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D&D&U&G: USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY
AND *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

by
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B.S. University of New Haven, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Given the growing popularity of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *D&D*, this thesis study applied the Uses and Gratifications theory to determine what players of the game get from engagement with this particular, previously overlooked form of entertainment media. Additionally, this research sought to determine whether these discovered gratifications overlapped at all with perceived similar media, specifically massive multiplayer online role-playing games, MMORPGs, and social media. A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit relevant responses were conducted with 14 respondents, followed by a thematic analysis to determine gratifications. The qualitative analysis determined a set of 24 gratifications, each categorized under social, immersion, narrative, and achievement labels. Among these included potentially unique gratifications such as story creation, control, creativity, freedom, and identity exploration. Moreover, while many similar gratifications were determined for *D&D* and MMORPGs, very few overlapping gratifications emerged between *D&D* and social media, possibly due to the latter's lack of available immersion gratifications. This research provides an insight as to why audience members choose to actively engage with a form of entertainment media previously discounted in scholarly literature, and how these reasons to engage differ from more modern, similar available media types.

Keywords: dungeons and dragons, uses and gratifications, qualitative, audience, media

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
Dungeons & Dragons.....	3
Popularity.....	4
Criticism.....	5
Gameplay and Key Components.....	6
Uses & Gratifications Theory.....	8
Uses and Gratifications and Games.....	12
Uses and Gratifications of Social Media.....	15
The Current Study.....	16
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	19
Sample.....	19
Materials.....	21
Procedure.....	22
Analysis.....	22
Bias, Ethics, & Reflexivity.....	23
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....	26
Uses and Gratifications.....	26
Social Gratifications.....	27
Immersion Gratifications.....	30
Narrative Gratifications.....	34
Achievement Gratifications.....	37
Overlapping Gratifications Between Media.....	39
D&D and MMORPGs.....	39
D&D and Social Media.....	42
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	45
Limitations.....	50
Future Research.....	52
APPENDIX A: PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY.....	54
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWER GUIDE.....	57

APPENDIX C: CODE BOOK.....	61
APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL.....	64
REFERENCES	67

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There exists an extensive, tumultuous history of the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, *D&D*. A table-top roleplaying game created nearly half a century ago by a pair of fantasy fans, the media form has attracted both scorn and praise alike, along with a steady number of hobbyists eager to participate in the flights of fantasy it provides. Over the last several years in particular, the game has seen a resurgence in popularity, translation to an online, digitally accessible format, and an incredible increase in its once smaller player base. What once was a game usually played exclusively by white males now attracts individuals of all kinds passionate to engage in the adventure and drama of *D&D*.

Despite the increasing popularity, appeal, and accessibility however, the game has received little to no scholarly attention, neither in mass media nor other communication studies. As an avid player of the game, I think the context is ripe with scholarly value. While other, more contemporary gaming subgenres have been studied for the gratifications their players seek while engaging with them, table-top role-playing games, and *D&D* specifically, have been overlooked. This gap in literature, along with my own interest in and personal history with the game, has inspired me to develop this thesis project. By completing this research, I resolve to bridge this gap and contribute to scholarly discourse on the subject of media use.

In the following literature review, I summarize the history of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game, from its humble beginnings and scandalous past to its favored contemporary public opinion and consumption. I detail how other forms of entertainment media, such as podcasts, television, and novels, have contributed to the widespread growth of the game's fanbase.

Previous and current criticism of the game are also discussed, as are general terms and game mechanics for the sake of reader clarity.

Once the game, its history, and how it works has been described adequately, I introduce the Uses and Gratifications theory, the media effects framework that I applied for this thesis project. Through a series of qualitative interviews that underwent thematic analysis, and the eventual completion of this research, I was able to discern which specific gratifications are sought by players of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The specific participants, and the process by which this data was collected is provided in the methods section, along with other specified materials employed in the study's interviews.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Dungeons & Dragons

The table-top role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, *D&D*, comes with a long, storied history. A creation of duo Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax and inspired by wargames, the fantasy role-playing game was first conceived in 1974 (Adams, 2013). Since then, the game has been updated several times, receiving five ‘editions’ in total. The most recent of these editions, Fifth Edition, abbreviated to 5e, arrived in 2014 (McElroy, 2014). All current *Dungeons & Dragons*-related media is currently published by Wizards of the Coast, or WotC, and the game itself has spawned or inspired many other tabletop games. Players of *D&D* create and portray a fictional persona, using them to partake in various dramatic and magical adventures concocted by the game’s leader. Like other table-top role-playing games, *D&D* is usually played at a table by a group of individuals utilizing various dice, miniatures, and conversation to enhance and engage with the story told.

D&D, while growing fiercely in popularity today, has not always been perceived of fondly by some. Most notably in the last couple decades of the 20th century, *D&D* inspired incidents of satanic panic. Due in part to its fantastical elements, concerned parents and other adults once feared that the game was an “occult tool” that involved devil worship, demon summoning, blasphemy, and sexual perversion (BBC News, 2014). The belief that players of *D&D* are at more risk of harmful ideation has been challenged, and no studies have found evidence supporting a connection between the game and these dangers (Carter & Lester, 1998; Simón, 1987). In the years since the panic, the game’s popularity has grown, and these

outlandish-sounding but oft-quoted fears have become mere outliers in contrast to the average, contemporary, and favorable opinion of the game.

Popularity

The increased recognition and success of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game has no doubt burgeoned through its appearances in popular television shows such as *Stranger Things* and *Community* (Layton, 2018). Additionally, the game has been used as a backdrop in popular fantasy storytelling podcasts like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, both of which have seen incredible success beyond their audio formatting.

Hosted by prolific voice actor Matthew Mercer, the podcast *Critical Role* became such a great success that, when the team behind the show started a fundraiser to raise money to create an animated adaptation (*The Legend of Vox Machina*, now available on Amazon Prime Video), nearly 90 thousand people pitched in (Whitten, 2019). The donations, collected through crowdfunding website Kickstarter, ended at 11.3 million dollars, the highest ever raised on the site.

While later seasons of the family-run podcast *The Adventure Zone* expanded to include other tabletop role-playing game systems such as *Fate* and *Powered by the Apocalypse*, the show started with serialized storytelling and gameplay based in *D&D*'s fifth edition. These episodes and the stories therein are currently being adapted to graphic novel format. The first of these volumes earned a #1 spot on the New York Times' bestseller list in paperback trade fiction upon publication, and third in fiction overall, the highest spot for a graphic novel at the time of its release (McMillan, 2018). Like *Critical Role*'s animated show, individuals dressing up as

characters from either series at themed conventions, and related merchandise like Funko Pops, these additional formats only help expand the game's reach.

Along with these popular shows and their related adaptations, the latest edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was purposefully designed to be accessible to new players, not requiring a game board and miniatures like previous versions (McElroy, 2014). This change in the game's design makes the *Dungeons & Dragons* game far easier for interested or otherwise curious parties to get into, increasing its likelihood of success.

Not only is it easier to find people playing *D&D*, it is also easier *to* play it. Online platforms such as Roll20 allow for remote *D&D* playing, and people can host voice call campaign sessions over applications like Zoom or Discord (Inkebarger, 2020). This means that, for those without tabletop-inclined friends in close proximity, interested players can still access and enjoy the game virtually.

Criticism

For all its popularity, *Dungeons & Dragons* has received its fair share of criticism in the decades since its inception. The game has been criticized, especially in its previous editions, for its harmful depictions of women and marginalized identities (Garcia, 2017; Stang & Trammell, 2019). The concerns don't stop at the lore, however. Many players have shared concerning behavior and uncomfortable experiences from participants both in and out of game (Donovan, 2014; Garcia, 2017). These experiences may be the result of increasing demographic shifts in the game's player pool.

Dungeons & Dragons and Tabletop Role-playing Games in general were largely white and male-dominated hobbies with very little involvement from female players for some time. These numbers have changed over the years, from just under 20% of players being female to around 40% (Dancey, 2000; Kane, 2018). Players of other races have increased in number, as well as players of differing sexualities (Inklebarger, 2020). Unfortunately, regardless of the growing parity, these horror stories persist (Donovan, 2014). These incidents may come in the form of Dungeon Masters objectifying female characters, or male players forcing female players into romantic or sexual situations through their characters as a power-play, or as a way to vicariously live out a fantasy.

To prevent this, it is necessary for *Dungeons & Dragons* players to establish and negotiate strong boundaries between both one another and between their characters and themselves over the course of their games (Waskul & Lust, 2004). If these boundaries are successfully enforced, the real life drama of the players will have less chance of bleeding into the lives and drama of the characters, and vice versa.

Gameplay and Key Components

With its history and contemporary standing established, it is important to discuss how *D&D* is played. For the purposes of this piece, this section explains the basic guidelines, key individuals, and elements as they appear in the fifth edition of the game, as it is the most recent, relevant, and popular of the editions.

