Curating the Self-Identity: Tabletop Game Hobbyist Online Practices as an Extended Leisure Experience

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Abstract
This interdisciplinary study investigates how networked online media facilitates meaning-making and identity (re)construction in distinctively material leisure. It presents a detailed and empirically grounded exploration of tabletop game hobbyists’ online practices that extend the leisure experience beyond playing. The data (N=190) was collected with a mixed-method online survey, and responses of six open-ended questions were subsequently analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Theoretical frameworks from leisure, consumer culture, game, and media studies informed the analysis. The results are discussed through three broad themes, (1) curating the personal world, (2) situating the self in the social world, and (3) engagement through everyday creativity. The study suggests that online practices allow deeper engagement with tabletop gaming through identity (re)construction. In conclusion, the contributions to literature, practitioners, and society are discussed.

Introduction
The leisure activity of contemporary tabletop gaming has become immensely popular over the past two decades, rising to new heights during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Coward-Gibbs, 2020). Enthusiast tabletop game (TTG) hobbyists enjoy the sociability, tangibility, intellectual challenge, and the variety of play experiences TTGs offer (Booth, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2016; Woods, 2012). Surrounding the physical act of playing TTGs there exists a wide social world (Unruh, 1980), where practices of play, consumption, and identity management intermix among TTG hobbyists (see Rogerson et al., 2016; Woods, 2012). As digitalization has changed how people perceive and engage in leisure (Schultz & McKeown, 2018; Silk et al., 2016), these activities are often pursued online (Coward-Gibbs, 2020; Mierzecka & Łączyński, 2022; Rogerson et al., 2017). While this development opens new means for TTG hobbyists to engage with TTGs, and to (re)construct related identities, it also exposes tabletop gaming to the commodification of leisure (Naulin & Jourdain, 2020), as TTG industry seeks to utilize TTG hobbyist identities for commercial purposes (Trammell, 2019).
The study asks how TTG hobbyists extend their leisure experience (Scott & Harmon, 2016) with curatorial online activities, and what are the implications of this for their identity (re)construction practices. With an interdisciplinary approach drawing from the fields of leisure, consumer, game, and media studies, it constructs a detailed description of TTG hobbyist online practices as an “extended leisure experience” (Scott & Harmon, 2016, p. 1). It shows how hobbyist identities become an “extended self” (Belk, 1988, p 1) through the curation of created, used, and shared online content (Davis, 2017, 2020; Thorson & Wells, 2016). This approach contributes to leisure studies literature by exploring how complementary theories and concepts make sense in this new context (Tracy, 2010), as they are utilized as multidisciplinary tools to gain insights into how meaning is created at the intersection of leisure, media, and consumption. It further shows how extending the leisure experience online expands opportunities of identity (re)construction and meaning-making in leisure through material–digital interactions, contributing to discussion on digital leisure (Schultz & McKeown, 2018; Silk et al., 2016).

Through the lens of extended self (Belk, 1988, 2013), the article also points out how material affordances of TTGs contribute to hobbyist identities through curatorial online activities surrounding TTG play, reasserting that leisure exists on a continuum of techno–social online/offline practices (López-Sintas et al., 2020). Responding to the need to understand the complexity of digital leisure (Schultz & McKeown, 2018; Silk et al., 2016), the suggested approach provides a fresh perspective to understand how meaning is created in online leisure practices. With a topic that potentially challenges more traditional views of leisure (Tracy, 2010), author hopes to excite others to explore opportunities for using interdisciplinarity to better understand the complexities of contemporary leisure engagement.

In the next section, I will discuss how digitalization shapes tabletop gaming leisure, and how TTG hobbyists use online media to extend their leisure experiences. I will point out the connections between tabletop gaming leisure, online consumption, and contemporary media ecosystem (see also Kankainen, 2020), discussing how this contributes to TTG hobbyists’ identity (re)construction practices. This study expands literature on digitalization of everyday leisure practices (Silk et al., 2016), and on the extended leisure experiences (Scott & Harmon, 2016), contributing also to discussions of analog gaming in digital culture (Rogerson et al., 2017; Trammell, 2019), and the role of identities in game experiences (Buyukozturk & Shay, 2022; Lehtonen et al., 2022; Rogerson et al., 2016).

