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Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons

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Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is an immersive fantasy role-playing game (RPG) which allows players to fulfill real-world social needs through interaction. Although D&D may appear to be a game of simple make-believe, the emotions, camaraderie, and accomplishments experienced by players are real, thus suggesting that RPGs have real-world implications for players. Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore the ways in which players fulfill social needs through group communication during the context of D&D table-top role-play. Utilizing Bormann's (1972) fantasy theme analysis, this study uses a case study approach to identify four themes which emerged within player talk on Facebook: (1) democratic ideologies; (2) friendship maintenance; (3) extraordinary experiences; and (4) good versus evil. Findings provide a description of group members' real-world needs met through symbolic in-game interactions evidenced by communicative markers.

Keywords: Role-Playing Game (RPG); Dungeons & Dragons (D&D); Fantasy Theme Analysis; Needs; Small Group Communication

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is an immersive fantasy role-playing game (RPG) which allows players to fulfill real-world social needs through interaction during imaginative play. Created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, D&D was the first published social RPG of its kind and remains a popular hobby game after nearly forty years ("History of TSR," 2003). In fact, sales of hobby games have seen a steady rise in growth over the last four years with D&D ranking as third in RPG sales ("Fourth Consecutive Growth Year," 2013). More than 20 million people worldwide have played the game and over one billion dollars have been spent on D&D equipment and manuals (Waters, 2004). A diverse player community exists including film stars such as Mike Myers, Vin Diesel, Judy Dench, and Robin Williams (Hartinger, 2009). D&D has inspired numerous spin-offs including movies, cartoons, comics, and an entire episode of NBC's television show "Community" (Wilson, Clark, & Kershner, 2012). Additionally, Warner Bros. studios recently announced the production of

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an upcoming D&D movie with ambitions to reboot the series for a new generation (Makuch, 2013). The enduring popularity of D&D as well as the game's social implications suggest it is an important cultural icon and thus worthy of scholarly attention.

Although the game system has significantly changed since the first edition, the dynamics have largely remained the same. The leader is called the Dungeon Master (DM), and it is her or his responsibility to create the story structure, enforce rules, and describe actions. Though the DM guides the story, the development and enactment is dependent on the creativity of the players. Players meet in small groups composed of three to eight individuals and work under a guiding set of rules to accomplish imaginary tasks. Thus, D&D functions as a "form of group-related, organized, controlled, waking fantasy" (Blackmon, 1994, p. 629).

On the surface, D&D may appear to be a game of simple make-believe. However, the emotions, camaraderie, and accomplishments experienced in the game are real; thus suggesting that real-world needs are met through communication in socially constructed RPG scenarios. The notion that needs are met through RPGs is evidenced by the multitude of play-time hours accrued by groups as well as the ways that players bond, construct inside jokes, and revel in retelling specific adventures. Games such as D&D can be used as research sites to learn more about RPG players, small groups, and communication within social communities. Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore the ways in which players fulfill social needs through group communication during the context of D&D table-top role-play. To begin this research, the extant literature is reviewed and then followed by a report on the case study methodology used to explore D&D-related talk. Concluding the study, cultural implications for group communication theory and practice are discussed.

Literature Review

Games have the potential to fulfill genuine human needs, engage learners, and unite people in unprecedented ways (McGonigal, 2011). Play-therapy games have been shown to teach children the self-concept, behavioral changes, cognitive abilities, social skills, and anxiety management (Bratton & Ray, 2000). Fantasy games have been used to improve comprehension, spelling, and critical thinking for students with learning-disabilities (Mather, 1986). Research on digital games has shown that they contribute to higher levels of well-being, less depression, and less negative affect amongst older adults (Allaire et al., 2013). On the whole, game-play may contribute to a variety of positive effects that researchers have only recently begun to understand.

One specific game genre which may contribute to an assortment of cognitive health benefits is the RPG. RPGs allow players to become a character in a game by taking control of the character's dialogue and actions.

