

# DM Habitus

## The Social Dispositions of Game Mastering in *Dungeons & Dragons*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the situatedness of the Game Master, specifically the Dungeon Master (DM), in terms of practice theory. I use Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus to create the notion of what I call DM habitus, or "deeply engrained habits, skills, and bodily dispositions" that result from the gaming experience that individuals in the Dungeon Master role enact to cement their role. I discuss how, instead of affirmative lines between the idea of "collaborator," "storyteller," and "divinity," the authority granted to Dungeon Masters by the space of social production of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) provides them the ability to appropriate these distinct roles for the sake of preserving the social structure of the gaming space.

Keywords: Dungeons & Dragons, gaming, habitus, practice theory, sociology

### 要約

本稿では、ゲームマスター、特にダンジョンマスター (DM) の位置づけについて、実践論の観点から考察する。DM ハビトゥスと呼ぶ概念、すなわちダンジョンマスターの役割を担う個人がその役割を強固にするために制定する、ゲーム体験から生じる「深く染み付いた習慣、技能、身体的気質」の概念を作り出すことのためにピエール・ブルデュー (1984) のハビトゥス理論を用いる。「協力者」、「語り部」、「神性」という考え方の間に断絶があるのではなく、卓上ロールプレイングゲーム (TRPG) という社会生産の場がダンジョンマスターに与えた権威が、ゲーム空間の社会構造を維持するために、これらの異なる役割を適切に果たす能力を与えていることを論じている。

キーワード：ダンジョンズ&ドラゴンズ、ゲーミング、ハビトゥス、実践理論、社会学

### 1. Introduction

When they formally appeared on the scene, tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) created a distinctly different experience in gaming for adults. With much of the experience occurring in the imagination of players, games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) confused and delighted those who were exposed. A tradition in most TRPGs is the presence of a singular storyteller, who is responsible for the organization, adjudication, and progression of the gaming session. In the *Dungeons & Dragons* world, this is known as the Dungeon Master (or DM), while many other TRPG forms use the term Game Master (GM). Still, Dungeon Master is a recognizable term and status in the RPG world. It exists as a position of significant authority and potential but has not been heavily examined in game studies.

This research applies principles of practice theory to the social behaviors of Dungeon Masters to unearth the existence of a Dungeon Master, or DM, habitus. First developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, habitus represents the conscious and unconscious dispositions an individual enacts in the social world on the basis of their status. Given the

Dungeon Master, as a social status and set of practices, has a history spanning decades, there are common understandings and observable patterns of behaviors that are not the direct result of any rulebook or official guidance. These configured practices, I theorize, represent a DM habitus that describes a flexible but significant presence in the gaming space. However, the collaborative nature of *Dungeons & Dragons*, as a shared experience between DM and gamers, provides some boundaries to these dispositions, which are additionally impacted by the social and behavioral norms of the table. DM habitus demonstrates the responsibility of the Dungeon Master to the upholding of structure combined with the latitude they might have in exercising authority.

This theory builds on the work of previous game studies scholars who have meshed the idea of play with practice theory (Apperley and Walsh 2012; Consalvo 2009; Zhu 2020). Additionally, it adds to the growing research on the dynamics of player and the social interactions that occur at the game table (Cover 2010; Dashiell 2021; Hendricks 2006). The overarching concept of this paper is to follow the work of Jaćević (2022), who stated the following in his discussion of habitus in digital games:



“[T]he paper simply *explores how this form of habitus aids players in navigating the moment-to-moment act of gaming practice*.[...]The paper’s examination of the practical aspects of one’s ludic habitus provides the basis for the understanding of the player as *a historically developed practitioner of gaming*.”

In short, this paper will describe DM habitus as a historically enacted set of conscious and unconscious behaviors reinforcing the roles of collaborator, storyteller, and divinity in the *Dungeons & Dragons* subculture.

## 2. TRPGs and Dungeon Masters

As a ludic form, TRPGs came into being in the mid-1970s, with the first being *Dungeons & Dragons*. While the first and most played TRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons* is hardly alone, and in the last five decades, many TRPGs have appeared throughout the world. Initially, the role of the Dungeon Master was seen by its creators as intuitive, related to an idea that the DM was most likely the individual who organized early groups and had a better command of game capital: that being knowledge of the game and possession (and more importantly, interpretation) of the game rulebooks. In simplest terms, the role of the Dungeon Master is the person “who oversees the storyline and major game events, except for the actions of individual players” (Banks, Bowman, and Wasserman 2018, 66). However, very quickly, it became evident that to be a Dungeon Master required a set of skills and knowledges greater than what was provided in the initial rules. Brennan explains this:

“The creators at TSR began to see that the players who wanted to be Dungeon Master (DM) were not always sure how to write a campaign since the role of DM required a thorough knowledge of the rules as well as creativity. This realization led to the creation of *The Dungeon Master’s Guide*, which was released in the summer of 1979” (Brennan 2020, 224).

