

# From Critical Rolls to Critical Analysis: Imaginary Worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons

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**Date:** 14/06/2021

**Wordcount:** 22653 words

**Master:** Tourism, Culture and Society

**Course:** Master Thesis

**Course code:** CC4250

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### ABSTRACT

In an increasingly digitized and mediatized world, individuals still physically gather around a table to play the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons. This thesis aims to determine how and in what ways do Dungeons & Dragons players engage in imaginary worldbuilding and how can the increasing popularity of this be explained in an environment characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization. It offers concrete insights into the process of imaginary worldbuilding, engaged in by ‘average’ individuals through Dungeons & Dragons, rejecting the elitist bias present in studies on the imagination and media studies in general (Benson, 1999; Rugg, 1963), adding to empirical research in the field that is still in its infancy (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021).

A total of twelve semi-structured interviews have been conducted with players of Dungeons & Dragons. The interviews were transcribed to prepare them for the iterative coding process and analysis (Babbie, 2016). The themes that arose were used as a basis to generate overarching themes using the guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data shows that the main appeals of Dungeons & Dragons surround the imagination, as it allows individuals to create worlds with seemingly endless possibilities, in which players experience continuous adventures (Hagerty et al., 1992; Morley 2000). The need to engage with these worlds is grounded in escapism (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 1990), driven by the increasing digitalization and mediatization of society (Appadurai, 2015; Hopper, 2007), combined with the daily grind. Oddly, the worldbuilding processes are inspired by digitization and mediatization. Dungeon masters draw inspiration from the known world and popular media from geek culture to create a blueprint determining the boundaries of the imaginary world (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018). This leads to harmonized worlds in which dungeon masters immerse the players, involving them in the worldbuilding process drawing upon the collective imagination. The harmonized worlds contain good and evil (Tuan, 1990), which creates a tension that immerses players, who roleplay a character, into the world. While players focus on the practicalities of the embodiment of a character, some embody a character that is based on ‘the self’ by corroborating or opposing it. As the game provides a safe environment to do so, it can even lead to personal growth. Moreover, the social rituals associated with Dungeons & Dragons may lead to social bridging and social bonding (Larsen et al., 2004), with Dungeons & Dragons as common ground (Keeley, 2007).

In conclusion, Dungeons & Dragons effectively fills the gaps that remain unfulfilled in daily life in current society, taking on the role of a storyteller and getting together in an offline environment with other players to engage in the collective imagination.

Keywords: Dungeons & Dragons, tabletop games, imagination, worldbuilding, storytelling, sense of belonging, escapism, roleplaying, geek culture.

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## 1. Preface and acknowledgments

“I am not a wizard, but I play one every Tuesday night.” is how Ewalt (2013, p. 4) introduced himself in his book about Dungeon & Dragons and its players. I would like to start this thesis in a similar fashion. I am not an eldritch knight, but I regularly play one on the weekends. By combining martial fighting techniques with the use of magical spells I spend some of my spare time slaying dragons and protecting the innocent from evil. That is, in the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons of course.

In addition to playing an eldritch knight, I am also a master’s student nearing graduation. Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, the process of completing a master’s degree has been different than usual. Everything people usually left their houses for, was mostly canceled or replaced by online alternatives. As a result, most people became home-bound. Personally, I felt the walls closing in on me after a few months. Aside from missing my friends, I missed the regular gaming nights on which we gathered around the table and rolled some dice, pretending to be everything we were not. Dungeons & Dragon has always been an enjoyable and geeky hobby to me, however, during the pandemic I started wondering whether it was more than just that. Because, of all things that were different during the pandemic, why did I specifically miss playing the game so much? Was it the fantasy aspects? The offline setting? The geek culture associated with it?

After pondering on these ideas for a while, I decided to focus my master thesis research on Dungeons & Dragons. Although the pandemic inspired the choice for this topic, this thesis focuses on the game as a whole, not just during the pandemic. After six months of exploring existing research and interviewing players of Dungeons & Dragons, I completed the quest of writing the master thesis that is currently in front of you. It explores how and in what ways players of Dungeons & Dragons engage in imaginary worldbuilding and how its increasing popularity can be explained in an environment characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization.

Just as Frodo would not have been able to reach Mount Doom without the help of his adventuring party, I would not have been able to complete the adventure of writing this master thesis without the help of several individuals. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Nicky van Es, who ensured my focus remained on completing the thesis, without dwelling on any side quests. Also, his extensive knowledge of related topics provided valuable input for the research. Moreover, I would like to thank the respondents for their interesting insights and enjoyable stories as input. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their kind words and support during the process, and more specifically, my parents for also providing me with regular cups of coffee on late nights and early mornings. Thank you for being the Fellowship of the Ring to my Frodo.

Hopefully you enjoy your reading.

Eva Hofman

Rotterdam, June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## 2. Introduction

Fighting dragons, retrieving magical artifacts, and forming alliances between rival kingdoms. Although this might sound like the plot of a fantasy movie, these activities are part of the common routine for those who do not only like to spend time in the real world, but in fantasy worlds as well. Roleplaying games (or RPGs) allow their players to escape the daily grind and be whoever and wherever they want to be. Dungeons & Dragons, or D&D in short, is one of the most popular tabletop roleplaying games nowadays and is usually set in an imaginary fantasy world. Each player portrays a self-created character of choice, with ranging backgrounds, races, and classes. The dungeon master, which can be seen as the storyteller, acts as a referee, sets the challenges, and narrates the world (Leung, 2017). This is done by building on the imagination in constructing imaginary worlds, events, and characters, making the imagination one of the most important elements of Dungeons & Dragons. It can be defined as “the affectively laden patterns/images/forms, by means of which we experience the world, other people and ourselves.” (Lennon, 2015, p. 1). Players engage in a campaign, a continuous story that takes place in the same world building onto past sessions, or a one-shot, a short story played out over one (or a few) sessions (Ewalt, 2013). The game largely consists of exploring the world and social interaction between players. Although sometimes avoided, the third element is combat, a strategic element that often includes figurines of the characters on a battle map. The players determine the course of action, but a set of dice decides whether their actions are successful. By going on successful adventures and quests, the players advance in the story and level up (Leung, 2017).

The game was initially created by game designers Arneson and Gygax in 1974. Over time, several editions of the game were released, each with new sets of rules (Hosch, 2009). In 2012 the latest edition of the game was announced by game publisher Wizards of the Coast, who officially released it in 2014. This edition is commonly referred to as *Dungeons & Dragons 5<sup>th</sup> edition* (Golsdorf, 2012). Over the last decade Dungeons & Dragons has received an influx of interest. Although the fifth edition was officially released in 2014, the biggest surge occurred in 2017 and 2018, in which the sales increased by respectively 41% and 52%, as opposed to the years before (Pilon, 2019). According to Stuart (2019), the increasing popularity of Dungeons and Dragons is fuelled by geek culture becoming more accepted, with fantasy movies and series as *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* reaching mainstream success. Moreover, Dungeons & Dragons was referenced in the television series *The Simpsons* as early as 1993 (O'Brien & Reardon, 1993). More recently, the game was referenced in the American comedy series *Community* (Guest & Russo, 2011) and the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

The increasing popularity of Dungeons & Dragons can be explained by its similarities with online gaming, especially massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), as both take place in narrative-driven and immersive worlds, and both have a social component. The main difference is that MMORPGs are situated in virtual imaginary worlds and Dungeons & Dragons in

offline imaginary worlds. Due to the similarities, online gamers can be expected to be more receptive towards Dungeons & Dragons. Similar to Dungeons & Dragons, the popularity of online games is rising too (Visual Capitalist, n.d.). The increasing popularity of both indicates there is an underlying need or desire in society to engage with imaginary worlds. With the possibilities offered by technological advancements for worldbuilding in a virtual setting, it could be argued that playing in an offline setting and relying on the imagination is less preferred. However, the success of Dungeons & Dragons shows the opposite appears to be true. This suggests an interplay between online and offline gaming, in which despite the plethora of online possibilities, individuals still opt to engage in an old-school tabletop game.

This ‘physical togetherness’ is what makes Dungeons & Dragons unique. In a technologically advanced world, individuals still come together to interact and dive into the imaginary, as opposed to spending their time behind a monitor. In this sense, Dungeons & Dragons is not just a game, but a social event in which individuals choose to come together physically to construct imaginary fantasy worlds and narrate stories within them. The importance of physical togetherness for Dungeons & Dragons underlines the academic relevance of further research, as players actively engage in constructing an imaginary world as well as a community in which they experience a sense of belonging. It offers concrete insights into this process of imagination and imaginary worldbuilding, engaged in by ‘regular’ individuals through Dungeons & Dragons. Although some studies are covering the imagination, systematic and empirical research into the subject is still in its infancy (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders, Waysdorff, Bolderman, and van Es, 2021). To determine the value of this physical togetherness and process of collective imaginary worldbuilding in an increasingly mediatized and digitized environment, the following research question was established:

*“How and in what ways do Dungeons & Dragons players engage in imaginary worldbuilding and how can the increasing popularity of this be explained in an environment characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization?”*

Dungeons & Dragons has been researched in previous academic studies, although many focused on different aspects of the game. For instance, there are studies with psychological approaches concerning alienation, personality types, emotional stability, and how it can be used in therapy (Armando, 1987; Blackmon, 1994; Carter & Lester, 1998; DeRenard & Kline, 1990). Moreover, there is an elitist bias in some media studies, that emphasizes the importance of professional education in the field (Benson, 1999), and sociological studies regarding the imagination, that focus on how experts use the imagination, including writers and artists (Rugg, 1963). This research adopts a sociological approach as well, but rejects the elitist stance by connecting the imagination with ‘regular’ individuals and everyday life. The imagination is fundamental for human experiences (Lennon, 2015), and therefore Dungeons & Dragons provides an interesting tangible case to study the imagination grounded in daily life, rather than in professional practices. Moreover, it focuses on the imagination engaged in by fans

of the game, rather than professionals in imaginary worldbuilding. As such, it adds to existing and ongoing research in the field.

This thesis continues with a review of previous research and relevant theories in chapter 2. Thereafter, chapter 3 covers the methods adopted for data gathering and analysis. Afterward, in chapter 4 the results of the field research are discussed, divided into five relevant themes. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and answers the research question. In addition, some ideas for further research are discussed. The appendices respectively contain an overview of respondents, the interview guide, the codebook, and an overview of the quotations in Dutch.

### 3. Literature review

This chapter contains a review of existing and ongoing research that form the theoretical foundation required to answer the research question. The first paragraph explores the processes of digitization, mediatization, and globalization of society, and how they relate to Dungeons & Dragons. Thereafter, in the second paragraph the imagination and its functions are discussed. Afterward, the third paragraph dives into the process of imaginary worldbuilding, applied to Dungeons & Dragons. Lastly, the final paragraph explores the social context of gaming and the communities associated with it.

#### *3.1 A sense of belonging*

In the current globalized world, everything is just a few mouse clicks or a short trip away from our reach. According to Hopper (2007), the ties between location and culture are changing as a result of globalization, a process which is referred to as deterritorialization. Appadurai (2015) argues that the cause of deterritorialization mostly lies within technological advancements and mediatization of society, which he referred to as ‘technocapes’ and ‘mediascapes’ as part of a larger model explaining globalization. This paragraph explores the relation between the ongoing processes of digitization, mediatization, and globalization of society, and imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons.

The digitization of society can be defined as the phenomenon in which different aspects of life increasingly become digitalized (Musik & Bogner, 2019). For instance, over the last few decades, the popularity of online gaming has been rising steadily. It is said to be one of the most rapidly growing industries worldwide, with an estimated revenue of \$196 by the year 2022 (Visual Capitalist, n.d.). As was mentioned in the introduction, the similarities between online gaming, especially MMORPGs, and Dungeons & Dragons raise the question as to why an old-school tabletop game like Dungeons & Dragons is becoming increasingly popular, while a plethora of virtual alternatives are available. This interplay between offline and online gaming suggesting there is an underlying need or desire in society to engage with imaginary worlds. Interestingly, online games and Dungeons & Dragons seem to be mutually reinforcing. Dungeons & Dragons is the inspiration for many games, such as the *Baldur’s Gate* series and *Divinity* series (Blye, 2020), but also draws inspiration from games. As locations from online in-game worlds can be used as inspiration, imaginary worlds in Dungeons & Dragons often share similar appearances, names, or quests players encounter during playing. This suggests that the ongoing process of digitization informs the imagination by providing inspiration and vice versa.

Moreover, in the mediatized world individuals continuously consume a plethora of information via different media. Indulging oneself in an imaginary world that temporarily helps escape the overload of information could allow individuals to feel more comfortable. The concept of escapism has negative connotations, as it suggests the inability to cope with reality. However, it should not be harshly defined as an escape from something inherently negative to something inherently positive, but can simply offer variety to daily life (Tuan, 2000, p. 5). In addition, various well-

established authors, such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, advocated for a more nuanced perception of escapism, as they saw creative fantasy as escapism, although it merely provides variety to daily life (Konzack, 2017). Even though the average Dungeons & Dragons campaign contains a fair dose of fear and danger, it still allows for an escape from the known world. After all, one of the goals of Dungeons & Dragons is to overcome danger through shared adventures and challenges. However, mediatization does not only feed the need for imaginary worlds, but informs them as well. According to Reijnders et al. (2021), the imagination operates as a link between media and locations, and thus generates an image of reality. As a result, individuals are capable of imagining places they have never visited, based on information from the media (Crouch, Jackson, & Thompson, 2005). Reijnders et al. (2021) add that the imagination is paired with an urge to locate the imagination, by using existing locations or locations from fictive media as reference points. For instance, it is said that movies and books such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* often inspire worlds and campaigns in Dungeons & Dragons (Ewalt, 2015; RPG Net, 2008).

Lastly, Hopper (2007) states that as globalization advances, individuals tend to hold on to their cultural identities and locations stronger. A possible explanation is that individuals want to feel at home somewhere, which is often tied to a location. Tuan (1990) refers to this concept as topophilia, the emotional attachment to a place that plays an important role in human experiences. The feeling of belonging somewhere is defined as experiencing oneself as essential within a specific environment and is an important factor in mental health (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). However, ‘home’ does not have to be a physical location, but can be any environment in which individuals experience comfort, security, and control (Morley, 2000, p. 24). Dungeons & Dragons is relevant, as it allows individuals to experience a sense of belonging or ‘homeness’ in a fantastical imaginary world, from a ‘home-like’ situation in the known world. Relating to the concept of escapism (Tuan, 1990), this imaginary world can simply be a diversion to daily life, or be conceived as a better ‘home’ than the actual home situation of an individual. In this sense, the boundaries between the known and the imaginary are significantly blurred, as individuals are experiencing a sense of belonging in the imaginary, created from the known world, showing how intertwined both worlds are (Reijnders et al., 2021). However, the concept of topophobia, fear of places, is relevant as well (Tuan, 1990). The average Dungeons & Dragons world also contains places aimed at instilling fear and discomfort. Examples include dark dungeons filled with monsters, abandoned buildings haunted by ghosts, or the unknown dangers of the deep sea. This is particularly interesting, as individuals have the creative and imaginative freedom to create anything while playing Dungeons & Dragons, but often resort to including locations of topophobia as well as topophilia. This raises the question as to what role such locations play, and how they are constructed. Moreover, relating to the affective imagination, in which individuals imagine the feelings of their characters (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013), it is relevant to explore how places of topophobia and topophilia affect the players. This dichotomy as perceived by players of Dungeons & Dragons is elaborated upon in the results chapter.

### ***3.2 The role of the imagination***

The previous paragraph indicated the ongoing processes of digitization, mediatization, and globalization of society may lead to the urge to feel at home somewhere (Appadurai, 2015; Hopper, 2007; Tuan, 1990), which can be fulfilled via imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons. As its players actively engage in imaginary worldbuilding, imagination is the most important asset of the game. To reach a full understanding as to how and in what ways this imaginative process takes place, it is important to explore the concept of the imaginary and how it operates. According to Lennon, the imagination can be understood as “the affectively laden patterns/images/forms, by means of which we experience the world, other people and ourselves.” (2015, p. 1). This definition is particularly interesting as it suggests that the imaginary and the known are not as clearly distinguished as one might expect. As the imagination is woven into any kind of experience and vice versa, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between what is imaginary and what not.

For a long period, the concept of the imagination was surrounded by controversy in philosophy. Although nowadays academic research into the imagination is becoming more prevalent and the accumulation of such research is increasing, the concept remains rather abstract and vague. In the past, it was deemed unfit for generating knowledge, as it had the image of being unreliable. Many classic philosophers claimed meaningful insights could only derive from reason. According to their views, the imagination opposed reason and therefore was a hindrance on the road towards knowledge (Reijnders et al., 2021). For instance, as a rationalist, Descartes defended the view that knowledge is grounded in reason, and could thus only derive from intellect. He argued that “nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher.” (as quoted by Dooremalen, de Regt & Schouten, 2007, p. 62).

However, philosophers Hume and Kant are widely known to have set in motion a countermovement by challenging the importance of reason in reaching meaningful insights. According to Hume, reason is mere ‘the slave to human passions’, as true knowledge derives from human experiences, which characterizes the empiricist movement (Dooremalen, de Regt, & Schouten, 2007). The imagination is a crucial part of cognitive abilities, as it creates new ideas, which he referred to as ‘mental images’. Individuals are capable of forming ideas about the world, without having seen every aspect of it, based on the collection of mental images that derive from the known world. This process is referred to by Hume as ‘making the absent present’ (Reijnders et al., 2021). Hume indicates that the imagination is reproductive in nature, as it consists of elements that directly derive from the known world (Lennon, 2015). Kant, as part of the empiricist movement, corroborated that human experiences form the foundation for generating knowledge (Dooremalen, de Regt, & Schouten, 2007). However, he argued the function of the imagination not to be reproductive, but productive. Individuals have numerous experiences throughout their lives. To make sense of the known world and its experiences, the imagination operates as a way to interpret and categorize these experiences into general thinking

patterns. Reijnders et al. (2021) corroborate the idea by Lennon (2015) that the imagination is part of any experience, although in many cases subconsciously. The function of the imagination is to make sense of reality, as it interprets the rather chaotic flow of human experiences, resulting in an unambiguous idea of reality.

