

Dungeons & Discourses:
A nexus analytic case study of negotiating competence and identity in table-top role-
playing games

Tanja Kuusniemi
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English Philology
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
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1 INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games and games in general are rapidly emerging into mainstream media, as evidenced by, for instance, the popularity of online gaming streams and televised e-sports tournaments as well as the appearance of table-top role-playing games on hit television shows like *Stranger Things*. Numerous celebrity interviews tell us that even action-movie stars like Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson enjoy a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* with their friends, forcing society and popular culture to rethink the stereotypical geek as an unpopular, male, teenaged loner. Similarly, the players themselves have to adjust to the new, more diverse user base with new models of representation and inclusivity. Indeed, with today's larger socio-political movements in Western society (e.g. the #metoo movement), attempts are being made towards establishing an ongoing dialogue on gate-keeping and intersectional feminism within the gamer community.

It is the purpose of this master's thesis to add yet another voice to this conversation by offering one possible window into the processes of acquiring competence and building identity within the *nexus of practice* of playing role-playing games. My interest in this topic arises from my own hobby background; having been both a role-playing gamer and an active participant in the University of Oulu role-playing society for the past ten years, I was curious as to how players position themselves and build identities within their social groups to develop and present their role-playing game competence. Although this thesis is first and foremost a case study of a particular group of people formed for a particular purpose for a limited amount of time, it will inevitably also address these issues on a larger scale.

The data chosen for analysis presents the merging of two established groups of role-players into one fledgling social group, foregrounding the covert discourses circling in the two communities of practice. It also presents the initiation of two newcomers into role-playing culture. To be successful, this coming together of diverging backgrounds requires a lot of verbalising of internalised routines, presuppositions and attitudes. The theoretical and analytical framework of nexus analysis was chosen for this thesis due to its ability to engage such complex social activities through the mapping of

historical trajectories of the participants' historical bodies, interaction orders and discourses in place as they come together in the nexus of practice.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: first, the theoretical framework supporting this study is introduced in Section 2. Next, in Section 3, the methods of data collection and contents of the data are presented, and the analytical tools of nexus analysis, interaction analysis and motive analysis, insofar as they were used in this study, are explained. From the whole of the "master nexus" I have chosen to call Game Night, I have here concentrated on presenting in more detail six smaller nexus of role-playing game practice (introduced in Section 4), through which I explore the twin issues of competence and identity. The analysis of these smaller nexus is presented in Section 5. The findings are discussed in Section 6, before concluding thoughts and some suggestions for further study are offered in Section 7.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this section is to introduce the framework of theoretical tools and paradigms through which the issues of perceiving and showcasing competence in role-playing games are investigated. First, the discipline of nexus analysis (also known as mediated discourse analysis) is introduced and its central ideas explored as a starting point for discussing historical trajectories of social action as it is taken *in situ* by social actors through various mediational means (Scollon, 2001a; Scollon, 2001b; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Jones & Norris, 2005a). As a newly-formed strategy of inquiry, the theoretical concepts and analytical methods of nexus analysis are still being developed. Community of practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2006) is then briefly outlined to take into consideration issues of community-based learning, identity-building and meaning-making. A survey of some previous research on games (e.g. Huizinga, 1944/1949; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) and a model of looking at role-playing games as a recurring, social ritual practice (Bowman, 2010; Montola, 2012) are then presented, before the section ends with an analysis of the role-playing gamer community as a subculture and a community of practice (Copier, 2007; Woo, 2012).

Previous nexus-analytic studies could be broadly categorised into two groups: those that concentrate on a specific social injustice (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Jones, 2013) and those that focus on learning, meaning-making and identity-building in community settings (e.g. Pietikäinen, 2012; Riekkö, 2016; Martinviita, 2017). This thesis will fall into the latter category, while also keeping in mind the current issues of identity gatekeeping and negotiation of boundaries in the gamer community.

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to use of the singular “they” instead of “he” or “he/she” as a gender-neutral pronoun denoting a person of unknown identity, or of indeterminable gender, as in the sentence “A dungeon master is only as good as *their* players.”

2.1 Nexus analysis

*Nexus analysis*¹ is both a theoretical framework and methodological approach to human interaction. It places its main emphasis of inquiry on social action, which is formed in the intersection of the historical bodies of the participants, their interaction order and the discourses in place circulating through the site of engagement (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As a theoretical position, nexus analysis is a relatively new one, and has its origins in other ethnographic fields of linguistics and communication studies, such as interactional sociolinguistics, new literacy studies, and critical discourse analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). The latter is characterised by Fairclough & Wodak (1997) as a program of inquiry which addresses social problems and power relations through the study of discourses (ways of using language in spoken and written forms). They characterise any discourse as a social practice and inevitably ideologically bound (see also e.g. Paltridge, 2012), the result of which is that social problems are predominantly founded in discourse.

2.1.1 Action and discourse

Nexus analysis shares the critical discourse analysts' view of discourse as a form of social action but differs in its understanding of the role of discourse within interaction – it emphasises that discourse is not the only mediational means available for performing a social action, though it certainly remains a very central one (Scollon, 2001b; Jones & Norris, 2005b). Scollon (2001b) remarks that although many theories of discourse and language in theory focus on social action, in practice they become focused only on text and speech, leaving other aspects of social action backgrounded as mere “context”. He notes that this is likely to be due to most people being used to representations of information mostly in printed (text) or spoken form. However, “[nexus analysis] begins with the social action and only takes up the analysis of the language [--] when [language is] understood to be [a] significant mediational means for the mediated actions under analysis (Scollon, 2001b, p. 5). It is the

¹ Nexus analysis is often referred to in somewhat older research by Scollon (2001b) and Jones & Norris (2005a) among others as *mediated discourse analysis* (MDA), and the former term of the two is only now starting to strengthen its foothold among researchers. For the sake of clarity, I have decided on using the term *nexus analysis* throughout this thesis. Another possibility would have been to refer to researchers' endeavours of forming a coherent theoretical framework as *mediated discourse analysis*, and to use the term *nexus analysis* when discussing the practical and methodological aspects of doing *nexus-analytic* research (as done e.g. by Scollon & de Saint-Georges, 2011).

action taken using those cultural tools (term from Vygotsky), or mediational means, that is of importance. Nexus analysis holds as its central research goal to refocus on mediated (social) action as it is performed by social actors through mediational means, and on the practices developed through “a sequence of mediated actions through which a person consolidates that practice in the habitus” (Scollon, 2001a, p. 141).

In addition to simply investigating discourse *as action* (i.e. all action is discourse), it is the theoretical repositioning of nexus analysis to view discourse *in action* (i.e. discourse is one possible action among many). This means that the first question to ask is “What is the action that is being taken here?” and only then is the question “What is the role of discourse in this action?” asked (Jones & Norris, 2005b, p. 9). Jones and Norris describe the relationship between discourse and action as “dynamic and contingent, located at a nexus of social practices, social identities and social goals” (p. 9). They further argue that there is a tension between the kinds of actions cultural tools make possible and the ways in which people blend and mix these tools in response to their immediate circumstances. This tension means that new tools for action are constantly being born, while old tools fall out of use and are forgotten.

2.1.2 Action and change

Another important aspect of “discourse in action” for nexus analysis that Jones and Norris (2005) introduce is that it is often the intention of a nexus-analytic study to take social action and thus serve as a means of bringing about positive change; for instance, it has been used in studying and influencing political decision-making regarding marginalized groups (e.g. Native Alaskan populations in Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Whether a research project has these overt goals of social change or not, it is recognised within nexus analysis that as a form of social action, any research inevitably creates some changes to the nexus of practice within which it is conducted (Ibid.). The methodological arm of nexus analysis, which is introduced in Section 3, presents the basic framework of a nexus-analytic study: engaging, navigating and *changing* the nexus of practice under examination. This elevation of the element of change on par with the actual analytic work further emphasises the role of transformation as an integral part of any study done within the field of nexus analysis.

2.1.3 Key concepts

Key concepts around which the theoretical standpoints of nexus analysis are organised include *mediated actions*, *social actors/agency*, *historical body/habitus*, *sites of engagement*, *mediational means*, *practice*, *nexus of practice*, and *community of practice*. Brief definitions for each are presented below; however, Scollon (2001b) emphasises that these concepts depend on them staying rather loosely defined (p. 30).

Mediated actions, as stated above, are social actions taken by persons (social actors) through various mediational means. All actions are understood to be mediated in the context of nexus analysis (Scollon, 2001b), and are construed as implicit or explicit claims of social identity (Scollon, 2001a). Mediated action is born in the intersection of the historical bodies of the participants, their interaction order and the discourses in place (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). There are many levels on which social actions can be examined (Scollon, 2001b); for example, the social action of buying a cup of tea at the on-campus cafeteria can be further broken down into lower-level actions of picking up a cup, paying at the checkout, filling one's cup and choosing to add a sweetener (or not), sitting down at a table, et cetera. Even the mediated action of sitting down can be divided into several micro-level actions such as mentally scanning the cafeteria for familiar faces, deciding on where to sit, carrying one's purchases to the table without spilling one's tea, pulling a chair, sitting down, and so on. In any given moment, there is an infinite number of mediated actions taking place, so in doing mediated-analytic research it is important to endeavour to find the central ones.

According to Scollon (2001b), mediated actions are rarely found in isolation and are instead performed in *action chains* and following *funnels of commitment*, meaning that by taking an action we have anticipated a certain sequence of actions emanating from that action, and by following through on the chain of actions we gradually narrow down our possibilities of diverting from our anticipated future set of actions. For example, a person who has entered the on-campus cafeteria is likely going to proceed to choose their drink of choice, pour it in a cup or mug, pay for it at the check-out, and either sit down (if they poured their drink into a cup) or leave (if they chose and paid extra for a take-away paper container). It is possible to divert from the funnel of commitment at any step of the action chain (by for instance changing one's drink choice after paying or deciding to leave after

ordering “for here”), but it creates disruption in the anticipated progress of events and therefore becomes less and less likely the further the person moves within the funnel of commitment.

Through mediated action, *social actors* “produce the histories and habitus of their daily lives which is the ground in which society is produced and reproduced” (Scollon, 2001b, p. 1). From a nexus-analytic perspective, these social actors never act in a social isolation. This means that human *agency* is never a matter of simple individual will or intention, but is instead “a product of the ‘tension’ between the agenda of the individual and the agendas embedded in the mediational means made available in the socio-cultural setting and appropriated into the individual’s *habitus* (from Bourdieu, 1977) as components of social practices” (Jones & Norris, 2005c, pp. 169–170). In other words, agency is always distributed amongst and negotiated between individuals and their social worlds. Studying an individual person’s agency is a matter of studying how they position themselves in relationship to their actions and other actors (Ibid.). *Habitus* and *historical body* (from Nishida, 1958) are both used in nexus analysis to refer to the accumulation of knowledge and *competence* in an individual person’s experience (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Jones and Norris (2005) quote Scollon (2001a) in defining competence as “a way of appropriating and using tools that show one to be a legitimate member of a particular group or nexus of practice” (p. 9). In our campus cafeteria scene, the social actors include not only the student or faculty members purchasing their beverages, the cafeteria staff and the people sitting down at the tables, but also an innumerable quantity of other social beings who affect their *habitus* in some way, such as the designers, builders and manufactures of the material reality of the campus around them, society as a whole as a keeper of norms and expectations of behaviour, as well as all the people (friends, relatives, co-workers, etc.) who shaped the coffee-buyers’ current competence in the nexus of practice of *going to a cafeteria*.

A convergence of mediated actions performed by social actors *in a moment in real time* is, within nexus analysis, called a *site of engagement*. In other words, the concept of the site of engagement opens a window in space and time which enables the social action to take place. In the site of engagement, multiple practices intersect, either momentarily or for extended periods of time, to construct linkages of actions such as in our example of buying tea at the university cafeteria. (Scollon, 2001b)

As mentioned above, *mediational means*, also known as cultural tools, are the semiotic means through which a mediated action is carried out (Scollon, 2001b). These tools are used by social actors to convey and construct meanings and identities in the site of engagement, and include not only “abstract or cognitive systems of representation” (p. 7) such as language or visual representations, but also any material objects present in the site of engagement. Therefore, mediational means at a cafeteria would include but not be limited to: the location within the university; the layout and design of the space (seating area, checkout, queueing area); any logos, brand names or other memetic material; the conversation at the cafeteria (gestures, volume, topics, vocabulary); the menu items and their arrangement and the cafeteria patrons’ appearances. Mediational means are also inherently polyvocal (Scollon, 2001b) or heteroglossic and dialogic (Norris & Jones, 2005, using Bakhtin’s 1934 terms), and intertextual.

In nexus analysis, a *practice* (defined narrowly and concretely and treated as a count noun) is a historical accumulation of mediated actions related to a specific environment or situation, housed within the habitus/historical body of a social actor during their lifetime. These actions must also be recognisable by other social actions as ‘the same’ social actions. (Scollon, 2001b) That is, the person sitting down at a table, having successfully purchased their cup of coffee, has been recognised by other social actors within the site of engagement as someone performing the practice of buying coffee. Most practices are acquired rather than initiated by the social actor, meaning they were learned either consciously or unconsciously at some stage of the person’s life path. Scollon (2001b) notes that because of its nature as an accumulation of mediated actions, a practice carries with it “a constellation of appropriated mediational means” (p. 7). That is to say, in addition to knowing what actions to take, we also know when, with whom and where to take them, what to expect just before and just after taking the action, and what overt and covert discourses can be considered “normal” to our environment (site of engagement). Disruptions or failures to follow through with an anticipated action can cause puzzlement and awkwardness and force us to adapt our familiar practices. Successful use of mediational means to perform of a sequence of social actions signifies competence in the practice, while failed or hesitant performance implies unfamiliarity with the practice.

Intersections or linkages of practices which social actors recognise in other people's actions are given the name *nexus of practice* (both singular and plural form of the word are the same). A central term for nexus analysis, a nexus of practice is the point at which "historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which in itself alters those historical trajectories in some way as those trajectories emanate from this moment of social action" (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 159). Due to the "undissolvable dialectic" (Scollon, 2001b, p. 148) that exists in mediated actions of social actors and mediational means, a nexus of practice, in addition to being a set of actions, is therefore always simultaneously also a set of actors and a set of mediational means.

A nexus of practice might also be characterised as a rather loosely structured collection of people (for example, people who regularly visit the same cafeteria), or a "fledgling social group" (Scollon, 2001b, p. 30). An informal group can, however, be objectified and solidified by undergoing a process of developing self-consciousness and building group identity, known as *technologisation* (Ibid.). In nexus analysis, the term *community of practice* (from Lave and Wenger 1991; see Section 2.1.5 below) is borrowed to refer to such a nexus of practice that has become more explicitly recognised by its members as well as outsiders. A community of practice, in nexus analysis, is therefore an objectified nexus of practice of people who regularly interact with each other and have developed an identity as members of the group.

