

I'M NOT PLAYING ANYMORE:
PLAYER SUBJECTIVITIES, IDENTITY PERFORMANCE, AND
LUDIC LIMITATIONS IN TABLETOP GAMES

by

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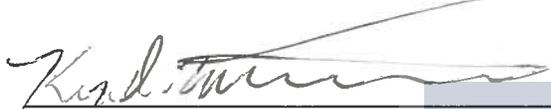
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DEDICATION

To those who play to make the world better and those who make the world better
through play

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ABSTRACT

My research examines the interplay of subjectivity, ideology, and tabletop games in order to consider the productive possibilities afforded by conflict, contradiction, and tension. In chapter two, I map the statistical co-occurrences of words in 3,395 board game rulebooks via topic modeling, a digital tool that uses algorithms to reveal patterns in large corpora. My findings validate cultural perceptions of games as competitive and violent and illustrate a trend in the (re)production of dominant ideologies (many oppressive) in games. The following chapter builds on these findings by weaving autoethnographic reflection with visual, rhetorical analysis of popular fantasy game, *Small World*. In this chapter, I show how game materials (e.g., rules, pieces, boards) construct “players” in ways that can complicate, contradict, or even undermine a participant’s lived reality. The fourth chapter analyzes the results of a survey I designed and distributed to collect information about tabletop gameplay experiences, showing how in-game activities both shape and are shaped by social circumstances, player subjectivities, and cultural beliefs about it what it means to “play a game.” Players, through in-game performance and agreement to the rules as written, enact the values embedded within the game materials. Ultimately, I argue that by positioning players in ways that complicate, contradict, or even undermine their lived realities and experiential knowledges, games, at once, restrict and open possibilities for the performance and (re)construction of identity.

CHAPTER ONE

ENTERING THE MAGIC CIRCLE:

GAMES, PLAY, AND THE EVERYDAY

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

– Johan Huizinga 10

1.1 You're Playing Yourself: The Telling Example of *Ghettopoly*

In 2003, David Chang released *Ghettopoly*, a game that blends the mechanics of household game *Monopoly* with his vision of hip hop culture and life in a modern American ghetto. According to the game box, playing *Ghettopoly* entails, “Buying stolen properties, pimpin hoes, building crack houses and projects, paying protection fees and getting car jacked (sic),” and moving around the board as one of the following player pieces: “Pimp, Hoe, 40 oz, Machine Gun, Marijuana Leaf, Basket Ball, and Crack” (“*Ghettopoly*”). Both Chang and *Ghettopoly* retailers were chided for promoting and profiting from offensive, racist portrayals of black Americans.¹ Notable critics of the game included leaders and members of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC), the Organization of Chinese Americans, the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and student organizations at Harvard and Yale (Willis). Global online retailer, eBay, responded by explicitly prohibiting the sale

¹ Although Chang’s game can just as well be criticized for its classist, misogynistic, and sexist content, public outcry focused primarily on its racist portrayal of black Americans.

of *Ghettopoly* in its official Offensive Material Policy, and Urban Outfitters—a retailer popular with college-aged consumers—eventually gave in to the weight of public pressure by choosing not to restock the game.

Responding to the backlash with levity, Chang defended the game, describing it as “medium to bring [people] together in laughter,” and reminding critics, “that [*Ghettopoly*] is just a game” (Santora; Fellers). Jetski Brooks and Tommy Ly, who commented on the game in an interview with *SFGate*, echoed Chang’s remarks. Brooks sees it as a joke, agreeing that “It’s not meant to be taken seriously,” and like Chang, Ly—who describes the game as “‘stupid- funny’”—also asks, “isn't this just a game?” (Vargas). Although Chang’s goal may be to alleviate the conflict surrounding *Ghettopoly*, arguing that “it’s just game” ignores the transformative possibilities of games, fails to consider how individuals participate in the (re)production of the game’s values, and ultimately suggests that what happens in the context of a game has little to no bearing on real life. At the very least, Chang leverages the cultural belief that games are—by virtue of being games—frivolous to reject the validity of criticisms aimed at *Ghettopoly*.

For some, it’s precisely the “gameness” of *Ghettopoly* that poses an issue. Jennifer Hawkins, a student involved in several black advocacy groups at Harvard, stated that “[Chang’s] game ceased to be harmless when he decided to make it into a game” (Jiang). Sociologist Tony Baker recognizes that the caricaturing black Americans is a broader cultural problem but says, “The extension of racist depictions *through games* is especially pernicious” (emphasis added). He explains that the argument it’s *just* a game,

“reinforces and gives permission . . . to play a game of death with black lives,” a sentiment expressed by participants discussing the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia and *Ghettopoly* at the 2004 Association of African American Historical Research and Preservation (AAHRP) Conference.

The story of *Ghettopoly* provides a useful illustration of concepts and debates taken up in this project. For instance, the conflicting responses to the game’s content demonstrate disagreement over the impact of games on individuals and on broader society and culture. Chang characterizes the game as an intentionally satirical activity designed to make people laugh, dismissing its potential to reify and reproduce existing stereotypes of black Americans (among others).² Those who protested Urban Outfitters for selling the game did so, in part, because it targets young consumers and “is not the appropriate place to market a game that could leave such a lasting impression on a highly impressionable group of minds” (“Board Game Crosses”). Some recognize the capacity of games to teach but ultimately view the outrage against *Ghettopoly* as misdirected. In his *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, Bob Herbert explains that hip hop culture—Chang’s inspiration for the game—has a greater reach and impact on the lives of black Americans. Still, he admits that “[it’s] an ugly game that promotes disgusting racial stereotypes. It presents blacks as murderous, thieving, dope-dealing, carjacking degenerates” (Herbert). As Baker alludes, however, *Ghettopoly* not only constructs a

² Although it doesn’t foreground them as a major part of the game’s theme, *Ghettopoly* also integrates offensive Chinese and Jewish portrayals.

particular image of black Americans but encourages players to perform those roles by integrating them into an activity often culturally viewed as fun.

Like Baker, Dennis D. Waskul's work complicates the presumed boundaries between in-game actions and "real life." In his article, "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life," Waskul describes role-playing games (RPGs) as "a circumstance where fantasy, imagination, and reality intersect . . . and oblige participants to occupy the role of a player character (PC)—a marginal and hyphenated role that is situated in the liminal boundaries of more than one frame of reality" (19). When a player performs in a game, s/he "is, in fact, the player and the person himself," as "neat distinctions between person, player, and [in the case of role-playing games] persona become messy; they erode into utterly permeable interlocking moments of experience" (31). In the case of *Ghettopoly*, players often adopt "so-called Black English or black dialect while playing the game. They 'become' blacks—pretend blacks, pretend gangsters" (Baker). Both Baker's discussion of racism in *Ghettopoly* and Waskul's work on RPGs highlight the need to (re)consider the degree of separation, if any, between games and everyday life.

Scholars of game and play studies refer to this separation as "the magic circle," a phrase that first appeared in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* by cultural historian Johan Huizinga. Used sparingly throughout the 1938 publication, the magic circle is but one of the many descriptors Huizinga uses to ground the experience of play within specified spaces, times, and rules. Huizinga focuses on the role of play in the formation and development of culture, devoting little to framing the metaphor as a

theoretical concept for the phenomena of play writ large. Despite this, the notion that games are separate from real life can easily be (and has been) seen in Huizinga's description of play:

the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game . . . inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently. (12)

Words like "apart," "withdrawing," "rejecting . . . norms" and "different" signal a distinction between what people do when they play and what people do in the rest of their lives. And, it was this particular reading of Huizinga that resonated with Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who adopted and further developed the idea in their book, *Rules of Play*. Albeit as a subject of debate—critiqued as an artificial, or nonexistent, boundary between games and the rest of life—the magic circle has proven foundational to game studies, becoming at once removed from and credited to Huizinga (i.e., conflated with Salen and Zimmerman's presentation of it).

Rather than open—and close—the magic circle debate once more, anthropologist Thomas Malaby focuses on how assumptions about play have impacted the study of games. In "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games," he argues that viewing games as a form of play has resulted in limited approaches to game research. For instance, the historical development of play as inherently unproductive, pleasurable,

and separate from the everyday extends to perceptions of games as non-serious, leisurely pursuits.³ When researchers assume that games are inherently separate, safe, or fun, they are unlikely to recognize important avenues of study, such as the real world affects games can have on an individual's life. Yet, rather than dismiss such characterizations, Malaby calls for researchers to investigate "how that boundary [between games and everyday experience] is maintained, how it is violated, and . . . also [to] examine the practices and cultural representations (claims) about games' safety and pleasurability (or otherwise) in every case" (110). By describing these elements of games (e.g., fun) as cultural accomplishments, Malaby highlights the capacity of games to produce multiple and different outcomes.

While there is evidence that narratives characterizing games as non-productive, non-serious, or leisurely activities have waned, their residual effects continue to diminish full consideration of the ways participants engage in the (re)production of ideologies and values through in-game behaviors. As my summary of the conflicting responses to *Ghettopoly* shows, accepting games as leisurely pursuits allows both designers and players to explain away—and perhaps embrace—the inclusion of otherwise questionable content and actions. At the same time, the seemingly universal boycotting of the game by critics implies that the very act of playing the game equates with the approval of its content, and narrows opportunities for exploring how

³ The same kind of association can be seen in the development of the word "hobby"—a term often deployed to note the place of games in culture. The 13th Century term *hobyn*, originally meaning "small horse," to the 16th Century reference to a "child's toy riding horse," became the basis for the phrase hobby-horse. The pejorative view of hobbies emerged when hobby-horse, a "favorite pastime or a vocation," was shortened to hobby, an "activity that doesn't go anywhere" ("hobby"). That is, to pursue a hobby is to be much like the child on the toy horse in the corner, enthusiastically headed nowhere.

Ghettopoly is experienced by, and impacts, a more diverse group of individuals. Such an exploration, while perhaps unvalued by many, could contribute to a broader understanding of the function and role of games in contemporary U.S. culture.

1.2 Cards on the Table: Project Overview and Researcher Position

Indeed, there are contexts within which gameplay is experienced in precisely the ways captured by the “magic circle,” but there are also circumstances in which gameplay unfolds in ways that oppose—or even prevent—such an experience. My dissertation works to identify the factors that move a person’s experience closer to the characteristics of each. To do this, I begin with examining how tabletop game materials (e.g., rules, boxes, illustrations, pieces, boards, etc.) and then compare my analyses with self-reported gameplay experiences. Together, this allows me to focus on how engagement with tabletop games and gameplay is impacted by one’s values and experiences as well as narratives circulating about those artifacts and activities.

Throughout this work, I argue that game materials construct the game world as well as the role(s) of players within that world. By agreeing to adopt—and perform—that role, individuals become momentarily complicit in the (re)production of implicit and explicit ideologies and values undergirding the game. Prevailing ideas about the separation between games and reality allow players to separate their actions within a game from implications beyond the game, and this distinction, arguably, encourages individuals to perform in ways that contradict or even undermine their sense of who they are—to perform against themselves. My project thus examines “the interrelationships between a public identity and lived subjectivity” in tabletop gaming

with the primary goal of identifying the contextual factors that facilitate and restrict the emergence of play and the secondary goal of “characteriz[ing] the way in which a public self may not match a lived self” (Alcoff, “Visible” 93). To do this, I engage in a playful methodology, examining game materials (chapters two and three) and player experiences (chapters three and four) through a variety of research methods.

Working against what Matt Hills aptly calls the “imagined academic subjectivity,” I recognize that my research—from design to interpretation—will always be “from a body . . . [rather than] from above, from nowhere” (Haraway 589). I embrace the ways this project is informed by my experiences as a tabletop gamer, a rhetoric and composition scholar, and a first-generation Filipina-American. As I navigate the various (and sometimes conflicting) expectations placed upon each position, I endeavor to recognize the ways my experiential knowledges come to the forefront of my work, the ways that my multiple positions work separately and together to inform my processes throughout this project. Each of these positions influences how and what I see in ways that are both limiting and enriching. I would be unlikely to dream up a project like this dissertation were it not for the ways these parts of my life mingle.

As an embodied researcher invested in play, I adopt what I tentatively call a playful methodology: pulling at the threads that hold my work together, following diverging paths, shifting strategies or combining methods to reflect my changing position and emerging knowledge as a researcher, and pursuing that which “engage the propensities of mind, body, and cells” (Sutton-Smith 229). Such a methodological approach not only recognizes but embraces the myriad of activities and processes

singularly referred to as research, many of which do not themselves to constraints of academic institutions and practices. Research is multiple, slippery, and unpredictable. It acts upon just as it is acted upon; it is felt. The rationale driving my methods is playful, mischievous, conflicting, and even impractical at times. In the footsteps of Jacqueline Rhodes, I actively ways of seeing slant “my own research, searching for the possibilities of playfulness, tomfoolery, and even failure” (Rhodes). I embrace that I can never *fully* understand the experiences of others, viewing subjectivity as “multidimensional,” “never finished,” and “always constructed and stitched together imperfectly” (Haraway 586). For instance, while chapter three blends reflections on my gameplay experience with game analysis, the fourth chapter examines the self-reported gameplay experiences of others “in order to see together,” and to open the possibility for their stories to speak with and against my own (586). Together, this allows me to proceed from a situated, partial, and embodied but moving and somewhat collectively-inflected research position.

1.3 The Study of Games: a Different Digital Divide

Currently, game studies is dominated by a focus on digital games, an unsurprising reflection of the cultural context from which it emerges. Prior to this, games research was primarily aimed at the historical documentation of games and the examination of games and play as part of gambling, or human and cultural development (Huizinga; Caillois). Such research was not only *inclusive of* but was *exclusive to* non-digital or analog games. While several scholars have incorporated non-digital games into

their research, scholarship examining computer games far outweighs scholarly work focused on phenomena surrounding analog games.

In *Gaming as Cultural Practice: Postcolonial Imaginations*, Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo writes, “the research and study of board games could be seen as a ‘dead science’ for many, especially now that a well-developed, digitally interactive media has found ‘videogames’ to be a very prolific market” (34). Four years later (and with a nod to Ortega-Grimaldo), Stewart Woods echoes this sentiment in his book, stating that while scholars “have examined the aesthetic, narrative and systemic elements of video games, documenting the evolution of digital play and examining the nature of the game form with an enthusiasm that has typified the rise of new media” (7), many publications on board games have emerged from “within the hobby rather than the academy” (8). Producing what they call “a digital fallacy,” Jaakko Stenros and Annikka Waern argue that features of digital games have been wrongly—even if inadvertently—applied to the study of games overall. The consequence of this fallacy is that the activity of play—and the role of the player—has often been omitted, and has thus limited how researchers study games.

Despite criticism that digital game studies has been, even if inadvertently, partially responsible for the shift away from a more inclusive conceptualization of games, it has foregrounded a broader interest in games in a number of disciplines (i.e., sociology, education, history, and communications) and perspectives. For example, Ken McAllister’s *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* highlights the complexity of the computer game industry by examining various functions and impacts

of computer games through multiple perspectives. Many researchers have done work that is undeniably relevant to—and has implications for—the study of tabletop games. Certainly, work tending to the notoriously difficult task of defining games is relevant, as the goal is often to develop a definition that will hold across and facilitate the study of an array of game genres and forms (e.g., *Uno*, *Monopoly*, and *Grand Theft Auto*). Relatively recent work in this area (Juul; Malaby; Zimmerman and Salen; Stenros and Waern) has synthesized, complicated, and built upon studies published well before computer games existed (Huizinga; Caillois; Suits). Jesper Juul takes stock of dominant game definitions in order to argue for the existence of a classic game model, ultimately arguing that games are transmedial. That is, games are not bound to a particular medium, but are instead bound to “the upholding of the rules, the determination of what moves and actions are permissible and what they will lead to” (41). Both computers (in the case of digital games) and humans (in the case of non-digital games) are capable of providing the immaterial support needed to uphold those rules. By defining games in this way, Juul’s work encourages scholars to broaden how they think of games. Thoughtful consideration of how games are conceptualized by researchers is important to the study of all games (digital and analog) as it has significant bearing on their project, and collectively, signal trends among games scholars.

Beyond developing a reliable and useful definition for games, researchers refer to tabletop games as points of reference, or supplements, to their study of something else. For example, some scholars have looked to tabletop games to learn about and improve approaches to digital game design (Xu et al; Cheung et al). Others have studied

a particular element or feature of games or game activities across game forms. In “Game Time Modeling and Analyzing Time in Multiplayer and Massively Multiplayer Games,” Anders Tychsen and Michael Hitchens examine the concept of time in both digital and non-digital role-playing games. Though these projects bring tabletop games into the conversation, they often do so from a position reflecting the current state of game studies scholarship: a primary concern, if not, orientation toward the digital. While much of this research *includes* tabletop games, they are not *about* tabletop games per se. This is to say that rather than shift the conversation toward tabletop games, they integrate tabletop games into already existing conversation. Yes, such work is valuable, but game studies could be further expanded with work in which tabletop games are a focal point.

Currently, the richest area of research concerning tabletop games is the study of role-playing games (RPGs). RPGs have been examined from a range of perspectives since the first major contribution to this area: Gary Fine’s *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, which considers how players create and engage with shared imaginary worlds of the four popular fantasy role-playing games. Since then, a number of contributions have been made to the study of RPGs: charting the historical development of RPGs (Barton; Tresca; Bowman), exploring role-playing games as creative outlets for self-expression and the development of community, examining how players construct narratives in tabletop role-playing games (Cover), and considering what RPGs can offer people culturally, socially, and even psychologically (Wilson; Sargen; Laycock). Such

scholarship has been helpful for beginning to think about the place of tabletop games within culture.

Tabletop games have been, however, the center of a few research projects, particularly those interested in creating and testing game taxonomies (Parlett; Caillois; Woods). H.J. R. Murray's *A History of Board Games Other Than Chess* focuses on developing a means of organizing and categorizing abstract positional games (e.g., *Checkers*), which was followed by R. C. Bell's two volume work, *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*. Dividing board and table games into six categories and including the rules for the games within, Bell's work is impressive in its breadth. Drawing from Murray and Bell, David Parlett's *An Oxford History of Board Games* refines categories for organizing board games and includes a section on modern board games, albeit rather small. While game designer Bruce Whitehill's "American Games: A Historical Perspective" also takes on a historical perspective, his focus is on the place and significance of board games in United States history rather than on developing a taxonomy of board games. Whitehill urges other games researchers to create a reliable archive of the US board game industry and its games, ultimately arguing that games reveal the values of the society that produces and plays them. Whitehill's project, though historical, shifts away from a focus on game mechanics and taxonomies, moving toward an interest in what happens beyond the game itself. Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo's *Games as Cultural Practice: Postcolonial Imaginations* argues board games can be used "to inform, promote discourse, and create interest," going beyond studying games as artifacts both to examine the potentials of the medium and to make players

an integral part of his research (vii). In *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*, Stewart Woods studies the practices of a specialized subgroup of the gaming population, gaming hobbyist.⁴ Woods' contribution is particularly noteworthy for its breadth. After developing his own schema of classification, he focuses on the history of hobby games in particular in order to show how the genre of eurogames has emerged. The latter part of his book is dedicated to the findings of his large-scale survey, distributed through BGG, which touch on the topics of tabletop game collecting, reasons for playing games, and the creation and regulation of the hobby gaming community. Indeed, Woods offers a fruitful foundation for a variety of research trajectories on tabletop games.

Acknowledging the relative proliferation of digital game studies is not done with lament, and it is not intended to perpetuate a bifurcation of game studies into two trajectories solely based on medium. I respectfully nod to the study of digital games as this work has been integral to my ability to pursue this research project. Predicated on the significance of games, digital game studies has helped paved the road for the study of tabletop games⁵. Moreover, the overarching goals of game researchers have largely remained the same: to understand games, their relationship to play, and the relationship to the rest of the world (socially, economically, and culturally).

⁴ Woods uses gaming hobbyist and hobby gamer interchangeably to refer to individuals whose participation in the subculture of tabletop gaming extends beyond playing games. Exhibiting an enthusiasm and devotion that sets them apart from others, hobby gamers engage in the discussion, analysis, and critique of games, develop alternative rules and user guides for games, and/or collect hobby games.

⁵ Significance is not to be conflated with positive or negative agendas carried into research on games.

1.5 The Increasing Visibility of Tabletop Games in U.S. Culture

On the weekend of August 14, 2014, over 56,000 people flooded the Indiana Convention Center to attend the annual game convention, Gen Con. This number is dwarfed by comparison to the most popular convention in the United States, the San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCC), attendance for which has not dipped below 120,000 since 2006. Nonetheless, Gen Con 2014's attendance increased by more than 7,000 attendees, breaking the previous year's record, and making it the fourth consecutive year to exceed 10% growth. Having doubled attendance over the last five years, Gen Con's upward trend—alongside the success of sites like boardgamegeek.com, the web series *TableTop*, and the board game cafes that are taking root—demonstrate an increased interest in, if not visibility of, tabletop gaming (“Gen Con”).

The convergence and spread of enthusiasm for tabletop games has been significantly easier with the advent of the Internet, offering gamers the chance to participate in a much larger community in a range of ways. *Boardgamegeek.com* (BGG), which launched in 2000, has become the most widely recognized site for accessing information about board games online. BGG is a growing “database of board games as well as an active community of users who discuss, argue, buy, sell, trade and play board games” (“Guide”). In 2010, BGG earned the Diana Jones Award—a merit-based prize recognizing a

individuals, products, publications, publishers, distributors, retailers, clubs, organisations, [sic] conventions, events, trends, innovations, and concepts” that

have “benefited or advanced the hobby and industry as a whole; or which has had the greatest positive effect on games and gaming; or which, in the opinion of the judging committee, shows or exemplifies gaming at its best. (Diana)

BGG has played a significant role in sustaining the tabletop gaming community by giving enthusiasts a virtual place to gather, discuss, review, rate, and share how they feel about playing games.