The *Dungeon Masters Guide*, or DMG, served three roles: to codify the expectations and duties of the Dungeon Master, to provide guidance for the management and running of a game session, and to provide the Dungeon Master with additional knowledge that players would not have. In regard to this latter point, not only does the DM then have prior knowledge of the plot and components of the overall story but is also privy to some game system knowledge that would be beyond what is required to

play the game. This concept becomes important, as the configuration of early *Dungeons & Dragons* operated on players having only the necessary information to function in the game, while the Dungeon Masters would have access to a host of additional information.<sup>1</sup>

A great deal of responsibility is put into the hands of the Dungeon Master. As understood in the game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, “a campaign is limited only by the creativity of the Dungeon Master and players” (Mentzer 1983, 2). Thus, the Dungeon Master must be both creative and collaborative; they must be in a position to construct a scenario the players will find satisfying and enjoyable, while leaving enough leeway in this construction to allow players to recognize how their choices, good or ill, can affect the outcome of the game (Fine 1983, 78–79). The job of the Dungeon Master is to provide an interesting but balanced game setting. Tychsen and his colleagues (2005) outline the five major functions of a Game Master as a manager of (a) narrative flow, (b) rules, (c) engagement, (d) environment, and (e) the virtual world. As Holmes notes, the experience should not be “too easy – the characters should always feel a sense of danger and lurking menace – but not too difficult – the characters should be able to swagger through much of their world with firm knowledge that they are heroes” (Holmes 1980, 93). Bastow (2021) notes a necessity for flexibility, highlighting how Dungeon Masters should construct their adventures in pencil to allow for the potential changing, or “shattering” of the initial plot.

Moreover, while players and Dungeon Masters have a great deal of power in shifting the game, there is an understood system that virtually all sessions of *Dungeons & Dragons* follow.

While creativity, imagination, and the creation of narrative are undoubtedly a very real part of the game, it is important to note that the game is not, in fact, so blank a canvas that the players’ imaginations are given free rein. [...] This is immediately evident when reading the rules, because the authors’ continued mention of “imagination” is paired with lists of products necessary for the “imagining” to take place. Each [rulebook] contains detailed and specific Instructions for how the fantasy world of the game, and everything imagined within the game, functions and appears. Far from the free-form imaginative space so often described in the academic treatments of the game, these books outline and market a fantasy

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the *Monster Manual* was initially created as a sourcebook and resource for Dungeon Masters, not necessarily players. As

such, that text is written in a way to assist those running the games, not to inform those who play the game.

world that is finite and specific (Mitchell-Smith 2009, 209).

There is a great deal that players and Dungeon Masters can do, but there are explicit limits placed on this by established rules which are known and understood by both players and Dungeon Masters. Greater knowledge of these rules represents a form of symbolic capital, demonstrating how individual participants are more knowledgeable of the world than their fellow players (Dashell 2017).

### 3. Practice Theory and Habitus

Practice theory is a federation of a number of disciplines, many of whom have different lenses for examining the nature of repeated, expected, and transmitted social practices. However, there are commonalities that can be found in much of the research that comes under the heading of practice theory. The collective understanding of how and why human life persists, in practice theory, remains critically linked to a comprehension of the actions and activities that make up daily lives. One's social being is best analyzed through a recognition of the configurations of those activities rather than other factors that are perceived as important guiding principles (such as race, gender, class, or self-perception). In short, these important defining concepts, like race and gender, are more products of our activities and tied inexorably to practices than embodied "things". They are created, perpetuated, modified, and destroyed by our continuation or appropriation of accepted, repeated activities. "If what a person does, thinks, believes, etc. presupposes the practices that s/he carries on, social phenomena cannot consist simply of people's actions but must comprise these actions together with, or in the context of, these practices" (Schatzki 2012, 14). Though he never applied the label to himself, Pierre Bourdieu is the best-known practice theorist. A sociologist, Bourdieu published a number of books that outline his principal concepts of habitus, capital, and field to interrogate the actions of those who take part in social systems. By looking at the component actions of the individual, especially those actions that allow the actor to conform to the system and are done without conscious action (*habitus*), one can get a better sense of what is valued by the actor and the system (*capital*), and physical and conceptual realms where valued knowledges, artifacts, and procedures are engaged (*field*).

