

**COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING IN DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS  
AND CMC FRIENDSHIP MAINTENANCE**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my mom and my older brother, thank you for always answering my calls and being there for me throughout all of this, I never could have done this without all your support. To Ash, Amanda, Elliott, Ella, and Aidan thank you all for being my friends in this world and in all the stories we tell, without you all this thesis wouldn't exist.*

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This study examines collaborative storytelling in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and computer mediated communication (CMC) friendship maintenance among long-term friends. The theoretical foundations for this study are the Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) Theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) and the concept of co-telling (Mandelbaum, 1987). For this study, 15 individuals who have played D&D online for more than six months with friends they have met in person participated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify two emergent themes. The theme of styles of collaborative storytelling, which looks at the different ways that collaborative narratives are shaped in D&D and the focus of the told narratives, provided insight the process of collaborative storytelling in online D&D groups. The theme online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” refers to the finding that the experience of stories collaboratively told in D&D as real, as working together, and as a commitment work together to make online D&D feel like a more meaningful mode of CMC friendship maintenance. This study expands the research on CNSM theory and co-telling to include fictional and improvisational stories as meaningful types of collaborative storytelling that can influence relationship quality and relationship maintenance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a significant type of communication in which people frequently engage throughout their lives, either as storytellers or listeners. Whether it be through novels, films, folklore, or even family stories that are passed down from one generation to the next, telling and listening to stories has a unique effect of sharing culture and connecting one to another (Bietti et al., 2018; Koenig, Kellas & Horstman, 2015). Communication research on storytelling has examined the processes used to tell stories, the influence of storytelling on identity formation, and the influence of storytelling on interpersonal relationship development and maintenance (Kiser et al., 2010; Koenig Kellas et al., 2020). However, research on interpersonal relationships in storytelling research has primarily focused on familial or romantic relationships with the relationships studied typically being relationships maintained and developed in a face-to-face format (Jong & Strong, 2014; Kiser et al., 2010; Koenig Kellas & Horstman, 2015; LeBlanc, 1996; Mandelbaum, 1987).

Throughout this study I aim to explore how storytelling can function as an act of communication in pre-established friendships that are maintained in an online format. Additionally, due to personal interest and experience, I focus on the collaborative storytelling process as a synergistic relationship between storytelling and online friendship maintenance. Furthermore, I intend to use the tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) as a context for collaborative storytelling to function as a tool for long distance friendship maintenance. To highlight the lived experiences of my participants I take a qualitative interpretive approach to my research.

### **Dungeons and Dragons**

First published in 1974 by co-creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, D&D originally found its footing in the 80's as a niche and 'nerdy' hobby. However, despite being a 50-year-old game, D&D has had massive growth in the past couple of years, with popular media such as Netflix's Stranger Things, and popular live play shows such as Critical Role and Dimension 20 making the game more accessible and approachable to players (Keenan, 2023; Laroche-Joubert, 2023; Whitten, 2020).

D&D is a fantasy TTRPG that is most often played in groups of four to five, where during play one player will act as the dungeon master (DM) narrating the world and plot for the game while the other players will create characters and role-play them as they explore the world that the DM is describing and as they are trying to move through the plot the DM has chosen. The stories told in a game of D&D can vary in scope with some people choosing to play through classic fantasy scenarios like fighting dragons and saving small towns, while others may choose to have their stories go against classic fantasy where the players might be playing as the villains, or people might even place their stories in different settings or genres. Overall, a typical game of D&D is a cooperative game where the DM and the player characters work together to tell a collaborative story with the DM side of the story being planned to an extent and the player character side of the story being improvised based off how the players believe their characters would feel and behave in situations that they come across in a session.

### **Collaborative Storytelling**

The storytelling aspect of D&D that the present research investigates is the process of collaborative storytelling that one takes part in as they play. Even though the DM is the main person narrating the setting and situations that the players may encounter in the game, the players have free will to interact with the world established in the game however they want to, and

through the course of the game all players are given the opportunity to work collaboratively as a group to shape the story told throughout the game by indicating the actions that their characters take and the thoughts that their characters voice. When playing D&D the level of immersion into the story that the players experience can vary in intensity based on style of play. Some people who play D&D will play in a “theater of the mind” format where everything in the game takes place entirely in their minds, while other players may use physical or digital maps as well as miniature figures to assist in the storytelling process. These different styles of play allow for different storytelling processes and capabilities, but in both situations the stories being told are collaborative works, where the players get to explore different identities and perspectives together.

The collaborative storytelling process in D&D makes it a game that heavily promotes companionship and even friendship between players. Therefore, D&D is a game where groups who first played together in person tend to transition their games to an online format when separated by distance, which is often seen in groups who played in high school and were separated when going to college, or in the pandemic when groups were no longer able to meet in person (Scriven, 2021). To explore this effect, I explore extant research on the process of collaborative storytelling in D&D and how it can relate to long distance friendship maintenance for friendships that were formed before being separated by distance. This research will first focus on theories of friendship maintenance looking into maintenance behaviors in high quality friendships and looking into differences between face to face and computer mediated maintenance, before narrowing down into a discussion of the relationship between storytelling and friendship maintenance, and then into a discussion of how collaborative storytelling in D&D has been connected to friendship maintenance.



## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Friendship Maintenance

Friendship maintenance can be defined as the effort that an individual puts forth to keep a relationship in good condition (Mason & Carr, 2021). A relationship in good condition is a relationship that meets Hays' (1984) four criteria: companionship, consideration, self-disclosure, and affection. From these criteria for high quality friendships, Oswald et al. (2004) studied and formed a list of friendship maintenance behaviors that are significant to maintaining high quality friendships.

Friendship maintenance behaviors are best defined as the investments that people put into their friendships to better sustain and further develop the relationship (McEwan & Guerrero, 2012). Oswald et al. (2004) suggested that the most significant behaviors for friendship maintenance were positivity, supportiveness, openness, and interaction. As research on friendship maintenance behaviors has continued to develop, McEwan and Guerrero (2012) have added on friendship maintenance behaviors of task sharing, assurances, and social networking as additional significant behaviors for high quality friendship maintenance. In research on these behaviors and the role that they play in friendship maintenance, it has been shown that these behaviors are key to sustaining relationships and are used to some extent in all friendships (McEwan & Guerrero, 2012).

Despite maintenance behaviors being used in all friendships, the behaviors used vary in frequency based on the quality of the friendship. In higher quality or close friendships, maintenance behaviors are used with similar effort between friends and the most frequently used behaviors are assurances, task sharing, and openness (McEwan & Guerrero, 2012; Oswald et al., 2004). In casual relationships, on the other hand, effort levels are not as similar, and positivity is

the most frequently used behavior. While these friendship maintenance behaviors provide insight on the behaviors to look for when studying how they may present in the process of collaborative storytelling as a device for friendship maintenance, all these studies discussed above are focused on face-to-face friendship maintenance rather than long distance friendship maintenance.