Perhaps recognizing the online presence of this community, Wil Wheaton (*Star Trek, Stand by Me*) and Felicia Day (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dr. Horrible’s Sing Along Blog*) launched the web series, *TableTop* in 2012. Each episode features Wheaton hosting and playing different board games with celebrity guests. Published on Day’s YouTube channel, *Geek & Sundry*, *TableTop* quickly garnered attention from both game enthusiasts and fans of creators Wheaton and Day. Given that watching people play board games on YouTube may not sound particularly entertaining or even broadly appealing, it is perhaps surprising to discover such strong enthusiasm for the show. In fact, when *TableTop* set an IndieGoGo fundraising goal of \$500,000 for its third and current season, support was so overwhelming it broke records. Raising more than 1.4 million dollars, it currently holds the record for most funds raised by a digital series, and reached \$251,000 within its first 24 hours (Ewalt). Moreover, since its launch (also in 2012), YouTube Channel *Geek & Sundry* has gained 1.2 million subscribers, and while multiple views may come from the same users, seven of the ten most viewed videos on the channel are episodes of *TableTop*—each with at least a million views (*Geek & Sundry*).

Some of its popularity may be attributed to the fan following Wheaton has amassed since his time playing Wesley Crusher in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and some fans may be trickling over from Felicia Day's award-winning show about a group of online gamers, *The Guild*. Yet, the positive effect the series has had on the tabletop gaming industry has been noted by both game publisher, Days of Wonder, and Canadian game retailer, Starlit Citadel—the latter dubbing the increased demand and sale of titles featured on *TableTop* the Wheaton effect (“Five Times”; “The Wheaton Effect”). Beyond boosting sales, the series further cultivates the tabletop gaming community and was recognized for doing so in 2013 when it received its very own the Diana Jones Award.

Arguably, the popularity of and support for *TableTop*, and the continued growth of Gen Con and BGG indicate that tabletop games are in an upward swing, or at the very least, there is an increasingly visible interest in tabletop gaming. Yet, while widely read popular publications like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *National Public Radio* have reported on what some are calling, “Board Gaming’s Golden Age,” the scholarly study of tabletop games has been sporadic and remains relatively sparse (Smith). The variety of media dedicated to tabletop games, combined with the relatively short time span within which they emerged, signal a cultural shift and a need to reconsider the research possibilities they present.

1.6 Defining the Terms of the Project

Board Games—or, “You mean like Monopoly?”

Board games are popularly understood to involve the movement of pieces across the board—as the name makes explicit. In fact, the positioning of pieces in relationship

to each other and to the board as well as mechanics and objectives have historically been used by researchers to make distinctions among different types of games (Murray; Bell; Parlett). As game designers have created more innovative games by combining many mechanics and goals, the applicability of previous taxonomies for understanding board games has waned. In an effort to reflect these changes, Stewart Woods uses patterns in game development and marketing, proposing three umbrella categories of board games: traditional/classical games, mass-market/commercial games, and hobby games. Broadly defining the “board game” to refer to any game requiring a flat surface for play, Woods can remain both inclusive of games from all three categories and also maintain the distinctions he articulates for the purpose of his research. Building on this, I opt to use the term “tabletop game” throughout this project. By replacing the modifier of “board” with “table,” I aim to emphasize the role of the flat surface and move away from the implied requirement of a game board. Moreover, this term accurately reflects the range of games included in this category (e.g., role-playing games, card games, dice games, board games, tile-laying games, and miniature games), nods to the current shift of board games in culture (discussed below), and separates such games from other analog games such as *Red Rover* and *Rock/Paper/Scissors*.⁶

Games as Cultural Artifacts

Adopting Ken McAllister’s definition, I understand rhetoric as “set of ideologically determined meaning-making events that have the consequence or are

⁶ Tabletop games include pen and paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Call of Cthulu*, but exclude live action role-playing or digital role-playing games.

intended to have the consequence of creating or prohibiting metanoetic (i.e., transformative) experiences” (203). As McAllister highlights, meaning-making is itself bound to ideology. As the uproar surrounding *Ghettopoly* illustrates, tabletop games are both rhetorical and ideological. They are persuasive texts, telling stories as they circulate across geographic, economic, and political borders. They are cultural artifacts, designed and played by people. They are sites of meaning-making, and meaning-making *is* the work of rhetoric. Moreover, it is my contention that this very activity—the playing of tabletop games—can not be understood outside of the world in which its designers and players live. Games are shaped by the values of those who design them, and in turn, these games teach us—from a very young age—to practice and enact values that we carry into the world. The better one understands the ways that identities are (re)constructed through play and the liberties people are willing to take when engaged in play, the more equipped one is to develop and design games that work against some of the most damaging racialized, gendered, and classed narratives.

Of course, the idea that games are rhetorical is not novel. Such belief has been foundational to the integration of games research into rhetoric and composition. A solid body of scholarship interrogating the benefit of using games to enhance educational experiences and outcomes has been well-established. Much of this work hopes to piggy-back on the place of games in popular culture by bringing into the classroom what students seem to be engaged with outside of school. Unlike bringing the study of film or television shows into classrooms, however, games offer a unique way of engaging students and several means by which instructors can draw from them.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Gee argues educators should consider the potentials of video games as tools that teach. That games teach is central to his book, and Gee demonstrates the many ways gamers are called upon to engage in a range of cognitive processes in ways that formal curricula do not. Since the publication of this book, several scholars have examined how this particular medium can be used to improve educational experiences and outcomes. Four years later, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe's edited collection, *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century: Literate Connections*, was published. This collection offers a broader examination of the relationship between computer games, literacy, and social and cultural practices, ultimately extending the argument that computer games have much to offer educators and gamers alike. As discussed in *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games*, instructors have since drawn from computer games in a variety of ways: 1) integrating lessons about gaming into the composition classroom; 2) using computer games and writing about computer games as course content; 3) modifying or designing courses to resemble games (gamification); and/or 4) examining how writing practices might improve understanding of rhetorical practices (Colby et. al). It is notable that significant though these contributions are to the study of games in relationship to rhetoric and composition, they look exclusively to computer games.

Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games follows interesting lines of inquiry, such as:

How do gaming spaces function rhetorically and in what ways can/do gamers conduct rhetorical readings of them? How do video games

represent identity and community and how are these representations interpreted by gamers? How do video games and gaming serve as metaphors for written discourse and writing? How do video games' rhetorical techniques differ from comparatively traditional texts? (Colby et al)

These questions are framed specifically for computer games. The need remains to broaden the field of study for rhetoric and composition scholars interested in games research by extending these questions to tabletop games as well. The remainder of this dissertation is dedicated to the study of how tabletop games teach, not only in ways frequently acknowledged (e.g., problem-solving), but in ways that sometimes go unnoticed. Though the explicitness of how they do so varies, tabletop games teach values. They teach way(s) of living by crafting—restricting and opening up—avenues for performances that are surely valued and read in particular ways.

From Identity to Performance: Limits of the Myriad Subject

Because I am centrally concerned with examining how identity and subjectivity impact and are impacted by tabletop games, I will briefly review how I understand and use each term. I view identity and subjectivity, along with the relationships between them and the processes through which they are formed, through the lens of scholarship that advocates for a realist theory of identity—specifically by the work of Linda Martín Alcoff, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya. As Alcoff and Mohanty explain, “Identities are markers for history, social location, and positionality. They are *always* subject to an individual's interpretation of their meaningfulness and salience in her or

his own life, and thus, their political implications are not transparent or fixed” (6). My use of the phrase “sense of self” as a way of highlighting the connections between subjective experiences and socially resisted and performed identities; that is, one understands who they are through subjectively experienced movements through various public and social contexts—each calling on them to resist, perform, or (re)negotiate identities. Thus, rather than describe the self, identity signals one’s social location: “identities are not our mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about ourselves in our world” (Alcoff, et. al. 6). Moreover, the “lived experience of consciousness” or self, necessarily includes subjectivity in relation to others.

1.7 Structure of the Project

Because engaging in a game means temporarily agreeing to abide by its rules, this dissertation starts by examining that very component of games. The following chapter provides an overview of how rules are conceptualized within game studies in order to demonstrate their rhetorical and ideological function and relationship to player experience. In this chapter, I map the statistical co-occurrences of words in 3,395 board game rulebooks via topic modeling, a digital tool that uses algorithms to reveal patterns in large corpora. A significant portion of this chapter details my research method—topic modeling—including a review of methodological texts, examples of previous applications of the method, and discussion of the limitations and affordances both within and beyond this particular project. While the method of topic modeling certainly has limitations with respect to examining identity and subjectivity in this project, it does offer a big picture of tabletop game themes. A broad view of tabletop gaming offers

perspective through which to consider the results of those chapters that do focus explicitly on player experience (chapters three and four). From there, the chapter details the research processes (and associated rationales) and the results of the study. My findings validate cultural perceptions of games as competitive and violent and illustrate a trend in the (re)production of dominant ideologies (many oppressive) in games. Combining these findings with game studies scholarship as well as for the social practices in gameplay, I highlight the implications of “playing by the rules.”

Chapter three builds on the results of my topic modeling data by weaving autoethnographic reflection with visual, rhetorical analysis of popular fantasy game, *Small World*. In addition to conducting analysis of the game’s material components (i.e., box art, rules, and tokens), I integrate reflective narration of my first time playing the game. Presenting the game through the lens of my own positionality, I show how game materials (e.g., rules, pieces, boards), as rhetorical and ideological artifacts, can complicate, contradict, or even undermine a participant’s lived reality.

In the fourth chapter, I move beyond my own experience with tabletop games to examine self-reported gameplay experiences. The purpose of the survey was to collect information about tabletop gameplay experiences, showing how in-game activities both shape and are shaped by social circumstances, player subjectivities, and cultural beliefs about it what it means to “play a game.” Overall, the data collected reveals tensions among the game itself (e.g., rules, content, themes), the social relationships of those playing, the motivations for playing, and the player subjectivities, pointing to these

variables as the contextual factors that facilitate or restrict the emergence of the magic circle.

The final chapter zooms out from the chapters two through four in order to provide a broader perspective to the project. Specifically, I revisit the findings of previous chapters in order to highlight the entanglement of power and play in tabletop games. I discuss notions of fun, agency, and mastery in relationship to power and the emergence of the magic circle. From there, I draw on the work of Henry Jenkins and José Muñoz to illustrate the ways that players practice textual poaching and disidentification through critical games modifications.

CHAPTER TWO

PLAYING AND PERFORMING

BY THE RULES

2.1 Those are the Rules

In beginning a new game, I start by reviewing the rules. An essential component of all games, rules outline the actions players may take in pursuit of a game's objective. In order to fulfill this purpose, the rules must be expressed to participants in some way. Board games, for instance, typically include an official rulebook or manual, whereas the rules for relatively simple games like *Rummy*, *Red Rover*, *Rock/Paper/Scissors*, or *Tag*, are often shared verbally. Even digital games are rule-based systems. Having advanced from rulebooks to in-game tutorials, the rules are integrated into the coding and learned through engagement with the game rather than beforehand.

While the means and degree to which rules are expressed varies, their presence remains, shaping the game and, as I argue in following chapters, impacting its participants. In his article, "The Game, The Player, and The World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," Jesper Juul argues that games are transmedial. To do this, he surveys the work of influential game scholars to identify their similarities, and ultimately, to present a classic game model that can be applied to all games. Though guided by a different research goal, his comparison highlights the significance of rules to game research. In fact, rules are the only feature to appear in every source he indexes. Yet, with the exception of work on game design, game scholarship rarely treats the subject of rules at

length.

Instead, rules are subsumed by the broader goal of defining what is meant by “game,” or they are presented to contextualize a researcher’s analysis of a specific game. Perhaps this is because rules seem clear-cut when compared to other areas of games research, such as the place(s) and/or circulation of games within culture(s), the impact of and shifts within the game industry, and the interactions between players and games. My use of the description “clear cut” in this context is not intended to suggest that rules, in and of themselves, lack ambiguity and complexity, but instead to signal how the characterization of rules as absolute and constitutive inadvertently explains away the need to examine them more closely. The fact that rules are an explicitly expressed component of tabletop games invites researchers to view them as fixed. The constraints of traditional academic research exacerbate the issue, resulting in either an analysis of a specific game (and its rules) or general characterizations about the function and role of rules within games generally.

In this chapter, I address this missing component of game scholarship by focusing exclusively on rulesets: showing the centrality of rules to games, identifying the underlying values or belief systems represented by thematic trends, and considering their implications for player-identity (re)construction. First, I provide an overview of how game researchers have conceptualized game rules in order to outline the importance of rules for this particular research project. Then, I introduce the processes and method of topic modeling, providing a gloss of key concepts and illustrating how they might be deployed in the context of an imagined (and hopefully accessible)

research project. Building on this foundational information, the remainder of the chapter presents the details of my topic modeling experiment, ultimately painting an unnerving portrait of what it means to play by the rules.

2.2 The Rules of the Magic Circle: Absolute and Negotiable

I briefly review play and game studies literature on the subjects of game rules, and games as rhetorical, ideological texts and activities. Under the umbrella of this literature review, I describe how rules *function*, demonstrating that rules are characterized as absolute, fundamental, and constitutive. In this section, I argue that if rules constitute games and games are rhetorical texts, then game rules should be analyzed to determine whether (and to what degree) they embody rhetorical ideological signifiers, be they textual, visual, or otherwise.

Although scholars have since reconsidered the notion that play is our primary means of engaging with games, cultural historian Johan Huizinga's work, *Homo Ludens: The Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, remains undeniably influential to game studies. In his examination of the play concept, Huizinga focuses on the pervasiveness of games and on the similarities with which play manifests across the practices and rituals of different cultures. Part of this work includes studying gameplay, but securing a definition of what constitutes a game is not his primary concern. Rather, his work is about the relationship between play and culture.

Among game researchers, however, Huizinga is most noted for his description of the play world as a magic circle (a concept glossed in chapter one of this dissertation). Though he dedicates little time to the phrase itself, his characterization of the play

world remains consistent throughout the book; such spaces are “forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed” (10). For Huizinga, it is integral that “a closed space is marked out for it [the play world], either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings” (19). Unsurprisingly, his description of these temporary, extraordinary playgrounds resonated with scholars, who subsequently adopted—and extended—the concept of the magic circle to games.

The phrase has since become a point of tension within game studies, its use simultaneously signaling oversimplification and complexity. Indeed, the magic of the metaphor has waned, its strength buckling under the weight of debate. The possibility of a separate space, beyond the reach of everyday life, has been disputed to the point that it sometimes reads as the rehashing of old issues. As I see it, the heart of the conflict is a failure to reconcile contradicting narratives about game rules. At best, the lack of a sustained discussion of rules has narrowed interpretations of the debate.

Key to understanding Huizinga’s concept of play (and the magic circle) is attentiveness to his treatment of rules. The rules are, “*freely accepted but absolutely binding*” (emphasis mine, 28). For Huizinga, rules help construct and maintain the magic circle; to play requires participants both to acknowledge and to abide by the rules within that space. Entering the magic circle—or the play-world—requires players to “stick to the rules of the game” because it is the rules that “determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play. . . . As soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses. The game is over” (11). Not only does Huizinga see the rules of play as integral to the emergence of the temporary world—or magic circle—within

our ordinary world, but he also sees acceptance of and adherence to the rules by all players as the very mechanism by which the play-world is co-constructed and maintained.

Building on Huizinga's work, Roger Caillois similarly writes, "the confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced . . . by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game" (7). From both Huizinga's and Caillois' perspectives, rules are absolute. "Denounce[ing] the rules as absurd," (Caillois 7) or outright refusing to acknowledge the rules "shatters the play-world itself" (Huizinga 12). Even a cheater's success—despite their willingness to bend or break the rules—relies on this belief. To gain an advantage over others or to improve their chances of winning, cheaters must operate on the assumption that most, if not all, other players respect the rules absolutely (Consalvo; Caillois; Huizinga). The rules structure the game activity while the player's agreement to abide by them creates the play-world.

In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Bernard Suits describes this aspect of games as the adoption of a lusory attitude: "the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible such acceptance can occur" (40). Like Caillois and Huizinga, Suits identifies rules as an essential, constitutive component of games—defining the means by which players can achieve the game's goal. A lusory attitude explains the peculiar frame of mind in which players accept rules simply, "because they want to act within the limitations the rules impose. They accept rules so that they can play a game, and they accept these rules so that they can play this game" (31). Participants cannot

really play a game without adopting a lusory attitude (i.e., obeying its rules).

In addition to inadvertently signaling simplicity, the presentation of rules as explicit, absolute, and constitutive has been foundational to interpretations of the magic circle as an impenetrable boundary. As Jesper Juul explains in, “The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece,” Huizinga’s description of the play-world “does not imply that a game is completely distinguished from the context in which it is played” (60). Huizinga’s work does not present play-world and the real world as mutually exclusive. Commenting on the conflict between games and their contexts, Bo Kampmann Walther explains that rules are “absolute in the sense that while the players may question the rationality of the rules at hand, they are nevertheless obliged to obey, to ‘play by the rules’” but he also complicates this by adding that, “this does not preclude the fact that game rules are discussed in a cultural or ethical milieu” (135). The characterization of rules as absolute speaks more to the lusory attitude required to play a game than it does to a utopian denial of real life circumstances.

This is demonstrated in Consalvo’s work on cheating, which suggests that despite the varying perceptions of what counts as cheating, there exists a shared desire among players to justify or explain motives for doing so. This need for justification is motivated by an understanding that playing by the rules is the expectation among those who engage in gameplay. Game rules are central to both an individual’s and a communities’ understanding and experience of a game (Consalvo; Cheung, et al). In summary, then: 1) game rules are often used to signal the distinction between games and other everyday activities; 2) game rules are absolute and fixed; and 3) game rules are descriptive and

constitutive (i.e., they constitute the game activity).

2.3 On the Ideological and Rhetorical Analysis of Games

As briefly covered in chapter one, my inquiry proceeds with the acceptance that as rhetorical artifacts created by people and grounded in language, tabletop games (and, therefore, rules) are ideological. In this section, I provide an overview of how ideological, cultural, and rhetorical analysis is framed within the context of game studies.

Because games are designed and played by people in broad cultural contexts, they often reflect cultural values of their time and place even if unintentionally. In advocating for meaningful play, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman dedicate a portion of their book, *Rules of Play*, to the discussion of this very point, in which they write, “beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not” (519). Beyond merely reflecting culture, games are—as rhetorical texts and activities—opportunities to (re)create and shape culture. For Salen and Zimmerman, viewing games as cultural rhetoric means understanding “how games replicate, reproduce, and sometimes transform cultural beliefs and principles . . . as ideological systems” (516). This means not only examining games as such, but designing games with an understanding of how “rules, forms of interaction, material forms—mirror external ideological contexts” (516). Clara Fernández-Vara echoes this view of games in her recently published book, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, which is a comprehensive overview of the many ways games can be (and are often) examined and

discussed.⁷ In it, she discusses the relationship between rules and ideology, observing that one of the ways to study or examine games is by thinking about the ways they are rhetorical:

how the game world is regulated can also express a set of cultural and social values that we can identify and critique as part of our analysis as well as part of our design methods. What is simulated or not, and what is considered positive or negative in the ruleset, can also express an ideology. (131)

Drawing on Ian Bogost's concept of games as procedural rhetoric, Fernández-Vara explains the key to this approach is examining whether and how games function in suasive ways. Moreover, she argues that the point of analyzing games as cultural rhetoric or ideological texts should not be to condemn or critique the creator of the game for particular political narratives or to make moral judgments but instead to consider how a game functions within the cultural contexts in which it is played. Bogost describes procedural rhetoric as "the practice of authoring arguments through processes" (29). If the means by which computer games teach through process is by the carrying out of rules—or computation—then such a method of persuasion surely exists within tabletop games as well.⁸ As Jesper Juul notes, computation is a part of all games.

⁷ In large part because her book covers so many aspects of game analysis including introducing key vocabulary for discussing games, reviewing a range of goals for different types of game research, and offering guidance on writing game analyses, Fernández-Vara's engagement with ideology in games is relatively minimal, but important.

⁸ Although Bogost's work in *Persuasive Games* focuses solely on computer games, procedural rhetoric is not absent in other media. To be clear, Bogost does not argue that other media are incapable of procedural rhetoric. Rather, he privileges computer games because they are particularly well-suited to

The distinction is how computation occurs in analog games, which is via human engagement with the game (i.e., participants carry out the rules).

Both popular and academic discourses about games illustrate the perspectives shared above. In fact, one of the most popular and accessible demonstrations of a game as cultural rhetoric is *Monopoly*—a game that clearly advocates, as the title suggests, monopolization. In the game, participants compete for control of land and housing. Salen and Zimmerman compare an excerpt from *Monopoly* with an original version of the game called *The Landlord's Game* showing that the latter, “was distinctly anti-capitalist in its conception. The game's conflict was not premised on property acquisition and the accumulation of monopolies, but instead on an unraveling of the prevailing land system” (520). Both examples are obvious demonstrations of how rhetoric is imbued within a game, but they are also examples that are easy to offer as illustrations.

I would argue that less obvious examples offer the more compelling evidence of how games can reflect cultural values or ideologies. For example, Alexis Polis argues that “the construction of sexuality within [World of Warcraft] has created an oppressive atmosphere for individuals who do not adhere to a heteronormative lifestyle” (77). For those who have played *World of Warcraft*, this is perhaps also an unsurprising analysis of the game and the communities surrounding it. Consider then the game *Guess Who?*, in which players ask one another a series of yes or no question in order to determine

this kind of expression given that they are coded to carry out particular procedures, thus making them subject to fewer immediate and unpredictable variables than people.

the card their opponent holds. Some may or may not notice the game's lack of inclusion and diversity, or that in the game, drawing a female card disadvantages players. Because there are so few female cards compared to male (five female to nineteen male), it is much easier to deduce which card your opponent has using far fewer questions. Perhaps some would notice this, but wouldn't necessarily see it as a reflection of culture or ideology. Hasbro, the game's manufacturer, has responded to the plea to include more female cards by stating the game is "based on a numerical equation . . . there are five of any given characteristics" (Sherwin). Although the number can easily be verified by examining the game materials—there are indeed five characters with hats, five characters with mustaches, five characters who are bald, and five who wear glasses—there are a few places where this explanation doesn't hold. For instance, there are only four characters with black hair. Moreover, even if there were five, the question would remain as to why being male is not considered a characteristic while being female is. Thus, designer or publisher intention aside, the game reflects a way of seeing the world in which "male" is the norm. My purpose for sharing this analysis, albeit brief, is to provide an example of how games reflect and shape culture.

