‘Hands, Face, Space’ - The Material Turn and COVID-19.

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In the early months of 2020, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic meant millions of people around the world had to change their daily behaviours with immediate effect, often with no real indications of when ‘normality’ (whatever that was) would return. Fundamental alterations in social, physical and cultural norms occurred overnight. Millions of people were confined to their homes, or near home environments. The deadly invisible pandemic was here, and it was taking our lives away, both literally and figuratively. In retrospect, perhaps we should have realised what living through a global pandemic might be like, but with so few touchstones – the drama of the past is far away from our memories (Dafoe 1722, Spinney 2017), and the fiction surrounding these disasters shows either the direct moments of an outbreak (Brooks 2009, St John Mandell 2014) or the world as it recovers years afterwards (Kirkman 2003-2019, Serpell 2019) – it is perhaps unsurprising that we were less prepared for what might happen during the months, possibly years, of a viral outbreak, for which there was no immediate vaccine.

Fiction gives us multiple, apocalyptic futures, but it does not usually depict the slow grind towards that vision, which is how 2020 felt to many of its inhabitants. Staying indoors, keeping away from other people, socialising remotely and refiguring our daily working lives caused an almost unthinkable upheaval; except it was happening right now, and we all had to do it in order to save each other. The world was thrown into disorder, regimented even more visibly along class lines, and punctuated with violent acts of civil disorder around the world.

Yet it felt as time itself had stuttered, punctuated by obsessive refreshing of new feeds but locked into hours with only ourselves for company.

I acknowledge that this paper necessarily excludes the experiences of essential workers, or those who could not afford to remain inside. Class and racial divisions, when compared with infection rates around the world present a stark picture of privilege and an ongoing lack of equality – issues which periodically burst to the surface as the pandemic continued. For the more affluent sections of the world however, the switch to social virtual technologies to manage day-to-day life was almost instantaneous. Working, teaching, learning and socialising was facilitated through online platforms and applications that allowed people to see each other, even if they could not physically be present. This pivot came at a point where virtual technologies are not only heavily embedded in global society, but when 'The Material Turn' within gaming and other media technologies has become a fairly well-established motif. In areas where Shelter in Place or full lockdown of local populations occurred, the majority of people not in key work positions had to shift daily practices to within the confines of their own homes.

Within this chapter I explore how materiality was challenged during this 'Pivot' through various different gaming technologies. My writing focuses the playing and consumption of boardgames. If the world outside our front doors seemed to be drastically stuttering from crisis to crisis, the sense of displacement inside drew players towards games that provided them with worlds of genuine escapism – literally jumping away from this world into others. This was not without difficulty, however, as it involved a radical reconfiguration of how players were used to interacting with boardgames, as well as the players that had previously sat with them during the playing of these games.

Boardgaming is a multibillion industry worth $7.2 billion in 2017, $13.1 billion in 2019 and still growing exponentially (Seetharaman 2020). Rather than slumping during the pandemic, new users flocked to an already vibrant area of gaming, selling out core titles, and engaging with platforms that replicated material gameplay experiences online. Older, more traditional titles saw a huge rise in sales, as those indoors hearkened back to nostalgic conceptions of happy domestic life outside. The image of a nuclear family gathered around a boardgame was central to this depiction, coupled with media attention that presented boardgaming to non-familial units as undergoing a 'golden age' of development and design (Smith 2017). Finally, a crucial element of boardgaming popularity has come from spectated playthroughs, both live and recorded, that emphaise the sociality of games. Shows such as *Tabletop*, *Dice Tower* and *Shut Up and Sit Down*, are not only immensely popular, but present boardgames to an upcoming generation of players. These shows are consumed as artifacts in their own right – as performed sessions with no accompanying need for viewers to play along or take part in any way. They also present games as intensely social – the banter of the invited guests (who are often highly experienced players, performers and voice actors) is as important to the audience – perhaps moreso – than the game they are playing.

