

Article

From Tabletop to Screen: Playing Dungeons and Dragons during COVID-19

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Abstract: Media reports suggest that the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons saw its biggest year to date in 2020, with many such reports touting the interactive and social benefits for people facing COVID-19 lockdowns. This paper explores the reported challenges and benefits of playing D&D through teleconferencing hardware and software, and the experience of using virtual tabletops. A thematic analysis of a sample of Reddit threads discussing player experiences of transitioning D&D to remote play during COVID-19 social distancing was undertaken. The findings highlight a variety of player attitudes and preferences towards playing D&D remotely. The data suggest a mostly negative sentiment towards playing D&D online for groups that had transitioned from in-person to remote play. Loss of in-person socialisation was identified as an important contributor to a poor play experience, but groups would persevere with remote play to maintain social relationships, suggesting that, for many players, D&D serves an important social function beyond mere play. Some avenues for future research are identified.

Keywords: COVID-19; gaming; dungeons and dragons; tabletop role-playing games



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1. Introduction

Despite global lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which on most occasions restricted social gatherings, sales of content and materials for the popular tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), published by Wizards of the Coast LLC, rose by a reported 33% during 2020 on the back of consistent growth for the previous six years [1]. It has been speculated that the resurgence of D&D in recent years has been due to an increased online presence through the adoption of web streaming of game sessions [2] and particularly with the popularity of web series' such as *Critical Role* [3], started in 2015 by a group of voice actors in which they livestreamed their weekly D&D sessions on Twitch.

First published in 1974 by creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, D&D laid the foundations for the TTRPG genre which has endured among enthusiasts for nearly 50 years. Now in its 5th edition, D&D is the quintessential tabletop role-playing game, allowing players to create and roleplay characters who interact in a fantasy world with a group of other adventurers against fantastic monsters. The Dungeon Master (DM) takes the role as game narrator, setting the stage and placing choices and obstacles in the players' paths. Outcomes of actions are often decided by the roll of dice, a game mechanic adopted widely among TTRPGs, having also found its way into the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) genre in games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Baldur's Gate*.

While D&D has been traditionally a tabletop, pen-and-paper game, web-based resources have been available for some time, allowing players to use modern technology to play D&D in a 'hybrid' style, for example, by adopting some multimedia elements into tabletop play, or transitioning to a fully remote style of play where players no longer need to share physical space. This remote style of play is in ways reminiscent of play-by-post gaming [4], although this article focuses on the adoption of web technologies to facilitate real-time, synchronous, but physically remote play.

Hybrid and remote play D&D are enabled through popular web platforms such as D&D Beyond, a website founded in 2017 that allows players to host character sheets online, as well as a repository for official play content in digital form, and virtual tabletops (VTTs) such as Roll20, launched in 2012 as a web-based, digital alternative to the physical tabletop. Fortuitously, in the time of global lockdowns due to COVID-19, such tools have allowed D&D players the opportunity to shift their usual in-person games online, and these web platforms have seen a significant rise in traffic and subscriptions across 2020 and 2021 [5]. D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast also made a selection of content free for download to help families deal with social distancing due to COVID-19 lockdowns [6]. Media outlets have run stories about how the use of online resources, and the shift to remote play has helped some D&D players cope with lockdowns, particularly in maintaining social connections due to social isolation [5,7,8].

However, shifting D&D from in-person to remote play during the COVID-19 pandemic does not appear to have been a straightforward transposition of experience.

Some players interviewed in media reports mention that, while the availability of digital tools has made it easier to run D&D games remotely, the use of physical objects, such as dice, miniatures, and terrain were missed [7,8]. Others found it strange to be playing online, but happy that their D&D campaign could continue for players to keep in touch with their group [9], and that while remote D&D was a decent substitute, players still missed in-person games [10]. A common theme across many such articles was that the shift to remote play was an important activity to maintain social connections with friends.

Sociability has been identified as a core aspect of play amongst D&D players since the early 1980s [11,12], alongside escapism from ‘everyday’ life, and a sense of control over one’s own in-game actions. However, Sidhu and Carter [3] note the limitations of Fine’s work, particularly how demographics of D&D players have changed alongside the recent reduction in stigma around playing D&D. Their interviews with Australian D&D players identified that the stigma around “geek/nerd subculture” had been mitigated or even reversed in media, particularly through the representation of D&D in the acclaimed Netflix series *Stranger Things*, and the wide popularity of *Critical Role*.