This can be a deeply personal process in which a player delves into the character's psyche (May, 1994). When a player merges minds with a fictional character, the process can result in a significantly higher level of character attachment compared to other forms of character-driven media (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008). Some of the cognitive benefits of RPGs include the ability to experience other perspectives, practice visualization, escape social pressure, increase personal control, improve social skills (Hughes, 1998), and release unconscious fantasies (Blackmon, 1994). Many types of RPGs have been adapted to suit a variety of demographics and play-styles. For example, Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) RPGs (e.g., World of Warcraft), allow players to meet in virtual spaces via internet channels. Conversely, table-top RPGs (e.g., D&D, Pathfinder, Vampire: The Masquerade) typically require in-person group play. Regardless of the type, RPGs function as imaginary play-spaces that have the power to fulfill real-world needs.

D&D is one of the oldest and most renowned RPGs; as such, opinions regarding D&D have varied throughout the last 40 years. Early research in this area focused on the relationship between players' traits and deviant behaviors (Abeyta & Forest, 1991; Leeds, 1995). However, the majority of reports indicated that players did not differ from non-players on measurements of (1) suicidal and antisocial behaviors (Carroll & Carolin, 1989); (2) depression, suicidal ideation, psychoticism, extraversion, neuroticism (Carter & Lester, 1998; Rosenthal, Soper, Folse, & Whipple, 1998); or (3) emotional stability, suicidal tendencies, and homicidal tendencies (Simón, 1987). These studies demonstrate that there is no link between D&D game-play and deviance.

Though D&D players as a group maintain a healthy psychological profile (Simón, 1987), personality traits are likely to differ between groups interested in any particular hobby to some extent. For example, fantasy RPG players report to be less feminine, less androgynous, have lower empathy, describe themselves as scientific, and engage in leisure activities such as reading and playing on computers (Douse & McManus, 1993). In contradiction to research which found that players did not differ on measures of extraversion, (Carter & Lester, 1998) some research found players to be more introverted than control groups (Douse & McManus, 1993). Additionally, D&D players reported greater feelings of alienation and experienced more cultural estrangement than non-players (DeRenard & Kline, 1990). These reports were consistent with stereotypes associated with fantasy and science-fiction game players:

We stereotypically associate socially awkward "geeks" with fantasy games like the pen and paper Dungeons & Dragons and the popular card game Magic. These same "geeks" in their pop-cultural perception often share a passion for computers, science and engineering. Speculation here may suggest a psychological correlation between adolescence, social awkwardness, escapist

fantasy, and a dubiously close bond with a non-human entity that forms this archetypical personality. (Stern, 2002, pp. 259-260)

Essentially, research shows some ways that D&D players differ from the population average. As shown, players are more likely to feel estrangement and alienation. Therefore, it stands within reason to expect that RPG players may have different social needs which may not be fulfilled during everyday interactions; rather, these needs are achieved to some degree through fantasy game-play. In fact, D&D has been utilized as a therapeutic tool to help depressed patients meet similar social needs (Hughes, 1998). As a location which allows individuals to practice important cognitive and social functions, D&D may effectively provide players with the “opportunity to explore their mental dungeons and slay their psychic dragons” (Blackmon, 1994, p. 631). Therefore, D&D persists as an excellent site to explore how RPGs allow players to satisfy specific needs.

To summarize, the extant research demonstrates that game-play can provide numerous cognitive health benefits. In particular, RPGs may be well suited to fulfill genuine social needs. Yet, it is not the mere act of role-play which satisfies needs; rather, it is through the act of communication within the specific context of role-play that serves this function. Table-top fantasy RPGs are guided entirely by talk and interaction. As such, they have much potential to teach us about communication and the subsequent needs that are met. D&D has persisted as an icon of RPG culture for nearly forty years, yet there has been little communication research in this area. Though research in communication has begun to study digital RPGs, table-top RPGs are typically referenced only during reports in which scholars trace the origin of MMOs (Stern, 2002; Turkle, 1994; Voorhees, 2008). Instead, research on table-top gaming has primarily been conducted within psychology and anthropology. Therefore, this study begins to fill a gap in the literature by utilizing D&D as a vehicle to explore communication. Through an analysis of fantasy themes, this study seeks to identify the ways in which players fulfill social needs through group communication during the context of D&D table-top role-play. The following research question guides this study: what fantasy themes emerged from D&D related RPG talk?