2.1.4 Discourses and discourses

As mentioned above, discourses (spoken and written texts) are seen in nexus analysis as "one of many available tools with which people take action" (Norris & Jones, 2005, p. 4). Nexus analysis also makes a distinction between discourses (with a small d) and Discourses (with a capital D); the latter are what J.P. Gee calls "cultural toolkits" or

socially accepted association[s] among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used *to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network," to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful "role," or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion.* (Gee, 1996, p. 161, emphases mine)

As we can see, Gee's definition of capital-d Discourses is thus much closer to what nexus analysis labels mediational means; it acknowledges the transferral of meaning through means other than speech and text, and recognises the presence of social identity construction within every action. Capital-d Discourses are also ways of reiterating societal values; they are identity-work within an accepted framework of value and meaning. Much like Gee's new literacy studies and critical discourse analysis, nexus analysis strives to develop a better understanding on how these different discourses and Discourses interact, reproducing and transforming each other. It holds that not only is each action taken transformed by the tools (of discourse, among other things) used, but also the tools themselves are transformed by the actions they are used to perform. (Jones & Norris, 2005b)

2.1.5 Community of practice

As mentioned above, the term community of practice, in nexus analysis, refers to a nexus of practice that has been solidified into a group of people who have developed an identity as members of said group. The term was borrowed, however, from the social learning theory of the same name, which was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) and further developed by Wenger (later Wenger-Trayner) with his wife Beverly (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2006). As this thesis is concerned with how learning and identity-building happens in social contexts, the community of practice theory is worth some attention.

Community of practice considers learning a first and foremost a social endeavour, recognising that learning happens by participating and that "participation – is both a kind of action and a form of belonging" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). According to Wenger, in order for participatory learning to take place, an apprentice to the practice must be granted legitimacy and initial peripherality, with a sense of being on an inbound trajectory (1998). This could mean giving a newcomer a sense of being welcome to the community while also offering gradually increasing volumes of knowledge and responsibility. As a theory of social learning, community of practice has not only been valuable to researchers but also suitable for numerous practical applications, such as critically analysing and rearranging social organisation at the workplace or at any other institutional setting. Increasingly, it

is also used to study web-based communities and other non-traditional forms of communication around which communities of practice have been and are being formed (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2006). It has however been criticised for having been adopted too readily and for being inevitably diluted down in meaning as a result (e.g. Scollon, 2001b).

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice are basic units of human interaction, almost indiscernible in their ubiquitousness, and have existed for as long as there have been humans. The community of practice theory is, therefore, chiefly concerned with bringing these already-prevalent communities into focus, which makes it possible to analyse them more clearly. A definition of a community of practice is given by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2006) as follows: any group of people who “share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” constitute a community of practice (2006, p. 1). This definition differs from Scollon and Scollon’s (2004) by stressing *learning together*, in addition to simply interacting regularly, as being the definitive feature of communities of practice.

According to Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2006), although communities of practice can be very large, small or anything in between, three characteristics are therefore of vital importance for a group to be considered a community of practice: domain, community and practice. Domain refers to a shared identity defined by an interest in and a commitment to a set of actions developed by the community, community refers to an understanding of the self as part of a larger group of people who interact at least occasionally, and practice refers to the set of actions developed by the sustained and regular interaction of the people in the same domain (p. 1). In short, a community of practice requires people who are willing to work towards some common goal by learning from each other and in a certain, agreed-upon way. When talking about communities of practice in this master’s thesis, I shall be using primarily this definition, which encompasses issues of apprenticeship and the transference of knowledge and competence perhaps more readily than the more succinct definition by Scollon (2001b) and other nexus analysts.

Within a community of practice, according to Wenger, meaning is constantly negotiated by reinterpretation, dismissal and confirmation of shared information through engagement in everyday

experiences. This negotiation of meaning involves the interaction of two processes known as participation (the act of taking part in doing something with others) and reification (the act of solidifying a practice in concrete and relatively permanent forms such as instructions, symbols, tools and concepts, similar to Norris' (2004) "disembodied" nodes of communication, introduced in Section 3.2) (Wenger, 1998). Wenger further states that these two processes work in balance; new practices and meanings are introduced through participation (importantly, also by newcomers!), which then are reified into a "canon" of practice. Both processes are needed, as too much participation causes a chaotic, confusing environment of ever-shifting practices and too much reification brings stagnancy and fails to take changing situations into account. Coverdale (2009) summarises Wenger's notions of apprenticeship-learning as a two-way process of balancing participation and reification as follows: the community of practice theory recognises

a 'wisdom of peripherality'; a unique perspective only accessible those who are not yet full members. This enables the potential for newcomers to explore new ideas and concepts, but these can easily become marginalised within established regimes of competence – where members are denied the opportunity to become full participants, or experience – where experiences are repressed, despised or ignored. (para. 35)

Therefore, the initiation and legitimising of new members and their ideas is vitally important not only for individual learning, but also for the learning of the whole community of practice.

Alongside meaning, and more central to the present study, the idea of identity is also continually being negotiated in a community of practice and constructed through negotiation of meaning. Learning is understood to act as "a vehicle for the evolution of practices and the inclusion of newcomers while also – for the development and transformation of identities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 13). Identity is built individually and collectively by participation in a community of practice, but also by non-participation – accepting or rejecting the notion of membership in any given community of practice. Identity formation practices can thus be both positive and negative, in that in addition to identifying as a member, it is possible to identify as a "non-member" of a social group or a community. Two key terms concerning the formation of identity are *identification* ("the process through which modes of belonging become constitutive of our identities by creating bonds or distinctions in which we become invested" (Wenger, 1998, p. 191)) and *negotiability* ("the ability, facility and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration" (Wenger, 1998, p.197)). In other words, identification involves our feelings of

connectedness with a domain and a community (e.g. national identity) and negotiability involves our sense of being able to affect that community (e.g. the ability to participate in politics).

2.2 Inside the magic circle: A look at role-playing game studies

This section aims to summarise the history of research done in attempt to find definitions for the central concepts of *play* and *game* as well as to present a brief survey of previous studies related to role-playing games as a social and ritual activity. In other words, we will gradually narrow our focus from games in general to role-playing games and eventually to table-top role-playing games. Finally, role-playing is construed as a tool of identity-building by examining some of the ways of learning and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion drawn by players in reinforcing their sense of belonging. For those readers not personally familiar with the vocabulary of role-playing games, a glossary of terms is included in this thesis as Appendix 1.

It should be noted that the definition of *a game* is a hotly contested topic² in game studies (*ludology*, term by Frasca, 1999) and it would be very difficult indeed to reach a definition that would encompass all aspects of playing games that are being and have been intuitively classified as such in all cultures and across all of history; in drawing a boundary, one must always leave something outside that boundary, otherwise it has served no purpose – and the concept of “this is what games are” in particular seems to always tiptoe on both sides of the borders drawn around it. It should also be noted that while there are two words *play* (as a noun) and *game* in English referring to two closely related but somewhat different types of activity (somewhat similarly in Finnish ‘leikki’ and ‘peli’), other languages such as German (‘ein Spiel’), Dutch (‘een spel’) and French (‘un jeu’) do not make such a division (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Copier, 2007).

Ludology as an academic field is a relatively recent one, and encompasses many different kinds of research interests, theoretical approaches as well as methods of inquiry (Mäyrä, 2008). Generally

² So much so that it is already a constant source of frustration and bemusement among ludologists. There is even a website that generates a random definition of games every time you load the page: <http://www.gamedefinitions.com/>

speaking, digital games have received more wide-spread interest in recent decades than their analogic counterparts, including studies conducted within the fields of education and cultural studies. As a long-time table-top role-playing game enthusiast, I would like to see non-digital games gain more recognition and attention in the academia, and it is the purpose of this master's thesis to bring my own humble contribution to the academic understanding of games. At the same time, however, I wish to emphasise that this thesis does not fall under the discipline of ludology as such – role-playing games are simply the cultural environment and phenomenon I wish to study through the methods of nexus analysis.

2.2.1 Ludology and the elusive definition of “game”

In looking at how games have been defined, Arjoranta (2014) makes a distinction between what he calls *common-core* approach and *language-game* approaches, the latter being a Wittgensteinian idea based on “family resemblance” rather than trying to find core characteristics of games that fit all possible variations of game and play; the idea being that there need not be a single universal definition, but rather a number of culturally-sensitive and flexible “family members” of definitions for various different kinds of games. The nominal, language-game approach certainly has its merits and proponents (such as Arjoranta himself). However, the common-core approach is arguably the more widespread view today, as old definitions continue to be challenged and tweaked by each micro-generation of ludologists. Among the many common-core approaches, one of the classic and most cited game definitions comes from Huizinga (1944/1949):

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it *a free activity* standing quite consciously *outside "ordinary" life* as being *"not serious"*, but at the same time *absorbing the player* intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and *no profit* can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to *fixed rules* and *in an orderly manner*. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to *surround themselves with secrecy* and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (p. 13, emphases mine)

As a starting point for game definitions, there is a lot to be said about the above quote by Huizinga. Its merit is that it draws attention to play as a leisurely, social activity separate from everyday life. Huizinga's mention of player groups “surrounding themselves with secrecy” and the use of special means such as disguises reminds one of ritualistic, ceremonial modes of behaviour. However, it is

rather easy to conceive games and games-related activities which slip past Huizinga’s definition, such as games being “not serious” or played for profit (professional gaming tournaments, or even sports games such as soccer or ice hockey). In contrast, coming from a more modern standpoint that takes into consideration the various kinds of newer games genres as well as the developments of the games industry, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) have studied several key game definitions and compiled the table below (table 1), the many elements and theories of which cannot, regrettably, be given enough attention within the scope of this thesis. Based on this synthesis of eight definitions, they offer their own: a game is “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (p. 7:11; the page numbering follows the one in the original work thusly: chapter:page).

Table 1: A summary of elements of game definition (from Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 7:9)

Elements of a game definition	Parlett	Abt	Huizinga	Caillois	Suits	Crawford	Costikyan	Avedon Sutton-Smith
Proceeds according to rules that limit players	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Conflict or contest	√					√		√
Goal-oriented/outcome-oriented	√	√			√		√	√
Activity, process, or event		√			√			√
Involves decision-making		√				√	√	
Not serious and Absorbing			√					
Never associated with material gain			√	√				
Artificial/Safe/Outside ordinary life			√	√		√		
Creates special social groups			√					
Voluntary				√	√			√
Uncertain				√				
Make-believe/Representational				√		√		
Inefficient					√			
System of parts/Resources and Tokens						√	√	
A form of art							√	

As can be noted from the table above, there is no single element that is present in all the definitions included, though by simply counting the checkmarks we can see that the two most commonly stated elements that a game should have are *rules* and *goals and/or outcomes*. This thesis seeks to better understand a phenomenon related specifically to one type of games; the table-top role-playing variety. It would therefore be enough for our purposes to remain aware of the complexity of defining

exactly what games are or are not, and to decide on a nominal approach to definitions, concluding that games are whatever the people regularly participating them feel they are.

2.2.2 Role-playing games - a ritual of shared story-telling

Role-playing games (commonly abbreviated *RPGs*) are a subcategory of games that emphasize telling stories together in a shared (mental and very often physical) space and immersing oneself in the journey of self-created characters. As a subcategory of games, role-playing itself is divided into smaller categories such as the *table-top role-playing game* (typically involving dice, pencils and paper character sheets, which lends this type of game its other popular nickname, pen-and-paper games), the *live-action role-playing game* (abbreviated LARPs, in which the players aim to not merely describe but also embody their characters' actions and appearance, though many situations such as violent encounters are of course simulated), and the text-based role-playing game (played e.g. via email, chat, forum or other textual mode of communication), not to even mention the plethora of digital console or computer RPGs. These categories have been divided and hybridised over time and across locations and genres, to create smaller communities such as the Forge school of heavily narrative-oriented, ethics-centric role-playing games (Edwards, 2003) or Jeepform, a specific form of Nordic structured freeform LARP often built around pre-written scenes and drawing on raw emotion and 'real-life' tragedies (Stark, 2012).

Throughout this multitude of artistic practices and schools of thought, according to Bowman (2010), there are still some foundations that hold true for all forms of role-playing games. She lists the following three major elements; an RPG should:

- 1) establish a sense of community by creating "a ritualized, shared storytelling experience" among the players.
- 2) have some sort of a game system providing a framework for enacting specific scenarios and solving problems within them.
- 3) guide the player to "alter their primary sense of identity and develop an alternate Self" (pp. 11–12).

The first and second elements are reminiscent of the definitions of a game presented earlier in this section. Firstly, the shared, performative space into which role-playing games place the player resembles a ritual setting. This is often referred to as a *magic circle* (e.g. Huizinga, 1944/1949; Copier, 2007; Montola, 2012), which could be characterised as a contract (Montola, 2012) of a culturally-constructed liminal and temporary space outside everyday experience. Bowman (2010) suggests that this magic circle offers players the freedom to “enact compelling stories or perform unusual, extraordinary deeds” (p. 8) and fulfil the need for modern-day ritual in the secularised, globalised and fragmented society in which we live. In this way, she argues, role-playing games can help individuals learn how to function as a group and can thus support the forming of *communitas* (Bowman borrows Turner’s 1969 term meaning community-building in ritual contexts).

Secondly, Bowman (2010) argues, there must be some sort of a rules system to settle disputes and to help the story progress. However, as Montola (2012) points out, role-playing games are somewhat special amongst games in that they are open-ended by nature and often lack clear victory conditions or other quantifiable outcomes. Many role-playing games, especially of the more traditional table-top variety, do include simulated fight scenes and other encounters which need to be overcome in order for the story to progress (Salen and Zimmerman’s “artificial conflict”), but there is rarely a predetermined point where a game is declared “won”. This has led some ludologists to call them “borderline cases” of games (e.g. Juul, 2003, p. 8) or even to prefer not to call them games at all. This difference in emphasis is notable enough that it is probably not a coincidence that in the established name for these kinds of games, the word *role* comes before the words *play* and *game* – the performance of a role takes precedence over game mechanics, rules and victory conditions.

The third element suggested by Bowman and the one that most separates role-playing games from many other types of games is the act of adopting and developing an alternate identity (*character*). Shifting between one’s own identity and the character is often enacted through several mediational means which vary depending on the type of game but typically include speech rhythm and volume, vocabulary, expressions, gestures, posture, costumes and specific agreed-upon conventions such as holding your closed fist above your head to signal being “off-game” in a LARP or writing metatext in ((parenthesis)) in a text-based forum role-playing game.

Naturally, all three elements intersect in any role-playing game situation. The learned practice of entering and leaving the ritual “magic circle” guides the players in knowing when and how to surface their character personas and when to return to their primary selves, and competence at the game system steers the *player characters’* choices along pathways of discourse possible to them.

There is, of course, a distinction that has to be made between role-playing as a more general social activity and role-playing *games*. Role-playing, when understood as assuming an identity different from your primary self, is a time-old social activity that is very likely to predate humanity. Structured forms of role-playing such as theatre performances, parlour games, theme parties and religious and cultural rituals have existed at least since antiquity (e.g. Montola, 2012), with more modern role-playing practices being widely used in contexts like workplace training and drama therapy (Bowman, 2010). From now on, our inquiry will concentrate on table-top role-playing games, the history of which dates back to the 1970s, which is when the first published game systems saw the light of day. Among the first RPGs published was the quasi-medieval fantasy game *Dungeons & Dragons* (often shortened to *D&D*), which is still the most recognised and popular role-playing game title in the world today. (Fine, 1983; Bowman, 2010; Montola, 2012; *Wizards*, 2014) *Dungeons & Dragons* is so well-known that it has almost become a synonym for all table-top role-playing games, particularly in the United States. Currently in its fifth edition, the original *Dungeons & Dragons* had roots in strategy wargaming, which it revolutionised by shifting the attention from commanding large armies to assuming the role of a single hero, allowing the players to take the first steps towards contemplating on and developing the characters’ inner lives and personalities (Fine, 1983).

