

TO PLAY WITH SPIRITS: FLUIDITY AND DISTINCTION IN ROLE-PLAYING GAME
SHAMANS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department
of Sociology
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Michael E. Ohsfeldt
August 2017

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ABSTRACT

Shamans, a category of spiritual specialist that bridges this world and others to heal, are fixtures in many cultures and religions across the world. Meanwhile, tabletop roleplaying games are a storied pastime which transports participants to fanciful worlds. Some of those fanciful worlds contain shamans as a class of character that players may choose to assume. Through this option, the cultural concept of shaman is repurposed into an aspect of entertaining fiction. The tabletop roleplaying games employ rulebooks that codify, outline and establish their world and its many aspects, of which shamans are one. Through qualitative content analysis of their rulebooks, I study how tabletop role-playing games depict shamans in flexible and fluid ways that encourage player participation toward constructing the role and function of the shaman. Utilizing a social constructionist framework, this thesis illuminates the symbolic boundary work that defines shamans by their connection to spirits and distinguishes shamans from other classes as they are made into a cultural tool. My findings bring new insights into the ways individuals are able to navigate and negotiate the sacred in secular entertainment. Moreover, through showing that boundaries can be fluid and flexible in entertainment and that they can serve to differentiate while not judging, the importance of entertainment as a context for exploring boundaries due to the structure of escapism is indicated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has many individuals to thank, with the first being my committee members, who gave valuable support and insight with each and every interaction. The chair, Professor Shayne Lee, was invaluable in helping this project develop, especially with theory. Moreover, I would like to thank Professor Jessica Brown for her assistance and advice on methodology. Additionally, I would like to thank my old friend Joe as well as the employees of Fat Ogres Games and Comics and Nan's Games and Comics for lending me their expertise on role-playing games, answering many questions and providing illuminating discussion. Similarly, I would like to thank my friends and parents for their emotional support and proofreading. Finally, this thesis would never have been possible without Professor Pam Frese of the College of Wooster, whose frequent inclusion of shamans in her Anthropology classes, including one just on shamans' healing, was responsible for the topic of this thesis ever germinating.

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INTRODUCTION

Your party of adventurers remains engaged in a trying contest, beset on all sides by brigands. Unfazed, the barbarian to your right swings his axe into yet another enemy. The wounded sorcerer behind you casts an angry, searing fireball, while the bard to your left sings a desperate song to buoy spirits. For your part, you have your shield raised, blocking blow after blow, wondering which way the battle will inevitably turn when you see something out of the corner of your eye. An ethereal bear, charging forth, disrupts the battle and buys you time as you witness the final leather and cloth clad member of your party arrive. The shaman has brought the cavalry, of mighty spirits to devastate your foes and heal your wounds. Relieved, you hope it is enough as you roll the dice once more. . . .

Such a scenario is an example of the events players of tabletop roleplaying games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, may encounter as they immerse themselves in the game worlds. The players engage with these roleplaying games through intricate systems utilizing a myriad of complex concepts in order to create the game world they will inhabit. This style of gaming has been around for decades, with *Dungeons & Dragons* having celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2014 with the release of its Fifth Edition (Peterson 2014). Throughout the many years of their existence, tabletop roleplaying games entail multiple players engaging in a form of organic storytelling where they take on characteristics of the game world in which they seek to immerse themselves (Waskul and Lust 2004). One of the concepts often utilized in the worlds of these role-playing games is that of the shaman. Historically, shamans are a type of spiritual specialist, who have the ability to both heal and harm due to their immersion in the supernatural plane (Howells 1948). Versions of shamans exist throughout the world, acting as healers who call upon spirits to accomplish their work. However, conceptions of shamans also exist in forms of fiction

and entertainment, such as tabletop role-playing games. Given this re-imagination of a religious cultural concept into a secular and novel context, I asked the following research questions: How are shamans depicted in tabletop roleplaying games? What defines the shamans? What does that definition reveal about the social construction of the sacred for secular entertainment?

To answer those questions, I examined tabletop roleplaying games' systems, through qualitative thematic analysis of the games' rulebooks which carefully outline and describe how the worlds of the games function. Importantly, players utilize these rulebooks and their concepts in order to play the games, regardless of any personal factors. As such, I studied these rulebooks for how they present, describe, and codify the concept of shaman. For my sample, I selected three well-known game systems of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and *Shadowrun*, and identified rulebooks containing discussions of shamans. After I selected the rulebooks pertinent to shamans, I subjected the rulebooks to qualitative, thematic content analysis and compared the depictions of shamans in order to discern traits, as well as understand how shamans are conceived as an entity distinct from other options, along with the meanings such distinctions entail. My analysis is informed by a social constructionist framework that employs conceptual and theoretical resources from cultural sociology, namely, the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986;2001), and the notion of boundary work (Zerubavel 1991). My analysis is also conversant with the literature on shamans, meaning in fiction, and gaming.

Role-playing game shamans were found to be magic users who were tied to nature and tribes, and who were capable of both healing and harming through their connection to a personal spirit. Their relationship to spirits, and specifically their individual, powerful personal spirit, was found to be the defining characteristic of shamans, more so than their ability to heal, harm, perform ritual, mediate, or travel to other realms. The shaman was also made distinct from others

using boundaries such as east versus west and academic versus non-academic forms of magic, which emphasized the importance of not necessarily what a shaman does, but how they are able to do so. Despite such definitional and symbolic boundary distinctions, conceptions of shamans are fluid, having features of inherent cultural variation within the games and encouraging player choice. As such, the ways in which to navigate conceptions of shamans are adaptable to varying needs. Hence, as a collaborative form of storytelling (Fine 1983), tabletop role-playing games are flexible enough to accommodate both the logic of the game world and the needs of other players.

This research contributes to the literature on shamans by examining how the concept is presented in an entertainment context, for the purpose of allowing those entertained to take on the role of shaman, highlighting new nuances in how shamans are perceived. Likewise, my research contributes to the gaming literature by looking at how a concept used in games is depicted across and within games, in order to better understand the construction of such concepts. These contributions are largely academic in nature, yet they will encourage further research into similar phenomena of portrayals in fiction of cultural concepts. Additionally, the fluidity and flexibility of the shaman and its boundaries, as well as those boundaries' choice providing rather than judgement giving purpose, highlight that entertainment with its escapism provides a distinct context for the study of boundaries, which contrasts with past conceptions of boundary work.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The fantastical worlds of tabletop role-playing games are rich, full of concepts and meanings. As these game systems provide alternative universes for players to enter, understanding how such an alternative reality is built is important. To that end, the sociology of knowledge's theoretical approach of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) is instrumental, as it highlights how knowledge comes to be formed and lead individuals to take their reality for granted. In so doing, plausibility structures are employed which provide legitimacy and maintain that reality. As the settings and medium of tabletop role-playing games provide a distinct context, the ways in which their reality is formed and shared with players is important. However, that knowledge in games is complex and meaningful, so the ways in which both game and player make sense of these worlds is vital. As such, a cognitive sociology approach to boundary work (Zerubavel 1991) illuminates how concepts are distinguished from each other, and that through such distinguishing meanings and values are revealed. In a game like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b) where there are dozens of races and classes, such distinction is integral to basic functioning. Additionally, tabletop role-playing games are a form of interactive fiction (Fine 1983), and so the knowledge and distinguished concepts of these game systems are intended to be used by players. Therefore, the cultural sociology metaphor of the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986), whereby people's cultural repertoire provides tools which shape their strategies of action, provides a useful understanding. This thesis' theoretical approach is social constructionist, but also incorporates boundary work and the cultural tool kit to understand the complex ways in which knowledge is formed, distinguished and utilized.

Social Construction

To understand a gaming context where players actively shape and tell stories set in fantastical worlds, a key element of the theory in which I will ground my research is Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) concept of Social Constructionism, which they argue is the sociology of knowledge, for the field "will have to deal with not only with empirical variety of 'knowledge' in human societies but also with the processes by which *any* [emphasis in original] body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established as 'reality.'" (3) This is a distinct approach to the sociology of knowledge, which was built upon the works of German philosopher Max Scheler, who was concerned with how society decides which ideas will form ideology, but not with the production of those ideas (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This early form of sociology of knowledge was itself informed by Marxian concerns with substructure and superstructure, Nietzsche's mistrust, and the historicist emphasis that events could only be understood in their own, relative context. After Scheler, Karl Mannheim provided a broader reach to the sociology of knowledge, as his conception posited that society was also responsible for what ideas entailed, not just which were utilized (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Then Robert Merton added a structural functionalist element to the sociology of knowledge, including that ideas had impacts which were intended as well as unintended (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

However, Berger and Luckmann content that, as constructed by these past scholars and many more, the sociology of knowledge is thoroughly focused upon ideology, which they find limiting. Instead, Berger and Luckmann argue that "[t]he *sociology of knowledge must concern itself with everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society*, [emphasis in original]" (14) especially the commonsense, as it is commonsense and not ideology that allows for everyday functioning society. In this sense, Berger and Luckman incorporate the work of Alfred Schutz,

which looked at the everyday commonsense structures. This approach of the social construction of reality is also heavily influenced by George Herbert Mead and American symbolic-interactionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Within this concept, reality is a subjective experience, formed by one's knowledge. While to Berger and Luckmann "reality" is "phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition" and "knowledge" is "the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics," (1) a key insight of social constructionism is that what constitutes an individual's knowledge differs depending upon the plausibility structures that legitimate such knowledge sources. And thus, what one takes for granted as reality differs from another person's socially located and culturally mediated reality. Berger and Luckmann stress that knowledge is not independently formed, but shaped by the social contexts within which the holders find themselves. These plausibility structures are processes which maintain the subjectivity of reality through legitimation, and should they be threatened, perceptions of reality are threatened, leading to them being protected with sanctions. Furthermore, one of the most important parts of the social construction of reality is the impact of interactions. On an individual, face-to-face level, knowledge can be flexible and rapidly respond; however, as size of groups or anonymity increases, so does a tendency for "typification," whereby people are categorized according to characteristics (Berger and Luckmann 1966; 33). Repeated interactions can also reinforce knowledge, particularly when those interactions are with those who share knowledge. For Berger and Luckman the social construction of reality is composed of processes both structural and individual, whereby the individual acts with structures and has the ability to impose and derive meaning.

The importance of ease of reference of knowledge is similarly central in what Berger and Luckmann call “objectivation,” the “products of human activity” which “serve as more or less enduring indices of the subjective processes of their producers, allowing their availability to extend beyond the face-to-face situation in which they can be directly apprehended.” (34) Objectivation can include items and objects as well as forms of communication like words or body language, which take on meaning that can be understood in multiple contexts, in a swift manner. These processes assist in understanding how reality is constructed through knowledge in ways that may be commonly occurring, and based upon reinforced past experiences or understandings of meaning.

As such, social constructionism lends itself to tabletop roleplaying games as the players interact with each other using their shared understandings of the way the games and each other operate, and these games can use commonly occurring concepts, interpreted in their own way, to facilitate this process. Additionally, the logic of the game systems, both narratively and mechanically, may provide plausibility structures through which interpretations and meaning making are legitimated. Moreover, the application of social constructionism to shamans is pertinent as shamans are a form of healer who engage with patients according to their shared culture (Howells 1948; Brown 1988; 1989). Medical sociology has developed a concern for the social construction of illness and healing, as individuals experience and conceive of illness and healing in remarkably varied ways, according to their personal beliefs (Parsons 1964; Bury 1982; Barker 2002). While the role-playing game context is one of entertainment, not healing, the shaman still engages in healing, and the ways in which that healing is performed are constructed in-game, for players to utilize. Furthermore, these rulebooks themselves are aware of social constructionism, with one *Dungeons & Dragons* text referring to how “[l]aws and taboos,

traditions and beliefs, are all largely social constructs...the rules of society shape and define all these customs and more.” (Carter, et. al. 2008; 20) Therefore, if the creators and designers of these games are aware of, and utilize, a form of social constructionism, employing that same theoretical approach for my thesis research is insightful. However, there are limitations to the social construction of reality, which are relevant for this thesis. As the knowledge that shapes reality is subjective and relative in nature, processes of differentiation and separation are crucial, which is why boundary work (Zerubavel 1991; Lamont 1992; Robinson 2014) is a critical addition. Moreover, Berger and Luckmann do not show how boundaries are navigated. Similarly, the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986; 2001) helps illuminate how such knowledge is utilized by agentive actors, and why some parts of knowledge are utilized over others.

Boundary Work

Building upon the relative, culturally informed nature of concepts provided by social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) is Eviatar Zerubavel’s (1991) conceptions of boundary work and distinction making. As a cognitive sociologist, Zerubavel’s focus is on how and why people distinguish between things, or the ways in which concepts, ideas, places, actions and more can become viewed as acceptable or close in ways that seem counterintuitive. In this framework, the act of separating something from something else provides meaning, and only through the act of being made separate is something made distinct. For example, social identity for Zerubavel is inherently exclusionary as through the act of including someone, one must exclude others, with what is seen as an act of inclusion for the one being viewed as an act of exclusion by the other. These many distinctions are often arbitrary, yet they are frequently rooted in culture, with, for instance, rules like dietary guidelines being based in religions founded millennia ago. Additionally, this ability to render things as distinct from each other is central to

conceiving of different frames of reality in which those things may exist, simultaneously. The example Zerubavel provides is that of a table where a chess game is occurring and there is a glass of water. The glass of water would not be found on the chess board, and the pieces on the chess board have their own rules to follow because they occupy “two separate realms of experience.” (11) This particular component of the distinction between the realm of the game and elsewhere has been a particular focus of past studies on tabletop roleplaying games (Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004; Tosca 2009). Zerubavel’s conception of boundaries are insightful for how they demonstrate the ways in which boundaries are constructed mentally, in a wide variety of circumstances. Boundaries provide one instance of the ways in which knowledge is utilized to make sense of the world, and can recall processes of typification (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

However, Zerubavel is not the only scholar to address the concept of boundary work. A contemporary of Zerubavel, the sociologist Michele Lamont (1992) is specifically concerned with boundaries between groups, identifying three key boundary types individuals use to categorize themselves as different from others: moral, socioeconomic, and cultural. Through so doing, Lamont builds upon the cultural capital perspective of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly by critiquing the emphasis or lack of emphasis placed on certain boundary types. Similarly, Lamont’s work relates to neo-Durkheimian conceptions centered on social control through explicitly moral boundaries, but attempts to address the pitfalls of the moral boundary focus. Moreover, Lamont critiques such approaches for not looking at group boundary formation. For Lamont, “symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize,” (9) however, while she acknowledges that there are boundaries beyond the types she examines, such as spatial and temporal, they are not part of her work. In such a way, Zerubavel (1991) is useful,

for his conceptions of boundaries are more abstract and address the processes of their formation in many contexts and forms. Considering how tabletop role-playing games provide an entire universe full of meanings and boundaries for players to engage with, being able to detect and address boundaries of any type is crucial. Moreover, Lamont (1992) is primarily interested in boundaries for how they relate processes of class reproduction, and thereby the reproduction of inequality. Similarly, Zandria Robinson's (2014) study of identity politics boundaries of southern blackness, which explicitly builds upon Lamontian conceptions, examines markers for identity construction, and how authenticity and legitimacy are at stake. Part of her analysis includes studying the impact of art, such as movies and music, on the construction of these boundaries. Robinson is valuable for showing that boundaries are multi-dimensional, and can be built upon intersections.

Additionally, one key aspect of both Robinson and Lamont's approaches to boundaries in group identity construction is that through the drawing of boundaries, people engage in judgements of worthiness. These boundaries and the values they call upon allow for groups to say that they are different from another, and that as they are different in these ways, this delineated group is therefore superior. For Lamont's (1991) upper-middle class professionals, this could be that they are smarter because they have the proper education, from the proper places. Importantly, once these boundaries are drawn and judgement given, interactions are shaped, because people may find the out-group unworthy, and therefore difficult to interact with as they are not viewed as equals and cannot understand them. Yet, while this aspect of boundaries may be incredibly potent and influential in the works of Lamont and Robinson, I find this aspect potentially restrictive in the context of entertainment, particularly in escapism oriented or choice driven entertainment, where boundaries, even of group identity formation,

may serve a purpose other than the determination of worth. Even though messages and values are often present in entertainment, the goals of entertainment remain captivation and fun, so boundaries may serve context specific aims to enable and deepen the realization of those goals. As such, I argue that boundaries need not have elements of judgement, or be driven by that judgement, that the purpose of boundaries can be that they distinguish, and that through distinguishing, provide depth and variety to a context by providing more concepts. This is why I find Zerubavel's (1991) boundaries most relevant for this thesis, as even though he often considers matters of taboo or acceptability, his more abstract, cognitive approach to boundaries highlights general processes of boundary formation, the importance of boundaries for distinction, and the complexities in their navigation.

Still, the ways in which boundaries are formed and navigated highlight what is meaningful in a culture, particularly when a specific component becomes the salient characteristic of distinction (Zerubavel 1991). That salience is culturally relative, so that for one boundary the points of distinction can vary depending upon those engaging with the boundary (Zerubavel 1991). Sometimes, a boundary can seek to impose itself over other boundaries, attempting to redefine what matters or who is important, yet that imposing boundary can face resistance due to the weight attached to other boundaries (Binder 1999). What forms a boundary varies broadly; however, there is often a moral component (Beisel 1992; Lamont 1999). That moral component becomes particularly potent and a point of strife when a boundary's definition begins to shift (Beisel 1992; Bryson 1999). Furthermore, boundaries are often oppositional in nature, beyond just providing points of inclusion and exclusion, producing dichotomies, such as with social class (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Lamont 1999) or race (Binder 1999). These points of inclusion and exclusion can extend to matters of taste, with studies of musical preference

being popular for what they say about boundaries (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Bryson 1996). However, concerns of boundaries in taste are particularly intriguing, as Zerubavel (1991) highlights that art and entertainment are contexts in which the crossing and blending of boundaries becomes more acceptable and less transgressive, allowing for engagements that would be frowned upon elsewhere, which is itself its own boundary. As such, studying the content of fiction, particularly a form of fiction designed to be interacted with, sheds new light on how concepts and their boundaries are navigated, for entertainment provides a different context for those concepts to be employed.

Such a concern with the boundaries of fiction is critical for this study for the focus of this thesis is not on the experience of the players, but how the rulebooks construct and interpret concepts, as well as how they distinguish them from others, by focusing on the example of the shaman. For roleplaying games the ability to distinguish quickly in understood ways allows the game to function. In addition to game world and real world, players must distinguish between their player characters, the game master, and non-player characters, and how that shapes their interactions. Moreover, while for many wizards, sorcerers, and warlocks may seem as though terms for the same thing, the differences between them are of utmost importance for a player of *Dungeons & Dragons* in understanding who that magic user is and how they might behave. Part of that important differentiation between magic users deals with the very nature of the magic each uses. A wizard is an academic, whose abilities are gained after years of intense study and practice (Carter, et. al. 2008). Meanwhile, a sorcerer is a natural prodigy, calling upon innate, often dangerous, magical talent (Crawford, et. al. 2009a). Then, the warlock's might stems from their pacts and rites with demons and spirits (Carter, et. al. 2008). Through understanding that these magic users are different, and the ways in which they are different, as presented by these

rulebooks, players will shape how they proceed in-game when they play as, or encounter, one. Boundaries, because of the knowledge they draw upon, can inform behavior. Therefore, the ways in which the shaman is distinguished, particularly from those who may seem similar, reveals what boundaries the tabletop role-playing games find meaningful. Furthermore, this work adds to the literature on boundaries by examining how boundaries of the sacred and spiritual are navigated in secular entertainment, particularly when those boundaries are likely quite different from the boundaries of sacred and spiritual that the consumer engages with regularly. Moreover, by examining boundaries in an escapist entertainment context, this study illuminates how context, and the purposes of that context, shape boundaries and their implications.

