altering one's behavior or strategy to keep the game interesting), and social-oriented (changing one's behavior to fit the social environment surrounding the game or the players themselves).

Looking at metagaming, it is clear that the action itself fits within this center circle of goal-oriented action. A player may metagame in an attempt to successfully defeat an enemy or challenge. The decision by a group to discourage metagaming, however, comes from this second circle, as bringing outside information into a game is seen as lessening the challenge of the battle and cheapens the experience of playing. This finally comes back to the final circle, the social, and the understanding that continued metagaming would not be tolerated by a group of players and the accused may find themselves needing to find a new group of people to play with after they are kicked out. There is a clear division between the goal-oriented circle and the challenge-oriented in terms of metagaming, as doing so gives a clear advantage to the player using their

own perspective to better guide their characters. And yet, in every case where metagaming was brought up by participants, it was always explained as a negative side effect of their media consumption. No individuals saw this as an opportunity to better themselves as players; rather, they saw this new information as a possible hurdle to be overcome while playing the game itself. Not only was using outside knowledge spoken of as a negative, several spoke on how they incorporated behaviors to prevent themselves from metagaming. Going back to Hurgrim, his player would often have his barbarian character throw himself out of windows, taking stupid choices to the extreme as a reaction to the fact that he could be using outside information to better his situation in-game. Not all participants reported behavior this drastic, but it was universal that the possibility of metagaming was seen as an unfortunate side effect of media consumption and something that experienced players had to keep at bay intentionally.

Metagaming fits well into this chapter, in that it is an impact of increased media consumption clearly tied to the characteristic of Game-Knowledge. The more Game-Knowledge a player has, the greater the risk of metagaming. Metagaming is not a problem for most new players, as their understanding of *D&D* is as limited as their character's and they do not risk breaking the Magic Circle between the game and the outside world. That is not to say that players with higher levels of Game-Knowledge are more tempted than others to metagame, but rather that it is more difficult to not allow outside knowledge to influence one's decision-making when they have more knowledge; the other aspect of this is that if one has relevant knowledge about 1/10 of the situations in the game, their overall metagaming will not be as impactful on gameplay than a player with knowledge relevant to 9/10 of the campaign's encounters. It is clear regardless that metagaming is directly tied to the characteristic Game-Knowledge and that it is a commonly cited influence of media consumption for many of the participants I spoke to.

And with this comes the end of my findings on the individual impacts that participants reported on their media consumption. These are the influences on the individual user themself, and how they reported their experience with *Dungeons & Dragons* has been impacted by what media objects they utilize in-game and consume out-of-game. The Matt Mercer Effect is perhaps the most well-known impact within the *D&D* community, with most participants I spoke with either having heard of it or having brought it up themselves; and yet only two of my 35 participants had any personal experience with the Mercer Effect, leading me to believe that it has become more of a buzzword than a wide-spread influence in 2022. What was a consistently reported trend, however, was participants talking about how their playstyle in-game had been altered in various ways due to media consumption. Some players found themselves emulating the playstyles of others, whether it was in an attempt to have more fun playing (like Lance) or trying to be "better" as a player/DM (such as myself, Markus, Jorge, etc.). Some players found themselves loosening the rules they enforce, lowering their level of Rules-Adhesion, either in an effort to make gameplay faster and more exciting, to encourage players with low Game-Knowledge, or because over time they grew more comfortable with the game and were willing to improvise more often. Tied directly to media consumption and Game-Engagement, more experienced participants often reported that their newfound confidence let them take actions not found directly in the rulebook. Rather than simply choosing the standard actions available, those who either had more experience with the game or had "pseudo-experience" through watching others play digitally, were more likely to make up new ways of acting in combat and embracing the open-ended nature of *D&D.* These more experienced, knowledgeable players often struggle with metagaming, having to force themselves to separate their own outside knowledge of *D&D* from their character's awareness of the current narrative situation in-game. This brings us to the

end of the discussion on individual impacts, leading into an analysis of how campaigns are influenced as a group of individual figurations linked through the shared purpose of playing together.

Figurations

In this final section, I will go into detail on how the figurations of players relate to the findings of this study. To review once more, a figuration is a set of "patterns of communication in which something distinctive is at stake emerges through the interrelations between three dimensions: relevance-frames, constellations of actors, and the communicative practices, that have, as their basis, a particular ensemble of objects" (Couldry, 2016, p. 67). A supplement of Nobert Elias' figurations, which he saw as a web of influences that impacted an individual, Couldry and Hepp saw that Elias looked at social influences but omitted those media that impacted the user. Especially in the 21st century, it is more important than ever to recognize the influence that media use and consumption has on its users as the world grows more and more heavily mediated. Hence, the authors openly state the importance of media objects and technologies in the building of a figuration. Summarizing for clarity and to demonstrate how the concept functions within this study, the figuration is made up of three main components: the relevance-frame is the common purpose behind the use of media (in this case, an interest in *Dungeons & Dragons*), the constellations of actors (the individual players and the groups playing together), and the ensemble of objects and media technology (the media objects used). In a figuration, all three elements must be present and be in tandem; the figurations within this dissertation are *D&D* players using media objects to interact with *D&D* (consuming content, finding tools to use in-game, etc.)*, with each participant having their own unique figuration.

I go back to the metaphor I provided in Chapter 2, illustrating a figuration as a solar system. The actor, or individual/user/participant, is the star at the center of the system. This is the most important element, as without it there is no purpose to the media objects' use and no user of said objects, which is why it stands at the center of this solar system with everything centered around said actor. The planets in this system represent the media objects used by the individual, the size and proximity to the star at the center determined by the use of the actor. The relevance-frame functions here as the gravitational forces at work, keeping each planet in its place around the star; the purpose of the user for each media object determines its position within the figuration solar system and keeps all related, permanent objects in orbit, with irrelevant objects slipping through the system. Like with any solar system, the pull and weight of the planets themselves impact the space around them (such as when moons revolve around a planet), but it is the star, the actor, at the center that has the greatest influence on the system because the star is responsible for the system's existence. While different figurations may resemble one another, as most should if the two users share a relevance-frame, each is unique to the individual actor at the heart of it all. In this study, playing *D&D* and consuming related media may be the shared purpose, but each participant brings forth their own figuration to be compared to those around it. This section now looks to observe how these 35 figurations resemble one another, and what overall trends can be concluded from said observations. First comes a look at how digital platforms have enabled the *D&D* community to become a more inclusive community by reducing the hurdle that physical distance once was to players. Then I will examine how the figurations of group members resemble one another more than other participants, showing a new relevance-frame involved in these figurations coming from the specific campaigns a person plays in. Finally, I will end the chapter with a discussion of *Critical Role*, a media object so impactful

on players, other media, and even reference frames that it seems to influence the entire figuration

it is an element of; for *CR*, I have created the term "alpha media object" to describe media

objects with this level of influence on everything around it.

