INTERSUBJECTIVE IMAGINATION:

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING WITHIN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Where the study of anthropology normally collects musings of alternative understandings within one world, another approach might rest instead within considering those understandings as separate worlds altogether: an ontological matter rather than epistemological. Structures of the individual and collective mind secure worlds to make sense within their context. Oftentimes it seems the anthropologist is not exploring different ways in which people think about the same thing but that the field they enter is a new realm completely. My recent field studies transported me to a realm where I found another role of the anthropologist can be to clone itself to reflect on the field with two sets of senses: those of the anthropologist in their original world and of the anthropologist in the new world. Within this ethnography, that clone can be taken just about literally. In order to explain myself, beginning with a description of my introduction to the field seems most accommodating…. After all, 'it's a game of the imagination, Leonard. Paint a picture.' [1]

Alone, destitute, and tired, I cradle my knees while curled up in the corner of a caravan. The driver hesitantly allowed me to hitch a ride along the dusty road toward Aberth after I begged for his charity. Having not spoken to anyone during the entirety of my trip thus far, I am tempted to prod the old man with questions – but nothing comes to mind and the road-weary wayfarer makes it clear how terribly he abhors forced conversation. Instead, we engage in a silent conversation of the senses – smelling storm clouds rising along the horizon, rubbing our achy bones, and tasting the sharpness of whisky that lingers on our breath from the tavern five miles back. Is this, I wonder, how the anthropologist explores a field? Can communication exist without conversation? Suddenly, what had seemed to be dark storm clouds have transformed into a posse of bandits riding horseback, rampaging toward the caravan! I'm faced with an inescapable interrogation: what do I do? Mind

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[1] Quote from TV programme, The Big Bang Theory – in which Sheldon urges Leonard, the DM, to describe in detail aspects of their D&D game to create an intersubjective image among them.

whizzing, quickly calculating options, my hands reach over opposite shoulders to draw three-quarter length swords from my back. Throwing the swords, throwing knuckle-duster punches, throwing six-sided dice, *I defeat, one by one, all eight bandits single-handedly. The caravan has been damaged in battle and my health has reduced to an agonizingly low level, warranting my journey to Aberth in search of The Ailment all the more urgent. The old man, who had hid behind a caravan wheel throughout the battle, now crawls out to present himself before me. He clears his throat and with a dry, croaky voice thanks me sincerely. Can companionship exist without conversation? We have to continue forward… now agreeably in silence that denotes reverence rather than awkwardness.* And with that, Robbie, the omnipotent "Dungeon Master", chuckles boldly and collects the dice, indicating that the game session is over for the night. Is this, I wonder again, how the anthropologist explores a field?

"Dungeons & Dragons" (D&D) is a prominent forty-year old "role-playing game" (RPG). Departing from traditional war-gaming, D&D participants each devise a personal character to enact as they embark on fantasy adventures through story-telling. They use dice to incorporate chance as an element of the course of fate during their adventures. The Dungeon Master (DM) performs as the game's referee and principal storyteller, guiding other players throughout the world of their D&D setting and presenting them with the conflicts and quests along the way. Through this spoken game, players engage creativity of imagination, making the make-believe come alive.

Imagination is a process inherently characterised by its solipsistic nature. Role-playing games, enactments of creative abstraction from the real-world, transfer that which is typically individual to communal by means of performance. Role-playing elicits the imagined-world of one individual to break the confines of their private mind and develop among a group. Imagination is a concealed system, a personal possession normally kept protected. But in RPGs, the individual tears down the curtain, as if revealing the great wizard of Oz, to allow other people to see and share the world constructed by their mind. Players communicate in such a way that spreads internal understanding outwards. Creating a world in D&D that is authentic among all players contributes toward two important social processes. To begin, assembling the alternate world ought to be ruminated. Then, the first social process I explore is the role of character-building in regard to personal identity

between worlds. Second is the role of community-building in regard to the shared imagined-world and inter-subjective relations. Ultimately, the real-world where D&D is played and the imagined-world in which D&D is lived collide. Social processes created in the imagined-world exist with equal authority in the real-world.

'…whenever we encounter one another, we do so as carriers of our own, always unique, history and whenever we speak to one another we speak out of the past that we have lived.' (Toren 2007:109) This concept underlies the construction of a world in D&D. As it was explained to me, when a single word is uttered – say "truck" for example – everyone has a different image of a truck within their mind. Everyone brings their own imagination to the field that ascribes different meanings of a single phenomenon; much like the anthropologist exploring a new world with the eyes of their original world: they have bias. By describing the world of your imagination accurately and in enough detail, letting the curtain fall, less confusion can occur between the individual understandings of words. Robbie, the DM during my D&D sessions, used a quick example to show how you might describe something as simple as nice weather:

> 'The wind is blowing soft – a gentle breeze just to lift the hair but nothing enough to interrupt the heat beating down from the sun… Suddenly you get a description with a rich wealth of experience and emotion and background brought into the floor to develop and interact more clearly.'