**Theoretical frameworks**

**Digitalization of tabletop gaming leisure**

Research surrounding the leisure of tabletop gaming (e.g., Rogerson et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2022; Woods, 2012) covers the play and culture of (typically) analog games playable on a table. The focus of which this study is on board games (e.g., *Terraforming Mars*; Fryxelius, 2016; *Carcassonne*; Wrede, 2000), tabletop role-playing games ([TTRPG] e.g., *Dungeons and Dragons* [D&D], Arneson & Gygax, 1974), and miniature wargames (e.g., *Warhammer 40,000*, Priestley, 1987), which were most prominent in the data.
TTG hobbyists are fans of TTGs, who, in addition to play, show emotional and intellectual commitment to leisure through affective play (Hills, 2002), that is, creative and playful engagement with TTGs. For TTG hobbyists, the curatorial activities of acquiring, evaluating, and collecting TTGs (Rogerson et al., 2016), as well as appreciating and discussing the material and ludic qualities of TTGs (e.g., Meriläinen et al., 2020) are part of tabletop gaming leisure. As media scholar Paul Booth suggests (2021), TTGs are media texts which facilitate affective play that connects the fan with the text. By forming an emotional attachment toward materiality of TTGs (Rogerson et al., 2016) and a community of like-minded enthusiasts, hobbyists (re) construct their fan identities (Booth, 2021). As a social endeavor, this is often conducted online.

The online community of BoardGameGeek (BGG) has been labeled a “digital hinterland” (Rogerson et al., 2017, p. 1) that frames the material act of play. In BGG, hobbyists accumulate gaming capital (cf. Consalvo, 2007) by researching information (e.g., reviews, or podcasts), collecting TTGs (e.g., online shopping), cataloging game collections, discussing things related to TTGs, and tracking their participation to the hobby (e.g., played games; Rogerson et al., 2017). With over three million users and more than 145 000 community-ranked board games (as of May 29, 2023), BGG forms a “communication center” (Unruh, 1980, pp. 283–284), which coordinates activities, production, and interrelationships in the social world of tabletop gaming. While BGG is used for a range of social practices and information behavior, in Facebook TTG communities the discussion seems to focus on consumption over gameplay purposes (Mierzecka & Łączyński, 2022), suggesting the influence of platform to community discourses.

In online communities, hobbyists interact amongst themselves, with TTG developers, and other TTG professionals (Trammell, 2019; Werning, 2018). TTG hobbyist identities are, then, affected by both the organizational logic of consumption and the expressive dimensions of TTG subculture (Williams, 2006). For instance, during the crowdfunding campaign for the Pathfinder Arena TTG (Anzidei et al., 2022), success was dependent on developers providing hobbyists a sense of social identity they can identify with (Prisco et al., 2022). This process reflects the commodification of identities and leisure in digital economies (Naulin & Jourdain, 2020), which exposes TTG hobbyist’s identities to industry exploitation (Trammell, 2019).

**Extended leisure experience of tabletop gaming**

Scott and Harmon (2016) defined the extended leisure experience (ELE) as “activities that leisure participants engage in following the completion of a primary leisure activity” (p. 482). For TTG hobbyists, the “secondary activities” they engage in online derive meaning from the “primary activity” of playing TTGs, thus extending the leisure experience temporally and spatially. Secondary activities make TTG experiences fuller and connect them to other meaning-making opportunities through continuity in leisure (Scott & Harmon, 2016). Similar to music fans getting involved with leisure outside concert participation (Harmon & Scott, 2017), TTG hobbyists extend their experience through secondary online activities (SOA) complementary to the primary leisure activity. As they do this, networked media contextualizes TTG hobbyist identities socially,
culturally, and economically, turning TTGs into a material brand identity (Trammell, 2019; Williams, 2006), which is, somewhat paradoxically, expressed online.

As game scholar Mia Consalvo (2009) argues, gameplay cannot be understood without considering players’ real-life "commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires" (p. 415) that contextualize and frame play. In digitalized culture networked media shapes and frames most aspects of the everyday (see Deuze, 2012). In this ecosystem of spreadable media (Jenkins et al., 2013), products, services, trends, and practices are circulated with unprecedented speed and efficiency in an increasingly messier and more participatory manner. Thus, the spreadability of media sets the context for understanding contemporary tabletop gaming leisure experiences, as TTG hobbyist identities are mutable and contingent on other identities and the presentation of TTGs in mainstream media (Shaw, 2012; Sidhu & Carter, 2020). For instance, on Twitch and YouTube TTG “actual play” live-streams, like Critical Role (2015–present), where people play D&D for the camera, have reduced the stigma of identifying as TTG hobbyist (Sidhu & Carter, 2020). In these streams, play becomes a performance and an object of experiential consumption for TTG hobbyists (Marsden & Mason, 2021; see Heath & Nixon, 2021). With constant access to leisure content, the contexts of leisure, work, consumption, and entertainment—combined with their related identities—become entangled as TTG hobbyists extend the leisure experience online.

