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Where Games and Stories Meet:

Four Frames of Meaning in the City of Mist TTRPG System

Master's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 4. 1. 2022

Tereza Picková

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'TP' in a stylized, cursive font.

References

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Abstrakt

Tento text se zaměřuje na zkoumání tzv. Stolových her "na hrdiny", které se vyznačují mimo jiné značnou imerzivitou, pluralitou "světů", ve kterých hráči operují a s tímto spjatou pluralitou rolí, které jsou těmito hráči adoptovány. Klasická studie této plurality publikovaná G. A. Finem inspirovaná prací E. Goffmana a jeho analýzou rámců (srov. Fine 2002) představuje tři z těchto "světů významu"; rámeček lidí, rámeček hráčů a rámeček postav ve hře. Tato práce si klade za cíl rozšířit klasický model G. A. Fina, obohacením tohoto třístupňového modelu přidáním čtvrtého rámečku nazvaného "rámeček vypravěčů". Přidání rámečku vypravěčů ukazuje, do jaké míry se rolové hry podobají tzv. "příběhovému událostem" (Georges 1969), a jak je tato skutečnost odlišuje od klasických her, a staví je do unikátní pozice procesů kolaborativní narace. Rámeček navíc přináší pochopení určitého chování hráčů, které je spjaté s vypravěčskou agendou a očekáváními spjatými s touto rolí. Tato jedinečná forma interakce je zkoumána z pohledu hry i z pohledu vypravěčství, přičemž předmětem analýzy je kromě momentů diskrepancí mezi čtyřmi světy významu také zvládnutí těchto situací, jejich předcházení, a aplikace kompetencí získaných při hraní těchto her v mimo herních situacích v primárním rámci žitého světa.

Abstract

This text focuses on so called table-top role-playing games, which can be characterized i. a. by the plurality of “worlds” the players operate in, and pertinent plurality of roles adopted by them. A classic study published by G. A. Fine, inspired by the work of E. Goffman and his frame analysis (see Fine 2002), describes three of these “worlds of meaning”: the frame of the people, the frame of the players and the frame of the characters in the game. This work aims to broaden classical analytical model presented by G. A. Fine by adding fourth frame of meaning “the frame of the storytellers”. Adding the frame of the storytellers shows, to which extend role-playing games resemble “storytelling events” (Georges 1969), and how this fact differentiates this genre from “classical” games. This framework broadens the understating of players behavior tied with the storyteller’s agenda and expectations linked to this role. This unique form of collaborative narration is consequently studied from the perspective of the game as well as from the perspective of storytelling, while focusing on the moments of discrepancies occurring between the four frames, but also on the prevention and management of such discrepancies, and application of skills and competencies acquired and cultivated during the game in the non-gaming world in the primary framework of the “real” world.

Klíčová slova

Stolní role-playové hry, analýza rámců, vypravěčství, storytelling event, City of Mist, reflexivita, mnohost světů významu, kolaborativní vyprávění

Keywords

Table-top role-playing games, frame analysis, storytelling, storytelling event, City of Mist, reflexivity, multiplicity of worlds of meaning, collaborative storytelling

Název práce

Kde se potkávají hry a příběhy: Čtyři rámce významu v herním systému City of Mist

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Table of contents

Table of contents	1
Introduction	3
What are we talking about?	3
Why are we talking about it?	8
Brief History of Tabletop Roleplaying Games	12
City of Mist: How to play the game and why it matters?	15
Theoretical background	19
Between the game and the story	19
Storytelling Events Analysis	24
Frame Analysis variation in the research on TTRPGs	28
Bad games and good stories	33
Fourth Frame – the Storyteller’s perspective	35
Research question	37
Methodology, data, and ethic	38
Research design	38
Welcome to Happyville	39
Time to reflect	41
Analyzing the data	42
Meet the Players, meet the Characters	45
Thoughts on ethic	47
Analysis	48
Frame of the people	49
People and Characters	50
People and Storytellers	52
People and Players	54
Concluding frame of the people	56
Frame of the players	58
Players and Characters	60
Players and People	62
Players and Storytellers	64
Concluding frame of the players	66
Frame of the characters	68

Characters and Players	69
Characters and People	70
Characters and Storytellers	72
Concluding frame of the characters	74
Frame of the storytellers	76
Storytellers and people	78
Storytellers and Characters	79
Storytellers and Players	81
Concluding the frame of the storytellers	83
Conclusion	86
List of References	92
Master's Thesis Summary	94
List of annexes	102

Introduction

What are we talking about?

“I must have been about 8 years old when I played for the first time. We were playing some simplified version of Dungeons and Dragons. I played as a strong, dumb troll, which was perfect; no need to think, or talk to anybody, just go and kill something – we were just some guys, killing stuff, really. And then I tried to kill a wild boar. “Does your weapon have silver on it?” asked the game master (the storyteller). “No”, I said, and he said “Well, the weapon did not go through. You are dead.” So, I went crying to my mom, and ever since I have been hooked on playing RPGs.”

(Personal interview with Steve)

It is not usually the case to start a thesis with the description of the research field itself. However, this work deals with a world of extended complexity, in many cases known only to those, who participate in it. For this reason, I will dedicate this chapter to the introduction of the concept of tabletop roleplaying games in general. My intention is to offer a brief understanding of the concept of such kind of games and define the genre within the context of games in general and its relevance to sociological research.

“A (fantasy) role-playing game (...) has been defined as ‘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.’” (Lortz 1979:36 in Fine 2002: 6). As broad as this definition of role-playing games is, it stood the test of time in sense of its accuracy. Role-playing games (referred to as RPGs) have evolved, but the central concept has not changed drastically.

However, since the first edition of Fine’s key work “Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds” in 1983, the world of RPGs has expanded enormously: especially towards the digital dimension of roleplaying computer games (PCRPG) and massive multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG). This work, however, does not comment on any RPGs based primary in the digital world, but focuses on the games played face to face without the use of technology. Among these “offline” RPGs, we can distinguish two main game designs: live action roleplaying games (LARP), which are played in the physical world by

performing the characters through acting as those characters, and so-called tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG), which are subject of this study.

The “table-top” in the name of the game stands for the format of the game system. The overall design of the game resembles a board game – a game for several people who sit around the table on which game elements are placed. In terms of RPGs, the elements usually consist of dice, sheets of the characters abilities, maps of the imagined world and the rulebooks.

As any game, TTRPGs have a set of rules, which regulate the actions that can be made by the players. An important rule, that most (but not all) of the TTRPG systems are based on, is that one of the players must take the role of a “referee”, “Dungeon Master”, “Game Master” or, in case of the *City of Mist* game system which will be analyzed in this paper, “Master of Ceremonies” (referred to as MC throughout this work). MC has the knowledge, or in some case is the author, of the prepared script the game is loosely based on; that is, he or she knows the locations, non-player characters (referred to as NPCs throughout this work) and dangers, that the players might encounter in their shared fantasy. MC guides his or her players through this script by telling them, what the characters players are playing as (known as player characters, or PC) see and experience, and how the imagined world react to their actions.

The dice are another important aspect in the process of the game. Each character of a player has some set of personal characteristics, which vary greatly from system to system, and can include character trades, such as knowledge, dexterity, strength, but also weaknesses and fears of the character. Based on these trades, the characters react differently do different obstacles, while fitting better for solving one, than the other. In most cases, when a player wants to make an action, a dice-roll is needed. Above-described personal characteristics can be added to (or deducted from) the number on the dice, making it easier or harder for the character to perform the action. The characteristics can change in the process of playing; for example, if a character gains a new ability, or loses an important artefact. The characteristics are usually according to the logical or narrative aspect of the story; for example, if a player’s character is a small, strong dwarf wearing a heavy armor, he or she will probably have high points for dice rolls having to do with strength but will have a problem if there is an obstacle requiring the character to perform a ballet solo.

The “role-playing” in the acronym TTRPGs stands for a characteristic activity, that defines the genre. Role-playing is the act of performing a character the players animate in the game world. It is not only the decision-making for the actions of that character, but also all forms of expressions of that character. There is lack of live action acting (unlike in the case of above-mentioned LARPs), although some petty props or costumes might be used. The performance is based mainly in the oral expression: the players often “speak in the role of a character”, but do not (usually) embody the character by physically representing them. The activity of expressing a character tends to be, given its nature, connected to a concept of immersivity. For most players, the act of being engrossed in the role of another person and the form of improvised expression of such constitutes the attractivity of RPGs. I discuss the concept of immersivity in following chapters.

By definition, the existence of another identity - that of the character - separated from the identity of the player expressed through the act of roleplaying is the very quality that differentiates role-playing games from other “classical” games. It makes no sense in chess to speak of “black” as being distinct from Karpov the player. (...) The pieces in chess (“black”) have no more or less knowledge than their animator (see Fine 2002: 186). On the contrary, the character in a role-play game is a full-fledged entity with emotions, knowledge and agenda, which is based in the imagined world. To play the game, it means (to a great extent) to bring this character to life in the context of the imagined world through the act of roleplaying. In other words, it is the effort of creating an imagined reality, pretended to be independent on that of the people who create it, in which characters animated by the players live their lives. In this sense, the focus on creating complex, coherent alternative reality rather than focusing on scoring higher score than the opposing team or achieving a check-mate is what makes the TTRPGs unique in the context of games in general, as the concept of “winning” is transformed into having a good experience of the play session.

It is crucial to note, that it is the plurality of identities – above-described player and character for instance – that I find analytically interesting. Such complexity tends to create certain discrepancies; for example, a term “metaknowledge” is used in the jargon of the players. It refers to a situation in which the character animated by the player uses the player’s knowledge, be it awareness of the 21st century, knowledge of the rules or knowledge of the prescribed story segments (which should remain secret even to the players). It is such moments of

problems occurring during the game I find particularly interesting. I discuss the term and its connotations further below.

These created worlds are shared collectively – they are shared fantasies (Fine 2002: 72), and it is this social aspect of the fantasy, that Fine finds so fascinating to analyze. However, the characters do not just aimlessly roam the imagined world - instead, their behavior relates to a storyline, of which the gameplay consists of. Besides the character performance, the game of TTRPG resembles a collaboratively narrated story about imaginative worlds and said imaginative characters. Some players expressed, that creating a good narrative is one of the main goals of playing such games. The heavy focus on the narrative and its quality might be considered another characteristic unique for TTRPGs. Naturally, the argument might arise that, for example, mentioned game of chess could be conceptualized as a story of pieces and their movements across the “battlefield” of 64 squares, resolving in a happy end of checkmate. However, the game of chess does not “need” such “storification” on order to be played. On the contrary, it is the very aim of TTRPGs to create a complex altered reality, in which the characters operate with their own consciousness, identity and agency mediated through the players. In this sense, the characters are actual actors in the process of this creation, as the players tend to follow the agenda of the characters, think “like them”, and make “their decisions” – the aim is to tell their story right. Agency of the characters, collaborative nature of the game and no-less collaborative process of story creation makes TTRPGs unique genre of games worth studying.

TTRPG tend to have episodic, linear structure; similar to books or television series both in terms of the structure and the story; each chapter is based on a half – structured script, and each MC builds upon that story. The story told by the players based on this brief structure finishes the final product. As such, these “chapters” cannot be repeated; in other words, every game is a part of a bigger story, which remains written as it has been played. Every action has consequences, as every outcome of the play session will affect the next ones. The reason is simple; player cannot play a detective story (investigative genre is often used in the *City of Mist* system) when they already know, who the villain is and where to find him or her. The organic collaborative creation process produces rigid chapters of the story, which must remain unchanged, as they become part of the fixed narrative of past games referred to as “the lore” by the players (term is further used throughout this thesis in the same context). I argue that this

specificity makes the TTRPGs exclusive in comparison with “classical games”, and it points out the importance of focusing on the narrativity they resemble.

To sum it up, I have stated, that TTRPGs can be considered a special form of games, that bring people to close proximity for a long period of time, where they have a conversation focused on a story creation restricted by the rules of a game. Additionally, the game genre in question is rather specific, as it lacks some classical specifications (for example the goal and playability of the game differs from other types of games due to its collaborative and investigative nature). The specificity of the gameplay stems, among other factors, from its heavy focus on the story, which is being created in the process. Based on this assumption, we might argue several different perspectives can be adopted by the players, that play the game, as they play several roles at once, or adopt several identities if you will. My intension is to try to understand this multiplicity of adopted perspectives, with the focus on the one concerned with the narrative formation and explore the ways in which the players deal with this multiplicity.

I have intentionally kept this subchapter free of any specific gaming systems description, making it as general as possible in order to introduce the main concept of TTRPGs to those readers, who might not have heard of them before. Next subchapter focuses on the studies of roleplaying games in the context of sociological discovery.

Why are we talking about it?

“I like to play, I like company of people and I see games in general as like, a medium to be in company with people. The game is a vehicle for social interactions with people. But I’m not very compelled to play with people I don’t know.”

(Personal interview with Steve)

“Sociologists who study leisure typically find themselves attacked on two fronts. First, they are accused for not being sufficiently serious about their scholarly pursuits. Second, they are accused of alchemically transforming that which is inherently fascinating into something as dull as a survey research computer tapes” (Fine 2002: Preface VI). Reflecting on Fine’s words, I would like to dedicate this subchapter to context of contemporary game and leisure studies, and their place in contemporary society. Consequently, the concept of storytelling related to the genre of TTRPGs will be discussed.

Role playing games have been a subject to many studies in the field of ludology, psychology and sociology as well, and have a solid tradition within the field of social sciences (Adams 2013, Bowman 2013, 2018, Cloete 2010, Eladhari 2018, Golub 2014, Montola 2010, Nardi 2010, Vorobyeva 2015). It is not only the tendency of such games to form fellowships and build relationship networks that social sciences find worth analyzing. According to Bowman (2018), other aspects describing the nature of these games such as flow, engagement, involvement, transportation, presence, engrossment, dissociation etc. have become the subject of interest.

One major aspect of social analysis of immersive roleplaying is a phenomenon known as “Bleed”. According to Hook (in Torner, White 2012: 54), the psychological basis for bleed is unclear, but the concept is used as design rhetoric by role-playing game writers as such the Nordic Vi åker jeep group, who describe it as follows:

“Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character and vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and the character becomes more and more transparent. It makes sense to think of the degree of bleed as a measure of how separated different levels of play (actual/inner/meta)

are. (...) A classic example of bleed is when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character.”¹

In order to immerse in a roleplaying game (or any game), the player must cross so called magic circle, a metaphorical border between the game and the real world, introduced by Johan Huizinga in the classical study “Homo Ludens”, first published in 1938. By doing so, the player accepts social norms and rules applied for the game. More importantly, the magic circle creates a social alibi, which separates the acts of the player from the acts of the character he or she portrays within the game. The bleed phenomenon describes the spill over between the player and the character; that is, the ways in which the magic circle is broken, and the borders of reality and game are smeared. There are two kinds of bleed experience: “Bleed in”, which describes projection of players beliefs, needs, emotions, issues etc. into the game, which impacts the behavior of his or her character, and “bleed out”, which refers to the reverse process, when the character’s choices, behavior, experience etc. have impact on the player in the real world². An example of this concept can be observed in the quotation by Margaret; she is reflecting on her character’s loss of a child, and focuses on the emotions that proceed to hunt her in the real world:

“I feel it every time, so much – I feel for the characters, for the NPCs too. With my first character, Iggy, I would carry it with me everywhere. Even the small things and the good things; like I randomly remembered that she is doing well because something good happened to her. Then the tragedy happened to her baby, and I would feel that long time after the session, still. I would sit in class, thinking about what she must be going through. I was mad.”

(Personal interview with Margaret)

Scholars, who focus on the analysis of the bleed phenomenon take several approaches. Some theorists connect the immersionism ideal with the phenomenon of bleed (Montola 2010 in Bowman 2013). Markus Montola conducted most interesting research on RPGs with positive negative impact; such games are design to intense the bleed effect and put the players in

¹ The definition was taken from the dictionary of the Vi åker jeep group website. Available here: <http://jeepen.org/dict/>

² Definition can be found on the webside of Nordic Larp. Available here: <https://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/>
See also Montola 2010, Bowman 2013

discomfort by exposing them to unsettling topics. Research focused on two extreme roleplaying games entitled “*Gang Rape*” and “*The Journey*”. Both games under scrutiny drive the characters into acts that the players consider disgusting, strange or unnatural. This discrepancy causes intense cognitive dissonance, a —feeling of discomfort [...] caused by performing an action that is discrepant from one’s customary, typically positive self-conception (Montola 2010). Other scholars analyze the use of bleed in therapeutic game mechanic, for example Eladhari (2018) analyses such game called “The Mind Shadows”.

Even though the bleed phenomenon (arguably luckily) does not occur extensively in the ethnographic data gathered for this study, several reasons spoke for its introduction. Research on bleed is one of the key topics in the field of studying TTRPGs. By introducing above mentioned approaches, I presented the impact the game-activities might have outside of the gaming world. My intention was to point out the potential immersive gaming has and present several examples of its application outside of the gaming sector – here, namely the therapeutic potential.

Consequently, immersive formats, such as TTRPGs, deserve attention for their potential danger to all participants. According to Hook, when reviewing his infamous Stanford Prison Experiment in 1999, Philip Zimbardo applied the term “immersion” to his scenario of ordinary people assuming the roles of guards and prisoners, stating that “immersion in “total institutions” can transform human nature.” Zimbardo presents immersion as both a possibility and risk in the social scientist’s laboratory (Hook in Torner, White 2012: 54). As immersion in the character has been conceptualized as one of the desired activities in TTRPGs, study of both positive and negative impacts found outside of the game is important, both in search for beneficial usage of the phenomenon, and prevention of difficulties.

However, immersive games that are less bleed-focused are also being studied in terms of their benefits. The extent of using games in other fields is still limited, arguably thanks to the stigma of conceptualizing TTRPGs “just as games”, and therefore not always taking them seriously as an appropriate tool. Even though some steps have been done in this direction, such as placing TTRPGs in the school curriculum (see Zalka 2016), and even on academic ground through performing ethnographies (see Kuehling 2015), there is still much unused potential of TTRPGs, that waits to be discovered, studied, and used. I argue that gamification has its place

in such areas as above-described therapy or pedagogy. Given their immersive and story-based nature, TTRPGs seem like one of the most promising genres for such inventive steps.

Narrative nature of TTRPGs broadens their potential by cultivating the skills of a good storyteller, such as rhetorical craftsmanship, ability of complex thinking, cooperation with the team of players, etc. The players collaboratively tell a coherent narrative, which is an uneasy task requiring certain abilities. As such, engaging in TTRPGs cultivates these skills, which are highly valued in today's society, and similarly to gamification, slowly find their ways to many social spheres. Namely, the storytelling as such is experiencing a comeback; for example, the storytelling academy "Erzaehl kunst" led by prof. Kristine Waletzky; an association teaching the art of storytelling in annual courses believe, that oral storytelling promotes transcultural education, the transmission of values and language competence. Storytelling connects people from different social and cultural backgrounds.³ The emphasis on the cultural heritage can also be seen in studies, that understand TTRPGs as a form of modern mythmaking, as narrative gaming allows for the consumption of both regional heritage and global multiculturalism (see Cragoe 2016). There is a vast number of reasons the storytelling works, such as the cause – consequence structure, and their potential to inspire Storytelling has earned its place in new spheres, such as pedagogy, psychology and therapy, or business/marketing. Presenting a project, be it in the company meeting or on academic ground can be enriched by adding a narrative structure (see Nevolová 2017: 24-25). I argue that collaborative narration has the same – even higher – potential as both mythmaking and storytelling, thanks to the immersivity and agency of the actors of the interaction.

In this subchapter, a number of approaches taken towards sociological understanding of role-playing games have been presented together with key concept in the field. Consequently, similar excursion towards storytelling was named. My intention was to show the relevance of both TTRPGs and storytelling formats in the context of scientific exploration, as well as in the contemporary society. The next subchapter continues to describe a brief history of role-playing games in general in order to present the journey, that led to creation of TTRPG systems.

³ Official website of the Erzähl kunst association. Accessed on 28.12. 2021.
Available: <https://erzaehlkunst.com/english-2/>

Brief History of Tabletop Roleplaying Games

“I must have been about 10 years old. We used to play something we called “Dračák” – it was a Dungeons and Dragons rip-off, we did not know anything about the rules, we did not roll dice; we played it as a conversation when we walked in the forest on school field trips. Somebody started by saying “You stand in front of a castle and the door is locked. What do you do?” And you could say anything, anything to outsmart him; it was like a battle of wits.”

