Not Just Roleplay: How Rules Shape Identity Exploration and Community Creation in *Dystopia Rising* and *Shadowrun*

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Abstract

Earlier research has shown that players use roleplaying in a number of contexts to explore identity, identity performance, and to better understand their personal interactions. One place this comes into play is in games where players play the role of a character other than themselves. This thesis looks specifically at analog games and examines the way that game rules shape players’ ability to explore identity and social interaction through the game. I argue that game rules in these games help determine what questions players ask themselves and what kinds of interaction they explore. To better understand these types of games I look at the rules of a specific LARP, *Dystopia Rising*, and a specific tabletop game, *Shadowrun*, in detail in order to better understand how these rules have the potential to shape players exploration of identity and interaction.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1 Introduction

I’m surrounded by zed. I turn to run but as I run I feel a small thump against my thigh and hear the words “toys in the attic.” I see a small fabric packet on the ground. I’ve been hit with a psionic power. I pause for a second then bring my hand to my forehead and say “Clarification: what’s toy’s in the attic?” The zed stops and says “you are lost in thought for 1 minute you can defend but not attack.” I bring my hand down and disappear into my thoughts as the zed approaches fists raised.

Live Action Role Playing games (LARPs) and Tabletop Role-Playing Games are games in which players roleplay characters in physical space rather than a digital world, LARPs usually take place in a park or camping area while tabletop games happen in indoors. In each of these games players create complex characters who they then act as for the duration of the game. A game runner or game runners creates obstacles for the characters to work through but an important aspect of the game is the players acting as their characters outside of just dealing with these obstacles. These games are distinctive because the game world is layered on top of the real world in a very visible way. Players can literally see both the player, in costume, and the character. One of the things examined in this thesis is the way that this dual vision can be used to help players see parallels between the real world and the game world as well as whether game rules can be used to make those parallels clearer. Current literature on LARP and tabletop games largely agrees that roleplaying games help players explore aspects of their own identity that might be difficult to explore in the real world. Further, identity play in RPGs may help players appreciate aspects of their social interaction in a safe space (Bowman 2010; Simkins 2015; Fine 2002). This project looks at how the game rules can encourage or discourage the roleplay from being used in to understand identity performance or for players to explore aspects of their own identity, as well as to explore strategies for social interaction.

This project uses some of the tools which have been developed to study digital games in order to
conduct a comparative study on LARP and tabletop games. More specifically this project uses the large body of work on how people construct identities and interact through video games especially multiplayer online games that is available (MOGs) (Bartle 2003; Ducheneaut et al. 2009; Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Ensslin and Muse 2011; Grimes 2014; Waggoner 2009) to analyze the rules from a specific LARP, Dystopia Rising, and a specific tabletop game, Shadowrun. There has been a great deal of work on the way that avatar creation and playing as an avatar in digital games can allow players a space to explore their identity and new forms of interaction with others in ways that they do not feel comfortable doing in the real world (Ensslin and Muse 2011; Waggoner 2009; Martey and Consalvo 2011).

LARPs and Tabletop Roleplaying Games change based on the way rules are implemented and interpreted as well as the way they are written. This project also uses autoethnography as a “reflexive analytical practice, to better understand the game context and how game rules are interpreted by players and game runners (Nardi 2010). I also used this method to understand the strategies used during game to help players map the ideas they were exploring in the game world onto their parallels in the real world.

The goal of this project is to create a baseline from which to discuss the interaction of players, rules, and the game itself around these issues similar to the one that exist in the field of games studies towards digital games. The hope is that this would be a starting point from which to look at these games further in the future. This thesis will show that game rules shape what kinds of roleplay players are encouraged to perform. Further I will show that the roleplay is shaped through the rulebook in multiple ways from the rules themselves to the way the rulebook addresses the players. Last, I will show that game runners and players can shape the game to focus more on certain out of game questions by making certain rules or aspects of gameplay more central to their game.

1.1 Statement of Contribution
Roleplay is used in professional and academic educational as well as therapeutic settings to help participants understand themselves, their roles in certain situations, as well as to help develop social skills such as empathy. This thesis argues that looking at game rules can help us better understand how roleplayers explore these questions which could help develop better educational
and therapeutic activities with the goal of helping people explore questions of identity and interaction. I hope this research will also help game scholars understand how games in general are used to explore identity by providing a point of comparison to the work that has already been done to look at this in digital roleplaying games.

1.2 Thesis overview

In chapter two I look at the current literature on roleplay and identity in live action and digital games. In the third chapter I discuss in detail the methods I used to explore these games. In the fourth chapter I give a detailed description of what LARP and Tabletop games are as well as the specific games I looked at for this project. In chapter five I describe my analytical techniques and in chapter six I describe my results. In chapter seven I discuss the ways that game rules can encourage or discourage players from exploring specific aspects of identity or from exploring certain forms of social interaction. In this section I also discuss the limitations of this project and some ideas for future work.
Chapter 2
Game Descriptions

2  Game Descriptions

2.1  What is LARP

LARP are live action role playing games. These are events in which people create characters and live as those characters for a few hours or a few days. The world the characters inhabit is built and kept alive by storytellers or game-masters who send out “mods,” essentially problems for players to solve, throughout the game. A mod can be anything from a horde of zombies sent out for players to fight, to a detective sent to get some players to help solve a mystery, to a farmer sent to teach players farming skills, to pretty much anything else that makes sense in the specific world of that LARP. Characters like the zombies or the detectives in the examples above are played by players playing non-player characters (NPCs). This works differently in different LARPS. Some LARPS which require individual NPCs to be available for long periods of time rely on players who commit to playing an NPC or several NPCs for the whole event. Others which have more interchangeable NPCs, have each player take an NPC shift for a few hours.

Part of the reason that there are so many distinctive types of LARP is that LARP emerged in many places at the same time and evolved in different ways. It is also difficult to differentiate at what point something becomes a LARP as opposed to a historical re-enactment, or improvised performance (Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola 2011). There are several attempts at definitions they largely agree that a LARP is non-digital, requires roleplay of a character (though what this means varies), immersion in a fiction, and the audience is the players (Bowman 2010; Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola 2011). There is some agreement that one of the earliest LARPs, and the one that formed the foundation for the American LARP tradition was Dagorhir. Dagorhir was a very combat heavy LARP, almost entirely combat, set in a world similar to that of JRR, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. According to the Dagorhir website It began in 1977 when the creator Bryan Weise put out a radio ad asking “Anyone wanting to fight in Hobbit Wars with padded weapons call Bryan at the following number.” In the early Dagorhir events information about events was distributed over the phone by organizers to each individual player (Dagorhir.com - Welcome to Dagorhir Battle Games n.d.). There does not seem to be a record of how rules were distributed but it seems likely they were also distributed over the phone or at
events. Early events were likely less rules-heavy than some more modern American LARPs and Dagorhir is still a fairly rules-light LARP because it is and always has been essentially only combat. Other LARPs tend to have a lot of rules around character creation crafting and other skills that are unnecessary in a combat only LARP.

There are several characteristics that define LARP. One major distinction is the method of combat. Boffer LARPS which are usually held outside because players use “boffer” weapons. These are props made of foam or latex to look like weapons which players fight with during combat scenes. Whether a strike hits and a character takes damage is determined by whether the boffer actually hits the player. Non-boffer LARPS are usually held indoors in someone’s house or a space rented for the purpose. In this type of LARP combat is done primarily through calls. Players take turns naming attacks or defensive actions their characters take and usually roll dice to determine whether they take damage. They still generally act non-combat actions out. The LARP I will be discussing in this paper, Dystopia Rising, is a boffer LARP that has aspects of parlour LARP.

Another distinction is between Nordic Art LARP and American LARP. American LARPs have a reputation for being more combat-oriented, escapist, and rules heavy while Nordic LARPs are generally thought of as more concerned with emotion and more immersive (Stark 2012). Nordic LARPs are designed to force players to deal with difficult emotions and difficult situations. American LARPs tend to focus more on escapism and fun. In general, this has led to a more academic culture forming around Nordic LARPs centering around the Knutepunkt conference which focuses on Nordic LARP. Nordic LARPs also often focus directly on real world groups for example the players might play a person dying of cancer and his friends sitting around him on his last days while American LARP is more likely to take place in fantasy worlds such as those inspired by JRR Tolkien or Tabletop Roleplaying Games like Dungeons and Dragons. Because of this Nordic LARP is often thought of as more serious and educational (Lizzie Stark 2012). However, in my analysis of Dystopia Rising I will argue that placing the game in a fictional world actually allows players to learn from it in a different way because it gives players a chance to examine their own ideas and behaviours from a distance.
This leads to some mechanical distinctions most Nordic LARPS are one-offs without continuing characters while most American LARPS, such as *Dystopia Rising, Z world, Underworld, Vampire the Masquerade, Shadow Realms*, etc. last for much longer. On top of that Nordic LARPs tend to be smaller and to have a very limited number of rules as rules are seen as unimportant and something that takes away from the immersive and emotional nature of the LARP. Nordic LARPS also largely create in-game and out-of-game spaces whereas in American LARPs it is acceptable to go out of game momentarily even while in the in-game space. This is partly because rules are so much more important in the American LARPS. One of the main reasons to go out of character is for rules clarifications. In Nordic LARPs such clarifications are considered unnecessary. If a player does not understand a rule they are expected to simply make it up (Lizzie Stark 2012). The LARP I will discuss in this paper is an American LARP. However, I will argue that the many rules help shape the way players learn in game and, the ease with which players transfer between in character and out of character is used in *Dystopia Rising* to help players transfer the skills they learn in game into their out of game lives.