Identity and meaning-making in leisure

Leisure research has explored how leisure and identity are inherently connected. It has been suggested that to understand how individuals make meaning and decisions in leisure, the concepts of behavior, experience, and identity should be understood in a symbiotic manner (Harmon & Kyle, 2021). One of the central ways of creating meaning in leisure is finding out who one is by discovering, reaffirming, and (re)constructing the self-identity (Iwasaki, 2017; Porter et al., 2010). Since identity shapes leisure experiences through the activities chosen, the experiences can result in changes to one’s sense of self and future behavior (Harmon & Kyle, 2021). The variety of engagement opportunities with TTGs in networked media provide diverse opportunities for TTG hobbyists to extend the leisure experience, which potentially contributes to (re)construction of hobbyist identities. For instance, if a shy person plays TTGs online, then developing a sense of belonging with an online community may encourage them to play and socialize offline.

As online and offline identities are entangled in tabletop gaming, it matters how TTG-related identities are performed and (re)constructed in networked media. Leisure brings meaning to people through active engagement with self, others, and things they value in life (Iwasaki, 2017; Porter et al., 2010). People also seem more inclined to engage with leisure activities that affirm their identity and help them in self-expression (Haggard & Williams, 1992). Tabletop gaming, as a leisure culture dominated by white male identities (Trammell, 2023), also overrepresented in TTG imagery (Jones & Pobuda, 2020), can feel excluding and alienating to those with less-privileged identities (Buyukozturk & Shay, 2022). The lack of representational content means less opportunities to affirm the identity, while the lack of shared
identities can cause less active leisure engagement, and in the end, less meaningful leisure experience.

**Curating the extended self**

Consumer culture theorist Russel W. Belk originally stated that “we are what we have” (1988, p. 139). Belk suggested that consumers construct, reflect, and express their identities through material and immaterial “possessions”, including experiences and interactions with others in a community. In other words, people integrate material and immaterial possessions into their extended self when they form an emotional attachment toward objects by controlling, creating, or knowing them (Belk, 1988).

Similarly, TTG hobbyists integrate material and immaterial possessions into their identities by forming an emotional attachment to the intellectual challenge, the variety, sociability, and materiality of TTGs (Rogerson et al., 2016).

Since identities in the networked society are constantly negotiated in a “constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 304), Belk theorized (2013) that online sharing and self-expression have become more relevant to the self-understanding than owning things. In online media, the focus of identity (re)construction has shifted from the personal extended self toward the shared sense of self with others in online communities and groups that TTG hobbyists feel attached to. Similar to digital gamer identities (Brock & Johnson, 2021; Shaw, 2013; Wearing et al., 2022), being a TTG hobbyist relies on consumption and dedication to leisure. By liking, commenting, and rating shared content, TTG hobbyists engage in affective play, using SOAs to co-construct fan identities with others, who become integrated to their aggregate extended self, which may then become a collective self (Belk, 2013). By sharing TTG experiences online with images, forum messages, or reviews, hobbyists store them into a distributed memory, where they become virtual mementos that contribute to individual and collective sense of the past (Belk, 2013). Similar to material photos or diaries, virtual mementos are self-extensions, functioning as memory cues for the narratives of self (Belk, 2010). They bridge the leisure experience over time and build affective connections to materiality of past TTG experiences, allowing them to be curated for personal and social identities through ELEs.

Curation is a selective process for deciding what kind of content to use and share, which aspects of the self to express online, and to whom (Davis, 2020). “Production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of [online] content” (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 310) allows TTG hobbyists to “define who they are versus who they are not” (Sheth & Solomon, 2014, p. 127). They can (re)construct a multiplicity of identities for different contexts and perform distinct aspects of the self to other TTG hobbyists, colleagues, family, and other audiences. Curation can be seen as a method of creating meaning through SOAs, by taking advantage of affordances that support identity (re)construction and affirmation with playful, social, and consumptive practices in networked media.

**Method and the context**

This qualitative exploratory study adopts a socio-constructivist perspective (Reiter, 2013), by investigating how online activities of TTG hobbyists contribute to leisure
experience. Exploratory research is an inductive, explorative, and dialectical methodology, suitable for studying partially explained phenomena (Reiter, 2013; Stebbins, 2001). Responses to six open-ended questions of an online survey were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) and the observations were contextualized with a combination of theoretical frameworks from the fields of leisure, consumer culture, game and media studies. The resulting contribution presents “new, insightful, fruitful, and plausible way to think about and explain” (Reiter, 2013, p. 15) how meaning is created in online practices of TTG hobbyists, and in digitalized leisure more broadly (Schultz & McKeown, 2018).

**Questionnaire design**

A mixed-method online survey, with focus on open-ended responses (Braun et al., 2021), was used for data collection to capture a diversity of experiences of TTG hobbyists who used networked media for gaming. Combining convenience and snowball sampling (Doyle et al., 2020), the questionnaire was distributed for six weeks on BGG, Twitter, Instagram, and in eight Facebook TTG groups. The use of an online survey allowed for the engagement of a geographically diverse sample of respondents and provided a diverse and detailed data set with a “wide-angle lens” (Braun et al., 2021, p. 643), with potential for rich and focused data suitable for interpretation and theorization.