(Personal interview with Mike)

“It all started with the release of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974. The idea for *D&D* began when Dave Arneson, a fan of the *Lord of the Rings* fantasy novels, introduced Tolkien-like fantasy elements into his war games and shifted the focus from controlling entire armies to controlling a single character.” (Mackay in Cover 2010: 8).

It is however not entirely true, that before the most famous TTRPG *Dungeons and Dragons*, cocreated by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, there were no roleplaying games to be found at all, but they appeared mostly in the form of unorganized children’s play of make-believe. However, the aspects of collaborative creation of a fantasy through narration first became famous with *Dungeons and Dragons*. „If we look at the gaming tradition, it is clear that *D&D* emerged from war games, which involve enacting battles between armies, usually with a large battle map and many miniature figures” (Cover 2010: 8). The war games differed from the today’s TTRPGs in several aspects: namely, they often had educative function and were played in order to teach young soldiers the art of warfare. “Herr von Rechwitz for example created a war-strategy game called *Kriegspiel* with the purpose of educating Prussian military officers. In this game, miniature battlefields showed the terrain and counters represented troops; dice rolls added a degree of random chance in determining the way in which the battle progressed” (Mackay in Cover 2010: 8). Additionally, the goal of wargames is usually „to win”; however, narrative TTRPGs do not share this, seemingly obvious goal. “There is no “winning” in a TRPG, although characters do gain experience points for completing certain challenges, and in an ongoing game, these experience points allow the player to continue building his or

her character. However, these challenges are met as a group, not as individuals”⁴ (Cover 2010: 6). This notion should not be mistaken with an absence of a collective agenda – however, the agenda takes forms such as tell a good story, to have a good time or to enjoy a quality roleplay. These “goals” are not as intuitive as we can observe in other games, such as a football match won by the team with the higher score.

It seems to be the fascination with fantasy books such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, that inspired Arneson to incorporate the aspect of medieval fantasy, magic and mythical creatures such as dragons into the traditional structure of wargames and create the best-selling TTRPG of all time. Although its creators later denied the direct influence of Tolkien’s work, the *D&D* world consists of character classes similar to those found in Tolkien such as a fighter, a wizard, and a rogue. The character races include humans, elves, and halflings (which were originally called hobbits but had to be changed to avoid copyright infringement). By incorporating the fantasy of Tolkien into these gaming worlds, Arneson also made significant changes in the relationship between gaming and literature (see Cover 2010: 8-9).

“While *D&D* was the first of its kind, similar games (often also based on fantasy or science fiction literature) emerged as TRPGs. Among these are *Vampire the Masquerade*, based on the vampire mythos; *Call of Cthulhu*, based on H.P. Lovecraft; *Babylon5* and *Star Trek* TTRPGs, based on the sci-fi television series; and *Champions*, based on comic book characters.” (Cover 2010: 9). It is notable, that TTRPGs are in majority based on pop culture and literature. The intention, we might argue, was to create a coherent world, based on an already existing fantastic narrative, in which a player could participate; the desire is to shift from a passive reader or observer into an active agent in the imagined world. Emergence of different games based on different genres and stories might be a form of a reflection of the limitations of *Dungeons and Dragons*, concerning the joy of participation. In other words, there are other fantastic worlds to visit, than a Tolkien inspired medieval fantasy.

Additionally, these games borderline with creating narratives, and share similarities with original narratives they build upon: cinematography, episodic structure, narrative structure

⁴ This does not mean, that it is impossible to create local fights between two player characters, however the design of the games is mostly not based on player versus player conflict. TTRPG system *City of Mist* this work focuses on is in majority collaborative.

and character-building story arches. “TRPGs are difficult to categorize because they are both games and narratives, thus breaking down a binary that both narrative theorists and ludologists often cling to. Perhaps one of the most significant advances that *D&D* made possible was a reimagining of the ways that stories and games interact” (Cover 2010: 8).

I argue that the above-described trend observed in the TTRPGs, that is, they are to great extent based on other media, such as books, movies and series, reflects the desire of the players to experience something more than “just a game”; they long to create narratives inspired by the media they passively consume, with the possibility of participating in the world they create. In depth argumentation about the similarities of TTRPGs and narratives can be found below. I would like to dedicate the next chapter to description of the game system called *City of Mist* my analysis focuses on. I will explain the importance of reflection on the relationship between story and game within this rather young gaming system, which deals with some of the limitations of the previous above-described bestselling TTRPGs, and puts great emphasis on the storytelling.

City of Mist: How to play the game and why it matters?

“And at some point, we started to put more pressure on the rules and suddenly, there was a huge time-investment, and a little voice in your head appeared, and it said “But this is homework! It should be fun!” And you try to memorize the rules but there is a lot. More rules, less fun – at least for me.”

(Personal interview with Mike)

“City of Mist is a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) about ordinary people with the powers of myths, legends, and fairy-tales, searching for the truth in a mystery-shrouded metropolis. (...) In City of Mist, myths and legends are born into modern-day people. Hard-boiled detectives and cunning mob lords hold the mythic powers of characters like Alice in Wonderland, the Big Bad Wolf, the Monkey King, and Gilgamesh.”⁵

City of Mist: A detective role-playing Game in the City of Ordinary People and Legendary Powers is a rather young game system. Rising from the fan-funded platform Kickstarter, its first set of rules has been published January the 1st 2017. Behind the project stands an “international band of game lovers who create deeply immersive and visual narrative RPGs.”⁶ The game studio is entitled “Son of Oak”, led by Amit Moshe, the producer and main creator of the game. Award-winning *City of Mist* stands as the “Flagship game” of the studio.

The world of *City of Mist* is built upon the contradiction of ordinary and mythical. Ordinary people living in a contemporary city, dealing with ordinary problems find themselves living with a mythos inside them; a story, legend, relic or historical event, that on one hand grants them supernatural powers, but on the other hand has an agenda of its own – to manifest itself in the world. By putting this agenda in action, they make it possible for the characters to use the power granted to them, but slowly consume their hosts. With the power growing stronger, the character might lose the ordinary self at all, and become an embodiment of the living narrative mythoi are. “The mist” in the title stands for a mysterious power, that opposes

⁵ Official website of the game. The quoted texts are the first any visitor encounter. Assumption was made, they content the essence of the game the creators want to put through to potential buyers. Accessed on 28.6.2021: <https://cityofmist.com>

⁶ Description of the creator team quoted from their Kickstarter profile was accessed 28. 9. 2021: <https://www.kickstarter.com/profile/sonof oak/about>

these mythoi, weakens them and keeps their manifestation hidden from the ordinary people. In the world of *City of Mist*, there is a secret organization of people called “Gatekeepers”, who use the power of this magical mist, and hunt down the people with mythical powers, such as the players are.

Players receive four “theme-cards sheets”; four cards, each describing one aspect of their character. The character’s theme books can describe either the “logos” aspect, representing the ordinary (their job, education, family, social status, training or routine) and the “mythos”, describing the mythical part (aspects of the myth living inside the character: expression of their power, the way they use it for attacks, defenses, healing, shapeshifting and more). On these theme-cards sheets, so-called “tags” can be found, which are key player resources of the game mechanics. Tags are short expression describing the abilities or properties of a character (for example “muscular”, “deadly stare”, “nerves of steel” or “can open any door”). The tags are created, together with the whole characters, by the players themselves, but must be approved by the Master of Ceremonies (the MC). Apart from the personal theme-cards sheets, the whole group of players has a collective theme-card sheet, which bares their collective “identity” which they have to agree on. This theme-card sheet also contains tags to be used in the same way, as the personal ones. Theme-cards sheets of the four characters participating in *Amnesia town*, the game that will be analyzed in the analytical discussion chapter, can be found as annexes (see annex 1.-4.)

Tags are the main tool put in use, when the players want to make a move. There are several moves to make (such as “hit with all you’ve got”, “investigate”, “sneaking” and more). In order to make a move, the player rolls two six-sided dice, but he or she can add the number of used tags to the number. In order to add the tags to the roll, however, the player must describe (in as cinematic way as possible), how exactly he or she wants to put these abilities to use.

“For example: a player plays a character of the Mafia boss, who is also an embodiment of the Snow Queen mythos from the most famous Andersen’s fairy-tale. She stands before an obstacle: a witness (NPC⁷) is needed to be interrogated, and he does not want to talk. The player has several options: she can use the tags in her mythoi theme

⁷ NPC acronym stands for non-player character; a character performer by the MC, that exists in the realm of the game, and can be interacted with.

books such as “cold-hearted”, “can froze a heart” and “is that a snowflake in your eye?”, in order to make the witness scared and intimidated. On the other hand, she might also use the tags from her logos themes, such as “Money – I have a lot of it”, “Owner of every bar in the area” or “Let’s make a deal”, and decide to bribe the witness, to get the information.”⁸

Above-described example sums up the essential reason, why I believe the *City of Mist* system is worth studying: it does not matter that much if the players succeed, as much as it matters *how*. Tags are created to be broad enough to be used in most creative ways in various situations. The goal of the game is to entertain yourself as much as the other players and to create immersive, visual narrative, that is enjoyable to listen to, as well as to tell it.

Additionally, the effect the moves of the characters have is not expressed in mere numbers, but in so-called “statuses” which consist of a word, phrase, or description and a number indicating the extent to which this description applies. If the Snow Queen in above presented example decided to use her money-related abilities, and the roll was successful, the result could be a witness with a status “bribed – 3”, which would make him or her behave that way, and therefor give the players a clue how to tell their story. This game system is not only a mere tool for navigating through the game – I argue that the specificity of this system lies to a great extent in its inherent narrativity.

The game system forces the players to do two things, which I consider key for the analysis: reflect on the self of the character, and reflect on the “big narrative” emerging in the game process. Both features strongly resonate with the analytical intention of this paper. Self-reflective aspect of the game always forces the players to consider several aspects: the personal story of their character and their mythos, the story they are telling together with the other players, and their intentions as a person, sitting around a table with his or her friends. These levels of self-understanding create complex structure of decision-making and problem solving, which I intend to focus on. I want to explore the worlds of meaning that people find themselves in, while playing the game: the world of real people around the table, the world of players

⁸ Although the description of the rules might seem tedious and off the topic of my thesis, it is necessary to understand the basic game mechanics, as they reflect not only the system of the game, but also the unique narration structure, that can happen within these mechanics.

framed by the rules of the game, the world of the characters living in the collaboratively written fiction and the role of the storytellers, who are making this fiction manifest through them.

The game system *City of Mist* was chosen precisely for the focus on the storytelling, that it continuously pushes the players to do. Emphasis on the “how” – how are the player’s going to animate the characters in order to create a story as good as possible – makes the system an ideal terrain for research of the storytelling aspect in TTRPGs. Additionally, the author of the thesis is a regular player, and has an immediate access to the data as well as good knowledge of the terrain itself. This fact is reflected below in connection to ethic as well as possible disadvantages of researching a well-known field.

Theoretical background

Between the game and the story

“When you wanna join, it means hour or two of learning the rules. We recruited someone new, and they said “ok, but what is the goal of the game?” and I said, “The goal is to win!” (laughter) but the more I play these games, the more I disagree. It’s just the cherry on top. The real goal is to enjoy the time you put into. It is a miracle to find 6+ hours of time in a group of 5 working people and students, to immerse in a game, collaborate with players, create stories, laugh for 6 hours nonstop, create memories.”

(Personal interview with Mike)

The work of Johan Huizinga (2016) is one of the most inspiring texts regarding the element of play in society. Even though this thorough analysis of the nature of games within different social spheres is not sufficient in and of itself, it provides solid starting point for such research as this one. I shall start my theoretical work by highlighting several crucial points of Huizinga’s analysis to define the conceptualization of games I am working with.

Huizinga begins his major work by stating four key characteristics of play, which are that (1) play is freedom, (2) the play is not part of the ordinary or real life, it is in fact stepping into a temporary sphere of its own disposition, (3) it is distinct from “ordinary” life both to locality and duration and (4) that play is order, it creates order; it creates limited perfection of the world (Huizinga 2016: 8 – 10). Below, I discuss these characteristics in relation to TTRPGs genre.

- (1) The first characteristics refers to the fact, that play is never a chore or work; it is in fact always done in leisure time, and in majority of cases for fun⁹. The freedom refers to the choice the players take, when deciding what types of activities, they wish to attend to in their free time.
- (2) Second characteristics is crucial for the description of narrative table-top role-playing games. Such TTRPG's are based in the player's imagination and collective narration. The unreal world is being created on the spot together with the real-time storytelling makes these types of games heavily engaging in terms of immersion of the players. Immersion, a term rather problematic considering its unclear analytical definition, shall be for the purposes of this paper understood as:

(...) a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from the psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean (...): the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality (...) that takes over all our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (...) In a participatory medium, immersion implies learning how to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible (Murray in Torner, White 2012: 3).

As vague as the definition is, it describes the state of mind that is often the psychological background for the exploration of the bleed phenomenon quite well. Immersion as such tends to swallow the players to the point, where the borders between the real and fictional smudges, and the real world lost its

⁹ However, there are most interesting studies conducted on games which purposely make the players feel negative emotions. Such games are supposed to enhance the bleed effect, and make their experience stronger, but not pleasant. The analysis of such games works with so called „paradox of painful art” is most inspiring (see Monotola, Holopainen in Torner, White 2012).

Additionally, the definition does not suit all forms of plays, as the field of leisure activities has experienced a drastic change in terms of professionalization, as described by many scholars (see for example Lee and Lin 2011). As this work focuses on the emotional processes and experiences of the players, an assumption has been made that such processes are highly affected by professionalization, and thus shall not be included in the analysis. However, it is a possible field of future study.

importance for the moment. In this crucial moment, players might not be always aware of the play being “only pretending”. Play becomes rather serious, as for the given moment, it becomes temporary reality.

- (3) The play begins, lasts for a while and then it is over; however, the player is left with the memory of the game. This memory obtains the structure of the play, which makes it possible to repeat it again and again, following the scheme of rules. As crucial as this characteristic is, the case of TTRPG’s requires certain clarification, as some differences can be found.

First, the description or repetitive nature of games does not apply entirely in the case of collective narratives. I have stated above, that TTRPGs tend to have episodic, linear structure. The *City of Mist* game system that is the subject of this work additionally works with the detective genre. The players take the roles of investigators, and they play to reveal the mystery, crack the case, or deal with the dead body of a murder victim. In this sense, they try to achieve a goal, however the important aspect of this endeavor is the “how” – the story they create while trying to achieve this goal.

Second, the main characteristic of above introduced bleed phenomenon is its lingering presence after the game is over. It is crucial not to limit the “play session” only to the point of its start and ending; in fact, the phase before and after play-session is analytically significant in terms of impact that the play process had on the players outside of the gaming world.

- (4) The order of the play is closely tied with a key term of Huizinga’s work: the magic circle (Huizinga 2016). It is not only the set of the rules that creates the structure of a perfect world out of the ordinary, that play is. To fully immerse into the play, a border must be crossed; and this apply for nearly any play, as this border can be the side of a football field, or the first move of a chess figure. In case of TTRPG, this line is as invisible to the naked eye as is the events of the game itself; but perhaps that is the reason why it tends to be dangerous. Following the metaphor of the immersion stated above, I would compare the

magic circle to the surface of the water; when emerged, we do not wish to come back to this border, although we are aware, that if we stay immersed for too long, we will drown.

However, the specificity of TTRPGs in relation to the order of the game is the fact, that the worlds created during the play process tends to be rather complex and as such challenges the perfection Huizinga speaks about. It is easier to observe the perfection of the world within the magic circle when looking at the chessboard, then trying to make sense of a messy detective story full of dead ends and dozens of characters. Additionally, all – or vast majority – of the play of TTRPG is invisible. The fantasy is based in a real-time oral narration of the participants, who, much like the detectives, make notes about what has happened. However, the shared fantasy is shared only through the collective narration. Its perfection is, therefore, questionable.

As inspirational as Huizinga's work is, especially in terms of using the magic circle as a key concept for the analysis, it lacks theoretical framework for certain specialties that analysis of TTRPGs require. Namely, the linear structure and investigative nature of the play needs to be examined from the narrative perspective, as it does not fit Huizinga's structure of repetitive games. Additionally, the social construction of the worlds created by the process of collective narration needs to be studied, in order to understand the social dimension of the problem. Even though TTRPGs refer to themselves as "games", it is crucial to examine their specific structure from rather different point of view. Huizinga's characteristics of a game discussed above is indeed applicable, however, not on all counts.

The notion number (3) states, that the play lasts for a while, and then it is over; such game can be repeated anytime. However, these characteristics cannot be applied to narrative TTRPG game this work focuses on. The game sessions or "episodes" are prepared for the play in a nature of a half-finished script of a (usually detective) story. The players must go through it, constructing and shaping the story as they go, having only one chance at it, since these games tend to be of rather investigative character. Once the villain of the story is defeated, the treasure found and the secrets revealed, particular players are done with particular scenario of the game and are left with whatever they managed to get out of it. This, among other things, means, that the players need to

wait for “new episodes” of the game to be published, or, alternatively, prepare their own stories to be played in the game system – they cannot just pull out the rule book and the dice to settle down for a play, as they could do with the box of ludo; they need to prepare “an episode” or “a chapter” in advance, and then play it. It is impossible for the players to play the same game session again, as it would mean pretending to forget what to do in the situations players find themselves in.¹⁰ Such pretending of a lack of certain knowledge would be rather difficult and would impact the game in negative ways. Below, I discuss behavior connected to pretense lack of knowledge and usage of knowledge that does not belong to the game as “metaknowledge”, which is considered one of major discrepancies for the flow of the game.

I conclude that the genre of TTRPGs do not fit perfectly the conceptualization of games presented by Huizinga, because they are not only games; they are, to great extent, stories, or “narrative conundrums” if you wish. As much as the conundrum can be only figured out once, as much as the book can be written once, particular episodes of particular TTRPGs can be played only once by particular players.¹¹ Following chapter focuses on this storytelling element of TTRPGs through introduction of an analytical approach for such scientific research.

¹⁰ It is important to note here, that this definition does not concern all the RPG games. For example, LARPs (live action role-playing games) can be materializations of fight scenes from fantastic literature or history. Such events tend to be prepared ahead to a great extent and are closer to semi-improvised theatre performance. However, this analysis only focuses on collective narratives, which most (but also not all) of the TTRPG games are. Additionally, these characteristics are not distinctive only for RPGs. Games and leisure activities such as escape-games, scary-houses, puzzles and conundrums and chipper-games share the one-time playability.

¹¹ It is important to add though, that this applies only to a description of the same position of the players within the gaming structure. Players, who have played an episode as players can go through the same episode in different role; for example, they can play in the role of an MC.

Storytelling Events Analysis

“Sometimes, the stories seem to be a bit predictable, some motives tend to replicate. But it is actually the creativity of the other players, that solves this problem: they give the story depth by playing their characters, bringing their own side-stories. This creativity of the group pushes the story to whole new level.”

(Personal interview with Margaret)

In this chapter I will focus on the definition of the narrative structure the TTRPGs have. I will draw on the approach of S. B. Chatman, and I will further show, why the TTRPGs can be defined as storytelling events, as the term was introduced by R. A. Georges (1969).

S. B. Chatman’s elaborated model of narrative discourse further differentiate between the structure of narrative transmission, and discourse manifestation. In other words, the narrative transmission refers to the form of expression of the narration, where the discourse manifestation is concerned with the substance of expression (the form of narration, verbal, pantomimic, cinematic, etc.) (Chatman 1980: 26). However, a rather specific approach towards the form of expression of the narration can be adopted. Chatman states, that “though this chapter has treated story as an object, I do not mean to suggest that it is a hypostatized object, separate from the process by which it emerges in the consciousness of a "reader" (using that term to include not only readers in their armchairs, but also audiences at movie houses, ballets, puppet shows, and so on)” (Chatman 1980: 41). Drawing from this statement, I intend to explore an approach which focuses on the process of the narration and conceptualizes the narration form of expression as a storytelling event.