Habitus represents a key concept of Pierre Bourdieu, critical to understanding the impact of practice theory. According to Bourdieu, habitus is "embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (Bourdieu 1980, 56). This is seen as a level of implicit "know-how;" an understanding of how to interact in society that Bourdieu called a "feel for the game". Habitus does

not need to be explicitly taught through other actors, but it is most assuredly "caught" implicitly via the socialization process. "Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these" (Bourdieu 1984, 170). One does not, then, actively work to create habitus; it happens as actors continue to be a part of the structure. Individuals who participate in the systems of power come to accept the habitus as real and inarguable, and the structures directly support the belief of the habitus. "[W]hen habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product; it is like a 'fish in water'" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127).

Further, Bourdieu tells us that habitus is created "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration" (Bourdieu 1984, 170). This fact is because habitus is a social phenomenon that affects the individual, not an individual phenomenon. Thereby, a habitus is a shared belief that is perpetuated by the power structure. Habitus then becomes "society written into the body, into the biological individual", or "a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action" (Bourdieu 1990, 13).

It is important to note that habitus is much more than just belief, but also physicality. Habitus becomes the essential concept of what we see as an ideology that is centered on belief by history. Because the action is so embedded as part of understood practice, deviation from this would require explanation (and deviation would need to be conscious, as simply following the practice is unconscious).

### 4. Practice Theory in Gaming

In gaming, several ludic theorists have engaged the work of Bourdieu. Mia Consalvo originated the concept of game capital, or "games-related knowledge and resources utilized as a part of social interactions within the gaming field" (Consalvo 2009, 18). This concept is deeply based on the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu, with game capital being a cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Apperly and Walsh expand on Consalvo's game capital, noting that individuals not only possess it, but "exchange it with others in different situations to enrich their own experiences or accumulate other forms of cultural, symbolic, economic and social capital" (Apperly and Walsh 2012, 120). It is from the initial work with game capital that other efforts to use practice theory, and particularly the work of Bourdieu, sprang.

Several theorists have postulated a gaming habitus, with refined bodily dispositions and expected ludic displays. Kirkpatrick (2012) was likely the first, labeling gamer habitus as “the socially acquired, embodied dispositions that ensure someone knows how to respond” in a gaming scenario. McNeish and De Paoli (2016) examined gaming habitus in a slightly different manner, characterizing it as “intellectual, cultural and experiential sources” shared collectively by those involved in gaming spaces. In all, much of the early analysis of gamer habitus represents involuntary know-how, a sense that individuals instinctively pick up which in some way separates them from casual gamers. It involves not only immersion into gaming culture but a structural connection with how games are played and how to engage in the gaming space.

It is Zhu who provides the most useful expansion of gaming habitus, recognizing it as at times more of a conscious experience than habitus is understood to be. He notes:

“One ‘chooses’ to acquire, or persists in working towards, a particular gamer habitus based on one’s self-identification, but one’s self-identification is also decided partly on the basis of one’s non-cognitive and embodied responses to the game (and one’s reflections concerning the latter). This is not, however, to disregard that the sedimentation of habitus can also be involuntary or unchosen” (Zhu 2019, 2).

Zhu (2020) further recognizes that unlike Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus that are calcified by historical preservation, gamer habitus is open to flexibility and change, as each type of game (and more deeply, each game) can possess its own habitus. Jaćević (2022) expands and refines what he calls a ludic habitus, players “acquired patterns of perception, appreciation, and action, which are tied to the broader field” of gaming. In this, he goes back to original ideas about gamer habitus; it is not only about how one plays the game, but how one shows their knowledge and adulation for the game. What all of this work on game habitus reinforces is expected norms for individuals in various roles. While each game can possess its own habitus, the critical position of the gamebooks serves as what Hammer refers to as an imposed authority (2007, 84). From the guidance provided by these ideals, which are canon, an articulated habitus for Dungeon Masters can be observed.