### 2.2 What is Tabletop

Tabletop Roleplaying Games, such as *Shadowrun, Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, Call of Cthulu*, the Gurps system, *Traveller, Dread*, etc. are roleplaying games in which players do not primarily act out their characters. Instead players have character sheets on which they write down character traits and numbers which represent character strengths and weaknesses. The Game Master (GM) tells players what situations they are in and players say verbally what they would like to do. Die rolls generally determine whether skill usages such as combat attacks or magical spells succeed or fail whereas in LARP success is more often determined by the player’s ability to complete the roleplay requirements for the skill. Tabletop gameplay tends to jump from skill to skill because players do not need to perform any of the tasks in between so they can just say what they want to have done which takes far less time.

Tabletop games usually consist of 4-6 players and one GM who runs the game. Games are usually a few hours long once a week or every two weeks and are part of a campaign, a series of games that make up one story, although one-off games or games which characters can easily step into and out of week by week are also common. NPC actions in tabletop are all determined by
the GM and the GM has to be directly involved in every part of gameplay in order to tell players what to roll and to continuously build the story around character actions. In LARP there is much less direct involvement from the GM in what is happening to individual players’ storylines.

Tabletop games grew out of war games in which each player controlled an army and they played out different strategies for an, often-historical, battle. Dice rolls determined how effective attacks were and players’ strategy was in how they moved their pieces around the board. In 1970 one person who ran these games, David Wesley, did an experiment. Instead of having each person control an army he gave each person an individual character to control. He also gave them specific objectives so that they had to consider the reasons for the choices they were making as well as the choices themselves. The game was chaos with people walking away and making deals among themselves. Wesley perceived the game as a failure because it had not run the way he was used to but players loved it and requested more games like this (Ewalt 2013). This question of why characters do the things they do is really where these games potential teach skills like empathy comes into play because they give players an opportunity to examine how events and ideas can effect characters motivations. When game rules give character’s motivations that are parallel to the types of motivations that exist but often go unexamined in the real world it gives players a lens through which to look at those motivations and examine them critically.

When Wesley stopped running the game his friend Dave Arneson started a series of games where he snuck bits of fantasy into the rules, setting it in a world that was not his own. After running these games for a few years he met Gary Gygax who was fascinated by these games. The two of them began playtesting variations on what they were calling “the fantasy game.” At this point there were no rules Gygax would change the rules based on what his players did each night. He wanted them to learn from experience rather than setting rules in advance. Eventually they settled on a set of rules which became Dungeons and Dragons (DND) (Ewalt 2013). Paul Mason points out that part of what this meant was that Dungeons and Dragons and tabletop games in general were not written solely by their authors. He claims that all games are still largely fan written and points out that even in the early days of the “the fantasy game” Arneson
and Gygax were not the only ones to realize people enjoyed roleplaying characters nor were they even the only ones running games. Plus, they were in communication with some of the other people sharing ideas and findings. He points out that many people played DND without ever owning the rule book, particularly in its early days. Instead players used the basic idea and made up rules they did not have. Essentially he argues that DND, and out of it tabletop gaming in general, grew into what it is today from fan culture and the community around DND rather than from a central point (Mason 2012).

Unsurprisingly in a game created by the community, assumptions that were likely prevalent in that community are also built into the game rules. Chris Van Dyke points out that though the “races” in DND are not human races there are some parallels that were almost certainly not consciously put into the game. He points out that that almost all of the playable races are described and depicted as white in the early DND books while almost all of the “bad” enemy races that players might encounter are dark and have physical elements of non-white humans. He goes on to assess the case of Drow, a playable race with black skin. However, he points out that the Drow are inherently evil. Players can play Drow who are trying to be good but they are necessarily fighting against their inherently evil nature (Chris van Dyke n.d.). This type of assumptions is built into all roleplaying games and have been since the beginning of the genre. However, some of the more modern games, including the ones I am focusing on here, seem to have been more conscious of these assumptions and the way they relate to the real world.

Both of these types of games are diverse enough in setting, genre, playstyle, rules, etc, to make it highly difficult to pick representative examples. These games are not overly unusual for their types, they follow many commonly used structures, but there is no standard LARP or tabletop game set-up. These games were chosen in part for practical reasons such as access and in part because they serve well as examples of how rules and structures in these games can shape roleplay. They are both fairly large, though not the largest games of their type. These two games are both set in post-apocalyptic versions of our world and both emphasize player vs environment actions rather than player vs. player gameplay. These characteristics made them comparable examples and make it possible to use them to demonstrate a method by which to understand how game rules shape players roleplay although there is no standard LARP or Tabletop Roleplaying Game. In the next two sections I will give detailed explanations of the games themselves.
2.3 *Dystopia Rising*

*Dystopia Rising* is a Post-Apocalyptic zombie boffer LARP (Pucci 2016). There are fifteen chapters of the game throughout the US and, until recently, there was one in Canada. Most of the chapters hold an event one weekend every month but players can travel and play at other chapters if they have the time and inclination. There are also two larger events each year at one of the locations. Players come from all over to attend these events and what happens there effects the storyline of the rest of the network for the next six months. The normal events begin on a Friday night around 10 pm and end the following Sunday at noon and are held at a nature preserve or park with a campsite.

The rules for DR come in two forms. A rulebook and a digital PDF version of the rulebook. The PDF is free for download and the physical version is roughly $50 USD. Players can order the paid version online or buy it at some of the larger games. Before games players usually get rules clarifications from other players or organizers. Each site has an email to send any questions about rules to and when players ask questions on the Facebook groups which exist for each site they are directed to these email addresses. Other players will also answer questions on the Facebook group, sometimes much to the chagrin of the organizers, particularly if the player gives a confident but incorrect answer. If players need to check a rule during game, there are always several rulebooks around that players can consult at any time. If a player needs a rule immediately, for example if they are hit with a skill they do not understand they simply put their hand up and ask for clarification, as in the story at the beginning of this paper. Last players learn a lot of the rules during their NPC shifts players generally come into game with a good sense of the skills their character has but it is hard to keep track of other skills. During NPC shifts players have the chance to ask longer and less urgent questions out of character then they would during game. They also play NPCs with different skills, strains (categories of evolved humans that exist in the game), and characteristics than their own characters so they have the chance to learn a lot of new skills. Last organizers will often give tips on how skills interact most effectively. This is not something that is in the rulebook but it is very useful information for players whose characters have both skills or are thinking of learning them.
*Dystopia Rising* is a “What you see is what you get LARP” which means players can play a character who is wildly different from them in age or other attributes but they have to dress in a way that suggests that. So some players wear aging makeup or oversized clothes to make them look older or younger. Players also often put gender/pronoun patches on their characters clothing. These patches list the pronouns players and characters should use when referring to this character. This is particularly important in *Dystopia Rising* North because there are a large number of trans and gender non-conforming players. As a result, people are particularly aware of misgendering and players are more likely to be playing characters of a gender different than their own. Many of the trans players still play characters from before they began to transition.

Characters are built by choosing a strain and a profession. Each strain has a lore that explains how they got the way they are, positive and negative attributes, and a list of skills they can learn easily. There are twenty-one strains but not all strains are available at every location. Strains are usually banned for one of two reasons (Pucci 2016). First, because the roleplay requirements would be impossible at the site that game uses, for example diesel jocks, a race that of car-driving hooligans were not allowed at the Canadian site because there are not enough places a car can go. Certain strains may also be banned for storyline reasons for example, in the *Dystopia Rising* world Solestros have been kept from moving around because they are a threat to the more powerful purebloods so they are banned at sites far from their native California. On top of that some strains are restricted at certain sites meaning that players have to submit a back story and character concept before playing them, this is usually because the storytellers want to make sure characters of the strain will be played well for plot reasons or because there are aspects of that strain that could be perceived as out of game racist if they were played badly.

I play a Lascarian, Lascarians are the people who went underground after the apocalypse and they have evolved characteristics that make it easier to live underground since then. Their special characteristics include light sensitivity, a mechanic that makes skills cost more in full sunlight unless the player is fully covered, they are cannibalistic, a mechanic that allows them to regain body when players’ roleplay eating killed people (players or NPCs but no Zed), and they are a bit uncouth so certain professions that require poise aren’t open to them. Their “strain” skills are skills like scrounging, essentially digging up resources, and blind fighting, essentially seeing in
the dark, which make sense given their lore. Mechanically, players don’t necessarily start with strain skills but they can learn them without a teacher. Players are required to make it clear from their costuming what strain they represent. Characters also have roleplay requirements based on their strain lascarians tend to be not very well attuned to social norms. Players are expected to fulfill these requirements when they play their character.

Characters also begin with at least one profession. This is essentially access to another skill list. These lists are much longer but the skills on them must be taught by another character. Over time characters can learn new professions or forget old ones. They can know up to 3 professions at a time and each profession allows the character access to a new skill list. No combination of three lists will allow characters access to every skill that would be useful to them but depending on the list characters will have access to different goods or services that they can trade (Pucci 2016).

*Dystopia Rising* is a player vs environment LARP so the rules and plot are designed to encourage players to work together against common enemies, such as hordes of zombies or NPC villains rather than fight against themselves. The system of character building in which characters cannot gain access to a large number of necessary skills so they have to trade goods and resources among themselves is part of that.

There are over forty professions but not all of them are available to all players (Pucci 2016). Choosing a profession is to some extent reliant on the strain the player chooses. Certain strains cannot learn certain professions and certain strains are specifically suited to certain professions. Players are encouraged to think about why they are playing the combination they have chosen and why their character chose to learn the profession they did. On top of that specific professions have various roleplay, costuming, and prop requirements that may guide player’s choices.