A storytelling event is a term coined by Robert A. Georges. His aim is to introduce holistic rather than an atomistic concept of a complex communicative event identified as a "storytelling event” (Georges 1969: 317). This will only be possible when researchers recognize the fact that storytelling events are distinct events within continua of human communication and that they are unique social experiences for those individuals whose social interactions generate them (Georges 1969: 327). Such approach is most fitting for analysis of collective narrations the RPGs are, as it stresses the importance of the uniqueness social situation within which the story unravels :

“(…) structure or the content of the message of an individual storytelling event may be socially prescribed as a result of (1) the nature of the social tensions giving rise to that storytelling event, and (2) the nature of the network of identity relationships and status relationships conceived to exist during storytelling events generally. But the message of any given storytelling event is generated and shaped by and exists because of a specific storyteller and specific story listeners whose interactions constitute a network of social interrelationships that is unique to that particular storytelling event. Every storytelling event, in other words, is its own reason for being; in the final analysis, the message of every storytelling event is inseparable from all other aspects of the storytelling event, without which no message could ever have been generated (Georges 1969: 324).”

As much as these statements describe the process of collective narration observed in TTRPG sessions, more throughout analysis is needed for the play to be identified as storytelling event. However, the description of uniqueness of every “chapter” of the game is well described here, opposing to the Huizinga’s understanding of repetitiveness of games. Georges presents several postulates, that shall be examined to further analysis. These postulates, paraphrased for the sake of this work, are (Georges 1969: 317 – 319):

1. Every storytelling event is a communicative event.
 2. Every storytelling event is a social experience.
 3. Every storytelling event is unique.
 4. Storytelling events exhibit degrees and kinds of similarities.
- (1) Georges furthermore adds that every communicative event requires coder and decoder, who engage in a person-to-person communication through coded messages. These can be linguistic, paralinguistic or kinesics, transmitted through combination of audio-visual channels.
- (2) In every storytelling event, participants establish a specific set of identity relationships for the purpose of the event. There must be at least one participant with the social role of storyteller, and at least one participant who adopted the social role of listener. The social roles prescribed to the participant outside of the

storytelling event are still relevant and have impact of the nature of the storytelling event. If a man selects the social identity of storyteller and his son selects the social role of story listener, for example, the social identities of father and son and man and boy are certainly relevant during the storytelling event and will even have important effects upon the choices that both the storyteller and the story listener can make during the course of that event. But as the storytelling event is generated, the social identities of storyteller and story listener become increasingly prominent while the other social identities coincident with these during the storytelling event decrease in relative prominence. Additionally, in every storytelling event, the participants operate in accordance with a specific set of status relationships. The participants enjoy the statuses to which their social roles of storyteller and story listener entitle them; for example the storyteller's duties are to formulate, encode and transmit a message in accordance with socially prescribed rules with which he and the other participants in the storytelling event are familiar; the story listener's duties are to receive, decode, and respond to that message in accordance with socially prescribed rules with which he and the other participants in the storytelling event are familiar. Consequently, every storytelling event has social uses and social functions, such as to pass time, to teach a lesson, to reinforce kinships or to validate claims.

- (3) Every storytelling event occurs only once in time and space, with a particular set of social interrelationships. Every storytelling event generates its own unique systems of social and psychological forces, which exert pressure on the social environment and upon those whose interactions create that social environment.
- (4) As much as every storytelling event is unique, certain structural similarities are unavoidable: These similarities enable members of a given society to group certain storytelling events together. There are also criteria for grouping storytelling events together are culturally determined, and thus they vary from society to society.

Postulate (2) requires a few notes. Primarily, the roles of the participants must be examined. Georges himself remarks, that there is a certain multi-identity adopted within every storytelling

situation. However, it is needed to be said that in the case of TTRPGs, this multi-identity applies also to the two key roles of the listener and storyteller, as the players embody both roles simultaneously. Both the key roles of the listener and the storyteller are switched rapidly, making the process of telling a story very different from how it is usually understood. Unlike in classical storytelling events, there is no all-knowing storyteller, that oversees delivering the narrative. Sure, there is MC with the prepared script, but he or she has no clue, how is the story going to unravel, and couldn't tell the story on his or her own. The collaboration on a story, that is being born in the conversation makes the TTRPGs unique, and worth studying.

The postulate (3) is key. It is the main argument, that separates the TTRPGs from most of other plays and games; its specific episodes cannot be ever repeated by the same group of players. The one-time play the TTRPG is thanks to its absolute uniqueness gives it its fascinating ambivalent status between a play and a collective narration, since it cannot be characterized as a game (see characteristics of play stated by Huizinga in previous chapter), yet hold on to the status of a game, conceptualized both by the creators and players. A term narrative conundrum seems rather fitting.

However, as stated in the postulate (4), every game or a narrative discourse has certain universalities required for the structure to hold together, whether it is the set of game rules or similar narrative models. Universalities and shared skills based on previous experiences as well as inspirations stemming from consumed media such as books, TV shows or movies are key for collective narration, as they enable the players to engage in a complex activity that playing TTRPGs is.

In this chapter, an approach conceptualizing TTRPGs as storytelling events was introduced. I argue that such approach is rather fitting, given the extent to which TTRPGs resemble storytelling events, even though they cling to the status of a game. Their unique ambivalent nature makes them a fruitful phenomenon for further social analysis. Next chapter introduces an analytical approach fitting for dealing with the plurality of roles and identities taken by players in various worlds of meaning the play offers.

Frame Analysis variation in the research on TTRPGs

“When you roleplay in RPGs, you need to be extra careful when playing your character, because the audience is going to interact with you. So, you need to create enough hooks for them to catch on, and do not leave any hooks you do not want them to react to. I guess I am never 100% immersed in the roleplay, because I am always meta-thinking; like what are they going to say, what is going to happen next.”

(Personal interview with Margaret)

So far, I have focused mainly on describing the similarities that can be found between the narrative and the TTRPG games. As said above, I intend to explore the relationship of TTRPGs and their narrative nature through analyzing the behavior of players, who adopt several different roles within the play process. This chapter is dedicated to introducing an analytical approach suitable for such analytic intention.

The plurality of the “realities” or “worlds of meaning”, has been in the focus of social scientists since the beginnings of roleplaying games analysis. Gary Alan Fine, pioneer in the field, has presented his perspective on the topic in his pivotal work “Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds” (1983).

Central to this approach is the assertion that human beings reside in finite worlds of meaning, and that individuals are skilled in juggling these worlds. (...) Sociologists and philosophers have long recognized the existence of finite worlds of meaning that have the potential for allowing human beings to become encapsulated in them (Fine 2002: 181).

I might add that it is the process of visiting and leaving these worlds of meaning, that makes the play of TTRPGs entertaining. However, it is the analytical perspective, that is of most value here. Fine further continues to explore the implications of Ervin Goffman’s frame analysis, in order to construct a suitable analytical framework for this type of research. According to Fine, Goffman describes the social worlds as constituting frames of experience. He defines a frame a situational definition constructed in accord with organizing principles, that

govern both the events themselves and participants' experiences of these events (Goffman in Fine 2002:181-182).¹²

Games seem particularly appropriate to the application of frame analysis because they represent a bounded set of social conventions, namely the social world. (...) This choice of topic is most significant because it reminds us that frames of experience might be conscious. Unlike dreams or madness, these worlds have a logical structure, recognizable as parallel to the mundane worlds (Fine 2002:182). Adopting this perspective makes it possible for the researcher to uncover above mentioned worlds of meaning, and further understand those meanings, and how they are being constituted, understood and reproduced by the players themselves. Additionally, Fine comments on the key characteristic of the gameplay which is the collaborative effort that is being put in action by all the involved players. The shared intention to immerse¹³ in the game in order to have fun is the condition for the conscious choices made when entering and leaving frames of experience. In addition, Fine notes, that since the immersion itself can be considered the main goal of the game, the additional frameworks beyond the players' primary framework must be seen as desirable alternatives in order for the game to continue (Fine 200: 185).¹⁴ However, TTRPGs are also characterized by the above-mentioned juggling with these worlds of immersive nature.

“As far as the gaming encounters and other focused gatherings are concerned, the most serious thing to consider is the fun in them. Something in which the individual can become unselfconsciously engrossed in something that can become real to him. Events that occur in his immediate physical presence are ones in which he can become easily engrossed. *Joint* engrossment in something with others reinforces the reality carved out by the individual's

¹² This work does not aim to further explore and deepen understanding of Goffman's work per se; instead, the term “frame analysis” is here used according to how Fine works with Goffman's approach in the context of role-playing games exploration.

¹³ In the works of Goffman and G. A. Fine, the term „engrossment „can be found. The term „immersion” is used in later published works of another research in the field. However, my understanding of the terms for the sake of this work is rather synonymous.

¹⁴ However, I have noted above, that such occurrences as „bleed games” bordering with so called „paradox of painful art” can also occur in connection to the bleed experience (see Monotola, Holopainen in Torner, White 2012). Additionally, the subject of the analysis is the role of stories in the game process. The argument will be made, that - based on player's reflections - good stories require strong or even cruel events in the game, and therefore sometimes create hostile environment of the immersive worlds. Such motivation of the players might be explained by understanding their action from the perspective of storytellers, as I will further argue below.

attention, even while subjecting this entrancement to the destructive distractions that the others are now in a position to cause (Goffman in Fine 2002: 182).”

Fine comments, that the frame analysis, as presented by Goffman lacks the proper recognition of the oscillating character of such engrossment, that can be found in TTRPGs. Although perhaps contrary to common sense, people easily slip into and out of engrossment. Frames succeed each other with remarkable rapidity; in conversations, people slip and slide among the frames. Engrossment, then, need not imply a permanent orientation toward experience (Fine 2002: 182-183).¹⁵ This remark reflects the two characteristics of TTRPGs most prominent for the purpose of the analysis; the conscious presence of plurality of worlds of meanings, and the already mentioned skill of rapidly switching between these worlds.

This plurality of worlds together with the tempo of switching between them creates a rather complex and obfuscated situation. This is caused especially by the finite, but incredibly high number of frames available to individuals, as frames can be not only multiple, but also embedded in one another. Gary Alan Fine furthermore builds upon the frame analysis, constructing three-level simplified model, that he applies to his ethnographical data. He claims that it is neither realistic nor useful to provide and exhaustive list of the types of frames available to individuals (...) What is important is that transformations of realms of action do occur and vary greatly in content and structure (Fine 2002: 185-186). Fine’s models consist of three main levels of meaning: primary framework of the people, framework of the players and framework of the characters.

- 1) Framework of the people is labelled, in order with the frame theory, „primary framework”, as it represent the common sense that people have of the real world. It is a framework that does not depend on other frameworks but on the ultimate reality of events (Fine 2002:186).
- 2) Framework of the players is the level of the game context: players’ actions are governed by a complicated set of rules and constrains. (...) Players do not operate

¹⁵ Fine further notes, that this point is consistent with Goffman’s discussion of talk as a „rapidly shifting stream of differently framed strips “(Goffman in Fine 2002: 182).

in light of their primary framework – in terms of what is physically possible – but in the light of the conventions of the game (Fine 2002: 186).

- 3) Framework of the characters is the world of the game itself. This gaming world is keyed in that the players not only manipulate their characters – they are characters. The character identity is separate from the player identity. In this, fantasy gaming is distinctive from other games (Fine 2002: 186).

This simplified analytic model of the gaming situation is then applied to the data collected during the ethnographic research conducted on the playing experiences. The plurality of the frames of meanings in which players find themselves can be most explicitly seen on the so-called “metaknowledge” paradox. Gary Alan Fine notes, that characteristics of framing is the pretense awareness context; the existence of frameworks outside the primary frameworks depends on the individual’s being willing to assume an unawareness of his other selves. The actor’s character pretends to know nothing of the actor’s self and knowledge, but it is only a pretense of ignorance for non-dissociated individuals (Fine 2002: 188). Therefore, the player knows well that he or she is operating in several frames, that are keyed accordingly to his or her understanding of these frames.

However, given the high number of frames available as well as the rapid tempo of switching between the frames, the consensus is not always shared by all the players. Nonnegligible portion of Fines’ analysis is dedicated to discrepancies that occur, when the frames are not interpreted consistently within the group.

“What is ambiguous is the meaning of an event, but what is at stake is the question of what framework of understanding to apply and once selected, to go on applying, and the potential frameworks available often differ quite radically one from another (Goffman in Fine 2002: 200).”

Such questions as “Did you kill me?” can be raised in the conversation during the play session, being understood in the correct framework quite easily. However, there are situations which generate confusion; Fine for example mentions the question “How old are you?” raised by one of the players, without giving any signals as to whether the question concerns the player or the character. Fine explores these situations through the concept of awareness contexts.

“Building on Glasier and Strauss’s article “Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction” (1964), I wish to extend the construct of awareness to the understanding of levels of meaning and experience. Contours of awareness coupled with engrossment permit us to speak of the frames as being different from each other. (...) Glasier and Strauss present four structural types of awareness contexts: open awareness context, closed awareness context, suspicion awareness context and pretense awareness context (Glasier and Strauss 1964 in Fine 2002: 187).”

For the analysis of TTRPGs, the pretense awareness context seems most relevant, as in reality, this is the context in which a player plays a character; the character is supposed to have no knowledge of the player, and the player, acting as the character, must keep the knowledge from his or her primary frame of people out of the frame of the character. The character is supposed to operate under the constraints of a closed awareness context with regard to his animator, although this is of course pretense. (...) Only in situations that in theory are closed awareness contexts but in reality are pretense awareness contexts (in which advantages are to be gained in the application of awareness) do difficulties occur (Fine 2002: 188). Classic example of such situation is, when the character is aware of the persons reality; in praxis, this means that for example a character of a knight from the medieval times tries to construct an airplane, because the player who animates the character is a person living in 21st century, possessing the knowledge (see Fine 2002: 189). In the jargon of players, these problematic moments are known as using so called “metaknowledge”.

As most of these inaccuracies are quickly resolved, some out of frame acting can cause discrepancies leading to more serious consequences; Fine notes, that such situations can be dangerous to the smooth run of the game, such as ringing of telephones, ordering and eating a pizza, or miscalculating the extent to which - and situations when - it is acceptable to switch frames. I believe that it is in these problematic situations, we gain the most understanding of the surprisingly fragile consensus of the fluid and complex process the gaming session is.

Bad games and good stories

“You want to participate in cool scenes, to live through a good story. They say you cannot win the LARP, and that this is the goal. (in LARP). (...) In TTRPGs too; the goal is for everyone to have fun. When the whole table is enjoying the game, you can tell. If one person is not having fun, you can tell also, and it drags everyone down. If there is an interesting story-arch, even better! But the main goal is to have fun.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

So far I have introduced the TTRPGs as a special genre of games, characteristics by the roleplaying, immersivity and most importantly, collaborative story creation. I have shown some examples of approaches towards social exploration of these games. Consequently, I have expressed my interest in analyzing TTRPGs from the perspective of narratives. I have compared the definition of games presented by Huizinga and shown the characteristics of TTRPGs which do not fit this definition. In order to further strengthen my argumentation, I have introduced the term storytelling event and shown some important similarities that can be found between such event and the event of playing a TTRPG. Finally, I have presented an analytical approach used by Gary Alan Fine to understand the plurality of identities adopted during the game, building on Goffman’s concept of multiple frames of meaning as a theoretical perspective. Even though Fine’s model was first introduced in the 1983, roleplaying game study “Shared Fantasy” (*in which the model was introduced – note of the author*) still informs most contemporary game studies texts to date (Torner, White 2012:8). For this reason, I have decided to further challenge it in my analysis by exploring its relation to storytelling events concept.

My intention for this work is twofold. Building on the analytical approach constructed by Gary Alan Fine, I intend to expand above presented model of three worlds of meaning – three frames by adding one more frame to the analysis, as I believe it has as major impact as the three frameworks used in the original analysis. I will apply this extended framework on the data gathered during my ethnographical research, while focusing on the discrepancies caused by the frame-switching, that can be seen during the game as well as in the reflections on the past game session of the players. Additionally, I plan on exploring the ways in which players deal with these discrepancies, as well as how do they prevent them – which skills and competencies are put in action in conflict management and prevention of hitches in the flow of

the game. I dedicate the next subchapters to the description of these two analytical intentions, followed by the appropriate research question.

I am using the term “discrepancies” as an umbrella term relating to occurring problems, misunderstandings and communication hitches, which constitute analytically significant moments in my data. This focus is adopted both from the above presented theoretical approaches: where Georges speaks about the responsibilities of storytellers and story listeners to correctly encode and decode the message in accordance with socially prescribed rules with which he and the other participants in the storytelling event are familiar (Georges 1969: 318), Fine explores the forms in which the closed awareness context is broken, and the multiple knowledges a person possess – that of a player, character and self – enter incorrect frames, and violate it’s consistency by incorrect keying of the current frame (see Fine 2002). “Keying” and “coding – decoding” in this sense show certain similarities, as both terms refer to an ability of the players to correctly understand the current interactive situation together with correct conceptualizing of their own role in these situations and the rights and responsibilities tied to this role. Whenever this procedure is not met with a proper outcome, problems in the interaction occur. I refer to those moments as the moments of discrepancies, and the ways in which players deal with them as “conflict management”, as these terms are flexible enough for description of both precautions taken before a problem arises, as well as dealing with a discrepancy that has already occurred and needs to be dealt with to continue in the flow of the game.

Fourth Frame – the Storyteller’s perspective

“In stories and narratives, you cannot avoid the bad things, conflicts. The world is no fool’s paradise, and if you played a story without conflict, you would get bored. We are programmed like this. Strong stories are built on this, and it is interesting to see this projected into the game.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

The introduction of this work dealt with the argumentation concerned with narratives and stories in role playing game. Additionally, I introduced the game system *City of Mist* in a way, which would clearly show the narrative nature the game has. My intention here was to present the role, that narrative construction has in the process of a gaming session. In fact, the process of “living” though a good story can be understood as the goal of the game itself; the players strive to finish the story by reveal its mysteries, but the very activity of doing so might be sufficient for a play to be considered “good” (as I will show later in the data analysis).

I have stated that the game itself encourages the players to play the game in a cinematic way – that means, to play the scenes in their descriptions as movie scenes or scenes from a comic book, or in other words – to play the scenes they would like to see on the screen, or “think cinematically”. The game system itself is very lore-creation oriented. Players uncover stories of NPCs, and fantastic narratives that take place in The City. Additionally, these narratives created in the process of playing become the lore of the player’s game – a now unchangeable narrative with consequences for the frame of the world of characters, and the world of storytellers.

The process of the storytelling is best described through the concept of above-mentioned storytelling situation. This concept manages to reflect key characteristics of the game process, such as multiplicity of roles and switching between them, defining storytelling situations as communicative events and unique social experiences. Building on this concept, TTRPGs can be perceived as a rather specific storytelling event, as the process is typical by rapid switching between the roles. The duty of the storyteller is shared among all the players, as well as the duties of the listeners. Additionally, the roles outside of the storytelling situation are rather well defined by the multiplicity of the frames of meaning in terms of Fine’s analytical approach.

Fine, working with Goffman's concept of frame analysis, notes, that it is neither realistic nor useful to provide an exhaustive list of the types of frames available to individuals (Fine 2002: 184). As much as I share this point of view, and my intention is not to try to engage in the impossible activity of providing the finite list of available frames, my argument here is, that the three-level model presented by Fine is not sufficient enough for certain types of TTRPG analysis, as there should be one more addition to it, which is required to understand certain decisions made by the players, and the motivations behind them.

I am expanding Fines' model by adding a fourth frame of meaning, labelled the frame of the storyteller. I argue that the framework understood as that of an author of the narrative produces different meanings than those already mentioned, and therefore adds more depth to the analysis of the gaming process, which would be incomplete otherwise.

The usefulness of the frame of the storytellers can be shown through the ways, in which it differs from Fines' frames presented above. The primary frame of the people by definition constitutes a starting point, as everything in the game needs to be said "in the real world". I argue that shared understanding of media, that can be found in the real world provide certain archetypes and inspiration for the construction of stories in the gaming process.

The difference between the framework of the players and the framework of the storytellers is more interesting. I will show that the process of translation of the meaning produced by the rules and desired to be seen in the story can produce conflicts of meaning production between these frameworks, as well as unexpected ways of collaboration of these two frames. That, what is desired to be done might be restricted by the rules, and the frames and their meanings can overlap, confluence or create discrepancies.

