Original research article

Pivotal Play: Rethinking Meaningful Play in Games Through Death in *Dungeons & Dragons*

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Abstract

In game studies, meaningful play is commonly discussed and situated through Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) definition describing it as the integrated and discernible relationship between player actions and system outcomes within the context of the game. However, this overlooks other ways that play can be meaningful. Based on observation and interviews with 20 Australian players, this article examines experiences with death in the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). In the context of meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) and positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008), we discuss (1) the impact of shared physical and social realities on death in D&D, (2) the design of death in D&D, and (3) how death in D&D shapes the future play and lives of players. From this, we argue that play can have meaning that transcends game boundaries, subsequently proposing the concept of "*pivotal play*" to describe appealing, memorable, and transformative play experiences.

Keywords

Dungeons & Dragons, death, meaningful play, positive negative experiences, pivotal play

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Introduction

Audiences, players, and game designers are continually being challenged to re-imagine what constitutes effective, emotional, and impactful play experiences (Hoffman, 2019; Ostenson, 2013, p. 71). The idea that games and play can facilitate experiences that subvert or go deeper than just being safe, leisurely, or fun is not novel (Geertz 1972; Huizinga, 1955; Vygotsky, 1978). The way that play can be meaningful for players is commonly understood through Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) definition of "meaningful play" that describes it as "the relationship between player action and system outcome… [which must be] both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" (pp. 33–34). Often overlooked, though, is meaning drawn from play that transcends these boundaries.

Recently, a trend in gaming has emerged whereby game developers inject serious meaning and values into their games (Belman, 2014, p. 33) by exploring intentionally negative, transgressive, or challenging content that ultimately aims to have a positive impact on players (Bopp, Mekler, & Opwis, 2016, p. 2996). This has been defined as "positive negative experiences" (Hopeametsä, 2008, p. 195). These dichotomous play experiences have been investigated in both digital (e.g., Allison, Carter, & Gibbs, 2015; Brown, 2015; Brown, Gerling, Dickinson, & Kriman, 2015; Geraci, Recine, & Fox, 2016; Gowler & Iacovides, 2019; Jørgensen, 2014; Linderoth & Öhrn, 2014; Petralito, Brühlmann, Iten, Mekler, & Opwis, 2017) and non-digital (e.g., Hopeametsä, 2008; Montola, 2010; Stenros, 2019) contexts, but this literature primarily targets player engagement and emotional ramifications. Consequently, the design, navigation, and deeper meaning derived from positive negative experiences require further exploration. A key example is in-game death.

Death in games varies in purpose and effect. Traditional or archetypal implementations often use death to mark player success and/or failure within the game space (Copcic, McKenzie, & Hobbs, 2013, p. 40), while more subversive adoptions can use themes or depictions of death to provoke greater moral reflection or comment on wider societal concerns (Carter & Allison, 2019; Schott, 2017). Phillips' (2018, 2020) recent work into video game death and mechropolitics (i.e., the political and real-world resonances of death and dying) explores the operation and implications of video game death in a wider cultural milieu. Although researchers have explored notions of meaningful death in digital game contexts (e.g., Allison et al., 2015; Carter, 2022; Carter, Gibbs, & Wadley, 2013; Gibson, 2019; Klastrup, 2007; Kocurek, 2015; Lingel, 2013), further attention must be directed towards their non-digital counterparts (Rousse, 2011).

In this article, we discuss player experiences with death in *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), drawn from our broader study focused on the contemporary resurgence and appeal of the game (Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b). We begin by situating our work in previous literature and provide an overview of our research methodology and aims which lead into the discussion of our findings. Our participants expressed that death was a key part of their engagement with D&D. Extending on Salen and Zimmerman's

(2004) definition which targets intrameaningful play in games, we frame these experiences with death as examples of "pivotal play": appealing, memorable, and transformative play moments that can facilitate player reflection, learning, or greater meaning taken from play, both inside and beyond the game's context. This extrameaningful concept of play is useful for designing and evaluating the appeal of serious meaning and values in games. While research by Lingel (2013) and Phillips (2018, 2020) builds toward a similar understanding of extrameaningful death in digital spaces, pivotal play is not limited to experiences of death. Rather, pivotal play encompasses a broad spectrum of intermeaningful gameplay experiences. Though we explicitly concentrate on death (due to the saturation of it in our research), we conclude this article by suggesting there are broader varieties of pivotal play experiences, such as moral decision-making, that future studies should explore.