Players can buy skills from the strain and profession lists using experience points (XP). Players get XP automatically by coming to events, they can also buy more or volunteer time (in the form of extra NPC shifts), donate items, or refer new players to get extra XP. Players get more XP per game when they begin playing then they do later which means that early on players have to plan the skills they will need much less carefully, as they learn the game they have less resources to learn. This helps to level the playing field between newer and older players.
2.4 **Shadowrun**

*Shadowrun* is a cyberpunk tabletop game. The world contains magic and fantasy races like elves but it is largely defined by its reliance on technology (Zimmerman 2013). The GM reminds us often “everything is smart, your clothes, your wallet, your gun, all of it can be hacked.” The world map of *Shadowrun* is made up of the same places with the same city names as our world is today but it is run by large corporations that control every aspect of citizen’s lives. A large part of our plot is built around staying under the radar of these corporations because most of our characters are on the run form at least one of them. We each have an image of this world in our heads but they do not always match up.

*Shadowrun* 5th edition has a prioritization system. Players have five characteristics they can prioritize at levels one through five. First is metatype (race) which allows them to have more choices over which metatype to be and to have more edge or luck. Certain metatypes are more attuned towards certain skills, for example elves are abler to see and hear well. Second is attribute points which allow characters to buy attributes which I will explain later in this section. Third is their magic or resonance ability; this determines how many spells they can cast or how attuned to that world’s internet they are. Fourth they can prioritize skills which gives them more points to put into various skills, I will explain this more thoroughly further down in this section. Last they can prioritize money which simply determines how much money the character has (Zimmerman 2013).

Once players have chosen how to prioritize these items they can go on to spend the skill and attribute points. There are professions in *Shadowrun* but they are designed to guide players thinking rather than control what they can do mechanically. The skill list is an open list, meaning that all players have access to all skills. There are skill groups that players can buy but this is merely a way to level up a set of skills together it does not allow players more access to skills (Zimmerman 2013). The skills are also divided into categories but players can choose to buy from every category. The professions are still likely to guide a character’s choices, for example if a player is building a character that is gunslinger they will probably buy all of the skills under firearms and depending on the earlier prioritization they may not have many skill points after that, however there are no skills they are forbidden to buy.
Players also have to select attributes. Attributes include things ranging from being able to see in the dark, to being hunted to the government, to being naturally rude, to having a tail. Attributes that will make life easier for the character cost attribute points while attributes that will make life harder for the character give Karma which can be spent to get more skills, attributes, money, or sources during character creation and then allows you to buy more skills, similarly to XP in DR, during the game. Unlike in DR the rate at which players will receive Karma is somewhat unpredictable. The GM can set individual players or characters goals or tasks and give them Karma for achieving them but there are not set rules about the rate players get Karma or what they get it for. As a rule, players get some Karma and money at the end of a run or mission but it is not always clear how many games a run will take to finish. The last piece of character building that players have to do for Shadowrun is to build their sources. These are NPCs who can give you character goods or information they will need. In DR the problem of getting these things is solved by having a large number of players and by traveling players who come from other games or players from our game traveling elsewhere. In Shadowrun players have to build these characters and go visit them as NPCs because other player characters are not available.
3 Literature Review

This thesis uses theories from game scholars who study identity and social interaction in digital games, particularly large online roleplaying games. It also looks at the existing landscape of research on LARP and tabletop games in order to understand where that research stands now.

3.1 Useful Frameworks from Computer Gaming About identity

In her article *Who Am We*, Sherry Turkle interviews MUD players who use their avatars to explore everything from sexuality, to assertiveness, to gender. They see these characters as representing aspects of themselves while not being them. One player even says that she feels anxious when she writes character descriptions because she might find out something about herself that she does not actually want to know (Sherry Turkle 1996). This shows the extent to which people who play these games use them to understand and explore parts of their identity they may have difficulty exploring in real life either for external societal reasons or simply because they are things the player needs help to understand about themselves. In LARP or Tabletop Roleplaying Games the player does not have the anonymity they do in MUDs but they do have that same duality in that the character is them, or a part of them and also not them. This paper explores the ways in which game rules can help shape the exploration that that duality enables.

Much of the work on identity creation and expression within digital roleplaying games has focused on avatar creation in digital games (Martey and Consalvo 2011; Ducheneaut et al. 2009; Waggoner 2009) the relationship between player and character is central to the way that we talk about identity in this type of game. Of course in analog games the player is less anonymous then they often are in digital games but we can still take many of the ideas about identity and avatars in digital games in order to understand the character player relationship in analog games. In her work on identity and avatars in Second Life, Consalvo found that many players were afraid to use the full breadth of possibilities available for creating their character because they were concerned that they would not fit in if they looked too strange. This stands counter to the idea that avatars are a completely free presentation of players “true selves” (Martey and Consalvo...
In Dystopia Rising characters have to be a member of a specific strain, or type of person somewhat like elves or dwarves in fantasy settings. Players are required to wear costumes that make their strain obvious and each strain has extremely specific requirements (one strain, lascarians must be fully covered during daylight hours, another strain, reclaimers have bright blue eyes and red arms and hands) so it is more difficult for players to see character’s physical representations of their true selves because they are expressly meant to represent something else. These clothing choices do determine how characters fit into society because certain strains hate each other and many characters are strainist or at least more inclined to interact with members of their own strain than other strains. Some strains are specifically written to form clans only with members of their own strain but it is very clearly not about how the player fits into that world it is about how the character fits in. This difference may be partly because players can see both character and player at once. In her study of URU, a MUD, Pearce found that players who had met each other in real life could hold multiple conceptions of each other’s identities in their minds (Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011).

In LARP and tabletop both player and character are always present making this skill even more necessary for players. Pearce also found that in URU characters identities were somewhat socially constructed as other players would recognize their skills and demand they use them. Similarly in LARP players often choose skills or professions they think will be useful and in tabletop games characters are often built to fill a missing gap on a team (Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011).

All of the gamers Bowman interviewed about their experiences playing roleplaying games experienced alienation when they were younger. Part of the reason they played the game was the community and friendships they got out of it. The intensity of roleplaying games helps create bonds between players and part of the reason players play these games is for this community (Bowman 2010). This may mean that the people playing these games are already looking for ways to explore questions of interaction and thus are primed to use these games in this way. Yee found that players in the group in a digital roleplaying game had a wide range of life experience in terms of professions, economic class and levels of education but that they see their relationships in the game as real and meaningful as their experiences in real life (Yee 2006). In LARP these demographics differences are also present, for example my character travels with characters played by players ranging from 17-32 and the game as a whole has players as young
as 9 and as old as 50 or 60 and with educational levels ranging from never finished high school to PhDs. Players feel such a strong connection to other characters that sometimes they will even talk about missing a character when the player is present.

Lisa Gjedde says LARP is what the American educational philosopher and psychologist Dewey (1938) terms collateral learning. "Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future.” She argues that LARP allows for a type of collaborative learning that would be difficult if not impossible in most traditional curriculums. She specifically was looking at the way LARP was used in a Danish public school. She says that because there were rules imposed about character creation and what worlds they would play in student fell into different social and academic systems than they would normally have. The type of LARP implemented in the school was somewhat more structured than Dystopia Rising. For example, students were assigned to teams at random which often meant that students worked with peers they might not have otherwise. She argues that this forced them to work across the whole spectrum of the classroom and taught them to interact in new ways and with new people (Gjedde 2014). Recreational LARPs do not have the same rules and assignments to groups as this in school one did but because there are a diverse group of players it allows players a chance to interact in ways different than they normally do similarly to the way the LARP in the school worked.

3.2 Useful Frameworks From Digital Gaming About Rules and Mastery

There has been a great deal of research on the way game mechanics can used to alter player interaction and teach players specific skills (Bartle 2003; Giddings and Kennedy 2008). There is also a lot of work on players use of games to explore their identity in computer games particularly digital RPGs (Ducheneaut et al. 2009; Waggoner 2009; Martey and Consalvo 2011). Not all of these frameworks will be relevant to LARP as many of them center on the computer and are supported through the anonymity that the internet affords players of online games. However, many of these frameworks do translate to LARPs and tabletop gaming. In this thesis, I will look at the ways that rules and game mechanics can encourage or discourage certain
behaviors and modes of play in LARPs and Tabletop games similar to the ways they can in digital games.

One of the frameworks that most readily applies to this analysis is Bartle’s play styles: achievers, socializers, explorers and killers. Although this framework was developed in the context of online games, they also exist in LARP. However the most important part of the theory for the purposes of this paper will be the idea that game worlds can be made to emphasize one type of play over another through either game administration or programming (Bartle 2003). In the case of LARP there is no programming but there are rules and NPCs can be directed to act in specific ways and this can encourage players to act in certain ways or to explore specific ideas more fully. LARPs naturally emphasize players over world. Because things like physics are hard to alter in a LARP and things outside of our own natural world like magic have to be represented in some noticeable way, *Dystopia Rising* uses packets of corn or birdseed. Tabletops allows for more alternative physics but the world is not very visible so the focus still tends to be on the way players act in the world rather than the world itself. *Dystopia Rising* and *Shadowrun*, along with many LARPs and Tabletop Roleplaying Games also emphasize interacting over acting by making it difficult to know what constitutes winning. Players gain experience points primarily by how many game sessions they have attended rather than how well they did in those sessions. Individual characters have goals and so players can play to achieve their own goals but it is set up to be difficult to claim that a character is achieving more or less than another character for any reason other than having played more games.

Games scholars Giddings and Kennedy’s theories about mastery and game learning can also be applied here (Giddings and Kennedy 2008). Their theory of Control Aesthetics which states that the player learning the game is not defined by the player making choice but by the game training the player to play correctly. They also theorize that mastery is equally achieved through the game teaching the player as the player learning the game (Giddings and Kennedy 2008). These concepts can be applied to LARP and Tabletop as well. These games are able to change to suit the players because the individual sessions are run by people rather than algorithms, however, the rules are still designed to guide play in specific directions and to shape player’s behaviors within the game. On top of that the game runners and other players teach rules and behaviors through in game “skill teaching” and through the way characters and NPCs react to specific behaviors. These tools help the game teach the player how to act in the game world. This is also
how these games can encourage players to use their roleplay to think about questions of identity and interaction and even to practice certain types of difficult social interaction in the game world.