Boardgames helped many people cope with enforced lockdown, giving them a sense of positive, if artificial materiality, in these early months: Fiona Reid says of playing the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020):

> As the news in the real world seemed to be going by so quickly, but so slowly at the same time, the game provided a certain sense of rhythm, gave them a pace to your day and allowed them to forget about everything for a few hours.

(Reid 2020)

However, boardgames are by nature tactile, often comprising hundreds of individual pieces which are handled and shared between players. Both boardgames and tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) – an adjacent cousin experiencing many of the same shifts during the pandemic, explicitly provide a linguistic delineator of location - ‘board’ and ‘tabletop’ being an indicative signifier of where play takes place.

However, the places where boardgames are played have changed. Their play and dissemination has moved away from family units, and towards larger groups of people (friends and fans) playing socially and publicly together, often sharing titles collectively due to cost. A social environment of cafes, pubs willing to host players and gaming shops with allocated space for play has evolved around this newer mode of playfulness, allowing an opportunity for players to ‘try before they buy’ and to play with friends (rather than their family) as a social event. The evolution of boardgames as a lucrative genre has evolved around this group, changing in content and price point as a result. For example – gaming shops quickly realised that understanding rules is a barrier to entry, and therefore trained their staff to be able to demonstrate and explain these as part of a sale (or social event at the shop) (Asmodee 2021, eclectic games 2021).

These newer ways of gaming conflicted with health guidelines during COVID, forbidding extensive social contact and eschewing touching objects to avoid transmission. This chapter explores how current boardgames and their communities refigured themselves, where groups chose to adapt, and how this affected the material play of a genre which effectively fetishizes

the importance of physical (and virtual or imaginary) artefacts. Whilst traditional representations of play in the media adopted a nostalgic – highly problematic – direction, presenting the materiality of play as idealised within domestic spaces, more modern audiences changed their habits, overcoming proprioceptive demands via a highly successful 'needs must' series of apps and virtual platforms. Despite this, they still ultimately yearned for the physical play and playful artefacts that this developing community had begun to create, compensating in other ways whilst still utilising virtual technology during play.

Boardgames

An area of huge commercial growth in recent years, boardgames are contingent on one major element – physical manipulation of tangible artefacts. The boardgames industry has experienced huge development in areas that support close social interaction including boardgames cafés, conventions and public meetups, further encouraging a boom in paratextual elements of what is already a very physical leisure pursuit. This section examines how boardgames used pre-existing motifs of play to develop and overcome the restraints of the pandemic by taking two radically different directions. In the media, boardgames were presented as a physical signifier of familial unity and strength, with many articles reverting to traditional, stereotypical depictions of boardgaming and the family to encourage healthy indoor relationships. For players however, the reality of lockdowns meant that their modes of play were frequently removed, and alternative ways of interaction had to be sought. Both aspects drew from, and reinterpreted, the materiality of the boardgame as a physical artefact that had to be repurposed when groups of people were suddenly unable to touch or interact in person. As Scott Beattie remarked, 'Before we lived with the reality of a global disease

outbreak, Pandemic was just the title of a series of boardgames'. Now games took on a newer purpose, becoming both physical and virtual articulations of what could and could not have a material presence in this new world.

Fun for all the Family

When the pandemic began and people headed inside, with schools and places of work closed or switched to 'work from home', an idealised family unit sheltering in solidarity together was pushed to the forefront of the popular imagination. An image of 'coziness in the household' was enforced in media representations by a systemic and unconscious adoption of the kyriarchy, regressing to dated, linear preconceptions of the family unit. This normality often reinforced retrospective images of solidarity and togetherness; for example the UK government changed a national holiday in May 2020 to coincide with VE (Victory in Europe) Day instead, and also used the term 'Business As Usual' throughout government propaganda during early months[1]. Boardgaming had a role to play in this depiction, with its persistent imagery of togetherness, healthy cooperation, fun, and material interaction with others. This section briefly examines this configuration and why it re-emerged, counterpoised with the reality of sales and boardgame consumption during the pandemic.