Literature Review

Meaningful Play

The concept of meaningful play in game studies has been derived from existing understandings of play in areas such as cultural studies, anthropology, and educational psychology. Regarding the cultural impact of play, Huizinga (1955) put forth the foundational idea that all play is meaningful, stating that "in play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (p. i). Huizinga's work establishes the nature and role of play in culture, suggesting that there is greater meaning encoded in and derived from play (Anchor, 1978, p. 93). This was expanded upon by Geertz (1972) who coined the term "deep play" to present how broader sociocultural and contextual concerns were subconsciously enacted through play by players. Geertz (1972) positioned meaningful play as "fundamentally a dramatization of status concerns" (p. 18), which hints at the liminal boundaries of play but remains fixated on the context that affects deep play. Vygotsky's (1978) work—taking a different approach—conceptualizes play as a desired imaginative activity that influences meaningful psychological development, particularly in children. However, this neglects the impact and role that meaningful play has for adult players. These historic approaches to understanding how play has meaning are useful, as they help us recognize that meaning can be taken from the act of play and the broader sociocultural, educational, and/or psychological impacts this may have on the player. However, this does not fully account for the impact of modern digital and non-digital game mediums on contemporary play practices.

   Most research on meaningful play is currently informed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), who present the concept through a game design lens. In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, they offer two definitions—one descriptive and one evaluative—that collectively propose an understanding of meaningful play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define meaningful play as "the relationship between player action

and system outcome… [which must be] both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" (pp. 33–34). This interpretation of meaningful play remains a foundational game design principle because it acknowledges the contentious relationship that exists between player agency and in-game outcomes to the overall reception and success of the game. Among other areas of interest, scholars have used the concept of meaningful play to understand the impact of particular game mechanics on player experiences (Carter & Allison, 2017; Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020) and enhance the learning potential of serious games (Burke et al., 2010; Jacobs, Timmermans, Michielsen, Vander Plaetse, & Markopoulos, 2013).

Our key critique of meaningful play, and what we hope to address, is that this definition does not consider play to be meaningful outside the context of the game. Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) work brings attention to the importance of successful player-centric game design but meaning experienced outside or after the game is beyond their scope. As games continue to experiment with effective, impactful, and often emotional play experiences that have lasting impact beyond gameplay, it is necessary to rethink meaningful play. Applying an understanding of positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008) to meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) gives evidence as to how and why meaningful play transcends game boundaries, confirming the necessity and utility of pivotal play to view contemporary play(er) practices beyond actual play of the game.

Positive Negative Experiences in Play

There is a strong underlying discourse present in game studies literature that gives impetus to the success and value of games being derived from their inherent ability to facilitate engaged or extrameaningful play that leads to positive pedagogical outcomes or change (e.g., Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Gee, 2003; Harrington & O'Connell, 2016; McFarland, 2020; McGonigal, 2011). This literature, however, focuses heavily on positively inclined play experiences (Stenros, 2019), which neglects the clear presence, value, and proclivity of games that diverge from this that could have similar application in pedagogical contexts. Growing in popularity are games that explore transgressive, challenging, or negative content and themes (Jørgensen & Karlsen, 2019). These games can offer positive negative experiences in play (Hopeametsä, 2008; Montola, 2010) which contribute to deeper meaningful learning and personal growth for players, outside of educational contexts and outcomes.

Positive negative experiences describe play that is distressing and intense but also gratifying, as it creates new experiences, reflection, or insights for the player (Bopp et al., 2016; Hopeametsä, 2008; Jørgensen, 2014, p. 6; Jørgensen, 2019, p. 154, Montola, 2010). Their success relies on the delicate balance between player immersion and safety. Hopeametsä (2008) claims that if a game offers a safe environment where in-game experiences can be both real and fictitious concurrently, players' real-life emotions and reactions to the fictional events in-game will surface

(p. 195). This is supported by both Bopp, Müller, Aeschbach, Opwis, and Melker (2019) and Burgess and Jones' (2020) tangential research that explores the range of emotional responses and attachments that players can feel in digital gameplay. Furthermore, these notions of deep player attachments and emotional vulnerability in games are also supported by many established theoretical frameworks and concepts. Some key examples include the *hierarchy of human motivation and needs* (Maslow, 1943), reciprocal *bleed* between players and their characters (Bowman, 2013; Montola, 2010; Vi åker Jeep, n.d.), *frame analysis* (Goffman, 1974), and *player engrossment* (Fine, 1983), to name a few.