Method

This study is guided by Bormann’s (1972) *fantasy theme analysis* (FTA) which is used to observe, categorize, and explain group communication. Scholars have utilized FTA to examine a variety of communicative events such as the sermons of colonial Massachusetts Bay Puritan ministers (Bormann, 1972), presidential election-themed political cartoons (Bormann, Koester, & Bennett, 1978), and online text-based RPGs (Hammers, 2007). Bormann (1982) argues that the process of group communication is facilitated through symbolic convergence, which refers to the way two or more private

symbolic worlds move toward each other to overlap through communication. This process is more than a rational or logical convergence; it is an emotional understanding that enables group members to sympathize, empathize, and identify with one another. Thus, an examination of dialogue that occurs during symbolic convergence can reveal a group's hidden emotions, motives, and meanings (Cragan & Shields, 1992).

To identify instances in which symbolic convergence occurs, one can examine the fantasy-themes that develop and chain-out during communication. A fantasy theme emerges when a specific idea or discourse is supported within a community. Bormann (1972) outlines how the process of fantasy theme chaining appears to an observer: "The tempo of the conversation would pick up. People would grow excited, interrupt one another, blush, laugh, forget their self-consciousness" (p. 397). In essence, when others gravitate toward a line of dialogue, the discourse expands like a chain reaction (Kidd, 1998) to become a supported fantasy theme.

A fantasy theme may only emerge when others communicate an appropriate response. If a bad joke falls flat, it does not chain-out, there is no symbolic convergence, and a fantasy theme does not emerge. Rather, if a group responds appropriately by laughing or demonstrating shared excitement, then the joke moves beyond one person's fantasy-world, chains-out, and contributes to a larger shared fantasy theme. When group members respond appropriately to a fantasy, they publicly display a verbal and nonverbal commitment to an attitude or perspective in an observable way: "if we cheer a hero's action, for example, we support that action; if we laugh at a character's antics, we define his behaviors as deserving laughter. Typically we do this without giving it much thought" (Kidd, 1998, para. 9). In sum, communication researchers can observe situations of discourse to identify fantasy-themes and uncover the otherwise hidden needs, motivations, and values of groups.

To utilize FTA as a guide, a researcher must first identify a way to capture and collect evidence of communication. This investigation utilizes Facebook as a site to retrieve D&D related talk and interaction. Next the researcher must look for patterns of characters, actions, and settings. Through an analysis of the communicative markers on Facebook, these patterns were identified and organized into prevalent fantasy themes. Each theme represents examples of symbolic convergence and identifies the social needs met through interaction during role-play. This research is secondarily informed through my observations as a long-time RPG gamer and participant on the D&D Facebook page.

Participants and Data

This analysis utilizes a case study approach to examine the out-of-game dialogue of one specific group entitled "D&D: Seeds" (in reference to a set of magical seeds featured in the game's main story). The campaign began

in October 2009 and lasted almost three years with little player turn-over. D&D discussions were retrieved from text conversations that were archived on the group's Facebook page. Participants in the online group included eight men and one woman with ages ranging from 15 to 28. Self-identified races included eight White individuals and one Asian individual. Five participants identified as straight and four as gay. The characters that role-played in the main story were named Greatcleft, Orion, Monte, Myst, and Rain. The player who role-played as Orion had cerebral palsy and required the use of a wheelchair. Of the nine Facebook contributors, five played the game regularly as main characters; one was the DM; another was the DM's assistant; and two were privy to the Facebook group as observers.

Though the group met in person to play, members utilized the private Facebook page to plan, coordinate, and discuss game-play outside of normal game time (November 2010 through March 2012). The page provided a location to archive events, organize new games, and keep players in contact. The online location was an ideal site to retrieve the group's fossilized communication for analysis. Extant research demonstrates the benefits of using online communities and internet message boards to observe communication (Temple, 2008). Facebook efficiently documented the group's history and future; Bormann (1972) claims that "a recollection of something that happened to the group in the past or a dream of what the group might do in the future could be considered a fantasy theme" (p. 397). As such, Facebook functioned as an effective location to observe the communicative markers that informed the fantasy themes.