D&D participants can be categorized into two roles- the Dungeon Master and the player. The Dungeon Master, or the DM, controls the plot and the setting of the game. They provide and play any NPC (or non-playable character) or enemies that the players may come across

throughout the game (Waskul & Lust, 2004). The player, on the other hand, will take on the role of a multitasker. Citing sociologist Gary Alan Fine, professor and researcher Nathan Shank explains “[p]layers can be described in two ways: as individuals who happen to be playing a game, carrying with them real-world interests and values, or as animators of a persona” (2015, p. 194). The player and the character they play are both linked and disconnected, and it may only be through word choice or specific tone that a player may decide to differentiate the two. How close a character resembles or doesn’t resemble the player controlling them is entirely the player’s prerogative.

The player must design the character they want to play before they can join a game. This character will be the persona they utilize to interact with the Dungeon Master’s creative world. Each player character (or PC) possesses a race and a class. Races can be as ordinary as humans, or more fantasy-aligned like half-orcs, elves, dwarves, and so on. Each race possesses their own unique benefits to specific statistics a player may want to exploit.

Classes are what job a character might have. The character may be a more physical, combat-oriented barbarian and more adept at fighting with brute strength, or they may be a magic user, such as a bard who uses music to cast spells that heal or harm. Like races, each class has their own specific perks. In addition, there are non-standard races and classes that are not part of the player guidebooks that a person may want to participate as. In that case, it is ultimately up to the Dungeon Master to determine whether they will allow anything ‘homebrew’ in their particular campaign.

While prepared campaigns are available from Wizards of the Coast for aspiring Dungeon Masters to use, many DMs will come up with their own story with their own challenges for

players to face. Among other infinite options, DMs may have their players' characters fight monsters, find treasure, and gain experience. This experience eventually allows characters to increase their level and gain more abilities from their race or class, like extra, better spells or more health.

In a standard *Dungeons & Dragons* game, players will use dice. These dice can have as few as three sides (or two if using a coin) and as many as 100. Players and Dungeon Masters roll these dice to perform actions and to gauge how successful they are (Mizer, 2014). For example, if a player wants their character to attack, they will roll a 20-sided die to hit, and if the number they rolled is high enough for whatever creature they are facing, then the attack will land. However, dice are not only used for combat. Dice may also be used in ability checks. If a player wants to, say, play an instrument to serenade an NPC, they will roll a die for a performance check. Players receive bonuses or detriments to whatever number they rolled if their character's ability stats are high or low in whatever they are trying to roll for.

Uses & Gratifications Theory

Having achieved a summation of *D&D*'s gameplay, key components, players, and their roles, it is now necessary to explain the theoretical approach applied in this thesis.

The Uses and Gratifications theory, developed by Elihu Katz and colleagues, is a theoretical approach that posits that individuals are motivated to engage with different types of communication media to fulfil different gratifications (Katz et al., 1973a). As the taste of every person is different, gratifications may not necessarily be the same between different audience members, and common trends of gratifications may shift in comparisons of different

demographic groups. Only the individual audience member can decide what gratification they achieve from which form of media, and how much value that content possesses.

An important distinction between the Uses and Gratifications theory from its predecessors is the active role played by the media-viewing audience (Katz et al., 1973b). In his own words, the goal of this theoretical application is not to ask “‘what do the media do to people?’ but, ‘what do people do with the media?’” (1959, p. 2). In contrast, research on the subject in the decades preceding the theoretical approach’s development perceived audience members as more passive in their media consumption.

Along with Katz and his colleagues, original and early research by other interested scholars focused on media types such as films, books, newspaper, radio, and television (Bantz, 1982; Blood et al., 1983). These initial studies determined multiple noteworthy gratifications, in particular information-seeking, escape, improvement of status, and interpersonal relationship maintenance, as well as relaxation, passing time, and education (Greenberg, 1974; Katz et al., 1973a). For television, younger viewers seeking specific gratifications were found to prefer specific programs (Rubin, 1979). For example, those seeking escapism would turn to comedies, while those seeking arousal would engage with dramas.

Later research expanded to feature other entertainment media, including music (Lonsdale & North, 2011; Patch, 2017) and cell phones (Wei & Lo, 2006). Newer media examined under the Uses and Gratifications lens also includes video games (Jansz & Tanis, 2007; Park et al., 2011) and social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Along with previously established gratifications such as relaxation, social media offered gratification-seekers the ability to share information, express opinions, and perform surveillance on other users (Whiting & Williams,

2013). It remains to be seen how recent technology will be examined through this theoretical application as new media is designed and implemented for public use.

As stated, the Uses and Gratifications theory assumes primarily that the individual audience member actively chooses to engage with the media and determines the value of each form of media (Katz et al., 1973a). Since there are multiple forms of media, however, these different media compete, both with one another and other sources of need satisfaction. These other sources include interpersonal relationships, such as family and friends, or schoolwork (Katz et al., 1973a; Rubin, 1993). Moreover, the further one is from one of these primary interpersonal sources, the larger role media plays in fulfilling a person's needs in comparison.

Further research on the Uses and Gratifications theory discusses the concept of audience activity and its location on a continuum. Audience activity is a crucial, central part of the Uses and Gratifications theory, its existence necessitated through the engagement with media types. Scholars have determined multiple definitions for audience activity, inclusive of utility, selectivity, and intentionality (Blumler, 1979). These concepts refer to audience motivations or reasons to engage, the decision to engage with the particular media type, and the plan to engage, respectively.

However, just as two audience members may seek out different gratifications from the same type of media, not all audience members are necessarily equally active (Rubin, 1993). The variances in activity orientations and the effects on gratifications have been explored further by communication scholars. In particular, the time before, during, and after audience exposure to a media form has been found to be influential on gratifications sought (Levy & Windahl, 1984; Rubin, 1993). For example, survey results determined that audience intention before exposure

was strongly connected with information seeking, but weakly connected with entertainment seeking (Rubin, 1984; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Depending on intention or lack thereof, audience activity may be defined as instrumental or ritualized (Rubin, 1984), with the latter form more frequent, habitual, and passive, and the former more selective and purposeful. Under the current understanding, however, it can be surmised that audience members who are players of *Dungeons & Dragons* are highly active and attentive when engaging within the tabletop gaming context. The previously detailed design and structure of the gameplay inspires a more involved, instrumental level of activity. A greater understanding of audience activity levels in this context may yet be gathered from the culmination of this thesis research.

Some scholars have levied criticism at the current understanding of audience activity. In particular, Biocca (1988) argues that the contemporary concept of audience activity is too complex in its current state, and that it requires further research and the restructuring or truncating of dimensions to be better understood. Additionally, the concept of habitual, more passive viewing seems to contradict with the Uses and Gratification's inherent premise of an active audience that chooses each piece of media purposefully. Indeed, more research must be done in the field to build and strengthen cohesion between the concepts.

As the Uses and Gratifications theory focuses on all types of media, both the original research and subsequent investigations have applied the theoretical approach to a wide variety of forms of entertainment through a variety of methodologies. Uses and Gratifications studies can be both qualitative and quantitative in scope, and may employ investigative tools such as focus groups, surveys, and one-on-one interviews (Greenberg, 1974; Gudelunas, 2012; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Whiting & Williams; Yee, 2006a). The theoretical approach has also been utilized by

marketing experts to determine how their customers may interact with brands (Athwal et al., 2019; Kamboj, 2019). Because of this great range of pertinence and methods of study, and the increasing role of mass media in our day-to-day lives, U&G is both flexible and indispensable as a tool for researchers and other professionals to understand why individuals engage with forms of different communication.

It is through this theoretical lens that this thesis investigates the context of tabletop role-playing games, specifically *Dungeons & Dragons* and its potential gratifications experienced by those playing it.

Uses and Gratifications and Games

Of the previously mentioned researched media types, video games, specifically the subgenre of massive multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs, are the most similar to tabletop role-playing games. They are similar enough in design and gameplay to where TTPRGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* may be considered “textual predecessors” of this digital gaming subgenre (Yee, 2006b, p. 311). MMORPGs are large, often open-world games that allow up to thousands of players to interact with its environments at one time. Players create avatars, sometimes fantastical, and complete a variety of tasks spread throughout the in-game world. These tasks can vary from the extraordinary to the mundane, similar to *D&D*, from fighting dragons to planting and harvesting crops. The types of tasks available for players to perform is often dependent on the type of world featured in the game. For example, a more science-fiction oriented MMORPG like *Star Trek Online* would have different goals to complete when compared to an MMORPG steeped more in fantasy, such as *Final Fantasy XIV* or *World of Warcraft*.

Through previous conducted research on motivations to play video games, as well as motivations to specifically play MMORPGs, consistent gratifications have been found (Billieux et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2010; Haagsma et al., 2013; Kirby & Copello, 2014; Zanetta Dauriat et al., 2011). For MMORPGs, gratifications can be sorted into three overarching categories- achievement, social, and immersion (Scharkow et al., 2015; Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b; Zanetta Dauriat et al., 2011). Achievement-related gratifications can include the want to advance through the game or collect resources, or the desire to compete with other players. Social gratifications, on the other hand, include working as a team and chatting with other players, sometimes even forming long-term relationships with them. Immersion gratifications, similar to achievement gratifications, are focused on the game, but are instead centered on exploration of the game, escapism into its world, and the ability to create and roleplay as a customizable character. *Dungeons & Dragons* may also present opportunities for these specific gratifications to be satisfied through gameplay. For example, players may advance through the game through level progression, converse and bond with fellow party members, and immerse themselves in the fantasy world the DM creates.