More Inclusive Community

The most uplifting of my findings, an unexpected conclusion I drew from listening to

Focus Group C was a return to McLuhan's (1994) take on electronic media. According to the

father of Media Ecology, "any form of specialist speed-up of exchange and information, will

serve to fragment a tribal structure…Specialist technologies detribalize" (p. 24). In a similar

fashion, the move onto the internet has also begun the process of detribalizing the *D&D*

community as well, in that physical location is no longer the most important factor in how people

are able to interact with the game. Going back to Focus Group C, during our conversation I

heard from multiple participants the struggles of trying to enter the *D&D* community as

marginalized people because they had to first appease the local leaders of the tabletop scene.

With the access and power brought by digital media objects and platforms, the former "tribe" of

local *D&D* players being forced to play together falls apart. Ashton noted that when they first

discovered *D&D,* they were quickly turned off from the game based on the players they had

access to in their area. At the time, the only real way to play the game if you were a new player

was to either create your own group to play with, having to teach oneself the rules from the long

and complex *Handbook*, or to find players already in your area to let you into their group and

teach you as you played. Unfortunately for Ashton, this meant dealing with sexist behaviors and

uncomfortable situations from the veteran players until they eventually left the tabletop

community until college. Sophie had a similar problem when she first tried *D&D*. She said that

she was brought into the group by her friend, the "pretty girl," who was warmly welcomed while

Sophie was met with a cold shoulder by the other players. They made it clear to her, with their attitudes and behavior rather than outright saying, that she was not appreciated at the table. Whenever she made a mistake, instead of helping her, the other players would voice frustrations and the DM told her that the game may be too difficult for her. Sophie stated the group made her feel stupid, both for making mistakes and for even trying to play at all, and it took several years and supportive friends to get back into the *D&D* community.

Another victim of unfriendly local players, Adam suffered from racial issues as a black man from Richmond, Virginia. He told stories of racist attitudes towards the game and his characters, having the color of him and his characters' skin impact the way he was treated in-game, even having a DM casually use slurs to describe his character. He was able to deal with this better than the others, working through his frustrations silently rather than dropping out, even though it was clear that the experiences hurt him even years later. Pipp, while not having to deal with racism and sexism, suffered from living in a rural area with virtually no options for him to play due to his distance from game shops and other people. This was a negative side effect of being forced to play with people in your area; one was forced to integrate themselves into the preexisting *D&D* community in their area, or struggle greatly to create their own without guidance.

Thus comes the detribalizing effect that the internet has had on the tabletop community. With access not only to video call software to play, but more importantly access to gathering places online where players could find like-minded people to create their own groups, physical distance no longer had to be a concern. After all, Focus Group C has six players from three countries: the United States, England, and Finland. While two of these players grew up in the same town together and two others are romantic partners, they all found one another through

online postings for campaigns across Reddit and Discord. Obviously, virtual call software is necessary for the six of them to play *D&D* together at all, but it was the internet that allowed them to find one another in the first place. This then allowed them to create a space where all six players felt comfortable and safe in expressing their racial, gender, and LGBTQ identities openly.

This ability to find and create one's own tribe does not simply stop at race or sexuality. From a playstyle perspective, *D&D*'s move to the internet also allows for people to find games that fit the manner in which they want to play. I myself suffered from this in college, where I had to play with groups because they were easily accessible to me. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that the type of game I wanted to play, one full of roleplay and character-driven dialogue, was not the game being created. The rest of the table enjoyed numbers-heavy combat and tended to skim past roleplaying. Eventually I quit playing with them, even though I liked the group as people, simply because the manner in which we played *D&D* was too different for me to continue. Markus from Focus Group B mentioned that he wanted players to put as much effort into researching character builds online and he and his current party did, so finding an individual who fit the group's playstyle was important to him. Just like those wanting to play *D&D* with those who acknowledge their identity, many individuals can now find campaigns where their playstyle is appreciated by the other players.

Which leads to the fact that, although these local "tribes" were impacted, if not destroyed, by the arrival of these digital media objects players can now use, it has created new tribes. Although Ashton and Sophie left the local tribes around them, they found new tribes to join online. Going back to McLuhan (1994) and finishing the earlier quote, "any form of specialist speed-up of exchange and information, will serve to fragment a tribal structure...Specialist

technologies detribalize. The nonspecialist electronic technology retribalizes" (p. 24). What we see happening in the *D&D* community is a process where digital media has minimized the importance of the local tribe (detribalized) but created and added importance to the virtual tribe (retribalize). While one could call the 922,000 members of the "DNDMemes" subreddit a tribe, I think it is more accurate to simply call that a large group of individual users; the campaign that Ashton plays in, however, is what I would call a tribe. This is a group that was brought together due to the access afforded by digital media, a group that interacts closely with one another and shares beliefs, communicative practices, and media objects. While digital media objects may have taken steps to invalidate the local *Dungeons & Dragons* tribes that have existed since the game was created, it has led to more personal, inclusive tribes online where one chooses their tribe rather than having physical distance determine one's group. And I would not call this digitally-led inclusivity as an impact onto players themselves, but I do see this as an obvious impact to many players' figurations as this ability to find one's tribe has allowed many who would not play otherwise to feel comfortable with *D&D*. Many participants told me that new digital platforms and technologies have allowed them to enter a community once dominated by older local leaders of the community, with Adam even saying "I don't think I would be playing *D&D* now if it wasn't for the online community."

It is important here to reference past literature on how inclusivity and minority representation have been researched before. While Critical Theory is not the major theme of this study, several other scholars have made this intersection between inclusivity and gaming the focus of their work; unfortunately, it is an intersection that has deserved scholarly examination as *D&D*'s past is not one that has been kind to AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) players or PoC (People of Color). In 2017, Antero Garcia analyzed the ruleset and rulebooks of *Dungeons &*

Dragons, going through each individual edition and rulebook from 1974 onward to illuminate how race and gender are "defined explicitly and implicitly within the rules system" (p. 233). In early editions, the game was clearly designed with a male audience in mind and demonstrated sexist views of women. Rulebooks were written with male pronouns to describe the players, a decision that later editions actually defended until 2000, and female characters were even mechanically made to limit how physically powerful they could be compared to male adventurers. Garcia did find that depictions of women in more contemporary editions to be more positive, both in terms of equaling the strength of men and women as well as dropping many of the scantily-clad images of bikini-esque armor that plagued older books.