Cultural Tool Kit

A useful analytical tool that complements Berger and Luckmann's social constructionist approach and redefinition of the sociology of knowledge, as well as cognitive sociologist Zerubavel's attention to the importance of boundary work, is cultural sociologist Ann Swidler's (1986) metaphor of the "cultural tool kit." In this conception of culture, Swidler posits that instead of values stemming from culture determining actions taken, culture provides "a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action.'" (273) These strategies of actions are viewed by Swidler (1986) not as consciously constructed plans, but rather the ways in which one organizes the possible actions or routes to goals, informed by a wide variety of cultural components, yet not the goals themselves. Swidler places her approach in contrast to past models of culture which were dominated by Weberian focus on interests and Parsonian value-oriented ends. Further, Swidler (1986) contends that if it is culture that forms these strategies of actions rather than the ends, there will be more consistency with those strategies of action than the ends sought. Moreover, because cultural experience determines the

skills one may have in their toolbox, regardless of their values, people may follow strategies of action informed by their culture, even if those strategies do not serve their theoretical aspirations. Likewise, because of how ingrained strategies of action can become, the acquisition of new tools is a significant endeavor.

Yet, Swidler (2001) also acknowledges that there is complex variation in the way in which culture is used. Even for one concept, like love, individuals hold intricate, often contradictory views, informed by both acculturation processes such as art which provide ideals and personal experiences which temper conceptions, with individuals implementing the diverse parts of those concepts at different times. As such, Swidler argues that “most people do not actually have a single, unified set of attitudes or beliefs and that searching for such unified beliefs was the wrong way to approach the study of culture.” (4) Therefore, the study of cultural resources, which individuals use to form their concepts, a type of cultural tool, which then inform their strategies of action, is beneficial for understanding how culture is utilized. There is agency to the ways culture is used, even as culture constrains. Part of this agentic variation is that people attach different levels of seriousness to culture.

However, this metaphor for culture has faced some critique from cognitive sociology due to how there are limits on what people can retain cognitively and much of culture is unused (Martin 2009). Yet, identifying the parts of culture that are utilized, and the ways in which those parts are utilized provides valuable insight into what components and actions are most meaningful, thereby highlighting what distinctions and boundaries are employed (Zerubavel 1991). Similarly, though referencing Swidler’s (1986) work, Lamont (1992) does not make the explicit connection between strategies of action and boundaries when she comments that “individuals do not exclusively draw boundaries out of their own experience: they borrow from

the general cultural repertoires supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on general definitions of valued traits that take on a rule-like status.” (7) In this point, socially formed knowledge provides the cultural tools which shape the boundaries, making boundaries a type of strategy of action, that, in Lamont’s case, serve to define group membership and worth.

As such, Swidler’s (1986) understanding of behavior following pathways informed, though not necessarily expressly written, by a complex, varied set of meanings, habits, beliefs, symbols, and more relates quite well to role-playing games where players take the worlds, settings, characteristics, options, and mechanics presented by the game system to play and build their own unique experiences. While the players’ experiences may be unique, and while they can bring in their own outsider influences (Tosca 2009), displaying agency in how they use culture, the players all build upon the guidelines and concepts provided by the game system and the world constructed therein. Past scholars have proposed that tabletop role-playing games can be viewed as cultural tools (Fuist 2012; Jones 2012). Still, for the purposes of this thesis, I must caution that I am not studying the act of playing the games, and thus not observing the strategies of action players would take when utilizing or encountering shamans in their games. The cultural tool kit stresses the agency of the actor, and while for many forms of media that may dampen an analysis of the content, tabletop role-playing games are thoroughly designed for the express purpose of interpretive interaction, and thus analyzing the tools provided to players by the game’s rulebooks can be illuminating, as well as for how boundaries of those tools are navigated and negotiated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying shamans in tabletop role-playing games necessitates calling upon complex and varied bodies of literature, across multiple disciplines. First, there is the storied literature on shamans as a global phenomenon which highlights both what shamans are, as well as the breadth and complexity of their variations. Then, literature on meaning in fiction highlights concerns of specific genres, particularly the fantasy of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, as well as why portrayals in media are of consequence. That literature is important for understanding why the examination of shamans in an entertainment context is worthwhile. Finally, there is the literature on gaming, which provides insights into the experience of playing games, the narratives that are collectively created, and the process of identity construction that is especially crucial for role-playing games, of both the digital and physical varieties. When combined with theoretical insights from social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1966), cognitive sociology's attentiveness to boundary work (Zerubavel 1991) and an agentic approach to culture as a toolkit (Swidler 1986; 2001), these bodies of literature produce a conceptual framework that helps illuminate new facets of how the sacred can be navigated in secular entertainment.

Conceptions of Shamans

Shamans are a category of spiritualists who employ their connection to the supernatural and spirits to heal and mediate, while also having the potential to cause harm (Howells 1948; Brown 1988; 1989). Such spiritualists can call upon spirits and familiars, detect evil spirits, and even enter the supernatural plane (Howells 1948). When healing is implemented it is frequently a grand performance, a spectacle that engaged the members of the community present (Howells 1948; Brown 1988; 1989). However, shamans are set apart from their community, despite their position of influence, as their connection to spirits and potential for both harming and healing

distances them (Howells 1948; Brown 1988; 1989). They often wear distinct garb, and the dangerous work of shamans further distances the shamans from their communities (Howells 1948). Moreover, many shamans once experienced a significant event in their life that brought them to the profession (Howells 1948). Often, shamans were severely ill until they petitioned a spirit for mercy, in return for becoming a shaman (Howells 1948). Or, a child could exhibit certain culturally determined signs that would indicate that they will become a shaman (Howells 1948). And while the term is believed to have etymological origins in the Tungus of Siberia (Howells 1948; Eliade 1961; Laughlin and Rock 2014), with the first recorded usage by a seventeenth century Russian member of the clergy to describe demon-utilizing Siberians (Krippner 2002), the term has since been used to label a great number of practitioners across the globe (Eliade 1951; Krippner 2002).

However, the usage of this label, a social construct intended to easily designate individuals and their practice for wider dissemination, has been criticized as being a western academic ideal typical concept that ignores the global variety in those labeled shamans (Krippner 2002). Furthermore, even academic discussions of shamans have included a variety of models for perceiving shamans (Krippner 2002), and shamans have been known to engage in syncretism and adaptation (Dow 1986; Kendall 1996). Crucially, however, despite any critiques of the term, the term has come to have meaning to multiple groups, as ethnotourism (Joralemon 1990; Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015) and neo-shamanism (Chiestier 2008; Lindquist 2004; Hendrickson 2015) indicate. Therefore, understanding what shamans mean in a fictional context, particularly one with worlds as fantastical as those common in tabletop role-playing games, will help illuminate what being a shaman means to commercial, secular enterprises.

Past models

As shamans have been a long and vividly studied concept, particularly within anthropology, numerous models for what a shaman is have arisen over the years. Stanley Krippner (2002) argues that over time there have been multiple models observers have utilized in their perception of shamans. These models include the demonic, the charlatan, the schizophrenic, soul flight, decadent and crude technology, and the deconstructionist model. The first model, of shamans consorting with demons, was primarily the result of the initial encounters between shamans and western clergymen, who needed a frame to understand the dramatic, powerful rituals of the indigenous healers they were witnessing. The charlatan model, shaped by the Enlightenment's dismissal of the supernatural, regarded shamans as tricksters and frauds, who used their dramatic practice for deception and legitimacy (Krippner 2002). Some academic accounts of shamans also posit that it is a possibility, though not necessarily so, that the shaman may be lying to their audience (Howells 1948). The third model, the schizophrenic, saw how the shaman was engaged in trances, was oriented towards other worlds, and had some quirks that, for western psychology, might be viewed as signs of mental illness (Krippner 2002). A critique is that illness is socially constructed, and whether a behavior is acceptable depends upon the cultural norms surrounding that behavior. However, some scholars took a functional perspective and viewed shamanism as potentially providing an outlet for those who might otherwise be classified as having mental health issues, and finding a way for them to serve in a culturally accepted and valued role, which may further cultivate those distinguishing characteristics (Howells 1948; Kim and Ko 2011). Yet, that functional perspective can be critiqued due to studies that indicate that shamans are well adjusted when compared to those who suffer mental health issues (Kim and Ko 2011) and that, in comparison to the population they are part of,

shamans do not have a higher rate of mental health issues (van Ommeren et. al. 2004). For many reasons, these first three models, with how they judge shamans or doubt them are not widely accepted (Krippner 2002).

Meanwhile, the soul flight model focused on a particular aspect of shamanic practice, to where it was the defining characteristic. That characteristic was shamans' thorough embracing of out of body experiences and altered states of consciousness in their duties to travel to other planes of existence (Krippner 2002). This model was specifically formed by the works of Mircea Eliade (1959; 1961), who was captivated by how shamans send their souls on journeys to mythical realms, rife with powerful meaning. Eliade (1959) wrote about how the worlds shamans travelled to were often paradises, heavenly 'upperworlds' full of abundance, though other scholars have discussed the shamans' travels to underworlds (Krippner 2002). For the soul flight model, the shaman was "the specialist in ecstasy *par excellence* [emphasis in original]" (Eliade 1959:256) due to the central place these visions and journeys had in their various roles. However, this model faces critique due to how reductionist the focus on altered states is, as for many forms of shamanism it is not a central component or even present, and a defining characteristic could instead be a heightened awareness (Krippner 2002), as other feats, like presenting their culture's mythology through monumental displays of memory, may indicate (Krippner 2012).

Still, discussions of visions and soul flight are still important facets of the academic study of shamanism, including how pre-existing beliefs impact the altered state (Polito, Langdon, and Brown 2010), soul retrieval (Lindquist 2004), cross-cultural analysis of shamanic dreaming (Laughlin and Rock 2014) and dreams in Zulu neo-shamanism (Chidester 2014), and the importance of dreams and visions to matters of initiation and healing (Kremer 2007).

Additionally, further efforts to define what shamans are cross-culturally often critique Eliade's focus (Sidky 2010; Pharo 2011). The erection and discussion of such a distinguishing boundary for shamans is intriguing, and reminds that the definition of boundaries is an ongoing process.

The subsequent model that Krippner (2002) considers, the crude and decadent technology, shares some similarities with the soul flight model, as it is also concerned with consciousness. This model comes from transpersonal philosophy's concern with meditation, and views shamans as a specialist who was able to achieve some lower level of higher consciousness. The transpersonal philosophy informed model has been criticized for ignoring the variety of shamanic practice, the shaman's communal role, and the importance of wisdom (Krippner 2002).

Finally, there is the deconstructionist model, springing from post-modernism, which is concerned with the liminal, mediating, meaning-altering nature of the shaman (Krippner 2002). Due to their roles in reproducing, retelling, and reinforcing cultural mythology through their practice, as well as their engagement with and travel to the supernatural, shamans straddle and confound normal conceptions of life, death, and power, and construct new ones. Furthermore, the shaman's power and authority is contingent upon the values of the society they are located in, and when confronted with western rationality persecution and marginalization may occur. However, this has been critiqued as while shamans may prosper in ambiguity, they are still channeling the meanings of the culture, and not necessarily challenging them (Krippner 2002). Even early studies of shamans viewed the shamans as chief conveyors of culture who received power and legitimacy through their calling upon preexisting cultural beliefs (Howells 1948). Additionally, the shaman's position relative to the audience and community can have an important impact on whether the shaman is viewed as beneficial or a malicious sorcerer, with the outcomes of the shaman's efforts further altering that dynamic (Brown 1988;1989). Moreover,

the ways in which shamans have been able to engage in syncretism and adapt to new belief systems, environments, and technologies (Brown 1988:1989; Dow 1989, Kendall 1996; Green 1998, Kim 2012) highlights how shamans can engage the world and incorporate its meanings into their tool-kits.

These various models Krippner (2002) presented highlighted the complex variety with which shamans have been studied and discussed. While key characteristics can be discerned, even that discernment is not without its issues. Shamanism is a diverse practice, and thus the ways in which role-playing games allow their players to interact and navigate with that diversity provides insight into what boundaries are most important to discerning the shaman in worlds of fantasy and cyberpunk.

Syncretism and adaptation

Shamans are not a historical concept frozen in time, as the practice of shamanism continues today, with the practice frequently evolving to meet the ever changing demands of the world. As a religious and spiritual specialist, the belief system that shamans call upon for meaning in their practice can take on elements of other belief systems. One example is with Don Antonio, an Otomi Indian shaman who utilized a belief system that blended the symbols and mythology of the indigenous beliefs with Roman Catholic beliefs to produce a potent set of meanings (Dow 1989). For Don Antonio, his knowledge came from God, and invoking Virgin Mary was a common element. This example indicates a fluidity to shamanic belief systems through an ability to incorporate components from belief systems which are without shamans. Shamans can also employ syncretism in their relationships and identity construction as shamans, and in varied ways, as modern Korean shamans incorporate or navigate various influences (Kim 2012). A Korean shaman can see the government label them a “Living National Treasure,”

transforming them into an authoritative icon (Kim 2012:374). Or, a Korean shaman can write a book, guiding others on the performance of shamanic ritual, and seeking to produce systematic, standard knowledge and training for shamans, akin to modern, western religious norms.

Conversely, a Korean shaman can present an identity that places them in opposition to traditional shamanism, and seek to tap the spiritual potential of patients, in a neo-shamanic fashion (Kim 2012). Shamans themselves navigate the world they encounter in the production of shamanism, and through so doing show that not only is shamanic practice diverse, it will only become more so as shamans encounter more influences. Likewise, as tabletop role-playing games are an interactive form of story-telling, where players create characters to embody, the games provide a context through which to see how the concept of shamans is navigated by non-shamans in worlds with their own influences.

Now, though shamans are known for their healing role, many have adapted to the introduction of western bio-medicine. For some cultures, this means that the types of rituals that are employed with frequency change, to reflect other needs of the community, such as the rise of good fortune ritual practice in Korean shamans to alleviate the tensions of the petty bourgeoisie (Kendall 1996). Other times, that adaptation is through drawing boundaries on what type of healing is needed for what type of illness, with certain illnesses being designated the domain of western biomedicine and others the domain of shamans, often due to the illnesses' magical and spiritual roots (Dow 1989). Yet others have embraced the very usage of western biomedicine into their practice (Brown 1988; 1989; Greene 1998). These shamans may advise their patients on which western biomedical treatments to seek, or utilize the western biomedicine themselves within their rituals. Indeed, the usage of western biomedicine knowledge in shamanic practice may give the shaman more power, as this is a form of healing that is not restricted and

constrained in the ways the shaman's traditional power is. Further, that western biomedicine comes from foreign, far flung sources may also synergize with local beliefs about how knowledge from such distances is powerful (Brown 1988; 1989; Greene 1998). As such, shamanic practice is agentive, and able to incorporate and adapt to various challenges, while also showing that once agreed upon boundaries of distinction may not be as potent or relevant as once regarded.

Yet, while there is a significant amount of syncretism and adaptation utilized by shamans, there are also efforts to resist influences, such as Korean efforts to preserve traditional music, such as that utilized by shamans, which have also encountered Christians renouncing superstitious, traditional elements in music (Maliangkay 2014).

Ethnotourism and the neo-shamans

A fascinating component of shamanism is that the dramatic practice calls upon cultural beliefs and expectations, for power, legitimacy, and effectiveness (Howells 1948). Thus, perceptions of what shamans are can have an intriguing impact upon shamanic practice, as cases of both ethnotourism (Joralemon 1990; Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015) and neo-shamanism (Lindquist 2004; Chidester 2008; Hendrickson 2015) demonstrate.

In ethnotourism there are three key perceptions at play: what tourists believe shamans are; what tourist-catering shamans believe tourists believe shamans to be; and what shamans themselves believe shamans to be (Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015). The differences among these perceptions bring up concerns of authenticity and legitimacy. The tourist has their notions, and will seek shamans that fit in order to find what they believe is authentic (Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015). For tourists that authenticity may be learning about the 'secret' knowledge the

shaman has, through what is displayed to them in catered encounters, for in the tourist's cultural framework shamanism is a lost, secret form, which remains so even after the tourist witnesses (Hammons 2015). However, the catered encounters are an altering of shamanic practice, through the more frequent implementation of mind-altering substances or certain rituals (Davidov 2010). Yet, despite this catering to perceptions, the experiences of parts of shamanic ritual, such as mind-altering substances, is still through the cultural framework of the individuals involved (Fotiou 2010). For Peruvian users of ayahuasca, bad experiences during the mind-alteration may be interpreted as a malicious shaman attack, indicating a problem in their community relations. Meanwhile, the western tourist, with their individualistic cultural framework, views the elements of their mind-alteration as revealing the nuances of their psyche. The importance of the beliefs one already holds before entering shamanic ritual has also been verified by cognitive scientists (Polito, Langdon, and Brown 2010). Therefore, perceptions of shamanism interact with other perceptions, highlighting the complexities of positionality and context.

Moreover, shamans who do not cater to tourists may doubt the training and knowledge of the tourist-catering shamans, calling into question their legitimacy, viewing them as economic opportunists, and thereby producing local tension (Davidov 2010). Similarly, once a shaman has begun to alter their practice to cater, they may be rendering themselves open to further and further influences which may distance them from their community and traditional practice (Proctor 2001). Some anthropologists have also questioned the legitimacy and authenticity of tourist-catering shamans in providing knowledge of local shamanic practice, though that is alleviated through how such shamans provide insight into commercialization (Joralemon 1990). Therefore, ethnotourism demonstrates how perceptions of shamanism can be constructed and molded to meet the needs of others' perceptions, such as a desire for authenticity and legitimacy,

even if the perceptions of two groups differ. Moreover, by seeing what is important to these ethnotourists in their definition of what makes, such as seeing spirits, the dramatic rituals, or the mind-altering substances, as well as the exotic nature of the excursion (Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015), the boundaries and distinctions that are meaningful are revealed. Though, for tabletop role-playing games, the boundaries of shamans may work under different concerns, as due to the games taking place in fantastical settings, authenticity and legitimacy may be lesser determinants.

Neo-shamanism is a form of shamanism that is frequently built upon a combination of New Age mysticism and interpretations of academic anthropological studies of shamanism (Hendrickson 2015). New Age philosophy emphasizes the ability one has to heal oneself, via the mind's power, their energy, and communion with the supernatural. To such a philosophy ecstatic soul flight was appealing, along with other elements such as spirit animals. As much of the literature on shamans that was utilized by the New Age movement was about Latin America, Mexican-American folk healers were approached (Hendrickson 2015). Yet, many of the traditions of these folk healers lacked the shamanic elements sought, thus some began to incorporate shamanic practices and neo-shamanic knowledge into their own folk healing (Hendrickson 2015). This example of syncretism through perceptions, expectations, and realities colliding shows that not only can shamans adapt, others can adapt to become a form of shaman, and further complicates the questions of what constitutes authenticity and legitimacy in shamanic practice.