Academic literature on the experiences of play in D&D are relatively sparse, with a significant body of the literature focusing on the content and contextual elements of D&D, such as representations of race and gender [13,14]. However, research examining the social aspects of play exist which support aspects of Fine’s early work, including how D&D helps fulfill players’ social needs [15], similar to how small guilds in MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* function as a platform to maintain social relationships between friends and family [16]. Other research has explored how D&D can be a vehicle for learning how to negotiate moral dilemmas [17] and to promote moral development [18]. There is also evidence that the socially interactive, role-play nature of D&D can have something of a therapeutic benefit, such as the working through of personal issues through play [19], helping younger players improve their literacy and social skills [20], and even dealing with the concept of death via the loss of a player’s character [21].

Being a recent event, there is little research available to date on how players have transitioned from in-person to online D&D as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, with our current knowledge of these practices and experiences confined to media reports. Early observations examined how “analog” (tabletop gaming) players adapted to lockdown conditions in the U.K., recognising that digital literacy could be a barrier [22]. Possible tensions between in-person and online play of TTRPGs have been identified in an analysis of discussion board posts for Swedish RPG Riotminds, whose publishers made the decision to shift to an online subscription model for its content back in 2010. Players reported that they felt there was an aesthetic shift that undermined the necessary materiality of the experience, and that a transition to digital can serve to potentially exclude some players [23]. These tensions were echoed more specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic in a qualitative study by Yuan et al. [24], who explored how TTRPG players adapted their practices of tabletop gaming for remote play during lockdowns. While the research focused on the

practical aspects of how participants adopted digital technology to play board games or TTRPGs remotely, players reported similar sentiments to those found in Thorén [23], with players missing things such as the feel of dice and non-verbal cues and gestures from other players. Many highlighted the aesthetic shift, e.g., it felt like a work meeting, and for some it felt like more of a video chat session with a shared activity, rather than a shared activity undertaken remotely.

The tensions between in-person and remote play, and the experiential differences between a physical and digital play experience, warrant further exploration. In a (hopefully) once in a lifetime pandemic, games such as D&D, played remotely, may serve to mitigate the effects of social isolation, and perhaps contribute to better mental health. While the limited literature and media reporting available tout some of the practical benefits and technological challenges of playing D&D remotely, there is a notable gap in our understanding of what players' attitudes, preferences, and experiences were in transitioning their in-person D&D group to remote play. Despite the current boom in remote D&D during the COVID-19 pandemic, does the experience live up to the standards set by traditionally in-person groups, or is it perhaps better?

2. Materials and Methods

A thematic analysis [25,26] of Reddit threads dedicated to a discussion of tips, challenges, and experiences in transitioning D&D from in-person to remote play was undertaken. An inductive approach was taken in coding the data. To identify relevant subreddits and discussion threads, a Google search was employed using the Boolean term `d&d OR dnd AND pandemic OR covid OR COVID-19 OR coronavirus site:www.reddit.com` in 28 July 2021. Although other research has focused on TTRPGs more widely [24], this research limited the scope to discussions of D&D only. Google search results were then reviewed for relevance, excluding duplicates. Relevance was determined by limiting the selection of search results in Reddit to threads dedicated to discussions of experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of the transition of D&D from in-person to online. Exclusion criteria:

- Threads dedicated to the discussion of tech use (e.g., requests for, or suggestions about what software to use);
- Threads by users advertising for players, or players looking for groups;
- Memes;
- General discussions of D&D content or gameplay practices.

A total of 10 discussion threads were selected for inclusion, all from the `r/dnd` and `r/dndnext` subreddits, for an initial pool of 1315 posts. These threads were topical of discussions regarding how to transition from in-person D&D to remote play, and discussions of player experiences of the transition to remote play, determined by the title and content of the original post in the thread. A web-based Reddit thread downloader (credit: Thomas Kyanko @ `reddit-downloader.tkyanko.me`) was used to export entire discussion threads to PDF for import into NVivo 12 Pro.