## 5. The Habitus of the Dungeon Master

Bourdieu (1990) states habitus is a collection of perceptions, appreciations, and actions found embodied in certain individuals in a social setting. These actions satisfy what is referred to in sociology

as the generalized other, or the internalized expectations of the singular person which match with the presumed expectations of the social group (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007). For the Dungeon Master, these expectations are complex because the definition of what a DM might be has been vast since the beginning of TRPGs. At times, as stated previously, this role has been summed up as a referee, a term other TRPGs use instead of Dungeon Master (Dormans 2006). However, what that entails in the sense of DM habitus springs from three involuntary roles the status of Dungeon Master confers and demands: supervision, time management, and conflict resolution.

Individual players look to the Dungeon Master to be the ultimate supervisor of the game. As the individual who crafted the adventure, they are looked to in terms of direction and appropriateness. The Dungeon Master is expected to provide clues and guidance when individuals are off-topic or focus when the presumptive story is not being adhered to. The Dungeon Master has multiple tools to make this happen, including gaming mechanics, informal communication, and *deus ex machina*. While these concepts on the surface might not seem like an aspect of habitus, it is important to stress how both the individual Dungeon Master and players share this perception and ability to act as core to the role of the DM. In short, they are expected to exercise this supervisory role in order to reinforce the enjoyment of the game for all. As such, if diversion is a source of enjoyment for players, the Dungeon Master has the ability to allow to story to veer and cede control to others in a collaborative fashion.

Time management is another function of the Dungeon Master, which melds into DM habitus through its implicit nature. The Dungeon Master is expected to be cognizant of time in the various aspects of the game (e.g. time of the overall game, time of the battle, time since battle) in order to make the game convenient and enjoyable to all participants. This not only involves circumstances that take an excessive amount of time but also those which happen too quickly, such as a battle that is too easily ended. As will be discussed later, it is incumbent on the DM to recognize they have the illusion of control in terms of these circumstances. Given the elements of the game left to chance, a roll of the dice could, literally, change the course of how long any particular scenario might take. Thus, the concept of time management must be sensitive to how much the system affects the Dungeon Master and how much power they might be able to apply over the system. While the DM does indeed create the story, the factors outside of that person’s control (e.g. dice rolls, other characters) may impact the overall game, which would cause the Dungeon Master to act.

The potential to act outside of the systems and algorithms is often to reduce conflict, whether the conflict is embodied (in the players) or objectified (through the game system). As mentioned previously, the Dungeon Master is a referee and is meant to have a final say in any issues that might arise during gameplay. However, the DM must be aware of this authority and how the components of control in their arsenal via DM habitus (ultimate control of the narrative, no matter how collaborative it is) could turn them into an “angry god” who uses the authority provided to simply make their will a reality. Part of DM habitus, in conflict management, then, must be the ability to manage divergence in the game without becoming imperious; a circumstance that would ruin the experience for all players. To examine the components of DM habitus, I provide an analysis of the Dungeon Master as a collaborator, as a narrator, and as a divinity to more deeply investigate these roles and how they are required practices of the Dungeon Master.

## 6. The Dungeon Master as a Collaborator

As stated before, the Dungeon Master as a referee must be a supervisor, but DM habitus demands that this be one of collaborative supervision. *Dungeons & Dragons*, or any tabletop game, is a space of collaborative play. The world is built as much in the lore as it is the imagination of the players. Fuist notes there are three levels of participation in a game: “(1) one’s immediate gaming group, usually in the form of face-to-face interaction in the practice of gaming; (2) the shared imagined spaces of the game world and; (3) the level of the greater collective identity of the imagined role-playing community, which individual role-players engage with through interaction with other role-players as well as engaging the cultural objects of gaming such as narratives, texts, and rituals” (Fuist 2012, 114). The Dungeon Master is responsible for active participation in all of these levels of participation. At its core, a session of *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game, and there is an aspect of “winning”. Unlike true collaborative games, there is not an egalitarian system of players versus the system, as the setting is controlled by the Dungeon Master, “essentially in the role of a deity, [shaping] virtual worlds” (Lenarcic and Mackay-Scollay 2005, 65). Thus, it is the responsibility of that person, via DM habitus, to have an awareness of how to balance control with an overarching sense of supervision. The alternative could be troubling, a game “in which either the referee has too tightly constrained own the actions of the players, so that they are forced to play out his personal fantasy, or one in which control ‘the scenario’ gets out of control and players go in directions pared that the referee is unprepared for and unable to deal with” (Fine 1983, 80).