Although the boardgames industry is experiencing massive growth, boardgames also have a very specific ideology attached to them as objects of play in the more general media arena. The same tired titles persist in the popular imagination as indicative of boardgaming play (*Monopoly*, *Scrabble*, *Cluedo*, *Catan*). These titles are ideologically presented as the epitome

[1] It is perhaps worth noting the superficiality of these propagandist actions. 'Business As Usual' was a term used initially during the First World War, specifically to mask the economic disaster unfolding in the United Kingdom, and VE Day occurred during a period of governmental crisis in the UK, when an exhausted population were growing increasingly disillusioned after five years of war and rationing.

of family ‘togetherness’. Advertising persistently shows an archetypal family unit (heterosexual cis female mother, cis male father, two children, all white) gathered around a board, with expressions of joy and celebration on their faces. This image also frequently contains Yule iconography such as festive decorations or clothing, supporting the idea that games are played once a year after the Christmas (Christian) meal. Males are shown in active positions, leaning forwards or taking turns, whilst females show appropriation or praise on their faces. In these images, boardgames are also frequently played on the floor, signifying that they are more toy than game.

Fig. XXX. In this stock footage image, a happy cookie cutter family enjoy an uncomfortable game on the floor.

A rapid resurgence in lifestyle articles promoting these cultural stereotypes and linking them to boardgame play proliferated during these first months, intensifying during the peak buying

period before Christmas and coinciding with a second wave of the pandemic in the UK and US. Stock images like the one above proliferated in articles where source material was unavailable, perpetuating the idea of an idealised boardgame playing unit. *Hello Magazine*'s December 2020 feature on boardgame recommendations is typical of this construction (Bull 2020). A selection of old, 'classic' or easy-to-play games are presented. The article recommends several trivia games, the unholy trinity of *Scrabble*, *Monopoly* and *Cluedo* (*Clue* in America), and two games aimed specifically at very young children. This list is typical in its scattershot approach to recommendations, and is indicative of someone who does not know the genre, it's players, or how it has developed. Many of the titles suggested have little sustained gameplay – they are neither interesting or indicative of the plethora of more playable (and age appropriate) titles available They are also not 'family friendly'; they do not encourage sustained group play and several could not be played by 'all ages' – for example, the trivia games have limited playability (once you know the answers, the game lacks excitement), the children's game are not interesting for adults, whilst the classic games such as *Scrabble* rely on a developed lexicon that may not be available to all. Whilst the article is nominally about recommending titles to play, it reinforces gameplay stereotypes of family unity and short-term play – for example through the recommendation of the trivia tie-in 'Mr and Mrs' 'how well do you know your partner?', the comment that one game (*Monopoly, Friends Edition*) will provide 'a few hours' entertainment, and comments suggesting that the recommendations are to keep children 'busy' rather than, perhaps 'interested'. These articles, although plentiful, often met with considerable asperity from people actually looking for recommended titles. *The Guardian's* 14th December 2020 article on boardgames to buy over Christmas and play during the pandemic (a sort of ghastly mash-up of both themes, here) (Irving 2020), attracted scathing comments concerning its lazy, dated recommendations. In

the comments, Cally777 accurately summarises the article: ‘It’s very like a video games enthusiast being told that the height of this or her hobby is playing *Space Invaders*’.

The presentation of classic boardgames as a panacea to boredom and fraught relationships in the household is problematic for many reasons, not simply for the presentation of archaic, exclusionary representations of family units, but because boardgames were shown to be extremely physical in nature. Images like those in Fig. XXX reinforce the idea of closeness, proprioception and physical intimacy, and of games as a play activity, more akin to a toy than a game. We see the hands of each participant nearly touch, and the game they are playing (*Chinese Checkers*) comprises dozens of pieces as well as the board itself. The material presence of the game is undeniable. The identification with ‘family’, alongside the subtext that of boardgames are an activity that everyone secretly loathes and only plays during one set point in the year, puts boardgames into a position where they become a figurehead for awkward physical play. Fortunately, this type of representation is not borne out by sales, recent boardgame design, player behaviours or increasingly more liberal attitudes to boardgaming and play (Woods 2012, Booth 2021). Importantly, boardgame design and sales are not consumed by a catch-all ‘family’ unit, but instead, lie predominantly within the 25 - 44 age group as previously discussed (Booth 2019, 2020). Young professionals with greater disposable incomes fall more heavily into this demographic, a group more likely to share accommodation with other people in their age range than their parents. Individuals with young families are additionally less likely to seek out classic games, having grown up in a mediated environment with a high exposure to new titles and other transmedial texts such as TV series which promote newer titles (Booth 2021).

