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**University of Southampton**

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Winchester School of Art

***The development of Chinese  
TRPG in the Digital Age***

by

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Thesis for the degree of Ph.D.

2023 July

# University of Southampton

## Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Winchester School of Art

Doctor of Philosophy

The development of Chinese TRPG in the Digital Age

by

Tianxiao Peng

Considering the rapid growth of TRPGs (Tabletop role playing games) in the digital age, and that most previous TRPG studies have focused on offline TRPGs, there is a need to engage further studies on online TRPGs. Most of existing previous studies on similar topics have focused on Europe and the United States, and have rarely covered Asian, Africa and Latin American geographic regions. In this context, I conducted a study on Chinese TRPGs in the digital age. This thesis adopted a qualitative research methodology, specifically including participant observation, case study analysis and thick description.

The thesis found that in the digital age, the communication and gaming approach between common players and Game Masters (GMs) in China have undergone significant changes. The popularization of online TRPGs has revolutionized the gaming experience. Online meeting software, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, have eliminated technical barriers and made online TRPGs more accessible. The advantages of online TRPGs include overcoming spatial distance, enhancing game props, and enabling more convenient use of multiple medium forms. With emergence of online TRPGs in China, it is necessary to rethink of small group communication. As for communicative activities in small groups, four aspects related to TRPG play were examined: the roles performed within the group, the impact of digital gathering on speech and discussion, strategies for overcoming team disagreements, and the distribution of in-game resources. The use of technology in TRPGs during the digital age has had a significant impact on TRPG play in China. Compared with conventional offline TRPGs, online TRPGs offer advantages in terms of accessibility and the establishment of online communities, they also encounter new challenges. The development of TRPG technology has contributed to improved digital character cards, advanced map-making software, and the ability to create professional replay productions. TRPG rules and players' attitudes towards them have undergone notable changes in the digital age in China. With the expansion of internet culture, a multitude of TRPG rules now exist. Most of these TRPG rules are created by players seeking customization and flexibility. The high learning costs associated with many traditional rules have led to the development of new rule sets. Additionally, players often draw inspiration from their favorite literary or film productions to create unique rulesets.

It is anticipated that these research findings will fill the gap in game research on Chinese TRPGs and digital TRPGs, and provide valuable reference for the industry practise to better develop digital TRPG rules and modules.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	i
Table of Contents .....	i
Table of Tables .....	iii
Table of Figures .....	v
Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	ix
Definitions and Abbreviations .....	10
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	14
1.1 Research question .....	14
1.2 Topic background .....	17
1.2.1 The development of Chinese TRPG .....	17
1.2.2 Current status of TRPG worldwide .....	22
1.2.3 Small group communication .....	25
1.2.4 Online games and the pandemic of COVID-19 .....	26
1.3 Significance of the research .....	28
1.4 The outline of the thesis .....	32
Chapter 2 History of TRPG .....	38
2.1 The development phases of the DND .....	38
2.2 The blooming of other TRPGs .....	44
2.3 The history of TRPG conventions .....	45
Chapter 3 Literature review .....	46
3.1 Research context of TRPG .....	46
3.2 TRPG and technologies in digitalisation .....	49
3.3 TRPG audience .....	53
3.4 TRPG rules .....	56
3.5 Magic Circle: Relationships between gameplay and non-play in everyday life .....	60
3.6 Online social play .....	62
3.6.1 The focus of online social play .....	63
3.6.2 The methods of online social play research .....	64
3.7 Small group communication .....	65
3.7.1 Why I have chosen this approach of small group communication .....	65
3.7.2 Background and context to small group communication .....	66
3.7.3 Main terms and concepts of SGC .....	67
3.7.4 Adapt the small group communication theory into TRPG .....	71
3.8 Summary .....	72
Chapter 4 Methodology .....	75
4.1 The research philosophy .....	76
4.2 The research methods .....	77
4.2.1 A concise review of ethnography in game studies .....	77
4.2.2 Participant observation .....	80
4.2.3 Case study .....	85
4.2.4 Thick description .....	86
4.3 Research ethics .....	88
Chapter 5 TRPG online .....	89
5.1 From offline TRPG gaming to online TRPG gaming .....	90
5.2 Text descriptions in online TRPG .....	98
5.3 Hosting online TRPG parties .....	102
5.3.1 Playing online, players distract .....	103
5.3.2 TRPG Party Announcement .....	107
5.3.3 GM Hosting .....	114

5.4 Weaken upgrade mechanics and new trend in TRPGs .....	118
5.5 Summary .....	120
Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play	122
6.1 Digital Character Card .....	123
6.2 Digital tools .....	132
6.3 Miniature wargame models in online TRPG .....	139
6.4 Conventions .....	149
6.4.1 World building .....	150
6.4.2 Log report .....	151
6.4.3 Fighting Scenario .....	154
6.4.4 Repeat adventures .....	156
6.4.5 Faster-paced gameplay .....	157
6.5 New view of life and death about TRPG characters .....	158
6.6 Cultural value of hardware .....	164
6.7 Summary .....	168
Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication .....	170
7.1 Digital Gathering .....	172
7.2 Group problems .....	179
7.2.1 Contradiction caused by time arrangement .....	179
7.2.2 Time to Solve group problems .....	183
7.2.3 Players' problems and characters' problems .....	186
7.3 Problem resolution in a harmony style .....	191
7.4 Distribution in TRPG small group .....	197
7.4.1 Guiding principle of solving distribution problems .....	198
7.4.2 Seven approaches of distribution in digital TRPG .....	200
7.4.3 Distribution and players' targets .....	205
7.5 Summary .....	209
Chapter 8 TRPG Rules .....	211
8.1 Choosing rules in the digital age .....	212
8.2 Rule-breaking and Cheating .....	219
8.2.1 The way of rule-breaking .....	219
8.2.2 The attitudes towards rule-breaking .....	223
8.2.3 The reasons of rule-breaking .....	226
8.2.4 The power of rule-breaking .....	230
8.3 Rules created by players .....	231
8.4 Summary .....	236
Chapter 9 Conclusion and future work .....	237
9.1 Discussion of research questions .....	237
9.2 The contribution of the thesis .....	242
9.2.1 The contribution to TRPG studies .....	242
9.2.2 The contribution to game studies .....	245
9.2.3 The contribution to other disciplines .....	247
9.2.4 the contribution to the industry .....	249
9.3 Recommendations .....	251
9.3.1 Recommendations for academic .....	251
9.3.2 Recommendations for industry .....	252
9.4 Future work .....	255
Appendix A Websites .....	258
Appendix B Communicative aspects of games and play in general .....	261
List of References .....	263
Bibliography .....	310

# Table of Tables

Table 3- 1 Basic concepts of small group communication (Cragan *et al.*, 2008:10)错误！未定义书签。

Table 6- 1 Comparison of Material and Digital Character Cards ..... 错误！未定义书签。

Table 8- 1 5 times of dice result confrontation ..... 错误！未定义书签。



## Table of Figures

Figure 1- 1 A Dungeon Master screen Of Roll 20 screenshot, captured by myself .....	23
Figure 2- 1 The Siege of Bodenbug (Bander, 2012) .....	40
Figure 2- 2 Chainmail session at Gary Con II (Paul, 2010) .....	41
Figure 5- 1 The local board club I have ever been, photographed in 2017 .....	91
Figure 5- 2 An announcement of Infinite Horror in my field research .....	110
Figure 5- 3 An example of online group announcement (Roll 20, 2022) .....	112
Figure 5- 4 An online TRPG scene conducted the tool Pencilplugg .....	121
Figure 6- 1 Visual example of digital character card .....	124
Figure 6- 2 Visual example of pre-electronic card .....	125
Figure 6- 3 An example of spells in the DND .....	129
Figure 6- 4 An example of digital character card, based on my own field work .....	131
Figure 6- 5 An example of using a digital die .....	134
Figure 6- 6 An TRPG map we used in a online DND5E TRPG based on the Excel .....	141
Figure 6- 7 A screenshot from my own online TRPG through Tencent QQ .....	142
Figure 6- 8 A picture of using the online TRPG tool Dicemod .....	143
Figure 6- 9 picture with two-dimensional miniature wargame models .....	146
Figure 6- 10 A screenshot from RPGScenery from top view .....	147
Figure 6- 11 A screenshot from RPGScenery from head-up view .....	147
Figure 7- 1 Distribution in digital TRPG, an example of Infinite Horror, the original version ...	200
Figure 7- 2 Distribution in digital TRPG, an example of Infinite Horror, the English version ....	202
Figure 8- 1 The result of One-sample T-test of dice rolling of four players .....	221



# Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: TIANXIAO PENG

Title of thesis: The development of Chinese TRPG in the Digital Age

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: Tianxiao Peng..... Date: 2024 July 10.....



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## Definitions and Abbreviations

TRPG..... Tabletop role playing game. There are several versions of definitions of TRPG. According to Hendricks, TRPG can be described as “many players (often between three and ten), a referee (often called the Gamemaster [GM]), a set of standard rules (D20, Hero, Storyteller), and a random element (normally dice, although some games, such as Deadlands and Castle Falkenstein use playing cards). The goal of such games is the construction of a narrative that is the result of the interactions of the GM, the players, the rules, and the random element” (Hendricks, 2006:39). According to Fine (2002:6), TRPG is “any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment.” According to Cover (2014:168), TRPG can be defined as “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a game master through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience”. In a normal TRPG, players consist of a small group, the number of which are commonly between 3 and 6. If the number is less than 3, it will be not very suitable to start a TRPG. If the number is bigger than 6, there might be some players cannot enjoy the game very well. In this thesis, the terms “online TRPG” and “offline TRPG” are sometimes used to differentiate between them. When “TRPG” is used directly, it means that the emphasis is not on whether the TRPG is online or offline, but rather on the rules, play, dissemination, distribution, etc. of the TRPG. In the

context of this thesis, I mainly refer to the definition of Hendricks’.

GM..... Game Master. GM is the host and storyteller of a TRPG. In a TRPG, GM is the most powerful person, and can decide whether a player’s action is allowed or not, how could the story plot develops, what is the environment of the game, and so on. In the period of DND, due to that most stories are happened in dungeons, the storyteller and host is called Dungeon Master (DM). Because of that DND is the earliest ancestor of TRPGs and the most well-known TRPG, in some other TRPGs, no matter the background is about dungeon or not, the person who takes the responsibility of host and narrative is called DM. In some other TRPGs, GM are called in different names. In Call of Cthulhu, the GM is named Keeper (KP), which means the person who knows the truth and keep it in the secret. In Infinite Horror, the GM is named Story Teller (ST), which means the person who is responsibility to introduce and tell the whole story of adventure. Although due to the variation of TRPG rulesets, the function of GMs is not totally the same, they can be called GM as well.

Player..... The word “Player” has been used in a lot of different conditions. While, it has special meaning in the context of TRPG. In a TRPG, a player is a person who takes participant in this game, creates as least a character, controls the speaking and action of his own character(s), let his own character(s) make decisions, interacts with other players. Because of that a player has and only has one character in a TRPG normally, in many situations, a player and the character owned by him are viewed as a whole, and it is

called “player character” (PC). Although DM is a member or a TRPG, established by the people through long social practice, DM is not count as a player. Sometimes all the players other than the DM in a TRPG play are called “common players”.

Character..... In TRPG, each player needs to create a character according to game rules. The characters controlled by players called player characters (PC) commonly. Characters controlled by DM called non-player characters (NPC) commonly.

Magic Circle..... Magic Circle in gameplay was defined as “the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004:95). This conception will be discussed in detail in the Chapter 2.

Reward..... In the virtual world of TRPGs, players who take on the role of adventurers, regardless of their profession or motivation for taking part in an adventure, will receive rewards for doing so. There are two main aspects to rewards. On the one hand, there are the wages, wealth, treasures, jewels, props, equipment, weapons, artefacts etc. received from NPCs based on the character’s interaction in the game. On the other hand, rewards are characters’ own growth, including learning new skills, mastering new spells, improving the player character's attribute values, increasing the characters’ level, and so on. The generation and distribution of rewards will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Module..... In the field of TRPG, the concept “Module” is a file about how to tell a specific story and take the responsibility based on a TRPG

ruleset, which mostly include the story's introduction, background, pilot, characters, endings, skills and feats that can be used, and so on.

|

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research question

TRPGs (Tabletop role playing games) have been widely discussed in academic world (Alberto, 2021; Bennert, 2018; Boon, 2022; Brunette, 2015; Crain *et al.*, 2022; Cover, 2014; White *et al.*, 2018; Zdravkova, 2014). But there are some aspects of TRPGs that have received limited attention when interpreted in terms of game study or other disciplines. Firstly, in terms of generalisability, previous scholars have mainly focused on TRPG players in Europe and North America, which makes their studies restricted to the geographical level and cultural level (Brace, 2012; Brunette, 2015; White *et al.*, 2018). Overall, TRPG research has not adequately followed the trend of globalisation. Secondly, due to technological limitations, TRPG scholars mainly focused on the perspective of relatively traditional face-to-face TRPGs. In the current age, online TRPGs, which previous scholars engage limited discussion, have become an important part of TRPGs (Bowman, 2010; Brace, 2012; Garcia, 2017). Thirdly, when examining the utility of TRPGs for players, many scholars have focused beyond the Magic Circle (Bergström, 2012; Daniau, 2016; Reed, 2022). For example, regarding the utility of TRPGs for presentation and communication skills, many scholars have neglected the interpersonal relationships among TRPG player communities (Coe, 2017; Cover, 2005; Hall, 2015). Based on these points stated above, this thesis intends to focus on the digital trend of TRPG in the Internet era in a country that has rarely been studied. Considering that I am a Chinese national, I have linguistic advantage on Chinese gaming culture. Therefore, from the convenience aspect, this thesis focused on the Chinese TRPG player community. Therefore, the main research question and sub-questions were identified as follows:

Core research question: How Chinese TRPG players are playing online TRPGs in the digital age?

To be detailed, this thesis identified four sub questions as follow:

- How does the shape of the magic circle change when TRPGs move from the physical to the digital in China?
- In what ways does small group communication need to be rethought to account for TRPG play and as communicative activities in China?
- How has the use of technology in TRPG in the digital age impacted on TRPG play in China?
- What are the TRPG rules and players' attitudes towards TRPG rules in the digital age in China?

The research aims of this thesis are to provide theoretical contributions for the following four parts respectively: game designers of traditional TRPGs, game designers of online TRPGs, TRPG players and academic exploration of game studies in the field of TRPG.

Firstly, this thesis intends to explore how traditional TRPGs can adapt to the needs of players in the digital age. Although the rise and development of video games has affected the position of TRPGs in the gaming market, TRPGs remain a very important category of games that attracts many players. Confronting a rapidly changing gaming market and digital technology, the direction of traditional TRPGs is worthy of consideration by game designers and game scholars. With the absence of a suitable direction of development, the shortcomings of TRPGs may be further exposed, while the appealing power of their strengths may be diminished, which in turn may lead to a decrease in number of game players.

Secondly, this thesis attempts to analyse how online TRPGs can better serve players. Online TRPGs are well suited to the needs of players to communicate and play remotely. On the one hand, a plethora of related rules, videos and digital products are emerging. These products often combine the advantages of both video games and traditional TRPGs. On the other hand, those products may also inherit the disadvantages of both. Therefore, this thesis concentrates at the psychological activities, game performance, rules usage and interpersonal interactions of online TRPG players, and attempts to provide informative and

practical suggestions for the future development of online TRPGs.

Thirdly, this thesis aims to analyse how TRPG players can better enjoy TRPG games in the digital age. The style of digital TRPGs and the demands placed on players are different from traditional TRPGs. Players may have to tolerate high learning costs in order to understand and learn online TRPGs, including but not limited to learning about software usage, video production, new TRPG rules, and the use of miniature tokens. For players, understanding their appropriate game style and game type is an important part of gaining satisfaction in the game.

Fourthly, this thesis attempts to combine small group communication theory and game research, providing a richer theoretical tool for game research, as well as more case material for small group communication. Considering that small group communication has already been widely used in the offline world (Cragan *et al.*, 2008), it is of great academic value to introduce it into the online world of games in order to further extend the scope of application of small group communication. As early as 1999, during the early development of the Internet, small group communication theory was considered by scholars to be useful in virtual environments. However, the technological conditions and the mentality of Internet users at that time were very different from those of the 1920s (Stacey, 1999). Therefore, a study of the presence and development of small group communication in the gaming field, based on fieldwork in the 2020s, could fill a gap in the relevant field. Considering from the perspective of game studies, the different roles that players play in small groups in TRPGs, and the different functions that player characters take on in the game world interact with each other and are well suited to be explored from the perspective of small group communication.

The objects of this study are the users of online TRPGs in China. They have met through TRPGs and formed a small group. During the pandemic of COVID-19, the group changed its main activity space from offline board game clubs or players' homes to online. Further details

of this group will be presented in the Chapter 3.

## 1.2 Topic background

### 1.2.1 The development of Chinese TRPG

From my personal observation, in China, the TRPG ((Tabletop role playing game) culture emerged as a subculture. There are hardcore board game players who love TRPGs and buy English or Japanese versions of TRPG ruleset books, mods books and so on. Then, Chinese TRPG players spontaneously organized and gathered together. Even in the board game world, there are many players who prefer traditional board games like Go or Mahjong, or board games like LTK • Legends of The Three Kingdoms or Werewolf, which are played one game at a time. A TRPG play, on the other hand, often requires players to prepare in advance and spend a lot of time learning and studying the rules. A TRPG game normally last dozens of hours. On the one hand, in the slow-paced life of rural China, audiences are rarely exposed to TRPGs and the culture associated with them. In the fast-paced city life, on the other hand, other forms of entertainment are significantly more competitive. The main TRPG players are university students and some working professionals with flexible working hours. They are very energetic to immerse themselves in the role-playing and fantasy world of TRPGs.

In China, playing TRPGs online has already been a normal phenomenon for about 10 to 15 years. No matter if the pandemic of COVID-19 happened or not, people would like to play TRPGs online. The reasons includes 3 dimensions: different locations, time-intensive transportation and access to TRPG.

Firstly, China owns vast geographic area of 9.6 million square kilometers (Zheng *et al.*, 2011). Given that it has a large territory, it is difficult for players to reach the same place offline. In the United States, where TRPG originated, many cities regularly hold TRPG-related

conventions (Brace, 2012). However, China is different. There are only 4 to 6 TRPG shows per year. Each show is also attended by only a few hundred players. Generally speaking, only one or two conventions are held in a few large cities each year in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an and Guangzhou. Some players could accept traveling long distances for the show. But if it is just an ordinary TRPG activity, then traffic may become an important obstacle. If players are in the same factory, company or college, the distance may not be a problem. But in other situations, it is. Even all the players are in the same city, it may need 1 or 2 hours for them to drive to one's home or a tabletop game club.

If players are from different cities, different provinces or even different countries, face-to-face TRPG gaming is nearly one impossible mission. For example, the TRPG small group I was involved in when I was in Beijing, there were eight members of this small group at the time. They are all ongoing students or graduates of universities located in Beijing. Two of these player were from Harbin city, Heilongjiang province, about 1240 kilometers from Beijing. Two of them went to study in the UK. I went to Southampton University. The other player went to the University of Portsmouth. Before the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis, it took at least 12 hours to travel by air from London to Beijing. Following the breakout of pandemic COVID-19 crisis, getting back home became highly complicated, requiring travelers to change planes at Changi International Airport in Singapore. In addition, passengers needed at least 14 days of intensive isolation and at least 7 days of home isolation before having the opportunity to participate in face- to-face TRPG parties with friends.

Secondly, compared with offline TRPG, online TRPG is a social activity with high efficiency. When a DM (Dungeon Master) is going to organize a TRPG party, if the DM does not give evidence to prove the party would be extraordinary entertaining, players may think that it does not deserve to spend such long time on transportation to physically participate. Otherwise, if the players only need to put up the earphones and use the smart phone or computer, they will be more likely to try to join a party like this.

Another situation is that some TRPGs place great emphasis on the interaction between players and the DM, while not paying great attention to the interaction among players. When players are in their role-playing and fighting sessions, other players may not have much room to play. If they are all in a common space offline, they will quickly get bored. After all, every player has only one-third, one-fourth, or even less time to participate in the game actively, and at other times to do nothing or become a mere spectator passively. For these players, choosing online TRPG is a more comfortable approach than offline TRPG.

Thirdly, it is related to the approach that how a Chinese player receives knowledge about TRPG. According to my own experience and field work, in China, there are a relatively small number of TRPG players have access to TRPG through out offline approach, such as talking with friends or going to the tabletop club. In contrast, a large number of Chinese TRPG players know TRPG through online approach, such as Internet surfing, online social media, glance over articles in online forum, etc. For example, many players have posted topics on the website [goddessfantasy.net](http://goddessfantasy.net) to attract new players and play TRPGs with them, which is the most popular TRPG website in China (further details about this website can be seen in Appendix A). To give another example, many potential players hope to become TRPG players after watching the TRPGs video on bilibili or Youtube. Regretfully, I have found no research on the access of Chinese TRPG players to TRPGs. Therefore, I can only speculate about this phenomenon: tabletop gamers are not a large percentage of all gamers, and TRPG players are not a large percentage of all tabletop gamers. This limited potential players have access to TRPGs. Even if a TRPG player intends to promote TRPGs to other audience, it is often difficult to target a proper group. In addition, teaching TRPGs has high cost in time and labour. Most TRPG players prefer to play TRPGs rather than teach others how to play them. So those who have the ability and inclination to read online tutorials and rulebooks are increasingly making up the majority of TRPG players.

In recent years, the TRPG has been under rapid development in China. Considering the relative small scale of Chinese TRPG players in the early stage, it is difficult to count the

accurate magnitude of change and growth rate. However, the current data can be used as a reference, which are listed as follows. on the Chinese original TRPG module website CNMODS, there are as many as 2331 modules in 2022 (CNMODS,2022). On the pop-up video site, the content creator “Little Jumping Winter” has uploaded more than 120 videos, with the most played one,Cassandra's Black Carnival Episode 1, having been viewed more than 2.4 million times (Huibenghuitiaodexiaozhendong, 2022). China's most influential comprehensive TRPG site, Goddessfantasy, has over 1 million posts and 150,000 registered users (Goddessfantasy, 2022).

TRPG’s quick development in China can be mainly reflected in four aspects: the prosperity of TRPG sections in various professional TRPG websites and comprehensive websites; the popularization of various TRPG rules and the development of original TRPG rules; the emergence of TRPG battle reports and videos; and the gradual maturity of the TRPG business model.

From the website aspect, the highly well-known professional TRPG websites in China are Goddess Fantasy and CNMODS. Goddess Fantasy is a TRPG website with over one decade development history, containing various TRPG rules discussion forums. No matter what kind of rules the players like, players can create a section on it to discuss. In addition, this website also provides online TRPG and offline TRPG game boards, so that netizens can use what they have learned. Also, there are many posts on the website introducing TRPG works from other countries in the world, so as to broaden the horizons of players and provide new choices. CNMODS is a TRPG module sharing website. The functions involved are relatively simple, with only a single channel for fans to upload modules, managers to edit and release modules, and users to download modules.

Many modules failed in receiving much evaluation, and it is challenging to tell the quality difference among different modules. However, this website provides a channel for module authors to publish works and assumes a function similar with a blog. Those who lack creative

experience and skills, or who are tired of writing modules in person, can obtain new modules through this channel and try new stories.

In Chinese TRPG environment, there are two dimensions of rulesets. One is about translation and discussion of foreign TRPG rulesets, such as the DND (Dungeons & Dragons), COC (Call of Cthulhu), TOC (Trail of Cthulhu), Order of the Stick, FATE, Nechronica, Double Cross 3<sup>rd</sup> and so on. In 2021, there are more than 20 zones of foreign TRPG rulesets on the website Goddess Fantasy. The other is original rules. There are plenty of original TRPG rules in China, and regretfully, many of them have not been officially published and cannot be purchased through the market, it is hard for the research to collect statistics about that. Actually, based on my own observation, there are more the 100 original TRPG rules. In order to enhance the entertaining function of TRPG and encourage more people to use their creativity and create their favorite TRPG rules, a one-page TRPG rule competition was also held. In this competition, a complete TRPG rule must be fully presented on a piece of A4 paper. The purpose of this competition is to promote creators to simplify unnecessary details and focus on creating TRPG rules suitable for novices.

Based on their own experience of participating in TRPG activities, many self-media operators create videos, and then put them on the Internet in a way similar with an original web series on the Internet. In Bilibili, China's famous barrage video platform, there are many similar "online original web series". These videos are somewhat similar with American dramas produced by Netflix or other companies. In the beginning, one or two episodes are put on the Internet. Generally, these episodes introduce the rules used in the story, the worldview that takes place, and the process by which players fill in character cards and shape roles. If the one or two episodes get a certain amount of attention, then this will become a complete season. In general, a season is also a module. The shorter ones may only have a few episodes, and the longer ones may have a dozen or even twenty or thirty episodes. Since the videos are mostly made by individuals or a few enthusiasts, the production level of the video itself normally cannot reach very high level. The scenes on the screen are just computer

graphics similar with visual novels, and the characters' speaking is electronic dubbing. Whether these videos are successful or not, the main influencing factors are whether the characters are played, how exciting the story is, and whether the producer has tailored and edited them appropriately.

In the commercial field, there is still a lot of room for TRPG improvement in China. Most of the available modules in the existing market are DND and COC modules translated by enthusiasts. Although there are companies such as Labyrinth that introduce foreign TRPG rules through legal channels, most TRPG-related publications have not obtained a publishing license and are still in the category of illegal publications. They can be sold only because that Chinese government has not taken strict measures on illegal TRPG publications. The sales of unregistered TRPG publications is rarely punished. However, they have not obtained publishing permission. In addition, there are also many hobbyists who operate their own shops, producing and selling various models, dice and cheat sheets. But the influence on the market is minor.

### **1.2.2 Current status of TRPG worldwide**

After Dungeons & Dragons (DND) having been published in 1974 (Gygax & Arneson, 1974), TRPGs have affected many people in multiple countries (Hall, 2015). These TRPGs can be well played with the involvement of following simple items, such as papers, pencils, dice and a table. In a TRPG party, every single player chooses to play a role in a fantasy world including magic, sword, divinities and so on, similar to a drama. Differentiating from dramas, all the characters in TRPGs have their own free will and do not only follow the written script. The beginner of TRPGs is the DND (Dungeons and Dragons). This has been played by over 20 million people (Brace, 2012). It is a huge challenge to identify TRPG players number in China. While, their level of popularity can be reflected through a case. Wizards of the Coast is the publisher of DND. In 2017, Chris Cocks, Wizards of the Coast's president and CEO, gave a speech about DND and other WotC goods on Twitch, telling that according to their most recent poll, Dungeons & Dragons 5e version is actively played by around 9.5 million

individuals (Cocks, 2017).

Compared with electronic games, this type of game has many shortcomings, such as the slow game rhythm, the limited number of players, the relative fixed battle style, and so on. But TRPGs still occupy a place in people's entertainment activities in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century (Phillips, 2013).

The fifth version of this classic TRPG entered the market in 2014, 40 years after the launch of its first version (Sheridan, 2020). Similar to before, it still centers on three rule books: a Monster Illustration to shape the world view, a Dungeons Master guide to guide game hosts, and a Player Manual for new players to understand the rules (Alex, 2020).

DND is still exploring new areas. For example, in 2021, the cooperation between DND and MTG (Magic: The gathering) has made new progress. As the world's first Trading card game (TCG), MTG, which has a history of more than 25 years, still maintains a strong vitality. It named a new expansion package in 2021 Adventures in the Forgotten Realms, and the Forgotten Realms is the name of the most famous place of the DND worldview (Charlie, 2021). The cards in this expansion pack are all from DND5e. Further, starting on June 30, 2021, a short module linked to Magic: The gathering was released every week for 5 weeks (Will, 2021).

Currently, players have many channels to learn DND rules. Even for beginners, they can also find ample introduction and interpretation on the Internet. As for players who only play DND offline, they are not ignored. They can also get Dungeon Master (DM) screen, dungeon

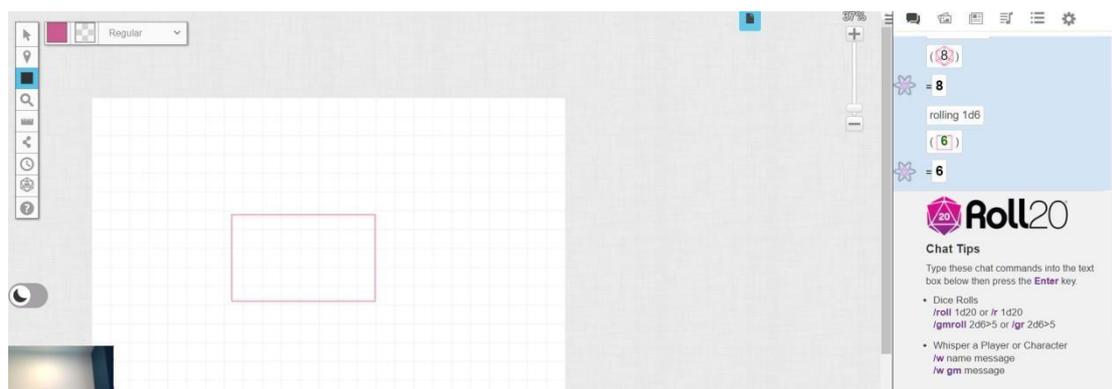


Figure 1- 1 A Dungeon Master screen Of Roll 20 screenshot, captured by myself

geomorph cards illustrated punch out condition cards and other tools to organize a DND adventure.

Followed by the universal of DND, some relevant tools have been created for playing DND online, such as Maptool, Foundry VTT, xchat, DNDBot, DICEBOT and so on. As early as 2007, DND can be played online. It is not a video game which looks like DND or uses DND rules, It is the original DND. All of these tools were done by player themselves, instead of game producers.

Also, there are plenty of conventions and other activities all over the world recently. For example, in 2019, there was a TRPG festival and a new TRPG journal was published, which is the Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies (JARPS) (Björn-Ole, 2019). The relationship between TRPG practice and academics has become increasingly close. There is an academic discussion session in this event. Scholars discussed the history of TRPG, the value of TRPG Journal, the use of TRPG to help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the development of TRPG in libraries, and TRPG in the field of environmental education (Björn-Ole, 2019).

In addition to the well-known TRPG mentioned above, there are a large plenty of noteless TRPGs active in the market, and can meet players' requirements for exploring and playing different kinds of characters, such as *Blades in the Dark*, a TRPG full of "brilliantly designed dark criminal fantasy"; *Masks: A New Generation*, a TRPG about how "teen superheroes fight to shape their identities"; *Feng Shui 2*, a TRPG in which players can enjoy "fast-paced cinematic action with over-the-top flare", and so on (Connor, 2021).

The regional imbalance in TRPG development has always been a problem. Several English-speaking countries represented by the United States have first-mover advantages and can easily purchase TRPGs, such as the rule book and expanded content of DND. For Chinese players, this is very difficult. The Chinese government has implemented a strict censorship

system, so foreign books cannot enter the Chinese market easily. Furthermore, because TRPG has higher requirements for the player's language level, players who only master everyday English cannot read the original text of TRPG rules books fluently. Although some companies, such as Labyrinth, have begun to introduce and publish TRPGs from all over the world in recent years, they are far from meeting the market requirement. In general, the number of translated TRPG books is very small, far from being able to meet the needs of Chinese TRPG players.

Confronting the problems mentioned above, with the advent of the Internet era, There are some interesting phenomena and characteristics in China's TRPG culture. Considering that many people need the translations of volunteer translators to be able to play TRPG, Chinese TRPG players began to spontaneously gather on some TRPG websites, such as [www.goddessfantasy.net](http://www.goddessfantasy.net), [www.cnmods.net](http://www.cnmods.net), <http://www.koboldgame.com/> and so on. In addition to spreading and sharing translated TRPG rules, such websites have become important places for old players to guide and lead new players to know TRPG and invite them to participate in TRPG.

### **1.2.3 Small group communication**

TRPG play has a particular social feature, which is based on small groups. When TRPG players come together to play TRPGs using pen and paper, dice or digital platforms under the constraints of a certain set of TRPG rules and the guidance of a GM, they tend to form small groups, either physical or virtual. They follow a certain frequency and interact with a size of 3 to 13 people for a common goal. Their activities can therefore be categorized as small group communication. Therefore, I think it is useful to use the theory of small group communication to analyse TRPG play. In the following, I will briefly introduce this theory.

According to the research (Cragan *et al.*, 2008:9), a small group can be defined as "a few people engaged in communication interaction over time, in face-to-face and /or computer

mediated environments, who have common goals and norms and have developed a communication pattern for meeting their goals in an interdependent manner". Based on this definition and my own participant observation, most of TRPG parties and adventure can be viewed as a kind of communication in a small group. Therefore, I will explain players' actions and speech in and out of TRPGs with the theory of small group communication.

The theory of small group communication can not only be used in the offline teams, but also in the online teams connected by virtual space and Internet (Walker *et al.*, 2018). According to Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), interaction style and group edges of virtual teams can be analyzed. However, there seems to be little research about utilizing this theory in the field of game studies. Therefore, it is of great significance to conduct this research in order to filling the gap.

As for the content of small group communication and how this theory can be used in the thesis of TRPGs, there will be further details in the Chapter 3 Literature Review.

### **1.2.4 Online games and the pandemic of COVID-19**

In the pandemic crisis of COVID-19, games played an important role (Zhu, 2021). Players' attitudes towards video games and tabletop games, and the state of development of these games themselves, have been influenced by the pandemic (Gaspar *et al.*, 2020; Marston and Kowert, 2020). The game studies associated with this phase can be categorised into three main areas: relaxation, research and cohesion. Specifically, three areas will be addressed as follows. Firstly, from the players perspective, games have the potential function to entertain, relax, reduce mental stress, perhaps even to provide an escape from the real problems and fear associated with the pandemic (Lukosch and Phelps, 2020). Playing video games has had a positive effect on players' perceived well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Games have provided an enjoyable means of maintaining social contact, and a stress relieving and mentally release from the lockdown (Barr and Copeland-Stewart, 2022). Secondly, video

games are functional in fighting against the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis. For example, games play a valuable role in teaching ventilator management (Naik *et al.*, 2020). However, it is not easy to produce good games that can be put to scientific use. The planning and expenditure requirements that serious games necessitate to ensure their efficacy as scientific communication products are obvious. Similarly, it has been discovered that large investment cannot prove for impact public receptivity (Romero-Luis and Gertrudix, 2022). Thirdly, several real-world games deal with pandemics. These items are frequently a blend of entertainment games, instructional learning games, and simulation games. They can improve comprehension of difficult events and aid in the development of information and skills required to deal with real-world issues (Kriz, 2020).

The state of video games during the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis has been discussed earlier. So how about TRPGs? The development of remote communication technology has received a great deal of attention in the wake of the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis (Joia and Lorenzo, 2021). There are increasing number of people are using software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to communicate online (Nuryana *et al.*, 2021). This has also contributed to the development of online TRPG. During the period of COVID-19 crisis, many people were unable to carry out their normal work and life and turned to TRPG for pleasure at home (Scriven, 2021). They were able to have TRPG parties through a variety of software and applications. Therefore, in this particular era background, research into the technology of online TRPG was the appropriate choice. The progress of TRPGs is benefited with the lockdown causing by the COVID-19. Wizards of the Coast LLC revealed that sales of content and supplies for the popular TRPG D&D increased by 33% in 2020, following six years of constant growth (Whitten, 2021). Fortunately, during the period of worldwide lockdowns caused by COVID-19 pandemic crisis, hybrid and remote play D&D technologies allowed D&D players to relocate their customary in-person games online, and these web platforms have witnessed shaping increase in traffic and subscriptions over 2020 and 2021 (Hughes, 2021). In the period when the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis is affecting people's lives and damaging the society, TRPG seems to be an approach to enhance people's social connection and avoid

being drawn in anxiety or depression (Kuchera, 2020).

In the middle and ending phases of the pandemic of COVID-19, many TRPG players around the world chose to move from offline TRPGs to online TRPGs (Eisenman and Bernstein, 2021; Diamond, 2021). Due to geographical factors, this shift occurred in China well before the pandemic of COVID-19. TRPGs save time on travelling, allow players to attend to other matters while participating in TRPGs, and are suitable for playing with online friends. Based on the above mentioned situation, it is significant to pay attention to how players have shifted from face-to face TRPG to online TRPG due to the COVID-19 epidemic.

### 1.3 Significance of the research

TRPG is not an isolated art and game style. It has connection with some other kinds of media and games. For example, some famous film companies and streaming media platforms have paid their attention to TRPG. There are some typical examples, which are listed as follows. In February 2020, Netflix has announced that *Altered Carbon* series, which is about “solving mysteries in a far-future cyberpunk world”, is getting its own tabletop RPG (Sheridan, 2020). *Dishonored: Definitive Edition* and *Dishonored 2* are an action-adventure and decision-making video game series (Lane, 2019), This series was developed by Arkane Studios and published by Bethesda Softworks. A team is working on *Dishonored Tabletop RPG*, and it is planned to make it lifelike and detailed (Cyre, 2020). Some television works are not originated from TRPG, but they are very closely related to TRPG. A famous representative is *the Gamers*. This series began in 2001 and includes five core works currently: *The Gamers: The Original Short Film*, *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising*, *The Gamers: Hands of Fate*, *The Gamers: The Series* and *The Gamers: The Shadow Menace*. In addition, it has two spin-offs, *The Gamers: Natural One*, *The Gamers: Humans & Households*, and two live shows, *The Gamers Live: Indianapolis 2012*, and *The Gamers Live: Curse of the Blind Swordsman* (Tvtropes, 2020). This lasting series chronicles the fantastic adventure of a group of DND

gamers. The plot follows the traditional "play inside a play" pattern. In TRPG, the interaction between player characters is both hazardous and thrilling. This work restores the status and look of American DND players in an unusual way. TRPG has a place in the film industry as well. DND-adapted fantasy films first appeared in theaters in 2000. A sequel to the film was released in 2005 and 2012. Another DND adaption film is now in production and is set to be released in 2023 (Josh, 2020). DND is not the only TRPG rule that has been turned into a film. The COC module "Crazy Mountain, Cthulhu's Mountain" began the animation process in August 2021 and is planned to be turned into an animated film (QooApp, 2021). As for the contribution of the thesis in this field, it can be seen in 9.2.3.

Despite of the development after the advent of electronic games, TRPG still has continued prosperity. In 1990s, some early video games, such as some persistent browser-based games(PBBGs) inherited a lot of elements from TRPG (Barton and Stacks, 2019). Later, as the medium form of video games got increasing in-depth development, it gradually moved away from TRPG. After TRPG players and electronic role-playing game players have kept their own territory for many years, some game companies have tried to explore the combination of them. Computer-based programs cannot provide instant feedback like real people do. While, the well-designed preset scenes can still attract some players. Pathfinder: Kingmaker is an example of this class. Its game system can be traced back to the most classic TRPG, Dungeons and Dragons. It is loyal to the pen-and-paper ruleset. It appears that the only difference between this work and traditional TRPGs is that the game platform has become a personal computer (Gibson, 2020). In September 2021, *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* was published on the Steam platform, which is the sequel of Pathfinder: Kingmaker. Players in this game may design whatever character they like based on their ideas. Although the flexibility of this game cannot be compared to the extensive history and rich material of numerous DNDs, there are 25 professions, 12 races, and over 1,000 spells, specializations, and skills for players to select from. In less than a month after its official release, the game garnered over 6,800 favorable reviews. As a result, there are compelling grounds to think that DND, as well as the TRPG rules of the sword and magic universe headed by DND,

remain alive and well, continuously infusing fresh life and inspiration into the production of video games. Another example is *Low Magic Age*, a video game that is similar with the DND3R. Although it is lacklustre in plot development and selection, its re-enactment on the numerical model is perfect. Some players who have a relatively superficial understanding of character card construction can learn about the advantages and disadvantages of different characters, races, equipment and skills of DND in this video game. If some players cannot find appropriate individuals to play TRPG with, they can use this game to temporarily relieve their loneliness as well.

Furthermore, the latest generation of DND rules are also used in the field of video games. The stand-alone role-playing chess game *Solasta: Crown of the Magister*, released on the Steam platform on May 27, 2021, uses the DND 5.1 version of the SRD rules. However, in actual operation, the degree of freedom is far from comparable to that of board games. For example, in this video game, players can only operate and play four heroes. When the game was launched, only five races and six occupations were opened. The contents of the basic DND5E package and various DLCs have not been fully included, to say nothing of. The *Witcher* is another intellectual property worth mentioning. The *Witcher* comes from the fantasy world created by Polish writer Andrei Spakowski. The protagonist is a body-modified *Witcher*. Novels, TV series and a variety of video games have appeared on the market. The publisher worked closely with the developer of the video game (that is the RED STUDIO, which is under the Polish company CD Projekt) to ensure that all content in the tabletop role-playing game is in line with the official (CD Projekt, 2015).

As members of TRPG parties often form small groups that meet at certain frequencies to enjoy TRPG together, it is valuable to examine TRPG from the perspective of small group communication. This is useful in exploring the roles, words, actions and psychological changes of players during the course of a TRPG, and informing the design of TRPGs better suited to the digital age.

It is essential to study TRPGs from a Chinese perspective. There have been many TRPG studies based on western countries, such as the United States (Abbott *et al.*, 2022; Garcia, 2017; Mizer, 2015), Japan (Kato, 2019; Reed, 2022), Canada (Campbell and Madsen, 2021), Denmark (Boysen *et al.*, 2023) and so on. It is unsuitable to simply assume that the state of TRPG development and TRPG player psychology in China is similar to that of western countries. One reason for this is that Chinese games face strict censorship. Censorship policy in China requires special attention. There are no age classifications for video games in China (Dong and Mangiron, 2018). Chinese youngsters frequently get access to games that are inappropriate for their age (O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013). As a result, censorship of video game material is tightly enforced. Specifically, "censorship is very strict with respect to pornography, violence, gambling, political issues, and misinterpretation of historical facts" (Zhang, 2012: 344). In contrast, the censorship of board games has been very haphazard. There are almost no cases or literature on the subject. In the author's personal experience, apart from intellectual property infringement, other aspects are seldom censored. This allows some content that is difficult to pass censorship in video games to appear in board games, which in turn indirectly promotes the development of the board game market.

On the contrary, in the United States and Europe, video game regulation is drawn by the assignment of age-based ratings, which deny minors access to specific video games if they are under a specified age group (Gentile *et al.*, 2005). The overarching goal of the censorship systems is to help parents' video game mediation efforts and, as a consequence, limit children's and teenagers' access to potentially hazardous video game material (Nikken and Jansz, 2006). As for adults, laws or policies that attempt to link video game violence to specific crimes are unlikely to stand up to close scrutiny (Ferguson, 2014). As for TRPG, its release has been somewhat blocked. In the 1980s, the anti-DND organisation Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons portrayed it as a dangerous tool capable of leading teenagers to cults and Satanism (Wilson, 2019). But this resistance did not lead to the issuance of any local laws on censorship.

Another reason is that in Scandinavia, non-hierarchical co-operation is an important part of the culture (Dahl and Irgens, 2022; Haug *et al.*, 2020). This is also reflected in TRPGs (Koren, 2018; Seregina, 2018; Thórisson, 2004). However, Chinese culture has a long history of hierarchy (Dorius, 2016). Although there seems to be very limited studies on hierarchy in Chinese TRPGs, this aspect may be somewhat different from that of Western countries and is worth exploring in depth.

Many TRPGs have complex rules, which makes mastering them a time-consuming and energy-intensive task. In the face of heavy school and work pressures, and with the availability of several other tabletop and video games with simple, accessible rules, the competitiveness of TRPGs may be diminishing. This thesis therefore attempts to explore the process by which players learn, apply and create TRPG rules, thereby encouraging rules innovation in TRPGs.

Overall, it is obvious that there are plenty of TRPGs that have been published or are willing to be published, and they are continuing to attract players and affect the world.

### **1.4 The outline of the thesis**

In this section, I will briefly summarize the thesis structure content from Chapter 2 to Chapter 9, in order to facilitate the readers' understanding.

#### Chapter 2 History of TRPG

This chapter will focus on three parts: the development phases of DND, the blooming of other TRPGs, the history of TRPG conventions and current status of TRPG worldwide. Firstly, I

briefly describe the various stages of the DND from its inception to its development and evolution, and the changes that have taken place in terms of rules, and so on. Secondly, although the DND was the earliest and most influential TRPG, there are other TRPGs that are worth discussing. Thirdly, I present the development of TRPG conventions, mainly from small gatherings of enthusiasts to large-scale conventions.

### Chapter 3 Literature review

The literature review chapter will focus on eight parts on other scholars' literature: research context of TRPG, TRPG and technologies in digitalisation, TRPG audience, TRPG rules, the theory of Magic Circle, the value of TRPG, online social play and small group communication.

The first part is about the research status, which specifically includes research on TRPG conducted by previous scholars. This is beneficial to proving the research gap of TRPG in digitization. The second part is about the relationship between the development of TRPG and technology. In this part, I discuss the origin of TRPG and how TRPG obtains necessary materials from wargaming for development. I also summarize the literature related to TRPG maps and TRPG platforms during the digitization process. The third part is about the TRPG audience, which is about the geographical and cultural specificity of both TRPG scholarships. The fourth part is about the rules of TRPG. Both the explicit and implicit rules of TRPG can be reflected through the gameplay. The process of players learning rules, using rules and creating new rules based on their own experience is an important part of TRPG. The fifth part concerns the theory of Magic Circle. This theory distinguishes everyday life from the play state. In TRPG, this distinction also exists, but the status of TRPG is also closely related to players outside the game. The sixth part is Value of TRPG. This part is aiming to explain the role of TRPG in cultivating community participation ability, exercising interpersonal relationship processing skills, psychotherapy, education and inspiring creativity. The seventh part is related to online social play. Online social play has attracted many game scholars' attention, and it is a common sense in online TRPG. I have reviewed some articles about

online social interactions, virtual communities, Identity, culture and game mechanics in this field. In addition, I will also pay attention to the main methods, advantages and disadvantages of research in online social play. The last part is about the theory of small group communication, which has a very important reference value for this research. The statement of small group communication has some diverse parts, such as frequently played roles, good and bad communication behaviors, and managing diversity and relational trust. It is useful to offer a theory to describe the TRPG play.

### Chapter 4 Methodology

Based on the clear identified researching gap in the literature review chapter, in this chapter, this thesis will clarify the research questions and choose the most suitable research methods to explore the questions of this thesis. This chapter is about the methodology and the methods that will be used in the thesis. This chapter has three parts: the research questions, the research philosophy and the methods for collecting and describing materials. The core research question of this thesis is: How Chinese TRPG players are playing online TRPGs in the digital age? Then some sub questions will be used to ask different part of TRPG play, such as experience, tools, interpersonal relationship and rules. The research philosophy of this study is interpretivism, because it is suitable for qualitative research and can benefit the exploring of TRPG play. Then, ethnography will be used to collect and describe materials. I have collected materials by participant observation, and analyse materials by case study and thick description. As a researcher, I have participated in TRPG play to do the participant observation and finish the fieldwork.

### Chapter 5 TRPG online

Online TRPG is one of the key themes of this thesis. This chapter's content is based on the change of TRPG magic circle from physical to digital. It includes three sections: From offline TRPG gaming to online TRPG gaming, text descriptions in online TRPG, hosting online TRPG

parties. Firstly, in the digitization era, the change from offline TRPG gaming to online TRPG gaming is obvious. In this part, I compared my personal experience of participating in offline TRPG and online TRPG, and emphasized how to enjoy online TRPG with not too much participation. Secondly, I focus on text descriptions in online TRPG, and discuss the results of player character skill checks, descriptions that meet the needs of different players, and the transfer of relatively complex and important information. Thirdly, I analyzed online TRPG parties from the perspective of game hosting, which includes player concentration in online TRPG, TRPG announcement writing, and rotating hosts.

### Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

In addition to the user experience, the tools used by TRPG players have also undergone revolutionary changes, so studying the tools of TRPG players is also of great significance. This chapter will concentrate on the tools used by TRPG players in the digital age. It consists of six components: digital character card, digital tools, miniature wargame models in online TRPG, conventions, new view of life and death about TRPG characters, cultural value of hardware. The first part is about digital character card. Character-Card Mod appeared after online TRPG was universally accepted. This refers to an Excel spreadsheet created by players voluntarily. Compared with the official Character-Card offered by *Wizards of the Coast*, it is easier for new players to learn and use. The second part is about other digital tools used in online TRPG. Electronic dice are more convenient than physical dice, and less likely to be worn. The production of electronic maps is significantly different from the production of commonly used offline TRPG maps. The third part concerns with miniature wargame models in online TRPG. In specific, the usage of miniature wargame models has three main situations in online TRPGs: substantial miniature models; virtual miniature models; no miniature models. The fourth part is about five valuable topic in online TRPG conventions: world building, log report, fighting scenery, repeat adventures and killing enemies. The fifth part is about a new view of life and death about TRPG characters: if the player-character relationship is not broken, then the character has not died in a serious sense. The sixth part is about cultural

value of hardware. Changes in hardware have brought about changes not only in the platform of the game, but also in the status of players within the small TRPG community.

### Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

The fifth and sixth chapters of this thesis are about the game itself, while this chapter focuses on the game player. This chapter will pay attention to interpersonal relationships among TRPG plays in three aspects: the characters player played in TRPG play, the appearance of group problems and the solving of group problems. Firstly, in TRPG play, each person plays a character in the fantasy world. In addition, they also play a role in the real world of the small group communication. Therefore, some questions are arising. How do they treat their role in the communication of small groups? How do they play their roles as task leader, social-emotional leaders, tension releasers and so on? Secondly, further exploration will be conducted on some group problems existing in this small group communications, which are listed as follows: What kind of small group spread will occur? What are the consequences of these problems? Why do these problems occur? Thirdly, this study will focus on the solving of the problems mentioned before. For some examples: How are these problems resolved? After being resolved, will these problems reappear? In small groups, are there any long-term mechanisms established to avoid these problems?

### Chapter 8 TRPG rules

This chapter will focus on digital TRPG rules. Rules are essential in every game. So does TRPG. When a new TRPG or a new extended content pack of a TRPG was published, new TRPG rules are following. This chapter will be divided into four parts: choosing rules, learning rules, obeying and breaking rules, original rules. Firstly, in the 1970s, the richness of the TRPG available to players is relatively limited, so their choices are also very limited as well. In contemporary society, TRPG players have a large number of new games to choose from. While, it means different TRPG rules are on an arena fighting to attract TRPG players. In the

context, benefiting from the ease of accessing rules, players can easily switch rules. So, some questions are arising: how do players pick rules? Which rules did they pick? Secondly, many TRPG rules, like DND, are complex. The original rules were hundreds of pages long, and then, new content has been continually added to the rules sets, and players lack professional guidance. So players have relatively high learning cost. Thirdly, in actual play, breaking TRPG rules is common. From the perspective of gamers This section will address the following issues: What are the rules? When will they break the rules? How do they deal with the conflict between following the rules and breaking them? Fourthly, the original TRPG rules created by players seem to be more important than ever in the digital age. So, this research will discuss the following issues in detail: when will players use the original TRPG rules? What rules did they make? What distinguishes these rules?

## Chapter 9 Conclusion of the thesis

This chapter will correspond to the introduction chapter, key issues raised in introduction chapter, and summarize the key findings of this study. This chapter has three parts: a summary of the whole thesis, the contribution of the thesis and recommendations, future work.

Firstly, the summary will include how researchers develop and use a theoretical framework for small group communication, as well as how they collect and analyse data from their studies. A review of the main findings of the thesis will also be included, including the experience, culture, interpersonal relationships and rules of TRPG play in the digital age, which are a summary of the main findings of the thesis.

Secondly, the contribution of the thesis includes the contribution to the academia and to the industry. The main part is to the academic field, which involves the following five aspects: the filling of the TRPG gap in the field of Chinese game studies, the filling of the Chinese gap in the field of world TRPG, the new exploration of the materiality turn of game studies, the

description and discussion of the new development of TRPG in the Internet era, and the new analysis of the relationship between TRPG and video games. In addition, the recommendations of this research were presented, including specific and feasible suggestions for game production, game studies researchers and game players.

Thirdly, I will present my plan of future work. I am going to continue my research of game study in these four perspectives: the period of post covid-19, participant observation of other demography groups, output and replay of online TRPG, TRPG software and their functions.

## **Chapter 2 History of TRPG**

This chapter will focus on the history of TRPG and the development of game studies in China. This is to emphasise the research contribution of this thesis. This is beneficial to explore new changes in the development history of TRPGs and hopes to set the current state of TRPG development within the history of TRPG development.

### **2.1 The development phases of the DND**

Before the emergency of the DND game, there was a strong fantasy atmosphere in certain American youth groups, with discussions about swords, magic, and knights' adventures (Tresca, 2014). The construction of this context appears to be built by lots of fantasy writers, and JRR Tolkien is the most important one of them (Barton and Stacks, 2019). Tolkien's novels, like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, told game designers how to narrate an epic of several heroes, other than a story of a simple hero, in that period (Tresca, 2014). There are 9 members in the team to find and destroy the Lord of the Rings. Each member has different experiences, backgrounds, personalities and abilities, and each of them is a significant part of the whole story. Later facts showed that it is very difficult to gather so many players and let them take an adventure together. Therefore, traditional DND game

considers that it is appropriate to start an adventure with 2 to 6 players in general (Slavicsek and Baker, 2009). He also created an enduring story outline: a group of characters gather together because of a common enemy. They intend to weaken this terrible enemy by destroying a powerful item, and then defeat him or her. Before the final battle, the heroes often need to explore several dangerous dungeons (Harrigan, P. and Wardrip-Fruin, 2007).

The beginning of TRPG is closely connected to tabletop wargames. Therefore, it is useful to give a summary of their long history here. Wargames emerged in the German-speaking world in the ending of the 18th century as a way of teaching army leaders, establishing a heritage of combat simulation (Peterson, 2016). These wargames used developments in military sciences to produce an unparalleled simulation of real battle over a forty-year period of fast progress (Peterson, 2016). By the end of the nineteenth century, mostly in the United Kingdom, a second wave of creativity occurred as enthusiasts repurposed these wargames to stress pleasure over study (Peterson, 2016). In the mid-twentieth century, one mostly headquartered in the United States, which concentrated on the commercial selling of “prepackaged board wargames, miniature figures, dice, rules”, and associated paraphernalia (Peterson, 2016:13). The easy access to wargaming tools familiarised a large group of audience with simulation principles, which in turn sparked a massive wave of creativity, one that eventually become a strong driving force for some modern games: TRPG, collectible card games, and, most importantly, computer games. Since all these loom large in early twenty-first-century society, they advocate studying wargames as a tool to investigate the development of gaming (Peterson, 2016).

In the field of table games, the origin of the first TRPG, DND, can be traced back to 1967. At that time, a wargame named *The Siege of Bodenburg* was published (Burroughs and Lawrence, 2015). A leader of the International Federation of Wargaming (IFW), Gary Gygax, played this game. In 1968, collaborated with his friend Jeff Perren, Gary designed a game called *Chainmail* (Mona, 2007). From a modern point of view, this game is relatively crudely designed. There is simply one rule book, no tiny figures, no equipment to go with it, and no

maps (Gygax, 1985). Gygax also gives recommendations in the rule book on how to make these times by the players themselves (Gygax and Perren, 1971).



Figure 2- 1 The Siege of Bodenburg (Bander, 2012)



Figure 2- 2 Chainmail session at Gary Con II (Paul, 2010)

In 1969, Wesley, a student at the University of Minnesota, began to design a series of strategy games. In the game Chainmail, the interests of different players are non-zero-sum. Each player needs to complete a unique goal in a virtual city (Daniel, 2001:13). Gygax was the first to utilize the approach of comparing the number of multi-sided dice to decide the outcome of behaviors in role-playing games. Dave Arneson was always one of the participants when Wesley developed these games (Tresca, 2014). He incorporated the inspiration from *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dark shadows* into the game *Braunstein* designed by Wesley, and created a new game called *Blackmoor* (Snow, 2008).

In 1971, Gary Gygax met David Arneson at a convention (Tresca, 2014). They produced the first edition of DND and distributed it at various conferences. The game was so well received that the preprinted game rulesets was sold out in 1973 (Costikyan, 2007). Then, it was published that year by Gygax's company, *Tactical Studies Rules* (Hosch, 2017). In this rulebook,

the content is far less than what the DND has now. There are only four races and three classes (Gygax and Arneson, 1974). There are certain concepts that are close to what we have now. For example, a player character's fundamental ability contains six items: strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma (Gygax and Arneson, 1974). When it comes to the 5th edition of DND, this same design has been followed (Wizards RPG Team, 2014).

In 1976, an important concept was proposed, it was the game master (Tresca, 2014). At first, the game master was just a post in charge of arranging the battlefield environment in the game (Bjornstad, 1984). Then, it became synonymous with game host. Different from the hosts in radio, TV shows and variety shows, the game master is the incarnation of the rules of the game. It has both administrative, legislative and judicial powers. It is the makers, executors and story promoters of the rules of the game. It is fair to say that whether there is a game master is the main difference between TRPG and other games. To make the DND easy to be learned, and encourage more players take participate in this game, some other books were published later, such as *Monster Manual* (1977), *Player's Handbook* (1978) and *Dungeon Master's guide* (1979) (Tresca, 2014:63).

In a long term, the sales volume of the DND series is satisfactory. In the starting year of the DND, 1000 copies were sold (Tresca, 2014:62). Then, 2000 more were sold out by April 1975, 3000 more was sold by July 1975 (Tresca, 2014:62). In the beginning of 21st century, it is also the most famous and dominating TRPG. According to the Orr Group Industry Report (The Roll20 Team, 2021), the DND 5th has occupied more than 50% of the American TRPG market. The success of the DND series not only lies in its own right, but also in fostering the occurrence of various types of TRPGs. These TRPGs are its competitors. For example, *Tunnels & Trolls*, published in 1975 by Ken St. Andre, is a TRPG that tried to make the DND rules simple (Astinus. 1998).

In 2000, the third version of *Dungeons and Dragons* was released. In this version, the original

rules have been simplified, and the original behaviors motivated by multiple dices have been changed to mainly using 20-sided dice. The Skills system used in the second edition has been retained. In the context of this section, the term “Skills” refer to non-weapon effects or abilities that do not cause damage. In this edition, the Feats system appears for the first time. Feats refers to the exclusive skills unique to each hero, some of which require specific races, occupations, or attributes as prerequisites. In addition, the job of magic user is divided in more detail, The Sorcerer and The Wizard have become two different professions (Barton, 2008).

The DND series have set many standards for the TRPG game genre. One of the most important standard is that this is a cooperative game, not a competitive game. In the game, the relationship among the players, and the relationship among the players and the game master is not confrontational, but cooperative. This way of socializing is more like watching a movie or reading a book. The important thing is to enjoy a role-playing journey with friends, not to separate the winners and losers (Gygax, 1987: 13).

Despite of the facts that story background, professions, races and abilities of adventurers of different modules are different, from the perspective of outside the game, every adventure is similar. Players playing adventurers sit around a table, or whatever. They are very close and can communicate with each other easily. The game master is also a member of this group, usually sitting in the center of the group. He is responsible for placing the map, telling stories, throwing dice, and determining the outcome of the player's actions based on the results of the dice. “Unlike a poker game, the players are all on the same team with a common goal: killing monsters and take their stuff” (Hite, 2007:32).

How can players better enjoy the fun of playing roles in the team in TRPG? This is a problem addressed by the fourth edition of DND. Before that, Gygax has made some settings for the balance of different occupations in DND, and recommended positions for different occupations. For example, regarding class roles, he said that it is identified that the fighter

takes the role of infantry, the thief the spy, cleric the medic and the artillery magic user (Tresca, 2014:67). In the fourth edition of the DND, these roles are embodied more clearly. It is no longer a suggestion from the game designers, but a part of the written game mechanics. In the fourth edition of DND, players can clearly understand what role each profession should take on, and what functions are left unattended in their adventure team (Wilkes, 2008).

## 2.2 The blooming of other TRPGs

In 1981, seven years after the publication of the DND, the COC (Call of Cthulhu) role-playing game was published (Daniel, 2001). Unlike the DND series, the player team in the COC must fight against incredibly powerful old dominators known as the great old ones (Brunette, 2015). There are different opinions about the description of this monster, and there is even no conclusive evidence that it is a creature. In addition, their strength is unmatched. No matter what kind of weapon or magic is used, they can only delay their footsteps temporarily, without any chance to completely defeat them (Petersen *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, knowing any information about the great old ones may cause the player's character to fall into destruction and madness. According to Richard L. Tierney (2011:11), "the 'shocker; in [Lovecraft' s] best tales is usually the line in which the narrator is forced to recognize that there are vast and powerful forces and entities basically indifferent to humanity because of their overwhelming superiority to man."

In 2014, the 7th edition of COC was published. Unlike DND, in this TRPG, players can master very limited power, and the story background is closer to reality. It is worth emphasizing that the COC ruleset does not include a complete upgrade system. Therefore, players cannot master more spells and become stronger by constantly defeating enemies and completing tasks like in DND. Instead, adventure after adventure will exhaust players' characters physically and mentally. Players' will is going to gradually become weak, until the fire of life

is burned out. In addition, COC officials have also introduced more powerful incentive policies to encourage COC fans and players to create. In the largest RPG download store, Drivetheru RPG, module writers can upload what they create based the COC 7th ruleset to the website and set a price freely. Then the writers will get 50% of the price for each sold module (Drivethrurpg, 2014). Capturing profits is not the original intention of most COC modules or TRPG module authors. However, the creation of a high-quality module often requires decades of hours or even longer time of speculation and experimentation. If it is possible to earn a certain amount of income, many module authors can also have a better financial situation.

In addition to the success of the 7th The Call of Cthulhu, this series has also introduced some new content which is significantly different from the atmosphere of horror, confusion and unknown established by the original the COC. An influential one of them is the COC (RPG Geek, 2021). In the world of The COC, players do not need to play the characters of human beings. Instead, they play the characters as cats. Correspondingly, the danger they may meet will not be the Great Old ones, the pain of nihilism or the powerlessness of themselves. Only people's actions and mood can be tricky challenges (Alex, 2013). In addition, the difficulty of mathematical calculations in the rules of this class has been greatly reduced. After all, although cats have certain intelligence, they are not good at logical thinking. The publication of this ruleset reflects the more lively and milder development direction of TRPGs.

### **2.3 The history of TRPG conventions**

TRPG conventions have been a popular gathering for fans of RPGs since the early days of the hobby. The first TRPG convention was Gen Con, which started in 1968 in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (White *et al.*, 2018). Gen con was founded by Gary Gygax, the co-creator of the iconic TRPG DND (Nikolaidou, 2018). Gen Con grew in popularity over the years and

spawned many other TRPG conventions across the United States and internationally (Mizer, 2015). Some of the notable TRPG conventions include Origins Game Fair, held annually in Columbus, Ohio since 1975, and Dragon Con, held annually in Atlanta, Georgia since 1987 (MacCallum-Stewart, and Trammell, 2018).

In addition to these large-scale conventions, there are also many small scale and local conventions that cater to local TRPG communities, such as Marmalade Dog, TotalCon and Orccon. These conventions provide a space for TRPG enthusiasts to meet, play games, and socialize with like-minded individuals (Trammell, 2018). As for Chinese TRPG conventions, I have already described this in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

TRPG conventions have played an important role in the growth and development of the TRPG hobby. They provide platforms for game designers and publishers to showcase their latest products and innovations, and offer a venue for gamers to try out new games and meet other gamers from around the world (Cover, 2005).

## **Chapter 3 Literature review**

### **3.1 Research context of TRPG**

According to Aarseth (2002), a founder of game research in the 20th century, the majority of game studies conducted are transdisciplinary, combining ideas from at least two disciplines. In TRPG studies, scholars use views and theories from other subjects to inform and deepen the academic study of TRPG as well. In general, there are 5 dimensions of TRPG research deserve discussion: motivation of TRPG playing, education and TRPG, mythology and TRPG, community building and TRPG, and TRPG's substance.

Some scholars paid attention to the motivation of TRPG playing (Coe, 2017; Bowman, 2010;

Dyson *et al.*, 2016; Daniau, 2016; Merilainen, 2012; Sarup, 1981) . According to Coe (2017), there were two primary motivations related to people initiating participation in TRPGs: Being Recruited and Creative Curiosity. This scholar also determined that “there were five motivations related to people continuing to participate in TRPGs: Imaginative Creativity, Exploring and Knowing Self, Belonging and Interacting, Relief and Safety, and Learning” (Coe, 2017:2856). According to Bowman (2010), TRPGs benefit participants by facilitating community building, identity exploration, and cognitive flexibility through strategizing, goal setting, and problem solving. Cultivating creativity is also considered a motivation for playing TRPG (Dyson *et al.*, 2016).

TRPG can play an important role in education. Philips (1994) tries to use TRPG in the field of English as a foreign language learning, and finds that role-playing games may not be suitable for all EFL classrooms, but they have the potential to become a valuable addition to many teachers' arsenals of meaningful language learning exercises for conversation classes. Cook (2017) has combined TRPG with English language arts classes, and finds that role-playing systems have the advantage of letting students meet instructor demands. For example, developing a board game or simulation would only allow for the adaptation of a single text. It's possible to turn any book into an interactive experience by altering a role-playing system.

Mythology and TRPG are tensely connected. Some scholars researched TRPG in the perspective of mythology (Bowman,2012; Hall, 2015; Gerritsen, 2020; Nikolaidou, 2018; Kaylor, 2017). The ritualized actions of the TRPG culture reproduce humanity's great mythological themes, encouraging players to encounter archetypal forces through organized personae (Bowman, 2012). Under the guidance of mythological studies of the hero archetype, including Campbell (2008), Hall (2015) investigates the variations in views of heroic journeys between the player and the characters in video games. Plenty of TRPG campaign arcs adhere to fantasy literary norms, a genre heavily influenced by mythologies from over the world (Cover, 2014). As a result, TRPG storylines frequently follow the pattern of heroic myths defined by Campbell (2008), making mythological studies a core source for

understanding TRPG worlds, which are frequently set in a mythologized version of our world. Mythological studies also make contribution to giving the stories and concepts that underpin the majority of TRPG play. Because mythological notions pervade all TRPGs, mythological studies are suitable for a study examining the creation of a new heroic archetype when playing TRPGs (Hall, 2015). Hemminger argues that the hero's journey is "a shared code for the fantasy genre," including TRPGs (Hemminger, 2009: 31). Hemminger (2009) argues that the 12-step framework of the Hero's journey is a solid way to evaluate RPGs, tracing the evolution and development of characters across their stories. Bartle (2009) employs the hero's journey to demonstrate the distinction between a well-crafted game narrative and an imaginary world with little capacity to captivate the player over time.

There exists abundant research about how TRPG makes sense in the field of community building (Bowman, 2010). In the real world, children are encouraged to get involved in different types of games, especially the activities that connect themselves with other members in a community, which can make them know and get familiar with others (Fine, 2002). But for adults, they have adapted to the situation of daily life, and their roles has been stable commonly (Goffman, 1978). In this situation, TRPG can show its strengths. When performing role-playing, people are aware that they are not the roles they actually intend to play. But in the mean time, they can deal with problems according to the character's view and experience. A TRPG can be an exercise in social interaction. Personal skills will also be exercised in this process.

Previous scholars in the TRPG field have done rich research on TRPG's play motives, TRPG and community construction, TRPG's application in education, TRPG's mythology origins, and the materiality of TRPG tools. Very few scholars have explored the potential of TRPG in-depth from the field of small group communication. Recent TRPG studies have not addressed everyday play of games nor interaction between players. Therefore, this research intends to address this gap and conduct in-depth research from this section to make a possible contribution to academic research on TRPG. To fill this academic gap, small group

communication is a particularly useful and appropriate approach to study and interpret TRPG play. Further details will be presented in Chapter 3, Section 9.

It can be seen that current TRPG research has some shortcomings through the reviewing of relevant literature. Some important dimensions of TRPG have not been researched by scholars. These important dimensions are small group communication of TRPG, online TRPG, TRPG platforms and Chinese TRPG. Considering that TRPG already has a certain foundation in China, and a unique TRPG culture has been formed in the Internet age, it is necessary to conduct research on China and all Chinese speakers playing TRPG. This can not only explore the development of TRPG culture in different nationalities and different regions, but also provide more references for the globalization of TRPG, allowing other fans and game designers interested in TRPG to grasp more information.

### **3.2 TRPG and technologies in digitalisation**

Technological developments are closely linked to changes in games (Ivory and Kalyanaraman, 2007). New games are often based on the mass adoption of new technologies (Schilling, 2003). Even playing the same game, versions based on different technologies can have different impacts on players. Juul proposed that, as games go from physical to digital forms, modifications occur, and “much detail is lost because the physics model of the computer program is a simplification of the real world, and in the interface because the video game players’ body is not part of the game state” (Juul, 2011: 43-44). Wirman and Leino (2019: 640) considered that the concept of transmediality refers to the idea that the same game can be manifested in a variety of different material versions: for example, “a table-top analogue Mahjong with tiles, a Mahjong app on a smartphone, and a Mahjong game on a PC” can all be considered Mahjong games, regardless of their differences. They found that since the digital version takes care of “both the rules and the game state”, it is possible to

make visible and accessible more parts of the game state than a player may be able to comprehend TRPG rules without assistance (2019: 654). A comparative study has shown that 2D, 3D and VR versions of the same game can bring different experiences to the player (Roettl and Terlutter, 2018).

Given that the type of media can have a great impact on gameplay, in this section, I will discuss four specific aspects of the impact of technology on games and the changes that technology has brought to the development of games, setting the stage for the later discussion on the impact of digital technology on TRPGs. These four areas are: the emergence of TRPG from wargaming, digitisation, TRPG maps and TRPG platforms.

The emergence of TRPGs from wargaming can be traced back to the 1960s (Nikolaidou, 2019). The first version of DND was released in 1974. Before 1974, some board games, the predecessor of TRPGs, were already very closely linked to wargaming (Peterson, 2016). A wargame required a minimum of two players. In order to find more people to play wargames with, related gaming communities were created (Peterson, 2016). There are a large number of game designers in the community. They published a number of wargaming-related books that tied the concept of miniature and war games together, laying the foundation for the formal birth of the TRPG (Morschauser, 1962). In the early miniature wargame communities, members made friends and extended social relationships through clubs and conventions, for example (Peterson, 2016). Email was not available, so players who wanted to play the miniature wargame with distant friends had to communicate through sending letters (Peterson, 2016). At the beginning of the miniature wargame, players focused on 19th and 20th century wars (Peterson, 2016). Then, the games' themes expanded to other historical periods, such as the European Middle Ages and even Middle-earth created by Tolkien (Peterson, 2016). This led to many traces of Lord of the Rings- related references surviving in early DND. In the 1970s, Gygax, a founder of the wargaming club, designed the game Chainmail (Gygax and Perren, 1971). It was a publicly published miniature wargame with better rules and a more plausible fantasy setting at the time (Peterson, 2016). Building on

the success of Chainmail, Gygax founded his own game company, Tactical Studies Rules, and published the first edition of DND (Peterson, 2016). The core of this version of DND is a fantasy world war game using pen and paper and miniature figures.

With the introduction of the TRPG history mentioned above, it is valuable to pay attention to TRPGs nowadays. Certain online TRPG systems exist as a shared digital realm where players and GMs may access the same information through a shared visualisation, such as the positions of player characters and foes on a map (C.Hall, 2022). There has been some investigation into the narrative strategies used in TRPGs, as well as theorization of how these approaches may be used to construct digital tools (Peinado and Gervás, 2004).

In order to visually represent the virtual environment in a game, some players often use 2D flat maps (MDN Contributors, 2022). With assistance of computer technology, many software programs allow users to create their own 2D TRPG maps to suit their needs, such as Tile (Lindeijer, 2022). This kind of software can provide a good experience for users of digital maps. However, it caused some dissatisfaction as well (Liapis *et al.*, 2013). Considering that users do not use such software for the primary purpose of getting paid to produce, production efficiency is not the most critical factor in their evaluation of the software (Nilsson, 2003). Instead, they are casual creators who value whether the software allows them to express their creativity and explore the unknown, and whether the process of working is enjoyable (Compton and Mateas, 2015). Specifically, if every part of the map has to be set up manually by players, it was considered boring and time-consuming (Crain *et al.*, 2022). When only a few parameters were set by the player and most of the content is generated directly by the program, players felt a lack of control (Alvarez *et al.*, 2018). Some scholars are already exploring ways to combine the advantages of both procedural generation and manual editing to allow players to express their creativity as easily as possible (Yannakakis *et al.*, 2014). Such software has received some positive reviews among the player community (Davis *et al.*, 2016).

New technological developments have dramatically changed the TRPG gaming platform (Mazalek *et al.*, 2008). There has been amount of research on electronic TRPG platforms, a plenty of which involves creating a console-like TRPG board through sensors and interactive technologies (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Harley *et al.*, 2016; Oliveira *et al.*, 2020; Schild and Masuch, 2010). This kind of tabletop media platform usuallt utilised computer vision techniques to track objects and/or fingers (Kaltenbrunner and Bencina, 2007; Magerkurth *et al.*, 2004; Wilson, 2005). According to Mazalek (2008), such platforms allow players to enter a mixed-reality operating space: the character represented by the player has a physical presence rather than just a pattern on an electronic computer screen; the player still needs to use their hands rather than a mouse to operate; however, the GM needs to use the operating interface of the electronic assistance system next to them when sorting, fighting and calculating, rather than with pen and paper.

So what if a deeper use of computer and internet technology was built on top of mixed reality? Digital TRPG platforms have already gained some audience in the marketplace and are recognised by some players (Hartelius *et al.*, 2012; Švelch, 2022; Vossen, 2017). Considering the need for player communication, there was also a TRPG platform having capability for covert communication, synchronisation of audio and visual presentations to game events, and real-time recording of the gaming session (Bergström *et al.*, 2010). However, fewscholars dug deeper into this platform technology, and further research is needed to reconcile digital TRPG platforms with player feelings, psychology and communication. Accessibility of tech platforms is also an important part of digital TRPG platforms. Further details about digital TRPG tools are presented in Chapter 6 Section 2. If players have to usually restart software and microphones, it is hard for them to have satisfying experience in TRPG parties. A relevant example from my field research in 5.3 Hosting online TRPG parties.

In a summary, current research on games and technology is driving the creation and use of new technologies in the TRPG field. These technologies have given traditional TRPGs the

opportunity to transform into digital TRPGs. Moreover, these technologies give players more space to use their imagination and creativity. However, current research has mainly focused on the realisability and commerciality of the technologies, and there is a lack of further detailed research on the interpersonal communication activities and psychological states behind player interaction behaviour, which is the focusing point of this research. There will be further discussion of this topic in Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play.

### 3.3 TRPG audience

Previous scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on TRPG (Tabletop Role-playing Game), but most of them focus on the West and English-speaking countries. Many related studies are based in the United States. For example, when Bowman (2013) studied the contradictions and conflicts in TRPG, her observation object came from Texas, USA. When Garcia (2017) tried to look at DND from the perspective of race and gender, the researcher chose Colorado, USA as the field. Underwood (2009) selected interviewees from Eugene, Oregon and Bloomington, Indiana on the study of interpersonal communication in TRPG. When Coe (2017) studied Motivation theory, he chose a small and rural liberal arts college in the United States as the fieldwork place. Brace's (2012) research on game subculture mainly conducted field surveys in two cities: Tulsa, a city in Oklahoma and Wichita, the largest city in the US state of Kansas and the county seat of Sedgwick County. In the research about the relation between TRPG and education, the United States is still the center of research. In the study that how can TRPG make sense in students' reading ability development, the two classes of the Midwest eighth grade were selected as the targets of field research (Cook *et al.*, 2017(1)). After all, the world's oldest and well-known TRPG, DND, was developed and continuously operated by Wizards of the Coast, a game company from the United States, which is headquartered in Seattle.

Some European countries and cities have been selected as locations for conducting TRPG-related fieldwork. For example, in a study on computer ethics and TRPG, the sample was 90 students selected from Skopje, the capital and largest city of North Macedonia (Zdravkova, 2014). In addition, there are also some TRPG studies that did not exactly indicate the area and language used by the interviewees (Cook *et al.*, 2017(2); Daniau, 2016), and some researchers pay little attention to the research methods because of using the method of virtual ethnography, or disclosed the area where the interviewee lives and the language used (Hall, 2015). But from their literature, there is no clue that these people who receive semi-structured interviews or become the targets of participatory observation come from China or use Chinese. Therefore, in the previous TRPG related research the TRPG activities of China and Chinese users received relative limited attention. This phenomenon could be justified by the following reasons. One possible reason is that when conducting field research, researchers tend to choose ethnic groups that speak the same language as themselves as samples. Another possible reason is that when conducting field research, researchers tend to choose geographical areas that are convenient for them to reach. For example, scholar Zdravkova, who is from University Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Macedonia, has chosen Skopje, Macedonia as the location for field research (Zdravkova, 2014). A more important reason may be that currently, the construction of game study is still in a relatively primitive state in China. game study is not recognized as an independent subject by the Chinese government, so scholars engaged in research on this subject have to take shelter in communication, design, animation, history and other subjects. As a secondary subject, game study can be developed through interdisciplinary research integrated with other subjects. But this kind of development is not perfect, leading to that many topics in game study are still being ignored, and TRPG is one of them.

In summary, in the current research on TRPG, most of the research samples come from European and American countries. Therefore, the choice of TRPG players has certain limitations. In order to overcome for this limitation, scholars in the TRPG field should focus

on TRPG players in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and take into account the gaming experience and expectations of these players. This research attempts to fill the gaps in TRPG research from this perspective, bring a global dimension to TRPG studies and put the research perspective on Chinese TRPG players to explore more about China's TRPG players. Therefore, this thesis has a particular focus on China.

Online TRPG seems to be a little discussed area of game scholars. Although in the early stages of TRPG research, TRPG, which only requires pen, paper, and dice, played an objective role in resisting video games (Brace, 2012), after TRPG development reached a new stage, the famous DND rules launched the third edition in 2000, and continued to expand its worldview based on it. The materiality of TRPG as a medium makes it seriously lack of complexity (Punday, 2005; Nephew, 2003; Mackay, 2017; Harrigan, P. and Wardrip-Fruin, 2007), and it is also difficult to assume further extension of complexity. This is mainly reflected in its calculation. When calculating damage and skill check values with pen and paper, it is difficult for players to perform a large number of calculations in a short period of time, or to calculate numbers with many digits. Compared to video games and other software, players' capability of computing has more limitations. Overly complex rules and too frequent calculations can take the fun out of it and make it tedious. Considering that offline TRPGs still have a large audience, it can be inferred that many players accept and enjoy this form of game that lacks complexity. But the popularity of online TRPGs also shows that many players want to enjoy the new era of TRPGs by embracing new technologies. When online TRPG has moved from the exploratory stage to the mature stage, if TRPG researchers fail to observe and analyze the changes in the community in time, then the research is undoubtedly lagging.

Based on the literature reviewed above, one question arises: which countries or regions' players are the target audience of TRPG? Regrettably, very few scholars pay attention to about the nationalities, cultural differences and contexts of TRPG players until now. The emergence of this situation is logical. As a branch of game research, TRPG research requires

researchers to maintain close contact with the community. This also results that a game researcher in a related field often has to spend plenty of time conducting fieldwork in one or several scenarios. Most of them are confined to a state, county or specific country, and ignore TRPG players elsewhere. If they send out questionnaires to conduct surveys on this basis, they will often snowball-style research, like the survey from Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of the most famous TRPG texts books (Dancey, 2000; Cook *et al.*, 2007(1); Chung, 2013). They will not have equal access to every game community participating in TRPG. Therefore, such surveys do not have extensive reference value in the geographical distribution of TRPG audiences. There are many game communities participating in TRPG. Taking DND as a starting point, TRPG has developed into many different types and styles to adapt to different player groups (Applecline, 2014). However, these players are difficult to be displayed in a balanced manner in the survey statistics. The reasons for this situation are complicated. For example, some TRPG rule enthusiasts may not have much interest in the survey, but only focus on the game itself.

According to the above literature, the TRPG research community currently focuses on TRPG face-to-face. This research direction is closely related to the context of TRPG development and fully respects the materiality of TRPG. However, with the innovation of computer network technology, remote TRPG via the Internet has become feasible. Online TRPG is a research area worthy of attention. This study will focus on the digital changes of TRPG, so as to fill the gaps in TRPG research.

### **3.4 TRPG rules**

For game playing, rules are necessary (Juul, 2010). When discussing the definition of play, many game scholars coincidentally refer to the importance of the rules of play (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001; Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Kelley, 2013; Suits, 2014). According to Huizinga, playing is an activity that takes place inside its own time and space constraints,

according to established rules, and in a systematic way (Huizinga, 2014). Caillois defines playing as an activity that is voluntary, distinct in time and space, unpredictable, unproductive, regulated by rules, and make-believe (Caillois, 2001). Suits proposed that to play a game is to participate in activity aimed at achieving a given state of things using only the methods authorised by the rules (Suits, 2014). The rules exclude more efficient ways in favour of less efficient ones, and when such rules are established only because they allow them based on common negotiation (Suits, 2014). At the most basic level, we may describe game as a practice of voluntary control systems in which opposing forces are constrained by a method and rules in order to generate a disequilibrium conclusion (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971). Kelley addressed that a game is a kind of entertainment that consists of a set of rules that describe a goal to be obtained and the acceptable methods for achieving it (Kelley, 2013).

Games' rules are embodied in gameplay. In a game like chess, for example, each chess piece has its own set of rules, and these rules interact to generate gameplay along the playing surface, the chess board. Rules with both active and passive repercussions provide the most engaging games (Newman, 2004). This requires the gamer to make judgments that are sometimes obvious and automatic. In effect, good gaming occurs when options are not evident and the player must experiment with various methods to determine the trade-offs for each decision (Newman, 2004). While the core layer, or called gameplay layer, is concerned with the total a player can do when they are playing the game, as well as the game rules that regulate these activities, the shell is concerned with all the semiotic richness that modifies, contains, and adds value to that fundamental interaction (Mäyrä, 2008). How do TRPG players learn how to play the game? How has this learning process been affected by digitization? These two questions will be explored in Section 8.1 of this thesis.

Rules can be divided into three types in the book *Rules of Play*: operational, constitutive, and implicit (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The operational rules are the fundamental principles that players must follow in order to play. sometimes "the rules of play" only means these

rules. The constitutive rules are the mathematical and logical frameworks that underpin the rules given to players, and the implicit rules concern correct game behaviour. A youngster may be permitted to take back a bad move, although the same rule does not apply in a competition match (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 130). This thesis is not aiming to do public understanding of any specific TRPG rule. Therefore, the operational rules will not be a main point of rules discussion in the thesis. Instead, the constitutive rules and implicit rules, the rules connected to the small group communication closely, will be explored carefully.

In addition, some rules are created by game players, instead of game companies (Torner, 2018). These rules are called village rules or house rules in general, and can be presented as a collection of mutually agreed-upon rules for a certain module in the TRPG field (Torner, 2022). Then some of these rules can be developed into an independent ruleset, like Pathfinder (Bennert, 2018). After the release of DND, all other TRPGs were created by using DND as their inspiration and source material. The TRPG model set by DND, that TRPGs should include Player books, Game Master books, Monster books Source books and Scenario books, has also been used by a large number of TRPGs (Tresca, 2014).

Rule-breaking is an important part of rules research, and it is also important of the discussion in 8.1 Rule-breaking and Cheating. Online gaming is quickly becoming one of the most popular Internet apps (McCreary, 2000). Cheating has arisen as a prominent occurrence in today's Internet game activity (Yan and Randell, 2005). There are different definitions of game cheating. According to Consalvo, cheating can be understood as “cheating creates an unfair advantage for the cheater. Although many times this advantage was in relation to another player in a multiplayer game, it was also mentioned in regards to single-player games. Cheating was more than just breaking a rule or law—it was also those instances of bending rules, or “re-interpreting” rules to the players’ advantage” (Consalvo, 2009:2). Cheating is the “introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world” (Consalvo, 2009:3). According to Yan and Choi (2002:3), cheating can be defined as follows: “Any behaviour that a player may use to get an unfair advantage, or achieve a target that he

is not supposed to is cheating.”

There are two main motivations for players to try to embark on writing original rules. Firstly, it is to try out a new worldview. Different TRPGs have different worldviews. Most of *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, takes place in the fantasy world of sword and sorcery. In the *Forgotten Realms*, beings of different races, professions, background and beliefs create their own legend (Alberto, 2021). *The Call of Cthulhu* takes place on an Earth where the ancient gods sleep (Lončar, 2018). Although DND has had many different expansions and is still being updated, the worldview structure will remain largely unchanged. Therefore, designing a set of rules in order to shape a new worldview is a common motivation. Secondly, it is to fix the flaws or change the unloved parts of the existed rules (Sturrock, 2015). When they first encounter a rule they do not like, some GMs and PCs may ignore that rule or rules and in turn make their own rules. If such patches become increasingly common, then some GMs will consider creating a unique set of TRPG rules. *Pathfinder* was published in order to provide a low-barrier, easy-to-learn set of DND rules (Matthew, 2020). This part will be discussed in detail in 8.3 Rules created by players.

In digital games and tabletop games, players have different attitudes and responses to the rules, and this has also had an impact in the TRPG digital process. Behaviour that a player uses to gain an advantage over his peer players or achieve a target in an online game is cheating, if according to the game rules or at the discretion of the game operator (i.e. the game service provider, who is not necessarily the developer of the game), the advantage or the target is one that he is not supposed to have achieved. Online TRPG partly retains the color of the board game, and partly absorbs the culture of digital games. Therefore, it is necessary to observe the impact of digital technology. Paper, pens and sitting round a table makes rule negotiation and amendment easy, like most board game play. However, online, or in videogames, the rules are more embedded in the technology (Flanagan, Howe and Nissenbaum, 2008). This part was be discussed detailed in 8.3 Rules created by players.

Rules distinguish a game from other games and from other aspects of life (Consalvo, 2009). The game world, which is isolated from reality, is often referred to in game studies as the Magic Circle. There are different rules of play, social relationships and interpersonal communication in the Magic Circle than in the real world. In the next section, I will introduce the concept of the Magic Circle and discuss how it can be useful in TRPG research.

### **3.5 Magic Circle: Relationships between gameplay and non-play in everyday life**

Games' fun, ludic character includes moving us into a condition where we are controlled by rules different than our ordinary working days. However, the independence from normal social norms and regulations does not entail that alternative digital worlds lack their own logic (Mäyrä, 2008). Digital games and other games can create special environments, the special environments apply the rules of the game rather than the rules of the real world, are known as magic circles (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The term magic circle was coined by the historian Johan Huizinga' in the 1930s (Huizinga, 1938: 10).

*“All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” (Huizinga, 1938: 10)*

As noted above, Huizinga merely considered the Magic Circle as one of several places where rituals are performed, without placing any special emphasis on the specificity of this concept,

nor does it provide a specific definition or analysis of it (Huizinga, 1938). Yet the conception of Magic Circle was used and discussed by later game study scholars. Play occupies a time apart from normal life and when a game is played, it creates a space apart from regular space—the playground or "magic circle" where a special kind of order is created (Consalvo, 2009).

The conception of Magic Circle was defined by Salen & Zimmerman (2004). Magic Circle in gameplay was defined as “the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004:95). Then this conception was explained deeply. For example, Stenros (2014) said Magic circle is self-contained, distinct in location and duration from everyday life, and has laws that vary from everyday life. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the outcomes of this isolated and hedged round arrangement with a set of special rules are enable one to distort reality and practice behaviour as though experimentally, uncoupled from real-world consequences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). That is how the Magic Circle functions.

However, the Magic Circle Theory has some shortcomings. Sometimes its explanation is confusing (Poremba, 2007). The Magic Circle Theory separates the fantasy world and the reality. However, the boundary is vague in some situations (Consalvo, 2009). The role-playing experience is negotiated across artificial borders such as real and fictional, in game and out of game, online and offline (Copier, 2007). When players go into the fantasy world, they still remember the skill and ability they have out of the game world, and in order to get some victories or high levels, they cheat (Consalvo, 2007). There is no doubt that cheating is using knowledge and technology in reality.

There are some scholars using the Magic Circle Theory to analyze TRPGs (Kawitzky, 2020; Lawson and Wigard, 2021; Martin, 2018; Rogers, 2021; Roques, 2021; Westers, 2019). According to Kawitzky (2020), TRPG can be used to build to construct a Utopia, develop and sustain a gay enclave centred on mutual help, communal support, and survival. It is helpful to

draw TRPG ideas “from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus community (LGBTQIA+) histories of community building amidst hostile external forces, threats and catastrophes”, and TRPGs can be useful experimental fields (Kawitzky, 2020:134). According to Westers’ research about mediated audio in TRPGs, people used the term “immersion” in and out of scholastic discourse to express a sensation of losing oneself in play, forgetting their surroundings owing to being so immersed in the game (Westers, 2019). The use of mediated audio strengthens this absorption, producing an auditory barrier to indicate the “magic circle” (Westers, 2019).

To sum up, the Magic Circle Theory will be used in the following chapters, especially in the Chapter 8 Rules. In contrast, the TRPG adventures will be viewed as events happened in a virtual world without connections of the real world. Instead, they will be observed both affected by the elements inside and outside games.

### **3.6 Online social play**

Online social play has attracted many game scholars’ attention (Cairns *et al.*, 2013; Canossa *et al.*, 2019; Heer and Boyd, 2015; Myers, 2007; Stenros *et al.*, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Vogiazou, 2007). When TRPG transformed for the traditional form to a new digital form, this kind of game may have some features of online social play. Therefore, it is necessary to present what has been discovered in the field of online social play.

MMORPGs will be typical examples in this section. Firstly, the earliest MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game) originated from TRPG (Kelly, 2004). Therefore, there are certain similarities between MMORPGs and TRPGs. Secondly, there are already many players enjoying in MMORPGs. As early as 2014, the famous MMORPG World of Warcraft had more than 10 million users (Reilly, 2014). Thirdly, In MMORPG, interacting with others is a significant dimension. This kind of interaction let players can communicate with other

players and exchange their considerations and feelings (Brown, 1994). Based on the three, when discussing digital TRPGs, some studies based on MMORPG research are available to be used as references.

### **3.6.1 The focus of online social play**

There are five main points of primary arguments and focus of game studies scholars about: online social interactions, virtual communities, Identity, culture and game mechanics.

Firstly, the field of online social interactions is of great importance. Taylor examines how players engage in various forms of social interaction within online games, such as chatting, forming groups, and collaborating on quests (Taylor, 2009). She also looks at how players create and maintain social networks in these environments, and found that social interaction is not just a peripheral aspect of online gaming, but rather a fundamental part of the experience (Taylor, 2009).

Secondly, Virtual communities have significant position in online games. Taylor explores the concept of virtual communities and how they are formed within online games (Taylor, 2009). Taylor examines how players come together around shared interests, values, and goals, and how these communities contribute to a sense of belonging, and found online games provide a unique space for new forms of sociality to emerge (Taylor, 2009). According to Nardi (2010), online social play involves a range of different social practices, from chatting with other players to forming groups and participating in collaborative activities, and these practices contribute to the sense of community and belonging that players experience within the game.

Thirdly, identity cannot be ignored when analyzing online play. Taylor looks at how identities are constructed and performed within online gaming environments (Taylor, 2009). Taylor explores how players negotiate and express their identity in these virtual worlds, and how these expressions are influenced by social norms and expectations, and found players are negotiating and challenging old hierarchies within the game to achieve and protect their

own identities (Taylor, 2009).

Fourthly, online social play is shaped by social and cultural forces to some extent. Online social play is not a separate or isolated phenomenon (Nardi, 2010). Online social play is a site of cultural production, where players can explore, experiment with, and create new social and cultural forms (Nardi, 2010).

Fifthly, game mechanics are useful in facilitating online social play. Game mechanics may be used to promote and reward social conduct, as well as to encourage players to create communities and collaborate on shared objectives (Bartle, 2004).

### **3.6.2 The methods of online social play research**

Some scholars use qualitative methodology to conduct online social play research (Cairns *et al.*, 2013; Myers, 2007; Taylor, 2009). A typical example of online social play research is Taylor's book *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Taylor, 2009). Also, Taylor has used a qualitative methodology to do the research based on the online video game *Everquest*, and she used three main methods: "ethnography, participant observation and interviewing" (Taylor, 2009:16). Chat logs have been used in analysis of player interaction in online games. For example, when Myers discussed player selfishness as reflected by aggressive and aggressive speech in the game, the researcher cited a long "the *CoH/V* chat log" (Myers, 2007:229).

The quantitative methodology is also used in online social play research. There are two important methods in these field: Immersive Experience Questionnaire (IEQ) and Game Experience Questionnaire (GEQ). IEQ is a measure of player immersion by quantitative means, involving player immersion and switching during a task, as well as eye movement (Jennett *et al.*, 2008). GEQ examined a variety of characteristics of the gaming experience, including: the three SCI dimensions of immersion; tension; emotional result and competency

while playing; and the experiential playing results while considering the influence of social presence (Cairns *et al.*, 2013). In addition, in an article about how the ordinary populace entertained themselves in the period of lockdown, researchers have distributed questionnaires to find out people's perceptions (Stenros *et al.*, 2009). In an article about the connections between influencers identified by network features and players who joined their in-game network, researchers used the data from an online game. *Tom Clancy's The Division*, although their initial sample consisted of only 1.7% of the players in a time period when the game was in operation, and the sample size was as high as 246041 (Canossa *et al.*, 2019).

In summary, both qualitative and quantitative methods can be useful in this area of research. Specifically for the research questions of this thesis, I have chosen the qualitative approach to investigate them. For further details, please see Chapter 4.

## **3.7 Small group communication**

### **3.7.1 Why I have chosen this approach of small group communication**

In the context of this research, small group communication will be used as one important theory framework. I have chosen this theory to analyse interpersonal communication in TRPGs, which can be justified by the following three main reasons. Firstly, in the process of TRPG players communicating and playing, they often form small groups, in line with the concept of small group communication. Secondly, I wanted to analyse the thoughts and actions of TRPG players in the digital age, and small group communication theory provided a suitable framework for this. Thirdly, small group communication theory has rarely been used in the TRPG field. By combining TRPG research with this theory, I will expand the scope of its application.

### 3.7.2 Background and context to small group communication

Historically, the appearance of small group communication theory is the combining of four theories: Rational Argumentation Theory, Role Emergence Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Symbolic convergence theory (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). Rational Argumentation Theory discusses how the communicative power of argument may be used to justify conviction and motivate human decision making (Cragan and Shields, 1998). Role Emergence Theory outlines how roles arise and natural leaders emerge in small work groups (Bormann, 1970). Uncertainty Reduction Theory analyses the impact of social information sharing's communicative energy on interpersonal interactions (Berger and Calabrese, 1974). Symbolic convergence theory belongs to normal communication theories (Bormann, 1990). Therefore, meanings, emotions, values, and motivations for action are included in communication that are co-created by individuals attempting to make sense of a shared experience (Bormann *et al.*, 1996).

According to the research (Cragan *et al.*, 2008:9), a small group can be defined as “a few people engaged in communication interaction over time, in face-to-face and /or computer mediated environments, who have common goals and norms and have developed a communication pattern for meeting their goals in an interdependent manner”. Specifically, a small group has nine characteristics:

Class	Characteristic	Explanation
Directly observable	Communication	Groups engage in purposeful, goal-directed, verbal and nonverbal talk.
Directly observable	Space	Groups are territorial about both their physical and virtual environments.
Directly observable	Time	Groups vary in how long it takes them to become a true group and how they manager their time.

Directly observable	Size	The minimum size is 3; the ideal size is 5-7; and the maximum size is 13.
Indirectly observable	Interdependence	Groups trust that each member will do his/her part of an interlocking task.
Indirectly observable	Norms	Groups share values, beliefs, procedures, and a symbolic identity.
Indirectly observable	Structural patterns of talk	Groups engage in four goal-directed patterns of talk: Problem Solving, Role Playing, Relational/Trust Building, and Team Building.
Indirectly observable	Goals	Group communication is goal-directed toward solving a problem or winning a game and is measured in terms of productivity, quality of work, member satisfaction, and consensus.
Indirectly observable	Perceived shared identity	The Group perceives a common, symbolic identity among its members, as contrasted with nonmembers.

Table 3-1 Basic concepts of small group communication (Cragan *et al.*, 2008:10)

According to the table 3-1 demonstrated above, when group members are engaging in “purposeful, goal-directed, verbal and nonverbal talk”, they are taking part in a small group communication. Given that TRPG plays meet the above conditions, it is reasonable to view TRPG in the perspective of small group communication. To present the connections of the theory of small group communication and TRPGs, in next sub-sections of the section 3.9, I will outline some main characteristic of the theory of small group communication, and make a clear statement about its applicability to play and TRPGs.

