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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**Bluestockings**  
**Exploring Tabletop RPGs and Pandemic Social Connection**

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS & NEW MEDIA

by

**Dayna Diamond**

September 2021

This thesis of Dayna Diamond is approved:

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2021

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## ABSTRACT

Dayna Diamond: *Bluestockings*—Exploring Tabletop RPGs and Pandemic Social Connection

*Bluestockings* is a tabletop role-playing game designed to be playable remotely. During its development, I engaged with the context of the pandemic, as well as game design theory on: (1) how to intervene in social games spaces, (2) layers of gameplay, (3) tabletop role-playing games specifically, particularly indie and queer. This was for the purpose of creating social connection between players and reducing anxiety and isolation during the pandemic. The game focuses on qualitative and social mechanics in order to create a deep sense of interpersonal connection between players, although it may be somewhat inaccessible for players new to tabletop role-playing games.

## DEDICATION

To my Opa, who always encouraged me to write, read, and think critically.

*I miss you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First and foremost, I must absolutely thank my thesis committee members, Karlton Hester, Elizabeth Swensen, and Dr. Chemers, who committed to supporting me through this process despite already-heavy loads. The DANM program in general, including all of its faculty, staff, and mentors, also provided a lot of support. I especially want to thank Colleen Jennings and Bennett Williamson, who keep all the cogs turning.

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A special acknowledgement also goes to A.M. Darke, my original advisor in this endeavor, and The Other Lab.

## INTRODUCTION

*Bluestockings* is a tabletop role-playing game (tabletop rpg) set in salon-era France and designed for remote play during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its design is informed by tabletop rpg theory and design, particularly indie and queer veins thereof. In this paper, I explore the diegetic, or in-game, narrative I intend the game to evoke, as well as the separate experience and emotional outcome I want players to have. My ideal audience is invested in dismantling oppressive structures, is extremely conscientious about the pandemic—and at the time my project was created, were sheltering in place and social distancing—and felt isolated and anxious because of the pandemic and the shelter-in-place. Ultimately, I unpack my project's attempt to explore community within and without the narrative, with a hopeful end impact of creating a sense of connectivity and potentially easing the loneliness of the pandemic.

Diegetically, this project explores salons as one historical iteration for how people have organized from outside the dominant power structures. Specifically, people who were assigned female at birth, poor, non-noble, or of a minority religion historically used salons as a way to engage with arts, culture, politics, sciences, and so on (Franklin 113, Smith 165, Sairio 526). I used this lens as a jumping-off point to narratively and diegetically explore, through a fictitious secret society but real historical setting, that kind of subversive organizing and additionally, communities mutually supporting marginalized individuals and social change. It imagines a no-consequences fantasy experience for players who are creative and invested in dismantling oppressive structures—that is, the ability to feel they are helping others in a playful way with no consequences to their real life.

In designing *Bluestockings*, I had several goals for the experience players would get out of the project. Designing during the pandemic, I considered a tabletop role-playing game to be a powerful tool for creating a sense of connection. I designed *Bluestockings* to include

elements of social connection and collaboration in both the endogenous structure of the game (asking *players* to collaborate to create a story enjoyed by everyone) and in the diegetic narrative (requiring *characters* to collaborate on a problem introduced by game mechanics). Additionally, I had a goal of engaging the player in humor through simple mechanics, examples in the instructions, and the tension created by making a historical game that encourages anachronisms. Through these intended outcomes, I hoped to reduce the isolation that players might be feeling during the pandemic and shelter-in-place.

## CREATING MEANING & CRAFTING SPACES IN TABLETOP GAMES

Many scholars highlight games among other forms of media for their unique interactive potential. In particular, games' ability to allow players to shape the narrative is a powerful tool for player agency (Garcia and Kennett 339). This is especially true for tabletop role-playing games. For one, "...a tabletop role-playing game, aside from some accoutrements such as dice, paper, and rule books, is constructed almost entirely within the minds of players. ...the text of the game is built through talk and collaboration" (Garcia and Kennett 339). For another, they actively encourage players to redefine and engage with the game on their own terms (Cross 70-4), and require players to participate in designing the story (Alder "Queer Storytelling and the Mechanics of Desire" 185). Tabletop games are uniquely malleable, particularly in contrast with digital games, as Alder discusses in "Queer Storytelling and the Mechanics of Desire." She explains how "...tabletop role-playing games invite players to become active participants in storytelling..." and how "you can play a [tabletop] game once and then you know how to design your own. You engage with the mechanics of the game directly... Tabletop role-playing games are transparent, replicable, and hackable" (188). She expands, "...mostly the story exists solely in that moment and for that purpose... This kind of storytelling can only be created. It can't be consumed," which provides players both agency and freedom. Tabletop rpgs are unique in their interaction with players, as players have more agency and responsibility than in other game forms. This makes it a powerful form for my primary goal of helping players connect with one another because it is already geared towards collaboration and social connection. It also gives players agency at a time when, in their real lives, my audience is limiting their overall choices to protect themselves and their communities as best they can.

Despite this seemingly clear distinction between tabletop role-playing and other kinds of games, definitions of role-playing games and terms to describe them can be slippery. In "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process,"

Montola attempts to define role-playing, delineate subcategories, and offer useful terminology for the discussion of different implicit mindsets in gameplay. He differentiates tabletop rpg's from live-action rpg's thusly: "In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication," as opposed to the game being superimposed on the real world or a "computational virtual reality," respectively (24). This harkens back to Garcia and Kennett's discussion of tabletop rpg's being built through "talk and collaboration" (339). Montola also speaks about collaboration in role-playing in general, defining role-play as "a social activity," and this shared act of agreeing to the game and defining its world is central to role-playing games (22). Again, this underscores how appropriate the form is for a game that is intended to facilitate social connection.

It's also important to understand the distinctions between different layers of gameplay. Different games scholars have different views on this, but many make crucial distinctions that are useful in one way or another to our discussion. For example, Montola unpacks distinctions between player behavior and different kinds of in-game impacts. He builds upon previous research in the space to define anew three categories within gameplay (23). The first is exogenous, and it refers to social rules that exist completely outside of the game or its text. These are things the players find important and codify themselves. The second is endogenous, which refers to something endemic to the rules of the text. In tabletop role-playing games, these are the things the author establishes but exist as a meta to the in-game universe. The third is diegetic, which refers to things that exist within the game world itself. Montola illustrates these distinctions thusly:

- "Do not discuss non-game business during the game" – exogenous.
- "A sword does d10 points of damage" – endogenous.
- "Carrying a sword within city limits is punishable by a fine" – diegetic.

