

# IS THERE MAGIC IN THE TABLE OR THE SCREEN: A LOOK AT THE EFFECTS OF DIGITALIZATION ON TABLE-TOP-ROLE-PLAYING-GAMES

Sam Buck

*ABSTRACT: In this research paper I examine the transition of table-top role-playing games to an online platform like Discord, due to the circumstances of the Covid pandemic, using Dungeons and Dragons and Call of Cthulhu as my prime examples. After introducing the concept of digital disengagement, I delve into the history of both games and the evolution of computer technology that made the transition online possible. I then examine the differences between in-person and online play by synthesizing my own experiences with the research of other scholars within and related to this topic.*

## **Introduction:**

### **How the World (and TRPGs) Became Pixelated**

In the present day, technology is everywhere. Whether it is there to take a food order, to help a student present their project, or even to allow me to write and share this paper, technology is undoubtedly ingrained in modern culture. It is so highly integrated in certain parts of the world that it is hard to imagine any person having resistance to it. Yet, this is a trend seen in the twenty-first century. According to one study, there is “a greater extent... of digital tools and processes...being questioned in favor of more reflective approaches” (Thorén, 2021). The study gives an example of an organization turning to more in-person interactions (like for meetings or sales), even though they are “digitally developed” (Thorén, 2021). This and other forms of retraction from the use of the digital world is known as digital disengagement and is caused by the idea that “digitization that is no longer driven by traditional innovation or improvement, but rather treated as something that has already happened and thus might be reconfigured” (Thorén, 2021). Essentially, technology has gotten to the point that rather than pushing the boundary of new developments, the wheel is simply being reinvented.

Perhaps this is why there is a resurgence of things that originated with in-person interactions. Gaming is a great example, especially in the form of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). By the time I joined the larger community nearly four years ago, TRPGs were recovering from an overwhelming amount of online gaming and in the midst, were even thriving. Games like Dungeons and Dragons were gaining even more traction than before and were carving their way back into the cultural mainstream.

However, due to the pandemic, society has been forced intensely back into the digital world to do most social things, gaming included. I played Dungeons and Dragons for two years before the pandemic put a hard stop on it, and the only way I have come back to TRPGs is by playing exclusively online gameplay. Digital sites like Discord are being used more to go about this, and realizing that made me wonder: How does an online platform like Discord affect TRPGs? As it turns out, despite the drawbacks, digitalizing a TRPG can have many positive effects by allowing players to continue building their stories. Digitalizing TRPGs allows people to play from anywhere, it helps keep track of the story virtually, while having all the necessary materials available with the click of the cursor.

In addition, this made building their communities arguably easier.

## A Brief Explanation of RPGs and TRPGs

First, I would like to define terms and acronyms that will be used throughout this paper. An RPG, or Role-Playing Game, refers to a game where players take on roles for their characters as they play. This is different from a TRPG, or Tabletop RPG, which is an RPG within the subgenre of tabletop games. From the name, it is not surprising then that tabletop games are described as “the broad category of board, card, role-play, and miniature games that are played sitting around a table” (Carter, Gibbs, Harrop, 2014). Some popular TRPGs include Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and Call of Cthulhu (CoC), which are the two TRPGs I will be focusing on for this paper. While there are many TRPGs out in the world that I could discuss, I have the most experience with these two, which will help me divulge deeper analysis.

## The History and the Mechanics

Let us now also investigate how these TRPGs came to be in the first place. Dungeons and Dragons first came from the minds of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 and was

published by Tactical Studies Rules before later being taken over and having later editions published by Wizards of the Coast (Tjernberg, 2021, p. 3). The basis of the game is that players create characters who will interact with the world and story (more commonly called a campaign) the Dungeon Master (DM) designs. The DM acts as a referee and storyteller, since they drive how the story goes based on the actions of the players. The players, thus, are the actors of the story. The characters themselves are built through what are called “stat” rolls, which are numbers that determine attributes such as strength and charisma, which then influence other skills the character can use during the game. And when those characters take actions within the game, the player must make a skill check to see how well the action was carried out. Seven different multi-sided dies are used for these numbers, along with a character sheet to record character information (refer to Figures 1 and 2). In addition, rulebooks are used to recount information about game mechanics and rules. Miniature figures can be used to show where the characters are within the story world, which can be helpful in combat, though individual campaign groups can opt to imagine these scenes instead.