As non-digital games continue to grow in popularity and critical attention (Trammell, 2019), it is essential to explore diverse player experiences like positive negative play in these non-digital game spaces. Though positive negative experiences have been explored with nuance in digital games (e.g., Bopp et al., 2016; Gowler & Iacovides, 2019; Jørgensen, 2016), they require further investigation in non-digital games. While there is growing research on positive negative experiences in live-action role-play (LARP) games (Bjørkelo & Jørgensen, 2018; Hopeametsä, 2008; Montola, 2010), this article adds to this nascent work via a study of a non-digital tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG), a game medium which has seen significant resurgence in recent years (Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b).

Death in Games

Death is ubiquitous in most games but ranges in consequence and effect (Copcic et al., 2013, p. 40). Often, death is assumed to be superficial or insignificant: a mechanic that marks player success and/or failure. However, death can add meaning to player experiences regardless of its execution. In the platformer *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010), in-game death is both frustrating and rewarding for the player—an idyllic representation of positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008). The game utilizes a respawn mechanic that allows players to die and then reappear moments later. Extending Juul (2005, p. 56), Flynn-Jones (2015) frames this common portrayal of superficial death in games as "repertoire-building." While death seems gratuitous from the outset, the mingling of pleasure and displeasure when experiencing death transforms initial player failure into eventual meaningful and successful play (Flynn-Jones, 2015, p. 54; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Comparatively, the survival video game *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013) challenges player expectations of superficial game death by incorporating meaningful permanent death—more commonly known as permadeath (Allison et al., 2015; Carter & Allison, 2017, 2019; Carter et al., 2013; Copcic et al., 2013; Schott, 2017). Upon death, players lose all their progress and are required to restart the game from the beginning—making death a more meaningful and salient part of the game and players' experiences (Allison et al., 2015; Carter & Allison, 2017, 2019; Carter et al., 2013).

Death has also been used to present deeper metafictional commentaries on real-life death and resulting themes such as violence or moral agency. Phillips (2018) argues

that "video games are full of mechanics of death and dying rich with similar implications for thinking about the real world" (p. 148). Single-player video games such as *Undertale* (Fox, 2015) and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato, 2017), and non-digital multiplayer board games such as *Train* (Romero, 2009), conceal the true intent of their death mechanics until an opportune moment where players are forced to "rethink their expectations and interpretations" (Mitgutsch & Weise, 2011, p. 1). There are myriad ways that death has been leveraged and experienced in games, which has led to a substantial body of literature that surrounds it.

In game studies, scholars have not only explored how death is constructed and experienced inside game spaces (Allison et al., 2015; Klastrup, 2007, 2008; Kocurek, 2015), they have also examined the real-life rituals and grieving practices that surround both in-game and real-life player death through shared social and communal experiences (Andrew, 2014; Gibbs, Carter, & Mori, 2016; Gibson, 2019; Servais, 2015). This is echoed in similar digital media studies research from Lingel (2013) that viewed the interaction between identity and community through social media practices of online grief. Particularly in digital games, the design of emotionally significant and meaningful death has been explored previously (Carter & Allison, 2017; Jørgensen, 2016). Though literature exists that is adjacent to meaningful death in non-digital games—notably, Montola's (2010) exploration of positive negative experiences in LARPs and Rogerson, Gibbs, Carter, and Allison's (2018) investigation of permadeath as an experience of loss and elimination in non-digital board games—few studies have explicitly explored experiences of death in non-digital contexts and physical game spaces. Death in the TTRPG D&D is a useful case study as it exemplifies how meaningful play and positive negative experiences coalesce into pivotal play.

Dungeons & Dragons

At its core, D&D is a long-form TTRPG where groups of players meet in person to role-play their created characters who have diverse motivations, backgrounds, and abilities. They explore imagined worlds, overcome challenges, and build relationships using dice rolls to determine the outcome of their actions. Over the last 47 years, D&D has altered its rulesets and content to cater to its transforming player base. It has recently drawn attention from the public because of increased positive media representations, reduction of associated stigma, and impact of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) on play and consumption of the game (Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b). D&D is often referred to as the foundation of modern RPGs and elements of the game's design and play have been adapted in many digital and non-digital successors (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). As the influence of D&D is widespread, there has been considerable academic research conducted on the game in various fields of interest.