Just as vital as these conversations on gender, race has also been a site of examination within tabletop games. Garcia's article concludes that "racism is built into the D&D system" (p. 240), and although much of this prejudice is pointed towards fantasy races (Orks, dark elves, etc.) much of it stems from racist depictions of people of color. Add in attempts in the 80s to insert Middle Eastern and Asian cultures into the game that come across more as "exoticized, non-Western cultures" (p. 241) than actual inclusion, one can see the troubled past *D&D* has with cultural and racial representation. This topic does not end with *D&D* itself, but continues into other related RPG communities. In 2009, Lisa Nakamura wrote on the hate that Asian players received in *World of Warcraft* due to the economic factors that have created digital sweatshops where people labor online to trade in-game items for real-world currency. What emerges from this practice is a community-wide prejudice against types of play or specific in-game actions that then create "new forms of networked racism that are particularly easy for players to disavow"(p. 130). In a different article, Nakamura pushes that in many online gaming spaces "the Orient is brought into the discourse, but only as a token or 'type'" (2009, p. 134),

again showcasing that race and culture are often added into a game for an "exotic flavor" and not as thoughtful representation.

That is not to say that these issues have not improved over time. In recent years, Wizards of the Coast has made changes to the lore of *D&D*, attempting to right racial wrongs that have been neglected since the 70s with more nuanced depictions of formerly "evil" races (Garcia, 2017). Alongside this, depictions of women within the lore and rulebooks has greatly improved within the most recent edition of *D&D*. More than this, however, is the fact that new technologies are enabling previously marginalized players the chance to find and create their own spaces. This rise in inclusivity thanks to digital platforms is different from the "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog!" view of online anonymity from early Mass Communication Studies, and instead have the ability to " have the power to turn the theatricality characteristic of MOOspace into a truly innovative form of play, rather than a tired reiteration and reinstatement of old hierarchies" (Nakamura, 2009). Digital communication is not a force to homogenize players into all appearing the same online; rather, it opens new spaces that allow AFAB and PoC players to express their identities in safer environments where they can easily find a community of accepting peers. Led by the communication technologies now available in 2022, I see the presence of these digital media objects as a welcome adjustment to the figurations of many who deserved better in the past.

Group Figurations

With enough discussion in this chapter on individual figurations and the media within, I will finally discuss how the figurations of players relate to the group they play within. After all, the reason that focus groups were my primary method was to understand the group-dynamic that naturally comes from *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game impossible to play alone. While it does not

surprise me, an interesting trend in data is that while overall most participants had consistent media use and media objects within their figurations (again 24/35 participants used Discord), it was within campaigns that participants' figurations most closely mirrored one another. Put simply, people that played *D&D* together seemed to have the most similar media consumption. This is partially simple to explain. As discussed in the previous chapter with Tools media, used by players while playing *D&D*, members of a group are forced to use the same media to engage with one another; you cannot have one player use Skype and the rest use Zoom for a virtual call, everyone in the group must utilize the same platform to play simultaneously. Even beyond seeing each member of a group using the same Tools media, however, many groups contain members that either use similar media to one another, or trends where each member is using different media for similar purposes. Perhaps the best example comes from Focus Group B, whose media use I have listed below in Table 1.

As you can see, while each individual of the group has slightly different figurations, all five members share similar media objects and uses to one another. Not only do they all use Zoom to play with one another (Tools use), but each member uses the same forum-websites to build more powerful characters and learn tips for playing better (Information use). Looking at other Focus Groups as well, there may be common media between each group but it appears that the greatest similarities seem to come within groups playing together. Granted, an easy explanation for this is that as most of these campaigns are made up of friends, it is possible that this is simply a case of friends recommending media they enjoy to their friends; but I am confident that this actually ties back to the make-up of figurations and relevance frames.

I will address this further in Chapter 6, but it seems clear to me that this is another element to the figuration theory I am utilizing for this study. In each figuration, there is a

Table 1. Media Usage of Focus Group B

Participant	Tools Media	Information Media	Entertainment Media	Info/Ent. Media
Markus	Zoom, Dice Roller	Forums	*Critical Role*	Reddit
Chris	Zoom, Dice Roller, DM Resources	Forums, Lore,	*Critical Role*	
Jefe	Zoom, Dice Roller	Forums	YouTube	Reddit
Lance	Zoom, Dice Roller, Discord	Forums, YouTube, Reddit	Twitch	
Tom	Zoom, Dice Roller	Forums	YouTube	

relevance frame, a common element coming from the individual user that links their media objects together. Looking at *Dungeons & Dragons,* this means analyzing media used while playing or used in reference to the game itself. Originally, the relevance frame I was using for each participant was "*Dungeons & Dragons,*" as this was both the site of examination as well as the common trend for each person. Now I am seeing that another reference frame, a smaller and more precise frame, is "playing *D&D* within a specific group." For example, members of Focus Group A all have the common reference frame of "playing *D&D* within Group A," which they do not share with members of the other five groups. This presents the possibilities of sub-frames within figurations, but again will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. For now, this demonstrates that individuals within the same *D&D* campaign seem to have more-similar media objects/media use than other, random participants. I would not classify this as an impact of the

media consumed by participants, but rather an influence from the group dynamic that affects the purpose (or relevance frame) behind a person's media consumption habits.

Critical Role's Impact on Figurations-The Alpha Media Object

I end this section, and the discussion of this dissertation's findings, by returning to *Critical Role*. Clearly showcased as one of the most popular media objects within this study, I have determined that it also seems to be the most influential media object as well. This perceived influence comes from both my past experience within the *D&D* community, the mainstream attention that the podcast has from its newly released Amazon Prime Video series, and that it was one of the most recognized media objects by participants, even those who did not watch *CR* themselves. In many cases, especially when discussing the Matt Mercer Effect, behaviors in-game were talked about by participants in relation to *CR*, oftentimes in opposition. Chris told me, in relation to the Mercer Effect, that "it'd be awesome to have a campaign like that. But I realized I don't have the production value that he has. And I'm not a voice actor, I'm not a professional voice actor." Even when we discussed this, it was not in the form of "this is how I play" but almost a direct rebuttal of "we do not play like this." Even if it is being used as an oppositional comparison to normal games of *D&D*, it is clear that *Critical Role* has become influential enough that many cannot help but use it as a measuring stick.

CR is a large enough media object in many individual's figurations, so many that it has almost made itself a proper fixture within most members of the *D&D* community; because even those who do not watch the podcast then consume other media objects that have been influenced by it. Actual Play podcasts existed before *Critical Role*, but it was after the success of *CR* that many more began to appear online, inspired by its reception. D&D Beyond would not have nearly as many users if not for its association with the podcast, as seen by the fact that each

member Focus Group C would not be using the application if not for one of their members seeing it advertised on *CR.* YouTube has been filled with clips, compilations, fan-animated highlights, and analysis videos of the *D&D* sensation, just as various subreddits teem with discussion and criticism on the show. The show has even grown to become official canon of *Dungeons & Dragons* itself. In a strange twist, Mercer went from a celebrity media figure in the D&D community to a bonafide author when Wizards of the Coast released *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (2020), an official Dungeons & Dragons sourcebook, and *Call of the Netherdeep* (2021), an official adventure module. A collaboration between Mercer and WotC, the books explore the setting created by Mercer for *CR* and offer new subclasses and adventures with homebrew monsters straight from the internet's favorite podcast. While *CR* was already an important facet within the *D&D* community and its recent growth, this printing has legitimized Mercer and the group in a way unseen for most media figures. The power of the media figure, as discussed in Chapter 2, stems from their position outside of the real world, within the media consumed by the "ordinary person." Not to belittle the obvious power that these positions of influence provide, but the fame and renown of media people rarely comes with any legitimate authority unless it is the source of the person's place in the spotlight (such as a politician using social media). In Mercer's case, his fame as a media person was a stepping stone to becoming a collaborator of the canonical text of *D&D* itself, going from a celebrity to a co-author in the span of five years.

