Role for Initiative:
A Look at How Identification Makes Role-Playing Games a Subculture
by Madison Sussmann

Introduction
In 1974 Gary Gygax created Dungeons & Dragons, the first series of games to launch a massive industry of role-playing games that have become ingrained in popular culture and have affected the routine recognition of social realities (Williams et al. 2006:3). These systems are designed to allow the players to do more than spin dials or roll dice. They give the players the freedom to make choices and modify the path of their fantasy expedition. Is it possible that role-playing games have become into something more than games? In the article “Contraculture and Subculture,” J. Milton Yinger assesses the definition of subculture. He concludes that a subculture is an “extension of communication that brings groups of different cultural background into membership of the same society” (1960:635). By examining role-playing games through a two part model of identification, I argue that the player networks of the gaming system have evolved into a subculture.

RPGs as Subculture
Defining subculture is not as simple as it seems. The definition has been highly debated, it has wavered in interpretation, and its mere existence has been contested. However, I have concluded that the definition of subculture hinges on two factors: identification and transmission. These concepts work in tandem, but I placed me focus of research on the conditions of identity. There are two types of identifications that take a group of people with common interests and place them within a subculture. These are 1) identification with cultural elements and 2) identification with the subculture itself. The members of a group must share in an engrossment of the game, as well as in the values and norms, and then they must recognize and define themselves as belonging to a subculture. Role-playing games (RPGs) have been attracting players since the 1970s, and the player networks have evolved to be more than a group of friends embarking on epic adventures together while seated around a table. They have taken on cultural elements that are distinct from the larger societies around them. The term
“subculture” points to normative systems of groups that are smaller than a society and give emphasis to the ways that the values, behaviors, language, and artifacts are different (Yinger 1960). RPGs appeal to players from throughout the nation, across the world, and from a wide variety of cultures. The games and the player networks offer the members cultural elements that are not prominent in their larger society.

Now, to the game that is at the center of the subculture. A role-playing game is more like storytelling than a board game or card game. In the fall of 2012, I engaged in the participant observation of a group of friends that met every week to play a table-top, fantasy, role-playing game. Before this experience the world of RPGs was completely unknown to me. I observed that the game most closely resemble a young girl’s imaginary tea party. To a spectator, all that is on the table are empty tea cups and saucers, and only stiffed animals are in the chairs that surround the table. However, in the girl’s imagination there is an elaborate spread of teas, cookies, and other delicate sweets. Furthermore, the chairs are far from empty, and each animal is alive with its own unique personality. All of the toys are different guests, each attributing different assets to the conversation. The basic principles of RPGs are very similar to the tea party. When playing the game, there are not boards, player pieces, or cards, there are just character sheets, dice, and the creativity of the individuals involved. The games take place entirely in the collective imagination.

There is a template for the roles of the players during the game. RPGs generally consist of three to seven participants. The group I studied included Isaac, Kathy, C.J, and Bill as the players, and Matt as the game master, typically referred to as the GM or DM (Dungeon Master). Each of the players develop a character that they will personify and perform during the quest, or “campaign.” This group of characters is called the “party.” It is expected that the party will work together to complete the overall goal and defeat any obstacle that Game Master throws at them. Unlike other games, RPGs have no clear winner and no clear end. The GM is different from the other participants, because he is not a player. He has the creative freedom of constructing a world based on his knowledge of the guidelines presented by the manual and his specific knowledge of the subject. What he builds is called the “universe.” One way to look at RPGs is through the characteristics of a film. The GM acts as the playwright, the narrator, and
all of the extras (non-player characters), and the players, the party, are the protagonists, a group of unsuspecting adventures. The Game Master, with an acute knowledge of the universe, creates every aspect of the game. This ranges from the color of the trees to rocks in the paths, or it can be the supernatural villain or a tricky double agent. The players generate and perform as single character that interacts with the fabricated world during the expedition.