In addition to the main Facebook status page which archived conversation threads, the DM also utilized a sub-document called the "adventure log" to keep track of the game's plot. This document was located within a separate space in the group that all members could access. The adventure log was an archived account of the story and game-play that the DM regularly updated after each in-person play-session. As such, this data reveals much about the communication that took place during the actual game as well as the fossilized remains of those events.

Analysis & Discussion

Discursive markers on Facebook revealed four emergent fantasy themes. These themes were categorized into the following groupings: (1) democratic ideologies; (2) friendship maintenance; (3) extraordinary experiences; and (4) good versus evil. The subsequent analysis discusses how these themes emerged and what specific real-world needs were met through role-play communication.

Democratic Ideologies

The members of the D&D: Seeds community regularly practiced and valued principles of democracy. Though the DM could have acted as chief decision-maker, instead he maintained transparent communication and

invited members to participate in planning processes. This was evidenced by administrative posts in which the DM solicited feedback, encouraged questions, reminded players of events, discussed rule changes, made announcements, and polled opinions. Two example quotes from the DM highlight this point:

If anyone ever wants additional information on what's going on, needs questions answered, wants a recap, or has any suggestions... feel free to let me know! :D! I love expanding on things outside of game just as much as in game. (DM, December 20, 2010)

Hello everyone! I thought I would come up with a little survey for you guys to take so I can get some insight on your thoughts on the game. Your character will be rewarded with 1000 gold upon completion of this survey. (DM, January 24, 2011)

Despite the fact that the group met in-person only fifteen times to play between November, 2010 and March, 2012, approximately fifty-five distinct posts of this nature were utilized to open dialogues with members. This communication style was consistent with a democratic leadership orientation designed not to control the discussion, but to encourage the group members to speak (Fessenden, 1950).

Members valued this communication style based on their involved participation. Although some announcements did not receive a single comment, others received numerous responses with players openly expressing insight and opinion. They engaged in question asking, built a conversational community, and responded to polls. Their preferences outside of the game shaped the ultimate direction and rules of their play. The following example demonstrates the DM's open communication style and the subsequent member response:

Everyone should give an idea of where the party should go next or how they should proceed! Also, give a suggestion for an item to create with your MP. I think you have 10! Remember, you have access to every item through the compendium! (DM, July 7, 2011)

After this input request was posted, members posted 34 responses. One player responded:

*Since no one else has suggested anything for the MP yet.. *hint hint!* Rain will suggest a Dire Totem! It has a daily power that would let Rain become a "Large" beast, which he thinks might be fun. Though, Rain is fairly happy with his current supply of magical items and would rather the MP be used by someone who would benefit more! *hint hint again!* (Rain, July 11, 2011)*

This dialogue typifies the prevalent theme of democracy that was chained-out and supported through communication.

Communication via role-play in this group likely fulfilled a real-world need to enact democratic participation. Players were able to utilize inherent and unspoken democratic procedures to give their opinions, listen to others, and impact decisions. Research has shown that role-playing through imagined problems can teach democratic skills in small groups (Fessenden, 1950). A natural inclination toward democratic needs is not an uncommon phenomenon; some consider democracy to be a universally shared value (Hickman, 2008). Burke (1961) claims that democracy (particularly in Western culture) operates rhetorically as a god-term due to the fact that battles have been fought and lives have been lost in the pursuit of democratic ideologies. Relatedly, democracy can be classified as an ‘ultimate legitimizer’ meaning that due to its power and influence, it can be irrefutably accepted in specific cultures (Kidd, 1988). Therefore, it was not surprising that democratic participation emerged as a chained-out fantasy theme evidenced in dialogue. Through participation in the D&D role-play community, members were able to engage in the pursuit of democratic practices.