Figure 1:

*This is a picture of my personal set of dice. Each die is given a shortened name based on the number of sides it has, and the name always starts with a “d” to signify that it’s a die. From left to right, here are two d4s, two d6s (or the typical dice we tend to think of), two d8s, two d10s, a percentile die, two d12s, and two d20s.*

Figure 2:

*This is a blank first page from the official fifth edition D&D character sheet. It has the initial numbers and ideas that goes into building a character, such as stat values, class, race, spells and/or weapons, among a few others. Other pages ask for information like backstory and a complete list of spells if it's applicable. (Credit: Wizards of the Coast)*

Call of Cthulhu was published seven years after D&D, in 1981, and is based on the works of “celebrated American horror and science-fiction writer Howard Phillip Lovecraft” (Brunette, 2015, p. 2-3). This game also has stats to roll for, character sheets to fill out, and books to have on hand. However, while D&D tends to be focused more on stories within a medieval lens (having wizards, spells, etc.), CoC tends to be based more in the modern world, with humans more often being the characters instead of an assortment of different races that D&D offers. These characters also tend to encounter

more elusive and mysterious monsters than in D&D, thanks to the monsters imagined by Lovecraft, which are based on the human fear of the unknown. Character sheets also include many more skills, a mechanic involving sanity, and other differing items (refer to Figure 3). The main difference between the two games is how stat checks work. In D&D, stat checks start with rolling a twenty-sided die (also called a d20), and then the appropriate numbers (called modifiers) are added to get a final number. The higher a player rolls (and thus calculates), the better the chance that the action they are rolling for will



Figure 3:

Here is an example of what a character sheet look like for a CoC game. This is most of the first page of my chartacter sheet for the current campaign I’m in. It is digital, and I don’t have a physical copy.. There are over 40 skills for a chatacter in CoC, many more than D&D. On the right side, there’s the sanity mechanic (the blue box) , something that is absent in D&D.

occur. In CoC, the opposite happens. Instead of a d20, when a d100 (which is composed of a d10 and a percentile die) is rolled, the number rolled must be below the value of the stat that is being rolled for in order for the action to be successful. This makes the risk of failure higher, which makes the game more interesting. Regardless, both TRPGs have been widely successful in bringing magic to those who play around the table. But what happens when there is no table to play around? Technology has been found to be the key.

### The Evolution of CRPGs

When computers became more popular, it was only a matter of time before computer games drew inspiration from the games played off-screen. Matt Barton, an English professor from St. Cloud University, is the author of the 2008 book Dungeons and Desktops, which looks at the history of computer games. While the specifics are blurry, the first computer RPGs (known as CRPGs) were created after the release of the first version of D&D, in the late 1970s (p.31). It is possible that there were ones made before then, but then we would have to discuss what

constitutes a CRPG, which also can get a little hazy. For the sake of this paper, assume these games were gaining traction after the seventies. Yet they were often limited to one player per game, rather than multiple players at once. The few multiplayer computer games available later were expensive and required a lot of equipment. This is where the first Multiuser Dungeons (MUDs) were made, as they were later known as MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role-playing games).