When Dungeons & Dragons, the first of fantasy role-playing genre, was introduced to the market, TSR Hobbies released a brief description of the game in a pamphlet that was to be distributed to the stores where the manuals were sold. It describes that the “players pit their wit and imagination against the creations of their DM, so D&D is basically a cooperative game where the group teams up to defeat the hostile environment developed by the Dungeon Master.” (1979:1). TSR Hobbies was the first to pitch this game to the public, and their description was as good as any. There was no way that they could have anticipated that a subculture would spring out of one of their products. The common interests of free will and imaginative responses was what first drew players to the new gaming system, and these interests served as the foundation for the emergence of the distinguishing cultural elements. The elements create a norm for the society in which they exist, and they have become the expected and valued behaviors and are widely followed. In the world of RPGs, the behaviors vary from performing as a character to referencing fantasy literature and real-life mythology. The relationships between players, players and non-players, and players and the game itself are based on what is valued and acts as the structure on which the subculture rests. Subcultures do not stand on their own as individual cultures; therefore, identification worlds alongside the cultural elements to develop a personal identity and to separate the player networks from the larger society.

Identification

Identification is the key component when describing RPGs as a subculture. In order for the population to define themselves as a subculture, they need to first have a common identification (Fine and Kleinman 1979:5). This common identification comes from subscribing meaning to the values, behaviors, language, and artifacts. These are the cultural elements that lay the ground work for recruitment of members and characterize the development of social
solidarity. Shared interests are the basics for bringing people together and keeping them invested. However, this is just half of the identification equation. The second part requires the members to actively identify themselves as belonging to a subculture, an entity that stands outside of their larger cultural system. This means that a person must recognize themselves as being part of a subculture and act according to the agreement upon collectively constructed expectations. The members have to be self-aware and observe that they are a part of a specific community that has a particular identity. This active self-identification can be defined through the recruitment of new members, distinguishing what makes an outsider, and recognizing how they are viewed from non-members. I will examine the two factors, identification with cultural elements and identification with the subculture, more closely in the following sections.

1. Identification with Cultural Elements

Player networks interact with the beliefs and norms created around the wider subculture. First, all of the RPG player were attracted to the game for a reason, and there is a rational as to how the groups remain stable and retain a devoted membership. Despite the development of sophisticated video games, table-top role-playing games have managed to sustain their committed participation. This is all a result of identification with the values, behaviors, language, and artifacts that are created by the subculture. The cultural elements were formed out of the manipulation of the cultural norms of the larger society in order to correspond with that the players view as important.

Values

Values are one of the most important cultural elements to review when discussing a group as a subculture. Membership requires an affinity for similar activities, be this fantasy novels or the desire for adventure. Players see the world a little differently; therefore, they have different expectations of what holds value. In the book *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing games as Social Worlds*, Gary Alan Fine explains that there are seven common interests that lead people to join RPG groups. He presents these are a list of seven factors. These range from the knowledge of the physical elements to the knowledge of fantasy literature (Fine 1983). By developing this
list, it helps to put a perimeter around the recruitment of new members, and it states the underlying interests of the subculture and gives a glimpse into what forms the basis of their values. The importance placed on the enterprise is what keeps the player invested in the game over a long period of time. From my field work, I observed that there are three key values among RPG players. These are adventure, knowledge, and community. Firstly, RPGs are nothing if not adventurous. The campaigns deliver a constant stream of undertakings and problems to solve. The players have the chance to become the heroes of the story instead of the pawns. They have the responsibility of making decisions that contribute to the betterment and survival of the entire party. Secondly, with each choice the player showcases particular knowledge. For example, a player can demonstrate his knowledge of H.P. Lovecraft, an author popular among RPG players, by disrupting rituals and using magical symbols to keep the dreaded Cthulhu from awakening. This knowledge is invaluable, because a Lovecraft expert knows that nothing short of a nuclear bomb can take down the sea god once he is active. Knowledge can save the lives of the entire party and each player benefits from the mutual engagement. All of the players are in the quest together, and the individual can only thrive when the group prospers. Thirdly, a major value of the RPG subculture is the sense of community. The common desire for adventure, the opportunity to receive recognition for knowledge that is well researched, and the need for mutual engagement to complete the tasks constructs a sense of community that validates the time and effort spent reading and learning about the universe. The community offers a sanctuary for the players to offer the strangest and most imaginative responses to the challenges, because instead of being ridiculed, the other members value the contribution. The more interesting the response, the more fun the game will be to play and to talk about later. By identifying with key aspects of gaming, players can build lasting relationships with their player networks and with the other members of the subculture.