However, the phenomenological approach of Lennon (2015) also stresses the importance of agency in how individuals affect reality. Individuals do not follow a set path, but have freedom in their actions. Therefore, they shape reality in different ways, as well as experience it in different ways. In this regard, it is relevant to explore how culture influences the imagination. As discussed by Zittoun and Glăveanu (2018), the relationship between culture and the imagination is often described as paradoxical. Culture is sometimes defined as something external, such as language and food, that is shared between groups of individuals. In contrast, the imagination has long been seen as a process that takes place on an individual level, within the mind of a single individual. However, adopting a more broad and open definition of culture, that recognizes the diversity and depth of the environments individuals reside in around the world, indicates that the relationship between culture and the imagination is symbiotic rather than paradoxical. Such a definition of culture includes customs and ideas about what is true, ideal, or right. Although the imagination is unique to each individual (Lennon, 2015), it heavily draws on social and cultural elements, such as customs and ideals, that are shared between individuals, indicating a symbiotic relationship between culture and the imagination (Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018). However, as discussed by Reijnders et al. (2021), popular culture affects the imagination too, as provides input for the imagination. Again, although the imagination is unique from one person to another (Lennon, 2015), it draws upon popular culture and media that are shared between individuals. Both these ideas emphasize the relevance of the collective imagination, in which individuals draw upon shared values or ideas based on culture and/or popular culture. This raises the question as to what role culture and popular have in imaginary processes in Dungeons & Dragons, which will be elaborated upon in the results section of this thesis.

### ***3.3 Imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons***

As the previous paragraph explored how the imagination operates, this paragraph continues with its most important function for the current research, namely imaginary worldbuilding. While the concept of the imagination remains somewhat abstract and vague, the case of Dungeons & Dragons provides clear and concrete insights into the process of imaginary worldbuilding. The imagination takes away the limitations of the senses and the known world, allowing individuals to transcend them. Therefore, the imagination allows individuals to create other worlds, that merely exist in the human mind. These can be worlds relating to the past, present, or future, but they can be non-existing fantasy worlds as well. Within the bubble of the imaginary world everything can occur, while common limitations of reality, such as time and gravity, do not always exist (Reijnders et al., 2021).

As discussed by Wolf (2017), all stories take place within a certain setting, the so-called world of the story and its characters. These story worlds can be quite basic, containing exactly the amount of information that is required to tell the story. However, many imaginary worlds are developed much further than required for the story, containing details about the world and its inhabitants. Wolf (2017) continues that generally, imaginary worlds have one or more unique features that distinguish them from the known world. They are created with the use of certain basic aspects, such as the size, scope, and shape of the world. For example, is it a small but detailed tropical archipelago, or a large desert continent in which many details are left open for interpretation? Moreover, generally, story worlds have inhabitants, which can be humanoid or not, although they are generally made to be relatable for the audience. Worlds and their inhabitants have a certain culture. This includes intangible elements such as ideals, customs, and philosophies, but also tangible elements such as architecture. All these elements combined determine what ‘makes sense’ in the world, or in other words, determine the parameters of and possibilities within the world. Wolf (2017) stresses the importance of the culture and possibilities within a world, as they are useful for creating a history of the world, as well as give direction for the future of the world. This is particularly relevant in worlds in which individuals engage over a longer period, as the lack of logical world design becomes more noticeable over time.

Although Wolf (2017) discussed imaginary worlds in general, his ideas apply to Dungeons & Dragons as well. Imaginary worlds within the game can be as developed as the dungeon master anticipates. Some like to plan every little detail, while others deliberately leave empty spots to fill depending on what the players require as the story advances. The preferred playstyle is ‘sandboxing’, in which players are not constrained, but have agency to explore and interact with the world as they see fit (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The less-favorable alternative is ‘railroading’, in which the dungeon master takes the players along in a predetermined story, limiting the agency of the players in the imaginary world (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In line with the ideas by Wolf (2017), worlds in Dungeons & Dragons have unique elements that distinguish them from the known world, such as magical powers and fantasy races. However, they also contain the basic aspects that were mentioned, such as geographies, cultures, inhabitants, and histories.

Some concepts that should be emphasized are the completeness and consistency of imaginary worlds. As discussed by Robertson (2017), the completeness of worlds does not refer to what extent the details of the world are planned out, but rather to what extent questions about the world are answerable. This relates to what Wolf (2017) described as what ‘makes sense’ in the world. In books or films, the questions to these answers are produced through the labor of the audience and their frame of reference. However, in Dungeons & Dragons, players can directly pose questions about the world to the dungeon master. This requires detailed planning of the world and plenty of flexibility from the dungeon master. Moreover, Lessa and Araújo (2017) argue that story worlds generally have to be consistent, meaning that they are plausible and do not contradict themselves. This is relevant in all kinds of worldbuilding, including that in Dungeons & Dragons. For instance, characters that have a

friendly personality one day, but appear to be hostile the next day are inconsistent and could hinder the experience in the imaginary world.

Particularly unique about worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons, as opposed to worldbuilding in general, is that players have agency in the world and therefore actively help shape the world and the story in it. According to Boni (2017), imaginary worlds are built via the active exploration by individuals, stating they “are also dependent upon their explores, who in return become worldbuilders.” (p. 10). When playing Dungeons & Dragons, the players portray a character of choice of ranging classes, races, and backgrounds. While embodying these characters, they actively explore - and thus build- the world in which the story is set. As most campaigns take place in a fantasy setting, players can embody all kinds of creatures with various supernatural and ordinary abilities. The races, such as orcs, elves, or dwarves determine the natural talents of a character. The classes, such as a fighter, rogue, or sorcerer, decide the gameplay experience (Leung, 2017). For instance, elves are generally elegant and graceful creatures, who have a keen eye for magic, nature, and art, while dwarves are known to be small yet bold warriors (DnD Beyond, n.d.a; DnD Beyond, n.d.b). Players can combine the races and classes in expected and unexpected ways, creating unique characters with diverse abilities. In addition to these practicalities, players generally flesh their characters out by writing a backstory, including their personality traits, upbringing, family members and/or friends, past activities, and so forth. Such details are less practical, but add depth to the game experience as they allow players to fully embody a fleshed-out character and behave as the character would. Players can choose to keep their characters close to themselves or try something different. These endless possibilities give a sense of freedom: players can be whoever and wherever they want to be, which allows them to indulge themselves in a different reality.

Dungeons & Dragons is mostly constructed by interaction and imagination, making it so-called theatre of the mind. However, the game does contain certain physical elements, such as rulebooks, guidebooks, dice. The books provide the rules and guidelines for players and dungeon masters, making them crucial physical elements, just as dice. Players have the freedom to do whatever they want, but the dice decide whether their actions are successful. The higher the number on the die, the more successfull the outcome or the higher the damage in combat (Leung, 2017). Moreover, certain groups decide to use additional physical elements, which include but are not limited to world- and battle maps, avatars, and figurines. It is possible to dress up, although this is generally not done during a game of Dungeons & Dragons. Therefore, it does show some similarities to live-action roleplay (LARPing), in which players mentally and physically portray their characters (Snyder, 2018). Generally, Dungeons & Dragons is limited to theatre of the mind, the mental and verbal portrayal of a character, with some optional physical representations of that character, such as figurines and/or avatars, that allow players to materialize the imaginary.

### ***3.4 The social context of gaming and its communities***

As previously established, particularly interesting about Dungeons & Dragons is how the worldbuilding processes draw upon the collective imagination, indicating that ‘togetherness’ and the social aspect of the game require further exploration. Lennon (2015) discusses the importance of the social context in which the imagination operates, because individuals interpret experiences differently based on those they are surrounded with. Culture and popular culture provide input for the imagination (Reijnders et al., 2021; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018), especially if they are shared between players engaging in an imaginary worldbuilding process in Dungeons & Dragons. Geek culture is especially interesting in this regard, as it is rooted in media. According to McCain, Gentile, and Campbell (2015), geek culture can be defined as “a subculture of enthusiasts that is traditionally associated with obscure media” (p. 1), such as video games and science fiction. The term ‘geek’ has been used in the past as a derogatory term to describe be outcasts, that were seen as socially awkward and overly intellectual. However, despite the traditional association with obscure media, nowadays geek culture is becoming increasingly mainstream. This is noticeable via the rising popularity of Dungeons & Dragons and online gaming (Pilon, 2019; Visual Capitalist, n.d.), but also the increasing popularity of annual events associated with geek culture. For instance, San Diego Comic-Con attracts over 130.000 visitors annually (Comic-Con, n.d.), while 373.000 visitors attended the 2019 edition of Gamescom in Germany (IGN Benelux, 2020). The increasing popularity of events associated with geek culture indicates individuals do not only enjoy engaging in ‘geeky’ activities, but also value the community surrounding geek culture, which allows them to meet and interact with like-minded individuals. This underlines the importance of communities within geek culture.

Aside from the larger community surrounding geek culture, many individuals engage in activities associated with geek culture with like-minded individuals in smaller settings. For instance, players of Dungeons & Dragons meet up regularly to play a campaign, a continuous story that takes place in the same world, with the same characters, building onto past sessions of the campaign. Alternatively, players sometimes meet up to play one-shots, short stories that take one (or a few) sessions to complete (Ewalt, 2013). Although there is little existing research on players of Dungeons & Dragons and their social behavior surrounding their engagement with the imagination, this indicates that playing Dungeons & Dragons can be seen as a very social activity. Because of the similarities between the game and online gaming, previous studies about the latter are used to explore the social context of gaming. Nowadays, gaming is often still seen as an isolating and anti-social activity, with many studies researching gaming in connection to social anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Wei, Chen, Huang, & Bai, 2012). However, it is recognized that such negative effects are almost solely visible in gamers who suffer from a gaming addiction or engage in problematic gameplay otherwise. Gamers who do not meet those criteria even experience positive social consequences, including a sense of community and friendship (Sublette & Mullan, 2012).

Moreover, Kolo and Baur (2004) corroborate that online gaming can be a social experience, as players create fixed social networks with each other, that often carry over to their offline lives as well. In this sense, the social component can be one of the main appeals of online gaming, especially those that are played in larger groups, such as the MMORPG World of Warcraft (Williams, et al., 2006). This corroborates gaming is very much a social activity that includes the construction of a community.

Although Dungeons & Dragons is commonly played offline, similar conclusions can be drawn. It is played in an offline setting in a group, making the social component essential. The portrayed characters dive into the imaginary world, in which they often have a collaborative quest to complete. This shared goal requires plenty of interaction between the different characters and the non-playable characters (NPCs) they encounter. Such interactions could be done virtually via voice chat programs, however, particularly interesting about Dungeons & Dragons is that players come together physically to play. As 'physical togetherness' is valued highly in Dungeons & Dragons, the question remains as to what social rituals are associated with the game. Social rituals can be defined as stereotypical behavioral sequences with symbolic meaning, although they can have different meanings for different players (Grund, 1993, p. 13), and are elaborated upon in the results chapter. The context in which these social rituals take place is related to the concept of social capital, which can be defined as networks with shared norms and values, that enable individuals within the network to function effectively (Keeley, 2007, p. 102). The question arises as to how the game affects relationships related and unrelated to Dungeons & Dragons. This is referred to as social bonding and social bridging, bonding that occurs within a community or that transcends communities (Larsen et al., 2004), and is elaborated upon in the results chapter.

## 4. Research design

Based on this theoretical foundation, the following research design adopted an inductive approach via semi-structured interviews with players of Dungeons & Dragons, to determine how they make use of their imagination while engaging in a collective imaginary worldbuilding process. As such, this research aims to answer the following question:

*“How and in what ways do Dungeon & Dragon players engage in imaginary worldbuilding and how can the increasing popularity of this be explained in an environment characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization?”*

This chapter continues with a description of the chosen method for data gathering and analysis. This includes an overview of how the data has been gathered and analyzed. Thereafter, the next paragraph describes the sampling methods, including the ways in which the respondents were approached and the sampling criteria. Thirdly, the next paragraph specifies how the concepts discussed in the literature review were operationalized into measurable aspects. This includes an overview of the codes used during the data analysis. Lastly, the fourth paragraph discusses the limitations of the research design.

### 4.1 Method

To answer the research question, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with players of Dungeons & Dragons. Particularly interesting about this research is how Dungeons & Dragons provides a case to connect the imagination with daily life and regular individuals, diversifying it from existing and ongoing research in the field. It allows for the analysis of insights from regular individuals on how they engage in imaginary worldbuilding, and how this can be explained in the context of current society. The research is inductive in nature, meaning that the outcomes provide new theory, as inductive research includes drawing generalizable conclusions out of observations (Bryman, 2012). In other words, it allows for the systematic observation and analysis of the imaginary worldbuilding processes associated with Dungeons & Dragons, which adds to existing and ongoing research by providing a unique window into how individuals engage with the imagination.

Interviews are an effective and relevant choice for data gathering in this case, as they are comparable to regular conversations, creating a natural and comfortable environment for respondents to share their insights. Moreover, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed for the discussion of certain predetermined topics, while also allowing the interviewees and interviewer to bring up additional topics they deemed relevant (Babbie, 2016, p. 311). This flexible and iterative method was fitting, as it allowed the researcher to, together with the respondents, reconstruct the imaginary worldbuilding process and what internal and external forces inspire it.

A total of twelve interviews have been conducted with an average length of approximately 56 minutes, adding up to a total of over 11 hours of data. The data is well-saturated, as additional

interviews would have led to repetitive information. It is expected that the number of interviews, as well as the quality of the data, allowed the researcher to develop a valid understanding of the topic (Saunders, et al., 2018). Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews have been conducted via Skype and Zoom. All except one interview have been conducted via video call, so that the nonverbal communication could be analyzed in addition to the verbal statements. The interview audio has been recorded with the permission of the respondents, who were also offered the option to remain anonymous, allowing for the transcription and analysis of the data.

#### ***4.2 Sampling***

The interviews have been conducted with players of Dungeons & Dragons, without distinguishing between regular players and dungeon masters, as the worldbuilding process is rooted in the collective imagination of a group of players. All respondents have been a dungeon master in a campaign or one-shot, although some had more experience as players. The main sampling criteria was that the respondents had to play Dungeons & Dragons, which can be categorized under generic purposive sampling, as respondents who match certain criteria are selected purposively (Bryman, 2012, p. 422). Everyone can play Dungeons & Dragons, and despite the players being quite diverse, there is a certain bias inherent to them. Although there is no exact data available, stereotypical players are generally seen as predominantly white, higher-educated men of the Millennial generation age-range, corresponding to stereotypes in wider geek culture. To acknowledge this stereotypical bias without abiding by it, the final sample in appendix A includes a variety of players of which some match the stereotypical characteristics, while some deviate from them. For instance, the age of the respondents ranges between 19 and 49, but 9 out of 12 respondents are aged between 25 and 40 and are thus considered part of the Millennial generation (Pew Research Center, 2019). Moreover, one-third of the respondents identify as female, while the others identify as male. As such, the respondents reflect the stereotypical players of Dungeons & Dragons, while also representing more diverse players, allowing for generalizable conclusions based on the observations. However, the process of finding respondents with culturally diverse backgrounds was challenging. Consequently, just one respondent has a culturally diverse background.

Three of the respondents were acquainted with the researcher, although most became involved in the research via social media. To reach a large group of the research population, a message was posted to a Dutch Dungeons & Dragons group on Facebook with more than 3.400 members. This message received well over 30 responses, of which nine additional respondents were selected, adding up to a total of twelve respondents. The sample was made with the demographics mentioned in the previous paragraph in mind, as well as the experience of the player. As a result, the research contains insights from fairly new players, as well as players that have more than 25 years of experience. This provides insights into whether prolonged involvement in the game affects the imaginary worldbuilding processes.

#### ***4.3 Operationalization and analysis***

The theories discussed in the literature review provided the theoretical foundation for the interviews. The topics that arose during the exploration research in the field have been used to generate an interview guide, which can be seen in appendix B. For instance, what societal forces drive the respondents to engage in the imaginary worldbuilding processes of Dungeons & Dragons has been operationalized by asking how they came in contact with the game, why they continue to play it, and what game features they value most. Moreover, the engagement in the process of imaginary worldbuilding has been operationalized into, for example, questions as to how dungeon masters go about creating a world as a campaign setting, and how they immerse the players into this world. In addition, the social context of Dungeons & Dragons was operationalized into questions regarding what an average playing session looks like, and how respondents define their relationships with other players. These are mere examples of operationalizations, a complete overview can be found in appendix B.

After conducting the interviews, they have been transcribed to prepare them for analysis. For the data-analysis Atlas.ti was used, software that allows for the coding of qualitative written data. The coding process was iterative and started during the interview process already, as certain motives already became apparent. After transcribing, the first step was to explore the collection of transcripts to identify key concepts and attach codes to them, a process that is referred to as open coding. Thereafter, axial coding helps identify the core concepts of the interviews by regrouping the codes derived from the open coding process. Lastly, with the use of selective coding, the overarching concept is determined, that all codes relate to (Babbie, 2016, pp. 388-389). Thus, the analysis process was iterative, including a lot of alternating between different transcripts and codes, eventually leading to the codebook which can be seen in appendix C.

