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TAKING POWER (UN)SERIOUSLY
Understanding players' power fantasies in tabletop
role-playing game play experiences

ABSTRACT

Daniel Andrés González Cohens: Taking power (un)seriously: Understanding players' power fantasies in tabletop role-playing game play experiences

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Power has been a concept of recurring relevance for studies in the social sciences, Game Studies, and other fields. Specifically, it has been a focal subject for tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) since its origins as a play form, where players accrue power and status as a form of character progression. Since TRPG play is materially carried out in the imagination of players in a collaborative manner, and since an essential aspect of TRPG play is that players have an impact on how play and story unfold, the ways they imagine power is driven not just by game texts, but also by their own cultural understandings of it and their own desires. The concept that can allow us access for studying these imaginary understandings of power is the power fantasy: a concept that has seen wide use in both academic and casual contexts but that is laden with derogatory meanings. I argue that this work highlights the value of power fantasies as an object of study, since it allows us access to the complex ways in which we understand and dream of power itself.

In this work, I set out to understand what kinds of power fantasies players seek out within TRPG play. To achieve this, I first carried out a theoretical background review to construct a definition of power fantasy that allows access to it as an object of study. After this, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with young adults from Chile who had played in a TRPG session at least once in the last year and asked them questions regarding their experiences doing “cool” things and achieving feelings of empowerment during play. I then conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of their responses from a grounded theory perspective, and I was able to produce two overarching themes of analysis: what meaningful play is to the interviewees, and what kinds of power fantasies they pursue during play.

My findings show the interviewees understand instances of meaningful TRPG play as experiences that rely on collaborative effort, clear communication, and well-conveyed expectations and boundaries, leading to the construction of a prescriptive ideal of good TRPG play characterized by an overwhelming feeling of uncoordinated and unmediated cooperation. This ideal form of play, which I have called synchronicity, which can be read as the aesthetic experience of social cohesion through collaborative play.

Additionally, the power fantasy I could observe from the interviewee's accounts is a power fantasy characterized by players seeking out a form of power that is highly agential and focused on their personal capacity to make things happen during play, but that is also reliant on the affordances that play gives players to create their characters and act during play. In this way, it can be understood as a process of subjectivation through the play experience, where the elements that constitute play are both knowable and measurable by everyone at the table. This, I argue, allows these power fantasies to be read as psychopolitical power fantasies.

These fantasies allow players to explore self-assertion and self-expression in ways that are defined directly against the oppressiveness of the demands of serious behavior from them in everyday life, and as such materialize as a specific form of it: the power fantasy of unserious success, where players are able to make use of their privileged knowledge of how the world works and what matters within it to achieve their goals in ways that are intentionally unconventional, risky, or silly.

Keywords: Power, Fantasy, Tabletop Role-playing Games, Collaborative play, Psychopolitics, Unseriousness

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

PREFACE

This work is the conclusion of two wonderful years of in-depth exploration of my own and other peoples' relationship to role-playing. As with any other research project, by the end I am left with more questions than answers, but I feel I have done my best and made something I am proud of.

I would like to thank Dr Jaakko Stenros for his insightful guidance and always encouraging disposition towards this project. Without his help, this would still be a tangle of ambitious ideas without a clear direction. I would also like to thank all the researchers in the Game Research Lab I had the opportunity to study under, learn from, and work with during my Master's studies. Special thanks to Lucrecia Ludovico Alves, whose essays on power fantasies were my inspiration for researching this subject.

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Finally, I would like to thank my friends, my partner, and my family, who have been supporting me so much during this process. Thank you for your love, your kindness, and above all, for believing in me for so long.

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Daniel Andrés González Cohens

“What I believe is always true about power is that power always reveals. When you have enough power to do what you always wanted to do, then you see what the guy always wanted to do.”

– Robert Caro

*“Talk with your mouth full
Bite the hand that feeds you
Bite off more than you chew
What can you do?
Dare to be stupid”*

– “Weird Al” Yankovic, *Dare to be stupid*

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1 INTRODUCTION

There are few subjects that have captured both thoughts and dreams of people across cultures and histories as consistently and rapturously as the concept of power. This has made it both a matter of vigorous debate within the social sciences and a topic that has been explored in countless ways in different modes of expression. Among these forms we can find that power has historically been one of the most ancient concerns of play, be it in terms of demonstrating power over others through competition (Caillois, 2001), of representing conflict and those who incarnate the status quo as their valiant defenders (Sutton-Smith, 1997), or as the basis for those institutions that manage and deploy power in the social world (Huizinga, 1980). Regardless of the framing, by the same coin that we can assert that power has fascinated humans since time immemorial, we can argue that power has been represented and explored through play in an equally significant amount of time.

Power itself has been a subject of notorious recurrence in the context of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs): games where a group of players come together to take the role of characters in a collaboratively-constructed fictional world and enact their actions through the use of game rules and conventions in order to tell a story where they are the protagonists (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). Beginning with the 1974 release of the first TRPG, *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* (Mason, 2004), the acquisition of power has long since been a central theme for representing how characters change over time, often represented as the characters acquiring wealth and in-universe political power, along with increased combat capabilities. At the same time, these games are often inspired by the tropes and structures of other works of fiction, and themselves are a vehicle for interrogating and playing with the idea of authorial power within the context of play (Nephew, 2003).

If players are to see their characters set out in these fictional worlds to attain power, in whatever form it may take, they must first want to do so: after all, since TRPG play relies on the players to provide both world and characters, whatever exists within it will be a reflection of the material being used as the basis or the inspiration for it, be it rulebooks, works of fiction, or the players' own wants and needs expressed through play. And we do have a concept that covers how people understand and desire power that has seen use in different contexts: the *power fantasy*.

However, this is a tricky concept to approach. The power fantasy evokes images of players that instrumentalize play to achieve victory at any cost, disregarding story, characters and even pleasure in the process (Hammer & Baker, 2014). However, this does not need to be the case. This is a framing that prioritizes zero-sum competition and violence as a primary framework for understanding power, and as such provides a limited window into what power is, how players understand it, and how they imagine it could be in a social world, even if fictional: for if during play we can imagine ourselves as powerful, then it can be a vehicle for empowering historically-disempowered voices by allowing them access to the feeling that challenges in life can be surmountable and the world can be ordered, and thus, allowing us to explore alternatives to what power is in our own world (Biswas, 2022). Likewise, expanding our understanding of how we imagine power during play – whether or not we have deliberately chosen to explore a specific kind of power during play – can allow us to be more mindful of the kinds of values we hold and perpetuate during play (Ludovico Alves, 2023a).

The relevance of studying this concept, then, is that in power fantasies people are able to articulate their own understanding of power in social life (that is, how it works, who wields it, and what it does), and in consequence, what they imagine themselves doing with power once they access it. Moreover, studying it in the context of TRPG play is particularly relevant because role-playing games in general and TRPGs in particular are an object of study that are uniquely equipped to allow power fantasies to be observed: TRPG play is centred around player agency through their characters within a co-constructed fictional world, which the players are able to create both from a bottom-up perspective through their actions within play, and also through a top-down approach when looking at it as players and narrators. At the same time, a key feature of TRPGs is the player's capacity to change both the game world and their characters. Therefore, they are a space in which different ways of wielding and understanding power can be imagined in a social context.

My personal interest on studying this subject comes from my experiences leading TRPG tables for friends, in workshops, and in conventions. One key aspect of TRPG play that I find is essential for new players to grasp is the idea that, unlike other games and play contexts, TRPGs allow for virtually any kind of action so long as it is grounded in what has already been established: in a very concrete sense, for some players this means re-defining the boundaries of what they believe is possible to do in a

game. While this is something that I've seen players take with them to their personal lives, even for the better, I have long been interested in the question of how we define and understand what's possible, and I feel that TRPGs are a valuable space to look at for these purposes.

Therefore, in this thesis I will frame my interests as questions from the perspective of players of TRPGs. If we are to explore what kinds of power is possible, then we must adopt a broad perspective and ask players themselves what they understand as power and what about it appears as desirable. In this sense, my main research question is:

What kinds of power fantasies do players of TRPGs seek out when playing?

In the second chapter of this thesis, I aim to develop the key terms and concepts that inform the study. In it, I begin by decomposing our term of interest into its two key components, power and fantasies, and explore different approaches to understanding each. After this, I proceed to lay a foundation for understanding TRPGs as play experiences, while also setting up relevant aspects of them for the task at hand. Finally, I bring all these elements together to explore how the concept of the "power fantasy" has been used both in culture in general and in games in particular, to finally arrive at a definition that will become both the object of study and as a methodological guide for identifying them in discourse.

In the third chapter, I systematically explain the different aspects of the methodology I used to approach this study. I begin by clearly stating both the scope and the aim of the study, to then explain the epistemological position and the specific method to be used. After doing this, I explain some of the practical decisions and steps required before beginning data collection, to finally describe the process put into practice for analysing the information that was produced during the field work.

In the fourth chapter, I present the results of the field work done. It is divided into two main sections: firstly, I explore how the interviewees describe the production of meaningful play, and secondly, I analyse their accounts of play to understand the kinds of power fantasies they include in their understanding of how play happens.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I reflect on the results of the study through various theoretical lenses to further develop the key takeaways of this analysis. Through these reflections I present both limitations of the study and potential future avenues for research, and then conclude by summarizing the key lessons I learned through it.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POWER FANTASIES AND TRPGS

In this chapter, we will explore the theoretical perspectives that will inform our study of power fantasies in TRPGs. The purpose of this exercise is to produce a conceptual basis that will allow us to both identify power fantasies in players' accounts of play and to examine them more closely. First, I will briefly explore different perspectives on the concepts of *power* and *fantasy*. Later, I will cover TRPGs by describing them and defining the relevant discussions that they bring up regarding our object of study. Following on this, I will review the concept of the *power fantasy* by looking at examples of its use in literature and discussion both in general media and in games. Finally, we will explore the intersection of power fantasies, games in general, and TRPGs in particular.

2.1. A discussion on power

Despite its centrality in the social sciences, providing a definition of “power” that is both comprehensive and applicable to most situations is difficult. For example, as a synthesis of the examples presented in the following paragraphs, we see it used in the context of the relationship between individuals and institutions such as governments, or to describe the subtle but strong sway that individuals may hold over others, or even still, as a quality that an individual may possess to get things to go their way.

Since our goal is to understand how players imagine power, using any single definition of it without accounting for this characteristic of its study would limit our chances of understanding power at play. To approach this challenge, we will examine several different perspectives to illuminate interesting angles for the discussion.

Hammer et al. (2018) highlight two points of conflict that can be interesting to explore: firstly, the discussion on whether power is primarily agentic (that is, rooted in the individual and their capacity for action) or systemic (that is, manifested within the affordances provided by the systems that structure and are structured by the behaviour of individuals). Secondly, we have the discussion on whether power refers to the ability to accomplish the individual's goals, or the ability to impose their will onto other individuals. This discussion is relevant because, depending on the angle we take, we need to adjust our approach to its study. In the following pages, we will explore these

two conflicts as described by Hammer et al. (2018), include definitions of power and related concepts that fit each framing proposed, and provide some examples to further clarify them.

If we focus on power as an agentic property, then our study of power must be focalized on the actions of individuals, on the ways power is allocated onto specific people, and how it they use it for furthering their own goals. For example, an agentic perspective of power allows us to understand the role of a judge, who by virtue of their role possesses the faculty of adjudicating the law and deciding on an appropriate sentence for someone who breaks the law.

Or, in another example, it may allow us to understand how within a group of friends, one person – due to influence, wealth, or sheer force of personality – may hold sway over the opinion or behaviours of others, either through setting trends or by advocating for the inclusion or exclusion of new members to the group.

Within this tradition we may find definitions of power like the one provided by Max Weber (2019, p. 134): the “*Chance*, within a social relationship, of enforcing one’s own will even against resistance, whatever the basis for this *Chance* may be”. The advantage of this definition is that it is broad and that it focuses clearly on the effects and the motivations for the use of power, which makes it easier to apply in the context of the behaviour of individuals. It additionally illuminates the coercive nature of power relationships, by explicitly indicating that power allows its wielder to overcome the will of other individuals.

On the other hand, if we focus on power as a systemic property, then we must address questions such as how, exactly, that power is expressed, how the systems that facilitate those expressions of power are constructed, and in service of what kind of order. Going back to the examples presented a few paragraphs prior, this perspective would have us look at the judge and ask: How is it that a judge becomes a judge? What kind of behaviour is punished through the sentence? What is done to the individual being punished? What kind of justification is being provided to assure the onlooking individuals that the punishment being doled out is adequate to the offense?

In the second example, it may lead us to ask: What exactly are the reasons this specific friend is held in such high regard? What are the reasons they provide to justify their

decisions to include or exclude a member into the group? And, moreover, are the included people similar in some way? What about the people who are excluded?

When looked at from this lens, we can make sense of a definition of power as the one proposed by Michel Foucault:

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them, as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another (Foucault, 1978, p. 92).

Foucault would later argue that the process that supports power in the social world is *subjectivation*, or the process of rationalization that objectifies people and turns them into subjects, that is, subjected through control and dependence but also granted identity, that operates through discursive technologies that are disseminated under a specific social order (Foucault, 1983; see also Butler, 1997). In other words, when we understand power in structural terms, we understand it as a force that both makes us become subjects with specific qualities and attributions, but which at the same time grants us opportunities for action that are inherent to the subject it turns us into: for example, if a police officer hails someone and that person turns around, in turning around the person has accepted the discursive act of the officer of defining them as a subject under the law, and as someone who the officer has power over (Butler, 1997, p. 106)¹.

This definition is useful because it portrays power as a structural and structuring force: that is, as a phenomenon that both creates social structure and that is integral to its maintenance. It also presents power as a phenomenon that produces and maintains social relationships and categories, and as a result, that is key to understanding certain forms of social order.

Going back, we mentioned a second discussion regarding the nature of power and the consequences it implies for its analysis: on the one hand, power as a form of coercion, and on the other, as a capacity for individual action. This distinction allows us to focus our conversation on a different set of elements, moving from the object to the subject of the exercise of power.

¹ This is actually an example attributed to Lois Althusser that Judith Butler comments on in their book (Butler, 1997).

| | Agentic Power | Systemic Power |
|--|--|---|
| Where is power seen? | In the actions of individuals | In the systems that sustain social life |
| How is power allocated into the social world? | Power is invested onto individuals by virtue of their qualities or positions | Power structures, and is structured by, the existing social order |
| What is power for? | To be used to further the individual's goals | For the continuation of a specific social order |
| What does power act upon? | The will of other individuals | The constitution of subjects (subjectivation) |

Table 1. Key differences between power as agentic and systemic properties.

Synthesis based on Hammer et al. 2018; Weber 2019; Foucault 1978; Foucault 1983; Butler 1997.

From this perspective, Mary Parker Follett (1942, pp. 78 - 83) suggests a distinction between *power-to* (to be able to further one's own goals), *power-over* (to be able to overcome opposition), and *power-with* (to be able to act beyond one's own capacities through collaboration).

| | Power-to | Power-over | Power-with |
|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| Otherwise understood as | Self-sufficiency, competence | Domination, coercion | Collaboration, co-creation |
| Power as... | The capacity to achieve a goal as an individual | The capacity to overcome opposition | The capacity to collectively achieve beyond any one individual's ability |

Table 2. Key differences between power as defined by Folett (1942)

For example, suppose we examine the role of a middle manager in a company. If we focus on coercion alone, we may see the manager as possessing power-over the employees under their supervision, since they may be able to fire any of them at their discretion; if we focus on their capacity for individual action, we may focus on the power-to, and we may end up talking about this manager's particular skills and strengths, among which we may count a particular technical skill that makes them so valuable to the company that it earned them a promotion; finally, if we consider both

coercion and capacity at the same time, we may see the manager as possessing power-with: understanding that they cannot fulfil their team's goals by themselves, they can collaborate with the workers under their supervision and achieve more together than they could've done alone – but of course, with the remaining knowledge that they could still fire them if it becomes necessary.

Despite the differences presented in these approaches, there has been a commonality between them that we have not looked at so far: that power as a concept is related to causality in social life. From an agential perspective, power allows an individual to do something, and from a structural perspective, power does something upon a subject who in turn is made able to do something else. In both these cases, power acts as the explanation for the causal link between subject and object, or action and effect (LedyaeV, 1997). While this does not mean that all forms of causality identified in social life are forms of power, no relationship in which power can be found lacks a causal connection between the social actors (LedyaeV, 1997, p. 59). In other words, this approach gives us the perspective to understand that, when we talk about power, we are asking “Why do things in the social world happen in the way they do?”.

Going forward, we should remember that the kinds of conversations that we can have regarding power, its uses, and its portrayal will vary depending on how we approach the question. TRPG players may view power as a tool that individuals wield or as a force that permeates every facet of social life, as a vehicle for self-assertion or as a cudgel for coercion, or in other more complex ways. However, by looking at power as the explanation for causality in social life, we can allow players to tell us how they understand power. It follows that, if these are forms of power that we can understand and recognize, they should also be forms of power that we may be able to dream of.

2.2. On fantasies

The concept of fantasy has an added complexity to its understanding: it is a term used very often in very different contexts, whose meaning is often implied to be obvious to the reader. However, as we hope to illustrate going forward, the discussion isn't so obvious, and it has interesting implications. To begin with, let us specify the field where we are understanding this concept from. When we talk about fantasy, we will not be talking of fantasy in genre fiction, but we will be referring to its use in the social sciences.

The concept of “fantasy” is intertwined with the development of the concept of “imagination”, “phantasms”, and “daydreams”. As a result, fantasies are understood to be imaginary visions made in the image of actual – or “real” – objects (Turner, 2022, pp. 4 - 6), or in other words, they can be understood as “enunciations of unconscious desire that structure how subjects understand themselves and their relation to the world” (Bollman, 2022).

This is an important distinction to make going forward: a fantasy is not entirely divorced from reality nor is it a perfect reflection of it. It is not the Platonic ideal, but instead it is the imagined reflection of that which exists filtered through the perception of the perceiving subject (Turner, 2022, p. 6).

For example, let’s say that it is a hot day, and we would really fancy to have a cool snack. One may begin to envision an enticing ice cream as a possible way of dealing with the heat, and thus begin desiring to eat ice cream. We probably will picture a specific kind of ice cream, of a particular shape, size, flavour, and so on, but it would also be an image filtered by our past experiences of ice cream, and by the intensity of our current desire. In the end, the ice cream we end up getting may be smaller or not as tasty as we wanted, which may not be a full satisfaction for our desire. This is because our desire for ice cream was not necessarily a desire for ice-cream itself (hence our image of it not existing in reality), but an expression of a lack of comfort due to the excessive heat.

Following on this, fantasy is often understood as a psychological process in which people produce mental imagery of diverse kinds – related to attraction, inference regarding future events, creating of alternative scenarios, and remembrance, to name a few (Turner, 2022, p. 20). From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, fantasy can also be understood as a sort of intermediary filter between perception and consciousness, or as a “support for the consistency and completion of the experience of an individual ‘self’” (Turner, 2022, p. 20). Through fantasy, a person addresses both internal and external inconsistencies, be they between the idealized and the actual “self”, or between an imagined world and the perceived world.

However, satisfying that perceived inconsistency may not be the final aim of the fantasy being constructed. Since the purpose of fantasy is addressing that inconsistency, acknowledging that desire may only serve to highlight the perceived lack in the self, or

instead threaten its own composition. Therefore, fantasies often include a mechanism through which the individual *disavows* the object of desire itself, producing a contrivance that allows them to enjoy achieving the desire while not having to acknowledge having the desire (ContraPoints, 2024, 58:18 - 1:00:58).

For example, if a person fantasizes with being a millionaire, the fantasy may be built around all the cool things they would be able to buy and do when they get all that money. However, what obtaining the object of desire (money) allows is to fantasize about being able to express and act in new ways, so it follows that the actual lack perceived is not lack of money, but lack of agency and capacity for expression. This is a risk for the person's sense of self because it means that, as they are now, they are not being themselves in a full sense. Therefore, this person disavows the lack at the root of the fantasy ("I can't do the things that I want to do, so I am incomplete") by producing the contrivance of being a millionaire, which is justified as what provides the agency that is perceived to be lacking ("If I were a rich man, I wouldn't have to work hard and I could buy and do whatever I want").