Through looking at what a RPG group values during game-play, the real world values of the players can be identified. This is possible because the characters are performed and not simply manipulated by roles of the dice or unwavering rules. The player can create the character to be anything that she wants, and the character becomes the epitome of what a player desires and of the goals she strives to reach (Waskul 2006:21). The values around game-play –
adventure, knowledge, and community – and the values around characters – strength, cunning, and imagination – distance the RPG subculture from the larger society. It creates an escape from the everyday doldrums, creates a community in which players can show-off their hard-earned knowledge, gain satisfaction through shared group interests, and feel comfortable reaching into the strangest and most remote corners of their imaginations. The interaction between the players and between the players and the game can be more closely examined through the behaviors of the group.

**Behavior**

There are two types of behaviors that are prevalent in the RPG subculture. These are actions of game-play and actions of membership. The two behaviors work together to show the value in action and to give value to action. When faced with a threat presented by the Game Master, players must take “action” in turn. This means that each player must make a decision on how they will respond to the challenge. In order to determine which character acts first, the players “roll for initiative.” This means that each of the players roll the dice and the one with the highest score goes first. This behavior is determined by the rules of the game and the socially constructed “group logic” (Fine 1983:83). As in real life, all actions have consequences. The success or failure of an action hinges on the role of the dice; however, this procedure is meaningless if it was outside the socially constructed expectation of the imaginary world. Dennis Waskul describes this as “presumed realism” (2006: 24). Waskul focuses on the effects of symbolic interaction in communities outside of reality, such as role-playing games and cyberspace. It is important to note that while a decision made in game-play would have no context in the real-world, but it does not mean that it is not possible or even logical in the fabricated one. Within the universe there is an unwritten handbook that governs the basic consequences that a player can expect from an action. This is the ability to make a reasonable assumption. The logic in which this is based may not exist in the real-world, but in the imaginary realm, such as that of H.P. Lovecraft, it allows the players to anticipate the reaction, even if it is response to a ritual or the use of magic. At first it appears that these assumptions
would be constructed by rules, but upon further inspection the rules are revealed to be more of guidelines instead of strict limitations.

The rules are manipulated and changed to best fit the personality, values, and identity of the group (Tyler and Pound 2002). Rules are a type of tradition. They lay the ground-work for how the game will operate, but the rest is left to the players and the Game Master. The actions of game-play and the rules governing the actions are behaviors that players must understand and acknowledge. The knowledge of the how the game works and familiarity with the group logics allows the players to act competently. During my first attempt to participate in a RPG, it was unaware of the series of subtleties and fine operations. I repeatedly made mistakes and had to be corrected. I became personally aware of the value of competent behavior. The ability to make reasonable assumptions and modify rules to better suit the party are examples of how the players identify with the values and make the games their own. The values of adventure, knowledge, and community are integrated into the actions and style of play.