These particular MMORPG and video game studies additionally presented notable demographic differences between gaming gratifications. While the female players analyzed more often sought out relationships and escapism during MMORPG gameplay, the male players were more likely to express interest in achievement gratifications (Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b). The gratification of escaping into a fantastical role was more relevant for players who are younger, as was socializing and participating with other players on a team (Scharkow et al., 2015). These particular gratifying elements observed may also appear in the gameplay of *D&D*, given their previously established similarities.

Since MMORPGs and TTRPGs are similar in design, they may potentially share some of these gratifications, something that is worthy of investigation and will be touched upon in data collection. However, there are multiple notable differences which may potentially serve to shift TTRPG player motivations and the gratifications satisfied therein when compared to those of MMORPG players. This thesis ascertains four important distinctions in particular: little standard playable environment, physical presence, lack of tangible or set goal, and required cooperation.

- Little standard playable environment

At most there are models and character figurines, but TTRPGs, specifically the most recent edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, can be played with little more than a sheet with character information, some dice (or a random number generator), and the player's imagination. This contrasts greatly with MMORPGs, who have graphical environments user-created avatars can navigate and interact with.

- Physical presence

While online TTRPG programs exist (Roll20 being the most popular), TTRPGs are typically played, as the name suggests, around a table. This physical proximity between players is not guaranteed in MMORPGs, as that would require multiple gaming platforms being run in the same location, which is usually not feasible.

- Lack of tangible or set goal

MMORPGs typically have quests programmed into the game, or levels to build. Conversely, TTRPGs are mostly freeform, allowing the dungeon or game master to choose what exists and is achievable in a campaign and what is not.

- Required cooperation

Although MMORPGs can theoretically be done with little cooperation with other players, TTRPGs require collaboration, whether that be in the form of fellow players in the participant's party or the Dungeon Master controlling the scene. Not only is this cooperation required, but the group the player interacts with is usually static, the same in the beginning of the campaign as it is at the end. For MMORPGs, users can jump in and out of groups whenever they please, meeting and going on quests with whichever other players may be online at the time.

Uses and Gratifications of Social Media

Along with video games and MMORPGs in particular, the gratifications offered by social media users may also be a site of overlap for *D&D* players, especially considering its nature as an exclusively collaborative media form. There is a wealth of information about the Uses and Gratifications of the more relatively novel concept of social media websites in comparison to the lack of research on *D&D*.

Social networking sites afford users a more nuanced, varied selection of gratifications than its pre-internet predecessors (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Users may engage with social networking sites to escape, create content, seek information, ensure a sense of belonging, form connections, pass time, self-document or self-express, relax, and perform surveillance on other users (Chen, 2011; Joinson, 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The layout of these sites also provides technological affordances such as modality, navigability, agency, and interactivity, that may lead to additional gratifications (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). These affordances concern how users can post different forms of media, move through the platform, provide information, and interact with the site, respectively. Among these gratifications

and affordances, as well as the design of networking sites, similarities between social media and *Dungeons & Dragons* can be determined.

Both social media platforms and the game *Dungeons & Dragons* encourage or require collaboration and the sharing of concepts or ideas between users and players (Whiting & Williams, 2013). The two media types also share the necessity of an active audience instead of a more passive one- to the point where, as Sundar and Limperos explain, “we seldom refer to them as ‘audiences.’ Instead, we call them ‘users’” (2013, p. 505). In the case of *D&D*, the term ‘user’ can be substituted for ‘player’, but their role as active, highly involved participants in the media form they are engaging with remains virtually the same.

Additionally, players and users both communicate with and *through* the respective media forms (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), particularly by means of posts or via player character interactions. *D&D*, while originating in a time before voice calls and group chats, can now be played in a digital space- the same digital space that social networks occupy.

As is the case with the gratifications of video games, it will be intriguing to see which gratifications sought by *Dungeons & Dragons* players overlap between those sought by social media users over the course of this thesis project. Undoubtedly both social media sites and *D&D* provide players and users with opportunities for escape and the formation of social connections, but further similarities may yet be found.

The Current Study

Despite its extensive history and attention from the public at large, very little academic focus of any kind has been directed toward *Dungeons & Dragons* and its tabletop context. Previous existing research, when available, has helped assess and define the potential benefits

provided by the tabletop game, either as a therapeutic tool for children or as an inspirational device to promote physical activity in schools (Blackmon, 1994; Causo & Quinlan, 2021; Esslinger et al., 2015). Studies on older groups between the ages of 18-45 have also discovered and encouraged the use of *D&D* as a potential tool for adults in therapy settings to lessen loneliness and anxiety (Abbott et al., 2021). Other scholars have explored the game and different RPGs for benefits outside of physical activity or use in therapy, particularly through the use of collected player interview testimony, participant journaling, and ethnography (Bowman, 2010; Hollander, 2021; Wright et al., 2017). The benefits found include the game's role as a tool for players of all ages to encourage positive moral development, manage identity, engender imagination, and build community.

In these studies, scholars have discovered a beneficial link between the collaborative, morally challenging nature of *D&D* gameplay and the enrichment of player subjectivity, as well as the improved ability to discern between prosocial and antisocial violence (Hollander, 2021; Wright et al., 2017). These results reveal the powerful, valuable role of this underrecognized form of communicative media, further necessitating and encouraging the fulfilment of this thesis project. By determining needs met by *D&D*, more positive effects of the media form and outlets for application will become understood.

While previous analysis has focused on potential social needs satisfied by *D&D*, said analysis was completed under a different, non-Uses and Gratifications theoretical framework, and with a case study-styled methodological approach instead of the qualitative interview approach detailed in the methods section below (Adams, 2013). Adams' study followed nine members of a *D&D* fan group as they participated in campaigns and discussed their activity on

their Facebook page. From these interactions, different gratifications were determined, including democratic participation, extraordinary experiences, interpersonal relationship maintenance, and the emergence and reinforcement of a good vs evil moral dichotomy. It remains to be seen whether similar gratifications will emerge through the data analysis of this thesis project.

It is my hope that, with this qualitative theoretical application to *Dungeons & Dragons* and its subsequent analysis, further understanding of the Uses and Gratifications theory and the various needs sought and obtained by media consumers may be achieved.

With this goal established, I propose three research questions to examine:

RQ1: What gratifications do players of *Dungeons & Dragons* describe regarding their experiences?

RQ2: In what ways do these gratifications overlap, if at all, with the gratifications fulfilled by massive multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs?

and

RQ3: In what ways do these gratifications overlap, if at all, with the gratifications fulfilled by social media?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study utilized a series of qualitative interviews conducted with participants who were adult players of the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. All participants were interviewed about their experience with the game and the needs satisfied through gameplay.

Qualitative interviews have previously been utilized in the application of the Uses and Gratifications theory, including studies about gratifications of entertainment media (Gudelunas, 2012; Steiner & Xu, 2020; Whiting & William, 2013). This made qualitative interviews conducive to a study on the gratifications sought by those playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Sample

Participants selected to take part in qualitative interviews were players of *Dungeons & Dragons* and were above 18 years of age. While these players may have had experience playing different TTRPGs, *D&D* was chosen for analysis due to its previously discussed popularity, extensive history, large available player-base, and its foundational role in the creation of the tabletop role-playing format. To focus on only one play style for the sake of cohesion, interviewees selected played the most recent, fifth edition of the game. Previous experiences with other editions was encouraged, but not necessary, and in the end, only three of the respondents expressed ever having played an edition other than the fifth. In accordance with the ethics board, this protocol received IRB approval before any data collection or participant recruitment occurred.

The gathering of interview participants utilized a convenience sample. Posts were made to Facebook requesting those interested to fill out a pre-interview survey. These post locations

included Facebook fan groups such as ‘Dungeons and Dragons: 5e Beginners’ and ‘All Things DnD (Dungeons & Dragons)’ These groups had, at the time of the research, about 40,000 and 80,000 members, respectively, allowing for a wide net to be cast in the recruitment of participants.

The pre-interview survey linked in the social media post included a consent form and allowed interested respondents to provide their email address so that the researcher could contact them if they met the inclusion criteria. This questionnaire is included as Appendix A. Along with basic demographic information such as age, gender, and race, the questionnaire asked participants several close-ended questions about their experience and familiarity with *D&D*. These questions determined how long the respondent had played the game and how often. If they were found to meet the qualifications for the study and an email address was provided, an email was sent to potentially arrange an interview. Since qualitative interviews are smaller and more personal in scope than surveys to ensure “more intense qualitative measurement” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 206), I interviewed 14 people in total throughout the course of this thesis project.

To cast a wider net and receive more variety in respondent experiences, the method of participant recruitment did not include a snowball sample. While shared uses and gratifications across multiple participants are important, it was additionally important that any gratifications discovered throughout this data analysis not be the result of proximity or shared engagement, and instead came from diverse players with little to no previous interaction.