In 2022, it is difficult for someone to play *Dungeons & Dragons* without some level of their play being touched by the podcast. It is clear that *Critical Role* is not simply another media object within a *D&D* player's figuration, as this media object has gone as far as to influence the very reference frame of *D&D* itself. Here I will go beyond the figuration theoretical concept as

outlined by Couldry and Hepp, as I believe that both authors would be surprised to find that such a media object exists. As such, I have created the term "alpha media object" to refer to media objects with so much influence that they impact not just the user, but the other media objects within the same figuration and even the reference frame holding said figuration together. Going back to my solar system metaphor once more, an alpha media object is like Jupiter: the object is so large that other media objects have begun to circle around its pull (like moons) and its own orbit around the user (the Sun at the center) influences the position of nearly every other body in space. In the case of *Critical Role*, it is clear that it has influenced players (user), other media objects, and even the game of *D&D* itself (reference frame). Other media in this study have demonstrated impacts onto their users, and in some cases on other media, but no one media object besides *CR* has had this type of pull on the overall community itself. As such, not only is it logical to see *Critical Role* as the most influential media object within most figurations, but to declare it its own type of media object, the alpha media object.

Conclusion

And so my Findings chapter comes to a close. In this chapter I have laid out the findings from my data collection, the result of 35 players worth of Focus Groups and interviews. Speaking of players, this chapter contained characteristics to describe participants based on how they interacted with *D&D*. Between Game-Knowledge, Game Engagement, and Rules-Adhesion, these characteristic spectrums categorize players and were vital to creating the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model, which theorizes that players with high Engagement are more likely to have high levels of media consumption which leads to higher levels of Game-Knowledge and decreased levels of Rules-Adhesion. This reflects the trends found throughout my data. Players found themselves struggling with metagaming as their Game-Knowledge

increased, having to force themselves to keep information they knew out-of-game separate from that of their character. New playstyles came as a result of this media consumption, in players trying new styles of playing, loosening the rules enforced during play, and finding themselves open to thinking outside the box (or outside *The Player's Handbook*) as their consumption allowed them to observe how people outside their own group played the same game in different ways. One of the biggest trends was how the rise of digital media objects within the *Dungeons & Dragons* community has led to it becoming a more inclusive, diverse community. Formerly marginalized players, especially PoC and AFAB players, have struggled to get into *D&D* when one had to join a pre-existing group to learn the learn; in many cases, these local leaders of the game placed hurdles of entry with their sexist or racist views that led to several of my participants stating they left the community after these bad early experiences. Luckily, digital spaces and virtual call platforms have negated the necessity to be close physically to the group you play with, allowing these formerly marginalized individuals to finally find their space comfortably within a campaign.

And what impacts were seen on these groups? Most impacts found through data collection focused on the individual, but within each focus group was a substantial similarity between members. Ignoring the fact that all members are generally required to utilize the same Tools media to facilitate play, most groups saw members having the most similar figurations. There were similarities among some participants across different groups, such as DMs consuming more media with the purpose of gaining Information, but people within the same campaign tended to resemble one another's' figurations the most, both in terms of what media objects were consumed as well as the purpose for consuming. The implications of the group

resemblance in figurations, as well as how many of these findings tie back to my theoretical categories, will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

I was extremely happy with both my data as well as the findings that have emerged from it. As the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts Model demonstrates, it was clear that media consumption does have an influence on most *D&D* players, if they are Engaged in the game enough to consume related media during their free time. While the impacts and influences of media consumption reported are not dramatic, oftentimes either unnoticed by the participant or needing me to guide their introspection, this is a realistic demonstration of the manner in which media objects frame their user's experience. If the findings reported were bold and dramatic, I would assume there was a problem with the study or with participant testimony. The *D&D* player does appear to be impacted by the media objects within their personal figuration, in small and subtle ways. My final chapter will conclude this study and I look back across the project and hypothesize how its findings could further future research or be used to revamp theoretical concepts used throughout.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

For every Media Studies project that begins with academic inquiry, another is started

because it comes from a place of personal love for the scholar; and even with the importance this

document serves to better understanding figurations and the cross-impacts of media use, this

process began with a need to better understand *D&D* through my academic discipline. My

journey with *Dungeons & Dragons* began with the need to fill the void that losing theatre left,

needing a creative outlet for the energy that I once put into theatre. Role-playing my character

within *D&D* was my entry into the game, but eventually it grew to become its own unique

obsession of mine. What emerged from this obsession was a massive shift in my media

consumption habits, with hours spent across different platforms looking for content to remind me

of *D&D*, to help me learn more about *D&D*, to teach me to be better at *D&D*. Since then, I have

heard from dozens of participants who told me about how *D&D*-related media fill the void when

they are unable to play, with others who say that their consumption comes from an interest in

furthering their love of the game even between campaign sessions. While each participant was

selected due to their playing *D&D*, it was their media habits that interested me throughout this

study, looking at how media objects impacted both users and the other media being utilized.

Much of this chapter will be summarizing or responding to the previous chapters, but now with

the ability to connect the material across the entire study rather than simply focusing on the

material within each individual chapter. And so this final chapter looks to conclude my study, by

first reviewing past chapters and findings, the key implications of my research, before examining

limitations of the study and future research.

Review of Previous Chapters

Before continuing with this conclusion, I think it is important to return to the previous

five chapters to review the progression of this project. By going back and seeing the steps that

led to the conclusion of the dissertation, I can have a better grasp on the eventual findings and

potential future of the research. The introductory chapter, like most, was my entry into the

dissertation. Telling my own story of how I found *Dungeons & Dragons*, I explained the rise of

the game's popularity alongside interactive digital platforms with both growing more popular

and more profitable by the year. Much of that first chapter was summarizing, as I do now, the

paper that lied ahead, before eventually coming to my two research questions:

1. What D&D-based media are players consuming?

2. How does the media ecosystem surrounding Dungeons & Dragons players change the

   way players interpret and understand the game?

I knew from my own experiences that media consumption could alter how an individual played

D&D; I have spoken on how the cast of *Critical Role* made me want to be a more supportive

player to others, but it also made me want to learn if the same process had happened to others.

