

## Pause to Reflect

# Ruminating on Interactive Methodology in Ethnography Writing

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### Abstract

The following piece explores the methodology of the dissertation I am currently constructing, which plays with form, employs short stories created through play, fictional characters who act as guides, and interactivity, asking the reader to add commentary, reflect on their own experiences, play games, and change the work itself as they read. Completing ethnographic research through and about the pandemic required a radical reframing of my methodology, not only during the research but also afterward as I began writing. How do you explain what it was like to live, play, and research during such a profound and collective experience? I studied face-to-face tabletop roleplaying (trpg) game communities, their process of losing the table, and finding it again online. The purpose of the interactivity in the piece is to bring to bear the experiences of living through a pandemic and political unrest, which melded pain and play together through the tools of play found within the community I observed and participated in, that of the trpg players in the Midwest, USA. This particular piece is a rumination on the methodology of writing, what my experience means in this context, and explores the what, how, and why of tools being used. Some of these tools will be utilized here where space allows.

Keywords: play, table-top role-playing, interactive story

### 要約

以下の記事は、私が現在執筆中の学位論文の方法論を探るものである。この学位論文は、形式を弄するものであり、遊びを通して創作された短編小説、ガイド役の架空の人物、そして読者に解説を加えたり、自身の経験を振り返ったり、ゲームをしたり、読みながら記事そのものを変化させたりするよう求める双方向性を採用している。パンデミックを通じて、またパンデミックに関するエスノグラフィック調査を完了させるためには、調査中だけでなく、その後執筆を始めるにあたって、私の方法論を根本的に見直す必要があった。このような深遠で集団的な体験の中で生活し、遊び、研究することがどのようなものであったかをどのように説明するか。私は、対面式の卓上ロールプレイングゲーム (trpg) のコミュニティや、テーブルを失い、オンラインで再びテーブルを見つける過程を研究した。この記事における双方向性の目的は、パンデミックと政情不安を生き抜いた経験を生かすことであり、私が観察し参加したアメリカ中西部の trpg プレイヤーたちのコミュニティで見つけた遊びの道具を通して、痛みと遊びを融合させたのである。この特別な作品は、執筆の方法論、この文脈における私の経験の意味、そして使用されているツールの何を、どのように、そしてなぜを探求するものである。スペースが許す限り、これらのツールのいくつかをここで使用する。

キーワード：遊び、卓上ロールプレイング、インタラクティブ物語

## 1. An Ethnographic Diagnostic Event

*The mix of sesame chicken and pepperoni pizza filled the space, as players carried in food from the restaurants next door. Our table, almost square, with a battle map at the center, sat near the back of the game shop. Little figurines were placed around a campfire by the Game Master (GM), who had arrived early. It was a fairly quiet Sunday. Of the ten or so other tables in the shop, only one was being occupied by a small cadre of Magic the Gathering players.*

*Sunlight streamed through the windows. Families came and went, perusing the stacks of tabletop games. Behind the desk, a head of bright pink hair was unboxing a game they had planned to demo next week. I never figured out what game it was,*

*only that it had 10,000 little pieces to pop out of cardboard sheets. There were eight players, all white men, and me. Most of them were regulars, though I'd only played with the two who sat across the table.*

*This was a grinding session (Pathfinder 2nd Edition, Bonner et al. 2019). We'd be completing four one-hour adventures. Four little dungeons, with four minor bosses, grinding away to gain levels. New to the experience of tabletop games in game shops, I asked the player next to me the purpose of this exercise. "Well, we'll take these [characters] to conventions to play exclusive content at higher levels [and] adventures don't get interesting until at least level 5 anyway."*

**Interruption** – Professor's Note – Anytime, Anywhere



Maybe there’s something to add here about the insertion of the disposition of work into our playgrounds (Dewey 1910). As much as playfulness as a disposition – a ludic attitude – can find its way into all sorts of random contexts (Dewey 1910; Lieberman 1977; Malaby 2009), playgrounds also do not have a singular disposition. The practice of grinding to get to the desired levels, to engage the adventures we cared about, had a distinctly different play aesthetic (Trammell, 2022) than the previous sessions or those that followed.