Research on proximity and friendship quality suggests that it is important to think of friendships as flexible and prone to change (Becker et al., 2009). Becker et al. (2009) found that friendships that had high levels of commitment initially were more resilient from periods of dormancy over the course of friendships. Due to this my study looks at the friendships between participants and their D&D groups across their whole experience with playing D&D online.

### ***FtF vs CMC Friendship Maintenance***

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to any form of communication between people that uses technology as the means for communication and it can be asynchronous or synchronous (Wrench et al., 2020). In asynchronous CMC, the people interacting do not have to be engaging with the technology they are communicating through at the same time.

Asynchronous CMC can include text messages, emails, or similar technology-based modes of communication where people do not have to immediately interact with messages. Synchronous CMC on the other hand occurs when people are communicating using technology that requires all communicators to be interacting at the same time such as video calls or live chat rooms. Most of the research that investigates friendship maintenance is based on studies that focus on face-to-face (FtF) friendship maintenance, with less research being focused on CMC friendship maintenance (Mason & Carr, 2021).

There is a wide variety of approaches to research on CMC friendship maintenance; however, a common issue in research on CMC friendship maintenance is that research is focused

on a single medium, which limits generalizability of the research and leads to the research becoming outdated quicker (Mason & Carr, 2021). This issue can be seen with research that focuses on the single medium of Facebook (e.g., McEwan, 2013; Sosik & Bazarova, 2014). In these studies, the researchers focus on how their participants use Facebook to maintain relationships. For example, McEwan (2013) studied the surveillance of other profiles on Facebook as a way to maintain relationships. With the ability to private one's profile and the update to Facebook that allows people to make multiple accounts, the data on surveillance of other profiles is outdated because people are no longer able to see everything that is posted unless the other wants them too. Research based on single mediums run into the issue of the research being too narrow to apply to other areas of CMC and the research becoming outdated if the communication through the single medium changes.

Due to the tendency of research on friendship maintenance and CMC being focused on single mediums, Mason and Carr (2021) have suggested that to best study CMC friendship maintenance the topic of self-disclosure, sharing information about oneself with others, should be focused on as a way for evaluating the quality of these relationships. Mason and Carr (2021) specifically suggest that the process of self-disclosure over time should be examined in research on CMC friendship maintenance.

### **Storytelling and Collaborative Storytelling in D&D**

Storytelling is a communication process focused on the telling of a narrative from a narrator to their audience through text, spoken word, pictures, artifacts, and so forth (Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva, 2022). According to Cleland Silva and de Tarso Fonseca Silva (2022) narratives can be defined as a sequence of unfolding events that have a clear beginning and may or may not have an ending. Additionally, Cleland Silva and de Tarso Fonseca Silva

(2022) indicate that when narratives are told as stories to an audience the interpretation of the narrative can take on different meanings because of the social identities of the audience who the narrative is told.

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of human communication that plays a part in everyday life and comes in many shapes and forms in terms of story content and the processes used to tell stories (Bietti et al., 2018; Currie & Sterelny, 2017; McBride, 2014). Regardless of the content of stories or the processes that stories are told through, they all serve unique functions in society. According to Koenig Kellas (2018), stories are told to construct identities, socialize people to cultural and societal values, to help people cope and make sense of difficult emotions, and to connect people interpersonally. As theorized by Fisher (1985) in his narrative paradigm theory, the ability for the narratives in stories to have these effects depends on the coherence and fidelity of the story to the listener. To have coherence, the narrative of the story should make sense to the listener and the fidelity of the story is based on how much a listener can relate to or believe in the narrative of the story. Through the collaborative storytelling process in D&D the phenomenon of intersubjectivity can be seen as players work together to co-construct social realities. Intersubjectivity refers to the exchange of thoughts and feelings between groups and people that is facilitated by empathy and limited by individual worldview (Cooper-White & Leeming, 2020).

Koenig Kellas's (2018) CNSM theory looks at storytelling as a communicated act connecting the content and processes of storytelling to relational health and individual wellbeing. Within CNSMT there are three heuristics proposed as topoi for communication researchers. These include retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling

(Kellas, 2018). In relation to collaborative storytelling and how it is seen to occur within D&D, the heuristics of interactional and translational storytelling have the most relevance.

Interactional storytelling focuses primarily on the processes of storytelling and how the process used to tell a story can have different effects on those involved (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Research on interactional storytelling suggests that within families engaged in collaborative storytelling, members demonstrating high levels of engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence in the storytelling process tend to experience greater relational health within the family unit (Koenig Kellas & Horstman, 2015). In D&D, the process of storytelling is collaborative and interactional at all times. As players work to tell their stories together, they interact from their character's perspective, they take turns in their interaction, and they all engage in the storytelling process by being attentive to the scenarios in the game and figuring out how to best contribute.

The translational storytelling heuristic on the other hand is focused on how research on storytelling can be used practically to better society (Koenig Kellas et al., 2020). Translational storytelling suggests that through narrative connection, groups who experience stories together feel a greater sense of solidarity with each other, feel more understood by each other, and feel more comfortable expressing vulnerability to each other. The translational storytelling heuristic relates to collaborative storytelling in D&D due to the suggestion that groups grow a sense of solidarity with each other through the experience of stories together.

Another vein of collaborative storytelling that has been studied is co-telling, which occurs when a story is told by two or more people about past shared experiences (Mandelbaum, 1987). Co-telling has often been researched in connection to the co-construction of group identities or a sense of "with"ness in groups, with commonly researched groups being couples or

family groups (Jong & Strong, 2014; LeBlanc, 1996; Mandelbaum, 1987). In LeBlanc's (1996) research on family co-telling, the perceived "with"ness of family groups was higher in family groups where co-tellers told honest unexaggerated stories. Additionally, LeBlanc (1996) found that throughout the conversation where a story is co-told, the perceived "with"ness of family groups was also higher when the other areas of the conversation included planning for future experiences together, asking for information about the other group members day, and attempts at co-constructions of meaning. The interactional and translational storytelling heuristics of CNSM theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018) as well as research on co-telling (LeBlanc, 1996) can be used to help analyze the potential influence that the process of collaborative storytelling in D&D has on relationship maintenance and friendship quality.