Therefore, if from the psychoanalytical perspective we understand fantasies to be related to desire and imagination, we can begin to conceptualize the fantasy as a specific way in which an individual makes a mental model of reality. It is not an *imaginary*, for imaginaries are mental models of the world as it is perceived by a specific group (Strauss, 2006, pp. 329 - 330); it is not a *phantasm*, for phantasms are imaginary images that do not correspond with reality (Turner, 2022, p. 18); instead, the fantasy is a culturally and socially situated model of ways in which inconsistencies could be addressed, or in other words, a model of how reality could be. As this model of potential reality is mediated by desire – that is, that the production of a fantasy necessitates the individual to want (to desire) to explore an alternative – its relationship with the satisfaction of that desire is often what gives it a direction to follow: this allows the individual to use the fantasy to mediate with uncertainty.

However, focusing our understanding of fantasies only regarding the internal psychological processes of individuals threatens to miss out on some nuance. Gary Alan Fine (1983, p. 230) critiques this approach to fantasies in his landmark study of TRPG play groups by noting that even though a fantasy in psychoanalytical terms is an internal, almost subconscious process, researching fantasies requires to ask an individual to describe the fantasy. Then, the object being analysed (the report) won't

necessarily be the same as the theoretical object of study (the fantasy). Following this observation, broadening our scope to consider fantasies that are collectively constructed may also help in approaching a more workable conceptualization.

Fine (1983, pp. 230 - 231) discusses collective fantasies in terms of them being central to the collective creation of meaning, which takes place in play as well as in collaborative acts of artistic creation or even playful banter among peers. Fine studied TRPG play as a form of constructing collective fantasies, in which participants built upon the input of each other and brought to life a fantasy world that reflected not just individual desires, but specifically those that were shared by the entire group.

An interesting aspect of fantasies constructed in this way, as Fine observes, is that there is an expectation for them to be internally consistent. The specific terms invoked by participants in his study are “realism” and “logic”. This does not mean that there is an expectation for rigorous historical authenticity in games based on genre fiction, but that the fantasy that players inhabit during play both “feel” reasonable and internally consistent, providing them with clear rules and expectations (Fine, 1983, pp. 80 - 84).

This finds additional support in Michael Saler’s (2012, pp. 6 - 7) observation that the expectation of fantasy works to be internally consistent over multiple iterations is a fairly recent development in fiction, which he argues is the result of the disenchantment modernity in the 20th century produced, and to secure a space in fiction to provide spaces for exploring objective details that may elicit wonder in their audiences. In this sense, we can see that there is an anxiety regarding the excitement that is expected of the actual world of the players that is then transposed onto the world of the collaborative fantasy.

However, not all fantasies are to be shared with everyone: Fine (1983, pp. 68 - 71) observes that, while the studied play communities were not explicitly exclusionary towards women, the participants were mostly men, and they often declared that they would not feel as much at ease to play in the presence of women players. Fine also notes that some of the fantasies enacted through play by these groups often involved sexual violence and systematic bigotry against women; we can understand this as the players addressing the inconsistencies of their own selves related to hegemonic discourses of masculine behaviour, which was then naturalised into play while based on the same criteria of “realism and logic” with regards to the setting of the fantasy.

These examples should make clear that, since fantasies bring desires and anxieties regarding the self in relation to the world and to others to the forefront, they can be spaces fraught with interpersonal tension. However, they are also spaces that showcase a notable potential for creativity and creation, both individually and collaboratively. Going forward, we should remember that fantasies are imaginary representations of elements that may or may not exist in reality, but that represent that gap between what is and what should be: a gap that is filled by the possibilities of what is desired and felt as possible, both by the individuals and by the group.

2.3. TRPGs: games, players, dynamics and relationships

Before going forward, we must first make a brief detour: in order to properly explore how power fantasies apply in the context of TRPGs, we need to explore TRPGs as an object of study. And to do this, a brief definition of TRPGs is required.

We can understand TRPGs as a specific type of role-playing game. By role-playing game, we mean the different play activities and objects that relate to the “rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world” (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 46).

In TRPGs, play is usually carried out by a group of players who – either locally or remotely, but most of the time synchronously – create, enact, and govern the actions of characters (called *Player Characters*, or *PCs*) in a fictional game world. One or more players in the group may participate as referees within the game world – usually called *Game Master*, *Dungeon Master*, *Storyteller* or other similar terms (*GM* going forward) – by describing the fictional play environment for the rest of the players and by governing the actions of other characters (called *Non-Player Characters*, or *NPCs*) within it, while the rest of the players usually “play as” their own individual characters. The goal of these play experiences is defined collaboratively between the members of the group, but can usually be running through a pre-defined storyline or allowing players to explore a specific setting for action provided by the referee (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 46). Beyond this general definition, there are some specific qualities of TRPGs that are relevant to this discussion.

Firstly, the *narrative context* in which play is carried out is *both fictional*, that is, based on a text or narrative premise that is understood to not be actual, but is played out as if it

were for the characters within it, *and imaginary*, in other words, materially located within the players' imaginations. This distinction can find grounding within studies that approach TRPGs from the perspective of literary studies (Hammer, 2007, pp. 69 – 72; see also Davies, 2022, p. 242), but is also relevant for another reason: since imagination is the material context in which TRPG play unfolds, then it is subject to the groundings and limitations of imagination. This means that all imaginary representations of TRPG play must draw from the imaginaries players carry from their own social and cultural contexts (Hammer et al., 2018, pp. 450 - 451), which can then be complemented by other references, ranging from the source books for TRPG rulesets, to research conducted on the historical periods or literary genres to be invoked during play.

Secondly, the fictional world of the game is usually based on *the tropes and expectations of a specific genre or style of fiction* – traditionally fantasy, science fiction, horror, and so on (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 46), but can expand to include other published works or even more “realistic fare”. The main reason this is meaningful is because it provides both an affordance for creativity and imagination in play, and also provides a reasonable distance from everyday life: role-playing in such contexts, then, can be a vehicle for escapism ² (Fine, 1983, pp. 54 - 57), be it from the tedium of daily life or as a way of looking for excitement.

Thirdly, since the material basis of gameplay is the players' imaginations, players are called to imagine the way action unfolds during play, and each player's statements – as

² The relationship between power fantasies and escapism is interesting enough to warrant a small examination: if, as we've argued, a power fantasy is an imagined model of how power is perceived to exist and how it may be possessed or used by the individual, wouldn't any power fantasy be automatically escapist by its nature?

This, I believe, is confusing motivation for content. Escapism is a retreat that permits the individual to remove themselves from contexts of excessive stress or despair – which one may argue are inherent to life under our particular strain of late neoliberal globalised capitalism (Sharzer, 2021). This means that a power fantasy may be the destination of this retreat, but it doesn't need to be.

However, one may argue back that since TRPGs are by definition a creative endeavour where players build fictional realities in their imaginations, and that since by their own mechanisms they emphasize player action and agency, using TRPGs as a vehicle for escapism would necessarily bring them to construct power fantasies.

To this, I would concede that yes, it would; however, as we've also discussed, the fantasy that is constructed through TRPG play is collective, and the needs being fulfilled through escapism are individual – though not unique. I venture as an hypothesis that this dynamic in TRPG play – the satisfaction of an individual need through a collective activity – may be the location of conflicts in player experience: for example, a player who wants to take certain actions that the rest of the group finds disruptive, and that they may feel less enjoyment out of play if the group, understandably, disallows said actions.

long as they are *validated both by the game rules and by the player group* – are taken into account when each player updates their “imaginary model” of the game (Hammer et al., 2018, pp. 451 - 452). This is relevant because it serves as a reminder that players’ actions in TRPGs happen in a social context as well; therefore, for players to be able to actually enact their characters’ will on the game world, they need to operate within the framework (both social and rule-based) in which play is carried out.

A very significant base assumption that I will be working from onwards is that, for our purposes, the player and the character are the same in the context of play. This doesn’t mean that the player is completely immersed into the character or that they literally “become someone else” during play: what it means is that, by the same token that we acknowledge that our fantasies are reflections of what we understand as possible in the world, the characters we create and play as will carry a kernel of ourselves within them. This is not a gratuitous decision to make – there is a lot of theoretical work done to explore different alternatives to this perspective (Bowman & Schrier, 2018) – but it allows us access to the discussion we are aiming towards.

Going forward, then, we must take into account that TRPG play is characterized by being a collaborative play activity in which participants co-create a fictional narrative context within a shared imaginary space, based on known elements taken from shared cultural or fictional references, and that the elements that are kept as “legitimate” part of the shared imaginary experience are those that have been legitimized by the ongoing social, ludic and diegetic context.

2.4. On TRPGs as a vehicle for “becoming”

The elements highlighted in the previous paragraph become relevant when we look at the implications that belie the social aspect of TRPG play. Part of the social contract that TRPG players agree to during play – be it in socially implicit or explicit terms – goes as follows: since one of the key elements of play is the co-construction of this imagined play space, the game state is expressed through the way the narrative context of the play space unfolds, and since players primarily interact with the play space through their characters, it follows that the PCs’ actions will have a direct effect in the narrative of the story being played out (Hammer et al., 2018).

In other words, the underlying assumption to TRPG play is that the actions that players undertake through their characters will matter and be meaningful. For this to be possible, their characters must be able to act and change the state of the game, or, in other words, change the world they inhabit. This means that this specific aspect of the social contract between players in TRPGs – which we will call the *agential contract* – can be subjected to analysis through the lens of power, how it is wielded and what dynamics and relationships it produces.

One of the first to tackle the subject of power within TRPGs was Michelle Nephew, who understood them through the lens of *literary games*: a playful process of speculating or deducing possible outcomes or developments in a provided text (2003, pp. 24 - 25). Here, Nephew argues, TRPG play can be seen as a medium that allows players to challenge and problematize authorial power, by taking turns at playing how a given story progresses and what kinds of developments can come out of this exercise.

Meanwhile, Jessica Hammer (2007) continues this approach and discusses how agency (how players are able to act within the play space afforded by the fiction) and authority (how players are able to determine what actually happens within the play space within the fiction) establish relationships between players and the imagined play space itself.

Hammer (2007) also discusses, among different kinds of player agency and authority in the context of role-playing games, the idea of “character agency” and its intersection with authority, or in other words, how characters have the capacity to act within play in diegetic terms. She argues that, even despite players being able to govern their characters’ actions up to what their imaginations allow, there are levels of authorship that enable or restrict those decisions – specifically, the game rules and fictional setting in which play is carried out, the role of the referee in conducting play, and the agreed social rules that bind the play group together. However, there is a critical and relevant element that Hammer brings up: players, so long as they agree, are free to question, restructure, or reimplement any of these types of constraint. Rules can be changed and the world modified, so long as it fits the players’ desires and expectations for the play experience (Hammer, 2007).

Following from this, Markus Montola proposes three different ways in which power is wielded by players in TRPG play: exogenous power, referring to the power players wield outside of the game context (“Do not discuss non-game business during the

game”); endogenous power, which refers to the power players wield in regards to the specific game mechanics and systems that allow them to change the game state (“A sword does d10 points of damage”); and diegetic power, or the power that players can wield or be subjected to according to the established elements and rules of the fiction being played out in the imaginary play space (“Carrying a sword within the city limits is punishable by fine”) (Montola, 2008, p. 23). By these same criteria, it becomes relevant to understand that different actions and statements can be representative of power being expressed on each level, or across them simultaneously. Going forward, we will refer to the three layers of play in the following terms: the social level, to refer to the exogenous; the ludic level, to refer to the endogenous; and the diegetic level, to refer to the diegetic.

The above discussion is relevant because it allows us to see TRPG play as a space in which players can tailor their collective play experience towards a shared goal in which they can play out their characters according to individual or collective goals. When looking at player motivations in players of TRPGs, Darrin Coe (2017) finds that this can be expressed as a single concept: TRPG players seek out

the process of becoming [...] Participants of TRPGs are motivated to begin playing because they recognize either consciously or subconsciously the opportunity to engage in a process that will help facilitate them developing their identity or their state of existence to a more idealized state (Coe, 2017, p. 2856).

The potential of TRPGs to allow this process of both becoming as an individual and developing and transforming the world has allowed TRPG play to be identified as a potential space in which different possibilities for the process of Becoming to be explored. Katherine Cross (2012) discusses it in terms of TRPGs as a form of the “laboratory of dreams”, or a safe space in which participants are free to experiment and iterate on new strategies of resistance or ways of organizing the social world; Felix Rose Kawitzky (2020) goes further, describing TRPGs as having the potential to act as a queer utopian method.

With all this in mind, we can see that TRPGs bring together a very particular set of conditions for our object of study. On the one hand, they are an exercise on the construction of a collaborative fantasy; on the other, TRPG play expects as a basic assumption that players will wield power within play, which we call the agential contract. In other words: TRPG play is a space in which power fantasies can emerge by

the nature of the elements that compose it, that can be represented and explore on the social, ludic, and diegetic levels of play, and that does not necessarily imply value statements regarding their deployment. With this established, we can now return to power fantasies as a concept and explore how they have been explored in game studies.

2.5. Towards a definition of power fantasy in TRPGs

By now, we have discussed both the concepts of “power” and “fantasy” by themselves. We have established that “power” as a concept relates to established relationships of causality in the social space and may be discussed on terms of individual agency or social structure, and in terms of coercion or individual capabilities. On the other hand, we have delineated “fantasies” as imaginary representations of elements existing in material reality, which may be mediated either by our own conscious or unconscious desires, and that can either be expressed as a function of internal psychological processes through social exercises of collaborative creation. Additionally, we have established that TRPGs are a collaborative play form based on shared elements of, usually, genre fiction and that features co-construction of a fictional world where additions to it are validated through a variety of validation mechanisms. Finally, we have addressed how TRPGs present specific conditions to explore power as a topic through play, including examining authorial power and personal agency, and the different layers in which power can operate, be it with the aim of achieving specific objectives or representing growth or change in characters. With this, we can go into how power fantasies have been discussed in academic literature.

The power fantasy as a concept has seen broad usage in cultural, critical, film, and gender studies (Turner, 2022). Broadly speaking, power fantasies relate to the elements in texts that enable their readers to feel empowered. These “dreams of power” are arguably an essential part of personal motivation: they enable individuals not only to imagine themselves in positions of culturally- and socially-relevant power, but also as a path to overcoming oppression and/or enforcing domination upon others (Paes de Paula & Wood Jr., 2009).

Power fantasies are often studied in tandem with representations of gender relations in media, such as explorations of how certain hegemonic forms of masculinity are reinforced in superhero comic books (Best, 2005) or how it can be used to explore resistance against societal expectations from a feminist framework in the works of Jane

Austen (Lowder Newton, 1978), to name a few. In both these cases, the power fantasy is constructed as a narrative structure within the texts analysed, allowing the reader to project their own desire for power into the main characters of these stories.

Another space in which contemporary scholarly work has covered the concept of the power fantasy is in psychological studies of mass shootings, specifically those done by teenage individuals within schools in the United States of America. For example, Nils Böckler, Thorsten Seeger, and Peter Sitzer (2012, pp. 35 - 36) argue that rampage shootings represent a way in which the adolescent perpetrators can enact retribution on the perceived humiliations and injustices within the social hierarchies in the school environment; before this, they argue, the shooter “withdraws into his fantasy world in order to escape from repeated hurts and setbacks in his life, compensating these with fantasies of omnipotence, revenge, and superiority” (Böckler et al., 2012, p. 33). Here, the authors argue that these acts are both a product of deep feelings of powerlessness as perceived by the shooters in their immediate social environment, and that violent media must play some role in the process.

When looking at how power fantasies have been analysed in the context of TRPGs, Michelle Nephew (2006) began by using slightly different terminology: by using the framework of Freudian daydreaming as a vehicle for wish fulfilment, she argued that TRPG play can serve as a negotiated space for enacting desires of players in a safe context where they are able to control directly the outcomes of their actions and, more crucially, where the rhetorical tools used to justify actions become objective facts of the game world through the use of certain game elements (in her example, morality becomes objective through the use of game elements that define that certain NPCs are objectively evil, and thus, the PCs are completely justified in whatever they do to stop them).

I believe that Nephew’s approach, while valuable, doesn’t address the collective nature of the fantasies enacted during play that Fine (1983) does, which is expressed through her use of the term “daydream” instead of “fantasy”. Despite this, it remains a work that looks closely at how players imagine power during play, so it is a very useful starting point for our discussion. The concept of “power fantasy” itself, meanwhile, has been studied from the perspective of literary criticism intersected with studies regarding portrayals of masculinity (Conway, 2020; Habel, 2018) or through the lens of studies dealing with player motivation.

For example, Benjamin Fritz and Stefan Stöckl (2022), while exploring the components of different kinds of player motivation in video games, identify the power fantasy as a distinct type of player motivation, strongly correlated to the desire to feel powerful in a game and to playing as someone who is powerful in the game world. Interestingly, it was seen as being often a secondary form of player motivation, accompanying motivations such as achievement, escapism, and immersion, and appeared to be more effectively served within single-player games (Fritz & Stöckl, 2022, pp. 8 - 9). This may already begin suggesting that in primarily social forms of play, such as TRPG play, the power fantasy may not be supported as the main motivator for play.

This finds a few points of contact with previous discussions on the nature of power fantasies within games. Hammer and Baker, for example, argue that these power fantasies imply “escapism and meaninglessness, evoking outsize explosions and equally outsized displays of dominance” (Hammer & Baker, 2014), abandoning possibilities of nuance and complexity during play.

As we’ve explored above, however, a thorough analysis of power should not just stay within the confines of individual empowerment, but should also stop and study the structure in which power is performed and upon whom. In this sense, power fantasies are often seen as expressions of dominant and harmful displays of masculinity, reinforcing cultural discourses of sexism, racism, homophobia and others (Hammer & Baker, 2014; Habel, 2018; see also Fine, 1983).

With all of this in mind, something interesting that we touched upon earlier in this chapter begins to take a clearer form. When power fantasies are mentioned in a negative light, it is often a very specific kind of power fantasy: that of escapism, meaninglessness, and violence, sought after by adolescent male audiences. This is an idea that is reflected in early emic player taxonomies in TRPG theory (Blacow, 1980), where the aspect of Power Gaming (playing to accumulate markers of in-game success and power) is directly linked to teenage novice players.

However, this need not be the case. Following on what we’ve established so far, TRPG play can be read as a particularly illustrative example of power-with as exemplified by Folett (1942): ideally, during TRPG play all participants collaborate to produce an experience that is only possible through the concurrent collaboration of everyone involved. Additionally, as we covered above, if fantasies can be a way in which

individuals can reconcile perceived inconsistencies in the self and imagine how real life could be, then another way in which power may be fantasised about is through imagining scenarios where it is wielded to change the world in ways that fundamentally oppose the power structures that already exist in the player's cultural and social context.

This framing towards the power fantasy may be focused not only on the specific narratives constructed within play – for example, players playing out stories in which traditionally marginalized characters are able to wield power or stand up to injustice (Huang, 2018) – but also in how the very structure of a game where mechanics operate as known conduits of action that exist within an agential contract where the possibility of changing the world is an agreed certainty (Biswas, 2022). In other words, in TRPGs players are able to make choices that are “meaningful, powerful, and consequential within the context of the game” (Hammer & Baker, 2014), and moreover, they themselves are able to construct a fictional world that is meaningful in its own right because of the significance that is placed on it by the players themselves (Fine, 1983, p. 231).

Dreaming of power as a meaningful endeavour can take the form of a specific game design lens that aims towards allowing the player a feeling of empowerment in a specific context, with the goal of this feeling of playful empowerment to be a source of inspiration for players when they leave the game (Bartczak, 2016). In a perhaps counterintuitive manner, we may also find that the practice of “playing to lose” – that is, playing a character with the explicit intention to fail at achieving their goals with the purpose of achieving more satisfying drama (Vejdemo, 2018) – can be seen as an expression of collaborative player empowerment: players can employ their agency together in a form of play that is decidedly not interested in winning, but instead prioritizes impactful and emotionally heightened play experiences and allowing players to seek out less conventional ways of standing out (for example, by achieving a cool death scene for your character).

As a way of rounding out what we've managed to piece together so far, we may be able to see TRPGs as a space in which power fantasies are collaboratively constructed and pursued by players. Since they are playing together, the fantasies that are created are not an expression of any individual participant, but an emerging property of what the group decides is appropriate for play. These fantasies may be a function of self-actualization through characters or an exploration of possibilities for systemic justice, or they may be

affordances for uncritical escapism that reaffirms and sustains hegemonic values and the social structures they represent. It is, after all, very difficult to imagine forms of power that aren't at the very least suggestive of the social order the participants have been socialized under. Playing at dreaming of power, as we can see, allows us to co-create a space where these discussions are brought to the forefront, but placed at a reasonable distance.