A key element overlooked by the many (many) articles suggesting games to play during lockdown was that the core purchasing group of boardgames was also in isolation together. These buyers did not necessarily form a family unit, and were also looking for things to do indoors for entertainment. Whilst experiencing the tensions of close proximity with a different group of peers, This group are more likely to experienced boardgame play in social spaces away from the home – boardgame cafes, expos and pubs. With a much stronger cultural awareness of available titles and changes in boardgaming design, this group spent heavily during lockdown. Many popular titles not only sold out, but had to be rapidly reprinted. The boardgames industry experienced a 240% increase in sales during the first week of the UK lockdown (Butler 2020), and consistent growth throughout the next year. This group were also highly mediated, and thus their response to finding alternative play spaces moved beyond the physical, as socialising had to shift to virtual spaces. The last section of this paper will discuss how this group shifted their material play on a 'needs must' basis to mediated play online.

Touch and Trace

Boardgames are extremely tactile. Components come in a vast array of shapes and sizes, and the majority of games involve movement of these elements – from playing a card to destroying a city populated with dozens of wooden 'meeples' using a wooden dinosaur (*Terror in Meeple City,* Bauza, 2013). Even non-physical games such as *Werewolf* (see Davidoff, 1986) or *Two Rooms and a Boom* (Gerding & McCoy 2013) have retail versions which provide cards, tokens and props for each game. As Paul Wake argues:

> In the manifest physicality of their paper, card, wood, and plastic technology, analog games might make a claim to be better placed to engage with the senses of their

> players than their digital counterparts. Characterized by the high production values of their components and artwork, contemporary board games appeal directly to the senses of touch and sight and on rare occasions to taste
>
> (Wake 2019)

In their paper ‘The Materiality of Boardgames’, Rogerson et al. assert the undeniable importance of a material presence in boardgaming (2016). Despite online alternatives, the players they surveyed actively chose to physically interact with the boardgames they played and with other players. This is a persistent theme in the trio’s research – later work finds that players frequently engage in practices such as the customisation of individual elements and pieces in order to make them both unique and interesting for others (Rogerson et al. 2018, 2020). Game pieces can be friable, and wear and tear can break a game entirely – for example if cards are scuffed or otherwise marked. Thus a thriving paratextual aspect of the boardgames industry is the supply of protective components such as boxes, bags and protective card ‘sleeves’, as well as individualistic markers such as interestingly coloured dice, moulded figures, apparel and storage items.

Fig XXX. A customised box for the game *Gloomhaven* (Childres 2017), a boardgame which contains over 1000 individual pieces.

The integral nature of physical components, and the fetishization of these (just ask a TRPG player how many sets of dice they own to see an example of this), is not the only reason that players like to be present when playing. The social ethos that has developed around boardgame sales is a result not only of the community growing, but also of the ways in which games encourage players to communicate whilst playing. Boardgames often involve discussing, debate and sometimes intense social interactions (for example games with a traitor mechanic, where one person is deliberately deceiving the others). They have a complexity that often involves one or more people needing to verbally explain the rules to others, or are cooperative, requiring verbal communication and agreement on how an

individual turn will take place, and what it's benefit to the group might be. Finally, cost (a large boxed boardgame in the UK often costs between £50-90), means that players tend to pool their resources – one person will buy a title and then bring it to an event to play collectively with others, or develop a circle of friends who share their copies of games.

Players enjoy being present when they play together, even if virtual alternatives exist. The growth of boardgame events and conventions a testimony to this, with thousands of people attending events such as UKGE (21 000 in 2019) and Gen Con (anticipated 70 000 in 2021) (Morrus 2019, Hall 2021). This is echoed in the more day to day aspects of the industry – boardgame shops and cafes frequently rent enough space to have areas where players can 'try before they buy', or spend evenings playing games together.

Prior to lockdown, Rogerson et al. discuss the availability of online platforms and apps which allowed boardgame play online, but consistently found that players eschewed them for material play (2015, 2018, 2020). Going into the pandemic, therefore, the core boardgames purchasing group were much more attuned to virtual and online technologies in daily life, but absolutely preferred physicality in their play.

The COVID pivot changed this physicality by necessity. Players could not meet in their regular groups, visit communal spaces or take part in events like conventions which showcased new titles. Both sales and play had to move online. Fortunately, an existing infrastructure already existing in the form of a number of sites which replicated games or allowed boardgame play online From March 2020, existing sites like *Tabletopia*, *Tabletop Simulator*, *Board Game Arena* and *Roll20* saw an immediate and dramatic increase in usage. Steam saw an increase from 50 69 users in Feb 2020, to 36, 793 in April 2020 (Steam 2021).

Boardgame Arena saw a 600% growth, with over 5 million users in 2020. In January 2021, it was bought out by boardgaming giant Asmodee (Jarvis 2021), suggesting a level of long-term investment in the platform, alongside n expectation that many players would retain their subscriptions on a long term basis.

This community demonstrated a flexible attitude to losing the materiality of shared play in larger groups – capitalising on both the growth in virtual sites and buying more physical copies. Interestingly, despite the huge growth in online play, sales of physical boardgames continued, with similar massive increases in sales as those seen online. This is borne out by pre-pandemic buying habits, where playing virtual copies of a game result in more physical sales. Famously, sales of the online version of *Ticket to Ride* caused commensurate increases in the sales of the physical copy (Melby 2013), bringing it to new audiences through apps and other online versions, but boosting physical copies alongside these purchases. This success also meant that Asmodee were already committed to creating copies of their boardgames in a robust online format. Whilst this was intended to drive physical sales as well, it meant that their developer team was already established, with a track record of existing titles that had been converted well to a virtual form.

Case Study – Wizards of the Coast and the online pivot

Wizards of the Coast make an interesting case study in how pre-existing attitudes towards online play fed into the rapid pivot needed to market their games. Companies such as Wizards of the Coast, who rely on in-person tournament sales for games like *Magic: The Gathering* (*M:TG*) (Garfield / Wizards of the Coast 1993) rapidly pivoted their sales to online versions of the game. Tournament play, which is a lucrative and popular element of *M:TG*, is

specifically tailored towards in-person events where players often need to buy unopened packs of cards to play on the day. After cancelling their in-person events and setting up contingencies for winning players to have their rankings rolled forwards, Wizards of the Coast created a series of online tournaments which required similar purchases, but were played entirely virtually. They also shifted their marketing to Twitch streams – a direction they were already moving into – and launched a 'Stay at Home, Play at Home' marketing campaign. As with Asmodee, and probably as a result of the transmedial nature of their purchasing audience, the company were not only starting to explore the potential of online content, but had a pre-existing development team, and an awareness of how online and physical sales can dovetail. For example, robust videogame conversions of *Magic the Gathering*, including pre-existing elements like card cover assets, game development, and competitive play, already existed, which they could draw on when creating the content for competition play in an online arena.

Dungeons & Dragons, the largest TRPG franchise and also owned by Wizards of the Coast, pivoted its marketing to support remote play. Whilst this is a TRPG and not a boardgame, the implementation of *Role20* and *D&D Beyond*, and the ways in which it moved its games online provides a more easily visible example to that of *Tabletopia*, *Tabletop Simulator*, and other boardgame conversion sites. In the first and second quarters of 2020, WoTC deployed a massive push towards their digital platform - *D&D Beyond*. *D&D Beyond* was launched in 2017 to revitalise *D&D 5ed* in a virtual context. The platform is largely free to use, with purchasable content comprising more aspects for players and storytellers[2] to use during play, access to supplements and new manuals, and online content which helps players taking part in virtual campaigns and games. It provides a large amount of resources for players and

[2] I am using this term rather than the traditional one to promote more inclusive language during play.

storytellers, with a specific remit to endorse ‘homebrew’ content (games created by players and not taken from official scenarios). Whilst the platform saw growing usage prior to 2020, it too saw unprecedented and immediate levels of growth in March 2020, with players shifting both regular and new games to an online space. The ‘Stay at home, play at home’ promotion supported freebies, support packages and online play in general, pushing the player base towards *D&D Beyond*.

D&D has also seen a recent move to online spaces through both official and unofficial endorsement from high profile ‘actual play’ Twitch streamers and podcasters, again highly symptomatic of the trend in gaming to spectate as well as play. *Critical Role* (Mercer et al. 2015-present) frequently use *D&D Beyond* during play to quickly look up information, and *The Adventure Zone*, used the adventure included in the *D&D 5ed Starters Guide* in a less official capacity as the basis of their first game ‘Here be Gerblins’ (Mcelroy Family 2014-present). These shows support a more casual participation mode whereby viewers spectate or listen to live or edited versions of games by skilled players including voice actors or comedians. Both are at the forefront of a huge wave in viewing/listening to games as well as playing them, moving the game into a spectated position easily consumed from virtual devices. Boardgame sites such as *Shut Up and Sit Down*, *Dice Tower* and *Tabletop*/*Geek and Sundry* promote both the celebretisation of play and are seen as key sites of endorsement by the industry. A recommendation on *Shut Up and Sit Down* is currently seen as a ‘golden ticket’ to success, as with their recommendation of FunEmployed (*Shut Up and Sit Down* 2015), which took the game from relative obscurity from sell out success as soon as the video review was published.

This last aspect – whereby play is seen from the perspective of fandom, highlights the last, possibly surprising element of pandemic play. Game sales of physical copies continued to boom. Despite the heavy promotion of existing virtual paratexts such as the online platforms, streamers and virtual resources, WotC advertising encouraged gamers to buy physical copies alongside the virtual ones. *Candlekeep Mysteries* (Wizards of the Coast 2021), a game supplement for *D&D* released on March 16, 2020, is a good example of this. The supplement provides resources and guidance for newer players, containing 17 short adventures for low level characters– thus specifically targeting new players and providing them with short, detailed adventures to play. The supplement was heavily advertised as both an online and physical artefact. Whilst the virtual copy of *Candlekeep Mysteries* came with a unique set of digital dice, physical copies were promoted in tandem, including a limited 'collector's' edition of the supplement. Advertising stressed the dual purchase options with 'local game store{s]' pre-eminent on this list: 'Preorder now at your local game store, bookstores such as *Barnes & Noble*, *Books-a-Million*, or online retailers like *Amazon*. Also available for preorder at *D&D Beyond*, *Fantasy Grounds* and *Roll 20'* (Wizards of the Coast 2021).

This blending is fascinating. Some of this drive for physical elements is long term finance nouse - keeping the 'local game store' afloat by bolstering a financial model that has afforded the boardgames industry rising success. By doing this alongside the large names, Wizards of the Coast can appear supportive and suggest a guaranteed alternative – this is a win-win situation for them. However, the focus on the materiality of the product– for example its different covers, its assumed place alongside others on a player's bookshelf, a pull out map included in the contents, and the the emphasis on simply owning a copy, are central elements of the advertising. The classic image of a Storyteller holding or pouring over

a manual – is a pose that is rather more difficult in virtual space. Overall, the expansion is defined by its material presence.

