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This study examines the interaction between narrative and collaborative worldbuilding and premade, extensive rulesets in tabletop role-playing games. This study specifically looks at the game *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th edition and included interviews with six participants on how they balanced the collaborative narrative environment and expressing creativity while working within a system with extensive rules and guidelines for how the game functions.

While participants did acknowledge that the rules were important, the rules themselves function more as paratexts, or guidelines. They functioned to create a consistent, understandable environment within which to create a narrative, but participants recognized that if these guidelines hamper the enjoyment or flow of the game and story they could be changed or ignored for the players' benefit. Furthermore, players were more likely to break the rules or allow others to do so if there was a creative and interesting narrative purpose, as it was important to allow all players to have agency and input in the narrative and to ensure that the story itself was enjoyable for all involved.

Headings:

Tabletop role-playing

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NARRATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE WORLDBUILDING IN TABLETOP ROLE-
PLAYING GAMES

by
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Introduction

There is a table covered in stacks of rule books and maps. Colorfully decorated figurines of humans carrying large broad swords, sorcerers, and thieves, maybe even a large, foreboding red dragon line the maps in combat, colorful dice of a variety of shapes and sizes flitted around the table. People are surrounding the table, talking, planning, and rolling dice to cheers and laments, with one slightly hidden behind a large screen. All the players and the accessories of the table come together to decide where the group will go and what they will do, creating as a group an engrossing narrative full of fun and adventure.

Tabletop role-playing games (tabletop RPGs) are often left out of discussions of information systems and information seeking behaviors; however, they have an extensive scholarship concerned with storytelling elements and collaboration (Tychsen et al., 2006). They feature intricate communication systems between players, game masters, and premade rulesets. Together, these three factors create a collaborative narrative, functioning as intricate information systems or even information worlds (Tychsen et al., 2006). To understand the relationship between these factors, an exploration of information systems and collaborative storytelling must take place. A definition and history of role-playing games must also be discussed.

Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) are defined as

a set of rules of varying complexity where a group of people (the players) assume roles (characters, the protagonists) and cooperatively seek to overcome obstacles and resolve conflicts placed before them by the game master (the GM). The action in the game is narrated by both the players (for their characters) and the GM (for all other inhabitants) for the purpose of collaboratively crafting a kind of ongoing narrative.” (Snow, 2008, p.63)

These games have detailed, often multi-volume, guidebooks that explain rules for character creation, worldbuilding, and gameplay. *Dungeons and Dragons 5e* in particular has three main rule books, the *Player’s Handbook*, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, and the *Monster Manual*, supplemented by several follow-up rulebooks that add new creatures and classes and pre-made campaign storylines for players to use and mold to their liking. While the rules define the set universe and how characters are created and combat, and other actions, are managed, dice also figure importantly into interpreting and following through with the rules.

For *Dungeons and Dragons*, the most important die is the 20-sided “D20.” It is the die used most frequently in all aspects of gameplay. The different dice are rolled according to their specific use, for instance combat or interaction with non-playable characters, “NPCs.” The roll of the dice determines the success or failure of a player character’s action. For instance, rolling a 1 on a D20 in an interaction means that the character has greatly failed, so if a character is trying to get information out of an NPC and rolls a 1, they would fail and not receive any relevant information. If they rolled a higher number, then depending on modifications from their character’s build, the statistics and skills a character is created to have, and depending on the NPC difficulty level- determined by the rulebooks or the GM, the character would gain more relevant information pertaining to what they needed to know. This provides an aspect of “luck” and unpredictability to the game, making it more immersive for the players who cannot

simply “know” the game and the best way to win. White describes this as “allowing the game-world to ‘speak’ for itself at the table” and giving players the “feeling of a world in motion.” It reassures players that the narrative being created isn’t the sole vision of one individual (White, 2014, p.89-90). Bateman has similar conclusions, highlighting the connection between player characters and the outcome of dice rolls. Unlike earlier war games on which it is based, *Dungeons and Dragons*’ use of characters “closed the narrative distance” between players and the game, making it more personal (Bateman, 2012, p.229-231). A key feature of immersion in tabletop role-playing games is the aspect of a player’s connection to the characters they create and play. Character creation is the time in which a player has the most control over the game and their role in the story, and a player will have control over how their character learns new abilities and gains levels (Fine, 2010, p.106-115). As such, the results of dice rolls can be a stressful time for players. The possibility of extreme outcomes, a lucky hit of rolling a 20 on the D20 or the critical fail of rolling a 1, creates moments of intense triumph or failure that will affect the characters and the overall narrative.

Interactions like this are detailed in the *Player’s Handbook* and the other rulebooks, providing a framework or “rules” for how the in-game universe functions; however, these rules are not always strictly followed, with some games or even Game Masters focusing more on story building and cooperation, as overbearing rules have sometimes been seen as oppressive and counterproductive to the storytelling process (Snow, 2008, p. 66, Beattie, 2007, p.478). This focus on story building and collaborative narrative can lead to “rule-breaking” in rule-heavy RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Pathfinder*.

Tabletop role-playing games officially have their start with the publication of Gary Gygax's *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974 (Beattie, 2007, p. 63). In the following years, other games such as *Runequest* and *Chivalry and Sorcery* would follow. Up until the 1990s there would be the production of subsequent versions of *Dungeons and Dragons* and of new tabletop role-playing games. In the 1990's though, there was a slowdown in the creation of new games, and *Dungeons and Dragons* faced a major setback with the release of its 3rd edition. This edition, produced after Wizards of the Coast purchased the original production company, Tactical Studies Rules, featured major design flaws, but also opened up the use of the game's mechanics with the Open Game License (Wizards of the Coast, 2004). This allowed other game companies to follow the *Dungeons and Dragons* play mechanics, making them essentially open content for use (Beattie, 2007, p.65). The result of this was a surge in the production and popularity of tabletop roleplaying games in the early 2000's, which is dubbed by Beattie as the "Indie Revolution" (2007, p.67). This popularity has continued to the present day, with *Dungeons and Dragons* having produced two new editions in that time and with hundreds of new games joining the market. The popular gaming review website RPGgeek lists over 500 games in the role-playing game category (RPGgeek.com). This continued and in fact growing popularity of tabletop role-playing games, not to mention their cousin the live action role-playing games (LARP), makes understanding this genre and how its players interact very important and relevant to Information Studies. This is especially important when considering how the video game industry looks to these tabletop role-playing games when designing user interfaces for their own games, as will be discussed later.