This balance, in DM habitus, requires flexibility at the core of the gaming function, as a Dungeon Master must recognize the constraints that exist in terms of their authority. First and foremost, the referee is governed by the rules of the game and the inherent power of the game as a structure. *Dungeons & Dragons* reinforces a keep *what is useful* policy, where authors have noted individual players and Dungeon Masters can ignore or augment what rules function in their game worlds (Gygax and Arneson 1983). However, individuals lean heavily on gamebooks, due to the paratextual value of these as sources of lore and consistency (Jara 2013). Thereby, while Dungeon Masters can stray from the rules, they are accepted as canon, and knowledge of this canon represents a powerful game capital in various ludic subcultures (Alberto 2021). Additionally, the Dungeon Master must be aware of the concerns of individual players and how their personal character stories and gaming desires can impact the game. Due to the collaborative nature of the narrative and a lack of foreknowledge of the Dungeon Master wishes, it is possible for any player to delve deeper into their character in order to enhance their experience or share more insight into the persona they wish to portray (Ewalt 2013). The Dungeon Master, via DM habitus, must be aware of when this is valuable or counterproductive, as these behaviors could be an effort for a character to exhibit control over the collaborative process in an effort to modify the narrative.

Moreover, players might simply not recognize the narrative and be unable to follow the plan as set by the Dungeon Master. In an effort of collaboration, it is the responsibility of the DM to use tools provided in order to guide characters towards the narrative they wish to move forward. Through gaming mechanics, an individual Dungeon Master can use character ability checks as a source of conveying information to focus (“Roll an intelligence check”). Upon successful completion, the DM can then provide information that would potentially change the trajectory of action of the players. With informal communication, the Dungeon Master can use what Cover refers to as the game frame and social frame to impart comments to players out of character (Cover 2010, 94). Lastly, the Dungeon Master as the ultimate controller of the narrative, can introduce (or remove) non-player characters, barriers, or encounters in order to use the story to drive characters towards a goal.

The Dungeon Master has an implicit responsibility for maintaining the magic circle, or the distinctive space of gaming separated from the real world (Huizinga 1971). Through the use of the story, it is the job of the Dungeon Master to make sure individuals stay not only engaged in the game but in character. One tool of DMs is the use of performative non-player characters, adopting different voices and mannerisms in order to act out the various other

players might meet in the course of the adventure. This allows for the Dungeon Master to encourage personification, particularly when players interact with these non-player characters. Hendricks, for example, noted the significance of personal reference as a sign of immersion; whether players said “my character” or “I” represented different perceptions of how enmeshed individuals were in the gaming world (Hendricks 2006). As the enforcer of the magic circle, the Dungeon Master must also be aware of the meta-discourse that occurs, or the conversation that is not germane to the game but would not occur if the game was not played (Dashiehl 2021). This type of conversation could prove useful in terms of strategy and social bonding, but too much could lead to a disruption of the magic circle. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the Dungeon Master to take control and bring individuals back to the adventure through various means.

## 7. The Dungeon Master as a Storyteller/Narrator

At its core, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a narrative experience, a shared collaborative story brought to life by the Dungeon Master and the players. Of course, the Dungeon Master has a significant degree of authority in the design of the process, as they choose either a prefabricated adventure (referred to as a module) or an adventure they created themselves (called a homebrew). Regardless of its source, the adventure bends and flows to the actions of the players and the Dungeon Master. While pace and supplemental elements are the responsibility of the DM, all participants are entrusted with the maintenance of an enjoyable experience with a measurable progression.

While it would be easy to assume the Dungeon Master possesses total control over the game world, it could be asserted that they, just like the players, have the illusion of control. Players and the Dungeon Master possess a measure of agency, where individuals “engage with the world that they perceive around them, analyzing the hierarchies imposed on them and reflexively considering their own thoughts and feelings about them” (Ortner 2006). Agency guarantees the actions of players and characters have cause and effect, and the additions to a collaborative nature can determine the outcome of the story. Players have a vast but finite number of things that can do at any point in the story, constrained mostly by the limitations of their characters (Mitchell-Smith 2009, 209). However, as the ultimate authority on the development of the narrative, the Dungeon Master exhibits agency over the players – limiting and expanding the impact of their individual agency. The Dungeon Master possesses an agency that is bounded by gaming texts, as are all who participate in a game, and is granted both a participant and framework-

related agency (Hammer 2007). Murray notes Dungeon Masters are encouraged to modify the state of play and, in doing so, become not only a player but a piece of the game system (Murray 2020, 2). Because of this authority granted to the Dungeon Master, it is understandable some sources paint the role as godlike, a concept that will be discussed later.