This trend for owning a tangible version – often fetishizing the ownership of such, is reflected in sale across the boardgames and TRPGs sector. Not only did these games sell in both a physical and virtual capacity, but sales of single player and two player games rose. The first reason for this is obvious; people were alone, or living together in smaller units, therefore they sought playable games. However, the idea of duplication also appears here. Some people, like myself, invested in more than one copy of a game so that they could play a physical version of a game in tandem with a remote partner, but others appear to have succumbed to the same desire as with *Ticket to Ride* in 2011, and bought a physical ('real') copy to own alongside the virtual one.

For myself, using virtual boardgaming and roleplaying platforms enhanced my ability to play; given that my usual gaming group live in Ireland and I am an inhabitant of the UK, but this was a fairly unusual circumstance. Nevertheless, I too found myself absolutely in thrall to compensating through physical guestures and purchases. I found myself consuming physical artefacts alongside the virtual ones – buying copies of boardgames I couldn't physically play and gaming manuals that were more effective to use in their virtual iterations. I leant physical copies of my boardgames to a couple down the road, and took a lot of satisfaction in knowing they would be played 'in person'. I bought new dice, continued to buy an escape room boardgame that I was fond of, despite having no one to play it with, and invested in the next iteration of *Gloomhaven* (*Frosthaven*), on Kickstarter – the first crowdfunded project I had spent money on for years. Many of my conversations with my gaming group consisted of lengthy discussions of what we would play when we saw each other again – sometimes at the

expense of completing any kind of meaningful play online. These daydreams became an important locator for our social activities – ‘when we meet in person’ becoming an extension, and an elision of the fact we were all gathering more frequently than we ever had done previously, and that I was in a different country. I found myself going further - buying physical copies of roleplaying games, and mailing them to my gaming group in Ireland (a ridiculously cumbersome way to purchase titles for them!), even when we were playing together on Discord and pooling .pdfs and website resources. When I sent a ‘gelatinous cube soap’ containing dice to a friend, she reciprocated by sending me a set of spellcards – our buying had transcended necessary gaming elements and become entirely cosmetic (it was good soap, though). Overall, these activities show a tension between the desire to continue touch based, in person activities, and adaptive techniques to overcome these. We liked the virtual versions, but we connected by sending physical accompaniments, reminding ourselves of the times we shared experiences in the same space. I do not think this part of my experience was particularly unusual, with a strong identification with material activity becoming part of our social makeup. The materiality of these items, and their proprioceptive nature (flicking a spellcard over, feeling the sensation of the dice emerging from the soap, stashing a manual on my bookcase) made up for the lack of touch, contact and face to face communication that we had lost.

Conclusion

The activities described in this chapter demonstrate an adaptation to material requirements rather than an abandonment of them. Our need to touch, possess and hold items peeks through the virtual iterations. Material play is shown to be important, but not essential, yet it is still discarded with some regret or with a residual need to have the best of both. Heidi Tyni

and Oli Sotamaa argue that ‘A lot of the play experiences now available to us are more or less hybrid experiences, combinations of physical and digital elements’ (Tyni and Sotamaa 2014:12), and it was perhaps because of this that players pivoted online so quickly. However, their lasting desire to materially interact with both the games and people they were playing with was still a pervasive element to their play.

Lockdown demonstrated a strengthening of physical desire, rather than a release of it, even when the virtual provided an almost identical version – sometimes a more streamlined one – for players to gather around. Conscious of what was missed, groups met online to replicate idealised versions of physical connections, although they also developed and strengthened these aspects of play to extend beyond their non-material presences. The fantasies played out in, boardgames with their clear definitions of win and lose, and the triumphant worlds of roleplaying games – all saw a dramatic surge which reflected not only the need for escapism, but the need to replicate material connections in liminal spaces. None of this was nessecarily problematic: more, it showed a reliance on materiality which persisted and was repurposed, with an understanding that both physical and non-physical interactions might move gaming forwards within both spheres, and proved that they were surprisingly interchangeable. The desire for both – for example buying a physical copy of a boardgame, demonstrated a fascinating blur between materiality both within the game, and as an essential comfort in the tangible world.

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