Finally, the differences between the framework of the characters and the framework of the storytellers are the most subtle. There might be discrepancies in the understanding of the characters action, which might be influenced by the players understanding of the story, that should be told, and on the contrary, the argumentation of the character's behavior must remain superior to the story, which can produce discrepancies. But these meanings and structures brought to the game through the understanding of the narrative framework might differ from those that stem from the identity of the character. Here, as well, might occur discrepancies, that bring interesting analysis outcomes.

Research question

To sum up, my intention is to extend the analytical approach Gary Alan Fine enriched of the frame of the storytellers, based on the argumentation in favor of perceiving TTRPGs to a great extent as stories, and the gameplay as a storytelling situation. I will prove the usefulness of this extension through the analysis of my own ethnographic data and interviews with the players, who engage in the game of a heavily narrative-focused TTRPG system, *City of Mist*.

I want to uncover the ways in which players deal with the multiplicity of frames of meanings in a gaming system heavily anchored in the narrative production. I intend to do so, above else, through focus on the discrepancies that occur in the problematic situations, in which the frame is not shared by all participants and explore other ways in which the frames of meaning confluence or collide. The focus on collisions has a potential not only to analytically distinguish of the frames of meaning, but also gives a clear insight in how players deal with such situations. Therefore, my intention is not only to follow the approach taken by Fine and analyze the problematic moments such as the moments of different context of awareness. I will also comment on situations, which were well handed by the players, focusing on the conflict-management stemming from experiences, while describing the skill of juggling worlds of meaning shared by the players. I intend to explore not only how the game can be disrupted by the collision of the frames, but also how do the players operate in this complex narrative interaction framed and conceptualized as game and which competencies are learnt during the process. Therefore, the questions I am asking myself are as follows:

What new knowledge can be acquired by conceptualizing the TTRPGs as storytelling events, adding a frame of the storytellers to Fine's analytical model concerning multiple frames of meaning?

Which discrepancies and confluences are observable between the four frames of meaning?

How are these discrepancies delt with and what are some of the conflict management strategies used by players?

Are there any significant skills or competencies the players cultivate and learn in order to manage conflict in TTRPGs?

Methodology, data, and ethic

Research design

A case study can focus both on the description and answering the questions HOW and WHY. Suitable subjects of interest are dynamic, complex processes, where knowing the real context is key for understanding these processes. Case study explores one or more cases, where “a case” might be an individual, social group, organization but also program, process, conflict, etc. (Novotná et al. 2019: 274).¹⁶ In this sense, this research design comes close to a case study, focusing on one group of players, and consequently one game-session.

The data that support this thesis are of two kinds. For one, I have recorded a full game session, so that data of ethnographic nature consisting of transcripts of situations that occur during an actual gameplay can be presented as situations representing above-described concepts. And second, I have conducted interviews with the players that participated in this game, that reflected not only on this particular game session, but also on their gaming experiences in general. This way, I have not only gathered significant extent of data, but also created such kind of material, that is both of ethnographic significance, and deeply reflective.

My intention is to put the extended analytical model of the four frames of meaning in action, so I can understand the process of playing the game and telling the story. For this intention, the ethnographic data from the game session seem most convenient. Through exploring and analyzing these moments, it might be possible to understand the nature of the skill of switching between the frames of meaning, as well as the conflict management strategies that players possess, or lack. Consequently, it will be most interesting to see problematic moments, when the understanding of the current frame is not shared by all the participants at the same time.

The analysis consists of presenting different frames of meaning observed in the situations during the game play as well as reflected upon in the interviews. In this sense, the approach taken by Gary Alan Fine is being reproduced, with the extended model of four frames

¹⁶ Translated by the author of the thesis. Original follows: “Případová studie se může zaměřit jak na popis, tak zodpovězení otázek JAK a PROČ. Vhodným předmětem zájmu jsou dynamické a komplexní procesy, pro jejichž pochopení je důležité znát reálný kontext. V rámci případové studie se zkoumá jeden či více případů, přičemž „případem“ může být jedinec, sociální skupina, organizace, ale také programy, procesy, konflikty atd.“

of meaning perspective. This chapter further discusses both kinds of the data and concludes with a reflection on some ethical issues that might have influenced the research.

Welcome to Happyville

The first kind of data is one game session, played in The *City of Mist* game system. This type of game is called a “one-shot”. This means, that the script of the game is excluded from the so-called campaign, that the group of players plays ordinarily in form of subsequent series – it is a one-time game session, taking place somewhere, sometime in The City, where all the other stories take place, but it is not connected to them. The most important note on this is the fact that actions taken during this game will not have consequences on the long-term campaign of the players, as the characters chosen for this adventure were chosen only for this one-time session and will not take appear in the main lore that is being created by the player group for the past two years.¹⁷ In literature jargon, this game session is like a short story, rather than a novel. The main influence this fact might have been that the decisions made by the players during the game are of more adventurous kind, as they lack the danger of serious consequences, that would stay written in the story and could cause some serious issues in the future.

The scenario of the game was called “The Amnesia Town: A Nightmarish Case of Government Conspiracies in Sleepy Suburbia”¹⁸. The subtitle consists of rather descriptive leads as to what kind of story is meant to be told here; what the mood and feel of the story is intended to be like.

The scenario takes place in a suburb on the edge of The City called Happyville, perfect and almost sucrose at the first sight. However, players quickly discover that the people walking the streets look like they are sleepwalking – the faces of the people are not as much happy as dreamy. Some of the residents are having a hard time remembering certain portions of their past, as if their memories disappeared, and none of them sleeps well in the night. Players are introduced to the game by an NPC of a young man, Isaac, whose grandmother disappeared, and with her the whole house – and he seems to be the only one to remember she was ever there, as

¹⁷ However, they do exist in The City and might be brought back as a joke, or an interesting NPC – this is possible, however none of the players did not assume that the consequences of the actions should have any major impact on the main story.

¹⁸ The author of the script is Amit Moshe, creator of the game system. The script was published in 2020 under the Sons of Oak studio label and was purchased by the author of the thesis. It is available on the web page of the game together with all the other materials: <https://cityofmist.co/products/amnesia-town>

the neighbors have no memory of her or the disappearance. Isaac is desperate and believes, that his granny was abducted by the aliens. The players are expected to take over the investigation and help Isaac crack the case.

The game session lasted for two days – Friday night, and majority of Saturday. The session took place in the apartment of the researcher on 24. – 25.10. 2021. The whole gaming process was 13 hours long; 5 hours were played on Friday, 8 hours of gametime followed on Saturday. Such game-time is considered typical by the group, as well as the setting in an apartment and the division to the two days of playing. The recordings were later listened to, and analytically important segments were transcribed in order to be further analyzed and serve as a demonstration for the concept introduction in the analysis below.

Unlike in Fine's research (see Fine 2002: 248), there was no problem with an entrance to the terrain, as the terrain consisted of researcher's friends. On the contrary, it was rather awkward to convert this space of regular fun-having into a field of social research. However, after a few jokes from both sides in the beginning of the play, the game itself run in the same nature as usual, so the data obtained can be declared relevant. Therefore, the position of the researcher might be described as an insider with a solid position within the observed group. The extend of participation might be marked as full-fledged membership (see Novotná et al. 2019: 358-359). Considering this fact, special attention was paid to avoid the "blindness in the home-field", that a well-known research environment may cause (see Novotná et al. 2019: 369). In order to achieve certain distance and to suppress the laic knowledge of the terrain, the researcher applied common strategies such as mind experiments, which consist of asking myself questions such as "what if..." and "why?" in order to further unravel objective basis of an interaction, which is impossible to explicit from the position of an insider (see Gobo in Novotná et al. 2019: 370).

The research method can be described as participant observation, even though the observations were complicated by the demanding role the researcher was playing in the game. However, this approach was the most suitable one, because for example external observant would disrupt the natural order of the game, as the gameplay and roleplay are rather intimate processes for no public observers. The recordings served as field notes, that made it possible for the researcher to participate in the game and avoid loss of important data. As such, this data

resembles the ethnographic material obtained by the research and are most similar to the type data collected by G.A. Fine during his research (Fine 2002).

Given the nature of gathered ethnographic material, a decision was made to combine the data with more reflexive approach. If we are interested in experiences of the actors in a broader context, which they find themselves in, how which is typical for ethnographic research, it is common to supplement participated observation with a data obtain with different techniques (Novotná et al. 2019: 387).¹⁹

Time to reflect

The interviews were conducted with the four players of the gaming group, that participated in the above introduced adventure. Given the homogeneity of the group, half-structured interviews seemed like an optimal choice (see Novotná et al. 2019: 322). The interviews were conducted with the help of a half-structured script prepared by the researcher, based on her theoretical knowledge, research intentions and past experiences from the laic position of a player. The script for the interview consisted of several different topic clusters. These topics had rather wide range, as the complexity of the field made it harder for the researcher to recognize the importance of the topics in the beginning of the research. The questions opening the interview were of biographical nature. These were employed with the intention to let the participants talk and remember, so they could speak more easily about upcoming topics, and recall more details and context of their gaming experiences. Otherwise, the half-structured script provided enough flexibility for the researcher to work through the “guide-list” of topics and run the interview naturally (see Novotná et al. 2019: 322).

In order not to exclude important reflections and topics of major interest from the perspective of the players, researcher approached these interviews with an opened mind, and tried to let the players touch on an atypically high number of topics. The consequences of this methodological decision were twofold – the data obtained are of rather high quality and consist of deep reflections on wide number of topics. However, each of these interviews lasted at least 3 hours, which caused issues with the focus and fatigue of both the players and the researcher

¹⁹ Translated by the author of the thesis. Original follows: “Zajima-li nas subjektivni zkušenost akterů dana do souvislosti s širším kontextem situace, v níž se nachazejí, jak je typické pro etnografický výzkum, je běžné zúčastněně pozorování doplňovat o data získaná jinými technikami.”

in the process of the interview. Consequently, the transcription process took quite a long time, and the analysis process was slowed down as well, since the researcher had more data to analyze, than she intended in the beginning of the research (see Novotná et al. 2019: 323).

Additionally, a reflection on specific moments of the above-described game session was added to these reflective interviews as well. This segment of the interview was conducted in the end, separated from the first part of the interview.

Given the insider position of the researcher and the close friendships with all the participants, a very careful and reflective approach was taken. The researcher has extensive knowledge about the biographies of the participants, and the nature of the relationships between her and the participants comes with the danger of making presumptions about their reflection on the game. The attempt was made by the researcher to stay as open, sensitive and careful regarding the data, constantly trying to reflect on what was said (see Novotná et al. 2019: 319).

Analyzing the data

The data collected were all of textual nature. The most notable step in the passportisation of the data was the anonymization of the participants. The players have chosen their pseudonyms themselves and are referred by these pseudonyms throughout this work (see Novotná et al. 2019: 346).

The transcription of the data was of two kinds: the 13 hours long game session was transcribed in the form of summary protocol, focusing on the topics, concerning with commentary on important passages and problematic moments worth consequent analysis (see Novotná et al. 2019: 350). This transcript, consisting of reduced data, made it possible for the researcher to recall analytically important moments of the gameplay, that were later transcribed verbatim so that they could be properly presented in quotations below. The interviews were transcribed in the form of an edited transcript (see Novotná et al. 2019:349).²⁰

After both types of the data were transformed into texts, in order to better orient in the extensive amount of data, the software for qualitative analysis ATLAS.ti was used. The analysis

²⁰ In some cases, the quotations were slightly rephrased for the sake of clear representation of the concepts. These subtle changes were always discussed and approved by the participants, and the meaning of those quotations was not changed.

process started with simple reading of the data, followed by writing down important topics. This led to certain reduction of the data which made it possible to compare important segments of the text, that would be later coded (see Novotná et al. 2019: 421-422). The consequent analytical process followed steps described by David Silverman (2014: 172-179). He recommends starting with the analysis in the early steps and on a small segment of the data first. The first (and largest) segment of data, the summary protocol of the gameplay, provided me enough material for understanding topics and occurrences, that seemed unique for the context of TTRPGs. Rapley notes, that all [methods of data analysis] start with a close inspection of a sample of data about a specific issue. This close inspection is used to discover, explore and generate an increasingly refined conceptual description of the phenomena. The resulting conceptual description therefore emerges from, is based on, or is grounded in the data about the phenomena (Rapley in Silverman 2014: 175). Aware of this fact, I have started thinking about a suitable analytical framing rather early in the analysis process. After gathering important topics from the gameplay transcription, I have noticed that the players seem to skillfully juggle and switch between several identities. This activity was notable throughout the game and was reflected on in early interviews as well. In order with the inductive approach, I have focused on this occurrence and searched for a theoretical framework capable of describing the concept in structured manner. After rejecting narrative analysis, which would not sufficiently describe the differences between the spheres the players exist in, I have shortly thought about focusing on the intersubjectivity of the players and the intersubjectivity among their characters. However, none of these approaches seemed to fit the intention I had in mind; to understand the skill of juggling the worlds of meaning in the game context, and its relationship to collaborative storytelling. A choice was made to stick to Fine's approach, providing a solid analytical start given its traditional position in the social research of role-playing games. Additionally, the extension of the original model made it possible for me to focus on the storytelling as well. Following the steps of Silverman's advice, I have kept an open mind regarding any hypothesis, and stayed loyal to the sequences found both in interviews and (mainly) in the gameplay (see Silverman 2014: 176-179). This way, I could proceed to next step of the analysis, focusing on finding the frames of meaning, understanding their discrepancies and confluences and creating codes.

As mentioned above, the analysis was conducted in the software for qualitative research ATLAS.ti. The analytical process is therefore indirectly inspired by the method of Grounded Theory (Glaser, Strauss 1967, Strauss, Corbin 1999), which ATLAS.ti implicitly supports (see Novotná et al. 2019: 417). However, the aim of this thesis is not to create a new theory; this work rather explores possibilities of a traditional theoretical framework and its flexibility when facing new terrain, focusing on new perspective.

First step in the analytic process was segmentation (see Novotná et al. 2014: 429). The segments consisted of prominent and reoccurring topics found in all the data. Segmentation helped the navigation in the data through visualization of important topics, and uncovered key moments, such as discrepancies, overlaps between the different roles of the players, performances, system related talk, the ways in which consensus is negotiated in the community, the story and topics regarding the goal of the game.

Consequently, based on the segmentation, codes were created and applied to the data (see Novotná et al. 2019: 430). I have created four codes for each frame of meaning: frame of the people, frame of the players, frame of the characters and frame of the storytellers. I went through the texts again, focusing on the frame of meaning, that is being put in action. Segmentation step proved most helpful, as for example segments coded as “discrepancies” often showed an interesting collision of two frames of meaning in the interaction of the players. Some of the segments were more prominent in certain frames of meaning – for example segments regarding the game system (almost always) occurred in the frame of the players – which also helped the analysis process greatly. Working my way through the data, I have ended up with a well – coded transcript of the game session, with quite a high number of analytically interesting moments of different use of the frames of meaning, the collisions between the frames, the ways in which the frames confluence and countless moments of players agency, such as misunderstandings, collaborations, disagreements and conflict management strategies. Above these, I had four in- depth interviews, which commented not only on the gameplay itself, but also on the players experiences, deepening my understanding of the skill needed for playing such a complex game as TTRPG can be. I have decided to follow the chronology of the story created during the gameplay, while enriching my analytical subchapters (below) with reflective comments of the players acquired during the interviews.

Meet the Players, meet the Characters

In line with the case study research design, the selection of the participants was based on the expertise of the researcher. The reasons for these decisions are several; one of the criterium was the accessibility of the group of players based on the researchers position within the group (see Novotná et al. 2019: 300 – 302). Player groups tend to be rather closed communities, this choice seemed ideal. Additionally, the laic knowledge of the game system and the expertise of the players in the field of playing was sufficient. This analytical decision naturally had an impact on the analysis, however, in many ways proved to be a fruitful one.

The player group, which kindly provided data for this work, is a group of friends, that has been playing The *City of Mist* TTRPG together for almost three years. Before that, several smaller sessions in different game systems were played by portions of the group, as well as some non-role-playing board games. The group of friends consists of three males and two females. Age ranges between 20 and 33 years. All the players have at some point studied at the university, and most of them have achieved at least Bachelor's degree. At the time of the research, two of the players were still studying. The group meets up mainly for the play sessions, however several other gatherings were conducted in the past, such as going to music concerts, going to see a new superhero movie in the cinema, meeting at each other's birthday parties or just meeting up for a beer and chat. Some professional collaboration of some of the players have occurred as well, as most of them studied at the same faculty. Even though not all of the players know each other for the same period of time, their relationships are rather close. Two of the players are siblings. The names of the players have been changed in order to assure anonymity (as well as the name of the researcher).

Given the complexity of the terrain – especially the nature of several “worlds” in which the players act through a character – I will try to briefly introduce each player and his or her character, so that the readers don't get too lost in finite worlds of meaning, that follow on next pages.

Name of the player	Characters that he or she plays in the “Amnesia Town”	Additional information about the player
Thelma	The role of the MC, and all the NPCs	The author of this thesis, female student of Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University
Phil	<p>Fabio A fabulous, fun-loving party animal, who’s specialties are illusion and magic. He owns a club called Wonderland, where “dreams come true”.</p> <p>The mythos living in him is the Cheshire cat, a character from Alice in Wonderland children’s book.</p>	Male, former student of Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University
Margaret	<p>Barry A shabby looking man in his 40’s. He used to work as a school janitor but was fired after he started focusing on his mythical powers instead of his job.</p> <p>The mythos living in him is the Golem of Prague.</p>	Female, student at the University of Chemistry and Technology Prague
Mike	<p>Rudolf Spent his childhood in the Natural Park outside of the city, where his parents worked as rangers. After a tragic event which cost him his family and a home, he moved to The City to work as a volunteer firefighter. He lives in a secret garden he grew for himself.</p> <p>The mythos living in him is the tale of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon of the queen Semiramis.</p>	Male, former student of Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University
Steve	<p>Calvin Used to be a normal guy, but then fell to the rabbit hole of internet conspiracy-theories. As such, he sold all of his property and is currently homeless, searching for people who will listen to his truth. His most beloved companion is a dog called Ruffian.</p> <p>The mythos living in him is the story of Jesus.</p>	Male, former student of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. Interviews with this player have been conducted both from the perspective of a player and the perspective of an MC, which is the usual role this player has.

Thoughts on ethic

It has to be noted here, that these players know each other rather well, and consider each other friends. This, of course, had a major impact on the data obtained during the game session and the interviews. Especially the position of the researcher is rather complicated by this fact, as some of the topics – especially those of painful or intimate nature – might have been excluded from the interviews by the informants. Consequently, some of the information might be shifted by the pre-understanding of the players, assuming they wanted to help the researcher not as an informant to a researcher, but as a friend to a friend. An attempt to prevent this sort of data influence was made by reflecting on this on the beginning of the interview. On the other hand, the extensive volume of the interviews and therefore the material available for the analysis was partially possible because of the long interviews, which were done in a friendly environment, that made it possible for the players to talk freely and safely, as there is a strong bond of trust between the researcher and informant.

The names of the players are anonymized for the sake of this work. The players were informed about the nature in which their interviews will be recorded, analyzed and used, and they agreed with it. The work was sent to those players before it was submitted, so that everyone had an opportunity to see the context in which the analysis of the interview was done. The data are safely stored and only the thesis supervisor and the researcher, or people designated by them have access to them.²¹

²¹ Additionally, the finished work has been sent to the participants to gain a reflective feedback. The work has been accepted warmly; the choice of an approach and the perspective taken on the matter was found interesting and fruitful. However, the participants made it clear, that each of the analytic segments deserve even deeper analysis in order to understand the phenomenon fully. As the format of master's thesis fails to provide such space, perhaps, this could be next step in the research on the matter.

Analysis

This chapter consists of four subchapters, each of these focusing on one of four frames of meaning, that can be found in the game process. Concurrently, each chapter explores how this frame of meaning collides, merges and collaborates with the other three frames. My intention is not only showing the discrepancies occurring in the process of rapid switching of the frames, but also the innovative ways in which skillful players, partly aware and partly unaware, work with the complex interactive situation they find themselves in.

The analysis is inspired by approach of Gary Alan Fine, and I intend to structure my analytical discussion in similar matter. Aligned with his approach, I will be commenting on the work the players do when skipping between frames, on the discrepancies that occur and awareness contexts which are being present and broken, focusing on which meanings are hidden from which entities in the current frame of meaning. Additionally, I am going to show the benefits of adding the frame of the storytellers to the analysis.