However, these new games never stuck to what D&D is known for—storytelling. This led to D&D players forming their own SIGs (Special Interests Groups) and using MUD networks to play. Here, players and the “Dungeon Master simply typed out the things they would ordinarily have said in a tabletop game, such as the result of dice rolls and room descriptions” (Baron, 2008, p. 41). But, as a constant thorn in modern life, money was a problem. Clive Thompson, author of the 2014 book, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better*, points out that “for most of history, people could not engage in mass collaboration. It was too expensive” (p. 151). This was no exception with the first MUDs that the SIGs used, as Baron explained that “two hours of gaming per week could cost up to \$50”, or about \$133 in 2021 (2008, p. 42). Despite the expenses though, this online format gave players the chance to meet other people who love to play from anywhere, and anyone shy could join since it was all text-based. While it was not an official form of D&D, it still held all the game’s essence while being online. Yet, the sense of intimate connection when playing and being able to see the other players likely was not present in this form. Playing only through text was not as immersive as in person. As the technology of a computer advanced, however, that is when we can start to see traits that are more familiar to today.

The best example of such a game with these familiar modern traits comes from the release

of 2006 MMORPG *Dungeons and Dragons: Stormreach*, which was developed by Turbine and published on Atari. The game was promised to contain a chat feature that allowed the players to actually speak while playing (Barton, 2008, p. 426). This was a huge leap from the text-based games from before, because now players could voice their thoughts and actions, which could hold promises of role-play through modifying their voices to match their characters. Even though the game did not live up to the standards it set for itself (it had many bugs and overall underperformed), at least the determination to create a more immersive TRPG environment was there (Barton, 2008, p. 426).

## A Gamer’s Modern Tools

That brings us to the present, where multiple online applications help make computer TRPGs easier to play. Take Roll20 for example. It is used for both D&D and CoC and “include automated dice rolling, dynamic lighting for maps, programming functionality to “automate tedious game mechanics and integrated text and video chat” (qtd. in Tjernberg, 2021, p. 8). This software not only gives the technological equivalent to many of the physical items needed to play a TRPG, but it also helps contribute to in-person connection by giving the video chat option. Another great example is *D&D Beyond*, which is an online toolset for playing D&D and has “online versions of fifth edition D&D books and tools like character builders, 9 digital character sheets, monster and spell listings, and digital dice” (Tjernberg, 2021, p. 8-9). Anyone could get this toolkit and play D&D right away, without the potential hassle of getting supplies. This makes playing the game online happen more quickly, and makes it more accessible to any group who is forced to play online for various reasons. And this brings us to another powerful online tool: Discord.

Discord is a communication platform released in 2015 by Jason Citron and Stan Vishnevskiy. Anyone with a Discord account can connect to others on the site through servers, two-person

chat channels, or group chats (“Discord”). The site has a function where a server can have various channels, and it could be a regular text channel, or a voice channel. Video chat is also a common aspect of the site, and video chats can be used within a voice channel. This allows the option to both hear and see everyone in the channel. The channels also have bots that can do tasks like playing music or rolling dice based on text commands.

For my group, we rely on many of the features Discord has to offer when we play CoC. We have several text channels for things like campaign summaries and character descriptions. Within these channels, anyone can update what happens during each session, especially to those who could not make it to any given session. In addition, we have been able to show each other what our characters look like, along with being able to look at the rulebook, make note of important lore bits, and much more. We take advantage of the dice-rolling bot if we need any quick dice rolls, and the music bot comes in handy while we wait for everyone to enter the server. We also have three voice channels, the main one is used for when we do our campaign sessions since we can use voice and video chat to communicate. The other two serve as a location to work on character sheets and backstory, and to discuss what our characters do individually when we go into a period of downtime (the time and events that happen between campaign sessions). Because of this, Discord has made playing CoC for us possible despite not being able to meet in person. It is no surprise then that all these online tools are contributing to the success of TRPG online.

