# 'When Last We Saw Our Heroes': Medieval Oral Tradition and Formulaic Narrative in Dungeons & Dragons

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# 'When Last We Saw Our Heroes':
## Medieval Oral Tradition and Formulaic Narrative in *Dungeons & Dragons*

**MA Thesis**
**English Literature and Culture**
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## INTRODUCTION

The history of mankind is intrinsically linked to the history of narrative, since it is in our very being to communicate and to produce narratives. Ever since man first invented speech, we have been fascinated by the telling and hearing of stories. At the genesis of sentient humanity, such stories may well have been mainly cautionary tales of poisonous plants and dangerous animals, perhaps no more than repeated accounts from survivors or witnesses. When survival ceased to be man's sole concern, these stories would turn to explaining their wider existence. Humans needed to know why the sky was blue, or why thunder struck, and narratives of ancestors and/or gods usually provided an answer. In time these narratives would also come to include other subjects like martial strategy and laws.

Until the invention of script, and after, the sharing of stories transpired orally, around campfires and hearths, out on the streets or inside the halls of the court, or performed alongside music at a feast. The script did not immediately make the oral storyteller obsolete; it remained a popular mode of narrative at least until the late Middle Ages. As noted by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, "the literature of the day was meant above all to be recited or read aloud to an audience, since the reading public was not large enough to warrant any other form of publication."[1] Writing did allow for the more permanent recording of orally transmitted stories,[2] creating the written sources that we may now use to discuss a tradition otherwise lost (see Chapter 1 below).

The introduction of the printing press brought an easier method of producing narratives on paper where before the mind of the storyteller, or the hand-crafted manuscript, would (have to) suffice. The introduction of the printing press saw oral tradition decline starkly because of the efficiency of printing. This in turn made it even more likely for cultural aspects hitherto orally transmitted, or shielded from the influence of the manuscript, to be abandoned for productions in print.[3] The oral storyteller was conquered by the author.[4]

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[1] Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: the Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, trans. David Gerard, eds Geoffrey Nowell-Smith David Wootton (London: Verso, 1997), 25.
[2] Whether by its original creator or some secondary hand like a scribe.
[3] Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, 239.
[4] In fact, the early printed authors may well have been oral storytellers settling their narratives down on a page, as it became even more accessible for them to (re)produce, distribute and profit off of their narratives.

Yet, it would not be fair to state that oral tradition has died out. Simple orality, such as catching up with friends, or discussing the events of the day over dinner, easily exemplify how much oral tradition is ingrained into the human experience. In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Walter J. Ong notes that even reading a text can be seen as an extension of orality, as it involves "converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination."[5] Similarly, modern education relies on orally transmitted knowledge—the teacher speaks and the student listens. To Walter J. Ong, "The basic orality of language is permanent,"[6] since "[o]f all the many thousands of languages—possibly tens of thousands—spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature" and "[e]ven now hundreds of languages in active use are never written at all."[7] Many languages retain(ed) an oral tradition for the transmission of (cultural) narratives. Moreover, orality itself does not remain stagnant. According to Ong, the electronic age has become an age of 'secondary orality', since technologies such as the telephone, radio, and television remain in essence oral, albeit dependent on writing and print for its existence.[8]

In addition to these new technologies that rely on a form of orality, the post-war 20th century also saw a mainstream resurgence of sorts of a more traditional form of orality. Undoubtedly sparked by the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epics from the 1940's onwards, and the ensuing 'fantasy boom', medieval oral tradition in particular has become a hallmark of modern fantasy and medievalist media. Perhaps the most potent example of medieval oral tradition being 'revived' is the rise of the TableTop RolePlaying Game or 'TTRPG'.[9] Tabletop roleplaying games are games of pseudo-ordered make-belief "driven by [the collective] imagination,"[10] of a group of players that create their own characters and actively participate in the narrative described by another player, the 'game master'. As the name suggests, the TTRPG precedes similarly-styled digital media like video

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[5] Ong, Walter J, *Orality and Literacy : The Technologizing of the Word* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 8.
[6] Ong. *Orality and Literacy*, 7.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ong. *Orality and Literacy*, 3.
[9] The acronym TTRPG will be used to mean 'tabletop roleplaying game' throughout this thesis. Where sources or discussion pertains to the more general 'role-playing game', (TT)RPG will be used, since much of what is true for RPG's is true for TTRPG's as well.
[10] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook, Fifth Edition* (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014), 5.

games, being commonly played at a table,[11] supplemented by rulebooks, dice and, at times, miniature battlefields. However, recent years have seen the TTRPG digitalise greatly (see Chapter 2.2. and 2.3.).

These games, while not exact replications of oral tradition, are heavily reliant on orality and collaborative storytelling elements: TTRPG's rarely function without its "lead storyteller and referee,"[12] or the oral input of the players. Furthermore, the gameplay of the TTRPG owes much to the narrative and stylistic features of oral tradition. Medieval oral tradition in particular has influenced tabletop roleplaying games greatly; most of the very first role-playing games, including *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), were inspired by numerous works of the early fantasy boom, which in turn were generally inspired by the medieval period.

Few academic sources can be found on the topic of orality in (tabletop) roleplaying games. Related topics are dealt with in the fields of narrative theory and philology for oral tradition, and game theory and the study of medievalism for (TT)RPG's. A founding text on orality, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) qualified the characteristics and extensive type-scenes of folkloric tales and fairy tales. Walter J. Ong in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) discussed the history of oral tradition, and especially its relationship to literacy and literature. Various efforts of 'field work' on the topic, such as by the later scholar Satu Apo,[13] have studied numerous extant sources of oral tradition and oral cultures. However, theory on oral tradition and oral narrative has not yet been linked to the relatively new medium of the (TT)RPG. By contrast, mainstream popular media such as films and video games are slowly becoming represented in scholarship.[14]

Similarly, while tabletop roleplaying games have garnered moderate scholarly interest since its inception, much of it pertains to topics other than its narrative or its

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[11] Hence 'tabletop.'

[12] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*, 5.

[13] See Satu Apo, "The Relationship between Oral and Literary Tradition as a Challenge in Fairy-Tale Research: The Case of Finnish Folktales." Translated by David Hackston. *Marvels & Tales* 21, no. 1 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 19-33.

[14] Both *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007) and *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* (2018) devote pages to interactive narratives, and the latter even mentions *Dungeons & Dragons* in passing while discussing video game narrative fluency.

ties with oral tradition, such as identity construction,[15] gender and sexuality,[16] social relations,[17] pedagogy,[18] and historiography.[19] Most frequently, scholarship on the (TT)RPG originate from inside the fandom, or from creators themselves, such as the plethora of handbooks and rulebooks for the many TTRPG's now in circulation,[20] as well as popular—that is, pseudo-scholarly at best—works such as David M. Ewalt *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (2013). In short, the tabletop roleplaying game's ties to medieval orality are left untouched.

