Tabletop role playing games and creativity: The Game Master perspective

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ABSTRACT

Tabletop role playing games (TRPGs) offer players the possibility to create and enact the actions of a character in a fictional game world, guided by a human "game master" (GM). The GM is the storyteller and facilitator who co-creates dynamically the world with the players. In this sense, creativity is a key aspect of TRPGs, both for the players and the GMs, confirmed by a number of existing studies. In this work we focus on the perspective of the GMs on creativity through a user study with 17 participants. They provide feedback on different aspects of creativity as expressed while preparing or executing a story. Our results, among others, highlight the importance of the creative aspects of the game for the GMs as motivation for assuming this role as well as their view of the game as a dynamic co-creation process where the player group dynamics are also a key factor.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **General and reference** → Cross-computing tools and techniques; Empirical studies.

KEYWORDS

tabletop role playing games, creativity, game masters, user study

1 INTRODUCTION

"Role-playing games" refer to "the multiple styles of play activities revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of

characters in a fictional world" [1]. The term "RPG" refers to a variety of games revolving around role playing, including tabletop RPGs (TRPG), live action RPGs (LARP), single-player computer RPGs (CRPG) and Multi-player online RPGs (MMORPG) [1]. All types allow the players to create their own identity in the game and experience the game story world through the eyes of this identity.

TRPGs and LARPs are particularly less pre-scripted and less mass-homogenized than their CRPG and MMORPG brethren. In TRPGs and LARPs, players have the possibility to create and enact the actions of a character in a fictional game world, most often being collocated around a table (in TRPGs) or other locations (in LARPs) or even connected on-line in the on-line free form versions of the game. They are guided by one or more human "game masters" (GMs), who act both as storytellers and facilitators, managing all aspects of the game and assuming the roles of the non- player characters (NPCs). The game world, including player and non-player characters and their actions, are constituted by talk between GMs and players, often with supporting props like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps and even cosplay in the case of LARPs. The material objects of TRPGs and LARPs – rulebooks, dice, paper sheets, props – do not pre-script, however, specific usages in a very strict way. Even when rulebooks and scenarios include detailed instructions, they are interpreted, and agreed upon by the GM and player group.

Cragoe [2] compares mythmaking in folk narratives and RPGs, especially TRPGs and LARPS. He argues that unlike in folk narratives, where the story is dictated, in TRPGs the GM or storyteller is a facilitator who helps co-create the world with the players, who play an active role performing the story. In this sense, creativity is a key aspect of RPGs, both from the perspective of the players and the GMs.

For the GMs, the main creative activity is the design of the interactive story, taking into account their players' chosen characters as well as their actions, often adjusting the story dynamically as the game unfolds. Apart from the story itself, GMs are called to create non-playing characters (NPCs) who interact with the players, in some cases going beyond the definition of the character statistics, to the creation of the NPC backstory, personality, goals, morals and dreams. GMs often prepare a wide variety of props, including the representations of NPCs, maps, story lore for the specific adventure or even physical props to be combined with miniatures on the table and form a physical representation of the game action.

The players also have the chance to become creative. They are called to create their own character based on the game rules and story world. If they have the creative skills, or with the help of their co-players, they create their own character sketches in digital or physical format in the form of images, sketches or miniatures.

In some cases, the GMs, sometimes in collaboration with the players, go a step from story creation, to designing a complete story-world. TRPGs grant more direct world building agency to the GM and players in comparison to CRPGs and MORPGs. Without requiring massive coordination between programmers, graphic artists, and storytellers, they can more easily incorporate player input and spin it into the fiber of the world being collectively built [3].

Previous work [4–6] has explored the relation between TRPGs and creativity adopting a more quantitative approach and exploring correlations of TRPG gaming with different creativity related indexes, not differentiating between the player and GM groups. In this work we follow a more in depth, qualitative approach on how GMs specifically perceive the creative aspects of the game. Through a study with 17 participants, we attempt to record the GM perspective on creativity promoted by TRPG play. Section 2 briefly presents existing research on TRPGs and creativity, whereas Section 3 focuses on our study methodology. Section 4 presents the results of the study and 5 concludes the paper.

2 BACKGROUND

Research has shown that role playing can encourage empathy, generate creativity and help the generation and expression of new ideas [7]. Dyson et al [4] examine through a user study how role-playing games influence creative potential and emotional creativity and the results partially support the idea that TRPGs actually improve creative potential, confirming previous relevant research in [5] and [6].