Collaborative worldbuilding is also a fundamental aspect of role-playing games. These games do feature a Game Master (GM or DM, Dungeon Master) who leads the development of a game's narrative (Drachen et al., 2005). There is usually only 1 GM per group averaging 3-7 players (Beattie, 2007). They are responsible for ensuring the narrative "flow," providing feedback to players' actions, introducing new events, and controlling Non-Playable characters (NPCs). They create the general "outline" of the story, its narrative structure, and must learn as much as they can about the fictional game setting so as to answer any player questions (Cook, 2009, p. 98). A game master must also be prepared to follow a different path in the story if characters come up with different or unexpected actions. In actuality, players could ignore a Game Masters' planned storyline completely, but as Cook, a longtime designer of tabletop role-playing games and writer for *Dungeons and Dragons*, describes there is an unspoken agreement between players and the Game Master. He says:

Most games operate with a sort of inherent unspoken agreement that players will attempt to stay within the bounds of the story that the GM [Game Master] originally planned, but it may not always be clear to them exactly what that plan was. That unspoken agreement also compels the GM [Game Master] to provide the players with a storyline that interests them; if their characters wander off to do something else, this may indicate the GM's [Game Master's] plan was not to the player's liking. In this case, the GM [Game Master] may want to alter it as a part of his or her campaign management (Cook, 2009, p. 100).

In effect, Game Masters are stewards for the story, knowing only the setting and main plot points; the player characters help to create the full story in their actions. GMs are also important in ensuring player engagement, facilitating communication of information, and in enforcing the rules of the game and the fictional environment the game takes place in (Cook, 2009, p.215-216). This paper in particular looks to more fully understand

Game Masters' perceptions of the merits and drawbacks of "rule-breaking" in regards to player experience and engagement and its effects on narrative worldbuilding

Background & Literature Review

Much research has been done on the concept of Information Worlds. As Burnett and Jaegar state, Information Worlds theory asserts that information behavior of individuals is influenced by both immediate influences- such as family and friends, or trusted information sources within their individual “small” worlds, and larger social influences (2011, p. 162). The theory allows for the analysis of the intersection between information and cultural contexts (Burnett and Jaegar, 2011). In relation to tabletop role-playing games, the individual groups may be seen as small information worlds or complex information systems, as they function as an interconnected group “bonded together by common interest, expectations, and behaviors...and geographic proximity” (Burnett and Jaegar, 2011, p.163). As role-playing, these games depend on the communication between the players, their characters, the Game Master, and the fictional setting the game takes place in (Tychsen et al., 2008, p.313). Work by Tychsen et al. interpret this relationship as being an information system, as it is a “collection of people, processes, and technologies (in this case books, dice rules...) to support the information needs of the participants and provide a framework for the gaming activity” (Tychsen et al., 2008).

Research by Harviainen similarly looks at the interpretive aspect of role-playing games, looking to previous scholarship on Nordic LARPing.¹ Harviainen (2009) takes a Hermeneutical perspective when analyzing these games. This perspective has its origins

in textual analysis, looking at peoples' relationship and interpretation of religious texts (p.66-67). In order for RPG players to successfully be immersed in their game, they must first engage in a 'social contract' by which they create the immersive, fictional reality that they will be playing in (Harviainen, 2009, p.68). This contract includes, but is not limited to "the rules." However, as RPGs rely on an imaginative environment, there is a dichotomy of the players' attention altering between the diegesis, the narrative, and the real world the players inhabit (Harviainen, 2009, p.70). Because of this dichotomy, Harviainen proposes that to understand RPGs we must look at interpretation at two level: the shared, imaginative space and the real world. The role-playing event that takes place, the game, is then built from the interplay of the narrative world, the shared imagined space, and the real world. Elements of the real-world influence how players act in the narrative world and vice versa. A role-player, according to Harviainen, is therefor never truly immersed and acting completely in the narrative world. This idea, though, isn't held by other scholars. For Sturm (1998), listeners of the narrative, or the players in this case, are able to be fully immersed at times, but can "flicker" out of it due to outside stimuli, but quickly become involved again in the narrative (p.101). This is due to a "distraction threshold," in which there are too many outside stimuli to ignore despite being immersed at some level to the story. For the purpose of this study, this would equate to the gameplay one is involved in. For players of tabletop RPGs, total immersion is not necessarily constant, and players can "flicker" out. In my own experiences with this genre of games, sessions of the games can last for a few hours, and players and the GM alike can be seen intermittently checking phones or seeking out much-needed snacks.

Looking at tabletop RPGs then, players are always bringing in elements or social interactions from the real world, which in turn affect how the game is played and experienced. This is in line with Young's work on "Taleworlds" and "Storyrealms". For Young (1987), the boundaries between the narrative and the real world are permeable and often times information leaks from one to the other (p. 67-68). As Young describes it, "frames do not enclose, or open and close, one realm; they specify a relationship between the two" (1987, p.68) The narratives in tabletop RPGs will always be affected by the real world and the players themselves, and there is no way to separate the two. In fact, the process of how the narrative is created in these games depends on this. Returning to Harviainen, his view also interprets three layers of player motivations that impact the narrative: the external participation motivations 'why do I play' (social interaction, fun, escapism), the internal 'what do I want to experience in the game' (conflict, drama, sense of triumph, adventure), and finally character motivations (what does my character want and need, the only completely diagetic motivation) (2008, p. 71). In summation, Harviainen (2008) sees RPGs as "In essence... a convergent medium, a focal point of shared interpretations done for the sake of mutual enjoyment" (p.76).

While the focus for RPGs and therefore tabletop RPGs is an enjoyable collaborative environment, studies of games and of role-playing games have found a division between the types of players, similar to the ideological divide between narratology and ludology. Brackin (2012) notes that to understand RPGs we need to understand if it is the 'story' or the 'game' that is the most important aspect of RPGs (p. 239). He discusses the long debate between narratologists, who put importance on story, versus ludologists, who stress the gaming aspects. Chris Crawford, a well-known game

designer claims that rules, goals, player activity, and how games define player activity should be the focus of study. Conversely, narratologist Brenda Laurel argues that labelling them as ‘games’ is unimportant since they include common defining elements featured in storytelling- situations featuring characters, worlds, histories, etc. (Brackin, 2012, p. 141). Brackin also cites a middle path, specifically game designer Greg Costikyan who says:

A story is best envisioned as ‘beads on a string,’ a linear narrative; a game is best envisioned as a triangle of possibility, with the initial position at one apex, and possible conclusions along the opposite side, with myriad, ideally, infinite paths between initial state and outcome. To the degree that you try to make a game more like a story by imposing arbitrary decision paths, you make it less like a game (Brackin, 2012, p.242).