This thesis will attempt to close the apparent research gap to a degree, by investigating to what extent the non-linear narrative structure of the tabletop roleplaying game resembles that of medieval oral tradition. In so doing, it will cover a topic otherwise largely left untouched. Indeed, this thesis will demonstrate that (TT)RPG's can provide valuable contributions to the scholarly fields wherein the topic is otherwise overlooked—narrative theory, oral tradition studies, the study of medievalism and game studies—and that they can be researched in a similar fashion to other medievalisms.[21] TTRPG's such as *Dungeons & Dragons* may provide insights into medieval orality and historical, communal storytelling, since the TTRPG can be found to simulate this historic orality. Moreover, in the wider scholarly world, (TT)RPG's may be used as an example of mankind's continuing want for stories, and thus could prove a useful case study for fields of social science, such as anthropology and psychology.

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[15] See for example Peterson, Jon. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

[16] See for example Garcia, Antero. "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." Mind, Culture and Activity 24, no. 3 (2017): 232–46.

[17] See for example Ferguson, Christopher J. "Are Orcs Racist? Dungeons and Dragons, Ethnocentrism, Anxiety, and the Depiction of "evil" Monsters." *Current Psychology (New Brunswick, N.J.)*, 2022.

[18] See for example Csenge Virág Zalka. "Adventures in the Classroom: Creating Traditional Story-Based Role-Playing Games for the High School Curriculum." *Storytelling, Self, Society* 12, no. 2 (2016): 173–206.

[19] See for example Laycock, Joseph P. *Dangerous Games : What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015). See also Chapter 2.2.2. below.

[20] The latest edition of *Dungeon and Dragons* alone counts nine rulebooks, eight campaign sourcebooks, and 17 adventure modules published, as well as an uncountable number of errata and additional documents. Standard issue are the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the *Monster Manual*, and the *Player's Handbook*; only the latter is essential for the understanding of game mechanics.

[21] Medievalism here defines "post-medieval devotion to or adoption of medieval ideals or practices." *Dictionay.com.* s.v. "Medievalism," https://www.dictionary.com/browse/medievalism, accessed 7th of March 2022.

Since the necessary space to discuss each of the individual TTRPG's in the already expansive corpus would be immeasurable, this thesis will concern itself primarily with only one TTRPG, namely *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition* (2012-2014), although exploration of earlier editions or related media may be necessary.

Chapter 1: What is Medieval Orality? will define what exactly constitutes medieval orality, by presenting (among others) Walter J. Ong's theory pertaining to the "Psychodynamics of Orality,"[22] and illustrating the presence of his characteristics in extant historical sources of medieval oral tradition, such as the Old English *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas.

Chapter 2: What is *Dungeons & Dragons*? will provide an overview of the popular TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, detailing its content, gameplay mechanics, history, and development.

Chapter 3: Medieval Orality in *Dungeons & Dragons* will demonstrate the relation between *Dungeons & Dragons* and medieval orality, by applying Walter J. Ong's theory on oral characteristics to the TTRPG.

Ultimately, this thesis will argue that *Dungeons & Dragons* in many ways reintroduces the characteristics of medieval oral tradition.

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[22] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.

**CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS MEDIEVAL ORALITY?**

To argue for the reintroduction of traditional oral elements in the modern TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons*,[23] orality itself must first be defined. Since the corpus of oral theory counts many varying definitions from different scholars, this chapter will briefly discuss the theories and definitions most potent to the analysis later in this thesis, before turning to Walter J. Ong's fundamental theory on characteristics of orality.

John Miles Foley defined "oral tradition" as follows:

> [O]ral tradition, also called orality, [is] the first and still most widespread mode of human communication. Far more than "just talking," oral tradition refers to a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas.[24]

Put differently, oral tradition is perhaps the most primal form of communication and transmission of knowledge between human beings. As Foley notes, "[f]or millennia prior to the invention of writing, […] oral tradition served as the sole means of communication available for forming and maintaining societies and their institutions."[25] Since the discussion in later chapters pertains to the TTRPG, a medium which can be crudely defined as 'the (collective) experience of an oral narrative', it would be effective to narrow down Foley's definition to exclude hypothetical sources, and focus only on extant works which can be proven to be of oral origin. In order for these works of orality to have survived until the present day, they will have likely been written down by the author or some (later) third party. Such is the case, for instance, with the Old English *Beowulf* which, although likely to stem from orally performed Germanic heroic poetry,[26] survives 'only' because it was written down by an anonymous, Christian poet, who sought to record the "heroic language, style and pagan world of ancient Germanic oral poetry."[27] The same can be

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[23] Hereafter frequently abbreviated to '*D&D*.'

[24] John Miles Foley, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Oral Tradition" Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica online, last revised January 6, 2019, last accessed March 13, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/oral-tradition.

[25] Ibid.

[26] James Simpson and Alfred David, "Introduction" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 9th ed., Vol. A (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012), 8.

[27] In turn, the only extant copy of the Old English *Beowulf* was produced as late at the tenth century by later scribes likely copying from an original. James Simpson and Alfred David, "*Beowulf*" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 9th ed., Vol. A (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012), 37.

said for the Eddic poems and the sagas of the Norse, which likely existed in oral forms for generations before being committed to writing by late medieval or post-medieval composers.[28]

Such sources, whether contemporary or written at a later date, show hybridity between literary art and oral structure.[29] One could, therefore, also speak of 'oral literature,' more akin to the discussions found in the scholarly collection *Medieval Oral Literature* (2012), and definitions such that of Panagiotis Roilos. Roilos defines 'orality' as "premodern literature that was produced in societies in which oral and written forms of communication and expression are known to have coexisted and that was transmitted to us from the distant past through writing."[30] In the same collection, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe argues that "[a]t some point in their lives all people are 'oral' peoples, and the evidence of early medieval European cultures shows the 'oral' and the 'literate' affecting and forming or deforming one another."[31] Other scholars, such as Robert L. Kellog, conclude that an oral tradition *must* lie at the basis of extant oral literature.[32] Since it is likely that medieval oral literature indeed continued to be performed orally throughout the medieval period,[33] and most extant sources of orality survive only in writing, this thesis must use a definition akin to Roilos' in order to discuss medieval orality.

Lastly, it is important to note that much of the corpus of extant oral tradition may also be considered 'oral poetry', since it is presented in (alliterative) verse and/or rhyme; it is this quality that alludes to oral performance of the original, as

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[28]Henry Adams Bellows, "Introduction" to *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems, Translated and With an Introduction by Henry Adams Bellows* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2018), xvii. See also Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982).