These distinctions are extremely useful in clarifying structural details about both role-playing games and the sociality that surrounds them, even if in certain cases they can blur or be blurred. For example, in games that ask a player to decide something for themselves, their choice could be both endogenous and diegetic. Even still, it helps make the distinction between the narrative, the system, and the way players are treating one another in the larger game space.

Games scholar Avery Alder discusses a similar distinction—between ‘representation’ and ‘structure.’ In *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, Ruberg explains a key feature of Avery Alder’s research: “Alder has been influential among queer game makers for her idea of ‘structural queerness,’ in which she argues that games can be queer in their systems as well as in their content.” That is, the endogenous elements work separately, and sometimes counter to, the diegetic elements in crafting meaning within a game. Alder emphasizes, “Game mechanics always imply a certain worldview” and explains how systems can define the ways in which characters can behave, forcing players to live in a world with that worldview (189). This is useful to my discussion of tabletop role-playing games because I selected the narrative that I did because it supports, but is not identical to, the structure imposed upon players.

Fullerton et al. also discuss a similar concept in *That Cloud Game: Dreaming (and Doing) Innovative Game Design*. In the paper, the authors discuss their concept of a play-centric design process, or designing with a player experience foremost, and then explain:

...a play-centric design process first stresses understanding the fundamentals of how games work on multiple levels. First, games are formal systems of rules that define and restrict player actions: objectives, procedures, mechanics – these are all part of the formal system of a game. In addition to these formal elements, however, games are also emotional experiences that challenge players to achieve their goals,

immerse themselves in their dramatic actions: premise, character, story – these are all part of the dramatic elements of a game. When these formal and dramatic elements are put into play, games exhibit dynamic, emergent properties that can be tuned to create specific types of play experiences and interactions for players. (2)

In summary, Fullerton et al. distinguish between the mechanical system and the narrative of gameplay, which is similar but not identical to Alder's distinguishing of system vs. representation.

All of these scholars outline distinctions between different layers of gameplay which I use in my game analysis to discuss how the narrative I crafted and the player behavior I facilitated in *Bluestockings* are separate but interrelated goals.

Game designer Naomi Clark has a different, though related, take on how mechanics influence player experience. In the essay *Disrupting Norms and Critiquing Systems through "Good, Nice Sex with a Tentacle Monster"*, designer Naomi Clark discusses her game *Consentacle*, which is about a consensual sexual encounter between a human and a tentacled alien (108). Notably, *Consentacle* doesn't have a game structure for when and how consent happens. Clark explains:

Players have to provide the consent and negotiate between themselves. I can't make you consent. That would be a paradox. Other games that deal with consent tell the players how to consent. They give instructions. That's an emulation of consent but it's not the same thing as consent. (109)

In this way, Clark creates a distinction between emulation—when games create a system that emulates or simulates how to do something through instructions—and experience—when games leave an open space for the player to genuinely experience the element of the game, not an approximation thereof. In terms of system design, this is a powerful distinction to

make, and one I found important to my mechanical development. I go into this in more depth in the project analysis section.

In understanding further how to create a social game, the question of the community that is formed in and around social games comes to light. A concerning feature is the well-known toxic and hostile cultural norms that have appeared in many digital games. This includes the deliberate construction of these games spaces as primarily white and male (Kocurek xiii-xvi, 20-22, 38-43), and it hinders marginalized players' ability to engage in games spaces (Vossen 206-8, Kocurek xii-xiv, Cote 193-4). During the pandemic, these concerns are heightened for my target audience, because, especially during the time *Bluestockings* was conceived of and developed, they were observing strict shelter-in-place and social distancing practices. Therefore, all sociality—and play—was relegated to the realm of the digital. Especially during times of shelter-in-place and strict social distancing, this means that marginalized people's access to any spaces of sociality and play at all was severely limited. The access of marginalized communities to social and games spaces during the pandemic is a key issue for my target audience, both in their personal experiences and in their belief systems. Definitionally, where my audience is not composed of marginalized people themselves, it is still composed of people who care about their access to things like social and play spaces.

Finally, this takes us to the question of accessibility of play in general. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga discusses the magic circle, the concept that play takes place within a designated theoretical or physical space that is delineated by discussion, social convention, etc. In *The Magic Circle and Consent in Gaming Practices*, games scholar Vossen critiques Jesper Juul's argument that the magic circle is the boundary all players negotiate, instead proposing that those boundaries are typically defined by dominant players in games culture (205-7). Vossen is referring here, in many cases, to player behavior within the game but not codified by game structures; that is, exogenous behavior. Her ultimate argument is this: if

privileged players within the games space are the ones who define the magic circle, then marginalized players exist outside of a magic circle that does not consider them (207-8). I take this to mean that, where consent is not involved, play cannot truly be involved either, although engaging with a game obviously can.

Of course, in a tabletop role-playing game, players are freer to act within the confines of the game as well, in ways that are either comfortable or uncomfortable to the other players. Julian Dibbell, in *A Rape in Cyberspace*, details an account of an online, text-based community where one player described violent sexual acts happening to other players. There were some significant similarities between that community and tabletop role-playing games, as it was theater of the mind, primarily socially defined, and—like some tabletop rpg's—each player was intended to only control another player. Despite some players claiming that the experience was not real, Dibbell describes how one victim continued to be impacted long after the incident. He goes on to explain that, for many people, playing in that type of community creates a visceral, embodied experience—which other games scholars document for different kinds of games (Dibbell, Anderson). This underscores Dibbell's belief—and argument—that despite taking place in a digital realm, games can affect players' bodies and—just as importantly—their well-being.

This discussion indicates that without the consent of each player, not all players can enter the magic circle—or that harm can otherwise be caused. Therefore, outside of consent's inherent value, this means that any game intended to facilitate a sense of positive social connection must heavily consider consent in its development.

Considering the importance of consent and, broadly speaking, non-toxic player behavior, it's important to discuss how designers might influence player behavior and the game culture of the experience and community they have created. Designers can influence

what players find socially normative within the game context through their game's instructions and structure.

