

# How Deep Realism in Games Supports Personal Catharsis

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# Abstract

This paper explores how deep realism in Tabletop Roleplaying Games can facilitate emotional introspection, community-building, a reclamation of agency, and a reaffirmation of the players' own positive traits as reflected in their character roleplay. Deep realism is the practice of building the details of a real environment into a game world to make the world recognizable to the players. This idea was investigated using the TTRPG system *Outbreak:UNDEAD*, a zombie apocalypse and survival simulation game where players have the option to take a personality test to create characters of themselves in the game. I designed a module for the system using the principles of deep realism and the setting of a real college in Massachusetts as its location. I ran this module for players from the school, who portrayed themselves as characters navigating an apocalyptic scenario set in a fictionalized version of their college campus and home. The goal of this study was to better understand how deep realism can be used to encourage agency when it is limited in the real world, how it affects locational and character bleed (Hugaas, 2022), and how it can support personal and community growth. During this "positive-negative experience" (Montola, 2010), I observed and recorded participant actions, which were subsequently analyzed alongside responses provided during reflective post-game interviews. Emphasizing deep realism allowed me to facilitate an experience of heightened bleed, encouraging players to actively explore their identities outside of and within the game world. Creating a safe and familiar gameplay environment empowers players to retain agency amidst adversity, experience "perezhivanie" (Schmit, 2016) which carries outside of the game space, and forge deeper connections within a supportive community setting.

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# Introduction

Outbreak:UNDEAD is a zombie apocalypse horror simulation TTRPG, which includes a component where players can take a personality test to create a version of themselves as a character. I used this system to create a deeply realistic module which takes place in 2019 Worcester, MA, on the college campus of my university. This module created a scenario where instead of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the world was overrun with a man-made and intentionally distributed contaminant which turned about 80% of those exposed into something we would likely refer to as zombies. To do this, I researched the real features of Worcester, MA to implement them into my game, and consulted with biologists to create an infection that would be realistic enough to be broken down by scientifically inclined players.

Table Top Role Playing Games (TTRPGs) have been used by many individuals as a method of storytelling, practicing experience, and building powerful friendships. Dungeons and Dragons is certainly the most visible of the genre (Weinberger, 2021), so often people discovering tabletop gaming start off their journey completing quests of heroism and saving towns from the monster of the week (or destroying it alongside them). However, as new players spend time playing and exploring the genre, the vast ocean of experiences are laid before them. Some games play quick and dirty, some have enough rules that can take years to properly learn and digest, and all have something different to deliver. One thing that most TTRPGs don't do though is create the space for players to have deeply realistic experiences, usually opting instead for fantasy or reality agnostic settings and adventures.

Deep realism is the practice of building the details of the real world into a game world such that it becomes recognizable to the players – either having elements of reality in the game, or having a game world that is entirely based on reality. This can be broken into four parts:

locational, procedural, scientific and personal deep realism. Each of these components represents something that is recognizable to the players from their real life, and doing so brings them closer to the game space.

In this paper I explore the uses of deep realism and the different effects it can have on TTRPG play. Drawing on the work of Sarah Lynn Bowman, Seth Sagstetter, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas and Wagner Luiz Schmit Utilizing I build up the ideas of how deeply realistic play differs from traditional TTRPG play. I develop the term deep realism and it's components, breaking it down into locational, procedural, scientific and personal deep realism. By playtesting the module I developed with these principles in mind, I explain the effects of deep realism that I observed in my playtesters, combined with further research on why these effects might be happening. Through study and observation, I found that deep realism gives players a chance to interact with their familiar world as a version of themselves, but by playing within a magic circle fortified by safety tools, deep realism gives players a form of agency over their world through fictional play. Additionally, deeply realistic situations and personally deeply realistic characters come together to increase the bleed between players and create heightened emotions through gameplay. By experiencing heightened emotions and distanced empathy, players are able to know themselves better and learn about their fellow players as well. **I argue that Gamemasters can use deep realism in Tabletop Roleplaying Games to facilitate a reclamation of agency, bleed- based emotional introspection, a reaffirmation of the players' own positive traits as reflected in their character roleplay, and community-building.**

## Background

In 2020, I, much like many of the people in my life, started to get pretty stir crazy. The pandemic was raging and I was doing nothing but work at my desk, so I decided that, in the middle of one of the greatest crises of my life so far, I wanted to design an apocalypse game. I had heard of the game *Outbreak:UNDEAD* (a zombie horror survival simulation game) years prior but there had always been a reason I was too busy to make time to play. With nothing to do but work and twiddle my thumbs, I thought I might as well work on the game I wanted to run. Drawn to the game's ability to make realistic environments, I decided to fabricate an outbreak that could take place in a real location and to use real maps and real details to fill out my world.

I had some friends whom I had met through martial arts and we had already picked up playing *Dungeons and Dragons* online since the quarantine, so I asked if they wanted to play a different kind of TTRPG with me. As it turns out, the Venn diagram of “people who grapple in their free time” and “people who play *Dungeons and Dragons* in their free time” was almost exclusively composed of survivalists, and they were stoked at the idea of playing through a zombie apocalypse simulation together— especially once I explained that they would be playing as themselves in the world. When the game began, I chose a flashy start and immediately began to hit my players with intense situations and violent consequences in locations familiar to them, all of which they excitedly ate up. As we played more, I started to see my players get more and more comfortable with death, intensity, and moments of horror. Not only that, but they were excited for every session and what new challenges they would get to face next. I started to suspect that my players were using this game to escape from reality (and pandemic) just as much as I was. Still, though, I wasn't sure what exactly was pulling us all to such a calamitous game during a time of enormous loss. Clearly not every player is looking for a purely heroic

experience, I thought, maybe sometimes it's the intensity of the emotions which create gratification (Bartsch, 2012), whether those emotions are positive or negative. Humans are more complicated than our best selves, and games can be a way of safely engaging in personal exploration, with many players seeking to play difficult experiences in search of insight into themselves (Montola, 2010). We're far too complex to be satisfied with only joy; in order to balance our light, love, and laughter, we need to see it clearly contrasted by darkness, disdain, and death. How better to do this than through experiential play? For humans in general, "need to struggle and the need to heal" are intertwined (Stengers, 2012), and these needs don't suddenly disappear when a person becomes a player of a game.

So I planned to run another game, one where I was intentionally trying to elicit powerful emotions and examining what exactly about this deeply realistic game could be used to create emotional catharsis. Before I could test any of this, I needed players. So, I set about searching for a group who were interested in exploring what loss meant for them in a setting mirroring their reality. Not every player wants to act as themselves in an apocalypse, especially one where there is no guarantee they'll make it out alive, let alone be heroes. I found three, each with different goals for the game. These players all brought something different to the table, a uniquely well-rounded party in my experience. While they all shared a major at the same university, that was the only extent to which they knew each other. So, as I was coming to learn what each player wanted out of the game, they were slowly getting to know each other. We built their characters together and discussed the best ways for each person to reflect themselves into their character sheets, and, as we did, each player began to reveal what parts of the game were exciting to them and which parts of themselves they were the most excited to explore. For each of my players, I will be using

nicknames based on the roles they assumed during play: The Security Blanket, the Skill Monkey, and the Protector.

First, the Security Blanket (SB), a 21-year-old woman with lots of experience being a Gamemaster (GM) and very little experience as a satisfied player. As I initially tempted her to join my game, she expressed apprehension about not being prepared enough, reassuring me that she would certainly die, but that everyone would love her before she did. Or, as she put it, "I don't have bunkers, but other people have bunkers, and they'll love me so they'll let me in," which made us both chuckle. When she took the personality test with other players, it was clear why everyone would love her, as her Empathy stat was a whooping 40 (with the average person sitting in the high 20s). While the other players had impressive stats of their own, nobody had an Emp stat as high as the Security Blanket, and as she realized she started looking for skills that would allow her the most leverage of such a high number. The more we talked, and the more her character was built, the more she leaned into compassionate abilities and skills, slowly building herself a character who could read you in a moment and give you exactly the support you need.

Next, the Skill Monkey (SM), an 18-year-old man with a quiet wit that he'd bring out at exactly the right moment, more than once startling everyone into laughter. The youngest of the group, the Skill Monkey was also often the most introspective, taking a long time to consider his options before jumping to any uneducated conclusions. Unsurprisingly, he spent the longest time filling out his personality test, ricocheting out the other side as he immediately began joking about ways to optimize his scores. As he continued to work on his character, we continued to enjoy his occasional witty comment, calling back to prior moments during our character creation session so far. I'd imagine he found the time to focus on his banter by needing less time to focus on his character, as the Skill Monkey picked up the complicated mechanics of the game with



impressive ease. His deep consideration and capability made for a deadly combination, especially written into skills.

Finally, the Protector, a 20-year-old with two immediate goals: turn their past pain into present power and protect the other players. The Protector spent the months between learning of my project and being accepted into my playtesting group preparing. They told me they had considered how to become the best meat shield and that they had plans to turn the traffic signs into armor and weapons. They'd thought about materials and gear, and they were ready in an instant to bring supplies to campus if it meant they would transfer into the game – even considering bringing both of their leather jackets so the group could have two sets of armor from the start. They were delighted to find their stats sitting far above average and set out to create a character that could absorb as much damage as possible so the other players wouldn't have to. They wanted to make themselves into a character that would be hard for me to kill, but they were so excited to see me try.

Each of these players explained their excitement to me in their own ways, describing the many ways in which they wanted to experience the game. I wanted them to more than just experience though, I wanted them to feel Catharsis. To do this, they would need to also go through moments which create *perezhivanie*, as it is the stepping stone towards creating catharsis. *Perezhivanie* has many forms, but it breaks down to “both the process of experiencing and the content of this process,” forming a unit of personality based on the content of the experience (Schmit, 2016). It is this depth of involvement, of understanding, that allows for catharsis, which means that the experiences of players need to be so full that they can be recorded in their minds as things that they went through, not things that were described to them. They must embody through performance, and that means they must feel safe to release into the

experience, and they must be listened to (Sagstetter, 2022). This became a priority as the game began: listen to my players and facilitate depth of experience. To do so, I worked to better define how I would encourage and include depth into my experience, which brought me back to deep realism.

## What Is Deep Realism?

The first, and most obvious, form of deep realism is locational deep realism. This is characterized by bringing modern day, recognizable locations into a fictional world such that players have a better physical understanding of the space they are in. This can include incorporating real world maps and details or just describing a physical location that players have visited in reality— or in my case, describing locations around a familiar college campus and providing maps of less familiar adjacent locations. Clarity of location allows people to imagine events in that location more vividly than events imagined in a space that a player has never visited (Arnold, McDermott and Szpunar, 2011), so players participating in a game are more likely to be able to vividly imagine the events taking place in a familiar location, like their home, business, or other frequented spaces. Playing on their university campus, my players described that the familiarity of the location meant that they were never confused about where they were in the game world, since they had walked the same paths so often that it created a sense of immersion. As the Protector put it, in fantasy you can imagine the world but you can't feel and understand it like you can with locational deep realism, and they found it was a fun additional layer to the game to be able to walk around the setting and plan what actions to take. This can be potentially helpful for players with mild to severe aphantasia— virtual or complete absence of mental imagery (Dance, Ward, Simner, 2021)— as they can struggle to picture events described

without a physical visual aid (Niachos et. al, 2023; mach1.pants, 2024). While people with aphantasia perform just as well as people without it on mental rotation tests for spatial awareness, they do report lower vividness of spatial imagery and self-efficacy in the arts (Crowder, 2018) indicating the familiarity with spaces could potentially improve their experience and confidence with understanding their location in game. Additionally, practicing an activity in a familiar location boosts confidence in participants and higher self-predictions of success in the activity being practiced (Schmitz et. al, 2015). Creating locational deeply realism can bolster these effects, allowing players to better understand their environment, invigorating their confidence interacting with it, and increasing player confidence dealing with locational scenarios in real life that were practiced in game. Dimension 20's *The Unsleeping City* is a great example of utilizing locational deep realism as a method of creating agency in its players: by utilizing a setting the players are familiar with (New York City) the gamemaster is able to bring in villains from the real world as intrusion fantasy for the players to handle, protecting "their" city in a way that creates confidence and hopepunk themes amongst the people involved (French, 2022).

The next is procedural deep realism. This concept is a little more difficult to conceptualize, since it's realism reflecting real world policy and operations rather than concrete objects. Procedural deep realism is reflecting the many systems in place in our world into a game's magic circle in a way that is recognizable to the players. This is more than just the existence of, for example, a fire station, but more accurately encompasses having a fire station in game that runs like the fire station the players already know (the one in Worcester I am most familiar with regularly keeps 3 trucks in the garage and sees an average of 22 firefighters in the building every day.) Success while completing novel tasks with transferred knowledge is affected by confidence levels in the person completing them, as well as their perception of the task's

difficulty level (Nair, Pillai, Demirbag, 2020). Fluency - or the measure of “how quick and effortless a task feels to complete” – is increased by confidence, and procedural consistency can increase confidence (Williams, Duke, Dunning, 2020). The task of integrating into the game world in my game was, in the Security Blanket’s case, facilitated by familiar tasks; starting at her real world job in game gave her a familiar system, which helped her grow more comfortable existing in the fictional world. Later, acting as a supervisor (as she would in reality) helped her feel more confident leading her NPC coworker, Sarah. Having procedural systems in game that are recognizable to players can make them feel more comfortable approaching and following through on related novel tasks, making the game more dynamic and giving players more confidence handling those kinds of actions and other novel tasks in the future. The game *Carbon 2185* was built using the Dungeon’s & Dragons fifth edition (D&D 5e) open game license, and uses procedural deep realism to mimic capitalist systems in a way that is absent from traditional D&D. Doing so allows players to determine the amount of experience their character has in the workforce, which in turn helps players to determine how much money they would have and how they would have spent it, which allows them to better understand the cyberpunk, capitalist undertones of *Carbon 2185* and more confidently operate within them.

Next we have scientific deep realism, which reflects whether the building blocks of reality are the same in game as they are in reality. This not only means that the forces of our universe are mirrored in the game (no magic, no falling into vats of acid to become a superhero), which would be scientific realism, but also that should a scientist in their field take a cursory glance at the science of the game, it would seem plausible. This doesn’t mean everything has to perfectly match up under a microscope of examination, but it does mean that the science should at least *make sense* to a trained professional. Suspension of scientific understanding can be

frustrating for people with scientific knowledge, and glaring inaccuracies made in the name of plot can keep people from being able to “remain absorbed in the story” (Gitlin, 2009). On the other hand, accurate science in entertainment is not just exciting for scientists, but can also build excitement amongst the general populace (Kirby, 2011). During my initial playthrough of my *Outbreak:UNDEAD* module, for example, one of my players was a biologist. Not only was he extremely excited by having a realistic “zombie” contagion to study, but the other players were further immersed each time he uncovered a new detail with his expansive knowledge.

Unfortunately, this is frequently overlooked in favor of creating “cool” or plot related pseudo-science, so when creators take the time to create more realistic science it can be all the more thrilling for passionate scientists, as well as instilling a curiosity in the general populace (Chitransh et. al, 2022; Funk, Gottfriend, Mitchell, 2017). Not only is the accurate science itself compelling to scientists, but seeing other members of society understand their passion is often exciting in its own right. Additionally, scientific deep realism in games can allow scientifically leaning players to show off their strengths in a way that can be rewarded by the Gamemaster, which is an excellent way for players to explore their positive qualities (Bean & Connell, 2023). The *Expanse* television show is a great example of how incorporating scientific deep realism can be exciting for scientists, as the show runner (who has a PhD in engineering) says the realism of the physics in the show was one of the reasons he was attracted to it in the first place. He goes on to further describe many of the ways in which the show adhered to known principles of science, gushing about how they weren’t ignored for plot but instead utilized to create tension. He “hopes [they’re] raising the game” for science fiction after elaborating on his excitement, even though he recognizes that it can be intimidating to pull off scientific deep realism (Humphrey, 2019).

The final component of deep realism is personal deep realism. This is characterized by having players who are playing a version of themselves in the game. These characters can be considered as falling under the doppelganger self as defined by Sarah Bowman, as they are characters “that closely resemble [a player’s] primary sense of self” (Bowman, 2010). The difference between personal deep realism and the doppelganger self is that personal deep realism is done to intentionally create a character that is a version of yourself in the game, whereas the doppelganger self is any character “who thinks and behaves as [a player] would, despite discrepancies on the character sheet.” To use a personal example, my first Dungeons and Dragons character was a doppelganger character, but I am by no means a tiefling druid with the power to control nature at my fingertips. Personal deep realism includes not just personality traits, but also some reflection of personal abilities. In this way, personal deep realism allows players to expand on the doppelganger self, not just thinking about how they would mentally and emotionally respond if their primary selves were placed in the situation of the game, but also to explore how their existing abilities would allow them to tackle the situation at hand. There tends to be a stigma amongst experienced TTRPG players that doppelganger characters are immature, and that what makes these games unique and valuable is playing a character who is distinct from themselves (Fine, 1983; Bowman, 2010). However, what this bias overlooks is the merit in self exploration inside of the game space. Playing a character that reflects both your abilities and your inclinations allows you to better understand yourself within the context of the game. As the Security Blanket put it, without playing herself as a character, she “would have learned much less about the other players and herself”. Playing a personally deeply realistic character allows you to examine your own strengths and weaknesses in the context of a game, and it allows you to be more immediately vulnerable with other players. There isn’t a layer of character traits to learn

before you can learn about the player underneath them. You get to immediately see what “being true to yourself” means to all of the other players, which is instantly more personal than getting to know them through the filter of another character’s traits. Not only does this show you more about yourself in a new context, but it gives you insight into the way your fellow players think and approach life. This was not a part of my original theory of deep realism, but as we played it became glaring that a definition of deep realism would be incomplete without including the impact of personal deep realism. Embodying a character that represents yourself, especially in a deeply realism world, creates a unique relationship to the game world that cannot be ignored.

	Not locational	locational		Not locational	locational		Not locational	locational
Not procedural	High fantasy setting with a government system based around pastry trade	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where all of the politicians trade pastry to pass laws	Not scientific	High fantasy setting where magic is real	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where magic is real	Not personal	High fantasy setting where the players are playing characters with traits and abilities very different from their own (shy person playing loud magic user)	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where players are playing characters different from themselves (shy person playing intense politician)
procedural	High fantasy setting with a democratic government system reflective of american capitalist ideals	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where politicians make deals and pass laws reflective of american capitalist ideals	scientific	High fantasy setting where people think magic is real, but it's all scientifically accurate manifestations of physics, chemistry and biology	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where magic is not real, but the laws of physics, chemistry and biology are real and accepted	personal	High fantasy setting where players are playing characters that are versions of themselves (shy person playing quiet stealth)	Fictional facsimile of Washington DC where players are playing versions of themselves (shy person playing shy person like himself)

	Not scientific	scientific		Not personal	personal		Not scientific	scientific
Not procedural	A hospital that always runs smoothly and cures every illness that comes through with magic	A hospital that always runs smoothly, but can't save every patient or cure every malady due to modern day scientific limitations	Not procedural	A group of non-healthcare workers playing doctors in a hospital where everything runs smoothly	A group of non-healthcare players playing themselves (as patients or visitors) in a hospital where everything runs smoothly	Not personal	A group of players playing characters very different from themselves who all have magic	A group of players not playing themselves who have abilities grounded in reality
procedural	A hospital with lots of tired workers running around trying to see all of their patients, who they can magically cure if they see them fast enough	A hospital with lots of tired workers running around trying to see all of their patients, even if they can't save every patient or cure every malady	procedural	A group of non-healthcare workers playing doctors trying to keep up with patient demand while balancing wellbeing	A group of non-healthcare workers playing themselves (as patients or visitors) in a hospital, trying to navigate hospital policy to be seen by doctors	personal	A group of players playing as themselves who have suddenly gained magical abilities	A group of players playing themselves with the abilities and skills they have in the real world

Each of these components of deep realism can be utilized on their own to great effect, each with their own result. However, as I looked, I didn’t find many examples that combined all four kinds. Since each element has a unique impact on the player's relationship to the game and

their feelings about the play happening, bringing them together presents a potential to explore player emotions and potentially create a form of personal catharsis through gameplay. With each component playing a role, I found that gamemasters can use deep realism in Tabletop Roleplaying Games to facilitate a reclamation of agency, bleed based emotional introspection, a reaffirmation of the players' own positive traits as reflected in their character roleplay, and community-building. I also understood that testing deep realism as I intended to (with a horror survival game) could have unwanted and traumatic impacts on unprepared players. To prevent this, an early focus became creating a set of safety tools to be used in game that would keep the real and fictional world separate.

The game world is separated from the real world by a social contract created by the players. Some of the agreement is implicit – understanding that the events in-game are fictional, as is the version of the world they're playing in. Other parts are explicit, chief among those being the safety tools put in place to make sure the game stays fun. This is something akin to the concept of the magic circle (Zimmerman, 1999), though for this paper we will not consider the magic circle to be completely removed from the real world, but instead as a communally upheld experience within it where a different or additional set of rules are adhered to (Knutepunkt, 2021).