After the completion of the analysis process, the themes that arose were used as a basis to generate overarching themes, that make up the paragraphs of the results section of the thesis. This is referred to as thematic analysis, a method of analysis that is used to categorize notable patterns that arose from the dataset into different themes that relate to the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, the previously mentioned questions about what societal forces drive the respondents to engage in Dungeons & Dragons, have been categorized under ‘affinity with Dungeons & Dragons’, which includes codes such as ‘endless possibilities’, ‘creative freedom’, and ‘agency’. Moreover, the category that covers imaginary worldbuilding includes codes such as ‘improvisation’, ‘theatre of the mind’, and ‘plot hooks’. Lastly, the theme that covers the social aspects of the game includes codes such as ‘new connections’, ‘deeper bonds’, and ‘sharing food’. These are a few examples of operationalizations, but a full overview of all codes and their respective themes can be seen in appendix C.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

Although the research design was created in careful consideration, some limitations were unavoidable. For instance, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews have been conducted digitally. This led to some minor issues, such as sound-interferences in the recordings, as well as overall lower quality audio recordings, as opposed to recordings of interviews that have been conducted physically. However, it should be taken into account that these limitations are paired with some advantages. For instance, as the interviews were conducted digitally, respondents were in the safe and comfortable environments of their homes. Thus, it could be expected that they were willing to share their insights more openly, as opposed to an interview in a more ‘neutral’ setting, such as a café.

Moreover, all final respondents in the sample are Dutch. The three respondents acquainted with the researches are Dutch caucasian, just like all but one individual that responded to the call for respondents on Facebook. The lack of different nationalities and culturally diverse backgrounds could be seen as compromising, as it problematizes the generalization of the results on a larger scale. For instance, the imaginary worldbuilding processes of Dutch Dungeons & Dragons players might deviate from those of Asian or South American players. However, the results do provide insights into the worldbuilding processes in Dungeons & Dragons in other parts of the world by providing examples. The results could inspire further research applying similar concepts to players with different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. In addition, it could be argued that the Dutch nationality of the respondents is beneficial because as a result, the respondents were able to express themselves in their native language. In this sense, their insights can be expected to be more apt, as opposed to if they had to express themselves in English. Moreover, it allows for the analysis of certain culturally determined ways of engaging in imaginary worldbuilding. For instance, whether the direct surroundings and/or place of residence of respondents affect the imagination, or whether it is rooted in parts of geek culture that transcends national boundaries and is informed by international (mainly western) popular culture.

Lastly, being part of geek culture as a researcher was both a blessing, as well as a burden. Being a player of Dungeons & Dragons myself, the pre-existing knowledge on the topic was useful, as it provided ideas on what to focus on during the literature review and the field research. Moreover, having many acquaintances that were part of the research population was an advantage, as it resulted in three respondents. The pre-existing knowledge also proved to be useful in the interviewing process, as it was easier to understand references to the lore of Dungeons & Dragons and other fantasy movies and books. However, it could have a compromising effect, as pre-existing knowledge could lead to blind spots as to what can be seen as general knowledge on the topic and what cannot. This was counteracted by receiving peer feedback from individuals who are not familiar with the game, to see if the information is presented in a way that is understandable for those that are not involved in Dungeons & Dragons and/or other parts of geek culture.

## 5. Results

Thus far, the thesis has explored relevant existing and ongoing research on the topic, as well as the methods adopted to answer the research question. In the following chapter, insights from respondents on how they engage in imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons are presented, as well as how this can be explained through the ongoing processes in society. In line with the proposed guidelines on thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), the results are divided up into five different themes, namely ‘The call of the imaginary’, ‘Sense of belonging’, ‘Imaginary worldbuilding’, ‘Embodying the imagination’ and ‘Dungeons & Dragons as a social conductor’. Although interrelated to one another, each theme relates to the research question differently and covers different insights that arose from the data. The quotes mentioned in this paragraph were originally in Dutch, but have been translated to English. The original quotes can be found in appendix D.

### 5.1 *The call of the imaginary*

The imagination plays an important role in interpreting and categorizing the experiences individuals have throughout their everyday lives into general thinking patterns, making sense of the surrounding world and its experiences. In that sense, the imagination is part of any experience (Reijnders et al., 2021). Although the imagination can be used to create other worlds that merely exist in the human mind, the appeal for individuals to engage in such imaginary worldbuilding processes remains unanswered within the scope of current academic studies. As for Dungeons & Dragons, the data suggests that the appeal of the game cannot simply be explained by an interest in imaginary worldbuilding, but includes many other facets that are associated with Dungeons & Dragons. As Joost, a 27-year old history graduate, describes:

It just has many facets that are all fun individually, and then combined it is just a very enjoyable pastime. [...] For me it is especially the part of seeing the character you create progress, and the combination of doing that with good friends. I just really like to sit around the table and roll some dice for the entire Sunday. [...] And I like the collecting aspect of it as well now that I am also dmming [being a dungeon master], collecting all miniatures, assembling a collection of dice, and so forth. I used to have that with Pokémon in the past, and now it has been replaced by, err, D&D.

This quote indicates that he is interested in Dungeons & Dragons as a total package. The storytelling aspects of character progression mentioned are especially unique, as the game allows individuals to be the director of or an actor in their own story. While the imagination has long been studied in an elitist manner (Rugg, 1963), the quote suggests ‘regular’ individuals can make use of their imagination to engage in storytelling in imaginary worldbuilding as well. Moreover, the quote mentions the physical togetherness associated with Dungeons & Dragons as an important appeal, corroborating the

importance of the social context in which the imagination operates (Lennon, 2015). Interestingly, Joost mentioned activities that are related to the game but are not inherently unique to Dungeons & Dragons. The collecting of dice and miniatures is no essential part of Dungeons & Dragons, as one set of dice and a pylon could suffice. However, the interest in assembling a collection suggests there could be an underlying need to materialize the imaginary. This seems to be related to the need to locate the imagination, as discussed by Reijnders et al. (2021), but focuses on tokens from the game rather than location within the imaginary world. The reference to Pokémons shows that some nostalgia is involved as well. Whereas Joost mentioned some elements that are not inherently unique to Dungeons & Dragons, for others the appeal mostly lies within the game itself. For instance, Kim, a 25-year old tourism student and tabletop game fanatic, describes it as follows:

It is definitely a good reason to get together with everyone and you can do everything in that world of course, it really is ‘the sky is the limit, which really appealed to all of us. [...] It is actually something different every time. For example, my dad sometimes asks me: ‘Did you win?’ or ‘When is it then finished?’ and it is never finished and that is the fun part. It is every time, you can discover new things every time and it keeps you interested, even when you are, for instance, finished playing your character, then you come up with a story of how your character could leave and then you come up with something new and that opens an entire different world of playing.

Kim corroborates the importance of physically getting together with friends, but also mentions several aspects of the game that interest her, including the endless possibilities in the imaginary world, and the fact that the game is never finished. When being asked about the appeal of Dungeons & Dragons as opposed to that of online games, she emphasizes how in Dungeons & Dragons a group of players work together towards a collective goal, whereas online games are generally more competitive. In comparison to fantasy movies, Dungeons & Dragons allows players to be the writers of their own stories, having agency in the imaginary world. This makes playing Dungeons & Dragons an active experience, compared to engaging with an existing narrative in fantasy movies or books. This again emphasizes how Dungeons & Dragons allows individuals to engage with their imagination for storytelling purposes, in which they can use their creativity to come up with new characters and stories. Both storytelling and the cooperative nature of Dungeons & Dragons were mentioned by other respondents too, indicating the importance of these game aspects.

As many of the respondents engaged with other hobbies associated with geek culture and the fantasy genre, the data indicates that Dungeons & Dragons is an extension of other hobbies for many. For instance, Merel, a 28-year old illustrator, enjoys writing stories and comic books in her pastime. Similarly, 32-year old Tom enjoys writing stories as well and even had some of his fantasy stories officially published. Moreover, 37-year old Menno spends his pastime writing short fantasy stories too. In addition, he occasionally enjoys live-action roleplaying. He describes the physical embodiment

of a character in LARPing as the next step after Dungeons & Dragons, in which individuals embody their character only mentally and verbally. Also, Harm Jan, a 35-year old dungeon master with about 20 years of experience, enjoys playing Warhammer, a game that is generally associated with geek culture as well. Although players unsurprisingly engage in other hobbies related to Dungeons & Dragons, these insights do indicate that they are part of a larger overarching geek culture grounded in specific media and activities (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015). Individuals that engage in some activities associated with geek culture, seem to be more receptive towards Dungeons & Dragons. As Samantha H., a 38-year old holistic massage therapist, describes aptly:

Fantasy world, really the fantasy, I always found fun and found interesting, and for me that goes further than... just fantasy, so to say. [...] Of course, they are fun books and you kind of grow up with them, but [...] I find that sometimes there is a grain of truth in there or something, so that I really like. And the playing itself is of course very nerdy and that I like too. (laughs)

In addition, Samantha H. described Dungeons & Dragons as a creative outlet, and so did many other respondents. For instance, Jeroen, a 28-year old student, described how he is impressed by the versatility and diversity that players can reach with just a few books, referring to the player handbook, dungeon master manual, and the additional books that have been published as an extension to the game. The importance of the books shows that despite the respondents value the endless possibilities of the game, the official books provide important guidelines. In gaming terms, Dungeons & Dragons allows for ‘sandboxing’, a playstyle in which players are not constrained, but have the agency to explore and interact with the game world as they see fit (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, just as regular sandboxes are fenced in, the official books provide the boundaries in which players can express their creative freedom, indicating the possibilities are not entirely unlimited, but give the illusion of seemingly endless possibilities. Jeroen values the creative freedom of Dungeons & Dragons highly, which is corroborated by Selwyn, 31, who especially loves to explore and discover new things via imaginary worlds in Dungeons & Dragons, as opposed to daily life. He describes some of the appeals of Dungeons & Dragons for him as follows:

... just the fact that you can give your own twist to the story. That means: how are you going to tell it? What are you going to leave out? Are you going to use sounds or not? Will you put background music on? You can make it as vivid as you want [...] You know, if I walk somewhere [in an imaginary world], then I could very well come across an upside-down volcano behind that hill or so, to name something. That really makes me think that there is something new to discover and that appeals, at least to me. That is... the facts that there is something to discover, the fact that there is something new, and that there are not only brick buildings.

As visualized in figure 1, these insights indicate the appeal of Dungeons & Dragons can partly be explained by specific game elements, such as the storytelling aspects and agency within imaginary worlds in Dungeons & Dragons. However, it can also be explained by certain aspects that are associated with Dungeons & Dragons, but not inherently unique to the game. This includes the overarching fantasy genre and the appeal of physically getting together. The accumulation of reasons brought up by the respondents could be seen as the pull factors of the game. The game aspects are presented as the core, while the other reasons that or not inherent to Dungeons & Dragons are visualized in a separate layer. This shows to what extent the increasing popularity of Dungeons & Dragons can be explained by aspects inseparable from it, or by aspects that are not inherent to it.

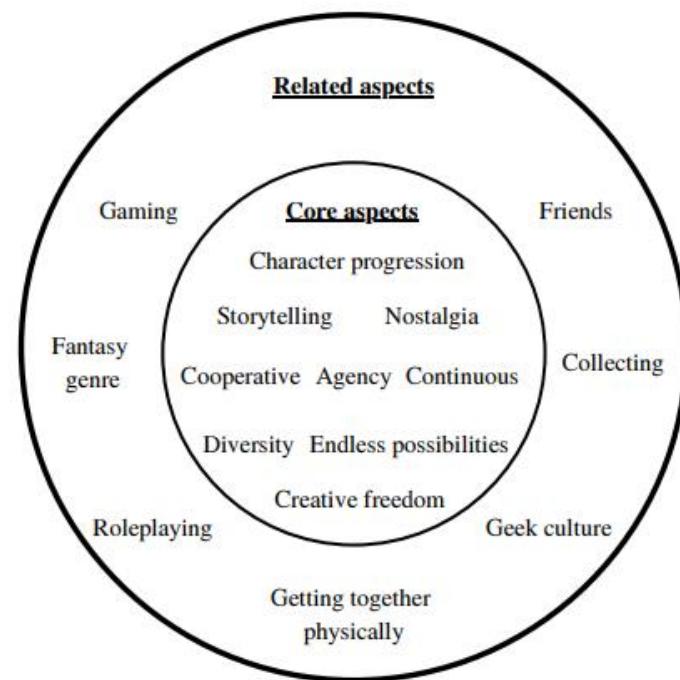


Figure 1: The pull factors of Dungeons & Dragons

As can be seen in figure 1, especially the game aspects presented at the core revolve around the imagination. Without making use of the imagination, players would not be able to generate their own stories within the imaginary worlds. Moreover, they would not be able to create characters within the imaginary world with their own plot hooks and progression. The game does never end, as via the imagination paired with creativity, individuals can come up with new ideas continuously within their imaginary worlds. These worlds have seemingly endless possibilities, as the only limitations are provided by the imagination itself, in addition to the proposed guidelines in the official books. This not only corroborates that the imagination is indeed part of any experience (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021), but also indicates that the imagination is the central concept that connects the most important assets from Dungeons & Dragons.

## ***5.2 Sense of belonging***

Part of the research question was how the increasing popularity of imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons can be explained in a society characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization. Whereas the previous paragraph covered the pull factors that attract players towards the game and its imaginary processes, this paragraph explores the underlying needs or desires that fuel this trend. According to Hopper (2007), one of the results of globalization lies in deterritorialization, the changing ties between location and culture. Appadurai (2015) argued that this process is caused by the technological advancements in and mediatization of society. The results corroborates that the needs or desires to engage in Dungeons & Dragons are indeed grounded in digitization, as many respondents expressed to enjoy the physical togetherness associated with Dungeons & Dragons. As Joost describes:

... I personally just prefer sitting around the table with people. That you can just talk to somebody face to face and work things out, rather than that you have to do all of that via chat or Discord. To me that is just less personal.

The data indicates that Dungeons & Dragons provides a good reason to physically come together in an increasingly digitized society. This is corroborated by several other respondents, such as Menno, who mentions ‘... that is something that I do miss in current society. Nowadays everybody is a keyboard warrior.’. However, in line with the findings by Appadurai (2015), the need or desire to play Dungeons & Dragons is not only driven by digitization, but by the mediatization of society as well. In current mediatized society, individuals are constantly confronted with large amounts of information via various media platforms (Appadurai, 2015). The data suggests that the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons, as well as the activity of playing the game, provide a welcome escape from mediatized society. As Tom, a fantasy writer with a special interest in Dungeons & Dragons, said:

Secondly, I think it's especially... something different than what we got used to over the last years. We really relied on media, on mass media, on binge-watching, and things alike. Very passive, also very little contact with one another, and especially that personal connection, now compromised by corona, but the personal connection of sitting around a table, really going out for a night of playing, so to say, and then again the simplicity that everyone can do it. That is a perfect combination, and makes that people actually experience a story, which we actually do since the dawn of time, passing on stories, but now with dice and orcs.

This indicates that Dungeons & Dragons allows for the distribution of stories, created by individuals themselves, in a way that is very much active and social. In general, nowadays stories are transmitted to individuals via different media in the form of, for example, films and series, in which individuals are mere receivers of a message. However, in Dungeons & Dragons individuals play an active role,

using their imagination to create their own stories and imaginary story world, which is dissimilar to other creative outlets in current mediatized society.

Concerning both digitization and mediatization, the current COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021 is mentioned by respondents several times. For instance, according to Samantha W., a 19-year old student, individuals have little control over regular life. Especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic, she finds news outlets so negative, she would rather not follow them. She continues that in Dungeons & Dragons she has control over the imaginary world, that only knows death and illness if she chooses to. This instills her with a sense of control and a sense of safety in the imaginary world, indicating that the notion of escapism is closely related to the idea of creating a sense of belonging in the imaginary, the feeling of being essential within a specific environment (Hagerty et al., 1992). This corroborates the idea by Hopper (2007) that as globalization advances, individuals tend to hold on to their cultural identities and locations stronger, as they want to feel at home somewhere. However, as individuals currently tend to spend a lot of time in lockdown at their homes in solitude, and many offline activities are replaced by online alternatives, many respondents described feeling the increasing need to gather around the table and play Dungeons & Dragons again. As Kim described:

Although I actually always looked forward to a new session, you now look forward to it in some kind of diffent way. Atleast I crave to just seeing my friends again. And it is a certain escape from the daily grind of getting up, showering, school, work, cooking, to bed and every day again, and you are allowed to do nothing. And in that [imaginary] world, you are allowed to do anything, you can do anything, and that is the escape that atleast I myself am really searching for.

Whereas Kim reflects on Dungeons & Dragons as a welcome variation to the daily grind of regular life, other respondents named other annoyances that made them want to 'escape' into the alternative imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons. Frank, a 43-year old dungeon master and player who is plays in small group and thus still plays Dungeons & Dragons offline rather than resorting to online alternatives, describes how he feels the increasing need to play Dungeons & Dragons with friends now that he spends most of his time at home working behind a monitor. He agrees it is a form of escapism, especially as he is currently experiencing work-related stress. However, the negative connotations surrounding the concept of escapism became apparent during the interviews (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 2000). Some respondents did not see the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons as an escape from regular life personally, although some did notice this need in others. For instance, Merel mentions how she plays Dungeons & Dragons mainly for entertainment, and not as an escape from daily life. Moreover, Samantha H. describes how she is content with her life, and therefore does not require an escape from it. They respectively mentioned:

I do know players who see D&D as an actual escape. Yes, where is the line between escape and just entertainment, you know? Entertainment is something people just do because they do not want to think about anything for a little bit and just want to have fun, you know. But I cannot really say it about myself or something. I cannot really say that I play D&D... I play D&D just because I really like it, and not because I do not want to deal with the real world or something.

I am very cheery, as in I am very happy. So I don't necessarily have to escape my reality, because my reality is put together nicely. Err, besides that, extending my reality is of course just a lot of fun. (laughs) You know what I mean? I can not slay a demon in reality.