With the above discussion, we can finally arrive at the definition of *power fantasy* that we will use for the purposes of our study. A *power fantasy* is an imaginary model of reality, produced individually or through collaboration, which features a goal (the acquisition of an object, the completion of an objective, etc.) that the participants want, and where the objective is realised using power, understood as achieving or being the causal point of origin of actions and change within this model of reality. This definition will allow us to understand both where we will be able to find power fantasies in players' accounts of previous experiences of play, while also allowing us to properly differentiate power fantasies from other kinds of fantasies being enacted.

Going forward, our definition of a "power fantasy" should keep this in consideration: part of the reason why playing TRPGs – and other forms of role-playing games, for that matter – is perceived as meaningful is precisely because it is something we do together (Stenros & MacDonald, 2020): here, the exercise of agency appears as meaningful only as long as it is recognised and legitimised by the people we are playing with. Be it by creating a different world that may show us what is possible despite all odds, or just allowing ourselves a moment of respite against the powerlessness and tedium of everyday life, the act of dreaming of power together appears to be a strong motivator for TRPG play. The contents of those fantasies, however, is what will be of interest to look into in the next chapters.

3 METHODS

In this chapter I will discuss the methodological decisions taken to tackle my research question. I will begin by stating the research goals, then establishing my methodological framework, to then describe the method I used and the decisions I made before and after starting field work, which will include the process of positioning myself as a researcher in the social context where I carried out the research. Finally, I will describe how I conducted analysis of the produced data, while also acknowledging the measures I took to ensure the privacy of the personal data of the people involved in this study.

3.1. Research question, goals, and scope

My main research question is:

What kinds of power fantasies do players of tabletop role-playing games seek out when playing?

Here, I understand a power fantasy as an imaginary model of reality, produced individually or through collaboration, which features a goal (the acquisition of an object, the completion of an objective, etc.) that the participants want, and where the objective is realised using power, understood as achieving or being the causal point of origin of actions and change within this model of reality.

Situating this exploration in the context of TRPGs means that these power fantasies will exist in tension between the individual desires of the participants, the social and ludic mechanisms that legitimize and enact those fantasies to appear during play, and the norms of social interaction that exist outside the play experience. Additionally, this means that the content of these power fantasies will draw from a variety of places: each player's individual desires, the group's collective understanding of the narrative and game elements being enacted in play, the social relationships and dynamics that govern play, the socio-cultural context in which play is framed, and so on.

The secondary questions I aim to answer over the course of this study will be the following:

- What conditions must be present in TRPG play for power fantasies to appear?

- What kinds of power fantasies are enabled or discouraged by the social contract in the TRPG group?
- What kinds of power fantasies are facilitated by the game elements in a TRPG experience?
- What do players call out as a power fantasy during play?
- How do players of TRPGs define the difference between an individual power fantasy that plays into the game and one that is disruptive?

This study aimed to research a relatively understudied phenomenon that occurs during TRPG play. As such, it was an exploratory study in scope. The unit of analysis to be studied was meaningful experiences of TRPG play: this decision was made following Fine's (1983, p. 231) assertion that the worlds explored by players through TRPG play produce systems of meaning that allow them to be interpreted as social worlds. In this context, fantasies, be them individual or collective, contribute to the production of meaning in the play experience, and as such they can be narrativized and included into accounts of meaningful play. In other words, to be able to observe and analyse power fantasies, I required a unit of analysis that both contained my subject of interest and provided enough context to fully understand how they are produced. The relevance of this will be explained in the following section, when approaching the methodological choices made while developing this study.

3.2. Grounded theory approach and semi-structured interviews as method

To achieve my research goals, I needed a methodological approach that allowed access to the results of the process of collaborative meaning-making featured in TRPG play. This means that an appropriate lens would be a qualitative strategy, as it allows us to describe TRPG play directly and interpret the meanings contained within. In addition, considering the absence of theoretical categories that directly address power fantasies in TRPG play, an approach that allows the data collected to be interpreted in its own terms is preferable to one that applies labels to the empirical data in a top-down manner: in this sense, I opted for a grounded theory approach to guide both data collection and

analysis, and opted for the semi-structured interview as the specific data collection method.

The grounded theory method was defined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as “the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analysed in social research” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.1, as cited in Urquhart, 2013). While there have been several different and competing approaches among different authors regarding how this principle should be understood and executed, the thoroughline for this approach remains centered on the researcher seeking to discover the theory that exists in the social world instead of applying categories to it (Flick, 2019).

This approach to producing theory of the social world implies that the researcher is necessarily interpreting the data in the process: therefore, those interpretations will always be subject to the researcher’s biases, experiences, and perspectives. One way to manage this level of situationality of the resulting data is for the researcher to conduct the study in a reflexive manner (Urquhart, 2013), or in other words, to be both conscious and forthright about their own subjectivity when conducting the study, both in terms of the kinds of analytical lines this perspective affords as well as the limitations it implies.

Additionally, the process of interpretation being conducted here implies that the researcher is choosing to construct meaning in a specific way: if the goal of a grounded theory approach is to allow the data to produce theory on its own terms, the researcher must make decisions as to how interpret and analyse the data being produced. Grounded theory approaches in the past have, for example, asserted that this process of interpretation is done through inductive reasoning, or in other words, that the researcher considers the particular points of empirical data and produces a general interpretation that accounts for all of them. However, I have chosen to follow the example of Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2014, as cited in Flick, 2019) and decided to take an approach based on *abductive* reasoning.

Abduction as a process of reasoning proposes that instead of producing a general theory based on data points in a direct manner as in induction, the researcher instead chooses to infer meaning out of the empirical reality being studied (Flick, 2019). In other words, this is an approach that accounts for the empirical facts of the analysed data being immediately evident, but the general conclusions requiring a process of elaboration by

the researcher. This is an approach that makes reflexive research all the more necessary on the part of the researcher, but has two key advantages: firstly, it allows me to be transparent about the use of the theoretical framework I have developed in the previous chapter, and secondly, it helps to further situate my discussion within the specific socio-cultural context in which I conduct it.

This last statement requires a bit of explaining: how can I call my approach one based on grounded theory if I am already using a theoretical framework? The explanation for this lies in the difference between abductive reasoning and the inductive approaches that originally informed grounded theory as a framework. Where empiricist approaches to grounded theory argue that all the relevant information to be analysed in a specific social situation exists in the data, more recent constructivist approaches argue that this frame ignores how knowledge is socially constructed, both on the part of the researcher and the informants (Flick, 2019). With this in mind, using abductive reasoning in hand with a properly reflexive disposition lets “qualitative researchers use a selective and creative process to examine how the data support existing theories or hypotheses as well as how the data may call for modifications in existing understandings” (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018, as cited in Flick, 2019).

Now that I have established the general approach to data collection I chose, I will describe the specific method I employed. The semi-structured interview is a method for collecting qualitative data through a personal interview with a person selected for the purposes of the study. At a practical level, it takes the form of a one-on-one interview following a set list of themes or questions which the interviewee can answer or cover freely through conversation with the interviewer (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

One advantage of this method is that, while the list of themes is set in advance, the rapport constructed between interviewer and interviewee allows for the conversation to expand to accommodate interesting and unexpected topics (Urquhart, 2013). This means that follow-up questions and effective probing is as valuable a tool as the design of the questionnaire itself, which demands that the interviewer be fully engaged in the conversation.

The data produced by the semi-structured interview takes the form of a co-constructed and contextualized record of a conversation, which will then be subjected to an analytical process that will allow theoretical categories to be inferred by the researcher

out of them. I will explain these steps in more detail in the next few sections, for that was a concern that only became apparent once the study was well underway.

3.3. Questionnaire design

To begin with, I needed to create a questionnaire that was able to cover the themes I am interested in studying. The challenge here comes from two sources: the questionnaire needed to touch on all the relevant topics for the study, and it also needed to deal with the potentially sensitive topics that the study deals with.

Questions in a semi-structured interview are designed with the intention to invite participants to elaborate on their own lived experiences and meaning-making processes, instead of being direct prompts for answering. For this reason, they usually take the form of open-ended questions that invite recounting memories, opinions, and/or behaviours in everyday life (Billups, 2021).

Additionally, it is recommended that the order of questions in a questionnaire should gradually increase the complexity and sensitivity of the topics talked about over the course of the interview, starting with less complex and more factual questions and, as rapport is being constructed between interviewer and interviewee, continuing with more complex and sensitive topics (Billups, 2021). That said, the key advantage of the semi-structured interview is the presence of the interviewer, who can adapt depending on the flow of the conversation, skipping questions if the topic has been already touched upon or probing for details (Urquhart, 2013). This means that the order of questions should be a guideline instead of an established protocol.

Therefore, I opened asking questions regarding play experiences and establishing what the interviewee finds meaningful in play. I followed up asking about more focused questions regarding opinions and feelings regarding TRPG play, and into concrete anecdotes that link into these thoughts.

Here I tackled the issue of the power fantasy being a potentially sensitive topic. While I have done a significant effort to provide a definition of the concept that is as value neutral as possible, as we have seen in previous chapters the power fantasy is often used as a derogatory term. Therefore, asking participants to talk about their power fantasies

would risk loading the conversation in a particular way or make participants uncomfortable.

As a means of dealing with this issue, I chose two ways of approaching the theme: in order to talk about the power fantasy as a way of expressing a desire that is unsatisfied, I asked participants to talk about TRPG play experiences where they could “do something really cool that they don’t get to do in real life”, and to talk about the power fantasy as a way of exploring and discussing power through play, I asked participants to talk about “feelings of empowerment” in TRPG play. In this way, I hope to use language that lines up with everyday conversation and avoid using technical terms that may already be loaded with unintended meanings.

The final questionnaire design can be found in Appendix 1.

3.4. Participant selection

The basic criteria for eligibility as a participant in the study was that potential participants needed to satisfy 3 key criteria:

- Participants must be older than 18 years old.
- Participants should either be Chilean or have lived a significant amount of time in Chile.
- Participants must have played in a TRPG session at least once in the last year.

Regarding TRPG play experience as a criterion for inclusion, while it was likely that people who had played prior to this cutoff date could still have valuable experiences to share, keeping experiences relatively recent serves the purpose of helping contextualise the data collected. In this way, to some extent, the experiences to be collectively analysed can be temporally situated in a similar scope. Meanwhile, participant age is included as part of the criteria to ensure only adults participate in the study. This is according to two criteria: first, the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation establishes in Article 8 that the minimum age for processing data of an individual without additionally requesting parental consent is 16 years of age (Intersoft Consulting, 2018), and second, according to Chilean law, the age of majority is 18 years old. Choosing to focus on adults is not a neutral decision, but it allowed me to focus my

efforts to pursue ethical research on a specific cohort of participants: otherwise, additional steps would need to be taken to ensure this in the case of minors.

Nationality is a criterion that warrants a closer examination. Since, as we have established above, power fantasies are depictions of how power is desired in a specific social and cultural context, it follows that understanding a power fantasy requires at least some grounding on the specific social and cultural context in which it is produced. While looking at multiple nationalities and cultural backgrounds would have resulted in richer and more diverse data, it would have also required me to be able to parse each participant's experience through their particular social and cultural histories. The decision to only interview participants that share my own nationality, then, means that my own lived experiences within that context will be the source of valuable insight during the analysis (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

For the purposes of transparently addressing this criterion in a reflexive manner throughout the analysis, a brief description of TRPG play cultures in Chile is required³. While I have not been able to ascertain when TRPGs were first played in Chile, one of the first cases of organized TRPG play events happened around 1995, with play groups coming together to hold public conventions in university spaces (such as in Universidad de Chile and the event "Concilio de Dragones", lit. "Council of Dragons" (González Nicolini, 2022)). While these communities remained active throughout the 2000s, convention play was not often the focus, and those events became rarer towards the end of the decade. Through these years there was a noticeable shift towards communities that took a step back from convention play and either met up in as private play groups in participants' homes or that organized around meeting up in common spaces, such as game shops (La Guarida de Burnaby, 2021). Towards the early 2010s, and as a direct response to a perceived insular and gatekeeping attitude in older, more established TRPG groups, several new communities were established with a transparent intention to make TRPGs more accessible to new players and with a disposition towards reclaiming convention play as a focus. With a more widespread access to internet services in the country, these groups were able to conduct more regularly-scheduled conventions and play events, and now encountered newer influences in the global TRPG sphere, such as the drive for simple rules and accessibility of independent TRPGs of this period.

³ Sources that cover this subject are, sadly, few and far between. I have attempted to provide sources to back these claims wherever possible, but a full exploration of the history of TRPG play in Chile is definitely outside of the scope of this study.

The interviewees and I mostly position ourselves in this specific period of the history of TRPG play cultures in Chile, and as such we have developed our own perspectives regarding the play form in an environment that values accessibility and inclusion. This is a play culture that is also informed by the growing access to internet communications, which also allowed more flexible and persistent channels for communication and community building. In my case, I first began playing TRPGs as the GM for a group of close friends back around 2009. I first began playing using the *D&D Fourth Edition* ruleset, then moved over to *Pathfinder First Edition*. During the following years, I played with that group on a mostly irregular schedule, until 2016, when I started running games for new groups as well. This led me to a play community that was being established at the time, called *EscueladeRol.cl* (lit. “Role-playing school” in the form of an address), one of the many established communities that developed during that decade, which was the first time I began regularly joining as a player. During my participation with this community, I helped organize several game groups during open play workshops to teach people how to play, and I also participated as GM in conventions where the organization was present. It was during this time that I became closely acquainted with the *Powered by the Apocalypse* rule framework that informed several of the games I ran and preferred during this time (such as *Pasión de las Pasiones* and *Worlds in Peril*). While I ceased my participation in *EscueladeRol.cl* around 2019, I have remained in close contact with the people I met in several other communities over the years, and I have continued running games for other people, even during my stay in Tampere. While I have favoured *Pathfinder First Edition* as my ruleset of choice for close to a decade now, I try to keep up with new developments in the design scene, with *Lancer* being a ruleset and setting I am currently running games for on a more dedicated basis.

An additional aspect of conducting interviews with Chilean informants was that the interviews had to be conducted in Spanish. As my own and the interviewee’s native language, conducting the interviews themselves was not a problem, but it did raise the issue of translation considering that this study would be written in English. My approach here was simple: I conducted the data collection and analysis processes in Spanish, but any excerpts from the interview transcripts that I require for the analysis chapter in the manuscript would need to be translated. I did this translation myself, and included translation notes as endnotes in the following chapter whenever it was relevant.

The main criteria for stopping to include new informants was content saturation: interviews were conducted until new participants provided no information nor statements that haven't been covered in prior interviews (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020) or when new insights on the theory could no longer be gained through additional interviews (Flick, 2019). This, as stated above, had to be done in a reflexive process, and as such, saturation could only be properly acknowledged once the study was well underway, and relied more heavily on my judgement as a researcher than on systematically defined processes (Flick, 2019).

An important piece of context to properly reflect the decisions taken from this point onward is that my initial intention was to conduct a pilot phase for this study. The aim of this pilot phase would have been to test the questionnaire and to verify if it was producing data pertinent to my object of study. By the end of the first interview, I confirmed that all the relevant topics I wanted to discuss had been touched on, so I concluded that no further adjustments to the questionnaire were necessary.

3.5. Conducting interviews and final informant selection

Once the questionnaire was completed, I produced an informed consent form to be sent to potential participants (see Appendix 2). This document contained detailed information about the topics of the study, the decisions made regarding data collection and analysis, and information about how participants' data was processed and protected (see below).

After this, I followed the participant selection criteria I described in the previous section to choose potential interviewees. As explained in previous sections, my experience as organizer for TRPG events allowed me to establish relationships with several members of different local play communities. Selecting potential participants from this pool gave the study the advantage of being conducted with people with whom I already had built rapport and trust with.

Based on Flick's (2018) suggestions for participant selection, I selected an initial set of four informants from my pool of contacts that I felt offered a wide variety of experiences in TRPG play. The main two guidelines for this purpose were gender and experience as a GM, but as secondary concern I tried to cover different play preferences

and personal backgrounds. The four participants I selected to participate in the study have the following significant characteristics:

- Their age was consistently in the 28 – 35 range, which would categorize them as Millennials;
- Two of the potential participants identified as men and two identified as women;
- Two of them had played as GMs before, while the other two had never played as GMs;
- All of them had formal education up to Undergraduate level in careers in the humanities and social sciences, and all of them were currently employed (with three of them working as educators in different educational institutions, from high schools to universities);
- Two of them had been active in TRPG play communities during the 2000s (which gave them insight into the shift between the culture of that period and that of the 2010s), while two of them had primarily been active during the 2010s;
- They all displayed a variety of preferences regarding TRPG rulesets, but with three very clear main influences: *D&D*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Vampire the Masquerade*;
- All of them resided in urban areas at the time of conducting the interviews, with two of them living in Santiago, the country's capital (a metropolitan zone) and the other two living in smaller cities.

Contact with the informants was achieved through instant messaging depending on their preferred channels, which were *WhatsApp* and *Instagram Messenger*. After informing them of the nature of the study and asking if they were interested in participating, I sent the information section of the informed consent form to them to allow them to acquaint themselves with the study on their own time before asking for confirmation to participate. Following this, a date was scheduled, and the interview was conducted. After the interview, the conversation was transcribed to allow for later data analysis.

After conducting the interviews four initial interviews, I began the data analysis process (see below). By the end of this process, I concluded that the collected data was enough to allow for the final stages of coding to occur. I argue this was an appropriate decision because of two main reasons: firstly, that by the end of the second stage of analysis (axial coding, as will be described below) every interview had produced at least one code that could be categorized into one of the larger categories of meaning produced, and secondly, that this allowed us to fulfil a criteria of variation (Flick, Doing Grounded Theory, 2019), where each interviewee produces statements on the different themes of the study that can then be compared and contrasted to produce a full story of the case (in the final stage, selective coding, as is described below). Therefore, after completing the fourth interview, the dataset was understood to have saturated.

3.6. Data privacy measures

Before progressing into describing the analysis process, I would like to take a moment to describe the measures taken to ensure the interviewees' privacy in regard to their personal data. This project was carried out in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules in the context of research (Intersoft Consulting, 2018). I confirmed that working on and completing this Master's Thesis under the guidance and supervision of Tampere University in general and my research supervisors in particular is deemed as a sufficient argument for the lawful basis that justifies data collection and processing during this study (Tampere University, n.d.).

Several decisions relating to secure data collection, processing and storage have been made while designing and carrying out this study. Firstly, regarding data collection, I chose to do the interviews as video calls done over the internet using the Zoom video call software, with the student license provided by the University. This is due to two reasons: first, because Zoom allows for End to End Encryption (E2EE) on its video calls, which means that only the invited parties to a video call (the interviewer and interviewee) are allowed to enter and look at the contents of the video call (Zoom, 2023), and secondly, because Zoom allows for recording the video call in a local drive in a process that does not generate copies of the recordings anywhere else (Zoom, 2023).

The resulting recordings (and related metadata) were stored in an external USB hard drive that was only accessed by myself and my direct supervisor. Whenever this drive

was not in use, it was securely stored in a locked drawer only I could access. Additionally, a backup of the information collected was kept in a separate external USB hard drive stored under similar conditions.

The transcription of the interviews was done using Microsoft Word's Automatic Transcription feature. This feature employs web services developed by Microsoft, which includes AI technology that recognizes speech and accents. This service, as per Microsoft's own Privacy policy and the details in the service's "About" page (Microsoft, 2023), is GDPR-Compliant as well.

As per Tampere University's own privacy policy, it is considered that the use of an automatic transcription feature means transferring personal data to a third party to assist in processing the data, and if the University already has an agreement with the service provider regarding the processing of personal data, then the use of said software is compliant as well (Tampere University, 2023). Since the license I use for Office 365 services was provided by the University as well, this applies to the use of the automatic transcription feature.

The one exception was the cases where the interview touched on particularly sensitive data, which could potentially result in additional risk to the participants in the case of its mishandling. Whenever this was the case, the University states that the use of said software is not permitted (Tampere University, 2023), which means that the transcription would need to be done manually. This was not required for the interviews conducted, since no sensitive data was shared. In either case, once an interview was fully transcribed, all personal information that was not relevant to the topic of study (sensitive or not) was anonymised or pseudonymised to protect the participants' identities and privacy. Once this process was finished, the recordings were promptly deleted.