One game that uses endogenous structure in an attempt to create a kind, communal space—and to structure its culture and player behavior to provide for this—is called *Kind Words* (*lo fi chill beats to write to*), or abbreviated, *Kind Words*. This game is about writing and receiving anonymous letters: players can send out letters about things they're currently struggling with, or they can send a response of support to others. Leo, a games scholar, explains why the game is successful in her opinion: “Game co-creator Ziba Scott has stated that only 3% of the millions of messages sent are automatically picked up for moderation based on keyword detection, and even then a majority are due to off-topic conversation.” Leo continues on to unpack how she believes this is achieved:

In an age where digital civility is remarkably rare, *Kind Words* manages to curate its messages by laying down the rules at the start of the game, telling you straight up that trolls are not welcome, and making you sign in a box to say you're going to respect the space and the purpose of the game.

This simple action goes a long way. Signing your name virtually, even if you use a pseudonym, feels almost as if you are signing an invisible contract with yourself and, as an extension, with the creators and community of *Kind Words*.

While *Kind Words* also uses other elements to influence player behavior, I chose to focus on the signature, because I felt it was most relevant to my game.

Overall, *Kind Words* is an important case study of how endogenous elements can directly influence how people engage with the game. Although it's not a role-playing game, it is a social bonding game that primarily uses written instructions to elicit the kind of player behavior the designers intend the game to evoke. As *Bluestockings* is also a social bonding

game, and as it is almost entirely dependent upon written instructions as a tabletop role-playing game, the lessons learned from *Kind Words* can be applied to the development of my thesis project.

Moreover, similar methods have been used in the tabletop role-playing space in order to engage people in vulnerability and kindness with one another. In “Safe Spaces for Queerness and Games Against Suffering,” Elizabeth Sampat discusses her game *Deadbolt*:

Deadbolt is a game that I made — like so many pieces of art have been made — because I had a crush on someone. I didn’t know how to get them to open up to me, so I made a game about sharing parts of yourself that you wouldn’t normally share, but with a set of really rigid rules. You could only speak if it was your turn. There were ritualized ways in which you could respond. It took all the guesswork out of the equation and gave you a chance to really get to know somebody on a deep level.

A lot of people have told me that *Deadbolt* is absolutely terrifying to play. My big secret is it’s the most comfortable I’ve ever been talking to strangers. Even if I don’t know what people are going to say, I know what the prompts will be. As long as people go into the game earnestly, there’s no fear of rejection or embarrassment.  
(119)

Although Sampat talks more about empathy as a design technique, empathy with the player, it’s equally clear that *Deadbolt* creates an environment that facilitates players to have empathy with one another (114-119).

The above analyses of *Deadbolt* and *Kind Words* both demonstrate how game rules in socially-oriented games—even ones that are not directly enforced by things like a word filter—can facilitate different player behaviors. The expectations a designer sets forth explicitly go a long way towards defining appropriate behavior in this kind of game space.

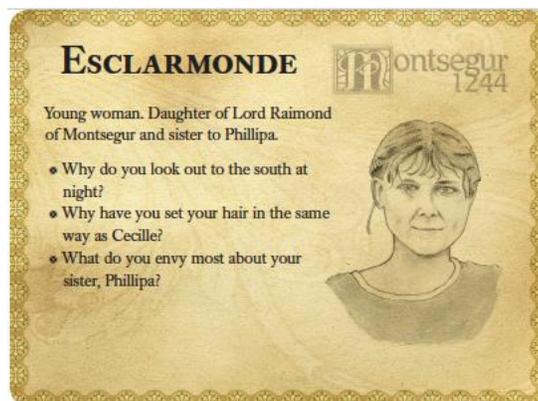
While *Bluestockings* is not attempting to intervene in an existing community or open players up to an online community, facilitating a positive and rewarding player experience was a key goal of mine, and these two games and the accompanying analyses helped me to understand how my socially-oriented game can shape my intended player behavior.

## PRIOR ART: RELEVANT MEDIA

### **Montsegur 1244**

*Montsegur 1244* is a historical, cathartic tragedy tabletop role-playing game. It follows a town composed of people of a religious minority who are targeted by the Inquisition during the medieval era. The setting of this game is characterized by rigid social roles and the small scopes of their lives, in time, distance, and choice. As players follow different periods of the townfolks' lives, they come to care about the community. At the end of the game, at least one character must choose to die for their religion. Up to one character may choose to flee. The only remaining option is to choose to convert.

When I was considering how to craft a community-driven tabletop role-playing game in a historical setting, especially one with characters based on historical figures, *Montsegur 1244* became an important reference. I was especially inspired by the character card structure, which uses short but evocative details and leading questions to paint a picture of the characters, their social connections, and their social standing. In this way, the character cards help to define not only the individuals but also the community itself.



*Fig. 1: Montsegur 1244 Character Card Example*

Although *Bluestockings* was intended to evoke joyous collaboration, and so the primary social friction came from characters outside of the core group, I still leveraged the

idea of demonstrating both the individual and the social in order to evoke a sense of community and identification with the characters in the players.

### **The Deep Forest**

*The Deep Forest* was developed by Avery Alder and Mark Diaz Truman and is, in many ways, a game about community action—how, when, and why people decide to work together; how they feel about that; and how that creates community. Each round, the players make choices about their community and initiatives. They answer leading questions to craft a scene and choose between starting a new community project, uncovering something old about their community, or expressing agreement or disagreement with an individuals' ideas. *The Deep Forest* also creates a sense of community among players through collaborative world-building: foundational decisions are made together, and other ideas are iterated on collaboratively over time.

When I was considering the core structure of *Bluestockings*, *The Deep Forest* quickly became a major inspiration for a few reasons. Notably, *The Deep Forest's* structure lent itself to evoking both diegetic and non-diegetic feelings of community amongst the players, which I found to be very resonant when playing the game. While *The Deep Forest* has a slightly different method of communal storytelling than *Bluestockings*, both use open-ended prompts and shared player responsibility in story outcomes to evoke those feelings of community.

### **Bridgerton**

*Bridgerton* is a Netflix Original television series that was released in December 2020. The main plot is a romance between two principal characters; however, it also follows a wider cast in an upper-class community in 1813 in Regency England. A key, if off-screen, character is “Lady Whistledown,” who writes “society papers” that influence the social scene, create scandals, and are themselves a scandal as everyone wonders who the mysterious “Lady Whistledown” could be. This is just one example of how many of the main characters must

organize outside of dominant power structures in order to advance and protect themselves. That theme especially made *Bridgerton* an important influence on *Bluestockings*, as did the precipitous timing and similar historical era.

In *Bridgerton*, the main characters are aware of but do not know the answers to many secrets, including that of “Lady Whistledown” because the audience is meant to feel in turn that they are powerful and then powerless as the intrigues unfold. In *Bluestockings*, the players’ characters are the ones enacting the changes upon their community, rather than being acted upon. So, while I draw upon this idea of the socially powerful secret in part from *Bridgerton*, I changed who holds the power in order to slightly change the player experience to always hold some power.