As role-playing games evolved, according to Montola (2010) “the focus of entertainment and expression moved away from winning a violent conflict towards drama and interpersonal play” (p. 108). Though many, if not most, games are still played unambitiously and purely for entertainment value, this has lent RPGs credence as a cultural media and a form of artistic expression, and even as a pedagogical tool for teaching anything from social skills such as teamwork and empathy to problem-solving and intercultural tolerance (e.g. Bowman, 2012; Soanjärvi, 2015).

2.2.3 Communities of role-playing practice

As shared fantasies (Fine, 1983) and communal ritual spaces, table-top role-playing games are an inherently social activity, which is why it is not surprising that there is a sense among players of a larger role-playing community beyond one's own play group, a community encompassing a community, as it were. Among others, Copier (2007) places role-playing within a larger fantasy fiction subculture, which encompasses a variety of activities such as reading books, watching movies and tv series as well as attending themed events known as *conventions* (or *cons* for short), making and wearing costumes of one's favourite characters (*cosplaying*), listening to music with fantasy themed or inspired lyrics, creating fanfiction or fan art, and so on. Although Copier only mentions fantasy fiction, the same activities can be found among fans of, for instance, science fiction, horror, post-apocalyptic, or alternative history fiction (the umbrella term *speculative fiction* has gained popularity in recent years to refer to all these different genres of fiction (Oziewicz, 2017)). Indeed, *fandom* interests under the umbrella of speculative fiction often overlap, so that the same person is interested in multiple genres of fiction simultaneously. Role-playing games are played within all these fictional worlds, and the stories created within their ritual circles follow the narrative examples of other works of fiction.

Buchholz (1999), in her study on the linguistic and identity practices of American teenage self-identified nerd girls, defines taking up a *nerd* identity as a conscious identity choice of rejecting mainstream youth forms of "coolness" and instead becoming "[a] competent [member] of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice" (p. 211). Being a nerd is therefore defined by the community of practice as being self-presenting in ways the so-called mainstream finds unfashionable, undesirable and "weird". This definition has somewhat wavered during the years, as fan culture has become more visible, and the more approachable and socially competent identity of *geek* has somewhat replaced the nerd as a shorthand for a person who is enthusiastic about and consumes works of popular culture. In practice, though, there are no standardised meanings of the words nerd and geek, and the names are often used interchangeably (Woo, 2012); indeed, they are both commonly translated into the same word (*nörtti* 'nerd') in Finnish.

As these and other such labels can be either self-claimed by their carriers or applied to other people, it is possible, though not extremely likely, that a person identify as a *gamer* but not a nerd/geek. For the majority, however, identifying as a gamer is a part of their identity as a geek/nerd. A gamer could be defined simply as a person who enjoys playing games and possibly has an interest in following and contributing to the gaming community (by participating in discussions online and offline, for example). Particularly within the video gaming community, however, it has adopted connotations of gate-keeping and resistance to change due to the 2014 #GamerGate incident, where concern for journalistic integrity was used as a front for online misogynistic behaviour and controversy over whether women were even welcome in the traditionally male-oriented world of digital gaming (Romano, 2014).

Thankfully, the table-top role-playing community has been spared such torrid controversies, though smaller arguments over issues of representation and safe spaces have been and continue to be had. Bowman (2012) reports findings of RPG players perceiving their community as having a relatively high level of open-mindedness and empathy towards others, which she attributes to them regularly immersing themselves into the mindset of another (fictional) person. Some common characteristics of table-top role-playing related cultural practices (aside from the actual play itself) that self-identified gamers perceive as being pertinent to their subculture include: adopting special linguistic features (e.g. Mattila, 2017), accumulating knowledge about various works of pop culture (Woo, 2012; Leppälähti, 2002), attending “generalist” geek conventions or more specialised role-playing conventions such as Ropecon in Finland or Gen Con in the United States (Woo, 2012). However, it is important to note that there is no single role-playing community of practice and that table-top gaming practices are dependent on the surrounding culture at all levels; whether national, local or a single game group, each community has their own culture. Nor is it to be left unchallenged that there even exists such a thing as “role-playing gamer culture”.

In conclusion, the formation of a community of practice of role-playing games could be construed as follows: the nexus of practice of playing role-playing games is, in itself, a set of activities that requires learning in a social context. Of course, it is entirely possible to “learn the rules” of a game by reading a rule book, but even then, the meaning is negotiated in dialogue between the creators of the rule

book and the would-be player memorising the rules through the mediational means of, for instance, language, text, image and layout. Furthermore, when that same player sits down at a table with others, there is a new and continuous negotiation of not only reified rules and participatory narrative creation, but also of player identities; the subjective perceived ability to partake in the collective identity of *being a role-playing gamer* depends on being legitimised and allowed into the community as a peripheral learner whose competence grows over time. These discourses of belonging circling in the nexus of practice of a single gaming group overlap with similar discourses in other larger nexus; they resurface online and in gaming conventions and other sites of engagement where social actors meet and recognise differences and similarities in each other's practices.

This section introduced nexus analysis and community of practice as theories of social action and learning, and of identity-building and meaning-making. The next section will present the methodology used in this thesis to collect and analyse data in order to assess and understand the what is going on in one particular nexus of practice of playing role-playing games through these theories.

3 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This section introduces the methodological tools that were used to conduct the nexus-analytic study described in the following sections. As a strategy of inquiry nexus analysis is transformative/constructivist in its worldview (Creswell, 2014) and thus qualitative, inductive and open-ended in its approach. It encourages the researcher to take up whatever tools of research are necessary for a fuller understanding of the data; if it serves to enrich the findings of a nexus analysis, methods from (multimodal) interaction analysis or motivation analysis, for example, can and should be employed in the study. This is precisely what was done for this thesis. This section begins with a description of the (auto)ethnographic data collection methods and process (Agar, 1995; Scollon 2001b; Scollon & Scollon, 2007), after which nexus analysis is characterised as a strategy of analysis with its threefold activities of *engaging*, *navigating* and *changing* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Tools of analysis from multimodal discourse analysis (Norris, 2004) and interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) as well as motive analysis (Burke, 1969) were also employed for this thesis, and these, too, are introduced.

3.1 Methods of data collection

Methods of data collection within nexus analysis are *interdiscursive* in that they are greatly diverse due to having been adopted from various schools of thought for the needs of a very interdisciplinary field. Nexus-analytic methods available for gathering data include classic ethnographic tools such as fieldnotes and interviews as well as focus groups, questionnaire surveys, and the collection of written and spoken texts and images (Scollon & Scollon, 2007). Within nexus analysis, the purpose of the data collection process is to produce data which is central to identifying and analysing the key mediated actions cycling in the nexus of practice under study (Ibid.).

Ethnographic research is characterised by close, qualitative analysis of a small number of cases. Rather than attempting to offer statistical or quantifiable results it emphasises observing and recognising individuals acting in their social and cultural environments. A traditional ethnographic study is founded upon the notion of *rich points*, or unfamiliar patterns of behaviour that the

researcher observes in the group they wish to study, of which they wish to develop an understanding through participant observation (Agar, 1995). The researcher is to assume *coherence* (internal sense-making) within this observed behaviour, and the study undertaken should seek to form a working model for explaining the socio-cultural significance of the behaviour (Ibid.). More recently, autoethnography (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and participant-observation (e.g. Scollon, 2007) have been adopted as models of research where the researcher, instead of investigating a previously unfamiliar culture or cultural practice from a somewhat distanced position, elects to study groups in which they are already an acknowledged member, and recognises themselves as an active participant in the scene, whose presence inevitably alters the scene in some way. This is one reason why nexus analysts frequently state that conducting a nexus analysis is in itself both a form of social action and a cause of social change (Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

Video and audio recordings of interaction situations offer many advantages to traditional field notes, as noted, among others, by Jordan and Henderson (1995). As the data captured with the use of video or audio equipment can be played back and studied endlessly by the original researcher as well as any other interested parties, it can be argued that data thus “frozen” enables a point of view that is more comprehensive, not to mention more objective, than the fieldnotes of an observer would be on their own. With technologically-assisted participant observation still being a relatively new method of data collection, however, there are bound to be limitations as well. Within the data used in this study, there are several instances of people standing outside the line of sight of the camera on their way back to the table after a break, for instance. Technological problems are also not only distracting to participants (as they easily divert attention to the recording device) but also can result in the loss of data, which is what happened during the second Game Night session when the laptop recording the audio had shut down, unnoticed by the participants.

To begin a nexus-analytic study, a researcher is encouraged to establish a proximity with the issue or practice that is of interest to them, either by choosing a relevant nexus of practice in which they are already a regular, recognised social actor, or by actively seeking contact with the nexus (e.g. Scollon 2001b; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) by approaching with an open mind. Depending on the research interests, possible strategies for achieving contact include: participant and mediational means

surveys, scene surveys and event/action surveys *or* media content surveys and “what’s in the news” surveys (Scollon, 2001b). The purpose is to locate key members, discourses and sites around which the issue revolves, and to place oneself in the middle of them.

Once the surveys needed to find locate the central nexus of practice have been conducted, Scollon and Scollon (2004) recommend that the researcher start gathering the data while simultaneously taking up the task of *engaging* the nexus of practice (see below). For ensuring partiality, Scollon (2001b, pp. 10–12) recommends that data be gathered by *triangulating* from at least the four different sources below, though he also admits that it would be difficult to produce all four types of fully-fledged data for any particular study. The short descriptions below are accompanied by my own, made-up sample findings.

Members’ generalisations might include statements of a general nature by the participants about their nexus of practice, such as “role-playing gamers are superstitious about their dice”. *Neutral (“objective”) observations* include fieldnotes and other researcher observations “for which some level of reliability -- and validity are claimed” (p.12). Neutral observation can be used in contrast and in dialogue with members’ generalisations to check on the subjectivity of both the members and the researcher’s viewpoint, as in “the video data shows the participant carefully inspecting and test-rolling their pool of dice before settling on one particular set”. *Individual member’s experience* refers in particular to claims by individual participants of behaviour contradictory to that of the group’s usual practices, e.g. “Most people get at least a little superstitious when it comes to dice, but for me they’re just lumps of plastic and it doesn’t matter which one I pick”. *The observer’s interactions with members* (or “playback responses”) include not only participant-analysis in the scene as it happens, but also the researcher keeping the participants informed about the findings of the analysis as it progresses and allowing them to comment on them. This could be done by allowing them to read the analysis, or by voicing their observations by commenting, for instance, “You’ve said that it doesn’t matter which dice one chooses, yet you showed joking concern when the DM rolled the third high result in a row. Can you remember what was going through your mind when you said, ‘someone steal that die?’”

As the data used in this master's thesis was already collected during an elective advanced-level course on nexus analysis during the autumn period of 2017, no formal surveys of social actors, mediational means or scenes was deemed necessary to collect at the beginning of this research project. However, due to most of the participants' (myself included) long personal histories with role-playing, there was already a rather clear understanding of the nexus of practice cycling around and through it. Although this access to data recorded earlier proved extremely useful for my research interests, and my own position as a central social actor within the nexus allowed me to autoethnographically place myself as a sort of retroactive participant-researcher, it also proved to be a somewhat difficult (though certainly interesting!) experience to navigate the discourses of different research projects within the data and my own historical body. What follows is a very brief explanation of the data recording process for the university course.

During the first session of the course, it was discovered that role-playing games were a topic that interested all the participants; the four students (all Masters-level students of English) attending the course were already regularly playing role-playing games, whereas the two faculty members supervising the course were RPG novices but interested in the game as a phenomenon of discourse. To fulfil the course requirements of the students familiarising themselves with the research practices of nexus analysis, the participants scheduled to play three four-hour game sessions of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition*, with a *dungeon master* selected from outside of the group. The sessions (*game nights*) were conducted in a classroom-like workspace at the university and were recorded using the faculty's audio and video recording equipment. Session 1 included discussing and deciding on the parameters for the mini-campaign, creating characters and taking the first turns of actual game-play. Sessions 2 and 3 were when the game proper began in earnest. Tape logs were produced by the students for sessions 1 and 2, and these were also very advantageous in locating notable instances of interaction within the body of data.

In addition to the audio and video data (reference code GNV; see Appendix 2 for an explanation of the reference codes) recorded during the Game Nights, a plethora of other materials were also collected and studied. The ones included in this thesis are:

- 1) The participants' visual and verbal representations of their *zones of identification* in relation to the nexus of practice of role-playing games. These will henceforth be called *trajectories* (reference codes TW and TD), to better represent the role they play in this

thesis as additional windows of information on the participants' historical bodies. Where my own zone of identification is concerned, the term is left unchanged.

- 2) A classroom conversation (reference code CRC) which took place after the first Game Night and was recorded and transcribed by the course teacher as an example on how to conduct motive analysis.

Out of the types of data outlined by Scollon (2001b), members' generalisations and individual experiences were found to be very well represented in all of the abovementioned bodies of data. These were compared and contrasted with my own "objective" observations, while keeping in mind that no viewpoint is ever truly objective and that I was and am bound to look at the findings through the viewpoint formed within my own historical body. Further conversations were also had with the participants during the writing of this thesis, primarily by email, in keeping with the program of nexus of practice. These email conversation form the "playback data", or data received by later interaction with the members (reference code ER) of this study.

The video and audio data excerpts in the analysis section (Section 6) have not been transcribed in any great detail, as this study is not concerned with doing linguistic or conversation analysis. Instead, a rough transcript is offered when needed. The transcription of the classroom conversation, as mentioned above, was created by the course teacher. Excerpts of text, when written by the Game Night participants, are presented "as is", without correcting possible spelling errors. The name of the university course and the names of the game night participants, apart from my own (Tanja) have been omitted and replaced with pseudonyms in accordance with research conventions (e.g. National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009) to ensure participant confidentiality. Informed consent forms (e.g. Yakura, 2004) were signed by all the participants, permitting the use of the data for future research, present study included.

3.2 Nexus analysis as a method of analysis

The practical, methodological research strategy to doing nexus analysis is, as of yet, most thoroughly developed in Scollon and Scollon (2004) and especially the appendix to the volume known as the *Practical fieldguide for mediated discourse analysis*. Mediated discourse analysis, as discussed before,

is another name used to refer to nexus analysis. As a new scientific field, the naming conventions have not been completely reified, and the two names are used either interchangeably (e.g. by Scollon and Scollon, 2004) or by naming mediated discourse analysis the “theoretical basis” (Martinviita, 2017, p. 23) of the more practical nexus analysis.

To a considerable extent the guidelines set by Scollon and Scollon in the 2004 *Fieldguide* of approaching the data inductively by *engaging*, *navigating* and *changing* (see figure 1) the chosen nexus of practice were followed in this thesis. The three activities of nexus analysis were conducted both consecutively and concurrently (and recurrently). This included identifying the key social actions, actors and mediational means which were cycling through the nexus of practice and discovering how the social actors’ historical bodies came to be involved in the practices, and how they positioned themselves in relation to the site of engagement, the mediational means, and other social actors within the nexus of practice.

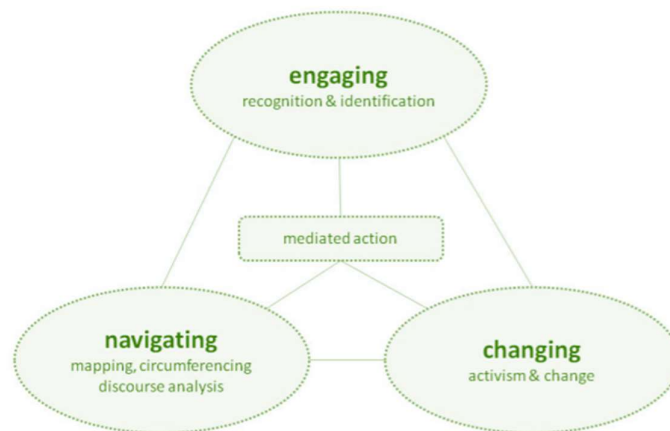


Figure 1. Activities of nexus analysis (from Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 153).