However, for neo-shamanism authenticity is not just what an authentic shaman is, it is also about the authentic self (Lindquist 2004). In urban western neo-shamans the practice of soul retrieval seeks to provide the patient with an authentic self, which involves forgiveness and

newly constructed self-perception. This is the case as soul loss occurs in neo-shamanism when people are inauthentic to themselves, because they too readily accepted roles placed upon them, or suffer to maintain connections (Lindquist 2004). This is a usage of spirituality to achieve authenticity for oneself, not necessarily seeking authenticity to provide spirituality. Furthermore, practice of neo-shamanism can face concerns of authenticity when utilizing media technology (Chidester 2015). Zulu neo-shamans utilize media technology to provide extrasensory experiences and to record the wisdom of current shamans. Yet, in so doing there are claims of both adding and diminishing authenticity (Chidester 2015). Therefore, while authenticity may be sought and valued, the attainment of shamanic authenticity is challenging, rife with perceptions of its own.

Meaning in Fiction

Fiction, even when taking place in far flung locales, is full of meanings. With genre fiction, there are expectations of what the genre entails, what it is built upon, and through such elements meanings can be reproduced or commented upon. With the genre of fantasy, in particular, there is also a relation to processes of Medievalism, where the historical past of Medieval Europe is interpreted, reinterpreted, and further reinterpreted in romanticized and idealistic fashions (Trigg 2008; Utz 2011). While genre trappings can be viewed as restrictive (Wilkins 2011), for repeated consumers of the genre, the utilization or play upon such trappings can be used for deepening of entertainment (Young 2010) or even increasing the resonance of meanings (Bezio 2014). Moreover, whatever the genre, the consumption of fiction and the meanings therein has been shown to alter perceptions and conceptions (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Tuchman 1978; Fazio and Marsh 2008), underlining the importance of understanding the meanings in media portrayals.

Medievalism and genre

Of the selected role-playing game systems, two, *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, are set in the fantasy genre, while the third, *Shadowrun*, is firmly cyberpunk. With these genres, there is a literature that looks at how meaning and tropes are utilized and repeated. This is especially the case for the fantasy genre, as there are academic concepts and schools of thought for studying how historical medieval concepts are utilized, perceived, and interpreted with fantasy being a key part of that (Utz 2011). That concept is Medievalism, which is “the continuing reception of medieval culture in post-medieval times” (Utz 2011: 101). The related concept of Neomedievalism looks at “technology-based pseudo-medieval texts,” such as video games or films, that have little care for historical narrative or accuracy, instead being “simulacra of the medieval” (Utz 2011:107-108). Medievalism and Neomedievalism look at a wide variety of ways in which medieval historical and cultural concepts are received and reinterpreted, in contexts such as gaming, tourism, and film, as well as academia (Utz 2011). Still, the particular connection Medievalism has to fiction is of great interest. For instance, Stephanie Trigg (2008) views Medievalism in fiction as a form of “convergence culture,” wherein thoughts on the medieval from past academic research, past popular understandings, and even the creative’s own thoughts combine to form something new, showing the complexities of cultural influences. Trigg’s (2008) specifically includes fantasy works, as they are key examples of how the Middle Ages are interpreted in novel fashions.

Similarly, the influences those fantasy interpretations call upon has been a point of study. Fantasy fiction can make both specific and nonspecific use of its influences, as Helen Young (2010) demonstrates through her analysis of the works of Katherine Kerr and Neil Gaiman. For background, Young (2010) explains that fantasy’s use of medieval concepts is viewed as a

perquisite for the genre. Further, the medieval concepts most often utilized in fantasy are those informing warfare and the feudal structure. Moreover, those concepts are frequently interpreted through understandings of the present and intermediate, building imagination upon imagination. Some of those central past understandings include Norse mythology, Arthurian legend, and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, as well as C.S. Lewis, with subsequent authors pulling from these both explicitly and implicitly, with the reader's own potential knowledge of these influences' mythos only deepening the experience (Young 2010). Yet, fantasy's reliance on, or almost necessitation of, the usage of such influences and medievalism as bedrock has been criticized as a hindrance to the genre's ability to incorporate the influence of indigenous culture (Wilkins 2011). For example, Australian fantasy is so grounded in understandings of European medievalism that it has failed to interface with potential indigenous cultural influences. That failure to bring Australian flavor to the fiction was, according to Kim Wilkins (2011), a result of genre conventions that defined fantasy, for the domination of *Lord of the Rings*, King Arthur, and the Nordic legends was not only influence, they had become the genre. Such reliance upon genre conventions was, in Wilkins' (2011) eyes, a disservice as Australian fantasy writers could potentially offer interesting insights into colonialism and race relations, given Australia's history. Yet, non-medievalist lens can be applied to fantasy, such as in the case of fantasy novels with female heroines. In such novels there is a trend of female exceptionalism as the heroines overcome restrictive norms of their worlds (Tolmie 2006). While those restrictive norms are influenced by understandings of the Middle Ages, the narratives and the protagonists' abilities to overcome those norms are informed by feminist critiques (Tolmie 2006). Therefore, fantasy can be shown to be both open and resistant to additional influences, as the genre continues to interpret and interpret again the legacy of Europe's past.

However, while fantasy has its unique concerns with how its meanings are formed and reproduced, the genre of cyberpunk, to which *Shadowrun* belongs, does as well. A newer genre, the foundational works of cyberpunk, and their legacy, are given much attention. These influential works include the 1982 Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* (Senior 1996) and the 1984 William Gibson novel *Neuromancer* (Idier 2000; Renegar and Dionisopoulos 2011), with the 1999 Wachowski sisters film *The Matrix* being a central work of the latter wave of post-cyberpunk (Kilgore 2017). Cyberpunk often has elements of a grid, matrix, or network of cyberspace (Calvert 2013; Kilgore 2017), cybernetics (Csicsery-Ronay 2010), cyborgs (Stockton 1995; Leblanc 1997; Cavallaro 2004), and a dystopic future, which frequently includes megacorporations (Leblanc 1997; Renegar and Dionisopoulos 2011; Martin 2015). Analyses of cyberpunk often have focused on how the genre plays with notions of humanity (Senior 1996), law (Effross 1997), technology (Idier 2000; Cavallaro 2004), and gender (Leblanc 1997; Sato 2004; Calvert 2013). Other studies have focused on the ways in which cyberpunk is treated and created in international versions of the genre such as Japan (Sato 2004; Marvidou 2015) and Brazil (Vazquez 2012), along with the accompanying meanings. Additionally, the dynamics through which the tropes of cyberpunk play with the tropes of other genres, when combined, has been studied, such as with *Spider-man 2099* (Martin 2009). In this rich literature on cyberpunk, the thesis' study of how shamans, a form of religious and spiritual specialist employed by diverse cultures, is constructed and made distinct in the cyberpunk world of *Shadowrun* fits in nicely and provides needed insight into how the sacred is navigated in the genre.

Fantasy and cyberpunk are both imaginative genres, which have central, influential works that define much of their make-up. As the selected role-playing games of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and *Shadowrun* are situated in these genres, they likely play within the tropes and

concerns which have defined fantasy and cyberpunk. Therefore, the ways in which the shaman is made distinct illuminates what boundaries are important, and similarities across games may also highlight how those boundaries are important across genres, bridging studies of fantasy and cyberpunk.

Importance of media portrayal

Beyond analyzing the tropes and history of genres, literature has examined how the consumption of media can shape people's perceptions in powerful ways. Part of that literature is the concept of symbolic annihilation, which was first viewed as erasure as if "[r]epresentation in the fictional world signifies social existence," the lack of representation or underrepresentation removes the absent group or concept from processes of socialization and value formation that occurs through the consumption of fiction (Gerbner and Gross 1976:182). This concern of absence has been expanded upon, particularly in feminist circles, with Gaye Tuchman (1978;1979) stressing how symbolic annihilation produced distortion, for when something that was underrepresented was present, there were often characteristic ways in which it was done, undercutting the variability present in a group, while also potentially emphasizing power dynamics. That emphasis of power dynamics, and the ways in which limited representation occurs echoes concerns of how boundaries are drawn, and how those boundaries reflect cultural values (Zerubavel 1991). Furthermore, Tuchman (1978) was also interested in how due to distorted media representation members of a group may gain a negative, doubtful, self-critical view due to an inability to attain the limited ideals presented to them as a form of social existence. And even for members outside of a group, consumption can shape world view in many ways, as cultivation analysis shows (Gerbner 1998), such as in the case of how long-term

consumption of news media, with their specific presentation and focuses of what the world is like, leads people to view the world as a mean place (Signorielli 1990).

The shaping of an individual's perceptions of the world through exposure to fiction has also been a concern of psychologists. Experiments have examined how knowledge is retained and viewed following exposure, including instances where the exposure involved details that were false. Age has been found to affect the learning of falsehoods, with exposure to stories producing more misinformation in older children than younger children, thereby evincing a greater degree of suggestibility (Fazio and Marsh 2008). The trend was children with better memory were the ones who were most likely to reiterate misinformation. However, exposure to correct knowledge produced benefits and strong results, due to reinforcement of preexisting pathways. Similar behavior can be seen in adults, where when tested individuals will utilize story knowledge to answer, and though potentially aware of their usage of story knowledge, the tested adults could feel that they had known the knowledge prior, including in cases of misinformation (Marsh, Meade and Roediger 2003). As such, consumption of fiction, and what is in that fiction, has a clear and evident impact upon individual's perceptions. However, one weakness of such tests is that what if the knowledge being exposed by the fiction is something distant to the individual? Or, something where almost all of the exposure and interaction with the concept will come through fiction, and not real world experience? For instance, while Medievalism literature discusses how interpretations of both historical Medieval Europe and medieval fantasy are built upon past interpretations of even further past interpretations (Trigg 2008: Young 2010: Utz 2011), many people may encounter Medieval Europe in their education. How potent of an effect could exposure in fiction be for concepts that for most people are only encountered through works of fiction, even if they have real world counterparts? As such, studying the portrayal of

concepts like shamanism in fiction is important, as there is a wide variety of practicing shamans outside of the world of fiction.

Yet, meaning in fiction is important in other ways as well. Whether an individual reads fiction or non-fiction books has been shown to have an impact on social ability, as the need to be able to understand and relate to characters in fictional stories produced greater empathy and ability to comprehend one's peers (Mar et. al. 2006). If reading fiction can produce social empathy through ability to relate to character, interactive and interpretive fiction such as role-playing games where individuals create and play a character alongside others may be particularly potent. And, though not an academic group, Seattle and Kirkland-based Wheelhouse Workshop cites how tabletop role-playing games facilitate players "learn[ing] to take the perspectives of others" as one of their reasons for their therapeutic gaming which aims to foster social skills in teens (Wheelhouse Workshop 2017). Additionally, exceptionally successful works of fiction on a topic can potentially shape the nonacademic discourse surrounding a topic, such as in the case of the Knights Templar (Schaffrath 2010). Identities can also be created and altered through consumption, such as how popular Taiwanese songs build a Taiwanese identity (Ho 2015). Therefore, while individuals may have diverse sets of reasons for consuming fiction, the content of fiction can have a dramatic impact upon how they perceive concepts.

Gaming

In addition to calling upon the bodies of literature on shamans and meaning in fiction, this thesis is also informed by the literature on gaming, and mainly role-playing games. While this literature includes studies of tabletop role-playing games (Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004), including *Dungeons & Dragons* (Fine 1983), this literature also embraces role-playing video games, from massively multiplayer (Lastowka and Hunter 2004; Dickey 2007) to single

player (Bezio 2014), as well as live action role-play (Milspaw and Evans 2010). Within this literature some relevant, thoroughly intertwined elements of concern are what individuals experience as they play games, the shared narratives they create, and the processes of identity construction that are undergone. While this thesis analyzes the content of rulebooks, rather than the play and utilization of those rulebooks, this literature illuminates the purpose for which these games are created. Moreover, through focusing on content rather than play, this study addresses an underserved gap in the literature.

The experience of playing games

The origins of tabletop role-playing games trace back to historical wargames which painstakingly recreated battles of the past utilizing miniatures (Fine 1983). Players wanted games that allowed more creativity, and so fantasy role-playing games began to evolve, with *Dungeons & Dragons* being the vanguard. The play of these games involves a variety of elements, though some systems may reduce the import or completely remove some of them. There are the players, the characters they create, the referee or Dungeon Master or game master, the world and adventure the game master presents to players, a random element which is usually multi-sided dice, and in many cases miniatures and a map on which the game takes place (Fine 1983; Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004; Hendricks 2006). These sessions of interactive fiction and storytelling can take place over the course of hours, potentially consuming most of a day, and are frequently episodes of larger, continuing narratives (Fine 1983).

In these sessions, the frame of the game is important, and players seek to immerse themselves in the game. Fantasy role-players engage in a form of “naïve realism,” as the purpose of the game is not to win but to become immersed in the world (Waskul and Lust 2004). When the role-players play their games they have to act in a way that fits the logic of the game world

and their characters, not the logic of the real world and their out of game self (Waskul and Lust 2004). A rogue must act as a rogue, and a shaman must act as a shaman, regardless of what the player is out of game. This immersion can take on linguistic elements, such as how “I” no longer possesses the meaning of referring to the individual but instead referring to the individual’s character and the character’s actions in the game world (Stromberg 1999). The player leaves the mundane and enters the fantastical, and uses this new, agreed upon, meaning of “I” to convey that they have achieved “*enthrallment* [emphasis in original],” specified by Peter Stromberg (1999) as “the immersion in culturally available fictions,” where one balances both “engrossment and disbelief.” (490-491) As such, stimuli that weakens immersion is sanctioned (Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004). In many ways these threats to immersion in the game are threats to the plausibility structures (Berger and Luckmann 1966) of the game, for they threaten the reality of the game and its play. Importantly for tabletop role-playing games, this immersion must be achieved through engagement and negotiation with others, with the boundaries of what is acceptable or not changing according to the preferences and composition of the group (Fine 1983; Jones 2012). That this immersion is frequently built upon the interpretation of game systems makes understanding the contents of those systems, and the boundaries they comment upon, vital, as well as how those systems suggest implementation.

However, it is that engrossment, that search for fun, which drives many to play these games, at least consciously (Fine 1983). While the importance of fun to playing has been critiqued as reductionist, fun has also been acknowledged as central to shaping the player’s viewpoint (Mortensen 2010). Moreover, being part of a group and the flow of that group contributes to the fun of engaging, even in video games which have less story emergence potential than tabletop role-playing games (Kaye and Bryce 2012). While individuals may be

cognizant of the benefits or secondary motivations of engaging tabletop role-playing games, such as socialization and ability to call upon and discuss forms of knowledge with interested peers, the primary motivation remains one of fun (Fine 1983). Therefore, acknowledging that the express purpose for which games are created, and which they are utilized, is fun enables one to understand that boundaries and meanings created are not necessarily seeking legitimacy, authenticity, or messages, even if those may be valued. Rather, enjoyment is sought above all else. A game will only be played, continuously played, and spread to others, if players have an enjoyable experience with the game (Fine 1983). This makes the conception of shamans in tabletop role-playing games inherently different from the conceptions of shamans seen in neo-shamanism or ethnotourism.

While fun is the determining factor, games can still include complex messages and meanings, or pose questions worth considering. At a basic level, many tabletop role-playing games are set in fantasy settings and so invite players to call upon their knowledge of historical Medieval Europe to address issues or problems, that the games themselves may not address (Fine 1983). That active usage of past understandings of Medieval Europe to inform additional, subsequent understandings of concepts from that time recalls much of what concerns Medievalism (Utz 2011). Additionally, a game's ability to engage the player's mind may be augmented if they can call upon such outside, preexisting conceptions. In the instance of the 2011 Bioware single-player role-playing video game *Dragon Age II*, Kristin Bezio (2014) argues that the central conflict is the competition between religious ideology and personal interaction as the basis for social order and relationships. While the plot focuses on religious conflict and extremism, throughout the game the player is guided by their interactions with characters in their party, and a system of approval and disapproval therein (Bezio 2014). The player must balance

their agreement with the social structure and their attachment to their comrades, though Bezio (2014) argues that the game's developer, Bioware, urges the player to side with one's friends and resist extremism. Importantly, the religions in this conflict were shaped and formed by understandings of Medieval European Christianity and the conceptions of Otherness and fear of Islam, all through the lens of fantasy (Bezio 2014). Building the fantasy setting and plot upon well-known real world concepts in a Medievalist fashion enabled Bioware to more quickly and efficiently establish the game world, while also making the social commentary more resonant (Bezio 2014). While the example of *Dragon Age II* is interesting because the tension is based upon the player's investment through interaction (Bezio 2014), games raise additional interesting questions about law through how video game worlds are different contexts (Lastowka and Hunter 2004) and what World War II video games say about collective memory of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust (Herkner 2012). Thus, this study on shamans in role-playing games is well suited to join the literature on gaming.

Shared narratives

Tabletop role-playing games are an interactive, often on-going form of fiction that involves the player creating emergent narratives that they share through their cooperative creation. This was a central conceit of the foundational academic work on tabletop role-playing games in academia, Gary Alan Fine's (1983) *Shared Fantasy*. While that work looked at a number of role-playing games, including *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the late 1970's, and scholars have commented on how the medium has changed since (Jones 2012), Fine's (1983) ethnographic and interview research remains relevant. Importantly, the stories told in these games are the result of negotiation, where concepts, expectations, and situations are navigated not just by the individual, but by their interactions with fellow players and the game master (Fine

1983). While the composition of those elements varies by groups, and stereotypes exist about players and game masters, failure to negotiate can produce tension and erode enjoyment, thereby ruining the game. As this negotiation calls upon multiple forms of knowledge, as well as appropriately limiting such knowledge, the characters players take on do not lead to acting, but to “storytelling – with each storyteller having authority over one character – producing a collective fantasy.” (Fine 1983: 213 – 214) That collective fantasy is the result of patchwork, continuous efforts, and is central to the engrossing immersion that players seek, for a smoothly functioning group is one that can be consumed by the game and its story, not squabbles (White, Harviainen, and Boss 2012).

Group cohesion is paramount for small groups, due to their fragility, and the satisfaction provided by fun causes groups to continue (Fine and Corte 2017). That fragility is of particular import for the tabletop role-playing groups who Fine (1983) studied as many of the social ties were weak, with individuals only knowing each other as members of the game group, due to segmentation of personal life and networks. Additionally, having fun as a group can produce positive memories and stories that may be called upon in the future to reinforce group stability (Fine and Corte 2017). The processes though which groups create their narratives and fun involve constant erection and navigation of boundaries, which may indicate power relations and dynamics (Fine and Corte 2017). An example of this is if a group of role-players create their fun narratives in a very violent and misogynistic way, which while potentially aligning with their perception of an unforgiving Middle Ages, that shared narrative can be exclusionary for possibly interested women (Fine 1983). Yet, some groups may embrace outside knowledge, or find parodies which reference out of game concepts humorous and beneficial to the game, though this too depends upon a group’s norms (Tosca 2009). Moreover, the importance of a group’s norms

in shaping what types of knowledge are used, and how they are used, reflects the agentic variation to the ways in which culture is used that permeates Swidler's work (1986; 2001).