Forty-two individuals filled out the pre-interview survey. Of these 42, 16 respondents refused to provide their email address for contact purposes or otherwise expressed a disinterest in being recorded, and so were excluded from the pool of potential interviewees. Each individual who provided their email was contacted with a request for an interview. Of the remaining 26 respondents, 14 replied to the email inquiries and were interviewed over the course of a month. These 14 interviewees consisted of seven men, four women, and three individuals identifying outside the gender binary. Nine of these respondents were white, one was Hispanic or Latino, one was Asian, and three identified their race on the pre-interview survey as ‘other’. Interviewed respondents ranged between the ages of 19 and 57 with a mean of 34.36 years, and their experience with the game ranged between three months and 30 years with a mean of 5.4 years. Thirteen resided in the United States and one lived in the Philippines. These interviewees played *Dungeons & Dragons* as often as twice a week and as rarely as once a month.

Materials

Along with the pre-interview survey covered in the sample section, a series of open-ended questions were developed for the purposes of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. There were 16 questions in total, with room for more improvised probing or related questions to elicit more in-depth responses. Some questions were removed depending on irrelevance in the wake of subject’s answers or overall relevance to the respondent. For example, subjects who reported only playing virtually in the pre-interview survey were not asked questions about their perceived differences comparing in-person and virtual *D&D* gaming, and players who reported experience only with the fifth edition were not asked about experience with previous editions. The interview guide and the initial questions are attached as Appendix B.

Procedure

After all participants were recruited for the study and replied to emails concerning interview scheduling, a time was determined for each subject to be interviewed. All qualitative interviews were hosted and recorded over the application Zoom, limiting any contact between researcher and subject and allowing for a wider range of participants to be interviewed. Before recording began, I reviewed the contents of the consent form again with the subjects and answered any outstanding questions they had had about the data being collected. Combined, the non-recorded review portion and the recorded interview took around 30 minutes to an hour each time due to the number of questions asked and the qualitative responses sought.

Analysis

After the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher over the course of a week for the purpose of thematic analysis and for further familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To swiftly complete the transcription process to ready the data for coding and subsequent analysis, the researcher utilized both the transcription software Otter.ai and manual transcription. Specifically, the researcher employed the Otter.ai program for the initial, rough transcription, and then listened back to the interview recordings while reading along to alter any words missed or mistakes that had been made by the software.

During the examination of data, an iterative and inductive coding process was utilized, assigning new codes to meaningful pieces of data. This coding process took another week to complete. Moreover, these new codes were categorized under relevant and established hierarchical MMORPG and general game gratification groups, namely social, immersion, and achievement (Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b). The results under each of these groups were compared to

gratifications previously established by players of MMORPGs and users of social media to identify any overlap.

As these transcriptions were surveyed for emerging gratifications, focusing particularly on three concepts- recurrence, forcefulness, and repetition. Recurrence is defined as the repetition of ideas not specifically utilizing the same words, forcefulness involves the prominent emphasis on ideas, words, or phrases through the use of inflection or volume, and repetition is the repeated use of specific words or phrases (Owen, 1984). Through focus on these three classifications, notable and recurring gratifications of players became evident in the content.

Bias, Ethics, & Reflexivity

In any study, there exists the concern over bias and the importance of ethics. It was of utmost importance that I did not cause undue harm throughout the research process, and that any results were not poisoned by predispositions (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). This thesis project was approved by the Institutional Review Board and followed all ethical guidelines to ensure the best quality of results and safety for all those contributing. To prevent any potential harm from occurring, many steps were taken to protect the rights and information of participants.

To maintain participant confidentiality, any identifying information provided to the researcher included in the final project has been altered through the use of implemented pseudonyms, and any collected data will be destroyed after a mandatory period of five years as specified by the IRB. Detailed informed consent forms were included and agreed to before interviews were conducted, and participants were allowed to decline any questions, take breaks,

or stop the voluntary interview at any time. Additionally, to prioritize further comfort on the part of the interviewees, they were not asked to turn on their webcam for any reason.

My previous extensive experience with and passion for the game *D&D* allowed for deeper connections and a chance for rapport to be built between myself and the interview participants, something that can produce better data and make the participant feel comfortable (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). However, this previous experience may also have served to unintentionally bias me during this research project. I aimed to mitigate any potential sources of bias through multiple means. All subjects that filled out the pre-interview survey and fit the criteria had no previous established relationship with me to prevent any possible preferential treatment. Additionally, the materials of the qualitative interview were overseen by the other members of the thesis team to guarantee clarity, and to ensure there were no leading or double-barreled questions.

Upon reflection, one surprising and worrisome issue that emerged during data collection was the lack of recruitment responses. As stated before, while 42 individuals replied to the pre-interview survey linked in the social media posts, many of them refused to provide their email address at the end, instead typing something to the effect of 'no' or 'not interested'. Furthermore, many who did offer their email addresses never replied to my multiple requests to schedule an interview over the course of the month. This led to a lot of frustration during the research process, especially when creating the initial email blast for the interview scheduling, and resulted in my having to perform one less interview than I would have hoped to conduct.

Another worrisome factor in the research process was my general lack of experience interviewing others. While I have interviewed numerous people in the past, these interviews were never for any qualitative research purpose. As a result, I fear I might have moved too fast or probed less often than I ought to have, out of fear that probing too often might have resulted in the respondent becoming uncomfortable or otherwise feeding me answers they believed I wanted to hear. Had I more experience in the practice of qualitative interviewing, some of the interviews might not have been as short as they turned out to be. In spite of this, however, and perhaps due to my previous experience conducting thematic analyses, I believe I have gathered a more than sufficient amount of gratification data from my respondents, all of which will be highlighted in the following section.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this thesis was to determine potential uses and gratifications of players of the game *Dungeons & Dragons* (RQ1), and to discern whether any emerging gratifications in the research overlapped with those occurring in similar forms of entertainment media (RQ2 and RQ3). I have organized the determined gratifications into four categories – social, immersion, narrative, and achievement, in response to RQ1. Following, a discussion of these gratifications and their overlaps and non-overlaps are reviewed to answer RQs 2 and 3. Additionally, any direct quotations referenced in these results have been assigned unrelated pseudonyms to protect the respondent's anonymity and confidentiality.

Uses and Gratifications

Upon the completion of interview transcription, coding, and thematic analysis, a total of 24 perceived uses and gratifications were determined for players of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Of these discovered 24, four were social gratifications, eight were immersion gratifications, eight were narrative gratifications, and four were achievement gratifications. These specific gratifications are named and elaborated upon below, and are also listed with definitions and their exact frequency in Appendix C.

While only the hierarchal categories of social, immersion, and achievement were initially employed due to their relevance and use in previous MMORPG gratification research (Billieux et al., 2013; Yee 2006a; Yee, 2006b), the initial broadness of the gratifications in the immersion category required the development and implementation of a fourth category closely related to immersion- narrative. For clarification purposes, immersion gratifications refer to benefits gained

from aspects of involving gameplay, while narrative gratifications refer to the aspects of the constructed storyline enjoyed by the respondents..

Social Gratifications

The two most prominent social gratifications that emerged throughout the semi-structured interviews were *bonding* and *collaboration*, which emerged in all and all but one of the interviews, respectively. Bonding specifically referred to relationships built between players and each other, as well as relationships built between their respective characters, while collaboration referred to players, DMs included, working together to achieve specific in-game goals.

Many subjects focused on the sense of “community” or “togetherness” built through bonding in gameplay, while others discussed the specific, meaningful relationships they had formed with others over the course of their campaigns. Others stated that *D&D* gave them an excuse to “keep in contact” with their friends that they otherwise might not have been able to spend time with. One player, Louis, appreciated the novel way *D&D* allows for individuals to socialize with each other and form what others called “a sense of camaraderie” outside of more casual conversation:

[I]t's a great way to stay connected with friends and meet new people, and socialize without having to just talk... One reason I like it is I can socialize with people without just needing to go through small talk or just needing to talk about myself.

The importance placed by respondents on the social ability speaks to the value of this gratification for *D&D* players. In-game discussion and bonding with other players, due to the more engrossing context, is held to a higher standard than simple ‘small talk’.

Furthermore, because *Dungeons & Dragons* can be played virtually, multiple players expressed appreciation for the fact that they could play the game with people “all over the country”, getting to know them better in the process as the game “brings [them] together”. As one respondent, Pepper, elaborated:

I like the social aspect, and being able, especially with Zoom and with various virtual tools, to spend time with friends across the country. My partner was just playing with somebody from New Zealand and someone from Russia. And so it’s just this way of keeping in contact with people and sharing this something with people.

Not only do players get to know one another over the course of their games, but they also get to learn more about each other’s characters as well. Over time, players may form deep relationships between themselves and other players, themselves and their character, and their characters and other players’ characters.

Collaboration was frequently cited as both a crucial and fulfilling part of the gaming process. Often times, respondents reported, collaboration can begin as early as character creation or campaign planning. Players sometimes mentioned hosting a “session zero”, wherein each of the participants would outline what they wanted from the D&D experience, what they were comfortable with, and their overall expectations for the campaign. Moreover, collaboration remained an important instrument for enjoyment during gameplay. Players enjoyed working together to get their fellow teammates “out of a jam”, or filling gaps in the party by creating a character that could heal or otherwise assist others during moments of combat.