### 3.7.3 Main terms and concepts of SGC

In this section, I will present some main terms and concepts of small group communication, which are connected to this TRPG research. In detail, these concepts include 4 parts: roles in

a small group, collaborating in virtual teams, positive and negative communication behaviors in small group communication, managing diversity.

Firstly, in a small group, people play different roles in the communication part (Benne and Sheats, 1948). In this context, the small group communication mainly focuses on the communication roles, which is opposite to the instrumental roles, the roles appointed administratively because of personal knowledge, skills, or professional abilities (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). There are many studies trying to understand the key roles in small groups (Baird and Weinberg, 1981; Roth *et al.*, 1984; Basik, 1997). According to the theory of small group communication (Cragan *et al.*, 2008), in a small group, the same person can play several different roles, and the same role may be played by multiple people. Different scholars have different opinions on how to classify and evaluate the roles in small groups. For example, Benne (1948) believes that there are 25 roles in small groups. The theoretical framework used in this thesis adopts Cragan's (2008) point of view and divides people's roles in small groups into 10 categories. Among these 10 types of roles, 5 types are the main roles, which exist in all small groups. The other five categories are secondary roles, and they only exist in some small groups. Task leader, social emotional leader, tension releaser, information provider, and central negative are the five main roles (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). In order to understand the small group communication theory in this thesis, readers must have a basic understanding of the following terms. The task leader is in charge of encouraging task completion. In small groups, he or she frequently has the highest status and professional ability (McGrath and Altman, 1966). Social-Emotional leaders are generally well-liked by the rest of the group. This leader is frequently endowed with a magnetic personality. If the task leader is charming, these two roles could be played by the same person. People who play the role of social-Emotional leader are able to perceive the emotions of the group members and provide them with emotional support and assistance (Meyers *et al.*, 2005). The lubricant in the group is tension releaser. Their presence can effectively alleviate group conflicts and create a pleasant working environment. They should occasionally tell a joke to lighten the nervous environment. More importantly, they should know how to use their humour appropriately

and to resolve conflicts. In general, the more dissimilar the group members are to one another, the more difficult it is to play this role. The role of information provider is most likely the most common in the group. It's possible that every member of the group takes on this role. The status of an information provider in the group is determined by his ability to provide accurate and valuable information in a timely manner. In groups, Central Negative is frequently unpopular. The person frequently possesses similar abilities to the task leader. However, they frequently question the task leader's decision and status. If the group's task leader leaves for any reason, Central Negative is the most likely to take over as task leader (Bormann, 1969).

Secondly, the revolution in digital and computer-mediated communication has enabled new group dynamics (Keyton and Stallworth, 2003). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, collaborating in virtual teams has already been an important branch of small group communication. A main part of collaborating in virtual teams is team building in virtual teams. Specifically, it can be viewed from three dimensions. Firstly, it is necessary to maintain the web of connection. Fostering socialisation and self-disclosure over a "virtual water cooler" may hasten relationship development (Kandola, 2006).

Thirdly, if an individual intends to play his or her role effectively in a small group, he or she needs to actively invest in communication behaviors and avoid negative ones. The positive communication behaviors mainly include dimensions: maintaining role stability; adopting an expanded role; performing the leadership role when needed; assisting in procedure; observing and self-monitoring; maintaining focus on one's professional role; esprit de corps and encouraging. Players need to avoid negative communication behaviors as well. In a small group, individual needs and personality have an important influence on the communication process, presentation of communication skills, and the results of the group's work (Wall and Galanes 1986). If someone plays a self-centered follower role in the group, then it will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the spread of the group. In order to avoid playing a self-centered follower role, a member of a small group should strive to avoid multiple

negative communication behaviors, which states as follows: aggressing; doormatting; eggheading; airheading; complaning; self-confessing; help seeking; recognition seeking; special-interest pleading; playing the clown; blocking and foddering. Doormatting and foddering are two typical examples. A doormat can be understood as someone who gives in too easily to others. If other people in the group raise objections to his point of view, he will immediately cave and say that his point of view is inadequate (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). Doormats are difficult to gain the respect of others in the group because they do not seem to respect themselves (Harris, 2012). People who are passionate about disrupting group relationships are referred to as foddering. This is the behaviour of spreading rumours and sowing discord among group members, as discovered by (Stohl and Schell, 1991). Farragos frequently emphasises the importance of his work while dismissing the work of others as insignificant or riddled with flaws, thereby gaining the trust and support of other members of the group (Cragan *et al.*, 2008).

Fourthly, managing diversity is an important part of small group communication. This part includes four components: sociocultural diversity, individual diversity, managing nonverbal messages. The management of sociocultural diversity reflects an organization's values of diversity and tolerance among people (Jackson, Joshi and Erhardt, 2003). For an organization, this is very important. If the members of the group fail to recognize the social diversity between people and face the differences in a positive manner, then it may lead to process loss (Adler 1997). This situation is very universal. Individual diversity mainly includes two parts. One is diverse interpersonal needs within a group, including need for inclusion; need for control; need for affection or openness and so on. The other is diverse personalities within a group, including dominant versus submissive; friendly versus unfriendly; analytically controlled versus emotionally expressive; and so on (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). In addition to verbal communication, nonverbal communication is critical in small group dissemination. For example, when a group of people sits around a table to talk, their seating arrangement sends a nonverbal message (Knapp *et al.*, 2013). Nonverbal information consists primarily of two components. On the one hand, it is environmental information, which includes spatial and

domain information, appliance information, and time information. On the other hand, personal information includes paralanguage, physique, gaze, and so on.

#### **3.7.4 Adapt the small group communication theory into TRPG**

Based on the concepts presented in 3.7.3, the part 3.7.4 is about how to adapt these terms from small group communication theory into TRPG.

From the perspective of roles, through the thick description of the different roles played by different members in the communication of small groups, this research can provide insight into what roles different members play in TRPG. In addition, this study can put the roles they play in small groups in the real world with the roles they play in adventure teams in the fantasy world together, so as to interpret the psychological activities and communication behaviors of TRPG players from the perspective of small group communication.

In the field of collaborating in virtual teams, a “virtual water cooler” is a communal location where people may exchange their experiences, personal information, and points of view (Kandola, 2006). This is specifically addressed in chapter 7, section 2 of this thesis. Secondly, group members should adapt to cultural differences. According to study, when individuals are aware that they are culturally, linguistically, and physically separated, they are more cognizant of the requirement to be clear and purposeful in their communication (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). In my fieldwork, although all the participants of TRPG play were Chinese, they had different cultural backgrounds, professional qualifications, and personalities. Thirdly, it is significant to develop “Swift Trust”. People have faith in a group when they see that its members follow through on their promises, are forthright in their dealings with one another, and do not take unfair advantage of one another (Cummings and Bromiley, 1996). Based on that, "Swift Trust" refers to the form of trust that progresses among teams working under pressure and with a limited past and future (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer, 1996).

As for positive and negative communication behaviors in small group communication, the

thick description of the good and bad communication behaviors in small group communication is of great value to the research of small groups formed by TRPG players. This research will combine the communication behaviors of TRPG players found in the field research to discuss which communication behaviors occur inside and outside the TRPG game process, as well as the reasons for these behaviors and the feedback received, so as to fill the gaps in TRPG player research in the digital age.

Facing diversity in TRPG small groups, it is significant to use some communication skills to build friendly relationship among group members and to achieve the goals. These skills include taking cross-cultural communication training; practicing cultural perspective taking; using symlog to facilitating effective role taking; ensuring interpersonal needs are met; team building to enhance cohesion in diverse groups and practising the communication skills of an ideal group member, and so on (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). In the small groups formed by TRPG players, they have uniqueness. There are three more common ones, including differences in personal real-life conditions and backgrounds, differences in understanding of game rules and modules, and differences in roles played and information obtained in the game world. This part of the small group communication theory can help this research explore the changes caused by these differences and the reactions of the characters inside and outside the game, and build a picture of TRPG's multiple management and trust establishment in the digital age.

### **3.8 Summary**

In summary, this chapter reviewed literature in seven main parts: research context of TRPG, TRPG audience, TRPG rules, Magic Circle, TRPG technologies, online social play and the theory of small group communication.

There are five vital dimensions of TRPG research: player motivation, educational applications, mythological connections, community-building potential, and the intrinsic nature of TRPGs. Scholars have explored the motivations behind TRPG participation, highlighting factors such as creativity, self-exploration, belonging, and learning. TRPGs have also found their place in education, enhancing language learning and problem-solving skills. Mythology plays a significant role, as TRPGs draw from mythological themes and hero archetypes, enriching players' experiences. Moreover, TRPGs foster community building and social interaction, particularly among adults. Despite of substantial research, there are uncharted areas, including small group communication in TRPGs, online variants, and the unique Chinese TRPG culture, which merits further exploration. Understanding these dimensions contributes to a holistic comprehension of TRPGs' societal and cultural impacts.

The influence of technology on TRPGs is of great significance. In the perspective of the transition from physical to digital formats, where technology simplifies the real world, altering gameplay experiences. The concept of transmediality highlights that a single game can manifest in various material versions, with the digital format offering enhanced accessibility to game states. Additionally, different technologies, such as 2D, 3D, and VR, can yield diverse player experiences within the same game. Technology shapes the TRPG landscape, impacting gameplay, accessibility, and the evolution of the genre. Despite of the fact that research has focused on practical aspects, there is a need for deeper exploration of technology's influence on player behavior and psychology.

Previous research on tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) has primarily focused on Western, English-speaking countries, especially the United States. This geographical bias has resulted in a limited understanding of TRPG players and communities in other regions, particularly China. The preference for studying TRPGs in one's native language and location, as well as the nascent state the emergence of online TRPGs has been largely overlooked in research, despite their growing significance. The focus has predominantly been on face-to-face TRPGs, ignoring the digital transformations and complexities brought about by online TRPGs. There

is a need for more inclusive TRPG research that explores diverse geographical regions, cultural contexts, and languages. Researchers should also address the digital aspects of TRPGs, especially online variants, to keep updated with the evolving TRPG landscape.

TRPGs rely on rules as a fundamental cornerstone of gameplay. These rules, emphasized by game scholars in defining play, establish the framework for structured and systematic gaming experiences within their own time and space constraints. TRPGs feature various rule types, including operational, constitutive, and implicit rules. Operational rules outline fundamental player guidelines, while constitutive rules form the logical foundation of gameplay, and implicit rules govern proper in-game behavior. Players sometimes create their own rules, known as village rules or house rules, further diversifying TRPGs. Rule-breaking and cheating are essential facets of rule studies, with cheating involving gaining an unfair advantage or bending rules.

The concept of the "Magic Circle" plays a significant role in understanding the distinct nature of gameplay in TRPGs. Coined by Johan Huizinga, this term signifies a space and time apart from ordinary life where games are played, and special rules apply. Salen and Zimmerman further defined it as a self-contained place created by a game with its own laws, distinct from everyday life (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). However, the Magic Circle theory has its limitations, as it does not always cleanly separate fantasy from reality, leading to cheating and blurred boundaries. Despite these shortcomings, scholars have applied the Magic Circle concept to analyze TRPGs, exploring how these games create unique spaces for communal experiences, immersion, and experimentation. In this study, the Magic Circle theory will be employed to examine TRPGs, focusing on the separation between the game world and reality while considering the impact of external factors on TRPG adventures.

Online social play, particularly within the context of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs), has drawn attention from game scholars. MMORPGs share similarities with tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) and offer insights relevant to digital

TRPGs due to their massive player bases and social interactions. Scholars have primarily focused on five key aspects of online social play: social interactions, virtual communities, identity construction, cultural influences, and the role of game mechanics. These elements contribute to a holistic understanding of how players engage with and within online games. Research methods employed in the study of online social play vary. Qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, participant observation, and interviews, have been utilized to explore player behaviors and interactions within virtual worlds. In this thesis, a qualitative approach will be employed to investigate research questions related to digital TRPGs.

The incorporation of small group communication theory into this research could bring three benefits. Firstly, it aligns with the inherent characteristics of TRPGs, where players frequently form small groups for communication and collaborative gameplay. Secondly, it provides a structured framework for investigating the behaviors and thought processes of TRPG participants in the digital age, a relatively uncharted area in gaming research. Lastly, by applying small group communication theory to the context of TRPGs, this study contributes to expanding the theory's applicability, effectively bridging the gap between the theoretical framework and gaming research, thus enriching our understanding of the dynamics within TRPG groups.

In addition, communicative aspects of games and play in general can be linked to the research of small group communication. However, considering that they are not directly connected to TRPG, details of this part is put into Appendix B.

## **Chapter 4 Methodology**

This methodology chapter will address the following points. Firstly, the research philosophy used in this thesis will be introduced. Secondly, there will be three main research methods in this thesis. In the section of each research method, there will be the rationale for selecting the research method its usage in material collection or analysis. Thirdly, I addressed ethical

considerations in the research process.

#### **4.1 The research philosophy**

This thesis will choose interpretivism research philosophy as the main research philosophy. The choice of interpretivism research philosophy in the thesis is justified by the following reasons. First, Interpretivism research philosophy is closely related to qualitative methods. The main material collection method of this thesis is participatory observation, and participatory observation is a typical qualitative research method (Spradley, 2016). Second, the interpretivism research philosophy is suitable for studying the relationship between individuals and organizations from the perspective of social phenomena and social functions (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). In the field of TRPG, this thesis intends to analyse and explore the relationship between TRPG players, as well as the relationship between individual TRPG players and the TRPG group as a whole. Therefore, this thesis chooses the interpretivism research philosophy as the main research philosophy.

In practising the interpretivism research philosophy, I was involved in the research as part of the TRPG player community. It is therefore necessary to consider reflexivity in the research. Through a process known as reflexivity, ethnography has responded to the need to resolve emotions while maintaining academic rigour (Brown, 2015). While, this approach will lead to a dilemma: if ethnographers show the reflexivity about their emotions and feelings toward their data, their integrity is questionable; if they choose to exclude or edit these feelings, they are dishonest, which can be described as a type of schizophrenia (Mies, 1993). To deal with this dilemma, I will not exclude myself from ethnography. In other words, my own words and actions in participatory observation will also be used as part of the ethnographic material. As Kathy Charmaz writes, “we interact with data and create theories about it, but we do not exist in a social vacuum” (Charmaz, 2006, p.127). In order to avoid my presence affecting the research findings, I have paid attention to boundary management. Specifically,

this includes four parts. First, the participatory observations I used are based on online. Therefore, I do not have the opportunity to interact with other participants in the same physical space. This avoids the possibility of intimacy or sexual relations among me and the other participants. Second, except for TRPG-related topics and other board game-related discussions that directly or indirectly help finishing the thesis, I did not participate in a large number of interactions with other players in order to avoid subjectively causing excessive adverse effects. Third, I chose a variety of TRPGs for participatory observation. In these TRPGs, I tried to play different roles, so as to avoid from always observing from a single perspective. Fourth, after obtaining the results of the research, I wrote some fragments and then ask my supervisors to help judge whether it contains inappropriate subjective content. The answers were negative, then I continued writing in the following paragraphs.

## **4.2 The research methods**

### **4.2.1 A concise review of ethnography in game studies**

In the field of game studies, ethnography has been used widely (Apperley and Jayemane, 2012; Horst *et al.*, 2012; Mayra, 2008; Miller, 2008; Taylor, 2009; Thornham, 2016; Whitson, 2020). Culture is frequently stated as incorporating the concept of gaming (Radcliffe-Brown, 1935; Strauss, 1974). In Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, the book is considered to be the founding work of game studies, Games have a very visible presence and a prominent role in the traditional cultures of many countries and nations (Huizinga, 2014).

Given this close connection between game and culture, anthropology may give frameworks for understanding culture in game studies as well as methods for exploring games and culture (Boellstorff, 2006). Besides, one important method is participant observation, and it is the main approach I have used for information collecting in this thesis. Participant observation is especially useful in fields such as game studies, where the topic of research is

“emergent, incompletely understood”, and so unexpected (Boellstorff, 2006:5). Researchers may analyse the difference between what individuals claim they do and what they really do via participant observation (Aktinson and Hammersley, 1998). Therefore, after participant observation, I chose to go deeper than just the words and actions of the players themselves, but to pay attention to the scene, the context of the game, the purpose of the players' actions and the intellectual activity.

Meaning, indexicality, and connotation are important in anthropology (Dick, 2006). They are important in game studies as well (Mol *et al.*, 2017). In the field of game studies, ethnographic explorations in this area often focus on rules or use rules as a medium (Isabella, 2007; Moline, 2021; Sundén, 2009). Considering that almost all games have their own rules, whether clear or obscure, complex or simple, the rules of games have become an important means for game studies scholars to give and uncover the meaning of games (De Koven, 2013).

In game study, ethnography is broadly used in the research of people's interactions and community building in virtual worlds (Taylor, 2006). The first famous book in this field is *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Nardi, 2010). Rather than focusing on media content or technology, the book focuses on the constructive aspects of ordinary media use, especially among children and teens (Nardi, 2010). Because of this ethnographic approach, the topic is approachable and interesting for an inquisitive layman while still offering rich empirical information for an interdisciplinary scientific community studying new media (Nardi, 2010). According to Bainbridge (2012), WOW can be seen as a virtual prototype for the future and hints at tribal fighting against each other in a time of increasing scarcity of natural resources, temporary alliances for the common good and the construction of values that transcend war. Taylor's in-depth examination of Everquest provides a perspective of multiplayer culture. Drawing on her personal experience as a female Gnome Necromancer in Everquest, including her presence at an Everquest Fan Faire, as well as intensive study, the author not only tells us something about gaming but

also exposes larger cultural concerns (Taylor, 2009).

However, ethnography is not limited in the field of MMORPGs or other MMOs. The approach in single-player games is interpretive potential (Miller, 2008). Gameworlds such as those seen in the GTA series may be considered as representations of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "imagined worlds," cultural landscapes "constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (Appadurai, 1996:33). According to Miller (2008), videogame players, like ethnographers, contribute conscious ideas and methods to their games, as well as subconscious cultural knowledge; no one undertakes fieldwork or gamework in a systematization of closure. According to Enevold and Hagström (2009)'s research about gaming mother, gaming and time management, as well as depictions of moms in the context of gaming, allow for the spontaneous integration of culture, family, the everyday, and playing.

In research of TRPG, ethnography is useful as well (Bowman, 2010). Brace (2012:11) collected data from April, 2011 to October, 2011 "with around 25 gamers on a regular basis, but interacted with approximately 30 additional participants during the 6 extra 'one-shot' games which occurred at conventions". Garcia (2021) have paid 26 months on fieldwork of TRPG in Northern Colorado. The scholar saw conversations and gaming sessions in two distinct game clubs, many TRPG conventions, and some other informal locations such as libraries and coffee shops throughout the time the scholar researched and participated in this community (Garcia, 2021). According to Boon (2022)'s research about friendship among TRPG players, it was critical to get to know the participants personally when doing research aiming to understand how individuals who play TRPG come to generate both new and pre-existing identities via their participation in tabletop gaming.

In summary, anthropological methods have been used in game studies for a long time. In different dimensions of game studies, such as culture, rules, and community, anthropological methods have played a huge role. Moreover, there are many studies that

illustrate the application of this approach to TRPG research. Therefore, the choice of an anthropological approach to TRPG research is justified.

#### **4.2.2 Participant observation**

The main method of this thesis will be participant observation. By sharing life experiences and learning the group's social conventions and habits, a researcher who uses participant observation as his or her research method becomes a kind of member of the observed group and participates in the research space I am observing. A membership would imply a sense of acceptance and belonging within the research space (Rowe, 2018). This method is useful in a variety of ways. For example, it can help researchers gain further details of people they studied. Without participant observation, it is hard to find out their true gestures, feelings, whom they talk with, or grasp the nonverbal information hidden (Schmuck, 2006). In addition, this method allows researchers to do interviews almost anytime during the activity or ritual without being brusque, and the people who are interviewed may just think it is an explanation to their guests or new members (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

A proper understanding of the advantages of participant observation method is beneficial to efficient use of this method in this thesis. This method has 5 main advantages. Firstly, when researcher goes into the participants' culture deeply, he or she can in detail describe the environment of the group or individuals. Therefore, researchers can comprehend more about research targets' behaviors and intentions (De Munck & Sobo, 1998). Secondly, information collected by others may not be representative, which are mostly in line of the researcher's interest individually, other than what happens in fact (Johnson & Sackett, 1998). Thirdly, no matter this method is the main strategy or one of additional strategies, it can help researcher do descriptive research about the group he or she studied, which is beneficial to increase the validity of the research (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). Fourthly, with assistance of this method, researchers can "become known to the cultural members, thereby easing facilitation of the research process" (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999:15) as well. Fifthly, in the

research field of TRPG, this method has been used commonly (Brace, 2012; Hall, 2015; Kamm, 2019; Jensen, 2020) .

It should be noted that as a research method, participant observation also has some limitations. Specifically, its limitations are mainly reflected in the following four aspects. Firstly, scholars conducting participatory observation may have spent a long time in the field, but still have not gained a deep understanding of other people's lives, and are then plagued by their own preconceived preconceptions (Shah, 2017). Secondly, scholars can become too deeply immersed in fieldwork, as exemplified by the study of psychics, magic and spells among Merina residents. This can cause the scholar to look at the research problem and be bound by the position of the subject of the research (Graeber, 2015). Thirdly, the investigation might go on indefinitely. While the beauty of what scholars do is an open-ended journey. It is crucial to recognize that there is a delicate balance between obtaining research findings and gaining appropriate purchase on the whole (Parry, 2016). Fourthly, the inclusion of scholars themselves may have an impact on activities and behaviour in the field. If academics hide their identity as academics, then they may be ethically challenged. If a scholar identify himself or herself to the others, he or she may change the modes of behaviour because of potentially including in the academic research (Parry, 2015).

The aim of the thesis is to research and explore the approaches the Internet influence contemporary TRPGs, in the view of small group communication. In details, I would like to analyze the digital aspect of TRPGs and identify motivations, behaviors, preferences and needs of young people (18-40) through completing participant observation. The reason is it is particularly appropriate within the context of small groups, where participant observation gives me an opportunity to get hands-on with the tools used by TRPG players in the digital age, access the websites they frequent and experience first-hand the convenience and inconvenience of online TRPGs that they have as a member of a small group.

Regarding the application of this method in this thesis, I went for actual playing the game

two or three sessions over a month. There will be 6 to 8 players, including me. As for the relationship between researcher and participants, participants will be my friends and schoolmates. Participants will play TRPGs online by my choice. They will play normally. I was playing as well and taking notes online. Regarding the date and time of the sessions, we will all just play for as long as a normal game would take. The online participants observation will take approximately 2 to 5 hours for participants to experience and discuss various scenes, multiple times.

The small group studied by this thesis has been organized in 2016, starting in a board game club. This board game club is located in Beijing, near the Communication University of China (CUC). It will take less than 10 minutes from CUC to this club. The founder of this club graduated from CUC. According to the club founder, there are two reasons for starting a board game club there. One is that the club founder is a graduate from CUC, knowing the foundations, culture and students in CUC. The other is that there are about 15,000 students studying in CUC, and they can be guests of this club. The facts have proved he was right. Most solid partners or regular customers are from CUC. In the 25 interviewees, only 5 of them are not students of CUC.

For the TRPG small group, fixed space is necessary. The TRPG players can meet physically offline or virtually online. At the beginning of TRPGs, offline meeting is the only choice. After the Internet became increasingly common, the feasibility of online TRPG game has arisen. When players are socializing through the approach of TRPGs offline, they can easily see other players' body movements and expressions. Meanwhile, if one or some of players are unable to concentrate because their mind is preoccupied, other players can quickly find it and remind them.

A significant shortcoming of playing TRPGs offline is that even all the players are living in the same city. they must spend some time on transportation. If they are living the different city, even different continent, offline meetings are extraordinary luxurious. Another shortcoming

of it is that face-to-face actions can lead to pressure to some participants, especially to the shamed players.

In this situation, finding a fixed site becomes a highly challenging issue. In universities or colleges with loose management and open-mindedness, it is a viable option for students to register a student board game club, then apply for an event venue according to the board game club. However, this method will make every meeting under the supervision of universities' leaders and teachers. Even if the application is approved, such supervision will cause great trouble. Another method is to do it in a participant's home. For participants who have purchased a townhouse or detached house, or rented in a villa with available public space it can be an easy thing. Moreover, only if a player can provide an event venue, the problem will be solved. But in a city like Beijing, where the price is huge, the price of houses is very high. The price of a villa has exceeded far beyond their affordability. Another method is to go to a board game club outside the university, which is also one of the strategies that has been implemented for a long time in the actual field investigation. However, this also exposed two problems. The first problem is that the board game club charges a venue fee. It is expensive for students who lack a source of income or white-collar workers who have just entered the workplace. The second problem is that Beijing's board game culture is not developed well. Some board game clubs are far away for the players in this research, while the nearby board game club is relatively simple and crude. This board game club where I conducted a lot of participatory observations is in a high-rise residential area. The sounds made by players while playing TRPGs have caused complaints from neighbors many times.

On the contrary, offline meetings can effectively avoid that players are too shy or nervous to express themselves. Because of the obstruction of screens, they can more easily hide themselves than without the obstructions if they want. However, it can lead to some obstacles as well. When all the players deliver their messages through keyboard of computer or mobile phone, the speed of information transmitting will decrease. The efficiency of communication among players will decrease as well. But this is just the beginning, and there

may be more troubles. Only after participating in online TRPG one or a few times, each player will clearly realize that even if the online TRPG is played by sound, the game will be much slower than the TRPG offline, let alone TRPG in text mode. As a result, some players will be distracted to engage with other tasks while playing their roles in the TRPG, and the result of doing two tasks at once is often to further reduce the speed of the game, thereby forming a vicious circle.

With the approval of ERGO, I officially began participant observation on 7 August 2021. This field research continued until 24 July 2022. After 24 July, I stopped participating in TRPG parties and concentrated on the analysis and discussion of the field findings. During this period, we conducted dozens of TRPG parties. Among these parties, I personally attended and recorded 55 parties, for a total of 128 hours. In addition, the gathering, preparation, discussion and creation of character cards prior to the game, and the review, recap and conclusion after the game also fall under the scope of this study. However, considering that they are not TRPG parties, they are not included in the 55 gatherings and 128 hours of time mentioned above.

There were 14 TRPG players involved. I have used Arabic numerals to number them and denote them as from Player 1 to Player 14. However, I will use the first-person pronoun "I" to refer directly to myself when I communicate with other players in the quoted fields, except when extra emphasis is placed on my status as a player.

In the following paragraph, I will summarise the basic information about the 14 players. For reasons of privacy, I will not go into too much detail.

- Age: All participants are adults and are young people. In 2022, the youngest is 20 years old and the oldest is 33 years old.
- Gender: There were 13 males and 1 female participant. The privacy of sexual orientation and gender identity is not specifically addressed here. Only biological gender is discussed

here.

- Ethnicity: All 14 participants were Han Chinese.
- Nationality: All 14 participants were Chinese and held a mainland Chinese passport.

When actually conducting participant observation, every TRPG party I conducted and participated in was an online party. These parties are held through online conferencing software. Players do not turn on their cameras while playing games. Therefore, I can only record their dice roll results, speech content, tone of voice, and text input in the chat window, but cannot record their facial expressions and body movements. This may bring certain obstacles to subsequent analysis and thick description, but this is a necessary compromise to integrate into the community and maintain a normal small group communication atmosphere.

#### **4.2.3 Case study**

One of the research challenges of this thesis is the broad research scope. In order to narrow down the research scope, this thesis intends to select several typical cases for specific discussion. Therefore, the method case study will be used. As for the rationality of the selected cases, this thesis intends to select a few games as typical cases, and explore how these TRPGs have changed during the digitalization process. They are Dungeons and Dragons (DND), Infinite Terror, Call of Cthulhu (COC) and the Age of Entrepreneurship. These cases were chosen mainly because they are typical and representative:

- Dungeon and Dragon is the oldest TRPG and currently the TRPG with the highest market share in the world. According to the TRPG market research report for the fourth quarter of 2020 released by TRPG website Roll 20, DND5e occupies 52.90% of the market share (The Roll 20 Team, 2021).
- The Call of Cthulhu is currently a very popular TRPG on China's famous streaming media platform bilibili.

- Infinite Horror is a TRPG originated in China that uses many digital tools and must be supported by digital tools to operate normally and smoothly.
- The Age of Entrepreneurship is an unlisted TRPG, its rule design and story background are completely different from the traditional TRPG “Dungeon and Dragon”, but has a strong innovative color.

All the above mentioned four TRPGs have already appeared in participant observation or expected to be in participant observation in the future. Therefore, it is feasible to choose these TRPGs and make case study. Over all, after a rational and logical consideration, I have determined that DND, *Infinite Terror*, *Call of Cthulhu* and *the Age of Entrepreneurship* are the most suitable cases in this research.

#### **4.2.4 Thick description**

According to Geertz, the first scholar who proposed the “thick description” in ethnography, anthropological writing data is “really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973:9). Hence, in order to letting a reader of anthropological work to assess the credibility of the author's interpretations, the context in which these interpretations were developed must be fully and densely detailed. “A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (Denzin, 1989, p. 83)”. According to Holloway (1997), thick description must be theoretical and analytical in the sense that scholars are interested in the abstract and general patterns and characteristics of social life in a culture. This sort of description tries to provide readers with a feeling of the emotions, ideas, and perspectives that study participants have. It is

concerned with not just the meanings and interpretations of individuals in a society, but also with their intents. Thick description makes comprehensive in-depth description on persons and groups within the context of their culture and the environment in which they live.

The approach “thick description” is particularly suitable for exploring the research questions of this thesis. This thesis intends to delve into the core content of online TRPGs to understand what motivates players to choose to use or break the rules, to adopt positive or negative communication behaviours, and how these motivations relate to their previous experiences, their current emotions, and their future expectations.

In this thesis, I used the thick description research method for recording the tools used by TRPG players and the behaviors in TRPG play, and paying attention to why they do it, trying to interpret the factors that influence their choices, and the motivation behind their attitude changes and language logic. In order to dig deeper into the new face and new development trend of TRPG in the digital age. Specifically, I provided a thick depth description of online TRPG from four perspectives. These four perspectives are respectively the following four chapters in the currently proposed structure of the thesis. First, from the perspective of experience, I provided a detailed portrayal of the player experience, a portrayal that builds on many different specific rules of the game, which are all be part of the case study as well. I looked at how the TRPG game rules are linked to the player in specific scenarios. For examples, it concerned with what character cards do players create, what professions do they choose, what shops do they visit, what spells do they learn. And the time it takes to complete these actions, in what order, and what influences did they have to choose such actions based on the rulebook. As well as, whether they believe that their actions are in line with their previous expectations. Secondly, from the perspective of tools, I recorded the tools that players use, specifically both material and digital tools. I hope to map the timing, mindset, frequency, categories and brands of players using tools in these two approaches, and to uncover the reasons for this behaviour. Thirdly, I have focused on the interpersonal communication of players in online TRPGs, as TRPGs’ nature does not change, so players’

previous relationships will be partly inherited from their previous interpersonal relationships. However, when the environment changes, the difference between physical and virtual space may naturally bring about differences in player relationships and feelings. Fourthly, I learned the rules of online TRPGs, focusing on documenting how the old rules migrated online, what content and form changed during the migration, and how new rules were created, whether the new rules applied to face-to-face traditional TRPGs, and to what extent the rules were followed and broken in online TRPGs.

### **4.3 Research ethics**

In the thesis research process, it is important to strictly adhere to ethical guidelines when applying all the methods mentioned above. As the research methods involved in this thesis involve human participants, this researcher has submitted a relevant form specifically for ethical considerations.

This thesis has been approved by the Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO)'s on June 25, 2021. The ERGO number is 61441. In addition, each player who participates in the research will be asked to sign a consent form, which has got ERGO's approval as well. The Submission ID is 61441.

In applying the three research methods mentioned in this chapter to the collection and analysis of materials, I take relevant ethics factors into account in the following five ways.

- To make sure that all the content are authentic and valid, all participants ensured that their participation were voluntary. They received and filled in the relevant authorisation forms before taking part in the research. This will make all participants aware that they are participating in my research. Although this may lead to a change in their behaviour. However, from ethical point of view, to minimise the negative impact of this, I try to avoid emphasising my researcher identity in the field. Moreover, I tried to experience different identities in

online TRPG, including common player, GM, writer, log reporter, etc., in order for enriching my experience and collect information as comprehensively as possible.

- It should be noted that the material collecting process of experiencing TRPG will avoid involving privacy data. Besides, in order to prevent the disclosure of personal information, all participants were kept anonymous throughout the study. Their personal information will be kept strictly confidential.

- The thesis will focus a group of players that this researcher is already playing with. This suggests that it is not necessary to recruit anyone new participant.

- The players should be adult TRPG players, aged at least 18.

- In the process of participant observation, this researcher will be a normal member in the group. Besides, this researcher will also record the games by audio. Meantime, the research will also take notes about what happened that cannot be record by audio, like players' actions, attitude and gestures, if available. These will be kept strictly confidential.

## Chapter 5 TRPG online

In the beginning of the findings and discussion, it is valuable to explore the situation of online TRPG, and the change of TRPG magic circle from physical to digital. In previous studies of TRPGs. Many scholars have discussed online TRPG from the perspective of experience (Dormans, 2006; Jensen, 2020; Webber, 2019; Philips, 1994; Brunette, 2015; Hall, 2015; Cover, 2005). TRPG is a kind of game that remains a rather esoteric and narrow circle of fans' experience (Dormans, 2006). Accordingly, in order to understand how the digital era has affected and changed TRPGs in China, it is also necessary to examine them from the perspective of player experience. Therefore, this chapter will have a discussion surrounding the sub question "How does digitization change the experience of TRPG play and players in China?"

This chapter's content is based on players' gaming experiences in TRPG magic circle. It includes four sections. These sections are about what I have found in my participant

observation and my analysis based on the field work. The first section is about the online change of TRPG plays. From a cultural standpoint, the TRPG of the Internet period significantly differs from the TRPG of the face-to-face period. This section discusses how players use online tools to carry out TRPG activities. The second section is about features of online TRPG. This specifically includes changes in the number dice and the use and textual descriptions. The third section attempts to analyse the change in TRPG DM based on the digitalisation. It includes the particular culture that has developed in online TRPGs, including changes in the importance attached to the rules, a slower pace, more cheating and a more divided player base. Then, it is the part of online TRPG players' attention in the context of the materiality shift in the medium. It is also devoted to the TRPG Party Announcement and compares the Party Announcements of online and offline TRPGs. The fourth section discusses the trend of weakening upgrade mechanics in TRPGs, especially highlighting the shift in modern digital era. It notes that while traditional TRPGs, like Dungeons & Dragons, featured complex and detailed upgrade mechanics, newer TRPGs are moving away from this approach. Besides, this chapter was ended by a summary section.

## **5.1 From offline TRPG gaming to online TRPG gaming**

Tabletop role-playing games are named began with T. Specifically, the meaning of the initial T is analysed and explained in detail as follows. Traditionally, players play these games on tables. The “tables” in TRPGs can include tables, desks, sofas, beds, gardens and even the floorboard. Players want to be able to temporarily disconnect from the distractions and stresses of real life and seek to find relaxation and entertainment through a virtual environment. It is worth noting that for TRPG gamers, the tangible, physical element often gives way to an intangible, spiritual and fantastical presence. Some physical features of the table, such as size, colour and shape are not important to players and have little impact on them. What really matters is the space available for TRPG. Generally, players only need a

spare to leave the reality and go into the field of TRPG, like going into a magic circle (Klabbers, 2009; Montola, 2005; Stenros, 2014).

Paying attention to experience also means taking notice of the contexts and contingencies of particular games and clubs, because the environments can largely affect players' feelings and enjoyment. Therefore, Then I will give some description about the club. Based on my subjective experience, TRPG parties used to be regularly held in a local board game club. That board game club was small, with only a few tables and two shelves for TRPG related items.



Figure 5- 1 The local board club I have ever been, photographed in 2017

This Club was in an apartment complex next to a university in Beijing. There are more than thirty buildings in this apartment complex, each of which is very tall. University students and residents of the neighbourhood form the main source of customers for this table game club.

When it first opened, the board game club was in a two-bedroom flat in one of the buildings. According to Beijing's regulations, not all apartment buildings can be used as a business address. In residential areas, only "commercial and residential buildings" can be used for shops. Therefore, in practice, the board game club was not official lanuched into commercial operations. Later on, due to complaints from neighbours, he let the club moved to a different apartment building in the neighbourhood.

The club had only had one employee. The owner is only staff taking responsibility of operation and management. He lived in the club. When there were not enough players for a board game, such as the minimum number of players for a particular game was not met, the owner would get involved in the games himself. After 6 months, the club founder found that running a board game club was not profitable and seem not to have a bright future commercially, so the club founder went to find a part-time job as an English teacher. Therefore, he went on to get a part-time job as a part-time art teacher. With his ability, it was not hard for him to do these jobs. But lesson preparation, commuting and correcting assignments consumed a lot of his time. As a result, for a long time the shop had no full-time staff and the quality of service was very poor. There are many long-running table games shops in China and his club is in a good location. In my opinion, the key reason why the club founder did not make much money on table games was that he was not professional. Running a club, art design and game hosting are three different positions. He chose to take on all three positions alone. He designed a board game and two LARPs himself, and these were well received. But as the manager of a board game club, it was just too inefficient to design the games himself. Also, when designing, he used a lot of storylines that were only known within the small group of this club. This made it difficult to promote his designs. Also, as a fan of Magic: The gathering, he used some of Wizards of the Coast's characters as material in his designs without restraint. This puts his work in possible copyright trouble. The changes to the location of the game have not caused small groups of players to split or disappear. This also reflects the fact that TRPG does not require much of a physical club and has every potential to be played through digital platforms.

After the board game club closed down, my friends and I planned to have a TRPG party, and we went to a particular player's house. One of my friends had bought an apartment nearby and it was easier to go to his place. A few other people, including myself, were renting rooms, some of which were shared with others. So, when it comes to TRPG parties, one needs to think about avoiding disturbing other roommates and not having too much fun. For a while, the room I lived in only had a normal study table, which was not enough for TRPG. Luckily, I had a double bed. People could remove the pillows and covers, sit on the edge of the bed and put their character cards and tokens in the middle of the bed. There was also a time when I shared a room with another TRPG player and when other players came to our place for a TRPG party, I moved my table from the bedroom to the living room and put two tables together into one. There was a slight height difference between the two tables, but it was barely enough for our TRPG play.

However, no matter what the tables are, they should not be online platforms based on computers as before. Players would like enjoy the joy of playing TRPGs with material dice, models, papers and pens (Brace, 2012). But from a functional point of view, Tables in the materialistic sense have little functions that cannot be replaced by computers. Considered in the TRPG sense, a mouse and keyboard could replace pens and papers. electronic or numerical dice could replace material ones. I will specifically discuss details about dice in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

There are already many platforms for different players to interact with each other. Platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, for example, have many users and a stable operation (Dean, 2022). Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, the rise of digital platforms is unimpeded. From a practical point of view, people are indeed doing so, as TRPG platforms like Roll 20 are already figuring out how to establish the rules and style of TRPG in the digital age (Carter, 2022). However, games played using a dedicated TRPG platform did not dominate the fieldwork for this study. Many of the online TRPGs conducted by the small

TRPG group I am also one of those users who are not a dedicated TRPG gaming platform, but general instant messaging software that allows TRPGs to be played.

TRPGs conducted online often have a slow pace. Specifically, the speed of writing is the slowest, followed by voice, and video is the fastest. This is determined by the amount of information spread. When players can and can only receive text messages carrying content, the communication efficiency is very low. Moreover, the speed at which ordinary people type is much slower than the speed at which they speak. The reason why voice TRPG is inferior to video TRPG is that video creates a face-to-face atmosphere. Although this is not a physical face-to-face, the players' expression and body movements can be conveyed, and the efficiency is improved. That could be a reason that Zoom is becoming increasingly popular. In addition, players are more easily distracted during online games, which is also an important factor that slows down the rhythm of TRPGs.

In recent years, there has been a clear trend of TRPG players moving online in most countries around the world due to technological developments (Hall, 2020). It is worth noting that this trend is also changing due to the impact of the pandemic of COVID-19 that started in 2020. In this context, the TRPG digitisation trend was further accelerated by governments' demands to maintain social distance (Scriven, 2021). Considering the permanent and fundamental changes that the epidemic of COVID-19 has brought to many industries, its impact on TRPG should not be overlooked. Especially with the realities of stressful work and difficulty in achieving work-life balance, it is more likely that many players have a psychological need to withdraw from the harsh realities of their environment (Walker, 2021). In the digital period, TRPG players' attitude to the game surface is changing. Due to the pandemic crisis of COVID-19, to avoid being affected by the virus, plenty of people go back to their home, including the TRPGs players (Kammartinez, 2021).

There are several players in my field who have to avoid group gathering and cannot go out to work in order to maintain social distancing. For example, player 6 is a photographer and

documentary videographer. His main job is to prepare, organise, lead and participate in field filming. In the context of the epidemic of COVID-19, China has a strict epidemic prevention policy in place. As a result, it was almost impossible for his work to run smoothly. Thus, he had plenty of free time to spend on TRPG. Considering that this professional experience was not considered competitive on his CV, he went on to undertake further study. After enrolling, he also played TRPG with his fellow students. They would like playing TRPGs to fill the free time generated by social distancing and to keep in touch with friends and emotions. TRPG players used this game as a way to reduce stress, keep them in good mood and reduce the anxiety of infectious diseases (Whitten, 2021). Unfortunately, they are required not to visit any person other than the family members who live with themselves unless necessary (Stockwell *et al.*, 2021). All the above is the situation happened in the U.K. (Kuchera, 2020).

In the context of China, the situation of online TRPG's development is different. In the next section, I will present some findings about Chinese online TRPG based on my field research. Since 2010, the trend of material turn in cultural research has become increasingly obvious (Bennett and Joyce, 2013). The material turn affected game studies as well (Raczkowski, 2022). This re-imagining of digital games in their material contexts across scales and registers can be seen in a number of approaches (Apperley and Jayemane, 2012). These approaches include detailed ethnographic studies that look into the cultures of online worlds and place gaming in relation to everyday practices, platform and software studies connected with technological infrastructure, and critical studies of digital labour (Apperley and Jayemane, 2012). Ethnographic methods have been used extensively (Flynn, 2003). The experience of playing massively multiplayer games was further explored in several later large-scale initiatives, and "microethnographies" which are mainly focused on short-term analyses of specific games, were even developed using ethnographic approaches (Giddings, 2009). This can also be applied in TRPG research. Even if the same information is delivered through pen and keyboard, the way people interact with information, as well as the cultural and psychological activities behind this way, will be different due to the difference of media. As one of the communication infrastructures, the Internet is not an immaterial space (Hondros,

2015). Actually, this is a naturally temporal and spatial medium. The carrier of information is not only the content it presents, but also its existence and use form (Gane and Hansen-Magnusson, 2006).

Similarly, some other scholars also observed the big change made by digitalisation. TRPG fans, artists, and publishers adopted this and many more methods inspired or enabled by digital technology, and new communication channels expanded the interconnection of many TRPG groups (White *et al.*, 2018). Digital printing, digital distribution, and online fundraising techniques made it easier for new and established publishers to reach their audiences while managing financial risk (White *et al.*, 2018). These approaches together have permanently altered how TRPGs are designed, produced, disseminated, and played, resulting in a medium shift that is currently continuing. Otherwise, Webb and Cesar explored the value of digital TRPG based on the view of Computer-Human Interaction in Play. They found virtual tabletops might provide many communication channels, including text, audio and video, which players could classify for specific purposes such as story, game, and social frameworks (Webb and Cesar, 2019). Therefore, feedback on player presence across these many channels becomes critical for seamless design (Webb and Cesar, 2019).

My research bases on previous work and specifically explores the changes that online TRPGs make to player behaviour patterns and the game environment. Online TRPG let players can take part in adventures in a virtual world flexible, especially in the background of the pandemic of COVID-19 (The Pop Mythologist, 2020). While other players are weaving their own adventure stories, the players who are not playing the role of their characters can do their own business, or send barrage on instant messaging software to express their views. In this way, they neither need to interrupt or intervene in the process of the players currently in the game, but also participate in the game process and have an impact on the game world. In addition to their own roles, their virtual avatars in the game have added a role similar to a consultant. In the following paragraphs, I will explain this typical example of TRPG experience in action.

For example, this happened when I was involved in the Infinite Horror TRPG. I used to be involved in the TRPG as a consultant and a bystander. In these TRPG parties, not only my player character, I personally played a role inside the Magic Circle. I chose to participate in this way because of two reasons as following:

Firstly, online TRPG gave me an opportunity to explore how to enjoy adventures without much participation. I had already started my own adventures in this TRPG play before. I was happy to let my player character continue the action. However, in order to keep up with the main storyline, the GM felt it was necessary to let other players take control of their characters in the adventure and take the responsibility as leaders. For the principle of fairness, the GM advised me not to let my character take part in these adventures. In this Infinite Horror TRPG setting, all player characters are seniors. Each player character has to individually train as a super hero in their senior year, before taking the national college entrance examination, the first multi-player character dungeon. The more martial arts, magic and high-tech weapons a player character accumulates before the entrance exams, the easier it is to gain an advantage in the exams. If I were to have my player character participate in multiple single-player adventures prior to the entrance examination because I have more free time in reality, it would undoubtedly make that character too powerful and thus affect the game balance. This differs from previous scholarly proposals for TRPGs that emphasise heavy player involvement (Dyson *et al.*, 2016). Players can have a good time taking part in TRPG adventures casually.

Secondly, this made me feel comfortable when playing TRPG without concentration. When I was feeling tired and wanted to do something can help me relax, I joined this TRPG party. I had not made any reservations before that. Because of the culture that has developed in this small group, it is agreed that any player with a character card can join the party at any time. It took me about ten minutes to hear the story through their conversation. Then, the GM's was saying, "Your teacher comes to the cleric at night to give you lessons and develop your

combat skills each time. When you ask about his actions during the day, he does not offer a specific explanation, just that he has other things to attend to during the day.” Combining my understanding of his description with my understanding of the *Infinite Terror* rulebook, I was certain that this was an effect of the bloodline Gargoyles. So, I typed in the wechat group stating this, and the player got the hint as a result. After another half hour or so, I felt the need to go through the literature immediately, so I exited that online room. No one would receive messages or pop-up alerts for this while I was out, and the adventure process would not be disrupted as a result. Previous scholars have argued that it is necessary for GMs in TRPGs to ensure the “highest concentration of narrativity” and thus avoid distracting players (Hope, 2021:62). There is some truth to this assertion, but it also limits the GM's play. On the contrary, it is acceptable for the GM to accept that some players are simply distracted bystanders and not fully engaged in the TRPG adventure.

In summary, my main finding in this section is that in the digital age, TRPG adventures are gradually becoming less confined by physical space, and there is a tendency to migrate to web-based platforms. This trend is part of the overall process of digital development of the world. From my perspective, the online approach makes it easier and more flexible for TRPG players to engage with TRPGs and provides new possibilities for gaming.

## 5.2 Text descriptions in online TRPG

In online TRPG modules, there are more text descriptions in large sections than offline TRPGs. The reason is that when a player is playing a game online, DMs can directly copy a large section of text from the module and then send it to the player via instant messaging software. The ordinary presentation of text descriptions covers three main situations. I will use the COC module *The End of Stars* as an example to illustrate this below.

The first situation is the result of a player character's skill check. A character will discover some secret through his or her ability and a successful roll. For example, a successful Investigation check can help the investigators understand some of the physical properties of an acquired prop.

*"You have carefully poured out a little of this brownish-red powder. Although the powder is generally brownish-red in colour, it is in fact a mixture of various coloured powders mixed together. The different substances are still distinct from each other and are not thoroughly mixed. The smell of this powder is like a myriad of things of different natures mixed together, from a drug-like bitterness that makes the heart grow fonder to a spicy smell similar to that of oriental spices, mixed with a slight sweet earthy aroma. With your knowledge of botany, you discover that it contains saffron, which has been dried and crushed. This is an ancient dye from Asia." (Shuerzishangwei, 2019:9)*

This information comes entirely from the knowledge and analysis of the player character rather than what the non-player character is told by the GM. Therefore, some GMs believe that copying and pasting into the chat window is relatively conducive to role playing.