The first part of a nexus-analytic study is engaging the nexus of practice (i.e. acknowledging and verbalising the researcher’s own relationship with the nexus). This involves entering into a zone of identification with the members of the community. My own visual and textual representations of my zone of identification, as mentioned above, were created for the university course and are

summarised in Section 5 alongside those of the other participants. Having acknowledged my involvement in the nexus (and community) of practice, I then sought to locate the key social actors, interaction orders and discourses in place within it, attempting to understand the historical bodies of the participants and the mediated actions they took in establishing their roles as members of the community of practice of playing role-playing games.

Moving on to the task of navigating the nexus of practice, I then followed Scollon and Scollon's (2004) lead in viewing the collected data and mapping "[the semiotic] cycles of people, places, discourses, objects and concepts which circulate through this micro-semiotic ecosystem" (p. 8). According to Scollon and Scollon, these cycles are observable throughout the nexus of practice in several forms: as the speech of the participants; as texts; as images; within the historical bodies of the participants, within the design of the built environment and objects; and as produced by the analysts in conducting the nexus of practice. Through the viewpoint of each of these cycles (which themselves can also be construed as nexus of practice), the following questions (from Scollon and Scollon, 2004) were therefore asked:

- 1) How are social power interests ("big D discourses") produced in this discourse?
- 2) What positions and alignments are participants taking up in relationship to each other and the discourses in which they are involved, the places in which these discourses occur and to the mediational means they are using, and the mediated actions which they are taking?
- 3) How are sociocultural or historical thought or cultural patterns in the language and its genres and registers providing a template for the mediated actions of participants in the nexus of practice?

The interest in particular was in finding instances where the participants would display their familiarity or unfamiliarity with practices related to role-playing games, such as handling objects, organising themselves around the table and taking turns in narrating the story. As mentioned before, as a new and developing research strategy, nexus analysis supports supplementary additions from other fields. A synthesis of some principal tools of multimodal discourse analysis and interaction analysis was developed for this thesis. The tools were chosen for their ability to analyse and explain

phenomena of multimodal human interaction down to a level of detail that, for nexus analysis, has as of yet not been consolidated into a fixed set of analytical practices.

The general design of the start of the analytic process of *interaction analysis* is to approach the data with an open mind and to attempt to identify interactional “hot-spots” (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, pp. 4–5). Hypotheses are then formulated and tested by finding other instances of the “same” event and discovering interactional patterns. Through these recurring interactional practices things like the collaborative creation and segmentation of the *event structure*, *rhythm* and *periodicity* (similar to Scollon’s *timescapes*, e.g. Scollon, 2005), *turn-taking*, *repair* and *participation structures* can all be analysed (Ibid.). All social action, whether embodied (gaze, gestures, object-handling) or disembodied (text on a piece of paper and other actions that have a “higher level or permanency” (Norris, 2004, p. 103)) can also be construed as different “nodes of communication” (a term used in *multimodal discourse analysis* by e.g. Norris, 2004) or sets of signs and regularities that have meaning assigned to them by participants. This is essentially the same standpoint that nexus analysis takes with social action as being done by social actors though mediational means within the site of engagement, and indeed also similar to Gee’s capital-D discourses, not to mention Vygotsky’s cultural tools, but tools from multimodal discourse analysis also allow us to categorically place the interplay of communicative nodes (social actions) within the historical bodies of the participants onto a foreground-background continuum (Norris, 2004) according to the amount of attention the participants pay to them. The location of a social action or communicative node on this continuum changes from moment to moment, so that certain backgrounded things can become foregrounded if they become relevant to the interactional situation.

Research methods from motive analysis, in particular Burke’s (1969) work on motive and agency, were also incorporated into the analysis. According to Jones & Norris (2005c), Burke’s theory on the matter of agency is to be understood

not so much in terms of objectively attributing responsibility for social actions, but rather in terms of understanding how those we study position themselves in various relationships to their actions, and understanding how we as observers position ourselves when we formulate interpretations of those actions. (p. 170)

This means firstly that it is both impossible and unnecessary to capture and understand the internal thought processes that lead a person to take a particular action, but that what matters is what explanations and rationalisations they give to behaving in a certain manner, and secondly that a researcher must remain aware of their own perspectives and biases that they bring to observing a person's behaviour. Discourses of explanation and sense-making are themselves cultural tools of constructing identity, and analysis on agency and motive needs to seek to understand the dialogue between the agency-construction of the individual and the interpretations of the agency-construction by other individuals present in the situation, those of the research-observer included (Jones & Norris, 2005c).

Scollon and Scollon (2004) follow along Burke's line of reasoning in suggesting that any action can be inspected from any one of five schemes or points of view, all of which form an explanation or a motive for the action: *the scene* ("this is how things are done"), *mediational means* ("these are the tools that are available"), *social actors* ("this is how I/they want to do this"), *purpose* ("this has to be done because of x"), or *mediated action* ("this is just how it happened"). By reframing their perspective on the action from one viewpoint to another, according to Scollon and Scollon (2004), a researcher can investigate whether this change affects the nature of the action itself. For this thesis, motive analysis was used to examine the explanations ascribed by the Game Night participants for their actions both as they were happening and in hindsight, and especially to pay attention to any shift in motive schemes in how they positioned themselves in the Game Night nexus.

Finally, nexus analysis recognises that contributing to changes within the nexus of practice is an inevitable result of the study of the nexus, as the discourses of research and analysis become "entangled" in the discourses of the nexus of practice, and are then "resemiotised" into mediational means and actions which then eventually become part of the discourses in place, interaction orders and historical bodies of the participants of the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 177). Research activities such as making audio and video recordings and fieldnotes and discussing the research work with the other students and staff during the elective course can be understood to have changed my own historical body in a way that inspired me to return to the material for my master's thesis. While having technically been conducted before the writing of this thesis began, the

trajectories of these discourses of research emanated through the writing process and into future anticipations.

4 THE GAME NIGHT NEXUS

For the sake of clarity, the whole of the many nexus of practice engaged, navigated and ultimately changed in this study (the seven people coming together as a group to play three games of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition* at the University of Oulu to fulfil the learning objectives of a university course on nexus analysis during the autumn semester of 2017) and all the data connected to them shall be collectively known as *the Game Night nexus*. The practices in which social actors in any given nexus of practice engage to produce identities and share meaning are beyond measure; for each action taken, it would always be possible to break it down further into smaller actions. Similarly, it is possible to count any one practice among several different nexus of practice simultaneously.

To study these particular nexus that we have elected to call Game Night, therefore, it was necessary to approach the nexus with an open mind and to find practices that appeared the most central and the most noteworthy for the social issue of which I wished to develop an improved understanding; the formation and presentation of identity and competence within playing role-playing games. For this thesis, six smaller nexus of practice (also referred to by Scollon and Scollon (2004) as “semiotic cycles”) within the larger Game Night nexus were selected to be mapped out and presented in more detail. The cycles/nexus are named and very briefly introduced in this section, before they are more thoroughly analysed in Section 5 below.

CHARACTER CREATION – Meeting the social actors

This nexus centres around the formation and perception of role-player identity and the trajectories of change located within the historical bodies of the social actors present in the Game Night nexus. The discourses cycling within it pertain various ways the social actors position themselves with the communities of practice which they either identify with or feel excluded from.

FINDING YOUR PLACE – Establishing the game area and movement within it

This nexus comprises of practices such as organising the game space to suit the interaction orders and discourses anticipated within the historical bodies of the participants, and signalling attention

shifts on the foreground-background continuum between the concerns of in-game (playing) and off-game (handling research equipment, food, and other material necessities) time.

THE MAGIC CIRCLE – The make-believe contract between players

The practices of this nexus are related to the “theatre of the mind” that the players enter during gameplay. The adaptation of how the players present themselves while playing characters different from their primary self is done through various mediational means such as gestures, expressions, pitch and tone.

ROLLING THE DICE – Handling objects and ownership

This nexus of practice includes the way various objects linked to playing the game are referred to, handled, requested and offered by the participants. It also includes discourses of ownership of game-related objects as perceived marks of competence and leadership.

CHARACTER GROWTH – Discussing game mechanics, editions, classes, levelling up

This nexus consists of practices of both displaying and sharing competence by discussing various game-related but off-game topics such as game mechanics, differences between the various editions of the game and game “lore” (i.e. widely accepted information about the game world). This subsection also discusses the motives the players offer for their choices in creating their characters in a particular way.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS – Allusions and intertextuality in meaning-making

This nexus includes various forms of allusions and references to reservoirs of literature, culture, pop culture, etc. within the participants’ historical bodies, and the additional layers of meaning negotiated by the social actors with the use of these intertextual allusions.

5 NEGOTIATING COMPETENCE AND IDENTITY IN THE GAME NIGHT NEXUS

The research interests at the core of this study were the participants' presentation and development of their competence at role-playing games as well as their definitions and reaffirmations of their positions and identities within a group of game-playing individuals. These issues tie in with perceptions of what it means to be a geek or a gamer, of who gets to call themselves a gamer, and by whom this is decided. These questions were approached through investigating a newly-formed gaming group (our *nexus of practice*), which was both typical and atypical in its makeup and purpose, in that it was created by university students and faculty members for the dual purposes of entertainment and research data collection, as explained in the above section on data collection (Section 3.1). Having a group of players with various levels of apparent competence – that is, having both members who had been active role-players and game enthusiasts for decades and members who had never role-played before – offered a somewhat unique window into studying the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge and agency in role-playing games.

The research questions were as follows:

- 1) In this particular nexus of practice, how are mediational means used by the participants to signal competence at table-top role-playing game practices?
- 2) In this particular nexus of practice, how do the participants negotiate and build agency and identity as members of a social group and a community?

However, as mentioned in Section 1 (Introduction), this thesis will also attempt to present some extrapolations from this one nexus of practice to some anticipations and emanations regarding other, larger-scale role-playing communities of practice, located within the historical bodies of the participants. That is to say, this thesis offers some suggestions as to why a person might enjoy playing role-playing games on a regular basis but be hesitant to consider themselves a role-playing gamer, or even why someone might still call themselves a gamer even if they don't play very often. No person and no group of people can exist in social isolation, and all our actions contain a multitude of Gee's capital-d Discourses. Throughout this section, there are certain tensions to be found between the learned practices and Discourses maintained by different communities of practice and nexus of practice; the participants were often seen drawing assumptions and expectations from their own

unique role-playing game histories, and sometimes those expectations differed from one participant to the next.

For this thesis, I characterise competence as follows: competence at role-playing games means knowledge of, and familiarity with, a) game mechanics, rules and conventions and b) game-related “off-game activities” such as the layout and structure (spatial and temporal necessities), material objects typically foregrounded during a game session, and pop-culture icons which have been incorporated into the “geek subculture”. When discussing competence in this thesis, I often refer to *perceived* competence, i.e. the anticipations and assumptions the social actors have of each other’s competence, based on either past or present interaction.

It is important to note that just like books or movies, individual role-playing games are cultural and commercial products that can be bought, gifted or borrowed. They each come with their own sets of rules, styles of play and imaginary worlds. Competence at one game, though possibly helpful in learning the rules and conventions other games, does not in itself mean that one is competent in all types of role-playing games or even all role-playing games of that particular subgenre. When talking about competence, I am referring to both forms of knowledge and familiarity mentioned below in my definition of the term; the ways in which the participants displayed their knowledge of the game system used (i.e. *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition*), and their familiarity with broader role-playing game practices that are not directly related to the game system itself.

Identity is strongly linked with competence, as taking the time and effort to develop one’s competence often – though not always – results in strong identification with a (community of) practice, and vice versa. Practices of building, developing and maintaining identity could, as discussed below, be both positive and negative – that is, it was possible for a social actor to identify, in addition to being a member of a particular group, as *not* a member of said group.

5.1 CHARACTER CREATION – Meeting the social actors

This section of the thesis is begun by discussing whether the nexus of practice called Game Night can also be characterised as a *community of practice*. The Game Night nexus certainly fulfils the definition of Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2006) of a community of practice as a group of people who share an interest in an activity (learning how to do nexus analysis) and learn to do it better together via regular interaction (the university course and the game nights organised as part of the course). However, it can also be argued that the presence of the dungeon master, as an “outsider” who was not attending the course, at the game nights means that was is not the shared and singular purpose of all the social actors in the Game Night nexus that the students learn about nexus analysis. (And even if it were the case, this would only mean that we participants could be said to belong to a community of practice of *learning nexus analysis*, while the matter of the community of practice of *playing role-playing games* would be left unsolved.)

Additionally, the fact that the nexus of practice was built around a university course means it had a prearranged end date and thus, while the group did interact regularly for a time, there was an awareness among the participants that the group, in its then form, would disband after a certain time. Finally, and perhaps the most importantly, the players within the nexus of practice repeatedly referred to their other, more long-standing and permanent social groups, often stating things like: “In *our group*, we use this game mechanic differently.” I argue that these social groups, which are clearly the groups with which the players identify with more due to this long-term association with them, can indisputably be called *communities of practice*. To make a distinction between these communities and the Game Night nexus in this thesis, therefore, I have decided to call the latter a *nexus of practice*.

Within the theoretical framework of nexus analysis, social actors are understood in a wide context; the nexus of practice is considered to be realised as the result of the actions of not only the participants themselves, but also a great number of other social actors, whose influence had left traces in the discourses of the place and the habitus of the participants (Scollon & Scollon, 2003;

Scollon & Scollon, 2004) – in the case of the Game Night nexus, these backgrounded social actors included but were not limited to:

- The creators of the rules set (*D&D 5th edition*) and the larger role-playing community which has influenced the development of the game for decades.
- The people with whom the participants had played or discussed games of any kind in the past.
- The manufacturers of the physical materials present (gaming books, dice, papers and pencils, food and food containers, clothes, furniture, space, etc).
- The current and retired staff members of English Philology, the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Oulu and the academia at large, presenting a historical trajectory of what had been and is being studied, and what is considered worthwhile.
- All the complexities of the social, political, cultural and environmental histories and present-day situations of human societies.

Due to the sheer number of the forces who have influenced the nexus of practice, it is necessary to concentrate only on the primary, foregrounded social actors; that is, the ones present during the Game Night sessions and acknowledged by the other participants as being members of the group: the players (Tanja, “Joonas”, “Mike”, “Anna”, “Janne”, and “Anniina” who was present during session 1 only but referred to *in absentia* throughout the three sessions) and “Katri”, the course teacher who attended game nights 1 and 2 and the very beginning of game night 3 as a non-playing researcher-observer. As students and staff of the department of English Philology, all the participants can be characterised as academically-oriented people with an interest in language and culture. They all spoke both Finnish and English, with Mike being a native speaker of (American) English and the rest of the group being native Finnish speakers.

For the university course, each participant practiced their research skills by producing a short piece describing their *zone of identification* (what I have chosen to call *trajectory*) in written and/or in visual form (most produced both a written and a visual representation). For this thesis, Joonas was also asked to produce similar documents. Although originally intended by Scollon and Scollon (2004) to be created only by the researcher to clarify their own sense of belonging to the nexus of practice (see below), these pieces of data contained valuable information regarding the historical bodies of the

participants and their relationships with each other, games in general and role-playing games in particular. The free-form visual representations were particularly interesting due to the many similarities they shared, despite the diversity of the participants' game-playing backgrounds. A short overview of the Game Night participants and their histories with role-playing games, as they themselves had outlined them in their visual and written representations of their trajectories, is presented in table 2 below. Table 2 also includes the participants' roles in both the three game nights and during the university course, which serve to remind the reader of the participants' dual identities as social actors and learners of both playing the game and doing nexus-analytic research.