The survey had nine open-ended questions, four closed-ended questions, and four background questions. The questions were in English, but responses were allowed in Finnish. To access the questions, respondents were asked to confirm they are at least 18 years old and to give informed consent for scientific use of the responses. No external ethics approval was needed, as according to the ethical principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019) followed in this study, informed consent is sufficient for adult respondents when no sensitive data is collected.

The six open-ended questions analyzed for this study asked respondents to describe their most meaningful TTGing online practices, their sharing habits, and how online media shapes hobby engagement in general. The survey prioritized qualitative values (Braun et al., 2021) and close-ended questions were used to contextualize open-ended responses (e.g., multiple-choice questions on play frequency and company). The open-ended questions analyzed here were broad ones with “clarificatory secondary questions” (Braun et al., 2021, p. 648) to help the respondents approach the topic, for instance:

Q9 How does the use of online media affect your tabletop-gaming hobby? For example: Has it changed the way you use tabletop games? Are you doing something you would not do without it? When and where do you use online media for tabletop-gaming?

This process allowed probing for more specific answers, while leaving respondents room to explore the topic. It was explicitly stated that responding to probes was optional and respondents were free to ignore them. After removing the unfinished responses, 190 out of 260 responses were usable.
Respondents

The gender distribution of the respondents was typical for TTG studies (e.g., Booth, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2021), 138 respondents identified as men, 43 as women, five as non-binary or other, while four did not disclose their gender. Their ages ranged from 22 to 73 with a median of 38. With 25 countries represented, most respondents lived in Finland (81) or the USA (49), followed by other European countries (38) and Australia (11). This result is probably due to BGG being a USA-based website and for publishing the link in several Finnish TTG hobby groups. More than four in five of the respondents played TTGs every week and 162 of them either fully or mostly identified as a TTG hobbyist. In order to capture the respondents’ self-understanding of the identity, no definition for “TTG hobbyist” was given.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) was a fitting choice for analyzing the data of an exploratory study by a typical “lone explorer” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54). RTA is a reflexive, interpretative process, conducted at the intersection of the data, theoretical assumptions, and the analytical skills and resources of the researcher. The analysis is conducted in flexible, playful, and creative yet rigorous manner, emphasizing the researcher positionality in theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The data was analyzed by a single researcher, who had a double position as a TTG hobbyist and a researcher. As another researcher would be unlikely to end up with similar set of codes using RTA, attempts for inter-coder reliability are explicitly discouraged (Byrne, 2022), but to ensure the codes made sense, they were discussed with colleagues. Three decades of sporadic participation in tabletop gaming, and the last ten years studying TTGs (e.g., Kankainen & Tyni, 2014; Kankainen et al., 2019) provided me with perspectives and understanding valuable in the analysis process. This made it easier to identify implicit meanings in the data (Braun et al., 2019), by providing access to the “tacit knowledge” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843) on cultural values, practices, and assumptions of TTG hobbyists. It allowed me to understand TTG-related lingo in the responses, gave a generic understanding what is meant with terms like “rules discussions” (e.g., ID23), and helped in relating to respondents’ experiences.

The data was coded on two levels: semantically by focusing on what was said explicitly and latently, by going into its deeper, more implicit meanings (Braun et al., 2019). During the process, theoretical frameworks guided how latent meanings were captured in responses and, in turn, connected codes to key concepts in the data surrounding the identity (re)construction practices. Codes were organized hierarchically to main codes and subcodes, and finally categorized under the broad themes described in the results (see Figure 1).

The analysis process was a blend of inductive and deductive approaches (Graebner et al., 2012). Data guided the early phases of the analysis, while in later stages of analysis, explanations, theories, and initial hypotheses were reformulated and adapted with theoretical frameworks drawn from the literature for explaining TTG hobbyist online behavior in a “more plausible and consistent way” (Reiter, 2017, p. 144).
The overview of TTG hobbyist online practices paints a picture of an affective environment of material-digital interactions, where hobbyists extend TTG leisure experience with curatorial online practices. These practices provide them extended opportunities for engagement with leisure and increased opportunities for (re)construction and presentation of their personal and social identities as TTG fans.

While most respondents engaged with TTG-related online content on a weekly basis, over half of them participated in online discussions every day. The responses to a five-point Likert scale (see Figure 2) show that online content was mostly used for socializing and keeping up to date on the goings-on of the tabletop gaming world. Overall, following the goings-on of the social world of TTGs or enjoying its esthetics seemed to prevail over more in-person content.