This viewpoint, though, puts narrative and game at opposite ends of the spectrum, not resolving it. Cover (2010) interprets tabletop RPGs as “possessing narrativity,” and while they do contain traits of a narrative, they are not exclusively narrative structures (p.86). She cites the importance that players of tabletop RPGs put on their narrative experiences in these kinds of games, including the emotions players experience when narrative events happen to their characters, such as death or a forbidden romance (Cover, 2010, p.85, 115). Instead, Cover points to using a rhetorical perspective to help classify these games. The overall situation of a tabletop RPG such as *Dungeons and Dragons* is one that elicits narrative as a rhetoric response, emphasizing the importance of the players and the narratives they help create together (Cover, 2010, p.87). This is in line with research by Ryan and Jenkins. Ryan (2010) believes that by possessing narrativity, a text, or in this situation a tabletop RPG, is “produce with the intent to create a response involving the

construction of a story. Jenkins (2009) similarly sees games as having the potential to create new stories, being “ripe with narrative possibility.”

Research by Fine similarly highlights the importance of the collaborative aspect. He sees such groups as collaboratively creating cultural systems, which can become extensive and meaningful to the group members (Fine, 1983, p.3-4). Tabletop role-playing games are then based on the shared experiences created through communication that leads to these cultural systems. These “fantasy” cultures, however, are also influenced by rulebooks (Fine, 1983, p.115). The Game Master monitors the games via these rules but is never fully restricted by them. Many different scholars of/designers of role-playing games agree on the malleability of the rules (Fine, 1983, p.115-116). Punday (2005) notes that this malleability is in part due to player agency. As players may propose actions that fall outside of the preset rules, results tend to be extrapolated from other rules or player discretion (Punday, 2005, 118). For example, *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th edition states that the game is firstly a game of storytelling, taking “place in the imagination of the players and the DM, [and] to play *D&D*, and to play it well, you don’t need to read all the rules, memorize every detail of the game...*D&D* is your personal corner of the universe, where you have free reign to do as you wish” (Bilsland et al., 2014, p. 4-8). The 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* in particular has also been seen as giving more freedom to “play” with the rules, making the rules more like a toolkit than actual instructions on how to run every aspect of the game (Hall, 2014).

Beattie, in a 2007 article, looks at the distinction between rules-heavy game types and those more focused on storytelling. This distinction is based on the misconception that rules can be oppressive and restrictive of good storytelling practices (Beattie, 2007,

p. 478). According to Beattie (2007), “rules govern physical possibilities, genre and metaphysical conventions, share narrative power and constitute an ideological framework” (p. 479). As role-playing games function as forms of collaborative storytelling, the rules act as parameters by which the GM and players can build a story together, with the GM as the main interpreter and moderator of the rules. Beattie (2007) explains that:

rule interpretations are governed by a human agent, who can be swayed by persuasive readings of these rules by other players, by rules errata and by community (including online) discussion. In fact, “rules lawyer” is a derogative term used in the community to describe someone who adopts an overly legalistic stance toward play (p.483).

Beattie (2007) concludes that rules help narrative development by defining reality for the players and the GM, and embody storytelling practices that dictate who and when a player can speak and how player’s fit into the overarching narrative (p.492).

Thorange (2013) sees “rules” as functioning as communicative processes that players apply to their role-playing games. In her study, they compared *Dungeons and Dragons 3.5e* and the online massive-multiplayer roleplaying game *World of Warcraft*. She found that in *Dungeons and Dragons 3.5e*, the rules functioned like a “toolkit,” similarly described in the Polygon article noted earlier. She described in detail how the rules assist in character creation, as “system-defined knowledge parameters” and how in-game players are able to gather information according to the rules and roll of the dice (Thorange, 2013, p.375-380). The rules, then, do not create the narrative, but function as the means of communication between the players and the GM.

Jara (n.a.) takes a different approach, viewing tabletop role-playing game handbooks as framing devices and paratexts to the narratives created in the game itself (p. 42-43). Rules therefore help players and GMs understand their fictional worlds and their characters and influence the development of the narrative and of player characters (Jara, p.42-43). However, as Jara asserts, rulebooks themselves are “unrealized” stories. They provide information on how characters are created, how the fictional universe works and its genre, and can even provide storylines that can be played through by a group, but the story itself can only be “realized” through play sessions in which certain parts of the rules become used and others aren’t (p.52). In a sense, the rules for tabletop roleplaying games are similar to recipes. They provide the framework, the steps and ingredients needed to make a specific meal but aren’t actually the meal itself.

Therefore, rules should function to allow players to be creative in their collaborative storytelling process, not hamper their attempts. Bateman sees the rules as spurring players to “imagine specific things” (Bateman, 2012, p. 225). He gives the example of a Saving Throw, which means a player must roll a dice and roll above a pre-designed number to escape some fate. Instead of simply regulating play, die rolls like the Saving Throw force players to envision some dramatic tension or excitement, such as a rogue almost being caught by guards or a barbarian potentially meeting their end at the fiery breath of an angry dragon. The dice themselves used in *Dungeons & Dragons* contribute to this suspense, connecting the intensity a person feels in gambling with the emotions garnered from the narrative experience (Bateman, 2012, p.230). Rules for character creation, such as picking a class and rolling for randomly determined character statistics, indeed everything on a character sheet, while seemingly restrictive, are in

reality powerful ways of capturing and maintaining player interest and making the games approachable and understandable, an interesting contrast to the unpredictability and aspect of chance of these games (Bateman, 2012, p. 232-237).