The respondents rejected the idea of escapism, associating it with the negative connotations of not being able to deal with regular life. Based on these associations with escapism, they described their need and desire to play Dungeons & Dragons not to be rooted in escapism. However, their insights are in line with the nuanced conceptualizations of escapism by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (as mentioned by Konzack, 2017) and Tuan (2000), who argued that creative fantasy and enjoyable activities offer variation to everyday life and are thus forms of escapism. When approaching escapism as a fluid concept, reflecting upon Dungeons & Dragons as a fun activity and addition to everyday life is a light and subtle form of escapism. After all, physically getting together with friends still provides a break from spending time alone at home. Similarly, indulging oneself in an imaginary world to go on quests and adventures still provides an alternative to reality, even if that reality is positive. Thus, within this concept of fluid escapism, reality does not have to be negative for individuals to feel the need to escape towards an alternative reality in which they experience a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Sometimes this sense of belonging can go a step further, and turn into a sense of home, at least for the characters players portray. For instance, Kim described how in her current campaign her group owns an island with a villa on it. She has positive associations with this location and sees it as the home base, as she had positive gameplay surrounding it. Recently, her group spent quite some time collecting farm animals for the island and is planning on learning how to make cheese from their milk. They also decorated the house with personal items from their characters. However, in most instances, the concept of a sense of belonging is not connected with an actual home base in imaginary worlds. Robert, a 49-year old government worker who has been a professional dungeon master for many groups, notices that some groups like to have a home base, while many do not:

It depends on the group, the one group is more like that than the other. Some groups are really like 'Well, we want to travel from place, to place, to place.' You notice that younger players generally tend to want to go from one quest to another, and basically the rest surrounding that does not interest them. But if you go to the somewhat older players, they want the

environment around it, they want to know what is happening and why. [...] The reason why such a house, or village, or city are important for them, they need a reason to fight. They need... like, there is family, friends, a brother, a sister, whatever. You need a reason to do something.

This indicates that it is not so much about having an actual home base in an imaginary world, but more so about players feeling connected to certain in-game locations. This fits the broad and nuanced definition of home as proposed by Morley (2000, p. 24), who argued that any environment in which individuals experience comfort, security, and control could be described as a home. With the broad definition of this concept in mind, rather than a literal interpretation of 'home', it could still be applied to imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons, at least for some players. Relating to the quote by Robert, fleshing out the world with locations that players feel connected to can, according to him, add depth to the imaginary world and make it more immersive, as it drives the characters to engage in certain in-game activities. For instance, to travel back to their place of birth of their character as it is under attack, or to go on a quest to help out an old friend of their character that is in trouble. The idea that creating a sense of belonging and a sense of 'homeness' is grounded in the players feeling connected to the world, rather than experiencing a literal home, is in line with the nomadic playstyle that most players seem to adopt. After all, when adopting the broad definition of 'home' as conceptualized by Morley (2000, p. 24), a sense of 'homeness' can also be experienced on the move, or during a temporal visit to a certain location in an imaginary world. As Jeroen, who regularly hosts sessions as a dungeon master for his group of friends, said:

... often the campaigns in which I dmmed [operated as the dungeon master] are focused on travel and passing through. [...] I think that that somewhat originates from the players who are just looking to find something new every time. Errr, but no, up until now it has not gotten across that de players have found some kind of home and go back to it every time. [...] They fall from one thing into another.

When comparing these insights to those of the previous theme, digitization, mediatization, and the daily grind can be seen as the societal push factors that create the need or desire to engage with imaginary worldbuilding processes as in Dungeons & Dragons. The data indicates many see Dungeons & Dragons as an extension to daily life, or a fun activity to relax. Others see it as a welcome variation to the daily grind, or as an escape from certain situations in regular life. These examples all fit into a fluid conceptualization of escapism, in which the known world does not have to be negative for individuals to want to escape to an alternate reality (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 2000). Moreover, the possibility to create world players feel connected to, allowing them to experience a sense of belonging is another pull factor (Hagerty et al., 1992; Morley, 2000). Combining these findings with the findings from the previous theme, results in the adapted visualization in figure 2.

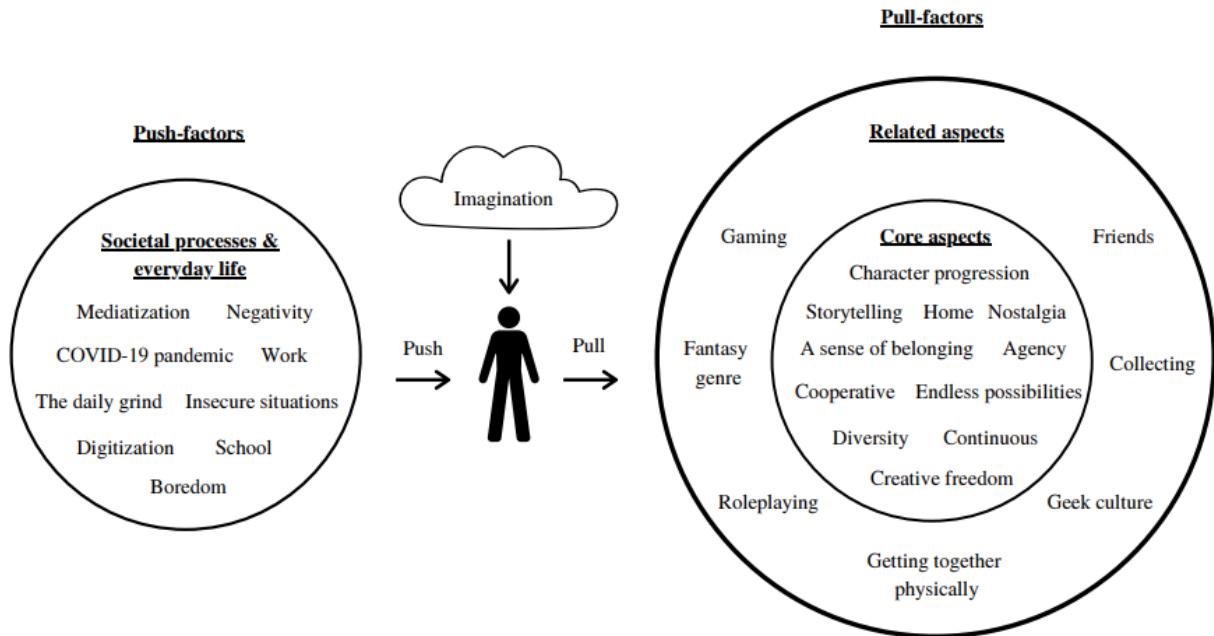


Figure 2: the push and pull factors of Dungeons & Dragons

Thus, the increasing popularity of the engagement of imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons could be explained by societal processes and aspects of everyday life, in combination with certain aspects of the game. The ongoing digitization and mediatization of society create the need to indulge oneself in an offline environment in which individuals experience a sense of control (Appadurai, 2015; Hopper, 2007). In current digitized times, individuals want to disconnect from digital platforms sometimes and get together physically. Moreover, individuals seem to want a break from the constant flow of information via the media, and step into a world in which this information does not have a place. Especially the current COVID-19 pandemic is strengthening this need, as it fuels negativity and insecurity in the known world, as well as enforced the digitalization of society. Although a more subtle form of escapism, the daily grind, including work and school, contributes to this as well (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 2000). The imagination seems to be an underlying force again, as it is the central concept that allows individuals to embody someone else and to create a world in which they go on adventures, complete quests, overcome problems and make a difference (Reijnders et al., 2021). This could make individuals experience the feeling of being an essential part of the imaginary world, in which they experience comfort and control (Hagerty et al., 1992; Morley, 2000). This indicates the imagination, especially when operating in an offline setting together with friends, makes that Dungeons & Dragons fills in the gaps that society and regular life fail to fill. Emphasizing the important role the imagination plays in this process, the central position of the imagination in figure 2 is only fitting.

### 5.3 Imaginary worldbuilding

Now that has been established how the increasing popularity of Dungeons & Dragons can be explained through ongoing societal processes, the question remains as to what these imaginary worldbuilding processes look like. The data indicates dungeon masters require a certain basic structure upon which their imaginary world is built. This so-called ‘blueprint’ for imaginary worldbuilding determines the boundaries of the world, comparable to the basic features of imaginary worlds as proposed by Wolf (2017). This includes, for example, the climates and cultures in the world. In addition to the official books, there is a large variety of books containing prewritten campaigns dungeon masters can base their blueprints upon. While some prefer to work between existing boundaries from, for instance, prewritten campaigns, others prefer starting from scratch and creating homebrew campaigns. Prewritten campaigns come with a world and a storyline that dungeon masters can reproduce literally in their campaigns. However, the data shows that most respondents use prewritten campaigns as a source for inspiration, or at least put their stamp on it. According to Selwyn, it can be necessary to adapt the prewritten campaign according to the needs of the players, stating:

There have been moments where I have led them away, because I knew they just could not handle certain content, because I was like ‘Yes, there should spawn a gigantic T-Rex right now, but they are level two, so let me just not do that.’

Whether players find inspiration in prewritten campaigns or other sources, the data indicates that some dungeon masters prefer to work between certain boundaries when creating a blueprint for imaginary worlds. Although everything can occur within the bubble of imaginary worlds (Reijnders et al., 2021), some respondents find the seemingly endless possibilities can be overwhelming. Relating to the first theme, prewritten campaigns can provide the boundaries of a sandboxing playstyle, in which creative freedom is possible, but not entirely unlimited (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For instance, Samantha H. describes her considerations regarding prewritten and homebrew campaigns as follows:

And at a certain point I want, I wanted to go entirely homebrew but it did not really work out, because I could not figure it out. So then I thought, yes, maybe I will buy a book [prewritten campaign] and throw it in there after all, and that did not make me entirely happy either. And what I am planning on doing now is to really make a mix. [...] But that combination seems like a nice way of playing for me, because entirely homebrew takes a lot... [...] It costs a lot, so to say. It is a lot of fun though.

Interestingly, although for many respondents the need and desire to play the game are rooted in a certain degree of escapism from the known world, the data indicates that the blueprint for imaginary worldbuilding is informed by the known world and everyday life experiences for many dungeon

masters. For instance, several respondents mentioned being inspired by other countries and cultures, such as Asia and the Middle East, and historical eras, such as the Middle Ages. As Merel describes:

... I find Southern Spain and Arabia very interesting, and it also has something mysterious or something, that whole 1001-nights thing. And I have been to those location often myself, so to say, to Spain and Morocco and things alike. And then you feel the ambiance so to say, that lingers there, or you know what the buildings look like, and how the people are, and so forth. [...] From there I actually just started with building a world around that, like how would that translate into a fantasy world or something?

Other prevalent examples include mythology, such as old Greek and Norse mythology, which provide interesting cultures and religions. Some respondents even used exact locations as a source of inspiration, such as Menno, who once based a storyline on the history of '*The Argonaut*', a building in the Dutch city of Amersfoort. Although many campaigns in Dungeons & Dragons are set in historical worlds, this is not always the case for the sources of inspiration. For instance, Jeroen once modeled a village in his world after his hometown. The examples from Menno and Jeroen suggest some kind of culturally determined ways of engaging in imaginary worldbuilding, as they find inspiration in their direct environments. Moreover, Robert adds that current affairs can be a source of inspiration too, as many interesting things occur in the known world. So, despite the known world driving the need and desire to play Dungeons & Dragons, the data corroborates that even imaginary fantasy worlds derive from sensory experiences from the real world, and thus, the imagination is never fully detached from reality (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021). However, as described by Harm Jan, "... the question remains as to what extent you want to involve all actuality in your game. You are also relaxing, after all.", indicating that he prefers inspiration from the known world to be limited to some extent.

In addition to the known world, popular media is a rich source of inspiration for creating a blueprint of an imaginary world for many respondents. In line with the previously discussed literature, (Ewalt, 2015; RPG Net, 2008), films and series such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Game of Thrones* were mentioned, as well as mangas and non-fiction documentaries. In addition, Dungeons & Dragons does not only inspire computer games (Blye, 2020), but also draws inspiration from them. For instance, Menno once prepared a campaign inspired by the computer game *Diablo III*. The campaign was not only set in the same world as the computer game, but also inspired the storyline. Similarly, Harm Jan once created a campaign inspired by the television series *The Shannara Chronicles* and the science fiction movie *Snowpiercer*. Other sources of inspiration include songs, books, stories, and fairytales. Social media also inspires, especially via live-streamed Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, such as Critical Role. However, social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, DnD Beyond, DM's Guild, and YouTube also allow dungeon masters to interact with one another and share their experiences. The inspiration from the known world and popular media that feeds the imagination to create imaginary worlds is visualized in figure 3.

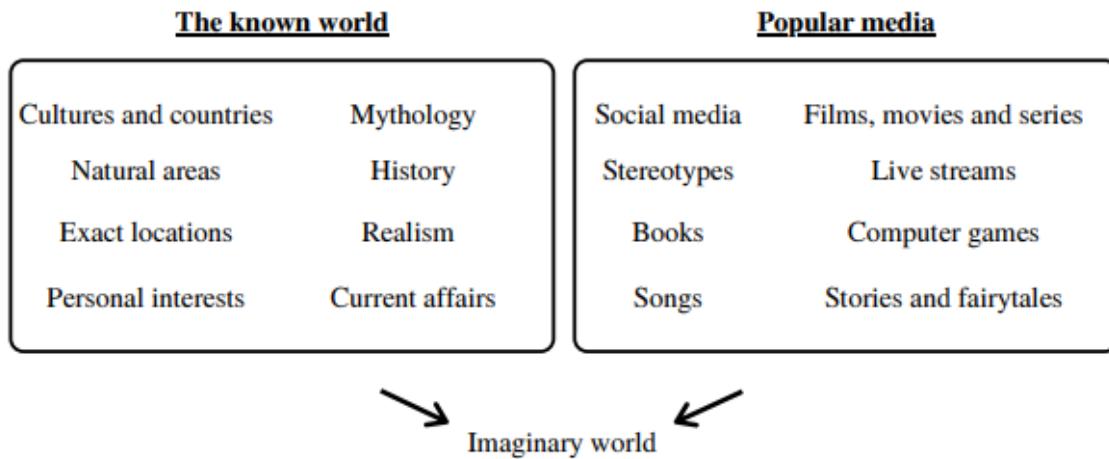


Figure 3: Sources for inspiration for blueprint imaginary worldbuilding

The results indicate the existence of a paradox, in which the increasing popularity of Dungeons & Dragons is grounded in an escape from current mediatized and digitized society, while the media and digital platforms are often used as a source for inspiration. After all, individuals generally learn about current affairs and other cultures and countries via media or digital platforms. In addition, they play computer games and watch movies via digital platforms, and make use of media platforms to connect with one another. This shows that the known world and imaginary worlds are intrinsically linked to one another, as imaginary worlds are heavily informed by the known world, corroborating the idea by Lennon (2015) that the imaginary and the known are not as clearly distinguished as one might expect, and that the imagination is part of any experience (Reijnders et al., 2021).

After finding inspiration, the next step is to engage in the actual creation of the imaginary world. In line with the ideas by Wolf (2017), some dungeon masters plan their world and the story within it elaborately, while others prepare less extensive and leave open spaces to fill up as they feel fit during the campaign, depending on the needs of the players. However much a dungeon master prepares, large amounts of preparations are required nonetheless. Robert calculated that over the course of 25 years, he spent about 10.000 hours as a dungeon master. He estimates about double that amount as preparation time for the world and the campaign. Besides all the preparations, he likes to leave open spaces that he fills up during the campaign with the players. He describes the balance between this follows:

I do have a general idea, so to say, what the storyline is and what could happen. And that does mean that you have to take a look after every session: what has happened? How have they [...] affected the storyline, [...] how did other creatures and people in the world reacted to that? Because all actions by the players affect the world. And you have to take that into account, because if the players do something and two weeks later they come back and nothing has changed, then the player is like 'Why do we do it?' And that makes it important for the immersion, so to say, if the players go somewhere, and a week later they come back and are

recognized, good or bad, because yes, they might also have done this wrong, has effect. Like, in the one village they are heroes, in the other they are chased with tar and feathers.

Clearly, creating an imaginary world and a campaign set in that world requires an inexhaustible amount of inspiration, but also plenty of flexibility and improvisation. As the players have freedom in their actions in the imaginary world, as long as the dice allow it, dungeon masters must be prepared to think and act quickly when players undertake actions the dungeon master did not account for. This is where the collective imagination comes in. To account for unexpected changes, Frank generally works with a so-called ‘fog of war’, meaning he leaves empty spaces in his imaginary world to make adaptations during the campaign depending on the needs of his players. Moreover, Jeroen acts as a dungeon master together with two friends, who pass on the baton after each session. Their imaginative worldbuilding process is thus rooted in the imagination of three people. To manage this, they work from the principle that nothing exists in their world until it is mentioned, rather than preparing an entire world together beforehand.

However, certain dungeon masters like to prepare their imaginary world and campaigns extensively. For instance, Samantha W., who is rather new to being a dungeon master, prefers to prepare her campaign in a detailed manner. Samantha H. is a new dungeon master too and shares the same sentiments, emphasizing that she sometimes finds it challenging to improvise, but also that she simply enjoys detailing the world extensively, as she likes it to be harmonized. Although extensive and detailed preparations are sometimes attributed to newer dungeon masters, several more experienced dungeon masters tend to prepare elaborately too. The data indicates that the level of preparation is related to the idea of creating a harmonized world. Corroborating the ideas by Lessa and Araújo (2017) and Robertson (2017) about completeness and consistency in worldbuilding, several respondents mentioned that the world should ‘make sense’, despite being a fantasy world. This is in line with the ideas by Wolf (2017) and requires the dungeon master to think about, for instance, how certain locations in the world come to be, and why people want to live there. Why are certain countries at war with one another? Why do the NPCs behave in a certain way? Some dungeon masters take it even more literally, such as Selwyn, who argues that despite the game being set in fantasy worlds, natural substances should work similarly according to him. As such, he once had a player pass out because of smoke inhalation, and had weapons destroyed by hydrochloric acid. By pondering upon how the world came to be and what the possibilities within it are, the dungeon master can create a harmonized world and anticipate most questions and actions by players without creating contradictions in the world (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017).