However, the habitus of the Dungeon Master involves the positions’ structuration. Developed by Anthony Giddens (2002), structuration represents an acknowledgment of an individual’s agency in any given situation and is a result of a relationship to the social structure. In short, an individual has agency, but that freedom is set by the social structure. While that seems limiting, individual agency can change the structure that limits it. Dungeon Masters have a great deal of power in any given situation, but that power is limited by the narrative story, the players, and the game rules. As Lapointe notes, most *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions occur in the context of a vaguely medieval setting, heavily influenced by the work of JRR Tolkien (Lapointe 2020, 137). This accepted game world limits the expectations from players in terms of the game and the interpretations of their actions. If the Dungeon Master were to introduce something that would threaten the world setting or disrupt the magic circle the narrative maintains, then the gaming experience would crumble. As is in many circumstances of DM habitus, the Dungeon Master is constrained by the concept of play and must work to reinforce enjoyment and engagement for all.

## 8. The Dungeon Master as Divinity

While the Dungeon Master is impacted by the agency of the players in storytelling, they have a great deal of agency themselves while playing the game. Beyond the limitations provided by the structural elements of the rules, the Dungeon Master has an ability to assert their will significantly greater than the players. At times gamers have referred to this as the DM taking on the role of a divine figure in the gaming world; not like deities found in the game, more as an individual who can control through their rulings what can actually happen in the game. Cover notes, that players “have more of a first-person relationship to the story, but the DM may be seen as more of a god” (Cover 2010, 44). But Fine correctly notes that while the DM is not a god, they “exert considerable influence over the development of the fantasy” (Fine 1983, 88). In terms of gaming habitus, this can be understood as game affordances. Cardona-Rivera and Young (2014) highlight three types of affordances in gaming: *real* affordances (actual things that can be done in-game), *perceived* affordances (things players believe they can do in the game), and *feedback* (components included in the game that solidify real affordances and lend credence to perceived affordances). As a result, the DM has

what I note as a ‘divinity’ factor, as they are someone who can manage, bestow and limit the affordances of the players. Unlike players, whose real and perceived affordances are managed by a Dungeon Master that serves as a component of feedback, the DM has little feedback beyond their own interpretations in most gaming situations. This means the line between real and perceived affordances can blur for the Dungeon Master, who might exploit their affordances and agency to make their wishes manifest in the game space.

Example: a player who is habitually engaging in distracting behavior to the point that it threatens gameplay. Because the player is constantly engaging in non-game discussions or giving indications, he is not taking the game seriously, the Dungeon Master decides he is struck by a stray lightning bolt and must make a saving throw or be knocked unconscious. This behavior serves three roles: a warning to the player, comic relief to the other players, and an assertion that as a supervisor and referee, the Dungeon Master can use means inaccessible to the players to move the game along.

What occurred in the scenario is quite common in TRPG settings when a Dungeon Master feels they are dealing with a problem player. How the Dungeon Master chose to respond did not truly involve *real* affordances, meaning the game rulebooks do not explicitly say a Dungeon Master can cause a stray lightning bolt. It is more so a *perceived* affordance, as one can imply that in their role to keep order, the Dungeon Master can act in this manner. The only relevant feedback is the social understanding or agentic imagination of the players and the Dungeon Master (Fuist 2012). In a magical world, why would that not happen if one was being obstructive?

The concern is one of structuration, as discussed before. If the Dungeon Master is, as both the status and habitus expect, acting in a manner to reinforce to ludic experience, then there is no problem. The DM is using their agency to support the game as a functioning field of practice. However, if this type of behavior is done (or *perceived* to be done) for some reason that might blur the magic circle (e.g. the DM does not like the player or simply does not like the way in which the player is playing the game, even if it is within the rules), then the Dungeon Master could be interpreted as using the perceived affordances for an odious purpose. In a purist sense, because the Dungeon Master is the embodiment of feedback for the game, players might believe they have little recourse.