No time was spent on in-character conversation. There was no stopping between adventures. We had our orders as our characters and our purpose as the players: kill the things in the dungeon and move on. The characters gain renown, the players gain a level, and the experience is the grind.<sup>1</sup>

Don’t fret. We are not falling into the age-old pit trap of work vs. play. Ultimately, that dichotomy is useless. And certainly, we will not reduce play to fun. The purpose of this playground was not to produce a playful disposition. There was no question about how each adventure would end. We would kill the boss. Failure was not in the dice. There was no contingency here. And yet, it was play, and it was a playground.

We could not find any good sources for this “grind” phenomenon at the physical table. Do you know of any?



– End

In this work, I include questions for you to answer. You should answer them directly, digitally including a note on your computer or tablet, or printed and written down with ink or graphite. As we read, words change how we think and become part of our future work. Past authors and future readers are our coauthors. I encourage you to write your thoughts in the spaces left open for you, but also in the margins. Cross my words out and replace them with your own. Rip a paragraph from one of its pages. Critique, edit, rewrite, reorganize, add pages, and leave space open for future readers. When you are done, do not stick it in the forgotten annals of your filing cabinet, pass it on to a new reader.

*The conversation at the table, which in the months prior had rarely strayed from the game itself, kept coming back to a conference several players had just returned from the day before.*

*Player 1: “It was almost empty. I couldn’t believe it. Even Artists Alley was pretty bare.”*

*Player 2: “You know what I can’t believe? I can’t believe people are taking this so seriously. It’s not actually real. We don’t have anything to worry about.”*

*Player 1: “I’m not sure. I have some friends in NYC and...”*

*Game Master: “Hey all [a reprimanding tone] are we here to play?”*

*This was the fourth time play had been paused to discuss what was happening beyond the confines of the game shop. Although the adventures were technically why I was there, this day in particular was important for other reasons. It was the last day of in-person research I would be able to complete. It was March 15, 2020. This date is significant for Wisconsin, because on March 19 the lockdowns of the universities began, and businesses and public places followed quickly. Covid-19 had come to Wisconsin (Liebeseller, fieldnotes, March 15, 2020).*

*Readers: Where were you when Covid came to town?<sup>2</sup>*



## 2. The Setup

I am a play scholar and anthropologist, currently writing my dissertation. This piece is a rumination on the process of writing an unfinished thesis. The reasons for the article itself, before the dissertation’s completion, are explored throughout the text. I started my ethnographic research in-person in December 2020 at game shops and gamer bars in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. My research questioned how the stories and imagined worlds created in tabletop roleplaying games (ttrpgs/TRPG)<sup>3</sup> were impacted where they were played – public space – interrogating – as most anthropologists do – the boundaries of my subject. As a city of festivals, Milwaukee itself is (or was) open to the idea of play in public. Tabletop roleplaying was happening all around me, on campus, at bars, in coffee shops, and at parks. I wanted to know what allowed this

<sup>1</sup> As one player put it, “If lacroix had a roleplay flavor, this would be it.”  
<sup>2</sup> The examination of our Covid experiences and the experience of the political unrest of this time are only explored lightly in this piece. In the dissertation, the questions are much punchier, often exploring heavier issues. The article did not seem to be the place for that kind of exploration.  
<sup>3</sup> I am using ttrpg here instead of TRPG partly for accessibility; I often do not unless I absolutely must capitalize. I and others with reading disabilities

often find reading more difficult with excessive capitalization. And because I see this work as a part of two different conversations, one among academics and the other within the community, in the dissertation, I will be using ttrpg and TRPG to denote when I am talking to and about the ttrpg community and when I am speaking about TRPG theory or to its theorists.

openness, which I had not seen in my previous research in other Midwest USA cities.