However, creating a harmonized world does not solely rely on the world ‘making sense’ but also on finding a certain balance between good and evil within the world. The notions of topophilia and topophobia by Tuan (1990) are relevant to discuss in this regard, because the average imaginary world in Dungeons & Dragons contains good and evil. According to the respondents, this balance

creates a certain tension. If everything were positive the game would lack challenge, as actions have no negative consequences. As Frank describes:

... there has to be a bit of tension, because otherwise, yeah, imagine everybody on the beach and 'Okay, how are you going to sunbathe today?' (laughs) But I mean, then there is no tension involved. So there will always has to be something dark, or something negative, or in any case something that gives the illusion the positive is threatened, especially to reach that tension.

Robert agrees, stating that a story can never be one-sided, and has to have up and downs. This way, there are negative elements that the players can attempt to change. According to him, negativity and danger operate as building blocks for the imaginary world, which show players the possibilities for change within the imaginary world. However, what the players use the building blocks for is up to them. Several respondents were able to name some locations in the imaginary world they associate with the concept of topophobia as introduced by Tuan (1990). This includes examples of enclosed dungeons and cities overtaken by murderous cults. Although a few respondents feel a sense of tensity when residing in such locations in an imaginary world, they all reflect upon this balance between good and evil as necessary. These are relevant examples of affective imagination as discussed by Vygotsky (1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013), in which the imaginary world leaves a mark on the feelings of the players. However, Tom argues that negativity in imaginary worlds can go too far. He describes:

But there are indeed very negative situations possible in the [imaginary] world too, but my opinion is [...] if you have a world of fantasy, of magic, of orcs and dwarves, you name it, and you resort to for example sexual intimidation, well sorry, then you are just narrow-minded. Because you have the world at your feet, you can do whatever you want, and then you collect players for something like that... that is strange. But if you have decided on that together and that is your thing, hey do your thing!

This indicates that although there will always be good and evil in imaginary worlds, clear boundaries must be set to prevent ethical implications that make that individuals do not experience comfort and safety within the imaginary world (Hagerty et al., 1992; Morley, 2000). To establish this, many respondents mentioned having a 'session zero' at the beginning of a new campaign, in which expectations are expressed and boundaries are set. This can simply be about to what extent players prefer roleplay or combat, but also include ethical implications that players might be uncomfortable with. In contrast, a few respondents gave examples of locations they associate with topophilia as introduced by Tuan (1990), such as the home base previously mentioned by Kim, or positive locations such as the feywild. However, it should be mentioned that quite a few respondents did not experience strong feelings of topophobia or topophilia at all, but rather experience the imaginary worlds as neutral. Such diverse experiences are characteristic for Dungeons & Dragons, as it largely consists of

‘theatre of the mind’, as the imaginary world exists in the mind and is not visually represented. Consequently, every individual sitting around the table might have a different interpretation of the imaginary world. The dungeon master creates the world with a certain idea in mind, but players might interpret it differently than intended based on their frames of reference generated throughout their lives. After all, the imagination is never fully detached from reality (Reijnders et al., 2021). Despite the imagination providing alternative worlds to immerse oneself in, the respondents are aware these imaginary worlds are not reality. However, even those who claimed to see the known and imaginary world as separate, seem to sometimes experience overspill from the imaginary world into their everyday lives. Although subtle, examples include not being able to sleep after a session, thinking of inspiration for Dungeons & Dragons at work, and wondering about what to do next session. These are more subtle examples of the affective imagination, in which the imaginary worlds affect the feelings of the players lightly (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013). This shows that although some players might experience the known and the imaginary to be separate, they might be more connected than they realize, in a subtle and subconscious manner. Another, less subtle example includes the emotions of characters spilling over to the players, a topic that is explored further in the next theme.

Despite the differences between the imaginary worldbuilding processes between different dungeon masters and the different effects the imaginary worlds have on players, there seems to be a consensus that the main focus should be on the enjoyment of the players. Being a dungeon master is about leading the story and reading the table. Once the imaginary world is created, dungeon masters are tasked to immerse the players into that world. This is where the collective imagination comes forward, as the actions from players influence the world. Although the dungeon master is the main worldbuilder, the worldbuilding process can be seen as collaborative, because of the large amounts of agency the players have. This corroborates the idea by Boni (2017) that worlds are built through their exploration, making the players worldbuilders as well. Dungeon masters can adopt several techniques to immerse their players into the imaginary world. As Menno describes:

I always try to involve them in the creation of the story, whether they know it or not. What I ask my players is to always a short background story [...] And I try to implement such little details in my game and in the story, thus, so that everyone eventually, for instance, has a home to return to or... That somewhere during the campaign a message comes in like ‘Well, that valued childhood friends is in big trouble. [...] You now have the chance to help, otherwise it probably ends badly’. In such ways I try to give actual influence to the players in my world.

In addition to involving the backstories of players, some respondents mentioned ‘planting seeds’, meaning they sometimes introduce elements that seem irrelevant at first, but that start to make sense to the players during later stages of the campaign. Once the realization settles in, the world comes together for the players. Thus, creating a harmonized world that incites players to interact with it is about creating plot hooks for the players to pick up on or come back to in later stages of the campaign.

Moreover, the descriptiveness of the dungeon master greatly influences the immersion of players into the imaginary world. As Dungeons & Dragons largely consists of theatre of the mind, a lot of power lies within immersive descriptions by the dungeon master. Describing certain aspects in great detail allows dungeon masters to create ambiances, such as creepy abandoned towns, as well as lively upbeat villages. To involve the affective imagination by creating a certain ambiance (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013), dungeon masters can lean on, for instance, their tone of voice, imitating sounds with their voice, or using different voices for different NPCs. Many of the respondents make use of music and ambient sound to support the ambiance. The music or sounds switch depending on the situation and setting. For instance, a busy tavern is paired with different music than an exciting combat scene. These examples involve multiple senses to stimulate the imagination, leading to a more embodied imaginary world that is not limited to theatre of the mind.

Moreover, combat introduces a different aspect of the game in which the imaginary world becomes even more embodied. The game requires a set of dice to play, as they determine the outcomes of the actions by the players. In addition, some respondents mentioned the use of world maps, which provide players with a general idea of the world and where they can travel. However, combat generally includes additional physical elements, such as a battle map. Some groups draw one on paper, while others create elaborate scenes with custom terrain. Sometimes, miniatures that represent the characters are placed on the battle map, allowing players to see what attacks would hit the enemy, and which would not. The respondents describe having physical elements during combat as convenient, but also adds extra depth to the experience. For instance, Joost describes that a miniature of a giant dragon on the battle map has a larger shock-effect than the dungeon master merely showing an image of a dragon on his phone. The consensus is that although most respondents find some physical elements convenient and immersive, the game mostly remains theatre of the mind. As Tom describes, too many physical elements can sometimes limit the tension during combat, as players can see everything, limiting their imagination and the threat of the unknown.

Despite all efforts from the dungeon master, the immersion of the players into the imaginary world depends on themselves as well, underlining the importance of the collective imagination and players as worldbuilders (Boni, 2017). Generally, the respondents valued the roleplaying aspects of Dungeons & Dragons very highly, meaning that once the session starts, they fully embody their character. The players give detailed descriptions of their actions and have conversations in-character. Rather than mentioning that two characters have a conversation about something, the players engage in this conversation while embodying their characters. In this sense, there is a difference between what a player says to another, and what their characters say to one another. Samantha W. notices new players can be a bit intimidated by the roleplaying aspects of Dungeons & Dragons. One of her players is more experienced and she notices a difference in the immersion in the world and descriptiveness of this player, stating:

... thus, instead of like 'I hit with my sword' he is like 'Oh, I make a step forward, I draw my sword from the scabbard and I errr, move my arm forward to hit him'. That is way more elaborate, way more detail, err, and the rest mostly follows along a bit. They are indeed still a bit shy, dus they don't talk so much.

This indicates players have to feel comfortable to roleplay. Kim describes how it helps to play with friends or acquaintances, which is corroborated by Joost, who expresses his group consists of players with similar personalities and lifestyles, resulting in an environment in which people dare to speak their minds. The data suggests that the more experienced players or dungeon masters are, the less trouble they have with roleplaying. For instance, Samantha H. describes how she saw herself grow in portraying characters over the years. She mentions now knowing her character so well, she does not have to think anymore about what her character would do. However, roleplaying a character in a group may lead to complications, a topic that is explored more thoroughly in the next theme, that covers the creation and embodiment of a character in an imaginary world.

#### ***5.4 Embodying the imagination***

As indicated previously, imaginary worlds depend on their explorers, who in the process of exploring this world, actively contribute to the imaginary worldbuilding processes (Boni, 2017, p. 9). Whereas dungeon masters have a key role in imaginary worldbuilding due to their extensive preparation for the world and the story within it, the process draws on the collective imagination of the entire group, as players -and thus their characters- have agency in the imaginary world. Players have the freedom to embody a character of choice, created as they see fit. Due to the importance of the collective imagination, it is relevant to deconstruct how players use their imagination to create and embody their characters, especially as little academic research has covered this aspect of worldbuilding thus far.

There are a plethora of practicalities involved in the creation of a new character, and many respondents mentioned starting with sorting out these practicalities. Some start by choosing a certain class they would like their character to portray, or a certain race they have not played before. There seems to be a consensus that the character should fit in the world setting and the group dynamics, relating to the idea that worlds should make sense (Wolf, 2017). For instance, Kim describes how Drow have always been one of her favorite fantasy races, but that they do not fit into any setting, as they are strongly disadvantaged by sunlight. Rather than bending the rules to create a Drow character nonetheless, she put her ideas on hold until a fitting opportunity came across. She is currently embodying a Drow in a campaign set in an imaginary world inspired by historical Germany, as the gloomy and cloudy weather poses no problems for Drow characters. Moreover, as a class, she chose a cleric that worships the goddess Luxon, as the world already had a dynasty of Drow clerics worshipping that deity. As such, she created her character in harmony with the imaginary world the campaign was set in. Jeroen finds the harmony between his character and the imaginary world

important as well. For a character he created recently, he based the ability scores and behavior of that character on the campaign setting, stating:

... the funny things is that for that character, I actually really started with the background and attempting to translate that into the characteristics that he would have. [...] So I was like okay, a person that comes from such a filthy place, constitution goes up, you have that inventive aspect of wanting to put things together, high intelligence. In addition, they are subject to a constant downfall of water, so he would probably be strong as well. [...] Oh, moreover, where he grew up is really isolated, so he might be a bit weaker socially.

The data indicates that the notions of completeness and consistency in worldbuilding do not only relate to the world itself (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017), but to the embodiment of the characters within that world too. They must fit within the campaign setting, although the dynamics of the player group are important as well. For instance, Samantha W. recently created a human character because all other characters in the group were human too. As for Joost, he enjoys a balanced group that covers all bases, including magic-users as well as weapon-wielders, and ranged fighters as well as melee fighters. Therefore, when creating a new character, Joost takes into account what is missing within his group. This indicates that the characters players embody within an imaginary world should make sense within that world, as well as the group with whom they explore it.

Aside from the practicalities surrounding the creation and embodiment of a character, several respondents described how they flesh out their characters. Although there is a certain player type referred to as 'minmaxers', players who attempt to create perfectly optimized characters, the respondents generally preferred roleplaying flawed characters. As Frank, who also enjoys writing stories in his pastime, described his preferences for creating a character:

Thus far it is especially because I have somewhat of an idea of how I want that person of being to be like. And thus I, I am not a person that creates the characters to be as good as possible or... No, more like what is interesting to roleplay. [...] Based on that story writing too, there always has to be a conflict within somebody to make them interesting.

Many character flaws passed the revue, such as a druid that is mortified of fire, an undexterous paladin with heavy plate armor who ruins every stealth mission, and an entire group of characters that all severely lacked in strength. The data suggests that the notions of completeness and consistency in worldbuilding even further (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017), as characters are not only created in harmony with the world and the player group, but in harmony within the character itself as well. For instance, several respondents mentioned they especially enjoy seeing the characters they embody grow and overcome their flaws throughout the game. This requires detailed preparations of the character, including the creation of a backstory and detailed personality traits. Kim specifically mentioned making the character 'feel real'. Menno finds this important as well and emphasizes:

If I play a character I want to know, okay, how is the character born? Where does he come from? Who were his childhood friends? What does he dislike? What does he enjoy? What contains the world he comes from? Why did he come from that world to this one? So there are many more questions involved than that you just say ‘So, I play a human. I come from the capital, my father was a baker and my mother was a florist, and I joined the city guard because it was fun.’ Period.

The previous theme already showed the importance of backstories for dungeon masters to immerse players into the imaginary world and make them interact with it. However, the backstory seems crucial for character creation as well, as it determines the abilities and personality traits of a character. This fleshes out the character as a whole and makes them feel real, in line with the notions of (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017).

Just as the known world and imaginary worlds are interrelated (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021), in-game characters are to some extent inseparable from the players that embody them.

Dungeons & Dragons allows individuals to embody all kinds of unique characters of various fantasy races and heroic classes (Leung, 2017). Interestingly, despite the game providing seemingly endless possibilities, the characters are often closely related to the players. Some respondents reflect upon the known world and Dungeons & Dragons as separated. However, several respondents describe that although their characters are no replicas of themselves, they feel closely related to them. For instance, they have shared personality traits, similar backgrounds, a similar moral compass, and/or similar mannerisms. As Robert describes “... you cannot exactly say: playing and character are the same, but many parts of the player are represented in their character of course. They often take a part of themselves and enlarge that.”. Merel corroborates this, as she prefers to embody characters that are related to her somehow. Jeroen adds that he recognizes parts of himself in his characters too, although often subconsciously. In retrospect, he realizes many of his characters represent a fantasy adaptation of issues he was dealing with at the time of creating that character. In this sense, ‘the self’ acts as a basis for creating a character, consciously or subconsciously. To illustrate, Robert explains how every actor that portrayed James Bond did so differently, as they put parts of themselves into the role. He notices a similar trend in the player groups he led during his years of being a professional dungeon master.

Aside from the insight that ‘the self’ can be used as a basis to build a character upon, Dungeons & Dragons allows individuals to embody a character that is different from themselves. Many players describe having portrayed characters that do not resemble themselves, such as Selwyn, who generally embodies characters that do not resemble him, although he did share some personality traits with his first Dungeon & Dragons character. For instance, Samantha W. mentions how Dungeons & Dragons provides a safe environment to try new things, and that many of her characters are in stark contrast with herself. Many respondents shared similar stories, including Menno, who has plenty of experience with roleplaying, as he also engages in LARPing. He enjoys challenging himself

to embody characters that do not resemble him. Frank, adds that this type of character creation can lead to the discovery of new parts of oneself, stating:

It is indeed, I think, also a fun way to discover new parts of yourself and I also see that in others. For that colleague that I just described, with whom I had limited contact for years until I started playing with him, he is also very introverted. And you see in the moment he starts playing, he is actually a bard, very outgoing.

Interestingly, the data suggests that although the imagination allows players to create all kinds of characters, which many players do, some feel comfortable with keeping their characters closer to themselves. Respondents mention several possible explanations. For instance, some propose the more experienced a player is, the more comfortable they feel with roleplaying different characters, including those that oppose ‘the self’. Convenience is suggested as an explanation too, as it is easier to imagine characters similar to ‘the self’ as it takes less effort to roleplay and prepare. For instance, a player that is interested in martial art supposedly finds it easier to embody a character who practices martial arts too, opposed to a player who has no experience with it. In addition, human characters that come from places similar to the known world are easier to roleplay than characters with unique fantasy races with specific lore, as it requires the player to study that lore to roleplay the character well. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent ‘the self’ acts as a basis for embodying a character in imaginary worlds, as some characters might oppose it in many ways, while still sharing some resemblances with the player. Moreover, the influence of ‘the self’ on the process of character creation can be subconscious, making it challenging to pinpoint. However, although research on the social context of Dungeons & Dragons remains limited, the data indicates that the game could provide a platform for personal growth as it allows players to explore different parts of themselves. As this occurs in a social context, it emphasizes the importance of the social context in which the imagination operates (Lennon, 2015), as players have to feel comfortable in their group to uncover parts of themselves. This is in line with the idea that gaming can have positive social effects (Sublette & Mullan, 2012), which is elaborated upon in the next theme. However, is important to mention that some respondents did not recognize similarities or contradictions between themselves and their characters, at least not consciously. For instance, Harm Jan recognizes that some players relate the character they embody to ‘the self’, although he finds this does not apply to him:

... I never really take that into account, I have to say. Really just what I feel like creating, and (inaudible) what type I would like to play. [...] I do have some preferences. But it is more so, indeed, how much feeling I have with a class, rather than really like ‘Well, this is really close to me, or not’ or something like that.

Concerning the embodiment of the imagination and ‘the self’, it is relevant to mention that emotions of character sometimes spill over to the player or vice versa. This again shows the strong connection

between the known world and imaginary worlds (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021). Although not applicable to all respondents, some players feel strongly connected to the characters they embody and have experienced negative emotions after the death of that character or other negative occurrences in the imaginary world. Moreover, some players sometimes notice themselves become nervous when the dungeon master describes a creepy setting, a clear example of topophobia as discussed by Tuan (1990). Another example includes irritations between characters, which translate to irritations between the players. Although in most cases such irritations are discussed and resolved out of character, during a break or after the session, this again underlines the overspill between emotions from imaginary worlds to the known world. Such overspill from a player to their character or vice versa is referred to as ‘character bleed’, and is related to the concept of affective imagination, in which individuals imagine the feelings of their characters (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013). Character bleed is easier to prevent when players embody a character close to ‘the self’, as in those cases, the overlap between the player and the character does not stand out. For instance, when the emotions of a player override those of their character, they could still be attributed to the character, as the character is closely related to the player. In this sense, character bleed can especially pose problems when a character opposes ‘the self’. For instance, an introverted player embodying an extroverted character can be expected to have more trouble doing so when having a rough day.