Finally, it is needed to add, that all the frames of meaning are present, and the people are operating in them in every moment of the game; however, some of them are more prominent or relevant to the ongoing situations. For this reason, the data presented are to show analytically relevant moments of the game process with the focus on interesting interaction of two or more frames; however, the situations showing action in only one frame of meaning are rare.

The following subchapters are structured in line with the story of the game “Amnesia Town” played in the *City of Mist* game system; the ethnographic material is presented in chronological order. Introducing short texts summarizing the plot of the play have been written by the researcher. They are followed by the quotes of the players either from the recorded play, or from interviews. My hope here is to present not only analytically significant moments, but also to walk the reader through the game play, and tell the story that has been created in the collaborative process. Additional data consist of segments of interviews, that reflect on discussed topic.

Frame of the people

Phil went down to get pizza for everyone before the game starts. When coming back:

1. **Phil:** *Fabio (Phil's character) flexes with having a lot of money, owning a club and what-not, but really, he makes living as a pizza-delivery guy. (laughter)*
2. **Thelma:** *Nice side-hustle, Fabio! Do you need any plates or knives?*
3. **Phil:** *Here is your heretic pizza with pineapple, Marge.*
4. **Margaret:** *Well thanks a lot. Who has the "heart-attack" pizza? The "meat on a meat with the meat?" (laughter)*
5. **Mike:** *Here, you want some? And It's a kebab pizza for your information. (laughter)*
6. **Thelma:** *Well, its seven pm and we haven't started yet, even though we met at five. I think it's great, because this is really an authentic material for my work.*
7. **Steve:** *Yeah, you get the true MC experience. And if your work is about how the RPG sessions work, well then this is spot-on.*

(Field notes)

The "primary frame", frame of the people, is a frame independent of the other frames. It is the common understanding of the social context of the mundane world, its culture and social structure. It is the frame in which people can be caught discussing politic affairs, jokes, TV shows and literature, newly released games, relationships, food that is passed around the table and other everyday topics. In this frame of meaning, the interaction is happening between people in a relationship relevant to this framing: friends, acquaintances, colleges, or co-players.

Opening quotation describes the situation in which the players settle down for a two-days gaming session. As they have just started, the primary framework is rather prominent, especially regarding the lines 3.-5. However, in the lines 1.-2. the framework of characters is skillfully switched to, for the sake of making a joke in order to entertain the people around the table. Arguably, lines 6.-7. represent both the frame of people and the frame of players, as the conversation between two friends regards the culture and habits of the player community.

However, as the comment touches on these habits, it is not itself governed by the set of rules that defines the frame of the players, and the situation is understood within the primary frame of the people. This opening shows no discrepancies; on the contrary, the people are already switching up between the frames in order to start having fun. Finding fun in switching between the frames has been noted by Fine and described above (Fine 2002).

People and Characters

Steve finishes a beer and tries to smash the tin can on his head to flatten it. He is lying on the floor, wearing a tinfoil hat; much like the character Calvin he is portraying would do.

1. **Thelma:** *Hard to say if this was Steve or Calvin (Steve's character), but its 1:0 for the tin can.*
2. **Steve:** *...and I spilled it on myself. (laughter)*
3. **Thelma:** *The best part is that you are drinking non-alcoholic stuff-*
4. **Steve:** *Well, Calvin has already had two, and its alcoholic, and in the moment when he, again, with no success – (Steve smashes the tin can against his head again) – I will stop making a mess here, sorry –*
5. **Thelma:** *How about you stop destroying my carpet?*
6. **Steve:** *Calvin just flattens it with his foot (Steve steps on a tin can, it rolls away).*
7. **Margaret:** *Sorry, but its 3:0 for the tin can. (laughter)*
8. **Steve:** *I'm going to wash myself up then.*
9. **Phil:** *Oh really?*
10. **Margaret:** *What do you mean oh reall- oh! (laughter) I forgot you stink! (laughter)*

(Field notes)

Roleplaying, which, as described above, is for most of the players the core reason for playing TTRPGs, is a non-structured, improvised short performance, in which a character is being brought to life through a person who plays it. Unlike in LARPs, described in the introduction, narrative tabletop games do not usually require the players to act with the body, or real-life props; the players usually act through their face expressions and speech. However,

limited full-body performance is common as well as some minor props or costumes, as we can see in the quotation above. Since these tools for distinguishing if the person is acting as himself in the primary frame or as the character portrayed are quite minor, it is hard to distinguish when the performance starts, and when it stops. In the line 1., this confusion is reflected by Thelma, operating in the primary frame. In terms of Georges' storytelling event, she reflects on her inability to correctly decode message from Steve, as she is unsure of his role as a storyteller (see Georges 1969). Steve, reacting to her remark, switches to the frame of the characters in the lines 4. and 6., giving a performance of his drunken character, then proceeds to wash himself, by which he comes back to the frame of the people. However, the remark Phil makes on the line 9. does not belong to Steve, but his drunken and smelly character Calvin again. This rapid switch of the frames of the characters was not fully understood by all of the players, and in the line 10., Margaret reflects on this discrepancy shortly. As he gave no indication for switching the frame (unlike Steve, who switched the frame of meaning mid-sentence in the line 4.), Margaret got confused, as the joke Phil was making was not relevant in the frame of the people. Margaret reflects on this issue in the interview:

"I notice these moments, you interact with the people and suddenly you have no idea if you are talking with players as a meta-talk²², or with characters. This happens almost every time, when the characters meet and have to come up with a plan. I usually switch to a player, and think about the next move, but it happened so often that other player talked to me as to a character, and I was like "oh, damn"! Sometimes it is hard to say if someone is roleplaying, there is no on – off switch, you just have to ... communicate it somehow."

(Personal interview with Margaret)

Absence of the indicators in the interaction is usually the main source of such discrepancies. Sometimes, strategies such as changing a voice, face expression or such is used in order to indicate who is speaking. Such behavior could be conceptualized as giving a signal for taking over the role of the storyteller, and therefore, in terms of Georges' approach, a form of coding of the message (see Georges 1969). This is also easier to recognize, if a player is performing a "cross-gender"; that is, if a female person portrays a male character and vice versa,

²² Similarly, to metaknowledge, the term meta-talk refers to an interview in the framework of either the players or the people – it is a conversation outside of the closed context of awareness, mostly referring to the frame of the characters.

as it can be recognized from the language. When a linkage can be made between the two worlds of being that coexist in the gaming encounter, tension (and joking) is found (Goffman 1974: 77 in Fine 2002: 202). Either way, the interaction discrepancy needs to be cleared out before the players can move on with the game.

People and Storytellers

The rules of the game state that when a new group of characters meet, they ought to come up with a way in which each character met with everyone. The rules give certain direction as how these scenes should be fabricated. Based on these rules, the players construct short stories together, conceptualizing them as “flashbacks”, and reflecting on these, using the jargon of TV series and shows. Additionally, they comment on these situations with jokes, typical for the groups of friends these people are in real life.

1. **Margaret:** *Hey Phil, do you think that on the magical carpet ride our characters Berry and Fabio met – however we understand this experience – (laughter)*
2. **Steve:** *Somebody stick somewhere something magical – (laughter)*
3. **Margaret:** *- you wanted to see what I can do with my powers, so you pushed me beyond my limits?*
4. **Phil:** *Oh, that is definitely possible!*
5. **Margaret:** *Very nice ... and did you like it?*
6. **Phil:** *I think Fabio liked it very, very much!*
(...)
7. **Phil:** *Let's play on, I will come up with the flashback origin-story of me and Mike later.*
8. **Margaret:** *I love how we build the history while actually playing the game in the present.*
9. **Steve:** *Exactly, it's like a typical TV series model, where the flashbacks just come gradually.*
10. **Thelma:** *Yeah, these are great cutscenes.*
11. **Steve:** *Well should we jump into the morning scene then?*

(Field notes)

As the game starts, people are becoming involved in the gaming process and often shift to the frame of the players. Lines 1.-6. are rather complicated interaction, arguably a player's actions governed by the set of rules, however, this situation is also a great demonstration of the collaborative storytelling, that makes the process of TTRPG playing quite unique. Margaret is making sure to tell the story of the first meeting of hers and Phil's character so that he would agree – decisions of both is happening through a procedure described in rules, but both storytellers need to agree, bearing in mind the continuity of their characters, as well as the impact their storytelling will have on the whole narrative. This demonstrates the specificity of this unique type of storytelling event; in this moment, two storytellers share the role, communicating the story in a way that is acceptable for everyone; yet, it preserves the nature of unique communicative event with the roles of storytellers and listeners, engaged in a narrative creation (Georges 1969). In the lines 7.-11., a reflection of the form of these storytelling structures is reflected on from the perspective of primary framework of people, who consume commonly shared media such as TV shows. This reflection and interruption of the primary framework of the people shows, where the inspiration for such narrative construction stems from, as the taste in media is often similar within the culture of players.

Collaborative storytelling is the significant characteristic, that makes the playing of TTRPGs a unique experience. While people draw on structures known from commonly shared media and their nature, as can be seen in the reflections in the quotation (lines 7. -11.), the play gives them the privilege to create this story.

“When you sit and read a book or watch a movie, you just consume someone else's work. Here, you are creating it, that's another type of experience. When you read, you flip pages. When you play a PC RPG, you follow pre-programed story. But in TTRPGs, there is no next chapter. You are free to do whatever – you can say your character goes home, nobody can stop you, anything can happen. It's all in your hands.”

(Personal interview with Margaret)

The difference between a passive consumption and an active storytelling agenda and agency to create stories alike to those consumed passively is the major appeal in playing highly

narrative role-playing games. The creation of a narrative artform known to players from other mentioned media makes these types of game unique and entertaining.

People and Players

As described above, the story begins, when the four characters: Berry, Fabio, Calvin with his dog Ruffian and Rudolf meet with Isaac Fiddle, NPC played by the MC, in a coffee shop in Happyville. The young man Isaac is desperate, because his grandmother Anna Fiddle and her house has disappeared, and nobody except for Isaac seems to remember she ever existed. He is certain that she was abducted by aliens. The group of players decides to start the investigation on the place where once stood Isaac's grandmother's house - now, gone. Margaret's character Barry is about to ask some investigative questions to a little girl who plays at the front porch of a neighboring house to the place where once stood grandma Fiddle's house.

1. **Thelma:** *The little girl is alert, so you should roll the dice and use the move "investigate" on this.*
2. **Margaret:** *Well, as a 45-year-old homeless, I have like zero tags for talking to children ...*
3. **Phil:** *We have, as a crew, "emotional-support" tag you can use-*
4. **Mike:** *Why are you all drinking this cheap ass beer? I bought craft beers; they are in the fridge!*
5. **Steve:** *Well, precisely, because I did not pay for it, and I did not want to drink somebody else's beer. You need to open it, if you bought it for us.*
6. **Mike:** *I should have done that an hour ago. Well, drink this one as fast as possible then. When was the last time you chugged the whole beer? Hm?*
7. **Steve:** *... Margaret, just roll the dice please. (laughter)*

(Field notes)

Fine refers to situations, in which the mundane "real world" breaks in the game process as down keying (in order with Goffman's frame analysis) (Fine 2002). Such down keying can be rather intrusive, as it creates undesired stops in the flow of the game. Lines 1.-3. describe a

conversation of players trying to operate their actions in the gaming system, where lines 4.-6. represent a conversation held in the primary framework of the people, which interrupts the action of the players. Such intrusions have been found undesirable, as Fine's research shows (Fine 2002: 197-198). However, the collaborative nature of the storytelling concerns also the desire for the game to run smoothly in other aspects. Sensing the danger of possible discrepancies, Steve steers the conversation back to the gaming process, as shown on the line 7. Steve's statement here substantiates not only the skill of the players to switch rapidly between the frames of meaning, but also certain empathy towards potentially problematic moments that experienced players possess.

In order to avoid problems, there is a need to, at least to some extent, cooperate also in the framework of the people. The relationships between the group of people playing the game can, however, quite contra intuitively range from groups of good friends to groups of complete strangers. Some of the groups meet just for the sake of playing, and the frame of people consisting mainly of their everyday selves, their other hobbies, desires, relationships, occupation and so on is barely present in the process of playing. But for some players, to feel comfortable with the people might be a condition for a good game session.

“Usually, you play TTRPGs with the people you know. Two years ago, I would not be able to play with strangers at all – it is possible now, but I prefer to play with friends. (...) In the City of Mist group, I feel safe, I consider you all good friends and I enjoy the play more; it makes it possible to open to more roleplaying, or darker issues to deal with in the story.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

Any discrepancies that occur tend to be, sooner or later, discussed in the frame of people, as the whole game process is anchored in the interaction between persons. This fact draws back to one of the functions storytelling events have; the social functions (see Georges 1969). In this case, I argue that the function of the event is to strengthen and preserve friendships, pass time and have fun. Mentioned roleplay is a rather intimate process, which is shared easily among friends, but requires some extend of extroversion when performed with strangers or acquaintances. Harmony among people is, therefore, most convenient.

Concluding frame of the people

The frame of the people is unique by its indisputable realness. It exists outside of the Huizinga's magic circle and is independent of the other three frames. Consequently, the other frames exist within this primary frame, stemming from experiences, inspirations and possibilities this frame provides. It is a frame separated from the others by its temporality and corporeality that is absent in the remaining three frames. Time of the real world burdens the players with mundane worries of mundane duties, while corporeality reminds the players of its presence through bodily needs, fatigue or physical incapability and filth. Additionally, interaction within the frame is governed by the social relationships between the people. As described above, these relationships can be of major importance, as a sort of safe space might be required for some players to enjoy the game and play well.

Immersion causes the players who are engaged in the game to disembodify from the primary framework – in fact, for many this might be the very reason to play such type of games. However, given the need for social well-being necessitated by some, complete separation might on the other hand, cause discrepancies. On the contrary, incapability to let go of the “real world”, at least for a moment, might be perceived as “bad play”. Conflict management here depends upon the extent of empathy among the players. In this chapter, empathic moments occurred as Margaret and Phil wanted to tell the story to both of their likings. Collaboration in the storytelling confluences with the consensus among the people who play the game. This particular moment, additionally, demonstrated clearly the ways in which the duties of storyteller shift rapidly, or are shared in one moment by multiple people. Such moments show how prominent the element of (collaborative) storytelling is, and how fruitful is to understand such moments through the perspective of storytelling events concept (see Georges 1969).

Any type of discrepancies tends to sooner or later transform to a conflict between two people. That is why this frame is rigid, always in the background, but undesirable to linger in while playing. On the contrary, the everydayness and its position outside of the magic circle makes this frame a safe haven in case the game within the other three frames becomes too difficult to handle. I have briefly discussed the notion of “bleed”, a phenomenon that tends to affect the people playing the game, mostly in negative connotation. As part of conflict management strategies, this player group came up with a safe word for moments of bleed occurrences. If the game becomes too much – for example a topic that triggers negative

emotions occur – the person can shout “skittles!”, and the game immediately stops, and everyone comes back to the frame of the people. Being empathic is one of the most important competencies a person, who wants to be a good player of TTRPGs can learn. In fact, when done right and in the right social setting, the play can serve as a tool for therapy (as described in the introduction). After all, the main aim of the game is for the people to be entertained by the story, to feel good and to have fun.

Frame of the players

Margaret is about to roll the dice for the important investigative move to get information from the little girl. She does not feel strong in her abilities for that roll, and there has been too many jokes from the other players so she does not want to blow it.

1. **Steve:** *I think that suddenly, Ruffian, the dog that accompanies Calvin runs over to the girl and licks her. Calvin's runs over too, and asks (as Calvin) "Do you like dogs? Do you wanna throw him a stick?"*
2. **Thelma:** *(as the little girl NPC) "Yes please, mister!"*
3. **Steve:** *(as Calvin) "All right!" (as Steve) In that case I am using the help point I have here to help you with that roll Margaret.*
4. **Thelma:** *Great, so you have the power of 1 for that help point, meaning you are giving her a status of power 1?*
5. **Margaret:** *Yeah, it's not ideal, but it's all I have.*
(Margaret rolls 10, which is a solid success.)

(Field notes)

The frame of the players is fully dependent on the specific gaming system. Without the knowledge of the rules, interactions happening in this frame seems like a pointless sum of absurd gibberish. The frame of players aligns quite well with how Huizinga described games as mysterious and hidden to those, who are not devoted to the language of the game (see Huizinga 2016). Hence, the frame of the players is clearly defined, as it concerns with structural means of communication of an abstract system, and, at the same time has little in common with the mundane world of people, individualistic world of characters or narrative world of storytellers. In this sense, the knowledge of the rules is a threshold, when considering joining a group of players. However, as this is a game about making a story, the set of rules must be skillfully translated to actions understood in these other frames, in order to fulfill its purpose of a fun-having experience. This is, indeed, what Steve is doing in the lines 1. and 3.; operating in the frame of the players, he is using the game mechanics to help Margaret with the dice roll. The rolls are performed with two six-sided dice, and the number is summed up with "tags" (special powers of the characters, and other advantages that can be gained, such as a help point

from another player, as can be seen in the line 3.). Margaret does not have too many “tags”, so Steve, using his knowledge of the rules, comes up with a move, that gives Margaret additional help - point she can add to her roll, but also a move that makes sense in the frame of the characters – his move needs to make sense in all frames. Be it differently, there would be discrepancies, that would have to be dealt with. Additionally, a mid-sentence switch of frames can be observed in the line 3., where Steve starts the sentence as his character Calvin, and finishes it as the player Steve.

The *City of Mist* gaming system is rather specific in the level of freedom the players have, to express their creative approach to problems and can be used in the most innovative ways. Given this fact, the translation of the story to the system and back goes on rather easily – at least mostly, as I will show later.

“I appreciate the freedom the system gives you – for example when you are choosing a character’s mythos, there is no pressure or limitation. On the contrary, I wonder if I am creative enough to ever experience all the possibilities the system offers. (...) I love the process of converting rules into the story and back. It is challenging, more difficult than other systems, like, you cannot repeat moves, because it would be boring, and it wouldn’t make such a good story.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

Phil here describes characteristics of the game rules, that I considered significant for orienting the analysis towards the nature of TTRPGs as storytelling events; the rules of the game, which create the frames of the players, are itself a tool for creating a story. Here, the confluence of the frames of storytellers and players is most significant.

Players and Characters

Phil's character Fabio left the group, and went to a local reality-agency, to ask about the empty space, pretending to be an interested developer. He gets a strange information, that no house has ever been built at that place. The players comment on his action, praising his idea and discuss theories. Meanwhile, the rest of the group – Calvin, Rudolf and Barry perform the interview with the little girl that lives in the neighboring house, and get interesting piece of information, while Phil sits and watches them perform. His character Fabio joins the rest of the group after the interview with the little girl that lives in the house next door.

1. **Steve: (performing as Calvin)** *“Ok, next step is to find the address of the Doctor who gave the girl the pills!”*
2. **Phil: (Performing as Fabio)** *“Can somebody brief me in, please?”*
3. **Steve (as Calvin)** *“Well, we found out, from that little girl from the neighbors, that she is the only one that remembers there ever actually was a house, but when she told her mother, she brought her to a doctor, and he gave her some pills after which she forgot – but not completely! Maybe she is not taking them, maybe it does not work on her, we don't know that. But what we know is that we must dig deeper to uncover this dirty secret!” (laughter)*
4. **Phil: (as Fabio)** *“Well that is very interesting, because as I was pretending that I am interested in buying this piece of property, I was told I can, because officially, there has never been any house, ever.”*
5. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** *“So everybody is involved in this conspiracy – the whole city!”*

(Field notes)

Skillful avoidance of discrepancies can be observed in the quotation above. Building on Fine's understanding of awareness contexts (Fine 2002), the pretense awareness context that the whole group of players is operating in is the effort to keep the character unaware of player's reality. This is commonly understood as avoiding “metaknowledge”, that is to play the character without the knowledge of the player. Only through this shared understanding is

the interaction in the quotation above meaningful; Phil heard very well every information the other players acquired from the little girl, and the other players have heard the information his character got from the real estate agency only a minute ago; in fact, they even commented on it. However, it is expected for their characters to exchange information in the frame of the characters as well, so that there are as little differences between the frame of the characters and the frame of the players.