Chapter 2 was the review of relevant literature, an important early step in any large

academic undertaking. It is here that my theoretical concepts are unveiled: Medium Theory,

figurations, and the Magic Circle/media worlds. While I will be discussing these theories in

more detail in the coming section, each guided a different aspect of this investigation and proved

even more valuable than I would have originally thought. Whereas figurations focused my

attention on the ways in which media objects can impact their user within specific conditions,

Medium Theory helped me better examine those media objects reported by participants. Finally,

while the two theories come from different fields and are not often mixed, both demonstrate that

reality is often split into a binary (due to play or due to media), contemporary understandings of both inform us that holes in the barrier between these worlds allow both sides to affect and influence one another.

The third chapter focused on my methods and methodology. I eventually decided to guide my study with an experiential, interpretive methodology, one that combines aspects of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Heuristics to focus on how individuals recall their lived experiences to better understand the reality they live in. For methods, I collected data through semi-structured focus groups that focused on allowing the respondents to tell their own story with as little guiding from myself as possible; I still believe this was a wise decision, as it allowed me to find perspectives on a field I was personally invested in, but from points of view much different than my own. This led to a total of 35 participants, each contributing to my eventual findings.

Said findings revealed themselves in Chapter 4, where I focused on the media objects consumed and utilized by participants. It became quite clear at this stage that *Critical Role* was perhaps the most influential media object within the study, as even those who did not watch the show were aware of its presence and influence on the larger *D&D* community. It was also the only media content within the most popular media objects, with every other media being a platform for other content or for use as a Tool. This chapter concluded with a description of Uses Categories, labeling each Use as either Entertainment, Information, Social, or Tools. Entertainment and Information were the most popular and were strangely intertwined as common Uses of many of the same media. Tools was the category that surprised me the most, with three of the five most popular media objects being those Used by players in-game, although this

number is certainly inflated due to the limitation that virtual gameplay requires each member of the group to use the same platform to connect.

This media chapter immediately leads into Chapter 5, which focused on the actual impacts of the discussed media objects. After creating categories from which to better understand each participant in relation to *D&D*, this led to the creation of my Engagement-Consumption-Impacts model: this model demonstrates that players with high Engagement with *D&D* are more likely to consume higher amounts of *D&D* media, where the most common impacts are an increased in one's Game-Knowledge and a decrease in the level of Rules-Adhesion that one enforces. The first of these major influences was the Matt Mercer Effect, a *Critical Role*-inspired phenomenon where players with lower Game-Knowledge could have their expectations of a "normal" game of *D&D* raised unrealistically high. Another common influence was participants changing aspects of their playstyle, either enforcing rules less or trying more unorthodox actions or even changing the fundamental ways they played *D&D*. Linked specifically to the increase of Game-Knowledge associated with media consumption, many participants struggled with metagaming, keeping their own Knowledge separated from their character's in-game. The chapter ended by examining how figurations came into play, revealing that many participants' figurations most closely resembled those of the other members of their group. I found that digital communication technology allowed marginalized players to find more success joining games, leading to an increase in diversity within *D&D*. Finally, I discussed the "alpha media object" (*CR* in the case of this study), a media object so influential that it impacted other media objects, the user, and even the relevance frame holding the figuration together. Alpha media objects will be a point of further discussion below, as well as how this is a potential change to the manner in which we understand figurations as a concept.

Review of Findings

This perfectly moves the discussion towards the findings illuminated through the last five chapters. The research questions of this dissertation looked to examine what media objects *D&D* players were consuming as well as the influence said media had on how one played and interacted with *Dungeons & Dragons*. The short answer is yes, whereas the long answer has been the last 200 pages of text. In general, the average participant consumed or utilized several *D&D*-centric media objects, both during and outside of gameplay. The most common media objects consumed were often Tools used by players as they played, from virtual call platforms like Discord (the most popular media among the sample) to digital toolsets to assist with play like D&D Beyond. Nearly everything else was a platform in some capacity, with the important exception of *Critical Role*, which was the second most popular media among my participants but demonstrated itself to be the most influential within the *D&D* community as a whole. In terms of Uses, Entertainment and Information were the most common Uses reported across all media consumption. Surprisingly, while Tools Use was relatively low compared to the previous two, three of the five most popular media objects were Tools media; this is easily explained, as all group members are required to utilize the same platform to connect to one another while playing (inflating that number) and those three were the only Tools media objects popular enough to be included in this paper.

Several influences were commonly reported by participants, the majority of which were included within my findings because they were widespread across the sample. While there were some media impacts only reported by a single participant, almost all influences discussed in one focus group were confirmed by the other members of that group, or by participants in another. The most commonly reported media impact was the changing of one's playstyle in various

forms. Some players, like Lance and myself, found themselves envious of the way a media

figure was playing the game, changing their own style in an attempt to replicate what they had

seen. Many DMs, such as Markus and Chris, consumed content with the goal of gaining tips on

how to be a better DM just as many players, such as Tom and Jorge, had the same goal to

become better players. In many cases, increased media consumption led to players trying actions

and strategies not found within the rules, taking advantage of the open-ended nature of *D&D*,

while many DMs reported decreased levels of Rules-Adhesion as they themselves embraced this

looser style alongside players. In relation to Game-Knowledge, metagaming was a challenge

that many participants seemed to struggle with, finding it more and more difficult to keep their

own knowledge separate from that of their character as they continued to learn more about the

game through media. Finally, the Matt Mercer Effect, a *Critical Role*-specific influence where

the podcast raises the expectations for a *D&D* game, was an impact that was widely known and

spoken about, but only personally experienced by one person. More than anything, the wide-

spread knowledge of the Mercer Effect with such a low rate of exposure to it only solidifies that

it has either become a buzzword or that enough time has passed since *Critical Role*'s debut that

the community has adjusted to its presence. The most uplifting finding of the study was the

realization that these digital media platforms have allowed for *Dungeons & Dragons* to become a

more inclusive community. In the past, one was limited to playing with the people physically

close, which often led to local leaders deciding who was and was not welcome to join local

groups; this furthered the stereotype that *D&D* was a game for white men because the white cis

men who had played since the 80s pressured PoC and AFABs into dropping out. With new

communication technology, however, many of my participants who had horrible early

experiences with the game are able to create their own tribes, gathering with groups that make them feel welcome and allowing them to finally enjoy the game.

One of my most significant accomplishments in this study was the creation of the Engagement-Consumption-Impacts model, which can be seen back in Chapter 5. Resulting from my Player Characteristics and seeing the overall trends in data, the model illustrates that as a player's Engagement with *D&D* increases, so too does their media consumption; this then leads to increases in Game-Knowledge and decreases in Rules-Adhesion, both resulting from the player learning more about the game, how it is played, and how the nature of the game facilitates on-the-spot improvisation. While many of the more specific influences are not seen within the model, it does an excellent job of connecting all three Characteristics to media consumption, the main variable at the heart of the study. I believe that the model is specific to the study of *D&D* media consumption, but with minor adjustments it could serve multiple fields of study. Fandom Studies have always focused on how people interact with specific sites they are highly engaged with, so the connection to the E-C-I Model seems immediate and could be utilized with little negotiation. Games Studies could also benefit from this model, with the only real change being the specific game that Engagement is based on, whether that be *Call of Duty*, *Pokémon*, or *Tetris*. Other Media Studies investigations could use the model as well, looking at how the base variable of "the audience's level of engagement with the content" impacts other facets of media consumption and influence.

