



TABLETOP AND DIGITAL RITUALS IN *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

Cristo León, James Lipuma, & Mauricio Rangel Jiménez

Abstract

This study analyzes the shifts and changes in the ritual elements in the playing of *Dungeons & Dragons* as players moved to virtual tabletops like Roll20. The essay draws on the formal elements of Randall Collins's *Interaction Ritual Chains* and the ritual categories of Arnold van Gennep's work. The study looks at two *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition game groups playing during the pandemic—one a "traditional" table game and the other played remotely on the Roll20. The study's methodology is based on observations of participants and in-depth interviews with the players of the two game groups, establishing a total of 80 game sessions between both tables.

Keywords

TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, ritual, virtual tabletops, Roll20, online play, ethnography, players

Introduction

Identifying games as ritual practices is not something new for tabletop role-playing games (TTTRPG), specifically *Dungeons & Dragons*, which are the "quintessential RPG."¹ The way of playing is developed with unique characteristics and elements that distinguish it from any other type of game from the ritual perspective. Over time, the way of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* has been modified, primarily due to the rules throughout its five editions;² however, the ritual elements and

¹ Hawke Robinson, "Hawkes-Robinson Role-Playing Game Model: The 4 RPG Formats (Diagram 1)," *RPG Research*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.rpgresearch.com/rpg-formats-diagram-1>.

² Monte Cook, *Dungeon Master's Guide: Core Rulebook II*, 3rd edition (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2000); Gary Gygax, *Official Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Players Handbook* (Lake Geneva, Wisconsin: New York: TSR Games, 1978); Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons and Dragons*, 1st ed. (Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.; New York: TSR Inc., 1974), [https://rpgmuseum.fandom.com/wiki/Dungeons_%26_Dragons_\(1974\)](https://rpgmuseum.fandom.com/wiki/Dungeons_%26_Dragons_(1974)); Wizards RPG Team, *Dungeons and*

objects have not been significantly altered for decades. With the incorporation of technological innovations into the norms of cultures, gameplay shifted, as did some rituals. Then, these subtle shifts were made stark during the pandemic, allowing the researchers to study two similar but distinct cases—virtualizing and digitizing the experience. This shift saw some games move from an actual table to a virtual interaction mediated through technology while others shifted gameplay to a fully digital environment.

The study will explore these two different types of shifts. One group of players shifted from live to virtual play, while another chose to play entirely on a digital platform (Roll20).