Within D&D, there are three major pillars of gameplay. These pillars include exploration or interaction with the created world, social interaction, which is the communication between player character to player character or between player character to characters controlled by the DM, and the combat function of the game which is turn based (Bean & Connell, 2023). Through all three pillars of the game the players take part in the process of collaborative storytelling, with each act that their character makes in the areas of gameplay having direct effects on the story that is created. In research on how D&D can influence the player outside of gameplay, it has been found that the collaborative nature of the game is connected to improved social behaviors and to the co-construction of social meaning and understanding amongst players (Wright et al., 2017). The collaboration between players as they participate in each pillar of the game and the significance of engagement in the storytelling process shows the key ideas of the interactional and translational storytelling heuristics. This suggests that the process of collaborative

storytelling in D&D could have similar effects on relational health and individual wellbeing as the family stories that have been studied with these heuristics.

### **Collaborative Storytelling in D&D and Friendship Maintenance**

As D&D has grown in popularity in academic research, it is seen as a game with transformative properties (Daniau, 2016). The idea of D&D as a game with transformative elements suggests that the game can help people with personal growth and development, which aligns with CNSM theory. That transformative elements can be seen in research on the real-life influences of D&D on players suggests that throughout gameplay people let the boundaries between reality and the game world slip, occasionally resulting in a crossover of feelings from the game to feelings in reality (Waskul & Lusk, 2004). Daniau (2016) cites the game's collaborative nature as the aspect that allows players to grow from the game and be influenced by the stories created in gameplay.

The real-world influences that are seen to occur from playing D&D include the maintenance of friendship, extraordinary experiences, and moral debates (Adams, 2013). Friendships are better maintained through the scheduling of time to spend together and through engagement in the storytelling process the group gets to experience events that would never happen in real life together. This helps the group develop a deeper repertoire of conversation, and through the moral debates that players encounter in play the players get to know each other better and get to understand the views of each other better. These behaviors found for real life effects of collaborative storytelling in D&D reflect similar behaviors as the maintenance behaviors that are used for high quality friendship maintenance.

In terms of long-distance friendship maintenance, D&D became increasingly popular as a device during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. This increase in popularity as a tool for

long distance friendship maintenance created an opening for research on D&D as a long-distance form of friendship maintenance. Scriven (2021) states that D&D acted as a significant tool for socialization for players during the pandemic, in addition to being used for entertainment and escapism. Most complaints that Scriven found with the shift of playing D&D to an online format consisted of issues with the technical aspects of play, while some of his research participants indicated that they preferred playing in person. However, a large majority stated that they enjoyed how structured and frequent play was online, and how they felt more comfortable role playing in an online format.

The research on friendship maintenance, collaborative storytelling in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), and how collaborative storytelling in D&D relates to friendship maintenance helps to gain a better understanding of the significance of research on collaborative storytelling as a tool for long distance friendship maintenance. This literature leads to the following research question:

**RQ1:** How do long-term friends maintain their relationships online through collaborative storytelling in D&D?



## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

To address the research question of "How do long-term friends maintain their relationships online through collaborative storytelling in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)?", I conducted this research using an interpretive approach. This qualitative study employed online interviews to explore the experiences that participants had with maintaining friendships online through collaborative storytelling in D&D. Interviews were chosen as the method to gather responses from participants due to their capacity to gather personal and detailed responses (Tracy, 2020).

### **Participants**

I recruited participants for the study from publicly listed Discord servers dedicated to Dungeons and Dragons communities. Discord is a text and video based social messaging platform used to form virtual communities where individuals with shared interests gather to engage in discussions and activities of their choosing. The demographic breakdown of the participants, the recruitment strategies used, and the sampling techniques used are addressed in order below.

**Demographics.** Participants for this study consisted of 15 people between 18 and 56 years of age. Of the 15 participants, 11 of them were between 18-24, and the remaining 4 participants were between 40-56. Participant gender identities were self-identified and included 8 who identified as male, 5 who identified as female, and 2 who identified as nonbinary. Participant races were also self-identified and included: 12 who identified as Caucasian, 2 who identified as Asian, and 1 who identified as Native American. The participants were also asked to share their sexual orientations; 8 participants identified themselves as straight, 3 identified as bisexual, 2 identified as asexual, 1 identified as pansexual, and 1 chose to skip the question.

Throughout interviews participants also self-identified their status as either a player character or dungeon master for the campaign they spoke about. Out of the participants 10 were player characters in the campaign they discussed, and 5 were the dungeon master for the campaign they discussed. Lastly, participants were asked to share their relationship status. Out of the 15 participants 8 were single, 5 were married, and 2 were in a relationship. All the married players reported that their partner played in their D&D group and participants in relationships reported an interest in having their partners join their groups.

**Recruitment.** I recruited participants for this study through a typed flyer (see Appendix A) that was posted with permission of server moderators on D&D community Discord servers and through the sharing of the flyer between participants and their D&D groups. The recruitment flyer contains information on the topic of study, an explanation of the criteria participants must meet to participate, an explanation of what participation entails, and contact information for participants to reach if interested in the study.

**Sampling.** The sampling procedures used to select participants for this study were opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling. Opportunistic sampling refers to sample groups that were chosen due to ease of access and convenience, and snowball sampling refers to the act of locating participants that fit an established criteria then asking them to reach out to peers (Tracy, 2020). Participation criteria were having played D&D with a pre-established group of friends online for more than half a year to ensure that the experience of group collaborative storytelling was done at least semi-frequently among participants.

All participants were recruited from public D&D Discord servers, which are groups filled primarily with people that have played D&D which increased the chance for participants to meet the criteria. Additionally, since the servers accessed were all public, opportunistic sampling was

used due to ease of access. At the end of interviews all participants were asked to share the recruitment flyer with the members of their D&D group, which is how snowball sampling was used.

### **Ethical Measures**

The maintenance of ethical standards in this research was of the utmost importance for this study. Ethical standards are a significant aspect of upholding the integrity and quality of qualitative research, through the consideration of procedural rules and the consideration of participant needs (Tracy, 2020). Steps enacted to maintain ethical standards within the study included obtaining IRB approval for the study before collecting data from participants, being transparent about the goals and expectations for the study, and keeping participants informed about what would be done with their responses from their participation. Before reaching out to participants to gather data, I obtained IRB approval for the project (IRB #FY23-24-32) to ensure that ethical principles were maintained throughout data collection. To be transparent with participants and obtain their informed consent before conducting the study, participants were provided with and walked through an information sheet, then encouraged to ask any questions or raise any concerns they had about the study. This approach aimed to ensure that participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and process and that their consent was informed. Additionally, participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could choose to end their participation at any time, that they could skip any question they did not want to answer, and that their decisions would not be held against them.

To be transparent with information about the study before the interviews, participants were also informed of how their responses would be used. Participants were informed that their responses would be recorded during the interview, then transcribed, and then once transcribed

the recordings and the transcriptions would be placed into a password protected file that only I have access to. Players were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms, that I have selected randomly, have replaced participants' real names throughout this thesis. Additionally, to ensure that the interpretations of findings from participant interviews accurately reflect participant intent, I will go through the process of member checking with participants before publishing.

