Identity and Community in Gaming

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CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Background

   Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the first commercially available tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) was established in 1974. Since then, many games and systems have been made, and countless players have found joy in the creativity and entertainment to be found in them. Anthropologists have long been interested in studying TTRPGs and other forms of gaming; much of this research has centered on roleplay as a form of imaginative play and as a possible tool to be used in the classroom or other professional settings. Here, we focus on a different aspect of TTRPGs: the depiction of personal identity and representation within TTRPGs and how this influences the experiences of players.

   In a different sphere, since the dawn of the internet, online communities of different shapes and sizes have formed, growing and evolving from text-only forums to communal spaces that exist solely in virtual reality. Online video games have been vessels for these communities for decades, spawning questions about the nature of finding community online rather than physically. Much research has been conducted across these spaces, from massive multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs) to highly technical wargames, focusing on why and how communities form, grow, and collapse, as well as the psychological impacts they can have on their members.

   The research and literature review detailed here was done in order to better understand the pre-existing knowledge and what is left to be discovered and thereafter compiled into a collection of relevant sources and information surrounding the topic. This collection is developed to provide a baseline level of research for a museum exhibit in the anthropology department to be created by students in the ANT4041 Museum Anthropology course.

Methods

- Research was conducted mainly through a review and analysis of current literature, as we were primarily focused on compiling sources and information for another group of students to use in the future, rather than conducting our own new research.
- We began by looking into faculty at FSU who worked in or around our research topic, finding that Dr. Dengah, a professor in the Anthropology department, had previously worked on and published research that had to do with culture and community in the context of online video games. We consulted him, as well as library personnel, to get their recommendations before beginning our review.
- We searched a number of online databases for sources centered around culture, personal identity, and community in both online video games and TTRPGs, and we thoroughly analyzed each related source in order to create an annotated bibliography for use by the Museum Anthropology course.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Kowal for her expert guidance and support throughout our research process; none of this would have been remotely possible without her.

We would also like to thank Dr. Dengah, whose advice and material recommendations proved invaluable.
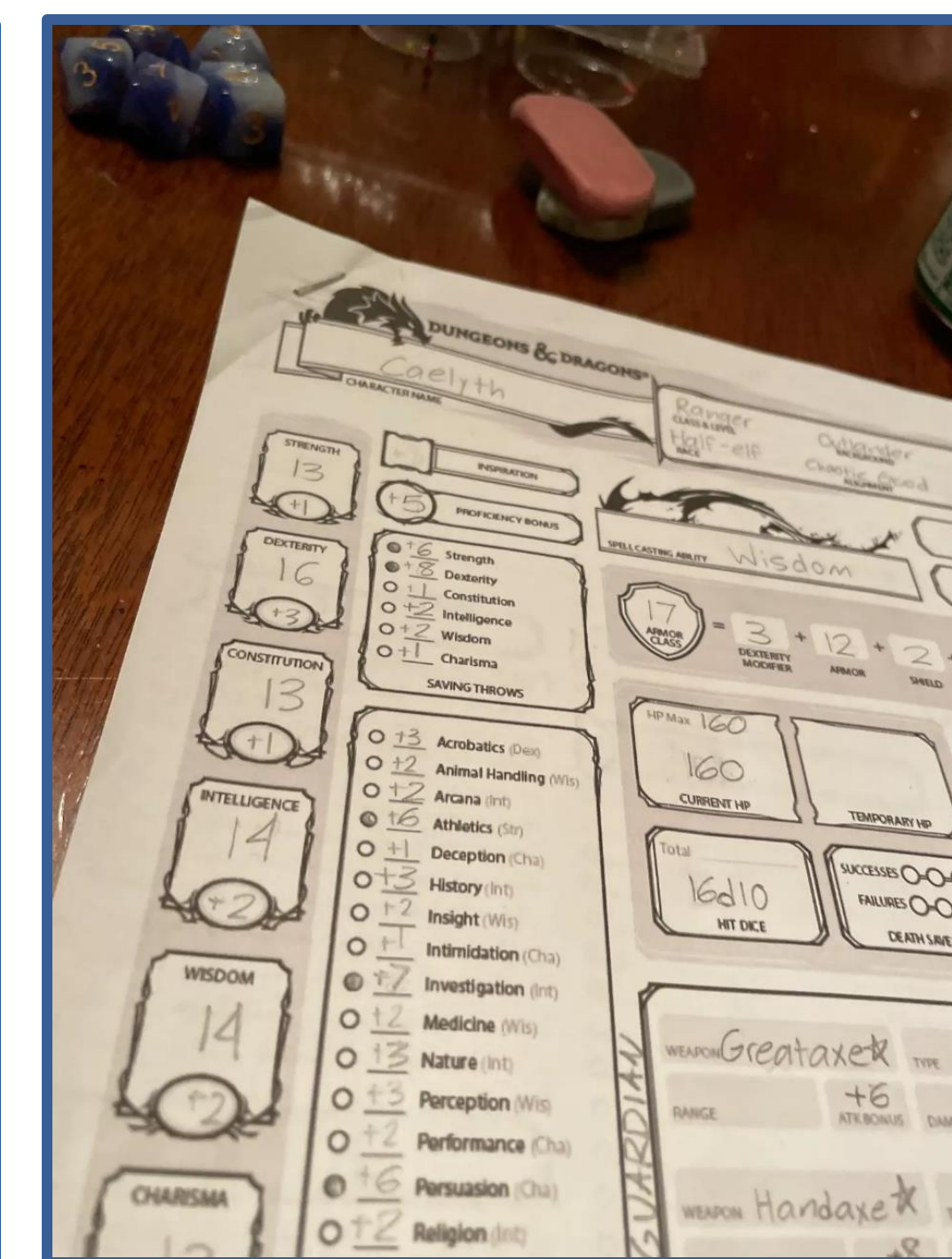
References