As tabletop role-playing groups are involved in constant processes of storytelling, the shared narratives produced may be rich with inside jokes or anecdotes that gain meaning for the players, attaching sentiment to not just the fellow players, but the games themselves. Thus, when a concept like the shaman becomes a feature of a game system, that concept becomes a potential tool for forming future strategies of action (Swidler 1986). That tool may be informed by not just the players' out-of-game perceptions of that concept and the presentation of the concept by the game, but also the memories formed by the players' encounters in-game. Furthermore, the fluidity with which role-playing game concepts are constructed, due to the interpretive nature of their intended utilization, highlights that concepts, despite categorization, are in some ways inherently unstable, and subject to the whims of those calling upon them.

Identity construction

Character creation is central to tabletop roleplaying games and many video games. Players can attempt to create themselves, putting themselves into a setting (Fine 1983). Or, players can settle on a concept and design around that, choosing to play as that character would behave in the setting and encounters (Fine 1983). Another option of players designing a character to game or exploit systems is worth noting as well, for that choice places in-game achievement over the role (Fine 1983). In collaborative efforts such as tabletop role-playing games a group is best served when each member shares similar intent, as differences in the intent of character creation can cause tension due to the ramifications on immersion and narrative (Fine 1983). There is also the risk that players can become too involved with their characters and lose the ability to separate, which is precarious as the characters created can be killed by the

outcomes of the game (Fine 1983). These facets mean that the ways that players construct themselves through the character creation process has meaningful implications. In this fashion, role-playing games may serve as part of a cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) as the elements of character creation provide tools for future strategies of action that may be interpreted in a variety of ways, yet still encounter limits, as the game must not be broken (Fuist 2012; Jones 2012).

Todd Nicholas Fuist (2012) argues that through gameplay players construct identities via self-exploration, world exploration, and connectivity. Self-exploration involves understanding oneself through the embracing of the other, by imagining how someone else would act (Fuist 2012). A related concept, world exploration is interested in seeing how the dynamics of another world impact concepts, such as an individual playing women in multiple games to better understand femininity cross-world, or the prejudice races can face, such as when someone plays an evil coded race like the drow, or dark elves, in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Fuist 2012). Encountering these issues out of game may be a source of discomfort, but by encountering them within the context of the game the discomfort is lessened, due to the shifting of boundaries provided by both entertainment and fictional setting (Fuist 2012). Finally, connectivity is about relating to a community of gamers and the imagined world of the game (Fuist 2012). Connectivity can call upon an oppositional or outsider identity, such as that nerds are socially awkward, and use that identity as a source of bonding, while also excluding outsiders that may be perceived as more socially adjusted (Fuist 2012). This reflects other scholars' discussions about how gamers find others and build their groups, while also establishing how they are different (Fine 1983; White, Harviainen and Boss 2012). Still, through engaging in these forms of identity exploration, tabletop roleplaying games provide powerful vehicles for self-discovery and reflection (Fuist 2012).

However, such processes can also be about the realization of desires, including male erotic fantasy and masculine power fantasy, due to the empowerment the games provide, yet tempered by the games encouraging self-reflexivity (Nephew 2006). Video games also are avenues for which individuals navigate multiple conceptions of American masculinity, even if those games occur in fantasy settings (Schut 2006). Additionally, the created shared narratives in vampire live action role-playing provide a way for individuals to reinvent and recreate traditional folkloric beliefs (Milspaw and Evans 2010). As such, identity construction in gaming is not just about character creation, it is about the stories and settings those characters live or die through. These are complex processes that involve the utilization of knowledge yet enable deeper understanding of the self, all while having fun. Therefore, by examining the shaman in tabletop role-playing games, the ways in which religious concepts, as interpreted in secular entertainment, can be used as a tool in an imaginative form of identity construction that plays with meaningful boundaries is revealed.

METHODS

When seeking to understand the depictions of shamans in tabletop role-playing games, the rulebooks of the games are critical. Each tabletop role-playing game is a system, which is defined by a set of rules and guidelines presented to players in the forms of comprehensive rulebooks. In these rulebooks, a legion of concepts, from how combat works to how much certain items cost, are carefully outlined and described. As such, these rulebooks provide the foundation for the games that all players partake in. A group playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in Austin is employing the same core as a group playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in Toronto, due to the central place of these rulebooks. Therefore, the rulebooks of tabletop role-playing games are fundamental in discerning how shamans are depicted, and for the purposes of this research were studied using content analysis.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of three game systems that are some of the most successful and influential in the medium. The first, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was first published in 1974 and has been dominant in the medium ever since, as well as enjoying numerous adaptations into other mediums (Peterson 2014). *Dungeons & Dragons* has also been parodied in other forms of entertainment, including an episode of the comedy television series *Community* (Harmon et. al. 2011), which was entitled “Advanced Dungeons & Dragons,” referencing the title borne by an early, influential version of the game. Furthermore, *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine’s (1983) pivotal work on roleplaying games, had the later 1970’s play of *Dungeons & Dragons* central to his analysis, including interviews with co-creator Gary Gygax. Presently the game system is in a form that is known as the Fifth Edition, having seen much revision and expansion since its inception. However, while Wizards of the Coast is currently publishing the Fifth Edition of

Dungeons & Dragons, for the purposes of this study I utilized the previous iteration, the Fourth Edition. The reasoning behind this choice was a matter of content. The current catalog of Fifth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* material has a very limited selection of classes, with most of the supplementary material published focused on settings and adventure campaigns. Only twelve core classes are currently available in Fifth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons*, of which the shaman is not one (Crawford and Mearls 2014). Therefore, I turned to the Fourth Edition where the shaman is not only established but elaborated upon, across multiple books (Crawford, et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

The second game system of interest is *Pathfinder*, which is notable for how it was inspired by and builds upon a previous iteration of *Dungeons & Dragons*, 3.5 Edition, coyly referred to as “the world’s oldest fantasy role-playing game.” (Paizo Publishing) The publisher of *Pathfinder*, Paizo, first released materials for the system in 2008, and has garnered significant sales and accolades in the years since (Paizo Publishing). Moreover, *Pathfinder* has also branched out, with other forms of games and adaptations in other mediums. As of the time of writing, there is even a current Kickstarter campaign to fund a *Pathfinder* video game, which has surpassed the initial funding goal (Owlcat Games 2017). Unlike with the other systems selected, there is only one edition of *Pathfinder*, at present, and so there are no concerns about which edition to select, as the only form of *Pathfinder* does include shamans as a separate class in one of the supplement books (Bulmahn, et. al. 2014).

Finally, the third game system is that of *Shadowrun*, with its distinct near-future magical cyberpunk setting rendering it quite different from the medieval fantasy of both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*. As a system, *Shadowrun* has been published for well over 20 years, with the present form being that of the Fifth Edition (Hardy 2013). However, that is not the only

presence *Shadowrun* has, for, as with *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Shadowrun* has expanded into other mediums, such as video games. Further, within the world of *Shadowrun*, shamans are very important, and form a notable portion of the core rulebook of the game, and are expanded upon elsewhere (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014)).

These three game systems, with the iterations discussed, provided my sample, as I focused upon the segments of their rulebooks which are dedicated to shamans. These rulebooks can vary greatly in length, with the core rulebook for *Shadowrun*'s Fifth Edition (Hardy 2013) being 480 pages, *Pathfinder*'s most relevant supplement, *Advanced Class Guide* (Bulmahn, et. al. 2014) at 253 pages, and Fourth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons*' shaman-introducing *Player's Handbook II* (Crawford, et. al. 2009a) having 223 pages. The heavily structured and thorough sections first introducing shamans are 14 pages in *Pathfinder*, with a follow up 4 pages later on, (Bulmahn, et. al. 2014) and 18 in Fourth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford, et. al. 2009a). Such sections in rulebooks are largely focused on rules, statistics, and suggestions; however, they are often accompanied by visuals, flavor text, and discussions of world and character building. Meanwhile, the initial, overt introduction to shamans as a concept in *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013) is only a single page, yet this is not due to a lack of detail, rather it has more to do with how the game and its conception of magic is structured, as further elaboration upon shamans permeates the rulebook's discussions of magic. However, those are page counts only for the introduction of shamans, and due to how these rulebooks continuously expand and elaborate upon their worlds, additional supplements do elaborate upon shamans with dedicated sections, such as in Fourth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons*' *Primal Power* (Crawford, et. al. 2009b). Moreover, my research was not restricted solely to those sections explicitly about shamans, as references and discussions of shamans were also included, as those were present throughout the contents of those rulebooks

which featured shamans. Furthermore, other material from the game systems, including from additional rulebooks, were also discussed to augment the process and further contextualize the shamans.

The content analysis was performed on two rulebooks for each game system. While an arbitrary number, the selection does allow for the choice of the rulebook that introduces shamans and the rulebook that either elaborates upon shamans or presents them in a different manner. For *Dungeons & Dragons* Fourth Edition, this led to the inclusion of *Players Handbook 2* (Crawford et. al. 2009a) and *Primal Power* (Crawford et. al. 2009b). With *Pathfinder*, the focus was on the *Advanced Class Guide* (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), which was supplemented by *Ultimate Combat* (Bulmahn et. al. 2011). Finally, the content analysis of *Shadowrun* Fifth Edition was on the *Core Rulebook* (Hardy 2013) and the *Street Grimoire* (Andrew et. al. 2014).

Ethical Considerations

For this research into the depictions of shamans in tabletop role-playing games through the content analysis of rulebooks, the ethical considerations are minimal. These rulebooks are published works, widely available, and thus not sensitive information. Furthermore, the contents within these rulebooks are for the creation and outlining of a fictitious world with which players are to interact. Additionally, even the visual components are drawn works of art, not photographs using humans. And, crucially, my research focuses explicitly on these rulebooks, using content analysis, and does not involve any interaction with human subjects, such as players or creators, in any shape or form. As such, this project's ethical considerations are minimal, and did not require a human subjects review.

However, for the inclusion of visuals in the thesis itself, the publishers of each system, Catalyst Game Labs for *Shadowrun*, Wizards of the Coast for *Dungeons & Dragons*, and Paizo for *Pathfinder*, were contacted for permission. Of those, permission for image usage was obtained from *Pathfinder*'s publisher Paizo and *Dungeons & Dragons*' publisher Wizards of the Coast.

Data Collection

From this sample of the three game systems of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and *Shadowrun*, I examined the selected game systems' selected rulebooks through content analysis of any and all sections pertaining to shamans. This content analysis was thematic, holistic, and qualitative, concerned with the complete depiction, rather than the more quantitative or linguistic coding approaches. Expected themes in these tabletop roleplaying game depictions of shamans, given details of past academic research on shamans, included liminality, interaction with the supernatural, magic, healing, harming, mediation, and exoticness. Additionally, I was concerned with how shamans are constructed as distinct from other options players have, thus these sections on shamans were supplemented with additional materials from the books.

Data Analysis

This qualitative content analysis will focus on the themes and symbols that emerge from the rulebooks. The process was step by step, and was informed by the open-coding methodology of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). First, I systematically went through each rulebook, cataloguing each and every instance of shamans for that rulebook, using a combination of tables of contents, indexes and search functions on any digital copies. Then, I performed a first reading of the materials. Following that, I carefully documented, for each rulebook, what

shamans consist of, as regards their abilities, descriptions, and more. Next, I analyzed those documented attributes to discern any themes, such as, but not limited to, the expected ones of interaction with the supernatural, liminality, magic, and healing, among others, as well as points of distinction making. Subsequently, I compared and contrasted the findings from each game system to each other. Finally, those findings are presented here.

Additionally, while the described above content analysis focused on the text of the rulebooks, a supplemental analysis of the visuals of shamans in the rulebooks was performed. However, as the distribution of images was uneven, with the number in *Dungeons & Dragons* dwarfing both *Pathfinder* and *Shadowrun* combined, this analysis was looser, intended more to augment the findings of the textual content analysis.

Furthermore, the content analysis on the shaman specific materials was accompanied by the reading of additional portions of the rulebooks so that shamans could be properly contextualized.

Validity and Reliability

I ensured the content analysis' reliability by carefully documenting what sources the content analysis utilizes, including the exact pages and sections, so that should someone wish they could look at the exact same sample. As the rulebook sample is composed of cultural artifacts, the information they hold will not change over time, or from researcher to researcher. Meanwhile, establishing the validity of my data and results is contingent upon relaying my positionality and theoretical framework so that my research is transparent, and that my readers can clearly see the approach taken. The positionality is that I am a straight white male who is an atheist, with a limited tabletop role-playing game experience consisting of *Star Wars: Edge of*

the Empire and a variety of demonstration games at conventions, comic shops, and with friends, including *Pathfinder*. My theoretical framework is formed by a combination of social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1966), boundary work (Zerubavel 1991; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 1999), and Swidler's (1986) metaphor of the cultural tool kit, to understand how concepts are constructed, made different from others, and serve to inform action. That theoretical framework is supplemented by concepts of cultural reproduction and portrayal, particularly Medievalism, and is further shaped by past literature on shamanism and role-playing games.

FINDINGS

The rulebooks of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and *Shadowrun*, through their mechanics, rules, settings, and stories create an image of the shaman for players to engage with, consume, and interpret. These shamans of each system have their nuances; yet shared, central characteristics can be identified to indicate how shamans are defined and approached in this form of entertainment. Furthermore, the depictions of shamans are also made salient and potent through how they are made distinct, and through what such distinctions reveal about the role-playing game conceptions of shamans. Finally, the shamans as constructed by the rulebooks are presented to players in ways that stress fluidity via individual interpretation, through both the settings' own cultural variations and the often encouraged ability for the player to decide the details of the shaman for themselves. Through such fluidity and distinction, the ways in which the sacred is navigated and negotiated for secular entertainment is highlighted in its myriad complexities.

Conceptions of Shamans

In two of the three game systems selected for study, *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, shamans are a discrete character class available for players to select. However, in these systems the shaman is not a central or foundational offering of magic user, as they are not presented in core rulebooks. In some ways this later introduction means that shamans are a more specialist class, for the players willing to spend more to acquire supplemental materials, to expand their game or meet considerations the central rulebooks may not cover. For *Dungeons & Dragons*' Fourth Edition, shamans were introduced as a distinct class in *Player's Handbook 2*, which introduced a number of classes, yet with a specific focus on character classes of the 'Primal Power' designation, such as shamans and barbarians, which have a connection to nature,

spirits and harmony (Crawford et. al. 2009). Meanwhile, in *Pathfinder*, shamans were introduced as a specific class in the *Advanced Class Guide*, whose newly introduced character classes were classified as ‘hybrid classes,’ which combined elements of two preexisting classes from previous *Pathfinder* rulebooks (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). While the later additions of the shamans to these two game systems by no means diminishes the ability for players to select the class, the place of shamans in the supplements to the game systems rather than in the core materials is worth noting.

That noting of shamans as supplementary in *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* is particularly crucial in light of how central shamans are to *Shadowrun*. In *Shadowrun* Fifth Edition, shamanism is introduced as one of just two overarching magical traditions in the *Core Rulebook*, placing shamans as foundational to conceptions of magic within the setting and game system (Hardy 2013). While *Shadowrun* employs a different approach to character creation and classes than *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, a conception of what shamans are like can still be derived. Across all three game systems shamans have their unique nuances, yet important similarities are also evident, with the most central and potent being perhaps the very defining characteristic of the shaman. That is, the shaman’s relationship to spirits. Understanding the depiction of concepts of the game systems is important as those concepts can be of salience and potent meaning to both players and the denizens of the settings themselves (Fine 1983).

The shaman of Dungeons & Dragons

The classic system of table-top fantasy role-playing games, whose early incarnations had a key role in the very spawning of the entire medium (Fine 1983), presents, in its Fourth Edition, a class of shaman who is inextricably linked with nature and spirits, and is placed in a category of ‘Primal’ alongside barbarians, druids, and wardens (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). The shaman

gains their powers from the spirits that populate the world, particularly those of nature or ancestors, through both channeling the might of the spirits and summoning them for action (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Such abilities can include healing allies, damaging foes, and casting a variety of bolstering and hindering spells, often having positive and negative impacts simultaneously, including the sacrifice of the shaman's own health in order to achieve an effect, or take on the suffering of an ally (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

Central to those spirit abilities is the shaman's spirit companion, "a spirit that temporarily leaves the great stream of spirits flowing throughout the world to join with a shaman's magic." (Crawford et. al. 2009b:62) These spirit companions are most frequently in the form of animal spirits, which act as powerful embodiments of nature. However, the spirit companion can also be humanoid, perhaps an ancestor from the shaman player character's distant past, or even something else, in rarer cases (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Whether ancestor or animal, the spirit companion is a spirit that the shaman has a distinct relationship with, and the shaman will converse with and learn from the spirit companion who may act as a guide to them (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Furthermore, these spirit companions can take on more complex, specific features as the shaman character is defined with further options of 'Builds' and 'Paragon paths,' which place the shaman and their spirit companion into varieties with both mechanistic and narrative nuances (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b). For example, a shaman who utilizes a "Protector Spirit" is associated with bears and a focus on assisting allies through defense and buffing, effects that increase attributes, whereas the "Stalker Spirit" shaman is associated with panthers and stealth to help allies through superior positioning (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 119).

Mechanically, the spirit companion is very important to the functions of the shaman. *Dungeons & Dragon* Fourth Edition is played in a way that is strongly interested in the

positioning of characters, particularly in combat, and this is fundamental to the shaman. Many of the shaman's abilities affect both shaman and spirit companion, or utilize the spirit companion as the conduit for channeling spirit abilities, thus the location of the spirit companion relative to both friend and foe is a central concern for those who play as a shaman (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Moreover, a significant portion of shaman abilities also involve the repositioning of spirit companion, enemies, and allies, including the spirit companion switching places (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). However, in addition to what the spirit companion can do, the presence of the spirit companion is near essential for the basic function of the shaman, as the shaman is unable to use abilities labeled as spirit when the spirit companion is not present (Crawford et. al. 2009a).

Furthermore, abilities are elaborated upon beyond the mechanics in *Dungeons & Dragons* through the copious presence of flavor text, just a sentence or two that describes what is happening, in a way that provides setting and narrative depth, rather than mechanical depth. For instance, an ability which behaves like a basic healing technique, "Spirit of Life" is described as "[t]he spirit of a golden owl alights on your ally's shoulder and flutters off, carrying with it that friend's aches and wounds" (Crawford et. al. 2009a: 123). As every ability of shamans is accompanied by such illustrative flavor text, as well as descriptive paragraphs for every variety of shaman, the shamans presented to players in the rulebooks of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b) have a depth which may help make the game world more real to players (Fine 1983), as well as making the shaman more distinct as care is taken to detail how an action unfolds for the shaman, even if the mechanics of such an action could have parallels elsewhere.



Figure 1 Introductory image of a shaman from *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook 2*, © Wizards of the Coast, used with permission



Figure 2 Introductory image of a shaman in Dungeons & Dragons Primal Power, © Wizards of the Coast, used with permission.

