

What is Creative Transgressive Play? Exploring Creativity and Transgression in *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D]

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INTRODUCTION

Transgressive play in games often refers to play that is “offensive, harmful, speculative, uncomfortable, or otherwise problematic” (Jørgensen & Karlsen, 2019b, 9). In line with this interpretation of transgression, there has been considerable research focused on the negative implications of transgressive player behavior (e.g., Achterbosch et al., 2017; Emmerich et al., 2020; Türkay et al., 2020). Although important, this pervasive understanding of transgressive play unintentionally excludes the potential for transgression to be positively manifested or motivated (Stenros, 2019). This presentation explores the relationship between creativity and transgression in the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D], contributing to the growing discourse surrounding positively-inclined experiences of transgressive play (e.g., Bopp et al., 2016; Carter & Allison, 2018; Jørgensen & Karlsen, 2019a; Stenros, 2015). Using data collected from focus group discussions (3 groups, 14 participants, aged 24-55) and an online survey (354 participants, aged 18-63), I aim to present my findings that encapsulate *creative transgressive play*—a term I define as positive play that creatively challenges player or game boundaries.

CREATIVITY AND TRANSGRESSION IN GAMES

This presentation draws on rich data collected from focus group discussions (n=14, 9M, 5F, aged 24-55) and an online survey (n=354, 172M, 153F, 23NB [Non-Binary], 6 No Answer, aged 18-63) intended to explore the contemporary appeal and play of D&D. Participants in both methods were asked to reflect on their meaningful play experiences in the game through a taxonomy based on my prior work and findings: *Memorable Play*, *Emotional Play*, *Pivotal Play*, and *Serious Play*. *Memorable Play* highlighted experiences at the forefront of players’ minds or experiences of D&D that sustained player interest. *Emotional Play* elicited understanding of any prominent emotions arising from D&D play—regardless of whether they were positive or negative. *Pivotal Play* recognised the more transformative experiences of D&D play, and *Serious Play* captured any play experiences associated with learning. This taxonomy of playful experiences reflected more meaningful levels of engagement with the game and allowed me to go beyond more superficial responses like ‘D&D is fun’. As hoped, participants’ anecdotes in these four targeted areas provided me with richer, context-based insight into what makes D&D play appealing.

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After initial open coding of this data targeted my interest towards creativity and transgression in the game, further axial coding was conducted on these areas to identify examples and types of creativity in D&D. I found that a considerable portion of these meaningful play anecdotes recalled experiences of creativity [Memorable Play: n=176, 50.3% | Emotional Play: n=85, 28.6% | Pivotal Play: n=26, 15.2% | Serious Play: n=78, 22.3%]. However, this process of analysis identified two distinct expressions of creativity: creativity that the game supported (i.e., non-transgressive creativity), and creativity that challenged either player or game boundaries (i.e., creative transgressive play). Due to the nature of the questions, all the responses I received referred to experiences that positively contributed to the appeal or play of D&D. Across this taxonomy I received a total of 1167 responses. 31.3% [n=354] of these responses recalled creativity in some form, with 40.3% [n=147] of those recollections being categorised as non-transgressive creativity and 59.7% [n=218] being categorised as creative transgressive play.

As Stenros argues, “to fully understand play, we need to examine its expressions, if they are valued as positive or negative, regardless of whether they comply with norms or transgress them. If we look at only half the picture, we cannot grasp the whole phenomenon and its nuances” (p. 13). Examining the relationship between creativity and transgression in contemporary D&D play can emphasise how collaboration and shared frames of understanding in games may resolve creative tensions and legitimise acts of creative transgression in opposition to toxic transgression. The concept of *creative transgressive play* to describe positive play that creatively challenges players or the game space, extends on current understandings of play by provoking us to reconsider how games themselves constrain and restrict playfulness. As players continue to experiment with impactful experiences that challenge other players and game boundaries, I argue that creative transgressive play can be used to motivate new directions for future game design and learning in both digital and non-digital contexts.

BIO

Premeet Sidhu is a PhD student at The University of Sydney. Her PhD focuses on understanding the modern resurgence and appeal of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D]. Her current research interests include investigating how meaningful player experiences in both digital and non-digital games can be applied and considered in wider areas of game studies, education, and media.

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