The most significant contribution to D&D literature is Gary Alan Fine's (1983) foundational ethnography: *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*.

Fine's (1983) exploration of D&D players through frame analysis is widely referenced and still applied as an influential theoretical framework when considering social play in games. However, while Fine inspected the phenomenon of D&D throughout the early 1980s, his research cannot address the changed context and design of D&D and, subsequently, its new player base. Additionally, Fine does not discuss the meaningful play experiences that are enabled by the game.

A review of contemporary D&D literature shows attention toward areas such as D&D's immersive experiences (Mizer, 2019; Wouters, Rogerson, & Hu, 2021), critical consideration of the game's present inclusivity (e.g., Cote, 2020, pp. 190-197; Jones, 2018; Jones & Pobuda, 2020; Stang & Trammell, 2019; Stokes, 2017; Trammell, 2014), and comprehensive historical documentation of the game (Peterson, 2012, 2018, 2020, 2021). Research has also covered D&D's rulesets and structures (Dashiell, 2017, 2018), related media representations and modern resurgence (Chalk 2018; Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b; Stanton & Johnson, 2021), and influence of the game on digital successors (LaLone, 2019; Voorhees, Call, & Whitlock, 2012; Zagal & Deterding, 2018). More recently, D&D has been examined in relation to its educative potential (e.g., Cook, Gremo, & Morgan, 2016; Garcia, 2020; Polkinghorne, Turner, Taboada, & Kerr, 2021; Sidhu, Carter, & Curwood, 2021; Wright, Weissglass, & Casey, 2017, p. 1).

While game studies researchers have established the complex and diverse gaming cultures, communities, and players that surround modern digital games, further research is needed into their non-digital counterparts and the inherently different player experiences they create and provide (Paul, 2018, p. 70). Our study intended to address this gap in academic literature by examining the appeal of D&D, particularly over the last six years, coinciding with the game's new ruleset (fifth edition) and perceived resurgence. In this article, we focus on how player experiences with death in D&D represent pivotal play, which can be used as a foundation to explore more inter-meaningful play experiences in other games and future studies.

Methods

The initial aim of our study was to contribute a deeper understanding of D&D's contemporary resurgence and appeal which was guided by two overarching research questions: "What are the factors contributing to the resurgence of D&D play?" and "Why do players find D&D appealing?" This article details findings related to the latter question which drew attention to meaningful player experiences with death.

Over the course of five months (May–September 2019) in Sydney, Australia, we interviewed and observed 20 current D&D players (7F, 13M, aged 18–34) across four different playing groups. Our participants had varying levels of play experience (ranging from 2 months to 19+ years) and were all playing in a fifth edition campaign setting. Both semi-structured interviews and participant observation of gameplay were implemented, and participants were involved in pre-play interviews, observations of play sessions, and follow-up post-play interviews. The interviews and

observations were targeted toward understanding player histories, motivations to play D&D, playing experiences, and engagement with D&D paratexts.

Data collected from pre-play interviews was used to inform observation of play sessions, and data from both was collectively used to create the post-play reflection questions which were tailored to each individual participant. Once data was collected, a combination of open coding, axial coding, and memos (Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyze findings in both individual participant responses and playing group data sets. Transcriptions of interviews were actively read and viewed in conjunction with recorded play observations and field notes. Open coding was used to identify initial similarities, differences, and trends in the data, while axial coding consolidated and linked core concepts, meta-themes, and expressions explored in this article, such as "death," "meaningful play," "positive negative experiences," and "pivotal play."

Results

During the pre-play interviews, all 20 participants were asked, "What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game?" We anticipated responses that would identify any recurring elements that were making the game more enjoyable for contemporary players and provide insight into the current appeal of D&D play, which was our initial aim. However, our participants overwhelmingly recounted and referred to their meaningful experiences with death. During the pre-play interviews, 17/20 participants explicitly mentioned death as the most memorable and meaningful part of their D&D play. Participants were required to further clarify, consolidate, and speak to their responses during the follow-up post-play interviews, where all 20 participants were then asked, "Many players' memorable moments surrounded experiences of death in various ways. Why do you think death is so meaningful and/or memorable in D&D?"