Thus far I have shown that games are forms of cultural rhetoric imbued—intentionally or not—with values that emerge from the contexts in which they are designed. If rules constitute games, and games are rhetorical and ideological, then examining games as cultural rhetoric necessitates examining rules. Salen and Zimmerman, Fernandez-Clara, and Bogost discuss mechanics and rules in the context of framing games as rhetorical and ideological texts and activities. Bogost emphasizes this

much more in his book *Persuasive Games* because he is primarily concerned with persuasion through “the authorship of rules of behavior,” which is done by programming in computer games (29). In analog games, rules set the expectation for acceptable means by which the win-condition can be achieved.

I focus on how game rules set parameters on the kind of players an individual should—or can—be and the extent to which these parameters are embodied in the language of rulesets. Clearly, rules do not constitute the kind of person an individual is, but they are certainly intended to set parameters on the way(s) individuals *should* behave with respect to playing or winning the game. Thus, rules, it seems, must be examined in order to gain insight into the trends surrounding how games position players, which in turn, can shed light on how players might generally interact with rules through game activity. Moreover, rules are an excellent transport medium for ideology in that participants are expected to accept and abide by them with little to no resistance. Ideology is a system of beliefs and values that masquerade as the natural way of seeing and being in the world. In other words, ideology masks the fact that it is itself a construct. As media scholar Douglas Kellner explains:

abstraction is fundamentally related to the key features of ideology such as legitimation, domination, and mystification, and the drawing of boundaries (between allegedly inferior and superior systems, groups, values, and so on) also plays a fundamental role in this process. Boundary maintenance (between men and women, capitalists and workers, whites and nonwhites, Americans and the rest of the world, capitalism and

communism, and so on) serves the interests of social domination, as well as the functions of legitimation and mystification of social reality. (61-62)

In this sense, games seem to be an ideal medium for ideology because gameplay is practiced with the shared assumption that those gathering to participate in the game are doing so with the intention of accepting the rules of the game with little to no resistance. Much of the examination of games as cultural rhetoric unfolds as the study of specific games, which makes sense given that grounding an analysis in one game allows for a more in-depth look at many variables in play rather than trading the examination of those variables for a generalizable and perhaps less revealing study of games or game types. The alternative is studying trends and patterns in games, and this often manifests as a study of the formal elements of games done for different purposes. Such work might compare and contrast many games with the goal of developing a sound organization schema or to identify and discuss patterns in design or in the industry.

To be sure, studying individual games within the contexts from which they emerge and within which they are played lends itself to a broader examination of the phenomena as a whole (player, player engagement, social negotiation, etc.), and this is indeed what Chapters Three and Four bring to this project. However, the goal of this chapter is to determine what thematic patterns exist in the games that are well-regarded among board game hobbyists in order to examine more closely the relationship between game rules and the construct of player. In other words, rules are the set of parameters intended to dictate the (in)correct means by which players can

work toward the achievement of a designated goal. To engage in a game is to agree to temporarily adopt a given set of rules that guide one's actions and behaviors. By regulating the acceptable ways of achieving a specified goal, rules both restrict and open possibilities for particular kinds of performance—that is, actions—within a game. In this way, game rules construct players by interpellating them into temporary worlds, couched in ideologies.

2.4 An Introduction to Topic Modeling

One requires a basic understanding of topic modeling (my research method) in order to grasp the details and significance of my findings. This section provides just such an introduction to the method including its benefits and limitations, followed by a gloss of this method's specialized language. I offer an invented sample research scenario as a rudimentary (but hopefully accessible) illustration of how the method unfolds.

While topic modeling can be deployed for a range of reasons, most humanities and social science researchers use it to examine the underlying structure of a corpus of data, a chance to analyze important but perhaps difficult to see patterns of usage. In these disciplinary contexts, each topic consists of a cluster of words, understood by researchers to signify the presence of a theme within the corpus⁹. In order to generate topics, researchers run their corpus through a topic modeling tool, which uses algorithms to identify and group together words that are statistically likely to co-occur. It is important to note that the algorithms do not 'understand' the meaning of words

⁹ While I will refer to words throughout this chapter, it is important to note that topic modeling is not limited to alphabetic data. This method has been used to examine many other forms of information such as the use of color in documents as well as to examine coordinates for historical shipping routes.

they group together; rather, the strength of the method is its ability to make visible human tendencies to group specific words together and the likelihood of particular topics to emerge from a given context represented by a corpus.

As a research method, topic modeling is fruitful in two key ways: 1) it can process a very large corpus in a relatively short amount of time, and 2) it facilitates the “[discovery of] categories, topics, and patterns that we might not be aware of in those texts” (Nelson n.p.). Probabilistic models like topic modeling offer a means of addressing both the constraints of individual labor (i.e., the time required to sift through large sets of data), as well as the limited findings that result from researcher positioning and bias (e.g., reproducing work that privileges examining only novels considered part of the canon).

For example, topic models have been used to improve historical research by breaking up and reorganizing a large corpus of newspapers into topics, making it both faster and easier for researchers to peruse and determine the relevance of texts (Torget, et al.). Additionally, topic modeling has been used to identify how themes in 19th century British, Irish, and American fiction have varied across time and to examine word choice within the corpora (Jockers and Mimno), and to compare data to see how two different social networking platforms frame the concept of digital humanities (Puschmann and Bastos). These are just a few examples of how humanities and social science researchers have leveraged the potential of topic modeling for different foci.

Outlining the Research Process

While the process of conducting topic modeling varies according to the purpose

of research, specifics of a corpus, and tools and programs used, topic modeling projects can generally be broken into three major stages: pre-processing, topic modeling, and topic analysis.

Pre-processing: Prepping Data

Before a topic modeling tool can generate topics, researchers must compile and pre-process their corpus. Simply put, pre-processing means preparing the corpus of data for the selected topic modeling program. If using an already existing and open dataset, the compiling process can be relatively easy, but some researchers may need to conduct scraping—using computer programs to pull and compile data from websites—and/or file conversion. If the corpus is not already in a readable format for a given program, the researcher needs to convert the data to the required format as well as determine the coherence of the corpus post-conversion (i.e., ensure the conversion has not adversely affected the corpus). Thus, for researchers interested in topic modeling data that has not yet been compiled, the process can be more challenging or time consuming.

Once the corpus is in the required format, the data typically goes through four preliminary steps: tokenization, filtration, stemming, and counting. Tokenization breaks the corpus into unique units or tokens. For an alphabetic text-based corpus, each token is a unique word. After converting the corpus into tokens, the researcher determines how best to conduct filtering—the removal of the undesirable tokens (e.g., a, and, the)—and stemming, which combines tokens with a shared root word (e.g., “change,” “changes,” and “changing” become a single token). Stemming can be implemented to different degrees. As Matt Burton explains, “A lightweight stemmer might remove

pluralization or other suffixes, a more aggressive stemmer cuts words back to their lexicographical root” (n.p.). Once the data have been tokenized, filtered, and stemmed, each token (e.g., word) is counted and indexed.

Topic Modeling: the Magic of Math

Researchers provide their pre-processed corpus to a topic modeling tool, which “reads” (i.e., scans) the corpus according to specific parameters (e.g., ignore all punctuation; omit terms that appear in more than 90% of the corpus). The topic modeling tool uses the magic of math (i.e., algorithms) to identify patterns and group together words that are likely to co-occur.

Topic Analysis: the Hermeneutic Process

As the name suggests, topic analysis refers to the researcher’s processes of interpreting the results of the topic modelling tool, which is to say, figuring out what the statistically determined topics discovered by the computer signify about a given corpus. Interpretative strategies can range from the analysis of words in or across topics to analysis focusing exclusively on and among topics, but researchers often begin by trying to identify what makes topics distinct from one another and how they relate to one another. Much like writing, this process manifests in multiple ways (e.g., mapping, outlining, free writing). Because labeling provides a way to quickly map a topic to a concept, idea, or theme, it tends to appear in most topic modeling research.

An Illustration of the Significance of Pre-processing

Imagine that you are interested in identifying research patterns among students within the Ph.D. program for which you teach. You hope to collect data to assist with

recording the program's history, articulating and revisiting the program's mission, and identifying how well faculty can address the breadth of research with which students go on the job market. For this study, you decide to examine dissertations written by graduates of the program (let's say 100 dissertations, total). Your experience as a researcher and advisor have shown that no dissertation focuses on merely one research area. Rather, each dissertation is a mixture of research areas, methods, and themes, and most dissertations are between 200 and 250 pages long. The prospect of sorting through more than 20,000 pages of text and dozens of themes, case and use studies, and motifs by hand would be daunting to say the least, but topic modeling can help sort through this material very quickly, providing researchers with a negotiable summary of the corpus that can then be explored and interpreted in a reasonable and timely way.

If one were to topic model this dissertation corpus by hand, here's how it would unfold: To begin pre-processing, you would cut each dissertation into its individual words and place each unique word in its own pile (i.e., tokenize the corpus). Once you've done this—hopefully with the generous assistance of your colleagues—you examine each pile, keeping a tally of every time a word each word appears. While counting, you notice two potential issues with the data. First, the most frequently occurring words (i.e., those with the largest piles) reveal very little about the corpus. Words like “the,” “of,” and “in” will likely produce topics that are difficult to interpret, or at the very least, would obscure your ability to identify research areas. Because these terms would interfere with the project at hand, you decide to omit them, keeping a running list of stop words (i.e., terms you excluded). You have now tokenized and

filtered the data.

As you continue counting, you also notice multiple forms of the same lexeme have been separated (i.e., plurals and/or different tenses for same lemma have been separated into individual piles). Depending on what those words are, you may choose to group them together and categorize them as a single word by conducting stemming. Or, you may choose to keep them as separate piles or remove them from the dataset. These decisions are part of preprocessing—or cleaning up—the data to prepare it for topic modeling. Pre-processing itself can be quite time consuming depending upon how “readable” texts are to a program. Failure to appropriately convert documents, remove frequently used data tokens, and stem texts within a corpus significantly impacts the kind of topics generated.

In addition to demonstrating how a researcher might manually conduct pre-processing, this example is also intended to illustrate the researcher’s impact on the dataset. One reason I decided to conduct topic modeling was my interest in the possibility of several—and potentially conflicting—outcomes. However, as the previous example shows, no research method precludes the researcher’s values from impacting the data. As in all research, decisions about what data to examine along with the interpretation of said data are informed by researchers’ own positionalities.¹⁰ My decision to conduct topic modeling sprouted from the value I place in possibility, the

¹⁰ Moreover, because topic modeling is an algorithms-based, computational method, the results of the method are sometimes unintentionally taken as objective proof, but just like games, these tools are created and used by people, subjecting them to the messy (and sometimes unpredictable) human element.

potential to uncover what might otherwise be difficult—if not, impossible—for me to predict or see, especially when it comes to the organization of play.

2.5 Topic Modeling the Rules

In this section, I outline the details of compiling, pre-processing, and analyzing my dataset, including identifying the resources and tools used to carry out these processes. As the latter portion of this chapter shows, the topic models my research generated reveal a widespread presence of violent confrontation among highly-rated tabletop games. As such, these themes collectively indicate the tendency of games to exhibit an imperialist narrative of success.

As evidenced by citations, many topic modeling projects are collaborative and often bring together researchers with different backgrounds. Because this was my first time using topic modeling, I worked closely with Phil Simpson, a Development Operations Engineer with ten years of professional experience working in the information technology field. Together, we compiled and pre-processed the corpus for topic modeling, discussing the potential impact of each decision both with respect to the integrity of the process and also to the broader goals of my research.

Dataset

The corpus compiled in this chapter contains tabletop game rulesets pulled from the popular website boardgamegeek.com (BGG). Since its start in 2000, BGG has become a well-established resource for board game news, reviews, discussions, and trades and sales. Arguably, the site's most used feature is its game database, which lists titles, publishers, and game descriptions in each entry. Game information can be

accessed by searching the site, by browsing categories or genres, and by viewing the most highly-rated games in the database. The site currently has 86,482 games in its database, an increase of more than 7,000 games in just over a year.¹¹ For each game in the databased, users can upload files, including official rulesets as well as summaries, modifications, and translations.¹²

Using a Python script to scrape (i.e., locate and download) the rulesets from BGG allowed for a much larger corpus while also decreasing the time it would take to download each file individually. To manually locate rules for a specific game, a user would need to navigate to the URL for that game's entry first (via the "search" feature or via a direct link located through browsing genres/categories or the game rankings). Once there, a user would consult the "files" section for uploaded attachments. Every game has a "files" section regardless of whether users have submitted attachments.¹³

While researching options for data mining BGG, we discovered a recent scrape of BGG on Sean Beck's Github repository.¹⁴ His data included the following for each game: title, game identification number, publication year, number of user ratings, average rating, and Bayesian average rating. Using this as a reference, our script located the

¹¹ On September 5, 2015 the BGG database had 79,187 games listed, and as of September 5, 2016 the database had 86,004 games. In less than a month, the database increased by 478 games though not all games are ranked or include uploaded rulesets.

¹² While users are advised files cannot be uploaded without consent from the copyright holder, it doesn't seem this is always the case.

¹³ My first method of compiling a corpus was by referencing the top-rated games on BGG, searching the site's game database for a PDF, and downloading it. In the event no PDF was available, I did a general web search to locate and save the document. After one day of working with colleagues, I gathered roughly 400 rulesets, not really enough to benefit from the computational power of topic modeling, which excels at processing thousands of files. It was at this point that I consulted with potential collaborators about the possibilities for extracting files more efficiently.

¹⁴ github.com/ThaWeatherman/scrapers/blob/master/boardgamegeek/games.csv

“files” section for each game on BGG and identified whether there were any attachments for download. If attachments or uploads were present, the most up-voted files appeared at the top of the list. We designed the script to download the first file that met three criteria: 1) the file was tagged as English, 2) the string “rule” appeared in the title, description, or file name,¹⁵ and 3) the filename ended with .pdf (case insensitive). This process gathered a total of 8,526 PDF files.¹⁶ Although game meta-data such as publication dates, publishers, and designers is not discussed in this chapter, it has been retained for future study.

Pre-processing

As many researchers have experienced before, PDFs can be quite limiting when they are not in Optical Character Recognition format. Document readers tend to experience this when they encounter scanned copies of a text, which are non-searchable and are often difficult to highlight or annotate without the assistance of a sophisticated PDF reader. Before my data could be tokenized, filtered, and stemmed, therefore, it required conversion to a machine readable format.

We first converted the files using a command-line process called pdftotext with default settings. From this process, we were able to successfully convert approximately 80% of the files in the corpus (6,844). For the remaining 20%, we used Google’s Cloud Vision Application Program Interface (API) to perform optical character recognition on

¹⁵ This would match “rulebook” as well as “overruled” because they both contain r-u-l-e in sequence.

¹⁶ For all HTTP client requests, we used Requests (docs.python-requests.org/en/master/). To search through the HTML and find download links, we used BeautifulSoup (www.crummy.com/software/BeautifulSoup/). To automatically retry failed requests, we used Retrying (github.com/rholder/retrying).

the PDFs.¹⁷ For every PDF—each of which contained multiple pages—we converted each page into a 200 DPI JPEG image using pdftoppm and submitted it to the TEXT_DETECTION Vision API. This script collected the detected text and created a machine readable text file for each PDF.¹⁸ Through this secondary conversion process, we generated an additional 927 usable rulesets for the corpus.

We considered a text file to be unusable if either of the following were true: 1) the file contained fewer than 50 correctly spelled 2+ character English words (i.e., the document was extremely brief), or 2) fewer than 70% of the 2+ character words contained in the text were correctly spelled English words (i.e., either the scan was bad or was in a language other than English).¹⁹ After the file conversion and cleanup process, 91% of the downloaded rulesets were usable. However, we narrowed this dataset further by focusing on games ranked in the top 10,000 on BGG under the assumption that this would reduce outliers. This decision resulted in a corpus of 3,431 rulesets for topic modeling. Early modeling with this dataset produced some questionable topics, and when we examined the corpus more closely, we identified several duplicate rulesets. After removing those, our corpus was finalized at 3,395 usable rulesets.

Following the conversion and cleanup process, we used the popular and well-maintained scikit-learn library to extract text features and to build the topic models.²⁰

¹⁷ cloud.google.com/vision/

¹⁸ linux.die.net/man/1/pdftoppm

¹⁹ The default GNU Aspell dictionary (aspell.net/) for American English (en_US) was used by PyEnchant (pythonhosted.org/pyenchant/) to determine if a word was correctly spelled. We removed **483** low quality text files using this process.

²⁰ scikit-learn.org/stable/about.html#funding

First, we ran the corpus through a stop words process in order to eliminate commonly used words that could muddy the topic models. We began with scikit-learn's default list of stop words. To this list, we added additional corpus-based stop words, or words common to the genre of tabletop game rulesets (e.g., "rules," "contents," "page," "publisher"). Commonly occurring words can lead to "noisy" (i.e., less distinct and meaningful) topics which are difficult to interpret because they are "non-content-bearing." In addition to removing specifically identified stop words, we also made a number of decisions to increase the likelihood of salient topics and reduce the likelihood of noisy output. For example, we directed the software to ignore all words that appeared in more than 90% of the documents, excluded words that appeared in fewer than five of the rulesets to remove infrequent words from the topic models, and used a part of speech tagger to isolate nouns (to emphasize thematic content over mechanics).

Topic Testing: Preliminary Analysis Using LDAVis

Before a topic modeling program generates clusters for analysis, variables, such as the number of tokens (e.g., words) and number of topics, are created. The number of topics significantly impacts output because it specifies how many groups across which to distribute the words. When we ran the models with a greater number of topics, the results were weaker. That is, the connections among the words within each topic were too inconsistent to yield useful results for this project. Without a larger dataset (i.e., greater variety of vocabulary and/or documents), increased topic numbers created topics with significant overlap (some of which were subsumed by other topics). With this in mind, we privileged (to the extent possible) a lower number of topics in order to

produce greater probabilistic representations and to minimize sacrificing meaningful topic distinctions. In other words, we wanted prominent, distinguishable topics.

Using a Python implementation of a topic modeling visualization tool LDAvis was instrumental in this decision-making process as it was our primary means of examining topic prevalence, topic overlap, and topic relationships.²¹ LDAvis takes the data from the topic modeling tool and generates two key visualizations: a plot of each topic, as represented by numbered circles, and a bar graph of term frequencies. LDAvis allows researchers to see the prevalence of a topic within a given corpus as well as in proportion to other topics. The greater the area of the circle, the more prevalent the topic is within the corpus. So, by visually examining the circular representation of each topic, researchers are able to tell immediately which topics have the greatest distribution within the corpus. Additionally, the bar graph can show both the most salient terms within the topic and also within the corpus, which facilitates comparison.

As Siviert and Shirley explain:

The left and right panels of our visualization are linked such that selecting a topic (on the left) reveals the most useful terms (on the right) for interpreting the selected topic. In addition, selecting a term (on the right) reveals the conditional distribution over topics (on the left) for the selected term. This kind of linked selection allows users to examine a large number of topic-term relationships in a compact manner. (63)

²¹ Prevalence refers to the topic distribution. To calculate this percentage, the total number of tokens within the given topic is divided by the total number of tokens in the entire corpus.

In other words, by allowing researchers to quickly move between the prevalence (distribution of topic across the corpus) and term salience (the most useful words for identifying and interpreting the topics, LDAvis facilitates the rapid examination and comparison of topic models generated by different variable settings such as the number of topics.

LDAvis allowed us to conduct relatively quick preliminary analyses of output based on different variables. Ultimately, we selected the variables that produced a balance of salient and prevalent topics²². Figure 1 reflects these variables and shows the most prevalent topic (circle) along with the topic's estimated term frequency in red.

²² The topic models discussed in the remainder of this chapter emerged from setting the number of tokens to 2000 and the number of topics to 15.