Not only was collaboration appreciated by respondents, but instances of players “[getting] in each other’s way” or otherwise hogging the spotlight were perceived as taboo or otherwise harmful to the enjoyment of a good session of D&D. The concept of a cohesive, cooperative group that “meshes well” during gameplay was considered crucial to an enjoyable time, to the point where, as Eric put it, “even if a campaign just totally goes sideways- you know everyone's gonna love it.” One player, Dean, expressed frustration with a DM refusing to work in tandem with the other participants:

[H]e kept dominating every session... he would also try to even play not in the session. We would communicate through Facebook or on Discord, and he would say, ‘oh, next session, this is what's gonna happen’ or try to have things happen. And in my opinion, that's not fun or right, ‘cause you should have all of the players there to participate in what's happening.

Communal dining, a less frequent, but otherwise recurring social gratification additionally emerged during data analysis. Respondents spoke of consuming snacks in conjunction with gameplay, considering it an important bonding tool, or one that enhanced social interaction. One respondent, Joseph, discussed frequently visiting a restaurant that hosted sessions of the game, expressing enjoyment that he could both play the game and share food with his fellow players while doing so. Joseph explained, “I love going up there, having a beer, grabbing something to eat, and getting a big basket of popcorn for the table. You know, everybody sharing.” This gratification is unique to in-person games, as while players can eat at the same *time* while gaming together online, the ability to specifically *share* their food with one another and enhance the feeling of togetherness in turn is lost thanks to the digital format.

The final social gratification discerned, *inclusivity*, or the appreciation that players of marginalized identities can comfortably participate in the game, was met with a large amount of discussion from the two respondents who remarked upon the concept. Unfortunately, however, both respondents mentioned a noticeable amount of prejudiced “gatekeeping” or otherwise meanspirited behavior in the community and wished that said “toxic” players would realize “it’s not their game anymore” given the growing popularity of the game as a whole.

These references to gatekeeping or otherwise problematic players in the *D&D* community are not isolated to the experiences of these respondents, as the literature review previously discussed the prevalence of mistreatment of female players (Donovan, 2014). The respondent appreciation for these new, more diverse players, however, as well as the rising population of players of marginalized identities (Inklebarger, 2020; Kane, 2018), indicates that there may be a shift occurring in the popular opinions of *Dungeons & Dragons* players on the subject.

Immersion Gratifications

The greatest amount of gratification data, both in frequency and in number of gratifications themselves, emerged under the immersion category, as well as the narrative gratification category. An equal number of gratifications, eight, were determined for each of these gratification types.

For the enjoyment of immersion, or the benefits of involving gameplay, there was some convergence in specific gratifications. All interviewed respondents discussed their appreciation

for *freedom* during gameplay- or the ability of players to perform a potentially limitless number of actions through their character, respectively.

Several subjects elaborated on wildly varied actions they performed given the freedom available to them, telling stories of “a lot of nonsense:” riding on conjured eagles, walking over books to avoid stepping in giant spiderwebs, and using sleeping bags to capture flying swords. As far as the number of decisions possible in gameplay were concerned, the interviewees liked that “the sky’s the limit” depending on the player’s imagination.

Many respondents also praised a general sense of *immersion* experienced during gameplay. A player, Tyler, lauded a moment where he and several other players were so engrossed in a game that they, despite only being in a coffee shop using coins as character tokens, shared the same imagination and passion for the scenario playing out in their minds. Another player, Emma, discussed running a campaign where the presence of spiders- entirely invisible except in the imagination of the players involved- caused her players to “[freak] out.” As she described:

We're sitting in a well-lit room, a bunch of twenty-somethings, and they're freaking out at these low-level mobs, and for me as the DM it was just so rewarding to see that involvement and- and sort of just purely being sucked in there.

Few players made mention of utilizing the game to *challenge* themselves. Those that did enjoyed the experience of being able to overcome a “really big” challenge or lauded the feeling of satisfaction that came from seeing their fellow players defeat a strong opponent or problem. These respondents appreciated moments where they were “scared for [their] life” in the face of

the difficulty before them, and they had to perform well together lest the team fail. Eric expanded on this, praising moments where “everyone's on the edge of their seats- you know, you make one wrong move in the fight, and you lose. And I just love that.”

Instead of wanting a feeling of challenge, respondents more often expressed a preference to use the game to *relax*. These respondents enjoyed that the game *Dungeons & Dragons* offered “less pressure” than other games in comparison. This aforementioned relaxation tied in frequently with the appreciation of the game as an instrument for *escape*, with many of these particular subjects remarking on how *D&D* gave them the chance to ignore “real world issues” or distract themselves from “all the stress and everything going on” in life outside the game.

Over a third of respondents mentioned the game provides opportunities for beneficial *skill-building*. In particular, respondents explained that they felt playing *D&D* helped them alleviate feelings of social and performance anxiety, and gave them the chance to improve project management, leadership, and public speaking skills. In addition, the often free-form, unpredictable nature of the game helped some respondents develop their improvisational abilities. Pepper explained:

[Y]ou never know what people are going to do, and you just got to roll with it. So it is really cool, and I think it's helped me in life as well, just helping me get over that. Not get over my introversion, because I don't think introversion is something you need to get over, I think it's perfectly fine to be introverted, but the performance anxiety part of that. I think it's helped me in many other areas as well.

Those who were asked, due to their experiences with both formats, about their preferences between in-person and virtual gameplay unanimously favored playing in-person. This preference stemmed from the existence of two additional gratifications: *physical elements* and *physical feedback*.

As far as physical elements were concerned, the respondents who remarked on the subject primarily enjoyed “having the dice and rolling the dice” in person instead of relying on an app on their phone to do it for them, calling the latter option “depressing”. Emma expanded, “Oh, I clicked and my dice rolled, fan-bloody-tastic. Like, where's my clickety clack noises? That's so, so small, but it is something I look for.”

Subjects also appreciated being able to see the physical or otherwise nonverbal reactions of those around them, something that in-person games can provide but virtual games cannot, or at least not as reliably. As Emma explained:

[B]eing able to see someone cringe, or being able to kind of pick up on those nonverbal signals, like the way somebody is, you know, messing with their dice at the table, like, are they getting nervous? Are you setting the right tone, you know, seeing them jump, seeing them kind of like, you know, really lean in and get involved in the story? All those sort of nonverbal responses are just very important to me.

Given the unanimous appreciation for in-person games, in general and because of their physical-only gratifications, this data suggests that those who play *Dungeons & Dragons* online experience a low degree of social presence. Players do not feel as though their fellow party members are ‘present’ when participating in games online. Regardless of this level of social

presence experienced by players, individuals playing *D&D* nonetheless enjoy a variety of both immersive and narrative elements inherent to the game. These latter, narrative gratifications are detailed below.

Narrative Gratifications

Narrative gratifications, as discussed previously, refer to the aspects of the game's created world and storyline enjoyed by the players. Like immersion gratifications, narrative gratifications appeared the most often in equal prevalence, coming to a total of eight specific gratifications.

All interviewed respondents discussed their appreciation for *creativity* during gameplay- or the ability to create worlds for players to interact with and within. For creativity, players appreciated that the game gave them the ability to “craft the world” that they and the other participants could then interact with over the course of the campaign.

Players also expressed interest in the fact that, because of the creativity given to them, there were no limits as to what kind of setting they could construct, or the specifics therein. Xander, who has been playing for a few years, explained, “[y]ou get to infuse it with whatever flavor you want. If you want like a cyberpunk setting, you can do that, or if you want like a more traditional swords and sorcery, you could do that.”

Nearly two thirds of interviewees mentioned utilizing *D&D* as an avenue to engage with *extraordinary experiences*, or fantastical elements present within the game's created world. Several spoke of loving to indulge in “make-believe”, able to fly, “breathe lightning on fools,” or

use other “awesome” powers. Overall, players who mentioned these experiences enjoyed engaging in these elements specifically because they couldn’t do the same in their real lives.

An equal number of respondents, particularly when discussing what they liked about being a Dungeon Master, explained their love for a sense of *control* during gameplay, or being “the puppet master moving things around.” As one participant, Lily, explained, “you really are in charge, I mean, you rule. I know there’s rules, like in the handbook and all that, but what it boils down to is your Dungeon Master makes the call.”

The gratification of *story creation*, or the ability to construct a plot that players will then follow, emerged in over two-thirds of the conducted interviews. Like the world-building ability of the creativity gratification, players who remarked on their appreciation for “coming up with an overarching story thread” enjoyed having the capability to bring their players into the fold of an “in-depth” story they made, as well as the option to surprise them with created twists. Other players mentioned lifting inspiration from other media they enjoyed to develop their stories, such as *Star Wars*, and how that gave them free reign to play with the properties they loved through a different, creative media format.

All subjects additionally spoke on their love for *story exploration*, or the capacity to progress through and interact with the created plot and world. Players enjoyed being able to weave stories with their friends while following the plot the DM created, while also having the chance to change or otherwise influence points how they pleased if they wanted to. Others found reaching or discovering the conclusion of a story, whether that be through toppling an evil villain

or seeing their characters settle down into normal, quiet lives at the end of their adventures to be very rewarding.

Like the case of story exploration and story creation, *character creation* and *character exploration* emerged in similarly frequent amounts in the data. Given the many options available to players such as races, classes, subclasses and backgrounds, not to mention the wealth of fan-created “homebrew” material to work with, it is no surprise that many in the dataset spoke often of their love for character creation. Joseph reveled in making characters to play so much that, if threatened with the prospect of one character dying, joked “go ahead, kill off my character, I got like, eighty-five in my head at this time.”