[29] Coleman, Janet, "Memory, Preaching and the Literature of a Society in Transition," in *Medieval Readers and Writers 1350-1400* (New York and London: Columbia University Press and Hutchinson & co, quoted in John Miles Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York]: Garland, 1985), 179.

[30] Roilos Panagiotis, "Oral Literature, Ritual, and the Dialectics of Performance" in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011): 230.

[31] Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Orality and Literacy: The Case of Anglo-Saxon England" in Medieval Oral Literature, ed. Karl Reichl (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011): 121.

[32] What is more, Robert L Kellog has argued, on the basis of formulaic phraseological evidence, that Anglo-Saxon, Old Icelandic, Old Saxon, and Old High German constitute "a more or less unified and indisputably oral tradition stretching back in time [...]." Kellog, Robert L., "The South Germanic Oral Tradition" in *Franciplegius: medieval and linguistic studies in honor of Francis Peabody Magoun Jr.,"* eds. Bessinger, J. B. and Robert P. Creed. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), quoted in John Miles Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985), 361.
This notion is especially interesting for this thesis, since the modern fantasy (TT)RPG is mainly influenced by western European medieval (cultural) history specifically, being the main inspiration for Tolkien and other early fantasy writers.

[33] By which this thesis will mean the historic period of approximately 500 to 1500 CE.

verse and rhyme aids the performer's memory.[34] As previously established by the extensive fieldwork and studies of Karl Reichl and others,[35] many extant sources of historic orality—especially oral poetry—can be proven to possess a clear trace of what Reichl calls the "event-character,"[36] an oral quality of the work that may well prove that it was, at some point, "orally performed (sung/chanted/recited) to an audience at a particular occasion and for a particular purpose."[37] Conversely, John Miles Foley's *How to Read a Poem* (2002) proposes a bit more nuance, suggesting "a flexible and non-evolutionary system of four categories,"[38] namely 'oral performance' (composed, performed and received orally-aurally), 'voiced texts' (composed in writing, but performed and received orally-aurally), 'voices from the past' (composed, performed and received either in written form or orally-aurally) and 'written oral poems' (composed, performed and received in writing).[39] This thesis will focus on the voiced texts of Foley's theory, since it would be futile to search for extant sources from the oral performance category without the work being written down, and thus transformed into a voiced text.

While the discussion of definitions and theorems above has given an overview of scholarship useful to this thesis, it has yet to define what exactly makes a piece of narrative 'oral'. This will be provided through Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982). In this work, Ong devotes a chapter to the "psychodynamics of orality"—the emotional, cognitive experience of humans in relation to attending or performing oral narration.[40] From the corpus of earlier scholarship and primary works previously studied, Ong states that "it is possible to generalize somewhat about the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures."[41] He proposes and defines ten universal characteristics of orality, which will be discussed below and illustrated through examples from primary medieval sources. Ong's

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[34] See the discussion of Ong's characteristic "Mnemonics and Formulas" in this chapter.

[35] See for instance also John D. Niles' *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (1999).

[36] Karl Reichl, "Comparative Notes on the Performance of Middle English Popular Romance" in *Western Folklore* 62, no. 1/2 (2003): 76.

[37] Ibid.

[38] John Miles Foley and Peter Ramey, "Oral Theory and Medieval Literature" in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011): 84.

[39] For a graphical overview and further discussion, see Karl Reichl (ed.) *Medieval Oral Literature* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 84.

[40] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.

[41] Ibid.

characteristics of orality provide a convenient set of criteria, through which the oral features of any work can be investigated—including the TTRPG.

*I. Mnemonics and formulas*[42]

In order for an oral narrative to be performed and/or passed down, it must be recorded mentally, remembered or, as Ong puts it, recalled.[43] Even with various (non-scriptural) memory aids, recollection of a narrative for performance in front of an audience can still prove challenging.[44] The answer, Ong argues, is to "[t]hink memorable thoughts," to construct your narrative, and condition your thinking, into predictable patterns: mnemonics.[45]

> Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings [...], in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form.[46]

Such mnemonics are readily found in extant medieval sources, especially those in Old English which, while recorded in writing, exhibit "techniques and rhetorical devices which were developed in an oral tradition and reflect the needs of that tradition."[47] Ong's also states that "[p]rotracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall,[48]" which can be easily related to Old English; all 30,000 lines of Old English verse that survive share roughly the same rhythm. The rhythm of Old English was mainly determined by its metre of alternating stressed ('lifts') and unstressed syllables ('falls) over two roughly

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[42] In Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, "Mnemonics and formulas" are discussed separately from a list of nine "[f]urther characteristics of orally based thought and expression," in which aspect II. "Additive rather than subordinate" is given as (i). Later scholarship continues to refer to the earlier section on 'mnemonics and formulas' as the tenth characteristic. Here the characteristics will be presented in chronological order as given in Ong.
The names of the individual characteristics given here and below are taken directly from Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.
[43] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 33.
[44] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse" in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50-51.
[48] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.

equal half lines, which resembles the metre of regular speech.[49] This in turn could help argue for the oral origins of these written narratives.[50]

While it did not exhibit rhyme patterns typical to later poetry, much of Old English verse was alliterative,[51] as can be seen in the opening lines of the Old English *Beowulf*: "Hwæt! Wé **G**árdena in **g**éardagum / **þ**éodcyninga **þ**rym **g**efrúnon" [Listen! We --of the Spear-Danes in the days of yore, of those clan-kings -- heard of their glory].[52] This alliteration is likely to have aided recollection of the narrative, since it meant that words after the caesura—the 'pause' in between two 'half lines' typical to Old English verse—or in later lines could be, to an extent, guessed by alliterating them with earlier words.

Poetic formulas help to implement this rhythm, and act as mnemonics themselves.[53] Old English was also rife with ephitets, such as patronymics and honorifics. Formulary expressions, like the aforementioned introductory expletive "Hwæt,"[54] meant to silence or pull the attention of the attending audience, are also prominent in Old English verse.

Moreover, a large corpus of specialised 'poetry vocabulary' can be found in Old English,[55] including different terms for the same object, emotion, person, and so on, so that 'warrior' could be said in hundreds of different ways. Donald G. Scragg has noted that this 'variation'—repetition of information in different terms—was "a distinctive feature of Old English poetry,"[56] and would have aided the composer/narrator in repeating essentially the same information, across lines or between works, while allowing for artful variation. The compound words,[57] and especially the periphrastic 'one word riddles' known as 'kennings' typical to Old English would have added to the already extensive vocabulary available for

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[49] Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse," 53; 54.