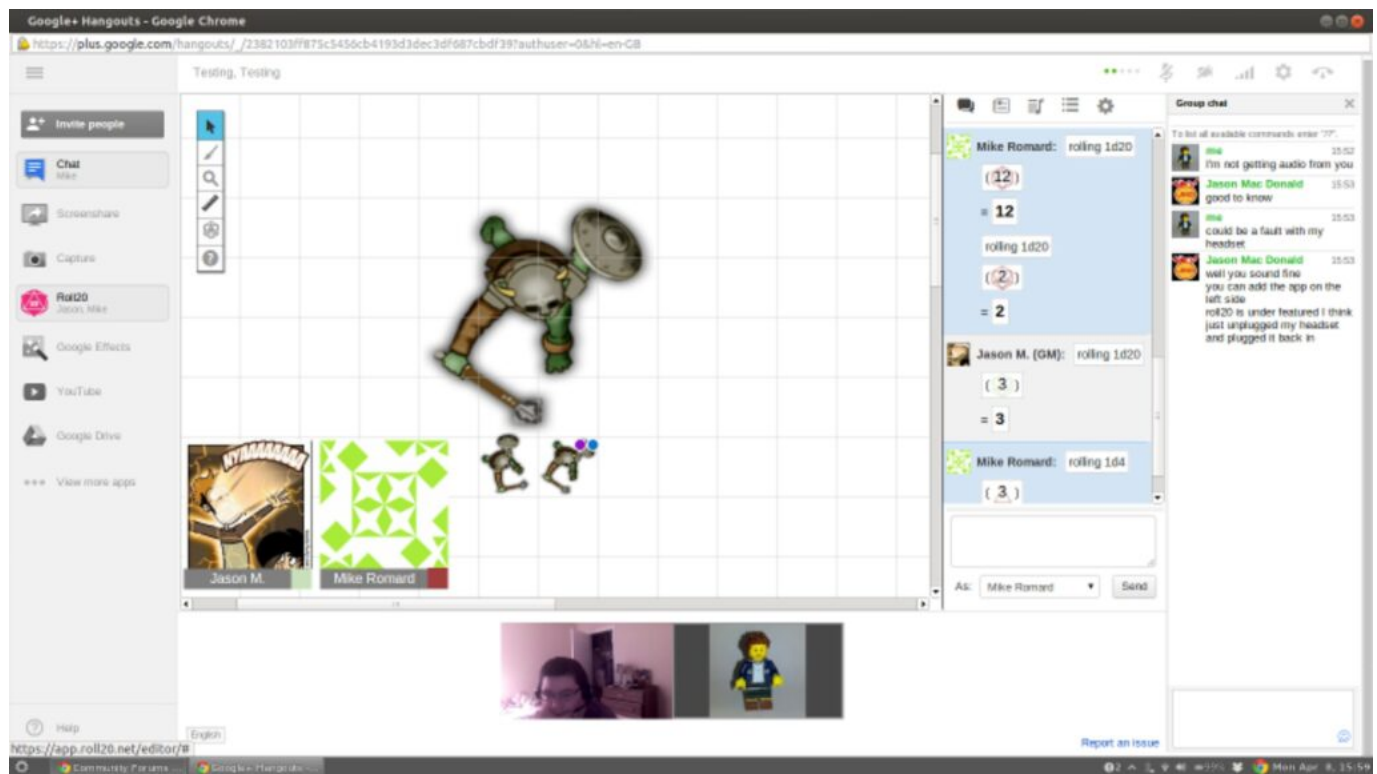


Figure 1: The Roll20 Interface. Photo by Mike Romard @ Flickr CC BY-NC-SA.

It is from implementing new technologies to play a role in these communities that it becomes necessary to understand how the processes and elements of ritual in the game have been modified and their impressions in contemporaneity. To achieve this challenge, the concept of interaction ritual from Randall Collins (2004) was taken up again, as well as its characteristics and component elements converted into categories of analysis, to later contrast them with categories of ritual elements proposed by Arnold van Gennep (1960). The object of study was two game tables of *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition,³ one of the tables in face-to-face mode at the beginning and later

Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide (5th Ed), 5th edition (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2014); James Wyatt, *Dungeon & Dragons: Dungeon Master's Guide – Roleplaying Game Core Rules, 4th Edition*, 4th edition (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2008).

³ Jeremy Crawford et al., *Player's Handbook (5th Ed)*, Illustrated 5th edition (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2014).

remotely through Roll20, the second table exclusively in the remote mode, the technology used focused on conducting interviews with five players who are part of both tables, two of them being game directors, in addition to the observation of the participants during all sessions.

As a result, a series of observations and analyses were generated to find aspects reflected in significant moments when playing, starting with the changes in the characteristics of the ritual and later with the elements resulting from the game rituals. Finally, the study found that playing *Dungeons & Dragons* has been modified due to various factors and elements interacting in the remote digital mode. The analysis focused on changes in the characteristics of the ritual and the resulting elements of the game rituals, revealing significant differences between the two modes of play.

Theoretical Framework

Fundamental to our discussion is the systematic literature review⁴ conducted to create the theoretical framework (see Appendix 1).⁵

The study utilizes Ken Anderson's ethnographic research approach to understand how people live and engage with products, socio-cultural artifacts, and rituals:

Ethnography is the branch of anthropology that involves trying to understand how people live their lives...anthropological researchers visit consumers in their homes or offices to observe and listen in a nondirected way. Our goal is to see people's behavior on their terms, not ours...it enlightens us about the context in which customers would use a new product and the meaning that product might hold in their lives.⁶

The author's operational definition of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPG) is a word used by multiple social groups to refer to numerous forms and styles of play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world. TTRPGs can be seen as a combination of role-play as a cultural system with a substantial impact on the literature of the fantastic and the dimension of 'game' added to 'role-play.' In TTRPGs, players create and act out characters in a fictional world while following a set of rules or structures, using mathematical language to regulate conflicts. The authors emphasize that the concept of TTRPGs incorporates the term "cultural system" as defined by Gary Alan Fine's book "Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as

⁴ Bruce B. Frey, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, First Edition*, 1st ed. (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, California 91320: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), p. 983, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139>; Julian Higgins et al., eds., *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Chichester (United Kingdom): John Wiley & Sons, 2019), www.training.cochrane.org/handbook.

⁵ Here are some key works linking tabletop games and rituals: Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, New Jersey, 2005); Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Angelico Press, 2016). Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes. Le masque et le vertige*, 1st ed. (Paris: Editions Gallimard (from original edition in 1967), 2015), <https://banq.pretnumerique.ca/accueil/isbn/9782072643071>; Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer, From the original German edition of 2019 (Cambridge, United Kingdom; Medford, Massachusetts, 2020); Arnold van Gennep, Monika B. Vizedon, and Gabrielle L. Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*, (from original edition in 1908) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960); José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018.: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637532>.