As the research focused on players' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences, further exclusion criteria for posts in threads were established as part of the initial coding process:

- Exclusion of posts that suggested or advertised online platforms or technology and that did not also include any discussion of attitudes, perceptions, or experiences;
- Exclusion of posts that were off-topic for the discussion thread;
- Exclusion of posts from players that explicitly stated that they had only ever played D&D online.

The remaining pool of posts were analysed and categorised by:

- Experiences with the hardware and software used to transition to remote play;
- Reported positive and negative experiences during remote play;
- Attitudes towards the experience of playing D&D remotely;
- Judgements of in-person versus remote play.

Some posts were coded into more than one category, depending on the content of the post. After initial coding of posts, a second coding run was undertaken to refine, split, or condense codes. At this stage, a set of themes were established in the data:

1. There were a common set of approaches to adapting D&D for remote play through available consumer-grade technology, which modified or augmented game practice.
2. There were a set of frequently reported positive and negative elements of transitioning to remote play, and some of these were in binary opposition depending on player preference.
3. There was a general trend towards a negative overall judgment of playing D&D online among players who had transitioned to remote play, while a small but not insignificant number reported now preferring remote play.

2.1. Ethics

Reddit's privacy policy maintains that users are not obligated to provide their real name to use the service and post content to the site [27], and usernames are typically creative pseudonyms. While usernames are generally assumed to give no indication as to the identity of a real person, names were removed from the analysis and subsequent reporting in this research to further preserve privacy. All data collected was publicly available on Reddit at the time of data capture.

2.2. Limitations

There are some limitations to be noted with the data captured. As the discussions were limited to transitioning D&D from in-person to remote play, the findings should not be generalised to other TTRPGs or in-person games that can be played remotely. While some other TTRPGs share a heritage with D&D, elements, such as the variability of game design and mechanics, and the range of online tools for remote play of other TTRPGs, cannot be accounted for. A second limitation is that the data was captured from Reddit threads, specifically subscribers to r/dnd and r/dndnext, and thus a representative sample of D&D players in general is not available. Subscribers to these forums, and the users that posted to the discussion threads captured, may not be representative of D&D players more generally, nor was any demographic information captured, i.e., age, location, or gender, so nothing can be inferred about these aspects of player characteristics.

3. Results

3.1. Adapting D&D for Online Play

A significant amount of discussion in the captured threads focused on the use of technology to facilitate the transition to remote play, although much of this discussion was not included in the analysis, as it did not contribute to the aims of the research. After excluding a significant number of posts that only suggested or advertised online platforms or technology, the remaining posts analysed fell mostly into two categories: (a) experiences in adapting or adopting technology and what this meant for the experience of play, and (b) the typical benefits granted, or challenges faced in using this technology. Nearly all the discussion of adapting D&D for remote play was contextualised around the use of teleconferencing and communications hardware and software, the use of web-based digital platforms for online character sheets and game content, and the adoption of virtual tabletops (VTTs).

To mitigate the absence of a physical tabletop, a widespread practice was to make use of a virtual tabletop such as Roll20, Foundry, Fantasy Grounds, or Astral. The capabilities of these platforms varied, and there was much discussion about player preferences for one or the other. As highlighted in Yuan et al. [24], the purpose of these platforms is not to radically change the play experience, but to try and preserve the physicality of play in the online space using digital battle maps, player cameras and microphones for presence, digital tokens in place of physical miniatures, etc. Many threads of discussion debated

the relative merits of these platforms, and players often reported their experiences with their use.

Players also discussed the inclusion of web-based teleconferencing platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Discord to facilitate telepresence through video and voice chat, and the streaming of music and sound effects through platforms such as YouTube and Syrinscape. An associated topic of discussion were the ways in which player communication outside of videoconferencing was augmented by the inclusion of text-based communication, of which Discord was a common platform. While the DM and players could interact in telepresence through video and audio, text-based interaction could happen ‘in the background’, allowing multiple kinds of interactions to occur simultaneously. In some instances, this was used to improve play, for example, side conversations with the DM, or shifting sometimes disruptive ‘table talk’ to a text channel. There were also mentions of using text-based communication to augment in-game character communication, for example:

Our wizard used secret chats for Message, and in another game the DM used them for a telepathic weapon’s speech.