### **Positionality**

The described study investigates how collaborative storytelling in D&D is used online to maintain long-term friendships. To further emphasize the ethical measures taken in this research, I locate myself to the research topic and my relation to the participants.

I consider D&D to be a huge part of my identity. I started watching live play D&D shows in 2015 and found a great group of people to play with in 2018 who have become my best friends. Being able to get together in person or online to build worlds and tell stories of bravery, curiosity, individuality, and kindness through collaborative storytelling in D&D is an experience that I consider of high value for the friendships that it has helped me build and maintain. For the past two years I have been living in Texas while my closest friends are all in Minnesota and Wisconsin, hundreds of miles away. While I am able to text and call my friends, the way I feel most connected to them is through our weekly D&D sessions. I have been playing D&D with my friends for six years now and our game has become a big part of our friendships with each other. Due to the way that D&D has helped me personally feel connected to my long-distance friends, and my passion for the game, this research is personally connected to my own experiences.

To relate myself to the participants of my study I connect to them because I have a similar set of experiences to them. However, it is important to acknowledge that D&D is a game that lives in a social circle that is not always the friendliest to those who do not fit in with the

norms. D&D largely resides as an artifact of nerd culture, which refers to people with a strong interest in niche hobbies, and the community for the game is predominantly white and male lead. As a mixed queer woman of color, it has not always been easy to be a member of the D&D community. I have constantly had to prove my knowledge and passion for the game to be treated with respect within the community and have had to work hard to find a group that is open and accepting. Being aware and personally experiencing the effects of difference within parts of the D&D community allows me to be open minded towards the vast array of experiences of my participants.

### **Procedures**

For this study participants were interviewed virtually over a private Discord call. Interviews followed an interview guide (see Appendix B) to direct the flow of the conversation. The interview guide was split into two sections with the first section gathering information about the participants' experience with D&D and their relationship with the other players. The second section gathered demographic information from the participants. For the first section the participants were first asked if they could think of a group of friends, they know in person that they have played D&D online with for half a year or more, after confirming that they fit this criteria participant were then asked to answer the questions in the first section thinking of said group. The questions in the first section aim to explore participants' perceived friendship quality with their online D&D groups, maintenance behaviors that participants engage in with their online groups through collaborative storytelling in D&D, and to explore the ways that participants engage in collaborative storytelling in their groups. Following the interview guide, interviews lasted 35 minutes on average with interview lengths ranging from 11-70 minutes long.

### **Data Analysis**

After responses were gathered in the first section, I applied Owen's (1984) thematic analysis procedures by studying the characteristics of repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness of themes within the data. Whereas repetition involves duplication of key words and phrases, recurrence involves similar meaning in different words and phrases. Forcefulness was detected through verbal means, such as qualifying language (e.g., "extremely") and statements (e.g., "The point is ..."), as well as nonverbal indicators, such as dramatic pauses.

Having already read through the data extensively, I manually coded the data for mentions of friendship maintenance behaviors, descriptions of perceived friendship quality, processes of collaborative storytelling, and mentions of how online collaborative storytelling compared to other online interactions with friends (see the Codebook in Appendix C). I then reviewed and cross-examined themes against the data, reworking codes and themes as needed for added nuance. After identifying two sets of themes, I gave each a label that reflected nuances of the theme in relation to the data and my research question. Finally, I selected exemplar quotations that captured the essence of each theme to define and illustrate it. Exemplar quotations were selected based on how clearly the responses of the participants reflected the emergent codes.

## CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Through a thematic analysis of participant interviews, two themes emerged to help understand the research question: “How do long-term friends maintain their relationships online through collaborative storytelling in D&D?” The first theme, styles of collaborative storytelling, refers to the approaches taken to collaboratively build narratives in D&D and the focus of the narratives told. The second theme is online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” which refers to collaborative storytelling feeling more significant than other types of CMC friendship maintenance due to the unique experiences of collaborative storytelling in D&D.

### **Styles of Collaborative Storytelling**

The first theme that emerged was a difference in the styles of collaborative storytelling used amongst the participants' different groups. The styles of collaborative storytelling used broke down into the ways that the D&D groups of participants shaped their collaborative narratives and the focus of the stories they told.

### ***Shaping of Collaborative Narratives***

From interview responses on how participants built collaborative narrative with their D&D groups three ways of shaping collaborative narratives emerged. The three ways of shaping collaborative narratives that emerged were action-reaction-action systems, group focused decision making, and in-character interactions that prioritize player boundaries.

The action-reaction-action systems refers to groups that followed the steps of an event happening in the game, the characters reacting to it, then the DM having the in-game world react to the characters. When describing the way that the narrative in his game is built, Bill, a 52-year-old said, “Players are responsible for what the PCs do and how they react and then, as they react

then the world gets to react to that” (Bill, p. 5). Dylan, a 24-year-old, responded similarly and said,

It usually tends to act based on what we hear, if a particular character is doing something that might be a trigger for another character based on what they would do in their background and situation to react in turn, or maybe do something out of the ordinary for them. In a system of action and interaction (Dylan, p. 3).

Victoria, 22 years old, related her interaction with collaborative storytelling that utilizes a system of action-interaction-action to a friend group and said, “It’s what you see in a normal friend group where someone will say something and then another person will react to it with either something really goofy or like I'd help a character through something” (Victoria, p. 3).

Group focused decision making describes groups that focused more on coordination between each other and making decisions that prioritized the group while shaping their collaborative narratives. Connor, 18 years old said,

The way we make decisions especially this new campaign everybody has like a voice at the table like we all have to try and figure out "hey, what we're going to do we're going to go like this peaceful or are we going to war" it's really just about whether we're going to fight people or whether we're going to try to talk to them (Connor, p. 4).

Quinn, 24 years old, shared a similar approach to their game,

I think the first chunk of playing online in our first long-term campaign, there was a point where I kind of realized that rather than just disconnected story arcs, and interesting plot points. In the long form campaign, there's a point when the characters had really bonded to the village that they were a part of, and they were looking for ways to fix it and they discovered enough about the world to do so. Where I was realizing afterwards that our



methods of communication were a little bit more collaborative, there were rarely any points where a question would be introduced to another individual, or a comment would be directed to an individual, almost everything we would say or do would be reflective of the group (Quinn, p. 6).