Bowman [8] argues that TRPGs "provide a healthy, useful outlet for creativity, self-expression, communal connection, and the development of important skills over time". She attempts to highlight the value of contemporary role-playing games, illustrating that the forms of play found within these games cut across a wide range of cultural and educational practices. Bowman's key argument is that RPGs connect to a wide set of concerns and endeavors: They are game-based performance spaces, they foster explorations of identity, and they have relatively untapped potential for development of soft skills, such as creativity.

According to Grouling [3], TRPGs allow players to access their creativity and tap into the power of narrative. She considers this power as a unifying purpose that allows us to separate the TRPG from other genres of both narratives and games. In RPGs, the world setting provides the raw material and constraints that shape the adventures and the role of the players in them. Schrier et al [9] discuss the power of world building as a creative process. For GMs, this constitutes both the "act of designing and constructing believable fictional universes" and the "process of creating a universe "that links together individual stories scattered across multiple media". World building involves not just imagining a new world, but also creating materials that instantiate it, such as writing timelines, drawing up maps, filling dictionaries with new languages, populating a religion with detailed mythology, realizing the technologies and artistic pieces of this new world as 2D or 3D assets, or even creating new races, ethnicities, cultures and subcultures in fictional travel guides and bestiaries.

In this work we attempt to closely examine these topics through the perspective of the GMs, attempting to offer a more in depth look on what creativity means to them in the context of the game.

3 USER STUDY METHODOLOGY

To record the GM outlook on different aspects of creativity, we conducted a study through questionnaires. An open invitation was created, inviting adult GMs to participate anonymously. The invitation was distributed to (1) the authors' personal acquaintances that are TRPG gamers, with the request to forward also to other gamers they may be acquainted with, (2) to two discord servers dedicated to TRPG and (3) to several Youtube channels dedicated to TRPG. Interested individuals who responded to the invitation were forwarded an on-line questionnaire to fill in, in the form of a Google Form. The questionnaire [10] was composed by different sections, including: (1) Participant profile, with basic demographic information such as age and gender, (2) experience with TRPG games, such as years of playing as a GM, preferred game systems and self-perceived level of experience as a GM, (3) motivations and challenges for playing or GM-ing as well as the perspective of the participant on the importance of different aspects of the game and (4) story creation and execution, focusing on different creativity aspects of the game as perceived by the GMs such as story creation, rule adaptation, world building and in-game story execution.

3.1 Participants

17 Game Masters responded to the invitation and filled in the on-line questionnaire. 15 self-identify as men, 1 as woman and one reported "prefer not to say". There was variety in the age groups and professions of the participants. There were 5 participants in the 18-25 age group, 4 in the 26-35 group, 6 in the 36-45 one and one above 45 years old (1 selected not to report their age). In terms of occupation, there were 3 students, 1 educator in a technical college, 2 IT professionals, 5 graphics or video designers, a martial arts instructor, 2 civil servants, 1 risk analyst and two reported being unemployed. In terms of other hobbies (Figure 1 - left), participants mainly report, apart from gaming related hobbies (video games, board games), reading and sports, several creative activities including modeling, playing music, drawing or cooking.

All participants had started playing TRPGs between the ages of 13 and 19. In terms of frequency of playing, there was also variety in the responses, from once every few months (3), to once per month (2), 2-4 times per month (1), and then once per week (6) and several times per week (5). In terms of self-reported level of experience as a GM, the 50% (8 participants) reported to be very experienced and there were also 3 "extremely experienced" and 4 "moderately experienced". Only one participant reported little experience. The GMs have used a variety of systems. All 16 participants uniformly report Dungeons and Dragons, followed by Call of Cthulhu (8) World of Darkness (7) and others. 12 participants reported to also have played with a homebrew game system.