In contrast, a small number of players reported that their group had rejected visually immersive tools such as VTTs in their transition to remote play, and that sometimes videoconferencing was also absent. Instead, these groups had opted to shift to a “theatre-of-the-mind” style of play, where games either ran with synchronous videoconferencing but no VTTs, or entirely text-based asynchronous play through social media messaging. As one user opined:

Pen and paper, no maps, no nonsense. Feels like playing 2nd edition again. And I love it!

3.2. Positive Experiences

Despite the sometimes unreliable nature of the technology used, there were a range of positive experiences reported in the transition from in-person to remote play, as seen in Table 1. A regularly reported positive aspect of remote play, even where some negative experiences were acknowledged, was that the shift to remote play made organising groups and play sessions much easier. It allowed for a wider participation of players during social isolation, and some players found it more convenient to organise sessions than pre-COVID. It also allowed participation by players who, for whatever reason, were not geographically close, facilitating D&D sessions for players across towns, countries, and even continents:

I could never get a game together everyone always had other things going on. With everyone locked inside it’s gaming galore. I have started up campaigns with friends across the continent, it’s been amazing.

The convenience of accessibility led some players to report that they were now able to play more often:

I love getting together to see friends, but online has been a revelation for us. We usually only play once or twice a month, but online we’ve been able to play once a week with no problems. No travel time, no rushing to get to someone’s house after work, easy to call a 15-minute break so we can all go help with bedtime for our kids, and so on.

The current quality of virtual tabletops, software glitches and tech bugs notwithstanding, was also seen by many as a positive element of the transition to remote play. Multimedia elements such as terrain visual quality and animations, fog of war (an area of the map that is obscured until players enter the area), digital miniatures, and automatically calculated dice rolling were commonly reported as positive elements. For example:

Online is better in my opinion since you have more resources, visual ones in particular. - Know exactly how many feet there are between creatures. - Create tokens for different ones instead of using placeholder miniatures. - Changing maps is seamless and they are of a better quality. - You can implement fog of war, flying and invisibility in a better way.

And:

last session our DM threw at us a damn Kraken with ANIMATED TENTACLES and we all lost our shit

Many DMs reported that, despite a bit of a learning curve, in many respects the use of VTTs and other resources had made their roles easier, as game content was more accessible. The macro abilities of VTTs such as Roll20, and plugins for character sheets such as D&D Beyond, allowed the DM to keep track of game activities and combat more easily:

As a DM I prefer it. So much easier to track and use spells/HP/ movement and there's so much content available for maps. Being able to input a map, then hide loot, throw in monster tokens and have fog of war enabled so that the party can't immediately see everything makes it so much more efficient.

The transition to a more digital, screen-based style of play was seen by some as a positive aspect of the transition to remote play. Both players and DMs who saw this as a positive aspect felt that, in contrast to in-person play, a remote session using a VTT often ran more smoothly, particularly regarding combat, which was often much quicker:

Yeah, the real game changer is Roll 20 with the DnDBeyond browser mod. All rolls and spell slots, initiative, etc automatically calculated with a single button click. Incredible. And moving players exact distances, etc. I love it.

In contrast to in-person games, many players reported preferring this more streamlined nature of remote play. Running a session online appeared to reduce a lot of the 'table talk', or the casual out-of-game chatting among players at the table. This meant that the sessions were more focused on actually playing the game:

We get a lot more actual gaming done. We don't have to take breaks for the smokers. There's no traveling. Everyone is in their favorite chair.

The remote, telepresent style of play was also seen by many to have improved their or their group's roleplaying. Many players reported that they felt more comfortable roleplaying their character online than in-person. Often, this was accompanied by a confession about shyness or social anxiety that remote play was able to help the player overcome:

I found moving to the virtual table top made the game more enjoyable. Role play felt more focused since we're having to relay so much more verbally.

And:

Yeah, it is so much easier without my friends staring at me while I try to pull off talking like a charming bard.

Table 1. Positive Experiences in Transitioning to Remote D&D.