The second situation is a description that only meets the needs of some players and may not satisfy all players, like this description of an inn.

*"The interior of the inn is very luxurious and beautifully decorated as far as the eye can see. The polished floors are made of carefully waxed quality pine. The lobby has a few old people's chairs with tortoiseshell armrests and small cabinets filled with exotic decorations. Although the hotel is constantly warmed by geothermal heat, there are two elaborate ash-filled metal fire pits in the lobby. The slow-burning wood in the firepit emits a natural pine scent. In addition, the lobby is decorated with a number of animal skins, including a majestic and arrogant stag's head and a fierce and savage black bear's head, adding a touch of the Appalachian Mountains to this luxurious little*

*inn.*" (Shuerzishangwei, 2019:11)

Instead of combat or puzzle solving, this presentation only aim to set the mood and present the world view. Some players enjoy the feeling of uncovering the mystery of the world bit by bit, while others find the descriptions tedious. Concerning the form of the text, the presentation rather than narration is therefore a compromise.

For offline TRPGs, if a GM intends to give long text to the player at once, players feel a sense of violation. If the GM turns on the phone and sends a message, it damages the nature of offline games. If GMs print out or read out large pieces of information that they intend to inform the player, it easily disrupts the rhythm or atmosphere of the game.

From 1990s to 2010s, although the internet has been used broadly, TRPG gamers are accustomed to off TRPG (Tresca, 2014). A variety of TRPG related equipment which could enhance users experience become increasingly popular. In this situation, many TRPG items had satisfying sales volume (Knowles and Castronova, 2018). If TRPG gamers have interest and demand, they may acquire a wide range of gaming equipment and supplements (Brace, 2012). These goods vary from utilitarian additions like new campaign books, replacement dice, and gaming maps to status symbols like gemstone dice, personalised figurines, and pricey 3-D dungeons (Brace, 2012). It should be noted, there exists difference between my findings and that of previous scholars. Among the community of TRPG players I have spoken to and their TRPG player friends, collecting or buying TRPG supplements in bulk has become a rare phenomenon. Even players who had previously been avid collectors of various dice and creature 3D models have often a relatively long update cycle for this kind for equipment.

Other scholars have referred to descriptive passages and texts in the TRPG. Dormans proposed that there are gazetteer-like entries, maps design, travelling guidelines, notable people and animals, whole dungeons with traps and monsters, random encounter tables, trade routes, and much more in these descriptions (Dormans, 2006). These explicitly define

the game universe. He limits the discussion to the TRPG rules books and does not combine it with concrete examples of game practice. Cover (2005) paid attention to text description's function in calling to mind scenery in a virtual world, and considered that descriptive utterances have often been deemed distinct from narrative, in part because they are unnecessary to be presented with a certain sequence, although in narrative there are causal linkages between events (Cover, 2005). However, he also did not address the specific rhythm of messaging and information processing. In the period of online TRPG, GMs can use flexible methods to present the fact by giving descriptive texts. According to the COC module *Ending of the Stars*, the scenario below is about relatively complex and crucial information, which is a death report.

*"The witness was sweeping snow from a doorway at around 8am on 8 October. Although it was dark, the witness still saw the dead man who had fallen to the ground diagonally opposite the doorway. The deceased was a waitress at the only bar in town. Her body was found on the way back from the bar to her house. Investigation revealed that the deceased was busy with work and often returned to her residence between 2am and 4am. There was only one wound on the body of the deceased, on the back of the head. The wound was inflicted with a blunt object. The attacker was strong. The back of the head was completely sunken and the back of the skull was crushed. It is clear that the victim was killed with a single blow without any resistance. A shiny, metallic, uneven stone was found in the mouth of the body."* (Shuerzishangwei, 2019:30)

The appropriateness of using a spoken form to convey the content of such death reports to players to players remains to be a controversial issue. When a GM highlights this death report clearly word by word in the oral form, the other players need to take notes so as not to miss important information. It should be noted that TRPG play is a casual and entertaining game, not a formal and academic lecture. Putting too much pressure on players is not conducive to enjoying the game. If the other players do not take notes, then they may miss some crucial information and the investigation of the subsequent reasoning may be steered

in the wrong direction.

In summary, long text descriptions are being used frequently in online TRPGs. The meaning of the measures can be highlighted with the following three value points. Firstly, it allows the GM to present the results of the player's actions more quickly and to move the game along. After all, it is much quicker to copy and paste text from a document than to read it aloud sentence by sentence. Although typing with a keyboard is generally slower than speaking, the written word conveys information with far greater clarity than the spoken word. Secondly, it can satisfy the desires of players who wish to have a full understanding of the details of the game environment and scenario without boring other players. Thirdly, it makes it easier for players to get information from text descriptions without having to take notes themselves. This demonstrates the advantages of the software in reducing the workload and allows the player to better focus on the journey through the fantasy world.

### **5.3 Hosting online TRPG parties**

Hosting online TRPG parties performs as an important element of this thesis research. When TRPG parties were thrown, players entered the magic circle of TRPGs and adventured in fantasy worlds. From traditional TRPGs to the contemporary online TRPGs, hosting is an essential component for TRPG to work. This section will look at hosting in online TRPGs in five parts. The first part deals with the conditions and causes of player distraction in online TRPGs. The second part concerns with how GMs write and make announcements before the game officially starts. The third part discusses a new trend in TRPGs in the digital age where players take turns to host TRPG parties. The fourth part are finding and discussion of how GMs and common players understand and treat the death of player characters in online TRPGs.

### 5.3.1 Playing online, players distract

When playing TRPGs offline, it would be easy to let all of them focus on the game, which has been discussed in online community (Echo, 2019). Even some of them are no experts on social communication, when communicating face to face, they pay attention to social etiquette most of the time. However, if they are not playing a particular TRPG in the same location, it could be a different situation, and the magic circle may not be as stable as face to face TRPG.

It should be emphasized that even for the same player, when the player is playing TRPGs offline, the degree of concentration will be different from what he does online. This probably does not involve the player's moral or ethics, but is affected by the environment. When all players are playing TRPGs offline, in a created environment dedicated to playing games, they are less likely to be disturbed. However, when everyone is in a separate space, the probability of being interrupted will be raised. This includes four factors: material distractions, digital distractions, temptations and interruptions. They will be specially discussed as follow.

The first factor is material distractions. When each player is in a different environment, there exists high probability of getting disturbed by others. For example, when we got together to take part in TRPG part based on the module COC, player 6 used a computer to play TRPG with us at home, his parents asked to help with housework. We are then need to make decisions: do we pause the adventure and wait for him to return, or do we push on without his involvement? If pause. Then do we go do something else and continue later in the day, or do we call it a day and find another time to continue the adventure? He was not able to predict how long it would take to complete the task his parents had given him, and he was not sure if he would only receive one task to deal with the chores that day. When he had finished his chores, I went to ask him how he felt.

Player 6: "I am sorry that everyone was upset because of me. I do not want that to happen

either. I will try to persuade them not to interrupt me when I am involved in a TRPG party. But I do live with them after all. As an adult, you cannot just accept care from your elders and refuse to help with the cooking and dishes.”

I: “Do they often ask you for help when you are not living at home?”

Player 6: “No, they do not. Right now I cannot go to work because of lockdown. They probably think it is just as well that I do not have much to do, so they often ask me to finish kitchen work or sweep and mop the floor. Maybe I could lie and trick them into saying that this is part of my job and that I work from home. But that kind of lie is easy to spot.”

This case is a good example of the impact of being home-based. If this player was not at home, his parents would not have let him end what he was doing and come home to do his chores. But the space he was in influenced his parents' decision. From an activity scheduling perspective, the work they had scheduled was not onerous. After completing the chores, this player can return to the TRPG adventure. However the magic circle has been broken. It was difficult for him to remain immersed in role-playing.

The second factor is digital distractions. When I was attending online TRPG parties, I found that I would often have trouble concentrating, instead of browsing twitter or other websites while others were performing actions and casting spells. After talking to others, it became clear that I was not an exception. When TRPG parties are held offline, everyone carries their smartphones with them as well. But this is a relatively rare occurrence. The reason for this is presumably because the offline space creates a kind of scrutiny of the players. Everyone faces more direct and powerful peer pressure. Therefore, if someone opens their mobile phone to play a mobile game or browse social media at a TRPG party, their inattentiveness is quickly noticed and stopped. This is hard to spot in online TRPGs. After all, if it is not exactly his player character's turn to act or speak, his distraction is subtle.

The third factor is temptations. The pace of online games will be slower than offline games. This will cause that the game cannot attract the player's full attention. Some players may be multitasking. If one player is multi-tasking, the pace of the game may be slower and a vicious circle may occur, sometimes a player character was due to act, at the same time the player was sleeping (Nawaz, 2022). Although this situation can also occur in offline games, as long as the host has sufficient experience and sufficient preparation, it is not difficult for players to concentrate.

The fourth factor is interruption. The stability of network is an significant element in online TRPG. The epidemic of COVID-19 crisis has provided a good opportunity for the development of online TRPG (Allison, 2021). Many people stay in touch with family and friends through TRPGs like DND during the closure and try to maintain good spirits (Hughes, 2021). However, the current long-term large-scale online meeting of human civilization is still a function under exploration (Majola and Mudau, 2022). Many software applications have errors and problems, and users also need time to accumulate experience in using these applications (Karamollahi *et al.*, 2022). For example, When I took part in a DND5e TRPG, I encountered one problem:

Player 11: "Really, do we have to get rid of a particularly horrible electric noise from who knows who first? Is that a bad headphone contact or something?"

Player 10: "I do not understand it either. First of all, rule out YaoGuang (player 9' character's name in this adventure), because he was the first one to come in. I did not hear the electric sound when he came in."

Player 11: "Then rule out me. I don't think it was me for sure. Excluding you, who else?"

Player 10: "So who else could it be?"

Player 9: "Who knows."

I: "So is it my voice here?"

Player 10: "Help. I seem to know it is the scariest."

Player 11: "It is scary, I seem to be taking 1D6 sonic damage."

Player 10: "I do not understand."

I: "So it is coming from me? Because I am the only one who doesn't have this magic sound in my ears."

Player 11: "It seems to be better now."

Player 10: "It is better now. If you keep remembering like that, I'm going to put a debuff on you so that every time you release one of those spells that requires a verbal component, you'll deal 1D6 damage both to the enemy and allies."

Events such as network interruption or network lag will weaken the player's gaming experience. I believe that I should take responsibility for this issue because I made a mistake in my installations at the time. The above conversation took place over a period of just a few minutes. In subsequent games, every few to ten minutes or so, some sort of communication breakdown would occur. In some situations, influenced by a number of external factors, it is difficult for these players to conduct communication, In some other situations, one person's speech was so intermittent that only part of it could be heard. Other times I can hear someone, while, no one else but me and himself. To sum up, the poor communication environment ruined the game playing.

I discussed this issue with player 9, player 10 and player 11 after the day's play and their comments were more or less the same. They all responded that it was inevitable and that the miscommunication was due to the quality of the equipment, and it would be fine once it was dealt with. However, their actual performance was a different story. A month after this gathering, when it came to continuing the adventure, all three of them excused themselves with various reasons, such as being busy at work or suffering sickness. I am not sure how credible these excuses are. But I suspect that even if these reasons did exist, the poor equipment and poor gaming experience was a big factor in keeping them from being happy to continue the adventure.

Compared with TRPGs offline, the consequence is that players of online TRPGs gaming are more frequently becoming unable to concentrate because one's mind is occupied by other issues.

### **5.3.2 TRPG Party Announcement**

Before starting a TRPG party, the GM needs to write an announcement to call players together. In general, the announcement includes information about the TRPG party so that participants can prepare in advance. If it is just a TRPG party among friends, which means the players involved are already friends of the host and know each other well, the announcement can be very brief, as long as it includes basic information. In this case, most of the information is agreed upon. However, if a GM is going to gather a TRPG party with strangers, it is necessary for the announcement to include complex information. This part has not received sufficient attention from other scholars in the TRPG field. However, the process of players gathering and meeting each other is actually very complex. A few people go from being strangers to joining a small TRPG group, which requires a period of screening and gaming. Unlike traditional TRPG cliques based on local and offline social circles, the process of forming online TRPG cliques is often also entirely based on online social interaction. The

following is a figure of my field research, and the translation is showed below the figure.

# 美梦成真

开团公告

## 背景

在许多故事里，好人没有得到幸福，坏人没有得到惩罚，追求正义的人死于冤屈，追求自由的人身陷囹圄，狂放不羁的独行侠困于名缰利锁，扶危济困的活菩萨化作累累白骨。但是结局并非固定，命运波谲云诡。这一次，重新书写人物的结局……

## 概要

ST：天笑

PC 数量：每次不超过 5 人。

开团时间：星期日，毕竟要考虑到上班。

开团方式：线上，语音

世界观：从近乎现实主义的低魔世界开始，之后过渡到武侠世界，再到魔幻和仙侠世界

## 规则

使用鹿版《无限恐怖核心规则 2.35 规则测试版》规则。蝶版规则和猪版规则均视为无效。若手里没有该规则请私聊天笑，人物卡模板同理。不建议使用 txt 卡，但是你想用我也接受。

PC 起始资源：完全按照规则书规定，即专长 5 级，属性点 3/2/1+3，技能点 6/5/4+5，其他不逐项列出

如果设置缺陷和怪癖以换取天赋，必须在扮演中有充分体现。

## 房规

- 1、传奇规则：在同一个轮回小队中，同一件血统、改造、称号、技艺、瞳术、物品、称号、物品只能存在一件。不同等级的同一升级物品也受传奇规则制约。Eg.不能同时出现 D 级玄铁重剑和 C 级玄铁重剑。但有【消耗品】关键字的物品除外
- 2、如使用造人或造物规则，制造费用改为 D+1000 分
- 3、可以支付 100 分，改变强化的画风。这一改变只影响外形，不影响具体数值和判定。

## 资源发放

- 1、每过两次团，发放的积分和支线会有所提升，但是经验值发放会相对固定
- 2、请勿制造不必要的杀戮。在不涉及任务和故事变动等方面的情况下，打怪不会得到任何正向激励

## 扮演与故事

如果对故事世界观已经有了解，那么可以尝试打出骚操作。如果对故事世界观没有了解，也完全没关系，可以直接当做原创故事来跑。

Figure 5- 2 An announcement of Infinite Horror in my field research

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# Sweet dreams come true

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## Background

### *TRPG Group Announcement*

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In many stories, the good are not awarded, the bad are not punished, those who seek justice die unjustly, those who seek freedom are imprisoned, the unruly loner is trapped in the chains of fame and fortune, and the living bodhisattva who helps the needy is turned to white bones. But the endings are not fixed, and the fates are treacherous. This time, the characters' endings are rewritten .....

## Synopsis

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ST: Myself (“ST” means “Story teller” here, and it is the name of game master in the ruleset *Infinite Horror*. This is my real name in the original context. Anonymization has been done here.) Number of PCs: No more than 5 at a time.

Time of the TRPG play: Sunday, after all, people need to go to work on weekdays. How to operate: online, by voice

Worldview: It starts with an almost realistic low magic world, then transitions to a martial arts world, then to magic and fairy worlds

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## Rules

The TRPG party will use the Deer version of the *Infinite Horror Core Rules 2.35* . The Butterfly rules and the Pig rules are not valid. If you do not have the rules in hand, please appeal to

Tianxiao privately for it and the same for the character card template. The use of txt cards is not recommended, but it will be accepted if you wish.

PC starting resources: exactly as specified in the rulebook, i.e. expertise level 5, attribute points 3/2/1+3, skill points 6/5/4+5, not itemised otherwise.

If flaws and quirks are set in exchange for talents, they must be fully represented in play.

## Room Rules

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1. Legendary rules: Only one of the same bloodline, transformation, title, skill, pupil, item or title can exist in the same reincarnation squad. The same upgraded item of different levels is also subject to the legendary rules. Eg. A D-rank basilisk heavy sword and a C-rank basilisk heavy sword cannot exist at the same time. Except for items with the [Consumable] keyword

2. If using the rules for making people or things, the cost of manufacture is changed to D+1000 points

3. 100 points can be paid to change the appearance style of the enhancement. This change only affects the appearance, not the specific value or judgement.

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## Resource distribution

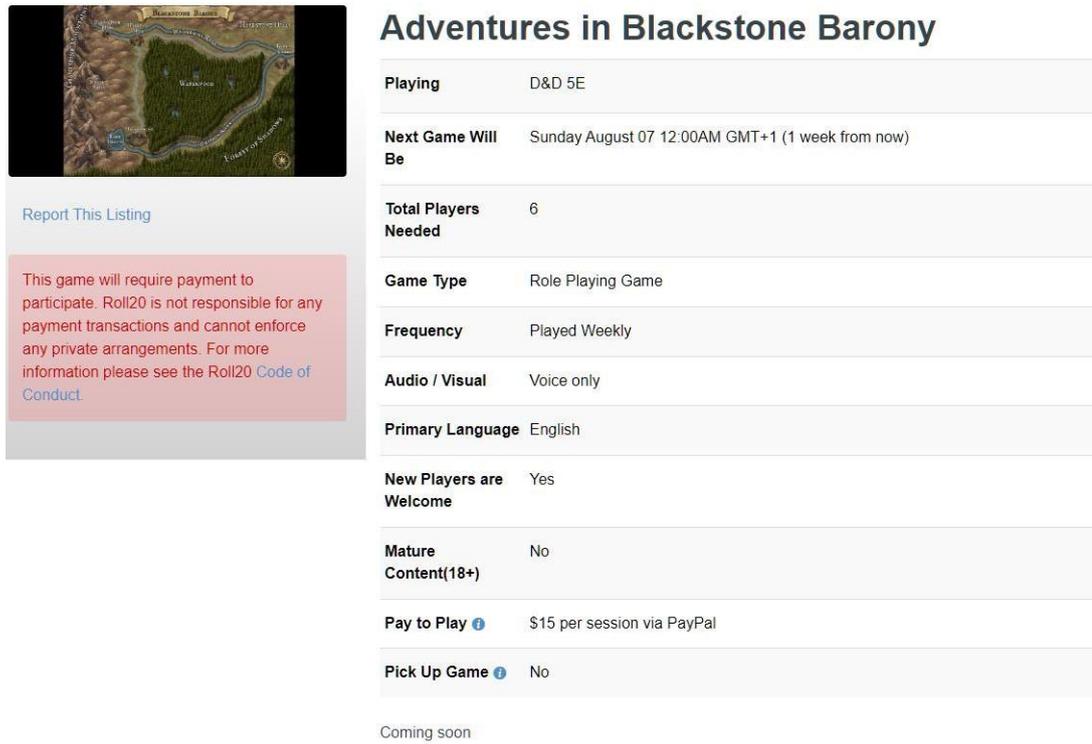
The points and branches issued will be increased after every two regiments, but the experience value issued will be relatively fixed.

Please do not kill unnecessarily. No positive incentives will be given for fighting monsters without involving quests, story changes etc.

## Play and Story

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If you already have an understanding of the story worldview, then you can try to play the trolling. If you don't have an understanding of the story worldview, that's perfectly fine and you can just run it as an original story.



**Adventures in Blackstone Barony**

<b>Playing</b>	D&D 5E
<b>Next Game Will Be</b>	Sunday August 07 12:00AM GMT+1 (1 week from now)
<b>Total Players Needed</b>	6
<b>Game Type</b>	Role Playing Game
<b>Frequency</b>	Played Weekly
<b>Audio / Visual</b>	Voice only
<b>Primary Language</b>	English
<b>New Players are Welcome</b>	Yes
<b>Mature Content(18+)</b>	No
<b>Pay to Play</b>	\$15 per session via PayPal
<b>Pick Up Game</b>	No

Coming soon

Figure 5- 3 An example of online group announcement (Roll 20, 2022)

What is included in the TRPG Party Announcement?

- Duration of TRPG parties. This part includes the frequency, timing and duration of the meetings. Given that players may come from different time zones, sometimes GMs need to indicate their own time zone. There are also GMs who only give a vague time range. The exact time will be determined after players have been recruited.
- Location of the TRPG party. For offline TRPGs, the location is usually a board game shop, a cafe or restaurant that allows patrons to play TRPGs, the GM or a player's residence.
- Rules of the TRPG party. The GM needs to state which TRPG rules are being used for this or these parties, and state the version of the rules and which expansions can be used.
- Special rules for TRPG parties. Many GMs choose to add, remove or change something from the original rules. There are also rules that inherently give the GM several initial settings for starting a TRPG, from which the GM needs to choose one. This will be discussed

in detail in Chapter 7 Rules of this thesis.

- TRPG party modules. This section is not necessary if the host is using a self -created module. However, if the GM is using a module that is already published or be disseminated to the public, it is necessary for the GM to indicate which module he/she is using to avoid players who have already participated in the module signing up again. Joining a TRPG with already knowing the storyline, character relationships and puzzle setting is a bad choice. This is often disruptive to other people's gaming experience and disrespectful to other players.
- GM contact information. Most GMs will provide social media accounts or instant messenger accounts here.
- Format of TRPG parties. This generally includes offline, online voice and online text.
- TRPG support software using. This type of software will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 Tools of this thesis.

In addition, there is a special type of TRPG Party Announcement in the Internet age, the TRPG Group Announcement. The purpose of such announcements is to create a community that can be organised and spread, instead of inviting players for one or more TRPG parties, but rather. This type of announcement is often has quite large size, over a hundred or even hundreds of people, and is more like a community than a small group. This type of group announcement usually includes the following.

- Contact details for the group. This is the basic content.
- The rules for the group. Some groups will support several rules at once, while others will only support one version of a particular rule.
- The form in which TRPG activities are conducted. These groups generally have no or very few offline activities, so there are the only two main formats, voice online or text online.
- Conditions for joining the group. Such subcultural groups sometimes have certain thresholds. For example, some groups require sign-ups to submit a character card they have created to prove that they actually belong to this subculture group.
- Other important things. A lot of GMs would like that the players should have a basic understanding. Therefore, they choose give a basic introduction in the TRPG Group

announcement.

It is important to pay attention to group announcements. This is because that group announcements are an innovative reflection of how GMs invited players to play TRPGs with them in the online era. These group announcements are a sign of the transition from socializing with acquaintances to socializing with strangers in the digital age, and a sign that TRPG small groups will be established.

### 5.3.3 GM Hosting

Concerning GM, the central role and facilitator of the TRPG, I found a shift in the form of the GM's presence in the digital age. In the traditional form, a TRPG group can use 1 year to seek and find a suitable GM for them (Yilduz, 2010). Unlike the traditional role of a fixed GM, the role of the GM in online TRPGs changes frequently. This allows different players to enjoy being the GM and common player, reduces learning costs, saves time and effort, and inspires empathy in the GM. However, this form of play also places greater demands on player ability and presents a dilemma not previously present in TRPGs.

In traditional TRPGs, a small group of TRPG players often has a fixed GM. Alternatively, in a module, there is a fixed GM, and when the module ends or pauses and a new story begins, another player takes over as GM. In 2022, there is an example of *Infinite Horror* TRPG in my field research. A GM made a special attempt to allow every player to be the GM, and for the sake of distinction, this GM will be called as the core GM in this section. Initially, only the core GM hosted TRPG plays. The other seven players played two separate TRPG sessions, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. During these two TRPG plays (fourteen TRPG plays in total), the core GM introduced each player to the basic structure and background of the worldview and laid out some of the main storyline. After the individual plots, the core GM arranges two group plots. There were three and four player characters in these two episodes, and the player characters did not repeat each time. The core GM said that apart from being a TRPG play in its own right, the two group plots also serve as examples for other

players wishing to be GMs in this TRPG to get a general idea of how to create a dungeon that fits this worldview. In addition, he has written two documents to remind other GMs of the norms of dungeon creation. These two documents include how rewards are awarded, the difficulty of the enemies and the items that can be got by player characters, the corresponding play time of the dungeon and the type of dungeons.

After this, I performed as a GM in person and hosted two dungeons in the TRPG. These two dungeons lasted two and three times respectively, each lasting approximately five hours. Two other players have also taken on the role of GM. In addition to this, one player is interested in being a GM and is actively thinking about the hosting style and monster design. It is worth noting that the core GM is also involved as a player. When involved in the dungeon, he does not modify the worldview or scenario as a GM, but rather role-plays as a regular player.

During the actual TRPG play, this setup has five main advantages. Firstly, the GM is also the common player and can think differently. When acting as GM, some people may ignore the player's feelings or set puzzles of inappropriate difficulty. By switching roles in the same TRPG play, the GM can better empathise with the common players. Secondly, multiple GMs can play with the identical rules in the same worldview. This can significantly reduce learning costs. If these GMs organise TRPG parties using different rules, then if a common player wants to participate in multiple TRPG parties, that common player will have to learn many rules. This can be a huge drain on his time and energy. Even if the rules are the same, different worldviews will result in different characters and environments. Thirdly, it allows GMs to refine the House rules, and many GMs will set many House rules based on their own preferences, but GMs are not professional game designers, and the rules they design may have a negative impact on the style or balance of the game. When they participate as common players, they often develop a deeper understanding of the House rules they have set. Fourthly, GMs and common players have different kinds of gaming fun, and such a shift in identity allows players to experience a wide variety of TRPG enjoyment in the same TRPG

adventure. Fifthly, thinking, planning and preparing for a TRPG play requires a lot of energy, and the presence of multiple GMs at the same time can reduce the workload of a single GM. Most GMs are not fully engaged in the TRPG play. They need to complete their own workloads and study schedules, and the maintenance of a TRPG small group is built on the basis of a party.

Considering the condition above, how should rewards be given out? As addressed in Chapter 1, rewards can be viewed as players' characters' remuneration in TRPG adventure, such as levels up, treasures, artifacts, and so on. The rules given by the core GM for awarding do not have detailed criteria for rewards distribution, but only vague suggestions. In practice, I have given out many rewards in the course of implementation. For example, in the dungeon I hosted, Crusader Kings: Notre Dame de Paris, four player characters entered the dungeon. By the time they left the dungeon, each participant had received over 7,000 points and other rewards. As a dungeon GM, I only received 3,000 points as compensation, according to the core GM's rules. In the Infinite Terror rules, points are not accolades in the nature of praise, but resources that can be converted directly into character's ability. This puts my player character's progress behind the others. How do I bridge this gap? The easiest way is for me to reduce the rewards given out so that other players only receive a small reward in my dungeon, and the dungeon GM's compensation does not change as a result. Another way is for me to participate in other GM's dungeons and hope that the other GM will give me a large amount of rewards. I chose the second method. This is because I considered that the performance of the participants in my dungeon is worth the high rewards gained. Besides, this is the influence I exert on the whole system as a dungeon GM. I wanted each participant to get more points. Although this does not become a rule, it is a presentation of my game values. Regarding the criteria for GM compensation, the core GM stated that the reason he set such criteria was to minimise the disparity between different player roles. Players who are willing to serve as GMs are often more familiar with the rulesets of the game and can create strong characters with few resources. These players, in turn, tend to have a higher level of involvement. If a large amount of GM compensation is

provided, the difference between the player characters of these GMs and other player characters will be too high, thus negatively impacting the gaming experience of these players.

Some scholars paid attention to Game Master's responsibility of story teller and scenario builder (White *et al.*, 2018; Jensen, 2020; Dormans, 2006). Some scholars tried to view the appearance of GM in the perspective of digitalisation (Kamm, 2019). Kamm (2019) found that in some video games based on TRPGs, the human GM was replaced by a computer. Brunette (2015) focused on how the GMs functions in competition. In this scholar's research, one of the primary components of most TRPGs' gameplay is competition, with players putting their characters in battle against foes, testing their ability at solving puzzles, and attempting to conquer the difficulties posed by the GM (Brunette, 2015). This is in line with my research findings. However, Brunette did not conduct a specific study on how GMs and common players can remain fair within the magic circle of the game on this point. Instead, in my research, taking turns as GM better stimulates player empathy and allows for a better match between the challenges of the GM and the abilities of the players. This trend is closely related to the shift of TRPGs from offline to online. Compared with offline TRPGs, the rapid growth of online TRPGs has given common players easier access and more opportunities to learn how to become GMs and how to be good GMs. The large number of TRPG log reports and replay videos also allowed players to see clearly the many possibilities of TRPG hosting. This information gathering and sharing is essential to the success of the TRPG. This gathering and sharing of information would not be possible without the flourishing of TRPG-related websites.

From the perspective of the magic circle theory, the system of rotating GMs in online TRPGs represents a weakening of this concept. This is primarily evident in two aspects. Firstly, in offline TRPG parties where there is only one GM and the TRPG group consistently chooses a specific player to assume this role, other players can focus entirely on role-playing and adventuring without having to consider the game from the GM's perspective. However, the strategy of rotating GMs allows every player in the small group an opportunity to be a GM,

even though not every player in the group actually take on this role. Consequently, players need to switch between the dual identities of being a common player and a GM. The essence of the magic circle lies precisely in allowing players to temporarily forget or abandon their identities outside the game and focus solely on their in-game roles. Secondly, although rotating GMs enables the GM to better understand the psychological experiences of players, thereby considering the players' thoughts and states more empathetically when hosting, the flexibility of the GM role leads some players to compare their own decisions as a GM with those made by the GM they face. This has led to some accusations which are not about TRPG play itself, but about how to be a good GM and how to treat common players.

#### **5.4 Weaken upgrade mechanics and new trend in TRPGs**

In the digital age, TRPGs present many new development trends. An important trend is that upgrade mechanics became weaker. This is an important choice for TRPG to maximize its strengths and avoid weaknesses. This is also closely related to players' rule selection, breaking and creation. I will discuss this further in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

During the creation period of DND the world's first TRPG (Dungeons & Dragons), the game designers devised specific and detailed character upgrade mechanics. As TRPGs became increasingly influential and attract increasing number of players, a variety of TRPGs were released with rulebooks that included upgrade mechanics. By DND 3rd Edition, with every expansion pack released, *Wizards of the Coast* offered a plethora of upgrade options. Even for veteran players, it can be difficult to become versed in the possible upgrade routes for each profession. Upgrades mean many things, including faster speed, higher attributes, more life, stronger attacks, the ability to learn and prepare more arcane magic, and so on. In short, it is the official characterisation of a character's force and power. Due to weaponry, battlefield conditions, ability restraints, luck and so on, many times lower level characters have the opportunity to defeat and kill higher level characters. However, in general, higher

level characters are more powerful than lower level characters and are more capable of handling combat, investigation and adventure. In this case, calculating character upgrades and enhancements is an important part of the game and the interaction between GMs and common players (Zagal and Altizer, 2014).

In 21st century China, this upgrade mechanism has been weakened in some online TRPGs. Some TRPG rulesets in small groups of TRPGs no longer have an explicit upgrade mechanism or only a small amount of upgrade related content. The following three examples correspond to each of the three situations in which the upgrade mechanism has been weakened.

Trail of Cthulhu, a TRPG published by Chaosium, focuses on investigation and exploration. Although there is an upgrade mechanic, it is only a minor touch. Out of all 76 pages of the Player's Handbook, there is less than 1 page dealing with how to advance player character (Hite *et al.*, 2008). For the most part, when building a character card, the character's abilities are probably all that can be used in the entire TRPG play. On the one hand, the reason this rule set barely covers character upgrades is that in the Cthulhu worldview, mortals are bound to be helpless against gods. Any attempt to kill Elder Gods is doomed to be declared ineffective. Cthulhu's stories, on the other hand, are often about investigating and learning the truth. The key is information gathering and analysis, and the data on the character cards simply provide the basis for role-playing. Although it was not created specifically for online TRPGs, the simple upgrade mechanism makes it popular in Chinese online TRPGs.

Age of Harmony is a TRPG created by a Chinese TRPG player. this one TRPG did not make it into the publishing channels, but was circulated on internet forums. This TRPG does not involve any upgrade mechanics at all. In the module that serves as an example, there are no rewards for players to improve their abilities. The reason why this ruleset does not involve character upgrades is that it is a very simple and easy to understand TRPG, unique in that it has very low difficulty in getting started and is suitable as a first entry for newcomers to TRPGs. In order to keep the learning barrier as low as possible, the game designers have had to cut back on

content related to upgrades.

Age of Entrepreneurship is a TRPG created by Chinese TRPG players. The rules of this TRPG have not yet been completed. Despite having completed a lengthy TRPG play, it has not entered any mass distribution channels. I learned of the existence of this rule through small group communication. The reason why this rule does not involve character upgrades is because this ruleset has not yet been fully documented in writing. Much of it relies on previous tacit agreement or conventions of the GM and other players. The GM, the creator of the ruleset himself, has no intention of continuing to push for the improvement of this ruleset. Having designed this ruleset and used it as the basis for telling the story he wanted to tell, he abandoned the rules.

In summary, there are three circumstances that currently give TRPGs with weak upgrade mechanics some influence. First, the core of the game is in the story and the investigation, and the attributes of the characters are irrelevant. Secondly, the game is very simple and shallow, with no complex mechanics. Third, the game rules are not yet well created. This trend is the epitome of the entire era, which means that TRPG needs to re-discover and find its own position in the competition with various video games, and it also means that TRPG's appeal to players is different from previous eras.

## **5.5 Summary**



Figure 5- 4 An online TRPG scene conducted the tool Pencilplugg

In summary, the content of this chapter consists of three main sections covering four important aspects of the TRPG experience change from my field findings. The first part is the trend towards the expansion and transformation of TRPGs towards online. With the growth of offline brick-and- mortar board game shops being hampered, and given the overall impact of the pandemic COVID-19 crisis on the board game industry, including TRPGs, many players are opting for online TRPGs. and this new way of playing brings with it a new gaming experience that makes adventures more flexible and less demanding of player concentration. The second part is a new feature of digital TRPGs. Compared of traditional ones, as digital platforms are more suitable for copying and pasting long passages of text, long text descriptions have a higher impact and a more suitable presentation space in online TRPGs. This way of unfolding the adventure can balance the needs of players who like and dislike knowing the details of the adventure, make it easier for players to review previous information and notes, and easily dig into the hints and clues provided by the GMs without having to take notes. The third section is a study of hosting in online TRPGs. This section covers three main areas, namely the increased distraction of players in the online age, the existence of TRPG party announcements, and the shift in identity between common players and GMs. The important findings acquired in this section is that digital platforms make it easier for players to be distracted when engaging in TRPG activities than traditional ones.

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

But on the other hand, TRPG models that do not require heavy player engagement are also growing. In addition, the value of TRPG announcements has become noteworthy in the digital age after moving away from the offline model of small community gatherings based on acquaintances and friends. In the fourth section, I point out three scenarios where the trend of making mechanics simple is evident: games focusing on story and investigation, where character attributes play a minor role; games designed to be simple and accessible for newcomers, minimizing complex mechanics; and games with incomplete or evolving rule sets. This shift indicates a redefinition of TRPGs' position in the gaming world, differentiating their appeal from video games and emphasizing narrative over character progression.

In addition, there are many important TRPG websites in the environment of Chinese online TRPG community. However, given that the research target of this thesis is not social media or online forum, this part is put into Appendix A as a supplement to relevant background.

## **Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play**

Role-playing is not a role-playing game when it stands alone. It is combined with certain means of communication and rule restrictions in order to be called a role-playing game (Montola, 2009). For traditional tabletop role-playing games, it is primarily entwined with verbal communication. For live-action role-playing games, it is often considered to be combined with the real physical world (Montola, 2003). Similarly, video role-playing games are combined with programs and algorithms. But how should we understand online TRPGs within this framework? It is a hybrid of both. It retains the spoken communication part of the traditional TRPG, while incorporating an algorithmically generated world (Loponen and Montola, 2004). The presence of Internet has changed the existence and operations of the

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play game.

In addition to the user experience, the technologies used by TRPG players have also undergone revolutionary changes, so studying the technologies of TRPG players is also of great significance. The change of technologies is company with the transformation of TRPG conventions and mechanics. This section will concentrate on the technologies used by TRPG players in the digital age. There are many aspects and mechanics of gameplay that change with online play. From these, I have chosen these six points for detailed discussion. This is because I have found in these six areas in my field research and feel that they have important implications for the existence and development of TRPGs. These six aspects are: Digital character cards, digital tools, miniature wargame models in online TRPG, new view of life and death, convention, and cultural value. The first part is about digital character card after TRPG entered the digital age. This refers to an Excel spreadsheet created by players voluntarily. Compared with the official Character-Card, it is easier for new players to learn and use. This section will concentrate on the description and value of digital character cards. The second part is about digital tools used in online TRPGs, including dice, maps and log reports recording. Digital dice are more convenient than physical dice, and less likely to be broken. The production of online maps differs greatly from the production of commonly used offline TRPG maps. The third part is about miniature wargame models in online TRPG. In this part, I used my own TRPG experience in fieldwork to explain the process from using miniature tokens traditional TRPGs to using them in digital platforms. The fourth part is about players' attitude to player characters' death in digital TRPGs. The fifth part is something special in digital conventions, including world building, log report, fighting scenery, repeat adventures and killing enemies. The sixth, also the final part of this chapter is cultural value in the period of digitalisation. Players' opinions to hardware have changed a lot.

## **6.1 Digital Character Card**

What is the Digital Character Card?

A Digital Character Card (also called digital character sheet) is an electronic version of a TRPG character card. These character cards usually include the individual items and other content of the physical character card, with formulas to help players do calculations. They are often presented as a text file, Excel or word document. There are also Digital Character Cards that are presented as web pages or mobile app pages.

The image shows a highly detailed digital character card. It features a grid-based layout with various colored sections. Key elements include:
 

- Header:** Character name '奈奈' (Nana), level '1', and class '魔法师' (Magician).
- Attributes:** A large table listing various stats such as 'HP', 'MP', 'SP', '物理攻击', '魔法攻击', etc., with numerical values and formulas.
- Skills:** A list of skills like '魔法', '剑术', '格斗', etc., with their respective levels and effects.
- Items:** A list of equipment and items, including '魔法杖', '魔法袍', etc.
- Character Background:** A narrative section describing the character's origin, mentioning '魔法学院' (Magic Academy) and '魔法世界' (Magic World).
- Visuals:** A character portrait of a young woman with dark hair and a red and black outfit.

Figure 6- 1 Visual example of digital character card



## TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

- Digital character cards can offer assistance in calculation. In some TRPGs, in order to create a player character, the player has to do a plenty of calculation and fill them in the blanks of characters. For example, in the 7th of the COC, each character has own Skill Points, which is the equivalent of their *Education* x 4.

(Some professions have different methods of calculating skill points. Only general conditions are considered here.) After knowing the total Skill Points, a player will then be required to distribute his or her own Skill Points. The player needs to allocate the Skill Points to 8 class skills. Furthermore, each character has many Personal Interest Skill Points, which is equal to Intelligence x 2, and the player needs to allocate Personal Interest Skill Points to approximately 50 non-class skills. Some players will find it difficult to get correct answer quickly by mental arithmetic alone. Instead of letting players use the calculator or vertical calculation, it is better to provide a built-in calculator in the Digital Character Card to help players with the calculations. For players familiar with video games, many calculations are performed automatically through the game's built-in programs. In TRPG, most of these calculations need to be performed manually by the player. This makes some players who are no experts on mathematical calculations or unwilling to spend their energy on mathematical calculations less willing to participate in TRPG. Formulas and algorithms inside a digital character card can help players quickly build character cards, which is very convenient for the players not good at calculations.

- Some values need to be changed frequently. For example, in a game like the fifth edition of the DND, the Player's Handbook provides a complete and precise upgrade path. Each time when a player upgrades, his or her character card changes somewhat. If changes are made just once or twice, this is usually not a big problem for common players or GMs to write or erase pencil marks with a rubber. For example, if a player character's level ups from 1st to 2nd, the character's health points can change from 6 to 10, and when a character level ups from 2nd to 3rd, the health points can change to 14. However, if changes are made

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

seven or eight or a dozen times, then the paper- based character cards can easily become cluttered and difficult to read.

- Some players may try to cheat when using paper based. In addition, without reprinting and transcribing, each iteration of the paper-based character card overwrites the previous one. This way, if a player secretly changes a value in one iteration, it is difficult to verify it later, even if other players or GMs notice something fishy. But with digital character cards, it is easy to save every version of the character card.

Due to the existence of the above situations, cheating becomes a viable option. If the calculations are very simple and clear, then cheating is easy to be found. If the values are always fixed, then once the values have changed during a scene, they are likely to be discovered by other players or the GM. However, given the complexity of the calculations, even if the wrong data is provided at some point, others may not find out. Moreover, it is difficult to tell whether the miscalculation is due to poor mathematical skills or deliberate cheating. The details about cheating in the online TRPG will be discussed amply in the Chapter 7, Section 2.

- Players do not need to worry about forgetting to bring digital character cards. The digital character cards can be stored on a mobile app or website, or as an Excel document on a mobile phone, desktop computer or laptop. In addition, when a digital character card is sent to an instant messaging application, such as WeChat, QQ or Whatsapp, it is automatically saved when clicking on it to open it. This way, anyone in the TRPG group can access the digital character card at any time. For modern people, it is almost impossible to have an ordinary social occasion within a city where all participants coincidentally do not have their mobile phones with them.

The content on the character cards may be cumbersome. At a low level and with relatively little adventure experience, an average player can memorise most or all the content in the

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play character cards. However, as one's character levels up and one's adventures become rich, there will be increasing amount of content on the character cards. If a player forgets to bring to his or her character card at a TRPG party, it may be very awkward. If the player is made to go home to get it, the pace of the TRPG party will be negatively affected. If the player is allowed to play based on memory, then the other players may wonder if the players has misremembered. In addition, it is not a good policy to keep all character cards in the hands of one player or the GM. This way of handling the situation prevents others from looking at their character cards and thinking of strategies for playing and adventuring during the two TRPG parties.

- Digital character cards are easy to read. When using paper-based character cards, the level of calligraphy of players can have a significant impact on the difficulty of reading. In the age of the internet, many people have rarely lifted a pen to write and have a relatively rudimentary level of calligraphy for words and phrases other than their name. As a result, reading a player's character card can become a challenge.

- Digital character cards can hold a lot more content than paper-based character card. Whereas physical cards often do not hold writing. For example, in the fifth edition of the DND, considering only the starting content and not any expansions, a cleric in the Spell Level 5 can release spells including 7 Level 0 spells, 15 Level 1 spells, 17 Level 2 spells, 20 Level 3 spells, 8 Level 4 spells and 13 Level 5 spells, for a total of 80 spells (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). Although the cleric is not able to release these spells at the same time or on the same day, for each day that passes in the game the cleric can reselect many spells from this spell list and prepare them. In turn, a spell includes the School, casting time, casting distance, casting components, spell effects and ascending Level casting effects, as shown in the following example:

Create or Destroy Water

*1st-level transmutation*

**Casting Time:** 1 action

**Range:** 30 feet

**Components:** V, S, M (a drop of water if creating water or a few grains of sand if destroying it)

**Duration:** Instantaneous

You either create or destroy water.

**Create Water.** You create up to 10 gallons of clean water within range in an open container.

Alternatively, the water falls as rain in a 30-foot cube within range, extinguishing exposed flames in the area.

**Destroy Water.** You destroy up to 10 gallons of water in an open container within range. Alternatively, you destroy fog in a 30-foot cube within range.

**At Higher Levels.** When you cast this spell using a spell slot of 2nd level or higher, you create or destroy 10 additional gallons of water, or the size of the cube increases by 5 feet, for each slot level above 1st.

Figure 6- 3 An example of spells in the DND

Based on the example mentioned above, it is obvious that the content of a spell is very complex. For an average player, knowing 20 or 30 common spells is doable. But when the number of spells reaches 80, it becomes nearly impossible to recite them all in detail. What's more, players need to know not only the spells in the original version, but also the spells in the expansion. In addition to their own player character's spells, there are also spells from the player characters of the other members of the group. Spells are only part of the character cards. Therefore, it is valuable to provide easy access to spell content on the character cards.

- Digital character cards are more environmentally friendly. Considering the size of the spell list, if a player wanted to print out a character card, it would consume a lot of paper. One's character card could be dozens of pages long. This is obviously resource-intensive and environmentally unfriendly.

Based on my participant observation and thick description of various TRPGs, I found that

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play digital character cards are very common in online TRPGs today, and some offline TRPGs also use digital character cards. Compared to paper character cards, digital character cards have six main features: firstly, they have an automatic calculation function, which can replace players who are not good at calculations. Secondly, it is more suitable for modification and does not become blurred by multiple scribbles. Thirdly, it is more difficult to be exploited by players who are good at cheating and is more capable of ensuring fair play. Fourth, it has a more diverse storage medium, making it easier to copy and read. Fifthly, it is able to carry more content and is suitable for high level adventures and complex TRPG classes. Sixthly, it is more environmentally friendly as it does not require printing.

The use of character cards in TRPGs has been explored by many scholars before (Hendricks, 2006; Byers and Crocco, 2016; Copeland *et al.*, 2013; Daniau, 2016; Gaina *et al.*, 2020; Sich, 2012; Tresca, 2014). Some scholars simply see the character card as a part of TRPGs and do not discuss it in depth as to its own meaning and role (Copeland *et al.*, 2013; Sich, 2012). The existence of digital character cards has already been noted by scholars (White *et al.*, 2018; Webb and Cesar, 2019). For example, Roll20, a virtual TRPG platform, has been studied by Webb and Cesar. They found that Layers on the canvas are available for combining visual assets such as maps and character tokens (Webb and Cesar, 2019). Text chat contents include the results of automatic dice rolls, character ability cards, and player remarks (Webb and Cesar, 2019).

Thorén (2021) discussed the opposition to the digitisation of TRPGs. Many players have expressed their disgust at the digitisation of TRPGs, fearing that it will compromise the integrity of the game and destroy the TRPG tradition. The digitisation of TRPG character cards was also included. This is inconsistent with the findings of this study. This difference may be due to the different perspectives of the two articles, with Thorén's article (2021) focusing on a specific Swedish company and trying to understand what happened after the company moved all publishing and distribution operations from offline to online, based on data from 2010 to 2019. The data in my thesis, on the other hand, is based on participatory

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

observations of Chinese TRPG players from 2021 to 2022, and involved multiple TRPG games from multiple companies.

The previous scholars' discussion has laid the groundwork for the study of the TRPG character card, but does not quite encapsulate the new trends in digital TRPG in the Internet age. In the age of the Internet, many GMs do not follow the advice in the Dungeon Master's Guide for hosting, but instead design faster paced, faster escalating adventures (Given that this section is aiming to present things about digital character cards, more details about faster-paced gameplay will be presented in 6.5.5). The trend of designing faster paced adventures has not been proved by statistics. It is my own experience and my observation in the fieldwork.



Figure 6- 4 An example of digital character card, based on my own field work

As for the reason of that GMs are tend to host faster paced adventures, there are two guesses. Firstly, this is the result of online play, TRPG play with slow or common speed will often cause distraction. Secondly, this is a bottom-up evolution of the game that is not driven by technology, but by the development of video games. A lot of TRPG game players are also video game players. Some of them are accustomed to the speed of video role-playing games, which are much faster than the speed of TRPG mostly. Hopefully, further research will explore how did the two reasons mixed in this result, and whether there are

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

other reasons for this phenomenon or not.

This has resulted in more frequent changes to the character cards and a rise in reading difficulty. In addition to character upgrades, battles and adventures bring many changes. For example, for every day that passes in game time, many spellcasters will need to reselect what spells they have prepared. On paper-based character cards, this outlining or repeated using erasures can easily lead to torn paper and blurred text. On electronic cards, however, the player can simply check the "O" and "X" boxes in the spell fields. Acquiring and selling items are similar as well. Players can acquire dozens of items in a single adventure and sell them later. Obviously, it is easier to delete text in a word or an excel file. The content stated earlier exposes the limitations of paper-based character card design in many TRPGs. Considering that even a well-known TRPG, such as the DND, did not address this issue, it is likely that this limitation goes hand in hand with the properties of the medium of the character cards themselves, and is difficult to circumvent or resolve through a game design perspective.

## **6.2 Digital tools**

Tools are not only an important element in TRPGs, but also an element that have been change heavily by the development of digitalisation. DND has lately witnessed a comeback in popularity, owing to advancements in online technologies (Escandon Quintanilla, 2017). In this section, I will give an analysis about digital tools in the online TRPG. Basically, according to my field research, when we played TRPG online, the main tools needed are digital dice. There are also some other useful place that digital tools make sense, such as maps, logs recording.

