

Critical Success: Technology and the Rise of Tabletop Gaming

The turn of the last century cemented the societal changes that have since dictated our increasingly virtual daily lives. The Y2K problem, borne from the way computers are

a global fiber-optic network that has made us all next-door neighbors” (Friedman). As a result, technology's rise has given millions access to an abundance of information. Thanks to the internet and the millions of users who believe in democratized information, tabletop gaming has spread to an abundance of new players. There are a variety of applications that help make tabletop gaming more accessible. For example, video conference software and online ebooks allow a group to take part in a gaming session virtually.

However, with free information comes corporations that stifle its flow and attempt to capitalize on recreating systems that access it. Similarly, capitalism’s incessant need to make every product all encompassing means that for every product, there is a frenzy of media about and around that product. For tabletop gaming, that means a number of side games, extra literature, web series programming, and podcasts accompany primary products to transform a traditional gaming experience into a life consuming obsession. For example, podcasting has brought a newfound appreciation for tabletop gaming as “Role-players are taking microphones to their games and people are listening, and these people are not just pre-existing fans of the games they play” (Dicicio). This means that as media spills into new platforms, corporations gain access to novel ways to reach new consumers. In this case, these consumers are novice tabletop gamers.

Additionally, tabletop gaming has crept its way into some of the most popular media franchises. Perhaps the ultimate case of capitalized nostalgia, the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a show based around the tabletop franchise *Dungeons & Dragons*, has become one of the most viewed programs of the past few years. Seeing as, “The release of *Stranger Things* Season 4 made it only the third title to ever break the 5 billion weekly viewing minute mark” (Nielsen), it is no understatement that tabletop gaming has made its way into the minds of the majority of



Essentially, ideals from the software industry bled into the world of tabletop gaming. When faced with the option of open-source information, industry leaders concluded that the resulting



about microidentities. In fact, consumed nostalgia lets us ‘put on’ multiplicities of identities across the movement through life. (Cross, Katherine Angel 29-30)

In a sense, nostalgia-based consumerism has the ability to both bring together unique generations of people while also placing emphasis on individualism. For tabletop gaming, a shared goal mixed with a variety of unique identities creates adventures out of a melting pot of personalities.

While nostalgia-based consumerism profits off a person’s past, tabletop gaming companies have a unique advantage in profiting off of a person’s future. That is, it offers a glimpse into the life a player wants to live. One important factor of tabletop gaming is character customizations. Since players are encouraged to role-play as fictional characters, hours are spent writing background lore for characters in each “campaign,” or series of adventures that a group of players will undertake. When looking at a standard character sheet, a player realizes the litany of ways they can become someone new. Sections for personality traits, ideals, and even a character’s charisma, or persuasive ability, are embedded in the fifth edition character sheets for *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D Character Sheets). Naturally, players have a tendency to sprinkle in aspects of their own lives or personality traits into the characters they create. In turn, a tabletop gaming campaign can act as a refuge for marginalized identities to flourish. For example, “As more queer people begin playing D&D, the LGBTQ+ player community grows more visible, which, in turn, appeals to new players because of traditional media’s lack of representation” (Lichtenstein). So, when a young transgender teen comes home to a rejection of their identity by their family, the world of tabletop gaming offers escape in refuge. In some games, players have found, “the rich campaign setting gives players a tremendous amount to think about: gender and sex are extremely fluid, sexuality is normatively polymorphous, and the class politics of the game invite much critical reflection” (Cross, Gary 77). Essentially, roleplaying in an inclusive

setting gives marginalized individuals an opportunity to experience a greater sense of acceptance. The real world is dark and unforgiving, and suspending yourself in a fantasy world that allows you to literally fight your demons is cathartic and rewarding. So, when a group of strictly queer gamers plan a campaign together, they can construct a world free of hate. Or, they can construct a world in which the haters are just another band of goblins to slay. They're your demons, and active roleplay means you get to fight them in the manner of your choice. In short, just as *Stranger Things* made tabletop gaming more popular amongst the greater population, queer representation sparked more popularity amongst a unique cross section of people. Consequently, tabletop gaming opens avenues for safe expression of individuality, an endeavor the importance of which can not be understated.

In part, the tabletop gaming industry catapulted into mainstream popularity because it was able to outgrow its mortal enemy: American Christianity. Unfortunately, the spread of tabletop gaming to new communities has not always been so fruitful. The early years of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the mid 1970s were marred by slanderous attacks from religious and moral groups in the United States. "This was the start of the 'satanic panic', a mass hysteria over supposed satanic ritual abuse that pointed the finger at *Dungeons & Dragons* and other supposedly demonic forms of popular culture" (Jeffries). Back then, before the internet granted skeptics with speedy fact checking abilities, claims of satanism held more legitimacy in public discourse. Since then, however, Christianity in America has been on the decline, and so too have attacks on seemingly satanic pursuits. This decline of Christianity is most clear when viewed through the lens of generational religious affiliation. "More than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly larger proportion than among millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent)" (Cox and Bowman). While Christianity

has been less popular with all age groups in general, younger generations have the lowest religious affiliation rates. This means the rate at which people distance themselves from Christianity is intensifying as fewer people raise their children under Christian beliefs. Since fewer people believe in the central tenets of Christianity, fewer people are being swayed away from participating in activities that are labeled as satanic, including tabletop gaming. Even so, technology once again plays an important role in this phenomenon. With a smart phone in hand, most Americans have the ability to fact check the assertions that are thrown their way. Had this fact checking technology been available in the 1970s, perhaps potential players could have realized that the stories they heard about *Dungeons & Dragons* were not connected to satanism in the first place. Today, of course, tabletop gaming companies grow their massive player bases from the contemporary consumer's ability to fact check and review a product before they make a purchase.

While the 2000s gave us cell phones and iPods, and the 2010s gave us smartphones and digital media streaming, the 2020s have already leveled up technological growth by growing platforms for video communications. During the coronavirus pandemic, the video conference software Zoom granted people the ability to socially communicate in groups while remaining physically solitary. Once again, the paradox of technological growth paired with economic downturn has widened the avenue that tabletop gaming has used to grow its popularity. Just as tabletop gaming rose to the public spotlight in the 2010s, it continues to enchant new players with a world of wonder and magic that allows an escape from the horrors of a global pandemic and garners relationship building amongst diverse communities.





Obi-Wan Kenobi.”