Coded Category	Count (%)
VTT features, e.g., digital maps, animated tokens, fog of war	27 (16%)
Running the game as a DM is easier/less work for DM	20 (12%)
A more streamlined or game-focused experience	45 (27%)
Organising sessions is easier, wider participation, more play	58 (35%)
Roleplay is easier/more accessible	16 (10%)
Total	166 (100%)

3.3. Negative Experiences

Despite the positive experiences, there was a stronger trend in the data towards the negative aspects of remote play, as shown in Table 2. Some clear patterns emerged in the reported negative experiences of the transition to remote play, and of note was that a couple of these appeared in binary opposition to the positive elements reported by others: some DMs found that the VTT platforms made more work for them, while a common theme was that the shift to remote play had a significant negative impact on roleplay.

Table 2. Negative Experiences in Transitioning to Remote D&D.

Coded Category	Count (%)
Hardware and software unreliability	90 (27%)
Distractions and difficulty concentrating	52 (16%)
Roleplay is harder/less accessible	49 (15%)
Loss of face-to-face social aspect	72 (22%)
Loss of tangible/physical interaction, e.g., dice	34 (10%)
More work for DM	32 (10%)
Total	329 (100%)

The use of web-based platforms and available consumer-level communications technology to transition from in-person to remote play was not without its problems. Consistent with the findings of Yuan et al. [24], significant problems were identified with audio-visual peripherals, particularly the use and quality of microphones. Issues such as background noise and feedback loops from microphones contributed to a poor experience in adapting to remote play:

My pet peeves [sic] is party members that don't understand muting when they're talking with SO/roommates when something else is going on in game. "Dude, we can totally hear you taking a piss. Mute your damn mic."

The latency introduced by videoconferencing software meant that some player groups struggled with crosstalk, or lapses in connection led to brief dropouts in audio:

Player A: impassioned roleplaying, heartfelt speech, dramatic roleplaying Player B: "You cut out halfway through. Can you please repeat all that?" About sums it up.

Buggy or unreliable software was also identified as a challenge. Many reported that the available communications platforms were not always working properly, and that players' poor internet connections disrupted the play experience at times.

Another of the most frequently reported negative experiences was to do with distractions. It seemed that it was too easy for players in a remote session to be doing something else while the session was in progress. Many recognised the importance of social presence to police people's attention to the task, and while some forms of remote play included teleconferencing, this was generally seen as a sub-standard form of social presence. Sitting in front of a computer or other device allowed opportunities to engage in activities that would be frowned upon during an in-person session, for example, browsing the internet, watching a video, or even playing a video game. A reason was opined that it was harder to focus on play when it was through a screen, particularly when many other activities, i.e., work and study, had also shifted online, signalling a potential role of screen fatigue. Several players commented that they recognised their own potential for distractions, and highlighted some strategies they employed to try and stay focused:

Phone put out of reach and muted, closed all non-essential browser tabs, closed all non-essential apps, closed the door to the room I'm doing it from, turn off the TV/music, etc. It really makes a big difference to your focus and what you get out of the game.

Some found that the problem of not having a sanctioned space of play, such as a weekly organised session at someone's house, meant that the nature of remote play also required play to be undertaken in spaces and situations which made it difficult to engage, and made distractions almost inevitable:

... I wish I could do this. Instead, I have to keep myself able to respond to my kids' frequent requests for snacks, or break up their arguments, or get on them for playing together at MAXIMUM VOLUME. Plus the inevitable other distractions – the cat coughing up a hairball, or someone accidentally breaking something, or someone getting hurt. I would love to be able to just shut out the rest of the house for a few hours, that one day a week, and just focus on a bit of escapism. Instead, I have to constantly put aside my hobby to put out fires

Another common negative experience was the loss of the face-to-face social aspect. Many players explained that D&D was more than just a game to them, echoing Fine's [11,12] research. While the use of videoconferencing and social media technology to engage remotely was, in a term, 'okay', in the sense that it facilitated a game session, it removed an integral social element:

D&D is first and foremost to me, a social game. Sure we get to talk to each other playing online, but it will never be the same as meeting in person and just "hanging out".