⁶ "Ethnographic Research: A Key to Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, March 1, 2009, par. 2. <https://hbr.org/2009/03/ethnographic-research-a-key-to-strategy>.

Social Worlds,”⁷ where he refers to a system of shared meaning and cultural practices that are created and maintained by a group of people. In the context of role-playing games, Fine argues that the game system, rules, and fictional world created by players constitute a cultural system that shapes their interactions and experiences within the game. Fine emphasizes that this cultural system is not just a product of individual players’ imaginations but is also shaped by the broader cultural context in which the game is played, including the social and historical contexts that influence players’ beliefs, values, and practices.

According to Nikolaidou,⁸ the literature of the fantastic refers to a body of fictional literature that uses extraordinary or magical elements in the narrative, such as supernatural creatures or events, mythical creatures, or alternative universes. In the context of tabletop role-playing games, the literature of the fantastic serves as a foundation for creating the settings and scenarios that the players will engage with during the game. The authors envision TTRPGs as a combination of role-play and game, where players make and act out characters in a fantastic fictional world while following a set of rules or structures consistent with Zagal and Deterding’s definition.⁹



Figure 2: A character sheet and dice for D&D. Photo by Scott Ackerman @ Flickr CC BY.

⁷ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Paperback, first edition 1983 (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁸ Dimitra Nikolaidou, “The Evolution of Fantastical Storyworlds: A Study of Tabletop Role-Playing Settings,” *Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* 1, no. 2 (2018), p. 219, <https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v1i2.6741>.

⁹ Jose Sagal and Sebastian Deterding, “Definitions of ‘Role-Playing Games,’” in *Role-Playing Game Studies. A Transmedia Approach*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018), p. 65. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637532-22>.

Dimensions of Rituals in the *Dungeons & Dragons* Case

Role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* can be viewed as more than just a simple game but a complex and multifaceted experience. Drawing from the work of Caillois and Huizinga, it is clear that these games involve a sense of ritual and symbolism that transcends their status as mere diversions. Moreover, as explored by Gadamer,¹⁰ the aesthetics of role-playing games add another layer to their significance.

In the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*, players engage in an experiential narrative that creates a rich tapestry of meaning through the various interactions and game elements. This narrative experience is an intricate communicative process involving all players as transmitters and receivers of information within the game action.¹¹ This process develops social competencies among the players, as Orr noted.¹² Overall, the experience of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is a holistic process that involves rituals, social development, and complex cultural and community components. Each player also exists within their own historical, social, cultural, and political contexts, adding more complexity and dynamic interactions to the study.

Zagal and Deterding identified *Dungeons & Dragons* as a tabletop role-playing game category.¹³ However, their study did not consider platforms like Roll20 for their categories and definitions. Thus, a new modality is generated that falls into a new category to be defined, as playing through Roll20 does not have the same characteristics as a single-player computer or Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG).¹⁴ The authors clearly distinguish between “Virtual” and “Digital”. This study defines virtual as gameplay handled through a gaming system like Roll20. At the same time, digital communication is a means of augmenting or facilitating communication during gameplay, such as through chat messenger tools or teleconferencing like Zoom.

This study identifies rituals enacted and with objects, as well as the communal experience leading to the development of culture tied to these ritual acts and items. The study’s theoretical-methodological construction is based, in the first instance, on Randall Collins’ ritual concept. This concept is “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which generates solidarity and symbols of group membership.”¹⁵ Furthermore, it is directly related to the ritual chains of interaction, specifically with its primary effects such as *group solidarity, symbols that represent the group (sacred objects), emotional energy in individuals, and standards of morality*, without neglecting the characteristics that Collins considers necessary to carry out a ritual, which he calls *bodily co-presence, the barrier to outsiders, the mutual focus of attention and shared mood*. The concepts of the magic circle, commensality, fraternization, and sacred zones

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La Actualidad de Lo Bello: El Arte Como Juego, Símbolo y Fiesta*, trans. Antonio Gomez Ramos, 1st ed., vol. 15 (Ediciones Paidós Iberica, 1991).

¹¹ Mauricio Rangel Jiménez, “Calabozos y Dragones: Medio Que Articula Narrativa Experiencial Mediante Sus Interacciones” (PhD Thesis, Mexico, Universidad Iberoamericana, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23133.95208>.

¹² Matthew Orr, Sara King, and Melissa McGonnell, “A Qualitative Exploration of the Perceived Social Benefits of Playing Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” *International Journal of Role-Playing*, no. 10 (2020): pp. 70–83.