## PROCESS

At the time when I was developing my idea for my thesis project, I was thinking a lot about the toxic nature of many games spaces (Kocurek, Taylor, Vossen 205-10). More broadly, I was researching and considering how people interact with one another in games spaces, and how game designers might effectively intervene in those spaces to negate that toxicity. Originally, I had hoped to create a performance piece that contrasted reactions in a physical space and a digital space with certain kinds of instructions. However, the pandemic incited me to change my plans. Although I could still have intervened critically in digital spaces, in-person spaces were off that table. Additionally, I felt that a less dynamic, interrogative concept was appropriate in the new unknown. That is to say, I decided to create a game that reacted to the pandemic, and for me, creating a sense of social connection and reducing isolation and anxiety became my new areas of exploration.

The next step of this exploration takes us back further than that. I was considering fairytales and—separately—how individuals in communities are connected to and supportive of one another. When I shared my consideration of fairytales with a friend, she told me about something she'd learned in a class: a French salon where a group of women would meet and write and share fairytales. Although I was never able to unearth the particular salon she referenced, this sparked research into the history of salons.

I learned that salons existed for centuries, encapsulating a much larger geographical and temporal scope than I had originally thought, and then often acted as a site of non-monarchical thought and redirection of culture (Bodek 186, Franklin 113, Guest 60-63). I was fascinated by the concepts wrapped up within them: new avenues to create and share knowledge—with the narrative allure of forbidden knowledge, social subversion, and the potential for the creation of new cultural beliefs.

I also explored the history of the Bluestockings Society, which was a group of English people—originally one salon but later, many—which brought together people of different classes and genders for intellectual discussion (Sairio 526, Smith 165). As “Bluestockings” later became a widespread term for women interested in intellectual discussion—and in many cases, feminists of the time—while also referencing this historical society (Bodek 187-8, Guest 60, Encyclopedia Britannica), I adopted the term for the name of my game, to reference both feminist sensibilities in the sense of changing culture and disrupting norms, and to reference a famous historical salon.

Returning to the era of the pandemic, it occurred to me that a modified form of this game might fulfill my goal of helping people feel connected to one another during the pandemic, as the game did have a core of community interconnection right from the start. However, I shifted from focusing on a more competitive game that focused on the tension between mutual support and self-interest to focusing on a game that would specifically foster a sense of support without complicating factors.

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

In order to robustly analyze this project, I'll be using the MDA Framework, which covers how games systems provoke certain types of engagement and, thereby, emotional outcomes for players (Hunicke, et al. 1-2). As I am interested in exploring how mechanics and player interactions come together to produce a specific player outcome, the MDA is a useful framework for unpacking my game. Additionally, games scholar and designer Joris Dormans identifies it as “probably...the closes thing the [games] industry has to a standardized game design method” (46). I'll also be including relevant critiques from Joris Dormans. In this section, I will start with a game description to line out the elements of the game that I will be analyzing. Then, I will use the MDA Framework in reverse, starting with aesthetics to elaborate on my goals with *Bluestockings* and then moving through dynamics to look at how players interacted with the game, and finally reaching mechanics to unpack the systemic underpinnings that I created in order to achieve my design goals. In the dynamics and mechanics section, I will be relating back to my stated aesthetic and other goals. At the end, I will discuss the outcomes players stated during my playtests to discuss how my goals and theories worked in real-time.

### **Game Description**

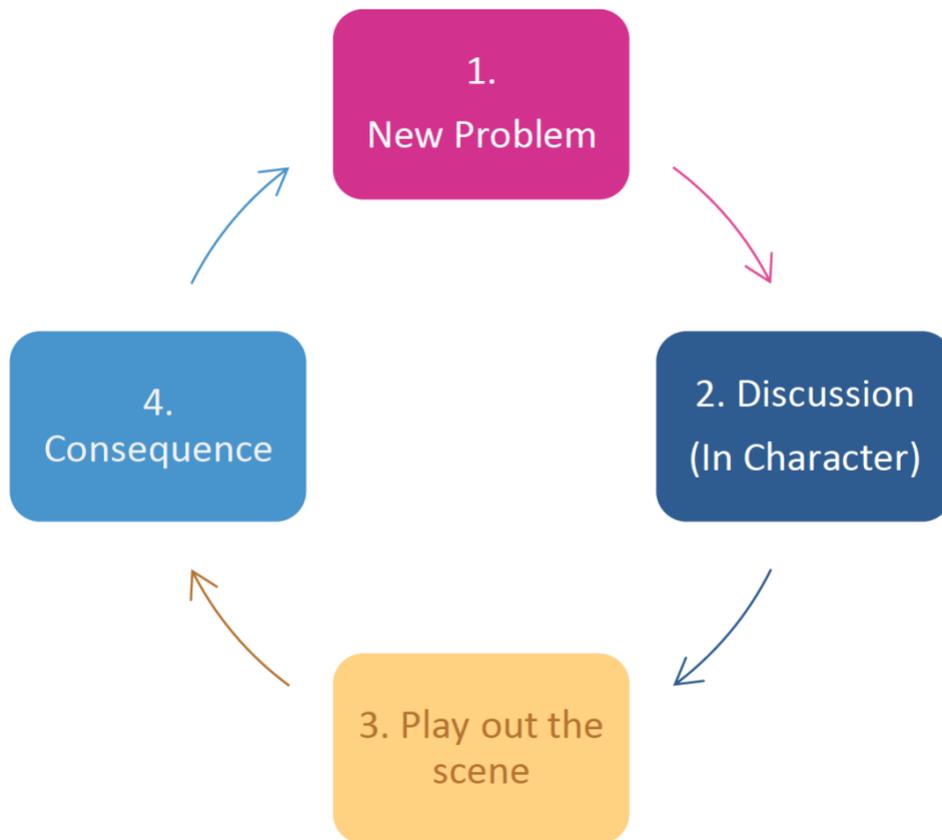
*Bluestockings* is a tabletop role-playing game designed to be played by 3-5 players in a digital space. The game comes to life predominantly through “theater of the mind” and social interaction and so although it requires (and assumes) digital components for gameplay, it could, in theory, be easily modified for in-person play. I focused on making mechanics that felt true to a tabletop experience while also being comfortable to play online. It requires either visual or voice chat, a text chat that stays open after the meeting is closed, and some way to randomly choose a number between 1 and 5 (though this last part is not strictly required, as there are multiple ways to engage in the game without it). As with some indie tabletop role-

playing games, including a number of games I researched for my game, *Bluestockings* is a non-hierarchical game where each player has the same role, rather than any players having special responsibilities and powers, as a game master or other role might. Characters are provided; there is no mechanism for creating your own characters. *Bluestockings* can be played as a one-shot (a story that ends at the close of the gaming session) or a recurring narrative (a story that does not “reboot” every time the players sit down at the table but instead has continuity between sessions).