Our data suggested that death was the most common meaningful play experience in D&D. However, through our coding, memos, and analysis, it became clear that participants had diverse and often conflicting experiences of death in D&D. The impact of death on players was not limited to the game space or context of play. What made these instances of play meaningful permeated game boundaries, exceeding the intent of Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) original concept. In their rich explanations, participants described death evocatively. Some participants characterized death as "devastating," "horrific," "intense," "brutal," and "the ultimate finality." Others re-called death as "exciting," "manageable," "poetic," "powerful," and "freeing." These dichotomies of death were further reflected in our participants' play experiences which ranged from tragic and humorous player-character (PC) and non-player character (NPC) deaths, to experiences of genuine grief and reflection on real-life deaths through death experienced in-game.

Our findings go beyond previous research that applies meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) or positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008) to discuss or understand player experiences in-game. Aligning with McAllister and Ruggill's

(2018) sentiments, we argue that death can permeate games and player experiences "well beyond the moments immediately before and after the instant of death" (p. 92). We propose that death in D&D has the potential to be *pivotal play*—appealing, memorable, and transformative play that transcends game boundaries. We also argue that pivotal play is a useful concept to understand and design intermeaningful play experiences. As game creators, consumers, and academics continue to develop and reimagine what impactful, emotional, and effective play experiences are, pivotal play draws attention to the appealing, memorable, and transformative nature of play that is not captured in current concepts. Our results are organized into three key thematic areas that emerged through analysis: (1) the impact of shared physical and social realities on death in D&D, (2) the design of death in D&D, and (3) how death in D&D shapes the future play and lives of players.

The Impact of Shared Physical and Social Realities

What became immediately clear from participant responses was the impact of D&D's shared physical and social environments on players' experiences with death. Mizer's (2019) research into TTRPGs notes the importance of these spatial considerations which highlight "the interplay between physical space, imaginary space, and the personalities that become invested in those spaces" (p. 62). Although not every D&D game is played in a shared physical or social environment—the key alternative being online campaigns conducted through platforms such as Roll20, Skype, or Zoom—the majority of our participants suggested that death in D&D was heightened by the inherent physical proximity and social realities they shared with other players. We argue that this is key for transforming a memorable moment in-game to deeper, more evocative pivotal play.

The shared physical space that D&D is often played in was discussed in an oppositional stance to the more physically intangible spaces of digital games. Participant responses highlighted the greater responsibility and consequences arising from having to physically navigate death in real time, in consideration of other players. In comparison to digital game environments, Dungeon Master (DM) and player Benji[1] noted that in D&D "you have to physically interact with the human being that died." Similarly, new player Xanthe acknowledged that physical D&D sessions have heightened "tension and emotional connections … which make death and the interactions inside D&D more meaningful and memorable." Both Benji and Xanthe emphasized that experiences of death in non-digital game spaces require players to be actively considerate of other players' emotions and reactions as well as their own. This is not necessarily the case in many digital games or mediums where individuals are physically isolated from each other and have arguably greater autonomy and flexibility regarding their enactment and reactions to grief or death in communal spaces. Having other players physically present during a delicate emotional moment like death elevates the meaning drawn from D&D play even further.

As Fine (1983) has explained previously, the layered social and natural frames present throughout physical D&D play allow players to implicitly construct shared meanings and values during their gameplay and role-play experiences (pp. 194–200). Interestingly, when witnessing a character death in a D&D session that was not played in-person (the game was conducted online through Skype and Roll20), the same impact of D&D's shared physical reality was still observed. When Yuri's character died in-game, they switched off their video output immediately and kept it off for subsequent play sessions, communicating only by voice. An improvised "physical" barrier was placed between themselves and other players in the game, similar to the physical barriers present in most digital game spaces. What this consolidates is the inherent impact of physical player proximity on the extrameaningful nature of death in D&D.

Another key factor framing death in D&D as a pivotal play moment is the impact of the game's social and communal realities. Unlike other games, death in D&D borrows from real-life death (Phillips, 2018) and becomes a shared lived experience for all involved. As new player Darcy put it,

> We are traipsing around fictional lands together, unravelling mysteries and working together (or in opposition) of each other; these activities create a shared history between players and their characters. The death of one of them is akin to saying bye to a friend.

In many digital games, though not all, once your character or avatar dies in-game there is often a discrepancy between other players' perceptions and experiences of that same character's death, both in multiplayer and solo games. While one player may mourn or feel deeply, others may react inversely as they have different lived experiences, understandings, or expectations of the game space. As D&D players inhabit a shared social frame when playing (Goffman, 1974; Mizer, 2019), they experience death communally, as observed and communicated above by Yuri and Darcy. As a result, players' experiences, understandings, and expectations of the game space are navigated and constructed socially each play session.