The shaping of narratives through in-character interactions that prioritize player boundaries, was found in groups that interacted in game primarily based on what they believed their characters would do while making sure to respect other player boundaries and the story they decided to tell as a group out of game. When talking about the players in his group Nolan, 45 years old, who has been online with his group for 3 years said,

I've been really proud of my players, their characters will be having this knockdown dragged out argument in the game, and people are checking in on our text channel. 'Hey, just wanted to make sure. You know, my character is angry, I am not. Is everybody else feeling that way?' So, I've seen people acting as friends first, and players in a game second (Nolan, p. 3).

Julia a 24-year-old, expressed a similar system of roleplay and out of game boundary checking, Part of it is just noticing, character tendencies, within the campaign, as well as talking outside as well of like, ideas that we want our characters to do, or later explaining if a character made a certain decision, and some of the party members were maybe confused on it so, kind of doing a little debriefing of 'Yeah, this is sort of why I did this instead of maybe this' and just that communication aspect of just being really clear on what our goals for our characters are, and then party members sort of respecting that for everyone and wanting to help each other (Julia, p. 4).

The responses of Nolan and Julia illustrate that in their D&D groups the players can interact as their character in game while maintaining clear and open communication out of game to ensure that their friendships are not being hurt by their in game interactions.

### ***Focus of Chosen Narratives***

In addition to these three ways that participants shaped the narratives of their stories while playing D&D, it was also found that they engaged in narratives with different foci. The foci of narratives can be broken down into plot focused narratives and character focused narratives.

Participants whose games had plot focused narratives were mainly groups that used prewritten D&D campaigns. These included Connor whose group played the *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus* campaign, Austin whose group played the *Curse of Strahd* campaign, and Ethan whose group played an Open World Fantasy campaign. In the plot focused game, the characters are set into a world with a plot that is fleshed out without regard for the characters, with a focus on an overall goal or set of tasks for the characters to do. Austin, 21 years old, described the plot of *Curse of Strahd* as,

There's this big, evil vampire that has his own demiplane, his own realm. You could say that nobody can escape so they get trapped in that room. It's very gothic or very, kind of spooky, scary, eerie vibes. But they're just trying to go through it and figure out about this vampire as much information as they can gather (Austin, p. 4).

Narratives that were character focused had themes on interactions between in game characters and the growth and development of those characters. Quinn explained their decision for the story they decided to DM,

I basically gave them a small fantasy town to be a part of, made a small dangerous event happen nearby, got them started as adventures, and just slowly added more and more details and expanded the world around them, as I like to, and more and more of what they're town meant to them, so then they could work to defend it. So, it was that development of what the character the players are playing hold as valuable, and then how they will choose to protect it against various outside forces (Quinn, p. 3).

Nolan, another DM, when describing why he chose to tell his story with his players said,

I think this was April 2021, we got started and I was exhausted, I was angry, and I was feeling very helpless in the face of everything that was going on, politically, everything that was going on in the world, everything that was going on in the pandemic. I was like, 'Okay, so I'm going to tell this story about people that do have the ability to do something. And it's not easy, and it's not simple. But there is hope, because you have this power to affect change' (Nolan, p. 5).

The styles of collaborative storytelling provide insight on how the collaborative narratives are shaped in D&D and what the focus of those narratives are. This allowed for the theme of online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” to emerge as a theme that helps provide insight to how collaborative storytelling in D&D is used for online friendship maintenance.

### **Online Collaborative Storytelling as “More Than”**

The second theme that emerged was online collaborative storytelling as “more than.” In interviews, participants expressed that they felt there was a difference in their online friendships between friends that they played D&D with and friends that they did not. Expressing the idea that the collaborative storytelling process of D&D makes the experience feel “more than” other

types of online communications. The aspects of collaborative storytelling in D&D that make online collaborative storytelling feel “more than” break down into the experiences of stories as real, stories as working together, and stories as a commitment.

### ***Stories as Real***

The first aspect of collaborative storytelling in D&D that makes online collaborative storytelling feel “more than” other types of online friendship maintenance is the experience of the stories as real. This aspect refers to the crossover of emotional experiences in game being felt in real life and the crossover of player relationships out of game shaping character relationships in game, with both making the fictional stories being told in game feel real.

The emotional experiences in game being felt in real life were not strongly linked to any specific emotion but were instead built from participant engagement in the stories their groups told and in the players embodiment of their characters. Nolan when discussing his experiences as the DM for his group said,

I've had games where people are whooping and cheering, and people are practically in tears, because something bad happened to an NPC that they've gotten particularly attached to, I've dealt with a lot of bleed, which, in TTRPG spaces is where you start blurring the lines between your emotions and the character's emotions. And the character is going through a lot, and it creates this emotional weight on the player as well (Nolan, p. 3).

Nolan's experience of emotional crossover focuses on the experience in a very broad sense, reflecting his observations of crossover as a DM for his group's campaign that has been running for three years. Quinn and Charlie participants who played in the same group reflected

on their experiences with emotional crossover in regard to a player character's death and the revivification of her. Reflecting on the death of his friend's character Charlie, 23 years old, said,

There was a moment where we all kind of stopped and realized Erana is dead. And woah, it just felt like, I mean, my friend was there, my friend was alive, my friend was talking to me about this. I felt like my friend had died (Charlie, p. 7).

Quinn, reflecting on why the final moment of their campaign when the character revived was their favorite moment of gameplay, said,

The engagement. Rather than just describing what happened on a board game, or whatever, we had almost real-life ties to these characters and how they turned out. And so, we were worried about what would happen before the character came back to life. We were worried about how victory would feel with a loss of this one character and so when it came back in an earned supported way, it wasn't just cool to see like, 'oh, this is a cool thing that happened,' it was a healing of heartbreak kind of moment. Because we were so attached to both that character and that character's relationship with other characters. It wasn't a standalone, 'here's your favorite character back,' it was, 'No, here, now you have this friendship that gets to return. Now you have this other friendship that gets returned because this character is revived' (Quinn, p. 5).

The crossover of player relationships out of game shaping character relationships in game was another experience that made the stories feel real. Participants noted that whether it was intentional or unintentional they always found themselves or their players working to make relationships or friendships between their characters. Julia said,

I've noticed that we all like to put small aspects of ourselves and our personalities and things that we like and dislike into our characters. So, I feel like, since we are all pretty

good friends outside of our campaigns that can't help but to show within our campaigns that our characters are always going to find, some way to connect to each other, because I feel like we all just kind of naturally want our characters to be good friends and get along and look out for each other (Julia, p. 4).

Mort, 24 years old, when talking about incorporating a new player character into a campaign after the player's previous character died said,

Getting the new character in after the first died was a little bit awkward, but just in the character sense, because we were still playing with a friend of ours that we wanted to include into our game. And I think that's part of the reason why that found family aspect of the campaign was able to continue, because we were playing with the friend as well as with the character, we wanted to include both of them in the game. So, we weren't just going to ignore this new person that arrived on the doorstep, we're going to integrate them into the game itself (Mort, p. 4).