### **The Magic of the Screen**

Even though TRPGs were made with the intention to be played in person, playing them online has advantages. Wilmer Tjernberg decided to look at what players thought when having to play online amid the pandemic. When interviewing, they found that it was “a little bit easier to play online” since “everyone doesn’t

have to be in the same spot” (qtd., 2021, p. 19). This was the first benefit I saw when I started playing over Discord. Everyone in my group was scattered in different places due to going to college or other reasons, so being online eliminated the need to meet up in the same location. When I played D&D, it was originally at a friend’s house that we would all have to agree on a set date and time. I also played at my neighborhood’s public library, where I volunteered for the D&D club. We would have to plan out when those sessions would happen, and we would always have to meet at the library (which required planning to be there on time, etc.). When playing CoC online, all we have to do is go onto our devices, log into Discord, go into the campaign voice channel and start playing. We even planned the next session date in a text channel, making planning much easier.

Another advantage Tjernberg points out occurs because of the ability for computers (and their software) to store all sorts of data. Playing online had the “convenience of having the game keep track of rules and possible actions,” which was beneficial because it “physically sometimes meant [people] would make errors that the computer could have prevented” (2021, p. 27-28). In my group’s CoC server we have links to blank character sheets, a PDF of the rulebook, a text channel that has a dice-rolling bot, even a text channel dedicated to session summaries. There are several others, but the point is that everything needed for a game is stored nicely online. None of us worry about needing to find the physical rulebook when checking the specifics of a character class or skill, we simply click on a link to the PDF. The same goes for physical dice and character sheets since those are we can access those online too. If we wanted to, we could find and use a computer software that keeps track of our actions. If one of us breaks a rule, the computer would tell us, whereas that would have likely gone unnoticed if no one recalled the rule correctly.

This all contributes to the ease of expanding a TRPG community. Since everything is online,

it is easy to get a new player to join because all they need is access to the digital tools to get started. When I started playing D&D, I had to carve out a lot of time to find all the necessary materials, to write down notes and character details, and to plan meet-up dates. At this point in my life, I was still years away from getting onto Discord, so my access to online communication was much narrower than it is today. This meant that preparing to play D&D had to happen in person in some capacity, so I had to plan time to go to stores and to talk to friends to figure everything out. In addition, this was all being balanced with my junior year of high school, which was stressful and time-consuming already. Joining the CoC community was as easy as pressing the “accept” option to a server invite. As soon as I entered the Discord server, I had access to everything needed to successfully play the game. All I had to do was download the necessary character sheet document, look at the rulebook PDF, and schedule some time to meet with my DM over a video chat. Granted, I have put as much time to character building and the actual role-playing in CoC as I do in D&D, but that is the nature of these games. Quality comes with time and dedication no matter the format. But this digital platform has also made it easier to recommend CoC to my friends. One of my friends was surprised when she found out that I was playing CoC online; she thought that I was going out and playing in person because of how passionate I was when I told her about the campaign. When I told her everything was online, she asked if she could join. Knowing that transitioning her into the group would be relatively easy, I happily said yes. This was significant to me because this has been in the first year of playing CoC. I was lucky to get three friends to join within the first three years of playing D&D. I am always happy to get my friends to see the magic that TRPGs make, and the online TRPG has made it much easier.

## **The Magic of the Table**

Yet, as I mentioned, the quality of a good TRPG campaign comes from time and

dedication. It also comes from the atmosphere of the game due to the immersion and intimate social connections between players. Even with the most immersive capabilities that online tools provide for TRPGs, they have their limits. Tjernberg found that “[all] participants enjoyed playing physically, preferring it over digital/remote play,” due to the disconnect from both not being in person and by having to use digital materials (2021, p. 19).

It is not surprising that playing online takes the charm away from the in-person interactions. As one of Tjernberg’s participants pointed out,

the physical will always be better, just because of direct reactions and stuff like that [...] even with cameras, it’s not quite the same thing, you don’t really get the same energy and it’s more difficult to talk over each other on Discord than it is in real life. In real life, it’s easy to do it without someone misunderstanding or not hearing (2021, p. 19).