Table 2. A summary of the participants' trajectories.

Participant	History with role-playing games	Years since start of role-playing	Role in game (character)	Role in course
Katri	grew up with books and board games -> "gate-keeping" her children's computer games -> children going to conventions, etc. -> "heard all about it [from children and students] but never played" -> Game Night!	0	Researcher-observer	Teacher
Anniina	board games growing up -> 20s regular card game nights -> 30s no time/interest to play, but created/tested some games for FL learning -> no previous knowledge of <i>D&D</i> before the start of the course -> Game Night!	0	Player (Lia)	Teacher
Mike	first RPG experiences during preteen years -> intervals of regular gameplay (junior high and grad school) with long periods of "gaming drought" in between -> currently plays regularly as dungeon master of his own group	20+	Player (Balthazar)	Student
Janne	childhood playing video games and roleplaying "as kids do" -> interested in fantasy worlds seen in video games -> first heard of <i>D&D</i> in high school -> first experiences at university less than one year ago -> weekly gaming sessions -> Game Night!	~1	Player (Lucas)	Student
Anna	childhood board games -> fantasy books, films and tv -> informal character games -> ~16: first <i>D&D</i> , playing "every once in a while" -> university: more regular games -> nowadays growing more interested in gaming communities online	~10	Player (Kaylee)	Student
Tanja	childhood board games -> interest in science fiction & fantasy -> moving to Oulu, joining the university gaming society, becoming a board member -> nowadays "games are an integral part of my life".	~10	Player (Flyndal)	Student
Joonas	"just never stopped playing" -> making new rules for children's play and board games -> RPGs with friends "consistently and excessively" -> first job opportunity as game designer -> active interaction with others "just as passionate about RPGs as myself" -> developing role-player identity	25+	Dungeon master	n/a

One similarity is that all participants chose to represent their trajectories leading up to the first Game Night as a chronological line from birth to the present day. This corresponds with how people in the Westernized world typically discuss the passage of time and is a result of life-long socialisation (e.g. Lewis, 2014). Interestingly, it appears that the less experienced the participant was, the more likely they were to finish their timeline by explicitly mentioning the date of the first game night (15 Nov 2017), whereas the participants with the most role-playing experience tended to end their trajectories with mentioning what games they are currently playing, how often they find the time to do so, or how they see themselves positioned within the gamer community. This is understandable, as the first Game Night is likely to be a much more defining moment in the role-playing game “careers” of the participants with less history with games – in other words, their historical bodies contained fewer instances of past interaction with the practices of gaming, and therefore the first game night was more significant in marking their initiation into the nexus and community of practice.

Another interesting similarity is that a number of participants stated that they had started reading fantasy and fairy tale fiction as children or during their early teens, and that they had played board games, childhood schoolyard games and computer-based games well before discovering table-top role-playing games. This corresponds with the earlier hypothesis by e.g. Copier, 2007 (introduced in Section 2.2.3), that playing role-playing games was perceived by the participants as being part of a larger subculture and fandom of works of fantasy, science fiction and horror. Role-playing game narratives and imaginary worlds draw from the same collective consciousness and (largely Indo-European and Judeo-Christian) mythic traditions which also inspire other works of popular culture, such as book, films and television shows. These mythic traditions and shared narratives carry with them sets of values and Discourses e.g. of individual heroism, beautiful good vs. ugly evil, and self-sacrifice for the greater good, which cycle through the interactions of everyday life rather covertly, but are foregrounded in role-playing games and other cultural narratives of extraordinary deeds, where they are actively adhered to or subverted.

For any nexus-analytic study, it is important to enter into a zone of identification with the key social actors in the nexus of practice studied; the researcher “must be recognized by other participants as a participant in the nexus of practice under analysis” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p.153). Looking at my

own written and drawn representations of my zone of identification, it appears to me that out of all the participants, I defined my own historical body the most in terms of *community*; specifically, the University of Oulu gaming society, as evidenced by example (1) below:

(1) TWT JOINING A COMMUNITY

However, it wasn't until I moved to Oulu and began my studies at the University of Oulu that I actually met real-life, actual role-players! I started going to their weekly gaming nights, joined my very first campaign (which ran for a number of years), became a member of the club and eventually a member of the board as well... in short, **built my main social circle around [society]**.

This sense of community and having my social life revolve around role-playing games has, I feel, had a profound influence on my historical body. It would be plausible to argue that my conception of role-playing games as a practice is quite different from that of someone who considers them a fun occasional pastime or someone who has never had a chance to play them before but has always been interested in trying. It is noteworthy that though there have been times when I haven't had the time or the energy to participate in actually taking part in sessions and campaigns, I have nonetheless felt I am part of a community. My established identity as a "geek" and a role-playing gamer is something I take for granted; however, I had to recognise that the same trajectory was not necessarily true for the other participants.

During a classroom discussion after the first game night session, the social actors had an opportunity to share their feelings about belonging to "the gamer subculture" and the perceived gate-keepers of the community. I brought up the topic of having found it strange that there were people at the University of Oulu who played role-playing games regularly but were not active members of the aforementioned university gaming society. Katri then asked about whether the people present had thought of role-playing games as a cool activity when they were children, to which Mike responded that when he had been a child, role-playing games were "a very socially marginalised game" (CRC) and something to be done in secret. He also gave this as one of the reasons why he didn't join the RPG society, as he was "too shy to confess an interest" to such an unpopular, "geeky" hobby.

From this, we moved on to the following exchange (2) which further illuminated the reluctance present in some of the participants' historical bodies to associate themselves with established gaming communities. Example number (3), which is from my email correspondence with Anna, also deals with the same feelings of not "fitting in":

(2) CRC SUPERNERDS AND GAMING JOCKS

- Katri: so are you are you can you be proud of ... can you?
 Anna: uhuh yes def.. I really like playing but the problem that I had is that I didn't get to play that often so I was I like the game I like playing **it but I don't know if I could call myself a player or like if I can actually say to anyone that I like playing the game 'cos what if someone is like supernerd** and ... yeah and so I felt I didn't know enough to start playing he game
 Mike: I had that feeling for years with Star Trek
 joint laughter
 Mike: I like the show but I haven't seen every episode
 joint laughter (inaudible)
 Mike: **I am a fan but not a fanatic**
 Anna: yeah I had that problem for a while
 Katri: yes so actually there's the membership and how deep you are in the community and how ex.. **to what degree you are an expert in playing** so that's of course an important ...
 Anna: it was one of the problems when I didn't like to go to any of the [Uni. Oulu game society] sessions (.) **I like games and I like playing but if these people REALLY like games** and I don't know ...
 joint laughter
 Mike: yeah that's good
 Mike: I don't know if I necessarily felt so ironic fear of rejection by people who would stereotypically
 Maria: be accustomed to be rejected
 Mike: yeah
 joint laughter
 Mike: so they ... interesting that they've seen online uhuh
 Maria: I think I know what you mean
 Mike: ... of **gaming jocks**

(3) EMA GAMERS AND PLAYERS

[Are you a role-playing gamer?]

I don't know. I definitely like playing role-playing games, and I have some experience with D&D. This seems to depend at least to some extent on who I'm talking with: with my friends who have no experience with role-playing games, I feel like a role-playing gamer. **With other gamers, though, I don't always think I'm experienced enough and see myself as more of a player.**

From these two examples, we can infer that there are two things that those people who play games but who are hesitant to call themselves role-playing gamers (in this nexus of practice, Anna and Mike in particular) offer for their negative-identity practices, both of which are related to positions they take in relation to other people; namely, they consider themselves to be less experienced at playing games (competence) than other people, and less “fanatic” (identity) about game than other people. One additional reason – not wanting to be socially stigmatised for playing RPGs – was given by Mike, whose historical body contained trajectories of having grown up thinking that playing *D&D* was a deeply “uncool” and unpopular pastime. However, he mentioned that there have been changes (in society and youth culture?) during the last twenty years and that such clear divisions of groups are no longer a reality.

In contrast to Mike and Anna’s wariness of being perceived as either “too geeky” or “not geeky enough”, neither Joonas or Janne reported any negative experiences related to building identity as a gamer, with Janne saying that he’s been “very outspoken about this *D&D* expedition” and only met with positive reactions. Joonas voices his feelings about his identities as a role-player thusly:

(4) TWJO A DEVELOPING ROLE-PLAYER IDENTITY

What is different now is that for the past 10 years I’ve been an active part of the local and national roleplaying communities, as well as engaging internationally. I’m communicating with others just as passionate as myself, some being from very different cultures and backgrounds, affording me both perspective in to the hobby and identity more defined than “roleplayer”. It seems I’m **starting to become a Nordic roleplayer, a Finnish roleplayer, perhaps even a roleplayer from Oulu.**

This observation from Joonas in example (4) is interesting in that it emphasises the fact that far from being monolithic, the nexus of practice of role-playing is in fact made out of an infinite number of overlapping and intersecting nexus of practice, some of which may be formalised into communities of practice while others remain more undefined, impermanent or informal. The practices of playing role-playing games with their own social group are enough for many (if not most) people to form and maintain a “role-playing gamer” identity, while others seek other, related practices such as discussing RPGs, developing new game systems and forming organisations to facilitate communication across boundaries of groups, local communities or even cultures.

One of the most fascinating things about this nexus of practice was the presence of Anniina and Katri as participants with no prior first-hand experience on table-top role-playing games. It was known from an early stage that Anniina would be unable to attend game session number two, but her character was created in the belief that she would be back for session three. It is very unfortunate that she was ultimately not able to return to play her character, Lia, as it would have been extremely interesting to see how differently she would act in the nexus, having freshly gained role-playing competence emanating from the first game night experience within her historical body. Her perceived apprenticeship encouraged the other players to vocalise their actions and their motives in a way which might not have occurred without her. For the most part, Katri shared this apprentice status with Anniina but her decision to contribute to the nexus of practice not as a player but as an observer meant that her participation in the game remained rather peripheral, and her presence as a social actor was foregrounded during the game sessions mostly before and after the game as well as during breaks.

The interaction order and power relations between the social actors within the nexus of practice was also fascinating and, truthfully, would merit a study of their own. However, they could be briefly characterised as follows; when asked about who was in charge during the game nights, all participants seemed to agree that while the setting up of recording equipment was done collaboratively (perhaps with Katri wielding the most social power due to her status as an institutional authority), when it was time to start the game, the power was relinquished to Joonas as the dungeon master. This theme of voluntary submission to the dungeon master's authority and leadership will be returned to several times in the following subsections.

In conclusion, the motives the social actors assigned to their feeling, or not feeling, like they belong to the "gamer" subculture very typically had to do with the emanations of how they had been received by other social actors in the past. "Other people" and their opinions on games and players were referred to both positively (in case of Joonas, Janne and myself) and somewhat negatively (in case of Mike and Anna). "Other people" were also present in the trajectories of Katri and Anniina, as

their anticipations of what table-top role-playing games are like were based on what they had heard from others (e.g. Katri from her children).

5.2 FINDING YOUR PLACE – Establishing the game area and movement within it

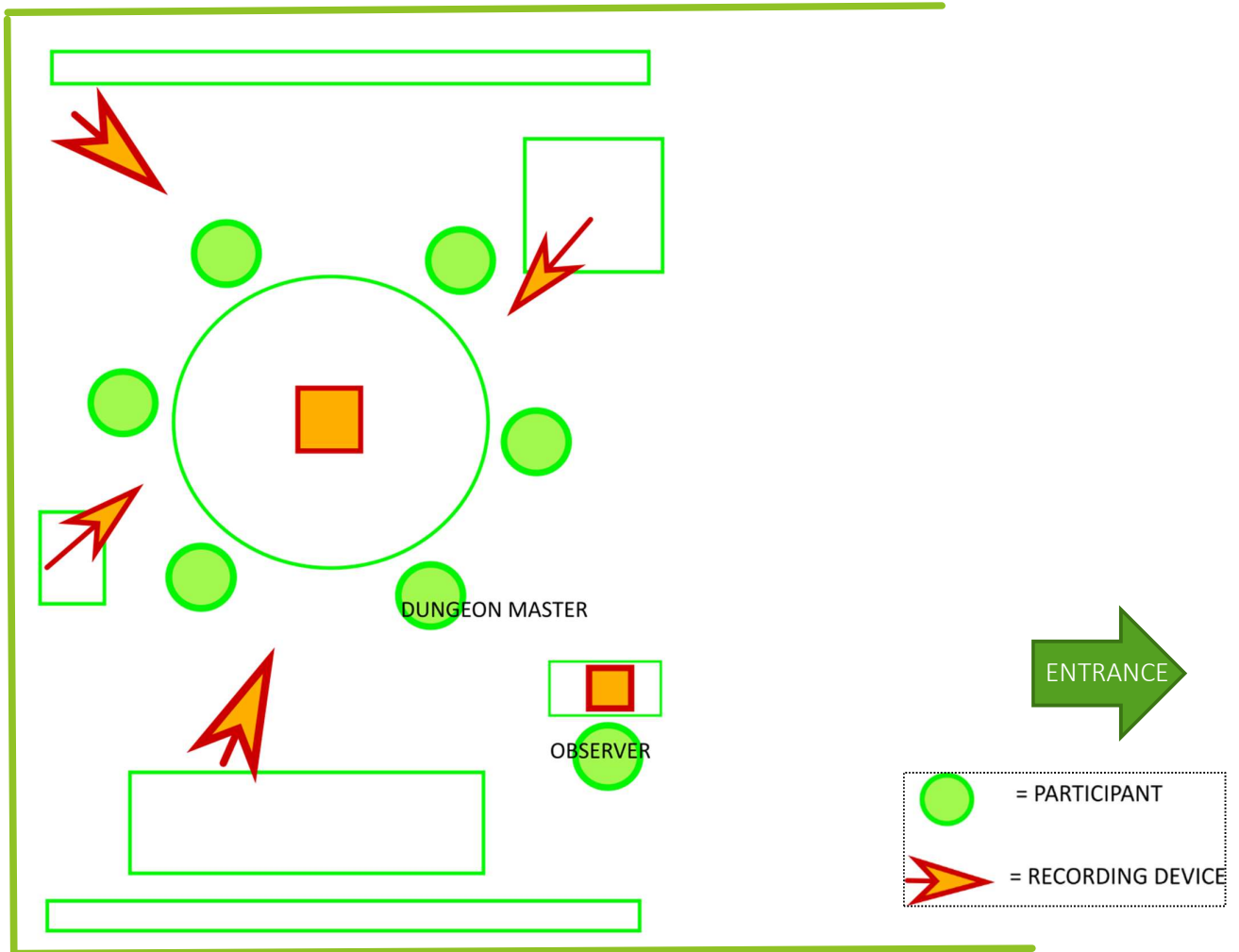


Figure 2. The Game Night setup.

Figure 2 above shows a rough diagram of the layout of the space in which the game nights were organised, as well as the setup of the tables, recording devices and players as they “fell into place” during the game sessions. The workspace was a large, somewhat spacious room, of which only approximately a third (the cluster of tables and chairs furthest away from the main entrance) was in active use by the game night participants. The tables, chairs, desks and other more or less permanent objects in the part of the room that the participants passed through to get to the designated game

area were mostly backgrounded, except for the rare occasion when they were needed, e.g. when I needed a trash bin near the beginning of the first game night and, unable to locate one from the part of the room we were currently occupying, I picked one up from the other side of the room and carried it closer to the game table.