3.7. On data analysis

Once I had the transcripts ready, the next step was to prepare the data for analysis. This took the form of three distinct steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Flick, 2019).

Open coding is the initial step of the coding process, which consisted in reading through the transcripts of the interviews while applying tags (codes) to every fragment that could be interpreted as a standalone concept (Flick, 2019). The purpose of this process is to produce an initial list of codes that allow the researcher both to disentangle the meanings being communicated through the data, but also to begin producing categories that will be relevant for the analysis. These initial categories may be extracted directly from the data itself or be inferred to be representing concepts that exist within the selected theory.

In my case, the open coding process through all 4 interviews resulted in an initial 181 codes. After this initial pass, I did a secondary pass through all the interviews to try and consolidate redundant codes and discard codes that were evaluated to not be relevant (such as, for example, a code made to mark when an Interviewee was describing game rules). After this final pass, the final number of codes was reduced to 175.

The next step was axial coding. This process involves producing larger categories that contain different aspects of the same theme or phenomenon expressed in standalone codes made during the previous step (Flick, 2019). Through this coding process, in which the researcher constantly compares these new general categories against both the codes and the data, the goal is to produce analytical categories that group together different strands of meaning and allows them to elaborate larger arguments based on the inferences being made. In my case, the in-depth process of axial coding ultimately resulted in the production of 10 code groups, each containing a number of standalone codes between 12 and 29. Thanks to this, at this point several of the key findings began to seem apparent, which led to the final step of the coding process: selective coding.

Selective coding is a further layer of abstraction for the analysis, where the researcher now focuses on potential core concepts or variables that explain the data produced in an overarching way, or in other words, this is the step where the researcher formulates the story of the study (Flick, 2019). The researcher now infers the general theories of what the study case is pointing towards, and begins checking and contrasting these theories against the data to corroborate that these inferences do not step too far away from what it conveys. This is a step that allows for relational analysis, where the researcher can compare and contrast categories against each other in ways that weren't immediately apparent in the original texts. In my case, the selective coding process resulted into a group of main theoretical concepts that will be elaborated in the next chapter.

4 RESULTS

The analysis of the interview transcripts allowed me to explore two major themes which are described in the following pages. This chapter has two major sections: one addressing the unit of analysis, experiences of meaningful play, in regards to them being the context where I was able to observe power fantasies in TRPG play. The second section addresses what power fantasies in TRPG play are like, and what their contents are ⁴.

4.1. What is meaningful TRPG play like?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my unit of analysis are meaningful play experiences in TRPGs, because if we understand TRPG play as the collaborative construction of a social world among participants, then the accounts of experiences of play will inform of the networks of meaning that are shared between players and find fantasies among them (Fine, 1983). I will now briefly examine some accounts of meaningful play to properly contextualize the power fantasies I will analyse in the following section.

In sharing their memories of their play experiences, the interviewees began mentioning a few key topics in prescriptive terms. These statements informed what interviewees state that “good play” *should* look like, how good play is both remembered and rationalized as such, how good play is achieved in practice, and how good play is often cut short. In this effort, we will be able to understand what meaningful play experiences are like, and we will have a clear picture of where to look for power fantasies and the context in which they appear.

4.1.1. What “good play” should be like

The aspect of good play that every interviewee agreed on was an overwhelming feeling of engagement with the play experience. The specific form this engagement took varied

⁴ Every interview conducted in the context of this research project was done in Spanish. The original transcripts of the interviews are also in Spanish. Wherever I am presenting a direct quotation by an interviewee, the fragment presented will be translated by myself and used specifically for the purposes of this research project. Whenever it has been necessary, I have included a footnote detailing choices made during the translation process.

from group to group, but a common line was a feeling of high *synchronicity* with others in the play group.

We can see this feeling appear in different kinds of experiences. For instance, Interviewee 2 tells an anecdote of one time they played a TRPG session with a group of friends at a local bar.

[...] I think that this thing, of building an absurd situation, that we were all really in sync with each other with the group that was there, I had a great time, I had a great time. Because it was us playing a role-playing game ⁵, throwing dice on paper with a group of twenty-somethings, I think we were, and sometimes you raised your head and looked around to see couples, people doing bar things in a bar, while we were all doing nerdy stuff there, having so much fun. (Interviewee 2)

As we see, this happened on a whim and was framed as them intentionally doing something unexpected in an inappropriate place. While there is certainly an element of transgression to the experience – informed by the phrase “people doing bar things in a bar” – the point Interviewee 1 is making is that it was directly elevated because they felt “in sync” with the other players.

On a similar note, Interviewee 4 frames it as a matter of “emotional infection”, meaning that by opening up to other players during play one can share in their emotional state and build upon it, framing the feeling of achieving something while in this state as the euphoria felt by a football fan.

[...] for better or worse, the roleplaying table is very influenced by the emotional infection of the players. And if you’re not willing to be infected, the table won’t flow, because it becomes too technical. But when you have this kind of like chemistry, and you allow yourself to lower your barriers like... I’m gonna sound super geeky, but it’s like okay, playing without an AT Field ⁶, whatever happens, you get better interactions, and it allows you to follow that flow. (Interviewee 4)

⁵ When the interviewees talk about the act of playing a role-playing game, they use the expression “jugar / jugando rol”, where the word “rol” (lit. role) is used in place of “juego de rol” (lit. role-playing game) as an abbreviation. While this expression is used to refer to TRPG play in its entirety, some interviewees intentionally highlight the word “role” to emphasize that the main point of TRPG play is role-playing. Given this ambiguity in its use, whenever an interviewee has used this expression, I have translated it into a form that reflects the intention of the specific statement being made.

⁶ Here, the interviewee mentions an “AT Field” referring to a concept present in the animated series “Neon Genesis Evangelion”. In this show, the AT Field is a protective barrier that all living beings possess, which has the literal and metaphorical purpose of protecting the ego of the individual from harm. The interviewee uses this cultural reference (which they presume to be shared) as the pivotal piece in the metaphor of lowering personal defences while playing. As such, I have decided to keep it as-is in this translation.

Here, the idea of “lowering barriers” can be understood as an expression of trust in the rest of the players, but the main point is that this kind of relationship allows them to achieve “emotional infection”, or once again, feeling in sync with the emotions of others.

Interviewee 3 complements this perspective: they mention how in a particularly tense situation where their characters needed to be quiet, they and their group started talking quietly without noticing, and more crucially, that it was commented upon as an unexpected and valuable aspect of play once the session had ended.

[...] for example, I can tell you about a recent experience where we were entering something like an abandoned prison, and the mood was kind of scary, you know what I mean? And both the GM and us players, like we instinctively started whispering while narrating, we were playing in person [...] And then we talked about it, and it was like “hey, that was so cool, like the involvement we had with the scene”. (Interviewee 3)

Here we can see that emotional synchronicity can happen unwittingly by leading players to perform in a way that leads from this shared emotional state. Again, this experience becomes meaningful because it was enacted and reinforced by everyone, but more crucially, that it appears to not have required prior coordination.

While these anecdotes could be framed under players commenting on the value of immersion during play, the term itself was not directly brought up by all the interviewees. What is more significant, though, is that while all three interviewees talk about different kinds of meaningful experiences, all of them are described with terms such as “in sync”, “lowering your barriers”, and “instinctively”, which are used to highlight the emergent, unmediated, and collective nature of the experience.

The interviewees note that, in these moments, the players at the table are aligned in their desires and goals. These moments of ideal TRPG play are able to link together into an experience of “good play” so long as the agential contract is sustained – that is, the agreement that player’s actions will matter during play. However, how do the interviewees know that this is happening? This leads into a discussion of the second most mentioned aspect of “good play”: the idea that actions made by PCs should have consequences that can be directly perceived.

This is described as a prescriptive factor of “good play” in TRPGs. It does not necessarily imply that players should feel that they are responsible for what happens

during play, but that their desires and goals in play be perceived by the actions they do and how those actions further or hinder those desires and goals. For instance, Interviewee 1 describes a play scenario where they were running a game for a group of players that were about to kill an NPC.

If you want to try and kill an NPC, at least do it in the most... Make it feel as natural as possible. What do I mean by this? You want to kill an important NPC. It's gonna be a challenge, you won't just come in and do it just like that, you get what I mean? And if it's going to be a challenge, make it feel like that. It shouldn't feel like "oh, I'm the GM, how dare you do this?" No! This NPC is super important, and you gotta understand that all of this that's happening here will have very important consequences. And I will make sure that, if you want to do this action, you'll feel the importance of this NPC with all the challenges it implies. (Interviewee 1)

While initially describing their own reaction as apprehensive towards the idea, they mention that actually allowing the players to go ahead with the idea was instrumental to a satisfactory play experience *because* the consequences were played out to their full extent. Notice that this is almost framed in ontological terms regarding the integrity of the play experience: the consequences of killing an important NPC must be significant because this character is a meaningful part of the world, and acting within it means committing to understanding how and why it is meaningful before acting.

On the players' side of things, Interviewee 4 fleshed out the idea of the value of perceivable consequences by talking about a play experience where all the PCs died (what is colloquially known in player communities as a Total Party Kill, or a "TPK") in a moment where they became too confident on their own abilities. They compare this moment to the myth of Icarus because they felt they "flew too close to the sun". They mention that these kinds of situations can be difficult to successfully navigate as a group, given the weight that PC death carries, but that it can be an instrumental lesson as players for future play sessions with different characters or with the same one.

[...] an empowering experience that went to shit because you pulled off an Icarus can be a moment of, "this is a character development moment", you know what I mean? And it can still be something super interesting in the story. Like... It leaves a mark. Character development, now this is an arc. It's like, next time you'll have to come back and like... Will you be consumed by hubris again or not? So, it can be very interesting, or it can deflate everything, to the point that the table doesn't get together again. (Interviewee 4)

The use of the expression “character development” is significant in this quote. Interviewee 4 uses it to signal that this was a learning experience for themselves as a player, not a moment of growth for the PC. Here, the value of perceivable diegetic consequences – that the PCs died because of their overconfidence – is framed as prevalent over the satisfaction of player goals: since every player wanted to do this risky action and everyone agreed to follow its consequences, the experience is perceived as “good play” even despite their goals remaining unfulfilled.

These two quotes could even be seen as opposite perspectives on a similar situation: on one hand, a GM fretting over a potentially disruptive player choice, and on the other, players wishing to take a very risky choice with an uncertain result. In both cases, the tension is alleviated by resolving to follow the consequences to the bitter end, which allows all members in the group to be aligned in their desires and goals during play, or in other words, to enter a state of synchronicity.

The examples seen before are mostly cases of emergent synchronicity, where the state is achieved as a result of their expectations and desires being met as a natural result of enacting “good play”. However, this is not the only way to reach this state, since it can also be reinforced by direct communication or by clearly establishing expectations for play. The relationship between clear expectations and synchronicity is succinctly expressed by Interviewee 2 when they state that part of the reason why difficulties and bad consequences can be incorporated into a good experience is because they are framed within a deliberate goal and play motivation.

[...] in most cases you know you’re the hero or heroine of the story, and we are telling this story while knowing we are going to be rewarded by the king, and we are gonna get our little medal for it. So, it’s a constant “let’s play, and even though we know we will stumble along the way, we know we will win in the end”. (Interviewee 2)

This quote is meaningful for an additional reason that we will explore in a following section: the idea that part of the reason they can do that is because on some level they know where the story is going. For now, we may focus on how it reinforces the idea that, since the players are aligned in the desire of following the story, they can push forward through the consequences.

From the interviewees’ statements, then, we can observe that the ideal of “good play” is one where synchronicity between players is achieved regarding their desires, objectives,

and performance during play. It is a form of play where the players can directly perceive that their actions have clear consequences, and where those consequences can be seamlessly accepted and incorporated into the experience, be they positive or negative.

4.1.2. How “good play” is achieved

Now that we have seen how the interviewees framed “good play” to be, it can be informative to look at how it is achieved in practice. In other words, while the previous statements are raised in prescriptive terms (“play should look like this”), this does not necessarily inform how play is actually carried out. In this sense, looking at how this “good play” is achieved is valuable because it allows us to look at the specific strategies that players deploy during TRPG play and the values that underlie those strategies.

The first key aspect for achieving good play that was raised by the interviewees is the idea of “taking play seriously”. This is understood as players committing to treating the diegetic level of play as meaningful for the purposes of play and in the terms of the structures that facilitate the play experience.

In other words, taking play seriously is not just committing to treat the game world as “real”, nor being open to accepting all consequences that come forward, as stated above. It is a general disposition towards the play experience that extends over the social, ludic, and diegetic levels of TRPG play: it is understanding that when a play group gets together to play, they are defining specific rules and expectations for the experience that are there not just to facilitate an experience, but also to signal what the group wants out of it. Taking play seriously, from these interviews, is acknowledging that the group is here to play in a specific way, and then committing to play in that specific way.

As examples, Interviewee 1 mentioned one time they were running a game for a group of teachers who had never played TRPGs before. They describe this group of players as initially hesitant to describe their characters’ actions and speak in-character during play, but once they began getting a grasp of what the expectations of play were and the kinds of actions could be performed, they began committing to it and playing in a more deliberate and meaningful way, which led to a much more enjoyable experience for everyone.

I remember above all the experience of one of the teachers there, she was a teacher of... I don’t know, maybe in the range of 50 or more years of age, who at the start was like “oh, I don’t really understand this game”, but later

was all like “oh, I wanna shoot at this”, and “I wanna do this”, and like it was very nice to see how seriously she took it and, like, she said to me later on, “I got really into it, into believing⁷ that I was a soldier, I believed I was an investigator, and when I saw this clue then I saw that other thing, oh, like this?” It was a very pleasant experience for me because I saw how their experience shifted from “this is a game” to “I am here and now I am a detective, I am a soldier”. (Interviewee 1)

Here we can see how the process of taking play seriously is framed as a good practice that does not require prior experience playing, and that more crucially depends on the idea of committing to and playing towards the experience as the group is enacting it.

This is additionally reinforced by Interviewee 4, who frames this process as a result of the “social contract” that players establish when initiating TRPG play, specifically in the sense that it is understanding the social dynamics and the rules that have been defined as meaningful for the group, rather than understanding the actual ludic components of the game, what make taking it seriously possible.

As a second key element, the interviewees frame achieving “good play” as a fundamentally collaborative effort, where it is essential that everyone at the table not only acknowledge the established expectations for play, but also pitch in, add to the story being played out, and support each other’s exploits during play.

For example, Interviewee 1 happily remembers when they were running a game designed to emulate the style of Latin-American telenovelas, where they saw the players in the group not only responding positively to the proposed ideas for the game to be played, but also pitching in and adding new ideas both before and during play.

I can be running the game and the players are able to follow whatever narrative they want and they can do things in between, no problem with that, but seeing players bring up something like “you know what, I want my character to go through this other thing instead”. I mean, “I don’t want my character to be a part of that family, I want them to be outside of the family”. Perfect! “And, also, they’re involved in this other thing”. I then I would say, look, I have an NPC that’s related to that, cool. And it worked out like that. So, it was a thing about “you come up with ideas and show

⁷ Here, when the interviewee talks about the player’s comments, they use the expression “creerse el cuento” (lit. “believing your own tale”), which refers to having self-confidence and grit, sometimes to the point of being full of themselves. A more accurate translation would be “believing their own hype”, which emphasizes the aspect of buying into the fiction of play and acting confidently from it, but it wouldn’t be the kind of language the person being referred to would use for it. I have chosen to translate it as “I got really into it, into believing that I was...” to try to convey the same meaning while keeping the phrase within the kind of language that would have been used by the person the interviewee talks about.

them to me, and I'll come up with ideas and offer them to you".
(Interviewee 1)

Here, we see collaborative play being described from the perspective of the GM as a continuous feedback loop between all players at the table. This quote is meaningful because it also encapsulates the idea that taking play seriously is also a collaborative effort: reinforcing the expectations of play at the table is framed here as a continuous exercise of saying "yes, and" to what other players do.

The collaborative nature of play is invoked in terms of balancing the aims of every person at the table by Interviewee 4, where they reinforce the idea that it is something that is not automatically achieved by a group but actively sought out instead.

Not all role-playing groups have the same asymmetry or symmetry between players and GM, understanding it as a collaborative game, ultimately. And it's a discussion that you often see in the community and in the play experience itself regarding what you are and aren't allowed to do, for example. A GM that doesn't let you do anything is just as annoying as a player who is constantly trying to min-max their way to breaking the game. And if you have both in the same group, then that's a place I won't want to go back to, because no, we are not telling a story together, if this is what we're doing I'd rather sit down at my computer and play a videogame or read a book instead. (Interviewee 4)

Here, the collaborative aspect of play is framed to be so important that failing to engage in this way invites the thought of failing to grasp TRPG play itself: Interviewee 4 suggests that players that fail to engage would be better served by other forms of play that better cater to individual aims.

One of the most interesting things to notice about the interviewees' perspective on good play and how it's achieved is that game preferences or playing styles are not really brought up in prescriptive terms: this suggests that taking play seriously and playing collaboratively is something that can be done in any TRPG play group, and therefore is more precisely found in the rapport and relationship being built between players across the different layers of play.

"Good play", however, doesn't look the same way in all groups: part of the reason the interviewees highlight different specifics of their experiences of play when arguing in favour of collaborative play and taking it seriously is that they clearly highlight their own preferences for play in the process: Interviewee 1 prefers a more narratively inclined style of play, where stories with persistent themes are developed over time,

while Interviewee 2 prefers play experiences that focus on interesting and suspenseful choices. Meanwhile, Interviewee 3 goes as far as suggesting that they enjoy TRPG play because it is centred around role-playing, and Interviewee 4 enjoys the freedom to try and express different ideas and concepts through the ludic affordances provided by the group and the play experience.

Despite this high variation on the specific aspects of play favoured, the accounts of the interviewees point towards the same facilitating structure for “good play”. Therefore, from these statements, we can describe the process of achieving “good play” as one where players clearly state and reinforce their expectations for the play experience on as many different levels as relevant, and where they work collaboratively to enact those expectations during play. The general disposition towards doing this and to actively seek out the agreed play experience, then, is framed as “taking play seriously”.

4.1.3. Obstacles to “good play”

Having seen what the process of achieving “good play” looks like, it becomes relevant to look closely at what the interviewees describe as the main obstacles to achieving good play. This is relevant to understanding not only where play is likely to break down, but because bad experiences were also observed to be meaningful: if “good play” is a prescriptively-defined concept, then moments when play strays too far from it are also illustrative of what should be avoided.

To begin with, opposed to the “good play” -enabling idea of having clear shared expectations for the play experience, we find that lack of clarity and clear communication is seen as a major obstacle to good play. This is a straightforward reasoning: if we understand “good play” as a structural element of play based on clear communication, then failure to convey expectations clearly doesn’t allow players to engage in a way that is meaningful for everyone in the group. This is a similar principle to how Nordic larp designers incorporate expectation management in their designs (Svanevik & Brind, 2018).

Interviewee 4 describes this very conflict when talking about the importance of communication while doing debriefings among players to try and figure out how to smooth things over after a tense session: failing to properly state everyone’s expectations can lead to constant and consistent problems between characters and their players, to the point where the difference becomes difficult to parse.

[...] if your expectations are, like, are in-character, and we can still talk about this, we can do a debriefing, and you go, okay, shit, it can still be a given milestone in the story we're telling, you know what I mean? It's in-character. But when the debriefing gets out of hand, and you begin seeing a fight that you no longer know if it's between the players or not, and that has to do with their shared, or not, expectations, you know what I mean? For example, the usual discussion about if we're going to be a super serious party or if we'll just wing it. [...] If you haven't reached an agreement on that front and you have this mix of characters, and that mix hasn't really managed to fit properly, those debriefings are going to be horrible. (Interviewee 4)

This quote is illustrative of how perceived obstacles are examples of what "good play" is. While initially it is referring to how expectations should be managed during play and the perils of failing to do so, notice the example given: the decision to play in a serious tone or to disregard tone entirely. The specific distinction being invoked here is the practice of coordinating during the character creation process, with the purpose of the group building characters that are rooted in the world and that have ludic options that fit the game context in an appropriate way. While this detail further explains the importance of coordination, this further illustrates how, for Interviewee 4, "good play" is achieved through the ludic affordances of the play experience.