Next, there are actions that create meaning instead of being driven by value. People come together out of common interest, but they participate in actions, such as inside jokes and references to shared experiences, to create social solidarity (Milner 2004). I refer to these behaviors as “actions of membership.” These are the responses that players use to establish or reestablish their membership in a group or in a subculture. In general, actions of membership have a dual effect when used. One effect is making the player networks feel more connected to each other, and the second is working to create a distance between members and non-members, thus establishing an outsider. Inside jokes and references carry a certain amount of “social capital” (Mello 2006: 179). Social capital is used to describe the “currency” of an utterance. Each reference carries a value that aligns with the beliefs and goals of a community. For example, if Kathy mentioned the instance when I rolled the perfect number to flawlessly etch a pentagon to halt the approach of Cthulhu, I instantly remember the circumstance and relate it with a happy memory that we experienced together. With this I felt more connected to Kathy and the game that created the situation. The same reference can make an outsider keenly aware that he does not belong and cannot participate in the conversation. By using the reference, a member is asserting her identification and loyalty to the group, and this
works to create social solidarity. The use of the collective memory to reassert membership gives meaning to the identification and makes it a process of active membership. The two types of behavior, action of game-play and action of membership, work together to pull a community tighter together and to intertwine their values and create a long lasting and committed membership. The use of language also benefits in representing values and creating unity among a group.

Language

While inside jokes and references are specific to a small area, the specialized vocabulary is able to reach further throughout the subculture through the use of websites and online forums. The language variants also act to identify a player with the subculture and to define a clearer perimeter of what makes an outsider. However, in order to have these affects the repertoire must first be created. For RPGs, the unique vocabulary words emerged out of the necessity to explain situations or events that do not exist in the real world. Repertoire gains its coherence through belonging to a group of people with a common interest and a common goal (Wenger 1998). The words are given meaning and added to the vocabulary because of their coexistence with the identification of values. In the case of role-playing games, the overall goal is an intriguing and imaginative game; therefore, the words correspond with the overwhelming theme of adventure, as well as the importance placed upon special skills. While conducting my field research, I observed that the terms can be divided into two categories: words with new meaning and words that are original to the subculture. Below is a table with example of both:

**Words with New Meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action v.</td>
<td>how a player responds to a challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frag v.</td>
<td>to kill another player; to kill using a fragmentation device</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage n.</td>
<td>a particularly positive trait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign n.</td>
<td>a series of adventures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crunchy adj.</td>
<td>a Game Master is running a rules-heavy game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage n.</td>
<td>injury to characters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initiative *n.* determination of who takes the first action
Universe *n.* where the story takes place

**Original Words**
Lasershark *v.* to combine two or more impressive elements
Natural 20 *n.* role of the number 20 on a twenty-side di
Psionics *n.* Powerful abilities of the mind

Words and phrases are not passive transfers of information. The RPG subculture arose out of text and the experience exists in the intangible, words and stories (Tyler and Pound 2002). They are heavy with meaning and expectations. The words in the table show that battles and challenges are major components in game-play, but with words like “crunchy,” they also highlight the dynamic nature of rules. Language and repertoire express values and have the power to create significance. There is an innate power that resides in words, their meanings, and their usages (Bourdieu 1991). The terms are not only understood, but they are signs of cultural wealth and intended to be appreciated (Bourdieu 1991). The use of the terms establishes that a player is invested in the community, and they also connect the players to the values that lead to the construction of the terms. When players use a word from the vocabulary, they know that it will be understood and carry a certain value to fellow members of the RPG subculture. With the development of the internet, these utterances can be understood beyond the regional player networks.

Like all parts of our world, RPGs are being affected by globalization. The internet has successfully made the world seem smaller. It is no longer difficult to communicate with people who live on the other side of the world. RPGs websites have worked to bridge the gap and eliminate some of the regional gaming differences. Unlike in the 1970s when a player from New York would not be able to play competently with a player from California, players now can communicate and play virtually with gamers in China or Germany. This has expanded the subculture to a national and global level. Even though a pair of strangers have never interacted before, they will both know the meaning of *advantage* and *frag.* Language functions as a
unifying force that is essential to the RPG subculture, because it is a world that takes place mostly in the intangible.