For character exploration, respondents appreciated the ability to expand upon their character’s backstories or personalities through gameplay. Some spoke on how the “constantly evolving” characters they created drove how they played in that campaign. Others detailed how they liked watching their characters go through character arcs or seeing how they interacted with others and developed as the story progressed.

Only two interviewees made mention of a different type of exploration- *identity exploration*, or an opportunity to examine an aspect of themselves through the game. One player, Sasha, mentioned utilizing one of their characters to explore their bisexuality, particularly their “women-loving-women” side, while another made mention of a fellow participant using their personal religious identity as an avenue to help develop their paladin character.

Given the fact that players have a large amount of freedom in what character they choose to create and develop for the game, and multiple respondents have admitted that they “pour a

little bit of [themselves]” into their characters, it is not surprising that some players would enjoy the ability to explore not only their character during the course of a game’s campaign, but also themselves. For these players, the fantastical setting of *Dungeons & Dragons* provides them with a more acceptable, freedom-rich setting to investigate aspects of themselves alongside their creations.

Achievement Gratifications

Overall, achievement gratifications appeared far less frequently in comparison to social and immersion gratifications, suggesting that players in general focus less on the mechanics, combat, and progression-related components of the game in favor of more immersive, explorative, or social aspects. While previous MMORPG gratification studies noted that male players enjoyed achievement gratifications more than female players (Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b), no significant data supporting this emerged in this *D&D*-focused dataset. This may be due to the small data pool, achievement gratifications appearing less often in the data overall, and the inclusion of data from players whose identities lie outside the gender binary.

The most frequent of the achievement-specific gratifications by far was *combat*, or the satisfaction of fighting and defeating in-game enemies. Many liked “killing bad guys”, “hitting stuff with swords”, and the ability to “do all kinds of damage” while playing. All but one of the interviewed respondents reported enjoying the battling element of *Dungeons & Dragons*, befitting the media’s wargame predecessors and the focus on combat in the game’s design.

While only two respondents confessed to partaking in the practice themselves at some point in time, discussion of players *optimizing*, or constructing incredibly strong characters

within the constraints of the game, emerged in over half of the interviews. Some, including Tyler, admired the ability and knowledge of the players who purposefully make the most of their character build to deal devastating damage in combat, calling it “hella cool.” Others, however, like Gavin, admonished the practice (also known as min-maxing), calling it “stupid” and lamenting that it took away potential opportunities for valuable bonding or collaboration during gameplay. A player, Emma, elaborated:

I mean, okay, great, yeah, you killed everybody. Good job. Now what, you know? We're not going to have that sense of levity, you're not going to have that sort of bonding experience that you have when a group of people are just willing to go into this as a story together, where sometimes they're going to look silly, sometimes bad shit's gonna happen, and sometimes they're going to do something stupid, and the DM's gonna slap them for it.

Contrasting the frequency of the respondent appreciation of combat and optimizing, the gratification *gathering*, or the enjoyment of collecting in-game resources and rewards, only appeared once in the data. *Progression*, or the satisfaction of leveling- improving the stats of-created characters, emerged in similarly small amounts, though not as low as gathering's singular instance. This may be due to the lack of concrete purpose for this effort. For instance, gathering gold may only become useful if a Dungeon Master comes up with items that a player can buy with said gold.

Overlapping Gratifications Between Media

D&D and MMORPGs

As asked in RQ2, the conducted qualitative data analysis determined significant overlap in *D&D* gratifications and previously researched MMORPG gratifications mentioned in the literature review (Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b). Specifically, social gratifications such as collaboration and making friends (bonding), immersion gratifications such as customization (character creation), storyline (story exploration), fantasy (extraordinary experiences), relaxation, and escapism, and achievement gratifications such as optimization and progression all emerged in the data set.

Despite the many shared gratifications between the two media forms, a number of dissimilar, particularly unique gratifications of note appeared in the analysis. These previously remarked upon *D&D* gratifications include creativity, control, freedom, story creation, inclusivity, and communal dining. While the concept of control has appeared in previous game gratification research (Scharrow et al., 2015), this appearance occurred in name only. Specifically, previous research used the label ‘control’ to refer to the appreciation of the mechanics of the game, such as the ability to physically move the character around to complete actions or tasks, and not the ability to manage in-game aspects such as the wider story as established in this research.

The concept of ‘manipulation’ also appeared in previous research (Yee, 2006b), but this referred to the ability of players to deceive, taunt, or trick one another for their own gain, not the manipulation of any storyline or other narrative aspect. This gratification did not appear in this data analysis, possibly due to the concept of a lack of collaboration being denounced by several

respondents. The other unique gratifications previously listed- creativity, control, freedom, story creation, inclusivity, and communal dining- failed to emerge in other MMORPG-related gratification research (Billieux et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2010; Haagsma et al., 2013; Kirby & Copello, 2014; Scharkow et al., 2015; Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b; Zanetta Dauriat et al., 2011), either under these names or alternate ones.

Another major difference lies with *D&D*'s capacity for physical elements and physical feedback gratifications. Each of these outlying gratifications are impossible to achieve during MMORPG or general video game gameplay, either due to the game's design, limited data space available in a game's code or storage, or the virtual-only nature of the media format. These specific sources of difference were previously noted in the literature review.

Remarkably, over half of the interview respondents made mention of these contrasts when talking about their enjoyment of *D&D* in comparison. I created a specific, non-gratification-related code for instances where this occurred. One player, Ross, elaborated on the previous highlighted differences:

[*D&D*]'s not even like a video game where you're confined by the size of the map, and what your character is able to do and what they programmed in, you get to sit down and have four to five hours of just letting your imagination be the only thing that limits your ability to have fun.

Like Ross, Joseph also mentioned the limits inherent to a pre-programmed video game:

Due to the limitations on technology, like as much as an RPG wants to create a quote unquote 'sandbox environment', they're limited by how much physical space you can put into a game and there's always kind of like these borders, they might have a huge map that your character can explore but there's always the invisible wall at the end of the mountains and stuff like that, there's a mountain range that you absolutely cannot climb. You can't go any further, because, due to the limitations, they haven't made anything beyond that.

Another, Eric, spoke more on the freedom *D&D* provides in comparison to video games in general:

[I]t's not like a campaign of a regular video game where it's already set in stone. You know, a plus b equals c. This can go anywhere. And, you know, it goes back to if you have a really good group of people as players and a really good DM, it can go anywhere, it can be anything you want it to be, if you have a good enough imagination, and you have enough people there who can wing it, basically.

These remarks showcase that not only are players of *D&D* aware of the similarities to traditional video games, but they are attracted to the tabletop game because it affords them different, otherwise unattainable gratifications in comparison to those provided by the former.

These remarks also indicate that the determined freedom and control gratifications are indeed exclusive to *D&D* and not MMORPGs. While more recently video games are getting larger and more open in scope in comparison to their more linear, rigid predecessors (Fung, 2015), in the end, there is only so much that can be programmed in for players to interact with

before the game has to be completed and sent out to consumers. Since players alone, not developers or programming, guide the creation of the world and its story, however, *D&D* has no such limitation.

D&D and Social Media

Research question 3 asked if there were any existing *Dungeons & Dragons* gratifications that overlapped with the gratifications determined for social media. In the literature review, I mentioned nine social media gratifications gathered from previous Uses and Gratifications research: content creation, information-seeking, escapism, ensuring a sense of belonging, connection forming, passing time, self-expression or documentation, relaxation, and performing surveillance on other users (Chen, 2011; Joinson, 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013). I also previously discussed the more novel, virtual-relevant gratification affordances of navigability, modality, agency, and interactivity (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Of these previous nine social media gratifications mentioned, the resulting thesis research data only provided three *D&D* gratifications that overlapped. These gratifications were relaxation, escapism, and connection forming (bonding).

It is possible that this smaller number of similar gratifications when compared to the many also fulfilled by MMORPGs may be due to *D&D*'s primary function as a game to play instead of as a networking tool, despite its prominent social elements. Because of social networking's role, the existence of achievement gratifications or game-related immersion and narrative gratifications, which were prolific in the data, have little chance to be satisfied by social media sites. Social media is not a media format that features a storyline for users to follow,

quests to go on, magic items to procure, or dragons to fight. There are obviously no opportunities for challenging, life or death battles on Twitter or Facebook.

However, this is not to say that the *potential* for further overlapping gratifications does not exist in social media. For example, as far as the previous gratification of self-expression (Nadkarni & Hoffmann, 2012) is concerned, while the online personas or faces one crafts while using social networking sites are not characters in the same way that *D&D* player characters are, one might be able to argue that they are at the very least similar. This is especially possible given the fact that respondents reported sometimes basing their characters off themselves or giving their characters their own personality traits, similar to how social media users pick and choose how they represent the fictional, idealized version of themselves to others online (Brunskill, 2013; Manago et al., 2008; Seidman, 2013). Further research may better elucidate this potential link between ‘character creation’ and the idealized, selectively disclosed ‘self-expression’.