By March of 2020, I was barely integrated into the community of the game shops. Covid was a horrific blow... *an incredible opportunity* for my research. With the lockdown, players who played primarily in person were forced online; *refugees*<sup>4</sup> quickly immersed in a new language, new practices, and a new embodiment of space. Conferences that were once held in-person had to shut down or quickly move online, shoving as much in-person experience into the digital as was possible.<sup>5</sup> Participants who had not played extensively online previously were now required to transverse the imagined mediated by the digital, experienced on a device, at a desk, in bed, on the couch, or in the bathroom where the kids might not bug them. “Separate and together” was a common mantra.<sup>6</sup>

I conceived of this moment of breakage, when the old world ended, replaced with something else, as an *opportunity*, as my anthropological training required. All data is good data. But that didn’t make Covid any less painful or any less terrifying. Although I knew that play could contain pain and trauma, the experience of playing through Covid made this realization into relief in a way I had not personally experienced before – visceral and present (Eisen 1988; Schechner 1995; Trammell 2023).<sup>7</sup>

**Interruption** – *Charlie’s Journal December 1995, Seattle Washington USA, Day 90*

*Today I was walking The Ave. Visiting new friends over some old pastry. My knuckles rapped three times on the bakery door instinctually. Rule #3: Always knock before entering, (Niven n.d., 8). You all used to talk about home like it was a real thing, like it existed. You were giddy to see the dragon perches as we crested that final hill back from our last adventure. It was endearing, but naive. Funny that I had to be yeeted across universes to understand. This bakery is next to a quick oil place. The door opened and I had to pause. I stood there long enough that the bassist from the new band had to come tap me on the shoulder. The smell of honey cakes muddled with the*

*oil made me wince like you’d kicked me in the shin for saying something stupid again. It smelled like home... an old bear and a little gnome.<sup>8</sup>*

*Reader: I know you’re there, my journal in hand. Who are you missing today?*

– End

There *is* a form to a standard dissertation. In anthropology, you have an introduction and conclusion bookending the work. Often, a methodology chapter, a chapter on the physical place you studied, and a literature review. Then, a few chapters utilize all that information to tell the reader something about the place you spent 12 to 36 months. You make the strange familiar, taking people’s lives from the field and making those lives readable, smoothing out a lot of the contingency and the mess. This piece that says something about a place’s people, their practices, their struggles, and your achievements is meant to prove a sufficient level of enculturation into the institution. Are you good enough?<sup>9</sup>

As anthropologists we spend an exorbitant amount of time on the methodology of the field, the ethics of research, the approach of interviews, observation, and the collection of data. We write proposals, and our work is evaluated by the Internal Review Board. What we are not entirely prepared for, coming into the final years of our PhD training, is the methodology of writing, how you present your information at the end. How you come home, process your experience, and make it readable. Of course, we take courses during our studies where we spend time writing papers and theses, learning the dialect of Academe. But that does not prepare us the way we believe it might while we’re in the middle of it.

I expected hurdles, but I did not expect to interrogate the structure of it. The format was a forgone conclusion, already wrapped in a neat little bow of expectation. I found instead that the format

<sup>4</sup> “Refugee” is the language my participants used to describe themselves in many instances, which begs for an interrogation that does not have space here but deserves critique. No doubt there was pain and loss and change of space and place. There was terror in going outside, in living, in making connections. A relearning of what it meant to be human. And yet, should *refugee* be used in the majority white, middle-class context in which it was found?

<sup>5</sup> There was a rapid development of new digital tools in mid-2020. Forums, walls, and chatrooms were filled with digital support. The community was hard at work helping as many people as possible to move into the digital to keep the community connected and engaged so that people would not get lost or left alone. The power shifted from the forever GM, who built foam castles, to the forever GM, who knew how to set up a Discord and use Roll20. Community organization changed hands.

<sup>6</sup> This focuses heavily on those who played in-person and moved to the digital. The experience for those already playing online was *much* different but were not the majority of my participants.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent rumination on this point which furthers our understanding of play, please read Aaron Trammell’s (2023) *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology*” and George Eisen’s (1988) work, *Children at Play in the Holocaust*.