Table 1: Average (AV) score and standard deviation (STD) for the question "Why do you play as a GM?" (Likert scale 1 to 5)

Statement	AV / STD
I like to create an experience that the players will admire	4.41 / 0.8
I like to create and control my own fantasy world	3.35 / 1.17
I see the game as an opportunity to improve certain skills	3.41 / 1.37
I like to entertain my friends	4.76 / 0.44
I want to make my players' characters face difficult questions	3.53 / 1.12
I want to make the players feel powerful emotions	4.41 / 0.86
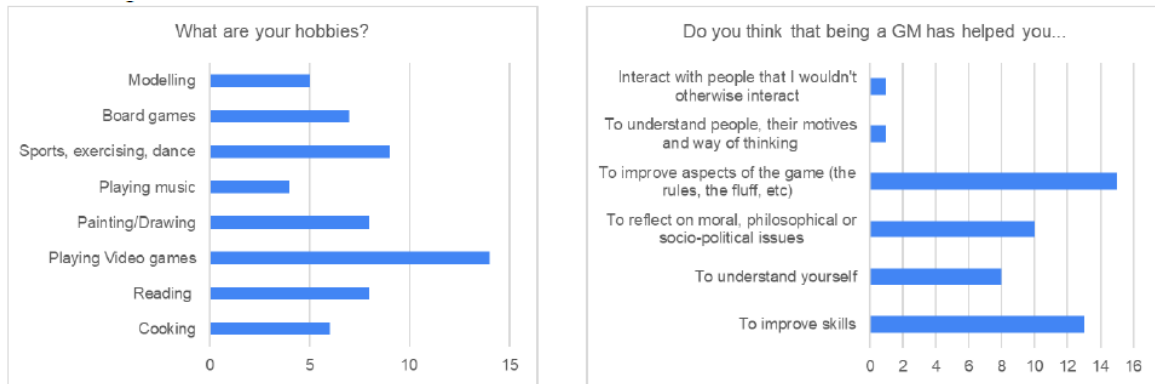
Figure 1: Responses to the questions "What are your hobbies?" (left) and "Do you think being a GM has helped you. . ." (right)

Finally, on the question "What role does TRPG play in your life?", only one user responded "It's just a game". 14 users consider it as one of their hobbies and 4 consider it their main activity and related to their profession. As users comment: "It is my primary source of entertainment", "It's an important part of my creative life" and "It's one of the things that defines me as a person".

4 RESULTS

4.1 Creativity as motivation and achievement

Creativity as a theme appears quite strongly in the questions relevant to the GMs general outlook for the game and their motivations for playing (Table 1). The importance of TRPG for the GMs can be also noted from their response to the question "Do you think about the game even when not playing or preparing the game?" where 29.4% responded "sometimes" and 70.6% "often". As seen in Table 1, the participants feel that a very strong motivation for taking up the role of GM is creating an experience that their fellow players will admire and that it will make them feel powerful emotions while also being entertained.

GMs elaborate on these motivations with statements such as: "[I play as GM] to unleash my creativity.", "[...] I love playing as a GM because it is a creative outlet that enables me to create worlds and stories that my players will enjoy and remember. If the players are having fun, I'm having fun as well." or "Being a player and a GM are completely different experiences with different things to enjoy. As a player I love the RP [role playing] aspect of the game and as a GM the world building."

As Figure 1 – left suggests, there is a variety of creative hobbies reported by the GMs, implying that creativity is a part of their lives beyond TRPG. When reporting their perceived achievements as GMs, creativity also seems to be a strong theme, combined with self-improvement (Figure 1 - right).

In terms of their most important achievements as GMs, their responses can be grouped as follows:

- world building and creation of elaborate settings used to run long story campaigns (6): "In my time as a GM I developed, with the help of the players, immersive worlds with engaging storylines that feature enticing alternatives with dramatic and epic narratives." or "Creating my own fantasy realm with its own storyline and also creating 2 big campaigns for Commercial RPGs that my players enjoyed a lot."
- accommodating the players to have a fun and an immersive experience: "Make each player be the hero that he/she wants!" or "When my players thanked me for the experience they had at the end of a campaign."
- other achievements related to personal skills, such as "My storytelling ability and my ability for ad-hoc problem solving." or "Flexibility and cooperation"

4.2 Story and Non-player character creation

When preparing a new story for the players, more than half of the participants reported that they never (17.6%) or rarely (47.1%) use premade adventures, with the rest reporting that they do use sometimes (23.5%) or often (11.8%). Even if they do use them, only 7.7% reports using them as they are. 69.2% use them as a source of

Table 2: Average (AV) score and standard deviation (STD) for the question "What do you consider important while game mastering when preparing the story?" (Likert scale 1 to 5)