Yet, players do. While DM habitus and agency are granted by the status of Dungeon Master, these functions of practice only exist if there is a game. If

individual players feel targeted or determine the Dungeon Master is “playing god” for their own benefit and not for the game, it could lead to individuals disengaging (which threatens the collaborative effort of gaming) or leaving the game, which might cause a premature end to play. The Dungeon Master must balance the potential of divinity, or perceived affordances, with the prospect of fun for those who are a part of the game. If an act of perceived affordance is not believable, fair, or deemed outside the possibility of the rules, such an act might prove detrimental to the gaming experience. Thus, part of DM habitus is the need to keep perceived affordances, the potential of divinity, in check and use any authority within a structured sense of play as well as the social and group dynamics surrounding that play.

## 9. “Rules Lawyering” as a Site of DM Habitus Enaction

As Mitchell-Smith (2009) stated, while there is great latitude for the players and Dungeon Masters, they are still bound to a system of rules. These rules set up algorithms that can be understood as forms of capital, symbolic but powerful in their ability to reinforce praxis in gameplay (Dashiell 2018). By nature, the rules question the notion that “the game is a kind of blank canvas upon which players can collaboratively imagine and create narrative” (Mitchell-Smith 2009, 208). Any creation is automatically bounded by the rules of the game a Dungeon Master can relax but could not wholly dismiss. As discussed before, it is these rules and knowledge of them that form a game capital that is prized in the TRPG subculture. While new players are freely offered time to get familiar with the system of roleplay, veteran players pride themselves on a near-encyclopedic knowledge of game rules and decisions.

A phenomenon in tabletop gaming that highlights the dissonance involved in DM habitus would be that of rules-lawyering. In the ludic experience, rules-lawyering is defined as “a colloquial description of a player who prioritizes enforcing a game’s official rules”, often to the halting of all of things (Hammer et al. 2018, 459). Research notes there is much debate on whether the act of rules lawyering is beneficial or detrimental to the game experience (Berman 2011; Dashiell 2021; Hammer et al. 2018). However, it is the Dungeon Master who has the final say as to whether a player who attempts to engage in the experience, either with another player or the Dungeon Master, is even allowed to continue. This represents a tension between the aspects of DM habitus involving collaborator and divinity. On the one hand, allowing the discussion permits players to have say. While it is assumed the Dungeon Master has knowledge of the gaming system and is afforded the capital associated with the possession of the

knowledge, no one knows everything. Because of the aspects of imagination involved in the game, it is possible a player could use a technique, skill, or spell that was not expected by the Dungeon Master. To allow rules-lawyering, a healthy discussion about the impact of action, demonstrates how a Dungeon Master might be open to consideration of the players, who do not challenge capital by *knowledge* of the rules but simply present a different *interpretation* of the rules.

However, rules lawyering can be a counterproductive and destructive game component, especially when it involves two players (and not the Dungeon Master). These circumstances can devolve from a discussion of rules to an off-topic discourse that could threaten to derail the gaming experience (Cover 2010; Dashiell 2021). In these scenarios, other players would look to the Dungeon Master exhibit habitus in a “divinity” mode, ending the discussion by making a unilateral decision. However, this action creates as many threats as opportunities. If the decision of the Dungeon Master is contrary to the rules or basic understanding of the other players, individuals might lose confidence in the decisions of the DM and by extension, lose interest in the game. Fuist reminds us that TRPGs represent spaces to “perform self-exploration, world exploration, and connection with other people and with ideas” (2012, 124). Disengaged players make for a poor collaborative circumstance.

As noted here, DM habitus includes the implicit authority and responsibility of the individual Dungeon Master combined with the explicit agency to engage one’s symbolic authority as collaborator, storyteller, or divinity. The DM has more power than any other at the table to shape the way in which rules lawyering has an impact on the game. Thereby, the amount of rules lawyering that occurs at a Dungeons & Dragons game table is the direct result of the desire of the Dungeon Master, as they can allow it (in an effort of collaboration), consider it (as a value to the overall story), or reject it (in an act of authority). Any power the Dungeon Master might have is always bounded by two elements – the social construct of the rules system and the collective will of the ludic space. *Dungeons & Dragons* is, at the end of the day, a game, and it is the perpetuation of play that will inform, empower, and regulate any Dungeon Master at any time.

## 10. Conclusion

Past research using practice theory, or specifically the theoretical ideas of Bourdieu, has sought to isolate various characteristics that work to explain social practice in the gaming arena. However, as Jačević (2022) intimated, there is an interrelationship between practice theory concepts that requires delving into other topics in order to fully

understand the implications of any social action. In essence, habitus has a relationship to agency and structuration, as presented in this work. Moreover, all of this understanding is dependent on the field of practice; in this case, gaming (Bourdieu 1980). The habitus of the Dungeon Master has little meaning outside the space of the game but becomes vitally important when we view it in the context of the TRPG subculture as a field of practice.