Compared with offline TRPG, the number of faces of dice in online TRPG is more diverse. In addition to the common four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided, ten-sided, twelve-side and

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play twentieth- sided dice, dice with other sides are also used in TRPG games. In particular, some odd-numbered dice are also included in the module, such as five-sided and seven-sided dice. Such dice are very rare in real life, and the manufacturing process is far more complicated than that of six-sided or twenty-sided dice. The reason is that odd- numbered dice are difficult to make directly in the form of regular polyhedrons, but other methods must be used. For example, if you want to make a five- sided dice, and ensure that the probability of these five sides is equal, then you need to set the shape of the dice to a triangular prism or a pentagonal prism. This problem does not exist in online running groups. As long as the program is set in advance, players can easily use various dice. I will give further details about the change of dice in the digital age in Chapter 7 Rules of this thesis.

The extensive use of electronic software in TRPG has also spawned rules based on online TRPG. For example, in the TRPG Infinite Terror, rules about rolling dice mainly use ten-sided dice. What makes this TRPG different from other TRPGs in this dimension is that it is not concerned with the specific value of the dice, but whether the value of the dice is within the range of 8 to 10. Whenever a character needs to make a check in the world under this rule, he needs to roll several dice. For every dice with points between 8 and 10, a success is recorded. For each dice with 10 points, the player who rolled the dice can roll one more dice. In this way, when the character's ability grows to a very strong level, dozens of dice need to be used at a time. In the real world, this is very troublesome. The player may not have that many dice. Even if there is, the dice may fall to the ground during the throw. In addition, counting the number of successes after each throw is also a troublesome task, and it might be boring for players to spend much time on counting dice one by one. But digital dice can almost perfectly solve this problem. Players only need to enter the number of dice thrown once, and the program inside the software will immediately display the value of each dice and the total number of successes. Player 4 said: "When I would like to use the dice, I type the code to roll the electronic dice. For example, if I would like to roll a six-sided dice, I should type RD6. If a ten-sided dice, I should type RD10. If twenty ten-sided dice, I should type 'ww20' ."

## TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

The existence of digital dice has a long history. In 2013, digital dice can be used easily in the computer science industry (Nahin, 2013). In 2019, there has been article comparing the features and using experience of digital and non-digital dice (Rachel, 2019). There is also electronic dice based on the combine of physical dice and digital control (Unidice, 2022). Accompany with the development of Internet, online TRPG platforms and rules have been created. In the early period, or can be called "Dice Period", the simulation of randomness is a problem remaining to be solved. TRPG players only would like to get a electronic dice in an instant messaging software to stimulate a material dice. For a long period of time, the most used instant messaging software in China is Tencent QQ (Yao, 2006., Wu, 2020).

Some digital dice can be used, but not stable. Player 3 said: "I can only use the digital dice when my friend's computer is open. Yeah, the feature of the electronic dice is based on his personal server. If he does not open his computer, his server does not give feedback whatever code I type."

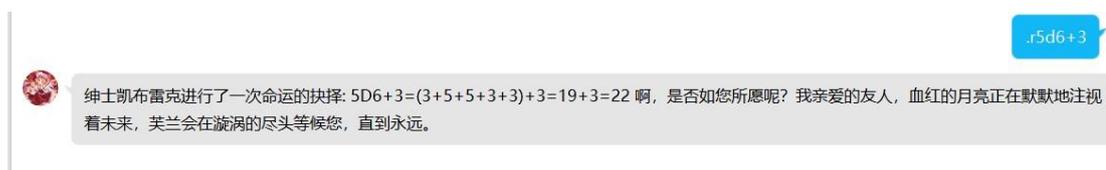


Figure 6- 5 An example of using a digital die

Digital dice has obvious development in the functions aspect. At the time of their creation, digital dice were relatively rudimentary. They could only be used as an alternative to physical dice, to "roll a number of X-sided dice and display the result". Although this function became an important technical support for online TRPGs, it did not go beyond physical dice.

It is well known that in TRPGs the result of a dice roll is often not the final result, and that often the character's attack or spell damage is obtained by adding the result of the dice roll to one or more of the character's attributes. Therefore, based on the basic dice rolling

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play function, some numerical dice have developed a simple calculator function.

Accompany with the broad using of digital dice, some new TRPG ruleset that must use digital dice appeared. In the Dice period, some Chinese TRPG rules have been created. One of them called Infinite Horror. This TRPG rule is created from an Internet novel, which has the same name and has been published in Starting point Chinese net, the largest Chinese Internet novel website. (Liu and Zhou, 2010) This novel has been serialized from April 2007, and ended in January 2009. Then, based on this novel, some TRPG players created the TRPG ruleset Infinite Horror (Ye, N/A). Its biggest feature is about dice using. Every time when a character should roll dice, he or she should not roll a dice to decide the result of an event, but roll many ten-sided dice. Every 8,9 and 10 of these rolled ten-sided dice means success and let the success count plus one. After that, the success count should be compared with DC (In the context of TRPG, DC is the abbreviation if Difficulty class, which is a number decided before by the story-teller and used to measure how difficult for character to do an action).

In TRPG adventures, the level of player characters can continue to increase, and their abilities get stronger as well. This makes the number of dice to be thrown again and again each time. In the beginning, players only need to roll several dice to complete the check. But later, every time when trying to attack an enemy in battle, the player character needs to throw dozens of ten-sided dice. If these dice exist in the form of physical entities, then many ten-sided dice must be specially collected first. Then, each roll of the dice will take a lot of time, and the dice will roll easily, and the reporter will fall to the floor or other places. After the dice is rolled, the players also need to count which side of the dice is up. On the Internet, throwing 100 or 1,000 ten-sided dice will only take one second longer than throwing 1 dice. Obviously, when this rule was born, it showed its unfriendly side to offline TRPG. In other words, it was born for online TRPG. More details about creating the ruleset Infinite Horror will be showed in the Chapter 7 Rules.

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Digital dice have disadvantages. When using digital dice, the most important disadvantage may be more cheating. When playing TRPGs offline, it is a big challenge for players to cheat with dice, for which the dice is made of metal, wood or plastic, etc. Anyway, the dice is not made of electronic software. If somebody is not a professional gambler or dila, he or she can rarely know how to control a organic dice and let it be the number he wants. However, when the use scene of dice is changed from offline to online, players will have to face another situation. A player can easily search and download cheating software for remote control dice from the Internet, even if he or she is not a brilliant programmer or hacker. The technical black box greatly reduces the difficulty of using magic dice. When a player is free to choose the number of dice, TRPGs will be mastered by him. The plots and puzzles designed by the DM before may be useless. The game experience of other players will also be negatively affected. If a magician can cast powerful magic, but also has a quick posture, strong physique, extraordinary bravery and superior debating skills, then why other player characters should exist in this virtue world?

In next part, I will analyse the digitisation of dice itself and its impact on online TRPGs, specifically in terms of the technology and the mechanics that have changed with it.

Based on fieldwork, I found that digital dice are very common in online TRPGs. There is also the practice of using video conferencing, such as Microsoft or Zoom meetings, and then throwing physical dice. This is also can be proved by TRPG community (Henry, 2020). But this is very rare. In most cases, the rolls are done using the relevant tool application or the TRPG website support function. Digital dice have evolved from simple to complex, adapting and feeding into online TRPG, allowing more possibilities for online TRPG and extending the functionality beyond the dice. On the negative side, it has provided more opportunities for cheating by some players with bad intentions. Considering that there are some electronic dice are created to previous possible cheating, cheating is a situation that cannot be ignored (Sharon, 2019).

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

The issue about the sides of dice have not attracted other TRPG scholars' attention. There are some TRPG scholars mentioned that, while, it has not been researched deeply (Dormans, 2006; Jensen, 2020). Dormans mentioned that "a certain of success" means "roll higher twelve or more using a twenty-sided dice" (Dormans, 2006:8). Jensen has explored the connection between the outcome of rolling a dice with lucky (Jensen, 2020). In most DND 5e settings, rolling a "natural 20" is "the best number one can roll" on a twenty-sided dice (Jensen, 2020:106). When they are rolled, gamers normally rejoice since it signifies the character will do twice damage in battle or will easily pass their skill check (Jensen, 2020). There were some scholars discussed that how the 20-sided dice got in touch with the 3rd edition of DND game system (White *et al.*, 2018). However, They simply accepted the settings for the number of dice faces that were readily available in the game system and cited them in their paper. They did not think about why dice face counts exist in the form they are designed to, and the possibility of more flexible dice face counts and the number of dice rolled. In a computer software driven online TRPG. Players can define the number of dice faces and the number of dice for a single die roll at will, and the time required for such a definition is negligible. However, probably due to the influence of previous TRPG traditions, many dice bots still only take on the function of replacing six-sided dice or twenty-sided dice in the days when there were no physical dice can be used by offline TRPG party.

Digital dice alone were not enough to meet TRPG players' need. Besides, some other demand should be satisfied, such as maps. When TRPG was just beginning to be popular, the most popular rule was DND. One of the characteristics of DND is that the characters played by players will venture into the dungeon, the long terrible traps and the fearsome monsters in the dungeon. Similarly, there is no shortage of treasures and magical magic. In terms of artistic conception, dungeons were excavated by mayforces organized by hands, or purely formed naturally. Therefore, the dungeons need to have a maze of terrain. Describing a dungeon with words and words alone is quite a challenge, and only a skilled TRPG host can complete it. Even for these hosts, having an auxiliary map will have the icing on the cake. In particular, the skills of many occupations in TRPG are related to distance. Without a map, it is

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play difficult for them to make correct decisions. A few presenters have art skills. For example, one of the interviewees in this study is a cartoonist (Player 4) and another is an art teacher (Player 9). They can easily draw a map. But for most TRPG hosts, TRPG mapping tools are very valuable. This situation is consistent with previous scholarly research: with the help of the role-playing community, effort has been done to improve the tools available to enable tabletop role-playing games through map builders (Drow, 2014; Nick, 2019). To solve the problem of maps causing distractions for players, some have combined digital maps with physical plates to design electronic maps that can be played (Plijnaer *et al.*, 2020).

Digital maps can also meet the demand for pictures and 3D modeling. In order to enrich the adventure of TRPG, many players want their characters to have a clearly recognizable avatar. DM needs more in this regard. They often choose the corresponding picture material on the website, so that players can intuitively see the image of the NPC and the scene they are in. In addition, with the rise of 3D printing technology, these websites also provide DMs with channels for 3D printing. DM may be hosting TRPG offline, but the 3D modeling work obviously cannot be completed without relying on computers and 3D printers. More details will be presented in Chapter 5 Section 3.

Digital tools can meet the need of recording TRPG log reports. Many TRPG players are willing to record their TRPG experience, and then polish it to form a unique story. Common instant messaging software, such as Tencent QQ or WeChat, also has this function. But when using this type of tool to record battle reports, all players can do is only copying and pasting the entire content into a word processing software, then modify it. The efficiency is relatively low, and the effect is not satisfactory. The professional TRPG report recording software will take the particularity of the TRPG into account, distinguish the player's thoughts, the character's thoughts, the character's speaking, the role's action and the role's dice-rolls, etc. It can also be linked with the drawn map to make the TRPG report appear figure out the walking (running, swimming or flying) track of the characters on the map. As for players' action, opinions and experience about TRPG log reports, more details will be rendered in Chapter 5

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

section 5.

### **6.3 Miniature wargame models in online TRPG**

The quick development of online TRPG has affected the creator community from the player community. In order to satisfy the needs of online TRPG players, some TRPG customs suitable for online TRPG have been created. Furthermore, a group of authors write modules based on the new customs, or write modules suitable for online TRPG within the framework of the old customs. There is an important change that compared with the traditional offline TRPG, the online TRPG module has fewer miniature wargame figures and tokens. Miniature wargame models are small-scale figurines or models representing soldiers, vehicles, monsters, or other units. They are typically made of metal, plastic, or resin. In offline TRPG, they are physical miniature figurines, and are painted or assembled by the players in general. In online TRPG, the meaning of miniature wargame models is similar, and the usage of miniature wargame models has three main situations: substantial miniature models; virtual miniature models; no miniature models.

The decline of miniature wargame models in online TRPG and the rise of electronic TRPG are inseparable. As the miniature wargame models in video games become more abundant and interesting, table games, including wargaming content in TRPG, gradually lose their appeal. In offline TRPG environment, the content of wargaming can also exist. In the online TRPG, players cannot experience the pleasure of role-playing by moving the small model by themselves. If each player's small model is operated by a DM or a certain player, then these small models will hardly become the material projection of the player's virtual avatar.

When we used online instant message applications as online TRPG platform at the beginning, we chose to let the GM control substantial miniature models and use the camera to make

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play them visible for other players. In this kind of scenery, we communicate with each other through the Internet, while what we do is to copy the offline TRPGs in the online environment. Like what players do offline, each of us can choose a substantial miniature model as his or her player character. What is different, we are unable to move these models by ourselves' arms. Every time when we would like to let our player characters do any act, we must ask the GM for help. The GM is glad to offer help. However, this is not as good as what the situation is was offline. When we play TRPG offline, we can observe our models from any angle we want. But according to this approach, we can only have one angle, the camera angle. After some time, there was a player letting the GM change the angle of viewing miniature wargame models. The GM agreed. But it is hard to be accomplished, because the GM is not a professional photographer, and it is strenuous for him to adjust the shooting frequently. If he uses the camera fixed on his laptop, he changes it painfully. If he uses the camera of his smart phone, it is very flexible. However, he is almost unable to take the responsibility of the GM. After all, this is an extra work and his main task is to arrange the plots, characters and adventure (Katifori *et al.*, 2022; Luong *et al.*, 2017; Smith and Cole, 2019).

To make the moving of miniature wargame models smooth, we gave up using physical miniature models afterwards, and instead them by virtual miniature models. Some online TRPG platforms or applications can offer the function of wargame simulation (Mochocki, 2021; Trengrove, 2022). So, we began attempts on using virtual miniature models, including three phases: Microsoft Excel, two-dimension application, three-dimension application.

- In the first phase, we used the Microsoft Excel to represent the TRPG map and miniature tokens. It is extraordinary easy to use, and it looks "too tough (Player 10)". According to the image below, it is unacceptable to admit that what we saw can be described by the word "miniature". They are just some color blocks and texts. Every time when a character moved, the GM deleted its name or code in the Excel, and type it again in the new place. The advantage of this approach is that it is easy and each GM can learn to let it operate quickly.

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

The disadvantage of it is that it cannot provide player with good immersion or empathy, and players do not consider the cold words in the Excel are lifelike enough to represent their virtual avatars. This bears a strong resemblance to the first tabletop wargame boards in the eighteenth century, such as Helwig 's Kriegsspiel, which allowed players to practice and refine their strategic and tactical skills in a simulated battlefield environment (Wintjes, 2015).

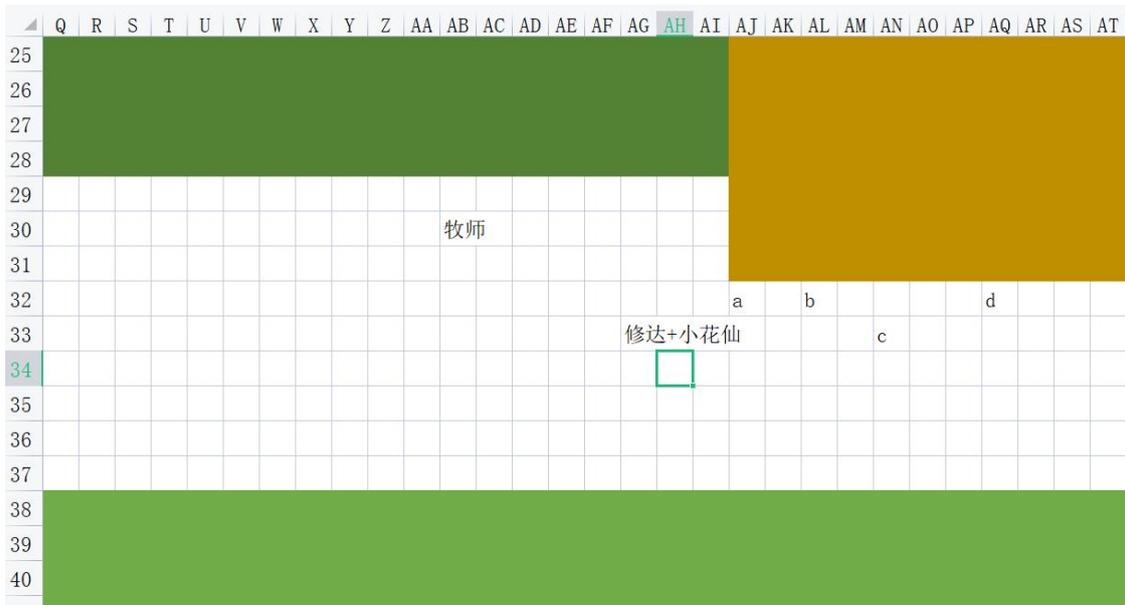


Figure 6- 6 An TRPG map we used in a online DND5E TRPG based on the Excel

In the picture, “牧师” means a player character whose class is cleric. “a”,”b”,”c” and “d” are for monsters. “修达+小花仙” is a combination of a non-player character and a player character. “修达” is the non-player character and “小花仙” is a player character.

## TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

【防护学派】小美兰 2022/7/24 15:38:27  
谦剥进行了一次命运的抉择:  $D20=17$  啊, 是否如您所愿呢? 我亲爱的友人, 血红的月亮正在默默地注视着未来, 芙兰会在漩涡的尽头等候您, 直到永远。

【守密人】DMLRime 2022/7/24 15:40:20  
。  $r\ 2\#d20+4$

【防护学派】小美兰 2022/7/24 15:40:21  
谦剥掷骰2次:  $D20+4=$   
 $9+4=13$   
 $14+4=18$

【守密人】DMLRime 2022/7/24 15:40:29  
。  $r\ 2\#d20+4$

【防护学派】小美兰 2022/7/24 15:40:30  
谦剥掷骰2次:  $D20+4=9+4=13$ ,  $8+4=12$

【守密人】DMLRime 2022/7/24 15:41:04  
。  $r\ 2\#d20+4-d4$

【防护学派】小美兰 2022/7/24 15:41:05  
谦剥掷骰2次:  $D20+4-D4=$   
 $19+4-4=19$   
 $5+4-1=8$

【守密人】DMLRime 2022/7/24 15:41:15  
。  $r\ 2\#d20+4-d4$

Figure 6- 7 A screenshot from my own online TRPG through Tencent QQ

Unlike the specialised online TRPG platform, Excel is only able to present maps in that situation. The other important feature of TRPG, dice rolling, requires us to use other software. For the actual game, we then chose Tencent QQ and rolled the dice through its subsidiary applet. This humble board looks similar with the tabletop wargame boards that first appeared in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. There are probably similarities in the beginning for their appearance. On one hand, factors such as maps, character models, battlefields and the course of battles in offline TRPGs took experience from tabletop wargame boards, which had been in development for over a century, and were gradually refined. On the other hand, using general instant messaging software to play TRPGs is just a preliminary grouping exercise. This has led to a relatively crude state of detail in the presentation of the game, despite its use of internet technology as a core, allowing players from far and wide to come together.

- In the second phase, we used a free two-dimension application.

There are some free two-dimension application beneficial for online TRPG, such as Foundry

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Virtual Tabletop, Maptool, Xchat and DiceMod. I chose one of them, DiceMod and took the responsibility of GM.



Figure 6- 8 A picture of using the online TRPG tool Dicemod

Here is an example that when I took the responsibility of GM, and three players let their character have a fight with 8 Kobolds. Although the monsters they faced are Kobolds, most of time these monsters were called “dogs” as an abbreviation in spoken language.

I: “Here, now you should determine where you will stand at the beginning, you cannot be within two squares of any enemy or ally at the beginning, then tap on the map so I can see which square you are standing on.”

Player 14: “What do you mean by ‘Tap it’?”

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Player 13 did the operating in the online platform, and said: "Tap it and it will have a flashing marker." Then each other players understood that.

I: "Okay." Then I saw player 14 taped a place on the map. "No. This is too close, you cannot be that close to others, everyone always needs to be slightly further away."

Player 14 chose another lattice on the map: "One step back? Now I am here, standing in the middle."

I: "Then ... the poet just stands here? Or is there any change?"

Player 13: "Let me see ..... I think ..... I am not sure..." Then he chose a place for his player character.

Player 14 said excitedly: "Cool! The let you be able to attract the dogs! Then, Hey! Player 5! Go and stand on the other side! You should go to hit that one happy dog!"

Player 13: "Right!"

Player 5: "Yeah, which is the happy dog? I want to observe its location."

Player 13 gave a flash on the map: "This one is the happy dog."

I: "I thought it was easy. I was going to type '开心的狗头人'(means: happy Kobolds), but there's a limit on the word count display here, and I could not type a name up that long. Therefore, I typed '开心狗'(happy dog)。

Player 5: "What is the distance represented by one lattice?"

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Player 13: "5 feet."

I: "If not specifically stated, one lattice represents 5 feet."

Player 13: "I would like to ask what the one whose initiative is 19." (The word "initiative" is a professional term in the 5th of DND, which represents the order of take actions for each character in a combat.)

I: "I have not decided that...".

Player 14 said in a firm tone: "In this way, counting one by one according to the position of D8, is the top left corner from left to right and top to bottom?"

Player 13: "Is it the happiest one, the fastest runner? If so, then this dog that has the initiative of 19 must be in the bottom right corner. I mean, if we go in the order of top to bottom and left to right."

I: "Reasonable. It is okay to let the happiest run the fastest. No problem. I can accommodate that."

Laying out tokens on a two-dimensional plane is not much more trouble than doing so offline. Although I do need to select the right monsters from a huge number of monster images so that they represent the monsters the player character encounters in the scene at the moment. But offline is the same. This is because there is an additional printing process when conducting an offline TRPG.

Similar conversations make me feel as if I was playing an MMORPG. As the GM, I took on the responsibility of hosting, as if I were the leader of a squad on a certain mission in an MMORPG. Unlike MMORPGs, we only yield to a small degree to the procedural rhetoric

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

embedded in the rules. More details about how we resist TRPGs' game rules will be presented in Chapter 8 Section 2.



Figure 6- 9 picture with two-dimensional miniature wargame models

For two-dimensional miniature wargame models the viewpoint does not become an issue. Because everyone uses a top-down view, with everything unobstructed. But the combination of maps and miniature models is lacklustre. Although it was barely acceptable to everyone, the software was not revered by the players. Although there are several software programs on Steam that offer 3D miniature models, this has not been well received by players, Player 7 felt that they are still too bulky and that those miniature models are mass produced replicas that cannot be held in the hand and painted and sculpted in person, thus losing their unique character.

- In the third phase, we used a three-dimension application. This application called RPGScenery.

This is a very powerful software, very realistic simulation of different scenes, forests, farms, graves, palaces, churches, villages, deserts, mountains, lakes, swamps and so on. It is reasonable to say that this software has a great number useful elements in a miniature-like online TRPG. Each scene is fully modeled and as a GM I can easily switch cameras 360

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play degrees and place miniature models in the scene as I wish. Player 10 said: “It is hard to believe this software is used for a TRPG. Even some well-known video games, like *Octopath Traveler*, are not as distinctly as it represents. There are so many details, so our imagination can fly so far.”

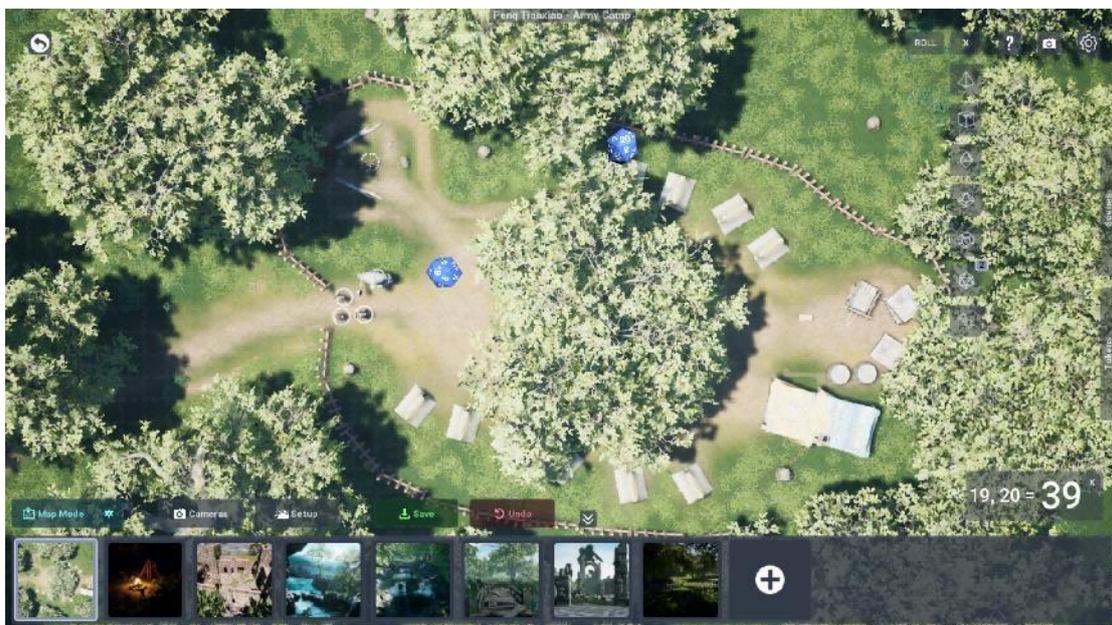


Figure 6- 10 A screenshot from RPGScenery from top view



Figure 6- 11 A screenshot from RPGScenery from head-up view

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

However, the price can be a problem. It is £5.19. When I saw the price at the beginning, I thought that it was not expensive and I was able to afford that. However, spending money the game itself is just a start, and it only allows the user to use a few of scenery. If I would like to use all of them, I have to buy all of its downloadable content (DLC). Until October 4, 2022, it has 46 DLCs. One of them is free, and each other costs £5.19. As least, for Chinese TRPG players, spending that much money on a TRPG application is unacceptable. All of the players in the small group tended not to buy the DLCs.

But the scenarios and content included in the game itself are very limited. Unlike when we were using Excel and 2-D dimension online TRPG platforms, there is now basically no way to enrich the map by uploading pictures of your choice. This is because modelling in 3-D software is very specialised and not something that amateurs can easily master through self-learning. Back to the price of this software. The price is relatively high. However, if a small group is split, say 8 or 10 players, it does not cost much per player. However, despite the fact that I have heard more than once from other players complaining about the lack of variation in maps and the lack of variety in monsters, no one has mentioned purchasing the software again. No one has mentioned buying the software again. I was curious about this, so I asked the players in the small group again.

I: "Do you think we need to chip in and buy RPGScenery? In my opinion, the modelling is very good and it gives everyone a sense of immersiveness."

Player 2: "If you want to buy it, you can buy a few DLCs and try it out."

Player 5: "I would recommend Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed and Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim for the immersive feel."

Player 7's attitude was passive: "It is quite time consuming, isn't it? If you have a lot of free time, you can learn it."

Player 13 was very negative and said: "I do not agree. It is mostly convenient for you, so why should we pay for it?"

Based on their answers, my subjective experience and my guesses, the players' aversion to the 3D online software is centred on four main areas.

- The software does not support family or group sharing. Therefore, players who do not act as GMs are not willing to pay for the GM's tools.
- The software takes a lot of time to learn and operate. The high cost of learning has had a negative impact on its mass rollout.
- For some TRPG players, gaming is just one of their many hobbies. TRPG is just one of the various games they play. This small group is just one of several small TRPG groups they are involved in. online TRPG is just one part of the TRPG activities they do in this small group. If it was not due to the pandemic of COVID-19, some of them might not be involved in Online TRPG at all, and in Online TRPG the software is just one component. It is not that they cannot afford to pay £40 to £50, but they do not think it deserves that price.

If they were to pay this amount of money for this specialist software, they would be asking for it at 3A video game standards. Consider that this is a tool software and not a full game. Clearly it does not provide the audio-visual entertainment that Ubisoft or Sony provide to their players.

## **6.4 Conventions**

When the physical platforms are replaced by online TRPG platforms, some customs in conventions existed perpetuate, and some changed. In this section, I would like share my findings of five changes in conventions: world building, log report, fighting scenery, repeat

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play adventures and killing enemies.

#### **6.4.1 World building**

It is critical to consider how players may participate in the world building process and how GMs can utilize what the players want to see to mould the tale. A typical example is in the *Infinite Horror* TRPG. A GM (Player 2) has designed a grand and attractive worldview, which is the mix of advanced technology and magic in the future. He is good at playing the roles of characters and weaving the fantastic plots. However, he must deal with his own job and does not have enough time to make the game design more and more detailed. Therefore, he asked some other people, including me, who are players of this adventure as well, help and offer their inspiration. In the worldview of the *Infinite Horror* TRPG, there is a main world with a great number of some worlds, also called satellite planes, satellite dimensions or branch planes. In this trial, the GM took the charge of game design in the main world or main realm, and others can design satellite planes.

To help others take part in the world building, he has offered some paragraphs of guideline: “The culture of the satellite planes is a cultural derivative of the main realm; STs (“ST” means “storyteller”, are the name of the GM in the *Infinite Horror* TRPG) may create original worlds independently, but the values and culture of the world must not be too far removed from mundane values (It would be inappropriate in the case of designing a purely alien civilization). If the plane is from a cultural work, like World of Warcraft, Jin Yong Martial Arts, etc., it is recommended that similar elements should be merged into the same plane, instead of being created separately. Such as. the Jin Yong realm and the Gu Long plane are considered as a unified plane. Therefore, STs of satellite planes should refer to the timing of other STs to prevent the topics from crashing.

“Satellite planes should be linked to the main plane. STs can consider these planes in terms of social behaviour, resource endowment, cultural ties, etc. Any uncertainties can be determined in consultation with the ST of the main world. The planes connections include,

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play but are not limited to, familiar NPCs, character relationships, organisations, facilities, mission follow-up, etc. If there is a significant impact on the main world, please communicate with the ST of main world (It is himself.) and have a discussion. The discussion only needs to include the direction and possibilities, no need spoilers.

“An adventure to a satellite plane should include at least 3 PCs. The difficulty of the adventure should match players’ strength towards the main quest, and can be moderately increased on side quests. On the main quest and on general encounters, it is not recommended that players should face the danger of death.

“About the level designs, STs should take into account the team's path to completion of the mission, including plot play, combat ability, immunity, skills, information judgement, etc. For important bosses and NPCs, please make your designs deep and elegant, either by referring to the rule book or by designing your own.” (Player 2)

Then we take turns to design satellite planes and hold the post of GMs in the planes of our work. As player 3 said: “I am glad with it. I can experience funny adventure with my character for a period. Besides, if a GM treated me too strict, I can revenge him When I am the GM.” The part of players’ participation has coordination with other scholars’ research. As part of the game's preparation, players may collaboratively establish facts about the game world to help develop its history (Schneider *et al.*, 2004). The GM, as a competent storyteller, should listen to the players in order to acquire a feel of what they want to see (Hartley, 2014). For example, if players are eager for social interactions or a combat, the GM may supply these types of encounters (Hartley, 2014). This is also in line with the game guide's understanding of TRPGs as GMs sharing stories with other players (Dungeons & Dragons starter set, 2014).

#### **6.4.2 Log report**

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Log reports' function has changed in the digital age. Log reports are the records of what happened and what characters did in an adventure (Dicerbo and Kidwai, 2013). In video games, logs are recorded by the system automatically and can be used by game designers to analyze players' motivation (Harpstead *et al.*, 2015). Generally speaking, the GM or the player who used the Bard character would do that. The reason why bards were asked to do this job is that bards are considered to be the chroniclers and tale-bearers of the adventures. Therefore, "the members of the adventurer's party agreed that the bard would portray and tribute their adventuring career" (Player 8). From a perspective outside the magic circle, the bard assumes a supporting role in combat. This means that the player uses the bard character does not need to expend much energy on role-playing. Instead, the player can do the recording while the other characters are in action. It is ordinary to ask the player who did well in storytelling as well. Traditionally, the role of TRPG log reports is mainly to offer records to the players themselves. The audience are only the players and the GM who are involved in the adventure, so the players are free to use their own writing style and to make extensive use of passages that only the members of the small group will understand. For example, I have played a bard in TRPGs on a number of occasions. When I played a bard, at first, I was happy to take on the responsibility of taking notes and embellishing. Later I became a little unhappy. This was because the records of a particular TRPG adventure were often quite long. It takes a lot of effort to produce a log report that has some literary and artistic merit, that shows where the story is going and that also contains the flavour of the characters. While this is much easier than writing an academic report, it does require a lot of thought and effort. Also, TRPG adventures are often conducted at some regular frequency, such as once a week. This means that I need to write one of these reports every week. It felt more difficult than taking another course. Considering that I had only been taking three or four courses in the previous semester, this workload was overwhelming. And after completing the assignments in class, at least I could get marks and feedback. But after writing the TRPG log report, only the GM was willing to give me a few compliments, while other Players might just look at it and say something like "Good" or "Perfect". I do not hear much sincerity in their comments. In other cases, I may be criticised when my report does

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play not show a player character's strengths, or portrays an awkward or bad scene with a player character.

However, with the shift in the function of battle reports, the way they were written changed as well. Many TRPG log reports from small groups have become fodder for “video production and advertisements to recruit new players” (Player 6). There was a discussion about how to deal with the recording:

Player 6: “When we run in the future, remember to record. With recording, it's easy to edit and make videos. ”(In the context of Chinese TRPG, some players use the word "run" to represent the actions of taking part in TRPG adventures.)

Player 2: “Yes, we can record it so it's much more complete than watching Player 1's recordings. After all, he cannot write everything down (Player 1 is myself. Due to what I have written in the start of this part, I have taken the responsibility of log report writer for a long time.) After the recording, we can also look back at what we said and did before and see if our decisions were reasonable.”

Player 6: “By the way, I got another point. When we run, be careful not to use too erotic descriptions or carry out too violent actions, as it will be difficult to use it for making videos afterwards.”

Player 5: “I came to run to relax, not to work. You know what you are talking about? It means that I do not get money from the videos, and I have to take so much into account.”

Afterwards, I asked Player 6 about it in private:

Player 6: “I did not ask for anything harsh. There are even some uploaders on streaming video sites, like Bilibili, who do TRPG videos specifically to re-record the funny bits that have

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play happened. Because it is worth to pay attention to tone of voice and giving audience a good experience.”

I: “So you are not worried about this affecting the pace of the run?”

Player 6: “Yes. It does. But there have been times before when you are in the middle of playing and suddenly there are other things to distract you, such as eating, playing mobile games, talking with parents or friends. There have also been arguments over the rules, with several people dragging the GM through the rule book, which can take five or six minutes or even ten minutes to go through. I do not against you specially, but mean all of us have done these things. With so much going on to affect the pace, that is not much for me to do one more thing. Besides, this is going to be recorded on video, and it might even be able to get everyone more focused on our adventure.”

In this context, Instead of the personal preferences of the members of the clique, log reports are judged by their clarity, accuracy, liveliness and their ability to be recognized by players who have not experienced the adventure. Although before the digital age, it was ordinary for players to share their gaming experiences, such as, funny passages, painful memories and puzzling parts, to other players either verbally or in writing. In the digital age, however, people seem more comfortable sharing the big and small things in their lives through social media and streaming video sites, and the fun of TRPGs breaks more into the fun of small group gatherings. This results in a clear conflict of interest between players who see this simply as a means of relaxation and those, like Player 6 here, who see it not just as a means of relaxation but as a workflow for getting video footage and sharing it with their followers. Other scholars mainly paid attention to game log in video games, and there is no other academic resource about game logs in TRPGs (Cheong and Young, 2006; Dicerbo and Kidwai, 2013; Harpstead *et al.*, 2015; Westera *et al.*, 2013).

### **6.4.3 Fighting Scenario**

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

One of the new TRPG conventions of the digital age is that some GMs would like to host “special fighting scenarios”. A “special fighting scenario” is a teaching-based combat scenario with less storyline and role-playing and more combat than a normal one. For example, I was involved in one such scenario once. I was involved because the previous DND5Es I had been involved in were basically at T1, meaning Level 1 to 5, where the players and enemies were relatively weak. But this GM thought it was necessary for us to learn how to deal with powerful enemies. In this scenario, another player and I each used a Level 10 character. In the actual battle, we made some mistakes because we were not familiar with the combat strategies of the higher level characters and ended up with a mediocre ending. Even though I learned a lot, I did not have a good experience within the game.

After the ending of the scenario, I had a discussion with the GM:

I: “For about 90 minutes of this TRPG gameplay, I did not have any opportunity to explore the world or have my player character make emotional connections with other characters. This made me feel like I was back in a university classroom, attending a seminar and having the lecturer check that I had studied the readings before the class.”

The GM: “I understand your feelings. But scenarios like this are designed to familiarise you with rulebooks of the 5th of DND in a short time. Just reading it will not be enough for you to integrate it.”

I: “I know. But why do we need to master these skills completely? The characters we play aren't perfect and don't react infallibly in combat.”

The GM: “Yes. While, the character's mistakes are already reflected by the dice rolls. A wizard may fail in chanting the incantation, but might not forget the spells he has learned.”

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

I: "There are many spells in DND, and it's not too late to learn them when we actually encounter them within the story."

The GM: "That's true if you are the only one in the team. But we also have to consider the feelings of the others. Is that fair for them to embark on a journey with such an awful adventurer?"

#### **6.4.4 Repeat adventures**

Some players choose to participate in the TRPG adventure that they have already finished when playing online. TRPG modules are different from campaigns in video games. After someone has ended his or her adventure during the module, he or she could comprehend all of the hints, puzzles, character relationships and storyline inside it. Therefore, it is meaningless to restart a new adventure by the same module. However, when I communicated with a player (Player 12) who did that, his opinion is different from that traditional convention:

*"I am familiar the module. But the same module can be interpreted differently in the hands of different DMs (Dungeon Masters, the name of Game Masters in the TRPG Dungeons & Dragons). They also have different interpretations of the same NPC's (Non-player character) personalities. I would like to experience more possibilities of the story, and try to lead to a different ending. Another reason is that when I join a group, I can also give some guideline to newcomers. If those raw hands fall into traps and get captured or killed by the enemy because they are not familiar with DND rules or strategy, then they will have a poor experience."*

When I asked further questions, he responded that as a player who has already experienced a module, he should know restraint and not overuse his information advantage:

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

If I were to participate in a TRPG adventure that I had already played once, I would tell the GM in advance that I had already played it and let him decide whether to let me participate in the adventure. Also, I would not reveal a puzzle to other players before the clues have been collected. It is because that would be cheating and would ruin the game experience for everyone.

#### **6.4.5 Faster-paced gameplay**

According to Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeon master's guide* (Master, 2014:37), In the DND, if the encounters level is identical with the adventure party level, then a character in the adventure party will level up during every 13.33 encounters events. According to this guide, 13 or 14 encounters events happen "quickly" (Master, 2014:37). However, it really takes too much fighting. Although some other things besides combat are counted as encounters, such as disarming traps. For the most part, encounters must be resolved by means of combat.

In actual execution, facing and dealing with encounters is very slow. As I have experienced in my fieldwork, even in battles of low-level characters, an encounter often takes half an hour or an hour.

In the case of higher-level battles, where the strength of both sides and the abilities they can use have grown considerably, the battles last longer. It may be that a realistic half hour to an hour corresponds to just one turn in the game. (In TRPGs, it is common to have 10 rounds a minute. That means that this represents six seconds elapsing for the game character.)

This may make many players feel impatient. For example:

Player 6: "Why do you set up so many battles in the adventure?"

I: "To let players can experience the fun of fighting and can use different spells to defeat different enemies."

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

Player 6: "But there are just a few spells that can be used. For example, my character this time is a warlock and I only known a few spells. Most of time, I can only use cantrips to solve problems. The best cantrip, you must know it even I do not say it clear."

I: "Yes, the most powerful cantrip for a warlock is 'Eldritch Blast'."

Player 6: "Yeah, so whether the enemy is a goblin, a goblin or an elemental creature, I mostly play to deal the most efficient damage to the enemy. You are playing a different number of different races of enemies each time, and you might think that, as the GM, you are having a good experience. But I just kept repeating a handful of spells and found it boring."

Player 5: "Yeah, if you really want to schedule a lot of battles, why not making them interesting?"

After listening to the players and reflecting on it, I reduced the number of battles and allowed the player characters to level up every 3-4 encounters. This was because I found that there was no way I could design battles to be as fun as an intense video game. Therefore, it was better to simplify the battles and let the player characters advance to the next level after they had a rough idea of the status, combat abilities, spells and tactics of the characters of a certain level. When other players took the responsibility of GMs, the game paces were variable. But most of time they were also faster than what the *Dungeon master's guide* suggested. I think they may have also considered that rewards and character advancement should be given out faster to keep players happy when leading a group TRPG players who are already familiar with the pace of video games' combat.

## 6.5 New view of life and death about TRPG characters

This is one of the most important themes of my entire thesis. In this section, I will focus on the life and death of player characters in TRPGs and use this as a starting point to explore the impact of character death on different dimensions of online TRPGs. The key finding of this section is that the death of a character in a online TRPG implies a break in the player-character relationship, whereas if the player-character relationship is not broken, then the character has not died in a serious sense.

In real life, when people talk about death, such as saying he or she would like to kill someone, what they said can be viewed as just a deterrent, and the most horrible sufferings may be different kinds of torture. Offline TRPG looked similar to what happened in real life in this perspective, even in the TRPG COC, a TRPG that players characters are weak and can hardly find an efficient way to kill their enemy, GM might not kill players' characters frequently. For example, a GM has hosted COC TRPG for about 4 years in 3 game groups and only killed one player character (Canageek, 2010).

However, in the online game world, death is a common thing. Many TRPG rulesets revolve around how to attack enemies and reduce the enemy's health, such as the DND. This is very unique. In the real world, even soldiers do not have many short-term encounters with the enemy in their careers. Since the character played by the player can destroy the life of the enemy, the enemy will naturally harm the player and even cause the player to die as well. To some extent, death in the game is torture in real life. As the player 2 said, "when a player's character dies in a TRPG, this player loses the right to freely determine the character's speech or behavior, that is why people try to prevent player character from being killed". After a player's character died, this player can only watch other players try to resurrect the character, or sit around and watch other players play their characters in the game. As Frasca said, if a player's character dies, this player may be unable to return to the game (Frasca, 2001).

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

In online TRPG, some common players and GMs have a special attitude to the death and life of player characters. Compared with death in offline TRPG, death in online TRPG is very different. This matter seems to have become very solemn and very frivolous. From a solemn aspect, in TRPG, the host (DM or KP) can completely kill the player characters. In some Cthulhu-related modules (ruleset: COC or TOC), death is the only destination of the story. This is much more solemn than in real life. From a frivolous point of view, death in the game may not be a major failure in an online TRPG. If the GM is good at listening to the opinions of players modestly, then when a player's character dies in the game, this player may choose to argue with the GM for reasons, thinking that his decision will not lead to the death of the character. The GM may also adopt his opinions. In addition, if the character has grown to a certain extent in a world of swords and magic, then resurrection is not a whimsical thing. Even resurrection is not a complicated matter. As long as the priest played by the player has sufficient knowledge of divine arts and is willing to spend some spell-casting materials, usually expensive jewels, he can release spells and revive a character. The conditions for this kind of resurrection are so loose that sometimes I wonder one thing. It is whether the heads of state and government who can get the support of religious leaders in a world where resurrection is so common are only possible to die for the reason that their lifespan is exhausted. After all, deaths caused by battles or accidents can be saved by spells.

In this case, once the player character in the adventuring party reaches a relatively high level, such as level 9 in DND5E, they are fully capable of casting a resurrection spell that will bring the character back from the dead. In this case, player 3 argues, "Death is a slight negation of the player's actions. If a GM lets a character die, then that GM has negated the player who manipulated that character." I asked for details. He said: "This negation could be in play, in reinforcement, or in luck. Negation in play means that the player character has incurred a strong enemy at a relatively weak time, or has treated an ally in such a rude and inappropriate way that the crowd has turned against them. A neg on player enhancement means that the GM believes the character should have used more effective equipment and more capable means of dealing with enemies. A denial of luck, on the other hand, means

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play that it is not the GM's intention to be difficult or critical of the player, but simply that he or she has to do so out of respect for the outcome of the dice rolling." I agree with this opinion. If the GM's negation is based on fairness and logic, then the death of a player character can be a negative experience with positive implications (Flynn-Jones, 2015; Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2003).

What happens when a character dies in an online TRPG is interesting. In the world outside the game, many people will leave a testament when their lives are about to end. But what can be involved in a testament is the world of the living. No will can arrange the world after death. But, what about that in TRPG? Death is a part of the game, and it does not mean the end of a travel.

I witnessed a similar case by personally. There is a player who plays as a swordsman in a TRPG. In the process of cultivation, unfortunately, he was injured and dying, leaving only a few days of life. In these few days, he heard that his "best buddy" had sex with his wife. He was very angry. So, he asked another swordsman to kill his "best buddy". He passed away when the swordsman he entrusted just embarked on a journey. If this is a real-life-like story. So, whether the character's "best buddy" is killed or not, it will have no effect on his fate. But in the TRPG world, the game host can weave the storyline in a strange way.

After the death of the original role, the player needs to play as a new character. After all, if he does not play a new character, he will have to quit his playing. Among the several options given by the host, he chose to play the "best buddy" before. Then, he just started to think about how to play as such a person, and the swordsman arrived. After a fierce battle, he, as the "best buddy" died. This seems to indicate that he died in his own hands. From a spiritual perspective, it is that his ghost is unwilling to give up on the road of revenge. However, when he played the role as the "best buddy", he did not deliberately let this character do ridiculous things or deliberately suicide. He is still following this character's previous background, hobbies and temperament. Therefore, if an NPC living in this TRPG world saw

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play the life of this “best buddy”, he would probably think that this is not a good person, but the logic of this person’s behavior is self-consistent. This is not a suspected mental patient either. In this example, death is the ending of a character’s life, and a beginning of the connections between a player with a character as well. Death can be used to explore the game or to learn more about expected possibilities (Mukherjee, 2009). He told me that it was an amazing experience. He was sad during the process of playing the character. But after the game came to an end, he felt that this innovative experience allowed him to better empathise with the characters in the story. This has revealed a function of death in a virtual online game. Characters’ death let players go into a shared world and imagination. According to Mizer (2019), it affects not just the narrative trajectory and emotional evolution of their characters they controlled in the game, but also themselves and their TRPG small group outside of the setting of the game.

After finding out what this player thought, I went back to ask the GM of the time.

I: “I have not seen you use this technique before for the life and death of characters in TRPGs. Why did you do it this time?”

The GM: “When we did TRPG adventures before, the relationship between players and characters was too rigid. I wanted to allow the players to experiment with more possibilities and to stop treating the characters they play in a completely traditional way. I wanted to shape the idea that they were just playing, not really the character in the game.”

I: “I did not see you do that when you were doing TRPGs online. Is it because it is an online TRPG now that you are doing this?”

The GM: “You can actually do that offline as well. It is just that online it is easier to create electronic character cards, and typing on Excel is in a printed font. Offline it is easier to have something on the character cards that everyone has recorded, and it is easier to develop a

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

deep bond as you're constantly scribbling and wiping and taking notes. I have seen players cry bitterly after their character's death. I did not want to irritate him like that."

I: "But doing so online may equally irritate the player."

The GM: "Yes, but this player is a Buddhist and is more at peace with himself. I do not do this with every player."

Judging from subsequent developments, he did have some success with this hosting strategy. Some players were able to better separate themselves from their characters and keep their distance from them. But some problems raised from this, for example, one player thus distanced himself from the character so much that he turned the character into his own tool altogether. So that the character's personality changed much too quickly during the story and many of his actions are illogical.

Based on the content addressed above, in online TRPGs, GMs and players are dealing with the death of a player character in a different way than in offline TRPGs. Firstly, the death of a player character does not imply a strong negation of the player. Death is simply a normal part of the adventure story. As soon as this consensus can be established, the death of a character becomes an in-game action that GMs can more readily employ, rather than an out-of-game denial by the players. Secondly, player characters' death scenes occur more frequently. This dilutes the connection between the player and the character and makes the player more inclined to see the character they are manipulating not as their own incarnation in the game, but as a conduit to experience a TRPG. Thirdly, the passing of a player character is not a great loss to the player, given that technological advances have made it less difficult to create a new character card. This aspect of the technique has been discussed in the first section of this chapter.

The emergence of this situation is an important example of the impact of technology on culture.