Statement	AV / STD
Deep knowledge of the rules and the game system	3.24 / 0.9
Creating realistic and lifelike NPCs	4.18 / 0.88
The ability to run a "balanced" and fair game for the players	3.47 / 1.01
Creating an interesting story	4.82 / 0.39
Adding humorous elements to the story	4.24 / 0.66
Using supporting material like music and images	4.29 / 0.92
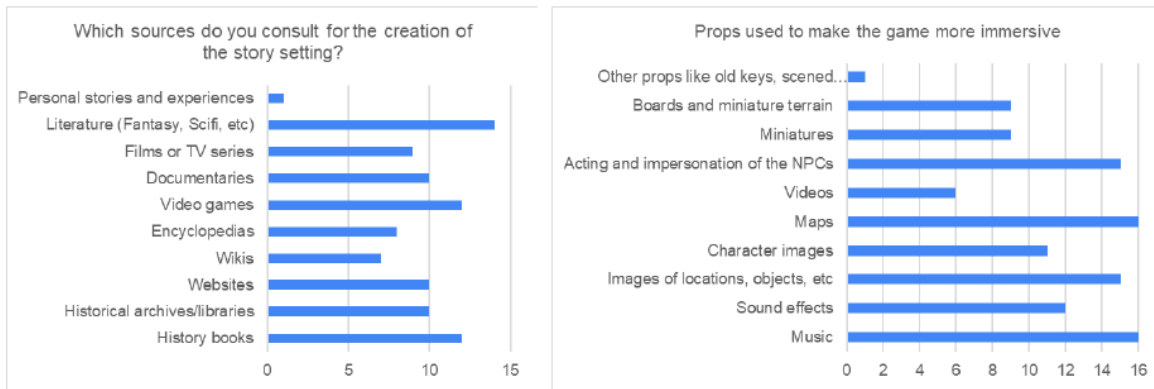
Figure 2: Results on: the sources the GMs consult to prepare their story setting (left) and the game props used (right).

NPCs, templates or props and the rest adjust and re-use smaller or greater parts of the story plot, modifying different aspects like the NPCs as they see fit. The vast majority of the GMs, as shown in Table 2, consider the creation of an interesting story, along with realistic NPCs and the relevant supporting material and props as very important aspects of the story preparation phase.

Important aspects during the story preparation phase are according to the GMs designing "intriguing" and "immersive" storylines with "cinematic scenes", allowing for a plot that can be "adjusted to player choices during game play" and "developing special props", to "assist storytelling with good visuals and fitting music". The rules and game system, although they are also considered important while preparing, "they should not restrict imagination and creativity".

While preparing a new story, the GMs consult and examine a variety of sources beyond the specific TRPG game source books. These may include Youtube channels (70.6%), wikis and forums (47.1%), other websites (58.8%), social media (29.4%) and also other players (76.5%). Especially for the story setting itself, the vast majority, as shown in Figure 2left, examines a wide variety of sources for inspiration including history books, archives, literature, documentaries, etc.

The Non-player characters (NPC) are an important aspect of the story creation process, as confirmed by the GMs (Table 2). As shown in Figure 3, the GMs prefer to create diverse NPC characters and prepare for them elaborate back stories which are used to provide depth to the character, irrespectively if they are exposed or not to

the players. 82.4% of the GM have created NPCs that in a sense represent them in the game and could be used as their playing characters if they were not the GM.

When asked to describe one of their favourite NPCs, GMs offered a great variety of concepts, including:

- "A magician with an inscrutable, suave facade, that appeared deceitful even though he was almost always trying to be as sincere as possible and helpful with the PCs. He had a rivalry of sorts with the party mage."
- "An old forest gnome that is a magic shop owner and is named Archibald Wagglestump. He travels all over the plane with his cart and sells door knobs."
- "A fire genasi artificer with daddy issues, who cut off her own arm so she could break free of an infernal contract."