A busy internet café, where many people, especially in the early 2000's, would gather to play multiplayer games. Photo credit: Getty Images
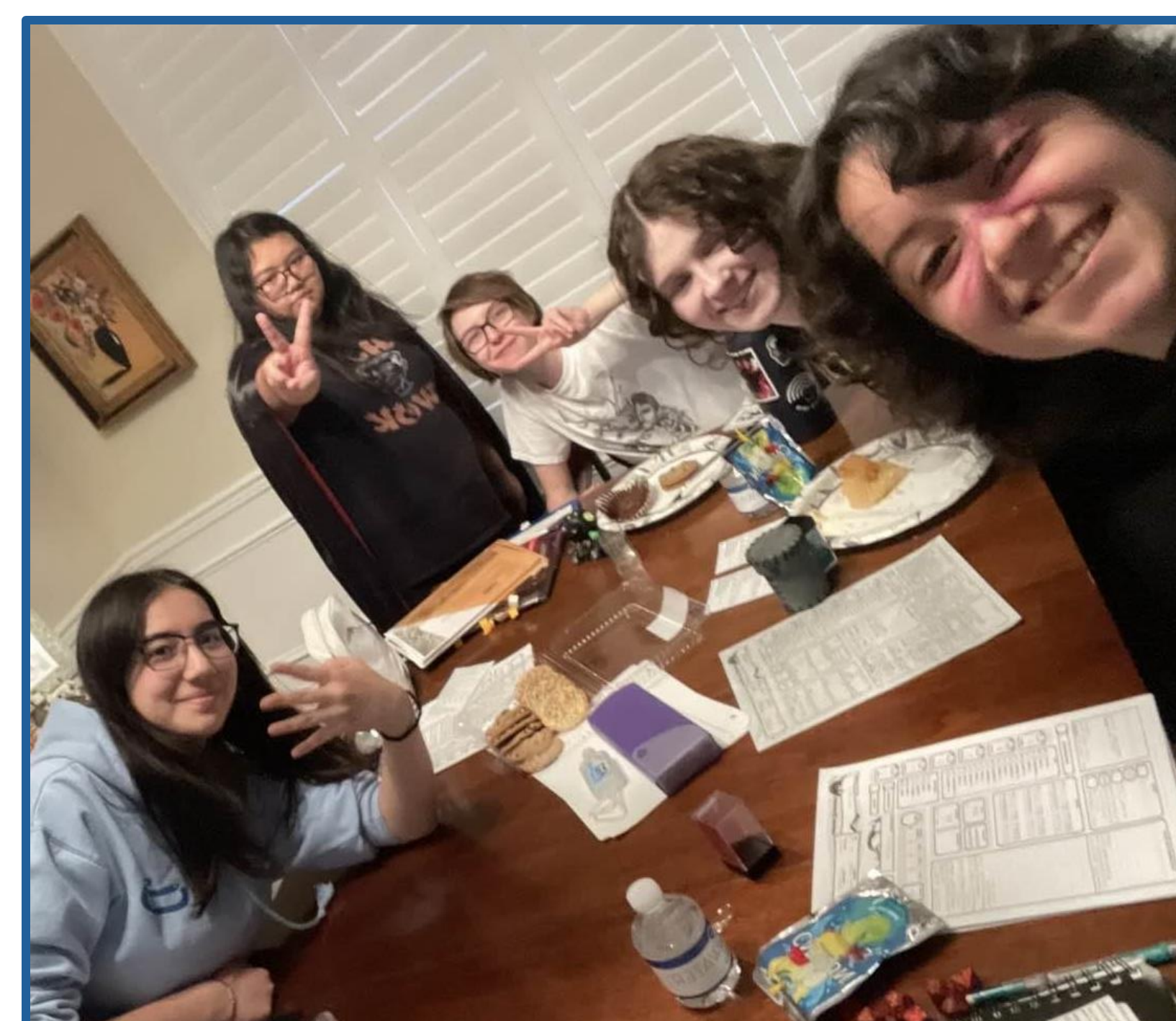
Five members of a *Dungeons & Dragons* group. Left to right: Enya Bullard, Nina Chounlamountry, Sullivan Dickerson, Ella Rose Montgomery, Francesca Cerezo. Photo credit: Christy Steinfeld