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

When analyzing digital game *Advance Wars 2* in the perspective of technoculture, Giddings proposed any specific game-event is realized by feedback between imagination, motor abilities, and software features ranging from virtual worlds to intelligent agents (Giddings, 2007). TRPGs are no exception. The ease of making digital character cards, where a skilled player may be able to make a new character card in just ten minutes or even a few minutes, also makes the negative feedback from the matter of the original character card being discarded less likely. As Latour said, if you would like to realize what a non-human does, picture what other humans or non-humans would have to do if this character were not around (Latour, 1992). If there is no digital character card, it can hardly imagine players' attitude to death of their player characters may change such heavily.

## 6.6 Cultural value of hardware

When technologies made TRPG transform from a type of traditional board game to a kind of game that can be played online, its cultural value has also been changed. According to Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014), the language of values in play can be reflected in 15 game elements. In this section, I would like to analyze the digital change about TRPG values based on one of these game elements: Hardware.

Game hardware influences how game creators think about games. The hardware—the system memory's core capacity, the performance of graphics processors, and the material device of the mouse, joystick, or keyboard—frames the potentialities of designers' innovations (Montfort and Bogost, 2020). New forms of games are conceivable with each advancement in hardware (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014). This makes sense in the field of digital TRPGs. The following is an example:

Once, I have asked the TRPG players in the small group, "Now that we're all playing TRPGs

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

online, what do you think of this way of playing?”

Player 3: “ That is good. Now I do not have to move things around and around. You know, I have a lot of miniature tokens, one or two of them do not weigh much. But when 70 or 80 of them were added up, they were quite heavy. If I had to move them around every time, it would not be very convenient. If I take the underground with so much stuff, it is difficult. If I drive or take a taxi, it is will be expensive.”

Player 4 told me privately: “I think it is fine. I do not have to worry about accidentally breaking my miniature tokens when I’m playing. I hate Player 3’s approach, because his miniature tokens are not particularly expensive or rare. Every time we play, we are always told not to damage them by him. If he cannot afford the possibility to lose them, he should just leave them at home and collect them all.”

Player 6: “I think it is good that I do not have to worry about saving character cards, miniature tokens and maps.”

Player 6 sometimes works as a photographer and has to buy and keep a large variety of props in his house. Before the pandemic of COVID-19, I have visited his apartment near a university several times and found clutter are spread everywhere, including table, bookshelf and shelf. If you purchased something new, it was hard to find the right storage space. When we played together before, we have had trouble finding maps or character cards. The character cards had a lot of information on them and when we all recalled them together, our memories differed from each other and arguments arose.

After about three months, the subject came up once again. I got a different answer.

Player 3: “I still prefer face-to-face. If we play online, why do not we go and play video games? Why don’t we go and play League of Legends or Dota? There are just a few boring miniature

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play tokens online, and they do not look good.”

When I first heard this, I was a bit surprised and worried. I wondered if he would resist this form of gaming and thus make my participant observation unproductive or hard to continue. Fortunately, he was just whining. There was some validity to his point. But there is a difference between the interaction of a video game and the interaction of a TRPG, which is very different from a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game like League of Legends or Dota. On this basis, I have three inferences. The first possibility is that he does not care exactly what game he plays, as long as he plays it within this small group. The second possibility is that the new format of the game increases the cost of learning, and that this learning cost appears to be higher for him. The third possibility is that the design is not too bad from my point of view, considering the wide variety of miniature tokens, and I suspect that he did not say what the real reason was, but was disgruntled because his status within the small group had fallen. In previous face-to-face encounters, because of the large number of miniature tokens purchased and offered, many players were overly polite to him, and even though he sometimes acted brashly, his requests could often be accommodated. But online, this advantage no longer exists, and the position he has gained through the provision of material materials is no longer as stable as it used to be.

I also asked Player 9 the same question mentioned earlier. Unlike other players, Player 9 has almost never been involved in face-to-face offline TRPGs, and his TRPG experience is mainly based on online platforms. In other words, based on his TRPG experience, he is an internet native.

Player 9: “I do not dare to participate in face-to-face TRPG at the moment. It is a tough challenge for me. If I were to do a playthrough with someone face to face, then my tone, mannerisms and movements would need to match the character, and I am unable to do that.”

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play

I: "It is not that difficult, we players are not professional actors."

Player 9: "Even for amateur actors, it is still necessary to consider body shape, looks and gender, right? I can play a female when I type on my keyboard. But you have seen me, and you know I am a man."

I: "Even if I had not seen you, I would have known that you were a man."

Player 9: "It is not the same thing. It is easier to immerse myself in a virtual environment when I am typing on my keyboard. Besides, being in a room with a lot of such people makes me feel uncomfortable."

I: "Why do you feel uncomfortable? You have actually known them for some time and have known their moral qualities and character."

Player 9: "It is just like the same thing I mentioned earlier. Even if others do not consider playing, I do. When I am typing, I can describe the setting of adventure environment and the action of characters word by word. But in person, my attention is obviously not on the keyboard, but on the people in the room. By the way, I cannot remember all of clues, I certainly cannot type as fast as they can talk. But if it is online and everyone's typing, I can just hack the chat. When playing offline, I cannot record it and then play it back."

Player 9 repeatedly mentions the keyboard as a piece of hardware. This brings me to an important change that digitization has brought to TRPG: the ability to use the hardware. Although using a keyboard does not require a high level of intelligence, it is still a skill that needs to be exercised and developed. More importantly, typing with a keyboard is in many cases a job, not a recreation. In previous online TRPG adventures, all of us in the small group were able to use computer keyboards and mobile phone keyboards proficiently to type large amounts of information quickly and accurately in situations that required it for

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play work. But on TRPG, it was clear that speaking was much less effort in conveying information.

In Player 9's customary puzzle-based TRPGs, the GM often buries clues in the text descriptions and wait players to dig them out. In order to solve a puzzle, players often need to look for clues from scenes that are 20 minutes or even an hour old. This brings out the advantages of typed communication. It is because of this hardware has been used broadly, that such TRPG modules, with their many clues and distances from each other, are designed.

In summary, changes in hardware have brought about changes not only in the platform of the game, but also in the status of players within the small TRPG community. In addition, the way the game is played has also changed because of hardware. The digitization of TRPG has narrowed the inequalities between the economies of TRPG players, and has made some of those who previously benefited from such inequalities feel lost. In addition, there is a problem that what does digitization mean for TRPG players who do not have sufficient financial means to buy a personal computer or a smartphone. However, my field research did not include such players. Although the players in my participant observation had different financial incomes and family backgrounds, there were no one's financial belongs to such extent.

## **6.7 Summary**

In summary, I found that there is something need to be discussed in the field of TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play.

Character cards are frequently present in TRPG studies and have some value in the development of TRPG studies from analog game studies to digital game studies. However, previous scholars have not explore further in this aspect, nor have they specifically analysed

TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play what impact and changes digitalisation has had on TRPG character cards. Their rise is inextricably tied to the progress of civil software. The vast number of formulae and automated computations incorporated in these environmentally friendly character cards accelerates the game while relieving GMs and common players of hard calculation during TRPG parties. The simplicity of modifying, reading, and sharing also eliminates the author's actual materials and penmanship. However, it also introduces additional issues, making it easier for some players to make a practice of cheating.

The study of dice has been a constant feature of TRPG research. There are many TRPGs that have covered dice in their papers or discussed the function of dice in TRPGs. Their analyses are useful in understanding traditional TRPGs, but do not take into account the changes brought about by digital TRPGs. Instead, I found that the instrumental nature of the dice itself has changed since its materiality was replaced by computer software or mobile phone applications.

Although there has been a lot of support for the promotion of Online miniature tokens and there is a large amount of software available, there have been many difficulties in practice. In the transition from traditional TRPGs to digital TRPGs, a new culture has not yet been established. Many players do not want to pay for online 3D modelling and access to software. In addition, the high learning costs and the slow pace of operation are also important factors that affect the gaming experience in this matter.

In the digital age, with more sophisticated tools for building character cards than traditionally available, many DMs no longer see killing a player character as a negative situation that is so bad they need to avoid it, but rather as a negative experience with positive implications. But technological advances do not compensate for the wear and tear on the player's projection of effort into the character. Therefore, there is a need for experimentation and thought on how to set the right level of difficulty and puzzles to allow the player to experience the thrill of the game while still being able to reasonably project

their avatar onto the character.

Changes in hardware have resulted in changes to the game's platform and players' position within the tiny TRPG community. Furthermore, hardware has altered how players play the game. TRPG digitization has reduced inequities between TRPG players' economies, making some of those who formerly profited from such discrepancies feel lost. Furthermore, it is interesting to investigate what digitisation implies for TRPG players without the financial resources to purchase a computer or a smartphone.

## **Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication**

Fine proposed a three-layered framework for tabletop role-playing (Fine, 1983). The first layer is the primary frame occupied by people, which is restricted by players' social relationship. The secondary frame occupied by players, and it is constructed by TRPG rules. The tertiary frame is the diegetic frame, and this one is with regard to the world characters live in (Fine, 1983). In this chapter, I would like focus on the layer of players, pay attention to players' actions and emotions. Specifically, this chapter is connected to interpersonal relationships among digital TRPG plays in three aspects: digital gathering, group problems and distribution.

### **1. Digital gathering**

It is necessary to pay attention to what the members of the TRPG small group are doing while they are getting together. The most important activity is obviously playing TRPG. But that is not the only activity players do when they are getting together. They also discuss the merits of the rules, compare different rules, evaluate the role-play and arrange the time for the meeting afterwards.

## 2. Group problems

Further exploration will be conducted on some group problems existing in this small group communications, which are listed as follows: What kind of small group spread will occur? What are the consequences of these problems? Why do these problems occur?

## 3. Solve group problems

After comprehending group problems in TRPG parties, it is worth thinking about solving these problems mentioned before. How are these problems resolved? After being resolved, will these problems reappear? In small groups, are there any long-term mechanisms established to avoid these problems? This part can show the readers how a GM can use his or her initiative and communication skills to promote the smooth running of the TRPG party in a harmonious atmosphere.

## 4. Distribution in TRPG

In any small-group communication, the distribution of the results produced by group cooperation is an important issue. Even when the glory generated by small group cooperation belongs to the group, or is not manifested in the form of financial income as a result, there is still the question of how to distribute it. In TRPGs, for example, the spoils of war that players can distribute are not the fruits of their labour in the usual sense, but rather resources that can be obtained infinitely in the virtual world. But in the digital age, the distribution of such resources is also unique. This is an aspect of small group communication theory that has not been addressed much in the past. Even in offline studies of small group communication, the main focus has been on how the participants work together to accomplish the tasks of the small group, rather than on the distribution of benefits once the goals have been achieved (Cragan *et al.*, 2008). There seems to be limited research on virtual cliques.

## 7.1 Digital Gathering

For TRPG small groups, most of the interaction takes place in TRPG gatherings. The various players in small group communications also present and function at TRPG gatherings. However, there are also some communications activities that precede and follow the TRPG gathering. These activities can be viewed as a kind of “virtual water cooler”, and give group members an opportunity and a period to maintain and strengthen fragile virtual group relationships (Kandola, 2006). These activities broadly include the following: discussion of rules content, comparing TRPG rules, analyzing role-playing, reviewing storyline and arranging next party. Then I will discuss them in detail.

1. Discussion of the rules to be used next time, and versions and extensions of that rule.

2. Comparing different rules or different TRPG parties.

For example, of these two, I have talked with player 14 as following:

Player 14: “Look at this rule, it only costs D+549 to buy 9 anti-tank mines.”

I: “Indeed, it seems to be good value for money. I was not reading this part of the rules too carefully before and didn't think about it.”

Player 14: “So are you learning other rules? Apart from DND, COC and *Infinite horror*, what rules do you like?”

I: “*Age of Harmony*. It is a very concise rule.” (Then, I sent the *Age of Harmony* rulebook to this player.)

Player 14: “It rings a bell, was it the group where I tried to slip someone with a banana back in the day?”

I: "Yes."

Player 14: "It shows the beauty of simplicity. It's a shame that it's so short there's a loophole for ambiguity. The rules still need to be facetious."

This can be categorised under the part on rule selection and rule learning. However, given that the focus of this section is on interpersonal communication in small groups, I will not describe the details about rules here. More discussion of the rules will be specified in Chapter 7.

3. Discussing the storyline of the game characters from the previous TRPG party, and the possibility of future episodes. For example, I have talked infinite horror with player 2 in Wechat:

I: "The previous battle was a complete let-down, and if people did not plan their battles properly, like when Little Wind (the name of player 14's character in this module) went to war with the court jester in the absence of those two, they could have also sought Asura's help and lost just a little reward. But one participation in the battle plus one bloodline awakening is a kindness to Asura, and I do not plan to have this character out to help adventurers fight again after that."

Player 2: "Player 7 and Player 13 are already up for the fight. I think their characters are strong enough and the world can stop being so friendly."

I: "I can adjust it. But I am sure it cannot be as hard as what player 6 has done when he was the GM. At that time, even player 3's character was beaten and near to death. If the This difficult challenge was put into these three, they are doomed to be beaten thoroughly."

Player 2: “Well, well, the monster strength, the test dimension and the choice difficulty are all not quite the same between different GMs.”

I: “There were multiple D level and C level treasure chests set up. But they have not opened them yet, so maybe the conditions set by me were too subtle or harsh? I could tweak it a bit in that regard.

About D level and C level treasure, there is a picture of distribution in section 4 of this chapter.

This discussion is to some extent in line with the interpretation of the “Swift Trust”, and such small groups are made up of persons with varied abilities who may not have a lot of time to engage in relationships (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer, 1996). But TRPG small group communication is different from ordinary virtual small group communication. In my fieldwork research, I found that the dual perspective of players and player characters made a wonderful difference. From the perspective of the player characters, these characters exist and act only during a campaign or even a party. This also leads to a sense of detachment between the individual player characters, and players may not be very well versed in their own player characters, *let alone* in the player characters of others. However, there is a trust that is quickly established between these player characters. This is because the players who play them have known each other for a long time and are good at working with each other.

4. Discussion of the game characters played by themselves or other players, and the strengths, weakness and development strategies of those characters. This discussion allows TRPG players to see each other's role-playing from a different perspective and to share their own gains and losses in exploration and combat. According to Kandola (2006), a lack of response or virtual silence may interrupt production, cause mistrust, and jeopardise the fabric of team relationships. This discussion thus served to maintain and deepen the relationship.

For example, in 2022 May, there was a conversation among our small group:

Player 6: "I would like to build one. What classes are in shortage now?"

Player 3: "Shortage...? There is a shortage of those who cannot only fight, but also resist and cure."

I: "Classes not in shortage now: Warrior, Mage, Bard, Warlock."

Classes in shortage now: Druid, Barbarian, Cleric, Monk, Paladin, Sorcerer, Ranger, Wanderer

Player 6: "Then I will just do the same as always and try to be a Cleric. Let me look at the builds of cleric."

Player 14: "Paladin is good too."

I: "Okay. My advice is that you would better have a decent faith, I mean besides [toilet] [evil sword fairy] or something like that."

Player 14: "You may have the faith of SanLu."

5. Discussing the time, place and participants of the next TRPG party. For example, when I was the GM of a TRPG used the 5th of DND:

I: "I estimated that the start time for the 6th adventure of us is 6th June, Sunday, 15:00 pm. In the view of the fact that we all may have erratic schedules. The adventure will take place as normal if there are 3 PCs at a time, or a week later if there are not."

Player 7: "Got it."

Player 14: "I apply to switch the time to Saturday."

Player 7: "Oh. Saturday....."

Player 14: "Can player 5 take part in the adventure this week?"

Player 5: "I should be able to on time, but I have never joined in the adventure for a long time, and I am too far behind you. I am afraid your adventure will be delayed, if you explain all the things to me in the party. If there are enough people, I would like to come next time."

Player 14: "It does not matter. I feel like I am getting to where you are the expert. Or maybe you can write the scripts well and go to the mythology and die for another round." (Player 5's job is dramatist, so player 14 said "write the scripts". The mythology is another TRPG ruleset, and some of us has participated in it.)

Player 5: "Okay, I will find time to update my character card first."

It is worth exploring whether this communication in preparation for a TRPG game was within or outside the Magic circle. We both understood and used the rules of the game. From that aspect, we were already in the Magic circle. But considering that we have not yet officially started the game, nor have we taken out character cards, dice, maps and other tools needed for TRPG play, we seem to be outside the Magic circle again. It should be stressed that in the conversation above, talking about faith, Player 14 says, "You may have the faith of SanLu." Sanlu is not a term used in TRPGs, nor is it about any DND rules, elements of the Forgotten Realms world. This is a Chinese food company that was once infamous for adding melamine to milk. Tied to this context, his words become subtle. When I asked Player 14 about it afterwards, he said he was only joking and did not intend Player 6 to worship the company as a unique deity. After all, as numerous as the gods are in the world of DND, such

apparently illogical and out-of-world gods could not be incorporated into its existing polytheistic system, nor could they bestow priestly divine magic and the ability to purify skeletons. However, this statement makes it clear that our discussion is at a tipping point between the in-game and out-of-game worlds. We can think and speak based on the knowledge and circumstances of our in-game characters. Further, we clearly see each other as players rather than as characters played by players.

There is also a type of interaction that can be considered in the cracks of TRPG parties. When a TRPG has a relatively large number of people and the GM is unable or has difficulty hosting a TRPG that involves all the players at the same time, there will be some players who choose not to participate or sit in for a while, meaning that they are learning where the story is going, but their characters are not participating in the interaction. But inside the of the Magic Circle, the characters they play are still living, they just is not giving further orders to their characters. So, at the right time, the GM may ask if there are any bystanders who intend to join in on this TRPG party.

This occurred once when I was playing *The Outcast* TRPG. I was playing a character travelling to Wudang Mountain and another spectator player was playing a character who happened to be a disciple of Wudang Mountain. Therefore, he transformed from being a spectator player to an involved player. This was because we already knew that Wudang Mountain had a pivotal place in this worldview. Although the character I played did not know the character he played, I did know that he was listening and that he was playing a disciple of Wudang Mountain. In this way, I actively created an opportunity for my player character to connect with other characters' stories.

The mechanics of bystanders are used commonly while working on the *Infinite Horror* TRPG. In the very first two TRPG plays for each player character, the GM deliberately stipulated that only one player character would make an appearance. Whereas during the actual play, most of the time there are three to five spectator players. These players can listen in to learn

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

about the worldview and plan their player character's next steps, as well as learning about the development paths of different player characters to determine team composition and enhancements. In March 2022, one player expressed his dissatisfaction with the current mechanics.

The player: "When I was the GM, every time someone wished to participate in a TRPG play, I would try my best to make them have a TRPG play to participate. But when you were the GM now, you made it twice for each player. I also helped you with the mapping and you would not give me more chances. Also, other people's TRPG plays were longer and I was at a disadvantage."

The GM: "You are getting pleasure because you have auditioned other people's TRPG plays!"

The Player: "I am unhappy, I have got emotional damage!"

When confronted with this issue, the GM did not give the player many opportunities to develop his own adventure. The GM explained that it would be unfair to the other players to allow him to have more personal involvement in TRPG time. As a compromise, the GM came up with the option of making him the acting director of the school. In this story, each player character starts out as a student in a senior-high school and an important part of finding their own path is communicating with and getting help from the director of their school's superpower department. In the original setting, this position was filled by a non-player character. But given the player's desperate need to increase his involvement, the GM gave him this position. He was paid 500 dollars per day (where dollar is the original currency of the worldview) for 60 days (game time), a total of 30,000 dollars. When any other player character visits the director in the office, 10,000 dollars is deducted if he is no longer there. This is a constraint, and prevents other players from applying for similar treatment if they find out he has been given this special treatment. The other players don't often observe the TRPG play, so if they did the same, it would be more than worth it.

## **7.2 Group problems**

It is increasingly likely that people will be a member of project teams and virtual teams (Hofstede, 1984). Improvements in cultural awareness and interpersonal skills will play an ever-growing role in the success of individuals and teams in small settings (Shuter, 2002). In this section, I will discuss how the theory of small group communication works for TRPG small group communication in the digital age, based on the combination of field research and the emergence and resolution of groups problems of this theory. These problems are some typical of those I have observed in online TRPGs. However, from my personal experience, these problems are also presented in offline TRPGs. Although the digitisation process has had an impact on them, this impact has not been dramatic.

### **7.2.1 Contradiction caused by time arrangement**

For a small group, regular gatherings are necessary both in the virtual and physical environment. As technological advancements continue to reshape the role of time and place, the office has already expanded to encompass the airport, the hotel lobby, WIFI hotspots, and a screened-in porch overlooking people's backyards (Kandola, 2006). The lack of regular gatherings will put the legitimacy of the small group at risk. A person may be in several small groups at the same period, with different small groups requiring a certain amount of time and energy from him, and things

outside the small groups requiring him spending time as well. In this way, this person may not have the means to meet the demands of the different cliques. How would a player make a decision in such a situation? A very simple decision would be to simply leaving the small group. This is the case for a number of people in the TRPG community that I personally know. When they were at university, they got involved in the TRPG community. By the time they graduate from university and start the professional career, they stop playing TRPGs.

A more complicated decision is to reduce the time spend on TRPGs. Specifically, this can be divided into three types of situations. The first is to stay within one's comfort zone, playing only the TRPGs one is already familiar with and not learning about other TRPGs, new versions of the current TRPG or new expansions to the current version of the TRPG. The second type goes a step further than the first by reducing the frequency of community activity from the first. For example, in a community where there are two regular weekly TRPG events, someone who previously participated in both would now only participate in one of them. The third type goes beyond the second by only participating in one TRPG, and there is no guarantee that he or she will attend every time.

From the GM's perspective, compared with the third situation, the first two situations are both better handled. Since a player chooses not to enter a particular TRPG in the first place, there is no need for the GM to think much about it, so it saves time. However, if one has promised to enter a series of TRPG party and is not able to participate every time, the situation is a bit trickier. For example, one of the Infinite Horror TRPGs that I was the GM who had five people sign up in the beginning. Then when I wove the story line, I prepared it according to the situation of the five players. However, during the process, two people were absent the first time and one the second. There were only two players who attended both times. This made it difficult for me. If I continued to lay the groundwork for the other player characters, then they might be absent from time to time, making my story confusing and the ambush difficult to wrap up. If I focus on the players who come every time, then those who sometimes comes may have even less presence and sense of belonging, and are more likely to choose to invest less time and effort in the small group.

Within the same small TRPG group, there can be contradictions over time allocation. I personally experienced this situation. In February 2022, after studying the ruleset of Infinite Horror, I attempted to take on the role of GM and start a TRPG journey based on this ruleset. As suggested by the ruleset of Infinite Horror, a full Infinite Horror TRPG play should include

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

20 TRPG parties. I thought that might be a bit too long, so I was going to finish the story in the range of 15 to 16 parties. After discussing this with other players, I have settled on a TRPG party time of every Sunday morning. In order to be the GM of this TRPG party, I had to get up at 6.30am on a Sunday morning. This was to fit in with the other players' schedules. There are 6 people involved in this TRPG and apart from me, 4 of the other 5 players are in China and 1 in the UK. Therefore, I had to take into account the time-zone difference. The first five TRPG parties all went smoothly. But after the fifth one was over, I was preparing for the sixth one when there was a mishap. Another person, someone who was in our TRPG small group but not involved in the TRPG play, announced that he was about to start hosting a new TRPG module, which he had originally created. He then made an announcement to gather players. The ruleset he used were also the Infinite Horror.

This left me in a dilemma: should I continue with the group, or should I pause? Even though this GM did not ask me for anything in this regard, I still needed to think about this question. All five players involved in Infinite Horror, where I was GM, signed up for the new Infinite Horror TRPG play. On the positive side, this was because they had gotten a good feel for the rules and enjoyed a good gaming experience during the TRPG parties I hosted. So, when they found out that another GM was going to start a new TRPG play based on this ruleset, they immediately chose to sign up. However, on the negative side, participating in two TRPGs at the same period takes up a lot of time. Even if I were to continue, they would hardly have enough energy to think about the story development and character card enhancements for this TRPG. More importantly, this GM conducts TRPGs for a long time each week. Whereas I generally only host one TRPG party per week that is about 3 hours long, each TRPG he hosts is one-on-one, with only 1 player attending at a time, and the other players can choose whether or not to spectate, and the duration is about 2 hours. But he expects to conduct 4 times a week, which is 8 hours. If a player wants to have a full understanding of the worldview and find the right companion in the story and work well together, then he needs to spectate each TRPG play.

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

Besides, the issue of scheduling is not only about co-ordination of time. It is also the phrasing of the schedule that needs to be taken into account. For example, in 7.2, I said "I estimated that the start time for the 6th adventure of us is 6th June, Sunday, 15:00 pm. The adventure will take place as normal if there are 3 PCs at a time, or a week later if there are not." (In view of the fact that it was presented in the previous section, and in view of space limitations, only this paragraph is quoted here.)

Player 5 did not object to my wording at the time. But some time later, when we came to the subject, Player 5 said: "That's a very insensitive way of putting it. When I read it, I just thought we were going to have a party together. But I didn't feel the attraction of the party at all. What's the difference between me going to your party and someone else's party? I know you have written log reports carefully and thought about character design and story properly, but when it comes to scheduling, very boring! Is it a math teacher scheduling time to teach students to do calculations?"

This shows that for players pursuing role-playing, scheduling statements can also be a part of setting the environment. It might have been more effective if I had used statements that put the player in the magic circle when making the timings, or if I had spoken in the voice of an NPC who was loved by the player. In the actual case, player 5 actually showed a euphemism for refusal. Although this was not entirely my factor, and the result might have been different if my arrangement had been more appealing. From the aspect of role-playing in a small group, rather than in a tabletop game, I should choose to adopt an expanded role, not just as a task leader, but also to try to take on some of the tasks of a tension releaser and make the atmosphere more alive. Especially in a digital environment where the platform for these conversations is instant messaging software. In the absence of gestures, gestures and intonation, it is extraordinary important to pay attention to the messages conveyed and implied by the text.

From a digital perspective, online TRPG has met the needs of some TRPG players, solved

some old problems and created some new ones. With offline TRPG only, it is difficult for TRPG players living in different cities or countries to meet regularly. It was highly challenging that players living in China and the UK would be able to travel frequently by plane to attend TRPG parties. The creation and popularisation of online communication platforms has solved this problem. However, it brought new problems, such as the scheduling obstacle of time difference.

### **7.2.2 Time to Solve group problems**

When faced with conflict in a TRPG, some people choose to stir up conflict during the story, while others will raise their grievances after the story is over and the GM and other players have left the Magic Circle. Which is the more appropriate time?

The solution to this is given in this thesis: if the conflict is about the characters and their roles, then it should be dealt with in the TRPG. For example, when a mage has an inappropriate prediction about the range of his spell's effect or the damage of his spell, then the game can be paused to confirm it. After all, if the GM has incorrectly inflated or reduced the mage's damage, players of other professions have suffered unfairly as a result. If the conflict is about player versus player, then it should be dealt with after the end of the TRPG play.

Here is an example of an adventure based on the ruleset Infinite Terror. I am the GM. The background is a kind of combination of Notre-Dame de Paris and Romeo and Juliet. One of their tasks is to prevent Romeo and Juliet from getting married. A player thought that he did a lot of work to destroy the wedding, and the GM's judgement that the wedding is continuing is unreasonable.

Player 3: "You explain this to me first. I know what you're trying to say, you say you have your arrangements, you have your plans, but we have our plans too, you have your arrangements.

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

But the arrangements can be corrected. You can adopt their logic, but the logic cannot be fixed. His logic, you need to enable us to have the opportunity to change it, understand?"

I: "Of course I know you're alive, that's how I think of you as a variable. Where am I not thinking of you as a living person? That's a very boring query, of course, you are alive because the point is for you to come and run this adventure and then make some changes."

Player 3: "You tell me! Where's the change?"

I: "You spoiled the wedding."

Player 3: "Did you reveal a little bit that I had spoiled this wedding before I attacked the archbishop? No! You did not!"

I: "Did you? Of course I did, not only with Xiaofeng, but also with Lingxiao and Jinmu."

Player 3: "But it's all been suppressed."

I: "Of course I'm going to suppress it. What else? Do you think they should let you destroy whatever you want to destroy? They're just standing there with a puppet? You just go ahead and play 1,000 puppets. Okay, I'll set you up with a few puppets and you start attacking."

Player 3: "You don't even have the momentum to pause, it's like the wind is calm."

I: "Does this look like the wind is calm?"

Player 3: "I think it's your lack of level, I just think it's the wind calming down. You ask them if they feel it."

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

Player 6: "Different GMs have different ways of expressing themselves. Maybe it's better to review the game after you've run the tour, even if you can tell the difference. If you don't give him a complete settlement in the process of TRPG adventure and start giving feedback, it's true that the GM will find it unreasonable."

Player 2: "Maybe we have been giving him to give those pressure, GM he will need to put himself to maintain this part first after expressing before he can express another part. So, he does not have time to say this or anything else. Then the GM sometimes behaves, how can I put it, in my opinion, it is really not obvious enough. But in general, I think that if you don't feel satisfied, if you're not happy with the arrangement or the setting at the time, you still have to wait until it is all over before you ask. You can ask and say how there was no feedback at all at that time, and then ask the GM to explain it, and it forms a chain."

I: "You do not think I am a professional ST (ST means Storyteller, which is the GM in the ruleset Infinite Terror), and I do not think you are a professional player. If You are a professional player, and you're not supposed to just interrupt the process and ask for a settlement for something like this without a major setback to your action."

Player 3: "I'm still not experiencing a setback here? You are lying!"

I: "What setback did you encounter? You have all your life points intact, in fact no bad status at all. You ate two people. According to the mission settlement, I have to settle you for 1000 points. If that's a setback, there's nothing in the world that isn't a setback."

Player 3: "The frustration is not in whether or not you die. The frustration I've had is that I felt like doing something that was obviously reasonable, that was in line with the basic law, but you did not let me succeed."

I: "The world does not run on your will, if you ask a world to run on your will, you can be the

ST. I have been there when you started the group, have not I been there when you started the group?”

Player 2: “Let us put it this way, I think it is better to respect the GM’s judgement.”

In terms of respect for the game, if a player asks to pause the game to deal with one’s grievances whenever one encounters any in the TRPG, then the progress of the game will be interrupted and the roleplay of other players will not be able to proceed smoothly. If any player asks for concessions from other players or the GM once they have had a poor experience in the game, then it is obviously difficult for the GM to shape the proper atmosphere of the game. If such a player’s demands are repeatedly met rather than punished, power relations in the game are alienated. From a gaming platform perspective, this lesson applies both online and offline. But after all, this is based on a summary of online games, and further research may be needed to discern the effectiveness of its use in offline TRPGs. From the perspective of small group communication, this point is a further extension of the theory of small group communication, considering how one should determine the right time to solve the problems encountered in small group communication when one person plays both roles at the same time.

### **7.2.3 Players’ problems and characters’ problems**

There is a difference between a player’s problems and a character’s problems. In a good TRPG adventure, the GM has to create difficulties for the characters, and solve them for the players. I will use an example from the field to illustrate this specifically.

I will use a case from the field to illustrate this in detail. This case takes place in The Age of Entrepreneurship, where Player 8 and I are the common players and Player 2 is the GM. I play the role of Yun Ting. Player 8 plays the role of Huang Mang. The story background story is that Player 8 and I run a business together that manufactures pacifiers. After developing

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

the company's first major product, we took a batch of samples to a trade show in Hong Kong to promote our product. One customer ordered a large quantity of the product on the spot. So, Huang Mang decided to deliver the goods himself.

GM: "After you collect the goods, you need to pack them up. Because you are good-looking and talk better, and it was only a small favour, the convention staff helped you with the packing. What did you choose to do after taking such a huge parcel with you?"

Huang Mang: "I chose to take a taxi to make the delivery."

GM: "You throw a 1D6 and see what the traffic is like. The lower the number of points you throw, the worse it is."

Huang Mang: "The lower it is, the worse it is! (He rolled a D6, the result is 1.) The worst!"

GM: "Here's the deal. You find that halfway through the car there is an accident and the front actually collapses."

Huang Mang: "The bridge collapsed?"

GM: "It wasn't a bridge, it was the cross-harbour tunnel. Some condition happened. You're not sure exactly what happened, but it caused a traffic jam. A few light bulbs went out and traffic was completely paralysed at the scene. You now find that the taxis are blocked. The taxi cannot move forward or backward. The scariest thing is that the signal is still bad when you get to the bottom of the sea."

Huang Mang: "Where is the location now?"

GM: "Now you are on the cross-harbour tunnel from Hong Kong Island to the New

Territories.”

Huang Mang: “Right in the middle?”

GM: “No, you see that after the traffic accident in front of you, the taxi is about 1/3 of the way through the tunnel.”

Huang Mang: “How long is the tunnel roughly?”

GM: “The tunnel is almost 3km, and there is about 2km to go before you drive out of the tunnel.”

Huang Mang: “So 1/3 of the way is the same as driving a kilometre, how long is it expected to take for traffic to resume?”

GM: “I don't know. Do you know how long it will take for traffic to resume when there's a traffic jam? No one will know.”

Huang Mang: “Get out of the car! I'll get out. It's only a kilometre anyway. It's not a long way.”

GM: “Okay. You've chosen to get off and are going to walk back.”

Yun Ting: “Is that allowed to walk? Or is the highway, that kind of road not allowed to walk?”

Huang Mang: “It's blocked anyway, so what can be disallowed.”

GM: “You could try walking inside the Cross Harbour Tunnel. You pay the fare, which is almost a hundred dollars or so. You walk like this, you walk a kilometre and go through next to the

cross-harbour tunnel like this.”

Yun Ting: “You should have walked a kilometre and passed almost there, right?”

GM: “Yes, walk a thousand metres and you're out.”

Huang Mang: “There's a traffic jam at the cross-harbour tunnel, so I'll take the ferry and turn around.”

GM: “Good. When you go back, you are faced with a situation where the ferry is not at this place at the mouth of the tunnel and you need to take another taxi.”

Huang Mang: “OK, I'll take a taxi again.”

GM: “You go over from the ferry side, you now need to cast a 1d6 and see if there will be some of this frictional damage that might be done to the whole outer package. I can tell you the meaning of results now. If the dice is 4,5, or 6, it will not do any damage, meaning you have carried it very carefully. But if you roll a dice and get 1,2, or 3, then the lower it is, the worse it gets.”

Yun Ting: “I don't think it should get to 50%. The probability of something going wrong should be lower than that, right? Our company has a pretty good product package.”

GM: “No. It's like this: it is normal for the outer packaging to get rubbed or for the box to get bumped. After all, he was carrying these two big boxes by himself, walking a kilometre out of the tunnel first, taking a taxi and then going to the ferry. Then if the result of D6 is 4,5 or 6, it is completely without any loss. If the result is three, your goods will have a slight wear and tear. If the result is two, one or two boxes will meet problems. If the result is one, I cannot describe how terrible it is now.”

Huang Mang rolled a D6 and got a 1.

I: "We have got three "1" s! It is only been ten minutes from the starting now!"

Player 8 is very unsatisfied with the GM's decision. He felt that he was only playing a real-world entrepreneur. He had already taken great care to go on deliveries himself in order to open up sales in his products. In such a situation, he encountered traffic jams, the tunnel even broke down, the goods were worn out, and someone tried to steal his goods (the part about the NPCs stealing his goods is also the story of the TRPG party. The story of the theft is not presented here due to space constraints.) This is a sad fate. The fate of the NPCs is so tragic that it could be called a form of torture.

I felt that Player 8's expression made sense, so I discussed this issue with the GM.

I: "Why did you make him do something so hard?"

Player 2: "It wasn't very difficult. Maybe you have thought of yourself as the starting point, consider it is just too difficult. But what's that to entrepreneurship? There are a lot of things that are much harder than that."

I: "But it's really an insurmountable obstacle."

Player 2: "You don't just look at the process, you also have to look at the end. He managed to deliver the goods after all."

I: "Yes, but he could also have done it more easily."

Player 2: "Yes, he could have, but would the story have been interesting if he had done it

easily? It wouldn't. Think about it, if when he said he was going to make the delivery I just said, "OK, so you came to the customer's door and handed over the goods. The customer is happy with the goods, so you exchange contact details." Then this plot development is just too ordinary. This kind of running plot is not really exciting."

Player 2's explanation has its merits. The difficulties encountered by the player are actually separated from the difficulties encountered by the player character. From the player's point of view, it is almost as if the whole world is against him. The GM has the power to control the characters, the environment and the actions of the world. But from the player's perspective, the GM intends to make the game a memorable experience for the player. From that perspective, Player 2 succeeded. Three or four months after that experience, I still hear Player 8 reminisce about the ups and downs of that experience. As he continues to play with the Huang Mang character, whenever he encounters an obstacle, he occasionally compares this experience to his previous delivery experience, which started in the humble beginnings. The emergence of this situation is not directly linked to the digital trend. Both online and offline, players and player characters encounter many problems and obstacles. Digitalisation has not brought about a significant change to this.

### **7.3 Problem resolution in a harmony style**

In small TRPG groups, various problems exist. However, these issues are not the main focus of a TRPG party. According to my field research, for the most part, GMs and common players are able to enjoy the fun of TRPGs and resolve problems harmoniously. Again, taking *The Age of Entrepreneurship* as an example, towards the climax, the character Huang Mang faces a major crisis. Previously, he chose to do business with the Japanese underworld, selling fake diamonds. Later, due to advancements in identification technology, he was exposed for selling non-natural diamonds at a lower value. Consequently, the Yakuza organization, the

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

Yamaguchi-gumi, demanded he rectify the situation. After failing to do so, a senior member of the Yamaguchi-gumi, Youkinro, with his followers and swords, took control of Huang Mang and his parents in their home.

The GM described the situation: "You just threatened him, so he is very angry. He has tied up your parents in their own house with three Japanese samurai swords and left a follower to guard them. Your parents' mouths are bound, and then he knocks you out, making you temporarily unable to resist. He takes you to a remote location on the outskirts, and because your house is in a villa area, which is not too far from the outskirts, it takes about 10 minutes by car to reach a desolate area only illuminated by moonlight."

Huang Mang asks if there is no room for cooperation, to which the GM decisively replies there isn't. Huang Mang, feeling helpless, decides the only option left is Seppuku (a form of Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment, traditionally performed by samurai to die honorably).

The GM confirms this choice: "Okay, no problem. Under duress, you chose to save your parents by performing Seppuku."

After this, player 8, who is playing Huang Mang, seeks the GM's protection to keep his character alive. The GM offers a glimmer of hope:

The GM hesitantly says: "Well, there's a chance you could survive. After Seppuku, you don't necessarily die immediately. If done skillfully, you could be saved within 24 hours. Roll a six-sided die; if the result is not 5 or 6, you die."

Player 8 rolls a six-sided die, and the result is 5.

The GM continues: "After cutting yourself, you don't die immediately. Youkinro, thinking you

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

won't survive, leaves with his subordinates, possibly allowing for your rescue. You have a 50% chance to endure for an hour and retain mobility after they leave.”

Player 8 rolls again, getting a 6.

The GM narratively describes: “You're now holding your intestines, walking on the road. You're driven by sheer willpower, worried about your parents possibly facing the Yamaguchi-gumi's retribution. It's likely you'll encounter a car since it's Wenzhou, a place where cars are common. Roll the die again; if it's not 1 or 2, a car passes by.”

Player 8 rolls a third time, getting a 3.

Player 6 excitedly exclaims: “A car's coming!” Although I did not speak at the time, I was curious about Huang Mang's fate. On one hand, I felt player 8 made a series of wrong choices, and Huang Mang dying that day seemed fitting. On the other hand, I felt that surviving such a calamity might bring future blessings.

The GM then explains: “Fortunately, you were taken to the hospital. Whether the rescue is successful depends on modern medicine. Roll the die again; if it's not 1 or 2, the doctors can save you.”

Player 8, without a word, rolls the die, getting a 4.

The GM, relieved, says: “Congratulations, you survived against the odds!”

At the end of this session, the GM and us discuss various possibilities regarding Huang Mang's life and death.

I asked the GM: “I remember you gave a hint that there were three viable paths for Huang

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

Mang, one of which might not require rolling the die. I guess one of the paths involved seeking help from Hanako Takeda. What were the other two options?”

(Hanako Takeda is the daughter of a high-ranking member of the Yamaguchi-gumi in this TRPG story and an old friend of Huang Mang.)

Player 2: “Yes, it is feasible to ask Hanako Takeda for help if prepared in advance. The other two paths are like this. One involves taking someone to deal with Youkinro. Actually, I was going to ask you if you wanted to bring Wang Ruouhan there, and for Wang Ruouhan, my judgement was this. You saved her life. And this one has a certain martyr's spirit of sacrifice. If you insist on seeking her help, try throwing a six-sided die. If successful, she may feel like saying yes .....”

(Wang Ruouhan is the name of an NPC in the story. Huang Mang risked her life to save her from a terrorist attack on a previous cruise ship).

Player 8 interrupts Player 2: “A life for a life.”

Player 2: “Yes. You saved my life, and now I'm returning your life with mine. From here on out, it's the equivalent of saying I owe you nothing, so you can live too. Let me tell you, the one who needed to roll the dice to decide was Hanako Takeda, and who was the last one who didn't need to roll the dice? The only one who doesn't need to roll dice is .....” If you want, you can ask the fiercest of all the PCs and NPCs to .....”

Player 8 gets a bright idea: “Ask Lv Dongbing for help!”

Player 2: “Yes. The man himself is chivalrous. He is also not afraid of the yakuza. This person is cynical. Even though you screamed at him to kill him before, if you cry and beg him to save you, he'll be willing to step in, no dice roll required.”

Player 6: "That is right. Lv Dongbing is the mad scientist who can fight three KGB with guns with his bare hands."

Player 8: "But ....."

Player 2: "The problem is that you had too little preparation before."

Player 6: "Right. You did not prepare enough."

Player 8: "No, I think I prepared."

Player 2: "Don't you think you prepared too little? But that is good, I think it is a very legendary development. I cannot believe I didn't die like this."

Player 6: "A legend."

Player 2: "I was tempted to just kill him many times, but fortunately, he chose Seppuku in the end."

In the opening of a subsequent TRPG party, Player 2 once again discusses the fate of Huang Mang. Unlike last time, this time it is not explained to the party, but to the other players involved.

Player 2: "I really do not recognise him when he says that he had a bad dice throw, and I really don't recognise him when he says that he had a bad dice throw! He actually threw it pretty high in a couple of key probes."

Player 6: "I think his whole planning and scheming was a huge failure. Including the last

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

negotiation which was ugly to the core. Right?"

Player 2: "As the GM, I have to play Youkinro, and I can't let him just take out his samurai and hack Huang Mang to death. after all, it's a bit disrespectful to the players, but what I heard was really angry, and Youkinro's veins were rippling, and he was really pissed off."

Player 6: "He was like, I have already purchased a piece of gold mine in Africa ....."

Player 6 and Player 2 speak in unison, repeating Player 8's wording from earlier, "A verbal agreement!"

Player 6: "If a verbal agreement works, then 'I won't hurt you' is also a verbal agreement."

Player 2: " 'I have a big plan', what plan? 'Let me make a phone call and you guys go deliver something.' Because of what? Why so sudden? So Youkinro takes a knife and destroys his phone. Youkinro says, 'You are going to talk about the contract on the spot to get rid of me. Nice Try!' "

Player 6 laughs: "At the end when he was about to die, Huang Mang actually said, "Think about it, Hanako Takeda is still in my friend's theatre, so what?"

Player 2: "He said I'll take your parents away, right? I will find someone to find a way to get Hanako Takeda out when the time comes. I wish you a family reunion when the time comes, I do not see anything wrong with that."

I: "Youkinro is like that."

Player 6: "Player 8 is trying to think of all the ways to make the worst of all the plans."

Player 2: “When negotiating he is already going to show it by the end of the day ..... In my opinion, there is no room for co-operation when the other party has already shown that they are disappointed and angry with you, and at the same time, they feel that you as a person are constantly trying to survive and stalling for time.”

Overall, I have tried to summarise the GM’s approach to deal with disagreements with common players in TRPGs. This method can be summarised in four parts: first, the GM should respond in the fantasy world of TRPG, which is the third level (Fine, 1983) of the game logic layer. After that, considering the difference between player needs and player character needs, it should also think in terms of the player’s perspective, as in the case mentioned above, the GM gives Huang Mang the chance to escape from the situation. Thirdly, after detaching from the story situation, it is still necessary to explain at the TRPG party, maintain and repair interpersonal relationships with the players by analysing the situation at that time, and give the tension releaser and social emotional leader room to play. Fourthly, apart from the player who encountered the problem, the emotions and thoughts of other players should also be handled properly.

A similar situation often occurs in offline TRPGs as well. Combined with my previous personal experience of participating in offline TRPGs, and considering that different people arrive at different times at different distances from the place where the TRPG party is held, those who arrive first tend to do something to kill time. These things include playing mobile phone video games, eating snacks, watching short videos or live gaming streams, and playing board games that are quickly finished. It also includes discussing some of the characters and plots from previous TRPGs, as I mentioned in Chapter 7 Section 2. Discussions of this retrospective nature can go some way to rallying consensus among the players, as well as reflecting on what previous playthroughs have slipped up and what could be improved.

### **7.4 Distribution in TRPG small group**

After a period of play, the adventurers team composed by players are bound to reap some trophies. These spoils may be either material or spiritual. Spiritual spoils are relatively easy to distribute and can simply be considered for the whole adventuring party as a whole. In this way, the prestige and glory gained in each camp can fall relatively fairly on each team member. But what if the trophies were material in nature? Or to say it directly, what about simply a huge amount of gold coins? In this section, there will be three parts of distribution in TRPG small group. The first is about the basic principle of solving distribution problems. The second is seven special ways to deal with the problem. The third is the discrimination between distribution for players and for player characters.

### **7.4.1 Guiding principle of solving distribution problems**

How is the problem of distribution to be solved? If this were not in the game world, but in the real world, it would be near impossible to explore a perfect way of distribution. In every country in the world there is a huge of complaint and dissatisfaction with the current distribution methods and calls for their reform (Cragan *et al.*, 2008).

Productivity and production relations in the TRPG world are very different from those in the real world. In TRPGs, before the cake can be shared, the cake must be made. After all, production tools need money to buy, production techniques need money to develop, and even if one has scouted out where the mineral deposits are buried, one still needs to mine them with specialist equipment and build bridges and roads for transportation. In TRPG, however, production is a different story. The difficulty of production becomes so low that supplies can be almost entirely God-given. The gods here are not the monotheistic or polytheistic gods of the game world, but the GM, who can create countless lands, weapons, equipment and artifacts at will with a single word. However, in order to maintain the logic of the story and the rationality of the world, almost no GM will give out resources without restraint. Once players have unlimited resources, then they can do almost anything, and the value of adventuring and playing is therefore lost.

In the DND 5e Dungeon Master's Guide (Wizards of the Coast, 2014:1), there is a paragraph for GMs:

Disclaimer: Wizards of the Coast not officially endorse the following tactics, which are guaranteed to maximize your enjoyment as a Dungeon Master. First, always keep straight face and say OK no matter how ludicrous or doomed the players' plan of action is. Second, no matter what happens, pretend that you intended all along for everything to unfold the way it did. Third, if you are not sure what to do next, feign illness, end the session early, and plot your next move. When all else fails, roll a bunch of dice behind your screen, study them for a moment with a look of deep concern mixed with regret, let loose a heavy sigh, and announce that Tiamat swoops from the sky and attacks.

Although Wizards of the Coast said these are "not officially", when a GM is reading the official book, Dungeon Master's Guide, he or she is unlikely to ignore texts on the page 1. Maybe GMs who have read this paragraph will not do as the tactics suggest. However, they may understand and use the spirit core of these tactics. These tactics articulated here certainly suggests to GMs that if they encounter a problem that is difficult to deal with or cannot understand a player's plan, the first thing to do is not to point out the absurdity and error of their plan, but to pretend that nothing has happened and continue to keep the game going in this Magic Circle. This kind of behaviour can show the GM is confident for a short while, but the storyline and character building has clearly been compromised. The final solution to the problem with Tiamat is even less clever. Despite the fact that the GM has all the power in the story, once the GM sets up an overpowered monster, the player characters have no choice but to receive their failure. This may demonstrate the GM's unparalleled authority, but it may not be as conducive to the GMs' enjoyment of the game as the game's publisher said. When the player characters team is defeated by the near-invincible Tiamat, the GM and other players leave the Magic Circle and return to the world outside the game. This could easily cause huge interpersonal conflicts.

### 7.4.2 Seven approaches of distribution in digital TRPG

In this situation, there are seven more common ways of distributing the spoils: equal distribution, selling all the loot for money, by a captain, the divider last chooses, based on contribution, based on needs and random allocation.