Bergström's (2013) interviews with a group of tabletop role-players found several roles that rules play, according to players. Because tabletop role-playing games are creative worlds in which collaboration creates a story, there is also often player conflict. Rules can act as an "arbitrator," settling disputes between players, or as "creative coolant," keeping the story grounded and consistent (Bergström, 2013, p.10-11). Bergström's interviews also support the idea of rules as paratext and framing devices. Their participants also viewed the rules as functioning as a supportive guideline for players, showing what can and can't be done and how characters can be made. They also aid in communicating repercussions, such as damage taken during combat. While narrative can describe how injured a character is, the combat system and rules for health and damage make it easier for players to understand their characters' limits and therefore make more informed in-game decisions. They also provide a sense of uncertainty through the use of dice rolls.

As GMs, in *Dungeons and Dragons* in particular as Bergström (2013) highlights, tend to be the overall referee's and guides for TRPG story creation, the presence of rules helps to "even out the playing field," reassuring players that there are things a GM can and can't do, so they cannot explicitly be the story's "god" (p.11-12). These roles of rules were seen by players to not hinder creative play and narrative building, but to facilitate it. Players, and the GMs, must find creative ways of working within the rule systems, or for groups to facilitate it.

Tychsen (2008) outlines that although the GM guides the story, possibly by following the game rules, and determines the credibility of player and NPC actions, but it is the players and their characters that perform actions and interact in the shared imagined space. They can choose if a rule is relevant, and it is the players and the GM that exercise authoritative control over the narrative, not the rules themselves.

Also, GMs aren't expected to control every action or story thread. It is quite typical, in fact, for players to not want a completely controlling GM. GMs who do completely control the narrative are said to be "railroading," forcing the players to fit into a prewritten story and to follow the GMs pre-planned outcomes, negating player agency completely (Bartoneus, 2010). For instance, a GM may override a player's actions, or only present players with pre-set actions, taking away player autonomy and ability to help build the story, making them little more than people reading along with a predefined story, such as a "choose your own adventure" book. For example, a GM may present a player with an NPC and only give them the option to talk to them to gain necessary information, while the player, if given the opportunity and agency to do so, may opt to physically threaten the NPC or pick-pocket them for clues. In essence, a GM must guide players through their own anomalous states of knowledge, as players are not privy to all paths and options that may be available to them without the GM's intervention (Harviainen, 2009). This absence of knowledge helps to create a barrier between the shared imaginative world, the narrative, and the real world, keeping players immersed and enjoying the game.

It is therefore better for GMs to control different paths a story can go down and to be malleable enough to change the rules or ignore rolls to fit into the narrative they are

building with their players. A GM must create an enjoyable game for the players and let them have some creative input. Matt Mercer, a well-known Game Master for the *Dungeons and Dragons* podcast and streaming group *Critical Role*, supports this view. Mercer describes this as the “Rule of Cool,” by which he believes that the rules can be flexible for the sake of the group having fun (Mercer, 2016). He recommends that sometimes a GM should allow their players to get away with “crazier” actions, in moderation of course. Breaking the rules too frequently could create an inconsistent world within the narrative, but Mercer insists that player creativity and enthusiasm should be rewarded. This allows players to own their in-game decisions and enjoy the game to a greater extent, along with encouraging better role-playing. Also, as with other aspects of the game, skill checks and dice rolls should have a say in the players’ success or failure. He believes that players should be allowed to attempt any actions they want to perform even if they don’t necessarily fit in with what the rulebooks would normally allow. Chris Perkins, an expert Game Master and content creator for *Dungeons and Dragons*, similarly echoes these sentiments. In a Tweet when asked why he let a player do something that went against a rule on spells, he replied “You will see me bend, ignore, or revise certain rules if I think it's worth it—all in the name of fun” (Perkins, 2017). In an interview following the release of a campaign he created he describes the rulebooks and the rules as being:

They’re there to save you not the other way around. A DM should absolutely feel the license to do whatever he or she wants in terms of the campaign and how they run their game. Don’t let the rules get in the way of the fun. They’re a crutch (Coffey, 2016).

A recent article by Atmore found similar conclusions. Atmore's (2017) study on players of the tabletop RPG *Pathfinder* found several instances in which players agreed that 'rule-breaking' was acceptable and even necessary for the process of creating a collaborative narrative. However, this agreement was determined by the presence of what Atmore calls the "rules-story gap" (Atmore, 2017). Connecting tabletop RPGs to Dervin's concept of sense-making for information gaps, players do come across instances where they don't know how to approach a situation or how a mechanic works, and in these cases the rulebooks and the knowledge of other players, comes into play. Atmore (2017) conceives of the rulebooks and the community-agreed upon fictional reality as tools that 'make sense' of the collaborative narrative the players are taking part in. When a situation arose in which the rulebooks were consulted but didn't provide an authoritative answer, the Game Master was allowed to have the final say, although group agreement was also seen as a positive solution with Atmore's subjects. Atmore's subjects also conclusively agreed that the presence of the rulebooks provided consistency in-world and created a sense of realism in an unreal setting, similar to Bergström's (2012) findings.

Altogether, tabletop RPGs are games in which a narrative is crafted in a collaborative style. They rely on the interaction of the players and the GM, who is responsible for controlling the narrative flow, in creating the encounters or NPCs that the players may interact with, and in consulting the rulebooks and making decisions in regards to the outcomes of players' actions. It is the existence and reliance on rules that define these games that causes concerns when discussing collaborative narratives. If these games can theoretically let you be as creative as you can be, and do fantastic things in

fantastic settings, how can this be resolved with the existence of rulebooks, often more several, that determine everything from how characters are created, to combat mechanics, to how the very metaphysics of deities and magic work? Previous scholarship has found that these rules function as paratexts, helping the GM and players make sense of the narrative world they are helping to create and help players understand repercussions for their actions in-game. Similarly, scholarly interviews, and interviews with well-known GMs such as Chris Perkins or Matt Mercer, seem to imply that the rules are in fact more malleable than they seem, and can be changed or ignored for the betterment of the group playing. However, are these views on the malleability of the rules consistent with current GMs of *Dungeons and Dragons*, specifically in its most current edition 5e? Do GMs, as the main arbiter of the rules and outcome of player actions, find comprehensive, multi-volume sets of rules, as is found in *Dungeons and Dragons*, to in fact hamper creativity. In what instances would they be willing to “bend” the rules and for what reasons? How do they themselves see the function of the rules in an imaginative setting that could theoretically have none?