However, the overlap between the known and imaginary world, or the player and their character, can have positive effects. Robert describes how one of the players in his campaign recently got divorced and got dragged into the campaign by caring friends, but mostly remained in the background. That is until her character unexpectedly came across her ex in a tavern in the imaginary world, which led to a savage bar-fight. Robert and the other players were left astonished. Afterward, the player expressed she let go of many frustrations at that moment, experiencing a sense of relief. This example shows a strong overlap between the known and the imaginary (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021), but also indicates character progression may lead to real-life benefits for the player. By overcoming topographical challenges (Tuan, 1990), imaginary worlds in Dungeons & Dragons can be used as an outlet that helps players balance their issues out in the known world. As such, Dungeons & Dragons provides a safe environment to explore ‘the self’ or embody characters that oppose it, accommodating a platform for personal growth.

### ***5.5 Imaginary worldbuilding as a social conductor***

The social context in which the imagination operates is important, because individuals interpret experiences differently based on those they are surrounded with (Lennon, 2015). The previous theme already explored the social context in-game, as the imaginary worldbuilding process is rooted in the collective imagination of the group, and interactions are an important part of the game. However, as the data indicates that physically getting together with friends is an important pull factor that appeals to Dungeons & Dragons players, the social interactions surrounding the game are relevant to explore

as well. Despite gaming generally being stigmatized as anti-social and related to social anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Wei, Chen, Huang, & Bai, 2012), the data corroborates the findings from previous studies that gaming is a social activity that can have many social benefits (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Sublette & Mullan, 2012). Moreover, the idea that the social component is one of the main appeals of online games, such as for (MMO)RPGs (Williams, et al., 2006), applies to Dungeons & Dragons as well. For instance, many respondents described how a session of Dungeons & Dragons is generally paired with conversations about the game or daily life. Several groups share meals together before or during the session, or share snacks and beverages during the session. The ambiance is what in Dutch is referred to as ‘gezellig’, which could be described as a combination between cozy, pleasant, and sociable. Playing Dungeons & Dragons could even be seen as a social ritual following the definition as proposed by Grund (1993, p. 13), as it consists of stereotypical behavioral sequences with symbolic meaning, although they can have different meanings for different players. For example, despite the frequency of sessions varies between different groups, players generally have an idea of how often they prefer to gather. Moreover, the groups generally have a time structure, including the time they gather, start playing, stop playing, and leave to their respective homes. Generally, when the dungeon master opens the session with a recap from the last session, the group mostly fully embodies their characters and remains in-character until the break or the end of the session. The moments before and after playing, or during the break(s), is generally when there is talked about daily life. Although this structure is a mere example that may vary between groups, most groups seem to have their own sequence of activities that make up a session, making it a social ritual (Grund, 1993).

However, during the current COVID-19 pandemic the nature of these social rituals has changed, as many groups have resorted to online platforms to continue their campaign in an online setting. As Jeroen describes, there are many differences between playing online and offline:

Like, it is often paired with that we indeed have dinner together. I mean, you are not going to play D&D the whole time, because eventually it is... everybody is just done with it. (laughs) Or then the story is just done for that day. [...] in the period that everybody was actually spread out over The Netherlands, and the regular friend group was somewhat separated, it was actually always paired with people staying the night and such. So then you go enjoy breakfast together the next morning, and yeah, maybe you go on a walk or something like that. [...] It is never just D&D, although now online it is.

Jeroen described how for his group, playing Dungeons & Dragons is a social ritual that often includes other social activities, such as sharing meals together and going on walks. However, because of the pandemic, playing Dungeons & Dragons has become less sociable, as online platforms do not allow for additional physical activities. Despite most groups valuing the social rituals associated with Dungeons & Dragons in an offline setting highly, a few respondents solely focus on the game rather

than combining it with other activities, even in an offline setting. Despite the general preference being to play offline, some groups are currently playing online, while others decided to sit out the pandemic and regroup afterward. Frank, a father of six who is a dungeon master in a campaign for his children, notices a stark contrast between playing Dungeons & Dragons around a table and sitting behind a computer screen. Because all players are part of his household, he continues to play offline, although he notices differences between his children playing Dungeons & Dragons, compared to them playing games online:

I see how my children sit behind a screen and have contact with somebody else, and I see just around the table that they look each other in the eyes and burst into laughter. Well, you don't have that there [online]. Such little things you miss, or at least, I would miss in an online experience that you do have here [offline].

The idea of Dungeons & Dragons as a social ritual is closely related to the concept of social capital, which refers to a network of individuals with shared norms and values (Grund, 1993; Keeley, 2007). These shared norms and values can connect players, making Dungeons & Dragons a social conductor. For instance, several respondents described having met new individuals via Dungeons & Dragons. This was sometimes limited to sole, spontaneous conversations, while in other instances these interactions resulted in new friendships. This is related to the concept of social bridging (Larsen et al., 2004), in which individuals form new bonds that transcend the community, as they did not know the individuals previously. The data indicates that because of Dungeons & Dragons individuals have plenty of subjects for conversation at hand. Generally, players are passionate about the game, allowing them to engage in elaborate conversations with others based on their similar interests. This lowers the threshold to play the game with new individuals. For instance, Samantha W. met several of her players via a community center, while Frank is soon joining a campaign he read about in a local newspaper. Moreover, years ago Menno joined a campaign via a poster he saw at a local store looking for players. Some of the other players grew into valued friends over the last years. This again underlines the relevance of social capital (Keeley, 2007), but also indicates the importance of geek culture as an overarching frame of reference that is shared between players (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015), making them feel connected to one another.

Moreover, relating to the concept of social bonding (Larsen et al., 2004), engaging in the imaginary worldbuilding processes of Dungeons & Dragons can lead to improved relationships within the existing networks of players. Several respondents mentioned how they noticed improvements in certain relationships through Dungeons & Dragons. This is because Dungeons & Dragons provides good reasons to maintain relationships in an offline setting through the previously mentioned social rituals. However, the game itself also leads to social bonding. As Kim and Tom respectively describe:

I do think we grew a bit closer because of it. For our friend group it really helps that we are very much on the same page, because we have somewhat similar expectations of the game. Because you do read about that sometimes of course, that there are certain clashes. [...] And yet, you really grow closer to each other or something. You see each other very often, you experience such bizarre things with each other actually.

And I do think that the memories you create from D&D, become real over time. While you might think, it was just a game, but in ten years you say ‘Do you remember when we beat that guy?’ and then a bystander thinks like ‘What did they do? Who did they beat up?’ [...] A certain amount of time passes and then you reminisce about the memories you made around a table, as if you really did it. And that is, that is the sickly power of the human brain, that at that moment in time you rolled a dice and the story teller said ‘You jump off the mountain’ and in ten year you feel as if you jumped off that mountain yourself, so to say.

These insights are particularly interesting, as it shows that social bonding can occur via experiences in the imaginary world, as the experiences actively contribute towards deeper bonds between individuals. As such, experiences that took place in the imaginary world, can enhance relationships in the known world, underlining the connection between the known world and the imagination (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021). Another factor is that Dungeons & Dragons allows players to get to know each other in different ways, as they embody a character and are put in situations in the imaginary world that are different from the known world. As a result, they might see each other in a different light. Despite most respondents agreeing their existing relationships either improved or remained similar through Dungeons & Dragons, there are few examples of the disputes Kim referred to in her statement. The disputes that affected existing relationships negatively were mostly caused by character bleed, which was discussed elaborately in the previous theme.

In conclusion, this indicates that as long as the separation between player and character remains clear, and issues are resolved out of character, Dungeons & Dragons provides a platform for social bridging and social bonding. With overarching geek culture and Dungeons & Dragons as common ground, the subjects of conversation are as unlimited as the game itself, leading to plenty of shared norms and values to connect individuals. Paired with the in-game experiences that lead to shared memories in the imaginary world, the game effectively brings individuals together. In times of ongoing digitization and mediatization, the physical togetherness and social aspects of Dungeons & Dragons seem to be exactly what individuals require, making the game a unique example of physical togetherness in a technologically advanced world.

## 6. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify how and in what ways players of Dungeons & Dragons engage in imaginary worldbuilding, and how its increasing popularity can be explained in an environment characterized by ongoing processes of mediatization and digitization. It can be concluded that the imagination is the core concept underlying the worldbuilding processes (Reijnders et al., 2021). Through the imagination and creativity, dungeon masters take on the role of storytellers and create imaginary worlds with seemingly endless possibilities, in which players experience continuous adventures they have control over (Hagerty et al., 1992; Morley 2000). The imaginary worlds provide a welcome escape from the known world (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 1990), in which individuals are continuously confronted with large amounts of information via media in an increasingly digitalized environment (Appadurai, 2015; Hopper, 2007). This indicates Dungeons & Dragons effectively fills the gaps that remain unfulfilled in daily life in current society, by getting together in an offline environment with other players.

Paradoxically, the worldbuilding processes are heavily informed by the processes of digitization and mediatization. Dungeon masters draw inspiration from the known world as well as popular media from overarching geek culture to create a blueprint determining the boundaries of the imaginary world (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018). Although the extent of preparation varies, most dungeon masters spend time creating a world with detailed environments and cultures (Wolf, 2017). They must be harmonized, meaning that the world does not contradict itself and feels complete (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017), but also by containing the right balance between good and evil. By including the right amount of locations of topophobia and topophilia (Tuan, 1990), players have an incentive to overcome challenges within the world, without the created tension negatively impacting the players (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013). By focusing on the player experience, the dungeon master attempts to immerse the players into the imaginary worlds in which they have agency. This shows the worldbuilding processes rooted in the collective imagination of the group of players. Interestingly, each player might have a different interpretation of the imaginary world because the game mostly revolves around theatre of the mind. However, sometimes the imagination becomes more embodied by the use of certain physical elements, especially during combat. Although this takes some imaginative freedom away from the players, it adds to the immersion into the imaginary world.

Players actively take part in the imaginative worldbuilding processes by embodying characters that explore the world and thus become worldbuilders (Boni, 2017). These characters should be in harmony with the world, the group of players, but also within themselves (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017). By adding flaws, characters can overcome personal challenges within the world, immersing them into the story. Whereas some simply choose a certain race or class, many players consciously or subconsciously- embody characters that are either based on ‘the self’ or oppose it. This

indicates the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons provide a safe environment to discover new parts of oneself and a platform for personal growth, as players may deal with issues from the known world via the game. Despite the players roleplaying a character within the imaginary world, and mostly remain in-character during a session, some implications of the embodiment of the imagination lie within the overspill of emotions between player and character. This is referred to as character bleed and is related to the affective imagination (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013).

Aside from personal growth, engaging in the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons can have social benefits. Playing the game can be seen as a social ritual (Grund, 1993), as groups generally have a sequence of activities structuring their sessions, including social activities that are not inherently related to the game. Emphasizing the existence of overarching geek culture as a frame of reference for players (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015), individuals engage in new relationships or improve existing relationships via the game (Larsen et al., 2004). Individuals have shared norms and values via Dungeons & Dragons, which allow them to engage in meaningful interactions with other players (Keeley, 2007). Moreover, the shared experiences in the imaginary world create shared memories between players, improving their relationships.

The most important findings of the research that led to these conclusions include that players highly value the possibilities of being the teller of their own stories, or actors within those stories through Dungeons & Dragons. By drawing on the collective imagination, a group of players and their dungeon master engage in elaborate storytelling, seeing the imaginary world and their characters progress because of their actions. Individuals enjoy that in Dungeons & Dragons you work towards a shared goal, making it cooperative rather than competitive. The game offers seemingly endless possibilities through the imagination, because of the creative freedom and agency the dungeon masters and players are provided with, between the boundaries of the game and the imagination. The imagination is the core concept that underlies the possibilities of engaging in such imaginary worldbuilding processes that allows for a different experience every time (Reijnders et al., 2021). Aside from these game aspects, several elements that are not inherent to Dungeons & Dragons influence the appeal of the game. Generally, those who are interested in fantasy and geek culture seem to be more receptive towards Dungeons & Dragons, indicating the relevance of overarching geek culture as a frame of reference (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015). The game is related to many other activities associated with geek culture, such as the collecting of miniatures, roleplaying, and gaming. The combination of the imagination as a core concept, as well as the aspects related to geek culture, explain the appeal of Dungeons & Dragons and can be seen as the pull factors of the game.

The negative connotations surrounding the concept of escapism were visible during the interviews. However, the need and desire to engage in imaginary worldbuilding in Dungeons & Dragons seem to be rooted in a broad and fluid definition of escapism nonetheless, in which the known world does not have to be negative for individuals to want to escape to an alternate reality (Konzack, 2017; Tuan, 2000). Especially in these digitized and mediatized times, as well as the

ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, respondents mentioned wanting to immerse themselves in the imaginary worlds of Dungeons & Dragons. This makes the processes of digitization and mediatization the push factors that explain the increasing popularity of the game in current society. Especially the physical togetherness associated with Dungeons & Dragons is relevant, because current society creates the need to indulge oneself in an offline environment (Appadurai, 2015; Hopper, 2007). Examples include an enjoyable extension of everyday life that is shared with like-minded individuals, a simple variation to the daily grind, or a break from negativity in the known world. Especially the current COVID-19 pandemic is strengthening this need, as it fuels negativity and insecurity in the known world, as well as enforced the digitalization of society. Dungeons & Dragons allows individuals to escape to an environment in which they experience a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992), instilling them with a sense of control and safety. Sometimes this sense of belonging became a sense of home, as broadly conceptualized by Morley (2000), especially if the imaginary world is associated with positive experiences during the game. This underlines the importance of the imagination as the core concept, as through the imagination individuals can create these imaginary worlds, allowing individuals to create worlds in which they have control, reach accomplishments, overcome problems and make a difference, all while being in an offline setting together with friends.

When engaging in imaginary worldbuilding, dungeon masters tend to create a certain blueprint to base their imaginary world upon. In line with the ideas by Wolf (2017), they prepare a general idea of what the world is like, including cultures and countries. Paradoxically, despite everyday life being one of the drivers behind the desire to play Dungeons & Dragons, many dungeon masters find inspiration in everyday life as a blueprint for their imaginary worlds. Many respondents are inspired by popular media from overarching geek culture (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015), such as the books and movies *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, and computer games such as *The Witcher*. Moreover, many dungeon masters find literal inspiration in the known world, including cultures, countries, and current affairs. Some dungeon masters are inspired by their direct surroundings, which suggests a certain culturally determined way of worldbuilding. However, the process of imaginary worldbuilding is unique for every dungeon master. Some like to prepare an elaborate world in which their campaign takes place, while others leave open spots to fill up during the campaign depending on the needs of the players (Wolf, 2017). Nonetheless, because of the agency of the players within Dungeons & Dragons, the worldbuilding processes are rooted in the collective imagination of the group. As a result, dungeon masters have to improvise often. Creating an imaginary world is an elaborate and challenging process, and the seeming lack of limitations sometimes leaves dungeon masters overwhelmed. Luckily there are many solutions available, such as finding inspiration in prewritten campaigns or asking other dungeon masters for advice.

The data indicates dungeon masters aim to create a harmonized world. This means the world is complete and consistent so that dungeon masters can quickly anticipate the actions of players, without creating contradictions within the imaginary world (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017).

This idea of harmony is also grounded in the balance between good and evil within the imaginary world. By adding locations associated with topophobia and topophilia as introduced by Tuan (1990), such as abandoned ruins or the tranquil feywild, tension is created that immerses players into the world. Sometimes, such locations leave a mark on the player, rather than their characters. This relates to the concept of affective imagination (Vygotsky, 1999, as mentioned by Fleer, 2013), and shows the imagination is never fully detached from reality (Reijnders et al., 2021). Several respondents named more methods of immersing players into the imaginary world, including involving the backstories of players in the world, which gives the players incentives to undertake actions within that world. Moreover, most dungeon masters choose their words carefully to be as descriptive as possible, and plant seeds during the campaign as hints that start to make sense later in the story. As Dungeons & Dragons mostly consists of theatre of the mind, such methods are important for the immersion. However, at certain moments throughout a session, the imagination becomes more embodied. Most dungeon masters make use of physical elements such as background music, ambient sound, and world maps. However, during combat, the imaginary world becomes even more embodied through the use of battle maps and miniatures that represent the characters and enemies. This conveniently allows players to see what actions they can take during combat. Although it limits the imaginative freedom, it can add to the immersion of the imaginary world, as a battle map and miniatures might impress the players.

Because the imaginary worldbuilding processes are rooted in the collective imagination of the group of players and their dungeon master, it is relevant to explore how players embody their character. There are many practicalities involved with creating a character, such as choosing a class, race, and abilities. The consensus is that the character should make sense within the setting of the imaginary world and the group of characters, relating to the notions of completeness and consistency (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017). Moreover, players tend to write a backstory for their characters, that connects them to the imaginary world. Although some players simply base their characters on a certain class or race they like to embody, some players relate their characters to themselves. Many players tend to find parts of themselves in their players, although sometimes retrospective. This again underlines the strong connection between the known world and imaginary worlds (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021). Dungeons & Dragons provides a safe environment to explore different parts of ‘the self’, or embody characters that oppose ‘the self’. By using ‘the self’ as a basis, Dungeons & Dragons provides a platform for growth, as occurrences in the imaginary world can help overcome issues in the known world. Although roleplaying can lead to complications, as character bleed may lead to irritations between players, many resolve such issues by emphasizing the separation between their character and themselves, despite the similarities.

Lastly, the data indicates that Dungeons & Dragons can have social benefits (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Sublette & Mullan, 2012). The social context in which the imagination operates is relevant (Lennon, 2015), especially as respondents valued the physical togetherness associated with Dungeons & Dragons highly. Playing the game can be seen as a social ritual following the definition by Grund

(1993), as a session consists of a certain sequence of social activities. For instance, many groups share meals together and have conversations about daily life among the group. Players of Dungeons & Dragons make up a community with shared interests, norms, and values (Keeley, 2007), with geek culture as common ground (McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015). Consequently, players feel connected to one another. This may lead to social bridging, as several respondents described having met new people via Dungeons & Dragons. Moreover, this is related to the concept of social bonding, as many respondents described certain existing relationships improved via the game (Larsen et al., 2004). Some respondents even mentioned they bonded over shared in-game experiences, that led to shared memories in the imaginary world. As such, experiences that took place in the imaginary world, can enhance relationships in the known world, underlining the connection between the known world and the imagination (Lennon, 2015; Reijnders et al., 2021). As such, Dungeons & Dragons effectively brings individuals together in a technologically advanced world.