A *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition Character Sheet. Photo credit: Francesca Cerezo

A large "Guild" of players in the game "World of Warcraft". Photo credit: Rivalry.com

Results: Online Gaming

- Online communities are formed for an infinite variety of reasons, and communities that center around online gaming are no different.
- Some studies found that groups initially came together in order to pursue a common goal, while others found that communities formed as a substitute for social interaction and connection that players felt they were missing in the real world.
- One major difference between online communities and physical ones is their composition and hierarchy, as researchers found that the leadership structures would not often resemble the ones you might see in an office.
- Many researchers looked at these communities through a lens of psychology, exploring the ways that these communities may be helpful or harmful to their members, especially in respect to how these spaces offer a substitute for social interaction in the physical world.
- Research into this topic is still ongoing, as these communities and their impacts are not yet fully understood. Due to the relative newness of this topic in academia, there is still much to be explored, in the context of Anthropology, Psychology, and beyond. Over time, research like what's been summarized here could greatly impact the way online communities are viewed as a part of society and culture, changing the way people think about and interact with group association and identity online.

Results: Tabletop Gaming

- In the history and systems of TTRPGs, specifically D&D, there tends to be a gender bias and a lack of diversity in terms of race, culture, and attributes and abilities.
- The earliest editions of D&D handbooks used mostly exclusive male pronouns and often portrayed any female characters as passive figures with exaggerated forms and stereotypical beauty and appearances.
- The diversity and representation within TTRPGs has improved over 50 years, but gender and racial bias were built into the original systems and have left their mark.
- Despite the limitations of the systems, TTRPGs have still been found to serve well as vehicles for confronting and working through one's personal biases and exploring both individual and group identities in the realms of gender, sexuality, race, class, and even disability.
- In the world of TTRPGs, players can create characters that either reflect themselves or represent their ideal selves and build worlds in which they are free to be and discover themselves.
- By extension, this allows players to form bonds with others that have similar ideals and identities to them, building a sense of community and acceptance in conditions where it would be unfavorable or downright dangerous to openly express oneself in some ways.
- This research, while still ongoing has implications for experiences and communities formulated through TTRPGs as effective mediums for the development of social skills, as well as the discovery and cultivation of both individual and group identities. These findings also open the way for further research on role-playing games as psychological and therapeutic tools in professional settings.