Methodology

Unlike some similar research on storytelling and role-playing games, this research will pull from player experiences and opinions instead of commonly known play structure and observations alone. For this study, semi-structured interviews were used to understand how rule-breaking and collaborative storytelling intersect in Dungeons and Dragons game sessions. A qualitative approach was chosen as a suitable method for this research based on several reasons. For one, similar research done by Atmore on the game *Pathfinder* and Bergström on *Dungeons and Dragons 3.5e*, *Pathfinder*, *World of Darkness*, and *Legends of Anglerre* yielded reproducible study formats (Atmore, 2017, Bergström, n.a.). In general, a qualitative approach is an effective way to look for “patterns of experience in lives” and interviews in particular were used as they are effective in identifying trends or major themes (Wilson, 2012, Dilley, 2000).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they permit moving back and forth between questioning and discussion, allowing the interviewer to clarify and create new questions based on what has already been heard (Westbrook, 1994, 244). Surveys and observations alone would not allow for these specific traits. Westbrook (1994) points out that interviews also make interviewees develop a feeling of satisfaction in contributing to something and help them gain perspective and understanding of their experiences (244). For interviews to be successful, as Dilley defines, interviewers must have a thorough background on the topic or demographic they will be interviewing about. An interviewer

must also design their questions in a way that builds to the larger research questions, beginning with a closed-ended inquiry, such as “where did you go to college” or “when did you start playing” in order to prepare the interviewee and make them feel comfortable (Dilley, 2000, p. 133). Interview questions must also allow for there to be more than one answer, not to presuppose how a question will be answered. In the end, Dilley also stresses that an interviewer be able to modify their questions when needed, to listen more than speaking, and be able to respond to the interviewee, being aware of when the contradict themselves or how they are acting (Dilley, 2000, p. 135-136). Coding was chosen to analyze the data in the interviews as it helps to identify main categories present across interviews, making qualitative results more analyzable (Dilley, 2000, p. 247). As this was a small-scale study, manual coding was preferred as it provides for more control over the process than electronic methods.

I chose to focus on Game Masters (GMs) for my interviews, as they are assumed to be more experienced and well-versed in the game rules. Subjects were recruited from a local game store that features weekly tabletop gaming sessions. I gained permission from two local game shops to hang up flyers, one of which in turn posted a picture of a flyer on a social media platform. People that were interested were instructed to contact me via email to arrange a date and time for the interviews.

No defining information on the participants was gathered and the interviews were deleted after the study was finished. The interviews were held in public places, such as the aforementioned game shops, although due to scheduling conflicts two were conducted over an online video services. Contact information and other personal information was stored in a password-protected computer and deleted after the completion of this project.

Contact information was recorded in the event of having follow-up questions for the participants.

Initial response to the flyers at the first game shop was very low and garnered no participants. The second shop, which posted the flyer to their social media, produced very strong initial responses. In the first week, ten people had volunteered, meeting the initial minimum estimate. In total, twelve emails from volunteers were received. As was expected, not all that volunteered to participate chose to continue with the study. Eight interviews were arranged to be completed and six were conducted as two volunteers did not make their scheduled sessions and did not reply to emails regarding rescheduling them. Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and a secure computer. The recordings were kept only until transcriptions could be made, to protect the subjects' privacy.

In interviews, subjects were initially asked about their experience in playing as a GM for *Dungeons and Dragons*, their view on the point of this game, and how they interpreted their role as a GM. Once participants described their experience and background with the game, they were asked questions concerning the role of the players and storytelling in their games. If they did not mention or refer to them themselves, subjects were asked questions regarding the role of the rulebooks in their games and how they interact with them.

The participants had a mean of 18 years and a median of 13.5 years of experience playing and GMing *Dungeons and Dragons*. The least amount of time a participant had been playing was four years and the most was thirty-five, although several subjects did note that they had times where they were players, not the GM specifically. All subjects

met the minimum experience level of three months as a GM, including the participant with the least amount of experience with the game. All were currently GMing or playing in games of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

The interviews were transcribed and coded following their completion by the interviewer. Coding allows for examining commonalities and differences among different qualitative data (Harding, 2015). The empirical method of coding, building the code once data has been collected, was used, and initial categories were created after an initial review of the transcripts, with additional revisions made to further define the coding categories. However, this method can be influenced by the researcher's prior knowledge of the subject (Harding, 2015).

It is important that the investigator denotes their biases and experiences here so that their interpretation of the data can be better understood and contextualized. I am a frequent participator and Game Master in tabletop roleplaying games and specifically the one *Dungeons and Dragons*. I bring an insider's knowledge and perceptions of tabletop roleplaying games and the role of Game Master. My experience helped to inform the interview questions I asked during the interviews. As such, it could affect how my data was collected and interpreted. I may not have realized I tailored my interviews for those with pre-existing knowledge and looked over questions that I may have interpreted as being common knowledge or practice for members of the *Dungeons and Dragons* community. In regards to interpretation, I may be swayed to think in the mindset of a community member, not as a researcher, focusing my conclusions on how the community views things.

Results

There are five main areas of discussion highlighted by the participants in their interviews. These main areas all influence how GMs interact with the rules and facilitate a collaborative environment for their groups as a whole. The participants frequently shortened the name *Dungeons & Dragons* to d&d and referred to themselves as GMs or DMs, an older term meaning Dungeon Master.

1. The Purpose of the Game
2. The Role of the GM vs. the Role of the Player
3. Group Cohesion and Open Communication
4. The Role of the Rules
5. Consequences and Creative Storytelling

Purpose of the Game

Participants agreed that one of the main functions of *Dungeons and Dragons* is collaborative storytelling. They described it as:

“making sure everyone can tell a story,” “to get together, to have fun with friends, and to tell a story even if it’s just murdering orcs in a room,”

“I feel its collaborative storytelling, trying to create something immersive,”

“We all create this narrative and share it and have some influence over how the story goes.”

They also similarly put emphasis on the aspect of fun in a group setting as a main goal of tabletop RPGs:

“in a simple word recreational. I mean it’s, you know, it’s a pass time, it’s for fun, it’s a hobby.”

“I do my best as a GM to first and foremost make the experience fun for my players.”

Another volunteer highlighted the importance of group dynamic on the aspect of fun:

“the fun part comes in depending on the DM and other players. Cause I’ve had some bad DMs in my life, I could say I’ve been playing 5 years more but the previous groups were pretty awful.”

The Role of the GM and the Role of the Players

The participants also all had similar ideas in regards to their role as a GM and the roles of their players. The three main roles of the GM that appeared in the interviews can be sorted into three main categories.