These conclusions are especially relevant, as it provides a concrete window into how ‘regular’ individuals make use of the imagination to create detailed imaginary worlds and stories within them. This research rejects the elitist bias in media studies, that emphasize professional education in the field (Benson, 1999), and the elitist bias in studies of the imagination in general, that mainly focus on how professionals make use of the imagination (Rugg, 1963). As empirical studies on how ‘regular’ individuals make use of the imagination are still in its infancy, these results add to research in the field by showing how players of Dungeons & Dragons actively engage in constructing an imaginary world as well as a community in which they experience a sense of belonging.

Despite the relevance of the results, some questions remain unanswered. As the final sample fully consisted of Dutch respondents, of which only one had a culturally diverse background, the results might not be generalizable on a larger scale. Possibly, imaginary worldbuilding processes in Dungeons & Dragons vary from culture to culture and in different locations around the world. The results carefully pointed towards some kind of culturally determined way of imaginary worldbuilding, as some respondents find inspiration in their direct locations. This was not explored elaborately in the current research, as the sample was not culturally diverse enough to do so. However, it indicates that more cross-cultural comparative research into the topic is relevant to determine if there is indeed a culturally determined way of imaginary worldbuilding, and if so, how it varies between cultures.

Moreover, the existing literature on character creation and the embodiment of a character in Dungeons & Dragons was limited. The results inductively generated ideas as to how players create a character, how they relate to the player, and what benefits and complications may arise. However, the topic of collective imaginary worldbuilding remains largely unexplored, as existing literature focused on the solitary process of worldbuilding in storytelling (Lessa & Araújo, 2017; Robertson, 2017; Wolf, 2017). Hopefully, this research sparks interest in the topic, paving the way for more research into the collective nature of worldbuilding processes in Dungeons & Dragons and the role of players and their characters.

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## Appendix A: Overview respondents

Name	Age*	Sex	Nationality	Occupation
Kim	25	Female	Dutch	Student
Joost	27	Male	Dutch	Book store employee
Samantha W.	19	Female	Dutch	Student
Jeroen	28	Male	Dutch	Student
Selwyn	31	Male	Dutch	Web care specialist
Robert	49	Male	Dutch	Government employee, professional dungeon master
Tom	32	Male	Dutch	Fantasy writer, online marketeer
Frank	43	Male	Dutch	Government employee
Merel	28	Female	Dutch	Illustrator, packaging
Samantha H.	38	Female	Dutch**	Holistic massage therapist
Harm Jan	35	Male	Dutch	Education inspectorate
Menno	37	Male	Dutch	Student transportation

\* At the time of the interview

\*\* Respondent has culturally diverse background

## **Appendix B: Interview guide**

Make sure to ask for permission to record, and ask whether they want to remain anonymous.

### **Introduction**

So you and Dungeons & Dragons, how did that came to be?

➔ This is meant to be an open and somewhat vague question, to see what respondents come up with themselves. Based on their answer, the interview can continue to any topic below.

### **Affinity with Dungeons & Dragons**

How did you find out about Dungeons & Dragons?

What initially made you play Dungeons & Dragons?

Why is it that you continue to play Dungeons & Dragons?

What do you like most about playing Dungeons & Dragons?

What do you think about Dungeons & Dragons, as opposed to other hobbies associated with geek culture (e.g. online gaming, LARPing, cosplay)?

➔ These questions could provide insights into players' affinity with Dungeons & Dragons, but also societal processes, such as the fast pace of life or escapism from all the digital.

### **Imaginary worldbuilding**

(Dungeon masters) Where do you draw inspiration from when preparing a session?

(Dungeon masters) Where do you draw inspiration from for the world you created?

(Dungeon masters) Where do you draw inspiration from for the characters and creatures in the world?

(Regular players) Where do you draw inspiration from for creating a character?

Can you take me along the process of creating a new character/creature/location in the world?

Can you tell me about the setting in which your campaign takes place (world, creatures)?

Can you explain to me to what extent you roleplay when playing Dungeons & Dragons?

What kind of physical elements are used when your group plays Dungeons & Dragons?

Are there, according to you, any complications surrounding roleplaying in Dungeons & Dragons?

➔ This questions hopefully provide insights in how players engage in the process of imaginary worldbuilding. Also look for existing locations or elements from films/series/books/media. Did they provide inspiration, and why?

### **Sense of belonging**

What effect does playing Dungeons & Dragons have on you / How does it make you feel?

Are there certain locations in the in-game world that you associate with positive feelings? (favorite places)

Are there certain locations in the in-game world that you associate with negative feelings? (least favorite places)

➔ Try to establish if the game makes them feel some kind of sense of belonging, topophilia or topophobia. This will also be done by asking plenty of follow up questions during the section about worldbuilding.

### **Sense of community**

How did the group you play Dungeons & Dragons with came to be?

How would you describe your connection with the other players from your group?

If you knew the other players before you started playing Dungeons & Dragons, how did the game change your connection/relationship, if it did at all?

Can you describe a common session for your group to me, so from the beginning of meeting up somewhere to going home again?

Aside from the other players from your group, how does Dungeons & Dragons play a role in your connections with others?

➔ Try to receive information about the social dynamics of the group they play in, but also outside of the group. Does the community surrounding Dungeons & Dragons transcend just the groups individuals play in?

### **End with characteristics**

Can you tell me some things about yourself?

➔ If not answered elaborately, ask for instance about age, occupation, hobbies, cultural background.

## Appendix C: Codebook

Theme 1: Affinity with Dungeons & Dragons
Getting to know D&D
Learning about D&D via friends
Learning about D&D via media
Appeal of D&D
Agency
Continuity
Cooperation
Creative freedom
Diversity
Endless possibilities
Extension of other hobbies
Nostalgia
Relaxation / enjoyment
Storytelling
Togetherness
Problems of D&D
Complex lore
Difficult to explain
Large amount of rules
Stigma
Comparison to other hobbies associated with geek culture
Online gaming
Competition
Digitization
Finances
Fixed experience
Skill
Time-consuming

Live-action roleplay (LARPing)

Accessibility

Drama

Familiarity

Finances

Insecurity

Less immersive

Not knowing others who engage with it

Physical embodiment

Stigma

Time-consuming

Cosplay

Accessibility

Being and doing what you want

Finances

Insecurity

Stigma

## Theme 2: Imaginary worldbuilding

Popular media as inspiration

Books

Computer games

Films, movies and series

Livestreams

Prewritten campaigns

Social media

Songs

Stereotypes

Stories and fairytales

The known world as inspiration

Cultures and countries

Current affairs

Exact locations

History  
Mythology  
Natural areas  
Personal interests  
Realism

### Immersive worldbuilding processes

Being descriptive  
Collaborative process  
Creativity  
Dropping hints  
Flexibility  
Focussing on player experience  
Getting players to interact with the world  
Good versus bad  
Harmonized world  
Improvisation  
Interaction with other dm's  
Involving backstories of players  
Originality  
Plot hooks  
Preparing in advance  
Railroading versus sandboxing  
Reading the players  
Too much possibilities  
Working between boundaries

### Roleplaying

Barrier to roleplay  
Body language  
Combat  
Sounds (made by dungeon master)  
Metagaming  
NPCs  
Remaining in character  
Resolving issues out of character

Sense of safety  
Theatre of the mind  
Voices

Physical elements  
Ambient sound (track)  
Battle maps  
Custom terrain  
Dice  
Dressing up  
Miniatures  
Music  
Portraits  
World map

Relation between known world and imaginary world  
Ethical implications  
Overspill / Separation

### Theme 3: Character creation

Practicalities  
Abilities  
Ability scores  
Class  
Group dynamics  
Race  
Setting

Fleshing out a character  
Backstory  
Character progression  
Flaws  
Harmonized character  
Personality traits  
Physique

Relation between character and ‘the self’

- Character bleed
- Discovering new parts of oneself
- Ethical implications
- Feeling connected
- Resolving issues via D&D
- Self as a basis
- Shared personality traits
- Social growth
- Trying something different

#### Theme 4: Sense of belonging

- Escapism
- Boredom
- COVID-19 pandemic
- Digitization
- Insecure situation
- Mediatization
- Negativity
- No need for escapism
- The daily grind
- Work

Sense of belonging in imaginary worlds

- Feeling accepted
- Nomadic playstyle
- Pleasant surroundings
- Sense of control
- Sense of home
- Sense of safety
- Topophobia
- Topophilia

#### Theme 5: Social context

- Social bonding
- Deeper bonds

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deviating expectations</li> <li>Shared expectations</li> <li>Shared in-game experiences</li> <li>Shared interests</li> </ul>
	<p>Social bridging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New connections</li> <li>New friendships</li> <li>Shared interests</li> <li>Spontaneous conversations</li> </ul>
	<p>Social activities surrounding the game</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combining it with other activities</li> <li>‘Gezelligheid’</li> <li>Only playing the game</li> <li>Sharing food</li> <li>Talking about other topics</li> <li>Talking about the game</li> </ul>

## Appendix D: Original quotations

### 4.1 *The call of the imaginary*

#### *Joost*

It just has many facets that are all fun individually, and then combined it is just a very enjoyable pastime. [...] For me it is especially the part of seeing the character you create progress, and the combination of doing that with good friends. I just really like to sit around the table and roll some dice for the entire Sunday. [...] And I like the collecting aspect of it as well now that I am also dmming, collecting all miniatures, assembling a collection of dice, and so forth. I used to have that with Pokémon in the past, and now it has been replaced by, err, D&D.

Het heeft gewoon heel veel facetten aan het spel die allemaal individueel leuk zijn, en dan gecombineerd is het gewoon hele fijne tijdsbesteding. [...] Voor mij is het vooral het deel van het personage dat je maakt verder zien groeien en de combinatie om dat met goede vrienden te doen. Ik vind het gewoon heel leuk om dan een hele zondag met zijn allen om de tafel te zitten en een beetje dobbelstenen te rollen. [...] en het verzamelaspect vind ik er ook wel leuk aan nu ik ook aan het dmen ben, alle mini's verzamelen, dobbelstenen collectie aanleggen enzo. Ik had dat vroeger met Pokémon, nu is dat vervangen door ehm, door D&D.

#### *Kim*

It is definitely a good reason to get together with everyone and you can do everything in that world of course, it really is 'the sky is the limit, which really appealed to all of us. [...] It is actually something different every time. For example, my dad sometimes asks me: 'Did you win?' or 'When is it then finished?' and it is never finished and that is the fun part. It is every time, you can discover new things every time and it keeps you interested, even when you are, for instance, finished playing your character, then you come up with a story of how your character could leave and then you come up with something new and that opens an entire different world of playing.

Het was sowieso een goede reden om gezellig met zijn allen samen te komen en je kon alles in die wereld doen natuurlijk, het is echt 'the sky is the limit', dus dat sprak ons allemaal heel erg aan. [...] Het is eigenlijk steeds iets nieuws. M'n vader bijvoorbeeld die vraagt me ook wel eens: 'Heb je nou gewonnen?' of 'Wanneer is het dan af?' en het is nooit af en dat is het leuke. Het is steeds, je kan steeds weer nieuwe dingen ontdekken en het blijft je boeien, zelfs als je bijvoorbeeld klaar bent met je character spelen, dan verzin je een story manier waarop je character zou kunnen vertrekken en dan kom je weer met iets heel nieuws aan en dat opent weer een hele andere wereld van spelen.

#### *Samantha H.*

Fantasy world, really the fantasy, I always found fun and found interesting, and for me that goes further than... just fantasy, so to say. [...] Of course, they are fun books and you kind of grow up with them, but [...] I find that sometimes there is a grain of truth in there or something, so that I really like. And the playing itself is of course very nerdy and that I like too. (laughs)

Fantasiewerelden, echt de fantasy, heb ik altijd leuk gevonden en interessant gevonden en dat gaat voor mij ook verder dan... gewoon fantasy zeg maar. [...] Het zijn leuke boeken natuurlijk en daar groei je een beetje mee op, maar [...] ik vind dat daar soms ook wel een kern van waarheid in zit ofzo, dus ik vind dat heel erg leuk. En het spelen zelf is natuurlijk ontzettend nerdy en daar ben ik ook wel van (lacht).

### ***Selwyn***

... just the fact that you can give your own twist to the story. That means: how are you going to tell it? What are you going to leave out? Are you going to use sounds or not? Will you put background music on? You can make it as vivid as you want [...] You know, if I walk somewhere, then I could very well come across an upside-down volcano behind that hill or so, to name something. That really makes me think that there is something new to discover and that appeals, at least to me. That is... the facts that there is something to discover, the fact that there is something new, and that there are not only brick buildings.

... gewoon het feit dat je je eigen draai aan het verhaal kan geven. Dus dat wil zeggen: hoe ga je het vertellen? Wat ga je weglaten? Ga je geluiden gebruiken of niet? Zet je een achtergrondmuziekje op? Je kan het zo levendig maken als dat je zelf wilt [...] Weet je, als ik ergens loopt, dan zou het zomaar kunnen dat ik over die heuvel ineens een omgekeerde vulkaan tegen kom ofzo, ik noem maar wat. Dat ik echt denk van er valt gewoon wat nieuws te ontdekken en dat is wat trekt, voor mij dan. Dat is... Het feit dat er iets te ontdekken valt, het feit dat er iets nieuws is, en niet dat het alleen maar stenen gebouwen zijn.

### ***4.2 Sense of belonging***

#### ***Joost***

... I personally just prefer sitting around the table with people. That you can just talk to somebody face to face and work things out, rather than that you have to do all of that via chat or Discord. To me that is just less personal.

... ik vind het persoonlijk gewoon leuker om met mensen rond de tafel te zitten. Dat je gewoon face to face met iemand kan praten en iets uit kan werken, in plaats van dat je dat allemaal via chat moet doen of via Discord. Dat vind ik gewoon minder persoonlijk.

### ***Menno***

... that is something that I do miss in current society. Nowadays everybody is a keyboard warrior.

... dat is iets wat ik wel mis in de maatschappij van tegenwoordig. Tegenwoordig is iedereen een toetsenbord krijger.

### ***Tom***

Secondly, I think it's especially... something different than what we got used to over the last years. We really relied on media, on mass media, on binge-watching, and things alike. Very passive, also very little contact with one another, and especially that personal connection, now compromised by corona, but the personal connection of sitting around a table, really going out for a night of playing, so to say, and then again the simplicity that everyone can do it. That is a perfect combination, and makes that people actually experience a story, which we actually do since the dawn of time, passing on stories, but now with dice and orcs.

Het tweede punt denk ik vooral dat het heel erg... iets anders is dan we gewend zijn geweest de afgelopen jaren. We zijn heel erg afgegaan op media, op massamedia, op binge watching en dat soort dingen. Heel passief, heel weinig contact ook met elkaar, en juist die persoonlijke connectie, nu wat lastiger met corona, maar de persoonlijke connectie van om een tafel zitten, echt even eruit gaan voor een avondje spel, als het ware, en dan ook weer de simpelheid dat iedereen dat zou kunnen. Dat is een perfecte combinatie, en dat zorgt ervoor dat mensen dus echt een verhaal beleven, wat we eigenlijk al sinds mensenheugenis doen, het doorvertellen van verhalen, alleen nu met dobbelstenen en orcs.

### ***Kim***

Although I actually always looked forward to a new session, you now look forward to it in some kind of diffent way. Atleast I crave to just seeing my friends again. And it is a certain escape from the daily grind of getting up, showering, school, work, cooking, to bed and every day again, and you are allowed to do nothing. And in that world, you are allowed to do anything, you can do anything, and that is the escape that atleast I myself am really searching for.

Hoewel ik er eigenlijk altijd wel uitkeek naar een nieuwe sessie, kijk je nu ook op een bepaalde andere manier ernaar uit. Ik snak er zelf in ieder geval heel erg naar om mijn vrienden ook gewoon weer te zien. En het is een bepaalde ontsnapping aan die dagelijkse sleur van het opstaan, douchen, school, werk, koken, naar bed en elke dag weer opnieuw en je mag ook gewoon helemaal niets. En in die wereld, je mag alles, je kan alles en dat is de ontsnapping waar ik zelf in ieder geval wel heel erg naar zoek.

### ***Merel***

I do know players who see D&D as an actual escape. Yes, where is the line between escape and just entertainment, you know? Entertainment is something people just do because they do not want to think about anything for a little bit and just want to have fun, you know. But I cannot really say it about myself or something. I cannot really say that I play D&D... I play D&D just because I really like it, and not because I do not want to deal with the real world or something.

Ik ken wel spelers die echt D&D als een uitvlucht zien. Ja, waar ligt de grens tussen uitvlucht en gewoon vermaak, weet je wel? Vermaak doen heel veel mensen gewoon omdat ze heel eventjes nergens aan willen denken en gewoon lol willen hebben, weet je wel. Maar ik kan het niet echt van mezelf zeggen ofzo. Ik kan niet zeggen dat ik D&D... ik doe D&D gewoon echt omdat ik het leuk vind, en niet omdat ik niet met de echte wereld wil dealen of zo.

### ***Samantha H.***

I am very cheery, as in I am very happy. So I don't necessarily have to escape my reality, because my reality is put together nicely. Err, besides that, extending my reality is of course just a lot of fun. (laughs) You know what I mean? I can not slay a demon in reality.

Ik ben heel blij, als in ik ben heel gelukkig. Dus ik hoef niet zozeer te vluchten van mijn werkelijkheid, omdat mijn werkelijkheid heel fijn in elkaar zit. Ehm, daarnaast is het uitbreiden van m'n werkelijkheid natuurlijk gewoon leuk. (lacht) Snap je? Ik kan niet echt een demon slayen.