Curating the personal world

For the respondents, curation was a way to make the leisure experience more personal by customizing it to their liking with SOAs. Network media facilitates experience customization by making it more accessible for TTG hobbyists and by offering an additional customizable layer of experience on top of the material TTG experience. This affirms the hobbyist identity, as the hobbyists can adapt the environment to

Figure 1. Example of codes and subcodes used to formulate the first theme.
Individual responses highlighted the ELE as a curated assemblage of online and offline practices, where the SOAs chosen reflected the subjective approach of each respondent. This respondent condensed their SOA preferences with a particularly descriptive anecdote:

This weekend I played the [board] game *Tapestry* for the first time. I would never have heard about it or bought it if it hadn’t been for online media. I first saw a *Watch it Played* video and found it very interesting. Then as more media [content] came out about the game, I felt that it would be a good fit for me. After watching hours of content and reading pages of on-line commentary and discussion, I was more prepared for my first game of *Tapestry* than for any other game I have ever played. The online resources were extremely useful to help me get the most out of my gaming experience. (ID8)

In this consumption-oriented experience, SOAs contribute directly to the gameplay situation, making it more meaningful. In contrast, the following response shows a more creative assemblage of SOAs, drawing from the participatory and spreadable affectations of networked media:

My main [online media] usage is Tabletop Simulator (on Steam). I play alone with a view to investigating the various mechanisms and strategies in a game, as well as to see if I want to purchase a physical copy. I have also used boardgamegeek.com to post my own [print and play] designs, and also to communicate with other designers. (…) I sometimes watch reviews of games on YouTube [channels], mostly *Shut Up and Sit Down*, and sometimes *The Dice Tower*. (ID28)

This response exemplifies the online/offline continuum (López-Sintas et al., 2020) in ELEs, where material and digital practices are blended into hybrid playful experiences (Kankainen et al., 2019; Paavilainen et al., 2018). The use of *Tabletop Simulator* (Henry, 2015), a physics sandbox software for creating and playing TTGs digitally, and the sharing of self-made print and play TTGs (typically in pdf format) that need...
to be printed and assembled before playing, exemplify how networked media provides affectations for ELs that blend consumer and producer identities.

Moreover, real-world experiences, in addition to their inherent value to the hobbyist, provide content that can be curated for online self-expression and identity performances. It is a way of extending the self by standing out on social media, expressing one's hobbyist identity to non-hobbyists, and signaling the poster's material self-branding (Trammell, 2019) and affiliation with leisure:

I guess [sharing online content] pretty much makes me stand out from my friends, who are not nearly as passionate about board gaming as me, and it might have caused some of them giving up FB friendship or following me on Instagram. I do not even see this as a negative thing, I should be accepted also as an enthusiastic board gamer, just as the others are enjoying their new shoes. (ID100)

For the respondent above, self-expression was an act of empowerment, a way to seek acceptance, and a method for building self-narrative. By curating which aspects of the self to express and to whom, TTG hobbyists affirm their self-identities (Belk, 2013; Davis, 2017). Another respondent who shared images of TTGs and “meeples”, human shaped game pieces, to over 1,400 Instagram followers, used her personal esthetic taste (see Fingerhut et al., 2020) to express a hobbyist identity through the materiality of TTGs:

I try to make each picture look good rather than document what I play. I always use filters and other adjustments to get the best result. This allows me to express my taste in games and what I consider esthetic about them. It is also a way to show that women also play boardgames and are part of the board game space. (ID146)

As online profiles extend the self as “broadly construed” avatars (Belk, 2013, p. 15), resulting from an active (yet not always intentional) process of curation, they represent the personal worlds of TTG hobbyists. By signaling the existence of women in the male-dominated TTG leisure space through her profile, the respondent affirmed her identity by expressing values important to her. Sharing can also be a way to “self-witness” (Deuze, 2012, p. 237) the identity through digital traces in the distributed memory, while expressing involvement with the hobby:

I take pictures by myself on Instagram; not many other people, mostly game situations, as a log what I have played. That is the point of the picture: look, I played this game. I might tell how I think about the game, or some detail of the game flow. (ID79)

When collated together, the images hobbyists share, the discussions they participate in, the information they reveal, and other digital traces will tell stories that help them to understand how TTGs relate to who they are, and their self-narrative. By sharing curated moments from past gaming experiences, hobbyists posit those situations as expressions of their identity: games they play, things they find funny, people they socialize with. It is a way to communicate to their audiences what TTG hobbyists enjoy, value, and consider meaningful in tabletop gaming. Identity may become further affirmed as SOAs give TTG hobbyists a sense of involvement with tabletop gaming, with more opportunities to be “in contact” (ID164) with games, and to “feel in” (ID44) them while not playing.
Media has affected my identity as a gamer because I was so little involved with games before that I could not identify as a tabletop gamer. Now I can, even if I have inactive periods. (ID184)

As the excerpt above illustrates, constant engagement with TTGs through SOAs extends the leisure experience over time, building affective relationships with games along the way. The ubiquitousness and flexibility of networked media brings leisure into other areas of everyday life through “consumable play” (Marsden & Mason, 2021, p. 168), as respondents engage TTGs by watching streamed play or listening TTG podcasts while commuting (ID109; ID112), at work (ID4; ID13), doing housework (ID106), or during a dinner (ID4). The flexibility of online media allows customizing leisure to personal needs and intense proactive involvement with something personally important increases the importance of tabletop gaming for hobbyists (see Iwasaki, 2017; cf. Lehtonen et al., 2022). Through constantly self-curated engagement, tabletop gaming can become a collection of nested pursuits where SOAs are meaningful in themselves.