Interestingly, this appears to contradict the more 'streamlined' game-like approach that other players saw as a positive benefit to remote play. Many players went into detail explaining how important their scheduled D&D session was to them, and the critical social function it served in their lives. For some, it was a paramount opportunity for social interaction with people who shared common interests; for others, particularly those who played in established groups, D&D represented something much deeper than just an opportunity for play:

I just miss everyone—I've known most of the group for 20+ years, and that connection is much harder online. I miss seeing their kids for a few minutes before games, and the occasional pregame dinners.

Some players spoke of the social 'atmosphere' that was missing in remote play, in a sense that the lack of physical presence left the play experience somewhat sanitised:

Not physically travelling, meeting my friends irl and playing with them just feels kinda cold and unfulfilling.

While it was recognised that videoconferencing was a practical proxy, for some it entirely undermined the experience of tabletop gaming:

I think there's something to be said about people that like it more than in person. Socialization is important. Meeting face to face is important. You're not a voice on the internet, you're a real person. You may as well just be playing a video game.

Congruent with the loss of in-person social interaction, in the transition to remote play was the loss of the physical interaction with tangible objects, for example, character miniatures, carefully crafted terrain, and, of course, dice rolling. Players and groups that had made a significant investment in character miniatures and playable terrain also lamented the inability to make good use of their creations. Many players found the simplified point-and-click nature of automated dice rolls available in some VTTs unsatisfying. Although it was acknowledged that it in some cases this made things easier, such as when calculating the outcome of dice rolls during combat, it was not a gratifying substitute for manual rolling:

This is like my biggest reason for disliking online games, online shiny math rocks do not compare to the thrill of holding all your dice preparing to end a mans whole life.

Related to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the loss of physical experiences, the use of VTTs were controversial as a replacement for the physical tabletop. As mentioned earlier, while some praised the bells and whistles of the digital experience, others found that the sanitised, digital experience of screen-based play was too similar to a video game; it was no longer the same kind of social play that they were used to. Many DMs also felt that the transition to a VTT made more work for them, for example, by increasing the preparation time needed to create or import maps into VTT platforms. Some felt that it negatively impacted the ad hoc, reflexive nature of a typical D&D session by introducing restrictions on what the DM could do in the spur of the moment, as is more available in a face-to-face setting. Once an online map or dungeon is set up, it cannot really be changed without disrupting the flow of play, whereas in a face-to-face setting the DM can make changes more readily:

I refuse to DM online where I have to pre-prep every single possibility that could happen, whereas our best session (last before lockdown) was basically all "seat of my pants" improv.

And:

I feel like (in addition to having to figure out how the vtt even fucking works) my dm prep time needed has more than tripled.

There was a sense that the availability of digital assets for use in VTTs, including animated maps, music, sound effects, etc., perhaps raised the stakes for some DMs to provide the group with a good play experience, while at the same time taking some of the fun out of preparing a session.

Again, in a binary contrast, while some felt that the transition to remote play made roleplay more accessible, a more prevalent perspective was that remote play had a significant negative impact on roleplay. Many users who felt that roleplay was undermined opined reasons for why they thought this was the case: a lack of face-to-face connection, the barriers to reading body language, video and audio issues, the 'video game' nature of VTTs, and even the style of campaign was seen as a contributing factor:

Virtual tabletops makes a good dungeon crawl ideal whereas a social encounter heavy campaign would suffer.

Indirectly, others noted the unease with being in front of a camera, in direct contrast to those who found roleplaying online easier:

I started off D&D online and I just couldn't enjoy it, I couldn't do the voices or anything online, it just felt stupid...but in person for some reason it feels natural.

3.4. Attitudes towards Remote Play

Although there were limited posts that made an explicit judgement about the player's attitude towards playing D&D remotely, there was enough to approximate a trend. Alongside discussions of the positive and negative aspects of transitioning to remote play, many posts offered quite explicit overall opinions of transitioning to remote play. Within the data, these were sorted into two categories, depending on the content of the post: the player's overall attitude towards the experience of playing D&D online, and the player's overall judgement of in-person play versus remote play.