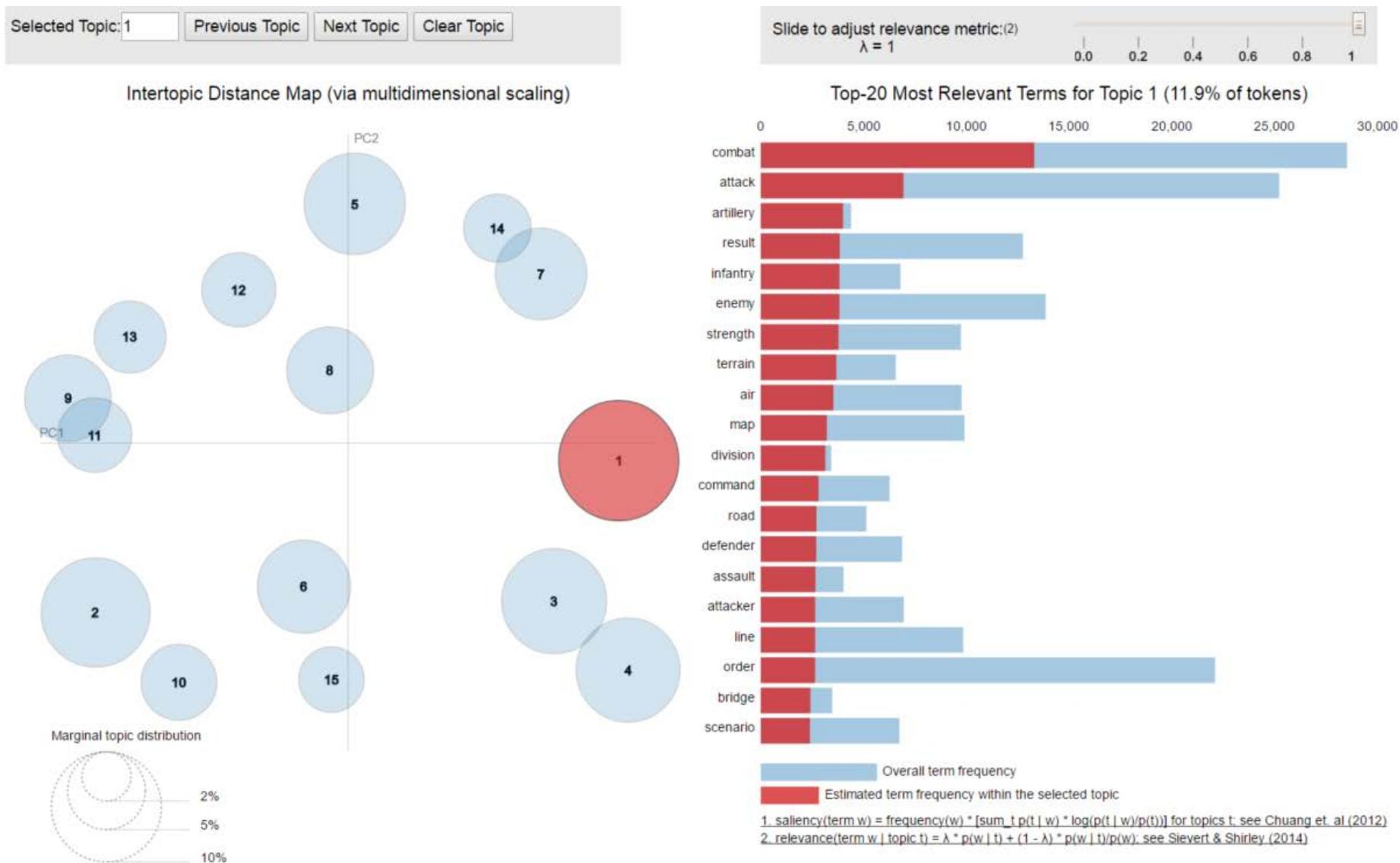


Figure 1. Screenshot of LDAVis using a Python implementation

2.6 Topic Modeling Analysis

Because LDA does not understand words (i.e., ascribe or interpret meaning), it is the work of researchers to interpret and discuss the significance of a topic or group of topics. Moreover, the human element—even when not immediately visible—is always at play in topic modeling. Consider the fact that to determine the reliability of algorithms, visualization tools, and programs for topic modeling, developers rely on people to examine and interpret their pre-release systems' topics. And, as historian and digital humanities scholar Benjamin M. Schmidt explains, "Topic models are no less ambiguous, no less fickle, and no less arbitrary than words. They require major feats of interpretation; even understanding the output of one particular model is a task which requires considerable effort. And ultimately, topics are not what we are actually interested in. Words—despite not being coherent wholes or stable constants—are" (n.p.). Schmidt cautions against interpretative approaches that focus exclusively on the top few words of a topic, and instead argues humanists should examine and engage more closely with words and metadata alongside topics. This approach, he argues, improves the validity of claims about topic significance.

My interpretive strategies were selected with the scope of this chapter in mind. While I do not focus on word counts for each topic, I begin by examining the top words in the corpus, revising them in the context of the topics, and then examining the topics. To test the strength of my topic interpretations, I looked beyond the top ten words, compared topics, and used LDAvis to adjust term relevance and identify more distinctive but less frequent topic terms.

Top Words

combat, attack, ship, city, battle, power, target, leader, army, building, hero, damage, location, air, monster, mission, region, company, country, influence

Figure 2. Top 20 terms from most to least frequent

Figure 2 shows the top twenty words in the corpus arranged in decreasing order. Using the top twenty words, I created preliminary groups and labeled them (Figure 3). Initially, I deduced the following categories for the terms (based on association): war, geography/space, development, transportation, fantasy, and positionality. Since some words could fit into multiple categories, as shown in Figure 3, I refined my labeling system. Because some terms fit more than one category, I examined the topics in which those terms are most common. This process guided my term interpretations by grounding my analysis in the context of each of the fifteen topics (Figure 4).

Geography/Space	country region city location
War	combat attack battle target army damage mission [company] [air] [ship] [hero]
Positionality/hierarchy	Power influence leader
Fantasy	hero monster
Transportation	air ship
Development	city building company

**Figure 3. Top 20 words organized by category.
Brackets signify terms that may or may not fit the category.**

For instance, the word “company” could fit into both the “war” and “development” categories. To predict whether its use more likely referred to a business or a group of soldiers, I used LDAvis to determine the topics in which it was most

common. The term appears most frequently in Topic 10, and does not show up in the top 20 words of the other topics. Since Topic 10 is primarily about industry (i.e., railways and economics), I determined that “company” more likely refers to a business organization than a group of soldiers.

TOPIC	DISTRIBUTION	TOP 10 WORDS
1	11.9%	combat attack artillery result infantry enemy strength terrain air map
2	9.8%	building city resource worker good order gold field market victory
3	9.1%	battle leader army area force city combat enemy block territory
4	8.9%	air war combat sea country force axis port ground faction
5	8.4%	hero attack monster damage model room combat level value target
6	7.1%	power planet order province faction technology resource sector battle base
7	6.9%	weapon target attack vehicle range enemy order squad gun damage
8	6.2%	ship team car zone crew island captain line boat sea
9	6.1%	family tower animal castle value king order follower member lord
10	4.8%	company train share bid stock money bank price value station
11	4.6%	location coin victory village gold cost agent treasure order knight
12	4.5%	creature dragon treasure spell encounter adventure gold quest minion challenge
13	4.3%	zombie survivor robot trick zone district order runner equipment value
14	3.8%	mission target aircraft fighter squadron flight level bomber pilot bomb
15	3.5%	region influence event country state control villain vote war value

Figure 4. Topics, distribution, and top ten words
Top 20 words indicated in bold.

Likewise, “air” can be kept in the category of war because it occurs most frequently in two war-related topics (1, 4), while “ship” was removed from the war category and kept under transportation—a closer fit to Topic 8. While Topic 5 includes terms like “attack,” “damage,” “wound,” “opponent,” “enemy,” “weapon,” and “warrior,” the emphasis on individuals (opponent, enemy, wound, warrior, hero) sets it apart from the broader category of war. Thus, topics 5 and 12 solidified the placement of “hero” and “monster” in the category of fantasy. “Building” is the top word in Topic 2 (production) and appears with the second highest frequency in the top 40 words of Topic 7 (war). While

the word fits both categories, its prominence in Topic 2 provided the rationale for categorizing it as part of Development. Given that “city” appears in the top twenty words of topics 2 (production), 3 (war), 4 (war), 10 (industry) and 11 (economy), it was grouped under development.

Analyzing the prominent terms in the context their topics helped with refining the categories and term groups (Figure 5). While this process does not utilize metadata to track terms over time or count word occurrences in each topic, it nonetheless reinforces Schmidt’s call for examining both words and topics by demonstrating how interpretative claims are influenced by the relationship(s) among topics and words.

Geography	country region location
War	combat attack battle target army damage mission air
Positionality/hierarchy	Power influence leader
Fantasy	hero monster
Movement	ship
Development	city building company

Figure 5. Top 20 words organized by category

On Playing by the Rules

This chapter began with an overview of the significance to, and function of, rules. Rules, as reflected in game scholarship, are an integral feature of all games. I argue that—because games are widely understood as rhetorical, ideological artifacts *and* there exists the expectation that participants abide by the rules (i.e., to act accordingly)—rules largely define the values and beliefs that can be enacted by participants in a game. In following this argument, my topic modeling experiment paints an unnerving portrait of what it often means to “play by the rules.” While none of the categories emerging from the top words map neatly to particular ideological systems

(e.g., capitalism, anarchism, socialism), this corpus, as a whole, indicates that many of the most successful English-language games have an ideological underpinning that promotes agonism—and in many cases, violence—as the primary means of achieving success or victory (as symbolically signaled by game materials). In fact, the language of war permeates the corpus to such a degree that even when examining a low number of topics, discrete clusters never emerged.²³

In hopes of delineating distinctions among the war-related topics, we looked at the top forty words in each topic and the game rules most heavily weighted in those topics. This process made visible a few distinctions. For instance, the inclusion and higher frequency of terrain specific terminology (e.g., artillery, infantry, terrain, map, road, bridge, cavalry, area, river, formation) distinguishes Topic 1 as predominantly land warfare, whereas Topic 14 is predominantly air warfare (e.g., aircraft, squadron, flight, bomber, pilot, bomb, speed, plane, altitude, range, missile). Together, Topic 1 and Topic 14 focus broadly on types of warfare, while Topic 3 and Topic 4 suggest specific historical wars. Topic 3 includes terms suggesting focus on US history, such as “union,” “commander,” “confederate,” “retreat,” “general,” and “state.” The theme of Topic 4, World War II, is demonstrated by the following terms: country, axis, France, Germany, ally, nation. Additionally, Topic 15, despite the frequency of the word “war,” overwhelmingly focuses on geopolitics. This is evidenced by its many references to political power and relationships rather than on military-specific actions (“region,”

²³ We ran the corpus with 10 to 100 topics at token variables of 1000, 2000, 3000, 5000, and 10,000. In all topic models we examined, there was a consistent and widespread presence of war-related topics.

“influence,” “country,” “state,” “control,” “vote,” “order,” “position,” “issue,” “support,” “power,” “victory,” “government,” “crisis,” “party,” “China,” “communist,” “election,” “nation,” “politician,” “class,” “guerrilla,” “head,” “office,” “democrat,” “agenda,” “France,” “ops,” and “aid”). Though such topic distinctions were fruitful, there remain some war-related topics for which clarification was more difficult, such as Topic 7. Moreover, analysis of non-war specific topics revealed the pervasiveness of the influence of armed conflict as a theme. For example, Topic 5, which I labeled as fantasy, and Topic 6, which I labeled as science fiction or space, are infused with much of the same language as previous topics. The word “attack” is wedged between “hero” and “monster” in the fantasy topic. Also included are “damage,” “combat,” “target,” “wound,” “opponent,” “enemy,” “weapon,” and “warrior.” The science fiction topic includes “battle,” “war,” and “victory.”

Additionally, when examining the top terms, the topics, and the rulesets that fit best to those topics, there is a clear privileging of Western (US and Western European) histories and values. Consider, for instance, the topics emerging around the Civil War and WWII. In such privileging is the assumption among game designers and publishers that participants are receptive to engagement with these values and to performing particular types of identities. Such themes can provide evidence of what kinds of “player” games construct and/or what kind of culture(s) games reflect, (re)produce, and assume players have knowledge of.

It is important to note that the results of my analysis of English language game rulesets does not indicate a particular insidiousness or villainy among game designers.

These findings are likely influenced by the history of the tabletop gaming industry, which is heavily rooted in the convergence of war-gaming (military simulation games) and mass market game production in the 1970s (Woods). Because designers are likely plugged into the hobby itself, they are undoubtedly susceptible to the ideological language used within the community—whether or not they are aware of it.

As my data reflect, the concept of player cooperation is only evident in a single term and topic (“team” appears in Topic 8). However, it is worth noting that as the tabletop gaming industry has grown, there has been a corresponding rise in games that challenge many of the mechanics and themes that have long dominated the hobby. Yet, the history of the hobby’s emergence out of military simulation games remains powerfully influential, saturating the way games are thematically designed even today, and naturalizing the language used to describe conflict by closely associating it with the pleasures of play.

While case studies of particular games help produce specific ideological analyses, topic modeling has proven to be a useful method for revealing at a very broad level a bias toward (often violent) conflict in popular English language oriented games. In the next chapter, I conduct a case study of the game *Small World*, complicating the analysis of the board game materials by integrating a reflective analysis of the connection between subjectivity and the performance of ideology in games.

CHAPTER THREE

NANCY DREW AND THE CASE OF THE LOST TRIBES²⁴

Fuck off, Nancy Drew
 Fuck off, Nancy Drew [. . .]
 Nancy, you never told us
 that detectives could feel so shitty.
 I always believed that you were real
 But you never lived outside “The Nancy Drew Mystery Series.”
 Now I’m left to solve it all by myself
 Me, famous girl detective
 In my own shiny blue roadster
 Without a damn clue at all.
 - *Melinda L. De Jesús*

3.1 Look a Little Closer

The magic circle debate epitomizes tensions between lived reality and the social activity of gameplay. In his examination of the subject, Jesper Juul explains that the one-size-fits-all misinterpretation of Huizinga’s magic circle cannot adequately account for the co-construction of the game world. He offers, instead, the metaphor of a puzzle piece to illustrate the significance of context on the study of games. Just as each puzzle piece fits perfectly in exactly one place, the contours of the game-world bend, break, or fit. He writes, “playing a game not only means following or observing the rules of that game, but there are also special social conventions about how one can act towards other people when playing games” (Juul 60). As a socially negotiated activity, gameplay

²⁴ My title refers to Melinda L. De Jesús’s “Fictions of Assimilation: Nancy Drew, Cultural Imperialism, and the Filipina/American Experience,” from which I also drew the opening quote. Arguing that Nancy drew is a symbol of U.S. cultural imperialism, she reflects on its impact in her life. The quote that opens this chapter illustrates how her obsession with Nancy turned to resentment.

unfolds in varied ways. By looking at the context surrounding gameplay, researchers might better understand the contours of the game-world.

This chapter is, then, my endeavor to look more closely at the multiple ways the game-world is (re)constructed by exploring how games position players in networks of social difference. I first build on my previous discussion of the magic circle, the lusory attitude, and the suasive capacities of games in order to demonstrate the significance of critical game scholarship. In the remainder of the chapter, I engage in an analysis of *Small World's* artwork in order to explore how the results of my topic modeling experiment manifest visually. In particular, I focus on the themes of dominance, violence, and dehumanization demonstrated by the game box, the race tokens, and the Lost Tribes tokens. This analysis provides a springboard for reflective interjections of my experience learning and playing *Small World* as a marginalized subject. Backstitching Chapter two, I show how games can exploit the notion of a lusory attitude (i.e., the expectation that individuals abide by constitutive rules) by compelling players to perform identities that contradict their experiential knowledges and lived realities.

3.2 Serious Games and Critical Game Studies

Two separate but related points bear repeating as they are foundational to the arguments I make throughout the dissertation. First, not only *can* games teach, but they *do* teach. As outlined in chapter one, many scholars have demonstrated the value of games as educational activities. Typically, the term “serious game” is used to distinguish games that have been explicitly designed to be educational from games that are designed primarily as entertainment. Despite the convenience of quickly characterizing

the context—especially the purpose—from which a game develops, the term also, inadvertently, provides an avenue for arguing that games only teach when they are designed to do so. Such a conclusion could only be reached with the assumption that entertainment (i.e., the antithesis of work, the pursuit of pleasure) offers little in the way of education. I point this out, not as a critique nor as an assertion that term implies advocacy for this position, but to foreground the notion that all games teach—and they do so despite intent. Thus, my second point is that the educational function unfolds unrestricted by the intention of those who craft them (designers, artists, and publishers). Rather, by the process of interacting with the game system, players interpret the games in ways both predictable and unforeseen.

Moreover, whether or not a person recognizes exactly *what* they are learning, their learning reaches beyond the temporal limits of gameplay. In fact, this is one of the primary reasons for the study of games. As board game designer and historian Bruce Whitehill shows, the examination of games provides, “insight into the values and demeanor of that society” (116). Presenting several examples, Whitehill demonstrates how games reflect the contexts from which they emerge. For instance, the *Mansion of Happiness*, which relies on simple mechanics to reinforce the concepts of virtue and vice, illustrates social concern regarding the decline of morality. Not only does the game, as Whitehill shows, incorporate a system of rewarding normative virtues (e.g., chastity, humanity) and punishing vices (e.g., passion, cruelty) through respective movements forward and backward, but the US version also explicitly identifies itself as “an instructive moral and entertaining amusement” (119). This particular example also

sheds light on how games were understood during the mid-19th century. Notably, the game implies the dual goals of educating and entertaining, or perhaps more accurately, of educating through entertainment. To connect to my earlier claims, it seems that the history of board games as educational activities has somehow been obscured by the overlap between the game industry and the entertainment industry.

Like *The Mansion of Happiness*, *The Landlord's Game* was also expressly designed as a game “of amusement as well as of instruction” (Phillips 56). To date, *The Landlord's Game* (now called *Monopoly*) is, arguably, the clearest illustration of the mercurial connections between intentions and effects. Elizabeth “Lizzie” J. Magie Phillips, who developed, patented, and self-published the game prior to its acquisition by Parker Brothers, explains that:

They [children] learn that the quickest way to accumulate wealth and gain power is to get all the land they can in the best localities and hold on to it. There are those who argue that it is a dangerous thing to teach children how they may thus get the advantage of their fellows, but let me tell you there are no fairer-minded beings in the world than our own little American children . . . let the children once see clearly the gross injustice of our present land system and when they grow up, if they are allowed to develop naturally, the evil will soon be remedied. 56

As a follower of the single-tax movement, Phillips reportedly created two sets of rules for *The Landlord's Game*. The first, which has been somewhat modified, remains recognizable to those familiar with *Monopoly*. The second ruleset, referred to as

Prosperity or *The Landlord's Game* (depending on the source and date), enacted several of the economic principles for which Phillips advocated. Importantly, Phillips' second ruleset was created to facilitate enacting single-tax economics by allowing players to collaboratively make the switch mid-game. However, as the game continued to develop, these rules evolved into a separate game that could be played using the same components. This brief retelling illustrates the complex ways games—and what they teach—develop.

Beyond showing an understanding *that* games teach, both *The Mansion of Happiness* and *The Landlord's Game* speak to *what* games *can* teach: how to live in the world. This is not to say that there exists a causal relationship between the games we play and who are. Instead, my argument is that game systems have a unique capacity to normalize particular views of the world by leveraging participant willingness to do 'x,' *for the sake of game*. That is, individuals are expected to contribute to these processes through engagement with the game—through action. The co-construction of the game-world depends upon the willingness of those at the table to *enact*, to *practice*, to *perform*, the values and ideologies undergirding the game. Thus, when scholars call for the examination of games as socially-negotiated and context-bound (Consalvo; Juul; Malaby; Thornham), they call for movement beyond the claims that games are dynamic and complex and instructional; they call for a richer understanding of the conditions that make them so.

In their studies of how social difference is represented in and by game components, mechanics, and themes, many game scholars have begun to do such work.

More recently, these critical conversations have extended beyond digital gaming, focusing on tabletop games instead. For instance, in her analysis of *Goa* and *Navegador*, Nancy Foasberg illustrates how foundational economic mechanics in the games, combined with selective historical engagement, replicate “colonial fantasies”; Will Robinson examines the ways games “contribute to Orientalism, shaping what the East is to the West through abstraction and the politics of erasure”; and Greg Loring-Albright advocates abandoning *Settler of Catan’s* “frontier myth” in favor of a critical modification that incorporates rather than ignores indigenous tribes’ existence. Concern for the ways individuals navigate the complicated positions they are expected to occupy—particularly as a condition of agreeing to play the game (or enter the magic circle)—is foundational to the work of both Foasberg and Loring-Albright. Collectively, these scholars outline the multiple means through which games (re)produce dominant narratives and Western ideologies and underscore the ubiquitous assumption that players are particular *kinds* of subjects. The importance of their research is further illuminated when coupled with the narratives that games are inherently fun and inconsequential.

Whereas much of the work outlined above centers on game components, mechanics, and themes to reveal the privileging of particular values, I analyze my own positionality in relationship to a specific game (*Small World*) to illustrate how one’s necessary compliance with such mechanics or themes can spoil, interrupt, or bar the very production of “fun” through gameplay. Additionally, my work centers on how games both open and close possibilities for the performance of—that is, the

(re)construction of—identities, and demonstrates how games, by placing players in precarious positions of social performance, are spaces where meaning must be (re)negotiated, contested and (re)shaped. Here, performance is both the simple execution of tasks as expected (i.e., playing by the rules and with the objective of winning the game), *and* a theoretical frame for thinking about the (re)construction of social identities.

Sociologist Erving Goffman's understanding of performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants," speaks both to the social roles we play in our day-to-day lives, as well as the simple ways our actions in a game influence the actions of others (e.g., modifying strategies and moves based on the actions of others, or eliminating options for other players by removing pieces from the board) (15). Even activity that is not regulated by the game itself, such as our body language, can influence how other players participate. More important to my argument, however, is the notion that identities are (re)constructed through performance, and that engagement in and with games—which do not preclude the lived realities of participants—can even require performances that (re)construct the self in relationship to the game. I carry forward my discussion of key terms in Chapter one, understanding identities as unstable and shifting, as a movement through social spaces. Identities do not emerge from within the self, but from social positioning and iterative performances. In this way, the repetition of non-neutral actions as part of gameplay, can be understood as a means of performing, or (re)constructing, identity.

3.3 *Small World*

In 2009, Days of Wonder published Philippe Keyaerts' *Small World*, the highly anticipated follow-up to *Vinci* (1999). With a peak rank of 34, it remained among the top 100 highly rated games on boardgamegeek.com for three years. Given the sheer volume of games in the database, this is particularly impressive. As of June 2017, *Small World* has the 10th highest number of ratings and is one of only ten games with more than 40,000 votes. *Small World* is an area control game like its predecessor, but the combination of its positive reception among designers and players, its eye-catching and award-winning artwork, and its resistance to easy categorization as either a eurogame or ameritrash make it distinctive.

The earliest uses of ameritrash appear in archived posts on rec.games.board (now a Google Group), and credit for coining the term is given to Richard Hutnik, who used it to describe games that are dominated by luck (Kuntz; Hutnik). Greg J. Schloesser also uses the term in the inaugural issue of *The Games Journal*, describing "games which relied solely on luck and had few if any strategic redeeming values" as ameritrash games (Schloesser). Unlike ameritrash games, German style board games or eurogames are lauded for integrating skills based mechanics without relying on significantly complex rulesets. Hobby gamers often have strong preferences for one over the other, and the discourse surrounding these preferences smacks of the all too familiar high culture/low culture divide. Yet, *Small World* blends an emphasis on comparative achievement (prevalent in eurogames) with a garish fantasy theme typically found in ameritrash games, in part, appealing to both preferences. Globally, the game was nominated for a

variety of awards, and has won in a range of categories from artwork and presentation to game of the year.