[50] For a more on Old English verse structure, see Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse" in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (2013).

[51] Elaine Treharne, "Introduction" to *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450 an anthology*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xxvi.

[52] *Beowulf*, ll. 1-2 (emphasis on alliterating letters in bold by me). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Beowulf were taken from *Beowulf on Steorarume*, edited and translated by Benjamin Slade, last modified June 22, 2022, http://www.heorot.dk.

[53] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 35.

[54] *Beowulf*, l. 1.

[55] Some of these words are extant only in verse, which supports the notion of a specialised verse vocabulary.

[56] Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse," 59.

[57] The prominence of compounds in Old English verse is easily illustrated by the fact that one third of the lexicon of *Beowulf* consists of compound words. Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse," 60.

variation,[58] while also providing the opportunity for skillful reinterpretation or cloaking of meaning.

Standard thematic settings taken from Germanic culture and the heroic ethos,[59] such as the lavish feast in the mead hall[60] and the gifting of jewellery,[61] armaments or other prestige from lord to vassal[62] further systematise oral tradition, and can be seen as a kind of formula for constructing a medieval oral narrative. Ong's thematic settings share some resemblance to so-called 'type-scenes' discussed in other scholarship, such as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Fairy Tale* (1928). While any two scholarly sources on the matter will define the term differently, this thesis will present a definition by Mark W. Edwards, from his article "Homer and Oral Tradition: The Type-Scene" (1992). Edwards defines the type-scene as "a recurrent block of narrative with an identifiable structure, such as a sacrifice, the reception of a guest, the launching and beaching of a ship, the donning of armor," and categorises these type-scenes according to five themes—battle, social intercourse, travel, ritual and speeches and deliberation.[63] Such an overview proves far more accessible than the exhaustive list of type-scenes prescribed by Propp. Even though Edwards' article defines type-scenes in order to discuss them within the works of Homer, many of his categories also apply to medieval narratives, such as *Beowulf*. For example, Edwards' theme of battle and struggle, more specifically the type-scene '2.3 *Aristeiai* and duels,'[64] can be amply illustrated in (medieval) oral narrative, such as  in tripartite battles/duels central to *Beowulf*—Grendel, Grendel's mother, dragon. Ong's characteristics also observe this centrality of battle in oral tradition, as point VII. below illustrates.

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[58] Donald G. Scragg, "The nature of Old English verse," 61.

[59] As opposed to the Greek culture and Homeric themes likely alluded to by Ong.

[60] Prominent not just in Beowulf, but also likely an antecedent to the christian holiday feasts (and centrality thereof to the starting setting) of the later Arthuriad and chivalric romance.

[61] Several Old English words allude to the prominence of such gift giving in Anglo-Saxon culture and narratives. A lord or king was often termed a *brytta* [a giver], a *bēah-gifa* [a ring-giver] or, as in *Beowulf*, l.2311, a "sincgifan" [a treasure-giver].

[62] In exchange for loyalty or to reward them for their services, as in *Beowulf*.

[63] Mark W. Edwards, "Homer and Oral Tradition: The Type-Scene," *Oral Tradition* 7 (1992), 285.

[64] *Aristeiai* here is defined by Edwards as  "flashing weapons; departure for battle; killings and pursuit of the enemy; wounding of the hero; recovery, thanks to a deity; single combat with the enemy leader; and struggle over the corpse, which is removed by divine intervention." Mark W. Edwards, "Homer and Oral Tradition," 301-302.

## II. Additive rather than subordinate

Modern texts are rife with objectively complex sentence structures and clausal relations. Ong argues that in the works of (primarily) oral cultures the opposite is found, namely a relatively more simple, additive style. "Oral structures often look to pragmatics [of the speaker],"[65] containing primarily additive clauses—clauses connected by transition words like 'and', which 'add' to the previous sentence, rather than "provid[ing] a flow of narration with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing."[66] This "more elaborate and fixed grammar" is needed in written discourse "since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar."[67]

Ong provides the example of the Bible, in which an early version, the Douay version (1610), "keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original" since it was "produced in a culture with a still massive oral residue."[68] Likewise, the manuscript version of *Beowulf* retains the additive style of the oral culture from which it most likely originated—if not in additive vocabulary,[69] then certainly in content. Barring a few noteworthy exceptions,[70] the narrative is chronological, the information adding to the previous. It can also be argued that the half lines of Old English verse, and in particular the frequent use of variation of exactly the same information, is additive in the sense that the audience receives new information—or rather, old information given in different terms, or only slightly expanded—with every variation. The 'ands' in this case, are not present, but certainly implied.

## III. Aggregative rather than analytic

A characteristic closely related to the use of formulas is the use of pithy phrases—phrasal connections of terms that are ingrained in a culture or discourse system, in this case oral tradition. As Ong states:

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[65] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 37.
[66] Chafe, Wallace L."Integration and involvement in speaking, writing, and oral literature" in *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Norwood: Ablex, 1982), quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 36.
[67] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.
[68] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 37.
[69] Since fewer 'ands' are found in Beowulf than expected in a work of additive style.
[70] These exceptions include moments of reflection upon the past ('flashbacks')—like the recollection in song of the feud between the Frysians and the Danes—and hints at the future ('flashforwards' or foreshadowing)—like the allusions to Beowulf's ultimate demise.

> The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak.[71]

Such expressions sourced from common knowledge or cultural experience may have assisted the performer's memory, while high literacy rejects these epithets and formulas as "cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight."[72] Yet, such phrasal patterns are everywhere in oral tradition, since "[t]raditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them."[73] This is to say that these expressions find their origin in oral discourse, and would be lost if they were not passed down. Once again, the compounds—and kennings—of Anglo-Saxon orality may well stem from uniform cultural thought, so that an audience would naturally accept—or even expect—Beowulf to be presented as "Higeláces þegn"[Hygelac's thane],[74] and King Hrothgar as "wine Scyldinga"[friend of the Scyldings].[75] Their formulaic epithets may have been just as well-known as their names.

## IV. Redundant or 'copious'

Written material can be left and returned to at any moment during the reading process without losing anything. Content and context "can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively" if the reader has forgotten.[76] This is not the case in oral discourse, where "[t]here is nothing to backloop into outside the mind."[77] Instead, the speaker "must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with."[78] In other words, the speaker must take care to captivate the hearer, and make them understand fully what is being said, without

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[71] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.
[72] Walter J. Ong *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University press, 1977), 188-212, quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.
[73] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39.
[74] *Beowulf*, l. 194.
[75] *Beowulf*, l. 170.
[76] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39.
[77] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39-40.
[78] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.

the help of written aid. This is often remedied with redundancy and repetition, to keep both speaker and hearer on track with the narrative,[79] and mindful of both content and context. Items are repeated entirely or summarised, verbatim or in different terms, all for the sake of oral continuity. "Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility,[80]" which later scholars would term 'copia'.[81] In a sense, it is similar to the variation of poetic vocabulary discussed above (see I. Mnemonics and formulas).