Artifacts

While most of the games take place in the imagination, it means that there are a few items that are left behind. Some games have adopted boards and character pieces, but all RPGs use character sheets and dice. The material culture is limited, but it is saturated with meaning. For RPGs, mundane objects have dual meanings. In the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige examines the youth culture of postwar Britain, and he explains how normal, everyday objects have symbolic significance when viewed by a person of a defined subculture. These observations can be applied to the objects of RPGs. In the real world, dice and sheets of paper containing a character’s abilities and personality are almost meaningless; however, for the players they are laden with significance. Their use in practice is what gives them meaning (Hedbige 1979). Once a campaign is over, all that remains of the beloved characters are the character sheets. These papers represent both the character’s background, as well as the desires and goals of the player. The character sheets serve as a palpable portrayal of the player’s sense of self (Nephew 2006). They show the physical and social elements of a person that are valued during game-play, and they indicated what the player deems as important. The association with the subculture has changed the role of the character sheets, because they are objects that are no longer used as tools, but they have taken on the ability to “reflect, express, and resonate” aspects of a culture (Hedbige 1979:114). Furthermore, character sheets are not the only objects that hold this capability. The special dice created for the game have taken anthropomorphized characteristics.

Dice are perceived to do more than deliver random numbers. There is a belief that the dice have an affinity for certain players, or they have decided temperaments for distinct situations. Players are aware that these are superstitions and that dice outcomes operate based on statistics, but when confronted with a seemingly impossible challenge it can feel that the dice have uncanny abilities (Fine 1983:92). While playing a game, I fell into this sentiment. I had to take an action against unreasonable odds, but I rolled the perfect number. It felt as if the dice
were working in my favor and that they were responsible for saving the lives of the entire party. I had only been observing the subculture for a short amount of time, and in reality I was still an outsider; nonetheless, I possessed the belief that the dice had consciousness. My interpretation of this phenomena is that the dice add the structure to an otherwise very flexible game, and because they are the deciding factor in the success or failure of an action, they act in the role of Fate. In a way, the dice control the life and death of a character and hold the key to the future of the campaign. Like Fate, the players can never escape the ruling of the dice. There are distinct values, behaviors, language, and artifacts that are used within the RPG subculture that are not found, or at least not prevalent, in the larger societies in which the players reside. Since no one can be born into the RPG subculture, the members must first choose to join, and then their identification with the cultural norms and the subculture itself is what elevates the RPGs from communities of practice to a subculture. The game-play, personal relationships, and dedicated membership makes the communities sustainable and dynamic. The values fill the voids the members feel in their other societies, their behaviors set them apart from the larger culture, their language usage and new vocabulary generate group unity and establish the existence of an outsider, and their artifacts represent the tangible culture of a practice that takes place mostly in the collective imagination. This identification with the cultural elements of a community is the first piece of a two-part model.

2. Identification with the Subculture

The second competent of identification is the identification with the subculture, not only its values or objects. In regard to subculture, a group cannot be considered more than a loyal community of peers without self-aware membership. RPG player networks share a set of cultural elements that they perceive to be different from those in their everyday lives. To actively identify with a subculture, players must distinguish themselves from outsiders, acknowledge the stereotypes, and defining themselves within the subculture.

The subculture must be identified by those outside the group. In order for a group to be considered a subculture, outsiders recognize that RPG players share similar characteristics and values (Fine 1983: 37). The groups are self-aware in acknowledging the categorization. One
group that most outspokenly distinguishes themselves from fantasy role-players are the war gamers. They criticize fantasy role-players because they believe that their games are unrealistic and are not held in high regard because of a lack of structure. Like fantasy-role players, war-gamers value knowledge, but that knowledge does not align with the RPGs. For war gamers the knowledge of history and strategy are more valuable than creative responses or familiarity with of fantasy literature. The characteristic that is frequently assigned to the fantasy gamers is one of frivolity and childish delusion. RPG players recognize the tension between the gaming systems, and the stereotyping is not one-sided. The fantasy gamers recognize the viewpoint of the war gamers and retaliate with criticism of militarism and warmongering. By recognizing the opinions of outsiders, the subculture is able to define them as “the other.” The counter criticism of war gamers reestablishes that the members of the subculture acknowledge that they are part of a group that share similar beliefs.