A significant proportion of posts were forward in stating that the player did not enjoy playing D&D online (Table 3), with words such as "hate", "despise", and "dislike" frequently used. Posts that also included a reason as to why they did not enjoy the experience were typically associated with the previously mentioned negative experiences, particularly the loss of in-person social and tangible experiences, difficulty with immersion, e.g., due to distractions, and that the use of VTTs were a poor substitute for the tabletop:

... I despise it. I can't stand any of the tabletop sites or apps, everyone I've played with sounds like they're using a cup with a string shoved into their mic jack, and there's just something so empty and depressing about rolling dice without actually rolling dice.

For some players, it was enough for them to admit they might stop playing until the pandemic was over:

... I would rather not play for six months than have to deal with all this online junk.

However, the most common attitude reported was that, while the transition to remote play was a generally sub-standard experience, the importance that D&D held in the lives of many players meant that they would persevere online while they had to, in other words, "it's better than nothing at all" (Table 3). The clearest motivator for continuing with remote play appeared to be the social importance of playing D&D with an established group of friends, and that these groups would continue to play remotely, even if it was an inferior experience, to maintain friendships and connection during social isolation. Some posts suggested that their groups had been playing for some time, with one example being a group who had been playing together since the 1980s, where D&D had become something of a social ritual. Others recognised the importance of social connection and interaction during isolation:

... I absolutely despise playing D&D online in every way ... But...it brings people to me that normally could not meet me, and that means everything.

And:

I hate not being able to play at all more. Online is a small price to pay for friendship.

This attitude was reinforced in some posts by players suggesting that the suitability of playing D&D remotely suited some groups more than others, and that the play experience of remote D&D may be more appropriate for players without existing social ties:

With Random? Yes. With friends? Naa.

A smaller but notable number of players stated that they were in fact enjoying the transition to remote play. Many of these players liked the conveniences afforded by remote play, such as not having to travel and “lug gear” around, or that the use of VTTs had enhanced their game experience. In contrast, some groups that had transitioned to remote play but were running “theatre of the mind” (narrative only) games through videoconferencing or text chat found that this experience was enjoyable, at least until in-person sessions could resume once social distancing restrictions were lifted.

Table 3. Attitude Towards Playing D&D Remotely.

Coded Category	Count (%)
Dislike it	38 (34%)
Better than nothing at all	54 (48%)
Enjoy it	20 (18%)
Total	112 (100%)

3.5. Perceptions of In-Person Versus Remote Play

Posts that made an explicit judgement about in-person versus remote play of D&D followed five categories of response as outlined in Table 4. Largely, players felt that the online experience was inferior to the in-person experience, and/or that, considering the alternative (that is, not playing at all), it was a functional replacement for an in-person game, but that it took some getting used to. Despite the misgivings of the remote play experience, players were appreciative that these platforms were available in the absence of the opportunity to play in-person, and that they could continue to engage in their hobby—even if it was not as good as a physical tabletop session:

Nothing beats in person. But online tools have much improved over setting up a party line like in the early 90s.

Social isolation due to COVID-19 aside, numerous posts appreciated the utility of the digital tools available—videoconferencing software, VTTs, and digital character sheets—but, while these facilitated a D&D session, for many players it just did not have the same feel:

It's tough for a lot of us, I think. Playing any tabletop game is a very social experience for me, and the online sessions don't feel the same. They are still fun, but not what I want out of gaming long term. I also enjoy breathing without a respirator though, so virtual gaming it is for now.

Many players that stated a preference for playing D&D remotely also highlighted the same kinds of positives, namely, the convenience afforded by the online tools available such as VTTs, or the removal of the need to prepare and leave the house:

no it's better than in person. I love it. I dont have to wear pants, I dont have to bring food for the party, i can roleplay all the same, and it's super easy to go to the bathroom or walk away without missing anything.

Table 4. Perceptions of In-Person Versus Remote Play.