With more time spent doing SOAs than playing, the lines between primary and secondary leisure activities can get blurred (Scott & Harmon, 2016), as noted by one respondent: “I seem to post on BoardGameGeek more than I actually play games” (ID22). In several cases, TTGs seem to become a focus and an inspiration for intellectual, social, and creative pursuits for respondents, a linchpin around which the ELE is constructed, similar to music fans (Harmon & Scott, 2017). This blurring is often consumption related:

Hunting for games at thrift shops is definitely a hobby for me. (...) My collection information is shared on BGG, as are my thrift shop finds. I read and post in the thrift shop findings list—mainly because I have come across lots of games on those lists that I then keep an eye out for, and because it is nice to be part of that (very friendly) BGG community. (ID15)

This response suggests a certain anticipation of materiality, daydreaming of future socio-material encounters that might never happen. By engaging online content, TTG hobbyists can enjoy the variety of TTGs without ever physically engaging with them. By confirming the material brand identity as an element of the extended self, daydreaming reinforces the self-understanding. Such experiential consumption can provide more reflective, pleasurable, and meaningful experiences than consuming the “actual” TTG (cf., Heath & Nixon, 2021).

To recap, networked media eases the curation of personally meaningful ELEs by providing means to express one’s hobbyist identity through prolonged engagement with TTGs, and by enticing anticipation of materiality. While becoming increasingly personal and meaningful, leisure becomes a more integrated element of the extended self.

**Situating the self in the social world**

Connecting and identifying with a global community of like-minded people was important for some respondents, curation was often aimed at, or done with, people hobbyists felt already aligned with: friends, family, colleagues, or a play group. This
suggests a preference for renewing and rebuilding the existing social bonds, instead of creating new ones. Connecting with those outside the aggregate extended self-seemed often secondary to those bonds.

As images and textual narratives are shared within the group, they become immaterial mementos for collective remembering. This process creates a shared sense of past, facilitating an aggregate sense of self with other group members. Collective remembering extends the leisure experience by reinforcing playgroup bonds, especially in times when group members cannot physically meet and “refocusing participants’ attention to specific incidents” (Scott & Harmon, 2016, p. 483), as described by this respondent: “I just started to make a blog about the gaming night. The content is pictures of the games played and a little description about the game. It is mainly intended for the participants for remembering the games” (ID95). The collective remembering of shared narratives build expectations for future leisure engagements (Harmon & Dunlap, 2018) and the aggregate sense of self.

Similarly, tracking TTG experiences permits hobbyists to recall the games they have played, people they have played with, or games they have collected (and parted with). It extends the leisure experience by bridging current moments with past TTG experiences and by acting as an immaterial memento that embeds the experience to self-identity, while also communicating to others one’s level of engagement with the hobby. Some used collective memories to express their shared hobbyist identities, as a group, or as partners:

I have posted many items to specific GeekLists [i.e., user-curated thematic lists of TTGs] on BGG, usually games played with my spouse. These have detailed our session reports for specific games as well as our evaluations of the games (e.g., their suitability for us and our tastes). I’ve also contributed a few images of games, usually of the board and pieces. (ID34)

Moreover, networked media allows TTG hobbyists to situate themselves in the social world by acting as a window to other peoples’ experiences, revealing the faceless others as real persons that are easier to relate with and to incorporate in the aggregate extended self. This builds affective relationships toward the social world of tabletop gaming, making leisure a more intimate part of the self by giving “a more personal view to the lives of other hobbyists, for example, miniatures painted badly, or brand-new board games played with the possibility to ask for user experience” (ID141). By sharing TTG experiences, hobbyists can feel closer to each other, contributing toward an aggregate sense of self. With this shared identity, discussions become meaningful beyond interactions during gameplay situations (cf. Buyukozturk & Shay, 2022):

Specific experiences of people playing a game, a specific thought about a game’s mechanics, or a specific game design theory or idea (…) are interesting because they give a greater context to my own experiences and let me participate in my favorite hobby without actually playing a game. (ID190)

TTG-related memories are grounded in materiality and corporeality of TTGs as elements of the extended self (see Rogerson et al., 2016), accentuating the emotional attachment toward TTGs and the affective play with them. For instance, tangibility of the gameplay situation depicted in images may help hobbyists later return to shared experiences and feel nostalgia over them. This corporeality also makes the experiences
more “real” than purely virtual ones (Belk, 2013), and in that sense, more meaningful as well.