4.3 Game props

All GMs reported using different types of props to create the appropriate ambience they envision for the game play and make the story more immersive (Figure 2 - right). Music selection for the story scenes is a very common technique, along with different images or drawing and maps. 58.8% of the participants reported that they themselves also create such props, going beyond re-using existing material. These may be digital in format ("a 3D pen for props and Photoshop for maps", "Maya, Photoshop, ZBrush") or even physical, by 3D printing their 3D digital creations or creating with physical material: "Paper, coffee, metal, rope, glass, fabric, bone, plastic, acrylic paint, plasticine, clay, sky's the limit." The importance given
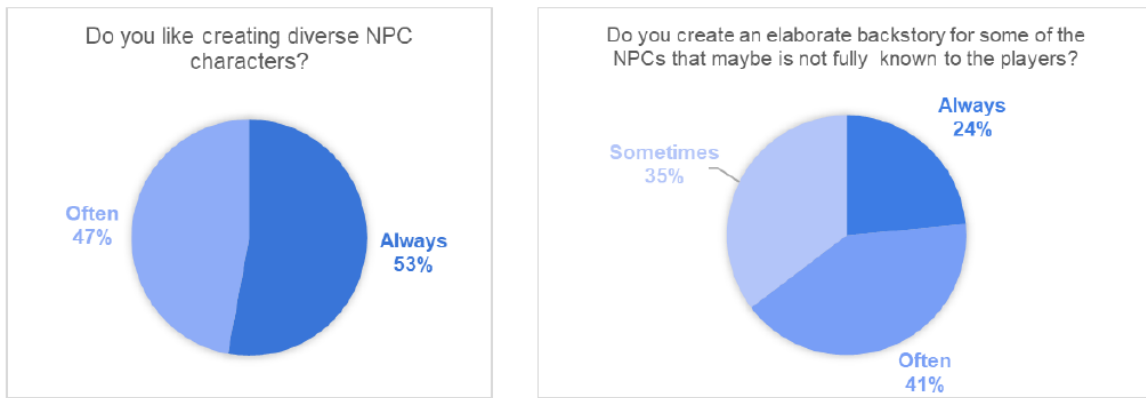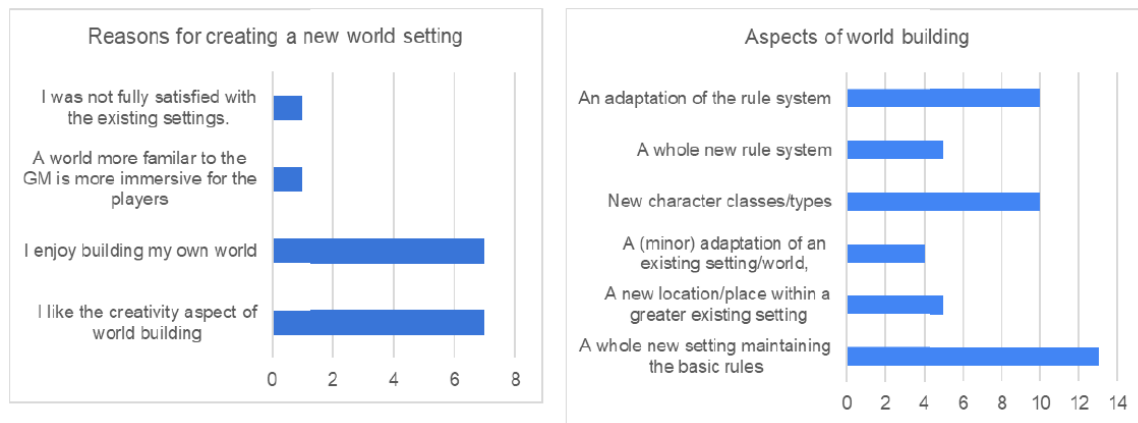
Figure 3: GM approach on creating NPCs.

Figure 4: GM perspective on world building: Left: Reasons for creating a new setting. Right: Aspects of world-building that the GMs have worked with.

on acting and impersonation of the NPCs is also evident in the GM responses.

4.4 World building

Almost all the GMs (88.2%) reported to have created their own world setting, with the joy of being creative being the most prominent reason (Figure 4left). As one of the participants comments: "[I created my own world setting] because I could! Jokes aside, one of the first things any GM loves is to make their own creation. Putting their thought to paper, creating their own campaign setting and playing it/running it, is the penultimate ego boost, especially when you are young and inexperienced. And if it succeeds it makes it even better. Of course, when you look back to what you have created, you mainly cringe, but hey, practice makes perfection, correct?".

World building in a TRPG context may take different forms. The GMs most often retain the basic rule system of the game and create their own world setting, sometimes including even new character classes, races, monsters and creatures. In some cases, this setting is part of a wider one, offered by the game (for example a country or region in an existing world) or it may be completely new. Sometimes,

GMs do not create their own world from scratch but rather adjust an existing setting according to their needs (Figure 4 - right).