1. Keep the story going, guide the story
2. Create problems the players need to address and create opportunities for players to flesh out their characters
3. Create the world and make it immersive.

Four of the six participants explicitly stated that their main role is to keep the flow of the game and story moving. One participant described the role of the GM as:

“to be a facilitator. I am facilitating [the players’] adventure and creating opportunities to flesh out characters and feel a part of something and I feel a successful campaign is one in which I’ve created enough of a vibe enough of an atmosphere that they can feel successful in the creation of a character that feels a part of a larger world and are important in it.”

Another participant, with over thirty years of experience, said:

“Whenever someone asks me to describe and RPG I equate it to a tv show or movie. The GM has 3 hats: he is the producer, the lead writer, and he is the director...the players are the main actors the stars of the show and they are associate writers. The GM though doesn’t direct like you would in a movie or tv show, where he has an exact vision of what he wants characters to do and act but a lot of the GM’s direction is to keep the story moving forward. To allow the players the freedom to whatever it is as long as it’s within the confines of the setting and of the story they’re trying to tell but also to keep the story moving in a forward direction... Obviously in a tv show you have a script, there is no script but the story is still being told and being directed the gm does the directing. As far as producing, he makes the setting, the initial scenarios and is also the main antagonist um also takes care of all the extras to give the setting life.”

Five of the six participants saw the players and contributing equally or the most to the overall story in their campaigns. While the GM was acknowledged as creating the setting, non-player characters, NPCs, and doing many other duties, as one participant described:

“the story truly comes from the players. It’s basically their adventure. Like, my world has things going on inside it but the true story being told is through them and their hardships and little quirks and interactions with each other and the world.”

One participant described the division of contribution and the role of the players’ as:

“They’re protagonists and the audience. There’s a difference there. And they’re equal contributors to the creation of the narrative but when I say that what I mean is the camps of player and GM. So, you know if I’m sitting at a table with four people, I am not contributing 20% and each of them 20% the reality is I’m contributing 50% and all 4 players are really equal in the other 50%. They as one entity, one camp and I as the other.”

Other participants describe the players as making smaller, interesting stories. One said

“they tell the story the individual stories that are interesting and I [as the GM] put them in a world that facilitates them telling these interesting stories,” another the players’ role as

“the players are you know provide the dialogue and actions, and reactions, and the biggest thing is to give this improv loop going to where you get the action-reaction and everybody is feeding off of each other to propel the story forward.”

Group Cohesion and Open Communication

The participants also highlighted the importance of group cohesion and communication. One participant highlighted that players and GMs need to communicate their expectations and desires for the game, saying:

“I think part of it is open communication, everyone is upfront about what they want in a campaign. People run into a lot of issues when they don’t verbalize what their expectations are or you try to gm for people who are so different.”

Two other participants discussed the issue of having problematic players that do things in-game that bother the other players, or simply overshadow the rest of the group, and having discussions with them to attempt to solve the issues. In another instance they described how different ideas on how a game should go or be run:

“There’s another group that we just stopped playing with just because you know we had just different ideas about how the game knows. It wasn’t that we didn’t like them or had some horrible scenarios or personality conflicts you know this isn’t the style of game that I enjoy.”

These three participants also highlighted the importance of a “session 0,” or having a game session in which the group discusses their expectations for the game, describe their characters, and learn how the game will be run. This also creates better cohesion and player investment in the story, which will in turn flow better:

“So, you’re building your ties before the game starts and then we had a launch party to flesh things out, picked out our minis talked about where our characters came from. Kind of for them to know, ok this guy’s playing the moody rogue and this guy’s the fighter and she’s the sorceress, and you know going in I’m friends with the sorceress so I’m kind of invested in their narrative too. Now there’s a lot of episodic natures cause I’m playing with 7 players and it was important to have

that intro conversation [be]cause they need to be invested in each other's narratives or there'll be dead time and you're a spectator and then I switch into character mode, but I feel it's better if you have an upfront conversation of what everyone's trying to build."

In particular, these participants also highlighted that having different problematic players can break the immersion and fun for the other players, or how a player's view on the rules and how a game should be run can conflict with the GM's personal style.

The Role of the Rules

All participants agreed that the rules and rulebooks for *Dungeons and Dragons* do not restrict creativity or hamper group collaboration. In fact, the participants saw the rules as providing useful guidelines and frameworks for the games, helping players understand how the fictional world works and keeping that world balanced:

"There also needs to be the very solid framework of what the environment is something I have kind of a mantra of mine that I've held for a long time is creativity can only exist when there are limitations. Because creativity without limitations is just chaos, it's just nonsense. There has to be a framework for it to exist so not only how you work with it but push against it. You need something to ground and that's a massive responsibility and it has to be consistent. A rule of both fiction writing, and it's on the fly fiction writing in a lot of ways, so huge important role, a lot of the onus is on the individual, on the Gm on the storyteller."

Some participants highlighted that the limitations and restrictions created a kind of realism for the players. This allows them to understand how the world works and how they can interact with it. It also helps build credibility and believability in the story that is being made, in turn making the story better:

"when there's no system so it can be very hard to improvisationally solve problems when they don't know what they're allowed to do in this situation....It's cool cinematically but as a player I have no idea how id solve a problem in that situation."

“the importance is that you do need limitations, that collaborative aspect needs limitations otherwise you come up with something not relatable or believable to anyone else listening or even to yourself. It’s just a whole bunch of self-gratification...a lot of the greatest fantasy and sci-fi stories have a lot of limitations to them. Even with how much of a paragon Gandalf was, he had restrictions only a certain amount of power and sure he was an angel and all that but he couldn’t make major dealing in the world of the hobbit and LOTR. No one likes a Mary Sue.”ⁱⁱ

“What’s interesting and what makes great stories is that consistency and the rules that follow. You know you just kind of, your existing in something that doesn’t exist you’re placing yourself in a completely imaginary place so there has to be something to help you function and navigate through so you have to have a set of rules for how all of that works. It helps us to connect the fantasy back to reality in a meaningful way that we can then interpret and be able to extend and act in that fantasy.”

The participants also mostly agreed in the flexibility of the rules, in that not all rules must be followed all of the time:

“the rules aren’t that important to me when it comes to playing a game and having fun. It if was a board game that’s different, but what we’re doing is telling a story around a fire and the rules are there to help make that fun and when they don’t the rules should be discarded.”