The redundancy of oral discourse is all the more marked in oral performance in front of larger audiences. Ong says on the matter:

> Redundancy is also favored by the physical conditions of oral expression before a large audience, where redundancy is in fact more marked than in most face-to-face conversation. Not everyone in a large audience understands every word a speaker utters […]. It is advantageous for the speaker to say the same thing, or equivalently the same thing, two or three times. If you miss the 'not only…' you can supply it by inference from the 'but also…'[82]

This is the crux of oral performance. The public speaker needs to continue speaking while running their performance through their mind to find what to say next.[83] "[Al]though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling,[84]" so "it is better to repeat something, artfully if possible, rather than simply to stop speaking."[85]

This same redundancy can be found in medieval oral cultures, as well as early written texts that "are often bloated with 'amplification', annoyingly redundant by modern standards."[86] To once again turn to Old English verse, its variations can be considered as redundancy, arguably originating from the needs of oral performance rather than the literary requirements of the poet writing the piece down. That said, early written text retained, for some time, the characteristics of oral literature. Ong states that "[t]hey [rhetoricians] continued to encourage it [the use of redundancy], by a kind of oversight, when they had modulated rhetoric from an art of public speaking to an art of writing."[87]

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[79] Ibid.
[80] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40-41.
[86] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41.
[87] Ibid.

*V. Conservative or traditionalist*

The crux of an oral culture is to keep their knowledge and narratives in circulation without the use of script, since "conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes."[88] Thus, oral societies must invest much time and energy in repeating previous knowledge and stories.[89] This in turn results in "a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation,"[90] since there is simply no time or energy remaining for (major) literary developments or experimentation within these societies. In other words, oral discourse is unavoidably characterised by traditionalism. This conservatism can certainly be found in the medieval sources previously discussed like *Beowulf*, which at the time of the text's composition is already perceivably remote, in time and style, from the audience of the poet.[91]

Additionally, since the knowledge of oral tradition is not written down, more significance is given to those individuals tasked with mentally recording and recalling the knowledge and narratives of their culture. These people likely held a communal or even spiritual status, which in turn instilled in the act of oral transmission not only a communal but an arcane, perhaps divine, connotation. This too is confirmed by Ong:

> Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old.[92]

It may well be that this special regard of 'keepers' of an oral culture's wisdom continued into the medieval period, exemplified by the importance of the Old English *scop* and the Old Norse *skald* in their respective cultures; they were entertainers who were able to establish a common history, and validate rulers through their narratives.[93]

Furthermore, the use of proverbs in Old English and Old Norse reflects Ong's argument that "[t]he law itself in oral cultures is enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs, which are not mere jurisprudential decorations, but themselves constitute

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41-2.
[90] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41.
[91] James Simpson and Alfred David. "Beowulf," 37.
[92] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41.
[93] The latter by telling of important deeds performed, or otherwise presenting a heroic genealogy

the law.[94]" For example, much of the poetic statements found in the Old English *Proverbs A* and *B* were likely accepted as truth, if not etiquette or law, by the Anglo-Saxons, while the wisdoms of the *Hávamál* ["the High One's Words,"[95] the words of the Norse patriarch god Odin] were taken as factual rules of (social) conduct amongst the followers of Norse religion.[96] While these 'laws' are extant only in writing, they are likely oral in origin, suggested by their formulaic nature. At a time before writing, it would have fallen to an aforementioned 'keeper' to preserve these laws and recall them orally.

The advent of writing and later print enabled the "[s]toring [of] knowledge outside the mind," which would "downgrade the figures of the wise old man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new."[97] That is not to say that writing is not conservative, nor that oral tradition never evolves, as observed by Ong:

> Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time—at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously.[98]

In other words, no two oral performances are the same, and may vary according to the whims of the speaker, the audience, or the time of oration. "There will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely."[99] Yet, oral culture can be assumed to maintain a canon that changes only little on the whole, diligently preserving values of previous generations.

## VI. Close to the human lifeworld

An absence of script as in orally-based societies brings with it an absence of literary depth, since the "elaborate analytic categories" needed to "structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience" are lost to the relative brevity and mnemonic

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[94] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 35.
[95] Translation taken from Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda, the Mythological Poems* (2004). He presents the verse as "Hovamol" and with variant spellings ("Othín" for "Odin," and so on).
[96] Henry Adams Bellows, "Introductory note to *Hovamol, the Ballad of the High One*" in *The Poetic Edda, the Mythological Poems, Translated and with an Introduction by Henry Adams Bellows* (Mineola: Dover Publications, inc., 2004), 28.
[97] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 41.
[98] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.
[99] Ibid.

requirements of an oral performance.[100] Instead, oral societies must "verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings."[101] An (early) written work, on the other hand, has more 'space' in the narrative and on the physical page to include objective expressions, such as lists of names, genealogies, instructions, and so on.[102] These are objective in that they evoke little, if any, empathetic response from the audience.

Then again, "[o]ral cultures know few statistics or facts divorced from human or quasi-human activity."[103] This is to say that oral narratives seldom go beyond the centre of the 'narrative world' and the direct experience of the protagonist(s). So too in *Beowulf* which, barring a few notable exceptions, remains very close to the lived experience and point of view of the protagonist. When the narrative does leave the confines of Beowulf's experience, such as the *scop*'s retelling of the tale of Finn and Hengest,[104] or the allusions to Sigmund and the wyrm,[105] it is not presented devoid of narrative context.[106] Rather, they are very much within the lifeworld of Beowulf, since he is present to hear them within the narrative. In other words, the audience hears/reads these digressions 'alongside' Beowulf, not removed from him. Thus, oral narrative remains 'small-scale' and close to the lived experience of the protagonist(s) in terms of its 'world of action'.

## *VII. Agonistically toned*

A result of the proximity of the oral narrative to the human lifeworld discussed above is the prominence of agonism: conflict between individuals. Orality "situates knowledge within a context of struggle," while "[w]riting fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another."[107] In other words, writing does not wholly focus on agonistic interactions

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[100] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.
[101] Ibid.
[102] An example of this is the so-called "Dvergatal" [the catalogue of dwarves] in the poetic Edda, an extra-narratival list of dwarves. The catalogue appears far too extensive to have been included in an oral narration, and was likely interpolated by a later author. Henry Adams Bellows, "footnote 9 on *the Voluspo, the wise woman's prophecy*" in *The Poetic Edda, the Mythological Poems, Translated and with an Introduction by Henry Adams Bellows* (Mineola: Dover Publications, inc., 2004), 6.
[103] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 43.
[104] *Beowulf*, ll. 1066-1168a.
[105] *Beowulf*, ll. 871b-897b.
[106] In contrast with the Dvergatal discussed in the footnote above.
[107] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 44.

between characters, but rather, as mentioned in VI., allows for the 'zooming out' to consider or introduce extra-narratival subjects.

Another way of putting it is that oral narrative is characterised by violence and antagonistic relations. Contests of character, skill, and battle prowess are prominent in oral discourse, and "[e]nthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative."[108] One need only take a look at the centrality of violence in works like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*,[109] to illustrate the verity of Ong's argument in (early) medieval orality. Both *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* provide a surplus of brutally-detailed battle scenes and martial themes. In *Beowulf*, the eponymous protagonist partakes in three major duels against monstrous foes, each gruesomely detailed; he dismembers and later decapitates the first, shreds the second, and stabs the third through the palate. In *The Battle of Maldon*, a bloody battle between Anglo-Saxon defenders and viking invaders is described from debatable start to unfortunate end, with each death of notable nobles or warriors detailed separately—worst of all that of Byrhtnoth, the commanding ealdorman of the Anglo-Saxons at the battle, who is struck by two spears, and a sword to the shoulder, before he is killed.

What is more, conflict goes beyond the realm of physical contests or battles. The proverbs and riddles that are found in Old English verse can also be considered agonistic, since "utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one."[110] Similarly, "[b]ragging about one's own prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings of an opponent figure regularly in encounters between characters in [oral] narrative."[111] This includes *Beowulf*, where Beowulf's skill is called into question by the courtier Unferth, and a *flyting*—a verbal battle of reciprocal name-calling—ensues.[112] Such an episode may also be observed as one of Edwards' themes, namely "6.3. Testing of a Stranger," although there its emphasis is not on the verbal battle, but on the formalised speech towards a newcomer.[113]

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Potent examples of the warrior culture(s) of the time, and of the need for violent narratives of war, feud and duels in these cultures.

[110] Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory remarks to a rhetorical theory of folklore" in *Journal of American Folklore*, 81 (1968) 143–58 and "The training of the man of words in talking sweet" in *Language in Society*, 1 (1972) 15–29, quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 44.

[111] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 44.

[112] Ibid.

[113] See Mark W. Edwards, "Homer and Oral Tradition," 318.

Conversely, agonistic name-calling need not always be malign. Ong considers verbal praise of one person by another as part of a feast or liturgy to be as much part of the agonistic nature of orality as a violent duel: "[t]he other side of agonistic name-calling or vituperation in oral or residually oral cultures is the fulsome expression of praise which is found everywhere in connection with orality."[114] Agonism is all the more prominent in the appraisals of (residually) oral warrior cultures, where rivalry and enmity may well have coloured relations between the appraiser and the one appraised—the speaker may well be a rival to the warrior at whom's funeral he is speaking, but for the sake of their culture/people they speak empathetically. Ong himself summarises this best:

> The fulsome praise in the old, residually oral, rhetoric tradition strikes persons from a high-literacy culture as insincere, flatulent, and comically pretentious. But praise goes with the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes.[115]

Clearly, the worlds of oral tradition are wrought with adversity. Oral narratives all the more so.

## VIII. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced

Writing creates a material object from immaterial, mental, knowledge. It "separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing,"[116] so that both the speaker/author, but also the audience, is removed from the work; it loses its intimacy. Oral culture retains this intimacy, since "[f]or an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known."[117] In other words, oral narration fosters a "communal reaction,"[118] or "communal soul;"[119] the speaker, audience and narrative are 'interacting' with each other. So intimately bonded are the speaker and the audience with the narrative that they may at times mingle, so that the audience may take decisions for, or interact with, characters in the narrative, or

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[114] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 45.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 45-46.
[117] Havelock, Eric A., *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,1963), 145–6, quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 45.
[118] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 46.
[119] Ibid.

the narrator might slip into first person narration when describing the acts of the protagonist.[120]

The intimacy between speaker, audience and narrative is what made a visit from the saga speaker, or the attendance of a feast by a *scop* or *skald* such a significant, entertaining, prospect. It may well have aided a society's (semi-)professional storytellers to promote a communal history and cultural identity through narrative.

## *IX. Homeostatic*

Writing establishes a written record, a history, whereas "oral societies live very much in [the] present" and communally dismiss "memories which no longer have present relevance."[121] This creates an equilibrium of (cultural-history) development; they become homeostatic. Where print cultures have invented dictionaries to record the various meanings of a word throughout its history, "many of them quite irrelevant to ordinary present meanings,"[122] oral cultures define a word only by what Goody and Watt call "direct semantic ratification,"[123] meaning "the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now."[124] Ong elaborates on this as follows:

> Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.[125]

That is not to say that oral discourse contains at all times a contemporary, present, vocabulary; "past meanings [...] have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways."[126] Ong goes on to exemplify this:

> It is true that oral art forms, such as epic, retain some words in archaic forms and senses. But they retain such words, too, through current use—not the current use of ordinary village discourse but the current use of ordinary epic poets, who preserve archaic forms in their special

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Goody, Jack and Ian Watt "The consequences of literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* , ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 29, quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 47.
[124] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 47.
[125] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 47.
[126] Ibid.

vocabulary. These performances are part of ordinary social life and so the archaic forms are current, though limited to poetic activity. Memory of the old meaning of old terms thus has some durability, but not unlimited durability.[127]

This presence of archaic, but nevertheless (culturally) significant vocabulary in oral discourse can once more be illustrated by looking at the corpus of specialised vocabulary of Old English verse. As discussed earlier, this vocabulary can only be found in poetic works and nowhere else. So it is that the *Beowulf* poet can express "man" as *beorn*,[128] while contemporary laymen would only express this as *mann*. Thus, Old English verse relies on archaic terminology, which may well be leftovers from earlier oral narratives.