Much of the way players learn to play the games is during the game rather than from the rule book. They learn both from other players and from the game runners. There are several ways the game runs that are particularly helpful in players learning the game rules and behaviors that are acceptable in the game. The first is opening and closing announcements. Opening announcements in particular are a time for game runners to go over the most important game rules including safety information and how players are expected to interact. For example, during opening announcements game runners often say something along the lines of “please do not use words or insults that represents anyone’s real life identity such as gender, race, gender identity, religion, etc. instead look in the rulebook for strainist terms to use in game.” This makes the parallel between real world behavior and in-game behavior more obvious it also makes it clear to players that they are expected to think about their compatriots on both an in-game and out of game level simultaneously. During the opening announcements game runners also tell players about important hand signals they will need to use during game the two main ones are putting your fist on your head to indicate the player is out of game and the character is not there. The out of game signal can also be used to ask other players brief clarifying rules questions in the middle of a scene although players are encouraged to find an in-game way to ask even mechanical questions when they can. The other hand signal is called the “ok-check-in” system it is a way for a player to check that another player is ok during an intense scene without interrupting the scene. The concerned player gives the hand signal that means “are you ok”? And the other player returns a thumbs up, straight hand parallel to the ground, or a thumbs down meaning I’m fine, this is getting close to my limits, or this needs to stop. This system is designed to navigate times when the player and the character might not feel the same.

There are also less obvious game structures in place to teach game rules as well for example new players usually enter on “new player mods” these mods serve a few purposes. First they allow for some scaffolding. The new player mod usually includes an NPC guide of some sort who helps ease the new players into game by giving them more direct cues and instruction then they would get in the less structured atmosphere of the regular game. The new player mod also often includes travelling players who either come from other games or are recently returning from another game these players can also serve as a resource to new players helping introduce them to
the game, answer rules questions and learn to roleplay in a much more individualized setting then the larger game will be. The other place players can learn rules is during NPC shifts. NPCs help develop plot and serve as enemies for the people playing characters at that time but NPC shifts also give players a chance to ask longer out of game questions, try out skills and character types before they implement them on their own characters and get tips from other players about their character builds. McArthur et al discussed addons which expert players in MMOs use to make invisible game language visible (McArthur et al. 2012). In LARPs and tabletops there is not a direct equivalent tool that expert players use to support their expertise but there are many ways to distinguish between out of game speech and in game speech which serve a similar purpose in that they help the players learn the mechanics of the game while existing outside the game world.

In Alone Together Ducheneaut Yee, Nickel, and Moore’s book on social dynamics in MUDs, they explain that in World of Warcraft players level faster if they do not form groups early on and it makes the most sense for them to group with players close to their level (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). This is largely due to the way in which experience points are affected by the number and level of all players who are partied together during quests and kills. In Dystopia Rising what differentiates characters is much more what skills they have then how many they have so groups with diverse amounts of experience work better than they would in MMOs. Shadowrun like most tabletop games is generally played in groups with characters of similar levels of experience but players do not get to choose whether to interact with characters of higher or lower levels than their own once they are in game. On top of that because the mods and scenes are run directly by people they are fairly changeable. NPCs are sometimes sent out with 2 sets of stats so that the people running the mods can change the difficulty of the mod based on the players who come to fight it. Similarly, in tabletop games the gamemaster will often create new paths or change things if they accidently write a plot that is impossible for players to succeed at. The authors of Alone together also discuss the role of other players saying that they provide an audience, social presence, and a spectacle. Both LARP and tabletop take advantage of this its frequent for game runners to dole out rewards for players who roleplay well or who have particularly impressive costumes or props. The explanation for this is always that it makes everyone’s game better by making the world more immersive. In other words players are rewarded for being a good spectacle as an acknowledgement that other players act as an audience.
3.3 The Current literature on LARP and Tabletop

Existing literature on the subject of LARP is scarce and primarily written for people already in the LARP community. Conferences such as the Living Games conference and even the more established academic conference, Knutepunkt, are largely presented as way for different LARP communities to understand the similarities and differences between their LARPS rather than a way to explore broader practices or trends in LARP (About Knutpunkt 2013; Living Games n.d.). Academic books about LARP are largely description (Simkins 2015). Books about role-playing largely describe the benefits of role-play in other settings including educational and therapeutic settings, covering both digital and analogue games (Roleplay and Simulation 1985; Simkins 2015; Bowman 2010).

Within the field of game studies, there is more literature on tabletop gaming than there is on LARP. Tabletop gaming, which predates LARP, was met with widespread societal fear that players would confuse their own identity with that of their characters. As a result, many of the earlier books on tabletop gaming focus primarily on the ways that players manage these identities and how they learn about their own identity from playing someone different from themselves (Fine 2002; Laycock 2015). Further, Gary Allen Fine describes the relationship between the player, the Game Master, and the dice created by the game mechanics and begins to explore the way this relationship between mechanics and other factors co-construct the game world. For example, he discusses the way that game masters can allow players bonuses to make it more likely they are successful on dice rolls that are important to the game. Technically these bonuses are often outside the official game rules but they players and game masters can agree to include them to make the game work more efficiently or to make it more fun (Fine 2002). David Simkins begins to explore similar concepts of both identity and the relationship of mechanics with other factors in talking about LARP. He discusses the relationship between the players, the organizers, and the setting by explaining that players are supposed to fully inhabit their characters while letting game runners create the context. He describes costumes and other setting elements players create to help themselves and other players become more immersed in the game world but presents the roleplay itself as primarily a process of playing the character instead of the player rather than the layered process of thinking about both person and character at once that I believe makes this type of roleplay work as a method to explore identity (Simkins 2015). Neither of them explore the way specific game mechanics or rules relate to what and how players are
able to learn about or explore identity within these different types of games. For example, descriptions of tabletop largely agree that the role of chance is important in tabletop gameplay while works on LARP are more prone to discuss story building (Fine 2002; Laycock 2015; Simkins 2015). Though both these story and chance are certainly elements in both types of roleplaying games it seems likely that the focus on one over the other would change players’ experiences and feelings of identity creation and community I hope to begin exploring these differences within this project.

There is also very little literature providing a comparative analysis of the two genres. As the primary conference on LARP, Knutpunkt has begun to accept papers on tabletop games as well, which is likely to encourage more comparisons between the two types of gaming (About Knutpunkt 2013). In The Functions of Role Playing Games, Sarah Lynne Bowman discusses several types of role playing including both LARP and tabletop gaming. However, since she is focused on the way role playing as a whole can teach skills and content she does not go into depth about the differences between the types of roleplay she discusses. For example she discusses roleplaying in gaming contexts as well as in therapeutic, theatrical, or educational contexts but does not delve into the ways that roleplay might work differently in these different contexts (Bowman 2010).

Bowman and other LARP scholars discuss the way roleplaying and roleplaying games teach social skills, empathy, and self-knowledge by inviting players to imagine being someone other than themselves. Works tend to focus on aspects roleplay rather than specific game systems. For example Laycock argues that character creation allows players to externalize certain aspects of themselves and really look at those aspects (Laycock 2015), Simkins discuss the use of roleplay in other settings to teach subjects knowledge and empathy (Simkins 2015), and Bowan that it allows players to explore identity by trying out identities different than their own (Bowman 2010) Comparison between game systems, could help us to understand the specific ways different aspects of the games help to teach specific aspects of these skills.

Several scholars allude to the fact that cohesive communities form around these games but the ways in which mechanics and game systems help to determine who that community consists of and what behaviors are expected within it is not heavily discussed. My thesis will begin to examine ways in which rules and mechanics can determine behaviours by looking at what
behaviours the rules of these two games encourage. A future project including interviews or full ethnography would be useful in understanding how rules actually do shape these communities. Further the ways in which the identity creation, identity exploration, and empathy training aspects relate to the formation of that community remains largely unexplored (Bowman 2010; Fine 2002; Laycock 2015; Simkins 2015).
Chapter 4
Methods

4 Methods

4.1 Approach

This project uses two methodologies, close reading and auto-ethnography, which complement each other. Nardi says "[h]ow does an anthropologist go about describing and analyzing a field site? There are two strategies. The first is through the application of theory...The second strategy is the accretion of a multitude of details that impart a sense of the everyday texture of experience in a culture. I present the details of the game in descriptions of the game itself, in specific episodes of activity, and through the words of players themselves" (Nardi 2010). Although Nardi's method is arguably a combination of both auto- and ethnography, in this thesis I mobilize only auto-ethnography as a means for presenting a contextual and reflective analysis of the rules and constraints of the game. I am not presenting a study of the players themselves and specific descriptions of events are somewhat limited because I have primarily focused on the way rules shape characters. However, I have played the game and through that play I have gained a greater knowledge of the details of the game which I use here to help flesh out and better understand the ways that the characters “come to be” in these worlds. I am looking at how their performances are supported, structured, and mediated through game texts, particularly the rulebooks but looking at the game was necessary to really understand how the characters came together. I also, like Nardi, am applying theory to the games but part of my access to the games is through my experience playing them. Auto-ethnography allows me to position myself in that research, to show that though I entered as an observer I also acted on and was a part of these games and my understanding is filtered through my own subjective experience in interacting with these materials.

Celia Pearce used similar methods in her study of URU and There.com, two digital roleplaying games. but suggested the term “participant engagement” to refer to them. She describes it as a way to be engaged in the research while still maintaining some measure of analytical objectivity. She found that because she was engaged in and subject to the processes she had to set out to
study which, to some extent, required the ability to observe herself in the same way she was observing her subjects (Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011). I did not set up a field site in these games the way that she did in URU and There.com but I did make characters who “live” in the game worlds similarly to her avatars. Part of my understanding of these games comes through the lens of acting in and being acted on by the game as those characters. This methodology allows me to acknowledge and use that experience to better understand the game texts and the game itself.