Sometimes rules were discarded or broken because they would stall a game or make the game too overwhelming or complicated. The enjoyment and agency of the players was also a factor. One participant noted that they would break the rules as long as it fit within the larger world framework and also allowed players to contribute to the story. They highlighted in particular not killing characters in order to facilitate group enjoyment:

“I guess the role of the rulebook is to provide a giant set of suggestions, it’s almost like a curriculum, for which you can then go and be like I like this and this and this and this one doesn’t fly in my world. I’m never gonna make people keep track of food or carry weight or casting agents. In certain situations, those can be used well but most of the times it feels like bureaucracy in a d&d game.”

“Ok, when something happens I need to be the players biggest advocate, not an adversary even if I’m playing the role of the antagonist, but I’m not in the role to make things hard towards not being fun Ok, if they come up with an idea I had

not planned and it utterly wipes away all my planning or anything in my own head, if the dice did it, and its legitimate and within consistencies if the setting and story, you gotta let them have it otherwise you're robbing them of their own agency of the story and of their enjoyment and entertainment of the story. Uh even within the more structured modules and living campaigns and stuff I'm not, I know some people are very adversarial and steamroll a group and do a total party kill, that's not fun for me and after a while no one wants to play with you cause you're a dick and...your friends are all doing this together and spending a large block of time out of a day to do this we all need to have fun."

This is especially true in regards to character actions that may lead to better narrative moments. The GMs were mostly in agreement that they would disregard or "break" a rule, i.e. lie about a die roll, if it made for a better narrative moment:

"I would say I lean more towards using the rules until you hit a point where bending them is more interesting. Rarely do I break them, like utterly, break them. With judicious use of GM screens, you can get away with a lot of stuff you players don't even know. That's the magic; they don't know that you're breaking the rules when you do."

"I [ad]judicate what the rules mean and say or if were pressed for time and no one has the books, I'll make a ruling and keep the story going. If someone finds a rule later I'll be like ok next time well use that or I'll be like I don't like that."

Some participants were warier of lying about dice rolls but did acknowledge that there could be situations in which they would try to rule on the side of the players and help them out of tough situations. The participants that were less inclined to lie about their dice rolls did acknowledge that tough situations can make players think more creatively and make for more interesting stories:

"It's sort of hard, um, so I don't try to do it too often, uh, and the only time, usually, I'll go and say 99% of the time I won't. If the players get into a position in which they'll die, and if it becomes clear that they'll die they start thinking outside the box and then I'll generally try to help them out like, "ok yeah maybe you can do this...""

"I think it's important to keep the damage and die rolls pretty true for what they are, with a lot of other people I know they like to fudge rolls. There's only like 2 people I've ever fudged my rolls for and they're very vocal and scared of the game. So, it's just like, nah, I can't do that. [for] A lot of other people that I feel

can actually deal with it then I'll just let everything tell the truth because I know they respect it, I respect it, and it's the roll and what really is the story about? No one wants to hear about a story like oh everything was good. I think everyone would like to hear about that time I was fighting with my bro and all of a sudden he went down, [then] his sister went down and I'm the only one standing with a knife and I killed the enemy and saved them at the last second."

Consequences and Creative Storytelling

The participants highlighted the need to balance breaking the rules or ignoring the results of a die roll with letting there be challenges for the players to face and consequences for their actions:

"If there are no consequences what fun is that? That's a bad story. Superman's a very boring character without Kryptonite, that Lex Luthor can buy in Walmart whenever he wants. There's gotta be foils for the characters, there's gotta be conflict, not always physical, but your money your job, social standing, what's motivating that character to do what they're doing and you put that in conflict and that's where you get better story because all of a sudden it's like 'oh, I did this and not this isn't happening and its bad' but hey it makes sense."

The looming threat of character death was also emphasized:

"For the storytelling process I'm gonna think of a fun way for them not to die. That being said, if you make death too much like a make-believe concept, where death happens with no real consequence, death has no meaning and to me as a player if there's no threat of death than d&d is a lot less fun."

The participants agreed that there not being consequences or any sort of challenged diminished the quality of the narrative and the enjoyment of the players, even if the idea of character death or having negative things happen are not necessarily what people would usually think of as part of playing a good game. One participant also mentioned using homemade or non-official game materials, colloquially called "homebrew," which often times lead to overpowered or "broken" characters or items. While it may be fun for the player to use "homebrew" materials, it can cause problems for the GM who doesn't know how these materials will work or if they will create an imbalanced story:

“I need to have an intimate knowledge of how your character works. Like a third-party book class or race- I have no idea how that works! I would say its negotiation. Everyone’s trying to have a good time and it’s at the end of the day to keep that trust I[‘ve] got to be open to the argument but at the same time you let your players go too crazy it gets hard to establish a narrative. And when I DM, I don’t have a very specific idea of the narrative...I have a bunch of question marks and the main points. There’s healthy creativity and then [there’s] off the rails...”

Discussion

There were three main questions that this study attempted to explore. First, do the comprehensive rulebooks for a game such as *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th edition hamper player creativity and storytelling or do they in fact help facilitate these aspects? The interviews show that GMs do not think that the rules and rulebooks hamper creativity or the collaborative storytelling environment. In fact, the results appear to be in agreement with earlier research on the subject in that the rulebooks function as guidelines, paratexts, suggestions, in that they provide useful boundaries to work within. These boundaries help players understand how the imagined world they are helping to create works, to understand what they can and cannot do, which in turn functions to create what Atmore (2017) coins as an “unreal realism,” including aspects such as consequences or even character death, that make the game feel more immersive and “real,” thereby making the game and story more enjoyable. The GMs also agreed that the rules in fact bolster their own creativity and that of their players by providing them a framework to work in, similar to Bergström’s (n.a.) findings. As one participant noted, “You can have analysis paralysis when you give people too many choices,” so by limiting how characters can be created or the kinds of classes, spells, or actions that can be taken in fact gives a focus.

The second question focused on how the GMs saw the rules. Are they malleable guidelines or set-in-stone definitions on how *Dungeons and Dragons* needs to be played, similar to the rules of a board game? For the most part, the GMs interpreted the rules as

being flexible depending on player playstyle or the needs of the story in certain instances. This relates back to how the GMs viewed their role and the role of the players. The participants saw their main functions as GMs to be to keep the story going and ensure player enjoyment. To that end, they found that the rules were there to facilitate their role. They also saw the players as being a main driving force behind the creation of the story, active participants and protagonists instead of passive observers following whatever story the GM wants to create. If the rules get in the way of player agency or slow down the story or hamper group enjoyment, then they can be changed or altered.