<sup>8</sup> Charlie is a character I played in one of the long-running tabletop games I participated in during my research in 2020 and 2021. His story is one of profound loss as he was ripped from one world into another, losing all sense of what was normal, and having to adapt to something new. Within the dissertation, I use his experience of both the fantasy world in which he was born and his “experiences” here on earth to question our understanding, of the line between the corporeal and the imagined, and to connect to readers as they explore their own experiences with the shift in our reality during COVID. You might consider reading the abstract if you haven’t yet read Scott Bruner’s dissertation (2023) *Agential Fantasy: A Copenhagen Approach to the Tabletop Role-Playing Game*.

<sup>9</sup> The answer is, yes, and you’d best not doubt it anymore.

did not fit the research. I was not unwilling to write in the standard format; I was unable.

*I woke up in the middle of the night and wrote this, “We transverse the objective methodologies of analysis in our training, but not the possible internal and emotional responses. We expect a culture shock going to our field site, but not the shock of coming home. We know the task of writing will be intense, but we don’t really know why. We know it will be isolating, but not how to combat that loneliness. Is objectivity just dissociation? Is it so hard for me to write because I am asking myself to disconnect rather than connect to the material? Is there a different way to approach this?” (Liebeseller, fieldnotes, January 3, 2022).<sup>10</sup>*

### Play with Me: Was it Twitter or was it 1918?

One of the following was found in an article about the reactions to the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, and the other was found on Twitter in response to the 2020 Covid Pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

**Statement A:** “I don’t care if you want to cultishly wear a mask everywhere you encounter humans. What I care about is forcing OTHERS to!”

**Circle 1 Option:** Twitter or 1918

**Statement B:** “Sanitary Spartacans’ have broken out in San Francisco in protest of the [disease] mask wearing ordinance. A league was organized last night which is to be known as the”Anti-Mask League.” Its members declare masks insanitary and useless. At the meeting in the Pacific building \$350 was raised to aid in fighting the board of health’s enforcement of the mask-wearing ordinance.”

**Circle 1 Option:** Twitter or 1918

### 3. The What

I have long held that playgrounds change the way we approach issues brought up within them. If that is true, could I make the dissertation itself a playground? Could it create a space where we could engage our experiences during Covid *and* bring the imagined worlds of the communities I was a part of to life?

Like this piece so far, the dissertation is a winding story. Its main points are often slightly obfuscated, hopefully, to get the reader to come to conclusions that are more profound when you come to them yourself or conclusions I could not make on

my own. I hope that its jumps, which are admittedly often jarring, do not come off as too smart for my own good but instead as asking the readers to engage, to change, to edit, to critique, to write in the margins and between the lines, to interrogate the definition of authorship. This is the main principle behind each of the pieces I am bringing to bear in the work.

Game studies straddles the world of players, developers, and academics. Many of our academic conferences, like *Meaningful Play* and *Living Games*, are purposefully inclusive of those with different and varied roles within our play communities and industries. More and more game conferences like *Pax U* and *Gen Con* include academic days or panels, realizing that their body public finds this work interesting. I knew that the dissertation needed to do the same. It needed to address both the academic and the ttrpg communities together equally.

Moreover, even though I am “just” talking about play and games, I knew I would need to address the state of the US during the time of the study. Covid is a central topic, but the politics of the time, the BLM marches, the presidential race, the insurrection, and the effects of global warming, which ravaged parts of every state, all needed to be included. Confronting these issues is an incredible lift for me as I write, but is no small feat for my readers, either. My most immediate readers lived through this time, which means they are confronted with that experience again through reading the dissertation. For those in the ttrpg community, the issues of politics pose a particular hurdle as, especially in public spaces, the community is asked to avoid politics or discussing harm in the outside world. These community practices are literally written into the community rules, which push out marginalized bodies and open the door for the continuance of all kinds of harm.

I will go through the form of the dissertation work as briefly as possible. You cannot simply go pick up my dissertation to read it yet. This is a preamble. A teaser. A trailer.<sup>12</sup>

**Part 1: Charlie and The Professor** – In this work, you have already met Charlie and The Professor. These are narrators in the dissertation. They often insert information non-academics or academics might need in order to understand what is happening in the text when the ratio between jargon and standard English is particularly high.