项目	收支	归属人	备注
购买舰队道具和门票	-375	每人	
向酒吧老板提问	-10×2=-20	凌霄	
向酒吧老板提问	-10×2=-20	程橙	
五张科技图纸	-50	程橙	工业革命初期水平
队伍每人无限衣箱	-10×4=-40	凌霄	
寄存重甲	-战斗动力装甲	程橙	暂交酒吧老板保管
兑换黄金 20 斤	-20	金木	
兑换黄金 20 斤	-20, 部分金币部分金条	程橙	有程橙独特徽章
兑换黄金 15 斤	-15	凌霄	熔铸为 30 根金条
两辆华贵马车和侍从	1 斤黄金	凌霄	
向天主教堂捐献黄金	5 斤黄金	凌霄	获得见面主教资格
向天主教堂捐献黄金	15 斤黄金	凌霄	获得净化黑暗机会
向天主教堂捐献黄金	2 斤黄金	凌霄	暂不净化黑暗生物
向天主教堂捐献黄金	10 斤黄金	凌霄	赔偿巴黎圣母院玻璃
比阿特丽斯	D 级宝箱: 龙髓	程橙	大战巴黎当红名妓
奥运会	运动员的赞许	团队	金木平衡木铜牌
奥运会	C 级宝箱: 大橙丸	团队	程橙长跑金牌
奥运会	D 级宝箱: 貔貅吊坠	团队	风青莲长跑银牌
奥运会	D 级宝箱: 学徒的护盾节制	团队	凌霄射箭银牌
奥运会	C 级宝箱: 誓仇弓	团队	程橙游泳金牌
奥运会	D 级宝箱: 男士长靴/女士皮靴	团队	风青莲白刃银牌
奥林匹克冠军会	附身: 哈迪斯	金木	深夜秘传
常规战斗奖励	50×4=200	团队	天主教低阶神官 4 名
常规战斗奖励	500	团队	天主教普通神官 1 名
常规战斗奖励	50×2+500=600	团队	阿萨辛刺客
常规战斗奖励	500×3=1500	团队	婚礼上的战斗
比阿特丽斯	-100 枚金币	程橙	寻找美丽的孕妇
主线任务	500+300×3=1400	每人	每人 1 血统升级点
支线任务-阿瑞斯	D	团队	
支线任务-雄辩家	1000	团队	
支线任务-捣蛋鬼	D+500	团队	
支线任务-超越极限	DD	团队	
支线任务-失落的武器	阿修罗锈刃	团队	
钟楼战斗	1500×2+500×2=4000	团队	
D 级宝箱	洛丝萝林的灰斗篷	团队	
C 级宝箱	无神祭司胸衣	团队	
击败阿修罗	1500	团队	
副本经验奖励	10XP	每人	完整七天副本

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Figure 7- 1 Distribution in digital TRPG, an example of Infinite Horror, the original version



## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

Items	Expenses and Receipts	Attribution	Note
Tickets	-375	Each one	
Ask the barkeeper	$-10 \times 2 = -20$	Lingxiao	
Ask the barkeeper	$-10 \times 2 = -20$	Chengcheng	
5 blueprint of technology	-50	Chengcheng	Early stage of the industrial revolution
Infinite suitcase for everyone	$-10 \times 4 = -40$	Lingxiao	
Deposit the heavy armor	-Combat power armor	Chengcheng	Kept by the barkeeper
Gold:10000g	-20	Jinmu	
Gold:10000g	-20, some coin some bullion	Chengcheng	With his special mark
Gold:7500g	-15	Lingxiao	30 bullion
Two magnificent carriages and attendants	Gold:500g	Lingxiao	
Donation in Catholic Church	Gold:2500g	Lingxiao	Allowed to meet the Bishop
Ibid.	Gold:7500g	Lingxiao	Get a chance to purify the darkness
Ibid.	Gold:1000g	Lingxiao	Get a chance to delay the purifying
Ibid.	Gold:10000g	Lingxiao	Compensation for the glass of Notre-Dame de Paris
Beatrice	Treasure box, Level D : Dragon Marrow	Chengcheng	Paris' most famous prostitute' recognition
The Olympics	Approval of Athletes	Team	Jinmu,Balance beam,Bronze
Ibid.	Treasure box, Level D : Dachengwan	Team	Chengcheng,Long-distance running,Gold
Ibid.	Treasure box, Level D : Pixie Pendant	Team	Fengqinglian,Long-distance running,Silver
Ibid.	Treasure box, Level D : Apprentice's shield ring	Team	Lingxiao, Archery, Silver
Ibid.	Treasure box, Level C : Bow,Vow to take revenge	Team	Chengcheng,Swimming, Gold
Ibid.	Treasure box, Level D: Men's long boots / Women's leather boots	Team	Fengqinglian,Blade,Silver
Olympic Champions Club	Spiritual possession:Hades	Jinmu	Secret Legacy
Ordinary Battle	$50 \times 4 = 200$	Team	Low Priest $\times 4$
Ibid.	500	Team	Normal Priest $\times 1$
Ibid.	$50 \times 2 + 500 = 600$	Team	Assassins
Ibid.	$500 \times 3 = 1500$	Team	Battle in the wedding
Beatrice	-100 gold coin	Chengcheng	Search for a beautiful pregnant woman
Main quest	$500 + 300 \times 3 = 1400$	Each one	Bloodline point $\times 1$
Side quest-Ares	D	Team	
Side quest-Eloquent speaker	1000	Team	
Side quest-Troublemakers	D+500	Team	
Side quest-Beyond limitations	DD	Team	
Side quest-lost weapons	Asura Rust Blade	Team	
Battle in the Bell Tower	$1500 \times 2 + 500 \times 2 = 4000$	Team	
Treasure box, Level D	The Grey Cloak of Lothlorien	Team	
Treasure box, Level C	Godless priestly corset	Team	
Defeat Asura	1500	Team	
XP reward	10XP	Each one	The 7-day Dungeon

Total side quests reward: DDDD Total rewards points: 15400

Figure 7- 2 Distribution in digital TRPG, an example of Infinite Horror, the English version

Firstly, equal distribution. This type of distribution is mathematically well measured. It is straightforward to divide the total loot by the number of people in the team, with each person receiving a number of separate portions. But there are difficulties in implementing this type of distribution. There are many things that cannot be distributed in this way. An emerald bracelet, for example, was only crafted once in total. Even when such a distribution is made, it does not take into account the needs of each character. For example, if five pieces of heavy iron armour of the same size and style were harvested in a DND3R adventure, one piece would be given to each of the five characters. The warrior would cheer because it would greatly strengthen his defence. But the druid and the mage would find it of little use. Druids cannot wear metal gauntlets to maintain their connection with nature. Mages, on the other hand, have a similar problem; once they wear heavy armour, arcane spellcasting has a certain failure rate. This side effect often far outweighs the protection offered by the armour.

Secondly, selling all the loot for money and distribute it evenly. This approach often tends to result in more losses than gains. Firstly, many times adventurers are in environments where there are no merchants willing to recycle weapons and equipment. Secondly, some of the weapons and equipment themselves come from the wrong place. Selling them openly may expose some secrets of the adventuring group or trigger the attention and attacks of some forces. Thirdly, merchants often buy items for much less than the price they sell them for. In other words, there is no way to buy items of the same quality, *let al.* one better ones, with the money earned from selling them.

Thirdly, distribution by a captain. How are captains created? One way is for the players to elect a captain, the other way is for the GM to appoint a captain directly. While running the Infinite Horror TRPG, as GM, I took it upon myself to suggest that a particular player be the captain. This suggestion was taken up. It is important to stress that the captain here is not the task leader in small group communication, but rather the person who has the authority to distribute the loot. Before making this suggestion, I considered the possibility of different

players being the team leader and listed a few criteria in my mind.

- The player needs to be familiar with the TRPG; if not, the player will be less likely to be convinced by other players when it comes to distributing loot.
- The player needs to have a strong personality. If the player is too willing to go along with other people's opinions, then the player will be influenced by almost everyone else and will have difficulty making good decisions.
- The player must not be too strong in character. If the player's leadership is strong enough to overpower all the other players, then the player becomes a dictator in a sense, or even a tyrant, and could obviously be at the expense of the public.
- The player has a relatively high level of enthusiasm for this game. After all, elections within a TRPG are different from elections in real life. Real life is the life that affects everyone most deeply in the long run. No one in society can stay out of it. But TRPG is a virtual world within the Magic Circle. Some people do not value this virtual world very much and have no intention of pursuing power and responsibility in it.

Fourthly, letting one person distributes the items into a number of parts, and the distributor chooses last. This distributor is not considered a captain and has no leadership in anything other than distribution. This approach ensures that the distribution is as fair as possible, but it is still not perfect. After all, it does not provide an order of distribution that is satisfactory to all players. The order in which the loot is picked by someone other than the allocator can still breed resentment.

Fifthly, distribution is based on contribution in the team. This is a more rewarding way of distributing the spoils of a team, and it shows the merits of each player. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to quantify each player's contribution. It's not like working for a company; players don't have KPIs or OKRs, and this can often lead to strife.

Sixth, distribution is based on needs. Every share of possessions goes to the person who

needs it most. If a piece of equipment is exclusive to a certain profession, then that piece of equipment is given to a player of that profession. If a piece of equipment is available to several professions, then it is given to the player whose ability has increased the most after acquiring the equipment.

Seventh, random allocation. This type of distribution is based entirely on luck. For each piece of loot, each player rolls a die and the player with the highest number of dice wins the loot. After the first loot has been distributed, only the players with the lowest number of loot items are involved in the roll. The drawback of this method is that, for one thing, the contribution of the participants is not fully recognised and, for another, it makes sense for a small amount of valuable loot, but if the amount of loot is too large then the players have to roll a large number of dice for this. This is likely to be boring for players who love to play. At the same time, this distribution makes TRPGs more like gambling.

### **7.4.3 Distribution and players' targets**

In TRPGs, players' goals and characters' goals are not aligned. Multi-level goals involve a relationship between player and their characters (Boal, 2005). For example, at the beginning of a TRPG party, if I am the GM and tell a player that his character has mastered the most powerful spells, has become king of the world and has acquired untold wealth, land and power, this is an unparalleled miracle for the character. However, this is utterly perfunctory to the player, as such a description is only appropriate at the end of the adventure to illustrate the rewards of the character's adventure and the end of the story. Such a plot device at the beginning of the story would clearly not satisfy the player.

The goals of the players are clearly more important than those of the characters. After all, in this game it is the living, breathing people we play with, not abstract beings in a fictional world. When faced with overly difficult challenges or a banal, boring, leisurely life, the character may simply mutter a few complaints. However, players are perfectly capable of

## Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication

protesting to the world creator. Indeed, in many cases they do. There was one time in Infinite Terror when I set up very challenging enemies. After several tentative attacks that didn't work, the player in control of the character immediately began to question my design aggressively, believing that I had not controlled the difficulty properly. I thought about it, and while the current game design was more conducive to putting the character through a legendary adventure that would swallow mountains, the player behind the character clearly had a different opinion. I could have put a character through the journey of Ragnar Lodbrok in Scandinavian legend or Heracles in ancient Greek mythology. However, the players themselves are not strong-willed, stalwart, courageous heroes. In most cases, the players are just ordinary people in the real world. They are not determined enough to face any harsh challenges.

When it comes to assignments, it is not difficult even for the less experienced GM if the goal is to satisfy just one of the players. But there are often 3-5 people in a group, and even GMs who are good at moderating may be criticised as well as perceived to have made unfair decisions when it comes to assignments. A better situation to deal with is when different players have different goals, such as some pursuing great strength, some seeking worldly status for their characters, and some seeking love. In this case, the GM can allow the player who is seeking great power to gain a large amount of experience and upgrade quickly, have the local king or emperor make the player who is seeking a noble title a baron, and provide the player who is seeking romance with a beautiful, handsome man or woman. However, if there is a fight between different players, the GM can be difficult to resolve. For example, if two players both want their characters to be the most powerful one in the adventure team, this could cause a dispute no matter how it is handled.

As an example, when I hosted DND5E, Player 3 participated in this adventure and became a member of the common players. However, due to work commitments, Player 3 missed two meetings. This resulted in his rank not being the highest in the group. So, Player 3 approached me and expressed his needs.

Player 3: "Can you design an adventure or a trip to this arena specifically for me, so that my character can level up?"

I: "Why would you want to do that? Now you can still let your character continue with the adventure."

Player 3: "But that's not appropriate. Other people's characters are adventuring and leveling up, but hasn't my character done anything in the meantime?"

I: "What your character did is your business. You didn't come on the adventure, you can't just get something for nothing."

Player 3: "But I had a bad experience! They've all got stronger and all I can do is wag the flag from behind!"

I: "It doesn't happen that way. I have set up village rules in advance so that if any player character is 3 or more levels below the highest-level-character in the group, that character will immediately be upgraded."

Player 3: "But my character is so weak, it's hard for me to enjoy the game. I want to be the strongest!"

I: "Your character is not the lowest level. Other people's characters aren't strong either. If you want to be the strongest, then obviously only one character in a team is the strongest. I can't satisfy everyone's requirements for character strength. If I upgrade your character today and others come to me about it, what am I supposed to do?"

Player 3 and I had a long argument afterwards, but I finally agreed to give him a chance to do

the arena challenge. He successfully completed the challenge and, as expected, made his character the most powerful character in the team. After that, the situation I feared did not occur. The other players didn't insist that their characters had to be the most powerful as he did. Instead, the others felt that having such a powerful teammate would provide strong spell support during the adventure. So, the adventure could again run smoothly.

In conclusion, when making the distribution of rewards, it is of course important to take into account the characteristics and experiences of the characters for the sake of the integrity of the story and the characterisation. But in the event of conflict between the character and the player, the player's needs can always be met by sacrificing character plausibility or by making up new backgrounds and contacts for the character. If the players' needs conflict with each other, it is best for the GM to understand this and arrange it before the game begins. In the example above, for example, I was able to resolve this conflict solely because I was lucky. If it were true that every player was desperately seeking strength of character, as I feared, then as GM I would be doomed to disappoint and frustrate some players.

Each distribution method has a certain range of use from a small group dissemination perspective. The key to choosing the right way to distribute loot is not to observe the role of the player in the game, but to observe the role of the player in the small group and to distribute it according to the preferences and needs of the different players. This falls squarely into the category of managing individual diversity in small group communication (Cragan *et al.*, 2008).

In this chapter, my findings serve to refine and extend Fine's theory concerning the three-layered framework in tabletop role-playing games (Fine, 1983). It provides additional fieldwork evidence to analyze the interrelations among these layers. Specifically, you argue that the social relationship layer is pivotal in establishing and shaping the other two layers. For instance, during digital gatherings for TRPGs, the discussions about time, place, and roles are initially outside the TRPG framework. The establishment of the TRPG layers is contingent

upon agreement among the players. If there's a lack of consensus, the game cannot proceed. Furthermore, player absence (like a paladin in a four-member party) directly impacts the player framework, necessitating adjustments in the fantasy world framework by the GM to prevent detrimental outcomes to the game. Considering that the third framework of a TRPG is designed to serve the players' enjoyment, it is entirely feasible to alter the specific methods of loot distribution to foster a harmonious gaming environment. While rulebooks may offer suggestions regarding the allocation of loot, neither GMs nor players are obliged to adhere to them. In a world of swords and sorcery, a character's temperament and personality are built upon the player's role-playing and personal choices, rather than the reverse. This illustrates the interconnectedness and dependence of these layers within the TRPG context.

### **7.5 Summary**

In summary, this chapter demonstrates the characteristics of small group communication in TRPGs in the digital age.

First, in the digital age, when members of small TRPG groups get together and discuss something, maybe they are not playing TRPG. They also engage in discussions about meeting times, places, and rules of use, as well as review and reflection on role-play, setting, and story. This perspective is one that has received less attention from scholars before. Although some scholars have also addressed elements beyond the party in their ethnographies, they have only described it as a process of field research and have not specifically discussed it (Barce, 2012; Garcia, 2017; Mizer, 2015).

Second, I have encountered many disagreement in my field research in TRPG. In this section, I cut through the time perspective and try to specifically analyse the reasons for the emergence of team conflicts and the ways to resolve them. This is because scheduling is one

of those things that can easily lead to conflict. Different people have different amounts of free time. What's even more troublesome is that the time when people are conveniently available for TRPG is not fixed. This is because the GM needs to coordinate time outside of the game and also within the game depending on the state of his character. With the change in medium from playing TRPG offline with pens and papers to playing TRPG online in a digital platform, players can play TRPG across time zones, and time differences become a major issue. In addition, competition within small groups is an important factor in time-related conflicts.

Considering these conflicts due to scheduling, it is necessary to find a suitable time to resolve them. I have tried to solve problems as soon as I encountered them, but this did not work very well. In small groups on TRPG adventures, we actually enter a magic circle. When we try to solve a problem, whether that problem is about quest content, culture or emotion, it quickly destroys that magic circle and the players lost immersion. So even if a small group encounter something a player or some players are not happy with, for the sake of the team as a whole, it is better to hold off and wait until the adventure is over before reviewing it.

It is also important to distinguish whether the problem in the team is a player problem or a player role problem. This is not only about the precise choice of the centre of conflict, but also about the way in which problems in the group should be confronted and solved. Unlike other small groups, the emphasis on role-playing in a TRPG small group requires players to temporarily forget or abandon their real-life identities and knowledge, even if it is TRPG-related. When a player plays a low-level cleric, for example, he is not supposed to know legendary spells and super-demons like the back of his hand. Even if he has fully grasped this part of the rules in his previous reading, such words should not come from his character. If it is a player problem, then the small group does need to address it. But the obstacles the player character encounters, and the obstacles the GM puts in the way of the player character, can instead be a way for the player to progress and enjoy a good game experience.

Thirdly, based on the Section 7.3, I attempted to summarize the GM's approach to dealing with arguments among common players with a harmony method in TRPGs. This strategy may be summarized as follows: To begin with, the GM should reply in the TRPG fantasy world. Following that, taking into account the distinction between player needs and player character needs, it should respect the player's point of view. Then, even after detaching from the tale scenario, it is still required to explain and analyze the situation at the moment, and let the tension releaser and social emotional leader to play. Lastly, in addition to the player who met the obstacle, the feelings and ideas of other players should be carefully addressed.

Fourth, in-game assignments are an important part of interpersonal communication in TRPG small groups. Above all, the distribution in a TRPG group can be greatly influenced by the GM. This is because the GM has a very strong power. This power must be used carefully, especially when considering the inexhaustible resources that the GM can create in the game world. Then, when it comes to the distribution of treasure in TRPG, there are many different ways of distributing it. Each of these allocation methods has its own rationale. Finally, when it comes to distribution, even though many resources exist only in the virtual world, it is still important to note that there are living, breathing players behind the characters who receive them. The needs of the players are the most important thing.

## **Chapter 8 TRPG Rules**

When a new TRPG or a new extended content pack, new TRPG rules are following, Therefore, each TRPG has its own ruleset. A ruleset includes classes, adventures, races, spells, weapons, monsters and so on, telling GMs and common players of the TRPG that which kinds of behaviors are allowed or not, and different result of diverse actions. Without a clear set of rules, a TRPG will become trifling matter.

To answer the main question of this thesis “How does the digitalisation change TRPG play in China?”, it is necessary to know how the rules are changed in China by digital period. This

section is divided into 3 parts: choosing rules, obeying and breaking rules, original rules. Firstly, as mentioned in the Chapter 1, in the 1970s, the richness of the TRPG available to players is relatively limited, so their choices are also very limited as well. In contemporary society, TRPG players have many new games to choose from. Further, it means different TRPG rules are on an arena fighting to attract TRPG players. In this context, benefiting from the ease of accessing rules, players can easily switch rules. Therefore, some questions will then arise: how do players pick rules? Which rules did they pick? Besides, many TRPG rules, such as DND, are relatively complicated. The original ruleset books were hundreds of pages long, and then, new content has been continually added to the rules sets, and players lack professional guidance. So, players' learning costs are high. Secondly, in actual play, breaking TRPG rules is common. From the perspective of gamers This section will discuss the following issues: What are the rules? When will they break the rules? How do they deal with the conflict between following the rules and breaking them? Thirdly, the original TRPG rules created by players seem to be more important than ever in the digital age. Therefore, this research will discuss the following issues in detail: when will players use the original TRPG rules? What rules did they make? What distinguishes these rules?

This chapter will focus on the theme of TRPG rules, linking in the viewpoints and discussion conducted by previous scholars in the Chapter 3 literature review, and the findings made by this thesis, and engaged in critical discussion, in order to proving the validity of these research findings. In specific, this section will conduct discussion surrounding the following four sub-themes: choosing rules; breaking rules and cheating; do-it-yourself rules; and summary and suggestions.

## **8.1 Choosing rules in the digital age**

The choosing of rules is the first part of the TRPG, which is before the application of TRPG

rules. It is often not included in the TRPG party. However, there is no substitute for the value of this process. In conjunction with the fieldwork, this section examines the changing dimensions of TRPG rule selection in the digital age from three perspectives: the reasons for selecting rules; the process of confirming rules; and the learning styles of learning rules.

For players who are new to TRPGs, their knowledge of TRPG rules might be limited to just a few of TRPG rulesets, or even one signal TRPG ruleset. In this case, their choice of one particular ruleset might be just only ruleset they are familiar with, rather than their preference of certain ruleset. In other words, their choice of rulesets is simply justified by the fact that they are very keen to try this game type. However, for players with some experience and knowledge, they may choose a particular TRPG rule for a variety of reasons. There are no set criteria for choosing TRPG rules. However, through field research, I have got important discoveries about TRPG rules in both traditional and digital terms.

From traditional aspect, I found that most rules are used mainly for the following reasons:

- The rule itself is very famous. Obviously, Dungeons & Dragons is an outstanding TRPG, being the first to appear and the most well-known (Spotorno *et al.*,2020).
- A TRPG player finds a module for a ruleset and thinks it's so interesting that he wants to be the GM and gather a group of players to start a TRPG play based on the module.
- Since one is unsatisfied with one of the previous TRPG rules, a player chooses a new ruleset. This new ruleset often has advantages that the previous ruleset does not have.
- One is not attracted by any of the TRPG ruleset. However, some of his or her friends would like to try a certain TRPG ruleset. Therefore, a player may take part in the TRPG and appear in the following TRPG party.

In the digital age, players' reasons for participating in TRPGs have changed. On top of these original reasons, there are new factors that will motivate players to try a particular TRPG rule.

- Through the news media or social media, there is a player who sees an advertisement for a

particular TRPG and chooses to buy it.

- If the DM and PCs intend to make videos of this TRPG and post them on a streaming video platform before the TRPG begins, the likes and dislikes of the platform's audience are also an important factor in the choice of rules.
- Some players want to try a rule because they see interesting videos uploaded by uploaders on streaming video sites. A player once said that he had previously played mostly DND, but after seeing huibenghuitiaodexiao zhendong's video Black Carnival of Cassandra, he saw the player in the story exclaim: "The beer is cold and I'm still sitting by the big clock. I am awful!" and was instantly interested in COC as a TRPG rule.

After selecting and confirming the TRPG ruleset they would like to use to hold one or some TRPG parties, players should learn and grasp the TRPG ruleset. In the 20th century, TRPG players often learned TRPG rules by purchasing TRPG rulebooks and magazines (Dashiell, 2022). This phenomenon was not only existing in the United States, the birthplace of TRPGs, but also in other countries (Kamm, 2020). The original rules provided the basis for GMs and common players to carry out their games. Furthermore, the constant publication of magazines adds more detail and available tools to the fantasy worlds they shape. Whereas in the digital age, some TRPG players choose to learn TRPGs in a different way. The two significant ways are presented as follows:

Learning by watching videos on streaming sites. This type of learning can be divided into two categories: In one case, you learn by watching TRPG instructional videos, which are more vivid than reading the rulebook yourself. The other is learning by watching TRPG story videos. This approach can help players understand the mechanics of how the rules are actually used, but it also leaves them vulnerable to the negative influence of the video creators themselves. It should be noted that, many uploaders do not follow the original rulesets when creating and uploading videos. Instead, they modified the original rules based on their personal preference.

Learning by watching other people's TRPG parties. This type of learning is also used for traditional TRPGs. But the context of an online TRPG party is different from that of an offline TRPG party. In traditional offline TRPGs, players who receive an invitation to join the game at someone's home or at a board game shop are often already connected to the players of that TRPG or are part of a small group of TRPGs. In the internet age, it is normal and easy to watch others play TRPGs through software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams (Charlie, 2020). New players can watch and then decide whether to learn the rules or join the group.

However, learning the TRPG rules in this way can lead to many drawbacks. The main problem is that the TRPGs hosted by each GM carry their own style. Even if the same TRPG is chosen by different GMs, the actual execution may produce completely different results. This is similar to the same characters and lines are presented with very different staging and dramatic effects by different actors. This means that if a player's knowledge of the rules of a TRPG comes from a TRPG party conducted by a GM or a few people, then when that player leaves the environment and plays the TRPG with others, he or she may find that the rules he or she has learned are of very limited application. For example, Player 2 was once again in *Infinite Horror* when the GM checked his weight and asked him to take adverse effects or discard some items. The player was so upset that the player had never had a GM enforce this restriction in *Infinite Horror* before. He had developed an adventure strategy that required a large stockpile of items for emergencies. Such a strict restriction disrupted his battle plan.

The process of confirming rules is also an important part of choosing rules. In contrast to the previous step of selecting rules, this step is a transition from the emotional oriented to the rational oriented rules choosing strategy. Players who have made it this far are already making an emotional connection to one of the TRPG rules and learning the rules of that TRPG, whether well learned or not. However, only the two steps above are not sufficient to describe the connection between a TRPG player and the rules. Players also need the actual TRPG party to confirm their choices to demonstrate how well they have previously judged this game and understood the rules. If the rules of a particular TRPG are tasteless or long and

boring, when players are actually playing the game, it may quickly be abandoned by players.

Based on participant observation and thick description, in the course of research for specific TRPG cases, I found that players' choice of TRPG rules has changed in the digital age. Specifically, this can be divided into three finding points. Firstly, in terms of selecting rules, the channels are more diverse. Secondly, in terms of confirming rules, small groups of TRPGs in the digital age are showing new characteristics. Thirdly, in terms of learning rules, there are many TRPG players who choose to follow TRPG videos for learning. They are able to find appropriate videos and are happy to accept them.

In previous academic research, there has been discussion about why players choose a TRPG ruleset (Coe, 2017; Gillespie and Crouse, 2012; Haslett, 2021; Wilson, 2007; Williams, 2019). Wilson believes that an important source of DND's appeal lies in the careful portrayal of the different races, professions, and the design of the six attributes and descriptions of a player's character through numeric (Wilson, 2007). Williams believes that DND's nine-court camp is a highlight, which differs from the logic of the real world to the extent that it gives players full role-playing guidance and character-building possibilities in the game (Williams, 2019). Starting from the key concerns of players in TRPGs, CC proposes that TRPG rules that better meet the needs of players in the three dimensions of exploration and self-awareness, interaction and sense of belonging, and belief and security will be more likely to be favoured by players, and more players

will be willing to engage in the process of learning these TRPG rules (Coe, 2017). While they did not focus on the rules themselves, In Gillespie and Crouse's opinion, the unique art style and design concept are a credit to the fantasy world, and the visual communication of dungeons, monsters, and adventurers in the DND expansion adds to the fantasy world.

Some scholars have also examined why players do not choose a particular TRPG ruleset (Bryant, 2009). For example, Bryant analyses the reasons why the DND series suffered a

setback in the 1990s in the study of players and copyrights (Bryant, 2009). According to this article, the people who owned the rights at the time started the fourth generation by making the role-playing and fantasy world parts of the game too weak and turning it into a wargame, which caused many players to switch to other TRPGs (Bryant, 2009).

Scholars have analysed the reasons for the popularity of TRPG rulesets, such as the DND (Gillespie and Crouse, 2012; Haslett, 2021). There is some validity to these reasons. However, these reasons relate more to why a particular player or players spend a long time and a lot of effort on a particular TRPG rule. The rules are indeed cleverly designed, rich and engaging. However, when most players are new to a particular TRPG rule, they will probably not have the means to grasp the vast worldview and unusual game mechanics behind that rule. Moreover, there is a distance that should not be overlooked between players learning about the existence of a particular TRPG rule, learning that rule, and using it to participate in a TRPG. These people's ideas and behaviours are the blind spot of current TRPG scholarship. This thesis attempts to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the reasons TRPG players choose the rules, the process of confirming rules, and the learning styles for TRPG rules.

In addition to the perspectives previously explored by scholars, it is also interesting to think about the process of TRPG player choice rules from the perspective of digitalization and small group communication, in order to better present the changes in TRPGs driven by new technologies and in-game player interaction. For example, the initiative to choose the rules may rest with the GM. When a GM indicates that he or she wishes to run a TRPG using a certain TRPG ruleset, the other players can simply choose to accept the ruleset or not.

As for the view of digitalisation, an important part of choosing rules is learning the TRPG rules and building a character card. The first step in learning the rules is learning how to create a character card. This process can be divided into four stages. The first stage is to understand a character card that has already been created. Some of the crude TRPG rules

and modules created by hobbyists do not contain pre-defined character cards. However, published, well-written TRPG rulesets like

the DND must definite include pre-defined character cards. Understanding a pre-set character card means that the player instructs himself or herself that he or she should let the character interact with other characters. This interaction may be inefficient, odd, or confusing, but it will be in accordance with the rules. The second stage is to understand the "quick start" rule and use it to create a character card. This rule tends to simplify the original character card building process. The character cards created in this way tend to lack personality. However, if it is only for a short adventure, learning the "quick start" rules is sufficient. The third stage is to follow the normal steps of building a complete character card, following the tips in the rulebook. This can be a complex process, like trying to complete an examination paper with many objective and subjective questions. The objective part of the questions includes the character's attributes, skills, expertise, profession, and so on, often based on some formula. The subjective part of the question is the character's family background, biography, etc., which can vary from character to character. This is the section that reflects a player's personality and creativity and is also a test of the player's familiarity with this TRPG worldview. The final stage is to create a character card by combining the GM's private set of rules with the game's original rulebook. Many GMs set up private rules, and this is discussed more fully in the third section "Breaking Rules and Cheating" of this chapter. It is important to emphasise that not every player learns how to build a character card in this order. Some players only learn the preset card part and refuse to move on to more in-depth content. Others never use the preset cards and move on to the third or fourth stage from the start.

Based on the analysis in the previous paragraph, as part of the rules, character cards can also affect whether a TRPG will be popular with players. If a TRPG gives players adequate guidance in the character card creation process or provides easy-to-follow digital character cards, then gamers who do not like the long and complicated process of filling out character

cards will be more likely to be attracted to the TRPG. If a TRPG offers a wide range of options and many professions, it is more likely to appeal to those who enjoy the freedom of adventure.

## **8.2 Rule-breaking and Cheating**

The behavior of breaking rules and cheating is common in TRPG plays. I believe that for players with more experience of board games or TRPGs, it is common for rules to be broken intentionally or unintentionally in some situations. In this section, I will analyse how the rules have been broken and reshaped in the internet age. Specifically, this section will consist of three main sections: the way of rule-breaking, the reasons of rule-breaking and the power of rule-breaking. In order to avoid providing too much information and thus risking the exposure of the participants' identities, the players involved in the fields are specifically numbered in this section using letters rather than numbers as before.

### **8.2.1 The way of rule-breaking**

From my participatory observations, there are four main ways to break the rules and attempt to cheat in TRPGs in the internet age. Then I would like to present these four ways one by one.

Firstly, a common player claims that a rule does not make sense and therefore asks to break it. For example, when we played the 5th of DND, once a player thought that the Wizard is a unbalanced class. His grounds are as follows:

“I think that in the eight schools of the class Wizard, the School of Evocation is so powerful that everybody who chooses the class Wizard would like to choose this School. However, the School of Evocation is mainly about damaging enemies directly, and the class Wizard should have some impressive them other than destroying. Accordingly, I decide to change the rules

of Wizard's Schools. The new rule of School choosing is that each Wizard other than the ones from the School of Evocation can have two schools' ability, but not the ability that a wizard can get in the level 14."

Secondly, a common player tries to break the rules by manipulating the dice rolling tool secretly. Once upon a time, I took the responsibility of the DM in a TRPG. In this TRPG, I created an original ruleset called *The chosen one*. Each player played not only a role of hero, but also a role of politician and arm general. Therefore, during their road of adventure, they should deal with both of ferocious monsters and arrangement of territorial governance. There was a player (Player A) told me that another player might cheat in rolling dices. This TRPG was an online TRPG, and each time the DM and players should use digital dices when they are asked to do a check by rolling. While, I did not recognise this issue. Player A thought that player B's dice rollings is "too reasonable". Therefore, I revisited the record of dice rollings of player B last time. I found that in the last TRPG party, he has rolled the digital dices 33 times. In these 33 times, there are 10 cast 6, which exceeded the ideal situation. However, it is not enough to judge that he has cheated in the TRPG party. Therefore, I have used all the four players' dice rolling in the TRPG party as the raw data, and used SPSS to do the statistical analysis. As a DM in TRPG, I would like to prove that Player B has cheated in the game or not. Therefore, I used one-sample T test to compare the mean of a set of data to his value with or without a difference. In this situation, He let his character become a leader of a small team, and led 7 followers to fight with a large group of soldiers. This is a high-risk, high-reward challenge. If instead of confronting the mutinous soldiers directly, he had backed off from the start and chosen a compromise to resolve the issue peacefully, the risk would have been minimal. But accordingly, he would not have been able to establish his authority immediately. The results are as below:

**One-Sample Test**  
Test Value = 3.5

	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
VAR00001	2.066	32	.024	.047	.62121	.0086	1.2338
VAR00002	-.177	43	.430	.860	-.04545	-.5636	.4727
VAR00003	.351	34	.364	.727	.10000	-.4784	.6784
VAR00004	1.016	25	.160	.319	.34615	-.3552	1.0475

Figure 8- 1 The result of One-sample T-test of dice rolling of four players

In the Figure 8-1, the first line is the dice rolling date of player B, and the second line to the four line is the data from other three players. According to Table 1, the P value of player A’s dice performance is significantly different with the outcome expectation of the single roll event (P=0.47). However, the other 3 players do not show a significant difference compared with the ideal expectation. Therefore, it is reasonable to doubt player A cheated in this game.

Besides, in a TRPG, the important things are not only about the absolute value of dice results, but also what the dice results mean in the adventure. I found that in 5 of the 33 times, I have rolled the digital dices before Player B rolled, and I have told him that if his dice result is higher than mine, he would be successful in the challenge. The results are as below:

Serial number	Player B’s dice result	My dice result
1	6	5
2	6	3
3	3	2
4	3	1
5	4	3

Table 8-1 5 times of dice result confrontation

Not all of the 5 results are high, even that there are two “3”, which are below the

expectation. However, from the table above, I found that in all the 5 times, his dice result is higher than mine. That means that he has succeeded in all the 5 rollings.

Even so, I am not absolute sure that he has cheated in the TRPG party. So, for the next TRPG party, I set up two traps to test. In a TRPG, it is not always the bigger the result of the dice that makes it better. The first time, he planned to visit a church in secret to visit a bishop. I let him to throw a dice, the value of which indicated whether the event was widely known. The smaller the result, the more secretive the visit. The larger the result, the more visible the visit. The second time, after he had entered the church and met the bishop, I asked him to throw a die to determine the bishop's attitude towards him. I told him that if it was 1 or 2, the bishop's attitude would be negative and the Bishop would feel that your was acting too aggressively and would have to delay. If it was a result 5,6, the bishop would be overly aggressive, wanting to do further than what you did and asking you for more resources. Whereas if the result was 3 or 4, it would mean that the bishop accepted his opinion straight away.

This time, throughout the story, he threw the dice 28 times, three times with a 2, and three times with a 3. However, in the two traps, his rolled resulted in a 2 the first time and a 3 the second time. It looked that his player character succeeded in the adventure. But the behaviour let me angry with him.

Thirdly, a common player claims a rule that is not in the rulebook and tries to gain an advantage by doing so. For example, there was a time when player 11 played a character whose class is the Wizard. He would like to let his character use the spell "Suggestion" to affect a NPC and *get all* of the money she has. He announced that this NPC will be affected by the spell as normal. However, the truth is that this NPC is an elf, and elves have advantages when fighting against any kind of spells about charming.

Fourthly, a common player tries to gain an informational advantage by learning the details of

a TRPG adventure before participating in it. This also existed in the traditional TRPG era, but may be more frequent in the online era. One possible reason for this is that there are a large number of TRPG videos about the TRPG experience in the internet age, and there are also many free modules that can be downloaded easily. Thus, if a GM prepares a module that happens to be based on an official or third-party creation, there is every chance that common players will be able to search for that module by keyword. When I was a GM myself, I adopted a method to counteract this cheating: when announcing an upcoming TRPG adventure, if I was going to use a module that was not original to me but might appear in search engines, I would change the name of the module and some recognisable characters in the module in order to avoid common players cheating in this way.

The subject of all these actions is "a common player". The reason is that during a TRPG party, from a perspective outside the magic circle, there are only two players, the GM and the common player. The GM himself is the rule maker, and a TRPG ruleset such as DND gives the GM the power to change or alter the rules on an ad hoc basis to suit the situation, so this behaviour is included as part of the normal flow of play and does not involve rule-breaking or cheating.

### **8.2.2 The attitudes towards rule-breaking**

Based on the evidence presented in 8.2.1, I spoke to a few players individually about this and wanted to get their thoughts on this cheating issue.

I talked with player A, said: "As a DM, I have the authority of a deity in my own right, though this authority needs to be carefully elite and maintained. But, in that sense, I do not have to be angry. If he touches the ceiling by merely rolling a 6 on every dice, whereas I can easily set up characters that are 6 higher than him in a single attribute. But in a move that was almost like breaking the fourth wall, he made me anxious when I was nursing and respecting the variations of randomness and luck. So, I was wondering, am I being respected?"

Furthermore, was I being humiliated?”

He said: “Not really, the player B is just too much of a winner, and he does not take the rules very seriously. It has nothing to do with you personally. To be reasonable, there are many ways you can punish him if you want to, but of course it's hard to say if you can do it subtly. His character is so hostile now that it would be easy for you to penalize him, and it would actually be an exercise for you. If you want you can take it all as a DM practice and go learn how to control the situation in the face of remote control dice.” Then, player A took the responsibility of DM in another TRPG party, this time using the same digital dice, and player B's rolls still made me doubtful. After it was over, player A said that this time he was trying to be a DM successfully managing the player who has the ability to control the dice remotely.”

Player C: “I do not know if he cheated or not. But I do not think it would matter if he did. The reason we play games and follow the rules is to have fun, not to follow the rules. I do think that this TRPG party gave me a good feeling and I would like to attend the next one.”

Player D: “I did not really focus on that, because I was mainly concerned with my own player character, not other people's player characters, and even less with whether other people's player characters were behaving erratically.”

Player E: “Even though I was not involved in this TRPG gathering, from my personal experience playing tabletop games with Player B, I found him to be relatively trustworthy in terms of morality. It is true that sometimes he breaks the rules, but that kind of situation occurs because he forgets one or more of the rules, not because he specifically uses a certain method to cheat.”

Although each player gave different reasons and focused their attention differently, their attitudes reflected a certain commonality: they did not think that allegedly cheating in online TRPGs was a very serious matter, and they did not intend to ask player B personally or

support me in confronting player B.

Why is this mentality somewhat common? The exact reason is unknown. However, I suspect that it has something to do with the rationalisation of cheating in online digital games. According to Chen and Ong (2018:10), cheating is benign, “when it is done for fun, when playing with your friends in a small group. with your friends in a small group. And also when your friends can accept it. Like when you are using a small cheat to play with your friends only and not to Like when you are using a small cheat to play with your friends only and not to affect other players.” In addition, it was observed that intentionality, usefulness, basic gaming goals, developing gaming norms, and social links to gaming groups all play a role in justifying game cheating activities (Chen and Ong, 2018). No previous research has demonstrated the extent to which cheating is recognised and accepted among Chinese gamer groups, and my field study serves to corroborate these findings, laying the groundwork for expanding the applicability of research on the rationalisation of cheating.

After hearing about the situation, Player F communicated with me. Considering the lengthy nature of our discussion, I will not quote directly from the fieldwork here. In summary, Player F advised against further pursuing the matter, providing three reasons: Firstly, Player B had been very kind to everyone, such as treating the group to meals and willingly providing necessary items like screens, maps, and character cards during TRPG parties. Secondly, Player B contributed significantly to the small group, introducing the rule set *Infinite Horror*. Lastly, insisting on getting to the bottom of the issue might damage relationships within the group.

Combining Player F's viewpoint with previous discussions, I believe further refinement of the magic circle theory is possible. This theory ideally posits that players in the game forget their prior identities, status, and backgrounds, embracing the game world's settings and rules. However, from a practical gameplay perspective, this is overly idealistic, failing to fully consider the complexity of player psychology. If my judgment is correct and Player B did

cheat, he likely contemplated the consequences of cheating. Assuming he made a rational adult decision, the risk of an action should typically dissuade such behavior. His awareness of his contributions, as noted by Player F, likely emboldened him to a degree. Thus, actions outside the magic circle. Those undertaken by players as “players” and not as their “player characters”, can influence plot development and decision-making within the circle. When judging in-game actions, players also consider the player's in-game and out-of-game circumstances.

### **8.2.3 The reasons of rule-breaking**

The reason of breaking rules and cheating is diversified. In TRPG, there are many situations in which the TRPG rules are broken. Specifically, I found six main types of rule-breaking scenarios in field research.

- Breaking the rules because of forgetting. Many PCs and GMs have not seriously studied the rules of this TRPG before the game begins, or they are aware of other versions and expansions of the rulesets. This makes them forget the rules most of the time. For example, in the fifth edition of DND, when a wizard is focused on casting a spell and takes damage, a constitution check is required to determine if that wizard can continue to maintain the spell he or she is casting. In one TRPG play with using the rulesets fifth edition of DND I was involved in, despite the fact that the wizard had taken quite serious damage, no one remembered that this would result in the wizard needing to do a constitution check.

- Breaking the rules because of misunderstanding. Learning the rules of a TRPG is quite a difficult thing to do. If it's a voluminous rule like DND, it can take as much effort to become proficient in it as it does to take a course, and many people don't have that much free time and extra energy to do this. As a result, their understanding of the rules may be faulty, which is similar with a student who has not listened attentively to a lesson may make mistakes in an exam subsequently.

- Breaking the rules in order to have a more powerful character. Unlike the previous two situations, in this case the PCs who break the rules often know the rules well or are even

proficient in the rules, but they believe that other PCs and GMs do not know the rules well enough, or may forget them. So, they subconsciously ignore the rules that are against them, thus making their character more powerful, for example by releasing a spell without paying the appropriate cost for it.

- The rules have to be broken because of a lack of materials. For TRPG players in China, there is often no access to the original English TRPG rulebooks and module sets, or they are unable to read the original English TRPG rulebooks fluently due to their English language skills, and official Chinese translations are not enough. In such cases, they have to rely on the Chinese content of private volunteers. These translations are often of personal interest to the translators and therefore contain many omissions. When these aspects are addressed in a TRPG play, the players often make a temporary rule that allows the game to run smoothly.

- Breaking the rules in order to amend them. This happens mainly in TRPG plays that use original rules. The rules that the players follow in a TRPG are originally a draft, not a finalised version. In this case, the GM is often the creator of the rule or a member of the creative team. This TRPG play, in addition to interpreting the adventure story, also serves to test the soundness of the rules. Therefore, when the GM or players think that a rule doesn't make sense, people may immediately revise that rule.

I present the findings of the research based on the fieldwork in the above. This part of the findings consists of two main parts: the first being the behaviour of rule-breaking and cheating in the digital age, and the second being the reasons for doing so. The first part consists of four main types of behaviour: claiming that the rules are unreasonable; manipulating the dice rolling tool; knowing the content of the adventure in advance; and cheating the GM and other players. The second section deals with the motivations for breaking the rules and covers five main ones: forgetting the rules, misinterpreting the rules, wanting to make your character more powerful, considering relationships, and improving the rules.

It has been discussed by previous scholars knowing the content of the adventure in advance.

According to Consalvo (2009), reading the materials, including the information that should not be presented at that time, is a behaviour that can get early knowledge. The knowledge is not free, and the outcome of getting the early knowledge is that when the gift, such as a wonderful plot, appears, the gamer who already knows that will get no surprise (Consalvo, 2009). In the world of video games, it's not a bad thing to read a game's cheats in advance, as long as the player is willing to pay that price. Some games have even published official cheats, such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Consalvo, 2009). I had a similar experience when I was playing a TRPG. A GM had designed a subtle module in which an important passage was adapted from a novel, and I had read that novel before. As a result, I knew the plot development and character actions in it like the back of my hand. I approached the story exactly as the protagonist would have done and expected to achieve the same successful ending as the protagonist. However, in reality, it was not to be. The character I played was not in the same physical condition or with the same weaponry as the protagonist. Besides, there was a certain amount of luck involved in the novel's protagonist's ability to complete such an adventure before. With a few awful dice rolls, my cheating attempt ended badly. However, what if I get lucky and the result of the dice is what I want? I'm afraid that wouldn't have been a very rewarding gaming experience either. Because of the long preparation of the GM and the role of the GM and common player at the TRPG party, it is confined to a fictional recreation of the scenario.

Based on the theory of the Magic Circle, play needs a defined time and location, as well as precise norms for its continuance and practise (Consalvo, 2009). The Magic Circle is an inherent feature of the activity of play and a condition for it to exist and to take place. When the rules are broken, the whole play world crumbles, and the game is finished (Huizinga, 1950). Compared with that, cheating clearly breaks the magic circle. There is absolutely no way that any TRPG would suggest that the average player read through the module's story and the list of enemies that appear in the module before playing. It's even more unlikely that the rules of a fantasy world would include a setting such as travelling to another world to use a search engine to look up information. This is unacceptable, even for the most powerful

witch-demons or wizards in the game.

Videogames' rules are different from TRPGs' rules. A videogame's rules are stored inside the game itself, in the game code. The rules that govern what characters (and hence players) may and cannot do are stored in the game engine (Consalvo, 2009). On the contrary, there is nothing objective as a game code or game engine in TRPGs. Instead, the responsibility of making rules and making sure the rules are enforced is taken by the GM, a subjective person. For many GMs, they can only manage a portion of the rules. Then, they may outlaw parts of the rules. For example, when I participated in the TRPG Infinite Horror, one GM banned the man-making and creature-making rules. The reason for this was that the man-making rules allowed a PC to create a new player character, a character whose value was almost equivalent to that of a PC's character card. This makes the PC too flexible and overpowered in play. The creature-making rules allow the PC to produce weapons and equipment between adventures at a third of the cost. This greatly affects the economic environment within the game. Therefore, in cases where GMs are not prepared or do not intend to mobilise module resources to deal with the impact of these two classes of rules, it is worth considering banning them.

Alternatively, there were GMs who felt that the existing rules of different races and classes' combat abilities were not sufficiently balanced. For example, during a TRPG party in the fifth edition of DND, the GM announced that the School of Evocation was very powerful, but that wizards of other schools had their own value as well. Therefore, in order to encourage players to choose other wizard schools, the GM created a new rule that said if a player chose a non-Evocation school of wizard for his or her character, he could choose two schools, even though the rulebook announces that each wizard can only have one school. Immediately after this rule was promulgated, one player chose the school of Divination and the other chose the school of Abjuration. Later in the adventure, this wizard took on the duties of both wizard and bard, clearly crushing the other player characters in the party in combat.

The result of breaking rules can be completed and cause a chain reaction. While the game design team may not have the best opinion or be able to cater to the needs of every TRPG player, most of the time, their knowledge and game design skills are far superior to those of the average player. As a result, when an ordinary player changes the rules for their own preference, they often distort the original balance of the game, making one of the professions in the game too powerful or too weak. Such changes can then cause a chain reaction. If a profession becomes too powerful and unbalances some other professions, then the players of those professions may also suggest changes to the rules. After all, many players involved in TRPGs want to run adventures with strong professions, not just sit in the audience and give other adventurers a pat on the back.