Both Julia and Mort's expression of player relationships shaping character relationships, showcased the experience of the stories told as real with the acknowledgement that even though they are playing as fictional characters it is still their friends that they are interacting with.

### ***Stories as Working Together***

The second aspect of collaborative storytelling in D&D that makes online collaborative storytelling feel "more than" other types of online friendship maintenance is the experience of the stories as work. The experience of stories as work was found in participant responses in discussions of the engagement needed to tell stories in D&D making it feel like they were working together as they played.

In describing what he thought to be the differences between friends he played D&D with and those he did not Nolan said,

It's different because we do this activity that has goals built into it, just by the nature of the game. It's a different context than just somebody that you get together with to talk about history or the theory of gaming, or any other things. It gives us structure, and also a sense of mutual accomplishment and mutually going through challenging stuff together in the game. A lot of the difference is that we're doing something together, and as a result, accomplishing something (Nolan, p. 10).

Participants also reflected on the direct differences between other online ways of keeping in contact with online friends. Mort said,

Most of the people that I talked to solely online, I do play some sort of game with them. But I will say D&D in particular, because of the nature of the roleplaying game where you have to act out and talk more and interact more with the other people to build the story, as opposed to maybe sitting back and playing a video game. I would say that I'm closer with the people that I play D&D with relative to less involved games (Mort, p. 6).

Winona, a 56-year-old, expressed a similar idea while reflecting on the difference between a childhood friend (K) she interacts with through text and her online D&D group,

Because D&D can be a really intense emotional experience. I have that emotional experience with gaming friends, where a lot of the time with my friend from high school that I text with most days, a lot of it's just grumbling about work, or what are you doing? What are your plans this evening? It doesn't have that kind of intense emotional focus sometimes. K is one of my very best friends and I love her dearly, but in some ways, I don't have the same kind of emotional connection because I don't have that weirdly

emotional, even though it's role playing and not entirely me it's my character, focus with (Winona, p.13).

She then added on, “K and I are great friends. And I've always been interested in what's going on in her life and want her to be happy. I'm interested in the emotionally intense experiences she's having, but I'm not having them with her” (Winona, p. 13).

These three participants' experiences showcase the level of engagement needed to tell stories in D&D and how that necessary level of engagement makes the interactions feel like working together. The feeling of working together and having experiences in the stories together are then seen to make the interactions feel more significant to the participants than other online interactions they have with friends outside of their D&D groups.

### ***Stories as a Commitment***

The third aspect of collaborative storytelling in D&D that makes online collaborative storytelling feel “more than” other types of online friendship maintenance is the experience of stories as a commitment. The experience of stories as a commitment was found in participant responses where there was commentary on participant D&D group member’s willingness to commit to the process of telling a collaborative story online in a D&D campaign being a sign of the group member’s willingness to commit to the friendships they have with the other players. The willingness to commit to an online collaborative storytelling campaign was brought up by multiple participants.

Charlie, while thinking of his friendships and formation of their online group said, I think the act of creating this online game and being committed to saying ‘we’re doing this,’ felt like a tether. Obviously, we are keeping in touch, but saying, ‘we’re going to do



this story and it's going to take a bit longer,' shows that we're willing to be friends for a long time (Charlie, p. 7).

While Charlie focused on the feeling of originally establishing his group and what everyone's willingness to commit meant for the friendship to him, Austin focused on the group's decision to play multiple online campaigns together,

I think we all just have that commitment. And I think that's what I love about this group. I think that's what we've kept it for. What's kept us together is that we want to play together and that we want to keep this game going, because we all rely on it, we all don't want it to fade out, it's too much of a part of our ways to just let it kind of die out without trying to stop it (Austin, p. 3).

Winona also shared a similar idea when discussing her groups first campaign coming to an end,

When that campaign was coming to an end, I was sad at the thought that we wouldn't be still playing together. And so, I can't even describe how happy I was that every single person in that group, when we were about level 19 was like, 'okay, so what's the next campaign going to be?' And we started planning our characters, and everybody wants to stay, they all want to stay and play together some more. It was just such a good feeling (Winona, p. 3).

Participant willingness to commit is seen throughout multiple stages in the choice to engage in collaborative storytelling online with friends. Each participant expressed the belief that the willingness of their groups to commit to the process of telling a collaborative story together in an online D&D group, as something that strengthened their friendships.

In expressing the idea of collaborative storytelling creating a feeling of “more than” when compared to other methods of online communication, participant responses showed that the experiences of stories as real, stories as working together, and stories as a commitment made the friendships maintained with collaborative storytelling in D&D online feel closer than those without.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The two themes that emerged from the participant responses offer insight to how collaborative storytelling in D&D is used by long-term friends to maintain friendships online. The first theme styles of collaborative storytelling provided insight on what the process of collaborative storytelling looks like in online D&D groups. The theme styles of collaborative storytelling looked into the processes used in D&D to shape collaborative narratives, and it looked into the focus of the narratives told. The second theme, online collaborative storytelling as “more than” offers insight to why collaborative storytelling is effective as an online maintenance strategy. In the second theme the experiences of stories as real, stories as working together, and stories as a commitment worked together to create the feeling of online collaborative storytelling as “more than.” Findings from this research contribute to research on collaborative storytelling and friendship maintenance by extending the existing research to include stories that are fictional and improvised. Additionally, the findings of this research suggest that collaborative storytelling can be used to effectively maintain friendships online that can feel more meaningful to some.

### **Differences and Similarities with Prior Research**

Participant responses showcased similarities with Hays’ (1984) criteria for relationships in good condition. Hays’ (1984) criteria for relationships to be in good condition includes friendship behaviors that support companionship, consideration, self-disclosure, and affection. Findings from participants showed that they engaged in all of these types of behaviors with their online D&D groups.

Participants met the criteria of companionship behaviors through their experience of playing D&D online with their friend groups. Companionship refers to sharing company with

friends through joint activities of experiences (Hays, 1984). Most participant groups met online weekly or bi-weekly, and they gathered for the activity of playing D&D together which is how companionship behaviors can be seen in participant friendships with their groups.

The behavior consideration refers to interactions between friends where they support each other and express concern for each other's wellbeing (Hays, 1984). In groups that shaped narratives through in-character interactions that prioritize player boundaries, behaviors of consideration were shown. In these groups participants indicated that they would check in on the emotions of their friends while playing, showing concern for each other's wellbeing.

Additionally, in the stories told by groups with this way of shaping collaborative narratives within the stories being told they offered support to each other as their characters. Although this behavior was done in-character it can still be an interaction of supporting each other since it was found that the stories told are real in how participants put their out of game relationships into the game.