The Dungeon Master fulfills an important role in the gaming experience. While tabletop role-playing is collaborative, the DM can play a part in maintaining structure, order, and flow in the game. As such, as this theory represents, much of the behaviors required for being a DM are consistent with those affirmed in leadership: supervision, time management, and conflict resolution. The nature of DM habitus makes these roles implicit; individuals might not even recognize the degree to which they are required to take on game management. However, the DM habitus involves this leadership, and if individuals choose to lean into these qualities, they do have that option.

By expanding DM habitus in a manner of the interpretations of Kirkpatrick (2012) and Zhu (2019; 2020), one can recognize the sociocultural dispositions that are imparted on all who take the role. The DM must be a collaborator and adhere to either the guidance of the game or the other players, as texts and participants can take a game in a direction that is different than planned. Flexibility, additionally, becomes a key role, as the vast body of knowledge involved in *Dungeons & Dragons*, a collection of game editions and versions spanning half a century, means thousands of possibilities for any outcome. As part of habitus, one must be flexible to the rules of the game, the players, and other circumstances. Moreover, the habitus of the DM involves stewardship of the magic circle, and the Dungeon Master must be aware of the needs of players that might be outside of the game.

As a storyteller, the Dungeon Master must recognize he is involved in a narrative where DM habitus provides the illusion of control. The players look to the Dungeon Master to effectively tell the story, but players have a vast amount of agency, provided them by the rules, social needs, and their own imagination. Thereby, part of DM habitus must involve a conscious knowledge of when that control can wax and wane. As explained, this reflects a practice theory concept of structuration, where the Dungeon Master, via habitus, has a measure of agency in the social structure, but more than any player, is impacted by the structure that can hinder his agency.

Being a Dungeon Master can, as discussed, provide a false sense of divinity, where the individual can play the “wrathful god” in circumstances where

gameplay (or the players) falters. Additionally, the Dungeon Master must work to inhibit the efforts of imbalance that could occur in the gaming system, which might require decisive action. DM habitus involves recognition of how individuals must be conscious of this situation and refrain from exploitation or authoritarianism to the detriment of gameplay. Such behavior can destroy the relationship between Dungeon Master and players and cause havoc in the social system. As discussed, individuals must recognize the boundary between the agency of the Dungeon Master and a divinity complex.

However, Dungeon Masters must be conscious of other agentic forces in the game that borders DM habitus. This research provided the example of rules lawyering and how players could employ techniques to inhibit the power of the Dungeon Master through interpretation of gaming books, given the power agency those rulebooks provide (Hammer 2007). Alternately, rules lawyering could be perceived as a mechanism of collaboration, where all players have the opportunity to participate in conversations about egalitarian interpretations of gaming practice. Ultimately, what Zhu (2020) says is likely true, and there is a habitus for each type of player in *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example, there could be a “power gamer” or a “simulationist” habitus. However, more generally, understanding the distinction between the implicit and explicit dispositions and practices expected of Dungeon Masters allows for a deeper understanding of the complex social relationship that is tabletop gameplay.

Using a lens of DM habitus can assist researchers and players, particularly those who are interested in the nature of interactions occurring around the table. There are, as Cover (2010) points out, many different levels of discourse going on at any time during a game. There is an assumed proficiency in order to deeply understand the affordances gained through proper interaction at the tabletop gaming table (Dashiell 2021). The DM habitus synthesizes roles that involve collaboration, storyteller, and authority, and by recognizing these simultaneous roles and how they are enacted, we gain a deeper sense of the impact a Dungeon Master can have on the affordances of others. Power gamers, rules lawyers, and marginalized players are amplified by the ways in which the components of DM habitus are engaged (or not engaged) by each individual DM. Gaming, however, is a collaborative act, and sometimes directional conflict can arise between particularly players and the DM in terms of the story. It is the responsibility of the DM to shape the actions of the players in a manner that does not significantly alter the trajectory of the game but does not heavily limit the affordances of players (Fine 1983). By noting the roles involved in DM habitus, research can delve more deeply into the impact a Dungeon Master can

have, and does have, in democratizing the gaming table.

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