Building on Darcy's understanding of D&D as a shared history between players and their characters, other participants articulated the role their social relationships had on heightening their emotional responses toward death. DM Lee noted that "not only do you have to process your own grief, but also the grief of the other characters and how it will affect them." Having to experience a death collectively and publicly elicits deeper meaning for D&D players. They inhabit a shared reality and imagination that not only impacts the narrative trajectory and emotional growth of their characters inside the game, but also themselves and their playing group outside of the game's context (Mizer, 2019). As players share these deeply personal moments, they begin to comprehend the liminal environment of D&D as a safe social space to genuinely experience or perform traditionally "negative" emotions, such as grief, shock, loss, and guilt, which commonly follow death. Experienced player and DM Taylor emphasized that "because you invest so much external time and effort into your

characters, storyline, and background—when a character dies it's almost like real life. It's the immersion. You get that sinking feeling in your chest." Taylor further clarified that the added complexity of having to navigate other players' emotional reactions and social attention, during and after a death, affected future play of the game. D&D's shared game realities highlight how in-game experiences of death are inherently shaped and heightened by external physical and social considerations. When viewing play through this extrameaningful paradigm, we can extend Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) definition of intrameaningful play experiences to be inclusive of play that transcends beyond the game.

Death in D&D is a pivotal play moment that begins inside the gaming environment but is not contained by it. Players can derive meaning and reflect on their experiences within the confines of the game, however, the innate physical, spatial, and social qualities of D&D (Mizer, 2019) allow death to permeate game boundaries and impact players beyond the game. D&D players navigate and adapt their expectations and experiences of death because of the game's inherent physical and social demands. Viewing death as pivotal play allows us to present a more intermeaningful understanding of transformative and memorable play experiences. It acknowledges the role of external factors on meaningful play, like shared physical and social environments, which are not accounted for in Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) current definition.

The Design of Death in D&D

> Injury and the risk of death are constant companions of those who wish to explore the worlds of D&D. – 5th Edition D&D Player's Handbook (WOTC, 2014, p. 181).

Death in D&D is designed to be flexible and accounts for player agency. Another recurring theme that emerged from our data analysis was the contentious participant discussion surrounding the rules and construction of death in games. Established previously, the design and experience of death in digital games can vary greatly. One of the notable differences about death in D&D is that it exists on a spectrum that can be altered at will. What we mean by this is that D&D players and DMs have greater control and agency over their play and the types of death that are encountered and experienced within their games. This is in direct comparison to most digital games where the role and flexibility of the death mechanic is decided on and constructed by the game's designers and developers. In this section, we argue that the flexible design of D&D facilitates greater player agency which leads to deeper engagement and meaning taken from player experiences with death.

The main point of contention in participant responses deals with the design mechanics and rules surrounding meaningful death. Many of our participants critiqued death in digital games, particularly their common incorporation of respawn mechanics. For example, two of our participants differing in play experience, Taylor

(DM/player, 19+ years) and Rae (player, >6 months), expressed the common sentiment that "when you lose a character in a videogame you can just reload it… you don't have consequences in videogames." Though Taylor and Rae were critical of the perceived superficial and inconsequential death that was constructed in digital games, similar comments were made by other participants about D&D's own resurrection mechanic.

DM Lee argued that the opportunity for resurrection made death "too trivial and meaningless in D&D," instead offering that permadeath of characters was "so much more effecting." Supporting this, Lee's convictions were observed and enacted in his play choices. Lee was running a campaign for his players where the major plot and premise surrounded the omission of resurrection magic. When observing his game, it was clear that death had higher stakes and irreversible consequences. Lee modeled and provided experiences more akin to real-life death, compared to the conventional "repertoire-building" design of death in many games (Flynn-Jones, 2015, p. 54; Juul, 2005, p. 56). As a result, this elevated the tension and engagement of players, who displayed frenzied emotions and were noticeably on edge whenever death was looming. Through the game's flexible design, death was contrived and positioned as emotionally significant and pivotal.

