

**Meat Space: Technology, Community, and the Importance of In-Person Tabletop
Gaming**

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Tabletop RPGs and Human Connection: A Case Study

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has increasingly moved online. We can work, play, and socialize without ever having to leave our houses. And while the move to online life may seem convenient (and during the pandemic, lifesaving) we are starting to see and feel the consequences of our increasing isolation. This shift has fundamentally changed the way that communities and groups come together as the in-person experience is decentered. In her 2012 TED talk, Sherry Turkle warns about the danger of losing human connection, observing that "we're letting technology take us places that we don't want to go." While I believe that the shift to online socializing was an excellent tool during the pandemic, ostensibly decreasing feelings of isolation, it has paradoxically increased our isolation by replacing the depth and richness of face-to-face interaction with the convenience of digital connection.

One example of a community that thrived online during COVID-19 but is now seeing the effects of this isolation is the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) community. Long known as the hobby that actually allows gamers to connect and be present in-person—as opposed to playing and connecting through a screen—the TTRPG community moved mostly online during the pandemic. This year, I joined a group whose goal is to put in-person connections back at the forefront of TTRPGs. We use a combination of online and in-person resources to build our community, and the results have been promising. People who play in person often have a better time and show up more consistently than people who play online only. Game sessions take

longer in-person, but are often more enjoyable and produce more laughter. People who play together in-person are more likely to seek one another out for other experiences and friendship.

State the Issue

The central issue of this case study concerns the use of technology to facilitate online communities at the expense of in-person connection, and what we lose in our human relationships because of this shift. Sherry Turkle's (2012) work on technology and connection provides a framework for understanding this problem. She argues that our constant connection to technology creates an illusion of companionship without the demands of genuine friendship, leaving us more isolated even as we appear more connected. Similarly, Laurence Thomas (1981), in "The Shadow of Friendship," explores the depth and authenticity required for genuine human connection—qualities that are difficult to cultivate through purely digital means. How do we balance the convenience and accessibility of technology with the irreplaceable value of in-person human interaction?

Plan of Action

Emphasis on in-person interaction.

This approach prioritizes in-person gatherings as the primary mode of community building, recognizing that physical presence creates a different quality of connection. In the context of TTRPGs, this means organizing regular in-person game sessions where

players can share physical space, read each other's body language, and experience the game together.

Technology as a tool to facilitate connection, not replace it.

Rather than taking an extreme Luddite approach by abandoning technology entirely, this option views digital tools as supplements to in-person interaction. Online platforms can be used for scheduling, communication between sessions, character and story tools, etc. These tools serve the in-person experience rather than substituting for it.

Returning to pen and paper, learning from scratch.

This approach emphasizes traditional methods of play that existed before everything became digitized. It asks participants to engage with the hobby in its original form, which naturally encourages presence and reduces the barriers and distractions that technology can introduce.

Building a community that embraces newcomers.

This option focuses on creating an inclusive environment that is a safe and welcoming space for newcomers. It recognizes that community strength depends on new faces, growth as a community, and inclusivity. It is easy to be new to a hobby when all you have to do is sit down and log in. The anonymity of the internet gives people the courage to try new things with very little risk of vulnerability to themselves. It is important

to recognize and address that it is more difficult to encourage new people to join in-person than it is to get them to join online. It is worth noting that the TTRPG community has a bad reputation stemming from a long history of misogyny and exclusion. Although times have changed, many spaces still carry this stigma. Showing up in-person shows the community that diversity and inclusion not only exists in TTRPG spaces, but is vital to stomping out old stigmas and beliefs.

Supporting community spaces and events.

This approach involves actively supporting and showing up to centers of community such as game stores, libraries, community centers and organizing events that bring people together. It acknowledges that in-person connection requires places to happen and that these spaces need both financial and participatory support.

Facts and Consequences

Accessibility concerns with in-person emphasis.