I have chosen *Small World* as my example not only because it is generally well-known and well-received²⁵, but also because it relies on familiar and relatively accessible mechanics, requiring little explanation and allowing for greater focus on analysis. My analysis of the game begins with the game materials, illustrating how the artwork of the game leverage its fantasy setting in order to lessen, if not neutralize, the otherwise disturbing prevalence of domination and armed-conflict. My analysis of the game components has the additional aim of “testing” the topic modeling results for applicability to a specific game and to contextualize the remainder of the chapter, which focuses on positionality and performance in gameplay.

The theme of dominance saturates the composition of the game. The front of the box (Figure 6) foregrounds (most of) the characters against the backdrop of the sun setting in the horizon. The giant stands out. In addition to towering above the others, the giant’s large, muscular arms depict strength as does the apparent lack of concern its surroundings. The placement, color, and stature of other characters reinforce the visual dominance of the giant. As a viewer’s eye moves to the left and right of the giant, the positioning and height of the characters create visual lines that descend away from the giant and ultimately, configure the giant as the point of a pyramid. Further reinforcing the giant’s dominance in the image, the horizon bends as it moves away from him. In

²⁵ Globally, the game was nominated for a variety of awards in a range of categories from artwork and presentation to game of the year. The Days of Wonder website lists a selection of honors and awards, but the most detailed list of nominations and awards can be found on boardgamegeek.com.

addition to their difference in size, the characters (to the left and right edges of the group) seem to melt into the background. The human, the elf, the ghoul, the halfling, the ratman, the skeleton, the orc, and the amazon are adorned in shades of yellow and green, providing little contrast with the surrounding terrain.

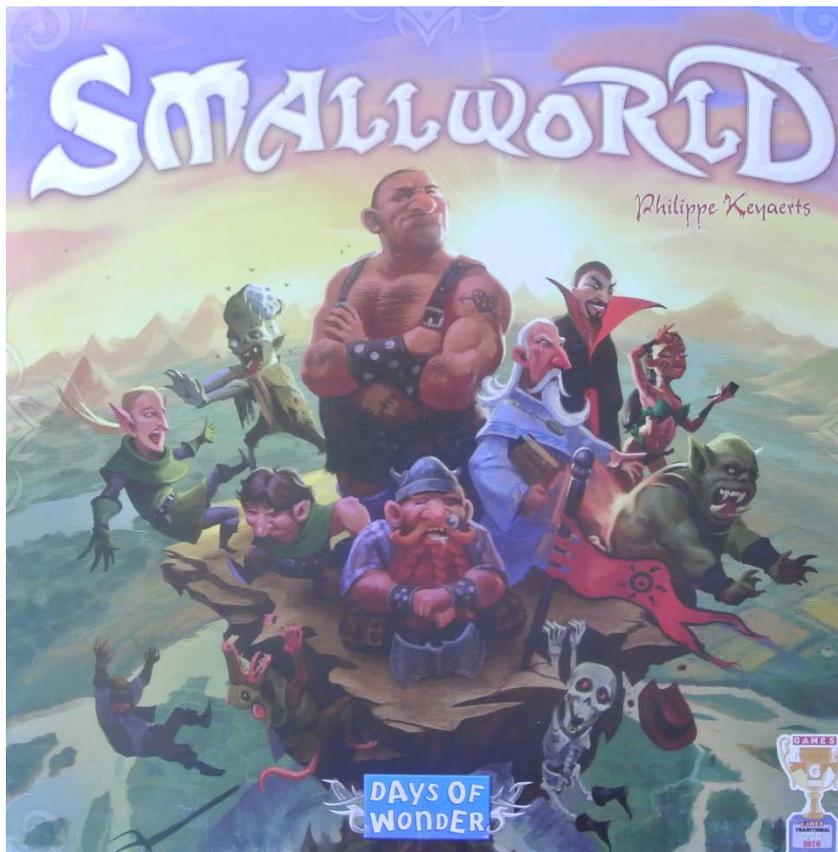


Figure 6. Photo - Small World box (front/top)

The disparity between the giant's demeanor and those of other characters likewise signals the role of dominance in the game. The ratman and skeleton cling to the edges of the land, hoping to escape the fate of the human and (presumably) the elf. The ghoul, the wizard, and the halfling are preoccupied with pushing out their competition, and the sorcerer's visage implies villainous plotting. Similarly, the dwarf perches in front of the giant, unaffected by its surroundings. Often associated with strength (in games), the dwarf also appears at the near-center of the box, outfitted with battle gear (a

helmet, cuffs, and an ax) of the same color scheme as the giant. Further reinforcing the suggestions of dominance and strength as integral components of the game, the front of the box features tribal-inspired markings along the corners, the top center, and the side centers, and the title appears in a font reminiscent of blades. The amazon woman appears in the top right, checking her image in a mirror as she applies battle paint to her forehead. A flag protrudes from the relatively small plot of land, claimed as someone's property.

Small World seems to embrace—and even emphasize—a cut-throat battle of races, in which players “use their troops to occupy territory and conquer adjacent lands in order to push the other races off the face of the earth [P]layers rush to expand their empires—often at the expense of weaker neighbors” (*Small World*). While one could argue that the game fully embraces its brutality, the integration of comedic elements bolsters the developer's construction of the game world as make believe. Militarized language—“troops,” “occupy territory,” “conquer,” “expand their empires,” and “expense of weaker neighbors”—is juxtaposed with vibrant, colorful, cartoon-like designs that ultimately overshadow the language of brutality (and reinforce my findings in Chapter two by illustrating the presence of violent language even in fantasy themed games).

For instance, the placement of the skeleton in cowboy attire, the snot bubble escaping the dwarf's nostril as drool drips from its lips, and the giant's heart tattoo suggest light-heartedness (Figure 6). The addition of the blood-drawn “S” to the lyrics of the widely-recognized Disney song, “It's a Small World,” simultaneously acknowledges

both the thuggish and the humorous elements portrayed on the front of the box: “It’s a World of Slaughter, After All!” (Figure 7). Additionally, the use of non-human creatures (amazons, dwarves, elves, ghouls, giants, halflings, orcs, ratmen, skeletons, sorcerors, tritons, trolls, and wizards) in a fantasy world creates distance between reality and imagination. Collectively, these features signal that the game is not real, that the game is fantasy, and that by engaging with the game, one is pretending to be something out of the ordinary. In this context, players can more easily view *Small World* as, “fun, zany, [and] light-hearted” (*Small World*).

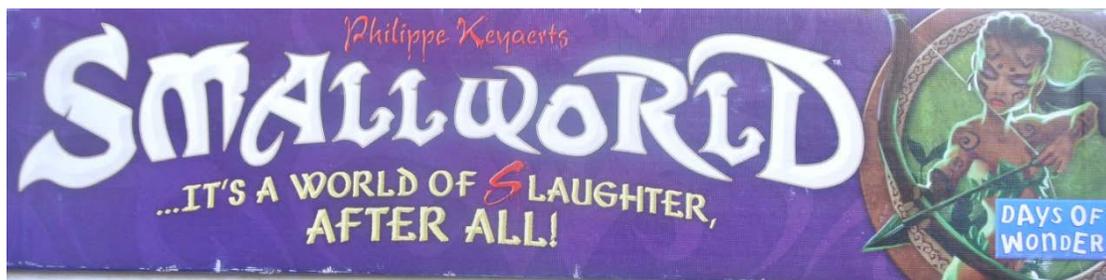


Figure 7. Photo - *Small World* (side of box)

3.4 Moving beyond the board: Reflections on a Critical Moment

While my analysis has, thus far, focused on examining the visual representation of the game, this section integrates reflective analysis on the relationship between the player and the rules through the presentation of my own experience playing *Small World*. I recognize that I cannot account for the experiences of other players, but I present my experience as a way to consider the significance of moments when gameplay unfolds unpredictably, reaching beyond the magic circle, and into lived realities of everyday life. Ultimately, *Small World* serves as an illustration of how player positionality (i.e., the extent to which players identify or align themselves with the game’s expectations) affects the game experience and how game actions open and

close possibilities for the (re)construction of identities through performance. By using performance as a lens for considering my own positionality, I demonstrate how—and argue that—players must sometimes perform in ways that complicate, contradict, and even undermine their own lived realities and experiential knowledges. In doing so, I highlight the variable implications of “playing by the rules” and extend the work of Chapter two.

My reflective analysis is based on my first experience playing *Small World*. At the time (2012), I was a third year Ph.D. student, whose research had nothing to do with games or play. Struck by what transpired, I have since revisited this moment countless times, grasping for an exact articulation of my experience. Certainly the passage of time, combined with my increased scholarly knowledge of games and play influence how I recall this experience. Rather than viewing this as a critique of its inclusion, I see as the logical conclusion given that my experiential knowledge has always informed and shaped my research agenda. As a Filipino-American, cisgender woman, I am socially, culturally, and economically positioned—and (mis)read—differently than many of the people with whom I game. Though we may sit at the same table, following the same rules of the same game, we enter the game world from different places and histories and at different moments.

*I listened as my partner read the rules, pressing my
fingers along the cardboard perforations, freeing
each token one-by-one.*

In *Small World*, players begin their first turn by selecting from a randomized set of face-up race tokens. Using the race they have selected, they spend each turn strategically conquering territory on the board. Each region occupied by a player's race at the end of the turn earns them a "victory point." Play continues with this initially selected race until a player uses a turn to place the race into decline, at which point they remove most of those race tokens from the board and use the following turn to choose a new race. The player with the most victory points at the end of the game wins.

Having no doubt we would reference the rules throughout the game, I noted only the most important information. To win the game, I need to accumulate more points than everyone else. To do that, I would need to expand my territory, and to avoid losing points, I need to be careful about over-extending myself.

A player must consider terrain and occupancy in order to determine whether they have enough race tokens (e.g., amazons) to take an area. As such, some territories are easier to conquer than others. For example, taking a mountainous territory requires more tokens than an unoccupied field does; in this particular example, the additional cost represents the increased challenge that conquering mountains would pose. A similar rule applies to taking land from other races in the game. The rule assumes that when one race attempts to take land from another, a battle would ensue, costing more than it would to claim an uninhabited area.

I stared at the map, studying my options, and mentally calculating the points associated with each potential move.

“What happens to the Lost Tribes if I move here?” I asked.

“I think it just goes back in the box,” my partner speculated as he began flipping through the rulebook for verification.

“Really? That’s it? They don’t come back onto the map like race tokens do?” I pressed.

The rulebook describes the Lost Tribes as “remnants of long-forgotten civilizations that have fallen into decline but still populate some regions at game start” (*Small World* 14). They function much like lairs, fortresses, and mountains: to take a region occupied by the Lost Tribes, a player must pay an additional race token. Mechanically, this also seems similar to taking land from an opponent, but the Lost Tribes are impacted differently. Despite their pieces’ resemblance in size and shape, the Lost Tribes chit is not considered a race token. While race tokens can be redeployed (i.e., taken back into a player’s hand and used in future conquests), the Lost Tribes cannot. Instead, they are removed from the board and returned to the box, never re-entering the game.

“Yeah,” he assured me, “It just costs more to take their territory, but as long as you have enough to cover the cost, they just go back into the box, and you get the land.”

I shifted in my chair, my mind retreating to my childhood.

“I’m not playing anymore!” I’d scream--when horseplay pushed the boundaries of fun, or when my sense of inferiority was brought to the surface, when I was angry. But mostly it would happen

when I could neither articulate nor contain what I was

experiencing. Now I know better, or differently. I recognize that

there are ways I am expected to behave, that such an outburst

is inappropriate.

Contemplating my move, I quieted my impulse to quit, but still felt

it there: a weighted knot, a persistent ember to be stoked, or

stamped out.



Figure 8. Photo - Lost Tribes token



Figure 9. Photo - Lost Tribes token (top right) and race tokens

The Lost Tribes tokens have notably fewer details than the race tokens of the same size (Figure 9). While the fantasy race tokens are depicted with a range of facial features and expressions, the Lost Tribes appear only as a shadowy profile—a literally faceless amalgamation of black, red, and brown (Figure 8). This abstract portrayal, particularly when compared to other artwork in the game, reinforces and further emphasizes what the rules suggest: the Lost Tribes of *Small World* are constructed as defenseless, dehumanized others. One could argue that the presence of the Lost Tribes works against the frontier myth by acknowledging (barely) a territory's prior inhabitants. Indeed, Loring-Albright's modification of the widely known game *Settlers of Catan* did just this, emerging from the failure of the game to recognize that the development of settlements has historically been tied to the invasion already-inhabited land. When compared to the literal absence of indigenous populations in *Settlers*, the inclusion of the Lost Tribes within *Small World* could be read as a degree of post-colonial consciousness. However, I would argue that the artwork and mechanics of the game do little more than dehumanize the Lost Tribes; in fact, the narrative that little is known about the Lost Tribes, the description of them as "remnants" of a bygone time, obscures the kind of settler colonial histories Loring-Albright's modifications introduced to *Settlers*. Even in name, the fate of the Lost Tribes is predetermined. They are to be forgotten, to disappear (or be disappeared by players), leaving only the land they once inhabited behind. That they are portrayed as an already lost civilization effectively removes the likelihood that the invasion of their land plays a significant role in their decline. Their inescapable fate as those who have already come to pass, those who have

died (i.e., lost), downplays the ways players participate in their erasure. Their only function is to be eliminated; they exist for eradication at the hands of others, for eradication by an/other.

Something stirred inside me: a feeling. Familiar, but too strange to explain. My desire to win the game was being challenged by my desire to remove myself, to pretend it hadn't happened, that I wasn't reminded of my everyday experiences as a "split Filipina subject" (Strobel 16). Perhaps what I felt was shame, which moves "toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality . . . [and] attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is" (Sedgwick 37). The game-world began to crumble; the magic circle began to look a lot more like everyday life.

3.5 On Possibilities and Limitations

My experience of this playing *Small World* for the first time illustrates how Dennis Waskul's work can be extended beyond the explicit aspects of performance and world building that typify the genre of role-playing games. As mentioned previously, Waskul explains that during games players must take on "a marginal and hyphenated role that is situated in the liminal boundaries of more than one frame of reality" (19). The relatively innocuous action of removing a token from a game board (which is, essentially, what players do when taking land from the Lost Tribes) felt like a symbolic gesture of approval, an act of complicity. Yet, to quit the game somehow seemed like a gesture of giving in, a resignation to stay where the game positioned me, and also meant ending the game for the other participants. I'd be expected to explain my

decision to others at the table—to articulate something that I didn't fully grasp in that moment.

As a woman of color, I recognized in this moment that *Small World* was not designed for me; more difficult to reconcile are the ways in which it is. I spent much of my life reading stories, watching films, and listening to music that seemed to be for made for someone else. When I was younger, I followed baseball so closely that I knew the batting lineup for the Cleveland Indians. I had two favorite players: Omar Vizquel and Kenny Lofton. I collected baseball cards, too. And, I enjoyed it. I live in a reality where most texts and activities and spaces are *not* made for me, and yet, I consume them—voraciously. I like to win—even at games that require me to engage in activities I would never condone otherwise; I am, in these ways, exactly the kind of person for whom *Small World* is made.

As critical game studies shows, and my work here illustrates, games often require players to negotiate multiple positions: some more or less oppressive, imperialist, and racist. When navigating social terrain requires movement along paths that are not for us, our movement becomes one of reconciliation, fraught with the contradictions among sense of self, expectations, and performances. And when these moments of tension present themselves, when they are *recognized* and *felt*, they become moments of performance—opportunities that are never wholly good nor wholly bad, but that must instead be seen as presenting players with a chance to (re)negotiate meaning. Thus, while I am overtly critical of this game's inclusion and treatment of the Lost Tribes, I also recognize its productive potential.

An overly rigid concept of the magic circle erases the very real ways in which our lives and identities both affect and are affected by the game space. The Lost Tribes in *Small World* should neither be overlooked as an unimportant element of fun, nor wholly condemned as overtly complicit with racist and imperialist ideologies. As I detail in chapter five, these nodes of tension produce limitations on players with particular subjectivities, but in doing so, they are places of performative possibilities. Rather than abandon the game-world, individuals can work on the game world through practices that make strange the seemingly natural narratives that operate in game systems. They are opportunities for individuals to engage in disidentification by re-reading the game through eyes it was not meant for, to “hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (12). As José Muñoz writes, such work centers on the refusal “to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious and shameful It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations” (12). In short, these moments are a chance to (re)negotiate the ways we (re)construct the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘WHERE’S THE MAGIC?’:

PLAYING FOR FUN AND THE LIMITS OF THE LUSORY ATTITUDE

4.1 Playing the Part: Surveying Gameplay

A close examination of games and context have recently gained popularity in game studies scholarship. Much of this work has involved direct observation of gameplay, conducting individual or group interviews, and designing surveys aimed at discussing a specific digital game (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) or a concept within the context of digital games (e.g., community). For example, Mia Consalvo investigates the phenomenon of cheating in videogames, dedicating one portion of the book to analyzing results of individual interviews with game players. Helen Thornham conducted an ethnographic study of game players in eleven households in order to examine discourses, activities, and reflections on social negotiation in solo videogaming.²⁶ As I outlined in the Chapter one literature review—and demonstrated by the sources I cite throughout—there is a paucity of scholarship on tabletop games and players. Part of situating myself and my research among existing scholarship has thus entailed careful consideration of the degree to which discourses about digital games can be mapped to tabletop games in meaningful ways. Although this process provides avenues for investigating the role of medium in game studies research—especially with respect to

²⁶ Thornham uses videogaming and videogames to indicate use of a console (e.g., Xbox) and computer games as those played on a PC or laptop in order to reinforce her argument that videogaming—which occurs in shared, social spaces (e.g., living room)—aligns more with television research than PC gaming does.

social engagement and performance—an appropriately detailed treatment of such research is beyond both the aim and scope of my dissertation research.

By opening the dissertation with the example of *Ghettopoly*, I highlighted how games can collide with the world around them, and in the previous chapter, I used own experience to illustrate how this manifests in conflict between the game-world and the player's lived reality. Using Malaby's argument as a springboard, I first focused on the construction of implied player identities via the ideological language of tabletop game rulesets (chapter two). Studying the English language rulesets of tabletop games allowed me to get a broader sense of what the game-world is. In this way, chapter two works to develop the setting or environment constructed by the rules of the game. In chapter three, I illustrated how my sense of self interrupted the emergence of play in the game *Small World*. By extending the broader study of tabletop game themes to the study of the game materials and their relationship to player subjectivity, I show how the expectation that players adopt a lusory attitude can be exploited by the game. Together, these chapters have examined how players are constructed through interaction with and analysis of game apparatuses.

In this chapter, I present the results of a research survey I designed in order to investigate how other individuals understand and experience gameplay. When compared to the methods used in previous chapters, the decision to conduct a research survey may seem to conflict with the goal of examining context in tabletop gameplay; however, as I address in the methodology and methods section, the study conducted for this chapter provides me with a point of departure for more in-depth research in the

future. Moreover, despite the limitations on the kind of data a survey questionnaire can capture, they can speak to contextual aspects of experience when well-designed.

To further illustrate the aims of my research in this chapter, I will first revisit the work of Stewart Woods. In his book (briefly glossed in chapter one), Woods lays the foundation needed to bridge the gap between popular discussions about tabletop gaming and game studies scholarship. He traces the historical development of eurogames and outlines prevalent features of the genre in order to contextualize his study of the hobby gaming culture, to which I turn my focus. In chapter six, Woods reviews the results of a 2007 research survey on tabletop game culture (self-selected participation via link posted on boardgamegeek.com), arguing that the intensity of enthusiasm exhibited by respondents demonstrates the emergence of “a particular type of board game player—the gaming hobbyist” (120). Summarizing response trends and integrating excerpts, Woods points to the range of ways post game participation distinguishes hobby gamers from casual gamers. For instance, hobby gamers often participate in game ownership and collecting, ruleset modification, and discussion, analyses, and critique of tabletop games, designs, rankings, and releases.

Notably, he characterizes the board game culture as a leisure subculture rather than a counter-culture, citing their convergence around the hobby rather than politics: they “rarely threaten or offer disruptive alternatives to the dominant ideologies of the society in which they are found” (128). And why would they? The absence of this cohesive, shared goal of political disruption is unsurprising given that the majority of survey respondents identified as men (96%) with college degrees (68% hold an

undergraduate degree or higher; 10% hold doctoral degrees). By delineating board gaming as a leisure pursuit and shifting focus away from possible mischaracterizations of the hobby as counter-culture, Woods develops a logic for discussing hobby gamers without necessitating the examination of the socio-political effects of their practices. While he acknowledges that factors like social location influence game preferences, he foregoes analysis of the connections among respondent demographics, the absence of a counter-cultural politics, and the privilege of leisure. Woods *does* address each of these items but does not tend to the relationships among them. One possible factor in his treatment of these subjects is the survey design, which was not developed with these concepts in mind, the consequence of which is the likely restriction of spaces for participants to disclose information relevant to such inquiry.

As one of few books on tabletop gaming and culture, Woods' work signals a need for the expansion of game studies, which he begins with an informative and broad study of eurogames. Moreover, with its focus on tabletop games specifically, Woods' study has direct implications for my research aims and methods. By posting a link to the survey on *BGG*, he narrowed respondent population and targeted a segment of tabletop gamers who were likely to exhibit the enthusiasm he notes. In addition to visiting *BGG*, which already suggests post game engagement in the hobby, participants voluntarily completed the survey. In other words, while I recognize the value of the data Woods' collected and shared (specifically, his treatment of the genre and history of eurogames), I also see his study of the tabletop gaming culture as limited in that it excludes the ways players participate in the hobby beyond the game *and* outside of the *BGG* community.

For instance, if players feel unwelcome in the *BGG* community, they are unlikely to visit and post to forums, but this does not exempt them from exhibiting the same preferences as the hobby gamers Woods describes.