#### **8.2.4 The power of rule-breaking**

Some people's attempts to break the rules will be recognised, while others will not. Whether or not a rule is successfully broken is a matter of the player's position in the small group. For the highest-ranking member of the small group, usually the task leader, they can break a rule publicly. This often occurs before or at the beginning of a TRPG party. At this stage, if they have confirmed that they have such authority, they will indicate which rules they want to abolish. As an example, Player 2 once announced a rule in *Infinite Terror* that all player characters could not use equipment higher than their bloodline level. This rule was not in line with the *Infinite Terror* rulebook, but he defended the validity of his proposed rule. He stated that it would upset the game balance if player characters gained access to use advanced equipment before they had upgraded to a high bloodline level. From this I found that he did not push his rules directly because he was the task leader, but by logical deduction. This is interpreted as him playing the role of task leader in a small group and asserting his leadership. This is the player's power to influence the game outside the magic circle (Montola, 2009).

For members of a small group who do not have a high position, it can take courage to break the rules directly and publicly. Therefore, they might first communicate with others in the

small group to ask their opinion on a rule, and then propose a rule change after many votes have been collected. For an example, Player 3 was keen to choose a caster profession in DND5E. At one point he played a cleric, he refused to state in advance what divine spells he had prepared, intending to declare that he had prepared a particular divine spell when needed. When he came to seek my advice, I objected. I thought that this flattering tactic overly enhanced the priest's power.

Some players cheat when their demands do not go through, or when they know that their demands aren't so unreasonable that they do not have enough power in the clique to get certain attempts to change the rules put into effect. The example is about Player 3 as well. When asked by the GM what divine magic he had prepared after his request had been denied, he tried to make up his mind by rambling. When it came time to use the spell, he then posted a screenshot from excel in the group and said that he had prepared it in advance. In my opinion, it was obvious that he was lying, he entered the name of the divine spell he wanted to release on the spot and then sent the screenshot.

### **8.3 Rules created by players**

In this section, I'd like to present my findings about TRPG rules in the context of Do-it-yourself rules (also known as house rules or village rules). These TRPG rules were not created by game companies like Wizards of the Coast but by the players themselves. Instead of being designed by professional game designers, DIY rules are formulated by normal players who are eager to play TRPGs. In my own personal experience, I have created my own set of TRPG rules for The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky. In the field investigation, I have observed many TRPG players who have created their own TRPG rules, such as Naruto, Harry Potter, and some independent TRPG rules.

In digitalisation, for original TRPG rules by players, the sources of material include three

main categories: other TRPG rulebooks; video games; and non-game works:

Firstly, other TRPG rulebooks are the most important source of inspiration for original rules (Bryant, 2009). While the internet's well-developed communication channels make it increasingly easy to have access to abundant knowledge about the many TRPG rulesets, and have deep comprehension of them. In my participant observation, player 3 told me that his opinion of paper-based TRPG rule books is:

“TRPG-related paperbacks are hard to come by in China. For example, the third edition of the DND series, which has many players who love it, costs 1,600 yuan (about £200) to buy the basic edition (Players’ Handbook, Dungeon Master’ Guide, and Monster Book), which is an expensive expense. Furthermore, with the vast number of expansions already published for this edition, even buying just the most attractive parts of it, there are dozens of copies. Besides, that's not counting the cost of buying maps and miniatures and painting. The difficulty is that, in many cases, there is no market for them, and the official dealers have long since sold out. I had to hope that other players would sell their collections on the second-hand market if I wanted to buy them.”

In the internet age, these rules can be downloaded from TRPG enthusiast websites. Many of the expansion rules that are not officially available in Chinese have also been translated into Chinese by enthusiasts for those who are not good at reading English. In this way, the creators of TRPG DIY rules in the digital age have a wealth of tools and references and get the most beneficial content from them.

Secondly, video games are also an important source for the creation of TRPG rules. Some of the classic video games often have a broad world view and a well-organised backstory. The work required to create TRPG rules can be greatly reduced by adapting video games that have already been released as source material. Furthermore, video RPG games have their own numerical system. The creator of the rules can copy this system to help the creation.

Thirdly, non-game works refer to various film and television productions and novels. Some works already have a more mature numerical structure, such as Kishimoto Masashi's Narutoseries. With reference to such works, a creator can directly refer to the author's numerical logic. Some works, on the other hand, barely involve any specific description of the characters' fighting capacity and various aspects of their abilities, such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythology and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. In order to turn these kinds of books into TRPGs, the people who make them have to come up with their own numbering system.

The result of DIY rules has complexity. After the above process, the original TRPG ruleset was born. So, what does an original ruleset look like? According to the author's observation, the status of the original TRPG rules generally includes four situations:

First, the author or the author's team has completed an entire TRPG ruleset that includes at least four parts: a player's handbook, a Game Master's guide, a monster illustration, a module or a module set, and sometimes extended content or extended content write-ups. These are ready to be pushed in the publishing process.

Second, the author or team of authors has completed an entire set of TRPG rules. Based on this set of rules, the PCs and GMs can understand the basic flow of the game and play it smoothly. Such rules may not have a complete player's handbook or game master's guide but only partial vignettes about building character cards, conducting adventures, and carrying out battles. The monsters are often only those that appear in the modules and are very sparse. For people to be able to play with these rules, they need to be familiar with TRPG and know how to play the different characters based on the introductions and guides in other TRPGs.

Thirdly, the author or team of authors has completed a rough set of TRPG rules and includes

a module or modules, but there is no guidance on how to create their own modules. In this case, the existing modules are all that can be used for this game. Because the rules guidance is not clear and complete, it is often difficult for other players to write new modules. As a result, the life of such rules is confined to a small group or a small part of a TRPG website. For example, with reference to *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky*, I tried to create my own rules.

Fourthly, the original rules are not written on paper but orally agreed upon by a group of players. In this case, only the creator of the rules himself or herself has the means to host a TRPG based on them, or rather, the rules are not separated from the creator himself, and other hosts would not have the ability to use the rules without the creator's intervention, even though forcing the rules to be played would be an attempt to create a new TRPG.

In chapter 7 section 4 of this thesis, I presented my findings about Do-it-yourself (DIY) rules in TRPGs. My findings can be viewed from two perspectives: the resources of DIY TRPG rules and the result of TRPG rules. The resources of DIY TRPG rules mainly include three parts: other TRPG rulebooks; video games; and other literary and image works. The result of TRPG rules can be divided into four situations: an entire TRPG ruleset with all the important components; an entire TRPG ruleset that can be used; a rough set of TRPG rules; a conventional set of TRPG rules that can only be used among its designers.

There have been some articles teaching TRPG players to create rules by themselves (Bruno, 2017; Kyle, 2022; Janice, 2022). Some tutorials told players how to arrange the systems, characters, and mechanics of the new TRPGs in detail (Kyle, 2022). Amateur TRPG designers, as well as weekend hobbyists, can follow the process of creating their own TRPG ruleset (Bruno, 2017). These tutorials use a number of game design concepts and techniques that can support TRPG enthusiasts in their thinking and approach. However, they focus solely on the game design itself and do not specifically focus on the sources of the material. From my participatory observations, understanding the means of game design alone is not enough for

a player to design a good TRPG ruleset, and drawing inspiration from the experiences of others is very important. For example, during my field research, the case study involved the Infinite Horror TRPG, which was initially based on Zhtty's novel Infinite Horror. This book gave the team of TRPG designers a view of the world that they kept adding to and making better.

In the section on game design outcomes, there are no TRPG-related scholars to be found to explore the topic in detail. Instead, relevant articles in the industry often focus on mimicking real industry design specifications and suggesting that players complete a complex full design process (Murphy, 2020; Percy, 2022). This approach can be helpful in making a good TRPG game. However, from the perspective of small group dissemination, this route may not be so appropriate. In my fieldwork, I have found that some rules are designed to be used only by a small group of people, or even only by the creator himself. In such cases, as long as the author is able to grasp the essence of this rule set, other aspects, such as readability, are not worth the effort. One GM I met, for example, designed a TRPG rule based on NARUTO. He was and is acting as GM of this rule, and he only used it for one TRPG adventure. In his anticipation, this adventure would contain 7 vignettes of 4 to 8 hours each. Later, due to work commitments, only five mini-sections were actual completed. He faced two sets of common players to complete this adventure and hasn't used this ruleset since.

Besides, the existing game tutorials do not sufficiently take the need for small group communication into account regarding the design of DIY rules. This is not in the broad or usual sense of small group communication, such as the reconciliation of conflicts or the distribution of responsibilities within a group, but rather in the particular small group to which the game creator

himself belongs. For instance, a designer has suggested the following: when the designer finally invites friends over to play, be sure there are no huge mistakes that might spoil all the enjoyment the designer worked so hard to build (Murphy, 2020). This suggestion is

reasonable for designing a TRPG that is in tune with the industry. But for a self-indulgent set of TRPG rules, it is the opposite. What game designers really need to do in order to satisfy the needs of the few people in their own little group is not to invite players to try it out after everything is as ready as possible, but to include others in the rule creation process at the point of inspiration. In other words, it is like discussing whether to break a rule in an existing TRPG and giving individual players a chance to express their opinions or not. This creates a sense of participation by the small group and makes the game design a group goal for the group rather than a project for the individual designer.

## 8.4 Summary

In summary, TRPG rules and players' attitude towards TRPG rules in the Internet era are different from what they were traditionally. This can be viewed from three perspectives: choosing rules, breaking rules, and do-it-yourself rules.

Firstly, there is a new trend of choosing TRPG rules in the internet age. The pathways for choosing rules are more diversified. In the digital era, small TRPG groups are exhibiting new characteristics in terms of verifying rules; in terms of learning rules, many TRPG players opt to follow TRPG videos for learning; they can discover relevant films and are delighted to accept them. Besides, they can discover relevant videos and are eager to learn from other TRPG gamers. The existence of this trend differs from previous scholarly discourse. In addition to the quality of the rules themselves, the popularity and accessibility of the ruleset in terms of publicity, as well as the ratings it has received among the small TRPG community, have become important references in the choice of rules by TRPG players.

Secondly, some TRPG players will breach or cheat the original rules. Because TRPG rules are not defined in code like video game rules, they are very simple to breach. Many individuals will attempt to breach the rules or cheat by using digital tools and search engines in the

internet era. Traditional methods of breaching the rules, like saying the rules are illogical or cheating other players, are still in use today. There are many ways for players to break the rules. Some of the more common ways include: claiming that a rule does not make sense; backdooring the dice rolling tool; claiming that there are rules in the rulebook that do not actually exist or, conversely, that there are no rules that exist in the rules; and learning about the game, level and puzzles by means other than the rules of the game before the adventure begins. They do this for a variety of

reasons, including forgetting the rules, misinterpreting the rules, wishing to make their character more powerful, considering relationships, and refining the rules. The way in which a player breaks the rules is closely related to that player's position in the TRPG clique. Higher status players tend to use honest, direct means, while lower status players tend to use deceptive, indirect means.

Thirdly, players are not content to learn and use existing TRPG rules but are passionate about creating their own ones. They draw inspiration from existing TRPG rules, video games, literature, and visuals, and adapt them to their established worldview to create original TRPG rules. These TRPG rules tend to be relatively simple, and many do not have full player manuals. But these rules can work within small groups and allow players to enjoy the game more fully. This fun is not just the fun of adventuring and playing in a TRPG, but also the fun of creating TRPG rules in small groups.

## **Chapter 9 Conclusion and future work**

### **9.1 Discussion of research questions**

Based on the discussion in these four chapters above, this section will attempt to answer this thesis' core research question: How Chinese TRPG players are playing online TRPGs in the

digital age?

As I mentioned in the Chapter 1 Introduction, there are sub questions of the core question:

- In the digital age, what is the state of communication and approach to gaming between the common players and the GMs in China?
- In what ways does small group communication need to be rethought to account for TRPG play and as communicative activities in China?
- How has the use of technology in TRPG in the digital age impacted on TRPG play in China?
- What are the TRPG rules and players' attitudes towards TRPG rules in the digital age in China?

**In the digital age, what is the state of communication and approach to gaming between the common players and the GMs in China?**

One obvious and immediate change was the popularization of online TRPGs. When TRPGs were first created, players were used to playing offline, not just because they were happy to play offline, but because that was the only option available to them at the time. With the birth of live chat software, the possibility of online TRPGs was born. When online meeting software such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams was created, the technical barriers to online TRPG were gone. More details can be seen in Chapter 5.

The emergence of online TRPG is a double-edged sword. From a positive perspective, it has obvious advantages in terms of spatial distance, game props, and game play. In terms of spatial distance, online TRPG eliminates the need for players to gather specifically at a player's home or board game store, which saves transportation costs and time, and keeps players in contact even if they move to another city. In terms of game props, a key prop in TRPG is the character card, which requires players to perform complex calculations and make multiple modifications during the game, leading to calculation stress and difficulty in recognizing the content due to poor

handwriting. The introduction of digital character cards solves these problems. In terms of

game play, online TRPG allows for more convenient and flexible use of multiple media forms. For example, a multi-paragraph description can be directly copied and pasted from a module into the software, without the GM having to read it out loud word by word. Reading long passages of text is very tiring, and players may miss important clues that require careful consideration. More details can be seen in Chapter 5.

**In what ways does small group communication need to be rethought to account for TRPG play and as communicative activities in China?**

It can be viewed in four parts: roles performance, digital gathering, group problems and distribution in TRPG small group.

First, in terms of character performance, the appearance of small groups is not dramatically different between TRPGs digitally and conventionally. However, the tasks and obstacles that the same positions encounter are not identical. Regardless of the platform utilised, the function of a task leader must be done by an expert who is acquainted with the rules and duties. Because of the way the group is set up digitally, the task leader has a stronger influence in choosing whether a group member remains or departs. Similarly, the tension releaser should devote greater attention and effort to avoiding conflict among members of the small group.

Second, in the digital era, players' speech and discussion can happen out of TRPG parties. They also talk about meeting times, locations, and regulations, as well as evaluation and comment on role-play, setting, and plot. Scholars have hitherto paid little attention to this viewpoint. Although some researchers have explored factors outside of the party in their ethnographies, they merely defined it as a field research procedure and have not extensively studied it (Barce, 2012; Garcia, 2017; Mizer, 2015).

Third, throughout my TRPG field study, I experienced a lot of team disagreements. In this part, I have used the perspective of party time to precisely analyse the causes of team

disagreements and how to overcome them. This is because that scheduling may quickly lead to disagreement. Given these schedule conflicts, it is vital to locate a good time to settle them. I attempted to tackle issues as soon as they arose, but the result let me disappointed. We genuinely enter a magical circle with other members in the TRPG small groups. When we attempt to address an issue, whether it's about quest content, culture, or emotion, it soon disrupts the magic circle and causes the players to lose immersion. So, even if a small party encounters anything that a player or few players are unhappy with, it is wiser to wait until the adventure is complete before analysing it. It

is also critical to differentiate whether the team's issue belongs to a player or a player character. This is not just about the physical location of the point of contention, but also about how conflicts will be faced and resolved. If the issue is one of the players, the small group must handle it. However, the hurdles that the player character experiences, as well as the impediments that the GM places in the road of the player character, may be used to help the player develop and have a pleasant gaming experience.

Fourth, in-game distribution is a key aspect of TRPG clique interpersonal communication. Principally, The GM may have a significant impact on the way of distribution. This is due to the GM's enormous authority. This power should be utilized with caution, particularly given the GM's endless resources in the game world. Then, there are a variety of options to complete the part of distribution in a specific TRPG adventure. All of these allocation strategies is justified in its own way. Finally, even if many resources exist solely inside the created world, it is crucial to remember that the characters who get them are made up of live, breathing people. Players' requirements and eager are of the utmost importance.

More details of this part can be seen in Chapter 7.

### **How has the use of technology in TRPG in the digital age impacted on TRPG play in China?**

Compared to traditional offline TRPGs, online TRPGs do not win across the board. Its main

shortcomings lie in the software and player interaction. From the point of view of the software, they do not necessarily simulate the offline TRPG scene perfectly. Or rather, although TRPG-related tools and software allow players to achieve animations and effects that are difficult to achieve offline, such software can be hard to learn. While, the sense of immersion they give is, in many cases, less than desirable. Worse still, the availability of tools and software makes it easier for some players with bad intentions to cheat on dice rolls. In terms of player interaction, communication from a distance can make it difficult for players to physically perceive each other's body movements and facial expressions, thus hindering the transfer of information. There may also be more unexpected distractions for players.

With the growth of online TRPGs as a form of gaming, the online TRPG culture and community has been established. Unlike the old ways of word-of-mouth, tabletop game shops and magazine subscriptions, many players have chosen to search for TRPG-related knowledge and information online, and have built a unique community culture. For example, *Goddessfantasy* and *CNMODS* in the Chinese world belong to this category. Among such TRPG online communities, there are many players who share their insights on rules and modules, as well as uploading their own written and designed modules.

As the culture and community of online TRPGs went on to thrive, TRPG technology evolved with it. Digital character cards became more and more refined and exquisite to cater for the needs of different players. More and more formulas are built into character cards, many of which cover solutions to problems players encounter in practice, and have greatly surpassed the game publisher's original character cards. Map-making software has also blossomed. It is no longer the case that GMs use Excel to create maps in the early days of online TRPGs. GMs can purchase and download specialist software on the Steam platform and other platforms to make it easier to create TRPG maps and mazes and have their characters interact with them.

The maturity of TRPG technology has opened many possibilities for TRPG, such as creating

beautiful log reports and replay, and uploading them to streaming video sites like Bilibili or Youtube. For some professional uploaders, their replay productions of live action or visual novels are already quite professional and popular.

More details can be seen in Chapter 6.

### **What are the TRPG rules and players' attitudes towards TRPG rules in the digital age in China?**

The TRPG rules have changed dramatically. Unlike before when there were only a handful of rules such as DND and COC, there are now thousands of TRPG rules. This has happened because, on the one hand, the internet culture has made more players jump at the chance to create their own rules. On the other hand, many players feel that the existing rules do not meet their needs, for example, the learning costs of many TRPGs are too high and require hundreds of hours. Others start with their favourite literary or film productions, hoping to create unique rules based on them. Considering that sophisticated TRPG technology allows players to play with TRPG with other players from far and wide, even very offbeat or niche rules can have a place. More details can be seen in Chapter 8.

## **9.2 The contribution of the thesis**

The thesis has made contribution both in the academy and industry. Specifically, the contributions of this thesis can be divided into four sections: academic contributions to TRPG studies, academic contributions to game studies, academic contributions to other disciplines, and contributions to industry.

### **9.2.1 The contribution to TRPG studies**

The academic contributions of this thesis to the TRPG studies are mainly reflected in the

following five aspects: the filling of the TRPG gap in the field of Chinese game studies, the filling of the Chinese gap in the field of world TRPG, the new exploration of the TRPG online platforms, the description and discussion of TRPG in the Internet era.

Firstly, Chinese game studies has developed to a certain extent, and many video games are taken into consideration by Chinese game studies scholars. Some games produced by Chinese game companies with Chinese cultural overtones, such as *Legend of Sword and Fairy*, have entered the field of game studies. Some widely influential online games, such as *Glory of Kings*, have become important cases for research on large scale online group competitive games. However, in this research climate, there has been a distinct lack of attention to tabletop games. Although there have also been studies on table games such as Mahjong, TRPGs have not received much attention. This thesis combines many behaviours such as players' communication, interaction, opinions, learning rules, using rules, innovating rules, using tools and software, etc. to provide an in-depth study of the development and flourishing of TRPG in China. Therefore, it is believed that this thesis can fill the gap in this area and provide an important foundation for future research on Chinese TRPGs. This thesis examines TRPG games for Chinese players, which is conducive to connecting Chinese TRPG research with the world, thus promoting the globalisation of Chinese game research.

Secondly, the current worldwide research on TRPGs has been analysed mainly using players in North America and Europe as case studies. North America is where TRPGs originated and where the famous TRPG rule DND emerged and spread on a large scale, and it is only right that TRPG- related scholarship should be presented in this state. However, given that TRPGs have become a global genre, with players of different nationalities, countries and regions of the world likely to dabble and immerse themselves in the genre, it is imperative to expand the scope of research. All the subjects chosen for this paper were Chinese language users and they were playing TRPGs in Chinese each time. In addition, they have interacted with the entire Chinese TRPG community as well as created content. In this way, this thesis is useful for other researchers to learn about the styles and characteristics of Chinese TRPG players

and to inform the next step in exploring the intertwining of TRPGs and different cultures.

Thirdly, this thesis focuses on the impact of digitalization on character cards and dice in TRPGs and explores the challenges and changes brought about by the transition from traditional to digital TRPGs. Character cards have gained significance in TRPG studies, but their evolution due to digitalization remains unexplored. Digital character cards offer advantages such as automated computations, easy modification, reading, and sharing, eliminating the need for physical materials. However, they also raise concerns about cheating. Similarly, the study of dice in TRPGs has been limited to traditional games and lacks analysis of digital adaptations. The instrumental nature of dice has transformed with the advent of computer software and mobile applications. While online miniature tokens and software support have been promoted, challenges such as the cost, learning curve, and slow pace of operation hinder their widespread adoption.

Fourthly, this thesis captures the new situations of TRPG small group communication in the digital age. Thanks to convenient means of communication and software, many TRPGs can conveniently play TRPGs over the internet and no longer need to be bound by spatial distance in all times. However, this convenience also brings with it many problems, such as the shift from socialising with TRPG acquaintances to socialising with strangers, the lack of concentration of players, and the problems of cheating and immersion due to the use of electronics.

Fifthly, this thesis uncovers a new attitude of GMs and players towards the life and death of player characters in the digital age: when playing online, players tend to accept the death and replacement of game characters more easily due to aspects such as a simpler character card creation process and faster iterations. The exploration of this aspect certainly provides an important case study and research direction for exploring online TRPGs. The main concepts around SGC can be checked in 3.7 Small group communication and related information are presented in Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group

communication.

### **9.2.2 The contribution to game studies**

This thesis's contribution to the study of games is not limited to TRPGs, but covers many other aspects based on TRPGs as the object of study. The more significant are the following four aspects: the materiality turn in games, the combination of video games and TRPGs, distribution in online play, and scheduling in small group play.

Firstly, this thesis offers a new theoretical exploration of the material turn in game studies. In TRPGs, pens, dice, paper and maps are the necessary items for traditional games. According to Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play, In digital TRPGs, these are replaced by electronic computers and tools and software. While some players have chosen to turn to online TRPGs altogether, others still prefer physical objects to their projections in the digital world. This tendency, and the appeal of physical objects, involves the personalisation of the player's experience and the interaction with other players.

Secondly, this thesis provides an important reference for research related to distribution in online play. A large number of video games that require online and real-time communication attract many players and have a significant impact. The distribution of their benefits is quite a complex element. According to 7.4 Distribution in TRPG small group, the guiding principle of solving distribution problems in TRPGs are examined. Unlike the real world, where distribution is a complex issue, in TRPGs, production and distribution are different. The production of resources in TRPGs is controlled by the GM, who creates the game world and its resources. The GM must balance the distribution of resources to maintain the logic of the story and the game's value. Although video games do not have the GMs found in TRPGs, algorithms written by game designers assume this responsibility in a substantial way. Seven common approaches to distributing spoils are discussed. These approaches include equal distribution, selling all loot for money and distributing it evenly,

distribution by a captain, letting one person distribute items and choosing last, distribution based on contribution, distribution based on needs, and random allocation. Each method has its advantages and challenges, and the choice of distribution method should consider the preferences and needs of different players in the small group. The distribution of spoils is examined in relation to the players' goals and the characters' goals. Players' goals take precedence over characters' goals since it is the players who actively participate in the game. Conflicts may arise when players have different goals for their characters. The GM's role is to manage these conflicts and make decisions that consider both the character's plausibility and the player's needs. Understanding individual diversity in the small group is crucial for choosing the appropriate distribution method.

Thirdly, this thesis also explores how TRPGs influence and are influenced by video games. According to 1.3, TRPG has an effect on video games. This perspective is different from the perspectives of previous researchers. This thesis no longer focuses on the difference between TRPG and video games, but are dedicated to finding the relevance and dependence of TRPG and video games, and even the entire Internet, so that TRPG can treat the Internet as assistants instead of enemies, and thus get better development in the Internet age. It will also give new impetus to electronic RPGs as a whole and push the designers of electronic RPGs to think more about the value of TRPGs and add new elements to electronic RPGs to attract players.

Fourthly, this thesis makes contribution in small group play. According to 7.3 Group problems, there are many problems happened in digital games. One of the challenges discussed is the contradiction caused by time arrangement. In the digital age, with the ability to connect with people from different locations, regular gatherings for small groups become crucial. However, individuals may be involved in multiple small groups with varying demands on their time, which can create conflicts and make it difficult to meet the expectations of each group. This can lead to players leaving the groups or reducing their time investment in small groups. The issue of scheduling is not just about coordinating time but also about the phrasing and

presentation of the schedule. The way scheduling is communicated can impact players' engagement and sense of immersion in the game. The section highlights the importance of creating an appealing and immersive environment through scheduling statements, especially in digital environments where textual communication is prominent. The timing of problem resolution is another aspect discussed. Conflicts between players should be dealt with after the game session, allowing the game to progress smoothly and preserving the atmosphere and immersion.

### **9.2.3 The contribution to other disciplines**

Other than game studies, the thesis is beneficial in some other disciplines. This contribution mainly includes four aspects: media psychology, communication studies, sociology and ethnography.

Firstly, from a media psychology perspective, There have been a number of studies on distraction factors in videoconferencing, such as Zoom meetings or Microsoft meetings (Balogova and Brumby, 2022; George *et al.*, 2022; LaFond, 2023). They pay attention to distraction when seeing their own faces (Balogova and Brumby, 2022) and distraction about gender (George *et al.*, 2022). Unlike them, this thesis discusses the problem of distraction from the perspective of the magic circle, providing a gaming perspective to media psychology research and facilitating subsequent scholars to explore the state of one's concentration on a particular activity more from the perspective of environment and atmosphere. According to 5.3 Hosting online TRPG parties, when playing TRPGs offline, players are usually able to go into the TRPG magic circle and focus more easily on the game. However, in an online setting, there are various factors that can lead to player distractions. One major factor is the network itself. Online meetings and games are still relatively new and are constantly evolving, leading to potential technical issues such as network interruptions or lag. These problems can greatly impact the gaming experience and communication between players, and can easily let TRPG players notice things out of the magic circle. Additionally, when each player is in a different physical environment, they may

face interruptions or distractions from their surroundings. For example, players may be asked to help with household chores while playing from home. Moreover, the pace of online games can be slower than offline games, leading to players multitasking or losing focus during the game. These factors contribute to a higher probability of players being unable to fully concentrate on the game compared to offline TRPGs, and let the magic easy to be broken.

Secondly, from the perspective of communication studies, virtual small group communication has been an important part of small group communication (Ocker, 2001; Sivunen and Hakonen, 2011; Walker *et al.*, 2018; ). But there are few research focus on small group communication during TRPG. This thesis provides a reference for communication research in virtual environments, and expand the scope of application of the theory to TRPG. In particular, for small group communication. According to 7.1 Roles performance, in the digital era, the roles of task leader and tension releaser in TRPG small group communication have similarities to traditional roles but also some notable changes. The task leader is responsible for work arrangement and goal achievement within the game. In digital TRPGs, the task leader needs to be well-versed in the rules and capable of providing direction when there is no clear dance. This guide expertise allows them to influence the group and make informed decisions. In addition, the leader must also make changes to the rules and accept changes to the rules from other players to ensure that the game runs smoothly. This is beneficial for research about how did a leader takes both roles of task leader and emotional leader at the same time.

Thirdly, from a Sociology perspective, this facilitates the study of human rule-breaking behaviour. According to 8.2 Rule-breaking and Cheating, this thesis discusses the ways in which rules are broken and cheating occurs in TRPGs, particularly in the internet age. It analyzes the different methods of rule-breaking and cheating, the reasons behind such behavior, and the power dynamics involved. Four main ways of breaking rules and cheating in TRPGs are discussed: questioning the validity of a rule, manipulating dice rolling tools, gaining an informational advantage, and trying to exploit unmentioned rules. Six main types

of rule-breaking scenarios are identified: rule-breaking due to forgetting, misunderstanding the rules, wanting to make characters more powerful, addressing material limitations, and amending existing rules. Task leaders or high-ranking members of the group may openly break or alter rules, asserting their authority. Other group members may seek consensus or propose rule changes indirectly to avoid confrontation. Some players may resort to cheating when their demands are not met or when they lack the power to change rules openly. Rules also exist in various scenarios and social activities outside of TRPGs. The study of TRPGs plus rule-breaking behaviours is useful in providing a reference for the study of other rule-breaking behaviours in society.

Fourthly, according to 4.2.1 A concise review of ethnography in game studies, anthropological methods, including ethnography, have been integral to game studies, providing insights into the cultural, rule-based, and community aspects of games. The application of anthropological approaches to TRPG research is justified and allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics and significance of TRPGs within the context of culture and society. This thesis provides a model for the application of ethnographic methods in TRPGs, which will facilitate subsequent scholars to better understand and use this research methodology.

### **9.2.4 the contribution to the industry**

The thesis's contribution to the TRPG industry can be seen in five dimensions: community, business subculture, individual TRPG designers, other media and Chinese TRPG practitioners.

For the TRPG business, this research can mainly target to two dimensions. In the dimension of production, it is useful to help TRPG enterprises decide that which kinds of games they would like to produce and translate, and which kinds of features are the key points for players. In the dimension of service, this research can tell enterprises how should they do to appeal players.

For the TRPG subculture, each kind of subcultural faces a problem that it may be hard to be understood by the mainstream society. TRPG culture is not excepted. It helps the society to understand TRPG culture on a deeper level and may change the biased attitude towards this subcultural activity.

From an individual developer's point of view, TRPGs are now in a state of blossoming. According to 3.2 TRPG and technologies in digitalisation, technological developments have transformed the TRPG gaming platform. Mixed-reality platforms have been developed, combining physical presence with digital interfaces. Additionally, digital TRPG platforms that integrate computer and internet technologies have gained popularity and recognition among players. These platforms offer features such as covert communication, synchronized audio and visual presentations, and real-time recording of gaming sessions. The technological tools brought about by digitisation and the social changes brought about by the pandemic of COVID-19 provide a good opportunity for game innovation in TRPGs. With less than adequate funding, individual developers are guided to understand the psychology of players in the digital age and create more popular TRPGs.

From the perspective of film and television, there is a growing connection between TRPGs and other media. This thesis is helpful to film and TV practitioners who would like taking inspiration and material from TRPGs and create scripts based on familiar stories and characters from TRPGs. Understanding the player psychology in TRPG small-group communication and how TRPGs are affected by the medium facilitates their better understanding of how to make cross-media adaptations. More details can be found in 1.3 Significance of the research and 8.3 Rules created by players.

From the perspective of Chinese TRPG practitioners, according to 3.3, while offline TRPGs have a large audience and offer unique gameplay experiences, the popularity of online TRPGs indicates a growing interest in embracing new technologies and exploring the possibilities they offer in China. Chinese TRPG players are very happy to adopt digital

platforms and other tools. When designing, designers may know more about the differences and connections between TRPGs and video games by this thesis, and take the actual needs of Chinese TRPG players in the digital era into account.

## 9.3 Recommendations

Based on the research in this thesis, in this section, I have made some suggestions for academia and industry, and I hope that my research can be helpful.

### 9.3.1 Recommendations for academic

Based on Chapter 5 TRPG online, my advice to the TRPG academic is that when studying online TRPGs, it is important to look at online TRPGs not just as a derivative or adjunct to TRPGs, but as a new genre of game. As we know, video RPGs, such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Pathfinder*, which already exhibit different media characteristics and game forms from traditional TRPGs, cannot be fully applied within the framework of the original discipline. The same is true of online TRPGs. The difference between them and traditional, or offline TRPGs, has been significant.

Based on Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play, I have found that the value of digital character cards is not given enough attention in research. They are definite more than just a piece of paper, a document or a table carrying textual descriptions and character data; they are an expression of the player's mood and an internal projection. TRPG researchers should pay attention to the importance of digital character cards when referring to, and focus on the function of character cards as player avatars when referring to them, rather than simply listing them alongside dice and maps. In addition, the topic of how to deal with the life and death of a game character is a very worthwhile one. If scholars can delve deeper into this area, it may contribute to the

development and digitalisation process of not only TRPGs, but also to the character and plot design of video games.

Based on Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication, I believe that the relationship between the player and the facilitator in TRPGs needs to be discussed further. We can see that in some studies that attempt to link TRPGs and pedagogy together, the teacher is given the role of the GM or plays the role of the GM. In this way, the GM has a dual authority inside and outside the magic circle, the authority of the facilitator within the magic circle, and the authority of the educator outside the magic circle. However, this does not adequately and comprehensively reflect the situation in which the TRPG is conducted as a game. The contradictions and interactions between the average player and the GM clearly deserve further as well as interdisciplinary discussion.

Based on Chapter 8 TRPG Rules, in future TRPG research, the boundaries of TRPG research should be expanded more in conjunction with the learning and creation of rules. In previous TRPG studies, it was often just a matter of stating what rules the players were using, as if the rules were naturally and directly learned and mastered by the players. However, this situation is no longer representative in the Internet age. Many players have encountered obstacles to learning established rules, have become resistant to them, or have developed new rules based on their own creativity. This is an important part of the TRPG community and culture and should be explored in depth.

### **9.3.2 Recommendations for industry**

Based on Chapter 5 TRPG online, new trend in digital TRPG has made this kind of game have some new features, and players' experience changed as follow. Therefore, I have some advises. My advice to the TRPG industry is that new TRPG games should subsequently be designed with the characteristics of online TRPGs in mind. TRPGs played through online platforms are less demanding in terms of wargaming and modelling, almost negligible in

terms of materialistic and mass production requirements, and more inclusive in terms of dice and textual narrative. Such characteristics of the medium need to be considered by game designers.

Considering the phenomenon of hosting opinion about shifting. I suggest that when designing new TRPGs in the future, game designers should consider the situation of multiple different GMs hosting the same TRPG play, set specific scenarios and numerical requirements regarding the division of labour among different GMs, as well as the interaction between different GMs, and the Dungeon Master's Guide could provide guidance and advice on hosting a TRPG party by multiple GMs.

When TRPG producers are designing new TRPGs, it is necessary to take greater account of the fact that TRPG players are not in the same physical space, as well as the pace and style of play through video communication software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. It is also necessary for TRPG platforms such as Roll 20 to consider how they can help players overcome the limitations of geographical distance to enjoy TRPGs.

Based on Chapter 6 TRPG technologies, conventions, and mechanics changed by Internet based play, I would suggest that the industry might consider developing companion dice rolling software alongside the development of new TRPGs. Rather than hiding the outcome of the roll in a complex algorithm, such as Crusader Kings or Pillars of Eternity, such software should draw on the strengths of traditional dice rolling systems and use dice to balance the randomness and strategy of TRPG adventures.

It is reasonable for the industry to take TRPG digital character cards seriously. On one hand, from the perspective of TRPG developers, game designers should consider how to create digital character cards when designing new TRPGs, or provide links or advice on the creation of digital character cards when releasing TRPGs. or provide links or suggestions for the creation of digital character cards when releasing TRPGs. On the other hand, from the

perspective of TRPG platform operators, they need to provide players with more convenient conditions for downloading digital character cards and more generic templates for card creation, so that players can easily download and use character cards with different rules.

The TRPG rulebook is perfectly capable of giving more guidance on how players should play the game. This guidance should, of course, be based on many iterations of research and experimentation. What needs to be stressed here is that the ruleset needs to focus more on the players, not just the role they play. Some rules conflate the two or focus only on player roles, ignoring the objective fact that these roles are merely player avatars. Only by focusing more on the feelings and experiences of the players in the group will the small TRPG community be able to enjoy and progress in the game.

For TRPG-related streaming video producers and web influencers, if they wish to contribute more to the industry, I suggest they devote more time and space to telling the story of what it's like to be a player and how they grind and compromise with each other as players in a TRPG. It is possible to make fantastic TRPG replay videos if they are just committed to presenting an interesting story and some lifelike characters.

Based on Chapter 7 Impact of digitalisation play on small group communication, to better handle possible conflicts, one suggestion is that when game companies are designing new TRPGs or new versions of existing TRPGs, they should give more rules or guidelines about how the GM and other players interact. One's power and responsibility are often closely intertwined, and if a GM only wishes to use his or her power to moderate the game, and does not want to take responsibility for making the TRPG a good experience for the participants, the TRPG small group may fall apart. This may not necessarily be the GM's own arrogance, but may simply be inappropriately guided by the game company. Therefore, providing GMs with more efficient means of dispute resolution is an important aspect of future TRPG design.

Based on Chapter 8 TRPG Rules, I would like to give suggestions of TRPG rules to TRPG-related organisations and people as follows:

Firstly, the TRPG industry should pay more attention to players' proclivities in terms of rules selection. For the industry, they should think more about how they can make the TRPG rules they publish and distribute better serve players and stand out in the ever-increasing competition for games. Since 2018, more than 7,500 new games have been released on the Steam gaming platform alone each year (Clement, 2022). Each new game is likely to bring players who previously chose TRPGs back into the arms of video games. After all, they are both games played while sitting in front of an electronic device, and TRPGs and other games are not irreplaceable to each other.

Secondly, it has become even more important for TRPG developers to listen to the needs of gamers and improve the rules. Considering that the various TRPG rules are no longer only familiar to die-hard enthusiasts but are now easily accessible and downloadable via the internet, there is an increasing opportunity for the average TRPG player to provide valuable input on changes based on their personal understanding of the rules. If this feedback isn't accepted and taken seriously, it could happen again like it did with Pathfinder and DND, where players made their own rules to meet needs that weren't met by the official rules and became a major competitor to that TRPG rule set.

### **9.4 Future work**

In the future, I plan to continue my research of game study in these seven perspectives: the period of post covid-19, demography, output, software, accessibility, views of life and death.

Firstly, I plan to conduct the study in a time period where the pandemic of COVID-19 has ended, or in a country or region that is barely affected by the pandemic of COVID-19. In this

way, I can get a more accurate picture of whether players' use of the TRPG platform is a specific reaction to a particular situation, or a common trend due to technological advances and applications.

Secondly, I would like to conduct the study among native English-speaking groups so that I can learn whether the findings of the current study are applicable to a different language group of players. If the right opportunity arises, I hope to conduct collaborative research with linguistics-related academics so as to explore the value of the TRPG digital platform on an interdisciplinary scale.

Thirdly, I hope to do further research on TRPG replay videos myself afterwards. In the digital age, the online TRPG platform has facilitated video production. Further, I have observed that there are a large number of related videos being produced on many streaming video sites. What kind of characteristics do these videos have? What kind of audience do they serve? What are the rules applied to these videos? What are the relationships between characters and members of small groups presented in these videos? I see value in exploring such questions further.

Fourthly, I anticipate further research into TRPG-related software later. Although I have used several pieces of software as case studies in this thesis. However, I do not focus exclusively on the software and analyse it in depth, but only use it to present the evolution of TRPG in the digital age. Later, on the basis of an in-depth study and comparison of different TRPG software, I aim to be able to offer suggestions to industry for new versions of such software that will better meet the needs of TRPG players. Furthermore, in 2023, artificial intelligence, represented by Chat GPT, has already sparked a new technological trend. Although I am not an academic in the field of computing, I have observed that it has had a huge impact on many companies and jobs. I have also noticed that some people are starting to experiment with a closer integration of TRPG and AI. This exploration is still in its infancy and may hold great promise for future practice.

Fifthly, the issue of accessibility is of concern in the field of gaming. People with visual or

hearing impairments often encounter obstacles to enjoying games. In offline TRPGs, such barriers also present. On one hand, games based on pens and paper require participants to be able to read and write. Verbal communication-based games, on the other hand, require players to be able to listen and speak competently. However, with the development of digital technology, people with disabilities can also try to join online TRPGs. With the right tools and software, visual or auditory impairments can be dealt with properly. At a time when digital technology is becoming increasingly sophisticated, it is worth looking at how software development can be done to help players with physical disabilities to participate in TRPGs and enjoy themselves.

Sixthly, I expect to explore in depth the new view of life and death in TRPGs. At present, I have observed this phenomenon, but I am not totally sure about the causes of it, nor am I able to determine whether it is widespread. I will be looking more closely at this phenomenon in order to analyze it deeply and to take a dim view of life and death in TRPGs. In my mind, it is definitely important. On one hand, I will study and use the different TRPG rule sets so that I can understand how players treat the lives of their player characters in the different rules. On the other hand, I intend to distribute questionnaires to collect players' perceptions of the life and death of their player characters from a quantitative perspective. Furthermore, the connection between this relationship between new and old characters, and the relationship in TRPGs and electronic role-playing games is worth exploring.

Seventh, I hope that in the future I will be able to conduct further research into the development of TRPGs in China, especially with regard to player-created rules and modules. In my field research, I have learnt a consensus among the TRPG community: the source of a TRPG's success lies in the game designer's design. But the key to its prosperity lies in the passion of the players and their active participation in its creation. In the 2020s, Chinese players were highly motivated to create TRPG rules. However, by what means were these rules actually created? Were these rules recognized broadly by Chinese TRPG players? What is the potential for future development of these TRPG rules? These questions are very appealing to me.

## Appendix A Websites

Some well-known TRPG websites, including platforms and applications, are a significant part of TRPG tools in the period of digitalisation.

GoddessFantasy is the most popular TRPG website in China. This website mainly includes five areas, TRPG discussion, translated data and contents, TRPG activities, GoddessFantasy activities and GoddessFantasy affairs.

The first area “TRPG discussion” includes five parts, enlisting, discussing, tools, topics and genuine products.

- The enlisting part includes more than 3000 topics. The topics can be divided in three parts, a or some players is enlisting a DM, a DM is enlisting one or some players, a group consists with players and DMs is enlisting new members. In these topics, there are more 2800 are about enlisting in TRPGs online. Only about 230 topics are about TRPGs offline.

- The discussing part includes freshman guiding, how to a player or DM in TRPGs, TRPG recording and TRPG rules.

- The genuine products part includes some news and information about genuine TRPG products, like Pathfinder, Trail of Cthulhu, Call of Cthulhu and a Chinese TRPG series, called Bloody meteor. In more than 10 years, there are only 31 posts, and each post has less than 10 replies on average. This means two facts. One is that Chinese players do not pay much attention to if a TRPG product is genuine or not. The other is that many Chinese TRPG players play piratical TRPGs, which may far more than the genuine players.

There are already many professional TRPG websites in China, represented by CNMODS and Dicecho. “CNMODS” is the abbreviation of “Chinese Modules”. Compared to comprehensive

forums, these sites are less informative, but are run by a small group of professional players. These players have often been involved in TRPGs for many years and are well versed in all aspects of TRPGs. As a result, the websites operating by them have a unique appeal.

CNMODS and Dicecho are both TRPG websites that focus on sharing and reviewing modules. Although the general forums also have a module sharing section generally, the structure is still in the form of an online forum. As a result, reviews can easily become disorganised and it can be difficult for those who need them to find the modules they want. However, on a professional site, the modules are not uploaded by the forum members themselves, but are first submitted to the site by the creator who wants to post the module. Once approved, the modules are posted on the website.

At CNMODS, the abstract of each module contains the module title, the contributor ID, the TRPG rules used and their version, the number of players suggested, and the length of the module. A brief background to the story can be found before downloading, as if it were a thesis abstract. In the case of Dicecho, after the release of the module, professional players will evaluate it in terms of characterisation, storyline, player guidance, fun of the rules used. This allows users to see a more comprehensive review and thus decide whether they want to read the module and try to be the GM of the module.

These websites also host creative events. For example, CNMODS organises a short story writing event. The campaign has many topics each month and accepts submissions from users. The submissions are posted on CNMODS's WeChat Subscription Account and are briefly reviewed by members of the management team. For TRPG enthusiasts who are interested in writing modules and are unable to navigate the story within the framework of TRPG rules, they can start with short stories to practice. In addition, CNMODS has copyright-related science activities to educate TRPG module writers and prevent them from being deceived or falling into commercial traps when signing a bestiary contract with a physical TRPG club.

At the moment, there are some obvious drawbacks to professional TRPG websites in China: firstly, they do not yet have a stable business model and need to be maintained by the management team with their own funds. Both CNMODS and Dicecho do not charge their users and have no advertising. Secondly, the management team is small. This makes the management team's personal inclination and subjective judgement very influential. The site is not objective enough. If a user contributes to a module in the framework of rules that none of the management team is familiar with or has been involved in before, the site's evaluation will not be convincing. The fact that CNMODS is not open to user reviews means that users will only see the management team's side of the story when they browse the modules. Thirdly, the threshold for the site is high. when reading reviews, players who are not already familiar with the TRPG rules and have had many experiences with TRPGs may be confused or not be able to understand.

As for profit, there are many free websites (Sigel, 2010). nearly, some TPRG tool sites is charging fees. Most of these websites are using membership-based system. Players can use some of the functions of the website for free, but they need to pay if they want to use all the functions. There are also monthly card systems where players can purchase different durations according to their actual requirement. This is similar to many streaming video sites today. Some TRPG websites are completely produced, managed and operated by volunteers. This kind of websites does not have a mature profit model and only accepts donations from players (Shajun@Shenkengweitian, 2017). Therefore, they often depend on the personal wishes and feelings of the core team. If one or all the main core team choose not to continue to maintain, this website will often be abandoned.

In the era of mobile Internet, some mobile apps have relatively complete functions and can gradually replace computer applications (reference). But for TRPG, despite the emergence of several mobile apps, computer applications still have a place and continue to develop. The reason for this phenomenon remains to be analyzed. One explanation is that these two kinds

of software are suitable for different players. The difference between computer TRPG tool software and mobile phone TRPG tool software, to some extent, corresponds to the "difference between computer games and mobile games". Both reflect the conflict between portability and functionality. For players who just want to participate in some TRPG freely and pass the time, the mobile TRPG tool software is enough. But for TRPG players who want to be deeply immersed and acting, they are often unwilling to use mobile TRPG tool software, nor do they want DMs or other players in the same game to use mobile TRPG tool software. The reason is that "if they do, it often means that they are not fully engaged in the game, which will damage the experience of all players in the game, or fail to meet higher expectations" (Player 2).

TRPG related websites and mobile apps are essential to the presence of online TRPGs. However, in the context of my thesis, they are not the focus of this thesis. Given the fragmentary nature of the content obtained from the fieldwork, I do not see the value of digging further into the scholarship. Therefore, this section is only used to illustrate information gathering and dissemination by specialist TRPG websites. This aspect will not be further explained.

## **Appendix B Communicative aspects of games and play in general**

Communication in games had already received extensive attention as early as the 1990s (Danet *et al.*, 1997; Moore *et al.*, 1996; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Parks and Roberts, 1998). In the first decade of the 21st century, such research entered a more in-depth phase, such as the comparison of friendship and offline friendship in online games (Yee, 2001), the aggressiveness of player communication in games (Anderson and Bushman, 2001), and the satisfaction that in-game communication brings to players (Sherry *et al.*, 2012). The interaction and communication between video game streamers and viewers has created a community of players with certain behavioural characteristics (Nascimento *et al.*, 2014).

An important area regarding communication in games is positive emotions in games (Oliveira, Arriaga, Correia and Paiva, 2020). study with adolescents aged 8 to 12 years showed that communication in multiplayer online video games had a significant impact on players' well-being and emotional competence (De la Barrera, 2021). Positive social-emotional communication often involves expressions of stress release, appreciation and encouragement of teamwork, and affirmation and recognition of other players' gaming performance (Peña and Hancock, 2006).

Live streaming of games is an important area of game distribution (Smith *et al.*, 2013). Streaming systems like Twitch are capable of distributing user-generated live video content, as well as hosting huge online communities (Kaytoue *et al.*, 2012). Rather than confining information within the Magic Circle, communication in this domain is frankly communicated to players outside of the game (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014). One study suggested that technology that enables broadcasters and viewers to better explain and debate game-related information is a good idea (Lessel *et al.*, 2017). The interaction and communication between game hosts and viewers has created a community of players with certain behavioural characteristics (Nascimento *et al.*, 2014).

When cooperating and competing in games, players interact and communicate a great deal. This communication is considered to be an important source of attraction for some online games (Li and Alfano, 2006). The connection between players is the result of reciprocity. Friendship and cooperation, where players effectively support the development of a low-stress environment marked by social cohesion, facilitate in-game co-construction (Peterson, 2012).

The communication that players engage in during games differs from communication outside of games, which has brought the specificity of in-game communication to the attention of scholars (Pizer, 2003; Schatten and Đurić; 2016; video games can provide an atmosphere of

openness, intimacy, deep attachment and strong community for interpersonal interactions (Li and Alfano, 2006). Some games are meaningful to participants because they facilitate real-life human connections (Li and Alfano, 2006).

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