¹³ Zagal and Deterding, *Role-Playing Game Studies*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Theodoros Sourmelis, Andri Ioannou, and Panayiotis Zaphiris, “Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and the 21st Century Skills: A Comprehensive Research Review from 2010 to 2016,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 67 (2017): pp. 41–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.10.020>.

¹⁵ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, p. 7.

of Arnold van Gennep¹⁶ are used as a second theoretical element. However, his concepts should be understood as complementary elements to those used by Collins.

The ritual aspects are essential within a game since meaning is derived from actions configured during the game. These become elements of cultural representation in such a way that "It is quite impossible to separate the contest as a cultural function from the complex "play-festival-rite."¹⁷ Similarly, Caillois also refers to the game's meaning: "The word game designates not only the specific activity that it names but also all the figures, symbols or instruments necessary for that activity. or to the functioning of a complex set."¹⁸

Observing Rituals

Randall Collins provides aspects that will be used to analyze the gameplay rituals.¹⁹ *The chains of interaction* rituals that Collins proposes are based on the subjects' interactions with an emotional charge within a given situation. Collins defines *bodily co-presence* as part of the necessary ingredients of any ritual; for role-playing games, we know that this is an essential ingredient, although, in an online game using the Roll20 platform or Discord as a means of communication, that definition becomes complex. The players are not physically within the same physical space, although they are in a virtualized space that is reflected in two ways: on the one hand, the virtual space that is generated by remote communication through the platforms, and on the other, the virtual space that is generated at the moment of playing, the latter becoming a common focus of attention (the *mutual focus of attention*), both elements being the ones that are made up of significant and emotional ones, as Collins mentions: "At the center of an interaction ritual is the process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions."²⁰

From this perspective, rituals generate an embodied memory and identity, so in the case of a face-to-face role-playing game, this component would be maintained, while in a virtual game or one managed through a digital presence, the corporeality is not clearly understood and needs to be examined to determine if it shifted transformed or lost. *The coincident focus of attention* could also be considered as immersion in terms of Bowman.²¹ The first one was chosen for this analysis due to its synergy with the other characteristics. The shared mood is the last element Collins mentions as necessary for an interaction ritual. In a role-playing game, it is linked to the *mutual focus of attention*; they are configured through significant moments in the timeline of the characters and players when meaningful experiences are created and shared by all participants.

Collins mentions that the ritual has specific effects, such as group solidarity, emotional energy in individuals, symbols representing the group (sacred objects), and standards of morality,²² which are

¹⁶ Gennep, Vizedon, and Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*.

¹⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Reprint from the German edition 1944 (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 31.

¹⁸ Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes. Le masque et le vertige*, par. 9. Translation from the original in French: "...le terme de jeu désigne non seulement l'activité spécifique qu'il nomme, mais encore la totalité des figures, des symboles ou des instruments nécessaires à cette activité ou au fonctionnement d'un ensemble complexe."

¹⁹ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

²⁰ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, p. 47.

²¹ Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Immersion and Shared Imagination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies. A Transmedia Approach*, edited by Sebastian Deterding and José Zagal (Routledge, 2018), pp. 379–94, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637532-22>.

²² Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, p. 49.

described and interrelated with elements considered fundamental by other authors when discussing ritual action.²³ Thus, both the rituals of interaction and those related to artifacts and elements tied to gameplay were examined in line with how Collins identifies them.

Group solidarity is constituted thanks to the goals or objectives established within the narrative line of the characters and players, generating a need for teamwork at the table. There can also be a sense of communion or group mutual help outside the game. Between them, in such a way that it differs from the regulations of the game circle, that is, there is a solid social bond of fraternization between equals (as players). Still, outside the game, Victor Turner would call this parameter *Communitas*,²⁴ a term that opposes the structure of the regulations imposed within the game.

Arnold van Gennep offers us another perspective that is related to these concepts; from the rites of passage, he speaks of fraternization as an element present in events with ritual characteristics; it is within the *magic circle* that defines it as a characteristic of rituality (being related to the concept that Huizinga would also take up).²⁵ From this perspective, the *fraternal bond* is observable at the time of the game with the teamwork that is presented in the narrative line of the characters through their interaction; when built with the characters, it implies that it is in the virtual game space where it can be developed.

Returning to Collins, the *emotional energy in the individual* alludes to the feeling of confidence, contentment, enthusiasm, and initiative for action; in terms of *Dungeons & Dragons*' experiential narrative, they are the significant moments that constitute the narrative line of the players in a few. In other words, the emotions that develop from the interactions of the players and characters in both game narratives are part of the elements that are considered necessary for the ritual process.