The development of this world is crucial to enacting within the game. If you don't have the same envisagement of the world as the DM, how should you know whether throwing three-quarter length swords might hit the bandits? What if the bandits are heavily shielded or too far away? 'The process is one in which mind is continuously brought into being as a function of the whole person in inter-subjective relations with others in the environing world' (Toren 2007:108). Inter-subjectivity is a necessary concept that alerts us that our understandings are founded in our relations with other humans (or perhaps with orcs, dwarves, tieflings…).[2] The importance of this imagined authenticity is upheld seriously by participants. For example, when characters separate and a DM is directing players in different spaces within the game (e.g. some characters explore the forest while others stay in a village), the spoken

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[2] Orcs, dwarves and tieflings are examples of some non-human characters in D&D. My character, for example, was a tiefling – a fictional race of part-humans with demonic ancestry.

narrative is apparent to all players.[3] They make-believe, however, that their characters have no idea what is happening to the others (e.g. if one Player's character is in the forest and they hear that the other players' characters are coming to find him, he continues to play as though his character has no idea, perhaps moving further into the forest and unintentionally yet knowingly making it more difficult for the others to find him.) Although it may seem arbitrary, the DM will repeat the circumstances to each player in terms of their character's perspective to support the game's authenticity. This mutual understanding among all players is the defining factor that divides worlds. By faking ignorance to a certain degree, it is possible to exist in two places at once. However, departing from the description of the world and narrowing in on descriptions of the character, D&D offers another identity for someone. In contrast to the afore-quoted Toren on encountering others, it may allow the person to speak out of a past that they have *not* lived. (ibid. pg. 109)

When deciding what my character would be like, I had no idea where to begin. Some suggestions made by the other players were to start by choosing whether I wanted the character to reflect myself in some way or to be entirely different. In an interview with Robbie, he recalled the many characters he has played as. He can describe each in broad detail, listing not only what the character looked like but parts of their personalities, their skills, and interactions they had throughout games. Initially, I guessed that these personas were somehow related to different aspects of Robbie's own personality – which sometimes they are. Other times however, Robbie explained, building a character can allow someone to play with an entirely different identity to their own. Similar to conjectures made about Performance Theory, the character is in a liminal state of being both "not me" and "not not me". 'Play itself deconstructs actuality in a "not me… not not me" way. The hierarchies that usually set off actuality as "real" and fantasy as "not real" are dissolved for the "time being", the play time' (Schechner 1985:110). There is a suspension of belief that allows you to enjoy a completely different reality. Either way, the character can embody its creator for inner-exploration. Robbie's most recent character explores issues in its identity that Robbie relates with very personally...

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[3] Here I use the distinction of 'characters' who are the inhabitants of the imagined-world, versus 'players' who are the "real" people.

'…by birth he's a bit of an oddling, a satyr, a corrupt character at least in the eyes of the culture. But on the flip-side, he's been offered this chance to become part of an order of humans. […] It's an identity crisis if you will: he's both a respectable member of society and also by birth a rejected member of society. The way that that's manifesting in me just now is, I don't know if I'm Scottish or English. You know, I've been raised in Scotland, I've been welcomed as such, but my birth is English. It's not a huge thing – it's just something to be considered. So I'm just going to see how he interacts and by extension how I would act with certain ideas…'

Although it is not always the case that a player will create a character that they identify with, it is common among new players to be drawn to RPGs in order to explore their own identities. Robbie explains, '[New players] like to make characters a bit like themselves so they can play as themselves in this new world but also so they can learn about themselves… or because if they can't be who they are in the real-world, they do it in the imagined-world!' The world of D&D becomes an intimate setting where these explorations of the self are entirely acceptable. It is, ironically, a performance allowing people to explore themselves through the medium of someone else. 'While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others. While performing, he no longer has a "me" but has a "not not me", and this double negative relationship also shows how restored behaviour is simultaneously private and social'[4] (Schecher 1985: 27). Fleischer, Wright, and Barnes (2007) found a very similar description of the identity of their own D&D informant. '…there's a connection there between the me in the game and the me in real life,' the player realised when considering their sense of morality and ethics between worlds (ibid. p149). The intimacy of a D&D game that allows for this self-exploration is created by the second process I will focus on: community-building across worlds.

Inter-subjectivity, as previously stated, is found among the players of D&D by the shared engagement of individual imagination. Through highly descriptive story-telling, dialogue, and collective problem-solving, players have a keyhole view into the minds of one

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[4] The "simultaneously private and social" here can also be interpreted as reinforcing a process of imagination that begins internally and shifts outwardly to a communal process through inter-subjectivity.

another. The imagined-world they create can be likened to a phantasm; '…phantasmic because they depend on the imagination as an elaborate *social* practice' (Alneg 2002:465). Making the phantasmic place a temporary reality is a unique getaway for each individual to share in. Its fundamental sociality utilizes collaboration in the form of collective imagination as well as teamwork: 'You got to use your imagination… you [play] with people more than against them usually; [it's] cooperative' (Fleischer et al. 2007:152). The simple table-top form of playing D&D also allows for the game to take place wherever a group can converse. A coffee shop, for example, once transformed itself into the mystical and magic world – but only in the players' minds. All other customers were ignorant of the sea-monster lurking beneath the floorboards, the Goliath size barista taking orders, the herd of satyrs rioting outside. An intimacy and trust is formed quickly among the players for such reason. Secretly transporting themselves to a realm where playing has no flippant connotation, the imagined-world builds relationships that carry forth out of the imagined and into the real-world. Much like Indian approaches toward make-believe playing, the game is one of multiple realities, each transformable into one another (Schechner 1995:35). Where there is a distinct divide in the time for playing and not-playing in Western conceptions, the Indian "maya-lila" has no discrimination. There is an intentional blurring of playing-not playing boundary. Similarly, I find that when running into a D&D player on the street, there is no stable distinction of whether it is the real-world person I am encountering or the imagined-world person. Our interactions on the street stay bounded to the real-world but there still lingers an air from the alternative reality.

André, also a new D&D player, imagined his character to be built of rock and named "Per". Both are quiet fellows, gentle and easy-going, yet strong and fuelled by determination. Still, there are obvious distinctions in their personalities; André is quick-witted where Per lacks intelligence. When encountering André in the real-world though, the blurring of realities is obvious. He quietly greets me and I can see the rock layer of Per within him. When seeing a photo of a forested area used to add some objective imagery to the game, André states: 'Per approves'; although it is obvious at the time that it is André, not Per, stating his endorsement of the forest becoming an element of the game. The inter-subjectivity between players blurs identities in a new communal consciousness. Friendships created through the game support an intimacy in light of the privately shared world.

The role of the anthropologist also blurs within the colliding worlds. My character, RuHa, was a young tiefling travelling to find her clansmen and herself. Another part of her however, captured the anthropologist clone. When I interacted with characters in the field, there was no clear distinction as to whether it was myself or RuHa researching. Approaching a captain abroad a ship toward Aberth in the game, my inquiries in dialogues were suitable for the game while applicable as a participant observer for this ethnography. For example, questions as to who the other character is point to how and why their identity was formed. Additionally, I find that though my outward appearance is never-changing, I now have a consciousness of recognizing when I do something that is particularly characteristic of RuHa. Such mannerisms are attached to my real-world self in everyone's eyes except those of the D&D group I played with. When I say something particularly cheeky or bold, the keyhole view of inter-subjectivity allows the other D&D players to see RuHa rather than the real-world me.

Beyond the blurring of identities that are fostered from a communal consciousness, inter-subjectivity among players allows them to feel a part of something greater than 'just a game'. For André, the sense of teamwork makes the game more valuable…

> 'The communal part makes the game fair. Because, if I were playing for myself, I would just make myself over-powered, steam-roll through the game with whatever rules I make, and only have the internal pride of knowing "I won a game".'

D&D, although derived from war-games, is not about winning or losing. It is about interacting: with other players, within another world, and with a new identity. From the perspective of the DM, creating the inter-subjective world promotes a real place where these interactions manifest.

> 'There is a definite joy in creating something, and for me this is to see how my friends react to certain situations… And what's more, I get joy out of other people enjoying the system fairly. And because it's all equal, it comes down to the players interpretations. [As a DM] I have an idea of how I want the game to go but I make it in such a way that anyone can influence how it goes. So there're masses of power handed over to the team.'

The point, it then seems, is for the game to create fellowship. Having already asserted the intimacy and trust that comes with the creation of the world, finding that intimacy and trust are also ultimately means to an end for the game implies an autopoietic system. Its self-maintaining nature of establishing fellowship in order to nourish fellowship suggests circularity. Across worlds, this circularity is seemingly straightforward: construct an imagined fellowship in the imagined-world of D&D to generate real fellowship in the real-world.

Of course, my inference so far that inter-subjectivity blurs the lines between the imagined and the real realms are not to be taken too literally. 'Every story is an artefact, and is always recognised by its audiences as a human construct' (Kroeber 2006: 46). When speaking of seeing both the person and their character during an interaction in the street, it is not an illusion of one's mind nor a physical ambiguity. The construction of multiple identities across multiple worlds is then neither make-believe nor real; also equitable to Schechner's (1985) '"not me... not not me"' distinction. What exists both in the imagined-world and the real-world undeniably is the community that is created. The make-believe hence conceives something real altogether. There is no refuting that the community built among players and the DM is somehow an imagined construct of the mind; no way similar to the sea monsters, giants, and satyrs. Cooperation in constructing a world, and playing within it fairly, nurtures community. The intimacy and trust that allow identity exploration are also the contributing factors that permit fellowship across worlds.

Sprawled across the back of a raft, body defeated, I lay still letting only the splashing waves sway me. Hand in hand with my new companions laying alike, sharing in fatigue and glory of conquering the sea-monster, we drift toward land. What new adventures lay before us are entirely unknown, apart from the omnipotent chuckle which suggests there is a predetermined destiny underlying every roll of the dice. Regardless of our fate, there is at least the comfort of companionship to keep our spirits alive in this foreign world.

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