As a quick aside, I found it important to receive feedback from the participants of the study. At least one member of each focus group and two of my interviewees were sent copies of Chapters 4 and 5 in the interest of receiving criticism and to make sure that I never misconstrued anyone's testimony. While I did not expect each individual to fully read through the document I

sent them (which was more than 100 pages, quite a task for participants who had already provided me hours of their time), I was pleased that the responses I received were positive in nature. Most players agreed with the way that I tried to tell their story, or were excited about the findings themselves and what they meant for the *D&D* community. Knowing that the people I represented in this work appreciated my work was a fantastic feeling, almost as rewarding as completing the project itself.

Key Implications of this Study

They say that no person is an island, they are constantly influenced by the people, technology, and society that surrounds them. This feels doubly true with academic research, as even the great Isaac Newton said that "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." This study could not have been possible without literature gathered and reviewed for months before I even began writing my introductory chapter. Even more important was the theoretical concepts that guided my analysis and findings, figurations, Medium Theory, and the Magic Circle/media worlds. While each of these concepts aided in my eventual findings, I found myself pushing the boundaries of figurations and medium theory at various times across the dissertation process; in many cases, this was due to the concepts being created to examine media from the Broadcast Era, thus needing to be renegotiated for the current digital era of interactive platforms. This section looks at the implications that my research poses for these two theories, posing the question to other scholars if my results can be helpful for those using these same theories at a later date.

Figurations

It seems that the best way to start this section is with the most important of the theories

I utilized, figurations. Couldry and Hepp's (2016) effort to build upon the sociology concept,

the modern figuration looks at how the individual is influenced and pressured by the media

objects around them, just as one is influenced by the society they live in. Figurations are

composed of the interrelations between three dimensions: relevance-frames, constellations of actors,

and the communicative practices, that have, as their basis, a particular ensemble of

objects and media technology. These dimensions are relatively autonomous, but because

each is involved in the situation in which action occurs, processes of acting together

generally tend to reinforce them, and stabilize patterns of association between them. (p.

67).

The relevance frame, or shared purpose, is the reason why a user is interacting with the media

objects, and the constellation of actors are the individual users, able to be grouped together

through their common relevance frame. In this study, the figurations benign studied are the

media objects utilized by *D&D* players in pursuit of the common purpose of being invested in

Dungeons & Dragons. I chose figurations as a guiding theory for this dissertation because of the

attention given to the influences of inter-connected media objects, as well as the emphasis on a

purpose focusing this media consumption. I wanted to be able to better study how various *D&D*

media impact one another, not just the user, while keeping all efforts centered on *D&D* as the

important site that links all activity together.

While figurations indeed became an important pillar supporting this research, I surprised

myself with how often I was forced to renegotiate elements of the concept. Couldry and Hepp

themselves altered Elias' theory of figurations by including and emphasizing media objects as

another societal influence, but they did so from a Broadcast Era perspective on media. Until the rise of high speed internet technology, media transmission was generally a process of media coming from a small number of large-scale creators and mass-distributed to a homogenized audience. Within the last decade, however, the internet and digital platforms have allowed for even the average person to create and upload content online; interactive media also means that there are fewer barriers separating creator and consumer, letting fans reach out and speak with one another and even the producers of their favorite media. Even after taking this into consideration, my findings have given me clarity into various ways that this study has the potential to alter our understanding of figurations, a robust theoretical concept that is in need of slight modification for it to be as relevant in 2022.

Alpha Media Objects

Perhaps the largest addition that I suggest for figurations is the inclusion of the alpha media object. Within this study, I documented that *Critical Role* was dramatically more influential than other media objects, just simply on the user but on the other elements of the figuration. Other media objects were altered by *CR*'s release, from the rise of other Actual Play podcasts to the success of platforms like D&D Beyond through their partnership with the podcast. Even the relevance frame itself, *Dungeons & Dragons*, has been impacted. From the booming popularity of *D&D* alongside the podcast, the official rulebooks that Matt Mercer has written, and even the Matt Mercer Effect; it is clear that the *D&D* community is different from the one I was a member of before the release of *CR*. With *CR* standing out in as many ways that it did, with the level of influence that it demonstrated on other aspects of the figuration, it was clear to me that *CR* was not simply another media object orbiting around the user.

So the concept of the alpha media object was created to demonstrate the higher importance and influence of these types of media. Going back once more to the figuration/solar system metaphor, the user sits at the center of the system as the star, with media objects rotating around them like planets, with the relevance frame acting as the gravitational pull keeping everything together and cohesive. In this case, *Critical Role* serves as the equivalent of a Jupiter-like planet. Not only is it the biggest media object within the figuration, it is so influential that it has its own media objects revolving around it, just as our system's largest planet has 79 moons surrounding it. *CR* is the largest object in orbit around the user, large and influential enough to impact the media orbiting around it, the other media objects within the same system, the user at the heart of the system, and even the relevance frame holding the figuration together.

Critical Role as an alpha media object is clearly a case specific to *D&D*, but in future research, this concept would be a welcome addition to any scholar utilizing figurations as a theory. As online algorithms push selected content to the front of a user's feed on most digital platforms, certain popular media will undoubtedly be presented more often than others, creating potential for certain content to dominate a space. Certain applications and platforms themselves could also become alpha media objects as trends and new technologies rise and fall in popularity and influence. What separates an alpha media object from a standard one is the difference in the impact that object has on the other elements within a figuration. I would assume that most figurations today would find that there are one or two alpha media objects that exist within them, but now scholars have terminology they can use to instill the extra importance of these colossal celestial bodies within whatever digital solar system is being studied.

Group Relevance Frames

The other modification that I found myself making when using figurations was as I examined the relevance frames of participants. The relevance frame, the shared purpose, is what connects the media consumption habits of each participant to one another, what filters which media objects are related to one another within an individual's habits. This relevance frame needs to be broad enough to include multiple media objects, but specific enough to exclude unrelated media to make a cohesive category. Originally, the relevance frame for this study was "consuming and utilizing *D&D* media," which would include a wide array of media objects and content, but filter out any unrelated to the site of examination. There were no issues that came from this, as all of the media objects studied and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 fit easily within this shared purpose. During the analysis of data, however, I did realize that the figurations of members of the same focus groups were the most similar compared to other participants. As such, I believe it is important to consider that smaller, more specific sub-relevance frames may exist for sub-communities within a larger relevance frame. In this study, rather than just looking at the shared purpose of "consuming and utilizing *D&D* media," each focus group had the shared frame of "consuming and utilizing *D&D* media within this group." This shows that they are still a part of the larger *D&D* community and the more general figuration of *D&D* fans consuming media, but classifies them within a small subgroup that has an even more specific shared purpose that only exists for the members of that subgroup; this means that the media objects and influences found within the larger figuration are still present, but all of these are then impacted by the specific elements found within that smaller group. This could be expanded upon in several different ways. Figuration research could move towards including subgroupings within larger communities, creating language for relevance frames and then additional frames within

that exclude more and more until a small, specific grouping is achieved. Another would be the examination of group figurations, as even the way I address these similar figurations within my own findings looks at them as individual figurations that resemble one another. It could be possible to create a new model that creates larger figurations for multiple users, broadening the relevance to allow it to inclusively describe more people instead of less. Both of these examples take the concept of figuration in opposite directions, yet both are implications of my research and both are viable futures for Couldry and Hepp's updated figuration model.