**Part 5: Interruptions** – *Interruptions are literal interruptions in the text. Here they are used most often by Charlie and The Professor, but in the larger work, will be utilized more broadly. In each*

<sup>10</sup> 3 am dream thoughts. More dramatic than we might write in the light of day but no less true in the moment when we wrote them. This is included because we don’t converse enough on what it’s like, what it’s really like when we’re writing.

<sup>11</sup> A = Twitter, B = 1918 (Dolan 2020).

<sup>12</sup> “A teaser trailer if you will.” *eye roll* (Dalton 2023).

*instance, they ask the reader to slow down and pause to reflect. They can be long or short. Sometimes they insert questions necessary to the text. Other times they are ephemera like news headlines from 2020. As you have seen here, they can ask the reader to do something, write something, or add or subtract something. In the longer work, they may ask the reader to take a break, to do an activity like call an old friend or engage someone new in a conversation. Sometimes they are comedic moments to bring levity. In all cases they interrupt. Inserting themselves in the midst of things, breaking concentration away from whatever the reader was doing before. – End*

The Professor often adds appendixes, rephrases things in Academe, or generally acts the part of an academic in the text. Charlie exists simultaneously between his home world and our own. His story starts in the high-fantasy world of the game but eventually is transported by the villain to 1995 Seattle. His insertions often speak to the experience of navigating loss and loneliness. His role is to translate from Academe into Standard English and to fictionalize the work. He adds lyrics, poetry, a prologue, and an epilogue, and tells several of the short stories in the text directly. Where The Professor attempts to move the work closer to a standard academic text, Charlie moves it away and into the fiction where he lives. This push and pull between these characters allow me to speak in the middle, straddling multiple worlds.

**Part 2: Theory (or The Main Quest)** – The theory, or the *Main Quest*, is a rumination on play – as a multi-definitional set of practices, playfulness – as a disposition, and playgrounds – institutionally, community, and momentarily created. Although I would not consider myself particularly fluent in Academe, often falling into a type of pidgin, these chapters are written in a way that academics will find most comfortable, with interjections from Charlie to explain more plainly particular passages in Standard English and the Professor to explain more plainly the politics of particular passages.

**Part 3: The Ethnography (or The Sidequests)** – The ethnographic pieces are found in a long series of *Sidequests*, which comprise the bulk of the work. This is required for anthropological work but also straddles conversations between ttrpg and TRPG more than any other part of the work. These chapters primarily explore how ttrpg communities moved online, their experiences, the impact on imagined space, and how play changed. However, these also include the politics of the USA, the way politics are or are not dealt with in the ttrpg community, Covid, and the conversations most prominent around or during this time.

*Example 1: Sidequest: Becoming Real details the ongoing process of monstrous races like Goblins and Orks becoming playable characters and*

*therefore “people” in the world. The commentary on race and sexuality is poignant in this space.*

*Example 2: Sidequest: Homo Huzingaus, which explores the players whose play practices fit within the definitional boundaries laid out by Johan Huizinga (2016) in Homo Ludens, and later expanded upon by Caillois (2001), cemented in the industry and games studies by Salen and Zimmerman (2003) – what a dungeon crawls so many monsters to slay.*

*The Professor - Anytime, Anywhere*

**Part 4: Games in the Text** – As you saw here in the section “Play with Me: Was it Twitter or was it 1918?” games have been inserted into the text. These provide comments on or reminders of the pandemic itself and the ways in which we gamified our experience of Covid.

*Example: Covid Bingo – An appendix allows you to choose a Bingo Card, as you read you will find interruptions you can mark off on the card you’ve chosen.*

Moreover, the text itself leaves space for commentary for four “players.” Each is asked to change the text in some way. Here in this text, you see that as asking questions to be written into the margins about your experiences. In the dissertation, this expanded significantly. No reader will read the same book. Instead, they read it as the reader before them authored it. The purpose of this practice, as I’ve already said, is to question what authorship means in both academia, where so much of our work is predicated on the conversations we have with those around us, and the authorship in ttrpg spaces, where the stories created do not exist without the influence of the designers and the players at the table. There is no such thing as a single-authored text in either of these spaces.