Our brain records experiences the same way, regardless of if we are experiencing them firsthand or vividly imagining them (Abraham, 2016); so alongside a good Gamemaster (GM), almost any experience is possible. This also means that the GM of a game has enormous responsibility, as any experience being possible also means that potentially traumatizing and harmful experiences can occur during TTRPG play (Wittig and Marino, 2020). This is especially true of a deeply realistic game, where traumatic events can manifest as memories of real world



features. As Eric Stein puts it, a player's willingness to be vulnerable and to improvise in game is fostered by the GM, and for our "part as both facilitator and instructor, it is important to emphasize that this does not happen by accident, and actively cultivating a safe play culture is vital to successful and healthy play experiences". (Stein, 2022)

The TTRPG Safety Toolkit provides a variety of ways to help mitigate player harm and prevent potentially traumatic scenarios from occurring, including discussion techniques, checklists and physical cards (Shaw & Bryant-Monk). For this game, I utilized their concept of Lines and Veils (otherwise known by Outbreak:UNDEAD as Walls and Curtains) and Stars and Wishes. Additionally, discussing safety during session zero allowed players to establish boundaries beyond those that they initially think of for Walls and Curtains. For example, during my game several of my players expressed concern over playing with personal deep realism in a deeply realistic apocalypse scenario, worried that the in-game events would be "too real" and would make them confront kinds of loss they weren't ready for. Notably, two players expressed concern over losing their loved ones inside of the game scenario, saying that it would pull them into a place of distress outside of the game if they were confronted with the death of a real loved one. As a result, we decided that even though the game was deeply realistic, all of the NPCs would be fictional. That way, players could interact with the loss of important characters without experiencing the trauma of losing anyone they knew in real life. In doing so, the social contract (or magic circle) which separates the game world from the real world is fortified by safety tools.

## What can Deep Realism do?

Often the world that exists within the magic circle is very different from the reality that exists outside of it, allowing players to escape the world they occupy in favor of one that's more appealing. Research into using TTRPGs as tools for personal growth have previously acknowledged the psychological benefits of engaging in escapism, or the practice of “avoiding the problems of reality by focusing on alternative stimuli or fantasies” (Lees, 2022). More recently this has made TTRPGs a subject of interest to clinicians, who have begun using them as a means of group therapy and social learning.

Speaking to a psychologist running a therapeutic game, they explained some of the reasons that players might be drawn to remedial TTRPG play. The clinician I spoke to had been running these types of games for years, explaining that they had originally begun using the medium after noticing how transgender teenagers in their life used roleplay to explore their identities. By playing characters, the players could control the ways in which they were perceived in the game space, and they could use this alibi to test out different traits and see how it feels to embody them. Players had the agency to define how they wanted to be viewed, and the control to change it if they decided it didn't suit them. As an applied gamemaster— a clinician using TTRPGs as a method of conducting therapy (Bean & Connell, 2023)— this therapist would make sure that their players felt safe to explore these new traits, greeting them with positivity when they did. Playing games in the magic circle also provides a comforting layer of separation for their players, as this clinician explained. Because it's a game, and a safe space, players could feel more comfortable exploring concepts that make them uncomfortable in their day to day life. For example, if a player identified issues with social anxiety, the Gamemaster could engineer situations where that player can exert agency over social interactions that might make them

nervous in real life, and then deliver positive feedback through the game for a player sticking through it (Bean & Connell, 2023). Players can also feel safe engaging at their own pace, as the therapist I spoke to clarified that at their table they have created a group norm of allowing players to step back from the game if they so desire.

Deep realism takes the idea of ameliorative play in a very different direction. Instead of having a clearly defined dichotomy between the real and fictional worlds, the game inside of the magic circle is representative of the world outside of it. The players also don't have a strong alibi for why they might act differently as their characters, since their characters are deeply realistic reflections of themselves. Instead, the gameplay of a deeply realistic experience allows players to act as themselves and explore a familiar world safely. Because players can recognize and actively affect the environment around them, deep realism allows them to reclaim a sense of agency over their world. During moments like the covid-19 pandemic, where there is a loss of agency in the real world, creating agency over reality inside of the magic circle can be incredibly satisfying for players. In fact, looking back on the original game that I ran, during 2020, the pandemic was a strong factor in why I chose to run a game about an outbreak. Whilst the world was shut down, the only option was to shelter away and hope other people would do the same for long enough that we could all make it through. The waiting was painful, and the separation was even worse. My players and I found escape through an apocalypse we could do something about. I designed my outbreak to look nothing like the slow creep of Covid, and I gave my players the outlet to literally battle the manifestation of illness in front of them. It was a small escape for everyone involved, a place where our power meant something, where we could enact meaningful change on the world. When reality offered no intercession, we made our own. Deep realism can be used to create agency where there is none.

However, this agency which comes from enacting real world scenarios in a fulfilling way is only possible if it is sufficiently safe. One of the many reasons we do not take risks in our day to day lives is the fear of consequences that might result from those actions. Maybe you don't want to take the risk to ask someone out because they might reject you, or you're afraid to change careers because you can't guarantee your financial stability. We put up barriers for ourselves to protect from a potential future pain that could occur if we were to fail (Rogers, 1975). This fear and the barriers associated with it are meant to prevent action as a method of self protection, but when we spend our energy insulating and avoiding potential consequences, we close ourselves off from experiencing things to the fullest. Inside of the magic circle, safety tools can help to mitigate the fear which prevents us from taking action, allowing players to investigate without the concern of their life being affected: the events inside of the magic circle remain contained within it. In deeply realistic scenarios, where players are playing in a familiar world as versions of themselves, this means that players can explore actions they would like to take in the real world but have been too afraid to.

In the real world, a fear of failure or consequences can increase avoidant behavior (Conroy, Kaye and Fifer, 2007; Gable, 2005). Within the magic circle though, players are allowed to indulge in their inclinations and accept resulting consequences as learning experiences rather than failures. This also means that players must feel comfortable that the consequences which occur in game will remain within their comfort zones. In order for the separation between reality and the magic circle to be meaningful, concepts which are upsetting to the players must not be allowed to enter the gameplay space. Gamemaster's running deeply realistic games must make active efforts to ensure that the barrier between reality and fiction is continually reaffirmed with safety measures.

One moment from my game where this happened was a boundary drawn by the Skill Monkey during play. At one moment during play, there was a moment where players grappled with the potential loss of their family. This was an unplanned side effect of where they were located, as even with all of the NPCs being fictional, my players still understood where their families lived in the deeply realistic world. For the Skill Monkey, this realization was too much. As GM, I worked with him to rearrange fictional reality so that none of his family would be in harm's way. It's important that players feel comfortable to allow their emotions to bleed between themselves and their characters to be able to fully engage with the emotional catharsis at hand. Since *perezhivanie* is (in very simply terms) both the process of experiencing and the unit of personality which comes from an experience (Veresov, 2014), being present in the experience is vital for creating it, and *perezhivanie* is an important component in creating catharsis in gaming (Schmit, 2016). Having moments in the game that make you want to shield yourself from something potentially traumatic make it difficult to experience them properly, since you are trying to remove your consciousness from the moment (Brown, 2008; Kindt, 2003). So, to keep the world safe and allow my players to feel they had agency over it, any details from the real world that make my players uncomfortable enough to take them out of the experience should and would be altered. That way, when truly intense moments arise, my players could feel safe enough to delve into them without worry that something will traumatize them in real life.

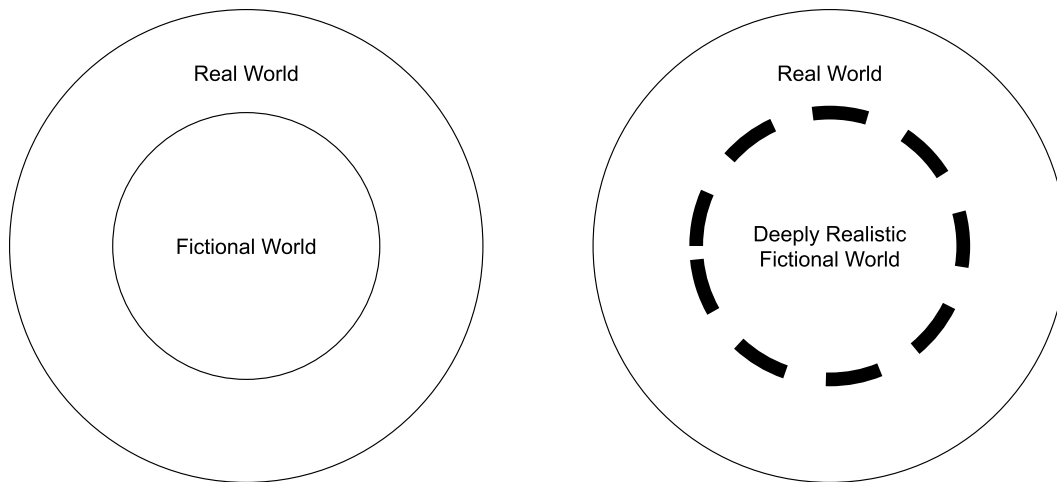
With appropriate safety measures in place, players can then feel free to explore how their personal proclivities will unfold within the world they understand, and they can understand the outcome without involving fear at all. Instead, they can revel in their newfound understanding, whether the results of their actions were met positively or negatively. Safety and revelry come together to give players a way to fully invest, without barriers built up to protect themselves.

This means players have more space to be emotionally involved in the campaign. Emotional investment is key to creating an experience with impact. A game where you play the dull, unmoving parts of day to day life is highly unlikely to elicit enjoyment, let alone *perezhivanie* or catharsis; those aren't the kind of experiences that stay with you. Games are the same as imagination in that way, as "in order for imagery to support human agency usefully, imagistic imagining must yield emotions automatically, whether one believes their contents or merely has an imaginative attitude toward them" (Leeuwen, 2016). Even though players understand the game is not real, the emotions they feel over the course of the game must be real to have a strong impact.

These safety tools also help to facilitate and manage bleed as well as agency. Bleed "describes the spillover of physical states, mental states, physicality, values, opinions and other similar concepts from player to character and vice versa." (Hugaas, 2022). Any time there is a moment where the character is completely aligned with the person playing them is considered bleed. In a game with personal deep realism, bleed is enhanced, as the line between who you are outside the game and who you are inside the game is as close as possible. Sarah Lynne Bowman describes alibi as the accepted "premise that any actions in the game are taken by the character, not by the player", and states that the greater the alibi, the lower the amount of bleed (Bowman, 2015). The inverse is also true, as the more similar players are to their characters, the lower their alibi and the greater the bleed. Deeply realistic settings push that bleed even further by creating recognizable environments for players to project situations into. Having this connection to the environment around them allows the players to form a stronger understanding of their character's place in it, with deep realism facilitating bleed. For my players, this manifested in a really interesting way.

The combination of personal deep realism and locational deep realism resulted in something they referred to as “phantom memories.” They described having flashbacks to moments in the game when they visited the real locations where fictional events took place, despite never visiting those locations whilst playing. The Security Blanket recalled vividly the moment her coworker, Sarah, died on the steps of the campus center’s steps, with some of the emotions from the session coming back the first few times she passed by that location. The Skill Monkey also reported that imagining situations for his character felt the same as imagining situations for himself, and walking around campus brought back memories from within the game similarly to memories from his life. This is because whether scenarios take place in actuality or the imagination, human memory stores the event the same way (Abraham, 2016). This is enhanced by locational deep realism, as events imagined in a location that a person has visited will be imagined more vividly than those imagined at unfamiliar locations (Arnold, 2011). Since the locations my players imagined events in were locations they visit with frequency, this principle was pushed to create powerful phantom memories. Events which take place in game exist on the edges of reality and can bleed into the players real lives, as their memories record them as if they happened.