## *X. Situational rather than abstract*

To use Ong's own introduction to this characteristic:

> All conceptual thinking is to a degree abstract. So 'concrete' a term as 'tree' does not refer simply to a singular 'concrete' tree but is an abstraction, drawn out of, away from, individual, sensible actuality; it refers to a concept which is neither this tree nor that tree but can apply to any tree. Each individual object that we style a tree is truly 'concrete', simply itself, not 'abstract' at all, but the term we apply to the individual object is in itself abstract. Nevertheless, if all conceptual thinking is thus to some degree abstract, some uses of concepts are more abstract than other uses.[129]

Such abstraction of terms has become paramount in cultural aspects like art and (literary) fiction where the object or creature described may not resemble anything found in the 'regular' human lifeworld. This forces the creator or those interacting with the work to rely on simpler descriptors like shapes, or things related in appearance to that which is described. And yet, because of the aforementioned proximity of oral discourse to the human lifeworld, "oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract."[130] That is to say that oral discourse will remain as close as possible to the human experience in description of (foreign) concepts. Thus, asked to describe a bus

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[127] Ibid.
[128] See for instance *Beowulf*, l. 1299. *Beorn* is also used to express "warrior" (as in for instance l. 2121).
[129] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 49.
[130] Ibid.

by neurophychologist A.R. Luria,[131] an illiterate farmer replied that 'buses have four legs, chairs in front for people to sit on, a roof for shade and an engine,' but ultimately that farmer would advise them to try it out for themselves, thereby turning back to (promoting) situational experience.[132] Luria contrasts this with a literate collective-farm worker who would reply in rather more functional, abstract terms:

> 'It's made in a factory. In one trip it can cover the distance it would take a horse ten days to make—it moves that fast. It uses fire and steam. We first have to set the fire going so the water gets steaming hot— the steam gives the machine its power.... I don't know whether there is water in a car, must be. But water isn't enough, it also needs fire'[133]

A similar trend can be found in medieval orality and early writing, which also prefers the situational and operational over the abstract. Thus, the monster Grendel, when first named in *Beowulf*, is compared to a "féond on helle"[134] [fiend in Hell] and a "grimma gaést"[135] [ghastly demon], rather than described in full. Being an unnatural creature, his appearance is given only through reference to concepts already known to the audience. This preference may also help to explain the prevalence of compounds and kennings in Old English works, since they too describe an item or concept through experiential terms close to the human lifeworld. Thus, shields become the far more literal "hildebord"[136] [battle-board], spears the evocative "wuduwælsceaftas"[137] [slaughter-shafts], and so on. Naturally, situational and operational description helps to decorate the performance with artful imagery, but they are also crucial for the correct understanding of the narrative by the audience; concepts otherwise too alien to understand are easily identified with everyday items, creatures, and so on, and therefore are not lost to the audience.

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[131] As mentioned by Ong, "Luria did extensive fieldwork with illiterate (that is, oral) persons and somewhat literate persons in the remoter areas of Uzbekistan (the homeland of Avicenna) and Kirghizia in the Soviet Union during the years 1931–2. Luria's book was published in its original Russian edition only in 1974, forty-two years after his research was completed, and appeared in English translation two years later." Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.

[132] Luria, A.R., *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, ed. Michael Cole, trans. by Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 87, quoted in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 54.

[133] Ibid.

[134] *Beowulf*, l. 101.

[135] *Beowulf*, l. 102

[136] *Beowulf*, l. 397.

[137] *Beowulf*, l. 398.

This chapter has given an overview of some of the theories concerning orality most useful to this thesis. In particular, Walter J. Ong's theory on the psychodynamics of orality categorises the many elements involved in  composing, recording and performing a narrative in (traditional) oral cultures. Ong's ten characteristics provide a useful overview of elements which are foundational to orality. Thus, finding (any number of) Ong's characteristics represented in a given work proves some degree of orality. This has been illustrated through examples from medieval oral narratives, which exhibit all ten elements. Similarly, by applying Ong's theory to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game's reliance on (medieval) orality can be illustrated.

## CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*?

This chapter presents a concise overview of the game's content, gameplay and history, to facilitate a better understanding of the comparisons made in the following chapter.

### *2.1. The Game*

*Dungeons & Dragons* is a TTRPG set in a world of medieval fantasy, a world of magic, folklore, and supernatural monsters and races.[138] Besides the fantastical, *Dungeons & Dragons* relies primarily on medieval history and literature for its inspiration. Peasants, castles, knights and kings, as well as more fundamental concepts like feudalism or honour systems, are present in many if not all *Dungeon & Dragons* games and resource material. For example, 'noble' and 'knight' are among the basic backgrounds available in *Dungeons & Dragons* fifth edition.[139] Furthermore, the game's time period is typically styled after the Middle Ages in terms of technology, societies and even urbanisation levels. This heavy medieval influence is due in part to the fact that the first version of *Dungeons & Dragons* was mechanically based on earlier rulesets for medieval wargame combat.[140] Another prominent influence during the initial creation of the game were the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and other early fantasy writers,[141] who in turn based their work on (literary)

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[138] Note that 'races' here and after are not used in the same way in 'earthly' understanding of race. Rather, they denote something akin to 'species' in our understanding of autecology. Fantasy settings regularly contain more than one race (meaning species) of humanoids (meaning bipedal, sentient organisms) outside of Humans, though they are commonly no less sentient or immensely different in biology.

[139] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook, Fifth Edition* (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014), 135-136.

[140] A wargame, here, refers to another form of tabletop strategy game, wherein players command an army of soldiers—often represented by miniature figures—of the (fictional) time-period that the game tries to emulate. In this way, the participants play at commanding an army in a (fictional) battle against other players, simulating strategic planning and placement, and determining the success of attacks through dice-rolling or rule tables. For more on the origins of *Dungeons & Dragons*, see 2.2. below).

[141] *Dungeons & Dragons*' most prominent inspirations were the previously published works of Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937) and *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955)—after all, *Dungeons & Dragons* was created out of a want to play at living one's own fantasy adventure. Especially in the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Tolkien's influence was so overt as to garner legal threats, for their inclusion of several terms like "Hobbit" and "warg", but also 'dragon', 'dwarf', 'elf', 'ent', and so on. Some of these terms were changed in later publications. See also Gygax's own words on the subject from an archived, though confirmed autographic, forum post below:

TSR was served with papers threatening damages to the tune of half a mil by the Saul Zantes (sp?) division of Elan Merchandising on behalf of the Tolkien Estate. The main objection was to the boardgame we were publishing, The Battle of Five Armies. The author of that game had given us a letter from his attorney claiming the work was grandfathered because it was published after the copyrights for JRRT's works had lapsed and before any renewals were made. The action also

works of the time. Besides, medieval literature itself already frequently contained fantastical or supernatural elements besides more (quasi-)historical content, such as the Arthuriad.