For this project, I began by attending games of Dystopia Rising and Shadowrun and taking notes on my own experiences playing and reflecting upon my own experiences as a participant within these game communities. I then put those notes aside and engaged in a close reading of the rule books for Dystopia Rising and Shadowrun. A close reading is an in depth analysis of the patterns and meanings in a text. I looked for the way that the rules and instructions for the settings and gameplay were designed in ways that helped players learn and practice social skills. This allowed me to get a better sense of the extent to which these games were intended to be social skills training tools and to see how the rules and setting were intended to interact. On top of that it gave me a better sense of the way the rules worked across games. I have attended three Dystopia Rising chapters and have played Shadowrun with one group but the rulebooks are the same across all chapters and games so using that as a direct source of information gave me more information about the wider game and more information about how much of the social skills training aspects of these games was built into the game structure rather than the culture or experience.

The rulebooks while an important part of these games are not all there is to them. Examining my own experience playing the games allowed me to understand more fully how these rules acted and interacted in actual gameplay. It also allowed me to see ways the social skills training aspects that are built into the rules are reinforced and built upon by staff actions before, after, and during the games. This method of examining my own experience critically is called auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography has been used in a variety of game studies particularly qualitative studies of MMOGs (Chen 2011; Nardi 2010; Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011). This methodology allows me to take advantage of my subjective experience learning and playing these games in order to understand the way that the mechanics and design can work in a more than theoretical sense. According to McArthur “Auto ethnography not only presents the
researcher with an opportunity to methodologically disclose their own subjectivity, but also to present additional data that may provide an outsider with a more intimate account of the subject of study” (McArthur 2015). In this case auto ethnography allows me to explore more deeply the effects the mechanics and game design have on the actual aspects of play, interaction, and community that I am interested in. This methodology means that I cannot extrapolate to other players of these games but it will add to an analysis of game rules and design by giving me a fuller understanding of how those aspects work.

I played both *Dystopia rising* and *Shadowrun* for several months before engaging in this analysis. I informed the groups that I was a researcher planning to write about the games but I played as a regular player. I immersed myself in the communities and observed the ways in which the rule books and other aspects of the larger set up of the games controlled character interaction, player interaction and community building. I have previously observed other tabletop games and communities in a variety of settings and I have talked to players about the ways these games are similar and different from others they have played.

I first learned about both of these games through friends who played them. I had been hearing about other tabletop games for years and had been aware of LARP although I did not know very much about until I began to think about playing. My friend knew that I was interested in gaming and gaming communities and different kinds of games. He also knew that I had experience with board games but had not done either tabletop or LARP. He invited me to join a *Shadowrun* campaign he was a part of and to come to one of the LARPs he played.

Rules in LARP and tabletop roleplaying games are constructed both by the rulebook and during the game by the players and game runners. Employing both the rulebook analysis and the ethnography turned out to be important in understanding the rules in general but more particularly it allowed me to see how many rules set up the foundations for players to think about aspects of their world and then how the real-world connections were reinforced during the game. It also allowed me to observe situations in which game rules or mechanics became separate from roleplay as well as how those aspects came together.
4.2 Dystopia Rising

In the case of DR, I began by reading the Dystopia Rising rulebook, joining the online community, and meeting some of the people I would be LARPing with through a friend. This last changed my entrance into the game quite a bit because I entered with character ties. Character ties are part of a character’s backstory essentially two players agree that their characters know each other already and figure out how they met. Players often ask for character ties on the online group and friends who come into game together usually come in with ties to each other. The benefit of being an older player bringing in a new character is that you know many of the characters in the game already so it is much easier to make ties with existing characters. Having character ties is convenient because it gives characters a reason to pull new characters, and thus players into the world. Players are encouraged to use the online forums in this way, even though they are generally discouraged from using those for anything else that directly effects the in-game world, because it makes it easier to ensure that new players have a good time their first game. I thought that creating character ties ahead of game allowed my character more instant access to the game world and me more access to the community.

Despite the fact that I had read the rulebook I could not remember how all of the abilities worked when I was actually playing the game, no one can, so there are mechanisms in place to allow players to ask. These were explained during opening announcements before the game starts. There is a hand signal that means “I am asking a question out of character and certain players are designated rules marshals who know the game really well. They wear badges and players can pull them aside to ask questions. On top during my first game several players taught me how to ask for different types of mechanical information in an in-game way. For example, if I wanted to ask someone if I the skill repair was a prerequisite for the skill SCIENCE!, I could ask “do I need to be able to fix the lab stuff before I can know how to figure things out with it?” This kind of duel question is common in LARP.

Because this is a full immersion game I could not walk around taking notes. I started conceptualizing this research project after I had played a few games and playing a printer turned out to be useful because it allowed me to walk around with a notebook and pen. However, I found it almost impossible to take notes during game. It made me fall out of character and caused
me to miss a lot more of what happened. Due to these problems I switched to taking notes in the evenings before I went to bed and after each event ended.

In my notes I tried to focus on places that the rules and the roleplay came into conflict or when I became more aware of the distinction between the game world and the real world. I found that these moments of conflict were often in places where there was either a conflict between what I would do and what my character would do or there was a conflict in the way my character would treat another character and the way I would treat that player. When I looked back at the rulebook I realized that it was heavily constructed to guide players in how to act in these situations.

### 4.3 Shadowrun

Our Shadowrun campaign began with a character creation session which most of the players attended. This was mostly because several of the players were new to the system. We were not expected to all have read the full rulebook before this event because we were all going to go through the rules for character creation together. Once we began playing it was also much easier to ask about the rules because, the goal here was not immersion. It was easy to simply ask a mechanical question verbally from another player or the GM. This meant that, unlike in DR, the symbols for in and out of character speech are mostly in the words used so visual symbols like hand signals were unnecessary. For me this also meant it was much easier to take notes as we were playing in this setting without disrupting the game.

Unlike in LARP we did not need to build in character ties because our characters would be put into a team by an NPC or in-game fate under the game master’s direction. In general, we would have much less control over the plot so it was less necessary to think about any type of specifics before beginning. However, as we all knew we would be going on a mission together we did discuss which skills we picked so that our group would have a range of skills to draw from when we met the challenges the GM thought up.

In Shadowrun the negotiation distinction between player and character was clearer because immersion was not a goal. It was sometimes harder to see moments in which I came into conflict with my character. But it still happened which made me aware that the game rules in this case were far less designed to inform my actions when that happened.
4.4 Rulebook Analysis

I began my analysis by looking at the rulebooks for both Shadowrun and Dystopia Rising. I wanted to examine the way the rules were designed to shape players’ interactions with each other and with their characters and the way the rules were designed to help them use those interactions to think critically about their identity or about their interactions in everyday life. I looked at three elements from the rulebooks, wording, rules, and specific mentions of the ways the rulebook related the outside world to the game world. I carefully read through each rulebook looking for these elements.

After I had marked these concepts I found that within each of these categories the most useful things to pay attention to were the way the rulebook constructed, the relationship between the player and their character, the relationship between different characters, and the way the rulebook dealt with differences and parallels between the game world and the outside world. I originally also looked for references to the relationship between different players but I found that neither rulebook dealt much with this, probably because players are primarily interacting through their characters during the game. I found that these three ideas covered the primary ways that the rulebooks constructed player interaction during game.

Many of these ideas are specifically discussed in the Dystopia Rising Rulebook in ways they are not in the Shadowrun rulebook because the Dystopia Rising rulebook deals with issues relating to the players much more directly. Mechanically this is likely to be because the player to game runner ratio is so much higher in Dystopia Rising than it is in Shadowrun. However, I found that through looking at the way the rulebook addressed the reader and the way rules were constructed, particularly those around character creation and development, and the comparisons drawn between the game world and the real world I could draw conclusions how these issues were addressed within the Shadowrun rulebook and how they encouraged players to think about interactions with each other and with their characters.

I found that the rulebooks treated their audiences differently. Wording and the way in which the rules were presented turned out to be really important in understanding how players were meant to interact with their own characters, each other’s characters and with each other.
4.5 Auto-ethnography Analysis

After going through the rule books I looked for the same themes in my notes on gameplay. I took notes on moments where I became aware of a tension between me and my character or when I became aware of a tension between the real world and the game world as well as anything else that struck me. I tried to capture as much of the experience as I could, given that there were sometimes several hours between when an event happened and when I was able to write it down. That is references to the relationship between player and character, different characters, and the relationship between the game world and the real world. I was looking for ways in which these were shaped by gameplay or by game rules or mechanics and how that changed the way I experienced or played my character. My notes on this were sometimes less specific or detailed than would have been ideal because I had had to take them sometimes several hours after the event and had tried to recall a full day at once. However, I found I was able to draw some illustrative examples from this experience and to better understand how the rules truly played out in during the game.

I also looked for notes on the way the people running the actual games had supported or contradicted one of the themes I had seen earlier in the rulebook. For example, I noted which rules were mentioned verbally during opening announcements in *Dystopia Rising* and how they were presented. I also looked to whether some of the rules I had noted in the rulebooks played out the way it had seemed they would when I read them. In other words, I was looking to see if it seemed like players were using the tools afforded them by the rulebook to explore complex interactions or whether they were ignoring those more difficult aspects of the roleplay.

The auto ethnographic portion of this project helped me understand how the rules in the rulebook were put into play. I noticed that game runners used announcements to connect game rules back to the real world and to reinforce elements of interaction or rules for roleplay that they thought were most important. It also helped me get a more complex idea of how player character interaction worked and how that informed the ways that players used the game to explore identity.
4.6 Benefits and Conflicts of Immersive Research

I decided to fully immerse myself into this community for this research. This was useful and ultimately necessary to get a full view of these games. This is particularly true of the LARP. Because it is meant to be an immersive game, observers who are not involved are not welcome at game. On top of that there are many branches of ways that people from the LARP communicate and interact between games. Some are official channels like the Facebook groups or the official *Dystopia Rising* forums but others like group chats spring up more organically. I would have been unlikely to have been able to gain access to those groups if the members had not seen me as a participant. It would have been more possible to gain access to the *Shadowrun* game without truly being a part of it but it would still have been disruptive to have someone there simply as an observer in a way that having another player observe is not.