Moreover, the concept of control as it relates to *D&D* shares some basic similarities with the concept of ‘interactivity’ (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Like the previous discussion of self-expression, however, the comparison is not perfect. For example, while the interactivity gratification discusses the ability of the user “to make real-time changes to the content in the medium” (p. 515) in the same way the control gratification does, the level of in-depth control of content in the former is limited by what the design of the social media website will allow. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, so long as a Dungeon Master is willing to improvise to incorporate something new to the plot or created world, there is no such limitation. In this way, social media suffers from the same constraints previously discussed about MMORPGs- the limitation of data, design, and storage on user or player freedom.

The greater lack of overlapping data may also be explained by a preference of many respondents to play in-person instead of virtually, thus negating many players' potential uses or enjoyment of the gratification-generating technological affordances of modality, navigability, agency, and interactivity defined in the research of Sundar & Limperos (2013). While *D&D* can be played on a computer or other virtual interface, it is not required, and the data collected in this research suggests that players overwhelmingly prefer to enjoy the game in a physical format.

Unlike in the case of MMORPGs, no interview respondents made any mention of social media, either to compare or contrast the two media forms. At most, respondents discussed sites like Facebook, Discord, and Roll20 as effective tools to find game partners and to play virtually if needed.

In summary, this thesis project determined 24 uses and gratifications for the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. These gratifications can be sorted into four distinct categories- social, immersion, narrative, and achievement, with the immersion and narrative categories being tied for the most numerous gratifications, and achievement having the lowest unique number of gratifications.

Many of these collected gratifications found also appeared in previous MMORPG gratification literature, save for more physical or more freedom and control-oriented gratifications, which are impossible to achieve in digital video game play due to the constraints of the media format. In contrast, few of these collected gratifications appeared in previous social media gratification research, likely due to the lack of available immersion and narrative in social media that is common and present in *D&D*.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Despite its nearly 50-year-old history and growing presence in popular culture, the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* has received relatively little scholarly attention in the field of communication research. Intending to rectify this observed gap in literature, this thesis applied the Uses and Gratifications theoretical approach to determine what players of the game seek and gain from their engagement with this particular media format. Once completed, I compared these determined gratifications to the gratifications of media types perceived as similar from previous theoretical research.

Upon conducting my qualitative thematic analysis, I discovered 24 gratifications in total, each falling under the categories of either social, immersion, narrative, or achievement. These gratifications included the potentially unique story creation, creativity, control, inclusivity,

identity exploration, and freedom, as well as physical elements and feedback. These unique gratifications emerging from the dataset, even when compared to similar media formats such as MMORPGs and social media, undoubtedly offers insight and furthers our understanding of what individuals do with the media they elect to engage with and why.

In comparison to social media and MMORPGs, *D&D* appeals to players because of its freeform, immersive nature, one full of both narrative and overall social benefits. These gratifications are unique to *D&D* due to the format of the tabletop role-playing genre, as these games are not concerned with size of the game or the limitations of programming that inherently inhibit social media and video games. Players enjoy these differences, as it grants them greater control and creativity over the media they engage with. The enjoyment of physical elements and feedback, as well as the unanimous preference for and the capacity to play in-person, another impossibility for social media and MMORPGs, additionally highlights intimate, more substantial, or otherwise presence-seeking motivations for *Dungeons & Dragons* gameplay.

One surprising element of this research is the lack of frequency in the few achievement gratifications discovered in this study. Very few respondents expressed an appreciation for optimizing their character builds to make combat easier, and only one player enjoyed collecting in-game rewards. This overall lack of frequency in achievement gratifications indicates that players of *Dungeons & Dragons* care less about specific mechanics or tangible in-game rewards, and instead prefer the benefits allotted to them when collaborating or exploring a narrative together. This observation differs from the findings of previous MMORPG research, in which many players not only reported liking gathering items and other rewards, but additionally enjoyed tormenting other players instead of working alongside them. This surprising lack of

achievement gratifications- outside of combat, which is a crucial element of the game- speaks to the needs to *Dungeons & Dragons* players, and what needs they value when looking to engage with a particular type of entertainment media.

Another surprising element of the completed research is the existence of the physical feedback and elements gratifications, as well as the unanimous preference for players to play the game in-person instead of virtually. I originally considered that players would be more or less split down the middle as to whether they preferred playing in-person or through virtual options such as Roll20 or D&D Beyond, but every interview participant who had played using both formats believed the former to be far superior. Given that social media and MMORPGs do not have the capacity for physical elements or feedback, the noted appreciation for these aspects by respondents furthers our understanding as to why players choose to engage with *Dungeons & Dragons* and not other media types. The desire for physical feedback from other players during gameplay further highlights the importance of the social gratifications in this media type, as it indicates an appreciation by players of the responses and experiences of their fellow *Dungeons & Dragons* participants during collaborative gameplay.

The existence of a gratification praising the inclusive nature of the game, as well as the overall social aspects lauded by respondents, could be utilized by Wizards of the Coast to help promote their increasingly popular product. Not only would it serve to draw in new members, but it would also increase the already commended diversity in the player base. The collaborative, social aspect in particular may also serve to draw in interested MMORPG players and social media users, as all three of the studied media formats share this gratification. The shared gratifications may appeal to these other media users, enticing them to engage with the tabletop

media type. If a person played, for example, *Final Fantasy XIV* for the immersive storyline and the ability to customize their character, or used Facebook to keep up with their friends, they could also find those needs satisfied by *Dungeons & Dragons*.

In general, the remarked upon inclusivity gratification visibly highlights the growing demographic shift in the wider *Dungeons & Dragons* player base. Where once the game was mostly played by men, the incoming surge of players with marginalized identities is visible enough to other players to warrant their appreciation of their inclusion. However, this inclusivity gratification only emerged twice in the data, indicating that progress still needs to be made, considering reports by other subjects of gatekeeping and an otherwise toxic, unwelcoming player base.

For current and prospective players, the respondent remarks offer sage advice. Players appreciate the game *Dungeons & Dragons* most when it is a collaborative experience, one where the party members are working toward the same goal and respect one another. Stories of teamwork appeared pervasive in the data, and moments of strife or disrespect between players were looked upon with shame. The previously mentioned appreciation for physical team member feedback emphasizes this enjoyment of a cohesive, friendly party. Players, both current and hopeful, should take these remarks into account next time they intend to run away with a plot idea without conversing with their team first or desire intentionally tormenting their Dungeon Master.

Given the similarities between gratifications between social media and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and therefore their potential appeal to audience members, advertisements promoting

the game could additionally be placed on the banners and timelines of social media websites like Twitter. These conceptual advertisements could mention these discerned similarities between *D&D* and the social networking websites, such as the capacity to make and maintain new friendships. Interested users viewing these advertisements could take note of the similarities and feel compelled to give the game a chance because of its relevance to the media they are already engaging with. A similar approach could be taken with MMORPG players, though the comparable gratifications promoted could be changed to more immersion-related ones instead. MMORPG players already explore fictional, fantastical worlds during their gameplay, performing impossible feats through their customized characters- it would make the most sense for marketing experts to mention the same possibilities available in *Dungeons & Dragons* when promoting to gamers.

As this is a study applying the Uses and Gratifications approach, it would behoove me to discuss its wider implications as this approach and communication research is concerned. The goal of the approach is to understand what active audience members do with the media they engage with, and what gratifications they achieve in doing so. For *Dungeons & Dragons* players, the game functions equally as a tool to form and maintain relationships with other players, while at the same time providing a fantastical world to explore and interact with through their customized, developed character. Given the lack of communication research on the subject of the increasingly popular *Dungeons & Dragons*, this thesis project serves to bridge a noted gap in the scholarly literature, additionally enhancing our understanding of media effects. Furthermore, these determined gratifications for a media type yet unexplored undoubtedly expands Uses and

Gratifications literature, especially given the potentially unique gratifications of control, freedom, identity exploration, inclusivity, and physical elements and feedback.

Additionally, the existence of the narrative gratification category must not be ignored. This gratification category and the benefits it provides players appears novel and entirely unexplored in uses and gratifications-related research. The abundant data on the subject in this thesis project speaks to its scholarly potential, and future media studies that apply the uses and gratifications theoretical approach should pay close attention to any instances of any of the related gratifications that emerged in this dataset.

Above all else, this research implies that *Dungeons & Dragons* players possess a wealth of needs satisfied by their engagement with the game. Most frequently, players engage with the tabletop media to socialize, create and develop their own character, interact with or control the storyline created, and immerse themselves in a co-constructed world of combat and fantasy. *Dungeons & Dragons* is an inherently collaborative media type of potentially unlimited possibility, and the players relish in the freedom it provides- a freedom provided by nothing else like it.

Limitations

Unfortunately, no research is without its limitations, and my own is no exception. Due to this being a qualitative study, I researched a much smaller data pool than would have been utilized by a similar, but quantitative study. Additionally, as qualitative research is entirely subjective, another individual's perspective on the collected data may differ from my own. While my research and my reported results are but one perspective on the subject, I feel as though it is

nonetheless an important, informative account, especially considering my extensive personal experience with the game.