Altogether, TTG hobbyists use SOAs to situate themselves in the social world by witnessing, understanding, and contributing to the experiences of others. This process extends the leisure experience by contextualizing it with a sense of belonging to something outside the personal experience (Porter et al., 2010). In the end, leisure can become less about playing games and more about connecting with the social world of tabletop gaming.

**Engagement through everyday creativity**

*Everyday creativity* refers to a process and a feeling that is meaningful to the creator, instead of a more high-browed understanding of creativity, where others need to approve the originality of the thing created (Gauntlett, 2018). Everyday creativity is a playful, social, and consumptive activity, facilitated by the participatoriness of networked media (Gauntlett, 2018; see also Jenkins et al., 2013). Creation builds a sense of ownership over created things and the processes of creating them, integrating them into the extended self of the creator (Belk, 1988), therefore contributing to the intimacy of leisure experience.

By sharing creations and images of creations online, TTG hobbyists effectively share parts of themselves as performances of leisure identity. The shared objects become vessels for expressing personal participation with TTG culture as an ELE, which also affirms self-identity through esthetic engagement with leisure (Fingerhut et al., 2020). As explicated by a respondent:

> I make art of my D&D characters and adventures. I share it with my friends and family (. …) on Facebook and get loads of likes from my family, relatives, and friends. It's fun to share it with the even if they don't really understand the hobby themselves. (ID176)

The spreadability of TTG-related online content facilitates printable materiality, or digitally distributed tangible content, which contributes to the ELEs of TTG hobbyists. **Printable materiality** adds to the material leisure experience with opportunities for creative engagement with TTGs, like in this case: “I have yet to paint miniatures, but now with my own 3D printer, it’s on my list. And yes, I do now ‘upgrade’ existing games with the 3D printer” (ID11).

Printable materiality contributes to the everyday creativity of TTG hobbyists by inspiring and facilitating material crafting. Similar to creative engagement with video games as craft (Brock & Johnson, 2021), everyday creativity in tabletop gaming often resides in “moments of experimentation and discovery” (p. 606) as hobbyists repurpose TTGs as material for creative activity, like photography:

> Taking pictures and reviewing (Instagram, blog). It’s part of my enjoyment of gaming. (…) Photos of games (boxes of games just bought pictures of pieces that look cool, pictures of games in progress) on Instagram, reviews on the blog, andboardgamegeek.com. (ID99)

Curation directly contributes to the circulation of material esthetics, practices, and modes of engagement within tabletop gaming, as the variety and diversity of the online
content inspires and calls the hobbyists to creative material practices when they curate inspiration for interior design (ID75), new “tricks” for crafting games and miniatures (ID45), or ideas for role-playing game campaigns (ID158). Increased access, especially to community content, allows for traversing outside major brands and industry-promoted creative patterns:

[I use] painting guides for games like *Mice and Mystics*, which have nice, paintable miniatures, but don't fall into the traditional realm of “build, paint, play” tabletop games like *WH40K*, or *Star Wars Legion*. (ID63)

Communities like BGG collate this creative variety, becoming participatory culture hubs that allow hobbyists to curate personally meaningful forms of creativity and related identities (Gauntlett, 2018). In addition to increased meaningfulness to the creators themselves, shared TTG content diversifies the experiences of those engaging with it. By sharing creative content, TTG hobbyists engage with social and physical environments, creating an asynchronous connection to those who use the content. This act establishes a sense of presence with other hobbyists and provides material for personal curative activity of the content user:

What I loved the most about the [Carcassonne Central] site were the fan-made expansions that were available for free download. I downloaded a whole stack of them, ordered proper blank Carcassonne tiles, and made over 200 tiles of fan-made expansions to add to my completionist Carcassonne collection. (ID151)

This is yet another instance of printable materiality that diversifies and extends the leisure experience as the respondent engaged in everyday creativity by assembling the expansions, adding them to their collection, playing them, or savoring the symbolic connection to the online community. This variety of activities creates meaning by contributing to respective aspects of TTG leisure identity: creator, collector, player, and community member. Expansions in above quotation become part of extended self through the creative activity and as parts of collection. They also symbolize connection to the online community as an aggregated extended self.

Overall, creative curation presents an alternative way of thinking about TTGs, adds new layers of enjoyment to the hobby, acts as a social glue, offers tools for leaving a mark on the hobby culture, and helps in developing personal identity (cf., Gauntlett, 2018). Through all this, it makes the experience increasingly meaningful to the hobbyist.