Self-disclosure refers to any interaction where an individual shares information about themselves with their friends (Hays, 1984). In the experience of stories self-disclosure was shown through the expression of participants' selves within the stories they told with their groups. When discussing the crossover of player relationships to in game relationships, participants noted that the crossover and the ease of the development in character was partially due to the characters played being given aspects of the players personalities and interests. Additionally, from the DM side participants noted that they put their own worries and hopes for the world into the game worlds that they created. These showcase how in the collaborative storytelling self-disclosure occurs, but instead of being direct it is through the story instead and the amount of their selves that participants put into the story.

The behavior affection refers to “any expression of the emotional bond” between friends (Hays, 1984, p. 78). Interactions of affection are seen mostly by participants prioritizing their real-life friendships with other players and choosing to make their characters in-game be friends with each other. Additionally, participant responses on commitment to the stories being a commitment to the friendships showcase the prioritizing of player bonds with each other as the reasons why they choose to collaboratively tell stories together.

In addition to Hays’ (1984) four criteria of good quality friendships, similarities were found between the findings of this study and McEwan and Guerrero’s (2012) findings on friendship maintenance behaviors that are related to sustaining close relationships. The behaviors that the findings share similarity with include friendship maintenance behaviors that consist of assurances and task-sharing, the behavior of social networking was not seen in the findings. Friendship maintenance behaviors that express assurances, refer to interactions that express commitment and comfort with friends (McEwan & Guererro, 2012). The expression of assurance of commitment was seen in group members’ initial willingness to commit to the process of collaborative storytelling in an online D&D campaign to keep in contact with long distance friends. Then assurances were continued to be seen through participants choice to repeatedly commit to online campaigns with friends because they found the interactions to be significant aspects of their friendships. Task sharing, the sharing of tasks with friends in a fair and equitable manner (McEwan & Guererro, 2012), was seen as a maintenance behavior in the way that participant groups shaped collaborative narratives. In all three categories of how D&D groups shape collaborative narratives, participants noted how each player would get opportunities to do what their characters wanted.

The findings of this study are similar to findings on the storytelling heuristics of interactional and translational storytelling from the Communicated Narrative Sense-making Theory (CNSMT). Research on the interactional heuristic suggests that within families engaged in collaborative storytelling, members demonstrating high levels of engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence in the storytelling process tend to experience greater relational health within the family unit (Koenig Kellas & Horstman, 2015). From the findings on collaborative storytelling in D&D it was found that the aspects of high engagement, perspective taking, and turn-taking were all major parts of telling stories in D&D in the theme styles of collaborative storytelling and in the theme of online collaborative storytelling as “more than.” The similarities with the themes come from the high engagement, perspective taking, and turn-taking all being showcased in the shaping of collaborative narratives in D&D, the experience of stories told as real, and the experience of stories as working together. Additionally, findings on the theme online collaborative storytelling feeling “more than,” found that experiences of stories as real and of stories as working together were reasons that participants considered their online D&D friends to be closer than online friends without D&D. This finding is similar to the findings on the translational heuristic which suggests that through narrative connection, groups who experience stories together feel a greater sense of solidarity with each other, and feel more understood by each other (Koenig Kellas et al., 2020). Participants online interactions with collaborative narratives helped them form narrative connections creating a sense of solidarity or closeness with their D&D groups.

Findings from this research are also similar to research conducted on co-telling. Research by LeBlanc (1996) indicates that throughout family conversation where stories are co-told, the perceived “with”ness of family groups was higher when other areas of the conversation included

planning for future experiences together and attempts at co-constructions of meaning. Stories as a commitment, one of the aspects of online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” is similar to the finding in co-telling research that suggests that planning for future experiences together is connected to higher levels of perceived “with”ness or quality of friendship in my research. Attempts at co-construction of meaning is seen through the different ways that participant D&D groups work together to shape the collaborative narratives of their game. In the D&D setting the co-construction of meaning takes place at the fictional level where the systems used to shape collaborative narratives are used to co-construct meaning within the game world. In groups that utilize group decision making, the co-construction of meaning in game is most clearly seen. In these groups events occur in game and as players of the game they as a group decide how to interpret the event and how to best respond based on the meaning they came up with as a group.

Despite the similarities between my research, CNSM theory and scholarship, and research on co-telling, my research differs in its focus on stories that are fictional and improvised. In the interactional heuristic of CNSMT high levels of coherence in collaborative storytelling is related to higher levels of relational health in the family unit (Koenig Kellas & Horstman, 2015). Similarly in research on co-telling perceived “with”ness was higher in family groups where co-tellers told honest and unexaggerated stories (LeBlanc, 1996). Additionally, CNSMT and research on co-telling both focus on past experiences, instead of fictional ones. Regardless of the fictional aspect of the stories told in D&D, participants felt that the experience of online collaborative storytelling was “more than,” their experiences with other styles of online friendship maintenance. In the findings of my research, it was seen that even in situations where participants were fighting werewolf rats (Bill, Mark, & Winona), or they were fighting demon space clowns (Ethan) there was still the experience of stories as real. Whether it was real in the

sense of emotions from the game being felt in real life or real-life relationships shaping in game relationships, the experiences impacted the players and their relationships despite not being realistic or experienced physically. This coupled with the similarities between the findings in my research and types of friendship maintenance behaviors shows that despite being fictional there is enough about the storytelling process that makes the game feel real and valuable to the friendships maintained.

### **Implications for Further Research**

From participant responses it was found that online collaborative storytelling felt “more than,” other types of online communication due to the different aspects of collaborative storytelling in D&D. The experience of the stories told together in the game as real, as working together, and as a commitment to their friendships made online friendships with D&D friends feel closer than online friendships without D&D. Due to the fictional and improvisational nature of the collaborative stories being told when playing D&D and the ways the narratives are shaped and focused, further research could be conducted to study potential differences that lived and fictionally lived stories have on relationship maintenance. The findings on the styles of collaborative storytelling suggest that more research could be conducted on the interactions between players in game and out of game. Specifically, further research could be conducted on the process of shaping collaborative narratives through in-character interactions that prioritize player boundaries and how this balance of in-character interactions and out-of-character caring can be seen as a friendship maintenance process withing D&D. Additionally, this study hints at the phenomenon of intersubjectivity and the social construction of reality through the exploration of creating fictional worlds that feel real in through collaborative storytelling in D&D. With this, more research could be conducted on the impact of the social construction of reality on



friendships and empathy, commitment, familial relationships, or romantic relationships. In my study, all married participants had their spouse in the game and all that were in a relationship wanted to start a group with their partner. This presents the clear opportunity to look further into couple co-telling and the co-construction of joint identities with a focus on types of stories that are co-told, to see if there is any difference in co-construction of joint identity if the stories being co-told are lived or fictional and improvised.