Friendship Maintenance

Markers of discourse also indicated the theme of friendship. The players were doing more than accomplishing imaginary tasks; they were engaged in camaraderie exemplified by the high level of warmth and affinity displayed in messages. To illustrate, Myst utilized the following affectionate language during an instance of text role-play:

**Myst ponders the recent unbalances Orion has had to deal with. She approaches him with heartfelt eyes and looks as though she has forgotten all of the things Orion has tried to do to destroy or [sic] fumble her and her companions plans. She says in a soft yet encouraging voice* Let us go there as soon as possible! *She grabs Orion’s hand and [sic] and points it towards the sky while staring up into the stars with a smile* (Myst July 7, 2011)*

The adventure log was another source to identify the affectionate language that was utilized during role-play. The following two log examples confirm the tight-knit relationships that formed:

While at camp, Greatcleft apologized to his party for losing control of himself. He was given a warm response -- his party truly cared about him as much as he cares [sic] for them! (Adventure Log July 15, 2011)

Representing spirits of fate, they told Myst that in order to gain power, she must sacrifice one of her comrades ... Having too much love in her heart to sacrifice the life of one of her comrades, she instead cut her own heart! Surprised at this, the spirits of fate

wailed and cried, restoring Myst's thread as quickly as possible.
(Adventure Log July 15, 2011)

Other observable comments demonstrated a high level of rapport in a variety of ways. Members spoke positively about each another and acted in a supportive manner. If a player was unable to attend a session or if a game was canceled, they demonstrated sadness. Conversely, when a game was about to take place, players appropriately indicated their excitement to get together. Smiling emoticons were utilized generously and contributed to enhance relational messages (Adams, 2013) as exemplified in the following posts:

D&D is today! Hurray! :D (DM, April 15, 2011)

i soo want to try this :D! (Orion, August 9, 2011)

Great game this weekend everyone1 [sic] :D" (Orion, October 10, 2011)

I'm glad you had fun! :D" (DM, October 10, 2011)

Although online groups frequently experience argumentation and flaming (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010), the dialogue on this Facebook group was remarkably void of confrontation. This was a surprising observation considering the fact that two of the participants were siblings in real life. These siblings were often observed heatedly arguing with each other in ordinary life. Yet, within the context of D&D, this sibling rivalry was not exhibited in their communicative behaviors.

It is worth noting that the group was composed of members with strong pre-existing relationships: not only did the group include close friends, but two members were dating, two were married, and others were family members. Although they enjoyed spending time together, occasions to meet outside the game were difficult to arrange. For example, Orion utilized a wheel chair and lived in a group-home; his brother was the DM. Because Orion had a mobility disability, it was challenging for the two to spend time together as siblings. This was evident when games were sometimes canceled due to Orion's transportation scheduling conflicts. Other players had trouble maintaining friendship outside of the game due to the distance apart that members lived: two lived over an hour away. However, D&D provided a vehicle for players to consistently make an effort to socialize in structured ways. Therefore, the game enabled members to sustain and improve existing relationships.

Although D&D players have been stereotyped as social pariahs (Carroll & Carolin, 1989), this categorization was found to be unwarranted. D&D was shown to be an inherently social phenomenon. Friendship maintenance through structured game-play fulfilled a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and contributed to prosocial emotions such as love, compassion, and admiration. McGonigal (2011) explains that prosocial

emotions are directed toward others and are crucial to long-term happiness. Without game-play to facilitate social interactions, people can become disconnected. As she states, “Games build stronger social bonds and lead to more active social networks. The more time we spend interacting with our social networks, the more likely we are to generate a subset of positive emotions” (p. 82). In brief, communication through role-play enabled players to maintain friendships with like-minded individuals.