Narratively, it is set in 1795 Paris and follows a secret society dedicated to helping vulnerable members of their community. That secret society, as explained in the process section, draws on historical salons and contemporary social upheavals as its basis and the basis of many of the story hooks within the game document.

There are a few steps to setting up play. Each player must choose a character from the “Character Cards” provided, which feature historical figures of different backgrounds, identities, and classes, to some extent. Then, each player must state any elements they would prefer not to include in gameplay—a consent section: players must then exogenously edit any of those elements out of gameplay where included in the original text, and players do not introduce those elements when offering ideas to the narrative. Lastly, the players spend a moment to understand and connect with their characters, including silently answering the leading questions on their character cards.

Once setup is complete, there are four major portions of the game, illustrated below.



*Fig. 2: Bluestockings Game Loop*

### **1. Choosing a problem**

The problem is the issue that gameplay will address—typically, it introduces the person who needs help, the problem they are struggling with, and some complicating or elucidating factor. The problem can be randomly selected from a list of five choices, deliberately selected from that list, or created using a structure provided in the gameplay document. Problems are things like, “A bakery that is a front for a political organization for equality for all—including women’s right to vote and freedom for the slaves in the West Indies—is unable to pay its rent. If discovered, how could this organization lead back to your Society?” or “A friend of yours needs financial help to return to France from England. Why is

it urgent they return home as soon as possible, and why can't you simply give them the money?" The question is selected out-of-character as players collaborate to pick a storyline they find mutually interesting and engaging.

## **2. Discussion**

This part is played in character. The players diegetically discuss how to address the problem using their interpersonal connections and individual resources. They have to come to a consensus, either before a timer goes off or in a way that feels comfortable to them, but the game does not provide mechanics on how to come to this consensus, nor rules for any kind of tiebreaker.

## **3. The Scene**

In this portion, players "play out" or describe what happens as the characters try to enact their plan, adding details to how they enact each part of their plan. They must give one way in which things go wrong and then, as a group, decide how they attempt to resolve those complications. At the end of this portion, players decide whether they were successful in solving the problem. This is the most action-packed portion of the game, and, typically, players introduce tongue-in-cheek humor.

## **4. Consequences**

The final part of gameplay is once again out-of-character. Players collaboratively decide what consequences befall the Society as individuals and as a group based on what happened in the previous portions. In a recurring game, these consequences inform how characters try to address future solutions (including acting as their own obstacle or complication) and players may choose to transform a consequence into its own featured

problem. In a one-shot, the players think a little more broadly and talk about the larger and long-term implications of their actions, both negative and positive.

## **Aesthetics**

As defined in the MDA Framework, “**Aesthetics** describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system” (Hunicke et al. 2). That is to say, when coming at a game from a designer's perspective, aesthetics are the emotional responses that the designer intends to evoke in the player. Hunicke et al. specify eight aesthetics, although not every game designer agrees on how useful those specifications are. As Dormans explains, “The[se] eight kinds of fun comprise a rather arbitrary list of emotional targets, which is hardly explored with any depth. Apart from short one-sentence descriptions, Hunicke et al. do not provide exact descriptions of what the types of fun entail” (48). For my process, this was a useful critique, because while the idea of emotional outcomes for players is something I incorporated into my design process, the goal that I set was much more specific than any of the eight established aesthetics.

During the design process of *Bluestockings*, I had a core goal for the game when it came to the outcomes I wanted players to have. My goal was for *Bluestockings* to foster social connection and escapism in order to reduce isolation and anxiety during the pandemic. This includes emotional goals to be completed by the game itself—social connection and escapism—and the larger, circumstance-driven impact I hoped the game would have—reducing feelings of isolation and anxiety in the face of the pandemic. At a honed-down level, the most important aesthetic or emotional outcome was “social connection”—my description—or “fellowship”—the MDA Framework's description. However, whether *Bluestockings* reduced fear and isolation during the pandemic and shelter-in-place will also be an important consideration as I unpack player reaction.

## **Dynamics**

The MDA Framework defines dynamics as such: “**Dynamics** describes the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others’ outputs over time” (Hunicke et al. 2). Within the context of tabletop role-playing games, “run-time behavior” must necessarily refer to not computer interaction but rather the interactions between players and the ruleset as the game is played. In this section, I therefore understand dynamics to mean the unique emergent behaviors that arise as a consequence of interaction between the game (written game document) and players. At the most basic level, I understand this to mean “things that were not instructions in the game text but came to exist during play nonetheless, especially recurring features or features that support the target aesthetics.” Some mechanical references will be included in this section, as it is difficult to discuss dynamics without some reference to mechanics, but the full analysis of each mechanic will be in the next section.

The first dynamic I want to discuss is that of humor. While humor could be defined as an emotional outcome itself, I define it here as a dynamic, because the ruleset is not written with humor as an explicit outcome, and because humor is a part of the experience that helps to achieve my primary goal with the project. Through establishing a historical setting and then encouraging players to value an immediate choice over any historical details, I create an embedded tension between historical accuracy and anachronism. In nearly every playtest, this tension has resolved itself through humor. Players introduce details incongruous with the setting, like a theater intern, and then poke fun at the obviously anachronistic details they have just created. While this provides players an “out” from knowing much about the setting, thereby helping to make the game more broadly accessible, it also helps to diffuse tension in a difficult time and add to the “fun” or enjoyment of the game itself.

The second dynamic I want to discuss is that of social interaction—of *player* interaction—within the context of the game. I will discuss this more in the mechanical section when I unpack how I considered both player and character level interactions (that is, the difference between what the player is doing and what the character is doing), but I believe

this particular area is also relevant to the discussion of dynamics. By *not* including a framework or mechanic for players to come to an in-character consensus, players must create their own framework. In playtests, this framework was typically an unspoken framework based on the mutual social understanding of the players. That is to say, through not including a framework on *how* players should come to a consensus, I thereby created a dynamic of real player collaboration and conversation.