This makes sense. For a game meant to be played around a table, playing online leaves out a lot of the intimacy that comes from being in-person. Being in-person allows for instantaneous reactions, of which could be delayed when online. Technology has the tendency to be glitchy which then breaks the atmosphere as the group scrambles to get back to where they were in the game. There have been multiple instances where my group has stopped playing because one of our players (or even our DM) was having video or audio problems. We would have to stop the game, figure out the problem, then try to re-immers ourselves back into the game. Yet trying to go back into the game after a disruption is difficult. It is like an accident happening in the middle of a play; the disruption rips the audience (and actors) out of the illusion of the story being told and the atmosphere that came with it. In terms of a TRPG online, it takes everyone out of the magic the role-playing creates. Often the video problems could only be solved by everyone

turning their cameras off, leaving only audio to continue playing. Being immersed into role-playing games is much better with audio than just with text, but it does not live up to video chat or in-person. Another smaller disadvantage is, when using video chats, everyone is on the same screen rather than in a circle. It can be difficult to know when dialogue or a reaction is meant for a certain individual, since everyone can see each other all at once, rather than being able to turn to the individual and tell them. This again makes the immersion and atmosphere of the game slightly duller.

The other vice of being online is the use of digital materials for the TRPG. Even though it might not seem as obvious, the digital form also takes away from the atmosphere and intimacy of the game. One of Tjernberg's participants explains how using online materials "takes away the charm from the real version, which is to roll dice, change the map and move your miniatures and all that [...] It's very important, at least when it comes to board games" (2021, p. 23). In a game of Sorry, it is always satisfying to use a physical game piece to knock my opponent's piece away, and the same is true when I roll my physical dice during a game of CoC and D&D. I can hear the die clink as they roll around in my hands and as they hit the table. When rolling for a risky action within the game, the rolling of dice creates a sense of suspense as everyone holds their breath for the determining numbers. That might not happen with digital dice, at least to the fullest extent. In addition, using a piece of paper to record my character makes the character feel more real than typing on a digital version. For me, I can remember my character better by writing it down than typing, though this is not true for everyone. I still use my physical dice during any game, online or not, so I still have some of the in-person-like quality while playing, but that is not true of all players. If someone got into playing a TRPG online right now, there is no need to use physical dice, so they never initially learn the value of having the physical ones. If players

do not have their dice with them as they play, they would have to resort to a digital version. In total, while technology can help players see and hear each other, nothing digital can recreate the entire experience of sitting next to others while playing. With that, the atmosphere and feel of the game is never quite the same, because the game was not made with technology in mind.

## **We Use the Screen, but is it Worth it?**

Technology is constantly changing and evolving alongside society because of the symbiotic relationship that is formed between them. Yet, any feelings of awe seem to ebb as the "new" technology becomes a part of everyday life, leading to the fatigue that fuels digital disengagement. Though it can be argued, as we have seen in this paper, that any "reinvented" pieces of the digital world are capable of being applied in new and creative ways to adapt to the pandemic. Discord might be seen as a reinvention of previous communication technologies, but currently it is vital to the upkeep of gaming by allowing people to play and communicate with others who are further and further away from them. Regardless of the limitations technology has with the digitalization of TRPGs, at least players can play in the first place. If there was no online alternative, imagine how stagnant this genre of gaming would be. Games like D&D and CoC would be frozen in time until the world was safe enough to return to "normal" (or as normal as the post-pandemic world can allow), which could still be years down the line. Life remains in a place where being social is challenging, so any form of interaction is rewarding. In the end, I would rather deal with lag and less of an in-world immersion if it means that I can continue to create stories with my friends. I cannot help but see the benefits outweighing the costs; this way these groups and the larger community can keep doing what they enjoy while keeping the world connected, one story at a time.

## Author's Note

This paper was prepared for BWRIT 135, taught by Professor Kellejian. This paper is dedicated to Professor Kellejian, who has helped me become the writer I finally know I am. This paper is also dedicated to my friends who play table-top role playing games with me. You all are the reason why this paper exists, and I'm honored to be at the same table when we create stories that last a lifetime.

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