It should be noted that the diagram above is an approximation and most accurately represents the relative position of players and their surroundings during the first game session, as there were minor changes in the group configuration between the sessions (chief among which were that Anniina was unable to attend sessions 2 and 3 and that the participant-observer, Katri, similarly was absent from session 3). Nevertheless, the relative positions of the players and the placement of the recording devices (cameras and microphone) stayed rather constant.

When first entering the space reserved for the game session, it is very probable that the social actors already had pre-existing schemes (or discourses) of how the space would appear embedded within their historical bodies as a result of a lifetime of interacting with environments within the framework of educational institutions. Similarly, they each had anticipations about what physical requirements playing the game would pose to the room. Though these learned schemes were likely to differ in their details between all the participants, they anticipated *homologous habitus* with the other members; that is, it was their mutual expectation that they would be able to set up the space so that it would serve their intentions of doing research and playing the game. In the classroom interview recorded after the first game session, Mike remarks:

(5) CRC SETUP ANTICIPATIONS

Mike: uhum so we came in and we had the circular table set up
[--]
Katri: and the table was there actually left by somebody else so
Mike: right yeah it was already set up (.) **but we would have put it in a circle anyway**

It can be inferred that in example (5) Mike recognised that setting up the tables in a circle was something that he would have done instinctively, and that he expected others would have performed

the same intuitive action. Drawing from my own history with playing games, I could extrapolate that unlike live-action role-playing games, table-top role-playing games are almost always played indoors, seated around a table. If played in someone's home (which is very typical), the games most often take place either around a dining room table or in the living room sitting on sofas. The players prefer to arrange themselves in a circle so that everyone can see and hear each other, with the game master often being offered the best seat available. These are some of the anticipations which I suspect Mike shared with me when he said that "we would have put it in a circle anyway". Interestingly, however, as a newcomer to the practices of playing role-playing games Katri confesses to have had a different idea prior to the start of the session, saying that she felt unsure whether the circle of tables, located at the extreme end of the room in a rather intimate arrangement, would be "ideal", and to have thought we "might have organized tables more centrally in the big space" (EMK). However, she changed her opinion and decided that the table setting would be suitable "for a board game" (sic) once others (more familiar with role-playing games) showed signs of approving of the circle of tables and started settling down. This begs the conclusion that having a history of playing board games and a budding understanding of role-playing games, Katri thought that table-top role-playing games might require a set-up that was somewhat, but not completely, similar to that required by board games. When perceiving other, more "competent" participants jointly selecting the circular table setting at the far end of the room, she accepted their judgment based on her belief that they had more accumulated knowledge about the game and related practices within their historical bodies.

At the very beginning of the first session, as we entered the room and surveyed the scene, we did so both as players of the game and as researchers concerned with collecting good-quality data. Thus, settling in for the session involved actions not just from the nexus of practice of playing role-playing games, but also of doing research. Rather than finding seating immediately, the participants first proceeded to set up the recording equipment, and only then gradually shifted their attention from the cameras, microphones and laptops to the table.

The exception to this was Joonas, the dungeon master, who was not involved in the course and therefore was free to choose his seat (the one closest to the entrance) immediately. As a person with

disabilities, Joonas offered one special motive stemming from his habitus that guided his choice of seating:

(6) EMJO SEATING PRIORITIES

My main concern was accessibility. I wanted to sit in a place where I wouldn't have to circle the table to, for example, go to the toilet. Once seated, I wanted to make sure that all the players were fairly evenly distributed around the table, and **that I could easily make eye contact with any of them.** After all that, **I wanted to make sure that I wouldn't be blocking any of the cameras.**

So, in order of importance, Joonas listed as first priority to ensure his own comfort and ability to move around when and how he needed. With his placement secured, he then turned his attention to matters of role-playing, and thirdly to matters related to research and data collection. As Joonas' partner who is accustomed to assisting him (by e.g. fetching items, placing them so they're easily accessible) I especially found myself wavering between the two nexus, moving between performing preparatory actions for the game and helping in configuring the recording devices. After the cameras were all recording, the participants found their seats one by one. Katri, who attended the session as a researcher-observer and did not take part in the game, positioned herself at a separate desk just outside of the circle ("to be as close as possible to the group playing because I wanted to be part of it all – not just a cold observer" (EMK)), while the players chose their seats from the available ones. Another factor that guided the seating order – friendship – was named by both Mike and Anna. Both mentioned (in EMA and EMM respectively) that they tended to "gravitate" toward people in the social group that they knew best and had played with previously, though Mike also commented on choosing his final seating so that Anniina, the new player, could "maximize her access to advice from two experts."

Even after the dungeon master had requested the start of the game by directing the participants' attention toward the material components of the game (i.e. rule books, character sheets and dice) the players were still occasionally getting up to double-check the recording equipment. During the following two sessions the dynamic between research and gameplay stayed relatively similar to the first session. While competence at using the recording equipment grew, there was less "hassle"

involved in the setup process, and the start of the game became smoother, but there were still occasions when the participants' attention was refocused from the discourses of gameplay to those of research. One such instance was during session 2 when it was discovered that the audio recording device (my laptop) had stopped recording some time earlier. This was stored in the historical bodies of the participants and referred to during session three when we used our newfound understanding of the technical constraints to ensure a similar incident would not happen again.

One interesting instance of disruption occurred when Anniina took a seat at the table where I myself had previously left my dice bag and water bottle. Having sat down and noticing me moving towards said items, she apologised and asked if she had taken my seat. I reassured her that it was fine and moved my items to the other side of the table. Drawing from my body of experience, I had erroneously assumed that having my dice and my bottle on the table had marked the seat in the eyes of the other participants as "mine", even though there was no tangible reason for such an expectation. Again, it is unfortunate that Anniina was unable to attend sessions two and three, as it would have been interesting to see if any similar or related instances of differing readings of the game space had transpired.

Play in table-top role-playing games is understood to be situated within a particular space; in practice, readiness to play is signalled by being seated at the table and orienting oneself toward the game master. Movement away from the table (e.g. to take a break) usually³ signals breaking away from the game situation, which in turn may halt the entire game if the player's active participation is required in order for the scene to proceed. The timing of breaks, therefore, requires certain knowledge of the flow and rhythm of a typical role-playing session. Based on many conversations I have had with people who regularly play role-playing games, there are two approaches to break-taking; either each player takes a short break as needed, which requires a certain competence in reading the situation and assessing when, in the game narrative, there is a moment of inactivity for their character (often referred to as *down time*), or the group agrees on pausing the game and taking a break

³ This was not always the case, however. For instance, during session three, the dungeon master momentarily moved away from the table to draw on the whiteboard located in the same room but somewhat removed from the table, while still maintaining the game situation. This was preceded by vocal agreement from the players, and served to simply add a new mediational means to the social action taking place.

simultaneously. While both approaches are viable and naturally are not mutually exclusive, they shape the flow of activity differently. Within the Game Night nexus, the players were allowed to leave the table at any time, but this was mostly done by myself, which is suspect is due to my history of playing games led by Joonas and being “competent” at his way of pacing the game, The endeavour to take simultaneous breaks was, however, set by the dungeon master at the beginning of session one. In terms of power relations, throughout the three sessions, the timing of breaks was either mandated by the game master or requested by one of the players. Given that the dungeon master was the principal keeper of the narrative and had been handed the authority to guide the story in the direction of his choosing, this interaction order was intuitive and uncontested by the participants. This authority was relinquished during breaks, however, as the players reverted to a more conversational interaction order, standing up and walking around as they pleased. As mentioned above, it was during the breaks that interaction with Katri as the participant-observer, while scarce during gameplay, was also once again foregrounded; research and data collection were also discussed, and the recording equipment was checked, water bottles were filled, and other biological functions were seen to.

In conclusion, the physical organisation of the game space and the participants’ movement within it were built in the intersection of the existing discourses in place (the university room) and the social actors’ anticipations and emanations located within their historical bodies. The players entered the scene with certain expectations of their own movements, as well as the movements of others, often assuming homologous habitus with the other persons in the nexus of practice. In addition to the nexus of playing games, there were other, sometimes contradictory, nexus at play, and these nexus became foregrounded and backgrounded as the social actors shifted their attention between them.

5.3 THE MAGIC CIRCLE – The make-believe contract between players

The term *magic circle*, as discussed in Section 2.2, refers to a contract and a ritual-like mindspace entered into by players during the game session. I argue that this contract is almost always implicit and separate from another kind of contract that players can make explicitly, for instance by discussing boundaries or “taboo” themes and establishing a safe space to ensure an enjoyable experience for

all participants. The implicit contract of the magic circle, as defined in this thesis, refers to the players' agreement to extend the scope of their experience beyond the input they receive from their physical senses. That is to say, the players agree to use their imagination to enliven and complete the narrative in their mind. This is also often called the "theatre of the mind" by role-players to distinguish this playstyle from ones that rely on the use of miniatures, grid maps and other physical objects that aid in the visualisation of the narrative scene (e.g. "Origin of term 'theater of the mind'", 2016).

It is generally appreciated that the players adopt some external elements (mediational means) to symbolise their characters and to mark a distinction between the character and their "primary self". These mediational means include, for example, changes in vocal tone or pitch, expressions, posture and gaze. However, due to the social contract of the magic circle, the players are not expected to be able to perform their characters with complete accuracy; they are allowed to make a character that is of a different age, gender, class, cultural background, ability and even species than the player themselves. To limit the choice of character to only such individuals as the player can portray in a totally believable manner in both appearance and personality would severely limit the escapist enjoyability of role-playing games as a pastime. The ability to both represent an imaginary character and to recognise character representations in other people is a learned skill, which can be acquired from multiple sources other than playing role-playing games.

When portraying their characters, players express the anger and other negative (and positive) emotions felt by those characters through a complex combination of mediational means, while simultaneously using the same means to signal that they are "only playing" and not in fact experiencing the feelings they are acting out, at least not to the same degree that their characters are. Expressing emotions is thought of as "good role-playing" in that it is considered entertaining; within the Game Night nexus of practice, this was seen in how the players readily responded to expressions of strong emotions of any kind from their fellow players with amusement (grinning, laughter, verbal encouragements) before composing themselves and reacting as their characters would.

Within the nexus of practice that we call the magic circle, the players regularly encountered discrepancy between what they themselves knew and what the characters knew, resulting in a kind of mental balancing act. This could work both ways; the characters created by the players frequently possessed skills and qualities the players did not (for instance, it is highly unlikely that Anniina was as adept a fighter as her character, Lia), and there were often situations where the players themselves were present at the table but their characters, for various reasons, were not involved in the scene. This, too, required some competence from the players. In the Game Night nexus, as mentioned above, players often reacted to a scene “as themselves” by for example laughing at a joke or a reference or showing admiration for something another character did, before giving a second reaction as their character, *regardless of whether the character was present* in the scene. This fluctuation between player and character personalities in reacting to others was, interestingly, not perceived to be distracting, but welcomed; a player who never breaks their role and shows that they are entertained might make others feel uncertain and uncomfortable, whereas a player who keeps joking around and is unable to immerse themselves in the character at all might be considered by others to be tedious and irritating to play with. When a player’s character was absent from a situation, they were allowed to offer comments and suggestions, but should not have been able to influence the scene directly. It was the expectation that when they acted “in-character”, their knowledge was limited to what their character had witnessed or been told by others.

Within the magic circle of table-top role-playing games, time is not always linear. Players might have more time to consider their reactions to a situation than they would in real-life situations, while occasionally the players choose to make a jump forward or even backward in narrative time to a moment that interests them. Particularly during combat encounters, in-game moments were lengthened by game mechanics as rules allowed several characters to act simultaneously within the story, but their actions were still resolved by the players one after another. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, a mechanic called *Initiative* determines the order with which the characters act. A call for an Initiative roll from the dungeon master also signals the start of a combat, which changes the rhythm and pace of the game by enforcing a scene that is more structurally determined by game rules and mechanics. The end of the combat situation allows the players to return to the more loosely organised, (approximately) moment-for-moment pacing of in-game actions. The asynchronicity of in-game and off-game time also means that the players often need to make and consult notes in order to

remember events, names and places that their characters only learned about minutes or hours ago, but that the players themselves learned about in a previous game session weeks, months or even years ago.

Making meaning communally within the “theatre of the mind” was frequently assisted by the players in the Game Night nexus of practice with the use of gestures. Gestures and mime were utilised to convey ideas of physical dimensions and movement such as size, direction, speed and force, as well as to give indications of how artefacts and creatures appear, such as shape, stance and posture. One important function of gestures in meaning-making that connects several of these mediated means was to complement verbal descriptions of battle. Frequently met in the Game Night nexus, this use of gestures is especially common in games like *Dungeons & Dragons* that, thematically, are heavily oriented toward narratives of adventuring in hostile territories.

In the Game Night nexus, each player differed somewhat in the strategy and style with which they use the above-mentioned mediational means, e.g. gestures, vocal changes, facial expressions and changes in vocabulary. As the dungeon master, Joonas had the added responsibility of presenting not just one character, but all the people, creatures and animals that the player characters encounter during their adventure. This means that he especially was expected by the others to be very versatile and quick to adopt new ways of portraying any character that was “needed” in the narrative situation to advance the story. New *non-player characters* played by him were introduced or suggested either by himself (“You see a young woman, a teenager, carrying a bundle and running towards you” (GNV1)) or by one of the other players, often prompted by the dungeon master (“There are all kinds of animals running around the farmyard. Which one would you like to speak with?” (GNV2)). In addition to portraying non-player characters, he was also in charge of describing the in-game environments and the movement of characters within it, and of ensuring internal story cohesion and the overall experience. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that the role of the dungeon master is to be the initiator and master of ceremonies for the ritual of role-playing within the shared magic circle of gameplay.

In portraying their characters' mannerisms and ways of speech, for example, the players often drew inspiration from sources such as characters in films or television series – or, in the case of Mike (see example (7) below), in role-playing games played by others online. Subsection 6.6 will examine the use of intertextuality and polyvocality in more detail.

(7) EMM FINDING BALTHAZAR'S VOICE

After I settled on the dragonborn, I eventually felt I was starting to unconsciously emulate Orion Acaba's performance of his dragonborn sorcerer character Tiberius Stormwind on *Critical Role*⁴, **particularly in the in-character voice I started trying to use**. That part of the character development was unplanned and unconscious, just sort of happening.

Here, Mike explains that having chosen to play a Dragonborn Sorcerer for the Game Night mini campaign, his performance of the character was “unconsciously” influenced by a similar character that he had seen played by someone else, someone who was, presumably, perceived by him as a very competent voice actor and role-player and thus his performance became a model after which Mike could model his own practices of in-character interaction within the “theatre of the mind”.