The third element resulting from the Rituals of Collins are the *symbols that represent the group*; they constitute *sacred objects* for the playgroup, and they can be represented by words, gestures, and icons that contribute to the cohesion of the playgroup, in the case of the playgroup. Dice, character sheets, and director screens represent face-to-face mode.

The interrelation of the concepts of Collins²⁶ and van Gennep²⁷ allows us to observe from a broad perspective the diversity and depth with which ritual elements have been reviewed over time; in this particular case, coincidences have been found that allow us to analyze how the game ritual is carried out in *Dungeons & Dragons*, both in face-to-face mode and remotely through platforms such as Roll20, establishing each of the revised concepts as formal analysis categories as part of the analysis.

Participants

The majority of the players participated in all the game sessions. To ensure anonymity, the authors scrubbed the names and created altered names for all participants; we informed them in a pre-game session of the intention and scope of the study "to provide potential research subjects with a better understanding of a project's scope, including its risks and benefits, so they can make a more fully

²³ See *The Rites of Passage, The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series* (Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks, 1991).

²⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 96.

²⁵ Gennep, Vizedon, and Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*.

²⁶ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

²⁷ Gennep, Vizedon, and Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*.

informed decision about whether to participate.”²⁸ The five participants will be named Participant “U,” Participant “S,” Participant “G,” Participant “Z”, and Participant “C” (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant’s Demographics

Participants	DM F2F	DM Virtual	Other Systems	Experience
U	X	X	X	14
S	X	X	No	16
G	No	No	No	12
Z	X	X	X	26
C	X	X	X	29

All players lived in CDMX during the year of the study and had the proper technology to play the game.

Methodology

To interweave the formal categories offered by Collins and van Gennep with how the changes between the elements that intervene in the ritual are observed, structured observations of the participants of two games of *Dungeons & Dragons* were carried out, game group 1 (directed by Zuare) began in a face-to-face table format, due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was switched to digital format from session 10. Additionally, 35 more sessions were played from the start of the contingency; Game group 2 (directed by Cuautlipilli) is totally in the virtual format in Roll20; it began within the dates of the COVID-19 contingency, and 35 sessions were played until this analysis. Game group 1 is the official adventure “Tales from the Yawning Portal”²⁹ designed for the “DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS 5th edition: Players Handbook,”³⁰ with the addition of a short adventure called “The Murky Deep,”³¹ designed for the “Player’s Handbook Advanced Dungeons and Dragons”³² but adapted to develop with characters of 5th edition. Game group 2 began with the adventure “Waterdeep: Dragon Heist.”³³ In the end, it continued with the adventure “Waterdeep: Dungeons of the Mad Mage,”³⁴ both adventures made to be developed in the *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition.

Complementing the participant observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with five players from the game groups, 4 of them participants from both groups (see Table 2). All players have had the game experience at other tables, both *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games, and gaming experience both in person and remotely (see Table 2).

²⁸ HHS, “Final Rule Enhances Protections for Research Participants, Modernizes Oversight System,” Text, HHS.gov, January 18, 2017, <http://wayback.archive-it.org/3926/20170127095200/>; <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2017/01/18/final-rule-enhances-protections-research-participants-modernizes-oversight-system.html>.

²⁹ K Mohan and M Mearls, *Tales From the Yawning Portal* (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

³⁰ Crawford et al., *Player’s Handbook (5th Ed)*.

³¹ Norman B. Ritchie, *The Murky Deep* (Lake Geneva, Wisconsin: TSR, 1993).

³² David Zeb Cook, *Player’s Handbook Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, 2nd edition (Lake Geneva, Wisconsin; Cambridge: TSR Inc., 1995).

³³ C Perkins, *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*, Illustrated edition (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2018).

³⁴ C Perkins, *Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage*, Illustrated edition (Wizards of the Coast, 2018).

Table 2: Game Sessions General Data

Game Group	Game Group 1	Game Group 2
Adventure 1	Tales from the Yawning Portal (5th Ed. F2F and Online)	Waterdeep: Dragon Heist (5th Ed. Online)
Adventure 2	The Murky Deep (Adapted from 2nd Ed. Online)	Waterdeep: Dungeons of the Mad Mage (5th Ed. Online)
Online Sessions	35	35
Face to Face Sessions	10	0
DM	Zuare	Cuautlipilli
Player 1	Cuautlipilli	Zuare
Player 2	Grau	Grau
Player 3	Uya	Uya
Player 4	Seycar	Seycar
Player 5	Keleltk	Keleltk

The data from the participant observation, the responses from the in-depth interviews, and elements of the author's gaming experience were analyzed and contrasted with the formal categories derived from the author's Collins and van Gennep through the Atlas.ti software, forming networks of interaction between the categories.