This method of research also creates some conflicts. In order to avoid any ethical conflicts, I told players that I was writing about LARP generally and *Dystopia Rising* specifically. I also told them I would not be quoting or writing anything specific about them or their characters for this project and would let them know if that changed. Another problem is that this is now a group and game that I enjoy and feel a connection too. However, I tried to note down negative as well as positive experiences as I went. Lastly, I have based this particular analysis on my own experiences and the materials (i.e. rulebook) that are generally available. This allows me some insight into some of the ways the game can work. However, a broader analysis including a wide range of views would be a useful future project.
Chapter 5
Results

5 Results

5.1 Roleplay and Rules

Much of the current literature about social skills education in roleplaying games focusses on the ways that players learn social skills naturally through roleplay (Bowman 2010; Fine 2002). The way the individual games aid in this process through rules, game structure or setting often gets lost. Scholars from the field of HCI have developed strategies to look at the relationships between digital games, the systems used to run those games, and the players (Bartle 2003; Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Dutton 2006). The relationship between these three elements in analog games is much less well understood.

*Shadowrun* and *Dystopia Rising* are both set in post-apocalyptic versions of our own world, they are both primarily science fiction with a small amount of magic thrown in and they have some comparable mechanics. They also are both constructed as character vs. environment games players are meant to work together to defeat the game rather than fight amongst themselves, although individual players may also have individual goals they are working towards. In both cases “the world” being fought is the problems and obstacles created by the gamerunners and their NPCs. On the surface they look very similar however the way the rulebooks construct the game world, the player character relationship, and the relationship of the game world to the real world is very different. In my analysis I found that the two games rulebooks create a space that encourages or discourages players from using their roleplay experience to better understand their own identity and social interactions in a variety of ways.

5.2 Wording of the Rulebook

The first way that the rulebooks construct players’ understanding of the ways they can use roleplay to explore identity and interaction in the game is simply through the way the game is introduced by the rulebook. The ways that the rulebooks introduce themselves set the tone for the game. The *Dystopia Rising* book models self-reflexivity and self-examination from the opening
page through the writers own explanations of their motivations. The *Shadowrun* rulebook does not encourage this type of thought. It blurs the line between player and character from the beginning and does not treat the game as a learning process but instead an inherent skillset that players either have or lack. Because character interaction and roleplay is the game, setting up the game as something that players learn and get better at allows players more freedom to play with that roleplay with less fear of doing something wrong.

The *Shadowrun* rulebook starts out “If you’re here, it’s because you think you have what it takes to be a Shadowrunner. And if you got it, we definitely want to help you use it. What you have to understand, though, is that not everyone’s got it. So we’re going to throw a quick screening interview at you, just to make sure you’re ready to hit the shadows” (Zimmerman 2013). The game introduces itself saying not everyone is welcome here you might not be good enough to do this if it feels strange it is because you do not have what it takes. From the beginning of the rulebook there is an implication that you there is a kind of person who fits in and you are either naturally that person or you are not. It sets it up as if managing in this world is not something that can be learned it is an inherent skill.

The *Dystopia Rising* rulebook begins with its own history. This serves two purposes, from the first page of text the authors model a way of being reflexive about their own history and learning process that is very similar to what they expect from the players who play their game. They also reveal that one of their goals is to make *Dystopia Rising* a welcoming space for inexperienced players and have written the rules accordingly (Pucci 2016). Making this clear in the first page of the rulebook makes clear both that this is a place that welcomes learning and will be understanding if new players do not get stuff right away. This likely makes it easier for people to create characters that are outside their comfort zone because it makes it clear that making the game a learning experience is the goal. The history also includes a description of how the games authors have changed the game to suit players needs just like they want players to change to suit other players needs it treats the process of interaction as a learning process rather than innate ability which allows players to see other aspects of the game that way.

Throughout the rulebooks they address the player differently and construct the player’s relationship to the game and their character differently. The *Dystopia Rising* rulebook carefully uses third person language whenever discussing characters and second person language when
addressing the player while the *Shadowrun* rulebook addresses both player and character in second person as if they are the same person.

### 5.2.1 Rulebook Construction of the Player-Character Relationship

In these beginning sections we can also see that the rulebooks treat the relationship between the player and their character differently. A clear concept of both the separation of player and character and the way those identities overlap is important in the way roleplay can help players understand identity (Fine 2002). The *Shadowrun* rulebook addresses the player as if they are their character. Even in the first few sentences the rulebook addresses itself to the character. The *Dystopia Rising* rulebook never does that and there is a lot of explicit discussion of keeping one’s own identity and that of one’s character separate. Throughout the rulebook this separation is presented as a necessary tool to allow players to explore difficult questions that they might not be able to explore otherwise. Making a clear distinction between player and character is presented as necessary to the game because it allows characters to explore types of interaction players would not. It is also presented as necessary to the players because it allows them to explore modes of interaction or aspects of character identity that they would not feel comfortable exploring as themselves. The way the rulebooks treat the relationship between the player and the character helps determine what type of roleplay is expected during the game and how players react to certain types of roleplay.

Of course the player’s interaction with the rulebook is different in tabletop games and in LARP. In LARP all players are responsible for knowing the rulebook and the world. They all create it through costuming and their own tents, food etc. that they bring into the world. In tabletop games the world exists primarily inside the game master’s head. Players may not have read the rulebook beyond glancing at the skills available to them in the character creation section so the relationship of the player to the rulebook is different in tabletop games then in LARP but the rulebooks description of the world still sets the tone for the game. However, it is possible that the rulebooks are written this way in part because they are expected to be read by more experienced players who already have a pretty significant grasp on their relationship to their character.

*Dystopia Rising* carefully reinforces the idea that there is a distinction between the character and the player through its language and explicitly in writing throughout the rulebook. *Shadowrun* collapses the character and player into one person in its language and does not explicitly discuss
that relationship. Making this distinction explicit is a way of allowing or even encouraging players to player characters with ideas or opinions they disagree with or even that they dislike. However, it also requires a careful understanding of how to treat conflicts between the player and the character. The *Shadowrun* rulebook does not address these issues but does that the world may have different moral rules than the ones players are used to. *Dystopia Rising* sets up on of the problems of roleplay as figuring out one’s characters moral codes and identity while *Shadowrun* does not set this up as a challenge of the game.

### 5.3 Game Rules

#### 5.3.1 Rules for Character Creation and Development

LARPs are also very different from tabletop games in the way that the story develops and in how much control the game masters have over that story. The games also require different forms of interaction and relationships from the players. The character creation systems in *Dystopia Rising* and *Shadowrun* are designed to allow for these differences and to encourage players to interact with other characters and with the game world in the way that works for that game. However, these systems also are systems that control one type of character growth. That is growth through game mechanics rather than through roleplay however the different constructions of character growth will change how players think about building and acting as their character. The way characters grow and change in game serves as a model for one way for players to think about their own personal growth or change.

The first way the games construct character growth is through the distribution of build, XP in DR and Karma in *Shadowrun*. In *Shadowrun* players get nearly all of their build when they are first making their characters (Zimmerman 2013). This means that the skills they pick from the beginning are the skills they have and they can only adapt to the events of the game through creativity rather than learning. So success or failure is based on the players’ creative abilities directly rather than the player working through their character’s growth. The challenge of building a character is to make one that will be versatile enough to deal with whatever the GM comes up with. The number of points of build given is usually high enough that players can have a wide range of skills or be very good at several categories of skills.
The number of skill points that a player starts with in *Shadowrun* depends on how they prioritised skills in the initial round of character building. There are two kinds of skill points the first can be put into individual skills and the second can be put into skill groups which essentially level up three to four related skills at once. A player who prioritizes skills as their highest priority starts with 46 points to put into skills and 10 to put into skill groups someone who makes skills their lowest priority starts with 18 individual skill points and 0 group points. At this point in the character creation players are allowed to put a maximum of 6 points into each skill. This means that they can buy at least 3 maximum level skills or several lower level skills if they have 18 points. If they prioritized skills as their highest characteristic they could buy 7 maximum level skills put 4 points into one more skill and have two skill groups at level 5 giving them around 14 skills. Players can then use the extra Karma they get from buying negative attributes to buy more skill points to level up skills further or buy new ones (Zimmerman 2013).

In *Dystopia Rising* characters need to be much more adaptable because, depending on which other players are present at an event, different skills may be necessary or useless. Because of this starting builds are much more limited in several ways but characters have a lot more flexibility in how they develop. However, this also encourages players to pick up needed skills as they develop which both displays the way in which circumstances can change people and makes the idea of playing to win work less well. The *Dystopia Rising* system allows for characters to be socially constructed as they learn skills that other character’s feel, are needed or that are obviously needed given specific circumstances. This is similar to dynamics found in some digital games (Pearce, Boellstorff, and Nardi 2011). Having the characters grow mechanically in this way can help players shape the ways the characters grow or change in terms of roleplay.