Interestingly, the game system and rules are considered "moderately important" by the majority of the GMs (see also Table 2), while preparing an adventure. All participants reported that they have indeed broken the rules at some point, the majority also quite often (Figure 5 - left). 76.5% in fact reported to also create their own rules.

4.5 Story execution

Creating the story and NPCs or possibly a new world setting is only the preparatory phase of the game. GMs need to be able to actually run the adventure they have created with the players, in a series of game sessions. Creativity plays an important role also during this phase, as GMs need to alternatively narrate the story, role play the NPCs and orchestrate the players' actions, being able to improvise when needed to adapt to unexpected ones. At the same time, they need to maintain and control the atmosphere and ambience, managing the player group to maintain a conflict-free and comfortable social space as well taking care of the use

Table 3: Average (AV) score and standard deviation (STD) for the question "What do you consider important while game mastering when playing?" (Likert scale 1 to 5)

Statement	AV / STD
Being able to immediately recall the rules	2.94 / 0.97
Player group management/facilitation skills	3.88 / 0.86
Being observant to player needs and abilities	4.29 / 0.69
Being able to adapt the story promptly when players take an unforeseen path	4.82 / 0.39
Creating the appropriate atmosphere	4.29 / 0.85
Good acting when impersonating the NPCs	3.71 / 0.99

Figure 5: Left: GM perspective on the game system and rules. Right: Adjusting to unexpected player actions.

of the prepared supporting material, including music, miniatures, drawings and other props. As seen in Table 3, all these aspects are considered quite important by the GMs.

As one of the participants aptly mentioned: "Game mastering is a marathon not a race, conservation of mental strength is vital. One must attune to the table and the flow of the game in order to know how to spend his/hers creative power and not reach a burn out."

Managing the unexpected seems to be one of the most important aspects of the story execution phase for GMs. Almost all report improvising new story paths often during game play (Figure 5 – right). As one participant comments: "'I've met a variety of players during my game sessions, but one thing is very commonly seen across every table: Things will most likely not go the way you expect. Your plot must be able to adapt to the player's choices, which sometimes requires you to be good at improvising. You can never predict everything that will happen on the table. And if the story can't make sharp turns, you'll end up in an awkward position as you won't be able to guide your players towards the End Goal."

4.6 Game mastering as co-creation

Although not explicitly asked about the concept of co-creation, the GMs themselves at different points highlighted the key role of the players for both story preparation and execution confirming Cragoe's stance [2] on TRPG as co-creative myth making. First and foremost, as already discussed, players have the power to affect and completely change the story flow through their, unexpected, choices

and actions. As one GM notes, when asked about the challenges of the game: "To be prepared to see your plans completely overlooked or changed by the whims of the players. I do believe that the players are the driving power in storytelling in any campaign and they should have absolute freedom in their choices. That said, stories emerge from that basis and therefore are not forced."

Apart from the power of the players to affect the story plot by their choices, the GMs implicitly or explicitly seek their feedback and participation in the creative aspects of the game. Even during the story preparation phase, 13 participants (76.5%) report to consult other players on different issues related to story or world creation as well as the rules and game system. The GMs also may take into account the backstory of the player character, as described by them and implement elements of these backstories into the story. During the story execution, the player characters' conversation and attitude may again become a source of inspiration. As one participant suggested: "Always listen while the players are role playing. They might come up with ideas that you have never thought of."

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Previous research has established that role playing games and creativity are correlated and mutually inclusive. Tabletop role playing games affect creativity and vice versa and the role of the GMs are key in this context. In this work we focus on the GM perspective on creativity in a TRPG context, through a questionnaire-based user study with 17 participants. Our results suggest that TRPG related creativity goes beyond the creation of a branching narrative, to

activities including world building and physical and digital asset creation and production, and their combination with live story-telling, which also requires improvisation and performance skills. Creativity is reported to be one of the main motivations for assuming the role of the GM in a TRPG setting. Another important aspect recognized by the GMs is that of co-creation: players play a very important role, not only as the "audience" of the story, but also through actively or indirectly affecting world setting and adventure creation and the plot and flow of the story.

The importance of the players in the context of their creative process has been evident by the GM comments throughout the study, considering the player group and its dynamics essential for the success of the game. GMs specifically mentioned the importance of "choosing teams of players that are compatible with each other", "consider the effect of the game as an impact in player psychology" and "balancing of equal participation between the players". This perspective merits further exploration to understand in depth the social factors that affect game play and creativity as a social activity.

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