Results and Findings

The four elements from Collins were used to track rituals (*body co-presence, the mutual focus of attention, barrier to outsiders, and shared mood state*).³⁵ *Body co-presence* was observed in both game groups with its particularities. Game group 1, having started in a face-to-face mode, allowed a before and after comparison; at the beginning, the players had to make an appearance for the first sessions, following an established regularity of every third weekend, either on Saturdays or Sundays, the players who contribute to this analysis attended all sessions.

From the formality of the ritual, it is precisely the constancy and regularity in the game that gives meaning to the coincident focus of attention and bodily co-presence to generate emotions, which, although they are not repetitive in themselves, each session that is attended causes what necessary to motivate participation in a following session, taking into account this element, the face-to-face game table at table one does not manage to maintain this ritual characteristic at all by not having in all its players the necessary constancy in their face-to-face moment. On the other hand, the regularity of the tables at a distance reconstitutes the ritual, although in a different sense.

Concerning the coincident focus of attention in face-to-face mode, although the players are present around the table, some distractions are observed that decrease the playing time in the sessions, such as seeing the cell phone, stopping playing for moments to tell anecdotes, talking about any topic, or even taking time to eat. However, the latter was also done simultaneously on several occasions, as in the case of playing.

³⁵ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

In remote mode, it is observed that four out of five interviewees engage in other activities while playing. These activities range from work-related tasks, browsing the internet and checking emails, to playing video games, all done in anticipation of their turn. However, gamemasters cannot multitask in this way, yet they admit to doing so when participating as players. The exception is Uya, who stated that he does not engage in other activities during the game. He attributes this to his inability to focus on two things simultaneously on the computer, maintaining concentration solely on the game. In contrast, Grau experiences restlessness during moments of the game where he is not actively involved, expressing a need to do 'something productive.' The others, however, resort to various distractions while waiting for their turn in the game."

In these cases, the concern of the players to keep busy in other situations at the same time as the game is observed; they leave part of the coincident focus of attention to carry out tasks of others, the need to be productive in terms of rampant capitalism is maintained even at times of leisure, and this is what Byung-Chul Han would define under the term of production when mentioning that.



Figure 3: This study found player attention occasionally drifting back to work. Photo by Bill Weiss @ Flickr CC BY-SA.

From observations, it was found that the ritual of co-presence suffered in both digital and virtual environments compared to face-to-face meetings, where initial meetings exhibited typical rituals that broke down when shifting to digital environments. These distractions and isolated turn-taking led to individuals engaging in other work or activities while waiting for a turn with the group moderator (GM), representing a lack of community-building. These findings are supported by sources such as Han's "assembly,"³⁶ Gennep,³⁷ and Huizinga in the context of establishing a "magic circle"³⁸ during gameplay. The virtual and digital mediation diluted the emotion and reduced the game flow to turn-taking rather than more simultaneous action and discussion, which was also observed.

Three interviewees identified a preference for FTF, which may result from nostalgia and familiarity more than situational factors. The rituals of past games were clearly stated as a significant factor in the preference for play style. Using the game's remembrance, players evoke stories, myths, and rituals they live inside and outside the game that fall back on a heroic and exaggerated vision of that past; this generates an emotional and symbolic relationship with the tables of the past play.

In the case of Grau, his preference was for the remote mode, determined above all by practicality, although he also refers to the remembrance of the games he had at the table years ago, due to his way of responding it is notorious the positive emotion of playing remotely, in that sense, even though *emotional energy in an individual* is observed, is also related to Han's "concept of emotion"³⁹ since its primary motivation lies in saving time and chance to do other things during the day. In this way, the experience of play and its associated rituals are not engaging enough to overcome the practical concerns of time and effort.

The sense of community is maintained similarly in the remote digital mode than in the face-to-face mode; the idea of working as a team is the same, although the technical aspects do alter the way it is carried out; this is because of the way in that they can communicate sitting around a table as opposed to having to be interconnected by applications; how they can agree to carry out specific strategies in the game is altered, all the players mentioned this except for Grau, who considers that there is better communication through digital channels. It was observed that most of the interviewed players carried out other activities while playing, which broke the *group solidarity*⁴⁰ generated in the distance mode.

The main elements to understand the rituals are the symbols of social relationships, understood as sacred objects, limiting them to iconic representations in words or gestures. The iconic also falls on physical objects that are constituted in group representation, not only of the game groups analyzed in a particular way, in this case, they reaffirm their sense of community with other role players, such is the case of the dice, an object recognizable by every role player as part of the game's ritual (even when not all types of dice are used in all role-playing games). The dice maintain a direct relationship with the players and the actions of their characters; in this case, all the players agreed that the rolls of the dice on the Roll20 platform are more practical because the platform performs all the necessary operations on the dice. "bonus" and "penalties" that should be considered, however, here problems with technology are observed, either due to lack of memory to use the virtual dice animation or disconnections among others. The actual rolling of physical dice contributes to a

³⁶ Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, p. 43.