The third research question was whether or not GMs strictly follow the rules for the game and in what instances would they be willing to ignore or break them. Most of the GMs interviewed were willing to bend the rules or lie about the outcome of dice rolls if it would benefit the story through more interesting moments. For instance, one GM said that they would ignore a die roll that would kill a character if they felt the death would have no impact or sense of gravitas, preferring to let players' characters die a "heroic death," or when it would benefit the narrative in some way.

The aspect of player agency and enjoyment was also involved. It was important for GMs to make the game fun for their players and were therefore willing to bend or break the rules if they think it would be more enjoyable for the players. For instance, letting a character do something despite a low role on their part if the player had been creative or was excited to do something. This also allows for players to exert their own agency over their characters and the narrative. As *Dungeons and Dragons* relies on collaborative storytelling, the GMs must balance their own narrative ideas, the rules and mechanics of the game, and the agency and participation of the players.

However, two participants were less likely to bend the rules or lie about dice rolls though. These participants emphasized the need for the game to have some kind of challenge or risk involved, as an easy game is not necessarily the most fun game. One though, did say they may be more inclined to lie about a die roll if the player would be upset or unhappy if something very bad happened to their character, like character death.

This highlights the importance of group dynamics and communication that help to inform how GMs interpret and enforce the rules. Atmore's (2017) study similarly found the social aspects of tabletop RPGs important when discussing the rules. As the main goal of the game is to have fun, as it is a leisure activity, GMs must balance their own ideas of the story with the agency and ideas of the story of the players, sharing narrative control with them so everyone can enjoy the game. The GMs interviewed did discuss situations in which participants in the game had different ideas or play styles, which in turn hampered the storytelling and enjoyment for the group as a whole. This is preventable through open communication about what the game will entail and what everyone wants to experience in it, as several of the participants highlighted.

Still, overall there must be consequences or at least the risk of consequences. Like two participants noted, "Mary Sue" characters that can do everything and everything or not having the threat of repercussions does not lead to immersive, compelling storytelling. They mentioned how there need to be boundaries, challenges, and consequences because they make good stories. For example, one participant mentioned how in great works of fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*, even very powerful characters like Gandalf always have boundaries, and there is a looming threat of destruction and consequences for the choices the characters in the series make. It would

not be as believable or enjoyable to read the series without these aspects. While games like *Dungeons and Dragons* are in theory imaginative games in which anything could happen, they in truth function better when anything can happen IF you meet the conditions needed to do so and it makes sense. As one participant described, their player can probably blow up the moon in the game, but they need to figure out how exactly they can do so in that imagined world and actually have the abilities and dice rolls to make that happen, because in the real world you also need to work within boundaries. Then, if the players do in fact figure out how to blow up the moon and can do so, why stifle the fun? Let them blow it up and see what the consequences are!

Conclusion

While the study was not extensive, it does suggest a relationship between the GMs balancing the needs of their players with the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* and with driving the story in ways that will make the story more immersive and entertaining, even if it might not be what the players would want, such as character death. As tabletop RPGS function both as games and as vehicles for narratives, both aspects of gameplay, the game mechanics and rules, and storytelling need to be considered by the GM.

The rules and rulebooks provide useful and necessary functions beyond simply describing what the game is and how it functions. They function as paratexts, as described by Jara (2014), providing the framework and ingredients needed to create a believable story in a collaborative setting. The GM and players interact with these paratexts, harmonizing their own ideas and needs with them in order to create something unique and entertaining. The group dynamic then becomes important. If the group does not have similar styles of play, or ideas on what they want from the story, the players' immersion and enjoyment in the story can be compromised. In the end, the main purpose of tabletop RPGS such as *Dungeons and Dragons* is to have fun. It is first and foremost a kind of entertainment, albeit one you can have an active role in creating and observing. The rulebooks' and the GMs' role is to facilitate this, so that as a whole the group playing can come together to create a story.

This study was limited in sample size and focused on a specific tabletop RPG, *Dungeons and Dragons*. The questions of this study also focused on the opinions of one kind of tabletop RPG player, the Game Masters, not the general population of players. Additional research could be conducted with a larger and more diverse sample, looking at several different kinds of tabletop RPGs as different games have different kinds of rulesets and mechanics for playing. Also, further research could be conducted with observations of gameplay or other methods, to determine if GMs truly do play and work with the rules as they described in this study's interviews.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What do you think the main goal of a tabletop role-playing game like *Dungeons and Dragons* is?
2. How important is storytelling for your games?
3. How important is player-enjoyment for your games?
4. What do you think the function of the *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebooks/ official rules is?
 - a. Which rules are more important than others?
 - b. Why are there some rules you always follow or don't always follow?
5. Why would you break the rules for the sake of the narrative you are telling?
6. Why would you not follow what the dice roll would indicate?

Appendix B: Research Exemption Form

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Research Information Sheet

IRB Study #: 17-3402

Principal Investigator: Jenni Royce

The purpose of this research study is to see what the opinions of Game Masters for the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* are in regards to storytelling and rule breaking. You are being asked to take part in a research study because you have experience as a Game Master.

Being in a research study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to be in this research study. You can also say yes now and change your mind later. Deciding not to be in the research study, now or later, will not affect your ability to receive medical care at UNC.

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Your participation in this interview will take about 25-30 minutes, with the possibility of follow-up questions. We expect that 10 people will take part in this research study.

The possible risks to you in taking part in this research are:

- ☐ You may feel uncomfortable discussing your games and players or the decisions you make while playing as a Game Master. There is the possible risk that someone may find out you participated in a research study or that there will be a loss of confidentiality of data related to you.

To protect your identity as a research subject, the research data will not be stored with your name and the researcher will not share your information with anyone. In any publication about this research, your name or other private information will not be used.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the Investigator named at the top of this form by calling 727-519-8044 or emailing jenni21@live.unc.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UNC Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

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ⁱ Live Action Role Playing

ⁱⁱ A Mary Sue is a character that is seemingly perfect and good at most tasks, usually without any proper training or explanation.