Anticipations and emanations of competence are, therefore, scattered throughout the nexus of practice of the make-believe contract; those among the social actors who have experience playing carry within their habitus trajectories of practices that they have witnessed prior to the present situation. They might also easily expect others, at least those that have played around the same amount or more as themselves, to have access to similar or “the same” information in their habitus. Thus, when the character creation process was finished and the actions of playing the role-playing game itself took over, Anniina, as a “peripheral learner”, was understandably a little hesitant about the conventions and practices, staying silent until her first turn of combat and then asking what her character could do in the situation (the adventuring party being attacked by enraged dogs). When given a list of some possible options and the encouragement that she could try anything she could imagine, she decided to move to defend Janne's character, Lucas. She also offered an additional piece of information to explain her character's motives: “because they attacked you first.” (GNV1) This was

⁴ *Critical Role* is a popular American web series where a group of voice actors play *Dungeons & Dragons*, often with visiting celebrity guests (“Critical Role”, n.d.).

received with positive feedback in the form of an exclamation of “How generous!” by Janne and the subsequent success of Lucas in defeating the dogs, with the dungeon master attributing the success partially to Lia’s help. This exchange could be said to have marked the start of her apprenticeship of the nexus of practice of the magic circle, as she was encouraged by the others to complete the information given by the dungeon master (the description of the fight scene and of the relative positions of the characters) by using her imagination.

5.4 ROLLING THE DICE – Handling objects and ownership

Material objects related to playing table-top role-playing games were introduced gradually during the first game session and revisited during the subsequent two sessions. Objects with a direct semiotic significance to gameplay included various kinds of dice, character sheets, writing equipment (pencils, erasers and sharpeners), spell cards and rule books. In addition to these, other artefacts such as bottles, various foodstuffs and snacks, items of clothing, cell phones and recording equipment were brought by the social actors to the site of engagement. The university workspace that served as the scene for the nexus of practice also contained its own pre-existing material realities such as the layout of the room, the furniture and the lighting. All these different pieces of material mediational means or communicative nodes represent different disembodied (from Norris, 2004) and reified (from Wenger, 1998) discourses in place.

Within the Game Night nexus, ownership of game-related material objects was at least somewhat linked with ownership (or rather, leadership) of the situation, as evidenced in the following remarks by Anna:

(8) EMA LEADERSHIP MEANS PROVIDING MATERIALS

[The dungeon master was in charge of the nexus,] since he was in charge of the game. This showed by him creating the story and leading the characters, **but also by the fact that he provided most of the materials, e.g. books, pictures, cards, etc.** The second person in charge might have been you [Tanja], since at least I felt that you had the most experience with role-playing games out of all of us players, and it showed. **You also provided us with materials and brought food**, which was part of the bonding experience between the players.

Within the Game Night nexus, the anticipation of the ownership of the materials that were related directly to gameplay lay on the dungeon master. This, mostly backgrounded, expectation was evident in Anna's statement (excerpt (8) above) that providing materials "showed that he was in charge", as well as in the way Joonas' first action after entering the room and choosing a seat was to start pulling out game books and character sheets, and in the way the distribution of the character sheets was used by him as a signal requesting the others to redirect their attention from the recording equipment to the game. As Joonas' partner who had helped him get ready for the session, I too contributed by bringing to the table my dice bag as well as an assortment of pencils, a sharpener and a few erasers. This, too, was noticed by Anna and added, in her eyes, to my perceived competence of the game practices. Once again, competence, as intuitively understood by the social participant within the nexus of practice, did not only mean competence at in-game matters such as great role-playing or vast knowledge of game mechanics, but also familiarity with meta practices of gaming such as providing food, having extra sheets of paper for notes, or handing over a game book to someone else when it was no longer needed.

The fact that the pencils I provided were there for all players to use was not made explicit at any point, as I recall; however, due to their central placement on the table, they were accepted and utilised by other players all the same. As all participants share similar histories of growing up in a culture where writing with pencils is a common practice, the writing equipment itself, while necessary for playing the game, did not receive much attention. On the other hand, the character sheets and the many-sided dice, as communicative nodes which are more specific to the practice of playing table-top role-playing games, were much more foregrounded, being both discussed and handled frequently by the participants. Dice, especially, are often seen as a symbol for role-playing as a hobby, and some players own dozens if not hundreds of dice, despite a typical game only requiring the player to roll only a few at a time. I myself admit that in addition to being a vessel that contains the tools I need for playing, my dice bag is also a "manifesto" of my identity as a role-playing gamer, and I tend to make a little show of opening my bag, pouring out the dice I want to use and returning the rest to the bag. Though there are also players who only own one set of seven dice (or none at all), I know I am not alone in indulging in this little assertion of competence and identity. Of the players in the Game Night nexus, in addition to myself, Joonas seemed to prefer having a large bag of dice, out of

which he picked the ones that “felt” the most right for the situation (choosing a colour scheme to suit the character, for instance). Janne had a single set of dice he used (except for when he had forgotten them home and had to borrow from others), and Mike brought a medium-sized dice bag of his own. Anna and Anniina, the players who did not have their own dice, either due to not owning any or having left theirs at home, were loaned a set for use during the game. The number, colour and design of dice also raised discussion, with Anniina, for instance, commenting on the pile of dice being poured from the bag: “You look professional!” (GNV1)

Both within the Game Night nexus and in the wider nexus of practice of role-playing, dice were/are also frequently the subject of jokes related to them having a will of their own; it is quite usual to hear a player say that they have “really bad luck with the dice today” or even that their dice want to see their character killed. For instance, in the Game Night nexus of practice, there was a running gag about a particular white die that the dungeon master owned that seemed to produce disproportionately high results whenever it is rolled, which was first noticed by the players during session one and referred back to several times during the next sessions, with the other players even humorously suggesting that I steal it (which I actually did at one point). Naturally, the die did not actually roll high result every time, but having formed a Discourse of exceptionality around this particular die, the players were more likely to notice the times when it did yield high rolls and ignore the contrary evidence. Similar instances of foregrounding die results occurred whenever a player rolled low or otherwise unwanted numbers, resulting in undesirable consequences for the character(s). For instance, Mike’s decision to keep using the same die after several unlucky rolls was met by other players with incredulity and repeated offers to provide him with alternative dice. There was something in the capital-d Discourses of the “collective consciousness” within the nexus of practice that equalled competence at role-playing games with the almost superstitious practice of accusing inanimate pieces of plastic of conspiring against the player.

While owning, handling and sharing dice may be a matter of identity by way of appearing competent, it can be argued that the ease with which a player fills in and reads their character sheet is the real mark of competence, as it requires the player to have spent some time studying the rules of the game, or at least to have played the game on several occasions. Displaying competence through the

knowledge of game rules and mechanics will be discussed in the next subsection, but here we will concentrate briefly on the character sheet as a material artefact. As each edition of each table-top role-playing game system has a different official character sheet, not to even mention the numerous fan-made “streamlined” character sheets that are widely available online today, even experienced role-playing gamers might have trouble with navigating a sheet if it is not one they have used extensively before. The purpose of the character sheet is to serve as a “compendium” of information relevant to the character in concise, often mechanics-oriented form. As a one-glance source of information about the character, the character sheet is often the focal point for a player’s gaze. In the Game Night nexus, the players were very often observed to be looking down at their own character sheets (especially when listening to a prolonged piece of narration by the dungeon master), but also at each other’s sheets; this appears to have been done especially for two purposes:

- 1) To help another player struggling to locate a piece of information about their character. This was especially done by Joonas and Mike to help the newcomer, Anniina, with her sheet, but also by the other players. This sort of assistance was most often given by reaching over and pointing at the relevant location on the character sheet, often with the tip of a pencil, while also reading the relevant score or ability aloud. This was most likely done to help the other player to not only find the correct answer, but also to remember the location so they would be able to find it by themselves next time. This makes the character sheet an important tool of assisting others in building their role-playing competence.
- 2) To find out more about each other’s characters out of curiosity. This was done more often by reaching for the character sheet and bringing it closer to oneself before returning it to the other player. Here, the purpose seemed to have less to do with educating and advising others and more about displaying identity and competence, as the sheet was usually returned with some comment given about game mechanics or the character concept.

Another notable set of artefacts which was regularly foregrounded by the social actors were various food items. The fact that foodstuffs were not permitted in the university workspace where the game was set to take place was met by the students, prior to the first game night, with some chagrin, as the sharing of food was considered to be “an important part of the game experience”. This sentiment was shared by members of both pre-existing communities of practice (Tanja and Joonas on one hand and Janne, Anna and Mike on the other), suggesting that as a practice, sharing food is something that is at least somewhat universally recognised and anticipated by players of role-playing games.

Eventually, the participants agreed to bring food to the workspace despite the prohibition and to dispose of the evidence after the session. The food was brought it potluck-style for session two, and for session three, Katri volunteered to provide the food. The items included various sorts of snacks and biscuits, soft drinks and, fruit and sweets from one of the university cafeterias. Mostly, these foods were kept on a separate table (located in the top-right corner of figure 2 in Section 6.2), but individual containers or bags were also passed around the table. Little to no hesitancy was observed by the recipients of these offerings – although not directly connected to playing the game, the act of sharing food seemed to, indeed, be a familiar mediated action linked with game-playing practices within the social actors’ historical bodies.

To conclude: When engaging in practices of handing, offering and requesting artefacts, whether these artefacts were related to gameplay directly (e.g. rule books) or more indirectly (e.g. food), the participants within the Game Night nexus were most often observed to take social actions in ways with which they appeared to anticipate the other social actors in the nexus would be familiar. For instance, the fact that it was the function of a pencil to write on a character sheet was not vocalised by the participants with more perceived competence to the participants who were understood to be apprentices in the nexus; instead, pencils were simply placed centrally on the table and all the participants helped themselves to them with little disruption or hesitation. With practices that required special interaction with particular game-related artefacts, however, anticipations of how much instruction is needed were based on the perceived “scale of fluency” – that is, during the first game night, Anniina received the most attention from the two experts, Joonas and Mike, regarding instruction on e.g. how to read the game book, fill in her character sheet, roll dice, while the other players were expected to be able to interact with the game materials directly and to request assistance when they recognised that it was needed.

5.5 CHARACTER GROWTH – Discussing game mechanics

As already suggested above, discussing the mechanics of the game plays a major role in both displaying and accumulating competence at playing table-top role-playing games. Here, game mechanics are understood to consist of a plethora of practices and conventions, including but not limited to game rules, character species and classes, and levelling up. Among the social actors in the

Game Night nexus, there was a “scale of fluency” of the mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons*; the two people who have the most experience acting as dungeon masters for *D&D*, Joonas and Mike, were perceived as being the most competent, whereas it is safe to assume that the two people (Katri and Anniina) who were in direct contact with role-playing games for the first time were assigned a status of peripheral apprenticeship by the other participants. The three remaining players, Tanja, Anna and Janne all already had some level of competence at playing *D&D 5th edition*, but nevertheless frequently requested direction from others. Verbal requests for assistance were most often accompanied either by directing one’s gaze toward one of the two dungeon masters, or, even more often, by looking down at one’s character sheets and continuing to search for the missing piece of information, which was then indicated by other players as described above.

It is important to note that competence, here, does not refer to simply possessing more accumulated information about the game system and its rules. Both Joonas and Mike were experienced dungeon masters, but had a situation arisen where there would have been a serious conflict over game mechanics between the two, Mike would doubtlessly have yielded in favour of Joonas’ interpretation of the rules because of his status at that time as the dungeon master. In our message correspondence, Mike wrote: “The Dungeon Master was in charge by social convention. It’s just a social norm of the game” (EMM). This is a reminder that the nexus of practice we call Game Night does not merely consist of linkages of practices relating to playing role-playing games in its general, abstract sense, but to the mediated actions of particular social actors within a particular site of engagement, including the specific practices of dungeon-mastering as performed by Joonas. Instruction was not, however, only given “from top to bottom” on this scale of competence; rather, it was a shared enterprise that was open for contributions from all members. This reflects the community of practice theory of learning by social participation. Because all players were allowed to create their own characters and determine some details about their characters’ backgrounds, they were also given narrative authority to decide on the character’s actions and reactions, and therefore authority to have an impact on the mechanics of the game itself. In other words, they were allowed to be perceived as competent at playing their own character, and the elements of the game that were directly related to the character. In this way, accumulation and displaying of competence was shared by all participants in the nexus of practice.

I observed that Anna and Janne, both of whom had been playing in a campaign dungeon mastered by Mike prior to the beginning of the university course, chose for the Game Night nexus to create characters that were mechanically quite similar to the ones they played in their “main” campaign. It was my initial assumption that they created those characters out of a wish to remain on “familiar footing” regarding the gameplay enabled by the characters’ class and race, which in *Dungeons & Dragons* are the two most notable features in determining what sorts of special abilities a character can have. By selecting a character that they already “knew how to play” (i.e. knew how to utilise in a mechanically effective manner), I assumed they were making displays of competence and minimising instances where they would have to position themselves as learners and apprentices of playing the game. However, the motives Anna gave for her choice of character during our email correspondence (see example (9) below) emphasise practices of identity-building and role-playing.

(9) EMA A SECOND CHANCE WITH THE ELF RANGER

I play a wood elf ranger with another group, and **felt like exploring that character a bit more.** In the other campaign, the DM prepared our characters before the first session and so I didn't actually get to create that character. I thought that this experiment would be a nice way to think about **how I would have done things in the other campaign if I had had the chance.**

Here, Anna presents her motives in terms of the *social actor*, that is, herself and her own desire to be able to have a stronger influence on the character she played. She also states that this is a change from her earlier experience in the campaign led by Mike, where the way she played her character was more guided by the ready-made character she received (scene) or the possibilities offered by the character’s skills and abilities (mediational means).

Interestingly, both Mike and myself had a somewhat different idea of what we wanted from our characters. Rather than re-live an old character, we both were motivated by a wish to play something we had not played before. In example (10) below Mike explains his motives in creating his Dragonborn Warlock in terms of an inner (social actor) motivation.

(10) EMM TIME FOR SOMETHING NEW

I was juggling several character themes in my mind that I had considered prior to the game session. I had settled on playing a warlock class well in advance **because it was a new character type for me that I was interested in exploring.** I settled on the dragonborn race for a similar reason. I wanted to play a character that unlike those I had played in the past. [--] At any rate, I was consciously seeking to break these trends and **play a very different character from my usual archetype.**

This wish to play new types of characters concerns both role-playing (wanting to act out different roles) and game mechanics (wanting to try e.g. new special abilities and fighting styles), and truthfully the two cannot be fully separated from one other. This was ultimately the case for Anna as well – when presented a chance to make a character from scratch, in addition to wanting to create someone she would like to role-play, she undoubtedly also had a wish to “tweak” her character mechanically to suit her interests.

One example of the players showing competence at the game mechanics through their reactions in the Game Night nexus was seen early in the gameplay during session one when Anna as Kaylee the Elf Ranger rolled the first “*natural one*”⁵ of the game. As she and the players closest to her saw the result of the die roll, they started laughing, which caused the other players to realise what was happening and start laughing as well, except for Anniina, who as a first-time player of role-playing games could not pick up on the social clues what was happening or why it was significant. An explanation was then offered by other players. Once again, it is a shame that Anniina was unable to attend the third game session as planned, as it would have been interesting to see whether she would have absorbed this piece of role-playing knowledge into her historical body and, during a subsequent game session, reacted along with everyone else in anticipation of the doubtlessly amusing description of the unfortunate character’s failure to accomplish their task.

To conclude: within the nexus of practice of role-playing games, competence at game mechanics cannot be completely separated from competence at role-playing. Perceived competence is also negotiated very fast based on emanations from past interactions and anticipations of future ones; that is to say, the social actors within the Game Night nexus entered the first game night with already-established assumptions about each other’s relative body of knowledge regarding role-playing games and understandings of the power relations between the players during the game nights (i.e. Joonas was in charge “by social convention”). These perceived differences in the players’ levels of

⁵ Rolling a natural one (also known as “critical failure”) means rolling a 1 on a 20-sided die, which is the worst possible result and always results in the character failing miserably at what they’re attempting to do.

competence did not mean, however, that newer players were “not allowed” to claim competent; all players were given opportunities to appear competent at things related to their characters.