The stereotypes of RPG players are when known. In his article, “Stereotypical Gamers – Debunking the Myths,” Derek Myers addresses seven of the worst stereotypes that gamers encounter. He addresses each in turn, and the he present a list of positive stereotypes that can be used to replace the negative typecasts. He concludes the article with a proclamation that times are changing: “as gamers we have a social responsibility to ensure we don’t perpetuate any of the negative stereotypes that cause people to misjudge or mock us for playing D&D” (Myers 2015). This article is an example of a player acknowledging the stereotypes placed upon him and speaking out for their removal. He is recognizing that he is part of a group that shares common values that are not prominent in the society around him. By proposing new stereotypes, positive stereotypes, he is asserting that how the subculture is viewed as a whole is important to its members. In order to attract new players, they need to redefine themselves in the minds of the outsiders. The future sustainability of the group rests in the hands of the individual player networks. They must converge around the values of the subculture and work to transmit their beliefs in an accurate manner.

The final step in characterizing RPGs as a subculture is by examining how the players define themselves. By acting in agreement to the expectations of the group, a gamer is recognizing that she is a part of the subculture (Fine 1983:36). It has been established that the
groups share common interests and behaviors, but they also experience the shared identity that they belong to a society. As I conducted my ethnographic interviews of my RPG study, I asked, “Do you believe that RPGs are a subculture?” The overwhelming response was in the affirmative. The players confidently identified themselves as collectively belonging to a cultural subgroup. The self-identification shows that there is a sense of self that resides in the subculture (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 12). This means that they have personal stock in the standing of the society. A person cannot exist within a subculture without being self-aware and mindful of the membership.

The three parts of identification work together to create an influential and dynamic subculture of player networks solidify their existence within a subsociety. Distinguishing the outsider generates solidarity, acknowledging stereotypes makes personal identification clear, and the final step, defining themselves as belonging to a cultural subgroup demonstrates the existence of a cultural entity that endures alongside the larger community.

Discussion

I limited my research to identification, but another major component in defining RPGs as a subculture is the transmission of beliefs and knowledge. The diffusion of cultural elements is made possible by multiple group membership, weak ties, structural roles, and media diffusion (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Subculture exists outside and alongside a larger culture; therefore, the subsociety both identifies with and manipulates the values of the encompassing culture. This is particularly shown through examining multiple group membership. Since it is impossible for a person to be born into the RPG subculture, multiple group membership is mandatory. This effects both the cultural elements and the diffusion of such elements. Subculture identification is only possible if a person has the opportunity to come into contact with the society. This is contingent on transmission. In future research I would like to examine transmission alongside identification. The key in successfully defining a group as a subculture rests in the validity of both essential features.

Conclusion
The player networks of role-playing games have evolved into a subculture. “Subsociety is fundamentally a set of small groups that is characterized by the unique, although somewhat similar, cultures” (Fine 1983:283). A subculture does not encapsulate all of the elements of an individual culture; for that reason, there is dependence on the relationship with the larger society. I examined the characteristics through a two-part model of identification. First, a player must identify with the cultural elements, such as values, behaviors, language, and artifacts, and then he must identify with the subculture. This is accomplished through distinguishing himself and his group from outsiders, acknowledging the stereotypes, and defining himself as part of a society that values the same cultural elements. Role-playing games have been attracting members since the 1970s, and the player networks have transformed to be more than groups of friends embarking on epic adventures together while seated around a table. They have transformed themselves into a subculture.

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