Playing with bleed can be considered brink play, as it allows players to border the difficult emotions involved in the game, as they sit on the barrier between reality and the magic circle (Montola 2016). Since Deep Realism blurs the line between reality and the world within the magic circle, it becomes easier to allow the game world to bleed into the real world. Facilitating this bleed also builds the strength of emotions experienced by players, which can be frightening to players who don’t feel safe engaging in the game.



It is the responsibility of the GM to maintain a gameplay environment that is safe enough for players to yield to bleed. While there can be catharsis in traditionally “negative” experiences (Montola, 2010), that catharsis cannot be achieved if a player is focused on avoiding real world pain. Catharsis comes from experiencing emotions so deeply that it produces a healing effect (Sagstetter, 2022), which is impossible if a player is holding themselves back from experiencing out of fear or avoidance. One of the ways in which bleed in deep realism affects players is by allowing them to have this altered experience of their own world in a way that sticks with them. This can build towards catharsis, but only if players are fully experiencing it. As a Russian LARPer explained, in “matching reality and virtuality” you lose the border between the two as they bleed together, and as your brain tries to reconcile between them “You have a moment of perezhivanie when you are going to catharsis” (schmidt, 2016). Perezhivanie (in very simple terms) is both the process of experiencing and the unit of personality which comes from an experience (Veresov, 2014), which means being present in the experience is vital for creating it, and perezhivanie is an important step in creating the path to catharsis in gaming (Schmit, 2016). Having moments in the game that make you want to shield yourself from something potentially traumatic make it difficult to experience them properly, since you are trying to remove your



consciousness from the moment; especially during games exploring less pleasant scenarios and emotions, as when emotions are high, bleed is more likely to occur (Bowman, 2015; Montola, 2016) On the other hand, when players feel safe and allow their emotions to bleed between themselves and their character, they are more emotionally primed for cathartic moments. With high levels of bleed comes high levels of emotional investment, which in turn paves the way for *perezhivanie*.

High levels of bleed mean that players are experiencing on two different levels: one where emotional bleed means that they experience the emotions of their character, and one where they cognitively understand why their character would feel a certain way based on circumstances. In traditional therapeutic TTRPG play, there is an intentional separation of the player from their character. In this way, the player is able to explore things that make them nervous at a safe distance with alibi that their actions are reflective of their character, not themselves. This mostly covers the cognitive understanding portion of the experience, but with alibi and bleed being inversely related, it usually leaves a little lacking in the feeling portion of the experience. Additionally, this leaves little room for players to explore who they are in the present moment, and even less room for their fellow players to understand them. When playing TTRPGs with other people, there are many glimpses into the way they view the world and their character. However, there will always be a filter for their actions: what would my character do in this moment? To empathize with a character, players must either imagine how their character feels or how they would feel in their position. Putting yourself in the shoes of another character means empathizing with how they interpret the world and filtering your actions to reflect their thoughts and feelings, regardless of which method you use to do so. (Batson, Early, Salvarani, 1997). This cultivates a kind of empathy called “distanced empathy”, where players are able to

understand the emotions of their character second hand (Koreman, 2021). In the case of personal deep realism, the character that you experience distanced empathy towards is yourself. Instead of filtering your thoughts and actions through the lens of a character, they're filtered by your personal reactions and inclinations. Players playing characters with personal deep realism must empathize with themselves, positively reaffirming their natural inclinations.

Distanced empathy is a fantastic way of coming to better understand yourself through the context of a game. By playing a character who is deeply realistic to who you are in your day to day life, the distanced empathy you're practicing is with yourself. Often we scrutinize our characteristics under the lens of societal norms, with the expectations of other people dictating how we feel about ourselves. Doing so can create feelings of inferiority and discomfort within ourselves (Thompson, 2004). It can be difficult to break away from these patterns, since this kind of self-criticism can create a cycle of hostility, fear, and disagreeableness (Thakur & Baumann, 2022; Thompson, 2004). The more you compare yourself to others and find things you don't like, the worse you feel and the worse you treat others. However, self-acceptance and self-empathy can help to combat these feelings. When you feel empathy for yourself, accepting the ways in which you view the world as understandable and valid and uniquely your own, the comparison to others is decentralized and a focus on self-acceptance is prioritized.

My players reported many moments of distanced self-empathy while they played. The Protector admitted after playtests concluded that, while they were excited to enter the game world and take on the challenges presented there, they often struggle with change in their real life. They explained that TTRPGs, for them, can serve as a method of introspection and a place to explore their own flaws and fears, often building characters to reflect a feature they want to better understand through gameplay. They said this campaign was no different, and that getting

the opportunity to explore their unease through a deeply realistic experience helped them better understand the ways in which they naturally cope. As they explained, the deeply realistic environment and personally deeply realistic character made for an excellent battle ground for trials of character; not trials against the environment, which was already familiar. The Security Blanket initially explained that she worried empathy wouldn't be relevant to the game, and that her skillset wouldn't be useful. However, after playing the game and seeing the many ways in which her compassion had powerful effects on the gameplay, she reported that the empathetic traits she had been practicing during our game had bled out into her understanding of the world as a whole, and that she felt more empowered leaning into her compassion in her day to day life. She elaborated that after seeing her character stats and practicing them in game, being more empathetic in her real life just "felt right." The Skill Monkey explained that a lot of the joy of the game for him didn't come from the effects he had on the surrounding world, but instead came from learning about himself through the game. With each new challenge he was excited to see how he would react, how he would tackle the issue, how much he would apply logic. He wanted to learn about himself in the face of new experiences, and he found himself understanding more about each reaction he had and each reaction he saw from his fellow players. As you allow emotions to bleed between yourself and your alter ego inside of the game, there is an opportunity for introspection and understanding: not only do you understand why you have a certain reaction, but you understand why that reaction makes sense in the scenario. Inside of that experience there is forgiveness, acceptance, and satisfaction.