While the data pool included a diverse number of respondents from different gender identities, age groups, and experience levels, most of the respondents were white. I acknowledge that more diverse, intersectional perspectives may have yielded different results, particularly for gratifications such as inclusivity and identity exploration. Furthermore, my admitted inexperience with the process of research interviews led to some of the interviews being shorter than I would have otherwise wanted them to be, regardless of the prolific gratifications gathered from the data they produced.

Due to my inexperience conducting research interviews, a number of the sessions with respondents fell closer to the 30-minute mark instead of the hour mark as previously stated, especially in the first few calls. I do eventually feel as though I found my footing, so to speak, after these occurrences, and conducted multiple interviews thereafter that ended up being over 50 minutes in length.

I utilized a number of strategies that I hoped would aid those cautious in speaking more openly or elaborating further about their experiences and feelings toward the game. The most important of these were the use of probing questions, whereupon I asked respondents to further explain why they felt the way they did about an answer they gave, or asked them to otherwise elaborate on the answer itself. Out of concern for the comfort level of the participants, I used these probing questions more sparingly than I likely ought to have, given the length of some of the interviews. This occurred mostly out of a fear that too many probing questions would make

the interviewee uncomfortable, and therefore less likely to answer my inquiries and provide me with the data-rich responses I sought. Regardless, I am confident that I was able to determine a wealth of gratification data from the information respondents generously provided me.

Future Research

Overall, this research study has established that *Dungeons & Dragons* as a media format remains rife with possibility for communication-related study. Given the existence of the identity exploration and inclusivity gratifications, as well as players' abilities to take on a variety of diverse roles during cooperative gameplay, I encourage future researchers to investigate the game as a tool for identity management. The repeated mentions from respondents of gatekeeping within the community may also be an avenue for studies of facework between participating players- perhaps both in and out of character.

I additionally call upon researchers to examine the Relational Dialectics Theory as it applies to *Dungeons & Dragons*. The negotiated relationships between player/player, player/own character, and own character/other character that emerge and are managed in competing discourses during recurring gameplay remains wholly unexplored. This is especially true considering the unanimous and near-unanimous appreciation from respondents on the subject of bond-forming and collaboration while playing the game, respectively.

Given the abundance of data related to the novel narrative gratification category, I believe it would be beneficial for future research to apply narrative-focused theoretical approaches to studies about *Dungeons & Dragons*. Investigating narrative transportation theory as it relates to

D&D and the linking of immersion and narrative gratifications may open new avenues for entertainment media research and media effects research.

The multiple instances of respondents reporting that *D&D* aided them in improving or otherwise learning new communication or social skills ought not to be ignored, either. While imaginary roleplay scenarios have already been applied in mental health settings and for physical education (Causo & Quinlan, 2021; Esslinger et al., 2015) fantastical collaborative activities styled after the game may prove to be a useful tool applicable in even wider scenarios outside the comfort of the game table. Further research into their potential benefit and implementation should be considered. Finally, given the unanimous preference among the respondents for in-person games as opposed to virtual, as well as the noted appreciation for physical elements and feedback, I suggest that future research explore the concept of social presence as it relates to *Dungeons & Dragons*.

APPENDIX A: PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in this *Dungeons & Dragons* research project. Please respond to the following questions to the best of your ability. No identifying or otherwise sensitive information will be retained after the completion of this study.

1. What year were you born?

2. How do you identify?
 - a. Male

 - b. Female

 - c. Other, or prefer to self-describe _____

3. What are your preferred pronouns?

4. In which state are you located? (If not in the US, please write the country instead)

5. What is your ethnic background?
 - a. White

 - b. Black

 - c. Hispanic or Latino

 - d. Asian

e. Native American or Pacific Islander

f. Other, or prefer to self-describe _____

6. How long have you played *Dungeons & Dragons*?

7. How frequently do you play *Dungeons & Dragons*?

8. Which editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* are you familiar with?

9. Which of these editions have you personally played?

10. When you do play, are you mainly a Dungeon Master or a player?

11. Do you play in-person, virtually, or both?

12. Would you be willing to participate in an interview about your gaming experiences and opinions?

If yes, what is the best email address to reach you with?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWER GUIDE

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Ariana Ferrante, and I am conducting this research for my thesis project at the University of Central Florida. I have just a few things to go over before we can officially get started.

This interview will take up to an hour of your time. During this time, I will be asking you questions specific to your experiences with the game *Dungeons & Dragons* in its current, fifth edition format. Primarily, I will be asking about your feelings toward the fifth edition of the game only, and why you enjoy it. Please feel free to share your thoughts openly and with confidence. There are no right or wrong answers here- all I ask is that you provide complex, thoughtful responses, and that you speak clearly.

While you do not have to turn on your webcam for this interview, your voice and responses will be recorded. The recorded responses will be kept in a secure location for five years before being destroyed. If you are not comfortable with your voice being recorded, you will not be able to participate in the study. If this is the case, please let me know immediately and we can stop the call here.

Although your responses will be recorded, any identifying information you provide me will be altered to protect your anonymity and confidentiality should your responses be included in the final product.

I want to make sure you are comfortable at all times. While there is minimal perceived risk involved in this study, you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer feel you can continue for the sake of your mental health. If at any point you feel as though you do not want to answer a question for whatever reason, please just let me know and we can move on to whichever

question comes next. Additionally, you are encouraged to speak up if you want to take a short break, or whether you have any questions or comments about the interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions for me before we start.

When you are ready to start, let me know and I will start the recording and begin the interview.

Questions:

- How long ago did you first start playing *Dungeons & Dragons*?
- How did you first get introduced to the game?
- What were your impressions of the game before you started playing?
 - Were you surprised by anything when you started playing?
- What about the game in particular do you enjoy?
- If you have played previous versions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, are there any aspects of those versions that you prefer compared to the most recent edition?
- What would you say is your favorite part of playing *Dungeons & Dragons*?
- If given the choice, would you prefer to play as a Dungeon Master or as a player character, and why?
 - What kind of benefits do you think a Dungeon Master might have that a player doesn't, and vice versa?

- Which of your characters has been your favorite to play as, and why?
- Could you describe the best D&D game you've ever played?
- What do you think is the most important part of a good campaign?
- Is there anything about the game that you wish you could change?
- Do you primarily play *D&D* virtually or in-person? Do you think one way is better than the other?
- If you were trying to sell a friend on the benefits of *D&D*, what would you tell them?
- Was there anything else you wanted to share about your perceptions of *Dungeons & Dragons*?

APPENDIX C: CODE BOOK

Code Category + Code – Code definition

- **Social Codes**

- Bonding (14) – characters or players forming relationships between other characters or players.
- Collaboration (13) – characters or players working together to complete tasks or achieve goals.
- Communal dining (5) – players eating or drinking together while playing.
- Inclusivity (2) – player appreciates that players of marginalized identities are able to comfortably participate in the game.

- **Immersion Codes**

- Freedom (14) – a player can perform a potentially limitless number of actions through their character.
- Immersion (12) – a player experiences a heightened sense of involvement during gameplay.
- Relax (6) – the player plays the game to relax.
- Escape (8) – the player plays the game to escape from the real world.
- Challenge (4) – a player feels challenged during gameplay.
- Skill-building (5) – player builds or improves real-life skills by playing the game.
- Physical elements (5) – the player enjoys physical elements of the game, such as miniature figures or dice.
- Physical feedback (6) – the player enjoys viewing physical or otherwise nonverbal reactions of other players.

- **Narrative Codes**

- Creativity (14) – the ability to create worlds for players to interact with and within.
- Extraordinary experiences (11) – a player experiences, utilizes, or otherwise engages with fantastical elements of a game's world.

- Control (11) – a DM’s ability to control story elements, NPCs, and other events.
 - Story creation (11) – the ability to construct a plot.
 - Story exploration (14) – the ability to progress through and interact with the created story and world.
 - Character creation (13) – the player creates and customizes their own unique player character.
 - Character exploration (12) – the ability of a player to develop and expand upon their character throughout the course of the game.
 - Identity exploration (2) – the player utilizes the game and their character to explore an aspect of themselves.
- **Achievement Codes**
 - Progression (3) – leveling up a character.
 - Combat (13) – fighting and defeating in-game enemies.
 - Gathering (1) – collecting in-game resources or other rewards.
 - Optimization (8) – purposefully constructing characters with maximized abilities and stats to more easily progress through the game.
- **Non-gratification Codes**
 - Prefers in-person (8) – player prefers to play D&D in-person.
 - Video game comparison (8) – player compares D&D to MMORPGs or video games in general.

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

January 26, 2022

Dear Ariana Ferrante:

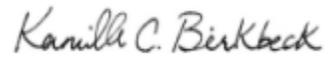
On 1/26/2022, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	D&D&U&G: Uses and Gratifications of Dungeons & Dragons
Investigator:	Ariana Ferrante
IRB ID:	STUDY00003804
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-251- FORM - Signed 12 22.pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval; • Interviewer Guide.docx, Category: Other; • Pre-interview Survey.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Social Media Recruitment Post.docx, Category: Recruitment Materials; • UPDATED IRB Ferrante 3804 HRP-254-FORM Explanation of Research 1.25.22.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • UPDATED IRB Ferrante 3804 HRP-255-FORM - Request for Exemption 1.24.22.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kamille C. Birkbeck".

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer

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