In short, one of the aims of my research survey is to expand Woods' work beyond the confines of *BGG* in an effort to study gameplay more inclusively and to map the contours of context by researching the factors that influence the emergence of play in tabletop games. After identifying and discussing the methodology and methods informing the design and distribution of my survey, I offer a general summary of the data I collected including a discussion of trends within the data. The end of this chapter lays the groundwork for a more formal and larger-scale study by broadly discussing how such data opens up avenues for further research.

4.2 Methodology

The use of surveys in research has been debated in many areas of study, but I focused on scholarship that situates a survey research methodology within the humanities and social sciences. Surveys, as a quantitative research method, have historically been associated with the perpetuation of positivist thinking. For instance, the use of statistical interpretation and presentation of data has been critiqued for facilitating the dehumanization of research subjects (i.e., the individuals become numbers) as well as presenting findings as if the data exists outside the values and bias of the researcher:

the issue is that knowledge is supposed to be based on experience; but male-dominance has simultaneously insured that women's experience will be different

from men's, and that it will not count as fruitful grounds from which to generate scientific problematics or evidence against which to test scientific hypotheses ("The Method Question" 26)

By framing the researcher as someone who finds and shares objective truth, survey research has been a vehicle through which non-dominant groups have been marginalized. Claims are shared and viewed as indisputable truths, effectively flattening the complexity, significance, and impact of subjective human experiences.

Yet, rather than dispense with the method wholesale, I believe the task of scholars is to think about the possibilities it offers and to consider how the benefits of this method might be leveraged in meaningful ways. Instead of adopting an all or nothing approach to problematical research practices, one should recognize that thinking creatively about revising and adapting research methods can itself be a powerful practice of inquiry. As developed in feminist research methodologies, the concept of "objectivity" itself can be (re)constructed. For instance, in her recent book, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research*, Sandra Harding explains:

that strong objectivity standards simply recognize realities about nature and social research practice that could not be detected in earlier eras. For example, there is no 'view from nowhere' position that ever could exist from which one can see every social and natural reality in the past, present, and future . . . the world is too indeterminate and too complex to permit such a 'total' understanding of nature and social relations, and nature keeps appearing to us in surprising forms. (43-44)

By acknowledging their positionality and values, researchers have an opportunity to engage in a reflective practice, revealing the often omitted processes through which they impact research outcomes. This acknowledgment can allow researchers to draw on the potential of survey research methods rather than disregard them as unrecoverable. I use the terms “opportunity” and “can” in order to emphasize the importance of researcher *practice*. When designed, conducted, and interpreted with an understanding of the influence researcher subjectivity has, survey research (among other methods historically constructed as objective) can tend to the “the inevitability of deeply conflicting knowledge claims” (Harding 44). Moreover, Harding argues for a need to begin such research from non-dominant positions, especially given the ways particular views and values can permeate a discipline. In this way, researcher positionality, which is itself subjectively experienced, is “based on the objective location of people in society; in many crucial instances, ‘experiences’ are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations” (Alcoff, et al. 6). With consideration of the ways objectivity and survey research have been (re)constructed in methodological scholarship and in researcher practice, I value experience *as* knowledge and also recognize that it is shaped by social location and external conditions of existence.

4.3 Crafting the Survey: An Explanation of Methods and Procedures

The aim of this survey was to collect details about how others experience tabletop gameplay. Specifically, I wanted to identify motivations for engaging in gameplay and the conditions that create discomfort and prohibit the “cultural accomplishment” of fun (Malaby). More broadly, my goal was (and continues to be) to

identify what, if any, connections exist between an individual's conceptualization of identity and their understanding of (and behavior during) games. As the following shows, I based my methodological decisions on my past experiences, on my research goals, and on established research protocols.²⁷

Considerations of Content

Couched within the methodological concerns of objectivity and research positionality, the validity and reliability of data gathered through surveys have likewise been examined. A number of techniques have been developed to assist researchers with crafting valid surveys (i.e., surveys that measure what they are designed to measure). Although the question of validity is an undeniably important aspect of survey research—especially in the context of interpreting data to develop knowledge claims—the evolution of methodological aims has allowed for a shift away from a focus on verifiable “measurement” as the only criteria for “good” research. For instance, I opted not to define the construct of identity within my survey, against the advice of the readings I consulted regarding method. Because one of my goals is to utilize the data I collected to develop sharper lines of inquiry for future research, I wanted participants to indicate how they understand the concept. While this brings into the question the

²⁷ As a part of my previous employment at a small start-up, I familiarized myself with survey design basics (e.g., types of questions and options for presenting them; developing survey flow including the integration of skip logic). That experience helped me develop a foundational understanding of what to consider when approaching survey design. My conceptualization of the interdependent components of survey design was sharpened when I began teaching design principles and usability testing in professional and technical communication courses. Thus, the scholarly texts I consulted on survey design and analysis built upon my experiential knowledge by framing the limitations and benefits of design choices in the context of different research areas and goals.

validity of respondent comparisons on this subject, it was important for me to leave this concept open to interpretation—particularly given the discourse surrounding identity and the effects of identity politics in both popular and academic contexts. My goal was not to “measure” the impact of identity on games, but to find out how others understand the concept as grounding for a more wide-scale research project in the future. I framed the questions on identity more openly, offering options for respondents to describe identity in their own words as well as to add short descriptors within the multiple choice responses.

Another challenging aspect of designing the survey was determining how to integrate questions that account for the respondent’s perception of his/her/their own identity and behavior as well as their perception of how others interpret their identity and behavior. In an effort to include multiple ways of comparing self-perception with beliefs about how one is perceived by others, I prompted respondents to identify where they fall along spectra of characteristics (e.g., extroverted and introverted) *and* asked them to identify where others might place them along each spectrum. In a single, directly comparative question, respondents were asked to indicate whether they would ascribe a particular adjective to themselves (yes, no, or unsure) as well as to indicate whether others would. By designing this as a single question, I implied that there may be distinctions; by including “unsure” as an option, I tried to account for the possibility of the distinction as unclear to respondents. I also expanded on the previous question by requesting that respondents assess whether relationships (e.g., familiarity or closeness) affect how they believe they are perceived. Respondents were also asked to consider

whether colleagues, acquaintances, and those with whom they are close would use each word to describe the respondent. I did not define each of these categories as I wanted to allow for respondents to create distinctions as they felt necessary—especially as these categories are not mutually exclusive. My hope was that respondents would be prompted to consider whether a distinction exists between their perception of themselves and their perception of how others see them.

During the design and revision of my questionnaire, I consulted several texts on survey research (Dörnyei; Gideon; Harnois; Miner). While writing my initial draft of the questionnaire, my main focus was developing content areas and questions that correlated with my research objectives without relying too heavily on response restriction (i.e., I wanted to provide open-ended questions). I wrote multiple questions and considered alternative wording, design, and presentation of each question before deciding what to include. For instance, because I used random sampling, I needed to create a set of questions that facilitated collecting this information in a variety of ways. To assess the impact of a respondent's knowledge of tabletop games and participation in tabletop gaming, I asked respondents to indicate their interest in tabletop games (ranking), to categorize specific types of tabletop games according to preferences and familiarity (drag and drop), and to identify how frequently they play tabletop games (open numerical field). After completing the initial draft of my questionnaire, I revisited each question with attention to clear and simple language and to ensure there were no double-barreled questions and unintentionally ambiguous constructs (Dörnyei;

Gideon).²⁸ Whenever I opted against defining a key term, I made sure to include options for open-ended responses. However, when ambiguous definitions impeded rather than assisted the aims of my research, I included definitions; this was the case for “tabletop games,” “willingness,” and “comfort.” Prior to its distribution, the survey also went through multiple revisions (wording, organization, and question formatting) based upon feedback from colleagues.²⁹

Survey Platform, Sampling Method, and Distribution

Through my affiliation with University of Arizona, I am granted access to the research core of Qualtrics. As a survey research platform, Qualtrics offers useful tools for visualization and analysis as well as options for piloting a questionnaire. Researchers can also customize reports, create cross tabulations to compare different sets of data, and download the raw data for use in other data visualization programs. Once finalized, I used convenience sampling to distribute the survey link via social networking sites and email listservs. Although the link was initially restricted to those “in my networks,” the survey created a chain reaction of subsequent distributions, not unlike snowball sampling.³⁰ The survey was open for response for two weeks.

4.4 Overview of Survey Results

Demographic Summary

²⁸ Double-barreled questions refers to posing multiple questions at one and structuring response options so that participants can only answer one of the questions posed.

²⁹ I am indebted to the generosity of colleagues who took time to offer their feedback and discuss the questionnaire with me.

³⁰ Snowball sampling often begins with selecting participants who meet given research criteria, and then leverages their participation to identify and recruit additional participants.

The survey yielded 178 finished responses and 152 unfinished responses (330 individuals accessed the survey landing page). Of the 178 respondents, 11 respondents chose not to identify their age. The average age of the remaining 167 respondents was 36.6 years old with an age range of 20-79 years old. More than half of the respondents indicated a gender pronoun preference of she/her/hers (Figure 10), and just more than 80% of respondents indicated “white” as their only ethnicity.³¹ All 178 research participants completed high school or above, many indicating completion of advanced degrees (Figure 11). Occupations ranged significantly, but the data reflected the use of convenience sampling via listserv and social network distribution: the largest segment of respondents were in education (approximately 35%).

Gender Pronoun Preferences by Percentage

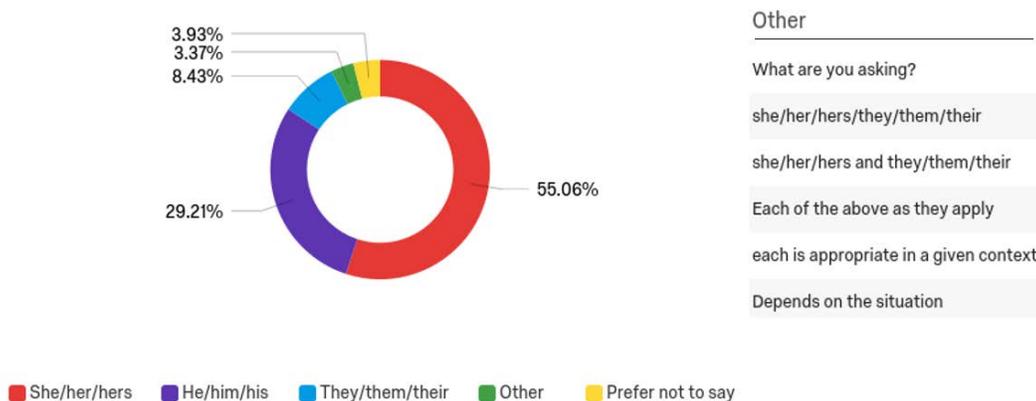


Figure 10. Respondent gender pronoun preferences by percentage

³¹ When presented in text rather than by use of visuals, all percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

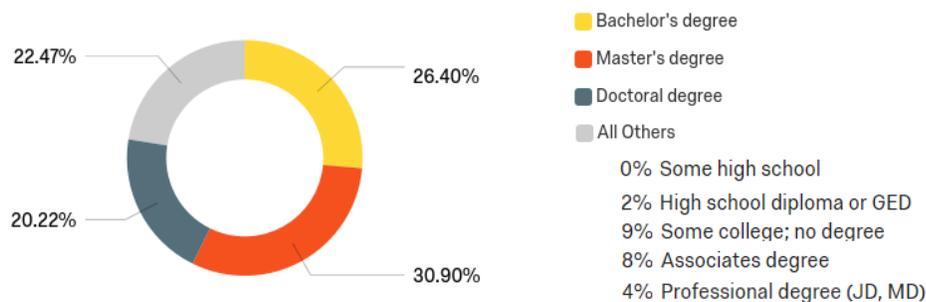


Figure 11. Highest levels of formal education completed by respondents

To supplement this question, the survey also gathered data about degree of interest in and familiarity with tabletop games. Overall, 96% of respondents have a degree of interest in tabletop games and 4% have a degree of disinterest (Figure 12). I also included a fairly extensive presentation of types of tabletop games which respondents were asked to identify or group according to familiarity and preference.

Respondent selection	Number of selections	Percentage of responses
Extremely interested	68	38%
Moderately interested	66	37%
Somewhat interested	36	20%
Somewhat uninterested	3	2%
Moderately uninterested	4	2%
Extremely uninterested	1	1%
Total	178	100%

Figure 12. Respondent interest in tabletop games

Respondents were asked if they identify as “gamers” in order to see gauge correlation to preference in game type, frequency of play, and level of interest in tabletop games. Additionally this question facilitates comparing results of this survey with Woods’ findings about the game hobbyists. I included a “sometimes” response in addition to “yes” and “no” both because claiming oneself as a gamer often takes on variable meanings to different audiences and also because the term “gamer” is often associated with digital gaming. To gather respondent perspectives, those who selected

“sometimes” were asked to expand on the contextual factors influencing whether they self-identify as a gamer. While 40% identify as gamers, the remaining 60% were an almost perfect split (54 respondents did not; 52 sometimes do). Generally, the 30% who sometimes identify as gamers indicated that it largely depends on who they are with (audience), what they are doing (circumstances under which they are discussing or using the term), and how often they have been playing lately. Three other reasons were cited: 1) they don’t see playing tabletop games as integral to their identity in the way they associate with fans or hobby gamers, 2) they enjoy tabletop games but it’s not their first choice of activity, and 3) “gamer” has connotations with which they prefer not to associate. Arguably, the first two reasons are related, and the third reason falls under audience and circumstances as it also prioritizes how the term is received.

4.5 Tabletop Gameplay and the Limits of the Lusory attitude

This chapter builds on my previous arguments by investigating how other individuals understand and experience tabletop games in order to identify contextual patterns in tabletop gameplay. In particular, I examine trends related to motivations for and discomfort during gameplay. First, I highlight significant quantitative data on these topics. Then, turning to qualitative analysis of open ended responses, I illustrate how rules, social relationships and content influence player experiences, showing that, together, they validate the arguments presented in the previous chapters. Ultimately, I argue that the misalignment between values and goals among participants and the game system interfere with the emergence and maintenance of play.

To gather data on participant motivations for gameplay, I designed and included a multiple choice question with pre-determined options as well as an “other” field for participants to identify any reasons I failed to include. Because motivations for playing can overlap but are not necessarily linked, I allowed for multiple answers. For instance, one person might play tabletop games because her partner enjoys it, but she may not necessarily be playing for fun or in order to win. Figure 13 shows the top four reasons that participants engage in tabletop games are “for fun,” “for socializing,” “to engage in strategic thinking,” and “for [someone] who enjoys it more.” Notably, responses echo the long-standing belief that games are something people do for fun. My results are similar to Woods’ finding that socialization functions as one of the primary motives for playing tabletop games, and despite the limited sample of responses examined here, it’s worth noting that this desire for social interaction through gameplay isn’t restricted to a niche group of hobby gamers. Engaging in tabletop games for someone who enjoys them more likewise suggests that study respondents are not necessarily individuals who participate more broadly in the hobby. At the very least, it suggests that part of their

participation is motivated by someone with a greater interest in what Woods calls “hobby gaming culture.”

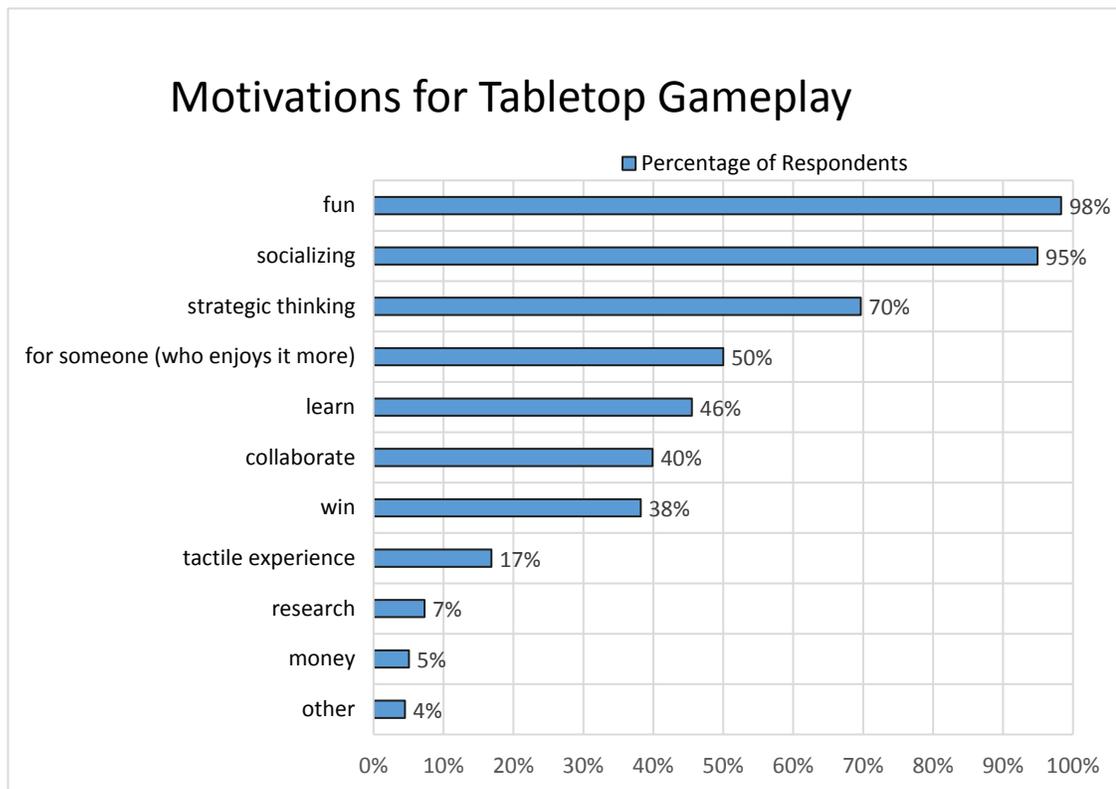


Figure 13. Motivations for tabletop gameplay

To identify whether or not individuals may behave differently in the context of a game, the survey posed several different questions, two of which I compare directly. At the beginning of the survey (question two), respondents were asked to rank their degree of willingness to engage in specified activities with a person they do not know well. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to rank their degree of willingness to engage in the same activities as part of playing a game (with a person they do not know well). In both questions, I attempted to narrow the impact of close, personal relationships by loosely defining the audience or social relationship. I also defined “willingness” the same way—as “likelihood to participate”—and provided five options: “willing,” “somewhat willing,”

“unsure,” “somewhat unwilling,” and “unwilling.” Comparison of the responses to both questions shows an overall increase in willingness to engage in activities as part of a game (Figure 14). Notably, this does not indicate that each respondent is individually more willing to engage in the specified activity. Rather, it means that a higher number of respondents indicated willingness to participate in each of the activities listed.³²

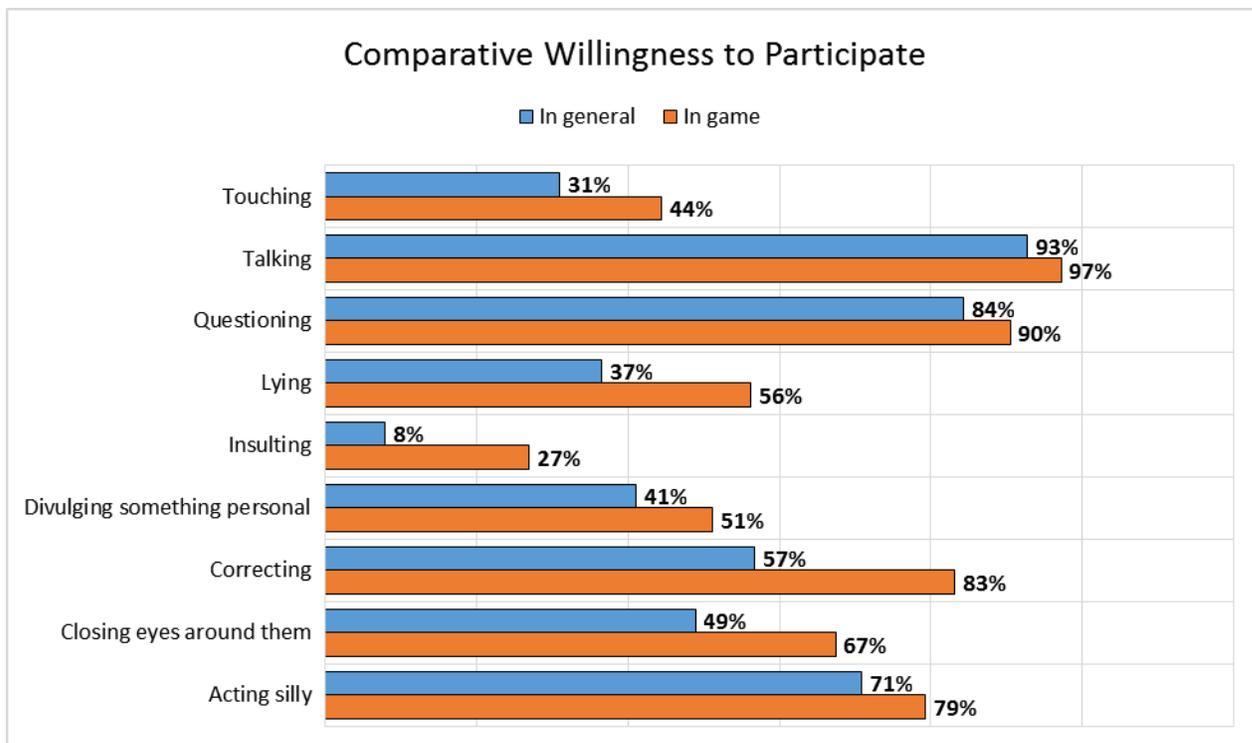


Figure 14. Respondent willingness to engage in specified activity by percentage

Similarly, comparison of “unwilling” responses indicated a decrease in unwillingness to do each of the specified activities as part of game. When considered together, these four categories demonstrate how framing an activity as part of a game increases receptiveness among participants, implying an understanding of the role of the lusory attitude in tabletop gameplay. The data for “unsure” responses to each

³² I combined the “somewhat willing” and “willing” responses in order to provide a clearer visual comparison of general and in-game answers.

activity show less consistent shifts between general and in game willingness to participate (Figure 15). However, the fact that respondent uncertainty decreases for most in game activities reflects the same trend. In-game context did not affect the percentage of “unsure” responses to “touching,” and it increased the percentage of “unsure” responses to “insulting” and “divulging something personal” (Figure 16). Ultimately, “unsure” answers likely indicate a need for additional information in order for gamers to assess their potential response to a given activity.