Medium Theory

This brings the discussion to Meyrowitz's (1994) Medium Theory, his attempts to rectify issues he saw within mainstream Media Ecology literature. Medium Theory is, in his words,

focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media. Broadly speaking, medium theorists ask: What are the relatively fixed features of each means of communicating and how do these features make the medium physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media and from face-to-face interaction? (p. 50)

Within this study, the role of Medium Theory was to help explain why certain media objects were utilized in the place of others, trying to find native attributes of each media to determine if its design pushed participants to use it for specific purposes. Discord was discussed in this way, as its ability to transmit audio/video calls while also retaining information made it a more attractive platform than Zoom, which cannot save information between calls. Discord was also paired often with Roll20 because the virtual tabletop simulator was well-suited for *D&D* play, but had low quality audio and that attribute changed the manner in which players utilized the site. Like figurations, however, Medium Theory was created during the Broadcast Era of media,

before many scholars knew of how extreme the impact of the internet would be on communication. That being said, my renegotiation of Medium Theory is not within the base theory itself, but with the variables the theory uses to categorize media objects.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Meyrowitz believed that media literacy could be broken down into three different "metaphors," each being a manner in which one could view the media consumption process. For Meyrowitz, and this dissertation, the one of most interest is Medium Theory, looking at media as an environment that is created by the presence of communicative technology. His concept was that all media environments-media are essentially the same, just differences in specific variables that alter what makes that one media object/environment unique. To classify and code media objects from one another, these variables created a spectrum to measure certain elements, or native attributes, such as "type of sensory information conveyed" or "relative ease/difficulty of learning to encode and decode" (1998, p. 104). It is here that contemporary communication technologies render certain variables as obsolete for describing digital platforms. One of the variables is "unidirectional vs. bidirectional vs. multidirectional," looking at how information flows through the media; the examples given by Meyrowitz (1998) for each being "radio vs. telephone vs. on-line computer conference" (p. 104). The issue in 2022 is that bidirectionality doesn't work with interactive media, it is a concept from 1998 so it is stuck in the Broadcast Era paradigm when media content was transmitted from a single source out to audiences. With interactive media, you can talk back and forth in a Twitch stream, a conversation taking place between you, the streamer, and other audience members. Unthinkable 20 years ago, a simple part of reality today is that most of the digital media used online has become multidirectional with no effort from any user involved. This is the major reason why interactivity was a main point of discussion in Chapter 2 when I reviewed Medium Theory, yet it

was not often discussed in the findings chapters; because when Meyrowitz originally wrote on Medium Theory, interactive media was a rising phenomenon, whereas now it is an attribute of most media objects consumed and used. The simple fact is that interactivity is not a unique trait to a small number of media anymore, making it redundant to center too much discussion on it when most media have interactive elements. This means that we must consider new ways of distinguishing media objects from one another, leading me to believe that the variables Meyrowitz utilized must be reconsidered within the scope of how new media objects function for future research.

For this study, I also saw the possibility that new variables can be constructed to better analyze modern media. Going back to D&D Beyond, the application's main purpose is to make it easier to play *D&D* by simplifying complicated mechanics and quickly bringing up character-relevant information on command. While I did reference the variable of "relative ease/difficulty of learning to encode and decode" a moment ago, this variable looks more at how easy or difficult it is to learn to operate/engage with a media; this is a case where the media object itself is tasked with making the content that it transmits simpler to understand. As such, I believe that a new variable measuring "the degree to which the media lowers/raises the difficulty in decoding the content it supports." In an age of interactive media, many platforms are capable of tasks similar to D&D Beyond, making the user's role in understanding the information presented easier as a result. Not only is this a variable I would have liked to reference while discussing certain media within this, I believe that other contemporary media scholars doing future research would find multiple ways they could utilize such a concept.

In terms of *Dungeons & Dragons* studies, I hope that this contribution to the academic conversation leads to further research into media's role within analog games, especially *D&D*.

Analog Game Studies has been healthily growing for the last decade, but I have noticed that in many cases digital media is not as vital of a variable in these studies as I believe it should be. My assumption is that this is often as a result of Analog Game Studies trying to distance itself from Games Studies to form its own unique identity, but that does not mean that digital media do not have a role in how individuals access and interact with traditional board games. There are already many theories and research that bridges the gap between these two related fields, so I hope that interrogating the role of media objects can serve as yet another. *D&D* studies is yet another field of research that I hope continues to examine media objects. Today, most *D&D* literature comes from either Psychology, Sociology, Fandom Studies, or Game Studies, four disciplines capable of great insight into various aspects of the role-playing game. While there is *D&D* research within Media and Communication Studies, these fields of research have much more to contribute to analyzing this site that remain to be seen. It is my wish that as *D&D* continues to achieve more success across digital platforms and as media content, my field only further increases the scrutiny of my favorite game.

Couldry, Hepp, and Meyrowitz are responsible for creating these theoretical concepts that elevated my findings and analysis much higher than I could have achieved on my own. Figurations and Medium Theory both played massive roles in shaping this dissertation, both before and after data collection. That being said, both concepts suffer (as much literature eventually does) from needing to be updated with a more contemporary understanding of the fields they study. Broadcast media objects functioned wildly differently than the interactive digital media platforms of today, from the speed of communication to the ability for multiple users to simultaneously interact with one another. Beyond this, my study has shown me modifications that could empower future scholars using the same theories I did. Alpha media

objects and group relevance frames are both ways in which the figuration model could more accurately examine digital spaces on the internet, while new variables could allow for Medium Theory to better examine how media objects can simplify data for their user. Neither is a massive shift to the core theory, simply small alterations that update it with a more modern understanding of media objects alongside a new understanding that my own findings provide.

Limitations and Future Research

This brings us to the limitations of my dissertation and how they could shape future research. To say that I look back proudly on the work I have completed does both this dissertation and my feelings a disservice. This study has changed, evolved, and grown countless times, each alteration to the formula a positive one as I worked to better understand my own research goals and the media objects I studied. That is not to say that the project was a perfect one by any means. Anyone who creates something will always find flaws in their finished result with hindsight and a self-criticism, me being no different. I am happy with this study and proud of my results, but if I were to continue this research I already know what changes would need to occur. To more fully understand the influence that media consumption and utilization has on a *D&D* player's gameplay, I would need to add an ethnographic element.