## **Mechanics**

In the MDA Framework, “**Mechanics** are the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context” (3). In other words, mechanics are the ways in which players can actually interact with your game. For a tabletop role-playing game, this becomes slightly blurred because there is no computer restricting action, but it can be loosely understood as the instructions provided to the player. This is not the full sum of the game document's content, as there is plenty of text that does not outline what players can do, including a brief historical overview, gameplay samples at each instructional portion, etc. In this section, I'll be addressing the instructions of the text, explaining the mechanics I have provided. As the MDA Framework explains, content and mechanics work together to support dynamics and aesthetics, and so I will be addressing content in this section as well (3). I'll reintroduce the idea that narratives and systems act on separate levels within a tabletop role-playing game, and I'll unpack how my mechanics gave rise to separate experiences for players vs. characters, and what that provides for the players themselves in service of the goal aesthetic.

An important part of discussing my game's mechanics is the understanding that every game has two separate layers: what the player is actually doing, and what they understand themselves to be doing through their identification with their character. Avery Alder comes at this with the idea of “structural queerness” or that mechanics can be

normative even when representation, at a narrative level, is ostensibly queer. However, she is not the only games scholar to discuss a similar concept. In *That Cloud Game: Dreaming (and Doing) Innovative Game Design*, Fullerton et al. introduce the idea that rules, objectives, and procedures are a separate layer of gameplay from the premise, character, and story (2). Dormans summarizes their research as “the formal core and a dramatic shell surrounding it (48).

This all brought me to the conclusion that an analysis of any game is most robust when both layers are considered. Further, while Alder proposes that mechanics are more important and must be considered in tangent with narrative so that they don't work at a cross-purpose, I argue that a unique richness can come from complementary yet different experiences on the narrative vs. mechanical level. One way to understand this core vs. narrative distinction is to consider what the player is doing—in following the rules, objectives, and procedures—versus what the character is doing—the in-universe understanding of gameplay. I'll be referencing back to that method of distinction throughout this section.

There are separate, if similar, mechanics and content for each portion of gameplay, and so I'll first describe generalized systemic features and the thought process behind them. This will include any mechanics and features which are present throughout the game or those especially important during setup. Then, I will take the game one portion at a time in order to conduct a robust analysis.

My general systemic considerations included a few different elements. The first was how players were going to relate to one another within the system. I chose to have a non-hierarchical system for a few different reasons. Games scholar Aaron Trammell identifies a player hierarchy as a key militaristic, masculine structure in *Dungeons and Dragons*.

...Dungeons & Dragons inherited a system of authority through which players would be forced to accept the world-making decisions made by the referees (Gygax and

Arneson 1974c, 12–14). This authoritative and somewhat patriarchal structure saturates all gameplay—it is derivative of military structures of authority that require soldiers to report up the chain of command to superior officers. (137)

Although it's not inherently true that every type of hierarchy must be militaristic and masculine, this does indicate militaristic implications of hierarchy in the history of tabletop role-playing games. A militaristic, masculine structure is of course not a structure created with my target audience in mind—as they care about dismantling oppressive structures. I could work around this implication, building up a structure of my own or based upon hierarchical but non-militaristic tabletop rpgs. However, it is not one of the goals of my project to critique or reimagine hierarchies in the tabletop rpg space. Therefore, a non-hierarchical structure is more appropriate. Additionally, in some cases, one player might end up doing more work than the other players, which they might not be able to commit to in the context of the pandemic. For example, in *Dungeons and Dragons*, the Dungeon Master has to select and plan for the campaign as well as play during the group playtime.

The next notable feature of my game is that it is systems light. It doesn't use math to determine results and has a fairly simple system to learn. Rather than having a system for any possible situation that might come up, it guides the players through four specific steps of gameplay for a more curated experience. This is important in other ways, which I discuss later, but it's also relatively simple to learn. Players can just about—and did in at least one playtest—sit down, review the rules, and play with very little time added to the session. This was important to me because I did not want to add to the mental burden as my audience was likely analyzing Covid-19 statistics and possibly experiencing pandemic fatigue.

I also implemented synchronous gameplay. Synchronous play is a barrier to entry because of things like unreliable internet access and players coming from different time zones or managing different schedules. However, I also found it extremely important to my

game development, because I wanted to maximize the feeling of social connection. I discuss the idea of player experience vs. character experience more later, but the important detail here is that there are certain social experiences, like a conversation, that can only ever be emulated, rather than experienced, when they lack that real-time interaction. Therefore, I decided that a synchronous game would best maximize feelings of community for players, and my playtest results reflect that.

Another aspect of time I included is how turns work. Specifically, I used simultaneous action rather than turn order for a couple of reasons. The first is discussed in more depth later in this section—that simultaneous action supports both the experience and emulation of collaboration because a real-time conversation is necessary to having and not just emulating such a conversation. The second is the question of access: it is difficult to keep track of a turn order virtually. Although I used Discord as my original template, and Discord shows a turn order to the left-hand side, this became difficult for a couple of reasons. In playtests, it became more accessible to use Zoom or Google Hangouts for the video chat and, in most cases, Discord for the text chat. Discord requires a lot of computer bandwidth to provide a video chat experience, and in attempts to use it, there were multiple crashes and lags. Additionally, I often met with playtesters in an existing Zoom or Google Hangouts space that already existed, making it easier to simply continue in that space. On top of that, in playing tabletop role-playing games virtually for research, I and my fellow players found that even with such help, it was difficult and unnatural to keep track of a turn order with more than two people in a virtual space. I decided that the far more fluid and useful method would be simultaneous action.

The character cards are also used throughout the game. I designed these for a few specific purposes. For one, I didn't want players to be responsible for the character-crafting portion of the story, because I wanted to limit the amount of time players had to commit to the game, especially any time not spent actively playing. For another, I was able to use the

character cards to indicate the time period, demonstrate the tone of the game, and offer the players further hooks for storylines they could create that were not included in the core document. I also used the character cards to indicate characters' relationships and connections, as well as their standing in society—including popularity, safety, financial standing, etc. In short, I used the character cards to take some responsibility off of the player and to add more structure to the game as a whole. In many ways, the character cards are content rather than a mechanic, but I believe they belong in this section nonetheless.

The last general mechanic—or content, as the case may be—that I want to cover is the narrative of a secret society. Since players and their characters are in on—and have in fact created—the secret, it creates both a sense of mystery and a feeling of control over the fictional environment. This is important because my audience is likely feeling a notable lack of control over their real environment. While they chose to stay at home during the shelter-in-place orders, they had no control over other people's behavior or the progression of the pandemic. Therefore, providing the sense that they have power over the fictional environment was a key element for me in considering how to reduce pandemic anxiety while I developed the game.