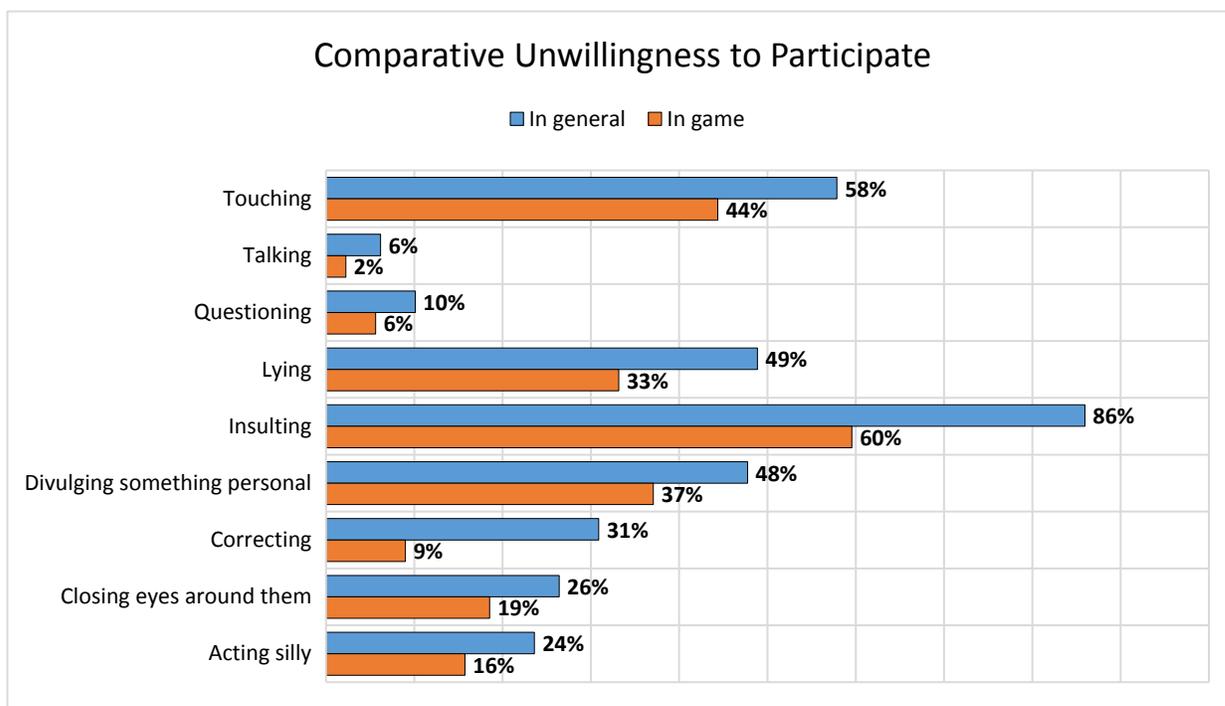


Figure 15. Respondent unwillingness to engage in specified activity by percentage

Broadly, these results illustrate a trend in increased *willingness* to behave differently in games. Willingness, however, does not equate to action. The data shows that the percentage of individuals who are willing to participate in the specified activities increases when framed as a game, but it does not correspond to an increased individual willingness to engage in each activity. Moreover, the activities listed above

emphasize player to player relationships and behaviors by framing games as a social activity rather than an object. In order to connect the social activity of games to the game-world created by material components, participants were prompted to identify what would potentially prevent them from playing a tabletop game. A multiple response, multiple choice question provided categories of my choosing and asked: "Which of the following, if any, would you be unwilling to do in a tabletop game? Select all that apply." When compiling the list of choices, I considered themes and mechanics from games I have played, including actions with varying degrees of ideological implications. And, to emphasize participant action, I included a statement of willingness. If a respondent was willing to participate in all of the listed activities, they did not have the option of selecting "none" or "not applicable" and were expected to select the following statement instead: "I would be willing to do all of these as part of a game."

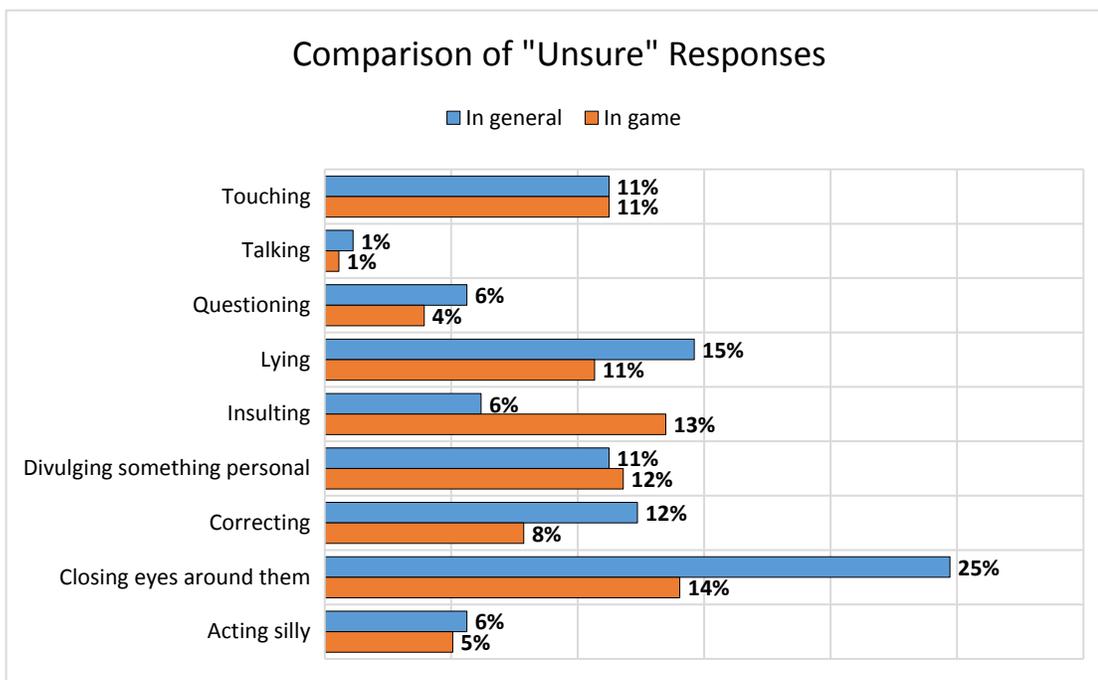


Figure 16. Respondent uncertainty of willingness to participate in an activity by percentage

Approximately 48% of respondents selected this option. For the remaining 93 respondents, the highest percentages of opposition were to playing the role of Hitler, using slaves, voting in favor of a fascist policy, and taking land from a declining indigenous tribe as part of a tabletop game (Figure 17).

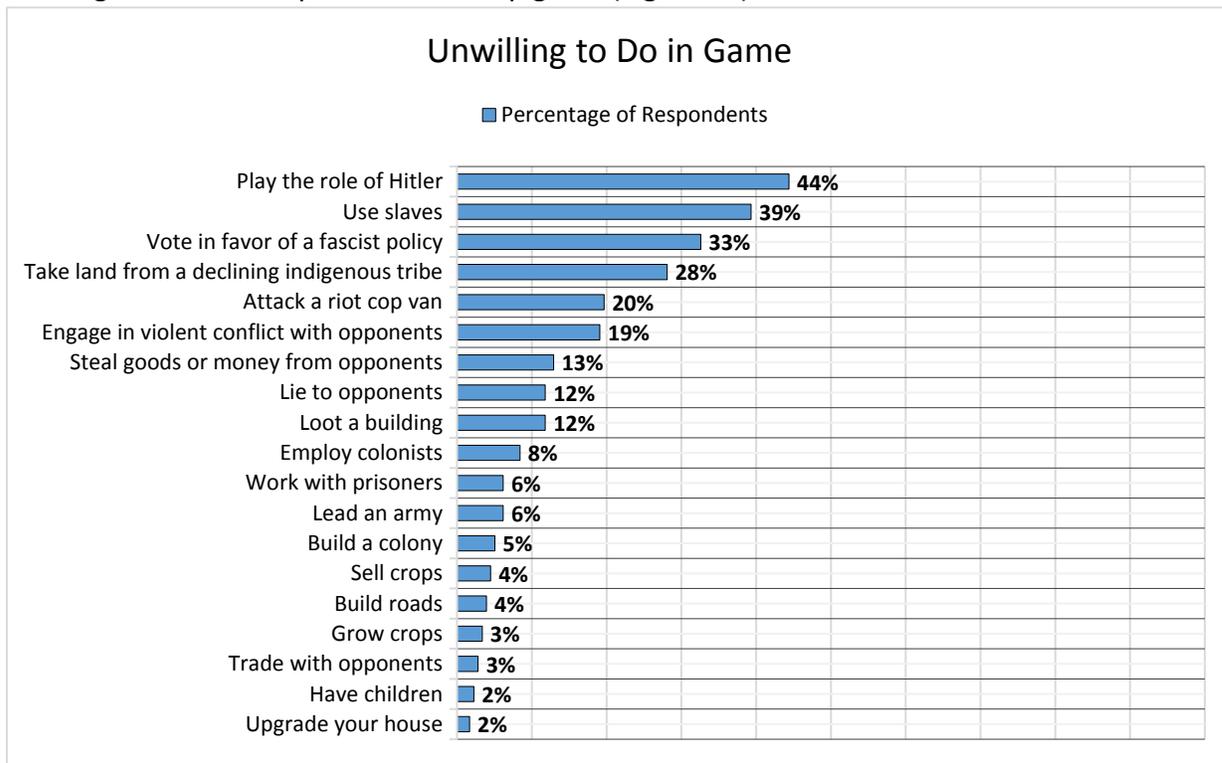


Figure 17. Comparison of activities respondents are unwilling to do during a game by percentage

Comparing different aspects of the survey results reveals the tension rooted between the expectation of fun and the experience of discomfort in games. To supplement the above questions, I also included an open-ended response in which participants could “Briefly explain what, if anything, would likely prevent you from playing a tabletop game. This may relate to the theme, mechanics, art, cost, or any other aspect of tabletop gaming.” The second sentence in this prompt identifies general categories for consideration with the intention of broadening reflection beyond in-game

actions. To narrow the data and develop a coding schema, I began by isolating the 48% of respondents who selected: “I would be willing to do all of these [e.g., “steal goods of money from an opponent”] as part of a game.” Using this data—and subsequently applying it to all open-ended responses to the same question—I identified the following potential barriers to tabletop game participation: rules, length, cost, theme, balance, and context (on which I provide a more detailed discussion in the next section). My rationale for referring to these as “potential barriers” is to emphasize that I explicitly prompted speculation on the part of participants. The purpose behind the phrasing, “would likely prevent,” was to expand the possible range of responses by allowing for flexibility. I hoped that this flexibility would facilitate responses commensurate with participant reflection. In other words, I wanted to create space for thoughtful answers from individuals who were unwilling, uncomfortable, or unable to identify and articulate deal-breaking play tasks.

In part because one of the key goals of this survey was to identify whether or not others have experienced anything like I did while playing *Small World*, open-ended responses remained a priority from the first draft to distribution. However, it was also important to indicate the level of detail expected. To balance these considerations, the survey presents three gradually less restricting questions. First, respondents selected a “yes” or “no” response to indicate whether they have ever felt uncomfortable during a tabletop game. If respondents answered affirmatively, they were routed to two follow-up questions: 1) a multiple choice, multiple response question in which participants were to identify if any of the listed options factored into their uncomfortable gameplay

experience, and 2) a text box in which they were prompted to, “Describe the experience to the best of your ability, explaining why you believe you were uncomfortable. Include the title of the game—if known—as well as any relevant details related to the items you've selected above (e.g., your relationship with other players, theme, etc.).”

Organizing the questions in this order allowed me to model the range and scope of content I sought without presenting my own categories as representative of all possible factors related to their experience. In all, 66% (X) of respondents indicated that “yes,” they have felt uncomfortable while playing a tabletop game.

Those who answered “no” (60 respondents) were subsequently asked if they recalled hearing others express feeling uncomfortable during a tabletop game. If they answered “yes,” they were routed to an open text field to describe what they recalled hearing. Their responses break down as follows: 62% answered “yes,” 17% answered “no,” and 22% answered “unsure.” In total, only 6% indicated that they have neither experienced nor heard others express experiencing discomfort during tabletop games, and only 7% were unable to confirm having heard others express discomfort. Finally, when taken together, 87% of research participants indicated that they have, or someone they know has, experienced discomfort during tabletop games. Quantitatively, these results confirm the need for context-bound analyses of gameplay, and while the survey lacks a large enough number of responses to provide statistically valid generalizations, the data provides compelling lines of inquiry—both for future survey research, and for framing my approach to analysis of qualitative responses that follows.

I coded respondent descriptions of uncomfortable tabletop gameplay into the following broad categories: rules, social interaction, and content. Codes were non-exclusionary and many responses were coded into more than one category. Additionally, I created sub-categories for codes as the need emerged. For instance, responses that cite rules as a contributing factor to their discomfort identified distinct issues like cheating, lack of clarity in the ruleset, and varying familiarity with rules among players. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss patterns among the responses, providing examples as evidence for analyses.

On the Need to Know and the Need to Win

The term “discomfort” has a generally negative connotation and also allows for specific embodied responses like “shame” or “frustration” without necessarily narrowing the breadth of responses to these terms; this is why it was used within the survey. Overall, results demonstrate that rules have a significant influence on gameplay experience; however, not all responses frame their understanding of rules the same way. I outline below specific examples to demonstrate how rules are talked about by respondents. In general, the responses suggest that participants believe that familiarity with the rules provides an advantage toward winning, that complex rules create anxieties, feelings of inadequacy, and player to player conflict, and that lack of clarity, disagreement, or bending of the rules among participants disrupts or stops gameplay.

Many survey respondents articulated concern about other players having a strategic advantage because of familiarity with the rules. While there is, undoubtedly, a barrier of entry to playing games with mechanics to which participants have never been

exposed, the perception that familiarity with game rules indicates increased likelihood of winning discounts the various experiences and skills players bring to the game. In his dissertation on community management and computer games, Josh Zimmerman describes this as *gameracy*: “I have the special skills involved in translating my desires into action in the game world. When I am confidently able to do this on a routine basis, I am likely to be considered *literate/gamerate* by the community” (157). For instance, one respondent writes: “I’m also uncomfortable playing new games with complicated rules—especially when they are long and the person who brought the game is an expert. If I’m going to lose, I would rather do it because of poor play on my part or good play on an opponents [sic] part rather than unfamiliarity with the rules.” In this example, complexity and length of play are cited as factors as well, but the primary implication is that poor play equates with unfamiliarity with rules and good play equates with expertise on the rules. While respondents do not overtly state that no skills transfer to gameplay, their responses suggest that familiarity with rules facilitates the chance to focus on strategic rather than correct play. Another respondent explains that despite feeling comfortable with a partner, they felt disadvantaged by having less experience with the game:

I played a couple of rounds of Magic the Gathering with my partner. I have no familiarity with the game, he has a lot. I wasn't necessarily uncomfortable in my lack of knowledge because I know he didn't expect me to know anything, but it was extremely frustrating to be at such a disadvantage when playing. I don't

HAVE to win games to have fun, but I do need to feel like I have a fighting chance.

Just as in the previous example, this respondent sees familiarity with rules as advantageous with respect to winning the game. Additionally, several responses mention both unfamiliarity and complexity of rules, implying that an understanding of the rules to a simple game isn't necessarily going to help with winning. The linking of complexity to familiarity suggests that more difficult games require greater degrees of familiarity to play strategically.

The concern for knowledge of the rules also seems bound to anxiety about how others perceive them and feelings of inadequacy. One participant describes "feeling overwhelmed and dumb when playing a game too complex for me (heavy euro) and feeling I'm being a pain as I ask the same questions over and over again." Such anxiety is both about the player's self-perception and the social relationships they have with others. For example, another response says, "I tend to beat myself up over my [in]ability to grasp a game quickly," and then goes on to state that is particularly true in scenarios in which they play with others who "expect me to be smarter than that." The pattern that emerges from these responses demonstrates a desire to facilitate a successful game experience for others. That is, the feelings of inadequacy are about how other players may respond to their inability to grasp the rules. The following excerpts show how research participants have experienced this discomfort in the past as well as what they believe caused it: "I felt like there were a lot of expectations"; "I don't know how to play and others shame me"; "I get really embarrassed when I don't understand rules"; "I

feel awkwardness about not knowing the rules.” One response, in particular, explains that “people who were frustrated at my newness to a game, who felt angry with my lack of knowledge and my abilities to cooperate and/or ability to strategize as a new player” led to an uncomfortable game experience. Many of the descriptions shared by participants reflect the same anxieties that show up in other parts of life, such as the need to appear knowledgeable as both a means of developing and maintaining self-efficacy and also as a means of avoiding negative interactions with others.

Even from the perspective of those more familiar with the rules, the gameplay experience relies upon how players understand and respond to the rules. A few responses cite discomfort with others who reacted poorly to being less familiar with the game. In one example, a respondent recalls feeling uncomfortable because “another player was slow to understand the rules, and when I attempted to explain what she was doing wrong she reacted in a defensive manner.” Similarly, one response explains that one player “became belligerent when corrected” about “how the rules operated,” and “even after a judge was called and the rules clarified, [they] remained angry” and blamed the interpretation of the rules “as the reason for their loss.” The latter example explicitly links rules, anger, and game outcome, demonstrating how too much concern over winning interferes with the ability to have fun during gameplay.

Significantly, arguments from both winning and losing perspectives show that an overinvestment in the outcome of a game—rather than an emphasis on or appreciation for the experience of the game—can impede the ability to have fun. For instance, one respondent describes being uncomfortable engaging in games with a friend who is,

“adept at many games and extremely competitive. It wasn't much fun constantly losing,” while another writes, “I also get uncomfortable when I beating [sic] somebody too much during a competitive game.” These examples reveal the tension that often exists in attempts to balance conflict-based games with social relationships. In fact, many participants express discomfort with gameplay becoming “too competitive,” explaining that it creates pressure and ruins fun.

Playing games with others requires a greater deal of trust than one might initially think, and the pressure to appease others while also demonstrating a capacity for strategic thinking likewise prohibits play. When considered in relationship to responses regarding familiarity and complexity of rules, these open ended responses demonstrate how social relationships and interactions can quickly shift gameplay. Comparative comprehension of game rules, perceptions of investment in the game (and its outcome), and anxieties about being judged are at the heart of many uncomfortable gameplay experiences. Players want to avoid looking, “stupid,” “being shamed,” “looking dumb,” and feeling “embarrassed.” My findings are not significant because they are specific to tabletop games but because they are present in everyday circumstances, and the act of recognizing or feeling their presence during a game works against the primary goal of having “fun” during the game. These experiences suggest that in order to have fun during the game, participants need to have similar reasons for playing or need to trust one another. Alignment regarding how flexible the rules are, how to appropriately respond to one another, and how to balance the need to win with the desire for fun can reduce the likelihood of play dissipating into disagreement and discomfort.

Testing the Limits of Play in Tabletop Games

My review of open-ended responses echo the need for trust among players as expressions of betrayal led to hurt feelings in gameplay. It should be noted that these feelings emerged across a variety of games. In some games, winning requires successfully deceiving others, and in such cases, it is perhaps less surprising that someone is hurt by another player's actions. Reflecting on this experience, one response says, "I advocated for someone I trusted, and she killed me. I had been totally confident I could read her before then!" Another writes: "The game was *Diplomacy*. I was betrayed by a group of close friends, because that is the nature of the game and I trusted too many of them at once. It still hurt. (I have never had a problem being on the other end of this.)" Beyond games that rely on deception, to some degree, the relationships among players alone can create unexpected discomfort: "Too much manipulation from the more experienced players.. [sic] Felt betrayed." Examples like these demonstrate that games are both informed by and inform social relationships among players. Moreover, they reinforce the need for trust among players while also illustrating how such trust can work against them during gameplay.

While there were a few examples that cite game content as an issue, it was more frequent that the experiences shared by respondents signaled discomfort grounded in conflict between player subjectivity and either game theme or social interactions. The game *Puerto Rico* was specifically mentioned for its theme, which one respondent describes as being "about owning people." Another player stated that "The game's nomenclature is set up to avoid admitting that it involves running a slave plantation and

this makes it uncomfortable to play. I have no discomfort with straight-up war games—even nuclear war games—or games involving being a dictator or murderer, but the game's need to euphemize its own premise was disturbing.” As an additional point of context—and support for these examples—it bears mentioning that the game uses relatively abstract wooden pieces to represent different goods (e.g., indigo, sugar, and coffee). In addition to goods that can be exported in the game, the only additional wooden pieces are brown discs referred to as “colonists.” To produce goods for export, players must take colonists from the “colonist ship” for future assignment to buildings or plantations. While the game uses language like “colonist” and “settler,” it does so in ways that fail to acknowledge the historical and political connotations for the terms with respect to the theme of the game.

Particularly prevalent were responses identifying tabletop role playing games—in which players are predominantly responsible for creating the gameplay scenarios—as unnecessarily and uncomfortably sexual. There are references both to the sexual mechanics in the rulebook (as is the case with *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Apocalypse World*) and also to the interactions among participants creating the story. These responses are generally more detailed than others, mapping the contextual contours of their specific experiences. Because they are compelling examples worthy of analysis and discussion, they will be quoted at length. One research participant writes:

Typing this out is very weird and is going to sound as such. While playing a D&D 3.5e game, the DM (a close friend of mine) introduced a Bag of Holding but it held disembodied penises. Some guy was going around trying to get our

characters to unwittingly put their hands in the bag. (it [sic] was kind of like a magical glory hole thing) Once I realized what was going on I was extremely upset and left the game for a bit. The other players didn't understand why I was upset and one even questioned if I was asexual. It really soured my opinion on the other players (they were acquaintances [sic] more than friends) and I left the group a few weeks later. The DM and I talked it out and are still friends though.