### ***Robert***

It depends on the group, the one group is more like that than the other. Some groups are really like 'Well, we want to travel from place, to place, to place.'. You notice that younger players generally tend to want to go from one quest to another, and basically the rest surrounding that does not interest them. But if you go to the somewhat older players, they want the environment around it, they want to know what is happening and why. [...] The reason why such a house, or village, or city are important for them, they need a reason to fight. They need... like, there is family, friends, a brother, a sister, whatever. You need a reason to do something.

Ligt aan de groep, de ene groep heeft dat meer dan de ander. Sommige groepen zijn echt zo van 'Nou we willen van plek, naar plek, naar plek reizen'. Je merkt dat jonge spelers vooral eigenlijk gewoon van de ene quest naar de andere quest willen, en eigenlijk de rest eromheen interesseert ze niet. Maar ga je naar de wat oudere spelers, die willen ook de omgeving eromheen, die willen weten wat er aan de hand is en waarom. [...] De reden waarom zo'n huis, of het dorp, of stad belangrijk voor hen zijn, ze moeten een reden hebben om te vechten. Ze moeten... hè er zit familie, vrienden, een broer, een zus, weet ik veel wat. Je moet een reden hebben om iets te doen.

### ***Jeroen***

... often the campaigns in which I dmmed are focused on travel and passing through. [...] I think that that somewhat originates from the players who are just looking to find something new every time. Errr, but no, up until now it has not gotten across that de players have found some kind of home and go back to it every time. [...] They fall from one thing into another.

... vaak zijn de campaign waar ik in gedmt heb meer gericht op reis en doorreis. [...] Ik denk dat dat ook een soort van voortkomt vanuit de spelers die gewoon steeds iets nieuws willen vinden. Ehm, maar nee, ik ben er tot nu toe nog niet voorbijgekomen dat dat de spelers echt een soort van thuis hebben gevonden en daar telkens naartoe terugkomen. Het is meer... Ze vallen telkens van het ene ding, in het andere ding.

#### ***4.3 Imaginary worldbuilding***

##### ***Selwyn***

There have been moments where I have led them away, because I knew they just could not handle certain content, because I was like 'Yes, there should spawn a gigantic T-Rex right now, but they are level two, so let me just not do that.'

Daar zijn ook wel momenten geweest dat ik ze heb weggeleid, want ik wist dat ze bepaalde content gewoon niet aankonden, omdat ik dan zoiets had van 'Ja, nu zou er een gigantische t-rex moeten spawnen, maar ze zijn level twee, dus laat ik dat gewoon effe niet doen.'

##### ***Samantha H.***

And at a certain point I want, I wanted to go entirely homebrew but it did not really work out, because I could not figure it out. So then I thought, yes, maybe I will buy a book and throw it in there after all, and that did not make me entirely happy either. And what I am planning on doing now is to really make a mix. [...] But that combination seems like a nice way of playing for me, because entirely homebrew takes a lot... [...] It costs a lot, so to say. It is a lot of fun though.

En op een gegeven moment wil ik, wilde ik helemaal homebrew gaan maar dat ging niet helemaal, omdat ik er niet uitkwam. Dus toen dacht ik, ja, misschien toch een boek aanschaffen en dat erin plompen, en daar werd ik ook niet helemaal blij van. En wat ik nu van plan ben is echt een mix te maken. [...] Maar die combi lijkt mij wel heel fijn om te spelen, want helemaal homebrew gaat ontzettend veel... [...] dat kost heel veel, laat ik het zo zeggen. Het is ontzettend leuk hoor.

##### ***Merel***

... I find Southern Spain and Arabia very interesting, and it also has something mysterious or something, that whole 1001-nights thing. And I have been to those location often myself, so to say, to

Spain and Morocco and things alike. And then you feel the ambiance so to say, that lingers there, or you know what the buildings look like, and how the people are, and so forth. [...] From there I actually just started with building a world around that, like how would that translate into a fantasy world or something?

... ik vind zuid-Spanje en Arabië heel interessant, en dat heeft ook wel iets mysterieus, of zo, dat 1001 nacht gebeuren. En ik ben zelf heel erg vaak op die locaties geweest, zeg maar, in Spanje en Marokko en dat soort dingen. En dan voel je zeg maar de sfeer ofzo, die daar hangt, of dan weet je hoe de gebouwen eruit zien, en hoe de mensen zijn en zo. [...] vanuit daar ben ik eigenlijk gewoon begonnen met een wereld daar omheen te bouwen, van hoe zou dat zich dan vertalen in een fantasy wereld ofzo?

### ***Harm Jan***

... the question remains as to what extent you want to involve all actuality in your game. You are also relaxing, after all.

... het is ook de vraag hoe zeer wil je alle actualiteit altijd naar je spel toe halen. Je bent ook aan het ontspannen tenslotte.

### ***Robert***

I do have a general idea, so to say, what the storyline is and what could happen. And that does mean that you have to take a look after every session: what has happened? How have they [...] affected the storyline, [...] how did other creatures and people in the world reacted to that? Because all actions by the players affect the world. And you have to take that into account as well, because if the players do something and two weeks later they come back and nothing has changed, then the player is like 'Why do we do it?' And that makes it important for the immersion, so to say, if the players go somewhere, and a week later they come back and are recognized, good or bad, because yes, they might also have done this wrong, has effect. Like, in the one village they are heroes, in the other they are chased with tar and feathers.

Ik heb wel een algemene lijn, zal ik maar zeggen, wat de verhaallijn is en wat er kan gebeuren. En dat betekent wel dat je na elke sessie even moeten kijken: wat is er gebeurd? Hoe hebben ze [...] de verhaallijn beïnvloed [...] hoe hebben de andere wezens en personen in die wereld daarop gereageerd? Want alle acties die de spelers doen, hebben effect op de wereld. En daar moet je ook rekening mee houden, want als de spelers iets doen en twee weken later komen ze terug en er is niks veranderd, dan heeft de speler ook zo iets van 'Waarom doen we het?'. En dat maakt het belangrijk voor de immersie, zal ik maar zeggen, als de speler ergens komt, en een week later komen ze weer en ze worden herkend, goed of slecht, want ja, ze kunnen ook dingen verkeerd hebben gedaan, heeft effect. Hè in het ene dorp zijn ze helden, in het andere dorp worden ze achtergezet met met pek en veren.

### ***Frank***

... there has to be a bit of tension, because otherwise, yeah, imagine everybody on the beach and 'Okay, how are you going to sunbathe today?' (laughs) But I mean then, then there is no tension involved. So there will always has to be something dark, or something negative, or in any case something that gives the illusion the positive is threatened, especially to reach that tension.

... er moet een stuk van spanning zijn, want anders ja... bedenk je iedereen op een strand en 'Oké, hoe ga jij zonnen vandaag?' (lacht) Maar ik bedoel dan, dan zit er niet iets van spanning in. Dus er zal altijd iets iets donkers, of iets negatiefs moeten zijn, of in ieder geval iets wat de illusie geeft dat het alle positieve bedreigt, juist om die spanning te zoeken.

### ***Tom***

But there are indeed very negative situations possible in the world too, but my opinion is [...] if you have a world of fantasy, of magic, of orcs and dwarves, you name it, and you resort to for example sexual intimidation, well sorry, then you are just narrow-minded. Because you have the world at your feet, you can do whatever you want, and then you collect players for something like that... that is strange. But if you have decided on that together and that is your thing, hey do your thing!

Maar er zijn inderdaad wel hele nare situaties ook mogelijk in de wereld, alleen ik ben van mening [...] als je een wereld hebt van fantasie, van magie, van orcs en dwergen, noem maar op, en je komt bijvoorbeeld neer op seksuele intimidatie, nou sorry, dan ben je gewoon bekrompen. Want je hebt de wereld aan je voeten, je kan doen wat je wil, als je dan spelers gaat neerzetten voor zoiets... dat is vreemd. Maar als je dat allemaal besloten hebt met elkaar en dat is jouw cake, hé doe je ding!

### ***Menno***

I always try to involve them in the creation of the story, whether they know it or not. What I ask my players is to always a short background story [...] And I try to implement such little details in my game and in the story, thus, so that everyone eventually, for instance, has a home to return to or... That somewhere during the campaign a message comes in like 'Well, that valued childhood friends is in big trouble. [...] You now have the chance to help, otherwise it probably ends badly'. In such ways I try to give actual influence to the players in my world.

Ik probeer ze altijd bij het bedenken van het verhaal te betrekken, of ze het nou weten of niet. Wat ik van mijn spelers vraag, is altijd een klein achtergrond verhaaltje [...] En ik probeer dat soort kleine details te verwerken in mijn spel en in het verhaal, dus, zodat iedereen ook uiteindelijk weer bijvoorbeeld een huis heeft om terug te keren of... Dat ergens halverwege de campagne een bericht komt van 'Goh, die goede jeugdvriend van je zit echt in problemen. [...] Je hebt nu de kans om te

helpen, anders dan loopt het waarschijnlijk slecht af.' Op die manier probeer ik de spelers echt invloed te geven in mijn wereld.

### ***Samantha W.***

... thus, instead of like 'I hit with my sword' he is like 'Oh, I make a step forward, I draw my sword from the scabbard and I errr, move my arm forward to hit him'. That is way more elaborate, way more detail, err, and the rest mostly follows along a bit. They are indeed still a bit shy, dus they don't talk so much.

... in plaats dus van 'ik sla met mijn zwaard' dan is hij van 'Oh, ik zet een stap naar voren, ik trek mijn zwaar uit de schede en ik eh, beweeg m'n arm naar voren om hem te slaan'. Dat is veel uitgebreider, veel meer detail, ehm, en de rest volgt vooral een beetje. Die zijn inderdaad nog wel schuw dus die praten niet zo.

### ***4.4 Embodying the imagination***

#### ***Jeroen***

... the funny things is that for that character, I actually really started with the background and attempting to translate that into the characteristics that he would have. [...] So I was like okay, a person that comes from such a filthy place, constitution goes up, you have that inventive aspect of wanting to put things together, high intelligence. In addition, they are subject to a constant downfall of water, so he would probably be strong as well. [...] Oh, moreover, where he grew up is really isolated, so he might be a bit weaker socially.

... het grappige is dat voor dat personage ben ik eigenlijk heel erg begonnen met de achtergrond en daar dat een soort van proberen te vertalen naar de eigenschappen die die zou hebben. [...] Dus ik was van oké, iemand die van zo'n vuile plek komt, constitution gaat omhoog, je hebt dat inventieve element van dingen in elkaar willen zetten, hoge intelligence. Daarnaast zijn ze onderhevig aan constante waterval, dus hij zal ook wel sterk zijn. [...] Oh, daarnaast waar die is opgegroeid is sterk geïsoleerd, dus hij is misschien sociaal wat minder sterk.

#### ***Frank***

Thus far it is especially because I have somewhat of an idea of how I want that person of being to be like. And thus I, I am not a person that creates the characters to be as good as possible or... No, more like what is interesting to roleplay. [...] Based on that story writing too, there always has to be a conflict within somebody to make them interesting.

Tot nu toe is het vooral omdat ik een beetje een idee heb van hoe ik wil dat die persoon of dat wezen is. En dat vandaar ik, ik ben niet iemand die de karakters maakt om zo goed mogelijk te zijn of... Nee, maar meer wat is leuk om te roleplayen. [...] Vanuit dat verhalen schrijven ook van, er moet altijd wel een conflict in iemand zijn om hem interessant te maken.

It is indeed, I think, also a fun way to discover new parts of yourself and I also see that in others. For that colleague that I just described, with whom I had limited contact for years until I started playing with him, he is also very introverted. And you see in the moment he starts playing, he is actually a bard, very outgoing.

Het is inderdaad, denk ik, ook wel een leuke manier om andere kant van jezelf te ontdekken en dat zie ik ook wel bij anderen. Bij die collega die ik net beschreef, met wie ik jaren amper contact had gehad tot ik met hem ging spelen, die is ook heel introvert. En je ziet op het moment dat ie gaat spelen is ie juist een bard: heel uitbundig.

### ***Menno***

If I play a character I want to know, okay, how is the character born? Where does he come from? Who were his childhood friends? What does he dislike? What does he enjoy? What contains the world he comes from? Why did he come from that world to this one? So there are many more questions involved than that you just say 'So, I play a human. I come from the capital, my father was a baker and my mother was a florist, and I joined the city guard because it was fun.' Period.

Als ik een personages speel, wil ik weten oke hoe is het personage geboren? Waar komt ie vandaan? Wat waren z'n jeugdvrienden? Waar heeft ie een hekel aan? Wat vind ie lekker? Wat komt er in de wereld voor waar die vandaan komt? Waarom is die van die wereld naar deze wereld? Dus daar zitten veel meer extra vragen aan dan dat je zegt van 'Goh ik speel een mens. Ik kom uit de hoofdstad, mijn vader was bakker en m'n moeder was bloemist, en ik ging bij de stadswacht omdat het leuk was.' Punt.

### ***Robert***

... you cannot exactly say: playing and character are the same, but many parts of the player are represented in their character of course. They often take a part of themselves and enlarge that.

... je kan niet helemaal zeggen: spelen en karakter is hetzelfde, maar wel heel veel delen van de speler zit in hun karakter natuurlijk. Vaak nemen ze een onderdeel van zichzelf en dat maken ze groter.

### ***Harm Jan***

... I never really take that into account, I have to say. Really just what I feel like creating, and (inaudible) what type I would like to play. [...] I do have some preferences. But it is more so, indeed, how much

feeling I have with a class, rather than really like 'Well, this is really close to me, or not' or something like that.

... daar ben ik nooit zo mee bezig, moet ik zeggen. Echt gewoon wat ik zin heb om te maken, en (inaudible) wat voor type dat ik wil gaan spelen. [...] ik heb wel voorkeuren daarin. Maar het is meer, inderdaad, met een class of hoeveel feeling dat ik ermee heb, als het echt van 'Nou, dit ligt heel dicht bij mij, of juist niet' of zo.

#### ***4.5 Imaginary worldbuilding as a social conductor***

##### ***Jeroen***

Like, it is often paired with that we indeed have dinner together. I mean, you are not going to play D&D the whole time, because eventually it is... everybody is just done with it. (laughs) Or then the story is just done for that day. [...] in the period that everybody was actually spread out over The Netherlands, and the regular friend group was somewhat separated, it was actually always paired with people staying the night and such. So then you go enjoy breakfast together the next morning, and yeah, maybe you go on a walk or something like that. [...] It is never just D&D, although now online it is.

Van het gaat vaak gepaard met, dat we inderdaad samen eten. Ik bedoel, je gaat niet de hele tijd D&D zitten spelen, want uiteindelijk is het... is iedereen er gewoon een beetje klaar mee. (lacht) Of dan is het verhaal gewoon even op voor die dag. [...] in de periode dat eigenlijk iedereen overal in Nederland zat, en normaal de vriendengroep een beetje uit elkaar getrokken was, ging het eigenlijk ook altijd gepaard met dat mensen bleven slapen en zo. Dus dan heb je de volgende ochtend dat je gewoon lekker samen gaat ontbijten, en ja misschien nog even een wandeling gaat maken of iets in die trant. [...] Het is nooit alleen D&D. Hoewel nu online wel.

##### ***Frank***

I see how my children sit behind a screen and have contact with somebody else, and I see just around the table that they look each other in the eyes and burst into laughter. Well, you don't have that there. Such little things you miss, or at least, I would miss in an online experience that you do have here.

Ik zie hoe mijn kinderen achter een schermpje in zitten en contact hebben met een ander, en ik zie gewoon aan tafel dat ze elkaar aankijken en ze schieten in de lach. Nou dat heb je daar al niet. Dat soort kleine dingetjes die mis je, of tenminste, die zou ik echt missen bij die online ervaring die je hier wel hebt.

##### ***Kim***

I do think we grew a bit closer because of it. For our friend group it really helps that we are very much on the same page, because we have somewhat similar expectations of the game. Because you do read

about that sometimes of course, that there are certain clashes. [...] And yet, you really grow closer to each other or something. You see each other very often, you experience such bizarre things with each other actually.

Ik denk dat we er wel een stuk hechter mee zijn geworden. Het helpt bij onze vriendengroep dan wel heel erg dat onze neuzen heel erg dezelfde kant op staan, omdat wij een beetje hetzelfde verwachten van het spel. Want dat lees je natuurlijk ook nog wel eens, dat er daar bepaalde botsingen in zijn. [...] En dan toch, je groeit naar elkaar toe ofzo. Je ziet elkaar heel erg veel, je maakt echt van die bizarre dingen eigenlijk met elkaar mee.

### ***Tom***

And I do think that the memories you create from D&D, become real over time. While you might think, it was just a game, but in ten years you say 'Do you remember when we beat that guy?' and then a bystander thinks like 'What did they do? Who did they beat up?' [...] A certain amount of time passes and then you reminisce about the memories you made around a table, as if you really did it. And that is, that is the sickly power of the human brain, that at that moment in time you rolled a dice and the story teller said 'You jump off the mountain' and in ten year you feel as if you jumped off that mountain yourself, so to say.

En ik denk dat ook dat herinneringen die je maakt van D&D, worden met de tijd ook echt. Terwijl je dan denkt, het was eigenlijk een spelletje, maar over tien jaar zeg jij 'Weet je nog toen wij die gast versloegen?' en dan denkt een omstander van 'Wat hebben ze gedaan? Wie hebben ze in elkaar geslagen?' [...] een bepaalde tijd gaat eroverheen en dan denk je terug aan de herinneringen die je maakte aan een tafel, alsof je het echt gedaan hebt. En dat is, dat is een ziekelijke kracht van het menselijke brein, dat je dan toentertijd een dobbelsteen rolde en de verteller zei 'Je springt de berg af' en over tien jaar voel je alsof je zelf die berg bent afgesprongen als het ware.