### **The Setup**

The key mechanic to address in setup is the directive for the players to discuss consent. As we discussed in the *Crafting Meaning and Creating Spaces* section, play does not exist without consent. It's not a new idea to encourage discussions of consent while playing tabletop role-playing games (Alder, *Consent at the Table* 1-2); however, it's still worth discussing the inclusion in the game. As *Bluestockings* makes the discussion of what each player is comfortable with—and removing anything they are not from gameplay—a directive for the players, I consider the discussion on consent a mechanic. However, that is complicated by the fact that it's an endogenous directive for essentially exogenous

behavior—I am asking players to change the game and to take some out-of-game action from within the game document. This is a call to have a conversation about what topics exist within the circle of play for each player. I consider it an important part of ensuring that the circle of play exists for all players. That means the game can foster social connection as intended: with all players being able to participate from within the magic circle.

Another important element to discuss here is how the game document influences player behavior throughout the game. Specifically, I explain in the document that the players have a shared purpose, to help vulnerable members of their community. In giving this directive, as well as implementing more social mechanics later on, I intended to define an overall premise that entrusted characters to treat other characters in their world with kindness and care. By extension, this holds the implication for players that they are also responsible for conscientious behavior as a basic presumption of the game.

### **1. Choosing a problem**

Similar to the conversation on consent, players must choose together how they want to select their problems. This mechanic is relatively simple, except if players decide to build their own problems, which has its own, relatively complicated mechanic. Having a mechanic for players to develop their own problems allows them to maximize the replayability of the game—giving players more time to reduce their feelings of isolation and anxiety—and allows them to express themselves more freely by introducing problems that are tailored to their interests. This, again, provides my audience with autonomy while they are self-restricting as they strictly follow shelter-in-place and social distancing directives.

### **2. Discussion**

The discussion section is the first in-character section, which leads us to a rich discussion of layers of play—specifically, in this case, the comparison of what characters are

experiencing within the narrative as compared to how players are actually engaging with the game. In this portion, characters must come up with a plan, using their skills and social connections, to address the problem the players (and, in-game, the characters) have chosen to explore. Although the players choose a problem out-of-character, which means that in-character problem choice is absent, this still means that on a player level and a character level, the starting point of the discussion section is very close to the same: a group of people who intend to collaborate with one another on the same topic. Throughout this section, the characters will collaborate through a discussion to solve a problem, while the players will collaborate on a plan that seems fun and in-character to each one of them using in-game constraints. In describing her game *Consentacles*, Naomi Clark discusses how she left any explicit rules for *how* to consent out of her game because she wanted to create the experience, not the emulation (109). In designing *Bluestockings*, I had similar goals, and I left out a mechanic for how to collaborate—how to agree or come to a consensus—so that players could actually experience that feeling, in order to truly achieve an outcome of real social connection, not just the emulation thereof.

Even so, the player level and the character level of the game are not identical. This is different from games like *Deadbolt* or *Kind Words*, which, through the nature of their structure, do not distinguish between player behavior and character behavior (Sampat 119-20, Leo, *Kind Words*). Therefore, while they are social connection games, they rely on the players actually being themselves and sharing a real vulnerability with the people around them. This vulnerability, as demonstrated in previous sections, can be a valuable player outcome, especially in regards to facilitating players to treat one another kindly. However, that same vulnerability, and the lack of any distinguishing between the player and character levels in the systems themselves, means that players are revealing themselves to one another without any distance. In contrast, as one of my core goals was to reduce anxiety during the isolation, I wanted to give players a layer of distance between themselves and the

game, as I feel that the pandemic was already making my intended audience feel vulnerable enough already. Therefore, it was important to me that the player and character experiences were not identical to one another so that players could engage in escapism from a difficult situation—or have some emotional distance between things happening to them and things happening to their characters in-game.

### **3. The Scene**

The scene portion is another section where the players must collaborate to create the story while the characters collaborate on the problem. However, here there is a wider gap between the layers of play. This is the portion of gameplay that necessarily features the most obvious historical anachronisms and the most creative freedoms, so in playtests, this is where players tended to introduce the most humor. Every playtest featured laughter and silly behavior from nearly every or every player in this section, which as we have described earlier was the relevant dynamic of humor.

In the discussion portion, players are explicitly collaborating to come to a consensus. In the scene portion, the gap between the player and character level widens, but players have been primed by the discussion portion to get comfortable collaborating on a mutually interesting and enjoyable story. In my playtests, they did not typically find it difficult to transition between the discussion portion and the scene portion. While players are collaborating to tell a mutually fulfilling story, the characters are enacting the different parts of their plan. This is where the narrative portion becomes particularly powerful, telling a story of characters with agency trying to do good in the world. When things did go wrong, players typically opted to make choices that were not especially harmful, which added further to the dynamic of humor and allowed players to feel like their characters were still good people, even when they weren't successful. The agency and humor that players experience in this

section was very important to achieving my goals of reducing anxiety and creating an enjoyable experience for my intended audience.

#### **4. Consequences**

In the consequences portion, players decide what the long-term impact of their characters' actions will be. This is, once again, an out-of-character portion as the players reflect on the broader consequences. For one-shot games, players are supposed to talk about the larger implications of their characters' actions, both positive and negative. I hoped that this would lead to a sense of longer continuity even in a short game. However, in playtests, players tested the rules of recurring games. The consequences portion was typically the shortest portion, but understanding the consequences helped the players to feel that the experience was complete and gave them a moment to transition from the heady experience of the scene portion, which was completely in-character. That is, it was a player-level buffer to make sure the end of the game was not jarring, which helped it to be a cohesive and rewarding experience.

#### **Playtest Results**

Players expressed that they found the synchronous format to be extremely engaging—like they were able to have “as close to a real conversation as possible” with the people they were playing with. Many players expressed enjoying and feeling engaged by the experience, which perhaps seemed surface-level, but players were as close to the target audience (people who wore masks, sheltered-in-place, cared about political activism for the liberation of marginalized people, and felt isolated and anxious during the pandemic) as I could find. Therefore, as I consider giving the target audience a pleasurable and engaging experience a step on the way to my goals, it is quite important to me. Players also reported feeling a sense of connection with the other players, and, notably, they collaborated with positive thoughts about the collaboration over multiple playtests.