Extraordinary Experiences

The third fantasy theme chained-out from talk exemplified extraordinary experiences. Player conversations indicated drama, mystery, adventure, danger, and paranormal phenomenon. Such activities were clearly not typical of their daily lives: some of the players worked in offices and others attended school, none regularly participated in extraordinary or spontaneous activity. However, D&D allowed players to witness unbelievable situations restricted only by their shared creativity. Language marked by elaborate drama was prevalent on the Facebook page and documented on the adventure log. This vivid language invoked a fantastic sense of the world within player’s ordinarily mundane lives. The following two adventure log examples demonstrate the dramatic communication:

The magic hastened once again, speeding the vision even farther through time to even before the spellplague had wrought the land. The magic slowed and they heard a voice call out...In that moment, the group suddenly heard the screams of the present-time Milia coming from the doorframe as the magic abruptly [sic] ends and the vision fades. Around them, the entire house was ablaze and Millia was lying on the floor, covered in flames. (Adventure Log, March 2, 2011)

He found a twisting passageway of flesh which eventually led to a smaller crystal shard that was draining energy from the flesh and sending it toward the larger crystal. With a single blast, Monte shattered the crystal, exploding its energy all around him but also stopping the flow of energy. (Adventure Log, September 16, 2011)

Members also used role-play to engage in a variety of other extraordinary activities such as the ability to become a new person. In particular, Myst identified as a gay male in real life, but he role-played as a straight female. It is important to restate that four of the nine participants in this group identified as gay and were generally accepting towards each other in terms of diverse gender identities. As such, Myst could have role-played as a gay male and it would have been perceived as normal; instead he decided to role-play as a straight female. Numerous possible reasons exist for this role-play choice. Perhaps Myst wanted to enact traditional

feminine roles and responsibilities or simply experience the world from a gender identity different than his own. Role-play easily allowed him to become this new person. In one example, a picture of Myst's character was posted (DM, March 3, 2012) which showed a beautiful, serene, and other-worldly woman posed in a dramatic fashion. A comment was posted in response to this picture in admiration of her beauty. Thus, Myst received a compliment about her appearance which was not viewed by other members of the role-play context as atypical. Additionally, Myst was able to actualize a desire for men without challenging straight males' heterosexuality:

Rain sits in solace, staring out back towards the remains of the fallen castle. He looks over at Myst and Orion, clutching each other's hands and gazing into the sky. A jealous loneliness pangs him as Powder nuzzles against his forepaw. (Rain, July 11, 2011)

In the same manner, the character Orion was also able to become a new person. Though, Orion utilized a wheel chair in ordinary life, he experienced the D&D world as a character with the ability to move without assistance. Orion could have role-played as someone that had similar mobility constraints, yet, he chose to experience the game from the perspective of someone different than himself. The following example demonstrates Orion's ability to become mobile through role-play:

he rushed as fast as he could and teleported to the front door before he could throw it open [sic] the bottom half of it was blown off and he saw Nezier in battle with his parents he crouched and squeezed through opening. (Orion, February 7, 2012)

The act of becoming a new person through role-play was accomplished in several ways. First, each player was encouraged to create an elaborate background story for her or his character. Additionally, the DM used language to give the illusion that each player had become the character that she or he was portraying. That is to say, the DM frequently retold the drama from the second person perspective. By referring to each player as a subjective "you" represented in the story, the DM allowed players to become their characters. As such, each player could exist as a unique protagonist in her or his own dramatic story not otherwise possible in real life:

After leaving the monster occupied city of Ormpittar with Millia and facing off against Rilta of the Vernorian army, you escape to the swamp where Millia resides. On the way, you speak to Millia about her homeland. (Adventure Log, Dec 5, 2010)

Participation in fictional extraordinary activity fulfills an important need to experience the world in exciting ways with the benefit that no real danger will take place. This is consistent with needs related to dialectical

tensions. Baxter & Montgomery (1996) propose that dialectic tensions exist in which two opposite needs contradict each other. In this case, the two needs are *spontaneity* versus *permanence*. The idea is that individuals seek out permanence and routine, yet too much routine can become predictable and boring. However, spontaneous experiences introduce variety. Thus, despite the fact that the two needs are in contradiction, role-play satisfies both the need for spontaneity and permanence. Relatedly, an evolutionary advantage has been shown to exist for those who sample the unknown; neurologists identified a key region of the brain which encourages people to be adventurous. Located in a primitive area of the brain, this region is activated when we choose unfamiliar options (Wittmann et al., 2008). As typified by thrill-seekers who participate in high-risk leisure activities such as skydiving, river rafting, and scuba diving (Celsi & Rose, 1993), humans display an innate desire to participate in remarkable experiences. For this reason, role-players can utilize imaginary thrills to participate in unfamiliar experiences and fulfill the need to engage with the world in new and fantastic ways.