Metaknowledge and discrepancies concerning the knowledge of the characters and players differences are the most common and can mess up with the decisions of the choices and expectations of players. MCs often try to prevent these situations by keeping the players and the characters knowledge as similar as possible. It has happened on several sessions, that one player left the room with MC to perform a situation 1 on 1, while the other players had a break, and engaged in a mundane conversation in the frame of people.

“As an MC, I try to avoid the situations when players have metaknowledge as much as possible. I trust them, but I understand that if you know something important, it’s hard to play around it, and it’s not comfortable. Like if you suddenly realize your friend’s character is the bad guy you are looking for, but your character thinks he is your friend, what the fuck can you do? Change the behavior and ruin the game, or play on and hate it, because you are just making fool of yourself? (...) In more serious cases, I sent the players to different rooms, and play it there. Otherwise, if the information is shared with all the other players at the table, I prefer when players play it out in the roles of the characters, but if it’s something of less importance ... I don’t want it to complicate the game too much if it’s only about the practical aspect.”

(Personal interview with Steve)

Conflict management described by Steve here regards the possible discrepancies that can occur not only between the frames of characters and players, but also on the verge of other frames. On the contrary, the main goal of the game is the entertainment, and in the last sentence of Steve’s remark, it is quite clear that there is space for tolerance if the flow of the game is at stake.

Players and People

The investigation led the players to a city park, that was mentioned in the newspapers they found in the coffee shop this morning. Once a lovely place for relaxation is now dark and full of shadows of unknown origins, and the park is guarded by the police. When the characters try to get in, a suspicious black car pulls up, and three men in grey coats and hats, who look like a secret organization members, get out to restrain them. The players start to refer to them as Hatters. All characters managed to get in the park except for Calvin, Steve's character, who is left alone on the street. This leads to a situation when two separate scenes are being played at once, as the characters are not together. Both groups are caught up in an intense scene; the three players in the park have been attacked by three meters tall animatronic bunny with blood on its paws and teeth, while Calvin is restrained by the Hatters outside.

1. **Thelma:** *Well, that's great. Steve, how would you deal with this situation as an MC, should I skip between the two groups, or should we finish this scene and get back to you?*
2. **Steve:** *I am ok with waiting, you can finish it, its ok. But otherwise, I would skip-*
3. **Mike:** *I would skip, we have nowhere to run anyway.*
4. **Phil:** *I would love to run away for sure. (laughter)*
5. **Mike:** *I would cut in between the scenes, so that it has dynamics for everyone, it gets kind of boring otherwise.*
6. **Thelma:** *Sure, we can, no problem.*

(Field notes)

It has been said that the extent to which immersive frames of characters, players and storytellers are disrupted is important, as too much interruptions mess with the flow of the game and destroy the atmosphere. However, in order to keep everyone entertained, it is sometimes beneficial to negotiate the situation through a dialog held withing the frame of the people. The interaction above shows a good example of this type of talk, where the players speak about the game in terms of what will be the most fun way to play for the people who play it. The rules of

the game make it possible for the players to decide about the structure; in fact, the rules state, that the film-like structure commonly shared as an entertaining medium is most welcomed to be put in action. Phil reflects on this in the interview:

“It really depends on the vision of the group of players. There are system-focused people who play RPG like chess in space; they talk only about the best strategy to use in combat, beat the monster, it’s all about rolling the dice. Then you have people who want to experience the story, live it, play with emotions, roleplay... if this does not align, there are tensions.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

Additionally, it is not only the experience of the players, and the custom to negotiate about the nature of the play within the community. In fact, the game system encourages the players to engage in the creative process in whichever way they seem fit.

„The combined imagination of everyone at the table has limitless potential. While the players are responsible for the cinematic actions of their individual characters, it’s up to you to stimulate their imaginations and get the creative juices flowing by setting up the right atmosphere, style, and pace for your story. Since *City of Mist* draws heavily on the comic book neo-noir genre, you’ll want to make your games look and feel like a movie, TV show, or comic book in the genre. You do so by thinking about your game as a similar work of fiction in the genre, or in other words, you think cinematically (Moshe 2017: 339).”

The game system itself recommends the players to act like movie-directors, or, most importantly, storytellers. In this sense, creating a gameplay that is most amusing for the players and the people is connected to the familiar structure of such media as a movie or a TV series, which is cinematic, and characteristics for its fast cuts between the scenes, such as we see in the quotation.

Players and Storytellers

Eventually, Calvin catches up with the rest of the group, although he was forced to leave his trusty dog Ruffian behind. All characters are fighting the huge bunny in the park, and it seems like their moves do not exactly work right – as if the monster was made of nightmares, rather than physical matter. Margaret, Phil, Steve and Thelma as the MC have spent the last five minutes figuring out the best way of rolling the dice and selecting a correct move from the moves available to use Margaret’s character’s powers.

1. **Thelma:** *Ok, so the verdict is you are attempting a linked move consisting of “change the game”, which makes it possible for your character to grow two pairs of extra limbs using your mythical powers, creating a power tag, and then roll again for a “go toe to toe” move to use the power tag gained from the first move to attack?”*
2. **Margaret:** *Hell yeah.*

Margaret rolls 10 on the first move, chooses to create a tag “more hands” with the power 1, and rolls 12 for the second move, combined with the tag from the first move. Both dice rolls are highly successful.

3. **Thelma:** *You guys have such high rolls today. Do you wanna describe what happens?*
4. **Margaret: (in a changed, intensive storyteller’s voice)** *Berry’s body structure starts to change, it changes color to muddish – which does not sound cool, but is – and he starts to grow, and from his back, two or three other pairs of hands grow, and he – since we have no clue what the bunny-monster can do – just smashes its face with all the power he has.*

I have touched the topic of translation of the structured and “coded” language of rules before. Here, the process is slightly different, as the player hesitated with the description of the narrative until she knew her rolls were successful. Lines 1.-2. are an interaction between two players, or rather a player and an MC. In order to understand it, it has to be keyed within relevant frame of meaning; the frame of the players. However, the same talk can be translated into

another frame, which becomes understandable even to non-players, as it follows a commonly shared narrative structure and description of events common in fantastic stories. Line 4. is the same event as described in the first two lines, but here, Margaret is telling the story, trying to make it as vivid and entertaining as possible. Here, she adopts the ever-shifting role of the storyteller, as the other players change into silent listeners. Before she does so, Thelma asks her, using a common phrase among the people in this group, if she wants to adopt this role – here, the indication of the shift of the roles is rather explicit. From the perspective of the players, there is no need to repeat the move that has already happened in a narration, but the entertainment of playing this type of TTRPG stems especially from collaborative storytelling, which can be seen here. Such behavior shows the importance of approaching these types of TTRPGs with the perspective of a storytelling frame in mind, as it is the only framework, that gives the behavior sense.

The process, however, does not always have to be this harmonic. It is no surprise, that rolling the dice can mess up with the narrative the players are trying to tell quite fundamentally. Once the dice are rolled there is no way for the players to talk themselves out of the result. Sometimes, there might be a frustration from the chain of low rolls. In other cases, the storyteller has an idea about how the story should be told, that they decide to ignore the frame of the players, and cheat:

“Well, if you need to know ... I have cheated once. When Eddie, my character from the last campaign was about to die, I rolled 12. I did not want to roll 10+, I wanted to succeed and die, or not succeed and die, but I did not want him to survive because I thought he shouldn't. I do not know if I should be proud of myself, because usually you cheat to get higher rolls, right? I said I rolled something like 8, a partial success. Well, there you have it.”

(Personal interview, Phil)

It can be so, that the dice complicate the story in the most unsuitable way, the result of the roll might be illogical within the framework of the storytellers or characters. Most of the time, the translation can be done smoothly, but in some cases, the discrepancy is avoided by discreet silencing one of the frames of meaning completely, like in this situation. However, when such behavior is discovered by the other players, it is met with disapproval.

Concluding frame of the players

Frame of the players has an ambivalent position. It consists of the very system that constitutes the magic circle of the game, as it defines its rules. However, majority of the interaction happening in this frame is perceived as disrupting the immersion in the game. As much as it can be an inspiring tool for storytelling, praised for its inherently storytelling nature, overuse of game-system talk might be seen as a metaknowledge, or simply as a discrepancy in the flow of the game. I argue that the flow of the game can be understood as the flow of the story – when the players get stuck on some rule unclarity, they cannot carry on with the plot. In this sense, the rules are a “necessary evil”; a threshold to be crossed in order to engage in the play, a knowledge requiring hours of studying the rulebooks, but one that rewards those who invest the time and energy with the unique skill to collaborate on a narrative.

The flow of the game is also closely linked with the fun the people who play the game want to experience. The frame of the players and the frame of the people meet each other in a potentially dangerous manner. To be a good player often means not only understanding the rules well, but also understanding when to put the rules aside and enjoy the game and the story with the others. Good players also do not spillover their frustrations from the gameplay to the frame of the people – Czech version of Ludo, one of the most famous board games in the Euromerican context, reflect this in its title “Člověče nezlob se” quite well, roughly translated as “Man, don’t be mad”. Managing frustrations stemming from the occurrences within the game system is an important step in growing up among children, and it plays equally important role in terms of conflict management in TTRPGs played by adults. Exploring the meaning of “being a good player” can be an important process of self-reflection and self-understanding in the frame of the people.

Finally, storytelling has a rather specific relationship with the game system. As said, the system is inherently storytelling-based and creates a rather unique space for the players to tell their stories. However, it also forces the players to react to changes and unexpected situations. In extreme cases, the player decides to suppress the rules and cheats in order to continue with the story he or she decided to tell – such as was presented above in Phil’s case. However, mostly, the players instead come up with an inventive solution, that translates the rules or dice roll into an interesting story arch. The skill to transform occurrences in the frame of the players to the

frame of the storytellers is an important competency not only in terms of discrepancies avoidance, but also in the sense of being a good storyteller, entertainer, and an empathic person, managing to keep the well-being of the group a priority.

Frame of the characters

The characters are saved from the bunny by an NPC played by Thelma, who introduces himself as Baku – the hunter of the nightmares. What they have fought was indeed a nightmare, that manifested itself in this world – seems like this one might belong to the little girl the players met earlier and seems like it is not the only one around here.

1. **Phil: (as Fabio)** *“Well now that we have delt with the nightmare, we might have a talk?”*
2. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *“We can’t. The Hatters are right behind us. We gotta run.”*
3. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** *“What do you mean, we gotta run? Where is Ruffian?”*
4. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *(starts crying)*
5. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** *“Well we have to go back, we have to find him!”*
6. **Thelma: (as the Baku NPC)** *“The stinky one is right, we have to go. Come with me if you want to.”*
7. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** *“We cannot go without Ruffian; we wouldn’t bail on any of you – just because he is an animal?!”*
8. **Phil: (as Fabio)** *“We have a mission here.”*
9. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *“Yeah. Let’s live to fight another day.” (sobbing)*
10. **Thelma: (as the Baku NPC)** *“Thought so. Let’s go!”*

(Field notes)

To fully emerge in the character is one of the most intriguing parts of playing TTRPGs. Players must react to new situations without script or (mostly) any extensive acting experience. To roleplay a character does not mean to give a perfect impression, as the point of these games is not to perform a theater act. However, one of the measurements of a good roleplay is a believable, consistent character. I argue that for such immersion to be achieved, correct keying of the frame of the characters is crucial. The quotation is a great example of a successful interaction. Even though there is conflict between the characters, this conflict belongs to the frame of the character and does not create any discrepancies between players or people. This is

possible only through shared skill to recognize the correct frame, and correct meaning of performed actions.

One of the above-mentioned qualities regarding the roleplay of a character is its consistency. Engaging in a conflict with an NPC or a PC, going against the “obvious” choices or expressing emotions of the character might be one of those moments.

“Before I roleplay, I always think about what the other characters know about me, and try to follow that, so it is not weird that I have changed behavior for no reason. (...) I have noticed it is so important for me – the continuity of the character. Also in books, movies and TV shows. To stick to what you stated in the beginning you said you are. It makes the roleplay a bit stressful to be honest, I want to do it well.”

(Personal interview with Margaret)

To achieve the consistency of a character, however, is one of the hardest tasks in the TTRPGs, as other frames and agencies are involved. Here, Margaret reflects on this also in other, more common media she consumes as a person. Below, several examples of conflicts of these agendas are reflected on as well.

Characters and Players

The characters spend the night in the motel outside of The City together with Baku. He told them, that something or someone is making the nightmares of the local people come to life. They are dangerous and their numbers are growing. In the morning, the characters carry on with gathering information. They manage to, using Berry’s powers, talk to the ghost of the dead Grandmother Fiddle and find out that she was killed by the bunny they defeated yesterday. The Hatters are, indeed, a secret organization, and are here to stop it, but they have been hostile to Baku when he tried to join forces with them – possibly considered him another nightmare. Even they don’t know what causes this. The characters sit down to talk about next steps.

1. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *“Ok, to the plan is to get a gun from Baku, go to the park, find my dog, get arrested by some of the Gatekeepers and make them cooperate with us –*

2. **Phil:** *We do not know these are the Gatekeepers!!*
3. **Mike:** *We do not know that! Don't use it, those are the Hatters, we called them.*
4. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *"Hatters – one of the Hatters, and we get some info from them as well – like where is their base of operations."*

(Field notes)

So far, I have shown a very skillful play, and avoidance of conflicts stemming from possible usage of metaknowledge. However, in the quotation above, a mistake was made by Steve, by breaking the frame of meaning, and using the knowledge of a player instead of sticking to the knowledge of the character. In the line 1., his character Calvin is describing the plan, but when he names the Hatters, he uses their correct name, that exists in the world of the *City of Mist* game system; Gatekeepers. The secret organization of Gatekeepers is well known to the players, as they have fought them many times before in a different story in the game with different characters; they are a secret organization trying to use the magical mist to cover up the mess people with magical powers – such as our characters – do. But the character Calvin does not know any of this; he has an idea about the Hatters but does not know their name or the context connected to them. In lines 2.-3. we can, therefore, see Mike and Phil calling Steve out on his mistake, and Steve corrects himself immediately, so that the game can continue within the frame of the characters with the correct keying. In terms of awareness context, this would be an example of character awareness of player reality (Fine 2002:189), and as well as in Fine's research, the discrepancy is immediately revealed and dealt with.

Characters and People

The players manage to stick to the plan: they got in the park, fought another nightmare – this time, it was a group of aliens, just like those Isaac Fiddle imagined abducted his grandmother, for which the players believe it was Isaac's nightmare. In the process they managed both to save Calvin's dog Ruffian and meet up with the Hatters, as they refer to them. They have been taken to their base of operation to strike a deal with an NPC of Agent Dunmore, the head of the Hatters organization.

1. **Thelma: (as Agent Dunmore NPC)** *“If you want a deal, you better tell us what you know.”*
2. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *“Well, we know who to contact to move on with the investigation.”*
3. **Thelma: (as Agent Dunmore NPC)** *“And who would that be?”*
4. **Steve: (as Calvin)** *“Well we won’t tell, because if we do, you will wipe our memories, put some rectal probes up our asses. Additionally, we know the park is a trap – a trap to which you lure the nightmares to keep things quiet and under control but instead, much like the consumer society, you treat the symptoms but not the cause. The nightmares will keep on coming, until we find the source.”*
5. **Mike:** *Guys, something is wrong with Calvin. He is starting to sound more and more reasonable. (laughter)*
6. **Phil:** *Well yeah, I noticed.*
7. **Thelma:** *Yeah, kind of.*

(Field notes)

I have mentioned above that one of the most cherished virtues of playing a good RPG character is to keep it consistent and believable. When players fail to do that, discrepancies occur. This can be seen in the line 4., when Steve’s character Calvin starts acting out of the role. Calvin was introduced to the rest of the group as a homeless paranoid mad man, immersed in conspiracy theories. Here, we see him suddenly leading a negotiation with the head of the secret organization of the Hatters as a professional. Mike, Phil and Thelma comment on this in the lines 5.-7. from the position of people, because they are surprised, and this sudden change is causing a discrepancy in the immersion in the roleplay. Steve here broke the pretense awareness context, as the character suddenly knew how to negotiate as Steve would.

People playing TTRPGs can, based on experiences, reflect on these possible discrepancies. In order to avoid complication, a certain choice can be put into action in order with the conflict management strategies.

“I have this thing, I actually only recently realized the characters I should be playing. I should just be playing. Nice talkative guys, it sounds like a horribly boring character but I

know that something I could actually do. (...) Every time, when I want to play a character that's not associative end up being targeted. When I try to play social outcast, I still end up being social. So, I realized that and also, I tend to play characters who have some flaws because I want to improve them, I suppose.

(Personal interview with Steve)

To play a character different than the mundane self is one of the most enjoyable and unique features of TTRPGs. However, to know the limits and to put the goal of the game – to keep everyone entertained and play a good, smooth game with a good story and believable characters – before the selfish enjoyment of exploring a character is a virtue, that can guarantee the smooth run of a game.

Characters and Storytellers

After the deal with the Hatters is done, the characters are free to investigate if they cooperate with them and share information. Our heroes decide to go hunt down the nightmares with Baku in hope to get some information on them. In the night, they fight a nightmare in a shape of two ghostly girls, but it escapes – fortunately, it leaves a trace behind to be followed. As the situation escalates, there is a conflict between Baku the NPC and the other characters.

1. **Steve: (as Calvin)** “You know, Baku, you are right. We are just a bunch of useless amateur idiots. So maybe we should each go our separate merry ways.”
2. **Thelma: (as Baku)** “What?”
3. **Steve:** I am trying to piss off Baku so he will leave, I don't like him. **(Proceeds as Calvin)** „Do not follow the trace Baku, we have found it, not you, it's ours!”
4. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** “Yeah Baku, fuck off, you are slowing us down.”
5. **Thelma: (as Baku)** “How dare you! If it was not for me, the bunny would tear you to pieces, you are powerless without me, only I have the power to devour the nightmares!”

6. **Mike: (as Rudolf)** *“You are so arrogant! Do you think you are better than us just because you live in some motel?!”*
7. **Thelma: (as Baku)** *“Just so you know, I do not live in a motel, I own a Dojo.”*
8. **Steve: (As Calvin)** *“... If Dojo is what I think it is, I had it once for a month and it itched so much...” (laughter)*
9. **Thelma:** *In the meantime, the nightmare’s trace is getting weaker.*
10. **Phil:** *I don’t care if the others follow me, I proceed to track down that nightmare, while the other fight.*

(Field notes)

For some of the players, to perform the character believably is the most important part of the gameplay. I have described certain discrepancies that occur when the players fail to portray their character well, however, this also does not mean that focus on correct performance of the character is the only aspect to worry about. In the lines 1.-8. We see a very well performed roleplay interaction within the frame of the characters. All the players stick to their character roles, they create conflicts, problematize the story and even try to get rid of the helpful NPC of Baku, who is, from a player’s perspective, huge benefit in terms of game resources. In the line 9., Thelma, stepping out of the frame of the characters and switching to the storyteller’s frame, gently reminds everyone that there is a story going on in the background of this fight. Phil, from the perspective of the storyteller that wants the story to move on, reacts to this reminder, and decides to make another step and left the scene of the fight, as seen in the line 10.

However, the decision of the storyteller is never done against the nature of the character. The decision must be aligned with the character’s continuity, or at least there must be good argumentation, otherwise there might be discrepancies noted by other players, and recognized as bad roleplay, or an agenda of the storyteller or a player shadowing the character’s decision-making process. Phil reflected on this moment in the gameplay as follows.

“Following Baku was from the position of the character to a great extent. Fabio is no saint, and Baku was an arrogant prick that is true, but my mythos, Cheshire cat, is basically a guiding spirit and he should take care of the others. Additionally, I like to push the story

forward, if it makes sense from the position of the characters. To go against the story for no reason or too much makes it worse, not better.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

In this case, the mythical part of his character (the Cheshire cat) is brought to attention as an argument for certain behavior. I argue that the skill of the players regarding the conflict management stems mainly from their experience, and consequently from the shared idea of the smooth game flow, that they are trying to achieve. The goal of the game is always to have fun as a group. This rule should not be crossed at any time.