In-person gatherings are not always the most accessible option for people with disabilities, those lacking reliable transportation, individuals with chronic illnesses, or those living in remote areas. An approach that emphasizes in-person connection risks excluding those who most need community but face barriers to physical participation. The consequence of this approach could be the creation of a more connected core community at the expense of marginalizing those unable to attend. In a 2024 study on the use of TTRPGs as a therapeutic tool for individuals with autism, Henning et al.

found that although in-person therapeutic game sessions had better results, there was potential for online game therapy because the individuals with autism who participated in the study still found social benefits in the online gaming format. Accessibility means something different to everyone, and discounting technology and online gaming may be harmful to groups who rely on it for accessibility reasons.

Where is the line between technology facilitating connection and replacing it?

Determining where technology serves as a helpful tool versus where it begins to replace genuine connection is not always clear. Video calls allow us to see faces and hear voices, creating what feels like meaningful interaction. At what point does this convenience become a substitute that diminishes rather than enhances our relationships?

The convenience of technology and the difficulty of returning to pen-and-paper roots.

Many people have become accustomed to the conveniences that technology provides: automated character sheets, instant access to rules, digital dice rollers, and online resources. Returning to pen-and-paper methods requires learning or relearning skills, accepting slower processes, and giving up conveniences that have become expected. The consequence is that this approach may alienate community members who find traditional methods frustrating or unnecessarily cumbersome.

Different dynamics in online versus in-person community building.

Building a community in person presents different challenges than online community development. In-person communities require mutual accountability and face-to-face conflict resolution, which can be uncomfortable but builds stronger bonds. Online, behavior is often different, people may say things they wouldn't say in person, and self-policing operates differently when anonymity or distance is involved. The consequence of choosing in-person community building is that it requires more emotional labor and vulnerability, while online communities may allow problematic behaviors to persist unchecked.

The decline of community spaces.

Many community spaces such as game stores, libraries, and community centers have been defunded, shut down, or are struggling financially. These spaces are essential for on-going in-person connection. The consequence of emphasizing in-person gathering without addressing this reality is that communities may lack the physical spaces necessary to meet, or may become dependent on commercial spaces that impose barriers to entry.

Relevant Moral Principles***Respect, empathy, and compassion.***

Any approach to building an in-person community must be grounded in respect for individual circumstances and empathy for the challenges people face. We must

show compassion both for those who struggle with isolation and for those whose barriers to in-person participation are real and significant. This principle demands that we not judge those who cannot or choose not to participate in person, while still advocating for the value of face-to-face connection.

Community building as a moral imperative.

In a world that often feels fractured and increasingly isolated, building genuine community takes on moral significance. Human beings are social creatures who need authentic connection to thrive. In a society where loneliness has been called an epidemic and where polarization increasingly defines our interactions, creating spaces where people can come together, see each other as full human beings, and build relationships serves a purpose beyond simply ‘playing games’.

The value of authenticity in human experience.

There is something irreplaceable about in-person human interaction: the full presence of another person, the ability to read subtle body language, the shared experience of inhabiting the same physical space. Turkle (2012) argues that we are sacrificing this authenticity for the convenience of connection on our own terms, always able to edit, delete, or withdraw. The moral principle here is that we owe it to ourselves and each other to seek authenticity in our relationships, even when it is often scarier, less convenient and we make ourselves more vulnerable.

Mutual accountability and self-policing.

In-person communities create natural systems of accountability. When we see each other face-to-face regularly, we develop relationships that encourage better behavior and make us accountable to one another. This develops character and strengthens social bonds in ways that online interaction, with its easy exit and reduced consequences, cannot replicate. People often behave much more positively in-person without the anonymity and easy exit of online interactions.

Resolution

I resolve to continue to facilitate and encourage in-person games while remaining thoughtful about accessibility and inclusion. I plan to do this by organizing regular events that prioritize face-to-face interaction, actively working to improve accessibility so that more people can participate in person, and forming lasting relationships with community spaces such as game stores and libraries. I will use technology as a supplementary tool but not as a replacement for in-person connections. I commit to welcoming newcomers warmly, creating an environment where people feel comfortable stepping away from screens and into the in-person community, while supporting the spaces and businesses that make these gatherings possible.