³⁷ Gennep, Vizedon, and Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*.

³⁸ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

³⁹ Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, p. 48.

communal experience fully replicated in the virtual or digital environment, weakening this aspect of the ritual.

The character sheet is one of the most relevant objects when playing *Dungeons & Dragons* on a tabletop or in online games. Both Uya, Zuare, and Cuautlipilli have a feeling of remembrance and emotional significance towards it; on the other hand, Seycar and Grau focused their comments on the sheet on their practical assessment of being able to take notes and not have a physical object to manage. The connection of the players with the character sheet does not necessarily imply that there is a change in the identification they have with their characters. However, in this analysis, miniatures were not reviewed (mainly because Table One was not used and Table Two was entirely digital). Works such as "A Bard in the Hand: The Role of Materiality in Player-Character Relationships"⁴¹ show that *Dungeons & Dragons* players maintain their identification and form of interaction with their characters regardless of whether digital or physical.

Another critical aspect is the availability of digital materials such as reference books. There is unanimous agreement among the players that conducting digital searches is considerably more convenient. This shift represents a significant transformation of a traditional ritual element – from an essential aspect to one often relegated to a Google search or provided by systems like Roll20. Such a change in the ritual element markedly influences the game's performance. In traditional settings, the group collaboratively finds content and fosters discussion. In contrast, in virtual or digital settings, the responsibility of searches typically falls on the Game Master (GM) or is undertaken by a particularly interested player.

The theme of the theater of the mind is very relevant to understanding the ritual process in role-playing games. It is a fundamental tool for narrative construction since the player imagines what surrounds the character as if they were his moments, while in Roll20, when playing with avatars of his characters, the graphical representation limits the use of the simulation to the same level as on the table by having the visual representation of his character and his surroundings. Regarding the construction of the story, the most evident difference lies in the fact that in the face-to-face mode, the so-called theater of the mind is encouraged, where the players imagine the situations proposed by the game director in the observed table maps, which were used only in specific moments of doubt regarding the position of the characters. This implies a significant change for the ritual elements since the computer is replacing some of the sacred objects of the ritual of the tabletop game, such as the character sheets, dice, and reticles, to become a new *ritual object*⁴² framed on the digital platform. In addition, for the players who served as game directors (Cuautlipilli and Zuare), how the sessions were prepared was also very different in the face-to-face mode of the table one did not require more preparation than the review of the adventure and a grid that worked as a generic map; When going remote at both tables, GMs have had to prepare Roll20 compatible images to display maps and non-player characters, while players had to find or create an image to serve as an "avatar" for your characters, in the case of table one, only adapt your characters from the physical sheet.

From the perspective of narrative and time, significant changes were observed; the way of advancing in the adventure at the tables in digital mode is modified by the facilities of the Roll20 platform, but also because there is less "talk" that interrupts the game, although from the

⁴¹ Jaime Banks, Nicholas David Bowman, and Joe A. Wasserman, "A Bard in the Hand: The Role of Materiality in Player-Character Relationships," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 38, no. 2 (December 1, 2018): pp. 61-81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236617748130>.

⁴² Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

conformation of significant moments each game mode advances at a “regular” rhythm according to the adventures that are being played, so for the directors and players it is not noticeable that they feel much difference, this makes sense since as Han says: “...rituals are *narrative processes*, that do not allow for acceleration.”⁴³

The difference regarding the emotional issues in the game ritual within *Dungeons & Dragons* in both game modes becomes a fundamental analysis element. It must be considered that the ultimate goal is to have fun. In this sense, four of the five players feel more emotion when playing in face-to-face mode; the only one that considers it to be the same type of experience is Seycar. However, the fact that all the players mentioned having good memories of previous games where very significant moments were generated, either due to rolls or teamwork, led them to consider that they felt more emotion. In contrast, regarding which of the two they have more fun with, all the players except Seycar show greater empathy regarding the fun in face-to-face mode, but with the difference that they comment on having much less time playing in face-to-face mode. Distance, so the formation of significant moments, has not been as strong as in the case of the face-to-face mode.