Concluding frame of the characters

Frame of the characters is rather fragile. It exists within the magic circle (Huizinga 2016) and should be interrupted by the frame of the people as little as possible, as the intention here is to immerse in a believable, consistent character performance. Such discrepancy can be seen in the inconsistent roleplay performed by Steve, when his character starts acting more like his person than his character, and the issue is resolved in the frame of the people. Similarly, having the most experience with the system and its world, Steve used metaknowledge stemming from his player-self when naming the Hatters by the true name, the Gatekeepers – again, this information is unknown to his character.

Fragility of the frame also stems from its collaborative nature, as the characters are brought to life through the interactions which shape them and makes them a part of a shared story; a player can come up with a certain character, but their role in the story will be decided in the process of collaborative narration, as well as their virtues, weaknesses and jokes connected to them. I argue that this characteristic is important in terms of distinguishing between the frame of characters and frame of storytellers and shows the insufficiency of Fine's model. The characters are key for the story creation, but without the storytelling agency that deserves to be analyzed separately, the characters could not move on with the narrative. This can be seen in the situation, when a perfect argument is roleplayed between Baku and the players, but the story stagnates until people switch to the storytelling frame in order to look at the events in the story from a storytelling perspective.

However, the relationship of the frame of storytellers and the fame of the characters is rather instable. The consistency of the character and logic to their actions is key for the story and has certain power over it. If there is not a good argumentation for the character's actions, the storytelling frame is of no help. There must be a consensus between these two frames, and it is one of the core conflict management strategies. Phil reflects on this in an interview, talking about how he likes to push the story – if it makes sense for the character. This skill can be well seen in his actions in the game.

Even though the players taking part in this study are quite experienced, and their actions in terms of conflict management are rather successful, there are still some discrepancies occurring in the way they are dealing with the actions within the framework of the characters. The competencies that can be learnt from this activity are, again, empathy and the skill to recognize an agenda of a certain characters – or person – in a social situation. This skill is not only useful for becoming a good player but can be a huge benefit in the frame of the people – in other words, can “teach” players something about the interactions of the characters in the real world, and makes it easier to understand the stories they are trying to tell.

Frame of the storytellers

The characters followed a nightmare in the form of two ghostly girls, and it led them to a back door of a local apothecary. Inside, they found a scared NPC of doctor Buster who has been forced to prepare sleeping pills and antidepressants to distribute them to the locals, as the more pills they get, the stronger their nightmares are when they manifest. They need to banish the nightmare in order to talk to him.

1. **Steve:** *Well, these ghosts are either once-alive girls with unfinished business and remains of humanly-wishes, that hunt the one who killed them, or they are inherently evil constructs, that are manifested like this. So how should I proceed?*
2. **Mike:** *So far, all the nightmares were banished through positive thoughts, I would stick to that.*
3. **Steve:** *Well, that is how Amit works.*
4. **Thelma:** *Um, this is the most meta-thing you said so far.*
5. **Mike:** *It's not just how Amit works, but like it has always worked.*
6. **Phil:** *Yeah. This is how stories work, honestly.*

(Field notes)

My argumentation throughout this work has been, that the analysis of TTRPGs building on Fines usage of Goffman's frame analysis is insufficient without a frame that explains the acts connected to the collective story creation. In the line 4., Thelma is calling out Steve for using players metaknowledge of the game system and its creator, Amit Moshe, who tends to slip to recognizable narrative structures. However, she is wrong to assume this is the only metaknowledge being put in action here; as Mike and Phil proceeds to comment on this in the lines 5.-6., it is the understanding of narrative structures, as they are commonly shared and consumed through such medias as books, movies, TV shows or other RPGs. Operating within the framework of the storytellers means, that players are making moves illogical from the perspective of the players, and at the same time, making decisions which steer the characters in a narrative that is relatable and understood by everyone around the table, so that the goal of the game – to create an entertaining collaborative narration – is achieved.

Collaborative storytelling, that specifies the TTRPGs is analytically interesting especially for its ambivalent character. The story creation and the gaming process itself might partially go against each other in the sense of the pre-understanding of the structure of the story and the gameplay. It is important especially from the position of the MC, who either creates the script for the story, and walks the players through the game, to distinguish between a good game, and a story, that might be good but resonates with the so-called “writers complex”, as described below:

“There is this thing called writer syndrome in the TTRPG community, where you as an MC railroad your characters too much. You think „I have this really cool story. Oh, I bet they're gonna love it, too. I'm gonna show it to them.” And then you make a story where they essentially don't really have a choice to do anything. (...) You should, you know, your players should have a choice and if you drag them too much it might be fine if they like the story but usually it's not the most enjoyable experience for anybody. (...) Like obviously you're writing a story, but there's the obvious difference that when you're writing a book, you're going for the best version of the story. And when you're writing a story for your group, you're trying to find a story that has interesting choices and ideally can reflect the choices, the players make, right?”

(Personal interview with Steve)

“Railroading”, in other words keeping the story linear without any significant player’s agency, is a technique, or rather a game type, that might be enjoyable for some players, but as reflect above, there must be a clear border to such setting. The most important characteristic, the collaboration of all the players, must be preserved. This characteristic stands out as an interesting difference between how Georges (1969) introduces the storytelling events. It is important to understand, that it is the plurality of storytellers, that is key for a game to be conceptualized as good (contrary to a railroad game). There is a need for all the storytellers to feel listened to. This constellation of roles is what makes TTRPGs unique genre in terms of storytelling events.

Storytellers and people

Doctor Buster is on the verge of mental breakdown, so the players need to make him calm to find out who is making him do this – who is behind the whole mystery. They talk about how to achieve this in order to move on with the story.

1. **Mike:** *Berry could summon the ghosts of Busters grandparents to show him that ghosts are good!!*
2. **Steve:** *... I can see this backfiring so much.*
3. **Phil:** *How about I (as Fabio) sit down with him, touch him so that he sees I am no ghost, assure him all of us are people and not nightmares and tell him he is safe? I can roll for that or burn the tag for immediate success.*
4. **Thelma:** *... or that, yea.*
5. **Mike:** *Like yeah, but what's more fun to play? C'mon.*

(Field notes)

As stated above, to create a fun experience for everyone can be perceived as the main goal of the game, rather than winning or finishing the story at all. Different players have different desires concerning the expectations of a TTRPG session. Here, the discrepancy between the storytellers can be seen quite clearly. Where Mike (in the lines 1. and 5.) wants this narrative to be as fun as possible, Steve and Phil are rather cautious about the actual outcome of the move they are about to make, because they want to finish the story in order with what they believe should be the shape of the final narrative. In this sense, differences between how the people playing the game and the storytellers they become in the process can be observed.

The fun having is, without question, the most important feature of the gameplay. However, there is a need for finding out the extent to which the game should be fun, and to which it is a narrative being put together by several collaborating storytellers. Indeed, the story itself can be funny, but most of the players in examined group prefers to keep the story rather senseful and consistent. Finding balance between the two goals might be tricky for some players.

“I think there are several goals of the game. One of them is to participate in such a way, that you entertain others, that you do something memorable, something that helps the others to

enjoy the game. (...) On the other hand, this honorable goal can change in the egoistic “I want to be the one to make the story more interesting, watch me as I go!”, and you seek satisfaction from telling a good joke, or coming up with an interesting plan. (...) It sort of confirms your position and contribution in the group.”

(Personal interview with Mike)

There is a subtle difference that needs to be recognized regarding the wish to entertain people around the table and self-assurance seeking, that might come out as undesired by other players. In terms of conflict management, it might be noted there that, as can be observed in Mikes quote above, self-reflection is the most important tool to be used.

Storytellers and Characters

The players found the mastermind behind the whole operation: Doctor Clement, who used the innocent people of Happyville, dosed them with sleeping pills and antidepressants and made their nightmare come true in order to build an army of monsters. He did this to fight the secret organization of Hatters, who are the enemy of people with powers like our characters are. Our heroes ambushed his mansion, together with the Hatters organization. While the Hatters are fighting the army of nightmares, the players face Doctor Clement for a final showdown. But instead of an expected fight, Doctor Clement wants the characters to join him in his cause – to wipe out the Hatters organization, so that all people with mythical powers can thrive. The characters are torn and must choose a side.

1. **Thelma: (as Dr. Clement NPC)** *“I have been watching you destroying my creations. You have talent! Don’t waste your talent on the enemy. What did they ever do for you? They stand in the way of your powers!”*
2. **Mike:** *We could work with this you know ...*
3. **Phil:** *Yeah, kinda cool.*
4. **Margaret:** *He ain’t wrong, holy shit ...*
5. **Thelma: (as Dr. Clement NPC)** *“Together we can cleanse Happyville of the hatters, and let the locals express their mythical powers openly!”*

6. **Phil:** *Yeah, finally people like us could stop hiding and we could use our powers freely!*
7. **Mike:** *Isn't it risky though? His argument is that people will use the power for good but then there is one who wants to be evil, and -*
8. **Steve:** *Well, it would be a self-regulating system...*
9. **Margaret:** *But we wouldn't be oppressed anymore!*
10. **Mike:** *But when somebody has an army ... I don't know. In principle, this is good, but he might be dangerous to us in the future...*

(Field notes)

To explore the gaming system of the *City of Mist* with the focus on the storytelling frame seems rather interesting, as the NPCs the players meet are usually not as flat and ordinary, as in “classical” narratives, such as fairytales or older TTRPG game systems. The players do not have to finish the game by killing Dr. Clement; they can arrest him, hand him over to Hatters organization, or even join his cause. The game system allows all these possibilities and puts a nonnegligible amount of responsibility on the player’s – or in this case storytellers - shoulders. Above shown interaction rapidly switches between the frames of people (lines 2.-4., 7., 8., 10.), frames of characters, who have agenda of their own (6., 9.) and the whole discussion is held with a certain hesitation; difficult decision will decide about how will the story the players have been working on for two days end.

In this case, the conflict stems from unclear moral background of the characters, colliding with the way the storytellers recognize cathartic moments in the story. They find themselves in a situation lacking arguments for either changing the course of the story to an ultimate plot twist that would challenge their morals, and a choice intuitive from the position of the storyteller, but hard to negotiate with the continuity of the characters. Mike commented on the situation later in an interview:

“You put it quite well as an MC, it was a really good dilemma, but you should have played with us a bit more. You should have lure us to the dark side, open the whole new world of possibilities for us, one we have never been to. And I loved the narrative, the idea, but then you said something, which made it easy again – something too cruel for my character to join the side. That would be my negative MC feedback for you, because then it was not as hard to

choose. But still I was looking for ways how to play with this maniac, and maybe choose his side after all.”

(Personal interview with Mike)

Mike describes he felt pushed over the line of the dilemma Thelma as an MC tried to create for her players. For his storytelling agenda, the option of joining the „wrong” side seemed more interesting, but he knew that his character would choose otherwise, and had to hold back. His decision-making process is torn between several frames and the corresponding roles he plays in them; he is aware of the responsibility for his decision and chooses carefully.

Storytellers and Players

The players need to make the most important decision to finish the story: either to decline Dr. Clements’s offer and stop his plan of destroying the Hatters organization or join him and help him with the cause. They have already discussed it as people, played it out as characters, but still cannot decide on what to do.

1. **Steve:** *The Hatters are fighting the nightmares in the lower levels of the building, right? Calvin is going to take a look.*
2. **Thelma:** *You see bloodshed. You are used to see Gatekeepers – sorry, the Hatters - in action as professionals, but for some of them, this is their first mission, and they stand against an army of nightmares – some of them met their own nightmares. They are young, disoriented and scared. There are tentacles, shadows, screaming, crying. The suffering it creates is terrible. You roll the dice against the status of “terrified 3”.*
3. **Steve:** *Well, I rolled 5 so I take the status then. (As Calvin) I go back, but say nothing, I am too terrified to talk.*
4. **Thelma: (as Dr. Clement NPC)** *“Tell them what you saw – isn’t the victory beautiful?”*
5. **Mike:** *Ok now he is pushing too much-*
6. **Phil:** *Actually, Fabio goes and takes a look. Because if I get the status “terrified” too, I will be against him. So I will leave the decision on the dice.*
7. **Thelma:** *Cool. You rolled 6, you also get to be “terrified 3”.*

8. **Phil:** *Yeah, I really hoped the dice will decide somehow good and I get to justify my decision.*
9. **Mike:** *Ok, I also go there and look.*
10. **Thelma:** *You rolled 8 you get “terrified 2”.*
11. **Margaret:** *Well, I go too.*
12. **Thelma:** *You rolled 10, you are not terrified.*

Players translate the rolls into the decisions of their characters and decide to finish the story with a fight with Dr. Clement. However, in order to push the story in this direction, Steve uses a very specific move in order to force the agenda of the group on Margaret’s character.

13. **Steve:** *Ok, so I use my powers to let Dr. Clement confess his worst sins. It’s a change the game roll, and I intend to create a status of “This bitch has to die.”*
14. **Thelma:** *Ok, the roll is successful. You place your hands on his head and see the memories or the suffering of thousands – inhabitants of Happyville forced to live in fear, dosed with sleeping pills and other drugs to keep them from living a happy life caused their nightmares to be stronger. The whole village suffered for months, but for Dr Clement this was just a mere tool for the greater good. The death of grandmother Fiddle was just a collateral damage, the suffering of those people does not concern him – they will understand when he gets to use his powers for good.*
15. **Steve:** *Nice. So now I force the status “This bitch has to die 3” on Margaret’s character Berry – I want him to hear all this, and finally join us in order to destroy this maniac.*
16. **Margaret:** *What?!*

(Field notes)

After all of the arguments have been exhausted, and it seemed like none of the frames of meaning would give any argumentation meaningful enough to choose sides, a rather unexpected decision has been made. As I have noted, the game system itself is very narrative. The characters do not get hit points or damage; they get statuses, which can be positive or

negative. It is expected for the character to act according to the status she has, so a “restrained” character cannot move, “depressed” character won’t make jokes and so on. Players, aware of this rule, used this (arguably) metaknowledge in order to use the system, so that the outcome of the move in the frame of the players could be sensibly translated to the frame of the characters. It was a very creative way of using the system, that has not been used in this group before, certainly not in such an important narrative moment. After Steve’s failed roll (in line 1.), Thelma proceeds to translate this to the story (in line 2.). Gaming mechanics, which dictates Thelma as an MC to give Steve’s character negative status “terrified 3” is aligned with the horrors described by her in the framework of the storytellers. Phil later reflected on this moment:

“You played it really well as an MC – you really got us to a tricky situation, you just sit there and think about which of these two evils is lesser. My character had an inner conflict, that needed to be resolved and I did not know how, as both solutions were valid – and I wanted the story to go well with my characters choice. So, I let the dice decide; it was ok from the position of the character, and as a player I knew that I might get a status “horrible 3”, so if I will be frightened, I will play that, and if not, I will choose the dark side.”

(Personal interview with Phil)

However, when Steve decided to force a narrative agenda on Margaret (lines 13.-6.), he breaks the integrity of the character and player in order to force his storytelling agenda on Margaret, it is met with a disagreement, which was later resolved, however such breakings do not occur, and the player group agreed that it is undesirable. As such, this move shows quite well how the rules can be used in order to finish a story according to one of the players.

Concluding the frame of the storytellers

Finally, the frame of the storytelling has an ambivalent position regarding it exists both in and out of the magic circle. This specificity can be seen in the fact, that the storytelling must be in order with what people playing the game consider a suitable story arch, and with the characters that are reachable only through deep immersion in the game. The frame of the storytelling is both extremely powerful, and instable in terms of possible discrepancies.

The storyteller's frame is, among other things, a vessel, that carries the flow of the game. The game "is" the story, and the skill to tell the story at the right pace, in order with the agenda of the characters and the rules while keeping everyone entertained means to play a good game of TTRPG. Empathic behavior and the sensitivity towards the other players are key for successful collaborative story creation. Especially in the end, the aim for achieving satisfaction in all of the frames of meaning and finish the game in an overall balance and consensus among the frames is of high importance. The story has the power to provide such happy end by concluding the story to everyone's contentment. The quality of the story is judged after it has been finished; and satisfaction of all frames of meaning is the ideal way of ending it.

Empathy is also required when the nature of the story comes to question. One of Fine's premises for engrossment in worlds of meaning is, that these worlds must be seen as desirable alternatives in order for the game to continue (Fine 200: 185). I have already mentioned several exceptions such as the "painful art paradox" (see Monotola, Holopainen in Torner, White 2012) and the bleed-focused games (see Montola 2010). However, it has also been noted in one of the interviews, that it is also the desire to create a good story, that pushes the storytellers to play with cruel or strong motives, which, consequently, create a reality that is arguably undesired to be inhabited by the people who tell the stories themselves. In this sense, the storytelling agenda challenges the three-leveled framework presented by Fine and gives a possible explanation for such kind of behavior in the game.

The core characteristic for the activity of the play is the dialog between the actors – the dialog, that creates the collaborative storytelling event the game is. The skill the players learn, and master is the ability to understand the needs of the others – in whichever frame – and empathically treat with those needs in order to keep the flow of the game smooth. The abilities stem from skill of including everyone's character in the story as well as their side-stories, understanding their agenda, listen to the others and think about how they could contribute to create a better narrative, and so on. Coordination and the management of the needs is a highly cherished soft skill in the contemporary society, and it might be noted here, that even not many players reflected on this, they train these skills as a byproduct of their leisure activities, together with becoming better storytellers.

Interesting relationship can be seen between the limited perfection of the world (see Huizinga 2016) created within the magic circle by the rules of the game, and the storytellers agency, which has the potential to challenge this perfection. Instead, the skill of using the multiple frames of meaning to their advantage can be seen in the way the players decided to resolve the moral dilemma in the story; even with all above-described storytelling skills, they knew, that they are still playing a game, that provides certain systematic moves. The confluence of the game and the story here is in perfect harmony.

Conclusion

Agent Dunmore, tired but unharmed, enters the room, where the characters held the last showdown with Doctor Clement. His body lies on the floor, fresh flowers growing from the seeds deep under his skin. Rudolf's flower shotgun finished the job. Luckily for Dunmore, the flowers cover the remains of what used to be his head. She looks at the characters, and the tension intensifies.

1. **Mike:** *Should I finish her? (laughter)*
2. **Phil:** *Yeah, we could top it off by fighting gatekeepers as well (laughter).*
3. **Thelma:** *She looks at you, thinking how the hell to get out of this pickle? Then she says (as agent Dunmore) "Time to get going and forget this ever happened."*
4. **Phil (as Fabio):** *"Yes." (Continuing as Phil) Did you notice this is the first mess anyone is going to clean after us?*
5. **Mike:** *Achievement unlocked! (laughter)*
(...)
6. **Thelma (as MC):** *So, what next? What happens to your friends?*
7. **Phil (as Fabio):** *We tell Baku we solved it WITHOUT his help. (laughter)*
8. **Thelma (as MC):** *He just sits there, and he cannot wait to close this chapter, open the dojo in the morning and go back to his job.*
9. **Margaret:** *We need to resolve poor Isaac too!*
10. **Thelma (as MC):** *Last thing you told him was you fought the aliens who took his granny. Basically, you made him believe the aliens theory and now he goes down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories. Do you want to explain it to him now?*
11. **Margaret:** *No. If he believes they are gone for good ...*
12. **Mike:** *Maybe his granny is kicking their asses at their home planet! (laughter)*
13. **Steve:** *I think maybe he will wake up the mythos of QAnon, and maybe we will meet him again. (laughter)*
14. **Thelma (as MC):** *... And Happyville, slowly comes back to its former glory, wakes up from its nightmares and starts to live to its name again. You did it! (clapping)*
(Round applause)

(Field notes)

As the story comes to an end, the frames become almost indistinguishable. As the key event in the storyline – the defeat of the arch enemy – passes, the story told and therefore the game played, is over. The satisfaction within all of the frames of meaning was achieved – even though it does not always have to be the case in TTRPG sessions, this one might be considered very successful.

In this thesis, I have presented an elaborated analytical model inspired by Gary Alan Fine's work (2002). Building on the three-level model of three frames of meaning that Fine constructed drawing from Goffman's frame analysis, I have decided to challenge this model by enriching the model with the frame of the storytellers. My intention was to show, that storytelling is key aspect of the TTRPG games, and that the behavior of the players must be understood as an act of storytelling, if the understanding of the game process is to be deepened. In order to strengthen this argument, I have introduced the concept of storytelling events coined by Robert A. Georges (1969), and I have asked myself 4 research questions, which I intend to answer below.