Coded Category	Count (%)
Just not as good as in-person	47 (33%)
It takes some getting used to	39 (28%)
It's just a different kind of experience	19 (14%)
Online is good, but preference for in-person	15 (11%)
Preference for online	19 (14%)
Total	139 (100%)

4. Discussion

The results suggest that the transition of D&D to remote play due to the COVID-19 pandemic was not always a smooth process for the players represented by the data, and one that, for many, characterised an inferior experience versus in-person play. For the most part, the data support the anecdotal evidence present in media reports on the transition from in-person to remote play. Many players in the Reddit threads recognised that the accessibility of online tools such as teleconferencing and VTTs facilitated an opportunity for groups to continue play in the absence of physical interaction, but that the current state of online tools, consumer-level hardware, internet connections, etc. undermined the quality of the play experience. Others felt that, while playing D&D remotely ‘worked’, the nature of the screen-based remote play experience was fundamentally different to playing D&D in person, resonating with findings by Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith, who, in their study of playing boardgames online, argued that “digitisation is a process of interpretation rather than translation” [28] (p. 3965). The typical experience of playing D&D remotely was, according to player sentiments in the posts captured, mediocre. Given the current and likely ongoing restrictions on social interaction imposed by many governments around the world, the ability to play D&D remotely was accepted as “better than nothing at all”. However, this sentiment was not shared by all player experiences captured in the data. Some preferred the more streamlined, ‘video-game like’ experience, and the convenience that remote play afforded them. It is not yet clear what other factors many influence players’ preferences for remote play, given that D&D has traditionally been recognised as an in-person, tabletop experience since its introduction in 1974.

For many, playing D&D remotely during COVID-19 serves a higher purpose than entertainment or escapism. It was an opportunity to mitigate the effects of isolation due to the lockdowns imposed during the pandemic, and helped to maintain relationships with friends, supporting the research by Adams [15]. Similarly, research on young people in Denmark found that playing multiplayer video games served to maintain social connections during COVID-19 lockdowns [29], suggesting that the activity of social play is an important coping mechanism during social isolation.

However, these sentiments did not appear to be associated consistently in the data with players who reported that they preferred remote play. There is an indication here that something deeper may be going on that warrants further research into the potential existence of two ‘kinds’ of players: ‘traditional’ in-person TTRPG players who see D&D as a predominantly social activity, and an emerging class of preferentially or predominantly ‘digital’ players, who see D&D as a principally game-focused activity. While the analysis in this research provides some initial evidence for this, no specific conclusions can yet be drawn. Is there perhaps a spectrum of preference between in-person and remote play? Although speculative, the data hinted at times towards age being a factor, with mentions of “children” or “family” among those who longed to return to in-person play. However, other factors such as gender, profession, personality, and mental health, e.g., social anxiety, could contribute to preference, and future research could endeavour to explore these in much greater detail.

While the data captured some surface discussion of why physical experiences, such as manual dice rolling, felt so much more important for the D&D experience, the physicality of TTRPGs is a critical element that could be further explored in future research, so as

to better understand the experiential distinctions between in-person D&D and remote D&D. Enthusiasm for the physical aspects of play have been explored in existing work [28], identifying some important play distinctions between physical and digital boardgame play, but not TTRPG play specifically.

Overall, there was an underlying sentiment that remote D&D was missing something, and while those that posted in the forums were able to readily identify what was problematic about the transition to remote play, many players were not able to elaborate on precisely why. To what extent is physical presence a paramount element of what we typically recognise as D&D, or TTRPGs more generally? Do players perhaps feel more ‘in control’ of their fate when they are relying on their own hands in the face of chance? Is there perhaps a phenomenological element to be explored in relation to how the dice may be a sort of extension of the body? There may be opportunity to further interrogate this via the phenomenology of human–computer interaction, e.g., the work of Ihde [30] and Verbeek [31].

5. Conclusions

This paper has examined the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of a sample of Reddit users discussing the transition of D&D from in-person to remote play due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there was a general sentiment that remote play was inferior to in-person play, but that, despite technological challenges and disruptions introduced by hardware and software, it was a functional but hopefully temporary replacement until in-person game sessions could resume. However, some players indicated a preference for remote play, often associated with elements of convenience and a more streamlined ‘game-like’ experience. This was in contrast to the much more ‘social’ experience lamented as absent by many players wanting to return to in-person play.

For many players represented in the data, D&D was an important part of their lives and served a social function much greater than a mere light-hearted hobby, and that while the temporary transition to remote play was ‘better than nothing at all’, it was often a bumpy experience and still missing something. This research contributes to our knowledge of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted games and play and has identified some useful opportunities for future research into the experience of playing TTRPGs in a digital space.

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