As the players are getting to know themselves inside of the game, they are showing that insight to their fellow players, getting to know each other through understanding themselves. Playing TTRPGs can help exercise the social mind (Bean & Connell, 2023), and playing them

together can help to foster connection between their players. Shared experiences can also build up social connection creating a sense of meaning as they do so (Patrick, 2022). Playing in deeply realistic environments can enhance this experience, as not only are the experiences happening shared, but the players all have existing impressions of the world that help deepen the new, shared experiences between them. Since players are familiar and comfortable with the deeply realistic environment, and already know how they would engage with it, new experiences in those places can take the focus. Instead of trying to get their bearings and understand the environment that they're in, players already have an intimate understanding of deeply realistic locations, as well as shared and personal memories of that space. As a result, they're able to bond over previously shared understanding, as well as focus more accurately on the new shared experiences taking place in those locations. Players are encouraged to understand each other as well as they already understand their locations. This is heightened by players playing personally deeply realistic characters, since players can get to know each other by having their characters get to know each other. Deep realism allows all players to quickly form relationships as they get to know each other without filtering their inclinations to reflect a character.

As players express their inner thoughts and the ways they think they would understand the world, their deeply realistic alter egos allow their fellow players to get to know them through their thoughts and actions. Rarely is there an opportunity in real life for people to get a first hand view of another person's thoughts and reasoning. Instead we see their actions and must interpret intentions by synthesizing what we know about human behavior with the activity we just observed. In tabletop gaming, GMs can guide players to explain their intentions, prompt moments of internal narration, and give players a space to reason through why they might take a particular action. With players acting as personally deeply realistic characters, this process of

elaboration gives fellow players insight into the mind of the person in the spotlight. In traditional TTRPG play “the relationships developed through tabletop play can carry on into the real world” (Sagstetter, 2022), but in deeply realistic TTRPG play the characters forming relationships in game mirror the relationships being formed between the players. This means that the same relationships are built up in two ways at the same time, coming together to synthesize a relationship with greater insight than either of the relationships on its own.

After our game, all of my players reported feeling as if they knew each other better through this experience. The Protector elucidated that thanks to GM facilitated inner monologues, each of the players got to explain their internal thinking process as we played the game, and then we got to see how that personal narrative played into the actions that they took. This meant that when a player was taking action or contemplating things under the spotlight, all of the other players got a glimpse into their inner world and the way that they authentically approach life. They further explained that this direct look into the psyche of their fellow players helped speed up the process of getting to know each other. This would not have been possible if players had instead been filtering their inner monologues through the thoughts and feelings of a character. Instead, as the Security Blanket described, they would all need to “first get to know the characters, then get to know the player underneath”. The Skill Monkey informed me that playing a personally deeply realistic character made him more comfortable being more intimate during sessions and showing off his inner workings for the other players to see. Instead of hiding behind a character and their intentions, all of my players had to come face to face with their own inclinations and share them with other players, which gave them all a chance to better understand each other through understanding themselves.

## Final Thoughts

Deep realism brings together features to create an experience which reinjects agency into players lives, heightens bleed so that emotional investment is also heightened, gives players a place to understand themselves, and in doing so forges community through a unique way of bonding. All of these features together can facilitate players reaching a point of catharsis, as their experience is so powerful that it imparts a sense of healing and relief. Relationships forged through TTRPG play can continue into the real world normally (Meriläinen, 2012), and deeply realistic play does this in a way that synergistically synthesizes relationships above and below table. By doing so, the community formed can support players through moments in-game hardship, and allow them to form identity within the context of external relationships. Additionally, by creating a space where players feel safe to explore themselves, their community, and the world they live in, players can more fully invest in the experience. This sense of safety “also happens to be a requirement for the generation of cathartic experience” (Sagstetter, 2022) since it is what allows players to achieve the emotional investment necessary to create *perezhivanie* and ultimately reach a place of catharsis. Deep realism then intensifies the power of the emotions felt, as the process of practicing distanced empathy whilst the emotions of a character bleed out to their player creates an echo chamber where emotions inside of the game are intensified. This primes players even further for moments of personal catharsis, as they experience the height of emotions. I’ll leave you with a final moment from the game that demonstrates this concept.

In the moment where the character Sarah was killed, I looked over to see tears streaming down the face of the Security Blanket. Despite periodic check-ins and the continued flow of tears, she assured me that she wanted to continue playing, to continue experiencing the emotional

upheaval of the loss she just witnessed. She later informed me that experiencing the full weight of her emotions in that moment gave her a sense of relief after the fact. She told me it felt really good to cry. It was not only satisfying to commit to something so fully, but it was satisfying to feel the full payout of the emotions associated. In losing her fictional friend, she experienced a moment of emotional catharsis, of relief, of loss, of acceptance even through pain.

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