Some of these flavor texts also introduce similarities of the *Dungeons & Dragons* shaman to academically studied shamans. In addition to the frequent summoning of spirits of nature or tribal ancestors, some abilities involve the saving or banishing of souls (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b), recalling that shamans often engage in soul retrieval (Howells 1948; Lindquist 2004). Moreover, both flavor text for abilities and special elaborative sections detail how the shaman is able to perceive the world in ways different from others due to their connections to spirits, as well as how shamans can cross and engage with the boundaries between worlds (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b). Such travels can include dreaming and prophetic visions (Crawford et. al. 2009b), evoking the ecstasy of Eliade (1959). Rites of initiation and how shamans can be born with culturally bound traits or encounter moments in their life that indicate a predisposition towards shamanism are also present in the depictions (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

The depictions of shamans in *Dungeons & Dragons* in the rulebooks are also supplemented with a number of illustrations, clearly showing players examples of shamans. These illustrations almost always have the shaman accompanied by their spirit companion, who is often given an ethereal effect (Crawford et. al. 20009a; 2009b). Additionally, the shamans are usually clad in some combination of cloth and leather, with some fur. That attire may have intricate patterns on it, and be accented with beads, talismans, feathers, or bones. Implement wise, shamans most commonly wield either a spear, totem, or staff. The depiction of shamans clad in cloth and leather, wielding spears and totems reflects the rule-based proficiencies of the class (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Gender wise there is not a significant preference for depicting the shaman as a man or woman, with, out of seventeen illustrations of shamans, eight are of women and nine are of men. Yet, the large images that start the sections on shamans in both *Players Handbook 2* (Crawford et. al. 2009a), Figure 1, and *Primal Power* (Crawford et. al.

2009b), Figure 2, are both of leather clad women. Unfortunately, due to style of dress, particularly the presence of headpieces, and the scale of images, the exact fantasy race of the illustrations was not always determinable. However, identifiable shamans included dwarves, elves, shifters, and humans, reflecting suggested guidelines for what races work well as shamans within the rulebooks (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Most of those races were suggested due to how they synergize well with the need for a high Wisdom attribute in the shaman as well as an “innate connection to nature” (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 119). These images help demonstrate to the player how a shaman would unfold in the setting, and how they might themselves craft a leather clad, spear wielding spiritual specialist.

The shamans of *Dungeons & Dragons* are meant to function as a group’s leader, through their ability to heal and buff using their spirit companion and other summoned spirits, and will take on more defensive or offensive roles following further specialization options (Crawford et. al. 2009a). This leader of the party is able to speak with spirits, and is portrayed as connected to nature, tribes, spirits, and traditions in a capacity that calls upon their wisdom and acute perception.

The shaman of Pathfinder

As a game system, *Pathfinder* is built off of the 3.5 rules set of *Dungeons & Dragons*, perhaps highlighting another facet of the trend commented upon in Medievalism of fantasy’s tendency to build upon past fantasy (Trigg 2008; Utz 2011). Additionally, the conception of shamans within *Pathfinder* is particularly interesting as the class is an explicit form of syncretism, being a ‘hybrid class’ of the preexisting classes of witch and oracle (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The shaman is a spellcaster that uses divine abilities, through communing with and calling upon worldly spirits and the animistic energies of the living (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). That

communion with spirits produces potent bonds, and the shaman may seek to expand their patron's influence in the world (Bulmahn et. al. 2014).

The most important spiritual connection is that of the shaman's spirit animal, a spirit that represents the spirit that the shaman has chosen to tie themselves to (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The spirit animal functions mechanically similar to the parent witch class's familiar (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Through this connection to the spirit animal, and thus the chosen spirit, the shaman is able to use abilities, and must each day commune with their spirit animal to replenish their daily stock of spells, while also being unable to use spells should their spirit animal perish (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). This usage of the spirit animal as a source of and restriction upon absence reflects attributes of *Dungeons & Dragons*' spirit companion (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). The abilities of the shaman are centered on buffing allies and harming foes, either through damage or curses, though shamans are also able to heal, if not to the extent a dedicated healer class like a cleric would be able to (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Though abilities of the shaman here can have the ability to have simultaneous impacts of benefit and detriment (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), such a component is rarer than it is for the shamans of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

While the shaman has a spirit animal in *Pathfinder*, there varieties of shaman are modelled after choosing a spirit like Flame, Battle, Bones, Stones, Life, Nature or Lore, among others (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Following that choice, the shaman's spirit animal, of whatever species the shaman so wishes, then takes on aesthetic and mechanic attributes reflecting that choice (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). That choice also affects the very nature of the shaman, and becomes incrementally more pronounced as the player character levels up (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The spirits available to choose from mirror the mysteries the parent class oracle calls upon

for power (Bulmahn et. al. 2010). Transformation is a central theme of the shaman, for in addition to their manifesting as an ideal of their spirit, one of their core abilities is to shapeshift (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). For one of the starkest examples of aesthetic reflection, a shaman, as well as accompanying spirit animal, who has chosen the Stone spirit begins to resemble stone, with rock-like skin that has embedded gemstones glow and pulse brightly upon the usage of abilities (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). In contrast, the shaman who has chosen the Lore spirit merely “appears far wiser and knowing than her age would suggest. Though she can seem unassuming, her eyes give the impression that she is peering deep into all she looks at, seeing the secrets,” while the spirit animal is “quiet and unassuming” (Bulmahn et. al. 2014: 43).

This aspect of *Pathfinder*'s shamans is an interesting point of contrast to the shaman varieties in *Dungeons & Dragons* which are often modelled after types of animals, like The World Serpent or Keen Eagle, though there are non-animal based ones like Great Elder or Disciple of Winds (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Interestingly, in both *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* there is a variety of shaman that has scars as a central part of their persona, and wears them as a badge of pride, though in very different ways. In *Pathfinder* the Battle spirit shaman bears scars from their wounds to tell tales of their past fights, and is a fierce, more offensively oriented variant of shaman (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Conversely, the Scarred Healer of *Dungeons & Dragons* gains scars for paying the price for mending and curing others of their injuries, and are marks of honor as they show a proven willingness to sacrifice (Crawford et. al. 2009b). These two contrasting varieties of scarred shamans show different ways in which the shaman's abilities to heal and harm can be interpreted.

Furthermore, the way in which the chosen spirits for shamans in *Pathfinder* reflect more specifically elemental considerations, with that consideration then shaping the spirit animal,

shows a way in which nature is constructed around its forces (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). However, the central place of the spirit animal to the shaman's functions still places animals as crucial to the conception of shamans. This is compounded by how in an earlier rulebook of *Pathfinder* than the one that introduced shamans as a class, there was the utilization of animal shamans, of Ape, Bat, and Boar varieties, as an archetype option for the druid class (Bulmahn et. al. 2011).

The shaman's own archetypes highlight the connection to spirits, through such concepts as a Possessed Shaman who allows a spirit to experience the physical world through their body, the Speaker for the Past who conveys the will of ancestors, or the Spirit Warden who protects against and destroys malicious spirits (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Interestingly, the Spirit Warden's less than amiable interactions with the spirit world are noted to take a toll on the shaman, bequeathing them "an unsettling demeanor," whilst replacing charm based class skills of "Diplomacy" and "Handle Animals" with "Intimidate" (Bulmahn et. al. 2014:112). This example illuminates how spirits are dangerous, and that the unique world of the shaman is dangerous. Moreover, the Witch Doctor archetype, who "specializes in afflictions of the soul" and is "misunderstood" due to their magical healing and defensive witchcraft, while also being the one shaman type with a note expressly prohibiting evil alignment, (Bulmahn et. al. 2014:113) highlights the precarious position of shamans in their communities, even as they provide a service (Brown 1988;1989).

Like with the shamans of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b), heightened perception is important to shamans, though in *Pathfinder* the form of perception varies with shaman type, and reflects the sort of spirit they have a connection with (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The Flame spirit shaman can see through fire and smoke, the Heavens spirit shaman is adept at using the stars of the night sky for astrolocation, and the Nature spirit shaman can speak

with animals (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Additionally, the Visionary shaman archetype is designed around divination (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The liminal nature of shamans is further evinced by some abilities which allow for teleportation through crossing through another world, or even entering into a safe, naturally idealistic extradimensional haven (Bulhman et. al. 2014), starkly echoing Eliade's (1959) concerns with the paradisaal ideal that shamans engage with.

Unfortunately, there were only three illustrations in the selected *Pathfinder* rulebooks that were explicitly of shamans (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), with one more that might have potentially been a shaman (Bulmahn et. al. 2011). The fantasy races of those shaman depictions differed, including a dwarf, human, and gnome (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The one image included in the initial section describing shamans can be seen in Figure 3., a female dwarven shaman which demonstrates the spirit animal that accompanies the shaman, their elaborate accoutrements, and some of the equipment a shaman might have with them.

Of those three illustrations that were explicitly shamans, two were of woman, while one was of a man. This gender aspect is noticeable due to a stylistic choice of the *Pathfinder* rulebooks to explicitly gender classes, choosing a gendered pronoun, such as his or her, and utilizing that same gendered pronoun for every instance of the class (Bulmahn et. al. 2011;2014), which differs from the *Dungeons & Dragons* approach of using a mixture of genderless and multiple gendered pronouns within the same class (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b). In the case of shamans, *Pathfinder* used feminine pronouns such as she and her (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). However, modern shamans are not necessarily of one gender or another, though specific cultures may have provisions which restrict or greatly influence this (Howells 1948; Eliade 1959; 1961; Kendall 1988; 1996; Krippner 2002; 2012; Van Ommeren et. al. 2004; Kim 2012).



Figure 3 Iconic Shaman image from Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Class Guide, © Paizo, Inc. Used with permission.

Structurally, *Pathfinder* rulebooks do not have unique, class-relative descriptions for each and every ability of the shaman, instead listing the particular combination of skills and spells that the shaman has from a larger pool of abilities that *Pathfinder* classes call upon (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). This aspect is particularly salient for the hybrid class of shamans as they borrow multiple mechanics of the parent class witch, though shamans utilize Wisdom rather than Intelligence, like witches' familiars (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Through the particular selection of recurring abilities and the more shaman specific aspects, like their characteristic spirit animal or ability to shapeshift or speak any tongue, the shamans are rendered a concept for players to latch onto and employ (Bulmahn et. al. 2014).

That *Pathfinder* concept of shaman is one that revolves around a spirit animal and how the shaman is drastically altered by the spirit they have chosen to draw their powers from (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The shaman uses their abilities to heal and buff their allies while also being able to damage and debuff their foes (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Moreover, the shaman has abilities that involve mediation and interaction, with both spirits and non-spirits (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The shaman is flavored as spiritual and as part of nature.

The shaman of Shadowrun

In contrast to the medieval fantasy settings of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, the world of *Shadowrun* is a unique blend of components, taking place in an alternate near-future cyberpunk landscape dominated by mega-corporations, that also happens to be populated by fantasy races like elves and orcs, as well as dragons, following the return of magic to the world (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). As this is a setting that builds upon the real world, rather than a further iterative interpretation of fantasy tropes, many elements of *Shadowrun* call upon interpretations of real world cultures (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014).

Furthermore, while occurring on Earth, the geo-political landscape of *Shadowrun* is very different from that of contemporary times (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Beyond the proliferation of all-powerful mega-corporations, the nations of the world are very different, particularly in the United States, which has undergone a significant degree of fracturing (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Key to that fracturing is the resurgence of various Native American groups, to the point where there are Native American Nations, including the Pueblo Corporate Council, the Sioux Nation, the Salish-Shidhe Council, the Tsimshian Protectorate, and the Algonkian-Manitou Council (Hardy 2013). Other parts of North America include the United Canadian and American States, the Confederation of American States, and the California Free State, each recalling more standard political entities. Furthermore, there are unique locales like Quebec, known for being corporation friendly, or Tir Talngire, a nation of elves (Hardy 2013). In that mix are additional, politically liminal cities such as Seattle and Denver (Hardy 2013). Although the rulebooks detail aspects of the *Shadowrun* setting for the entire world, they provide an especially rich level of detail for North America, particularly for Seattle (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). However, the choice of Seattle is perhaps not all that surprising given that the publishers of all three game systems selected for this study are based in Washington state (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014).

Liminality is a central component of *Shadowrun*, as players engage in the role of ‘shadowrunner,’ an individual who performs a variety of odd jobs, often under the table, either for or against various corporations, individuals, governments, and groups (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). These odd jobs are often of a very illegal nature, including corporate espionage, assassination, kidnapping, and the like (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). While the common trope of wandering adventurers for characters in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a;

2009b) and *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2011;2014) also provides a liminal status, that liminality is not as potent or central as the covert, explicitly outside-of-the-law work that shadowrunners perform, and the numerous perils that work entails (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). This liminality is also accented by how individuals in *Shadowrun* can enter separate types of reality, with their own mechanics (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). There are a variety of astral planes, or metaplanes, for magic users to interact with or journey to (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Additionally, keeping with a foundational trope of cyberpunk (Calvert 2013), there is a technological world to interface with, the Matrix (Hardy 2013). While different individuals, with different specializations, engage with their respective alternate world, the presence and utilization of these places in their number of ways further highlights how liminality flows throughout *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). The conception of liminality referred to here is largely informed by the works of anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) on the stages of rites of passage. In Turner's conception of rites of passage, there is a middle, "liminal" phase where one is "[b]etwixt and [b]etween" (93), as during the ritual one is no longer who they were before, yet not who they will be afterwards. As such, liminality is rife with ambiguity, as it plays within thresholds and transitions, and makes symbols and meanings have complex, different meanings. While Turner is expressly concerned with ritual contexts, concerns of liminality exist elsewhere, including entertainment (Palmer 2007; Ball 2016), and can refer to far more than periods of time, including characteristics and activities of individuals. The shadowrunners, through their illicit, covert work for entities legitimate and illegitimate, as well as their engagement with other realms, both astral and cyber, thrive in the thresholds of the setting.

Within the strongly liminal world of *Shadowrun*, shamans are no strangers to such liminality. However, unlike with *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b) or

Pathfinder (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), where shamans were a distinct class with specific mechanics and structured guidelines for advancement, the role of shamans in *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014) differs for two key dimensions. First, *Shadowrun* is a strongly narratively driven game, with a less rigid and more open approach to character creation and advancement, so that while there may be archetypes like the Street Shaman, those archetypes exist more to fit within culturally or narratively archetypal roles, rather than mechanically archetypal ones (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Second, and perhaps most important, shamanism has a central, defining place in the ways in which magic is defined and conceived of in *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014), rather than being just one of many options. In the *Core Rulebook*, the magic of *Shadowrun* is broken into two large, overarching traditions (Hardy 2013). One is the academic, formal, magic circle and tomes centric hermetic mages (Hardy 2013). The other is the nature focused, harmonious, spirit connected shaman (Hardy 2013). Such differences are of consequence as magic in this setting is thoroughly social constructionist, with what is magically relevant being contingent upon what the magically gifted individual believes to be relevant and magical, according to their cultural traditions and beliefs (Hardy 2013). While the variety of traditions is expanded greatly in the magic-focused *Street Grimoire*, many of the additional traditions are placed within or mentioned as akin to one side or the other of the central hermetic versus shamanic debate (Andrew et. al. 2014). As such, shamanism is not a class in *Shadowrun*, rather shamanism is a foundational part of the magical corner of the setting.

Though a key, overarching component of the world, the shamanism of *Shadowrun* can still have characteristics identified as being definitional. Shamanism is strongly affected by the individual's personality, as well as the area in which a shaman finds themselves (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). That openness to influences is in part due to how shamanic traditions

emphasize intuition and instinct in decision making, and have nature as central to the shaman's connection to magic. One of the ways nature is vital for shamans is that the items a shaman may use in their magic includes plants, animals, naturally worn rocks, and handmade jewelry, all items that have a connection to life (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). This connection to nature persists even in the urban sprawl of *Shadowrun*'s cyberpunk setting, with groups like the Rat Pack, composed primarily of shamans who serve a patron Rat spirit, finding ways to adapt (Andrew et. al. 2014). Furthermore, shamans are known for their relationships and seeking harmony, as they view spirits as intelligent, ancient entities to treat with veneration. Frequently, shamans are emphasized as learning from and reacting to the environments, situations, and spirits they encounter, including building personal relationships to spirits. Moreover, variation according to the culture of the shaman is also mentioned, with similar aspects having different names, meanings, and components for specific cultures, such as the shaman's medicine lodge, which reflects the great variety of shamans seen in the real world (Eliade 1961; Krippner 2002). These elements help indicate that the *Shadowrun* conception of shamans is one that emphasizes variability and improvisation.

Progression in *Shadowrun* for magic users, not just shamans, is often tied to initiations, a rite of passage formed by the cultural contents of the magic user's tradition. For shamans, this frequently involves vision quests where the shaman receive guidance from a mentor spirit, with a given example of a Lakota Sun Dance (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Mentor spirits are incredibly powerful spirits that the magic user has a special, personal connection to, as this is a spirit that often reached out to the individual when they first acquired magic and sought to guide and mold the magic user. These mentor spirits can be persistent, and will find ways to motivate individuals who reject or ignore the call to faith. However, they can also be treacherous, either

through being part of a dangerous, corrupting type like Toxic or Insect, or simply being malicious, seeking to kill the magic user (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014).

Importantly, while mentor spirits are a voluntary option available for all magic users, the rulebooks do note that for shamans they are referred to as totems, and often have tribal ties (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Furthermore, in flavor text sections involving shamans mentor spirits commonly played a role, even if a minor one, that showcased the mentor spirit's influence on the shaman's development. The types of spirits that mentor spirits could be include animals like Bear or Rat, natural components like Sea or Mountain, or more specific concepts like Seducer or Dragonslayer (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). However, many mentions of shamans, or those who are similar to shamans, involve mentor spirits specifically appearing as animals, though this is in part due to how magic in *Shadowrun* takes the form of what the magic user expects magic take, and that shamans' traditions would more likely bring forth an animal-esque appearance for a spirit (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014) The *Shadowrun* shaman's mentor spirit or totem is distinctly different from the spirit companion of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b) or the spirit animal of *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), as while the totem is an oft utilized option, it is not the foundational component of the shaman. However, the ways in which that option when utilized has an impact upon the shaman's powers, as well as the ways in which shamans interactions with spirits are discussed generally, reinforces the recurrent theme of how shamans are defined by their spiritual relationships.

Yet, even nonspiritual relationships are important to shamans, with some of the organizations that include shamans being ones involved in community outreach, though the importance of relationships is stressed, for they are dangerous to cross (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014), highlighting the mix of benefits and perils associated with shamanic relations (Brown

1988:1989). Additionally, as magic users are rare in the world of *Shadowrun*, and face considerable prejudice, even if thoroughly valued commodities, the magical shadowrunner is suggested to find a support network of other magic users as the other members of your crew, just statistically speaking, are unlikely to be able to relate, both to the magic use and the quirks that can accompany (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). There was a similar mention of how the shaman's eccentricities, brought about by their thorough, repeated interactions with spirits, could be a point of concern in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). However, in both *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014) and *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et al. 2009a; 2009b), it was mentioned that the distance provided by the shamanic experience, as well as expectations others might have about shamans being unusual, could be actively emphasized by the player in certain situations, in an advantageous manner. Playing upon expectations for benefit can be seen as having real world parallels in how shamans interact with ethnotourism (Davidov 2010; Hammons 2015).

Moreover, *Shadowrun* discusses how the conceptions of shamans held by individuals in the setting are frequently formed by media portrayals, and can produce stereotypes of shamans as “either beautiful NAN [Native American Nations] princesses or weathered Amerind men wearing feathers and smoking peyote.” (Andrew et. al. 2014: 12) These mistaken, fiction formed portrayals are viewed as a negative, with an all too potent impact upon the world the shaman navigates. Such a concern echoes the thoughts of many academics on the importance of media portrayals when discussing symbolic annihilation (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Tuchman 1978) as well as those studying how people learn from fiction (Fazio and Marsh 2008). For the denizens of *Shadowrun*, this is such a concern that some groups, like the anti-authoritarian Painted Horse

Lodge, seek to normalize actual shamanic practice through seeking greater inclusion of shamans in society (Andrew et. al. 2014).