To be clear, this ethnography would be in addition to the focus groups I conducted. After finishing this dissertation, it is evident to me that focus groups were a great method for the goals and research I was conducting; not only did they allow me to gather testimony from many participants at once, making it an efficient method for gathering experiential data, they also let me study the group dynamic of the members of the campaign as they interacted, one of the main reasons I chose focus groups over standard interviews. For future groups, I would still begin my process with a focus group, speaking with all of the members of a campaign together to discuss

what media they consumed and what influences they noticed from that media. Then I would sit in sessions while the focus group was playing to compare the impacts they mentioned during the interview against the gameplay I was observing. This would enable me to further explore how media impacts can be observed within the gameplay itself of *D&D*. While Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated the findings of my project and how they answered my two research questions, most of the media influences I discuss involve the ways that participants perceive *D&D*, with less specific examples of moments in-game where media impacts occur. A limitation of the focus groups, the addition of viewing gameplay would allow for further, deeper examinations of how gameplay is altered, giving me the opportunity to collaborate what I see with participant testimony.

Another element of the study that would benefit greatly from this would be my Player Characteristics. All three of the characteristics I created (Game-Knowledge, Game-Engagement, and Rules-Adhesion) all look at how players view *D&D*, and hint at the playstyles those players may have. That connection to how they actually play *D&D*, however, is difficult to show without seeing gameplay, as my interviews and focus groups were not effective as methods for examining the in-game playstyles of participants. Watching a group play, on the other hand, would let me better measure a DM's level of Rules-Adhesion throughout hours of ethnography. Not only could I better measure the Characteristics listed, it would then be possible to create and measure new Characteristics that focus on gameplay itself. Levels of how interested a player is in combat encounters, social roleplaying, how serious or silly a session is, how often players are in character vs. speaking as themselves. All of these are Characteristics I wanted to gauge throughout the study but found myself dropping because my methods did not allow me to observe them sufficiently. Even my understanding of the Tools Use category could be improved

with the addition of ethnography, letting me watch these media objects as they are being Used to better understand their role within that group's gameplay as well as giving me a better analysis of the media itself.

I want to stress again that I am more than satisfied with the work that was done in this dissertation. The reason that I chose focus groups over ethnography as my primary method at the start of this process was due to the increased time and effort that ethnography would require. With the resources and schedule I had, focus groups were a much more realistic, efficient way of gathering data from a larger number of participants; if I had done ethnography instead, I find it unlikely that I could have properly collected testimony from 35 individuals and would most likely have studied one or two groups in greater detail. While that would have allowed for a more thorough examination of those groups, and a greater focus on influences to gameplay itself, the scope of testimony would be greatly diminished by the smaller number of participants, which I feel is reason enough to justify my initial decision. If this project were to continue, however, then the work documented here would be an excellent starting point for adding a second method. I would also be in a place professionally where I would have the resources required to do these larger ethnographies, making a combination of ethnography and focus groups more practical and more successful than if I had attempted them in the last two years. This perfectly leads me towards the next section of this conclusion, looking at how future research, both within *Dungeons & Dragons* studies and the application of my theoretical concepts, could be impacted by this study.

Conclusion

When I moved to Bowling Green, Ohio in the fall of 2018 to start my Doctoral degree, I left all of my friends behind in Indiana. Knowing that I was missing my regular *D&D* games in-

person, Kevin introduced me to *Critical Role*, telling me how much the adventures of the cast resembled the early games we used to play together. And now, almost four years later, I am still trying to better understand how watching the program impacted my own impressions about *D&D*. From modeling my own playstyle after cast members to copying Dungeon Master techniques shown by Matt Mercer, it is obvious how the 1000+ hours of podcast I have consumed influenced me as a player. It led me to consider how the podcast had changed other people's perspectives on *D&D*, which led to what would eventually become the paper before you. What I could not have guessed was the level of consistency that I saw reported in terms of media's impact on the average player, nor how many of their stories so closely resembled my own. I may no longer use *Dungeons & Dragons* as a substitute for performing onstage, but now I am often using media objects to substitute for time I am not playing my favorite tabletop game. For others, their media use is tied to trying to learn more about *D&D*, to be better players, to listen to other's perspectives for guidance, to steal ideas for their own games. Whether it be for Entertainment, Information, or Social Use, whether a player watches *CR* as a stream or listens to it as a podcast; *Dungeons & Dragons* players have begun to see the rise in digital media centered around the original role-playing game, and now we begin to understand the influences said media consumption leaves with those players.

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School of Media and Communication
302 Kuhlin Center
Bowling Green, OH 43403

Consent form:

Project Title: Dungeons & Dragons & Figurations: A D&D Player's Place with a Sea of Media Objects

Primary Researcher: Jules Patalita is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Communication at Bowling Green State University (BGSU).

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore the ways in which *Dungeons & Dragons* players are impacted by the media they consume and illuminate how this media influences gameplay and the experience of playing *D&D*.

Methods: In order to explore the role of media within the *D&D* community, you will be asked to take part in a focus group with people you play *Dungeons & Dragons* with. You will be asked to discuss the types of media you consume related to *D&D* and about your experiences playing with the group. The focus group discussion will take 1 to 2 hours depending on the material that you provide.

Voluntary: Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time and you may refuse to answer any question. If you decline to participate, any current or future relationships that you hold with BGSU will not be affected.

Benefit: The study will have the following benefits to the community: The study can highlight the ways in which media impacts *D&D* players and their experiences playing. There are no direct benefits to individuals who take part in the study.

Risks: Risk of participation is no greater than that experienced in everyday life. The focus group will take place virtually to negate the threat of COVID-19.

Confidential:

   The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality.

   1. The research team will not mention you by name in any published materials.
   2. The identity of the community, the region, and the individuals will not be revealed in the final paper.
   3. You can refuse to answer any questions asked.
   4. Interviews will be digitally recorded for future transcription and data analysis.
   5. As we cannot guarantee that other members of the focus group will maintain confidentiality, please do not reveal anything about yourself that you would not want others to know.

Contact: If you have any questions, feel free to contact the primary investigator:

Jules Patalita. Office: 415 Kuhlin Center. Phone: (260) 458-4716. Email: patalitajules@gmail.com

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School of Media and Communication
302 Kuhlin Center
Bowling Green, OH 43403

Or feel free to contact my advisor: Dr. Joshua Atkinson, Phone: (419)372-3403, Email:
jatkins@bgsu.edu
Questions: If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, contact:
      Chair, BGSU's Institutional Review Board
      (419) 372-7716
      irb@bgsu.edu
Signing this consent indicates that you have been informed about and agree to the conditions mentioned
above and are over the age of 18.

_____

Signature   Date

_____

Print name

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_____
Signature   Date

_____
Print name