In the Game Night nexus, there was no one universally accepted way of “achieving competence”; some players preferred to pick character classes and races that they were already familiar with, while others wished to explore unfamiliar playstyles and consciously break conventions that they themselves had previously set. What is important is that all the social actors perceived their reasons for creating their chosen character as being motivated by their own wishes, rather than by any outside force. As always with motive analysis, whether this view is accurate or not is irrelevant.

5.6 *IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS* – Allusion and intertextuality in meaning-making

One major way in which the players in the Game Night nexus positioned themselves in relation to each other and the nexus of practice was through the means of humour. One variety of humour is especially interesting for the purposes of this thesis in particular as it links with the practices of identity-building as a member of gamer culture, which in itself is located within the larger geek subculture. This variety of humour is born out of intertextual allusions and references to works of fiction and popular culture, and especially popular films, television series, games and literature in the fantasy and science fiction genres. Making a reference opened a window for presenting geek competence and identity not just for the social actor themselves, but also for the other players in the form of reacting to the reference. In most instances, this was done simply by showing amusement (e.g. laughing, chuckling) and/or repeating the reference back to show recognition.

Intertextuality was, of course, used in the nexus of practice not only humorously but also to make meanings of many sorts. Making a reference to an existing text introduced new Discourses to the nexus of practice, hybridising meaning via heteroglossia and polyvocality. Intentionally positioning oneself in dialogue with other discourses was also a way to portray a character within the magic circle of the “theatre of the mind” (see excerpt (7) “Finding Balthazar’s Voice” in Section 5.3). In fact, it can be argued, that since all means of meaning-making are intertextual and heteroglossic (according to nexus analysis), all role-playing practices, whether intended as allusions to other texts or not, are

inevitably results of positions taken by social actors in relationship with other Discourses and arising from their socio-cultural backgrounds (historical bodies).

Types of references used by the players in the Game Night nexus of practice included:

- approximating sound effects or snatches of music borrowed from iconic moments in classic games and the cinema: e.g. *“dun-dun-DUUUUUN!”* to signal a dramatic or surprising moment in the narrative (GNV2)
- directly drawing parallels to characters, story lines or entire works by naming them: e.g. *“Are you blond like Legolas?”* (GNV1)
- quoting or paraphrasing popular works: e.g. *“I have been falling for thirty minutes!”* (GNV2)
- code-switching, i.e. throwaway lines in Finnish: e.g. *“Kuulepas nyt Heluna, juttu on niin että minä en maidolla tee mitään!”* (GNV2)

Most often, a discourse element containing a reference was not preceded by any attempt to ascertain that the other participants would understand the cultural connotations behind it. On the rare occasion that confirmation of familiarity with a particular work was asked, the work of fiction was typically either quite obscure or published very recently, as was the case, for example, when Anna paraphrased a line of dialogue from the latest film in a popular superhero movie franchise, which had come out only some weeks earlier and was still in theatres. Thus, it can be concluded that in these practices of participation in creating additional layers of meaning by referring to reified bodies of fiction and culture, the participants once again assumed *homologous habitus* with their fellow players. This ties in with the supposed “standard path” of entering nexus of role-playing practice via an interest in fantasy and science fiction as discussed in Section 5.1.

(11) EMJO CREATING NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

For this answer I presume the character in question to be someone directly involved with the characters as an individual, as opposed to a part of a group, and someone that I expect might recur at a later date. I usually **draw on a stereotype that should be familiar to the players**, and add setting-appropriate twists to it, both **to make it easier for me to present and for the players to imagine and remember**. I tend to choose race/culture/ethnicity based on what would present the demographics of the setting accurately, **considering what has been presented**

before. I try to have a roughly equal split between men and women, and include other genders besides. Occupation is almost entirely based on the situation and what needs I have as game master. Appearance I derive from the earlier points, with the addition of a detail that will help distinguish the character from all similar characters.

In the above excerpt (11), Joonas described his usual process of creating non-player characters with whom the players, as their characters, could interact in the game world to receive information or simply to bring the world alive. He explained how he begins with a stereotype with which he *assumes* the other participants are familiar, in order to facilitate play for both himself and the other players. In other words, he considered common cultural knowledge to be a helpful tool of constructing meaning. These generalisations were also brought into the Game Night nexus within his historical body.

Joonas then described some activities he typically engages in to fit the chosen stereotype into the game narrative, by thinking about the internal cohesion of the game world (“considering what has been presented before”) and also somewhat consciously including different genders into the story. This adjustment of the stereotype to suit the story is, of course, in itself an act of changing or subverting the stereotype. In addition to direct references, therefore, it can be determined that social actors the Game Night nexus also created meaning by alluding to different power relations such as gender roles and race and gender politics, and how these have been presented in popular culture. This is also visible, for instance, in the motive offered by Anna for creating a female character, as seen below in excerpt (12):

(12) EMA CREATING KAYLEE

I chose to keep my character a female, matching my gender, because I find it easier to role play and because I like strong female characters, which there can always be more of. **I don't like it how in many fantasy films etc. the female characters' strength is either something magical or it's their sex appeal.** This is why I like creating female characters who are physically strong and maybe not very likeable.

Here, Anna recognised that her historical body contained many instances of feeling that female characters in popular culture left something to be desired, in that they were reduced to being either “sexy” or “magical”, with fewer opportunities to have flaws or layers to their character. She also considered creating new female characters for table-top role-playing games to be adding to the pool

of women in “fantasy films”, etc, meaning she, like other members of the “geek” subculture presumably do, sees stories created in role-playing games as part of the same narrative traditions that cycle around genres of fiction such as fantasy, science fiction and horror.

In conclusion, role-playing games and the character archetypes, stories and values present in their narratives do not exist in a cultural vacuum. In the Game Night nexus, there was certain “cultural baggage” attached to each mediational means available for the players to use. This baggage of Discourses could be and was used by players to introduce humorous elements as well as other semiotic layers to the nexus of practice. Simultaneously claiming competence (for themselves) and assuming competence (for others), the participants most often presumed homologous habitus with the other social actors; there was an expectation that a person who regularly plays role-playing games was also familiar enough with e.g. fantasy books, superhero films or iconic video game sound effects that they would at the very least be able to appreciate the reference.

6 DISCUSSION – CHANGING THE NEXUS OF PRACTICE

One of the core activities of doing nexus analysis is *changing* the nexus of practice. The important final (and first) question of a nexus-analytic study, according to Scollon and Scollon (2004) is therefore this: “What actions can you take as a participant-analyst in this nexus of practice that will transform discourses into actions and actions into new discourses and practices?” (p.178). Firstly, taking the action of conducting this study has created change within my own historical body. I have developed a fuller understanding of nexus analysis, and its vocabulary and ways of thinking and doing have entered my habitus as new sets of mediational means available to me. As an important milestone in the development of one’s academic identity and competence, completing a master’s thesis is, in itself, a nexus of practice wherein one transforms discourses into actions and, in the process of writing, creates new discourses.

Secondly, the university course within the framework of which the data used in this thesis was collected undoubtedly changed the ways in which the participants view table-top role-playing games, as they were encouraged to analytically inspect the social actors, interaction orders and discourses in place circulating in the nexus of practice in which they participated. For some of the participants, the game nights presented their first direct contact with table-top role-playing games, while for others the changes were subtler. For all participants, the integration of the nexus of practice of data collection into the nexus of playing role-playing games was a transformative one in that it introduced new discourses in place and new interaction orders into the participants’ anticipations of the practices of a role-playing game session.

Finally, this study and the thesis that arose from it are contributions, however humble, to the continued dialogue of identity evolution within the community of practice of “geeks and gamers” (though whether such a community of practice exists is debatable). As such, the action of writing and presenting this master’s thesis creates change in the discourses that cycle in the nexus of practice of these communities.

The study of social action, and of the historical accumulations of social actions housed within the historical body of social actors known as practices, lies at the heart of a nexus analysis. The practices

of building, negotiating and displaying competence and identity, central to the present study, were located and identified, in the nexus of practice that has in this thesis been called Game Night, to be present in a multitude of ways, from building role-playing gamer identity on foundations of local and global communities of game practice to claiming competence through the use of material objects or intertextual allusions. Yet more ways, however, remained backgrounded due to limitations of time and presentation format. My action of choosing the six nexus of practice (or semiotic cycles) within the Game Night nexus unavoidably directed my understanding and viewing of the data available to me and the nexus as a whole. During the course of my writing process, I entered a “funnel of commitment” by gradually narrowing my ability to diverge from my chosen research path. For this reason, I fully recognise the subjectivity of this research report and invite the other Game Night nexus participants to challenge, build upon and supplement my findings. In the next section (Conclusion) I offer some suggestions for further study. Below is a brief summary of the findings of this study.

- **Competence at role-playing games within the Game Night nexus is not perceived as simply competence at the rules of the game or as convincingly playing a role, but also as fluency in related practices such as providing game-essential materials or food items, and using and recognising intertextual allusions to works of fiction such as films, television series or literature.**
- Competence is subjective. It is *perceived* in and *offered* to others, and *accumulated* and *claimed* within the historical body.
- Identity practices are often linked with displays of competence as a way of strengthening identity.
- Identity practices can be positive (“I am a member”) or negative (“I am not a member”).
- The participants, while sharing many similarities in their personal histories (e.g. academic education, current place of living), had vastly different trajectories of role-playing gaming practices in their historical bodies; some had embraced the identity of a “role-playing gamer”, while others had either refused it or had so far had little to do with it.
- The participants perceived role-playing game narratives as “the same” as those found in works of fantasy, science fiction or horror, for instance. In other words, they placed stories told within role-playing games inside a larger framework of (Western) storytelling, and readily traced their involvement with role-playing games all the way back to their first encounters with works of fiction in these genres.

- At the beginning of “in-game” time, Discourses of power relations shifted away from those of traditional teacher-led interaction as authority was voluntarily handed to the dungeon master. This authority was relinquished during breaks and at the end of each session, but the timing of these transitions was decided by him.
- **Anticipations and emanations of identity and competence located within the social actors’ historical bodies shaped their interactions 1) with each other, 2) with the physical organisation and layout of the game space, 3) with each other’s portrayal of their characters, 4) with artefacts brought into the nexus by the participants, 5) with the game mechanics, and 6) with other texts.**
- Accumulating these anticipations and emanations and acting on them is a learned practice, of which social actors often assume homologous habitus with other participants, at least those who are perceived to be as (or more) competent as themselves.
- Certain practices such as sharing food, superstitiousness about dice, or deciding the layout of the game area, were recognised by members of both established communities of role-playing game practice, suggesting that these practices may possibly cross community borders.
- **Table-top role-playing games are “hotspots” of collective meaning-making, where narrative authority, although held chiefly by the dungeon master, is shared by all participants. Thus, participants falling anywhere on the “scale of fluency” are given opportunities for participation, strengthening perceptions of personal competence and identity.**

7 CONCLUSION

Nexus analysis maintains that all human action is inherently social and that to take an action is to position oneself in a relationship with other social actors. These claims of position shape our interactions in the many nexus of practice within which each of us constantly engages in meaning-making of various kinds. Therefore, competence and identity are not truly two separate things, but rather built on the same foundation of our habitus as social actors. Within the nexus of practice that has, in this master's thesis, been called Game Night, the anticipations and emanations of what it means to be a person who plays role-playing games were seen assuming many forms of both positive and negative identity practices, where the participants assigned both desirable and less desirable qualities to being viewed as a *geek*. *Being* a role-playing gamer (identity) was perceived to be intermingled with *knowing how* to play role-playing games (competence). Ultimately, it can be argued that whether or not they wanted to identify with the larger communities of practice of role-playing, the participants nevertheless sought to establish practices of communal meaning-making *within the Game Night nexus of practice*, therefore seeking to negotiate their identity and competence *as members of that particular nexus*, rather than the "gamer community" as a whole.

It is these practices of negotiation done by social actors using various mediational means in the site of engagement that were the interest of this study. These practices took many forms, only some of which were introduced in this thesis. It is also important to note that though some points of intersection exist, no two role-playing groups follow the exact same set of practices. Similarly, local and national trends and preferences both influence and are influenced by smaller and more tight-knit communities of role-playing game practice. As culturally and interactionally complex and intertextually packed situations, table-top role-playing games are practically teeming with possibilities for further nexus-analytic study.

There is also a lot more that could be done with the data collected during the university course, whether as a nexus-analytic study by one or more of the participants of the nexus (students or staff), or by "outsider-observers" (as it were), approaching the data using other, more conventional research strategies such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis or interactional sociolinguistics.

Some interesting semiotic cycles circling within the Game Night nexus that were not, unfortunately, developed as fully as they would merit, include cycles of apprenticeship and leadership, and those of movement within “the magic circle” between the player and their representation of their character through role-playing.

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APPENDIX 1. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Below (table 3) are short definitions of some key terms that are useful for discussing the social activity of playing role-playing games.

Table 3. Some essential role-playing game terminology.

Term	Explanation
<i>Player</i>	A participant in a role-playing game. An average table-top game has 3-8 players, while LARPs can have hundreds of attendants.
<i>Game master (GM) Dungeon master (DM) Storyteller</i>	“[T]he game’s lead storyteller and referee” (<i>Wizards</i> , 2014, p. 5); considered to have more creative freedom but also more responsibility than the rest of the group. GM is the most generic term, while DM is associated with <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> , and Storyteller with <i>World of Darkness</i> . In a table-top game, there is typically only one GM, while there can be several co-GMs in a LARP.
<i>Player character (PC)</i>	A character played (and often created from scratch) by one of the non-GM players.
<i>Non-player character (NPC)</i>	All other characters in the world, played by the GM (table-top games) or walk-on extras (LARPs) and typically not as fleshed out as the PCs. NPCs serve to bring life and colour into the game world.
<i>Game (session)</i>	A single role-playing instance, typically lasting anything between 2-8 hours (or sometimes longer, especially in the case of LARPs). A game session that is meant to tell a stand-alone story is called a <i>one-shot</i> .
<i>Campaign</i>	A series of game sessions with a continuous plotline lasting anywhere between days and years. Typically, the players play the same characters throughout the campaign, allowing the characters to grow both in terms of personalities and game mechanics (see <i>Levelling up</i>).
<i>In-game vs. off-game In-character vs. out-of-character</i>	Actively portraying one’s character through e.g. speech and gestures vs. interacting as oneself
<i>Natural 1 vs. Natural 20</i>	The worst possible die roll which always results in a failure of comical proportions vs. the best possible roll, allowing the character to perform some epic feat or great success
<i>Character sheet</i>	A record of information regarding a player character. Often a form filled in by the player during character creation and updated during the game as characters level up, take damage, and learn new things about the world.
<i>Levelling up</i>	The evolution of player characters as a reward for accumulating in-game experiences. Depending on the game system, characters might e.g. learn new skills, gain improved abilities or more health points, which makes them more durable in battle.

APPENDIX 2. DATA SAMPLE CODES EXPLAINED

GNV1, GNV2, CNV3	Video recordings from Game Night 1, 2, 3
CRC	Classroom conversation
TWJO, TWT, TWA...	Written representations of participants' trajectories (JO = Joonas, T = Tanja, A = Anna, JA = Janne, M = Mike, K = Katri, AN = Anniina)
TDJO, TDA, TDK...	Visual (drawn) representations of participants' trajectories
EMJO, EMA, EMK...	Email correspondence between myself and the participants