The starting build in *Dystopia Rising* is similar to the lowest level skill expenditure in *Shadowrun*. Each player gets 13 points of XP to spend on their character. In DR skills do not have levels but each skill costs between 3 and 6 points so a starting character can buy 4 3-point skills and have one point left over. Characters then receive more build every game they play at a rate of 4 points for their first 5 games 2 points for their next 5 games and 1 point for every game after that. This gradated system allows new players to build up useful skills rapidly so that they can catch up to the older players but they still have to be in game before getting the skills (Pucci 2016). This means that players’ skill choices are more likely to be reactions to what is needed in game and it forces them to engage in roleplay, either alone for strain skills or together with other
characters for profession skills which have to be “taught” by another character. In other words, extending character creation into the actual game play as Dystopia Rising does is a way of bringing new players into the game and getting them involved with the game and other characters, as well as a way to help them figure out what skills will be useful in-game. This was less necessary in Shadowrun for several reasons. First the game master is expected to exercise far more control over the storyline so they can adjust the environment to characters’ skills and they don’t need to create mechanical reasons for characters to interact because they will force them too for story reasons. Secondly, because our characters were to some extent created as a team and we were each allowed a wide range of skills we simply depended on our range rather than on our ability to gain the appropriate skill for the situation.

Players can also build up their characters in-game in ways other than buying individual skills. They can use XP to gain more mind and more body or to buy new professions, although the latter is essentially access to new skills (Pucci 2016). Karma in Shadowrun can also be used for things other than skills including, money and connections however every option is very expensive and players only receive a maximum of 7 karma per a campaign so the rate at which they can build up their characters is very slow and is not a strong focus of the game (Zimmerman 2013). Whereas in DR this constant balance of learning things to help spur on your personal storyline, such as interesting lores that allow your character to do fun but not necessarily useful things, things that are useful to the immediate storyline, and things that may be useful in the longer term, besides the fact that even within each of those categories there is never enough XP to do everything, is very much a part of the game. The mechanics in Dystopia Rising are designed to work with the more fluid constantly changing game world but they also encourage players to think about how their characters can grow and change and to pick uses of XP that work with that on a continuous basis. Shadowrun characters are mechanically much more static and primarily gain Karma at the end of missions which constructs character growth as part of in game achievement rather than something that is constantly occurring. Because the Dystopia Rising characters are constantly changing mechanically in a way the Shadowrun characters are not players are forced to continuously think about how their characters are changing in a broader way than just how they will react to a specific situation.

Mechanical character growth can be one thing that forms the circumstances for more roleplay based character growth and watching the way the characters grow and change in relation to in
game events is one way in which these games can help players explore their own identity and their own relationship to their world (Bowman 2010).

5.3.2 Traditions Around Creation of Characters and the Game World

The game mechanics have also led to some traditions which further encourage players to think deeply about their characters’ motivations. These are not necessarily visible in the rulebook but are very visible when playing the game itself. The characters in Dystopia Rising by necessity are also three dimensional people who have previous experiences which have shaped them. Though players often feel the need to create backstories for characters in Shadowrun they are generally not as detailed as the ones players create in Dystopia Rising. The gameplay for Shadowrun does not require players to have much of an idea of their character outside of the game mechanics such as metatype. In Dystopia Rising players are expected to have a much greater understanding of their character’s backstory, likes, dislikes, and personality because they have to act as them in between game actions. Part of the task of the LARPer is to think what every situation would look like to their character given their experiences and to act accordingly. For example, my character had a cousin who tried to master “magic,” he lost control and called hundreds of zombies killing most of their tribe. My character was very young at the time and did not really understand what was happening so she thinks that sometimes people unpredictably go insane and then zombies come and kill the people they care about. Because of this she becomes disproportionately upset when someone she cares about does something she sees as out of character.

There are also some ways the game shapes player interaction which are mentioned in the rulebook but become much more obvious when actually in play. Some rules about character interaction are designed to put players in uncomfortable situations for example certain strains hate each other the clearest example of this is Bay walkers and Yorkers. These are two strains who are so predisposed to hate each other that they have specific abilities and drawbacks against each other written into each of their profiles. Other than those abilities Yorkers and Bay walkers have opposing strengths Yorkers are good fighters and Bay walkers are more likely to be able to do intellectual work. These differing abilities mean it is likely that the two strains will need to interact and negotiate to get what they need. By doing this the game creates a situation where people playing these two strains have to roleplay dealing with people they have an inherent and unreasonable hatred for. Of course both players can see that the categories are constructed
because they know the players. Some players make this even more obvious by playing both a Yorker and a Baywalker character.

In general relationships between strains are written as parallels to real world societal groups with all of the biases and complications that come from that these parallels tend to be mentioned in the rule book but not fully fleshed out. However, the game culture is to make these parallels very apparent. For example, strains are not all written as equal some strains are written as socially superior to others and some are written as particularly looked down upon in general for example monstrous strains like the cannibalistic Lascarians are often looked down upon while purebloods are able to get money and resources much more easily than other races. Other strains are supposed to react accordingly to these races (Pucci 2016). This is one of an attempt to build examples of systems that can be hard to see in the real world into the game. For example, this is an attempt to build the idea of institutional privilege in to the game, it is naturally and invisibly easier for purebloods to get money and resources than it is for other strains to make the game work the number of purebloods is artificially limited everywhere. Strains are also made unequal by limiting different ones by location. Some strains are banned or only limited numbers are allowed in certain places making them minorities in that area but not in other areas. Shadowrun does not have this level of real world parallels built in which makes social parallels in the game to the real world less clear. A lot of the strainism that makes this parallel work is only mentioned briefly in the rulebook, however players and game runners have widely chosen to play up this aspect of the world which makes it more difficult to avoid dealing with the kind of issues that this type of roleplay relates too.

The rules in Dystopia Rising were written to create parallels to real world conflicts and interactions and to parts of people’s identities that are often fraught in the real world. This was designed to encourage players to explore these aspects of their identities and interactions. In Shadowrun these parallels are not written as clearly into the rules so if players are not already looking to explore certain questions the game itself is less likely to force them to run across them.

5.4 Relating the Storyworld to the Real World

Both the Dystopia Rising and the Shadowrun rulebooks make clear parallels and distinctions between the real world and the game world. For example, in the case of Dystopia Rising the
rulebook makes it apparent that Strain is to be seen as a metaphor for race but not as actually related to real world race. The section called “Strains and Not Race” starts out by saying “You will notice that we always refer to Strain and not race in Dystopia Rising. There are a thousand different reasons as to why we do not have real world cultural races as character types, but the primary reason is to prevent cultural appropriation and potential for insulting the culture or heritage of real world people” (Pucci 2016). This serves both as a reminder that strains are a metaphor for race in the real world and that players should endeavor to be aware of that the way they play their characters can upset or offend someone based on something outside the game. The rule book further implies that human races and humanoid strains are different by having drawings of characters of strains with a wide variety of human races.

When the rule book discusses reasons to follow the rules it often mixes personal reasons and storytelling reasons. For example, along with the reasons about cultural appropriation they give above for not using real world races in the game the rule book says “By removing real world races, cultural meanings, and cultural history from the characters we are playing, we can allow for a grim and darker world without harming real world cultural identities” (Pucci 2016). Similarly, there is a rule against any sexual assault plot in game. The reasons for this are always given as twofold. First, it is too real life upsetting to too many people and second it is a cheap storytelling trick used for shock value. Since one of the primary modes of achievement in the game is doing things which make for good stories pointing to this as both points of consideration for social reasons and poor storytelling aligns the social goals with the goal of achievement in the game.

Both Shadowrun and Dystopia Rising present worlds where the things generally considered moral or immoral are different than in our world. The Dystopia Rising rulebook presents this as a point of discussion for example the book says

“What is considered “right” and what is considered “wrong” has been drastically altered as the Infection has spread and taken hold. Take slavery as an example. In today’s modern world, slavery is repellent (for good reason). Yet when the world fell, men and women took advantage of the situation and instated more of a Roman inspired form of slavery…While this doesn’t make slavery right, in any form, it makes it part of the landscape.”(Pucci 2016)

The rulebook makes it clear that the writers do not believe slavery is right or moral but they are presenting it as a topic of discussion or a way to ask certain questions. The reason they present slavery as a topic available for discussion while sexual assault is not is that players are more
likely to have personal experience with sexual assault and also there is more of a storytelling tradition around using sexual assault for cheap shock value. In other words they worry that discussion of sexual assault will not be thoughtful or productive while they have higher hopes for discussion of slavery.

The rule book then goes on to say

“You are more than welcome to have a character that is either pro- or anti-slavery. However, the subject of slavery should always be treated with respect.” (Pucci 2016)

This sentence adds an important element to the way this is used. It presents these issues as complex and difficult and gives players the chance to talk about them but it also is showing them that disagreeing on a difficult issue is different than disrespecting that issue disagreement or discussion is part of the game but disrespect is outside of the game. This sort of teaching about how to talk about difficult things works well with the ability to explore these things that is presented by roleplay more generally. These moral issues are left as questions for players to explore. In contrast when the Shadowrun rulebook describes the way the morality in that world differs from our own it does not present those changes as something to be questioned or explored but only figured out. For example, the sex section reads “With sex and prostitution being as open as it is in the Sixth World, you might think it reduces the opportunities for blackmaill. You’d be right. But only partly. There are still some taboos, some lines that should not be crossed. … your job is to know the basic sexual mores of the area you are in, so you can use violations of these mores against select people” (Zimmerman 2013). It is presented as a puzzle to be solved rather than a way to explore difficult ideas. The authors also do not state their own views showing the ways their own morals differ from that of the world they live in. In the Dystopia Rising rulebook doing this serves to model the way they expect the players to think about their own morals and those of the game world.

For the characters of Shadowrun and Dystopia Rising the goals are very similar, to survive, make a little money, and live in a harsh world. However, the games present the task of the player very differently Shadowrun presents the players task as figuring out how to make their character successful in the world they are in. Dystopia Rising presents the character’s success as less important than the task of the player to really understand and enact that character.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

6 Conclusion

Roleplay is central to the way in which these games allow players to try out new forms of interaction and to explore their own identity but game rules shape the avenues of roleplay that are available to players. The rulebooks themselves determine the tone of the game which can make the game a space that is more or less open to exploration and learning by the players. The rulebooks also are a key part of the way that the relationship the player should have to their character is made clear. This is important because maintaining the separation between player and character in both the mind of the individual player toward their own character and other players towards a player and their character, is helpful in allowing players to explore moralities or aspects of their identities that are they do not consider to be part of themselves.