The food is something outstanding when playing; in the face-to-face sessions of table one, it was observed that the players organize themselves and eat before the game; in the same way, cooperation between all is carried out to buy snacks and soft drinks to consume at the moment to be playing. In the remote game mode, all the players admit to eating snacks when playing; in terms of the individual situation, it is the same action. However, they all mentioned not eating a substantial meal during the game session. In the same way, the snacks and drinks that each player consumes are different. The idea of sharing found at the time of being diners in a shared moment is not present, an issue that van Gennep⁴⁴ considers an element that constitutes a reinforced bond in the diners, which in this case are not only diners but players. The sense of *communion* van Gennep mentions is directly related to Turner’s concept of *Communitas*.⁴⁵ This is because of the action of eating in a group. However, it is not now part of the game ritual; it is an activity that directly influences the generation of links that constitute them beyond a community and derives from it.

Seycar is the only one who mentions missing the tabletop moments held before each game session. At the same time, the rest of the players comment on the difference between both game modes concerning food and the interaction between them. Food becomes a symbol of social relationships,⁴⁶ thus creating a highly significant activity for players in their most intimate gaming environment.

Implications

The implications of this study relate to the disruption of technology. The most important implication is the need to actively identify and establish ritual behaviors and elements to build community and culture. Also, it is essential to note that the disruption of the pandemic was the impetus for the shift within the study. If a study like this is to be replicated, the baseline technological affinity, distance, and levels of familiarity with virtual and digital technologies should be conducted before the study.

As part of the analysis, intersecting Collins’ categories with the ritual elements that van Gennep considers was favorable for the discussion; in addition, in another essential intersection, Han’s criticism that rituals have been modified by both technology and the neoliberal imperialist vision

⁴³ Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Gennep, Vizedon, and Caffee, *The Rites of Passage*.

⁴⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

⁴⁶ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

allowed, among several contrasts, to understand how playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in digital mode creates a perception of being more “productive” people, not only because of the possibility of doing things while playing but because of “saving time” by not having to move from their homes to play, this implies that the players allocate less time to dedicate it to their ritual pastime.

Conclusions

This analysis does not intend to categorize the online game or the face-to-face game as one better than the other; what has been done is based on understanding how the changes are presented in both game modes, in the understanding that the rituality is not lost in either of the two ways, it is only transformed, at the end it is glimpsed that every day we generate new rituals from the means that we have at our disposal to play, with different elements, although not necessarily diverse.

The analysis of the changes in the ritual elements when playing *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition. In both game tables, it is clear that the rituality of the role-playing game is modified in general terms when moving from face-to-face to distance mode.

In general terms, the ritual characteristics proposed by Collins are modified, although they are still present in each table; both game modes have certain particularities that make the game form unique; what makes the difference is the virtual aspect found in each mode, for example, in the face-to-face mode, the coincident focus of attention and the shared emotional state is intimately linked to bodily co-presence, since the players need to visualize the other players to determine specific actions. In contrast, in the remote mode, this physical connection is diluted and falls on the virtuality of the focus of attention, that is, what is happening on the screen.



[Editors’ Note: Parts of this essay have been created using large-language model tools for aid in translation. AGS Editorial Board policy is against the use of large-language models in all cases other than those which specifically address the accessibility needs of the journal. In cases of accessibility, like this, we have decided to flag such usage for the prospective reader.]



Cristo León, PhD holds a doctorate in Organizational Leadership focusing on Institutional Leadership and Innovation. As an experienced Director of Research, he has successfully managed over 1,500 proposal submissions, securing over 350 new awards and over \$77 million in funding. León’s passion for role-playing games and storytelling has led him to develop over 30 years of experience as a Dungeon Master, refining his strategic planning, problem-solving, and improvisational skills. He sees clear parallels between developing game worlds and conducting research, believing that his passion for role-playing games has significantly enriched both his personal life and professional achievements.

Dr. James Lipuma is an educator who believes in the power of collaboration to create positive change. Legally blind since nine, he promotes broader participation for women and under-represented minorities in STEM. His philosophy of education emphasizes providing students with encouragement, direction, support, and autonomy to achieve their goals. He sees himself as a leader, guiding the learning process through mentoring and coaching. Additionally, he wrote *Slayer of Evermore*, a fast-paced fantasy adventure that takes readers on a journey through the planet Moniva. His dedication to promoting positive change and creating equal opportunities is an inspiration to all those who work with him.

Mauricio Rangel Jiménez holds a Ph.D. in Communication from the Universidad Iberoamericana and is a guest professor in the Department of Research and Knowledge for Design of the Division of Sciences and Arts for Design at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Unidad Azcapotzalco. Founder and organizer of the International Colloquium of Studies on Role-Playing Games in operation since 2016 and the International Network of Role-Playing Game Researchers since 2018. He currently serves as the operational editor-in-chief of the Journal of Roleplaying Studies and STEAM.