As a result, we can see that a failure to communicate can be perceived on different layers and can be understood both before and after play begins. Additionally, while it is often perceived as an annoyance, it is not always strictly defined directly as a problem that should be addressed.

Interviewee 3 illustrates this when bringing up two different instances of poor communication during play. The first one, when one of the characters in the PC group decided to attack an NPC on a whim, only to find out that it was a plot-critical NPC after the fact and after that NPC was no longer willing to help them, is framed as a bad experience but accepted as a possible result of the interaction. However, the second one, where in a group that highly prioritizes expressing role-play by acting and speaking in-character, one of the players flat-out refused to communicate with the rest of the players in that way, is framed explicitly as going against what the players were there to do.

For example, when we are playing, and a character in particular is given some information. And, obviously, it's information that your character knows, but the rest of the party doesn't, you know what I mean? Then the character, the person, let's say, that was playing, they refused to narrate, to narrate that information they had received in-character. And a lot of the time it was information that we didn't know as players, because, I don't know,

the GM went with them to a different room, to inform the character. Then, for example, they come back, and they say “no, the GM told me this”. [...] Then, like, okay, but aren’t we role-playing? (Interviewee 3)

In a similar way to the previous example, this quote illustrates how the perceived obstacle shows what “good play” looks like to each person. Interviewee 3, as mentioned previously, highly prioritizes role-playing as a source of enjoyment during TRPG play. Therefore, it is no wonder that a player that doesn’t role-play along with the group will be perceived as an obstacle to the ideal experience.

It follows that when each players’ expectations are not being met during play, their capacity to engage with the play experience suffers as a result. And as we have seen, while this is framed as something that should be achieved through clear communication, the interviewees base these ideas on their own preference. It is significant, then, that this difference in preference is not highlighted as something to be taken into consideration, but instead folded into the importance of expectation management.

Because of this, these experiences can be an issue that appears from one player’s perspective, where all players but one are operating under a shared set of expectations, where the player that is left out has no means to actually match the interests of the rest of the group. This can be particularly insidious when a player’s attempts to engage with the play experience are misunderstood by the rest to be something different from what they intend.

For example, Interviewee 1 describes one time when they were intentionally playing as a sexually promiscuous character in a game set in the world of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* fantasy novels. As they describe, one of the reasons they found playing such a character appealing was that the world and the ruleset could support the concept in an interesting way, and they wanted to explore that idea during play. While their intentions were to use this character to explore both sexuality and promiscuity during play in a safe manner, the group they were playing with understood that said character was being deployed as a means to look out for as many possibilities for sexual encounters as possible, and everyone reduced the character concept as someone who was exclusively motivated by sex.

[*A Song of Ice and Fire*] is a world where the things that have to do with the world of sexualization are something that the system itself tells you, like, “do it like this”. All these rules about how to follow these patterns and how to approach this without doing it in an explicit way. But, even despite this,

or at least how I felt it, was that it was shocking for the players anyways, in the sense of... I am talking about sexuality. I, at least, feel it that way, regardless of whether the game gave you the freedom to, like, “hey, use this”, for example, to generate intrigue, to get information, and all that, I feel that talking about sexuality at that table was always going to be like going to the other extreme, and I was like “oh no, I do not want this”. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 describes this as an uncomfortable experience that soured the play sessions for them. While this on its face can be seen as an example of the rest of the players misunderstanding what Interviewee 1 wanted to do with this character, this can also be read as them not being aligned with the expectations and preferences of the rest of the group. This complicates the situation slightly, since it raises the idea that establishing a common understanding of the elements of the world being played in is not always something that can be achieved: here, Interviewee 1 assumed that, by virtue of how the book series treated sexuality, the group at the table would be willing to treat it with a nuance that matched their own expectations, which was not the case.

As a result of experiences like these, the interviewees described their own agency during play as being compromised. When a player is not properly understanding the expectations for play and is not able to engage with the game in a way that is meaningful for others, their capacity to contribute and add to others’ play is diminished, and as a result said players can become wholly disengaged from the experience. This is the reasoning that explains why good communication is key to achieving good play: when everyone is “on the same page”, players can more directly and safely support each other during the experience.

A final element that rounds out the description of “good play” is how the role of the GM is perceived. After all, if we’re exploring power fantasies in play, the figure of the GM stares players directly as the most immediately evident figure holding real-world power over the play experience, and as such, they would be the most likely to impact it while making “good play” happen.

While the interviewees problematize the figure of the GM, they only do so in very specific situations: specifically, when they fail to make the play experience into a positive one, be it through inaction towards “problem” players or through excessive action towards a pre-determined path (a practice colloquially known as “railroading”).

The main purpose of the GM during play, as the interviewees argue, is to provide an experience for the players that is clearly defined but allows for flexibility. This accounts for both of the elements of “good play” mentioned: both clearly communicating expectations and boundaries, and also providing players for the opportunity to meaningfully impact play through action.

For example: Interviewees 1 and 2 stated that they had several years of experience running games, and as such talk at length about the importance of designing play sessions that intentionally lead towards specific experiences. This is framed as an important act of communication, in the sense that if you as a GM understand what kind of play you want to foster, players can more accurately aim towards it. On a similar note, Interviewee 3 speaks from the perspective of the player, highlighting the corollary of the relationship towards the GM: if “good play” is collaborative, that collaboration must include the GM as well. They describe how their GM, while initially very hesitant to fully entertain their group’s propensity for making fun of the premises presented during play, eventually understood that this level of unseriousness was part of the experience the group enjoyed, and so instead of fighting against it decided to join in, which in turn signalled to players that there was space both for seriousness and silliness at the table.

I think it has also been kind of a process for the GM, because our usual GM, let’s say, because we do sometimes play with other friends that GM, but our usual GM, in the end, also had to learn that our tables also have its chaos component, you know what I mean? And that seriousness, like, he had to lower his expectations regarding seriousness. Know what I mean? But the thing is that, okay, I think by now we have learned... Well, it was because the party changed, and all that jazz, but we have learned that there are moments of seriousness, and there are moments where we can fuck around and our usual GM is kind of used to that rhythm, know what I mean? And he joins in to it too. (Interviewee 3)

Here, we see an example of how the previous misalignment of expectations can be resolved over time: the GM, as any other player, can find themselves in a situation where their expectations are not being met by those of the rest of the players. This shows us that expectations can, and do, shift over time. This is an additional showing of the value of clear communication for achieving “good play”.

On the flipside, the GM is seen as responsible for the enjoyment of the play experience for the entire group specifically when it comes to the correct exercise of their power over the play experience over elements that may compromise its proper functioning

such as poor communication or expectation management. This is a point where the role of the GM becomes very important, especially when it is mishandled: Interviewee 2 remembers a time when they were running a game for a large group of people, and where they accidentally misgendered one of the players at the table, despite their own original insistence on being clear about preferred pronouns.

I once had a table that was really diverse... Sexually diverse, and I was greener on that subject. Then, it happened, I don't know, like 3 or 4 years ago. Then I was at that stage of my process of deconstruction where I was picking up on the importance of remembering pronouns. So, I took to it, and it was like "Hey, one moment, before we get confused. Please tell me your pronouns right now so that we won't get confused later". And the only jackass who got confused was me, because I wrote it down and everyone could remember them easily, except me. So, at some point I kind of got the pronouns wrong, and I didn't even notice. But later I did notice that the person in question was really offended, like, a lot. So, it kind of like, it was a bitter pill to swallow. (Interviewee 2)

While we could just take note of how this quote is an example of a GM failing to properly accommodate all players at the table, I would point towards the specific callback to how long ago this incident happened: this was clearly an impactful moment for the interviewee, to the point where they remember it and still feel uncomfortable years later. This can be seen as evidence of the weight of the prescriptive role of the GM as the provider of a safe play experience for the players.

Another responsibility of the GM is to manage the behaviour of "problem players", that is, players who intentionally play in a way that is disruptive for the rest of the group. We will return to this point later in this analysis, but what we should keep in mind is that if the GM's power only becomes a problem when it fails to act to preserve "good play", then it can be seen as a presence that becomes transparent when "good play" is being achieved: they are part of the collective effort of play, and as such, the power they wield becomes a known factor of the play experience.

Going forward, then, we should understand that "good play" is understood by the interviewees as a structural property of TRPG play: not something that is necessarily expressed in the specific fictional or ludic elements being invoked or manipulated during play, but rather, a disposition from all players at the table to commit to playing out the results of play and finding out what happens, taking play seriously, and building play together in a way that meaningfully reflects each player and character's agency.

If we were to extrapolate from these statements, the ideal TRPG experience proposed here appears to be one that is so collaborative that it emerges as an experience of uncoordinated synchronicity, where players don't need to communicate and reinforce what they want with each other, but build upon and further their actions within play instinctually, and where all results, be them positive or negative for their characters, can be opportunities for interesting developments in a story that players know is moving in a direction they find meaningful, so long as the players commit to taking play seriously – that is, to reinforcing what the group wants to see during play – and to fully seeing the consequences of their characters' actions.

We should keep in mind that this experience as described paints ideal TRPG play as frictionless, or in other words, when players do the work of achieving good play, the experience will flow freely, without distractions or impediments, towards the kind of experiences every member of the group has agreed they want. This is extremely important going forward since it informs the kinds of power fantasies that TRPGs are uniquely equipped to support and that players seek out as a result.

4.2. Understanding power fantasies in TRPG play

Now that we have characterised the kind of play experience where we can observe power fantasies, we must now look at the specific content of these fantasies with the aim of understanding both what they look like and how they function. We will begin examining the interviewees' statements at a more general level, first looking at fantasies enacted during TRPG play, so that we can then move on to specifically address how power is constructed during play, to finally bringing them together in examining what kinds of power fantasies are sought out during play. We will conclude by problematizing how this same mechanism works when it serves "good play" and when it becomes disruptive to the experience, all while examining the main kind of power fantasy we were able to identify in this study.

4.2.1. The "Barbie Girl" space: what fantasies look like in TRPG play

We'll begin by first exploring what kinds of things the interviewees described as the "cool" things that you can do when playing TRPGs. Once again, the specific contents of "cool" play experiences were highly dependent on each interviewee's personal preferences and life experiences. However, once we look at the commonalities in how

the interviewees argue that TRPGs are unique in letting them access those cool situations, we will begin to see how these preferences inform the power fantasies they seek out as a result.

When looking at the diegetic level of play, experiences such as traveling the world, being able to wield magic, and generally being able to explore situations and experience positions that would be stressful or undesirable are highlighted as cool things that can be done during TRPG play. While these elements are expressions of the personal preferences of the interviewees, an interesting element arose from them: the idea that those experiences are cool *precisely because* they are things that they don't have to do in real life. As we saw in an earlier chapter, this is an essential feature of fantasies.

For example, Interviewee 3 describes how one aspect of play they enjoy is the possibility of playing characters that travel the world and get to discover exciting and interesting new places. However, one of the things they highlight about said experiences is precisely that they are fictional, and therefore, allow them to reach the good parts of travel without dealing with the minutiae of preparing for a trip and affording it.

In the end I think that traveling is good, cool, fun, in real life, let's say, concretely, maybe. Then actually being able to say, like, "I'm going off on a trip", I insist, like, I think the coolest thing is the thing about there being no repercussions. You know what I mean? I kinda link it to that. Like, because, for example, if in the actual world I said "all right, I'm going on a trip tomorrow", let's suppose. OK? What would I need to do to be able to go on a trip? I'd have to, I dunno, for example, give notice at my job, let my family know, check if I have the money to do it, know what I mean? Like, all those really operative things, get my bags ready, etcetera. On the other hand, in D&D I'm like "all right, I'm going on a trip tomorrow", and that's that, OK. Know what I mean? (Interviewee 3)

As we can see, the specific thing that is avoided here is the ungrateful labour of planning and preparing for a trip. It follows that in this scenario, Interviewee 2 enjoys all the benefits of traveling without any of the costs, or even, the consequences of pursuing this decision.

On that same note, Interviewee 2 describes the experience of running a game about characters trying to survive during a zombie apocalypse. When asked to explain why such a situation is cool for them, they explained that one of the interesting aspects of playing TRPGs for them was precisely about finding out what they would do in highly stressful situations from a safe distance.

[...] nobody dreams of... No, I'm not gonna say no one, I know a lot of people do, but... I don't dream of being in a zombie apocalypse. But okay, let's say we are in a zombie apocalypse. What kinds of choices would we make? What would we do? Like... You live that stress, because you can live that stress while you're drinking a soda and eating a donut, and as soon as that's over, we say goodbye, we return to reality, without actually having lost your young 15-year-old daughter in a zombie attack. (Interviewee 2)

This previous quote lets us see that the idea of something being cool in TRPG play because the consequences only exist in the play experience and not in real life is closely related to the idea of TRPG play as a safe space to experience different possibilities. The interviewees describe TRPG play as a space where they are able to play out topics and ideas that they personally find interesting, be it finding out what they would do in unusual situations, or even trying out different identities on in a controlled environment. This is an aspect of character play that has been studied previously (Bowman & Schrier, 2018), but once again, the aspect of non-consequence is highlighted as a relevant angle for understanding cool play situations.

Interviewee 1, for example, elaborates on how something cool they can do in TRPG play is to portray a character that is significantly different from themselves in their everyday life. The reason why they frame TRPG play as a safe space for doing this is because outside of play, said behaviours would be criticized by others.

You are using an avatar of what you are in this context, but you can also do it in a safe space. If you did this in everyday life, it is very likely that you would face criticism or run into a "hey, what is going on with this person", or that you're crazy, for example, someone shows up and goes, oh, I don't know, "I am the best explorer in the world". It's very likely that people, like the perception they may have of your behaviour, that you come across as weird, inappropriate, or even... Like, I dunno, childish or immature, a lot of the time. But in this kind of environment you can do this sort of thing. (Interviewee 1)

In this quote, the safe space allows for unconventional expression, and protects the player from outside judgement or misunderstandings: in other words, it protects them from the social consequences of non-conformity.

Finally, Interviewee 4 explains that for them TRPG play allows players the space and time to intentionally explore and reflect on topics and ideas they find personally significant in a relatively safe manner, dubbing it the "Barbie Girl" space.

[...] I think that role-playing games are a "Barbie Girl" space. This means that you can be who you want to be in them, and they give you a space, for

example, to feel catharsis on certain topics that you are currently fixated on as a person. It's, for example, let's say you're grieving, you're reflecting on your own identity, there's some topic you'd like to work on. It's a space that allows you that parenthesis, to work on it in a relatively safe space where nothing happens apart from processing the experience. It's like an easy way of getting experience, without having to face real life, the cost of experience, as a real experience. Because usually real experience puts you in a situation where you just can't stop shaking all over. This is a space where you can go, sure, I'm feeling overwhelmed, you can pause it, give it two, three thoughts, decide if you want to go through with it or not, you don't have to face the hard dissonance regarding certain beliefs, but it pushes them to you, it forces you to engage and put a foot forward. (Interviewee 4)

We can see in this quote that the safety being described is specifically safety from consequences: this again highlights the idea that non-consequence in real life is the relevant factor that makes TRPG play an ideal context to explore these kinds of ideas.

As we can see from all four examples shown, while once again the specific preferences and dispositions vary with each interviewee, there is an underlying understanding that the cool things one can do in TRPG play are possible because play gives players a safe space to experience the consequences of their actions without them following into the real world, or in other words, that the play experience is being constructed as a space where a difference between real-life and fictional consequences is enforced and maintained.

This idea has previously been expressed when describing role-playing as building towards producing a "brave space" for players (Friedner, 2019), because being aware that TRPG play allows players to safely play out the consequences of an action without the real-life consequences of doing so allows them to express themselves in ways that would normally be frowned upon their respective social contexts. Crucially, this also allows us to understand that these play situations give affordance to the production of fantasies, in the sense that the lack of real-life consequences is observed as a main draw of them. This becomes meaningful, then, when we start looking at how this license is used to imagine what power is, and what being powerful looks like, in TRPG play.

4.2.2. "I simply would not have opened the door": what power looks like in TRPG play

Let us briefly go back to the exploration of power established in previous chapters. Power is the concept that we use to explain causality in the social world, that is, what we look at to explain who makes things happen and why they happen the way they do.

It can be understood as a property of an individual's capacity of enacting their will upon the world, that is, power in agential terms, or it can be seen as an extension of a social structure that defines certain subjects that can act upon and because of the position they inhabit in said structure, that is, power in structural terms. With this in mind, how do the interviewees talk about power during play?

At a first glance, the interviewees talk about power almost exclusively in agential terms. When asked about their previous play experiences that they would describe as "empowering", the interviewees agree that feeling like you can take their characters in whatever direction they want and that the story being told will change because of their choices is essential. Some of them go as far as to suggest that said feeling of agency during play is intrinsic to TRPGs.

For example, even though Interviewee 3 stated that their main priority during play is role-playing as a character, they also acknowledge that a significant part of the "cool" part of play is related to combat, which in *D&D* is a situation which is mostly framed through the ludic layer of play.

[...] in general, I play D&D only using casters. Now, I've played with other characters before, like barbarians, rogues, etcetera, but I like caster characters a lot, I find them very comfortable, and I like them because I like magical characters, and so on. I think that for me, in a way, every session with a combat where I kill a lot of guys with my spells, well, I could call that a bit empowering. That it feels kinda cool. (Interviewee 3)

Here, we can see that even despite it falling outside of the realm of the preferences of Interviewee 3, engaging with the ludic layer of play is perceived as rewarding because it is a way to perceive themselves as the causal origin of the development of a scenario.

From the perspective of the GM, a similar situation is acknowledged. While talking about the challenges that a GM may face when learning to be comfortable with the idea of letting players do what they want doing play instead of following a set path, Interviewee 1 talks about agential empowerment as producing a feedback loop between all the people at the table: if I get to do what I want and the game accommodates it, then others can build upon it with what they want, all the while keeping themselves open to later actions.

[Many GMs] generally have an expectation of "I have a story that took a lot of time to build and you guys are going to fit in here", but it rarely happens that a GM can allow that what you wrote to be adapted a bit. Generally, it's

either me who is going to adapt, or you make yourself fit in my story. But, like, this dialogue, “let’s build the story all together”? That dialogue, like, when you are able to make it happen, now I realize with this experience I had, the players feel really empowered because it’s like “hey, I wanted this”, and then now, pow! And really, for me it’s been one of the most pleasant experiences I’ve ever had as a GM, because the players were really into this, it was like “I have this prepared, I want to do this, this [...]”. This is what I would mention as an example of empowerment, both from the players and from the GM. (Interviewee 1)

Here, the identification of players as the causal point of origin of the events during play is more clearly observable, but operating on a different scale. While the previous example focused on the ludic level, here we see that power is observed across the layers of play, since the players described identify themselves as the reason why the story unfolded in a particular way.

Now, let’s pay attention to what is going on under the surface here. While both examples being brought up highlight the value of allowing for individual agency from the players, they both do so while implying a structural affordance for that agency. Interviewee 3’s anecdote about combat prowess and individual expression being empowered is framed as possible within the rules selected for the play experience, while Interviewee 1’s anecdote about allowing players to change the GM’s story if it produces a more involved experience is framed as possible within the premise of collaborative play as a process that leads to “good play”, as explained above.

Agency during play is not only discussed in terms of being able to act, but also specifically in terms of personal expression. As we’ve seen before, the interviewees acknowledge that one of the most significant cool things that can be done during TRPG play is being able to deliberately express oneself in a safe space in ways one could not usually do. However, one of the interesting things about this is that they acknowledge that it is something that is possible because of the collaborative process of defining the play experience at the table.

For example, Interviewee 4 describes the importance of knowing the people they will play with in terms of managing expectations of the kinds of things that other players will bring to the table (such as specific safety tools ⁸ or general player dispositions) and, in turn, the kinds of play they will feel comfortable enacting during play sessions.