Good versus Evil

The last emergent fantasy theme was the dualism of good versus evil. Players consistently demonstrated that they fought for what was morally right and saw each other in the role of a hero. In one instance, Greatcleft posted a comment discussing his excitement to defeat an enemy. This post generated 21 comments with players in agreement and generating excitement for the potential battle in various ways. Examples from this thread include:

I just wanted to say that I cannot wait to pwn [sic] the V-named guy tonight. I'll show him what's what! (Greatcleft, July 1, 2011)

He deserves to die for abusing those poor women!" (Monte, July 1, 2011)

The eyeless one died after you battled her and Vernor said you couldn't have her! I think you might have shoved her into your sack or something. (DM, July 1, 2011)

:O! I am shocked and appalled that you would think I would disrespect a dead body by "tossing" it into my sack! >.> (Greatcleft, July 1, 2011).

Although players typically enacted a moral play style, the notion that one of the characters might become evil was a constant threat. Characters were possessed by demons, manipulated to harm their friends, and sometimes held motives inconsistent with the goals of the group. Three examples outline this point:

Milia sensed a sinister presence within Orion... it attempted to gain full control of him through the night. Luckily, the rest of the party stood watch over him (Adventure Log, December 16, 2010)

Greatcleft had difficulty resisting the succubus' charms and almost succumbed to becoming her eternal slave. However, the relentless attacks of the gargoyles reminded him who his friends and who his enemies truly were (Adventure Log, March 11, 2011).

Cmon ... your [sic] an evil wizard, just conjure up the illusion that the sky ISNT raining down evil stuff, and just make a brigbht [sic] illusion on the sky so that its day time all the time and delicious and nice! then go for the fire seed. RIGHT ... you would do that, i know orion would! (DM's Assistant, August 29, 2011)

Therefore, the risk that a group member might become a villain, was an ongoing plot-point that drove the story. Nonetheless, each instance in which a player showed a momentary lapse in goodness, an event would take place in which morality was restored, thus confirming that the tension between good versus evil was a prevalent theme within the role-play.

This theme suggests that role-play fulfills a need to participate in moral involvement. The inclination to function as a moral citizen is not a surprising find. A sense of morality typically develops before the age of seven as children are taught to understand ethical rules which must be followed or a punishment may ensue (Piaget, 1948). Relatedly, the depiction of evil as a force that is brought to justice by characters of goodwill is a common theme within media entertainment (Zillman & Bryant, 1975). Audiences have come to expect that the hero in a story must seek out retribution when a villain performs a misdeed. This retribution cannot be too severe or too mild or the audience loses enjoyment. Although perceptions of morality and justice may differ between groups (Tamborini et al., 2012), some elements of right and wrong are enduring. For example, the archetypal metaphors of light and dark (Osborn, 1967) have functioned as Western representations of good and evil with roots in Judeo-Christian mythology. As another ultimate legitimizer, moral participation is not merely an ideal pursuit, but inherently expected of ethical individuals. In particular, ultimate legitimizers are often "so central to most fantasy themes and rhetorical visions that adherents often do not see any need to state it. To them it is obvious, taken for granted" (Kidd, 1998, para. 65). In essence, while it was never officially stated that the characters should act in righteous ways, each player enacted a persona representative of a human with a conscience. Although players were tempted to become immoral, ultimately they sought to protect others, punish evil-doers, and restore what was right in their storyline; thus they fulfilled a need to function as moral and ethical citizens through the context of role-play communication.

Conclusion

In summary, the goal of this study was to explore the ways in which D&D players utilize group communication to fulfill social-needs. The research question sought to identify emergent fantasy themes evident in D&D RPG talk. Themes were clustered in four groupings: (I.) democratic ideologies; (II.) friendship maintenance; (III.) extraordinary experiences; and lastly (IV.) good versus evil. These themes demonstrate the following needs that were met to some extent: democratic participation, the need to belong, the need for spontaneity, and the need to be moral.