**Part 6: Short Stories** – Short Stories are not represented here as they will be in the dissertation itself; there simply is not enough space. Although the ttrpg community is primarily one of oral tradition, passing down practices and stories orally from one player or generation to the next, it is a common ttrpg tradition to take the tales from the table and write them as stories, novellas or even entire book series. The same is done in the dissertation. Short stories detailing one-shots or poignant moments are used as diagnostic events that highlight or represent the theory found in the Main and Sidequests, bring levity, and significantly place the imagined world of my study on equal footing to the worlds of the players’ corporeal bodies.

## 4. The Theory

How our stories affect us is a critical and ongoing conversation within the ttrpg community and among the TRPG academics who study them. The different ways community members understand this effect are a part of what defines entire generations of ttrpg players.<sup>13</sup> I spent much time as an academic searching for language that could add to these conversations. Eventually, I found this language among those playing with the form and the structure of academic information itself.

Through the activity of play and the creation of the playground, can we create a space where we ebb and flow (pun intended) between states of interaction, immersion, and reflection? Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of *flow* as being something entirely immersive and producible; Dewey (1910), Lieberman (1977), and Malaby (2009) work on the disposition of *playfulness* and the ability of games to produce that playfulness; Huizinga (2016), Sicart (2017), and Stenros (2015) work on *play* as an activity and act of creation; Luton's (2017) work of bringing play into our methodologies, all in turn profoundly influenced the form and the content. These are the authors you might expect an anthropologist to pull from, but there is another history. One that is a bit longer, a little more chaotic, and almost entirely reliant on black, latinx, and queer theorists.

### **Interruption** – Professor's Note – Anytime, Anywhere

*As an aside, there is a long history of gamification for the purpose of learning – serious games as they are called. You will note that gamification is not discussed in this piece at all. Introducing tools of play is not the same as gamifying a text. When you answer questions, write in the margin, and tear out the pages the author is asking you to do so with a level of seriousness certainly, but that does not negate the playfulness the author is also asking for. Paragraph to paragraph you are not entirely certain what to expect, at least for a time. The work itself is a playground, not a game. – End*

If you want to know where my format came from, look no further than *I, Carmelita Tropicana*, by Alina Troyano (2000), a Cuban-American, queer performance artist and comedian in New York. The book itself both archives and analyzes Troyano's work throughout her career. As a whole body, the work explains and critiques the lived realities of America and Cuba in the 1980's and 1990's. It expertly walks the line between comedy, history, culture, and political critique, while also speaking to

a reading audience. Some of it explains her experience as a comedian and the creation of her comedic personas and characters, other pieces are direct excerpts from screenplays, and other bits are poetry and lyrics written across three languages (German, Spanish, and English). "The method: When two or more cultural systems come into contact – and when don't they? – the best survival strategy consists of finding the "multi" that holds them together in communication. For Troyano, that "multi" is language itself. Still, it is a language that is always imprecise, especially when working between national cultures, political frameworks, or sexual orientations. Multi, multi, multi," (Troyano 2000, ix). I read it originally in late 2012 and returned to it in 2022 as I started thinking about how I could reorient my writing. The concept of multi became paramount.

Starting here, I began writing theory, making mechanics, giving words to what it means to author a book you are reading, fleshing out the stories, writing songs, and eventually searching for pieces of work to help ground it. Unsurprisingly, most of those using alternate formats were people of color, particularly women and queer academics of color.

### **Interruption:** *but actually why tho?*

*I became an anthropologist because it allowed me to jump from topic to topic, following my own hyperfixations. With enough years behind me I can see what I've been chasing is an interrogation of boundary and transformation throughout all of my topics, beginning with an understanding of the Virgin Mary and her various incarnations and transformations as she traveled through (and was used to colonize) the Americas. This led me to work from performance theorists like Alicia Arrizón (2000) who wrote on Chicana performativity and its creation and redefinition of space. My own reflection on that storytelling did not begin in earnest until the first year of my masters degree when I read *Wisdom Sits in Places* by Keith Basso (1996). It is a book on research conducted on the ways the Western Apache tell stories as direct communication. This piece more than any other before this point forced a reflection on what our stories do in the world and to us directly.*

*Basso led me to work written by indigenous people; *World-Making Stories* edited by M. Elenor Nevins (2017) sticks out most profoundly. Though there is a lot I could say about this work, the highlight here is its request that you read stories in Maidu alongside the English translations. It critiques the academic institution and the way it privileges particular types of information and ways of knowing.*

<sup>13</sup> Like all communities, the ttrpg community writ large has a series of debates that surface over and over again. Do the stories within our games reflect who we are? Do the stories we tell help us change or stagnate? Can stories do harm? Although I cannot go into specifics here, how a ttrpg

player answers these questions can tell you where and when they started playing, as different generations and even different locals have specific ways of framing and speaking about these topics.

*This was the first time I had encountered this kind of information dissemination in an academic context.*

*There are many answers to the question of why choose to create a playful text. For any academics with friends and family outside the institution it can be difficult to explain why we are here doing what we are doing. De Certeau's (1984) *Walking in the City* changed the way I physically walk, what I notice, and how I embody movement. I am no De Certeau, but can my work bring these kinds of realizations to those outside of academia, connecting academics and non-academics? Can we, together, change the way we walk side-by-side? I want readers to feel as if they are walking through a world and giving it meaning, producing its street signs, telling each other about what was lost, gained, and experienced.*

Laya Liebeseller – **End**

For a short discussion of the use of interactive formats for research dissemination, I want to give space to three examples. *Decolonizing Ethnography* by Carolina Bejarano, Lopez Juarez, Mijangos Garcia, and Danile Goldstein (2019), *Decolonizing African Knowledge* by Toyin Falola (2022), and *Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought* by TreaAndrea M Russworm and Samantha Blackmon (2020). Each of these works expresses something similar to Troyano. Each is multi in its own way.

*Decolonizing Ethnography* comes from a study completed on a community of undocumented immigrants. The book reflects on methodology, focusing on the entire process, beginning before the researchers entered the field and through the various ways the information was presented. Here, locals became ethnographers, fully a part of the process. They disseminated the work in multiple modes. Chapter 5, “Undocumented Theater: Writing and Resistance,” documents the alternative ways the ethnographers conceived of and produced their work. Including the song lyrics and play scripts they created together. “The idea to write a play occurred simultaneously to Carolina and Mirian at the very beginning of the project, and they brought the idea to the rest of the team. All quickly agreed. In doing so, our team became a part of a long history – from the ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to the Theater of the Oppressed – in which theater is understood as a means of social transformation” (Bejarano et al. 2019, 105). The following pages are filled with some of the script from this play. The play was performed for the community to make the study results readable and experienceable for the community itself.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge* posits that to analyze African cultures, scholars must look beyond the tools produced by white academics that come from a European worldview. To this end, Falola

writes this book, an archive of her own intellectual and creative work.

As I began to think of how best to cumulate the diversity of knowledge and experience into a set of writings, my mind became restless... I agonized on how to structure an interrogation of myself as an archive in order to arrive at originality and value. I settled for two interrelated bodies of ideas and objects - the accumulation of my creative/literary and academic work as one part; and the cumulation of my extensive collections of sculptures, textiles, and paintings as the second. Both parts are archives that are both external and internal to me...The two archives speak to the African societies from which they emerge and to which they are addressed. Both reveal the path of history and all of its contractions... This archive is thus an extension of me as a consciousness... This is buttressed by the fact that readers and viewers can respond to this archive, (re)negotiating the meaning of its composition as I have organized them and their knowledge of it as they have received it... (Falola 2022, 6–7).