⁸ “Safety tools” are mechanisms that can be included during TRPG play that are meant to define visible and actionable triggers for reinforcing personal boundaries during play (Shaw & Bryant-Monk, n.d.). These tools are designed to use the language of ludic elements to enable players to act upon the social

I know that tables that will be run by [third party], we all agree that no one will think, for instance, I need a pause, X Card, it's a thing. "Ow, how dare...!" It's like no, no, no. Someone flashed a red light, we stop, we breathe, we figure out what to do, there's discussions, like none of us is gonna get all edgy, unless someone's like "Hey, you know what, I am playing a character that is going to be edgy", I want... Then, because of that, I won't have, I dunno, xenophobic discourses, gender violence for anything, but instead... Yes, we will deal with difficult topics, but we're all adults here when it comes to dealing with difficult topics, it's not an edgy thing, not something against a character in particular, or a specific trauma. Then it becomes a space that gives you a lot of freedoms, because you already have a baseline for safety and a frame. (Interviewee 4)

Following from the examples shown above and in the previous section, in this quote personal expression is closely linked to how expectations are managed before play begins: if one of the cool things that we can do in TRPG play is explore personally significant themes and express ourselves in unconventional ways, then being clear about what kinds of topics we can explore with our characters enables players to pursue their own desires through play more thoroughly. Therefore, if we understand the capacity for personal expression as another form of agency, this quote is once again reinforcing the idea that this is an agency that has a structural affordance: if we can express ourselves freely, it's because we know what the boundaries of the experience are.

This framing of TRPG play as a safe space for personal expression leads into a consistent theme across the interviewees' statements: that this safe space allows them to move out of their "comfort zone" during play. What this means is highly specific to each interviewee's preferences, but it generally relates to the experience of being able to step out of what they perceive as "usual" for themselves and their regular lives to be. Again, this is consistent with previous literature (Bowman & Schrier, 2018) about character play in TRPGs and how players relate to it.

However, when we look at these statements in the context of the interviewees' understanding of TRPG play as valuable for being a space free of real-life consequences, and in the context of understanding power in agential terms while acknowledging it is embedded in an agreed-upon structural context, it can become valuable to ask ourselves: if TRPG play allows them to move away from their "comfort zone" and express themselves in ways they usually can't, what are the interviewees saying about what their comfort zone is and how they usually express themselves?

level in a more comfortable way. The examples brought up in the following quote (the X Card, "red light") are examples of these.

In general, the comfort zone is described by the interviewees in terms of *predictability*. This is mostly raised in terms of everyday life being perceived as restrictive in a consistent way, such as the expectations around professional and self-restrained personal expression in work environments, or the repetitive and grounded nature of their usual routine. This repetitiveness and predictability can extend to even other aspects of life, such as other entertainment forms like movies and videogames, which some interviewees directly state is why they prefer TRPG play in some situations, defining it as a medium that allows for more variety and unpredictability.

This by itself may already make us look with interest: after all, by their own accounts TRPG play's draw is precisely the fact that the experience is not necessarily pre-defined but that its shape and direction is negotiated by everyone at the table. To illustrate how this tension is resolved, Interviewee 2 gives us an account of why they believe TRPG play is so uniquely empowering:

Almost by definition, you feel empowered [when playing]. When I, usually, when I have to explain what role-playing games are, with so many years under your belt you kinda develop a speech for it, and for me, one of the fundamental parts of that speech is: if you're a "screen yeller", I call them like that, you'll really enjoy playing role-playing games. I mean, if you're watching a movie, and you're one of those people who says like "No, don't open the door! Don't open the door! She opened it, how dumb. I simply would not have opened the door. I would have saved myself. If I had been in that situation, I would've done it better". (Interviewee 2)

Let us review what we've seen so far to make sense of this. We are understanding power as *causality in social life* (or in other words, how interviewees understand cause and effect of the things that happen during play). Therefore, the kind of power that is being described here as actively pursued and enjoyed by the interviewees:

- Is understood as agential ("Things happen during play because I choose to make them happen"),
- But is structurally facilitated ("Because the game rules and a known social context with people I trust allow me to act like this and for my actions to work"),
- Is defined in terms of personal expression ("I do this by expressing myself freely and with intention") and impact on the experience ("And by deliberately choosing things that will change the trajectory of the story"),

- Is defined in opposition to real life in terms of restrictiveness of expression and impact (“Which is meaningful because in real life I can’t act nor express myself like this”), and
- Is attractive because it allows exploration of the effects of the cause without having to endure them as real-life consequences (“And because, if I were to act like this in real life, the consequences of it would be undesirable”).

This form of power is one that is highly motivated by personal action to explore uncertain aspects of social life and personal agency, but also one that is heavily reliant on knowing ahead of time what the possible spectrum of experiences will be for it to operate as a safe space. It is a form of power that, as afforded by explicit negotiations between players and manipulation of the socio-ludic context of TRPG play, is predicated on the capacity of understanding the situation fully and playfully engaging with a very specific range of uncertain scenarios. With this, we have enough elements to elaborate on the kind of power fantasy that the interviewees are describing.

4.2.3. “That catharsis of ‘I don’t have to be a serious person’”: What power fantasies look like in TRPG Play

Before going forward, let’s review some elements from previous chapters to understand what kind of power fantasy the interviewees are describing. First, as we established before by following psychoanalytic thinking, a fantasy is an imaginary model of reality that is produced by an individual with the ultimate purpose of addressing a perceived inconsistency in the self, which is done through the acquisition of an object or through achieving an objective. However, this applies specifically to individual fantasies: the fantasies that players produce during TRPG play are collective, which means that they are collaboratively defined and enacted by the players at the table, and need to achieve a level of verisimilitude and consistency that the players feel satisfied with in order to achieve a satisfying experience.

Therefore, if we use this understanding of the mechanisms of a fantasy, then a power fantasy should present power as either the object of desire or the proxy through which some other desired object is acquired either by an individual player or by the whole group.

Let us briefly, then, return to the subject of how the interviewees frame power within their meaningful play experiences. The form of power that is described by them is both agential but embedded in a specific structure: the choices the group has made to define the play experience's rules, boundaries and qualities give affordances to certain forms of expression and action. This would make TRPG play an exercise in collective subjectivation: the process through which power produces specific subjects that are both defined by the system that power resides in and that are able to act within the system because of how they have been defined (Butler, 1997).

This way of looking at the interviewees' statements allows us to further interrogate their understanding of power during TRPG play, since it shows that the interviewees recognize a process of producing and enacting a character within a specific framework that prioritizes certain aspects of the self as relevant for action within the social world of the game. Interviewee 2's statement about TRPG play being especially attractive to "screen yellers" shown near the end of the previous section is an expression of this: such a player knows that stories like this work in a certain way, and by exercising this known element about the world, they can act impactfully upon it.

That said, the subjectivity described by the interviewees raises some points that puts this interpretation into a tension that is worth examining. Firstly, let's look at the idea of unpleasant results being meaningful in TRPGs under this lens. Previously in this chapter we discussed one interviewee's perspective on PC death being meaningful and not necessarily a bad result to play as long as it is framed properly within the expectations of the play experience. Understanding TRPG play as a process of collaborative subjectivation, we can view this as the players collectively deciding to make death knowable in certain terms during play, producing a context where certain aspects of its uncertainty can be safely explored. Interviewee 1 mentions this directly when talking about how one of the aspects they most enjoy about horror-themed games is that even in death, characters (and in turn players) are able to understand the incomprehensible, even if the only thing that can be understood is that death is inevitable.

It's even one of the few games where I see people enjoying the fact of understanding that their character has died. Not because of some morbid enjoyment of "aha, I killed you", but because of the fact that what the player understands of this is "the most I can understand within this entire world is that my character can die", no matter what is happening in all these things, and that death seems to be the most tangible thing within everything else existing in the world. [...] That's what seems most interesting to me, this

fact that within this much... Uncertainty, the smallest discovery, can be the first step towards a “wow, now I can understand a little bit of what is going on”. (Interviewee 1)

In this quote, death is framed as a major source of uncertainty in real life that is made approachable and understandable in specific ways because of the genre of fiction being invoked by the play experience: if in a horror story the death of the protagonist is a foregone conclusion, then players know it can happen, and it can be woven into the experience to become something meaningful.

Similarly, Interviewee 2 talks about a game set during a zombie apocalypse that they ran during a convention. In this game, they remember a novice player being confronted with a life-or-death situation: the PCs were running away from the zombie horde and found a young child trapped inside a locked car, which presented the players with a challenge. Would they be able to free the child successfully before the horde caught up? However, in an unexpected but highly memorable turn, Interviewee 2 recounts that this novice player absolutely refused to save the child on the grounds that it would obviously lead to the entire group’s death. To top it off, while the rest of the players were originally hesitant to join in, they were all perceived to be having fun towards the end.

It was this player who had never played a role-playing game before. While she was containing the emotion of her speech, she put her back to the car, and explained briefly, and finished her speech saying, like “you guys see what you do”, and then left and started running, like “I am not even going to waste one second in my life even trying to think about this problem”. All the rest of the players followed her and abandoned the child, something that had never happened before [when running this adventure for other groups]. And she had so, so, so much fun. And I noticed the other players in that moment were kind of on the fence about whether or not they had the right to have fun with her because of the speech that she gave. But when they followed her, it really was like “this is so cool”. (Interviewee 2)

This experience could help us understand genre-savvy play as a practice that is supported by subjectivation in power fantasies in TRPG play. If the subjectivities being constructed by the players effectively incorporate knowledge about the sort of events that can pan out from such a scenario in other similar pieces of fiction, then players can choose to act in a way that is directly informed by their knowledge of the narrative genre, and as such impact the story based on knowledge they possess that would not be accessible for the characters in the diegetic layer of play. In other words, the reason why the ethics of this choice are not a relevant factor for the inciting player is because the

fantasy is constructed on a process of subjectivation that centred on the agential contract of TRPG play: what matters for the purposes of the fantasy is that the player is able to make a meaningful change in the story, even if it is through an amoral decision (cf. Nephew, 2003).

Following up on this, Interviewee 3 describes a scenario where they were playing a Halloween-themed game where the characters had to face off against a Headless Horseman, an undead rider, slaughtering dozens of people in a haunted manor. They describe how they remembered that the way of defeating this monster was to return its skull to its grave, so they had their character grab the skull and run all over town to return it in a way they describe as panic-inducing, but fun. When asked to further elaborate about why this play experience stood out to them, Interviewee 3 specifically stated that it was because it was a chance to apply knowledge about the world that only they held and that, as a result, allowed them to have a significant impact on the results of the scenario.

[...] it was the way in which, well, I as a player, through my character, came to the decision to try to defeat the headless horseman, because, it had already killed a lot of NPCs with latino names, worth mentioning. So, it was a very sad moment. Very sad, very tense, and it was like “okay, no, we have to kill this guy”, and the rest of the party was hitting it... They were like “okay, we’ll distract it, you take its skull”, you know what I mean? [...] I mean, because of course, we could say that there was also a thing about me as a player, because I don’t know if the other players knew the headless horseman lore well enough to know that that’s how you defeat the headless horseman, because it wasn’t a thing they told us. (Interviewee 3)

This could also be understood as genre-savvy play, but once again, this is specifically focused on the capacity of the player, as opposed to their character, to act in impactful ways because they understand how the world works, what their character is able to do, and what the legitimate avenues of achieving their goals are. This allows them to act upon the play experience in a way that, while risky, is perceived as rewarding.

However, as we’ve seen above, the other aspect that can support play in these terms are the game rules that the group is enacting during play. Interviewee 4 gives a clear example of this when they describe a time they played as a character who clearly underperformed at every skill a character could have, save for one: style. As a result, they very fondly remember how this frontloading of their character skills into style allowed them to turn almost every situation in their favour, even if it meant failing in the process, just because of how cool they looked while trying.

I reached level 11 in that game, that means, I could jog from one side of the world to another, but that wasn't the fun part. It was like, I dunno, apart from fighting and doing those things, the only thing I know is to look pretty with the Style skill. Like, imagine, I had about 420 points in Style. I rolled a die just to see if I fumbled, because there was a chance to fumble. And Style, as a skill, what it does is that it makes everything happen in like a cinematic way, just how I want, so like "I have to negotiate? Fuck, I don't know how to negotiate". Then I said whatever stupid thing, but I rolled for Style, and then it made a lot of sense. You know what I mean? Like, I did whatever, but did I have the skill? No, but I'll roll for that, with all the penalties, but I'll also roll for Style, you know what I mean? Then I'm doing it in such a cool way, or looking so good while doing it, that you are going to want to help me. (Interviewee 4)

While this could be understood as a more transparent example of how these power fantasies are supported by ludic elements – to the point that this example reduces a character's qualities to numerical variables – it is important to take note that it is not essential for this kind of power fantasy that the qualities of the character being invoked to support their actions to be expressed as statistics or game variables. The previous three examples, for instance, show how the interviewees support their fantasies using elements from other layers of play, sometimes across several of them.

This is because all the examples point towards a similar underlying process: the power fantasy being portrayed relies on the player identifying an aspect of their character and/or the world that, as a result of the process of achieving collaborative play, has been defined to be relevant and important to the play experience, and using that element to further an objective that positions them as the causal origin of a specific action. This is the kind of power these fantasies seek: a power where the players can meaningfully act upon the world because they intimately know how it works and what is relevant within it. This power, then, is expressed by players seeking out to actively use their privileged knowledge of the world to achieve their goals, be them oriented to action or expression.

Then, let us contrast this interpretation with an argument from a previous section: if the power sought out is explicitly supported by the opposition of in-game consequences and real-life consequences, then how is this power absent in real life, and why would it be undesirable to achieve in real life? This can be explained by the interviewees' initial description of one kind of power fantasy in TRPG play: the power fantasy of unserious success.

Let's look at two examples. First, Interviewee 3 talks about the malleability of game rules during TRPG play when invoking the "rule of cool". In their words, the rule of

cool is the principle that allows the play group to temporarily ignore what would normally be the “normal” way of resolving things, be it in terms of procedure or verisimilitude, if the result would be enabling something players find “cooler” during play. So, as it follows, the rule of cool allows the group to elevate the experience according to their wishes, which includes playfully modifying the entire context of play to facilitate it.

For example, every time we’re fighting a guy, and we have to kill a very bad, evil guy, a smaller guy, you know what I mean, suddenly the dice are really going in your favour and the instant it is decided that the guy is going to be killed, for example, I dunno, well we roll, someone rolls for Dexterity to see how well, for example, they come up with the idea of okay, can I kill the guy jumping and hitting them with my two daggers, and slice them in half, I dunno, like a fatality, like in *Mortal Kombat*? Like, okay, yeah, sure, rule of cool. But you gotta roll for Dexterity anyways to see if you land properly, that whole jazz. Then, I dunno, for example, we choose special music for when that happens. For example, usually when we cast fireball, wizard spell and so on, just for a laugh we play *Fireball* by Pitbull [...] So then while we pick up the dice we listen to the “doo do do dodo do”, it’s like a spell that really fucks shit up, you know? It’s like fun, it makes the experience better. (Interviewee 3)

Here we can see a subtle detail regarding this kind of power fantasy: this fantasy becomes noteworthy because there is a micro-level negotiation of the significance of a specific moment during play, which allows the group to resolve that it needs to be elevated among the rest, and even dispensing additional authority upon a player to decide exactly how the events transpire in that micro-moment. This is meaningful, then, because in a moment where the player has complete control over the events, they willingly choose the unconventional and the playful as an approach.

Interviewee 4, on the other hand, raises the idea that one of the key draws of TRPG play for them is that they allow them to play at being silly while specifically framing it as opposed to the seriousness demanded of them in their professional life. The implication of this example, they argue, is that in TRPGs being unserious is a path that you can take in safety of understanding that the consequences of failing to be serious are not endured in real life: they happen within play, and that space is precisely where they want to explore themselves as actively unserious.

If I want something clearly epic, I can play a videogame, I can read a book, I can read a comic book, that sort of things. Like the experience is replicable in other aspects, but not the experience of like allowing yourself to be goofy, that catharsis of “I don’t have to be a serious person”. Like at work,

one isn't a person that can allow themselves this thing of being goofy, there's consequences in real life. So it's like, if you really want to do something stupid just because "lol", role-playing games allow you to do it in a safe space [...] my fantasies are not of epicness, which is why I prefer, I dunno, sessions with [third party] where I'm all "Hi, I'm an evil toaster that can use mage hand and can throw stale bread at you". It's so much more appealing, because, when else can you allow yourself something like this? (Interviewee 4)

This quote is particularly significant because Interviewee 4 explicitly frames the aesthetic value of TRPG play in terms of it allowing unseriousness as a valid and viable choice. Of course, this is an example that is transparently possible because it happens in a play group where this is the kind of experience being sought, but it remains remarkable that among all options, this kind of fantasy relies on players voluntarily choosing to fulfil their goals in an unserious manner.

The power fantasy being portrayed here, then, is predicated upon knowledge about what can be possible within the frame for play being defined, and portrays characters being able to express, act, and succeed at the challenges they face in ways that are deliberately unserious. This unseriousness is explicitly framed in opposition to the demands that professional labour makes of them, and these expressions of deliberate silliness that would normally be unacceptable are made to be legitimate strategies of achieving goals in the social world. This active seeking of an unseriousness afforded within play is the power fantasy itself. We can see now that several of the examples presented throughout this chapter resonate as power fantasies, in which players are afforded agency because they know how the world works and how to succeed at it, which gives them the freedom to approach normally illegitimate strategies that are validated because of their knowledge.

There is still one final aspect of the structure of power fantasies that we have not addressed: the difference between the individual and the collective fantasy, and how they inform these perspectives on TRPG play. For this purpose, we will make a final return to one of the aspects of good play that we have not yet touched on: what do power fantasies look like when good play is not being achieved?

4.2.4. “It’s what my character would do”: How disavowal works in power fantasies during TRPG play

As we’ve seen, the interviewees understand good play in structural terms, mostly referring to the play group’s disposition towards collaboratively constructing play that is meaningful because of the perceived diegetic consequences of in-game actions. In these terms, a fundamental obstacle to achieving good play is, then, a failure to communicate or coordinate with other players.

It follows that, if meaningful play allows for power fantasies to emerge, and meaningful play is “good play”, then the power fantasies we’ve described so far are understood to be collective, at the very least insofar they are supported by the players at the table and are not perceived as disruptive. Be it through genre-savviness towards tropes being referenced during play or through mastery of the game rules, these experiences are power fantasies that are framed in positive terms by the interviewees. But what about negative experiences?

Openly negative experiences are often framed by the interviewees in terms of a single player overriding the rest of the group’s capacity for agency during play. When this happens, it is framed in one of two ways: either the player in question instrumentalizes the play experience to achieve what they want while disregarding the enjoyment of the rest of the group, or they disengage from the experience to the point their actions on the play experience become completely out of sync with what the rest of the group wants.

Interviewee 1, for example, describes one uncomfortable play experience where, paraphrasing their words, one player took over the game away from the GM. This was made possible because the player insisted they were acting within the established mechanisms of play and because the GM failed to take action to stop it, and as a result, they were able to exercise their will onto the game completely unopposed to the point where the rest of the players were unwilling to keep playing.

[...] the GM didn’t know how to stop it. They didn’t know how to put a brake on the player. Because what the player did, according to the GM, was okay. What ended up happening? It was a context of being able to do many things, very fantastic, it was a game of Vampire, I recall, and it ended up destroying the entire town, setting it on fire, and things like that, but in a way that was very... “I want to create an illusion so that everybody here believes this”, when actually this other thing was happening... It was a very crazy description, that within the context maybe didn’t make a lot of sense,

but the GM allowed it to happen. And I noticed how I and the rest of the players were uncomfortable and didn't want to continue playing. Why? Because that player took control of everything and we didn't feel like we had a guide, or a GM, to direct play, because one as a player could basically do whatever they wanted. (Interviewee 1)

The significance of this anecdote is that here the fact that one player gained unfettered access to the authority to dictate what happened during play immediately had repercussions over other players' capacity to impact it in a significant way. While still ostensibly aligned with the stated expectations of play (as defined by the GM), here this player did something more pernicious: they jeopardized the agential contract of the play experience.

Similar instances are framed as disruptive behaviour towards good play by the interviewees specifically on account of how it shows that the player in question "does not care for the enjoyment of others". Interviewee 2 discusses that sort of behaviour from the perspective of a GM and talks about the point where they would feel obligated to intervene to prevent the play experience from becoming altogether inviable.

I understood that if it's already detected, you gotta talk, you have to talk to that person. You have to remove them, you have to have a private conversation, and make them understand that they either join the logic of "you're here having fun, but it's also fundamental that you are looking out for the fun of everyone else", or maybe this is not for you. (Interviewee 2)

Here, collaborative play is framed in extremely prescriptive terms, even going as far to suggest that failing to play in that way means that the player is unsuited for TRPG altogether. Again, this is a case where the identified "problem player" appears to be endangering something fundamental to the play experience, in this case, the idea of "taking play seriously".