Two primary implications arise from this analysis. First, beyond the narrow scope of role-play research, this analysis furthers the study of group communication. Just as sociologists and psychologists have studied small groups to generalize insights to the understanding of larger social structures, Bormann (1972) claims that communication researchers can utilize observations from group interaction to reveal insights into mass communication and public address. While individual fantasies correlate with group fantasies, we can extrapolate that audience fantasies correlate with messages from the mass media. Bormann (1972) argues that:

The dramatizations which catch on and chain out in small groups are worked into public speeches and into the mass media and, in turn, spread out across larger publics, serve to sustain the members sense of community, to impel them strongly to action... and to provide them with a social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes. (p. 398)

Therefore, what we learn from studying the fantasy themes evident in small role-playing groups; we can also generalize to infer something about larger communication mass media structures. In this report, it was found that D&D chained-out fantasy themes related to democracy, friendship, extraordinary experiences, and ethics. Not surprisingly, these themes resonant within Western rhetorical visions and work as legitimizers during public address and mass media messages. For example, President Reagan delivered an address in 1983 known as the “Evil Empire” speech which transcended pragmatic political issues and argued from an ethical standpoint for Russian nuclear disarmament. By framing the situation as a struggle between good and evil, Reagan was able to utilize morality as a tool to unite attitudes (Hjälmeby, 2008). Mass media messages often tap in to fundamental human needs in this way. As such, the fantasy themes demonstrated in this report, which were evident in small group communication, have the potential to further inform scholars regarding the power of media messages to affect and inform larger cultural values.

Second, the power of FTA does not simply exist in the ability to identify fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. It offers an explanatory

ability to account “for the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that catch up groups of people and change their behavior” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398). Essentially, scholars can use fantasy themes to explain behavior and understand how groups ascribe meaning to actions. For instance, although role-play may appear nonsensical to an outsider, through observation of the talk and interaction, we can identify the needs and motivations of players; we can understand why they play and what fulfillment it creates for them. Bormann (1972) explains that through the analysis of rhetorical visions, researchers can vicariously experience ways of life ordinarily inaccessible to scholars.

Therefore, FTA functions to enlarge one’s awareness and enables a better understanding of the human condition. Just as a rhetorical scholar might analyze a text or public speech to learn something about communication, a researcher can use the FTA to analyze the richness of case studies (Bormann, 1972). Through multiple case studies related to role-playing groups, we may be able to learn more about gamer-culture and human communication in general. This analysis identified the ways that players fulfill social needs through group communication; because it was shown that players fulfilled needs related democracy, friendship, extraordinary experiences, and ethics, it can be extrapolated that meeting these needs serves as motivation for the game-play itself. Therefore, researchers can understand a glimpse in to the motivations of role-players to better inform our understanding of this social community.

Future Research

Future research is needed to compare results from this study with fantasy themes generated from other RPGs (such as *Vampire: the Masquerade*) to compare and contrast findings. Subsequently, researchers may develop more generalizable insights regarding role-play communities. A further line of research is needed to investigate how themes evidenced in D&D player talk may compare to the perceptions of society at large as well as the mass media. Kidd (1998) argues that “if you could look at the dramas believed by a small group... you could similarly look at the dramas which chain out to a much larger group or an entire society and learn something about that society’s values” (para. 44). By examining small group fantasy themes, we may be able to learn about communication as a cultural phenomenon. Lastly, future research is needed to consider how role-play groups compare to other types of socially-oriented groups. Data may provide general insight regarding the functions of socially-oriented groups in comparison to task-oriented groups.

Finally, RPGs function as remarkable sites for social engagement and cognitive health benefits. Motivations to play are situated in the game’s ability to utilize communication as a tool to enact democracy, enhance relationships, participate in spontaneity, and perform morality. As RPGs continue to become a prevalent phenomenon in our globally networked era,

research must continue to examine the needs and motivations of players to inform future studies on gamers and to generate further insight into human communication experiences.

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