Falola's work lives as an interactive archive. It is a body of work constantly evolving with intention and purpose. Further, it comes from within the communities and is about the communities she spent her life working with and living in, utilizing the multiple modes of communication recognized by the community. She argues, “The idea of the individual within the collective, used to represent the workings of the system, has always found traction within the African epistemology - it is reflected by cultural principles rich in epistemic considerations” (Falola 2022, 453). The self as an archive represents how her community views and understands their own societal structure.

*Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought* by Russworm and Blackmon speaks best for itself. It is “a Black feminist mixtape, blends music, interviews, and critical analysis in order to demonstrate some of the ways in which Black women have impactfully engaged with the video game industry. Organized as musical ‘tracks,’ it uses lyrics by Black women performers as a critical and cultural frame for understanding some of the work Black women have done with video games” (Russworm and Blackmon 2020, 1). Like Falola and Bejarano et al., Russworm and Blackmon looked to their material, their experiences, and the experiences of those they were representing and chose a different form. They all took a multi approach, making space for different forms of

knowledge to collide and mix, allowing the work to reflect the people within them.

This work obviously centers my story. I want to be cognizant of the fact that what I am saying here is people, and predominantly women of color, made this dissertation written by a white person possible. I want to ensure their names are here and their work is given space. I do not want to pretend that my experience is somehow equal to theirs. The inclusion of black hip-hop lyrics in the work of Russworm and Blackmon is not equatable to lyrics written by a bard in a ttrpg game lamenting the loneliness of his white player during Covid. Although my work utilizes the work of academics of color actively seeking to decolonize academia, I will not pretend that my work reaches that goal. I think it's essential to utilize the tools at our disposal that help us think differently, but as a colonizer myself, my job is to listen and to learn more than I speak, and when I speak, to give space to voices beyond mine. Their language gave voice to some of my experiences and gave me the ability to interrogate my work and some of the academic rules I thought were unbreakable. To me, the power of this academic work is how these theorists connect so deeply to their material.

What these pieces do so expertly is speak from the communities included. The dissertation aims to tell of my own experience while pushing the voices of these early 2020s forward through the use of ttrpg community tools – play, playgrounds, stories, imagined worlds, and the creation of characters to explore identity. Because I am a part of these communities myself and have been for many years, these are also the tools that come most readily to me as I try to write.

I chose interactivity as a medium, turning the dissertation into a playground with strange little stories, winding turns, and weird little dead ends. I did this because it seems to me to be the best way to encapsulate the community I observed in 2020 and 2021. It also allows me to say something about the pandemic and political unrest being experienced simultaneously. Asking questions of the readers, like the ones you see here in this piece, hopefully frames the work with their own experience in mind. It puts into practice the theory I am using and creating. It elicits a response meant to be shared.

## 5. A Final Note

*It seems strange to write this article before the dissertation is done. To preface work that isn't finished. But I know there are many other PhD students, master's students, undergrads, and adjuncts out there who were forced to do their research through and with the pandemic. A process already so incredibly isolating has been made even more so. The pain of that process is profound. This piece is for you*

*more than anyone else. Because writing and publishing take forever; I want you to know now that you can do something different. You are allowed to do something different.*

*Suppose you will pardon a moment of vulnerability. In that case, if I had to do my research in a space of profound trauma, and I have to write, that is, process that trauma, while this pandemic still rages around me. At the same time, fascism takes over my country, while I watch Tennessee require registration of trans people and queer people more generally - my people, my community - while I watch black bodies - human beings - be beaten and killed and school shootings happen every day - an active shooter was on campus the day I submitted this article - then well, it cannot be done another way. In my heart of hearts, I hope that, maybe the work can be a tool for healing. In writing it, I had to find a way to work through my experiences, and I want the reading of it to do the same. Of course, that is a lofty goal. At a minimum, I hope it successfully poses the question, in a time of profound loneliness, what tools can we create that help us confront the world around us together? (not a rhetorical question)*

*I guess, I always end on a high note? – Charlie, Seattle, WA 1995*

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