Still, while shamans may be part of the fringes of cyberpunk society in some regards, like their connection to nature or lesser involvement in corporations, the groups they are part of highlight what shamans mean. The previously mentioned Rat Pack is a nature focused group that does community outreach and healing among squatter communities, while funding itself through black market activities (Andrew et. al. 2014). The Seattle-based Sisterhood of Ariadne is a feminist Wiccan coven who deal in divination and, freely offered to women, healing while also avoiding causing harm (Andrew et. al. 2014). These two groups show ways in which shamans are characterized as serving parts of their community and as healers, even if the player character is not put in a healer role simply by being a shaman (Andrew et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, the shaman-led Planestridders are specialists and explorers of the astral planes, who often act as guides for those seeking to enter another metaplane. Importantly, the Planestridders are motivated by a desire to expand consciousness (Andrew et. al. 2014), once more recalling the ecstasy of Eliade (1959), as well as transpersonal philosophy's interests in shamans (Krippner 2002). Shamanism is also an important part of how magic is practiced in many of the Native American Nations (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Such connections show that the *Shadowrun* shaman has components of a healing, supernatural guide, and is associated with certain cultures.

Though a world filled with cybernetics and mega-corporations, *Shadowrun* possesses a conception of shamans that is very open. Shamans have mechanical freedom, due to shamans being a core, overarching category of magical practice. Meanwhile, shamans also have narrative freedom, due to the tendency of shamans to learn from and react to their environments and experiences, as well as the great cultural variation in shamans, which builds upon interpretations

of real world cultures. Still, despite that freedom, shamans are constructed as innovative, instinctual magic users who value nature and harmony, who cultivate respectful relationships with spirits, engage with other planes, and, even more so than other shadowrunners, have a liminal existence.

The relationship to spirits

Despite all the characteristics and nuances each game system has in their conceptions of shamans, the core, underlying attribute of shamans that makes a shaman a shaman in each system is the relationship that shamans have with spirits. Specifically, it is how shamans have a close, personal connection to a specific spirit, which then shapes much of their existence. Whether the spirit companion of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b), the spirit animal of *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2011;2014), or the mentor spirit totem of *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014), shamans have an intense relationship to a spirit from which they learn and garner power. This relationship is so central that the active presence of the spirit companion and the spirit animal are necessary for their respective shamans to even fulfill magical functions. While what these personal spirits represents differs in each game, they do act as a representation of identifiable concepts, though they may manifest in ways appropriate to the player created shaman. Moreover, those concepts are often connected to nature, animals, and ancestors, with the manifestation of the personal spirits usually taking the form of an animal for shamans in all three game systems, though the animal may be stylized or altered to reflect the concept they embody. *Pathfinder's* rules provide clear examples of this, with spirit animals gaining elemental touches like fire, or becoming an idealized version of the animal, full of vibrant life or imposing muscles (Bulmahn et. al. 2014).

These personal spirits are not just a key source of mechanical function, utility and development for the shaman, they can also provide narrative momentum for the shaman. For instance, a World Speaker shaman in *Dungeons & Dragons* is marked for a great destiny and will encounter many forces which seek to persuade the shaman towards one path or another (Crawford et. al. 2009b). Additionally, the story and background of how the shaman acquired their personal spirit can be a fraught, trying tale, which may inform much of the shaman's character and their relationship to spirits (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). The central nature of the shaman's connection to their personal spirit indicates that the shaman is defined by a unique connection to a specific form of spirituality. For "as soon as that spirit made itself known to you – whether you accepted it or not – you were on the road to becoming a shaman." (Crawford et. al. 2009b:63)

For *Pathfinder's* shamans it is the nature of their connection to a personal spirit animal that makes them unique as a class offering, even as they are explicitly a hybrid of two pre-existing classes (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). From the parent witch class the shaman takes the familiar mechanic, a magical animal which teaches and guides (Bulmahn et. al. 2010;2014). That concept of familiar is then combined with the other parent class of oracle's 'mysteries' mechanic, which are the classifications of gods and spirits the oracle is a vessel for, in order to produce the shaman's defining spirit animal (Bulmahn et. al. 2010:2014). The spirit animal is a familiar who reflects and embodies the spirit that the shaman has chosen to have a relationship with. Here, even when mechanics are borrowed and mixed to produce something new, the syncretism is centered upon the personal spirit.

Yet, the relationship to the personal spirit is not the only way in which the shaman's manner of interacting with spirits is crucial to the shaman's identity. Shamans engage with

numerous spirits, not just their personal spirit, and the manner in which shamans do so further defines them. The interactions are framed as speaking with spirits, conversing in often difficult and complex back and forth dialogues. Through this manner, shamans can serve as mediators for their parties by acting as a connection between the world of spirits and the mundane, in a way others might not be able to. However, the shamanic way of interacting with spirits even differs from other approaches taken by other classes of characters. The *Dungeons & Dragons* shaman frequently summons spirits in their abilities, calling upon spirits of nature, the elements, and ancestors to intervene, as well as being able to converse with spirits regularly (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). This is in contrast to other classes who gain powers in somewhat similar ways. For instance, warlocks gain their powers through either theft or pact with demons or eldritch entities, and it is a manner which often leaves them tainted and viewed negatively by others (Carter et. al. 2008). Though both shaman and warlock gain their power through a relationship to powerful, supernatural forces, the shaman's gain is through a reciprocal connection with a spirit and has a guiding influence, whereas the warlock engages in perilous, treacherous bargaining, with risk of damnation (Carter et. al. 2008; Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b). While even the fellow primal class of druid may also engage with or invoke the spirits of nature, the druidic engagement is in passing, as kin, without dynamic or lasting relationships or respectful conversing, the core characteristics of the shamanic approach (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

Similarly, *Shadowrun*'s shamans are characterized as summoning the spirits in the environments they find themselves in, and treating those spirits as respected elders when called upon (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). This is framed as in contrast to the hermetic mage's approach of deciding for oneself which spirit to summon, and forcefully binding that spirit, which the hermetic mage regards as less than equal. Moreover, the shamanic approach to spirits

is one that stresses harmony. Furthermore, the connection to spirits is even a defining characteristic for determining which malicious, or potentially so, magic types in *Shadowrun* are coded as shamans. Necromancy is not viewed as inherently evil in *Shadowrun*, though the practice faces restrictive opposition and can have dangerous practitioners, and the magic is “derive[d] from shamanic rituals for speaking with ancestors.” (Andrew et. al. 2014: 143) Meanwhile, the purely malicious, invading Insect form of magic involves communing with extraplanar entities that destroy the mind of the shaman in order to construct a hive (Andrew et. al. 2014). While there are other forms of malicious or dangerous magic, such as blood magic, these are the two forms that have explicit connections to shamans, due to their connections to spirits. At the same time, there is also the Toxic form of magic, which is coded as both shaman and mage, that malicious magic is a result of the pollution of the physical world corrupting the magic of places (Andrew et. al. 2014). As the corruption of an area’s magic is likely to affect all who are magically connected, that may be why that form is coded for multiple types of magic user, even if the corruption of nature may seem more relevant to shamans. However, where the distinction of malicious shaman is or is not made highlights the attribute of shaman that is most important; the connection to spirits.

Part of boundary work and distinction making is that not all defining attributes are always the most salient, and through seeing which is generally most salient that the defining characteristic can be identified (Zerubavel 1991). In the instance of tabletop role-playing games, aspects of ritual, liminality, connection to nature, healing, tribal, and harming, may be potent in creating the concept of shaman, yet it is the undercurrent aspect of how the shaman symbiotically converses with spirits that is what distinguishes the shaman from the many other options

available. Though, why is the defining characteristic of shamans spirits and not their rituals, travels to other planes, or capacity for both healing and harming?

Part of this defining through spirits may be due to the structure of tabletop roleplaying games themselves. Some systems include traveling to other planes or the conducting of complex rituals, however these are mechanically concrete processes. As such, due to the labor involved with designing these processes, as well as the avenues they present players, restricting these to certain classifications is not ideal. This may be further compounded by how in these settings there are multiple sources and types of magic or religious specialist, with their own sources of power and ways of relating to that power, which still nevertheless may need the ability to conduct rituals or astrally project. Similarly, healing and harming become less defining characteristics of the shaman as there are multiple classes who can heal; therefore, other aspects must be used to make the shaman distinct from other healers.

This may mean that there are two approaches to character creation. The first is mechanically focused, where an individual decides they want to fulfill the role of healer. They may then look at the various healer options in a game and then weigh the nuances of each class. Role wise, one class may be more purely healing focused, while another can perform multiple support functions. And if narrowed down to two functionally similar classes, the flavor or narrative aspects may become salient, such as the shaman's ability to commune with spirits. Conversely, an individual could take a narrative focused approach to character creation, and decide they want their character to have some sort of aspect in their concept and then look at the options that would best suit that. For instance, a player may want their character to be tribal in background, and so, for *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b), might look at the various Primal classes and then need to decide between barbarian and shaman, which fulfill two

very different roles, with the propensity for healing then becoming salient. Therefore, an attribute such as relationship to spirits becomes central to the shaman identity, as the characteristic provides an explanation for how the shaman is able to do what they do, and in a way that is crucially unique.

Distinction of Shamans

While the shaman's relationship to spirits may be regarded as the defining characteristic, the role-playing game conceptions of shamans across *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and *Shadowrun* erect and engage with a number of boundaries that are used to render the shamans distinct. These are contexts where shamans are simply one form of magic user among many others, where there are clerics, wizards, oracles, druids, warlocks, sorcerers, witches, monks and mages, to list just a sample. Within that rich diversity of magic, shamans carve out a niche for themselves in large part due to their personal spirits; however, the other small ways in which shamans are defined highlight meaningful boundaries that comment upon meanings which extend past the fun and games.

There are two broad, overlapping categories of boundaries which shamans' distinctions can be placed. Like many boundaries, these are oppositional and dichotomous (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Binder 1999; Lamont 1999). The first are boundaries of east versus west, which include the cultural associations shamans and how the shaman, a global concept, is distinguished from the similar druid, a concept of the British Isles and Gallic Europe (von Pfluck-Harttung 1893; DeWitt 1938; Last 1949; Duddy 1996; Webster 1999), as well as the various associations shamans have. The second are the boundaries between academic and non-academic forms of magic, such as between learning through university systems or mentors and distinctions between shamans and wizards.

East vs. west

While shamans are seen around the globe, they are predominantly part of cultures that would not be considered part of a Western, largely United States and Europe, paradigm. Meanwhile, the settings of the selected game systems are informed by Western thought. Part of this Western construction is that the companies are located in Washington state, and thus of an American context, though their creative teams have a great many individuals on them (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). More crucially, however, is the settings themselves. *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014) is built upon a past iteration of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a ;2009b), and both are set in classical fantasy worlds. Fantasy, as Medievalism literature relays, is largely built upon interpretations of earlier interpretations of romanticized and idealized interpretations of Medieval Europe (Tolmie 2006; Trigg 2008; Utz 2011). Meanwhile, *Shadowrun* is set in an alternate cyberpunk near-future envisioning of our world, and while the rulebooks address the entirety of the world, there is a degree of focus on North America and Seattle (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). As such, the addition of the global concept of shamanism to the Western oriented settings of these games, created by American companies, is noteworthy in that the presentation may shed some light into how American fiction interprets this global concept.

Therefore, a classical perspective on conceiving such interpretations is useful. That perspective is Edward Said's (1977) Orientalism, which is a way of viewing and presenting the world as only two halves, "the Orient" or the East and "the Occident" or the West, and focusing on the latter defining the former. Said (1977) focuses on this phenomenon as it relates to imperialism, with two distinct varieties. There is the understanding of the Orient as informed by the British and French imperial experiences, and then the American understanding, shaped by

America's rise following the World Wars (Said 1977). The French and British variant of Orientalism is the most important and associated with the term, however (Said 1977). Throughout, though, Orientalism is concerned with "the Other," at one time an object of exploitation, at others, fascination (Said 1977:48-49). That fascination leads to the Occident presenting its interpretation of the Orient, through its own lens shaped by the complex histories of their relationships. This concept is no stranger to fiction, with past scholars applying Orientalism to their readings of cyberpunk (Park 2005; Paulk 2011; Martin 2015). Orientalism can be connected to concerns of authenticity, as concepts that are viewed as coming from others are deemed to need to be accompanied by those others, such as in the case of food service (Hirose and Pih 2011). As such, consumers who have Orientalist perspectives have their preconceived notions of what a concept from the Eastern Other is supposed to entail, and believes that the concept when encountered should meet those notions. There are some similarities to the perceptions navigated by shamans in ethnotourism (Davidov 2010). As tabletop role-playing games are a form of collaborative storytelling, where players create and interpret according to their desires, Orientalism is useful, for these rulebooks, made in Washington state, present an interpretation of Eastern concepts in a Western context for the purposes of entertainment. Moreover, by looking at an interpretation that is designed around further interpretation utilizing it, one can see how interpretations determine what is most important, by seeing what boundaries are erected around the concept from the 'East' to make it distinct from potentially similar concepts from the 'West,' retaining its exotic, fascinating 'Otherness.'

That distinguishing an Eastern concept from a possibly similar Western one is not just a hypothetical concern, as all three game systems include druids alongside their shaman. Druids

are a religious specialist from the British Isles that is most often remembered as part of ancient Celtic society (von Pfluck-Harttung 1893; Duddy 1996) or a segment of Gaul and Britannia which interacted with Rome, during and after its conquests (DeWitt 1938; Last 1949; Webster 1999). As part of Druidic history is of when the Roman Empire was dominant and the Druids were part of the peoples they sought to conquer, Said's (1977) dynamic of an Imperial West and the Other East may have some traces here, though Gaul and Britannia would be an Other North. The historical Druid can be hard to define, as much of our knowledge of them comes from the accounts of conquering Romans or philosophers, which have had their veracity questioned (Webster 1999), and Druidic cultures were ones of oral history (Duddy 1996). However, some key details from Roman accounts remain that Druids were religious officiants, who often presided over sacrifices and rituals, they were educators and judges, and they had an ordered structure across tribes, with a key teaching being immortality of the soul (Webster 1999). While that may be the academic, historical version of Druids, conceptions of druids in fantasy are remarkably different.

The druid in fantasy settings, such as those of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, is closely tied to nature (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011). Fantasy druids are secretive and hidden, prowling the wilds of forests as protectors of nature, in stark opposition to civilization (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011). Druids have an innate connection to nature, able to call upon animals, plants, and even weather in their fiercely protective duties (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011). Shape-shifting into animals is a central component of being a druid (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009). The druid of *Pathfinder* can elect to have an animal companion, and knows multiple languages, including Sylvan, for speaking with woodland creatures, and Druidic,

a special language knowable only for druids (Bulmahn et. al. 2009). Meanwhile, the druids of *Dungeons & Dragons* model themselves after nature or its beasts, and while they can gain power from spirits of nature, they do not commune or have relationships like shamans would (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Moreover, the *Dungeons & Dragons* druid is in active opposition to other forms of magic than Primal, seeing them as dangerous or unnatural (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Though a minor aspect, the druids of *Pathfinder* are presented using feminine pronouns, similar to that game's presentation of shamans (Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2014). These two systems have druids who are oriented towards combat, and serve as violent protectors which seek to maintain the boundaries between nature and civilization (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

As a magic user who calls upon nature, with many ties to animals, druids are similar to shamans in some key regards. Yet, there are still some boundaries which serve to provide distinction. The first is mechanical, but central; while shamans can both heal and harm, druids are an explicitly offensively oriented class (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2014). Therefore, despite some similarities that the two classes might have narratively, they perform different functions, at least in combat. Still, those more narrative distinctions are intriguing. Druids are shapeshifters, as a defining component, and while shamans may have some capacity to shapeshift or transform, such an ability is supplementary, not core (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011; 2014). Moreover, while both are connected to nature, druids are portrayed as more of loners, losing themselves in their embracing of the wild, while shamans, for all their potential eccentricities and otherworldliness, are religious specialists, with connections to tribes (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011; 2014). Additionally, while both are centrally connected to nature and frequently animals, the druid is more part of nature while the shaman is the linkage between the spirits and the world (Crawford

et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2011; 2014). In fact, for shamans in *Dungeons & Dragons*, the rulebooks view the shaman's connection to spirits as the singular attribute which distinguishes the shaman from all other classes, while the shaman's capacity for otherworldly visions and perception of those spirits is what separates the shaman from the other Primal classes like druids, which have limited connections to spirits (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). The relationship to spirits is generally the most salient point of distinction, with the nuance and depth of that relationship serving to further distinguish even amongst the most similar of entities.

Yet, if both shamans and druids are deep in nature and embody nature in their own liminal ways, what does the fact that the historical European concept is powerful through being part of nature, while the global concept of shaman is powerful through relationships with spirits say for what is the meaningful boundary? Both are magical, after all. Perhaps the meaning is that nature is a more understandable, less mystical concept than spirits. The power of nature might be easily understandable, almost logical, especially if in opposition to civilization, as bears and earthquakes are certainly mighty. Yet, the idea of ancestor spirits which one communes with may be outside of most Western conceptions, considering the legacy of Abrahamic faiths. Moreover, druids are dangerous, almost violent in their love of nature and rejection of civilization, while shamans are more cautious curiosities, as they converse with spirits and share wisdom. This may tie into concepts of the "Magical Negro" in film where people of color have magical abilities and proffer wisdom to white protagonists (Hughey 2009). Indeed, though shamans are listed as having the role of leader in *Dungeons & Dragons*, there is the addendum that the shaman is the least likely of that classification to actually fulfill that function, instead assisting and supplementing others (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b). The relationship to spirits remains the point of distinction making for shamans, as well as important to how the nature-based druid is

different, even though both are nature, animal, and spirit related magic users. The ways both classes are framed, is that while nature is scary, spirits are unknown, and difficult to comprehend. Shamans and their spirits are an Other, magically, even more so than the frightening nature of druids.

However, while the shaman and druid are two separate classes in both *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, that separation is a less definite separation in *Pathfinder*. In a rulebook earlier than the one which introduced shamans as a hybrid class of witches and oracles, there were archetypes for the druid class which were animal shamans (Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014). These druids embrace animal totems in order to embody the ideals of that animal, with the options being Ape, Bat, and Boar (Bulmahn et. al. 2011). Though structured differently, this taking on and embodying the characteristics of an ideal recalls the spirits which shamans choose (Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014). Similarly, even for other archetypes in other classes which borrow shamanic elements, such as the oracle's Spirit Guide or the wizard's Spirit Whisperer, recreating or resembling the connection shamans have with spirits, including their personal spirit, is what provides the shamanic nuances (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Such instances further reinforce that it is the shaman's relationship to spirits that is foundational to conceiving of the shaman, and is the boundary which designates something as a shaman or shaman-esque. Therefore, the distinction of a relationship to spirits is meaningful, and shows that it is an element that other classes do not have, that other concepts, formed from other fantasy interpretations, lack this form of spirituality, that it is unique, even when borrowed.