### **Strengths and Challenges of Study**

Strengths of this study include the similarity in gender breakdown that my participants have with an infographic published by Wizards of the Coast, the publishers of D&D, in 2021 that reflects the demographics of all D&D players. The gender breakdown for my participants is 54% male, 33% female, and 13% percent non-binary. This is relatively close to the 60% male, 40% female, and less than 1 percent non-binary gender demographics gathered by Wizards of the Coast (Corliss, 2021). An additional strength to this study is the wide range of diversity in the sexual orientations of my participants. Challenges for the study include the lack of variety in age, and the lack of diversity in participant racial identities, which limit the generalizability of this study to the D&D population as a whole. Additionally, this study focuses solely on collaborative storytelling in D&D which limits the generalizability of the findings to other TTRPGS and to other ways that people may engage in collaborative storytelling online.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between collaborative storytelling in Dungeons and Dragons and online friendship maintenance with long-term friends. Through this study, the theme of styles of collaborative storytelling in D&D emerged which provided insight on how collaborative narratives are shaped in D&D and what the focus of those narratives are. This theme then allowed for the second theme, online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” to emerge. The theme online collaborative storytelling as “more than,” refers to the experience of D&D feeling like a more significant type of online friendship to participants due to the experiences of the collaborative stories told as real, as working together, and as a sign of commitment to their friendships with the other players in their groups. These themes provided insight to the variety of approaches to collaborative storytelling in D&D and to how the requirements of these approaches create an experience that allows for D&D to help players maintain close online friendships. This research helps showcase the value and significance of fictional stories and the real-life impact that they can have on relationships when told together. This research also extends past scholarship on collaborative storytelling and relational health and relationship maintenance by highlighting the value of fictional and improvised stories.

## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Flyer

# Hello Adventurers

Participants needed for a research study on  
Collaborative Storytelling in Dungeons & Dragons and  
Long Distance Friendship Maintenance



### Who I am looking for

People who have played Dungeons & Dragons online  
with a group of friends for more than half a year

### What Participation Includes

One short interview that will take approximately  
30-50 minutes and take place over Discord.

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For more information, Email [alanna.espinoza@my.utsa.edu](mailto:alanna.espinoza@my.utsa.edu) or  
Direct Message LlamaLogic152#0683 on Discord

UT San Antonio  
FY23-24-32  
Approved on 1-22-2024

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

Section One: For this first section of questions, could you think of a group of friends that you have played D&D with both in person and also online for more than half a year. Can you think of a group of friends like that? Okay great. Please answer this first set of questions with these friends in mind.

1. Can you tell me a little about the group that you thought of?
  1. How long have you been friends with the members of the group?
  2. Would you describe these friends as best friends, close friends, or casual friends?
  3. How long have you been playing with them?
  4. How much of that was in person and how much was online?
  5. How often do you meet and how long do you tend to play for?
  6. Do you play theater of the mind or have some type of visual representation for your game?
  7. Are there other ways that you keep in contact with this group online?
2. Did you have experience with D&D before playing with this group?
  1. What was your experience?
  2. If not, why did you start playing D&D with this group?
3. How has your experience of D&D been with this group?
4. Can you tell me a little about the campaign you are currently playing with this group?
  1. Overall plot
  2. Character dynamics - do they reflect/mirror
5. How do you and the other players build off each other to shape the flow of the game?
6. Within either the same campaign or another campaign you have played with this group, could you tell me about one of your favorite moments of gameplay?
  1. What made this moment special?
7. Have there been any turning points in your friendship with members of this group since you started playing online?
  1. If there weren't any turning points, do you think there have been any ways that your friendships have grown or changed since you started playing D&D with them?
8. How do your friendships with the players in your online group differ from other friendships maintained online with friends that you don't play D&D with?
  1. Are there any differences in your relationships with friends that you play D&D with compared to your friends you don't play D&D with?

9. How would you pitch D&D to someone who was thinking of starting a campaign with their friends?

Section Two: This next set of questions will be gathering demographic information about you as a participant. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering just let me know and we can skip it.

1. How old are you?
2. What year of college are you in?
3. What is your racial identity?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. What is your sexual identity?
6. What is your relationship status?
  1. Does your partner play in your group?

## APPENDIX C

### Codebook

Code Name	Code Definition	Example from Data
Perceived Relationship Quality	Descriptions of how participants view the quality of their friendships	“I think most of them would at least be close friends. Some of them I would consider my best friends, but at least close friends for all of them” (P5)
Comfort Level	Expression of being more comfortable being self with D&D friends	“I'm definitely a lot more open to the to my friends who I play D&D with. And with my work friends, I, there are some things that I don't feel comfortable sharing with that I would probably feel comfortable sharing with my D&D friends” (P3)
Emotional Experience Crossover	Descriptions of the experience of in game emotions out of game	“There was a moment where we all kind of stopped and realized Erana is dead. And woah, it just felt like, I mean, my friend was there, my friend was alive, my friend was talking to me about this. I felt like my friend had died” (P6)
Player Relationships Shape Character Relationships	Descriptions of participants transferring out of game relationships to their characters	“I decided to make the character of the girl who I had previously mentioned, my character's best friend and I think bouncing off of each other that way, with the added bonus of us sitting next to each other in that class and the friendship that we were role playing as in this campaign. I definitely think it helped a lot with my ability to talk to this girl and like, understand her vibe” (P3)
Characters mirroring players personalities	Descriptions of participants making their characters similar to their out of game personality	“Trusting kind hearted friend... both him and his character have this ability to create a very strong bond right away” (P6)
Shaping of collaborative narratives	Descriptions of how participants worked together to tell stories collaboratively in D&D	“Players are responsible for what the PCs do and how they react and then, as they react then the world gets to react to that” (P11)

<p>Focuses of stories being told</p>	<p>Descriptions of the stories that participants were telling with their D&amp;D group</p>	<p>“I wanted them to grow from nothing to something. That growth is what allowed for the story to go for a long time. If the characters were already important then it wouldn’t have gone for a longtime, because once you are already important you can do things right away and resolve issues right away. I wanted small scale adventures that would slowly build” (P7)</p>
<p>Commitment to playing online as a friendship tether</p>	<p>Descriptions of participants feeling like their groups commitment to meeting to play D&amp;D felt like a commitment to their friendship</p>	<p>“I think the act of creating this online game and being committed to saying ‘we’re doing this,’ felt like a tether. Obviously we are keeping in touch, but saying, ‘we’re going to do this story and it’s going to take a bit longer,’ it shows that we’re willing to be friends for a long time” (P6)</p>

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## **VITA**

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