By adding the frame of storytellers to the analytical model, several findings occurred. Firstly, I believe this work has showed, that table-top roleplaying games are games only to some extent – to a great extent, they come close to storytelling events. As such, they are communicative events based on interaction of the players, they are social experiences and the play often does have social aim, every game is unique by definition and yet, similarities that make it possible for the players to evolve and learn are to be found. Based on these postulates (Georges 1969: 317-319) I conclude, that TTRPGs resemble storytelling situation to such high degree, that avoiding the frame of meaning of the storyteller in the analysis would result into incomplete understanding of the behavior of the players, as a key frame of meaning would be missing. In the analysis, several examples of particular actions were presented to demonstrate this argument, such as taking over the role of the storyteller in order to collaborate on the story, immersing in unpleasant fantasies in order to experience a good story or storytelling agenda put in action in the contrary to the frame of the characters, which did not seem to move the story forward. Such behavior cannot be explained only by the immersion in the characters, as it was in Fine's model.

Adopting this perspective, I might also add, that playing a game of “collaborative storytelling” makes TTRPGs probably single exclusive model of creating narratives in a group of people, following certain rules of this creation. As such, studying TTRPGs from this perspective is rather promising in terms of understanding different concept of storytelling, arguably one of a kind in our cultural context.

Secondly, by adding the perspective of the storytellers to the equation, the understanding of the TTRPGs as a complex interactive situation has been boarded by the agenda of the storyteller, that every player adopts for the time of the game. The shared responsibility of delivering a good story is combined with the expectation, that the others will do the same; the roles of the listener and the storyteller are both relevant for each player. These responsibilities and expectations drive players to make certain choices, that cannot be explained within the interaction order of any of the other three frames, such as narrating the scene that has just been played according to the rules, adding unnecessary details to the description, or making in-game choices that are questionable from the perspective of other frames. I argue that these findings are approachable only through adding the fourth frame of the storytellers to Fine’s model of frame analysis of TTRPGs, which is, in it’s previous from, insufficient.

Second research question regarded the confluences and discrepancies that can be observed between the four frames of meaning described above. Drawing on Fine’s (2002) research, I have marked those discrepancies that resembled the problems with awareness contexts with a special focus on the discrepancies occurring in case of breaking the pretense awareness context, which seems to be most relatable in terms of TTRPGs. So-called “metaknowledge”, the usage of resources of any kind, that stem from different frame then the one that players are interacting with has been marked in several passages in this work. Mostly, it is the usage of the player’s knowledge of the game system and the lore or the people’s knowledge about the story, that is being used in the frame of the characters in order to gain advantage.

However, there are not only such discrepancies, that Fine documented. I argue that other types of misunderstandings, far more serious can be observed. In my analysis, I have encountered interesting moments of clash, such as the disagreements about the subject of “fun” versus the concept of “good story”. The discrepancy here stems more form the expectation the

players have from one another – in this case, the expectation of the good storyteller on one side, and the expectation of the entertainer on the other. In this sense, the approach presented by Georges (1969) seems rather fitting for explanation. I argue that it is the expectations and responsibility tied to the role of the storyteller, that create such inconsistencies. The clash of two goals, one stemming from the frame of the storytellers and one stemming from the frame of the people shows, that there are many more problematic moments to be discovered in this type of interaction. Consequently, it declares, that such moments are only reachable if the perspective of storytellers is added, as it has the power to explain the expectations operating in this matter.

I have asked myself, how are these discrepancies dealt with, as they stand in the way of the flow of the game. Since the common goal of all the players is to have a fun, smooth play session, there is quite a vast number of conflict management strategies in action during the gameplay. I have shown that the group of the players who participated in this research are quite experienced, and therefore are prepared to face discrepancies. Besides the particular strategies, however, it is a certain level of empathy, which needs to be adopted by the players. I argue it is a virtue, that the players not only need, but further cultivate in the process of the game as a byproduct of the play. Among the strategies, most common are soft communication skills, such as steering the conversation back to the proper frame of meaning when the players get too distracted, good knowledge of the rules, so that the flow of the game does not have to be interrupted by the “meta-talk” about the system, or effort to keep up a good, believable roleplay. Concerning the management of the discrepancies described in the previous paragraph, avoiding “metaknowledge” is hard, however, it is usually, when encountered, pointed out by other players, and immediately fixed. The nature of the “fun” in games can be harder to communicate and belongs almost exclusively to the frame of the people. As described, avoidance of such differences in expectations can be solved through a dialog, however such conversation must take place before the game, as it is considered a discrepancy in the flow of the game once the session has started. Here, the empathy of all involved in the continuity of the play.

My last research question is closely tied to the previous one. I argue that the ability to become a good player is connected with number of important skills and competencies the players possess, learn and further cultivate during the play. I will name here those I consider key.

In the first place, the players are, consciously or unconsciously, becoming better storytellers. This occurrence is observable through the choices made within the framework of the storytellers which, once again, proves its sufficiency for the analysis. Being able to tell a good story, or even understand the concept of a good narrative structure is a highly valued virtue today's society. I have argued for the relevance of the skills related to storytelling in the introduction of my thesis (see Nevolová 2017), and I believe that collaborative storytelling is a great tool for cultivation of such skillsets, as proven in the analysis.

Among other competencies, those connected to social interaction are of most importance. The skill of empathically approaching conflict and manage it is a virtue of a great value. To become a good mediator in difficult situations might be of use in the contemporary society both in personal and professional life of the players. Ability of correct keying of several coexisting frames of meaning operating in the social interaction, and skillful switching between these frames is a virtue that can be benefited from in many social interactions as well. Consequently, ability to translate events in one frame into another – such as the rules of the game into a story – cultivates complex and innovative thinking of the players. This “playground” for cultivation of innovative thinking has a huge potential especially in case of younger players and children.

I would like to conclude my work by proposing a possible direction for future research. Even though it was not my main research question, I have discovered significant potential the TTRPGs have as tools for social communication and learning. Thanks to storytelling perspective added to the analytical framework, benefits stemming from this unique social interaction could be observed. I argue that such benefits of playing immersive, collaborative-narrative games deserve more scientific attention, as they might join similar techniques used in such spheres as education, therapy and coaching, which already work with the art of storytelling, and resemble modern mythmaking processes (see Zalka 2016, Eladhari 2018, Kuehling 2015, Cragoe 2016).

I argue TTRPGs can be beneficial on two fronts. For one, they cultivate and teach above-described skills and abilities. As such, the players are passively learning extensive number of virtues within a rather safe space of the game system. Thanks to this fact, the players tell stories and have fun, but also immerse in a potentially difficult topics, are met with uneasy moral decisions, practice social interaction and empathic behavior by interacting both with other players, and virtual NPCs.

For two, the games, given these qualities, can be used as a tool intentionally, in order to cultivate these virtues, educate the players on number of topics, putting in use the immersive nature of the games in order to make people experience the topics they want to learn about. In the context of gamification, I believe, that studying narrative immersive games has a huge potential. It is my sincere hope that the story of scientific exploration of the field is to be continued.

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Master's Thesis Summary

Projekt Diplomové práce

Jméno a příjmení studujícího: Tereza Picková

Předpokládaný název práce: Bleeding in the Mist: Triadic identity model analysis and bleed experiences within the City of Mist TTRPG mechanic

Klíčová slova: City of Mist, ludology, table top role playing games (TTRPG), identity construction, collective narration, performativity

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Barbora Spalová, Ph. D.

Jméno vedoucích diplomového semináře, do kterého se chce studující hlásit (předběžně):
doc. Martin Hájek, doc. Jakub Grygar

Námět práce

Role playing games (so called RPG's) have been a subject to many studies in the field of ludology, psychology and sociology as well (Adams 2013, Bowman 2018, Bowman 2013, Cloete 2010, Eladhari 2018, Golub 2014, Montola 2010, Nardi 2010, Vorobyeva 2015). It is not only the tendency of such games to form fellowships and build relationship networks that social sciences find worth analysing. Other aspects describing the nature of these games such as flow, engagement, involvement, transportation, presence, engrossment, dissociation etc. (Bowman 2018) have become the subject of interest. One of such aspects of immersive roleplaying is a phenomenon known as "Bleed". This term shall be the key concept of my thesis.

To understand the phenomenon of bleed, a brief description of the whole roleplaying experience is needed. In order to immerse in a roleplaying game (or any game), the player must cross so called magic circle (Hiuzinga 2016). By doing so, the player accepts social norms and rules applied for the game. More importantly, the magic circle creates a social alibi, which separates the acts of the player from the acts of the character he or she portrays within the game. The bleed phenomenon describes the spill over between the player and the character; that is,

the ways in which the magic circle is broken, and the borders of reality and game are smeared. Bleed is therefore a term describing a situation, in which the feelings, thoughts, relationships, and psychical state of the player affect the character and vice versa. There are two kinds of bleed experience: “Bleed in”, which describes projection of players beliefs, needs, emotions, issues etc. into the game, which impacts the behaviour of his or her character. “Bleed out” refers to the reverse process, when the character’s choices, behaviour, experience etc. have impact on the player in the real world.

Scholars, who focus on the analysis of the bleed phenomenon take several approaches. Some theorists connect the immersionism ideal with the phenomenon of bleed (Montola 2010 in Bowman 2013). Markus Montola conducted most interesting research on RPGs with positive negative impact; such games are design to intense the bleed effect and put the players in discomfort by exposing them to unsettling topics. Research focused on two extreme roleplaying games entitled “*Gang rape*” and “*The Journey*”. Both games under scrutiny drive the characters into acts that the players consider disgusting, strange or unnatural. This discrepancy causes intense cognitive dissonance, a —feeling of discomfort [...] caused by performing an action that is discrepant from one’s customary, typically positive self-conception (Montola 2010). Other scholars analyse the use of bleed in therapeutic game mechanic, for example Eladhari analyses such game called “The Mind Shadows” (Eladhari 2018).

It is important to understand, that most of the works mentioned above are not of anthropological nature. The phenomenon is analysed by media studies, psychologists, ludologists and philosophers, but rarely anthropologists. I believe that anthropology has valuable perspective, that can help us understand the events of RPG playing better. Besides, I have chosen rather specific field of research for my thesis. There are various forms of roleplaying games, that have become a subject of social research; both online, such as the biggest online game “*World of Warcraft*” (Golub 2014, Nardi 2010), and offline. In the case of offline games, two main categories can be found, first being LARP (live action role play), when the roles are performed by the players physically portray their characters in the real world, such as LARP-themed “*Junktown*” festival in Czechia, or the founding LARP “*Dragorhir*” (Bowman 2013, Vorobyeva 2015). Second category, which I will focus on, are tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG), also known as pen-and-paper games, which are form of collective narration, where players describe their character’s actions by speech. The first and most famous

TTRPG is “*Dungeons and Dragons*”, followed by successful “*Vampires: The Masquarade*” and many more. Both TTRPG’s have been thoroughly analysed by various scholars (Bowman 2013, Cloete 2010, Adams 2013).

One of the goals of my work is to introduce a rather new and yet unstudied game of this genre. The game system is entitled “*City of Mist: Ordinary People, Legendary Powers*”, and was published in 2017. I have chosen it because of its specific game mechanic, which, as I believe, have strong potential for social analysis. The usual duality of player-character is broadened to a trio, as the character is divided into two; Player – Character’s civil part – Character’s mystical part. Such design constructs two kinds of character identities beyond the magic circle, which impact players decision making process. Game as such is highly narrative; players are encouraged to play “in character”, that is, to play the role of the character in their speeches with the master of ceremonies (equivalent for a “Dungeon Master”) as well as between each other as much as possible. Performativity of this kind, typical for all RPG’s is a transformation tool, which supports the immersivity of the game, and reinforces the bleed effect. Role of performativity in such games shall be focus of my work as well.

Theoretical framing of this work shall be anchored in Huizinga’s classic work “*Homo Ludens: A study of the Play-Element in Culture*”, as an insight in the games and the role they play in culture in broader sense. However, to study the processes on the borders of the two worlds in for anthropology a theoretical challenge, as a great number of perspectives must be taken in account.

It is true, that the bleed phenomenon as described above is in its nature a problem of psychology. However, I argue that the experience of bleed in TTRPG is never experienced alone, as the nature of the game is a story narrated collectively. Balancing between character’s and player’s perspective causes shattering of the identity into different fragments. The creation of multiidentity by being present in several spaces at once has been developed continually in the work of Gilles Lipovetsky since his first publication (Lipovetsky 2008). Even though his work focuses on the modern world an its challenges for the identity connected to globalisation, the model can be applied to the virtual world of fantasy as well. The framework Lipovetsky presents can be crucial for understanding the decision-making process of the player, who’s identity has been divided into three parts.

The decisions made are therefore anchored in the triadic model of shattered identity. It is important to understand, that each of these identities belongs to different “world”, and each of these worlds have different moral system. The discomfort of the player is caused by the dissonance between different moral systems, which collide during the play. To understand the background of the colliding identities, the focus must shift to different moral systems, the identities of player – civil character – mythic character are anchored in. The work of Didier Fassin on the moral economy has the potential to help to explain this collision of different “worlds” and their moral systems (Fassin 2009). Within this framework, the communicated morality of the group can be observed and analysed as well. Another approach that comes into consideration is Goffmanian Frame theory, which is also related to understanding the behaviour between different frames and social situations (Goffman 1986, 1990).

There is, however, another actor, that interferes with the decisions made, and the emotional aftermath of these decisions. This transcendental actor I call for the absence of any better name, “The Story”. It is crucial to understand, that TTRPG such as *City of Mist* is a game, in which “to win” is not the goal; at least, not in the same sense as winning the football match of a game of chess. The goal of the game is to collectively tell a good story, that would entertain the players. In this sense, the players are not making their decisions only within the triadic identity, and on borders of several different moral systems, but also with the responsibility held for the next chapter of their collective work. I believe it is important to take in account yet another theoretic framework, which concerns the structure of stories and myths. Classical approach of Vladimir Propp is most helpful in such analysis (Propp 2008), as well as younger researches in this field (Lakoff, Johnson 2002).

Lastly, it is important to mention, that the game anchored in the storytelling is a highly performative activity. Roleplaying, that is speaking in character is highly recommended, and used as a transportation tool which deepens the experience of the players. It is useful to study this activity through theory of theatre, as it works with emotions and experiences evoked through acting. The works of Richard Schechner are most inspirational when analysing the performative side of the phenomenon (Schechner 2013).

All above mentioned theoretical approaches are to be yet considered as more or less relevant to the actual analysis of the phenomenon, however, it is crucial to introduce them and

be aware of the possibilities, that some might be most important for the research. For this reason, the variety of approaches is presented; not to follow all of them parallelly during the actual research, but to stay open-minded and careful with the data from the field, as the findings can be explained from more than just one perspectives.

With that being said, I present following research questions:

How do Players of City of Mist TTRPG construct their identities withing the triadic scheme of the game? How do they refer to the bleed phenomenon experiences? What kind of relationship can be found between the performance, experience of bleed and the level of immersion? Can we analyse the moral economies of the different world that collide during the play? What impact of the story structures can be observed in the collective narration?

Předpokládané metody zpracování

Vast portion of my data will be based in self-reflection and autoethnographic diary. I myself am a player, and as such, I must reflect upon my own understanding of the analysed terms.

Data will also be collected in a form of semi-structured interviews with the players, both character players and Master of Ceremonies. Interviews will be conducted with my own player group of five people, which has been playing together for a year now, as well as with players of other groups, most probably by skype calls (due to the coronavirus situation and the fact, that players are scattered all around the World). Community interviews with whole player groups are welcomed as secondary source, although personal face to face interviews are preferred. If the circumstances allow it, I plan on interview the creator of the game as well. The Interviews and autoethnographic notes will be analysed through open coding (Corbin, Strauss 199).

I expect alternative data collection and analysis possibility to occur. Given the performative dimension of the gaming process, understanding can also come from the acting itself. Bearing this in mind, I want to stay opened to possibility of “experienced ethnography”, as it is described in work of Victor Turner (Turner 1982). Depending on the nature of the data, partial narrative analysis of the story structure might be conducted as well (Propp 2008).

Etické souvislosti zvažovaného projektu

All participants will be beforehand asked to give spoken or written permission for their quotations to be analysed and presented in this work. The names will be changed in order to protect the personal data of the participants (when possible).

The biggest issue of the research is the analysis of my own player group, as I have very close relationship to the players, and some of these players are educated sociologists. The issue here is both ethical and of analysis accuracy, as the data will be unavoidably impacted by this fact. Enough data form interviews with other players shall minimalize the impact.

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List of annexes

Annex no. 1: An example of Margaret’s character’s Barry theme-card sheet and character sheet. The character sheet contains information about the player, the character, it’s relationships with other characters in the group (through help and hurt points) and other features. The character sheet is not included in the rest of the annexes. The theme cards sheet describes the characters power both from the non-mythical (logos) and the mythical (mythos) side. Each theme has a type, a name, a mystery in case of a mythos theme (that the players can decide to further investigate) or an identity in case of a logos theme. Mainly, each theme card consists of at least three “power tags” – phrases, that describe an ability which can be used in the game. A “weakness” tag can be used by MC to lower the number by invoking a weakness of the character:



The image displays four theme cards from the City of Mist game, arranged horizontally. Each card has a specific 'TYPE' at the top: ROUTINE, MOBILITY, BASTION, and DIVINATION. The cards are titled 'EX-JANITOR', 'JUST GOLEM THINGS', 'BODY OF CLAY', and 'SPIRITS AND GHOSTS'. Each card features a 'MYSTERY / IDENTITY' section with a question, a 'POWER TAGS' section with a list of abilities (A, B, D, E, G, F, I), and a 'WEAKNESS TAGS' section with a list of vulnerabilities (D, A). The cards are designed to look like old, worn pieces of paper with a textured background.

Card Title	Type	Mystery / Identity	Power Tags	Weakness Tags
EX-JANITOR	ROUTINE	Hey! Change those shoes! I just mopped the floors!	A KNOW THE STREETS B STOLEN TOOLS H EASILY OVERLOOKED	D SOCIALLY AWKWARD
JUST GOLEM THINGS	MOBILITY	Where can't I go?	A TURN INTO MUD D CHANGE SHAPE G LIMB SEPARATION	D TRACES OF MUD
BODY OF CLAY	BASTION	Who should I protect with such power?	A INDESTRUCTIBLE BODY B PROVIDE COVER E FISTS OF STEEL	B TOO STRONG
SPIRITS AND GHOSTS	DIVINATION	Can you tell me where is my power coming from?	A SPEAK WITH THE DEAD F THE DEAD HAVE MY BACK I SUMMON GHOSTS AND WRIGHTS	A OVERWHELMING SADNESS

Annex no. 2: Phil's Character's Fabio theme cards sheet:



Annex no. 3: Steve's character's Calvin theme cards sheet:

THEMECARDS SHEET (FRONT) BORDERLINER

DESTINY ⚡	DIVINATION ⚡	DEFINING RELATIONSHIP ∞	MISSION ∞
saviour of humankind	omniscience	Rogue (lotr)	tin-foil-hat-wearing conspiracy theorist
○○○ ATTENTION FADE ○○○	○○○ ATTENTION FADE ○○○	○○○ ATTENTION CRACK ○○○	○○○ ATTENTION CRACK ○○○
MYSTERY	MYSTERY	IDENTITY	IDENTITY
does evil deserve my forgiveness?	what secrets are maliciously being kept from me?!	when choosing between people and dogs, always go with dogs!	there's somebody behind all of this - and I'm gonna expose 'em!
POWER TAGS	POWER TAGS	POWER TAGS	POWER TAGS
A sticks and stones can't break my bones 🔥	A direct link to the man upstairs 🔥	A he's my best friend 🔥	A have my own TRUTH 🔥
H healing touch 🔥	B i can read your sins 🔥	B fetch! 🔥	B You gotta always watch your back 🔥
E sacrifice for others 🔥	C i can hear your prayers 🔥	C Animals love me. (people don't) 🔥	I vintage metal detector 🔥
			E don't worry, I believe you 🔥
WEAKNESS TAGS	WEAKNESS TAGS	WEAKNESS TAGS	WEAKNESS TAGS
A they'll betray me, i know it 🔥	A lord works in mysterious ways 🔥	C SQUIRELL! 🔥	D nobody ever takes me seriously 🔥

Annex no. 4: Mike's character's Rudolf theme cards sheet:

