

# Right Table, Wrong Idioculture: Examining the Impacts of TTRPG-specific Media at the Player Table Level

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## Article abstract

Over the past decade and a half, there has been an explosion in the quantity and availability of media focused on tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs). Episodes of highly-produced actual play series like *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* regularly get millions of views online and have spawned hundreds, if not thousands, of similar programs. Type in “Dungeons & Dragons” or “tabletop role playing” into your search engine of choice, and you will find copious amounts of meta content covering nearly every aspect of the hobby. This wide range of content caters to a broad audience — from the beginner player with zero real-world experience, all the way to the grizzled veteran Dungeon Master. The popularity of these media has brought more players to the game and has made it easier for new players to become socialized into the subculture. Currently, little research exists on the impacts of these media on the quality of players' games. Central to our discussion is Sidhu and Carter's concept of “pivotal play,” wherein moments transcend the game and deeply impact the players even after they walk away from the table. We propose a framework necessary for moments of pivotal play to emerge, encompassing three layers of socialization crucial for each player: game competency, subcultural competency, and comradery. Through five qualitative, in-depth interviews with experienced TTRPG players, we sought to understand if this explosion of TTRPG-specific media has changed how players play TTRPGs. As a result of our research, we identify five key impact areas and suggest a new term (parasocial idioculture) to describe how actual play media may affect the process of player socialization.





## Right Table, Wrong Idioculture: Examining the Impacts of TTRPG-specific Media at the Player Table Level

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### Abstract:

Over the past decade and a half, there has been an explosion in the quantity and availability of media focused on tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs). Episodes of highly-produced actual play series like Critical Role and Dimension 20 regularly get millions of views online and have spawned hundreds, if not thousands, of similar programs. Type in “Dungeons & Dragons” or “tabletop role playing” into your search engine of choice, and you will find copious amounts of meta content covering nearly every aspect of the hobby. This wide range of content caters to a broad audience — from the beginner player with zero real-world experience, all the way to the grizzled veteran Dungeon Master. The popularity of these media has brought more players to the game and has made it easier for new players to become socialized into the subculture. Currently, little research exists on the impacts of these media on the quality of players' games. Central to our discussion is Sidhu and Carter's concept of “pivotal play,” wherein moments transcend the game and deeply impact the players even after they walk away from the table. We propose a framework necessary for moments of pivotal play to emerge, encompassing three layers of socialization crucial for each player: game competency, subcultural competency, and comradery. Through five qualitative, in-depth interviews with experienced TTRPG players, we sought to understand if this explosion of TTRPG-specific media has changed how players play TTRPGs. As a result of our research, we identify five key impact areas and suggest a new term (parasocial idioculture) to describe how actual play media may affect the process of player socialization.

### Introduction

Tabletop role-playing arose as a distinct subculture in the mid to late 1970s and has continuously grown in popularity since (Fine, 1983; Wieland, 2021). In its early years, games such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the first commercially available tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) system, were primarily played by young, white, unmarried males between the ages of 13 and 25, often in small groups in the backrooms or basements of comic stores, and community centers (Fine, 1983). What began as a niche hobby for those interested in fantasy, medieval history, and wargaming would slowly but steadily grow into a global billion-dollar industry (Hasbro, 2023; Wieland, 2021). Through the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, D&D grew in popularity. With this rise in interest in TTRPGs came a supporting cottage industry, which began producing various peripheral products. These included new game systems, rulebooks, magazines, and other printed products (Fine, 1983).

The TTRPG community has steadily adopted new communication methods throughout its history. From the early fanzines of the late 1970s to the arrival of listservs and internet forums in the 1990s, communication technology has played a vital role in forming and maintaining the TTRPG community (Fine, 1983; Morrus, 2015). Today, the TTRPG community has colonized platforms such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, giving rise to a niche form of media called ‘actual play’ where creators present “recorded, unscripted sessions of tabletop role-playing games” (Chalk, 2023, pp. 449-50). The term ‘actual play’ originated as early as 2001 on the popular TTRPG

message board, The Forge, where it was the title of a forum page where people posted textual accounts of their actual role-playing experiences (Torner, 2021, p. 26). Soon, actual play took the form of entertainment podcasts, such as Acquisitions Inc., followed by pre-produced videos, and finally, as Blau (2021) argues, evolved to the status of a medium in its own right, as popular shows such as Critical Role began utilizing the affordances of live-streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv to extend the performance beyond the typical stream into something else entirely (Blau, 2021, pp. 50-51). In addition to the development of actual play as a new medium, there has also been a rise in the availability and prevalence of “meta content” that focuses on instruction or issues surrounding the game itself. This ongoing mediatization of TTRPGs has led to the rise of “professional” TTRPG players who make a living off of the production of TTRPG-specific media (Chalk, 2023).

The widespread availability of meta content (tutorials, explainers, and guides), alongside the broad popularity of actual play media, has lowered the barrier of entry for new players and has contributed to an expansion in the popularity of TTRPGs (Sidhu & Carter, 2020). While these media have made TTRPGs more accessible, they also have the potential to foster unrealistic expectations of what playing TTRPGs looks like at a non-professional level. New players who have viewed this content before playing TTRPGs may come to the game with higher expectations of the “quality” of role play — resulting in disappointment when players realize that playing TTRPGs with non-professional players may not look the same as what is presented in their preferred actual play media. We argue that this disconnect between expectation and reality may result from socialization into the idioculture of their preferred actual play table.

Despite these potential pitfalls and conflicts that may occur between experienced TTRPG players and newcomers, our participants reported a multi-faceted improvement in their game experience as a result of engaging with TTRPG-specific media. Players reported using these media for worldbuilding and storytelling inspiration and to learn more about specific game mechanics and role-play techniques. Additionally, players reported a new respect for the game and the ritual of play due to a deeper understanding of the game and their character's place in the world. Research into the effects of these media on the TTRPG community is still in its infancy; as such, we sought to add to the academic literature by interviewing experienced TTRPG players to understand what impacts this media is having on the quality of their games at the level of the amateur “table” (a specific game or group of players). Through our analysis of player interviews, we suggest that the affordances of TTRPG-specific media generally improve the quality of gameplay at the everyday TTRPG Table. Additionally, we suggest a new framework for understanding how transcendent, deeply impactful moments of pivotal play, as defined by Sidhu and Carter (2020) arise.

**Keywords:** Pivotal Play, Actual Play, Streaming, Dungeons and Dragons, Table Top Role Playing Games, Micro Culture, Idioculture, Critical Role, Mercer Effect

### Background

Much of the current academic literature covering tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG) focuses on *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, which has long been the preeminent TTRPG system (Loftis, 2020). Given its prominence and because most TTRPGs function similarly, it is worth understanding how *D&D* is played and who plays it before we examine the impacts of TTRPG-specific media on player experiences.

### Dungeons and Dragons

Created in 1974 by American game designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and based on existing

historical wargames of the time (Fine, 1983), *D&D* quickly became the most well-known communicative storytelling game (Giordano, 2022). Since its release, *D&D* has continuously grown in popularity and cemented itself within popular culture (Švelch, 2022, p. 1662). According to Wizards of the Coast (the publisher of *D&D*), as of 2020, *Dungeons & Dragons* has been a market leader in the TTRPG space for its entire 47-year history (Wieland, 2021). During this time, an estimated 50 million people have played it. Recently, the game has seen explosive growth, with 2023 marking the tenth year of consecutive growth (Hasbro, 2023, p.13). One often-cited explanation for the continued popularity of *D&D* and its resurgence in recent years is the mass proliferation of online TTRPG-specific media content that has occurred since the early 2010s (Švelch, 2022; Sidhu, 2023, p. 202).

Game sessions are led by a Dungeon Master (DM) — a dedicated player who fulfills many game roles, acting as a referee, a storyteller, a director, an actor, and a worldbuilder all at once (Patalita, 2022). Small groups of players (usually around 3-7) gather in some form of collective space, either online or in person, and work cooperatively to build a narrative. Each player creates a character, deciding on what this character looks like, how they act, and other elements of their backstory. The players use a combination of dice rolls and decisions to choose any distinctive traits or special abilities they may have. Once characters, backstories, and a setting are determined, the Dungeon Master initiates the story, acting out all the other non-playable characters (NPCs) and fleshing out the setting. There is an immense amount of flexibility in how these stories unfold; usually, some story elements are planned out beforehand, but in many cases, narratives are driven by an improvisational storytelling approach where players and DM's build off each other's ideas in real-time. Thus, as Giordano (2022) points out, TTRPGs can be “seen as a form of improvisational acting” where players “describe what their characters do in the fantasy world and cooperatively pool their knowledge and skills to solve challenges created by the storyteller” (p. 447). The game system's rules act as guidelines (which can be broken or bent at the DM's discretion) which help ground the story and define what is possible within the shared fantasy. Dice rolls represent chance and are used to solve conflict and determine whether player actions are successful.

When compared with other popular tabletop games such as *Warhammer 40k* or *Magic the Gathering*, the financial barrier to entry is relatively low; the only requirements are a pen, paper, and a set of dice (and even these can be substituted or omitted); the required books can be shared amongst several players. Despite this low financial barrier to entry, a significant amount of subcultural knowledge is required to play the game successfully at a high level. Thus, players who “have experience in the fantasy genre and with *D&D*, in particular, are at an advantage over less experienced players” (Giordano, 2022, p. 448).

### Academic TTRPG Research

Academic research into TTRPGs began in earnest in 1983 with the publication of *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* by sociologist Gary Alan Fine. Through this book, Fine immersed himself in the emerging hobby of tabletop role-play and sought to “analyze and describe a contemporary urban leisure subculture” (1983, p. 1). By joining local gaming groups, observing their sessions, interviewing players, and then writing down and analyzing his experiences, Fine provides a detailed, ethnographic description of the early days of tabletop role-playing as a distinct subculture. At the time, TTRPGs were predominantly played by young, unmarried males between the ages of 13 and 25, with interest spiking around age 20 (Fine, 1983). Surveys and estimates from the time of Fine's research found that female players only made up between 0.4% and 15% of the player base (Fine, 1983, p. 41). These numbers have changed dramatically in the intervening years. According to data shared by Wizards of the Coast, in 2020, *D&D*'s player base reportedly comprised 60% male, 40% female, and <1% other/non-binary players (Wieland, 2021).

Given the significant shifts in demographics, social acceptance, and general popularity of TTRPGs since *Shared Fantasy* was published, much of the information in the book needs to be updated. Because of the changes in the TTRPG space, Sidhu & Carter (2020, p. 5) argue that Fine's book should be viewed primarily as a

historiography which provides a window into the world of fantasy role-playing in its formative years. For our purposes, *Shared Fantasy* provides a valuable point of comparison in examining how the role-playing subculture has changed over time and lays out a helpful picture of what role-playing was like before the widespread mediatization of the hobby. Additionally, Fines' (1979) concept of idioculture, which describes the "system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs" that circulate and dictate membership among small, localized groups, is particularly useful in explaining the unique eccentricities, in-jokes, rules, rituals and social norms that individual gaming groups may have (p. 734).

In recent years, a significant body of new research into TTRPGs has been published. Most of this work focuses specifically on *D&D*; in general, little attention has been given to other TTRPG systems (Bjørkelo, 2022). Some have explored the therapeutic and social benefits of tabletop role-playing (Abbott et al., 2022; Varrette et al., 2023), the educational potential of *D&D* (Carter, 2011; Garcia, 2019), as well as the link between role-playing and creativity (Chung, 2013). Others have focused on how *D&D* depicts gender, race, power, and disability (Garcia, 2017; Jones, 2018). There have also been general examinations of player motivations which seek to understand why people play (Coe, 2017).

### **Mechanical vs Performative vs Pivotal Play**

As open-ended, improvisation-heavy games, TTRPGs like *D&D* allow players to adopt different play styles depending on personal and group preferences (Black, 2024). These vary from strict war game-like (sometimes referred to as "crunchy") styles of play that focus on numbers, rules, combat, simulation and optimal outcomes - to more "performative" styles of play that emphasize narrative, character, improvisation and storytelling. This performative style of play typically emphasizes "role playing," where players and DMs are expected to work harder to develop and fully inhabit their characters. Today, almost all tables fall between the two extremes, borrowing elements from "crunchy" mechanical styles and "performative" narrative-driven styles.

In unpacking these different modes of play, it is helpful to understand Salen and Zimmerman's (2010) definition of "meaningful play" as an established standard for evaluating game quality. Meaningful play is described as "the relationship between player action and system outcome... [which must be] both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" (pp. 33-34). This definition focuses primarily on game mechanisms and how the player and the game interact but does not consider other modes or layers of play on the player's part. While meaningful play works well to describe successful interaction within strict game systems, such as board games, war games, or video games, with their clear rules and boundaries, it does not take into account layers of game contribution created by the players themselves - or in a TTRPG's case, the Dungeon Master. In other words, it does not account for the performance when describing the results of an ideal game system (Sidhu & Carter, 2021). Additionally, it does not allow the outcomes of these forms of play to go beyond the game itself and create meaningful changes in the player's life outside the game. To account for this, Sidhu & Carter (2021) built on the concept of meaningful play with their framework of "pivotal play," which they define as "meaning that is drawn from the play that transcends [meaningful play's] boundaries" (p. 1046) which Sidhu argues results "in changed attitudes towards non-game topics" (DiGRA India, 2021, 09:44).

In its current iteration (5th edition), *D&D* has shifted from its more mechanical, number-heavy wargame roots to include a broader focus on role-playing and storytelling (Mearls, 2013). This shift from strategic to performative play creates an awareness of an audience in the player provided by the rest of the game party, which results in the player taking on a "performative consciousness" (Soules, 2021, p. 133). The degree to which



a player commits to the performance may affect the overall post-session outcome for the players in and out of the game. As Soules (2021) notes, the ritualistic play style of *D&D*, whereby the players often meet weekly to sit, eat snacks, and play, either online, in person, or both, creates "sacred play, in disguise" (2021, p. 134), which builds the commitment to the player's characters, and their party as a whole. This ritualistic social framework often creates a safe space for players where "in-game experiences can be both real and fictitious concurrently" (Sidhu, 2021, p. 1047). It can evoke real-life emotions so committed players can experience "trance-like states" as the character's psyche is brought forward (Soules, 2021, p. 134).

This commitment to their characters can result in what Sidhu and Carter (2021) describe as positive negative play, or "play that is distressing and intense but also gratifying, as it creates new experiences, reflection, or insights for the player" (p. 1047). *D&D* features ever-present dangers for characters within a campaign, many of which can result in death. Unlike in many video games where players simply re-spawn after dying, many long-running *D&D* Campaigns (a series of play sessions that can span years) feature what is colloquially known as "perma-death," whereby a character who dies will (more often than not) remain in that state forever. This realistic approach to death can create extreme tension for the players who have reported their experiences with death in *D&D* to range from "devastating," "horrific," and "the ultimate finality" to "exciting," "poetic," and "freeing" (Sidhu, 2021, p. 1051). These immense emotional effects can be noted even within the world of "professional" players in their off-stream games. While being interviewed on Dimension 20's podcast (2019), Marisha Ray recounted the first time the players of *Critical Role* experienced the death of a party member during their pre-stream home game (23:01). Ray described the unexpected death of Ashley Johnson's character, Pike, which left fellow party member Laura Bailey in the fetal position on the floor sobbing, emotionally unable to take her turn. "It felt like everything changed. Our perception and reality of what our game was [...] That was when we realized, 'Oh, we feel something for these characters.' [...] When you stop, and you all look around, and you're like, 'We're crying over imaginary people that do not exist.' That's when we realized how important it was." (Dimension 20, 2019, 23:01). Ray then goes on to discuss how her first character, Keyleth, "taught her to be a better person" (27:53) and how her experiences playing as Keyleth altered how she approached the world in her daily life. These testimonies describe the core of Sidhu and Carter's pivotal play framework.

### **The "Matt Mercer Effect"**

The exponential growth of TTRPG-specific media has generated mixed responses from members of the TTRPG community, particularly concerning actual play media. Most famously, active debates have sprung up around the impact of the most popular actual play series, *Critical Role*. The colloquial term "the Matt Mercer Effect" (A reference to the professional voice actor and DM of *Critical Role*) refers to newcomers' unrealistic expectations of the performance quality and narrative from the DM's and players at their home tables (moralhazard333, 2021). Some groups dispute the use of the term as impolite and effectively shifting the blame to others instead of undertaking the task of setting expectations for their players at the outset of the player's first session (Girdwood, 2019; Jones, 2021, p. 3).

### **TTRPG-specific media**

Our research uses the term "TTRPG-specific media" to refer to the large ecosystem of fan-created media surrounding TTRPGs. Examples include popular actual play video series such as *Critical Role* or *Dimension 20* and podcasts like *The Adventure Zone*. Importantly, this term also includes smaller, less popular shows and other non-entertainment-focused media such as tutorials, instructional videos, and meta podcasts which discuss the game itself. In recent years, there has been an explosion in both the quantity and the popularity of this form of content. While there has been some recent research into this rise of TTRPG-specific media (Chalk, 2022; Švelch,

2022; Jones, 2021; Sidhu & Carter, 2020), there has been limited research on these media's specific effects and impacts on players' games.

Through qualitative interviews with TTRPG Players, Sidhu and Carter (2020) examined how the rise of TTRPG-specific media has contributed to increased player access and reduced stigma associated with the hobby. Their interviews found that “almost all participants detailed the impact of greater technological access and various new media platforms on their play” (Sidhu & Carter, 2020, p. 11). Platforms like YouTube, Roll20, and D&D Beyond were identified as key avenues in which new players, or potential new players, could easily access a vast swath of *D&D*-related content — something that was far more difficult to do in a pre-internet, pre-convergence era. This increased access to information through new media means it is far easier for new players to learn the basics and for experienced players to expand their skill set. The popular actual play live stream *Critical Role* was also identified as a key vector which drew “more interest and players towards D&D” (Sidhu & Carter, 2020, p. 12).

Švelch (2022) used the example of *Critical Role* to explore the increased mediatization of the hobby of tabletop role-playing. By examining the political economy of the emerging actual play industry and the corresponding rise of TTRPG-specific media, Švelch argues that this mediatization “allows tabletop role-playing to function as both a product and its own promotion, using digital and mediated forms like actual play to grow its reach and encourage physical consumerism” (2022, p. 1675). The mediatization of the hobby has helped transform *D&D* (and TTRPGs more generally) into “profitable transmedia properties with complex networks of licensed and third-party products and services” (Švelch, 2022, p. 1663). Put simply, the increased mediatization of the hobby driven by the growth of shows like *Critical Role* and virtual tabletop services like Roll20 and D&D Beyond has helped encourage an increase in consumerism and commodification of the game (Švelch, 2022).

Giordano (2022) applied Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation, or the process through which newcomers become experienced members of a group, to a qualitative study of *D&D* players to examine how novices become integrated into the role-playing subculture. Through participant observation of a game session which included players with differing degrees of *D&D* experience, Giordano found that for some novices, “explicit in-game training was required to learn their role at the table”; however, for novices who “took extra steps to gain experience by engaging in the wider distributed and virtual community through online forums or viewing streamed actual play *D&D* games” learning the nuances of the game came more quickly (Giordano, 2022, p. 446). These observations suggest that acts of legitimate peripheral participation, such as watching TTRPG-specific media, can make it easier and less daunting for new players to enter the subculture.

Existing literature on TTRPG-specific media has primarily examined its impacts on the accessibility (Sidhu & Carter, 2021; Giordano, 2022) and commercialization (Švelch, 2022) of the hobby. Presently, there has been little research on the impact of these media on the quality of players' games. As such, we sought to understand if these media are making players ‘better’ at TTRPGs. Because it is difficult to define what makes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ TTRPG player, we have developed the following conceptual framework to describe the qualities necessary for transcendent, high-quality TTRPG gameplay moments to occur.

### **Conceptual Framework**

What makes a successful, fulfilling TTRPG experience? As we have discussed, TTRPGs allow for a significant degree of flexibility in how they are played; thus, each group of players will have their own criteria for what makes a “successful” game session. From our interviews, moments of pivotal play where play transcends

the game and impacts players on a deeper level were frequently identified as indicators of a successful game session. Brennan Lee Mulligan, the DM for the popular *Dimension 20* actual play series, calls these transcendent moments “the pinnacle of RP experience” (Dimension 20, 2021, 18:00). If we consider these moments to be the collective “goal” of players, how do we achieve them? We contend that, based on our research, to create these kinds of pivotal play experiences, three overlapping layers of socialization must be present for each player at the table:

1. **Game Competency** –This includes understanding the mechanics of the TTRPG in question and a solid understanding of the player’s character, attributes, and features. According to Sidhu and Carter (2021), one of the main components of pivotal play is meaningful play (p. 1049). As a result, one must understand the game mechanics and how they work to a degree to make play meaningful.
2. **Subcultural Competency** – Shay (2013) contends that part of being an effective player includes a requisite level of “geek knowledge,” whether that be directly in the TTRPG community and actual play media or in ancillary interests such as “science fiction, fantasy, military history, spy movies, video games, comic books/graphic novels, and Japanese anime/manga” (p. 44). Subcultural Competency is a necessary social layer for all players but is particularly important for DM’s as it serves as a source for inspiration, themes, story, and general game knowledge. One must understand the general culture around TTRPGs within the broader geek community. This knowledge gives players (and thus their table) an advantage over players who have not immersed themselves in the subculture (Giordano, 2022, p448).
3. **Comradery (Idiocultural Competency)** - Finally, comradery exists at the level of the table’s idioculture and is driven by several factors, including time spent together, group rituals, and commitment to performance. On an in-game level, this includes understanding the motivations and abilities of the other characters in the party, similar to one’s own character (detailed in layer 1: Game Competency). This understanding turns the table into a simultaneous collection of actors and audience members who share a single “performative consciousness” and, as a result, make it easy to understand each other’s actions within the game. In an ideal situation, this would result in “trance-like states” that would provide extreme immersion to the players (Soules, 2021, p.134). To achieve this state, the table has to have a level of trust with one another and be comfortable within the group, which is a level of socialization that must be developed. Returning to Marisha Ray’s experiences (Dimension 20, 2019) as an example of pivotal play, we can see how the players at the table must reach a state of not only caring about (and learning from) their character in the game but also the members of their characters party as well.

While an expert level of experience is not required in any of these layers, the greater the level of experience each player possesses in each layer, the greater the odds of creating the conditions conducive to generating moments of pivotal play. Therefore, the use of TTRPG-specific media to consistently improve a player’s skill in any of these three layers should result in an improvement in overall game quality for everyday players.

## Methods

To examine the impacts of TTRPG-specific media on players’ games, we used qualitative, in-depth interviews with five experienced (median: 10 years experience, mean: 12.6 years experience) D&D players from various backgrounds. To recruit participants, we used a combination of judgment and snowball sampling. We gave recruiters who were well established within the TTRPG community a form email invitation and instructed



them to send it to people who matched our criteria. Additionally, some participants were referred to the researchers by other participants. Because we wanted to examine the long-term impacts that TTRPG-specific media have had on gaming habits, we purposefully sought out participants with considerable experience at multiple “tables,” and who had consumed TTRPG-specific media. Experience as a DM was mandatory, with extensive experience being preferred. Interviews were conducted online and ran approximately 45-75 minutes in length. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed digitally, then proofread and corrected. Completed transcripts were then analyzed and coded by the researchers for five relevant themes.

## Discussion

Five themes arose throughout our interviews. We found a direct correlation between the number of themes represented in each interview and each participant's experience level. The identified themes were as follows:

1. Media-driven dissonance in new player expectation.
2. Media-assisted socialization within the game.
3. Media for DM inspiration and ideation.
4. A shift toward narrative-focused games.
5. Quality of the “whole” player.

Each of these themes impacts the others. As such, we have broken them down into sections relative to each other, first to discuss current frustrations being generated by TTRPG-specific media due to dissonance in new player expectations vs the reality of non-professional play, and then move on to our four other themes viewed through the lenses of legitimate peripheral participation, pivotal play, and cultural theory to establish a trend in everyday games related to TTRPG-specific media consumption.

### Right Table, Wrong Idioculture

Four out of five of our participants indicated that they had directly encountered dissonance in new player expectations with an increased demand toward a more “performative” game style when sitting at the table. In each case, our participants indicated that their newer players had expected the home game to function similarly to *Critical Role*, with two of the four explicitly mentioning the “Mercer Effect.” All described the problem as more of a short-lived annoyance, which was easily remedied shortly after that. One participant recounted their experiences in both encountering this dissonance and setting realistic expectations with their new player:

“What I told them was that this is kind of how the game - most games I've played [go] - these players are actually pretty good. I know they're more charismatic than the average player I have had [...], this is more actually how it happens in real life” (Participant 2, 0:38:30).

The same participant described how their player eventually settled into the norms of the table and became a regular participant in that group. Meanwhile, another participant settled on providing a regular disclaimer to their tables, stating that “we’re not like those shows, we run our games our own style” (Participant 1, 1:08:55).

Even when new players sit down with a group and sufficiently socialize themselves with the group to engage with the game, it can lead to difficulties where the new player fails to engage with the game mechanics sufficiently to move the plot forward meaningfully. Two of our participants discussed concerns where newer players would prefer to role-play endlessly while avoiding the overall adventuring mechanics of the games. Participant 4 described this as a need to “get the player's feet under them.” This dissonance between new

players and the games they are joining can create issues with overall enjoyment.

Both of these examples fall under the definition of the “Matt Mercer Effect,” where new players who have consumed TTRPG-specific media come to their first session with a specific set of assumptions regarding how the game should be played. While these mismatches in expectations vs reality are relatively easily handled with a disclaimer or a conversation, it is essential to consider why this occurs with respect to the layers of game competency and comradery.

Fine’s (1979) concept of idiocultures helps describe this mismatch, whereby each table and player group has their own cultural mythos, history, and set of rituals, behaviours, and beliefs. Additionally, the in-game world and story, which is communally built by the table, is unique to that table regardless of whether the world is entirely homebrew (created from scratch by a table member) or as part of a pre-published setting or campaign. Playing in the game and the actions the players will take make the in-game culture unique to that table (pp. 123-152).

To describe how new players can sometimes have unrealistic expectations of what to expect from a role-playing session, we have combined this concept of idiocultures with that of Horton and Wohl’s (1956) concept of parasocial relationships, which has long been studied across various fields and describe a one-sided relationship between a media figures’ persona and media consumers. This relationship creates a hierarchy between the media figure and the consumer in which the consumer has “little or no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility.” In contrast, the figure maintains control over the relationship (p. 215). In the case of streaming actual play, parasocial relationships are quickly developed, as these media are specifically designed in part to feel like you, the viewer, are part of an already established, highly talented group of role players.

We contend that the “Mercer Effect” represents a form of “parasocial idioculturization” whereby a player becomes socialized into the idioculture of their preferred actual play programming and, without additional reference points, assumes that the idioculture of the table on screen is universal. Thus, when the new player applies the cultural norms they have learned through TTRPG-specific media to their first “real world” session, they may not understand that each table’s idioculture can be dramatically different. In other words, while actual play media allows novices to improve their baseline understanding of the game and its mechanics, new players whose only exposure to TTRPG idiocultures comes via media representations may find they are left with limited knowledge of what comradery looks like in a real-life scenario.

### **Socialization Within the Game**

While the negative impacts of this form of socialization seem relatively short-lived, the overall benefits of legitimate peripheral participation, as established by Giordano (2022), were readily apparent across all of our participants. Between the massive growth in the hobby and new players having some prior knowledge in the Subcultural and Game Competency layers, our participants reported a general ease in socializing their players into the game and the table after any initial dissonance is addressed. While our participants still classified novices who came to their tables via TTRPG-specific media as “beginner players who are [still] very much beginning their RPG journey” (Participant 5, 0:25:41), our participants also pointed out the benefit of new players having an existing framework with which to help teach and socialize players “I had something I could relate to with them. Something I could draw an example from” (Participant 1, 01:05:18). This represents a significant reduction in the barrier to entry for players and DM’s as it removes the daunting task of understanding larger texts such as *The Players Handbook* when it comes time to play, and allows the table to socialize the player to their idioculture through filling in the gaps in the players knowledge, allowing the new player to become remarkably efficient with the nuances of their character, and their characters place within the in-game party.

Our participants confirmed Sidhu and Carter’s (2020) findings that many new players were coming to

the game via TTRPG-specific media. As one participant stated, “The popularization of D&D-specific media has brought a ton of players [...] it has done wonders” (Participant 3, 28:03). This indicates that, for the first time in TTRPG history, the vast majority of new players are approaching the game with at least a rudimentary understanding of the game mechanics and surrounding culture. Combined with a table willing to socialize a player appropriately, this dramatically increases the likelihood of players experiencing moments of pivotal play. Thus, as Giordano (2022) found, by participating on the periphery through TTRPG-specific media, players can come to the table with a greater understanding of the basic rules and be socialized into the group faster.

### **Great Experiences Require Good DM's**

The majority of our arguments up until this point have focused on the culture and socialization of new players; however, the level of knowledge and skill required across all three layers is significantly higher for DMs. Thus, it is essential to consider the impact of TTRPG-specific media on DMs. DMs are uniquely positioned at the table as they are the arbiters of the game rules, responsible for every non-player character (NPC) in the game, for building and describing the world, and for providing a story framework and an adversary to challenge the players. Outside of the game, the DM is typically considered the table leader and is often responsible for helping to manage the culture of the table and managing interpersonal disputes. Recognizing that being a DM is a multifaceted position that requires organization and strong performative and communication skills means that the position can be demanding outside of the “game night.” While each player significantly contributes to creating pivotal play moments, the DM holds more responsibility than anyone else. As a result, it is imperative to understand the impact TTRPG-specific media has on the DM.

While most TTRPG-specific media referenced in this research has been of the actual play variety, there is an entirely instructional style of TTRPG-specific media directed at DM's for use in their own game. These media often include advice on tailoring the game rules for an individual table and advice from game designers and writers on creating worlds, encounters (individual interactions or combat between the players and monsters or NPCs), and campaigns. All of our participants were experienced DMs, and they indicated that they regularly took advantage of different forms of TTRPG-specific media for advice and inspiration across several subjects.

Two of our participants told us about how they use inspiration from actual play DM's to influence their in-game styles directly and how they approach putting their spin on these examples:

“Brennan (the DM for *Dimension 20*) has been an insane influence on me as a DM. How I describe places, how I interact with my players in terms of offering them choices, and how my NPCs play out. [...] I've taken to mimicking him so that I can then work and adapt, to get my own ‘brand’” (Participant 3, 0:30:19).

Participant 1 shared a similar experience of taking inspiration from an actual play DM:

“I've been taking tips from Matthew Mercer. I've definitely picked up on when an enemy gets killed. ‘Okay, how do you want to do it?’ [Although,] I am kind of rethinking that a little bit because I do want to experiment with enemies pretending to be killed” (Participant 1, 1:20:21).

All of our participants discussed how they utilize both actual play and meta-TTRPG-specific media to improve how they plan their sessions and design encounters. The advice they gleaned from TTRPG-specific media included improving encounters by incorporating systems from older editions, spotting and building story arcs, controlling pacing through world-building, and social communication with their players outside the game. While each participant mentioned actual play media as inspiration, they all respectively went into greater detail

about what they had taken away from instructional media when it comes to creating more engaging experiences for their players:

“Honestly, it would be kind of stupid of me not to take advantage of learning from the greats, as long as I know why they're using the tools. I've definitely tried to improvise my descriptions based on what Matthew Colville (a notable meta-content creator, famous for his contributions as a writer for *D&D's* 4th Edition among other TTRPG properties) is using because I don't see any reason for not trying to improve on descriptive language. Matt Colville has definitely taught me more about tension, what to keep hidden and what not to. It's just tool use and figuring out those tools from the greats. It's like any creative field like composers, they listen to music, and they figure out why people did things they did, and they use the tools that they feel were effective” (Participant 1, 1:20:21).

### **Movement to the Narrative**

Outside of the social layers we have identified, pivotal play requires that the gameplay have a potent mix of mechanical and performative play. This necessitates an overall shift from what would typically be described as exclusively “dungeon crawling” (playing combat and puzzles) to narrative-driven gameplay (dungeon crawling mixed with role play in the context of an overarching story). Aside from the expectation of novice players coming into the game to have a narrative-driven experience, existing players have also been pushing a shift to narrative gameplay.

“I think there's been a movement away from more strategic game styles in players, and I think that's a good thing. [...] People who are playing it less [like] a board game and more like improv, they will create a character based on an idea they had for a character to play as an actor rather than a token they move around the board and who is objectively better or worse than other tokens” (Participant 2, 41:01-44:34).

The fifth edition of *D&D (5e)* ushered in a newer focus on story building, and the accompanying prebuilt adventure modules made some inroads along that vein. However, as Participant 1 points out, “5e as a system tries to pretend it's too many things that isn't” (36:50) and, as a result, can produce sub-optimal experiences for its players. In addressing the overall change in what players expect from their home tables, Participant 4 described how their players found the typical “dungeon crawl” experience when playing the prebuilt module *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* as “grindy,” (a term typically used in video game culture to describe a tedious, repetitive task to fill time until the character is of sufficient strength to move forward) and failing to advance the storyline (40:44).

Participants summarized their perspectives on what they viewed as the fundamental reason for the shift in play style. “It's more about getting people together and trying to tell a story that's cohesive, and then using the rules to adjudicate those conflicts” (Participant 5, 12:43). “So yeah, it was a way of creating and escaping from rules. Within a system that is organized and proximately fair” (Participant 1, 31:17). “Because really, it's the escapism is something we want to build into each of the players experiences so they can play whatever the heck they want, with some limitations.” (Participant 5, 10:18)

This movement to narrative provides an efficient method of directly contributing to the building of a table's culture. Ongoing jokes and events in the narrative produce group shorthands to remind the players about events that may even predate the current members of the table. This provides a united way to build the Comradery layer while engaging directly with the game.

### **Good Players Getting Better**

Finally, it is crucial to define what makes a good player. Admittedly, this is a subjective definition, but the consensus from our participants indicates that a good player is one who “is someone who is having fun and makes sure everyone else is having fun” (Participant 2, 41:01), remains invested in the game, engages with

TTRPG-specific media in a self-reflective way, regularly shows up and communicates with the table, has a concept of what their character wants, and role plays in character to the best of their ability. (Participant 5, 38:12; Participant 3, 27:07; Participant 2, 41:01). It is notable that the combined definition of a good player includes both social and in-game elements in relation to the group and that all three layers of socialization are present in the definition on top of in-game skills. Of all of our participants, only one could detail an explicit instance of a player showing a dramatic change due to general consumption of TTRPG-specific media.

“I think he is a better player because it has changed how he regards his character as more of a living, breathing person inside a universe where the rules are just different, and that's how he said it to me in the past. And that feels different than being someone who has a piece of paper that represents my guy in this game. And so that immersion level, I think, for whatever reason, taking that intermediate step of understanding the way those two things interact, has helped his immersion to feel better. And therefore, the way that he is invested in the game has changed completely, he went from someone who can only barely make it to someone who's there on time, really, every time now because of it. And a lot of that had to do with the work that he did. And I think either he had the time or the inclination to do so” (Participant 5, 38:12).

With that said, it is important to recognize that most change is incremental. Given the near ubiquity of TTRPG-specific media combined with the affordances of platforms and their algorithms, everyday players receive a steady stream of examples and advice on contributing to their games daily. The changes may be challenging to pick out explicitly or differentiate between simply “levelling up” as a player instead of learning from outside media sources.

### Conclusion

From the perspective of the overall change at the everyday player's table, the rise of TTRPG-specific media has generally improved the quality of TTRPG games across the hobby. Despite the broadly held belief that actual play TTRPG-specific media is creating broad dissatisfaction, our data shows a strong correlation between utilization of TTRPG-specific media and overall improvements in experiences for players, novice or veteran, at the level of the everyday player.

In addressing the widely reported dissatisfaction created by “the Matt Mercer effect,” we provided a novel concept for understanding the overall dissonance between the expectations of new players who were socialized into *D&D* via an online, actual play table when facing the realities of playing at any other table by combining Horton and Wohl's concept of parasocial relationships with Fine's concept of idiocultures. Parasocial idiocultures also explain why this dissonance is typically easily remedied by explicitly setting expectations with new players and explaining/demonstrating how each table's idioculture is unique. Additionally, despite its initial challenges within the community, we have shown that the shifting expectations of new players may represent a net positive in groups wanting to engage more deeply in role play by expediting the shift to narrative-focused games. Finally, TTRPG-specific media has provided an avenue to engage through legitimate peripheral participation which has lowered barriers to entry, making integration into everyday tables easier and a more consistent social experience.

In order to establish a benchmark for gauging improvement for players across all tables, we have proposed a framework of various levels of socialization. These levels of socialization correlate directly to Sidhu and Carter's concept of pivotal play, which we contend - based on our participants and interviews available from the community - constitutes the ideal outcome of a play session for players. Utilizing this framework, we were able to code our participant's responses for occurrences of components that are likely to improve the chances of



producing moments of pivotal play. Through this framework and analysis, we can show that TTRPG-specific media, both directly, through inspiration and instruction, and indirectly, through shifts to consumer demand, contributes to the likelihood of thoughtful, engaging, and memorable experiences for everyday players that go beyond the game session itself.

Based on these results we contend that TTRPG-specific media represents a valuable resource for the TTRPG community as a whole, which consistently produces improvements for the community at all levels.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While our findings indicate that the ubiquity of TTRPG-specific media has been a net improvement for the TTRPG community, we recognize that our research and proposed models have several limitations that would benefit from more extensive research. Because the scope of our subject pool was limited to only five candidates, who all reside in a small, culturally homogeneous geographic area, our testing may be flawed simply due to the nature of our sample. Resources and recruiting requirements limited our project scope. Using a hybrid methods approach is suggested to improve the sample size and overall data set. By interviewing a broader cross-section of the TTRPG community, new, previously uncovered impacts of TTRPG-specific media are likely to be uncovered.

Our framework which defines the social requirements for creating moments of pivotal play is based on research from multiple social fields but requires additional, more specialized research to establish its validity. As this framework was developed after our interviews were completed, further research should be undertaken to investigate its

The concept of a user being socialized into a parasocial ideoculture is novel but requires additional research to explain its implications more completely. Research in this area could be expanded to other communities and their ideocultures as many have specialized digital media ecosystems which are often the first place newcomers interact with them.

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