However, this can extend to the social layer of play as well: Interviewee 4, for example, mentions a play group where the GM tried to flirt with them, even though both their partners (the GM's and Interviewee 4's) were present and playing at the same table, which made for a very uncomfortable experience. This level of interpersonal friction is also echoed by Interviewee 1, when describing the actions of other players as overly familiar, specifically in the sense of them acting as if they could treat others as they please because they are role-playing.

Let us look carefully at what is going on here: these are all players that appear to be doing something similar to what the interviewees describe as empowering play. The actions they are taking are explicitly framed within the play experience that the group is playing under, be it because they are acting within the game rules or because they are assuming that the play context overrides other rules of social interaction because they were not directly established as rules for interacting. They are forms of acting or expressing, one can safely assume, that these players can't enact in real life without severe consequences, such as in the case of getting away with unreasonable actions or in the case of harassing other people. The main issue here that makes these examples into uncomfortable play experiences is precisely a failure in properly communicating the expectations and boundaries for each player, but there's a common aspect in all these cases: if they play in a transgressive manner, it's because they appear to perceive that the play experience is allowing them to.

If we return to our approach to fantasies, we will find that an element that is missing from our reading is the mechanism of disavowal within their function. If TRPG play can sustain power fantasies that showcase the PCs as able to act and express within knowable and actionable variables that are defined as important for a subject's existence, then that capacity for action or agency is the object of desire for that fantasy. So, if there's a mechanism for disavowal ("I don't actually want the thing I am seeking out"), where is it? I propose, from these examples, that the mechanism for disavowal are the components of TRPG play itself, counting among them the ludic (game rules), diegetic (characteristics of the world), and social (premise of TRPG play as a social activity).

The interviewees bring up the specific phrase that serves as the marker for this disavowal in action: "It's what my character would do". Interviewee 1 mentions it in terms of a player that deliberately acts their character out in a disrespectful or offensive manner, and using that phrase as justification for said actions, while Interviewee 4 brings up players that attempt to override the GM's calls during play by appealing to a more extensive knowledge of the game rules (colloquially known as "rules lawyers"). Both these examples point towards the same process: players using a specific aspect of the play experience to disavow the responsibility for desiring the thing that they are doing during play.

With this in mind, when we look at power fantasies in TRPG play that are framed as negative experiences by the interviewees, we are looking at play experiences characterized by specific players disregarding collaborative play altogether and using the play experience as a disavowal mechanism for their own desire for power during play. This process is seen as disruptive because it instrumentalizes TRPG play for personal satisfaction, removing agency from other players and making collaborative play impossible in the process. Some of the interviewees go an extra step and suggest that said players would be better served by playing a videogame, in the specific sense that it both does not require playing well with others and that it can cater more accurately for their own personal desires. This may allow us to see this behaviour as transparently transgressive because it exploits the play experience for the ends of the disruptor (Stenros & Bowman, 2019), or in other words, understanding these players as playing with the TRPG (and by extension with the other players) as if they were objects.

It is important to note, however, that this same process of disavowal is in effect whether the fantasy is framed as a positive experience or as a negative one. When the experience is negative, one player is disavowing the desire expressed by their actions during play by pointing at the play experience as the reason why they are able to do the actions perceived as disruptive by others: the reason why the process of disavowal becomes visible here is precisely because the offending player is not participating in “good play”. This does not just mean that it’s because the experience ceases to be pleasant, but that, to some extent, the offending player is failing to read the room.

Meanwhile, when the experience is positive, the interviewees highlight collaborative play as the main reason behind their enjoyment, which itself is supported by effective communication, be it explicit or implicit. This can allow us to see “good play” as a prescriptive approach to disavowal in collective fantasies: so long as we communicate clearly and commit to acting within that frame, we will be able to play out whatever we want and perceive it as a result of play itself, not our own desires. If, as we established at the beginning of this chapter, “good play” is frictionless, it follows that it is that way because effectively building upon each other’s play allows us to enact fantasies while disavowing the friction of the process, because “fantasies construct situations where emotional needs are met and inhibitions to pleasure are removed” (ContraPoints, 2024, 1:00:24).

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we will reflect on some of the key findings of the study. To do this, we will review some of the ideas explored in the previous chapter, which we will then examine more closely, developing some larger arguments and suggesting lines for further research. Finally, we will address the limitations of the study, and then lead into a conclusion.

5.1. On collaboration, synchronicity, and frictionless play

We examined what the interviewees understood as the moments of meaningful play that enable their feelings of empowerment and, as a result, the production of power fantasies. These moments of meaningful play, which we called “good play”, were characterized by two main elements. Firstly, an overwhelming feeling of engagement with the play experience and with the rest of the players that was based on feeling their expectations met and communication with the group to be so fluid as to be unperceivable, which we called synchronicity. Secondly, the experience of directly perceiving the consequences of their actions during play, to the point where they were able to perceive themselves as the main driving force behind play.

“Good play” is achieved, as described by the interviewees, by playing in a collaborative manner with the rest of the players. This is an effort where every player at the table should clearly communicate their expectations for play and acknowledge each other’s expectations as well (which may be expressed through their goals in character play, through the game rules, or through their expectations for the social experience of play). This also means that, during play, players reinforce each other’s expectations and their actions during play by directly engaging them and building upon them through their own actions. This disposition towards collaboration and co-creation was understood by the players as “taking play seriously”.

In this context, the concept of synchronicity requires some development. As it is being proposed (a sense of overwhelming engagement with the desires and expectations of other players) it is very close to other concepts that have seen abundant discussion in previous theoretical and empirical work both within and outside of TRPGs, such as immersion (Bowman, 2018), inter-immersion (Stenros & Montola, 2019), engrossment (Fine, 1983), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), among others. While fully addressing

this debate is outside the scope of this study, I would like to argue for the usefulness of this concept.

When we talk about synchronicity during TRPG play, we talk about a form of engagement specifically with the desires and expectations of the group. It does not necessarily imply immersing into the experience or the fictional world of play, but instead highlights the social nature of the practice. To put it more bluntly, this concept helps us look at how this feeling is produced by other players "being on the same page" when playing. In this sense, as a concept it is much closer to inter-immersion, or the feeling of everyone not just playing their own characters, but also playing at supporting everyone else's characters (Stenros & Montola, 2019). However, since synchronicity addresses desires and goals across all different layers of play (diegetic, ludic, and social), I would argue that it is a broader term that may also help understand player experience in TRPGs beyond immersion into fiction. Through this argument, then, synchronicity can be read as the aesthetic experience of social cohesion through collaborative play⁹. While fully exploring this statement is also outside the scope of this study, it may prove to be a valuable line for further research.

It followed, then, that failure to properly engage with the process of communication at the heart of achieving "good play" was perceived as the key obstacle towards producing it at the table. This, however, can happen in two forms: either through willing refusal to engage with others' expectations, or through a failure to sync in with others during play, leading to misunderstandings and miscommunication. The role of the GM is highlighted in this regard, which is perceived as fundamentally in charge of providing players with a defined experience that is in line with the group's expectations and of looking out for everyone's enjoyment of it. However, this role is questioned or examined only when those responsibilities are not being upheld. We understood this as the GM, the most obvious and evident position of power at the table, becoming a transparent role when

⁹ Pushing the envelope further, I would argue that this proposes the idea that the element of TRPG play experiences that actually informs feelings of immersion is not the experience of verisimilitude (be it regarding the fictional world or the emotional reaction to it), but the feeling of the experience being in line with what we want it to be and what we believe it should be: a sort of paidian euphoria, where the player not only feels they can lose themselves in the experience but that the experience is "as it should be". This would, of course, also imply that experiences that are not in line what they should be and what we want can be understood as paidian dysphoria, where the player is made painfully conscious of the unpleasantness of the experience at the table. Pursuing this angle, however, is a matter for a later study to tackle.

good play is being achieved, and understood as yet another element of the play experience that is known and understood by the group.

Therefore, we understood “good play” as a prescriptive ideal enacted by principles of clear communication and collaboration, and which eventually leads to an experience that we described as frictionless, or in other words, where play flows freely, without distractions or impediments, towards the kind of experiences the group wants.

The idea that “good play” is frictionless, and its corollary, the idea that synchronicity is an aesthetic experience of frictionless play, warrants some extra development as well. We can understand friction in play experiences as any source of interference that prevents it from achieving an intended experience. For example, any time a player wishes to perform some action during TRPG play (i.e. attack another character or convince them to do something), they must first perform some action that may achieve that intended goal (i.e. select a weapon / argument, a combat stance / an argumentative strategy, check the appropriate statistic, roll a die, and check the results). These actions that mediate the intent and the actions appear as friction: small inconveniences that both impede action and shape the way play happens.

Friction is an inevitable part of any focused experience, and it can be desirable or undesirable depending on the context. Moreover, tolerance to friction varies, and certain play groups may be comfortable with large amounts of contrivances to resolve their actions, while others may prefer minimal interference between their desires and their capacity to impact the play experience. What is extremely significant of exploring friction as a property of play, however, is that there has been no small amount of work – both academic and amateur – towards exploring different ideals of frictionless play as an openly desirable goal of play, if not its prescriptive ideal outright (e.g., Edwards, 2001; Pohjola, 2003; Brown & Cairns, 2004; Balzer, 2011; De Koven, 2013; Bowman, 2018; Kemper, 2020). From this perspective, one way to understand immersion would be as an un-mediated, frictionless experience afforded by TRPG play.

While it would be presumptuous to attribute unstated desires to others’ personal play experiences, if we are to understand the concept of synchronicity as another way of arguing for the prescriptive value of frictionless play present across different play cultures, then examining frictionless play as a value becomes relevant for future research. I believe that it is relevant not only because it may allow us to study how

different play cultures structure themselves around their own values and interpretations of how TRPG play should look like, but also what kinds of actions during play may be facilitated by value structures such as these, including, but not limited to, power fantasies during play.

5.2. The psychopolitical power fantasy of TRPG play

Following the previous findings, we observed cases where the interviewees described “cool” things they can do in TRPG play (understanding the use of the word “cool” as a general marker for desirability). Since the common factor in these things was being able to experience the consequences of those actions in a safe space and not having to live through those experiences in real life, we ascertained that these experiences were indeed fantasies.

With this in mind, we observed the kind of power that was being pursued as an object of desire in these fantasies. We found that the power being described by the interviewees was understood as agential but structurally facilitated, manifested as the capacity for personal expression and impact on the experience, and was defined in opposition to real, everyday life in terms of restrictiveness of expression and impact. This allowed us to understand that, by the nature of the context in which these fantasies appear, the power being portrayed can be better understood as a process of collective subjectivation enacted by the play group: that is, that power in TRPG play implies the production of specific subjectivities and acting within those subjectivities as an exercise of “taking play seriously”.

This process of subjectivation, as we observed, relies on the diegetic (through narrative devices, tropes and traits), the ludic (through game elements, statistics, and mechanics), and social layers of play (through reinforcement of a desired experience by all members of the group). In this sense, the power being desired in this fantasy is the power to collectively decide what the variables and traits that matter in the world are, to choose which of those traits they want to incorporate into their subjectivities, and to what extent, and to act on those traits, their knowledge of how the world functions, and what is supposed to happen in it to achieve their goals.

Firstly, an interesting aspect to address is the specific kind of subjectivation happening in the examples brought up by the interviewees. Given that these fantasies are supported

by collaborative play and that good play is supported by clear communication, the subjectivities being produced during play rely on several layers of known factors shared by all the participants. This makes players active participants in the definition of the subjectivities they inhabit during play, and moreover, it results in subjectivities that are defined around factors that have been decided to matter in the context of TRPG play.

The interviewees provided several examples of these power fantasies in the previous chapter. One example showed a player recognizing the narrative tropes of zombie fiction being invoked to pursue an avenue of action that was extremely effective in helping them survive, even if it meant acting against the expectations of the genre; another showed a player making use of knowledge that their character did not know in order to defeat a dangerous monster; a different example showed a player frontloading their game skills into one ability that allowed them to succeed at almost everything they tried to do by virtue of using the game elements of the play experience in a legitimate manner; and to top it all off, one example showed a play group agreeing to explore and acknowledge death within specific terms. In all these examples, the interviewees show how they achieved these experiences through collaboration with other players, by deciding what the relevant aspects for play are, and then making their characters act within those aspects in order to achieve their goals during play.

By this logic, I argue that these power fantasies can be read as *psychopolitical* power fantasies, or power fantasies focused on a process subjectivation that relies on the self being reduced to transparently knowable variables that are expected to be employed and improved upon by the individual. As argued by Byung-Chul Han (2017), the capitalist processes of subjectivation deepen and rationalize even further under neoliberal regimes, which makes the individual the fundamental political actor, leading to a form of subjectivation that is optimized to the point of rationalizing the individual self into variables and statistics that can be and are expected to be improved upon by the subject itself. Under neoliberal psychopolitical subjectivation, Han argues, the subject is defined under a regime of transparency that aims to make every aspect of the self a perceivable variable. Through technologies like behavioural psychotherapy, big data, and digital social media, the subject is made to understand that every single aspect of the self not only can be defined, but also asserted, improved upon, and projected upon the world through individual action (Han, 2017).

As such, this becomes a subjectivation that directly operates on the desires of the individual, by framing agency as something that can be accessed through personal effort, motivation, and individual change: this is what Han describes as neoliberal psychopolitics (2017). What this eventually means is that the subject no longer needs an external disciplinary reinforcement to maintain its subjection, but itself sustains it through the quest for transparent self-improvement. The quintessential example of this subject would be the self-made entrepreneur: an individual that pursues personal well-being by optimizing their own life experience, from counting calories ingested to the amount of exercise done, to self-implementing self-betterment strategies which seek out to make them more efficient and productive, and eventually using social media to share with the world both what they are doing and how this reflects on their personal character ¹⁰.

Therefore, if becoming is one of the main motivators of TRPG play (Coe, 2017), then through a psychopolitical lens the process of subjectivation that lies underneath the play group's defining of rules and boundaries for the play experience is becoming itself: expression and action within this frame becomes the exercise of psychopolitically producing and reinforcing that same subjectivity, which is turned into objective variables that are expressed through ludic elements (statistics, attributes, labels, etc.), diegetic elements (genre tropes, narrative expectations, etc.), and social elements (explicit or implicit coordination of play expectations) ¹¹. These are all elements that constitute characters and roles within play around explicitly knowable and understandable variables and are given meaning specifically because players choose them as relevant and enact them during play to reaffirm those choices ¹².

¹⁰ Perhaps even invoking one or two hashtags in the process, such as #hustle, #motivation, #mindset, or even #goals.

¹¹ This also opens the door to possible critiques to Coe's (2017) assertion: if becoming is the main motivation for TRPG play, and becoming is a process of psychopolitical subjectivation, then the only thing you can become by playing TRPGs is a neoliberal psychopolitical subject, which could hardly be called an emancipatory proposal.

¹² This way of approaching TRPG play (understanding it as producing a specific social context with specific rules that configure a set of roles that can be taken within it with specific capacities for actions derived from those roles) is, to I presume absolutely no surprise to an informed reader, remarkably close to Erving Goffman's frame analysis approach (Goffman, 1974). This is to be expected, since my approach is informed by Fine's work, who was in turn using Goffman's work to further his study (Fine, 1983). That said, while I do not wish to de-emphasize this grounding, I want to argue that the relevance of using psychopolitics as a point of approach lies in the specific way these roles are defined: through a psychopolitical lens, subjectivities are reduced to their component variables, which can be expressed as either formulaic properties that can produce different actors in their respective contexts or as values that make the social world predictable, quantifiable, and most importantly, comparable in competitive terms. I

Reading the power fantasies examined in the previous chapter as psychopolitical power fantasies resonates with Nephew's (2003) proposal of understanding TRPG play as a literary game, where players understand their actions during play as elements within a certain genre of fiction open for modification. While Nephew's approach highlights the tension of the authorial relationship between players and both source texts and the play experience as a text itself, I argue that it also lends itself to understand genre-savvy TRPG play as psychopolitically defining the traits, tropes, and expectations of the genre fiction as known and transparently available factors of the experience. In other words, as we saw in previous examples by the interviewees, if under psychopolitics the subject is expected to improve themselves on these known variables, knowing what kinds of things may happen in a given story can give them an edge in performing in a more effective way.

Following from this, Ludovico Alves (2023b) argues that TRPG rulesets as game forms are inherently psychopolitical in the kinds of rhetoric they are built to support, specifically because through design they are able to literalize the ultimate aim of psychopolitics: the construction of subjects that not only define themselves in terms they are responsible for to improve upon, but also that want to do so enthusiastically. In this sense, psychopolitical subjectivation becomes relevant because it too shapes the desires of its subject oriented towards transforming the self into a shape that more closely aligns with the system of power that produces it: psychopolitical games are, then, "games about hating *you*" (Ludovico Alves, 2023b).

My main point of divergence with Ludovico Alves in this regard lies in what my specific focus of attention is. Since her aim is to examine the power fantasies embedded in the game texts and rulesets that are used during play and not necessarily examine what power fantasies players seek out, the distinction between what elements of these fantasies are facilitated by the ludic and which ones are brought to the table by the people participating in the play experience is not brought to the forefront. Meanwhile, since I have focused on players' accounts of meaningful play, I have de-emphasized the role of game texts in favour of the social aspects of the construction of TRPG play when approaching the question of collective power fantasies.

believe that using psychopolitics as a term here allows us to call attention to the fact that the TRPG as a play form as we understand it today is specific to life under neoliberal capitalism, which has specific value structures and systemic processes that may allow us to better understand it in its context.

It is worth asking whether that distinction is relevant or not, and if it is, in what terms. I argue that, if we are to recognise TRPG play as a play experience that is made meaningful through collaboration, and that the power fantasies sought out by the participants are collective, then the question of what to do with psychopolitics in play can only be answered collectively as well. If TRPG rulesets are particularly well-equipped to produce ludic contexts that enact psychopolitical subjectivities, and psychopolitical subjects are fundamentally individualistic, we must also recognize that collaborative TRPG play is also well-equipped to examine and question psychopolitical subjectivation since, as a fundamentally collaborative endeavour, it makes resisting the individualizing force of neoliberal psychopolitics possible.

5.3. Unseriousness, trust, and polite fictions

One specific kind of power fantasy that we observed is a fantasy of unserious success. In these fantasies, players' insider knowledge of the functioning of the world is used in opposition to the restrictiveness of everyday life. By doing this, players can succeed in the experience in ways that would explicitly be ineffective or frowned upon in real life due to them not being serious enough. In this power fantasy, players can seek out and achieve their goals by acting in an intentionally silly way.

Finally, we observed that the power fantasies being enacted during play could be understood as both collective and individual. When a power fantasy is collective, it is generally understood in positive terms, and is grounded in "good play". When a power fantasy is individual, however, either one player overrides the experience and disregards everyone's enjoyment of it, or where the player in question fails to integrate their own expectations and desires during play to those of the group, which often leads to it being unambiguously understood as a negative experience by the co-players in the group. This is further developed by understanding the elements that constitute TRPG play as the mechanism for disavowal in the power fantasies observed: while, as I argued back when introducing the concept, disavowal is not necessarily present in all fantasies, the interviewees' statements suggests that it is present in their power fantasies in TRPG play, since in both cases (collective and individual) the fact that players are seeking out these experiences is not brought up by the rest of the group, suggesting that if the players are actively seeking out something, it is only because the game itself is allowing and moving them to do so.

This way of understanding the relationship between players, their characters, and the repercussions of their actions is adjacent to the concept of alibi, which refers to the mutually agreed upon premise that the actions that players take during TRPG play are taken by the character, not the player themselves (Bowman & Schrier, 2018), which is an agreement that makes play possible in the first place. In this context, then, we could understand that the factor that makes the difference between positive and negative experiences is precisely the breaking of the alibi: at a certain point, recognising other players' actions not as their character's, but as their own, becomes unavoidable.

This shines light onto a line of reasoning that I believe is worth exploring:

- If we understand that players make use of TRPG play as a way to disavow their own desires, we must also understand that all players do so to some extent.
- Therefore, even if everyone at the table maintains the alibi during play, we must also accept the premise that the group is tacitly acknowledging that everyone at the table is seeking to fulfil their own desire for power at play, but politely asking everyone not to call attention to it except to encourage them through joining in.
- Such an arrangement becomes clear when a player's actions go beyond the space where others feel comfortable following or when they go explicitly against their wishes, because that's precisely when the interviewees point out that a development like that is the inciting player's fault.