Justification

This resolution is justified on several grounds. First, the evidence from my own community demonstrates that in-person participation leads to better experiences and

more consistent engagement. People who attend in-person games report greater satisfaction, form stronger friendships, and maintain more reliable attendance than those who participate only online. This suggests that there is something qualitatively different about in-person interaction that technology cannot fully replicate. The TTRPG community at large has found the same conclusion. Mollie Russel (2024) argues that “there are subtleties that cannot be picked up on when you cannot see who you're speaking to” such as body language, facial expressions etc.

Additionally, this resolution aligns with the moral principles outlined above. By prioritizing in-person connection while working to improve accessibility, we honor both the value of authentic human interaction while acknowledging and working to remove barriers that many players will face when moving from online to in-person. By using technology as a tool rather than a replacement, we can avoid the false dichotomy of complete rejection or uncritical acceptance. This balanced approach recognizes technology's utility while resisting its tendency to substitute for deeper connection. To challenge this combination of tech and in-person community, a 2017 study by Ward et al. posits that even having technology such as our smartphones close to us (even if they are not being actively used) affects our cognition and our ability to focus on the present task. In light of this, the switch from online to in-person may need to happen more gradually to allow people to get used to analog methods and become less dependent on technology to engage in the game.

This approach addresses Turkle's (2012) concerns about technology leading us to places we don't want to go. She warns that constant connectivity through smartphones and technology actually increases isolation by providing the illusion of connection without real conversation. When we center the in-person experience we are setting an example of a way of play that increases true human connection, rather than a 'half' connection online. Heinrich (2025) found that playing TTRPGs with colleagues created a collective and social identity that improved their relationships and collaboration on other areas such as work, academia etc.

Laurence Thomas's (1981) work on friendship reminds us that genuine connection requires presence, vulnerability, and mutual investment. These qualities are cultivated more naturally in physical presence, where we cannot easily edit ourselves or withdraw without consequence. We cannot delete, we cannot log out, we cannot block people in physical spaces. By facilitating in-person gatherings, we create spaces for people to be authentically human. TTRPGs are being studied and used for therapeutic purposes. Rosenblad et al. (2025) posits that "TTRPGs support the development of conflict resolution skills, selfregulation, and coping mechanisms". These skills are important for anybody, whether they are a part of a therapeutic approach or not. These skills are better learned in an in-person environment.

Finally, this resolution has practical benefits for community resilience. By supporting community spaces and organizing events, we contribute to the community at

large that makes in-person connection possible for everyone. By forming lasting relationships with these spaces, we can help ensure they continue to exist for future community members. This creates a positive feedback loop where the existence of welcoming spaces encourages in-person participation, which in turn strengthens those spaces.

The inclusion of accessibility improvements addresses the most significant counterargument to this approach. By acknowledging that some people face genuine barriers to in-person participation and working to reduce those barriers where possible, this resolution avoids the moral failing of creating community only for the easily mobile. Where barriers cannot be removed, technology serves its proper role as a tool for inclusion rather than a default mode of interaction for everyone.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a trend toward online life, and in doing so, revealed both the benefits and limitations of digital connection. While technology provided a crucial lifeline during a period of necessary physical isolation, the continuing preference for online interaction now reflects convenience rather than necessity. Convenience, in this case, comes at the cost of authentic human connection. As Sherry Turkle (2012) warned over a decade ago in her TED Talk, “Connected, but alone?”, we risk losing something essential about human connection when we allow technology to mediate all our relationships.

The tabletop role-playing game community provides a microcosm of this larger social challenge. By intentionally building in-person community in this space, we can model a different approach which values technology as a tool but insists on the primacy of in-person connection. The evidence from our community suggests that this approach works: people laugh more, are more engaged, and more connected when they play in person. By continuing to facilitate these in-person experiences while working to make them more accessible and supporting the spaces where they happen, we can push back against the tide of isolation that threatens to define our post-COVID era. In doing so, we reclaim something fundamental about what it means to be human: the experience of being authentically present with one another.

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