Nevertheless, that unique form of spirituality is perhaps treated as incidental in these two game systems, in comparison to the treatment druids receive. In *Pathfinder* druids are part of the core rulebook, and are expanded upon in additional rulebooks before the shaman is introduced,

years later (Bulmahn et. al. 2009; 2010; 2011; 2014). Furthermore, part of that expansion of druids involved making optional varieties of them shamans, subsuming shamanism beneath druidism (Bulmahn et. al. 2011). Moreover, while shamans and druids receive roughly equal treatment in the Fourth Edition of *Dungeon & Dragons*, being introduced and expanded alongside one another (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b), that arrangement has changed. In *Dungeons & Dragons*' Fifth Edition, the current iteration of the game, druids have become a core class while shamans have yet to be introduced (Crawford and Mearls 2014). Therefore, there is a small degree of the global concept of shamanism being marginalized in favor of the European concept of druidism, which may indicate that despite the uniqueness of the shaman's wisdom and spirit-based magic, the druid's protective and nature-based magic is deemed more appropriate and essential for the fantasy settings, which are built upon interpretations of Medieval European concepts.

Yet, shamanism is ascendant over druidism in the cyberpunk setting of *Shadowrun*, where shamanism is one of the two main categorizations of magical traditions (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Within that categorization system for cultural traditions of magic, druids are considered shamanic (Andrew et. al. 2014). In this setting, druidism is used to refer to a wide variety of practice, such as nature oriented Celts and "the esoteric mumblings of English druids," where "[t]he commonality between the beliefs is the invocation of spirits tied to particular locations and the desire of the druid to work with those spirits to gain a measure of control over what happens in that spot" (Andrew et. al. 2014:45). These druids seek to uncover the true spirit and power of a place of land, utilizing a knowledge of history to withstand trickery and deceit by other spirits. Druids do this as they wish to build a special connection with the spirit of that place, and are fiercely protective of their chosen spirit land. These magic users are also proficient

in rituals and conjuration, and knowledgeable in nature (Andrew et. al. 2014). The attachment to nature and violent protection of land recalls the ways in which druids are defined in *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2009;2010;2011). Meanwhile, the ways in which druids call upon the spirit of a place echoes the overall trait of how shamans will frequently engage the spirits of the locales they find themselves in (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). However, the nuance that druids are looking for a specific spirit of a specific place with which to tie themselves, rather than being open and improvisational, is the point of distinction (Andrew et. al. 2014). Through that distinction, values of worldly freedom for shamans and the power of place for druids are highlighted. Moreover, the connection to spirits is once more reified as a central boundary for determining not just shamans, but what other traditions are considered akin to shamans.

However, druids are not the only other cultural tradition associated with shamans in *Shadowrun*, with others including many Native American traditions, certain types of Wiccans, and Shintoism (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). While a prominent Wiccan form, Gardnerian Wicca, is characterized as similar to hermetic magic, due to its hierarchical structure and usage of specific books, Wicca can be characterized as shamanic in other ways, due to how its teachings stress harmony in relations with nature (Andrew et. al. 2014). Similarly, Shintoism's relation to shamanism may be due to how the practice is portrayed as seeking harmony with spirits (Andrew et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, a Native American tradition, such as the Sioux, is characterized as learning through patient observation of the world, with careful listening to the magic of that world (Andrew et. al. 2014). Through the characterizations of these traditions, as well as druids, some of the meaningful boundaries of shamanism are revealed. Shintoism and Wicca stress harmony, a central component of how *Shadowrun*'s shamans strive to treat the

world (Andrew et. al. 2014). Wicca and Druidism have elements of nature, which shamans are commonly associated with (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Druids and Shintoism have components of spirits, which are crucial to shamanism (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). And, while the nature of the relationship is very different, both Sioux and Druidism tie magic to the land (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Through these connections, highlighting the ways in which the overarching concept of shamanism can be used to relate to other traditions, labeling as shaman-esque, some values emerge, such as harmony, connection to nature, connection to spirits, and learning from the land.

Those values gain further meaning when an additional boundary is considered. Both Wicca and Druidism may be based upon European beliefs, but they are based upon supposedly ancient, nature-oriented systems of belief that long suffered marginalization and persecution in Europe (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, Native American traditions and Shintoism are both traditions from cultures foreign to the industrial West (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Therefore, recalling Said's (1977) Orientalism, shamanism is the magic of the Other, either too ancient or too exotic to be otherwise. Moreover, shamans are big on nature, and with the exception of Shintoism, are not prominent in the powerful megacorporations (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). That lack of presence in powerful entities can extend to even Native American Nations where shamanism is promoted, such as how in the Sioux Nation the university of Montana Tech and Geomancy has a faculty that is largely Anglo hermetic mages (Andrew et. al. 2014). While there may be places in Shadowrun's world, such as the Athabaskan Council where shamanism is promoted to the point where non-shamans are repressed and marginalized (Andrew et. al. 2014), these examples highlight how the culturally diverse shamanism is what is practiced on the fringes, while the formal, academic hermetic mages are what is accepted and

promoted by powerful entities. Shamans' lack of presence in corporations and universities may highlight a further element of magic's opposition to technology in *Shadowrun*, as the more cybernetics one has, the dramatically less magic one can do (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Such an element echoes a classic sense of technophobia present in cyberpunk (Martin 2015; Cavallaro 2014), yet adds the magical component to emphasize that it is not merely one's humanity that is threatened by technology, but one's spiritual potential. Shamans then reflect a value of the power of what is natural, but also that what is natural is not what is the norm in a cyberpunk future.

Outside of *Shadowrun*, the shamans of *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* have their own values, indicated by what shamans are associated with. Those associations help further delineate the shaman's place in the setting, drawing boundaries. Shamans are associated with nature, they engage with plants, animals, and their spirits (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn 2014). In so doing, however, shamans are also heavily associated with tribes, often being a key part of the tribe, as either a wise advisor, or communing with spirits the tribe values, such as venerable ancestors (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn 2014). The shaman is characterized as wise, seeking harmony, and as willing to engage and learn from spirits that others cannot understand (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn 2014). However, as the illustrations of the shaman depict them in leather and furs, with decorative elements of feathers, beads, and tattoos, while brandishing spears or totems (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2014), the close connection shamans have to Native Americans in *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014) may potentially extend to other systems if they call upon the stereotypes of Native Americans already held by players. Such stereotypes of Native Americans

have a complex history, with certain attires and values, including wisdom, being part of their makeup (Black 2002; Parezo 2013). *Shadowrun*'s one explicit visual depiction of a shaman is of a fringed leather wearing Native American male elf, with beads and feathers (Hardy 2013). Therefore, if the fantasy shaman, already a liminal individual in these settings, who is associated with nature, tribes, ancestors, spirits, and wisdom, is also associated with a culture resembling Native Americans, when such associations serve to distinguish the shaman from others, the ways in which boundaries are drawn in these games may influence the way players view the real-world counterparts of these concepts. As past literature has indicated that consumption of fiction alters perceptions and knowledge, even when false (Fazio and Marsh 2008), this instance of western interpretation of shamans, may further associations of wisdom, tribes, nature, and spirits with the shamanic Other.

Academic vs. non-academic magic

The magic in tabletop role-playing games can come from many sources. In *Dungeons & Dragons* there are some main categories, and these categories help distinguish magic users from each other, even when functions such as healing many be similar. Primal, to which shamans belong, claims power through spirits and nature (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Divine, the domain of clerics and paladins, seek the intercession of deities (Carter et. al. 2008; Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Psionics are telepaths and telekinetics, who have power due to the leakage between realms (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Mearls et. al. 2010). However, the central form of magic is Arcane, to which wizards, sorcerers and warlocks belong. As the central form of magic, Arcane is less defined than others, and broader in its manifestations (Carter et. al. 2008; Bonner et. al. 2009; Crawford et. al. 2009a). Yet, for many, mastery over magic is sought, and mastery is gained through learning and studying (Bonner et. al. 2009). While the wizard owes

their entire magical ability to arduous academic study, others place value in academics as well (Carter et. al. 2008; Bonner et. al. 2009; Crawford et. al. 2009a). Though the warlock has power through a Faustian pact with an entity, many first had to engage in study to even decipher how to make contact with the entity (Carter et. al. 2008; Bonner et. al. 2009). Yet, even once contact was made, and they were bound to an entity, their power might be augmented through the entity teaching the newly made warlock, akin to a teacher and pupil, in ways that resemble the academic learning of wizards (Carter et. al. 2008; Bonner et. al. 2009). And even the sorcerer, who is magical through their innate capacity for magic, may seek academic learning in order to understand how to utilize and control that magical potential (Bonner et. al. 2009; Crawford et. al. 2009a). This academic form of magic, where magic is learned through prolonged study and dusty tomes, without calling upon spirits or gods, is the central, baseline form of magic in *Dungeons & Dragons*, to which other magic users contrast. The pursuit of mastery, often through study, is also central to the wizards and sorcerers of *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2009). Moreover, the central divide in magic in *Shadowrun* is between shamans and the academic hermetic mages, who can occasionally be referred to as wizards or warlocks (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014).

As a form of magic, shamanism contrasts well with the academic wizards. Shamanism takes place in nature, and involves communing with spirits to learn from their wisdom, with an end goal often being to serve spirits and nature, rather than to achieve for oneself (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The knowledge of shamans is often characterized as ancient, lost or forgotten, with it being conveyed via their mentoring spirit (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Though while commonly characterized as esoteric secrets, the knowledge sought by magic users such as wizards is something they personally seek and acquire (Carter et. al. 2008;

Bonner et. al. 2009; Crawford et. al. 2009a; Bulmahn et. al. 2010;2011;2014; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Moreover, shamanism frequently takes magic from the environments it encounters, accommodating, rather than imposing will like wizards or hermetic mages may be inclined to (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). These distinctions highlight an interesting set of values. The wizard is out for themselves, and is individualistic, hungry for powerful knowledge. Meanwhile, the shaman serves others, and is a point of contact through which knowledge and power flows. That boundary highlights that conceptions of self-interest and community service are both important values through the ways in which they serve to define sources of power, and the intent through which they are acquired. The different ways in which magic users derive their power is an interesting set of boundaries, which merit further discussion in future research, however. these examples hopefully illuminate the phenomena to a degree.

The magic of wizards and hermetic mages is not just academic in how learning occurs, but also in how magic is performed, though sciences such as alchemy, as well as treating magic like a science (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Magic can be rendered formal and practical, stripped of its mysticism. This contrasts with the ways in which academia has characterized magic's relationship to both science and magic in the past (Evans-Pritchard 1929; Versnel 1991; Stark 2001; Collins 2008; Stroeken 2008). Part of that is that magic calls upon and is backed up by mythology for its power, and also gains potency from being a tradition, even if those traditions and mythos are non-specific (Evans-Pritchard 1929). However, definitions of magic, particularly in relation to religion, have long been a source of controversy (Versnel 1991). Some argue that magic and science are similar, because they deal with the world which people encounter and witness daily, and as such can be empirical and adapt

to new data and errors, while religion must maintain its truth in the face of everything, and cannot be questioned due to the unknowability of the world it concerns (Stark 2001). Still, others find science and religion more similar than magic, as magic does not challenge the beliefs of those who hold it, while science and modern religions posit their truths in the face of other beliefs (Stroeken 2008) That proposed unknowability of religion is complicated when the gods are known to intercede, and individuals like warlocks and shamans engage with beings from other realms. The transformation of magic into science is the full realization of the empirical potential of magic, but doing so also dramatically changes how magic is conceived.

In *Shadowrun* where magic is frequently divided into the natural shamanic or the academic hermetic, the scientific nature of hermetic magic can frequently be seen (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). This can occur in small, less consequential, ways, such as how with the crafting of reagents, alchemical components, hermetic mages do so in eight hour shifts, part of the legacy of industrialization, more than necessity (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, shamans follow a more traditional pattern that adheres to the rising and setting of the sun (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2013). Though this is described as a delicate, potentially dangerous process, different traditions, due to the different ways they socially construct magic, perform a crucial step in ways which reflect their values. The shaman's following of the night and day cycle reflects openness and adherence to nature's changes, while the hermetic mage's work shifts reflect a formalized, scientific approach. Such differences persist in the magical arts of shamanic geomancy and hermetic geomasonry (Andrew et. al. 2014). Geomancy is about intuition, flow, and instinct, informed by Eastern philosophy, while geomasonry is about logic and construction of structures that best call upon magical energies (Andrew et. al. 2014). The

boundary between free adaptation and imposed structure continues to define the differences between magic users.

Intriguingly, magic is divorced from religion not just in academic forms of magic, but in shamanism as well (Crawford et al. 2009a; 2009b). While shamans commune with and channel spirits, the game systems do not treat this as akin to religion, though the practice may be part of religions (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Such a perspective may mean that reserving religion in magic is important, for that is what provides distinction for classes like clerics who offer prayers to deities for their abilities (Carter et. al. 2008; Bulmahn et al. 2009; Crawford et al. 2009a). Though, this is complicated by how an individual's culture, such as their religion, shapes what is magical in *Shadowrun*, reflecting that not just reality, but ability are socially constructed (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Yet, this divorce from magic also means that the navigation of the sacred is far more complicated in fantasy settings where one knows the gods are real because a paladin can mutter a prayer and light a goblin on fire, while one also knows that the wizard can do so because they read a book the other day.

The way magic is taught also differs, with the academic versus non-academic divide taken to an extreme in *Shadowrun*. Shamans are taught either as part of their cultural tradition, via the individual mentor spirit totem they are tied to, or by the spirits they encounter throughout their life (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). In many ways, the being taught through one's personal spirit and cultural background reflects how the shamans of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* are also taught (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2014). However, the hermetic mages in *Shadowrun* are fully and truly academic, attending schools and universities to learn their magic (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). While a shaman's initiation rite might be a vision quest informed by their cultural background, the hermetic mage's initiation would be a

master's thesis, similar in some ways to this one, perhaps (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Moreover, shamanism is even marginalized as an area of study in these institutions, with prestigious schools not offering courses on such traditions at all, and Shamanistic Studies not becoming an accepted area of study for a degree in Thaumaturgy until years after the academic study of magic had been firmly established (Andrew et. al. 2014). Considering that shamans are usually not part of corporations, which also often use universities to recruit talent (Andrew et. al. 2014), this is a small way in which shamans are marginalized in-universe. Both are powerful, yet only one is fully integrated into society's powerful institutions.

Nevertheless, that there are such differences in how magic is acquired and taught, and that these boundaries are used to make magic users distinct from each other, illuminates a value placed upon learning. The shamans' way of learning from spirits of nature and ancestors shows a value placed in the power of cultural history and of nature. The wizard and hermetic mage's learning from books and years of research reflects how valued academia, formal knowledge, and persistence are. Additionally, the cleric and paladin's powers from praying for divine intervention show a level of respect for the power of belief and religion. These individuals may all have magic, yet it is the way in which magic is gained and treated that makes them distinct and informs their persona.

However, what is fascinating about these boundaries, and what makes them differ from the symbolic boundary work that characterized the boundaries Lamont (1992) and Robinson (2014) found is that there is an apparent lack of judgement attached to the games' boundaries, even as they are used to distinguish one group from another. The boundaries Lamont studied, which indicated processes of reproduction of class and inequality, involved upper-middle class professionals judging themselves as superior or inferior to others on the basis of moral,

socioeconomic, and cultural boundaries. Moreover, when Robinson studied conceptions of southern blackness, for many of the contributors there were elements of authenticity at stake, with views that this authentic southern black identity was superior to other forms of blackness. In such boundaries where people seek to distinguish themselves from others, not only are there values, there is judgement along those values. This is even part of the boundaries of taboos that Zerubavel (1991) discusses, that things are either acceptable or unacceptable, worthy or unworthy. For Lamont, this can shape interactions, with the unworthy becoming excluded and marginalized through how they are treated, for they are viewed as something one should not interact with, beneath oneself. Boundaries do not just serve purposes of self-identification, they serve to determine self-worth as well, for not only is one different from that other, one is also better because of those differences.

Yet, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b), *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2011; 2014), and *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014) provide a different context for boundaries, for these games seek to provide entertainment, escapism. While there may be very real and articulated in-universe tensions between different groups, which players may be even encouraged to acknowledge, such as with how the example of a player character shaman in *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013) has a slight prejudice against hermetic mages listed under his attributes, there are also plenty of examples where individuals from very different groups are said to be working together as part of a party, with some suggestions even about how to navigate such potential in-universe tensions. Yet, these are just in-universe, narrative tensions, for the rulebooks make no such value judgements about the worthiness of any particular group. Each new group or class is not something to be judged as better as or worse than what came before, they are simply additional options. This great number of options, even if they may receive late

introductions or unequal additional development, are given equal validity and respectability. The player can be a wizard, cleric, or shaman, the game does not care which, the game merely wishes to tell the player how they could be so, so that the player can escape into the role. As such, boundaries do not need to involve judgement, boundaries can be primarily for differentiation, and, at that, differentiation for variety, not hierarchy. Even the boundaries which generate in-universe tension are not for value judgement, rather that tension can serve the valuable purpose of providing depth and narrative possibility to the game world.

Fluidity of Shamans

While the shaman is defined and made distinct in the rulebooks, the purpose of these conceptions remains for them to be utilized in a form of secular entertainment that is formed around emergent storytelling. As such, the concepts presented in tabletop rulebooks are designed to allow and encourage interpretations. Past literature has shown that this interpretative component of tabletop role-playing games is valuable for not just enjoyment and enthrallment (Fine 1983; Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004; Jones 2012), but also for processes of identity construction which can enable self-reflection (Fuist 2012; White Harviainen and Boss 2012). For shamans, the fluidity is provided to players in two primary forms. The first is the cultural variation inherent within the conceptions of shamans presented in the game world, as there is not just one end-all-be-all shaman offered. The second is that of player choice, for the player has agency in interpretation and construction. Again, while this is a study of rulebooks and not of play, player choice is still found to be a vital component in how the rulebooks presented and constructed shamans. This aspect of fluidity indicates how the sacred can be navigated and negotiated for the purposes of secular entertainment, though meeting the needs of the individual for enjoyment, and not necessarily authenticity or spirituality.

Cultural variation

Within the rulebooks themselves shamans are presented with a stark amount of variety. While in game systems like *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* this variety has a mechanical benefit of providing options which can perform different tasks, those options are still constructed in a way that tries to fit the logic of the game world and of the core shaman concept. Thus, how do the game systems explain that this shaman can do different things than this shaman, even if those differences are slight? For the game systems, the answer is that they are indeed different, that they commune with different spirits, have different beliefs, and by thus having different cultures, shamanism manifests differently. This inherent, promoted variety in shamanic practice reflects the diversity of shamanic practice seen globally (Eliade 1961; Krippner 2002).

In *Dungeons & Dragons* this takes the form of deciding what type of spirit companion one will have, such as a Protector, Stalker, Watcher, or World Speaker, each of which has suggestions for what type of form the spirit companion might take (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). This first step of differentiation is then followed by Paragon Paths, such as Ghost Panther, Warrior of Spring, Great Elder, or Disciple of the World Serpent (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). These Paragon Paths are crucial in determining much of a shaman's persona, for they state what the shaman's beliefs are, what spirits they commune with, and what their motivations are. For instance, the Disciple of the World Serpent is a restrictive defender "charged with maintaining the balance of the natural order and ensuring that creatures from beyond the mortal realm keep to their place." (Crawford et. al. 2009a:132) Meanwhile, the Warrior of Spring is a healer that spreads seeds throughout their adventures "so that their verdant bounty can continue the cycle of spring." (Crawford et. al. 2009b; 85) Moreover, *Dungeons & Dragons* provides illustrations for each and every option available here so that players can fully

see the variety in shamanic practice. In addition to shaping the shaman's culture and their spirit companion, each choice here has accompanying ability options, further differentiating the varieties of shamans both mechanically and narratively.