6.1 Discussion

Game rules shape the world the characters play in. They shape the types of questions players are encouraged to ask and the situations that might make players ask specific questions over other questions. Rulebooks can position players to be more or less able to ask difficult questions about themselves and their world and can model ways to consciously use the experience of roleplay for personal explanation, or not. One of the ways rulebooks do this positioning is in the way the book itself is written. By writing in a self-conscious manner the authors of the Dystopia Rising rulebook model the type of self-knowledge they would like their players to develop. Another thing that they do in order to encourage players to use the game the way they would like is to keep the player character dynamic very separate. This separation allows players to more fully explore parts of themselves they may not like or test out types of interaction they are concerned about because it is not them it is their character and it is not this world it is the game world. However, the rulebook also gives frameworks for empathizing with other players and thus hopefully exploring these issues in a way that is at least inoffensive to most participants.

Shadowrun provides a place for players to be someone other than themselves, it provides a space for roleplay and for players to try on alternate identities but does not encourage players to use that roleplay to explore difficult parts of their own identity. The rule book positions character and
player identity as widely overlapping and presents the challenges for the character in the game as figuring out the world rather than figuring out yourself. Both these games are built on roleplay and that roleplay has the capacity to allow players to explore questions of identity and social interaction in both but the *Dystopia Rising* rulebooks makes it safe and celebrates exploring more difficult aspects of those things whereas the *Shadowrun* rulebook encourages players to imagine themselves as their characters making it more likely that they will explore fantasies or the parts of their identity that they like.

This trend continues into the actual game rules. For example, in *Dystopia Rising*, character creation is thought of as a process that never really ends. In *Shadowrun*, characters may be designed with secrets that are meant to be revealed in game and will react to events in game but they are not expected to develop over time the same way *Dystopia Rising* characters are. This idea of character development allows players to explore how the world and the ways that characters’ experiences shape those characters. The way that characters continue to exist as they were created in *Shadowrun* means that this change and growth is not built into the game in the same way. As I discussed in chapter 5.3 the rules are written to create parallels to complex aspects of many people’s real world identities and then game runners make these parallels explicit through their announcements. In this way players are encouraged to examine their own identity through the game as well as to understand their characters identity within the game.

This is because the player goal is constructed differently. As I discussed in chapters 4 and 5 the rule book wording as well as the rules themselves encourage players to consider player and character differences and to understand the ways and to explore questions of identity, identity performance, and interaction through those differences. The *Shadowrun* rulebook presents player and character goals as the same and does not differentiate between the player and character in other ways that rulebook presents the goal of the player as being about understanding the world the character lives in and how to survive in it. This means that players need to look less closely at characters’ identity and are not forced to consider the ways in which it conflicts with their own as much, thus it is less necessary for players to examine their own identity in order to meet the goals presented in *Shadowrun* than those in *Dystopia Rising*.

This project points to the need to consider the rules around roleplay in a variety of settings both when studying the effects of roleplay in an academic study and in using roleplay for therapeutic,
educational or other purposes. It shows some ways in which game rules can be used to make roleplay activities designed to help players explore identity or identity performance in educational or therapeutic settings more effective or to direct players towards certain aspects of those concepts. It also points towards a need to look at analog game rules more fully when studying these games and to use analog games as a point of comparison in understanding how players use roleplaying games to better understand concepts of identity and identity performance as well as to explore their own identity and personal interactions.

6.2 Limitations

This project is a very limited started on something that would need to be much larger to be complete. I was only able to look at one LARP and one tabletop game. This allows me to make some claims about the potential these games may have to teach social interaction or help players to explore questions of identity but I can make no claims about how many games are actually constructed in these ways. Furthermore, I do not know if the strategies I have presented here would even work when discussing other types of LARPS or Tabletops. These ideas may not map nicely onto games that differ in genre, play style (for example more player vs. player combat oriented LARPs), timeframe, etc. I also cannot say for sure that they have any effect in the context of these games because I have not talked to players or in any way tested whether they had more capacity to talk about these issues or to navigate social interaction after playing the game. Once again the only claims this project can make have to do with the potential of these games rather than the practice.

This project also only looks into the literature around social skills education in gaming. There are likely useful insights in the more general information around social skills learning and how roleplay can be used to teach skills in other settings that I have not found or covered here. Expanding to look at these fields would also give more insight into how these ideas might be used for purposes outside of just gaming.

This project comes very heavily out of a North American context. Both I and the games I have examined here come from this context and the types of interaction skills that I have pointed to as examples of ways the rules can encourage behavior are very much types of interaction that are valued in North America and may be seen as less important in other cultural contexts. I think that the idea that game rules for this type of can teach social interaction could be transferred to other
types of skills but I have not examined that carefully, nor do I know of anything exactly similar that exists in another context with which I could compare.

6.3 Future work

This work has many limitations that present opportunities for future projects. The first and most obvious way it is limited is that I only was able to discuss one tabletop game and one LARP. Expanding this to a larger number of analog games would allow for a better overall theory of the relationship of game rules and social skills learning by representing a much more diverse set of game rules. For example, it would be interesting to look at whether the same strategies for encouraging players to explore different skills work in player vs player oriented games as work in player vs environment games. It seems plausible that certain types of interactive skills and certain aspects of identity could be explored more deeply in player vs player environment where the conflict can feel more personal. Characters created for these games could then further be compared to characters with player vs player based skillsets, such as the ability to steal from other characters created for player vs environment games. Similarly, it would be interesting to compare different genres of games. For example, players may feel they have a different relationship to their characters in, high fantasy games set in worlds like that of The Lord of the Rings, to games set in a future, past, or fantasy world with a definite relationship to this one like a world with underground magic that humans are oblivious to or a world set in a post-apocalyptic future. A further comparison could be made to Art LARP or more realistic games although that may be a harder comparison because they are generally conceived of so differently than other analog games.

This work is also limited in that it primarily addresses what social skills could be learned rather than what social skills are learned. This is a fault of the methodologies used textual analysis of game rules can only reveal a games potential because the game is never fully constituted by the rules, players, circumstance, and in the case of these games, game runners have a huge effect on the way a game actually proceeds. The use of auto-ethnography was meant to take some of this into account but of course auto-ethnography has significant limitations of its own because it is only one players experience of the game. A full ethnography combined with interviews with players and game runners could help better understand whether players feel they learn about their own identity or about social interaction from playing the game as well as what aspects of the
game they believe help them learn those things. Further it could help us understand whether players build characters on purpose to explore specific questions of identity or social interaction and what strategies they implement for this purpose.

An in depth study of players existing characters in LARPs and tabletop games could also help us understand whether players emphasize different aspects of their identity, explore specific interactive styles, or emphasize different playstyles when building different characters. To understand this, it would be useful to look closely at players who play multiple characters either “Alts” in the same game or characters in different games. This would be a way to explore questions about whether players vary characters to accommodate different game rules or whether they create different characters to explore different aspects of identity or interaction, simply for a change, or for some other reason entirely. This strategy could also be used to better understand how characters grow and change as gameplay progresses. Do players shape their characters in order to explore questions they may or characteristics they may have built their character around in the first place or do they grow more in line with what their character needs based on in-game circumstance? In depth interviews with these players about their existing characters along with observation of their playstyles and analysis of their character builds could be a way to answer some of these questions.

Scholars such as Mia Consalvo, Zach Waggoner and many others have done extensive research on avatar creation and player interaction in MMOs, MOOGs, etc. A comparison between those works and this type of rules analysis for analog games could help to understand the differences between the potential educational power of roleplay in a digital context vs. an analog one as well as what different rules or strategies for world construction might be necessary in each circumstance. Similarly, further study of the differences between tabletop games and LARP could help us understand what types of issues the acts of costuming and the more immersive style of play in LARP encourages players to engage in vs the less immersive style of tabletop games.

Last the recorded history of LARP and Tabletop games is spotty. It would be useful to have a better understanding of the way game rules for these types of games developed and changed over time, as well as the way game rules were distributed and the way games were advertised. As well as how writers and game runners conceived of what they were doing when they began their
games and how those conceptions over time. More of this work is already done for tabletop games than for LARPs both because the academic tradition around tabletop games is more established and because tabletop game rulebooks make up a larger part of the game so that history is more available. Because early LARP rules were not always recorded on paper and were generally not widely published it is often harder to reconstruct those rules or the ways they have changed. However, having this history would help to understand the way these games have changed in relation to player goals and societal norms.

A better understanding of these games could lead to insights that could be implemented in other activities designed to teach these skills like therapeutic or classroom settings. An understanding of how world construction and rules can effect player interaction in games could be adapted to create community spaces, schools, or other spaces that are more conducive to specific types of interaction or to certain types of self-exploration.
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Appendix A

7 Glossary of Terms

DND – *Dungeons and Dragons*, One of the earliest tabletop games and still the most widely played

Game Master (GM) – Person who runs a tabletop game. They write the initial setting and storyline and present obstacles for players to overcome

Game Runners – People who run a game I use this particularly for people running LARPs as there are many people rather than one game master

LARP – Live Action Role Playing game, a game in which players actually dress up as and play their characters physically

MMO – Massive Multiplayer Online game, A large digital game in which players control avatars in order to complete actions in the game

MMORPG – Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game, an MMO with extra focus on the roleplaying aspect

NPC – Non player Character, a character controlled by the game runners as opposed to by an individual player

Tabletop – A roleplaying game in which players roleplay characters verbally and with some physical actions but without the costumes or complete immersion of LARP

Shadowrunner – A character from the world of *Shadowrun*

Strain – In *Dystopia Rising* a type of evolved human with physical and psychological characteristics specific to them

Lascarians, Reclaimers, Baywalkers, Yorkers, and Purebloods are all examples of st