**Conclusion**

Online media provides TTG hobbyists an environment for meaning-making through identity (re)construction and extended TTG experiences in tabletop gaming SOAs. As digitalization causes various forms of leisure, entertainment, and consumption to collide and blend together, it is increasingly difficult to consider leisure in clean categories or separated by a physical–digital divide. To this end, current article has presented the extent and diversity of SOAs in the leisure of tabletop gaming through three broad themes. It has responded to the research question: how do TTG hobbyists extend their leisure experience with networked media, and what are the implications of this for their identity (re)construction practices? The work has several contributions.
First, using an interdisciplinary approach to build on and expand previous discussion (Coward-Gibbs, 2020; Mierzecka & Łączyński, 2022; Rogerson et al., 2017), this empirical, in-depth exploratory study analyzed “connectivity, entanglements and mutual constitutions” (Reiter, 2017, p. 148) of online/offline interactions in ELEs of TTG hobbyists. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it provided a “crystallized” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843) and complex view of meaning-making through material–digital interactions in tabletop gaming, and leisure more broadly. These new insights affirm contemporary leisure as an online/offline continuum (López-Sintas et al., 2020), where practices from both ends of the continuum inform and amplify each other.

It was found that in ELE of tabletop gaming, SOAs are used for customizing the leisure experience to fit and to express perceived leisure identities, especially through creative practices. By facilitating everyday creativity, networked media connects TTG hobbyists and supports a more intimate approach to leisure. The extended engagement with TTGs through SOAs affirms hobbyist identities, as the games become a larger part of the everyday life (Iwasaki, 2017). Finally, situating the personal experience in the social world of leisure though ELE creates a sense of belonging to something bigger than the self, increasing the meaningfulness of leisure. Considering the question whether primary activities are becoming a platform for telling stories during ELE (Scott & Harmon, 2016), this study’s findings suggests that some TTG hobbyists engage in primary activities in this way.

Second, the study proposes a “fluid interdisciplinary, theoretical, and multi-methodological approach” (Silk et al., 2016, p. 716) to study digital leisure, in an attempt to “amplify and extend our conceptual tools and therefore to be able to see more, more clearly, and more accurately” (Reiter, 2017, p. 136). The value of the approach is in a timely and interesting topic, supported by rich rigor via “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex” (Tracy, 2010, Table 1) data collection and analysis methods, samples, and use of theoretical constructs. While open-ended survey responses did provide rich description of online practices at large, it was limited in getting deeper to individual experiences. Thus, it would be valuable in future to take a more profound look on specific activities presented in this study, using, for instance, the approach suggested by Piredda and Candiotto (2019) to study interaction as the source of self-understanding.

Third, the study has elaborated on how SOAs are not only supporting the material act of playing TTGs (cf. Rogerson et al., 2017), but offer deeper engagement with leisure and meaning-making through identity (re)construction. Curation may allow less privileged identities to affirm their hobbyist identities and to build a sense of belonging to the social world of tabletop gaming. The creative affordances of networked media (see Gauntlett, 2018) expand the engagement opportunities even further, similar to other material leisure (e.g., knitting; see Orton-Johnson, 2014), providing opportunities for TTG designers and other practitioners to create novel and more inclusive service-based leisure experiences.

The recent moves of industry conglomerates Hasbro and Asmodee make evident that developers are interested in capitalizing on the emergent potential of networked practices. To illustrate, in 2021 Asmodee Group acquired an online tabletop gaming platform and community Board Game Arena (Asmodee Group, 2021), while Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast has an extended road map for releasing the One D&D (Meehan, 2022), a
multiplatform update to their flagship product D&D, that blends online services, digital technology, and offline materiality into a hybrid playful experience (see Kankainen et al., 2019; Paavilainen et al., 2018). Without downplaying the creative and cultural potential of such developments, we need to be wary of the potential dangers increasing monetization poses for self-definition, creativity, and increased engagement in consumption-based leisure. Commodifying the TTG experience potentially risks turning over the control of the experience to the TTG industry (Harmon & Kyle, 2021). For comparison, in mobile gaming, the industry aims to capitalize on the extended player identities, as they seek to control the emergent creativity and disrupt player engagement for monetization purposes (Lehtonen et al., 2022). In this light, the outcomes of this article call for critical scrutiny of the ways the TTG industry is capitalizing on TTG hobbyist identities.

Finally, confining the understanding of play in tabletop gaming to merely the act of play limits understanding of the engagement potential of TTGs. By understanding how meaning is created through ELE, allows for designing hybrid TTG experiences (Paavilainen et al., 2018) that take benefit of the affective relationship TTG hobbyists have toward the games. It is also a necessary step for mitigating the harm caused by the commodification of leisure (Naulin & Jourdain, 2020), as identities have become an exploitable resource for TTG industry. In conclusion, the assemblage of offline–online practices in tabletop gaming enables creation of novel and empowering leisure experiences through playful engagement with identities, but will those identities become commodities to be sold for the highest bidder?

Notes

1A popular YouTube channel for TTG tutorials: https://www.youtube.com/@WatchItPlayed.
2Small, typically human-shaped, figures used as playing pieces (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

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