Even though the overall results of the playtests were largely positive, there were of course some elements that posed problems for certain players. For one, I included multiple playtesters throughout the process who were varying degrees of unfamiliar with either tabletop rpgs as a whole or with specifically indie tabletop rpgs (that is to say, players who had played a tabletop rpg once or twice or players who had only played a major tabletop rpg such as *Dungeons and Dragons*). Some of these playtesters expressed that the game was difficult to play without more structure. I believe that elements garnered from the project, including the genuine social experience, necessitated less structure and my results indicated it was an effective decision. However, it seems that I sacrificed some accessibility for inexperienced players in order to achieve my goals of social connection. Interestingly, the inexperienced playtesters who had no problems were almost all also creative fiction writers. It may be that, in some respects, they are not inexperienced in the tools of playing tabletop rpgs, particularly ones like *Bluestockings* which include such a heavy emphasis on story creation. That is, their practice in coming up with content on the fly probably helped them to do so in this new context.

Additionally, there was one playtester who was fairly disruptive, dragging the course of the game away from its central idea of helping vulnerable people. At the time, I decided to largely disregard this player's data, as I and the other playtesters felt this person had not gone into the game with the genuine intention of playing it properly. However, having considered more deeply how intervening in player behavior relates to my game, I believe I could have better structured the game to get even more-disruptive players invested in the game's central tenet. I could have, for example, taken another lesson from *Kind Words* and gotten players to sign a pact to help one another in the community, in the hopes of surviving and rebuilding. However, I do take one positive element away from that experience. Despite this disruptive influence, the players all worked together and created a fun and entertaining

story for everyone, which indicates that my ruleset did impress upon them that the player community was more important than the narrative.

Finally, there were a few more elements that could have been improved upon, based on playtest results. For one, playtesters expressed that the character cards were still too long to be comfortably read in the game timeframe. Another issue was that players continued to ask for more social context. In particular, they enjoyed places like the theater, where they understood how characters would relate to one another and what was expected of them. I believe more Problems would have helped players to understand the setting and its expectations better. Players also never chose to leverage their backstories when creating problems. Based on that data, I could have encouraged that more, both in the section on selecting the problem and in the section on building your own problems. Ultimately, I feel that my project was overall successful with some exceptions, and left room for some rich exploration or iteration on the same topics.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of writing this paper and developing *Bluestockings*, I engaged with both the existing bodies of theory and artwork and my own contemporary reality. Specifically, like many artists, my practice was heavily influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, I was sheltering in place during the majority of my thesis development, including exploring potential topics, writing a proposal, and crafting the thesis. I had not intended to craft my project or write my paper in near-isolation, and prior to the first shelter-in-place orders, I had a rich social life and strong in-person community, both inside and outside my cohort. Therefore, although my project sits embedded in a broader theoretical arena (the questions of how game designers can intervene in how players treat one another), it was also very much engaging with the reality of the pandemic—and creating a mechanism for players to imagine—and live within—a different reality, if only for a little while. My primary goal for *Bluestockings*, which is situated within those theoretical and situational contexts, was to create an effective social bonding game for reducing isolation and anxiety during the pandemic.

As I have covered within this paper, I did that in a number of different ways. In engaging with theories of social interaction in games, I considered how to preserve the magic circle for everyone involved, and therefore codified in the games document questions of consent—what elements would and would not be included in gameplay. This referred specifically to narrative elements, and I believe I could have taken it further. I could have directed players to also make a plan for how they treated one another when out-of-character as well, defined what kind of joking was acceptable, whether any particular terms were unacceptable, etc. I also could have directed players to be sensitive to one another's needs, to notice if someone was getting quiet or seemed uncomfortable, and for someone other than the uncomfortable player to be able to initiate that conversation. Currently, the onus is on the

player who is uncomfortable to express that discomfort, and that could be improved by strengthening the responsibility of the community.

Systemically, I leveraged the tabletop role-playing game format in order to create mechanics that were primarily social. In particular, I created a system that supported not just the emulation but also the experience of collaboration through asking players to come to a consensus that everyone was comfortable rather than giving an in-game, systemic framework for how to collaborate. This experience of collaboration was leveraged to reduce feelings of isolation by actually having players collaborate with one another on the story while characters were also collaborating within the narrative.

Additionally, I used systems to reduce players' feelings of powerlessness and therefore anxiety. Outcomes are determined by players and what they feel is likely. This gives them control over their environment in the game, which is important because of the inherent powerlessness my intended audience likely felt over their environment during the pandemic—especially since they wore masks and respected shelter-in-place and social distancing mandates, while many others did not. Each person had control over only their own actions, not the progression of the virus as a whole.

Narratively, I engaged with the idea of a French salon in order to engage with the concept of organizing from the margins for the protection of people society has made vulnerable, that is, marginalized people. Although in early prototypes, this was a larger part of my game and what I was exploring, in the final version of *Bluestockings*, I used this engagement in two ways: 1) I used this narrative to engage my intended audience, people who care about organizing socially and coming together to liberate marginalized people as a sort of fantasy version of collaboration-without-conflict and feel-good social organizing; and 2) this was a primarily social narrative about collaboration, which reflected how the system was

social and asked players to collaborate with one another but also gave some narrative distance.

There were several theoretical areas that *Bluestockings* did not fully engage in and could be more fully explored in a new iteration or different project in the same theoretical space. Although *Bluestockings* lies in the social theory of how people in games spaces treat one another and why, it largely assumes that players will follow the basic premises of gameplay. Although it was designed to encourage players to engage with one another in a healthy and positive manner that is enjoyable for everyone, my target audience in this case was not people who push games boundaries or attempt to cause other people pain for fun. Therefore, the question of how those interested in introducing toxic behavior might engage with *Bluestockings* is a missing playtest element and overall facet from the game. Although it was not strictly necessary to achieve my primary goal in the game, I do care about the question, and it does "fold in" to my existing goals, so to speak. It is possible that people would not use *Bluestockings* to troll others for a few reasons:

- as a tabletop role-playing game rather than, say, an MMO game, players must already choose to curate their own communities;
- a game about helping people without the systemic ability to introduce conflict into the group of characters trying to help might not appeal to people whose primary goal is to cause strife or mischief to others.

However, the question itself still looms large in exploring both my game and the vast theoretical arena of how players treat one another.

On the whole, *Bluestockings* was successful in helping my intended audience to feel connected to one another and to have fun during the pandemic—an undoubtedly difficult

time—with the exceptions noted above. Despite this, there is still plenty of room for further exploration in the same conceptual and theoretical arenas.

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