Knowing that playstyles and preferences of players are inherently varied, it is important to consider other ways that death is designed to be meaningful. Regardless of the type of death (temporary/permanent, PC/NPC, etc.), D&D leverages player agency and immersion to deliver heightened emotional play experiences. LaLone (2019) suggests that the emotional quality of D&D play is not only shaped by the rules, but guided and co-created by the DMs, players, and procedurality of the game system (para. 30). Our participants articulated having greater control and flexibility over their in-game actions compared to players of digital games. Player/DM Benji stated that the rules of death "in D&D are enforced by a human being so the consequences are more real, just like in real life." Benji argued that death was more meaningful in D&D than it was in digital games because it was the consequence of collective and individual human actions, rather than those of machines or artificial intelligence. The cumulative actions, reactions, and choices of players and DMs foster deeper investment, engagement, and subsequent responsibility inside the game, which contribute to greater meaning being derived from and attributed to death in D&D.

Furthermore, D&D's variable design informs the way that meaningful play is created and navigated. Player Val mentioned in her interview that "the creative space of D&D is limited in the most exciting way which is that other people are involved." Val builds on LaLone's (2019) suggestion and Benji's previous assertions that human choices are what make death meaningful in D&D. When observing her relatively new playing group, it was evident that the recent death of a beloved NPC had impacted players both internally and externally. Feeling responsible for the death, Val's group was continually sharing fond memories and words of mourning both in-game as their characters and beyond the game in their digital group chat. The players were so moved

by this death that they expressed their grief through the creation of external paratexts like deified illustrations and gospels, which were also incorporated in-game. The group's DM Shannon laughed when these materials were mentioned, enlightening that the NPC was originally intended to be an insignificant enemy that had only transformed into a pivotal figure because of the group's fascination and choices. Echoing Mizer (2019), "as players define and re-define a game world, they must take apart some of its pieces, make new sense of them, and then communicate the new state to one another by reassembling the words and images used to conjure the world" (p. 3). Having the design flexibility to allow players to explore and draw value from elements of the game they are intrigued by not only increases player satisfaction and engagement, but also leads to meaningful relationships and pivotal play moments that are not intended otherwise.

D&D utilizes flexible design mechanics to offer players meaningful and pivotal play experiences. As players and DMs have greater control, agency, and discretion over their play choices, richer meaning is attributed to and derived from experiences with death—emotional or otherwise. Consequently, death in D&D is perceived to be more meaningful than death in other game environments. In conjunction with the game's shared physical and social realities, D&D's flexible design permits meaningful death to exist in diverse ways both inside of and beyond actions and outcomes within the game space—extending our understanding of Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) meaningful play.

How Death Shapes the Future Play and Lives of Players

Death in D&D affects future play and players' lives beyond the game. Throughout the data collection process, it was apparent that most participants had experienced an in-game death that imparted legitimate meaning on them. For some participants though, this meaning was further bolstered by their real-life experiences and understandings of death (Phillips, 2018). Through analysis, it became clear that death in D&D facilitated similar relational attachments and emotions that resembled those present in real-life experiences of death. From this, we argue that death in D&D can be a pivotal play moment imbued with meaning that exists within, and can transcend beyond, game boundaries.

Interestingly, our data indicated that experiences of death in D&D were amplified by experiences of death in real-life. For two of our participants, death in D&D had provided an explicit outlet to reflect on and come to terms with a real-life death they had recently faced. This supports Phillips' (2018) work that positions how death and dying in games can be used to view similar experiences and implications in real-life beyond the game (p. 148). New player Quinn, who lost a family member earlier in the year, highlighted the similarities present between real-life attachments and ongoing relationships with the deceased compared to those experienced in-game. Reflecting on both deaths, Quinn pointed out that "when you think about it, we only really have rough models of the people in our lives—we're not in their heads, living their lives—

it's our characterisation of them that we get attached to." Quinn's experience of death in D&D provided them with "another lens to look at [real-life] death through [which] actually helped." These reciprocal experiences of death allowed Quinn to self-reflect, anchor, and find a deeper connection between their in-game grief and external grief, shaping their life and perspectives toward death both in-game and outside the game. Death in D&D was pivotal for Quinn as it facilitated genuine reflection on similar external experiences of death (Phillips, 2018).