Structured very similarly, *Pathfinder* has a shaman select a spirit type, like Waves, Bones, Fire, Battle, Heavens, and Stone, which dramatically alters the appearance of their spirit animal, their own appearance, and the abilities they have (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Some of these varieties can be dramatic, such as the Bones spirit which makes the shaman a deathly smelling, ghoulish person, with a transparent ghost of a spirit animal. This deathly nature is so central that the Bones shaman can be played as an undead creature, and the rulebook has prescribed rules variations to accompany such a scenario (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). The choice of spirit type can be accompanied by an archetype selection, such as Animist, Speaker for the Past, or Unsworn Shaman, if the player so chooses (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). These archetypes can have dramatic impacts upon how a shaman is played, with the Unsworn Shaman being a stark example as that shaman "never binds herself to one specific spirit, always making new deals as she deems necessary for the circumstances that she finds herself in." (Bulmahn et. al. 2014:112) The lack of the singular personal spirit connection, instead flitting from one to another, renders this shaman archetype a rather unique variant of *Pathfinder* shaman, yet one that still fits within the game system's conception of shamans. Through providing such varieties of shamans that even alter core mechanics, *Pathfinder* shows that one can be a shaman even if one approaches a defining characteristic differently. This variation, even upon core elements, recalls some of the critiques of the ideal typical nature of shamans as a classification, or how some models may place one characteristic above all else (Krippner 2002). As such, this cultural variation among the presented game conceptions of shamans highlights that although there may be some ideal typical

elements, there is also variety which plays upon those same elements, deepening, elaborating, or even straying from them, in order to provide a richer suite of shamanic options for players to encounter and embody in their pursuit of fun.

Importantly, much of the cultural variation present among shamans in *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* relates back to the central, definitional component of the shaman's relationship to spirits, and specifically to their personal spirit companion or animal. However, there are also other hints of cultural variation along other lines. In *Dungeons & Dragons* some flavor text segments will provide multiple examples of shamans, highlighting the variety of shamanic manifestations:

“A wizened dwarf follows a shaggy bear spirit along a lonely mountain road, unsure where the spirit will lead. Moving with the grace and stealth of a panther, an elf and his spirit companion creep through the forest toward their unsuspecting orc prey. A human draped in leaves and furs stands with arms upraised to the stormy sky, calling on the spirits of thunder and lightning.” (Crawford et. al. 2009b; 62)

In such instances an overlap is displayed of associations and boundaries that shamans play upon with the ways in which some key fantasy races are coded. The dwarf is trekking the mountains with a bear. The elf prowls in the forest, stealthily hunting. The human is wearing furs and invoking thunder and lightning, like one might expect of a human barbarian. Such examples are important as, in the worlds of *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, the various fantasy races have their own diverse and complex cultures that still have common elements or stereotypes attached to them (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2011;2014). The games may even go so far as to suggest that certain classes and races mesh well, not just mechanically, but narratively as well. Furthermore, while there are examples presented in the text, this is still a

form of interpretative fiction, and the rulebooks know that. The spirit animal in *Pathfinder* is expressly of whatever species the player so chooses (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, while there might be recurring examples and suggestions of panthers and bears as spirit companions in *Dungeons & Dragons*, the rulebooks do implore players to feel free to design their own spirit companion and shamanic background which best meets the needs of both their shaman type and the cultural background of their character, as a drow may be more comfortable with a spider (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). In such ways a fluidity is built into the conception of shamans as the conception of shamans must not only navigate the player's needs for and perceptions of the shamans, but of the larger world. Though being variable, that game system logic is followed and expanded upon allows for the shamanic conceptions to not disrupt immersion (Fine 1983; Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004). The conceptions are not simply that a shaman is something, they are that a drow shaman might be like this, while a dwarf shaman could be like that.

Yet, while the personal spirit options are not as central in *Shadowrun*, though still available to provide variation, the cultural variation of shamanic practice is even more fundamental, given the social constructionist conception of magic. The variation in magic and practice is crucial, as what is magical and potent depends upon what the magic user believes and values as magical and potent (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). That variation is even more important in shamanic tradition, as shamanism is one of the two main, umbrella traditions of magic in the *Shadowrun* universe (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). As such, there is an inherent need to provide a vast degree of variability in shamanism. While part of this is addressed through how shamanism is characterized as particularly individualist and built upon personal experience and individual mentorship, variation is also achieved through the setting

itself (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). The world of *Shadowrun* is a reimagining of the real world, and so incorporates the cultural diversity and variation already present, while also adding elements of cyberpunk and magical fantasy to further differentiate. Shamanism in *Shadowrun* is expressly attached to various cultures and traditions like Native Americans, Shintoism, some forms of Wicca, and Druidism by the rulebooks, while also allowing the potential for magic users of many other cultures to also be viewed as shamans (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). Other aspects of a shaman's background, such as the environments they grew up in, nationality, their socio-economic background, metahuman race, ethnicity, social networks, personal interests, hobbies, and more can be utilized to provide further variability to the shaman and what magic entails for them. However, though enabling great freedom, that variability must still be adhere to the logic of the game system's rules and setting. Therefore, just like in fantasy settings, the *Shadowrun* conception of shaman is a flexible, fluid concept that is presented in a way that shows that shamans are not just one thing, they are many things, and because they are many things, the shaman can adapt to the needs of the player without breaking the game.

Player choice

All that cultural variation in the shamans of these game systems does not just serve to make them richer, and a more real component of the settings, they also serve a key function of tabletop role-playing game design: enabling players to choose for themselves. While the game master can call upon the great variety of shamans to best suit the needs of the campaign they are creating for the players, the players have multiple ways of constructing and navigating their own conception of the game's shaman.

In this context, player choice revolves around character creation and progression. If the player decides that they shall be a shaman, many more details remain to be decided. Those

details include, but are not limited to, gender, race, background, the specific type of shaman one is, alignment, what one's personal spirit is like, and motivations. Though the discussions and presentation of shamans may give suggestions and provide examples, players are free to decide as they will, with what they believe is appropriate for their character concept. A player could create a female elven Scarred Healer shaman who has a Chaotic Good alignment and a panther Stalker spirit who nomadically wanders, healing the gravest of wounds (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). Or, one could be a male dwarf Bone shaman who is part of the Spirit Warden archetype, who is Lawful Evil, as they and their ghostly bear ensure the dead stay dead (Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Meanwhile, there could also be a female orc Street Shaman, who happens to be a practicing druid, learning from a mentoring Raven totem, as they seek to use a magically powerful location to travel to other planes (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). While purely hypothetical examples, there are possible ones, allowed through the creation processes of these games.

Moreover, customization and player choice continues past the creation stage, as when players succeed and achieve in the games, they will gain experience and level up. As they become more powerful, they gain access to more abilities, however, they must select which abilities they will add to their repertoire, further specializing and customizing their interpretation of the shaman (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014; Bulmahn et. al. 2014). Players can also elect to multiclass or create a hybrid character, combining a shaman with another class, or another class with shamans (Mearls et. al. 2010; Bulmahn et. al. 2014). As these classes were not designed to be dismantled and reassembled, this can be dangerous due to a loss of effectiveness; however, the choice does enable even more variation to occur as a player levels up (Mearls et. al. 2010). The hybrid shaman of *Dungeons & Dragons* can call a spirit

companion, yet otherwise has a deficiency in their connection to spirits (Mearls et. al. 2010). Again the defining characteristic of the shaman is their relationship to spirits, with the weaker hybrid having the personal spirit but not the ability to commune with others. Narrative reasons for this deficiency are even suggested, such as failing the rite of passage or alienating the spirit world through a past action (Mearls et. al. 2010). Still, such options, even if they produce potentially weaker shamans, show that syncretism is an ongoing and continuous process with shamanism, both in game and in the real-world. Perhaps the shamans who are products of hybridization or multi-classing could be compared to some forms of neo-shamanism where folk healers took on shamanic attributes which they found appealing (Hendrickson 2015). Meanwhile, shamans who decide to multiclass and gain new abilities could reflect the adaptive potential of shamans (Dow 1989; Kendall 1996; Kim 2012). Yet, the inclusion of hybrid characters and multi-classing, along with the warnings of the mechanical risks of doing so, even if there is great narrative potential (Mearls et. al. 2010), indicates that sometimes enabling the player to decide for themselves can slightly trump the rules, as this interpretive fluidity is central, not just to shamans, but to the very functions of the games. That the games stress themselves that the player's ability to interpret the contents of games is an interesting echo of Swidler's (1986: 2001) agentic view of how individuals call upon their tool-kit, and that they can determine that a part is more useful or relevant, or that another can be disregarded. In a way, the games accept that the rules they posit are only one component of gameplay, and that by ceding some control, explicitly encouraging active choice from players, as well as providing regulation and suggestions for choice, they may in fact be strengthening their plausibility structures, giving their contents more potency.

Through the game systems' gradual processes of character progression not only do the characters further embody the concept they were selected to fulfill, they specifically begin to embody the player's interpretation of that concept. In *Dungeons & Dragons* this embodiment is highlighted by the end-of-game goals of "Epic Destinies" (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b).

Though there is not a shaman-specific Epic Destiny, there are those for any Primal class, with the two mentioning shamans in their descriptions being Primal Avatar and Honored Ancestor (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). These are the embodiment and achievement of ideals of the Primal classes' concerns with nature, ancestors, and spirits. The Honored Ancestor is the mortal reincarnation of a great ancestral spirit, who will perform a great task before returning to the world of spirits until needed again (Crawford et. al. 2009b). A player can decide to pursue an epic destiny, to achieve that immortal embodiment of an ideal, yet, to do so, they must negotiate what that entails with their game master.

That negotiation is a key component of the fluidity of role-playing game shamans. While cultural variation is present and offered to the players, with rulebooks freely encouraging players to decide for themselves how best to interpret the concepts, this is still a collaborative form of storytelling (Crawford et al. 2009a; 2009b). Past literature on tabletop role-playing games has highlighted that this form of play is one of cooperative, shared emergent storytelling that relies upon group cohesion, immersion, and fun (Fine 1983; Stromberg 1999; Waskul and Lust 2004; White, Harviainen and Boss 2012; Hendricks 2006). These rulebooks are fully cognizant of how it is not just the player's interpretations of concepts, but how those interpreted concepts fit into the adventures the player has alongside other players' interpretations of those and other concepts. In character creation, players are encouraged to discuss what they want with their game master,

particularly as the elements a player decides upon may provide fodder for the game master to create future adventures with (Crawford et. al. 2009a;2009b).

Importantly though, the game master's consent is sought in these discussions, not merely informing them (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b). *Pathfinder* uses the phrase "GM [game master] discretion" to highlight how the player's interpretation and utilization of concepts is a matter of negotiation with others (Bulmahn et. al. 2014:35). In particular, the game master's role as decider of this negotiation can be reified by the texts, as the game master both designs adventures and balances the needs of the various players (Crawford et. al. 2009a; 2009b; Bulmahn et. al. 2011;2014; Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014). For example, in *Shadowrun*'s initiation rites, the process of designing the initiation ritual, to fit both the needs of the ritual and the character's culture and traditions, is a discussion between game master and player (Andrew et. al. 2014). However, that discussion, even if allowing player suggestions, is largely framed as ultimately the choice of the game master as they need to ensure that the ritual is of sufficient challenge for the benefit provided (Andrew et al. 2014). These components highlight that while there is negotiation of concepts and their interpretations, there is also a power dynamic in place in the way that the rulebooks present such negotiations.

Concepts in tabletop role-play games are inherently fluid, for they are built for interpretation. The rulebooks present a world and its denizens for players to put themselves into and explore. For those worlds, concepts are constructed with variety to allow the players freedom in their interpretation. However, the player is further encouraged to make choices about their interpretations beyond the confines of the rulebooks. Yet, as they play with others, they caution that interpretation is something that might need to be discussed. In such games, the shaman is one of many concepts. However, their construction and portrayal in this entertainment context

reveals much. These interpretative, collaborative games show that secular entertainment can enable individuals to navigate the sacred in ways that allow them to explore the meaningful boundaries and distinctions in a way that allows fluid interpretation. There is fluidity as though concepts are presented with structured rules, with illustrative examples, they are also tinged with inherent cultural variability, an awareness that the sacred has many meanings. That variability is then expounded upon by encouraging player choice, telling the player that not only is there fluidity here in the rulebooks, there is so much more if you would only imagine. Yet, that great fluidity, which navigates the perceptions of shamans in the game systems and the perceptions the player has from elsewhere, must also be flexible enough to withstand negotiation of others' perceptions and needs. Therefore, the rulebooks provide players with a number of tools, such as the shaman, enabling the formation of diverse strategies of action through the cultural variation within the concepts and encouraging player choice, thereby allowing the culture of both player and rulebook to interact. Though, at the same time, those potential strategies of action remain a matter of negotiation of both the logic of game systems and the perceptions of other players, highlighting a manner in which tools can be constrained, even in the freest of contexts and designs.

In the end, the concept of the shaman is meant to be role-played, acted out and interpreted as the player tells their shamanic part of a shared legend. The quest is for fun, and the reward is experience, with, perhaps, some bonus understanding of the sacred.

CONCLUSION

Role-playing games are an intriguing medium to study, as they are built around players feely interpreting the concepts presented as they act out those concepts in emergent story-telling. Within those games, the shaman is depicted as a part of nature, often tribal, who is a liminal magic user capable of both healing and harming, performing rituals, traveling to other worlds, and having a relationship with spirits, including a personal spirit from which much of their power is derived. That relationship to spirits, and especially the personal spirit, is the definitional quality of shamans, which renders things shamanic, even in cases of hybridization. However, other forms of boundaries exist with which to make the shaman distinct as an option for players. These boundaries play upon concerns of east versus west, bringing up elements of Said's (1977) Orientalism, as these Western informed and set worlds present a global concept, as well as distinctions between academic and non-academic forms of magic, highlighting the importance of the source of magic rather than its function. Finally, these conceptions, in light of these defining characteristics and distinctions, were shown to be fluid, as in each game system, *Pathfinder* (Bulmahn et. al. 2014), *Dungeons & Dragons* (Crawford 2009a;2009b), and *Shadowrun* (Hardy 2013; Andrew et. al. 2014), shamans were constructed with a wide degree of cultural variation, showing a richness to how they manifest in these universes. That fluidity through cultural variation was amplified by the games encouraging player choice, reminding that this was an interpretative medium of fiction, so the player was invited to design a shaman that best met their desires for fun. Yet, this fluidity was tinged with a need for flexibility as tabletop role-playing games are not a solo tale, rather they are told through interactions with other players and a game master. As such, the player's interpretations needed to be negotiated with both the logic of the game systems and the needs and desires of the other players.

These fictional conceptions of shamans have much in common with past, academic conceptions of shamans (Howels 1948; Eliade 1959;1961; Brown 1988;1989; Kendall 1996; Krippner 2002;2012). However, unlike past work which might focus on ritual, healing, or visions, these games were focused on the shaman's relationship with spirits, indicating that secular entertainment may find certain elements of the shaman more important than might be expected. This has important ramifications as fiction can shape perceptions of concepts (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Tuchman 1978; Gross 1998; Fazio and Marsh 2008). Therefore, for players of tabletop role-playing games their definitions of shamans may come to center on spirits. Additionally, by examining how shamans are constructed for fantasy and cyberpunk settings, the ways in which shamans interact with genre concerns are illuminated.

Social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) was a subtle, thorough presence in the findings, as the game systems themselves embraced the importance of how different cultures conceive of the world and, thus, conceive of what magic and shamanism entails. Moreover, the fluidity in the conceptions enables the shaman to become a cultural tool able to form many strategies of action (Swidler 1986), as the shaman is informed by combination of the desires of the player and the logic of the game system. Throughout this, the shaman was made distinct through boundaries (Zerubavel 1991) which highlighted the importance of how and why the shaman performs magic, rather than the functions of their magic. These boundaries are important as shamans exist alongside many other magic user options available to players, and so the forms of distinction need to be for differentiation of choices, rather than exclusion or inclusion, or value judgements.

Yet, as these boundaries largely served a purpose of differentiation, to provide the player even more choices in a richer world, rather than to establish worthiness or acceptability,

entertainment is shown to be a context where boundaries behave differently, with different implications, than past studies have indicated. This is particularly the case for the class boundaries of Lamont (1992) or the identity politics boundaries of Robinson (2014). While Robinson included an analysis of art, like movies and music, even then boundaries had authenticity and legitimacy at stake. As such, entertainment can be seen as a unique context because escapism is structured differently. While escapism may have messages and deep meanings, those are ancillary to the ultimate, stated purposes of enjoyment. As Fine (1983) argued in his own study of tabletop role-playing games, games only survive and succeed if they are fun. In escapist entertainment, concerns of authenticity and legitimacy may become inconsequential if fun is achieved. Therefore, boundaries exist to make entertainment more enjoyable by providing variation, making the content richer. Moreover, in interactive or choice driven entertainment, those boundaries to create variation also allow the consumers to consume in more ways, increasing their agency and variety of future strategies of action, even if those actions lead to identity formation, such as in the case of player creation. Therefore, much more research needs to be done on how boundaries are constructed and function in escapist entertainment. How are characters made distinct from each other, even when very similar, such as the various ninjas of *Mortal Kombat*? In games where players are given choices, how are those choices made distinct? Does this lack of judgement of choices extend to more instances of interactive fiction, or do some forms of interactive fiction provide distinct choices while judging the choices a consumer can take? How does having fun as a primary concern contrast with authenticity or legitimacy? When a new setting is introduced into an ongoing story, how is that setting distinguished from what came before? How do boundaries for variation ultimately shape

the perceptions of those distinguished concepts held by consumers? These questions and more are in need of future inquiry to illuminate the nuances of boundaries.

However, as this work was a content analysis of rulebooks, rather than analysis of play, there are some noteworthy limitations to what this research can say about how things are interpreted. Yet, these findings highlight how the games themselves design for wide interpretation. Similarly, this was a multi-game sample, intended to capture the breadth of shamanic depictions in some influential game systems. While that enabled insight into defining characteristics of shamans across settings, another approach might have selected one game system and done a thorough analysis of a small selection of classes, such as shamans, druids, wizards, sorcerers, and clerics, to determine how boundaries are constructed. Unfortunately, due to the amount of detail available on any one class, that was out of the scope of this project.

Nevertheless, the findings that the navigation of the sacred in secular entertainment is one of fluidity and flexible negotiation of meaningful distinctions, by not just the individual consumer, but by the consumer, the content, and other consumers, indicates that there is more work to be done. For instance, future research could interview role-players who play religious characters, particularly if they are themselves areligious, to see how game contexts dramatically shift understanding of religions. Moreover, further research into the distinctions between sources of magic is warranted. Additionally, as classes are gendered in *Pathfinder* a study awaits to see the trends of that gendering. Finally, research on how real-world shamans feel about their interpretations in fiction would be beneficial. Portrayals of cultural concepts in fiction are rich with meanings, the navigation of which says much about the consumer and producer.

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