A Lacanian TTRPG where you are always playing

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Keywords

Participatory surveillance, Recognition, Lacan, Gaze, TTRPG, playing cards

Format of work

Game prototype played with a single deck of playing cards, pencils and note cards.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

This is an experimental TTRPG played with a single deck of standard playing cards, pencils, and copious note cards. It requires a table to play around. Each player has a hand of playing cards. When someone makes a skill check each other player (and GM) is asked the question 'do you believe the character will succeed?" and votes by playing a card face down and revealing simultaneously. Majority Reds = success, Majority Blacks = fail, Tie = partial success.

When you guess with the majority you add your playing card to a long-term project. Examples can be "Find my long lost brother: ♥♥♠♠" or "Prepare to cast fireball: ♣♥♦♠". Once you fulfill the requirements of your project you can cast whatever spell you've prepared, learn whatever information you're trying to gather, or whatever else you were preparing to do.

The purpose of the game is to create a TTRPG experience where everyone is playing, where the rules are light but robust, and where players feel as if their roleplaying performance is constantly subject to the gaze of others.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Why do we play TTRPG games in groups? This practice leads to games that Conway describes as having a poor 'fun coefficient' (Conway, Personal Correspondence, July 2025). Much time is spent passively watching as other players labouriously take their turn, with players spending at most 25% of the time in the spotlight (assuming a game with four players).

Solo TTRPGs exist, as do games designed for one Game Master and a single player. Nonetheless, such games are primarily played in groups despite the various issues latent in such games. From the GM scarcity crisis, through to the sheer difficulty in scheduling, why do we insist on playing these games in big groups?

My as-yet unnamed game makes the argument that part of the reason we play games in groups is because we do not merely wish to roleplay, but we wish to roleplay within the gaze of the other. Much of Jacques Lacan's work focuses on the psychoanalytic importance of the 'gaze', wherein by being watched we come to perceive and interpret ourselves through the gaze of the other (Lacan, 1973). Hegel too places importance on

the notion of 'recognition', on the value of being recognised by another autonomous independent mind (Hegel, 1807). Albrechtslund (2008) also, in his research on social media performances notes the importance of 'participatory surveillance', on the gratifying experience of not only performing but to perform in a way that allows one to be seen within that performance. If a Barbarian rages and there's nobody there to see it, did they really rage at all?

To address this my game incorporates the gaze into skill checks. Instead of simulating a game world through complex, time consuming math; skill checks are instead a fuzzy tabletop consensus. You are constantly watching and being watched when you play, generating a game that leans into the very aspect that causes players to roleplay in big groups.

EXHIBITION

This work is interacted with by sitting at a dedicated table. I will serve as a Game Master. Players use playing cards, pencils and note cards (all of which I will provide myself). This is a TTRPG experience.

BIO

Antranig Sarian is a board game developer with Bigger Worlds Games. His narrative-heavy board game *Courtroom Mysteries* will have a public Kickstarter launch on January 2026. Sarian has previously finished a doctorate at Swinburne University of Technology with his thesis titled *Endings and Alignments* which looks at morality meters and reputation systems as a form of quantified self. He has previously done narrative design work for the mobile game *Loveverse* and has published papers in *Games and Culture, Eludamos* and *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

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