Likewise, experienced player and DM Harley highlighted the emotional attachments mirrored between real-life death and death in D&D. Having experienced a family death just weeks prior to a poignant in-game death, Harley added that "when we invest in the characters so strongly, having them die can be almost as affecting as having a family member die." Throughout observation of Harley's group play session, an unexpected in-game death occurred. Players were exhibiting a vast array of emotional reactions: shock, confusion, apathy, devastation, and even tears. It became obvious that Harley's group had invested time and care to develop strong emotional bonds and connections with each other—not only between their characters in-game, but in their relationships beyond the game. D&D was a safe environment where players were comfortable enough to express their raw emotions and reactions to a typically negative event (Hopeametsä, 2008, p. 195).

Moreover, in-game death also altered how players traversed and approached their future D&D play inside the game. Many participants described how their first interaction with in-game death impacted their subsequent play of the game. For player and DM Ash, the death of his first character left him in constant denial and "in a state of wishing that [his] character hadn't died in the first place." Ash felt that his character's death was unfulfilling and, as a result, grew a habit of creating characters that were similar to his first. Though Ash was cognizant of the lasting impact, death had inherently informed the trajectory of his D&D playstyle and character preferences for many years to come. Conversely, player Fern had noted that "as with death in the real world, grief is a complicated emotion that comes hand in hand with a flood of reminiscences. It reminds us of all the other fond memories of a person/character and challenges us to move forward without them." For player and DM Ridley, the significance of his first in-game death confirmed his passion toward D&D and subsequent excitement in providing other players with similar pivotal play moments. Ridley remarked, "I've had a couple of characters die and it's devastating but also really exciting that you've been through that in a way. As a DM it's the same, I love giving players that experience." Ridley explained that the death of his first character "was the moment where [he] first wanted to be a DM." Utilizing the game's flexible design, Ridley helped orchestrate the sacrifice of his character during the emotional apex of a plot arc. Reminiscing on the wider impact of this pivotal play moment, Ridley expressed his awe and satisfaction: "It was like 'holy shit I orchestrated that' and that reaction from the rest of the players was really cool to me." Though Ash, Fern, and Ridley's experiences and attitudes towards death in D&D were varied, death was similarly positioned as a conduit that shaped their future play of the game.

Extending this notion, Paris' first altercation with death typifies why death in D&D should considered as a pivotal play. Paris described,

> I was so grieved by this death that I went on this three-week streak of 'I'm not going to talk to anyone'—a grief coma. When I woke up from this grief coma, I changed my values. It was actually… really strong for me to go through, not just in character but as a player. I went on a day vacation, visited a park, had a nap in the forest. I had a lovely day.

Viewing Paris' experience through meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) or positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008) neglects the complexity and breadth of death in D&D. Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) framework allows us to consider the impact of Paris' "grief coma" on her changing values inside the game, but overlooks her evolution as a player and person outside the game. Hopeametsä's (2008) positive negative experiences address this discrepancy, explaining why Paris attributes deeper meaning to her death experience. However, as explored and signposted throughout this article, experiences with death are varied and may not be considered "positive negative" by all players. If we instead view death as pivotal play, we can account for the appealing, memorable, and transformative nature of death both inside of and beyond the game space without polarizing its impact on players.

Though death in D&D has an immediate impact on players and their emotions or attachments inside the game, it is often the conduit for experiencing greater metaphysical change and reflection outside the game. This is paralleled in, and enhanced by, real-life experiences of death (Phillips, 2018). As player Ash conclusively summarized, death shapes your "future interactions with the game, as well as the world around you." The combination of D&D's shared physical and social realities and flexible game design enables players to situate and reflect on death in their future play of the game and in their wider lives, establishing death as a pivotal play moment.

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to show how play can have meaning that transcends game boundaries, rethinking the current definition of meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The account we have provided here of meaningful player experiences with death contributes valuable insight to game studies about meaningful play, positive negative experiences, and death in TTRPGs.

Of most significance, we proposed the concept of pivotal play to describe appealing, memorable, and transformative play experiences. This conceptualization of play that has meaning extends on current understandings (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) by considering the impact of these play(er) experiences both within and beyond the confines of the game, which benefits the design and evaluation of serious meaning and values in games.

Though this article is focused on player experiences with death, our findings suggest the possibility of pivotal play in moral decision-making. To strengthen the utility of this concept in game studies, further investigation into moral decision-making in games and other potential instances of pivotal play is required and recommended. As games continue to experiment with impactful gameplay that transcends game boundaries, pivotal play can help articulate the significance of appealing, memorable, and transformative play experiences for future game design.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Throughout this article, participants and their resulting data are referred to by pseudonyms.

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