The social activity of gameplay is at the forefront of this response, as it highlights a friendship with the Dungeon Master (DM) in opposition to acquaintances. Presumably the lack of friendship between the writer and the other players exacerbated the feeling of being upset given that they didn't understand the writer's objection, further alienating the respondent.

While the previous example does not indicate much about player subjectivity, some responses point specifically to the impact of gender and race on their experiences. Recalling a game of *Call of Cthulhu*, one respondent writes that "about midway through the game, the guys I barely knew began steering the game in a sexual direction (which, thinking back on it, must have been quite challenging, given the nature of the game). I was the only woman there, and it made me feel uncomfortable." Another participant explicitly states they were bothered by the discomfort of others rather than the content itself: "I was running a game of *White Wolf's Vampire: the Masquerade* when one player decided to attempt to seduce another. He rolled well, she rolled poorly and what followed was a graphic depiction of sexual activity that his character engaged in with her character. The content itself was not disturbing but the way in which she was

uncomfortable was disturbing.” Role playing games of the kind mentioned here happen to be a genre in which the social negotiation of the game is emphasized. In fact, one of the main reasons this genre is the focus of many research studies is its seemingly unrestricted possibilities for character creation, storytelling, and world building. Yet, many of the stories shared by survey respondents illustrate how ideology restricts imagination.

Given that a majority of respondents identified their ethnicity as white and their gender pronoun preferences as she/her/hers, it is unsurprising that gender appears in more responses than race. In the most explicit reflection of racialized subjectivity influencing gameplay experience, one respondent explained a game in relationship to their subject position and identity: “I don't remember the name of the game, but there were ‘classes’ of people and little tokens that represented the people and the tokens that represented the ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ class were black. This made me uncomfortable because I'm black and was playing with an all-white group.” In another example, the same respondent focused on how the social interaction, rather than the game, created discomfort: “one of the other players used the n-word to insult another player as we were playing.” Similar responses downplayed the game itself and emphasized the relationships and interactions among players. For instance, they recall being the target of sexist attitudes and comments like, “Of course you can't handle that, you're a woman.” And, one participant's experience suggests not only reductive views of women, but also shows how foundational to constructions of other social identities these views are: “I am occasionally the only woman or non-scientist playing games, and

feel that when I don't do well or don't understand the rules immediately, other players feel it's because I'm not a 'gamer' or 'analytic thinker' or blah blah blah." Additionally, one participant attributes their discomfort to "playing *Magic* with a bunch of dudes," adding only that "if you really need me to explain more, then you need to stop and reflect on your own understanding of gender dynamics and your own attitudes towards women playing games." Arguably, this response says the most with the fewest words.

It's (Not) Just a Game

Like Woods' survey, mine also yielded data from primarily white tabletop game players. However, the data I presented and analyzed in this chapter reinforces my earlier claim that the results of Woods' survey could show an absence of ethnic and gender diversity due to perceptions of boardgamegeek forums (where he distributed the survey) as relatively unwelcoming. If the very experience of tabletop gameplay creates the kind of anxieties and discomfort expressed above, then one would could easily imagine why some people are less likely to engage in the hobby beyond gameplay.

In terms of assessing whether or not respondents perceive games as somehow separate from reality, the results of this survey suggests a binary outcome. On the one hand, game participants are motivated to play games primarily by the expectation of fun and more individuals are willing to engage in the same activities when described as part of the game. On the other hand, respondents indicate that games are never just a game. While some individuals suggest "it's just a game," they often do so in response to players demonstrating an overinvestment in winning (i.e., too competitive) or losing

(i.e., too upset by losing). “It’s just a game” serves as a means of rhetorically mitigating the game’s impact on participants. Overwhelmingly, however, survey data illustrates that individuals understand how context facilitates as well as restricts the emergence of the magic circle, that an entanglement of factors create obstacles to the cultural accomplishments of safety and fun. They are hopeful for the possibilities afforded by tabletop gameplay (e.g., fun, socializing, strategic thinking, escaping the mundane) while also aware of its limitations (e.g., restrictive, inflexible rules, unnecessarily graphic or offensive materials and mechanics). Ultimately, this survey maps the tensions among game themes and rules, social relationships, participant motivations and behavior, and player subjectivities—both stitching together and ripping at the seams of the magic circle.

CHAPTER FIVE

POWER, PLAY: ON SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF “FUN”

5.1 Looking Back, Moving Forward

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the construct of “player” within tabletop game materials (e.g., rules, artwork) subjects participants to the ideologies embedded within the game system. The ludic context reinforces the way game participants are interpellated as “players” by prompting them to perform within the confines of rules that are undergirded by ideologies. In order to understand how individuals navigate conflicts between their subjectivity and the expectations player identity through in-game performance, the relationship between the concept of play and tabletop games requires reconsideration.

Despite its broad and informal use to describe activities pursued for pleasure, “play” must be defined with even greater flexibility than games. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith organizes scholarship on play according to seven rhetorics, none of which are mutually exclusive, all of which emerge in relationship to the ideologies, values, and uses of respective researchers and their disciplines. Notably, he observes that “theoretically speaking, play is difficult to understand *because* it is ambiguous” (emphasis mine, 214). The ambiguity of play is partly the result of its relative unpredictability. Individuals experience play in moments, but because of its broad application to a number of different activities, “play” becomes a catch-all description for

activities done for pleasure. One consequence of this near universal application is that it obscures an integral part of play: its momentary and unpredictable manifestations. As I discuss later in this chapter, the frequent characterization of play as “things people do” affixes it to agency and raises questions about how power emerges during and around experiences of play.

It is, perhaps, this subjective quality of play that informs Bernard Suits’ concept of the lusory attitude (detailed in the following chapter). The lusory attitude, as delineated by Suits, describes the phenomenon by which players willingly submit to the rules of a game for the sole purpose of engaging in the game. The lusory attitude emerges—as the name suggests—from a motivation to engage in play. However, the rules of a game, which Suits argues players follow solely for the purpose of engaging in that game, can impede players from their desired experience of play. When this happens, the desire to play can supersede following the rules of the game. Thus, an important clarification to Suits’ work is that the lusory attitude is motivated by the desire to play, which can override the desire to abide by the rules of the game. It is at precisely those moments when the exploitation of the lusory attitude emerges, calling attention to performance, identity, and subjectivity.

In the preceding chapters, I use game studies scholarship to contextualize my research, highlighting not only the need for an increase in tabletop game studies but also the need for research that tends to the intricacies and spectra of ways individuals (re)create, engage, understand, and are affected by games. Although no single project could carefully address all of these, I share my research, in part, as an endeavor to

contribute to a body of scholarship that could collectively contend with such aims. Taken together, the previous chapters illustrate the assumptions and values that guide the construction of different iterations of “player” as an identity. The corpus analysis offered in chapter two shows an ideological trend of masculine, imperialist conceptualizations of conflict in games: an unsettling confirmation of the ways culture is (re)produced in game development and gameplay. Within the broader ludic contexts of tabletop gameplay, individuals demonstrate understanding of the implied agreement to play by the rules, and to play by the rules requires adopting the underlying ideologies and values—or, at the very least, performing identification with those values by adopting and enacting them as intended by the rules. Illustrating how this emerges subjectively, I combine my analysis of the game *Small World* with personal experience playing it in chapter three.

In addition to demonstrating how tabletop game materials work collectively to construct players, my analysis also shows that *Small World* instantiates masculine, imperialist attitudes toward conflict. I show that following the rules, as written, requires behaving by the same freedoms and limitations as other players, but it does not *mean* the same for all participants nor is its effect the same. Ultimately, I critically reflect on my experience engaging with a rule system that required me to consider the conflict between my lived reality—subjectivity—and my performance of identity within the game. In an effort to determine whether my subjective experience of this conflict is an anomaly among tabletop game players, chapter four shifts its focus to examining how others experience, understand, and are affected by tabletop gameplay. According to the

results of the survey, respondents construct players in ways that tend to the complexities of social relationships and demonstrate that discomfort often arises from conflict between motivations for gameplay and the outcomes of the game. In a basic sense, the results of this survey merely confirm Malaby's characterization of play (and narratives of its safety and fun) as a cultural accomplishment. With respect to identifying the factors that impact whether one's experience of gameplay aligns with the prevalent conceptualization of the magic circle, this data highlights the significance of social relationships.

5.2 Pinning the Pieces Together: A Theory of Play in Tabletop Games

The data and experiences examined for this project reveal how power moves throughout gameplay, showing the complexity of tabletop games as rhetorical and ideological texts—the instantiation of which relies upon social negotiation and player performance. Ultimately, tabletop games are, by and large, structured around the struggle for power, and in this way, they further complicate both the degree of separation from everyday life and also the role of play in game studies. I contextualize my project in response to the magic circle debate and the “cultural accomplishment of fun” (Malaby). The remainder of the chapter outlines my theory of play in tabletop games as well as articulates avenues for future work.

Scholars have struggled to determine a means of expressing what makes games unique and worthy of study without falling into the trap of constructing narratives of exceptionalism: that games are utopian spaces untouched by the monotony of everyday life. One would be strained to make a convincing claim that games cannot

impact a person's life, or that games cannot function as relatively safer places of exploration, social interaction, strategic thinking, or learning. Yet, this does not mean that games are always or inherently safe; what is experienced or understood as safe or inconsequential for one person may be of significant burden or anxiety to another. The degree to which play unfolds during games is necessarily linked to participant engagement and response to the game and the context that surrounds it. Malaby's work is particularly useful because it calls attention to variable ways fun is constructed and experienced, and it questions the assumption that all participants in all games experience play.

By examining the conditions under which fun emerges in the context of subjectivity and the performance of player identities, I have shown the centrality of power in both potentiating and prohibiting play during tabletop games. The tendency to construct games as agonistic activities illustrates the pervasiveness of cultural instantiations of dominant ideological systems. As the personal experiences of discomfort show, systematic domination over others becomes a normalized part of game activity, shaping how participants engage with others, understand and address conflict, and most importantly, attach value to oppressive practices that saturate life outside the game. Through these processes, "fun" becomes bound to—though not synonymous with—struggles over power: to winning, to accumulating wealth, to viewing success as an individual rather than communal pursuit. In other words, play's entanglement with power and control becomes visible and is felt. Play, in other words, becomes entangled with power and control.

5.3 Players as Agents of Outcomes: The Need to Feel in Control

The purpose of my dissertation has primarily been to examine how player identities are constructed via tabletop game materials and participant responses. Specifically, my goal for investigating these constructions has been to improve understanding of the phenomenon of individual willingness to behave differently in the context of a game, and to move closer toward an explanation of what compels individuals to become someone different—to behave differently—during gameplay. The results of my research imply that one reason is the desire for control as enacted within the game and its surrounding environment.

Individuals indicate frustration when games are imbalanced. Survey respondents describe feeling inadequate when others are more familiar with the rules of the game, becoming frustrated when others cheat or bend the rules, and getting bored when game systems explicitly or implicitly create player elimination, or tilt more toward luck than strategy. Though these examples fail to mention control specifically, I argue that the desire to influence how the game unfolds undergirds each one. For instance, while expert knowledge of game rules does not necessarily result in the ability to perform well within the game, respondents connect knowledge of the rules with the ability to positively impact the outcome of the game. To know the rules well provides individuals with a sense of confidence about their ability to exert control within the game system, and importantly, control in this particular example is not about winning, but about the ability to connect knowledge to effect (i.e., the emphasis is on intention). Similarly, individuals expressed difficulty finishing games that prioritize luck as well as games that

make them feel like catching up to the person in the lead is an impossible task. These responses identify different contexts in which the player's experience of a game was negatively impacted by their perceived inability—or, lack of confidence therein—to positively impact the game. Participants value gamercy and balanced mechanics *because* they facilitate confidence in one's ability to impact the game-world in ways they desire. The feeling of being able to affect change in accordance with one's goals can be understood as a lusory reward, a positive reinforcement of adopting a lusory attitude.

The magic circle cannot hold—and in some cases, cannot even emerge—when gameplay highlights the absence of, or limits, the control a player has. In these contexts, the entanglement of play with power becomes glaringly visible. Given that games are constructed as agonistic competitions wherein winning is construed as domination over others, the connection among play, power, and control is perhaps unsurprising. The saturation of game systems premised on the domination of others perpetuates the value of control such that even if one cannot successfully win a game, their ability to derive pleasure is bound to feeling as though they *can* win. In this way, the emergence of play depends upon the construction of a game-world within which individuals sense possibility, which itself appears to be bound to control.

When the values and goals of the game system fail to align with those of a participant, a conflict between subjectivity and the player identity emerges, impeding the opportunities for play to arise. The same is true among participants, who must (re)negotiate the game world in ways that are rigid enough to honor the game system

but flexible enough to honor the experiences of those at the table. The circumstances that facilitate simultaneous and/or contiguous play among participants become more unlikely when the social (re)construction of the game world occurs implicitly (i.e., when expectations are implied on the assumption that everyone knows them). The game-world—or magic circle—is constructed through social negotiation, but the survey responses as well as my own experiences suggest that players do not always recognize when they are engaged in this process. More frequently, the role of this negotiation becomes apparent when game activity stops due to conflict. Such conflicts may include disagreement about rules, negative reactions to the theme or language in the game, or even arguments about how individuals are speaking to one another during the game. Moreover, even in circumstances when individuals seem to come to the table for the same reasons, game activity can unfold in ways that reveal the degrees of distinction among individual motivations, behaviors, and values.

While winning a game does not result in or prevent players from having fun, the means by which individuals demonstrate the value of winning can. To some individuals, the fun is inextricably bound to the outcome, and while this itself is not a barrier for others to experience play, it can manifest in ways that interfere (e.g., others are too competitive, others are poor sports, others don't care about the rules). One player's idea of fun may simply involve social engagement with friends while another's may be contingent upon the game system itself (though neither of these precludes the other). Through this example, I point once again to the significance of subjectivity in

relationship to gameplay, to which I will turn my focus after clarifying what appears to be a contradiction within my theory.

Whether play emerges depends on an individual's confidence about their ability to exert influence over the game, highlighting the connection between play and power through control. Moreover, connection between control and play is not limited to the confines of the game system itself, but expands to the social circumstances on which the players' experiences of the game are built. Imagine that all players at the table know the rules to the same degree, believe the game to be appropriately balanced, and feel as though they are able to control their role in the game meaningfully through intentional actions that move them toward the win-condition of the game. This scenario has all the makings of a "magical" experience in which play can emerge for all players at the table. However, one player who happens to be winning starts to gloat and antagonize others at the table. For this player, "fun" is likely amplified through this behavior, but I would argue that those who are put off by this behavior are responding both to misaligned preferences for what is appropriate during the game and more to the point, they are also responding to the relative force of "control."

5.4 Playing Yourself—Or Not

While the focus of this dissertation began by examining the interpellation of individuals by game materials, consideration has also been given to the processes by which the social interactions that shape the game also subject participants to various player identity constructs. As my experience with *Small World* illustrates, my subjectivity made difficult the task of performing an identity construct of "player" within the

parameters of the rules of the game, and what was perhaps made less clear in chapter three is the influence of the social environment on my final decision to play by the rules. Because I was playing the game with my partner of ten years and my sister (with whom I am very close), I trusted that this performance would be seen as such, that the other players at the table would recognize in me the discomfort of moving forward, and the residual shame that followed. I did not feel as though the other players would recognize me as the player the game constructs—the masculine, imperial, violent, dehumanizer of others. Yet, my lived experiences still compelled me to verbalize my issues with playing by the rules, and I leveraged the game as an opportunity to talk about the issues it raised—specifically, around gender, race, and the construction of historical narratives. For me, this example demonstrates the multiple considerations that one must make when presented with an expectation to perform identification with constructed categories that undermine their subjective experiences, which are themselves often relegated to the sidelines and dismissed as questionable sources of knowledge.

My research suggests that individuals derive pleasure from tabletop games when they feel a sense of control, and this sense of control facilitates the invocation of the magic circle. A player's ability to experience "play" as designed within the game is impeded when their sense of control is compromised. The many stories that identified sexism and racism as causes of discomfort during game activities highlight the ways that "fun" and "play" as dominantly constructed within tabletop gaming culture are more attainable for those whose lived realities do not conflict with the public performances of identity they enact to play by the rules of game. To put it another way, when the power

struggle of gameplay manifests in ways that call into question one's agency and/or highlight the mismatch between lived experiences and social location, there is an opportunity to "consider the manner in which [one] manage[s] to separate [them]selves from public interpellation" (Alcoff 93). To "manage" this separation requires one to (re)establish a feeling of control, or to frame it differently, to (re)create the possibilities for play.

The magic circle emerges through "play," and the experience of "play," while itself ambiguous, is contextualized in tabletop gaming as bound to the exertion of control. By this, I mean that games are not fun when individuals feel as though they cannot impact game activity (i.e., the game and the social interactions shaping it) in meaningful ways. When the game limits the possibilities for transgressing one's lived reality, or undermines real life experiences, through narrative, artwork, rules, mechanics, and social interactions, the potential for "play" to emerge through the game activity is largely restricted.

5.5 (Re)creating Possibilities for Play

In this section, I draw on the work of scholars like Henry Jenkins, Matthew Hills, and José Esteban Muñoz to consider how the concepts of textual poaching and disidentification can be applied to tabletop gaming. Specifically, I explore how individuals have remained engaged with tabletop games by (re)creating possibilities for play where they were denied. By refusing to view their options as binary choices, participants (re)create possibilities for play—that is, the chance to experience pleasure through game activity. As Greg Loring-Ablright's alternate ruleset to *Settlers of Catan*

and Elizabeth “Lizzie” J. Magie Phillips’ second ruleset to *The Landlord’s Game* illustrate, these practices are political acts that work to transform the tabletop gaming culture into a more welcoming and inclusive site of engagement and play.

Henry Jenkins, in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, demonstrates how fans operate as textual poachers (a term he borrows from Michel de Certeau). Fans travel across texts (objects of fandom) repurposing them in ways that more adequately meet their needs. Jenkins borrows de Certeau’s term “poachers” to describe the process by which fans use cultural texts for their own production: “for the fan, reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure” (39). Textual poaching—particularly via fan fiction—offers an opportunity for fans to re-class, re-gender, and/or re-race aspects of their fandom. In this way, they are producers, as well as consumers. As an example, Jenkins argues that females are called upon to perform a kind of transvestitism in their reading of male-oriented texts. In other words, for female fans to derive enjoyment from a text, they are required to perform male subjectivity. Jenkins’ work has been critiqued by Matt Hills for its overly broad application of “production” to fan activities as well as for maintaining the hierarchy of production of consumption. Hills also argues that not *all* fans participate in the practices Jenkins describes. Fan experiences, for Hills, are shaped by living out contradictions. For instance, fans simultaneously express sentiments of anti-commercialism while also being intensely attached to the consumption as an expression of fan identity. Jenkins’ work fails to bend in a way that

allows for such contradictions and hybridity, whereas Hills argues that fans are shifting, non-static, hybridized, and performative.

Practices like developing alternative rulesets, meta-games, and even indie game design can offer a means of repurposing tabletop games to fulfill the desires of those who are otherwise excluded and disempowered. Such practices provide an alternative to the either/or approach that presents tabletop gameplay as a choice of either abiding by the rules of the game or quitting. Instead, these practices can be understood through Muñoz's theory of disidentification, offering players a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it" (11). Disidentification occurs in varying degrees, manifesting in ways that best serve those who are working against the dominant ideologies of a given space or activity. For instance, individuals have taken to boardgamegeek.com to discuss their disagreement with the portrayal of the Lost Tribes, sharing ways to modify gameplay in an effort to alleviate the tensions raised by official design of the game. Requesting assistance in a post to the game variant forum, Cameron Fulton (beat1823) writes:

The only thing I had a problem with was taking over the Lost Tribes people. They seemed innocent and I thought it would be great if someone would be able to defend against the invading jerks. Now, after countless debates, my friend agreed if I could come up with a set of rules that would allow someone to play as the lost tribe, then he would allow it . . . if anyone would wanna help me think of a set of rules to make it so someone could somehow play as the lost tribe, that would be awesome [sic].

Moreover, the reference to “countless debates” reflects what one survey respondent indicates as a productive aspect of tabletop games often disliked for their content: “for objectives involving slaves, the role of Hitler, stealing, lying, etc., those are opportunities for important conversations in relating the game and our every day [sic] lives.” These conversations, though important, can make it difficult to experience “play” during the game, and the practice of modifying the game in ways that reduce the pressure to discuss these issues (particularly if the discussion is with individuals one does not know well) can facilitate the emergence of play through the game activity. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these conversations necessarily preclude the play, but that for some, they interrupt the ludic reward of “playing to win.”

However, as the game *Five Tribes* by Days of Wonder shows, these conversations can, when broad enough, influence the official design and development of a game. Originally released with slave cards, *Five Tribes* sparked controversy among tabletop gamers: “I’m referring to the inclusion of slave cards in the marketplace deck alongside the gold, ivory, cloth, fish and other non-human goods. In the game, players can discard slave cards to take certain effects, and in the mind of some, this came across as players offering human sacrifices or trading in human suffering” (W. Eric Martin). The backlash was strong enough that the publishers explained their decision to re-release the game with different cards, and to offer the cards individually for those who already own the game. Adrien Martinot explains: “Despite being part of the *Arabian Nights* tales folklore, we do regard slavery as an important matter and condemn it. Still, we understood that this very precise element was preventing some people from enjoying *Five Tribes*. As a

publisher, we thought it was important to offer the same joyful game experience to everyone.” These two examples illustrate different approaches that do the work of disidentification by “transform[ing] a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the important of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (12). By opting not to forego participation—boycotting a game in protest—and refusing to succumb to the narrative that calling them “games” means anything goes, individuals rewrite what it means to participate in the culture. Thus, they poach the game system, re-coding it to create possibilities “to read oneself and one’s own life narrative” within it, to create possibilities for play.

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