Sharp-eyed readers might have already noticed that the accounts brought up regarding TRPG play are rife with value-statements in a state of precarious tension. Among these, we have found:

- Players want to feel they have enough agency to act and express themselves as they wish, but within specific and known boundaries that must be discussed before beginning play,
- Players want to explore and live through the consequences of their own actions, but only if they fall within the boundaries of the kinds of experiences they agree to live through and experience,

- Players highly value the possibility of inhabiting new identities, exploring personally significant subjects, and fulfilling their desires as one of the key draws of TRPG play, but also don't acknowledge that other players are doing so too unless they're being disruptive.

Of course, these tensions in motivations and values regarding TRPG play can be addressed if we understand them as expressions of the “magic circle” of play, or as the expressions of the social contract that makes play operate as a separate frame from normal, everyday life (Huizinga, 1980) and is a boundary that can be (re)negotiated by players, and sometimes “players can ignore it and pretend that they do not notice” those elements that do carry over from outside play, be it intentionally or accidentally (Stenros, 2012, p. 15).

However, while this approach is good for understanding how these tensions come to be and how they are negotiated through play itself, it still doesn't shine a light on what I believe is a more pressing question: If this is such a foundational element of play, why weren't these tensions mentioned by players and were instead accepted as continuous parts of their play experiences? And why were they only illuminated when discussing moments when their group was no longer playing well?

A possible way of taking this discussion forward would be through the concept of trust. While not directly mentioned by any of the interviewees, trust is a prerequisite for players to feel safe during play (De Koven, 2013) and to feel comfortable with sharing and participating (Fine, 1983). It is meaningful, then, that the interviewees did talk about the value of TRPG play being perceived as a “safe space”.

Trust is an aspect of interpersonal relationships that allows individuals to be willing to become vulnerable towards each other due to possessing knowledge about how the other will act and whether or not they will behave in a specific manner, allowing to reduce the complexity of said relationships (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). In this sense, when the interviewees spend time explaining how important it is to properly communicate and convey expectations during play, they appear to be talking about the importance of building trust within the play group. This trust makes play less complex: since players know what to expect, they do not require to wonder how others will act nor behave, since their intentions have (ostensibly) already been made manifest. Then, if trust is the means through which players can open themselves to being vulnerable to

others, it makes sense that “good play” is conceived as a space where players can follow their freely-flowing intentions into good experiences (De Koven, 2013, p. 13).

Following this reasoning we can understand that, despite it not being a larger theme across the interviewees’ accounts, trust is understood as a foundational aspect of TRPG play. It’s not just that trust in the group allows different kinds of play to happen at the table: if trust effectively reduces the complexity of interpersonal relationships, then it allows players to effectively “skip over” discussions and doubts regarding others’ intentions. Briefly returning to our discussion on synchronicity, we can see that trust towards players is the aspect that best grounds the value of clear communication; going further, trust towards play is what grounds the psychopolitical practices that inform power fantasies at play. If players build safe spaces through trust, then it would make sense to see these apparent tensions unfold during play, as play itself is a method of approaching and engaging with uncertainty.

However, stopping here would be to ignore the material reality of TRPG play and the ideas that are brought into it. As much as it is normatively understood as a separate space from everyday life, play is still informed by its context and whatever preconceptions of the world players bring into it (Stenros, 2012), which is doubly true in the context of TRPG play, and triply true when we analyse the power fantasies that players seek out within it. The process of psychopolitical subjectivation is, at the very least, expressive of dynamics of subjection and domination that exist in the real world, and the examples of unserious power fantasies showcase that the interviewees’ relationships with existent power structures in the real world influence how they dream of it – both when they see themselves as enacting power and when they see themselves as free from it.

This is the basis on which play in general and TRPG play in particular has been seen as a fruitful context and vehicle for analysing both personal and social change (Cross, 2012; Kawitzki, 2020; Kemper, 2020; Phelps & Rusch, 2020) which, while presenting a valuable way forward for academic, practical, and political analyses of TRPG play, still doesn’t address what I believe is a more pressing consequence of highlighting the aspects of the real world that are brought into play, which can become more easily visible if we look at this exchange as a kind of *polite fiction*.

Let's briefly go back to Nephew's (2003) and Hammer's (2007) approach towards authorship and authority in TRPG play. By their accounts, the power that is problematized through play is authorial power, and through the use of different mechanisms included during play, players are able to determine who has the capacity at which point to determine what happens next and how. In other words, both authors point out that TRPG play requires methods to produce consensus regarding what is currently happening during the play experience. This consensus, as we have seen, operates across the different levels of play, and is achieved through the establishment of rules, agreements, and social contracts. Within these frames, each player is able to define themselves and act from a specific position – in the case of TRPG play, as player or GM – which itself is a known element by the rest of the group which makes the activity possible (Goffman, 1974, p. 247).

However, any given social context may involve the overlap of several different frames of reference, which will mean that participants must learn how to negotiate those overlapping frames and the respective roles and statuses that each participant holds in them. When participants choose to act “as if” an individual's status or role from one frame of reference doesn't exist for the purposes of preserving the interaction in a different frame, we can say that the participants are sustaining a fictional version of the social context that is upheld for practical purposes: we can call this construction a “polite fiction” (Burns, 1953).

While this may be yet another way of rephrasing the same situation we have described in this section, it allows us to highlight an essential component of the interaction which as of yet we haven't seen explored directly: if power fantasies at play only become disruptive when trust is broken and when play is instrumentalized, then there is an aspect of the consensus that governs the play experience that has been transgressed in a manner that is perceived as inappropriate. In other words, if we have mechanisms that allow us to arrive to a consensus regarding the play experience, then these experiences show us that there is a point where said mechanisms become insufficient and the experience breaks. But on that very same note, if we understand that TRPG play is made possible by the consensus mechanisms that are deployed by players, and we pair that with our understanding of players bringing their own understanding of how the real world works into play, then we have reason to view TRPG play as a window to how social consensus itself is achieved.

By the above reflections, some fruitful future lines for research would be both to look at the specific moments at which consensus fails and the play experience breaks to look at what kinds of strategies players deploy to deal with recovering consensus at play, which is a clear invitation to study awkward experiences of TRPG play. On the other hand, and returning to my initial provocation in the unserious power fantasy, if we see TRPG play as an exercise in producing consensus, the idea of TRPG play as producing an unserious consensus on the use of power gives us the chance to demystify both collective power and literalized desire. It may be valuable to look at these power fantasies alongside imaginaries surrounding power, for instance, comparing how power is desired and how it is imagined to be. Recognizing that power can be both serious and silly can be a powerful framing when imagining political alternatives.

5.4. Limitations of this research

Finally, it is essential to recognise the limitations of this research project. By the nature of the language being used and the concepts being explored, it is tempting to rush and use these findings as generalizations towards describing the totality of TRPG play experiences, which would be a mistake. The following limitations also carry with them possible paths to follow to deepen our understanding of the phenomena explored in this project.

First, I must address the methodological limitations of this study. As a small-scale qualitative study with an exploratory scope, it aimed to describe a very narrow slice of the social reality of TRPG play and discourse surrounding it as a social practice. While this is an obvious consequence of the framing chosen, it is worth remembering that this means that the results of this study are not to be considered representative of TRPG play in a broader scale nor of the discourses surrounding it. However, it does give us conceptual tools to approach further research with the confidence that the themes and ideas touched here have grounding in the social world.

Linked to this, and while this has already been pointed out in previous chapters, this project is mostly reflective of the social context of a very specific play culture in a very specific place and time. The reality of Chilean TRPG play culture at time of writing ¹³

¹³ And moreover, of a very specific play culture rooted in large urban areas, higher education, and strong attachment to TRPG play that is not necessarily representative of all the possible expressions that role-playing can have in Chile.

may not map directly to the experiences to other play cultures in different places, but as the available literature on the subject shows, there are commonalities in this play form that are worth keeping in mind when studying it.

Moreover, most of the existent literature on TRPGs is done from the perspective of specific countries and cultures (most notably the United States), and I believe that presenting underexamined perspectives in academic discussion on TRPGs is always a valuable proposition. For further research, I would consider trying to examine in closer ways how the specific reality of this play culture informs what kind of fantasies appear and are desired, and to what extent they are comparable to other play cultures in this regard.

On a related note, one very noticeable aspect of the interviews conducted on this topic was the fact that gender was rarely mentioned, despite it being a significant aspect of the existent literature on power fantasies in other contexts. This should, under no means, be taken as evidence that gendered forms of power are not part of the fantasies being enacted during play, but instead be understood because of my methodological approach to the subject.

Choosing both a definition of power fantasy and specific questions that tried not to invoke these existent connotations to the topic meant that I had a wider lens to look at these specific processes of meaning-making, but at the cost of losing the particularities of understanding how gender acts upon the conceptions of power that are possible in social life. For further research, it would be valuable to make a deliberate effort to approach this question from a gendered perspective: for example, exploring masculine, feminine, or gender non-conforming power fantasies in TRPG play, as well as how gendered subjectivities are constructed through character play.

One final limitation that may be worth addressing is related to my choice of using a psychoanalytical framing to understand fantasies and how they work. A complicated consequence of framing the discussion in these terms is that it requires extracting meaning from people's statements about their actions during play and interpreting them as desires through a framework that is, fundamentally, designed to help professionals to identify potential psychological pathologies. As a result, the assumptions that we make in the process may be stretching the meaning of each informant's statements and

attributing value judgements where they are not warranted, even though I have taken measures to try to contextualize the interviewees' statements as much as possible.

The reason why I feel that furthering this frame is relevant despite these risks is because, as we've seen in some of the statements put forward by the interviewees, this is a framing that already exists in the social world of the play community being studied: for example, some interviewees directly attribute certain players' approach to instrumentalizing play to enact individual power fantasies to unresolved emotional issues or psychological conditions. If pathologizing poor play is a rhetorical practice that already exists in this context and that the interviewees bring up unprompted, it may be worth keeping the framing to further examine why and how this is done, and to what extent it may be a framing device to define specific subjectivities in the social sphere of TRPG play. If we have already established that trust in the group is instrumental to achieving good play, there may be a possibility that pathologizing poor play is a way groups simplify and explain disruptive behaviour, and going further, that this act of reduction is an expression of psychopolitical subjectivation.

5.5. Conclusions

In this thesis, I set out to understand what kinds of power fantasies players seek out when playing tabletop role-playing games. To do this, I began by defining what a power fantasy is by addressing the play context in which I would try to observe them, TRPG play, defining how I would understand both power and fantasies as general concepts, and arrived at a central definition: a power fantasy is an imaginary model of reality, produced individually or through collaboration, which features a goal (the acquisition of an object, the completion of an objective, etc.) that the participants want, and where the objective is realised using power, understood as achieving or being the causal point of origin of actions and change within this model of reality. As a result, this work understands TRPG play as a process of collaboratively constructing fantasies, which makes it a particularly suitable space for observing power fantasies.

In order to observe what kinds of power fantasies players seek out when playing, I conducted four interviews with young adults from Chile who had played in a TRPG session at least once in the last year, and asked them questions regarding their experiences while playing, specifically asking them to recount their experiences doing "cool" things and achieving empowerment during play.

Thanks to these efforts, I was able to answer my main research question:

What kinds of power fantasies do players of tabletop role-playing games seek out when playing?

The interviewees described themselves seeking out a power fantasy where they understand power in agential terms, that is, as a personal capacity that allows them to achieve their own goals, but also as a process that intentionally produces both the context that allows that power to exist in diegetic, ludic, and social terms, and the characters they play. As a result, the power they seek out can also be understood as a process of subjectivation through the play experience.

In this process, the specific elements that constitute both the structure and the characters are made both knowable and measurable by everyone at the table, which allows players to explore self-assertion and self-expression in ways that are defined directly against the oppressiveness of uncertainty and the demands for serious behaviour in their everyday lives. This informed the specific kind of power fantasy that I was able to gather from the interviewees' accounts: a power fantasy of unserious success, which showcases players finding ways to achieve what they want through deliberately unconventional means that they are aware would be frowned upon in real life.

I was also able to answer my secondary research questions:

- What conditions must be present in TRPG play for power fantasies to appear?

From the theoretical perspectives explored, this work understood meaningful TRPG play as the unit of analysis following Fine's (1983) assertion that the fictional world of TRPG play can be understood as a social world, and therefore, that reports of play that players find meaningful will also be reports where power fantasies can be found.

In the process of analysing their responses, I was able to observe the interviewees' prescriptive stance on meaningful play, which I called "good play", which is expressed in collaborative play supported on effective communication and well-conveyed boundaries that allows the players to commit to the experience as intended by the group. The idealized goal of "good play" as an experience of uncoordinated, unmediated collaboration, which I called the ideal of synchronicity, which I argue can be read as the aesthetic experience of social cohesion through collaborative play.

- What kinds of power fantasies are enabled or discouraged by the social contract in the TRPG group?

A relevant finding in this regard is that specific contents of power fantasies were not directly mentioned by the interviewees. In their place, and following up on the previous answer, the crucial aspect of a power fantasy that was enabled or discouraged by the social contract of play was, precisely, that it was achieved through collaborative means and that fell in line with the expectations that the rest of the group had for the play experience.

In other words, the power fantasies that are enabled or discouraged by the social contract in the TRPG group are those that align themselves with the aesthetic expectations of the group, and the ones that are discouraged are the ones that fail to conform to them. It is in this context that the power fantasy of unserious success becomes interesting, since they appear directly as an aesthetic aspiration constructed against the backdrop of predictability in everyday life.

- What kinds of power fantasies are facilitated by the game elements in a TRPG experience?

The power fantasies described relied on the definition of specific criteria, both qualitative and quantitative, that define characters as subjects. These criteria were observed to operate as part of the game rules (game mechanisms, statistics, and abilities) and as part of the literary genres being invoked for play (narrative tropes, character archetypes, and plot expectations).

Since these criteria were known by the players, they informed the kinds of characters they create, play, and develop, and they were used as the method through which the actions in the power fantasy they enabled to be understood as a product of the play experience and not their own desires, I argue that they are psychopolitical power fantasies. In other words, they can be understood as power fantasies centred around a form of subjectivation that reduces both the world and the characters in it to understandable and knowable variables that can be both harnessed and developed by the individual's personal motivation.

- What do players call out as a power fantasy during play?

While the term power fantasy was not directly invoked by any of the interviewees, I additionally found that the interviewees consistently framed power fantasies as a collective endeavour in TRPG play, but that these practices were not usually described in terms of satisfaction of desires.

However, an interesting finding was that the fantasies that were problematised and treated in a similar derogatory way as how power fantasies are described in prior work were precisely the fantasies that were enacted by individual players and that tended to be disruptive for the enjoyment of everyone else.

- How do players of TRPGs define the difference between an individual power fantasy that plays into the game and one that is disruptive?

Following up on the finding highlighted as the answer to the previous question, the individual fantasies that were perceived to be disruptive were the ones that completely disregarded other players' expectations and desires for play, which was perceived as one player instrumentalizing the play experience for their own satisfaction over the expectations of the rest of the group.

While I have covered several limitations to this study in the previous section, I believe that the contributions being made in this study can be of significant use for further research towards how players understand power within play and where those ideas come from.

Firstly, I believe that the theoretical framework I have developed is a significant contribution as a tool for precisely identifying power fantasies when analysing accounts of play experiences, and understanding them within the context of the discourses surrounding what "good play" is can allow us to gain insight into how power is organised in everyday life.

Secondly, though it was not the specific focus of the project, I believe that synchronicity as a concept is an important contribution towards a clearer understanding of the aesthetics of TRPG play in specific and of play practices in general. Understanding synchronicity as the aesthetic experience of social cohesion during play is, I believe, an analytical tool that may assist in unpacking the complex strands of meaning that comprise play experiences of all kinds.

Finally, a significant contribution that I hope to keep exploring in further work is the value of analysing and understanding power fantasies as an object of study. Where its colloquial use as a term has long seemed to imply that they are not worth taking seriously, I hope that the examples brought forward in this work serve to showcase the extent to which our shared thoughts on power can be relevant to discuss and explore in an earnest manner. After all, if the experience of good play relies on the trust that everything is where it's supposed to be, exploring the potential of unserious power may yet have important implications to how seriously we take power itself in our own lives.

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APPENDIX 1. INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE (IN ENGLISH)

- What games are you currently playing or have recently played? What do you find interesting about them?
- What games do you like the most? Why do you like them?
- What do you feel is something really cool that you can do in TRPGs that you don't get to do in real life? Can you explain why that is cool?
- How important is it to you to play out things that you don't get to do in real life? Why?
- Can you remember a time when playing a TRPG where someone played out something that they didn't get to do in real life and made the game experience cooler for everyone? Can you remember a time when it happened, and it made the game experience awkward?
- Can you remember a time when you tried to play out something you can't usually do in real life? How did it happen? How was it received by the rest of the players?
- Have you ever felt that a play session or experience has felt "empowering"? Why is that?
- Can you remember a time when it felt that someone really leaned into that empowerment? Can you remember when it felt that someone took it too far?

APPENDIX 2. INFORMED CONSENT FORM (IN ENGLISH)

Hello! My name is Daniel González Cohens, and I am a researcher from Tampere University's Master's programme in Game Studies. I am currently working on a research project on players' experiences of empowerment in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), and I am conducting interviews with people who have played a TRPG at least once in the past year. I would like to invite you to participate as an interviewee for this study.

The purpose of this document is to help you to make an informed decision on whether to participate in the study or not. To this end, I will inform you of the details of the study, what your participation will entail, and explain how the data collected will be analysed, stored, and protected. If anything in this document is unclear, feel free to ask me for details, and keep in mind that you are free to stop participating for any reason and at any point in time, including declining to participate, walking away from the interview, or even requesting to opt out of the study after the interview is finished.

If you choose to accept this invitation, your participation in the study will consist in an interview I will conduct remotely over the internet using the video call software Zoom at a time of your convenience to be defined. I will ask you to schedule at least 90 minutes for our interview, though it is likely it will be shorter than that. You are not required to keep your camera on during the interview.

During the interview, I will ask you open questions relating to your own experience playing TRPGs, including what games you've played, what kinds of characters you've played as, the things you enjoy doing when playing TRPGs, and your opinions about the things other people do when playing TRPGs.

To analyse your responses, I will record the interview in audio and video format using the Zoom software's functionality for recording calls. Your anonymity and the confidentiality of your information will be protected. In this spirit, your responses will be treated as personal data, and this study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. With this into account, in this study:

- The interview will be conducted using Zoom's End to End Encryption feature to ensure your privacy.
- The recording (and connected metadata) will be digitally stored in a single external hard drive which will be accessed only by myself and my thesis supervisor. When this hard drive is not being used to access the information in the context of the project, it will be kept inside a locked drawer to which only I have access to. Additionally, I will keep a backup copy of the data in an additional, separate hard drive stored under the same conditions.
- The recordings of the interview will be transcribed into text form before analysis. Any fragment or element within the transcript that may individually identify you and that is not directly relevant to the study's subject (such as given names, locations, addresses, etc.) will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms to ensure your anonymity. You may also request that any other detail you deem appropriate (such as your age, gender, nationality, and so on) to be removed to further protect your privacy at any time.
- The transcriptions will be done using Microsoft Word's Automatic Transcribe feature. This feature requires me to upload the recording of the interview to Microsoft's servers for it to be processed and transcribed. Once this process is finished, Microsoft states that the recording is promptly deleted from their servers. I will ensure that the data uploaded is deleted from Microsoft's service as soon as it is no longer required.
- The audio and video recording of an interview will be promptly deleted once I have finished transcribing it into text (but no later than a month has passed from the date of the interview) and all the personal data has been anonymised and pseudonymised.
- Fragments of the transcript of the interview will be published as a part of the final thesis document. Whenever I do so, said fragment will not feature any information that may individually identify you, and I will request additional permission from you before committing a final version of the quote to the final text.

- After the end of the study, the anonymised transcripts of the interviews will be transferred to a Research Archive. Transcripts stored here may later be analysed as data for other research projects related to TRPGs and player experiences carried out by me or other researchers.

The results of this study will be included as a part of my Master's Degree Thesis to be submitted to University authorities, and later published by Tampere University as a student thesis in English. If you would like to have access to the finished products of the study, please send me an email to the address included below.

If there's any other question you have that I have not yet covered in this document, please ask away. I will try to answer as clearly and precisely as possible. You may also contact me or my thesis supervisor, Jaakko Stenros, through the email addresses included below (please use English when contacting Dr Stenros!).

Thank you for your help! I hope your participation in this study is an enjoyable experience.

Best regards,

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