A TTRPG is a game of somewhat structured make-belief played with a group of players and presided over by a game master. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game master is referred to as the "Dungeon Master," often abbreviated to 'DM'.[142] While *Dungeons & Dragons* has existed in many different forms since its first creation until today (see 2.2. below), its central set-up has remained relatively the same:

> Each player creates an adventurer (also called a character) [picking from a variety of different fantasy races and (fantasy-)medieval vocations, or 'Classes'] and teams up with other adventurers (played by friends). Working together, the group might explore a dark dungeon, a ruined city, a haunted castle, a lost temple deep in a jungle, or a lava-filled cavern beneath a mysterious mountain. The adventurers can solve puzzles, talk with other characters, battle fantastic monsters, and discover fabulous magic items and other treasure. [...] The DM creates adventures for the characters, who navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore.[143]

At its core, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game of collective storytelling in a fantasy world. In this game, it is ultimately the DM and players, and not a set of rules or computer code that determines what happens in the game. Thus, *Dungeons & Dragons* is "infinitely flexible, and each adventure can be exciting and

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demanded we remove balrog, dragon, dwarf, elf, ent, goblin, hobbit, orc, and warg from the D&D game. Although only balrog and warg were unique names we agreed to hobbit as well, kept the rest, of course. The boardgame was dumped, and thus the suit was settled out of court at that. Col_Pladoh, "Gary Gygax Q&A, Part IV", Archive threads, EN World, 24th July 2003, 01:33 PM (GMT +1), Accessed via Internet Archive *Wayback Machine* on 3rd of March 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20121007050950/http://www.enworld.org/forum/archive-threads/578 32-gary-gygax-q-part-iv-4.html#post1026737.

[142] Plural form: DMs. Also used frequently as verb, as in 'I DM/you DM/she DM's'/'I DM'ed' and so on.

[143] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*, 5. Compare this, for instance, with Jon Peterson's summary of Gary Gygax's first draft of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules:

The game required a referee to prepare a half dozen or more levels of a dungeon on paper, populating this underworld with monsters and treasure. Players then select from one of three classes of adventurers—fighting men, magic-users, and clerics—and send these characters into the referee's dungeon, where they explore, defeat adversaries, and collect rewards. Successful characters gain experience points and advance in level, rendering them more powerful, and thus enabling them to explore deeper and more dangerous areas of the dungeon. Money could be spent in towns, and with sufficient resources, characters could build their own castles and hire private armies. Polyhedral dice were rolled to resolve combat and decide various random circumstances of the game world. Around half of the game text enumerated the various monsters, magical items, and spells found in the game. Unabashedly, it was merely a rules framework, a fragmentary set of ideas and tools that relied heavily on its players to flesh out how the game would work. Jon Peterson, *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 30-31.

unexpected."[144] To assist both players and DMs to decide the outcome of certain actions, the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset(s) bring structure by providing "a way of determining the consequences of the adventurers' action,"[145] through the rolling of one or a number of polyhedral dice: "[p]layers roll dice to resolve whether their attacks hit or miss or whether their adventurers can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull off some other dangerous task."[146]

Furthermore, an individual game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, often called a 'session', has no real end. Instead, one quest or task completed in one session may lead to a new task in another, forming what is known as a 'campaign,' the overarching narrative which the characters take part in. Indeed, a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign can last for months or even years without a proper end. Similar to a climax in (fantasy) literature, the end of a session and/or campaign usually entails some form of 'boss battle', a final struggle with the antagonist or 'boss' enemy.[147] Over the course of the campaign, player characters grow in strength and abilities during such an extended journey, reflected by the characters' 'level'.

Besides boss battles, which usually involves the slaying of a creature whose death averts some form of doom or otherwise rewards the player characters, there is no winning or losing in *Dungeons & Dragons* in the sense that one player, or the DM, wins against other members of the group, as is common in other forms of gaming. This is fittingly illustrated by the following passage from the fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*:

> Together, the DM and the players create an exciting story of bold adventurers who confront deadly perils. Sometimes an adventurer might come to a grisly end, torn apart by ferocious monsters or done in by a nefarious villain. Even so, the other adventurers can search for powerful magic to revive their fallen comrade, or the player might choose to create a new character to carry on. The group might fail to complete an adventure successfully, but if everyone had a good time and created a memorable story, they all win.[148]

Compared to other, more conventional (board)games, *Dungeons & Dragons* is not so much about who wins or loses, lives or dies; what matters is the journey of the

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[144] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 5.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Who usually presides over other, lesser enemies, hence the term 'boss.'
[148] Ibid.

characters, and the enjoyment of the players over anything else. It is a game of sharing in the creation of a collective story with your friends, and living a near-limitless fantasy adventure.

## 2.1.1. Gameplay

To further illustrate what a game session of *Dungeons & Dragons* may look like, it may be useful to provide an overview of the contents of a typical session.

Before a session can start, some preparation is necessary on the part of the DM and, in some cases, the players as well. While perhaps obvious, the basic necessities for a session are: around four to six players,[149] a Dungeon Master, player characters and accompanying character sheets,[150] writing implements, and a number of polyhedral dice.[151] Optional additions include a Dungeon Master's screen—a foldable screen placed between the players and the DM to hide the DM's notes and rolls from the players—or miniature figurines and battlegrounds to simulate the in-game combat, to name a few.

Before meeting, the DM has usually prepared (part of) an adventure, or the aforementioned campaign, for the players to play through. Such preparation typically includes making note of what will happen in that particular session—where are the player characters, what can or should they do, what monsters might they face, and so on. The typical structure of an adventure is best described in the fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, which details an obvious, though typical, tripartite structure:

> **Beginning:** An adventure starts with a hook to get the players interested.
> A good adventure hook piques the interest of the players and provides a

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[149] *Dungeons & Dragons* can be played with more or less players than allowed in this range. While it is It is possible to play with just one player and one Dungeon Master, it is typical to play *Dungeons & Dragons* with a larger group, since the focus of the game is in part on the interrelation between the characters.

[150] The character sheet details a character's name, race, class, statistics, skills, weapons, inventory, spells and other important aspects of a particular character.

[151] *Dungeons & Dragons* has always necessitated the use of dice to determine the outcome of a particular action. Since the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game has used the so-called 'D20 system', named after the twenty-sided dice used most prominently. Other dice are required for rolling for the amount of damage dealt, or to otherwise determine in-game actions. A typical polyhedral set contains seven dice—four-sided(D4), the typical six-sided (D6), eight-sided (D8), twelve-sided (D12), twenty-sided (D20) and a 'percentile dice' (D100). Instead of a hundred-sided dice, rolling a D100 implies rolling two separate ten-sided dice (D10) and treating each dice as a single dixit. Most sets come with two D10's, where one depicts singulars, and the other depicts the tens.

compelling reason for their characters to become involved in the adventure.

Maybe the adventurers stumble onto something they're not meant to see, monsters attack them on the road, an assassin makes an attempt on their lives, or a dragon shows up at the city gates. Adventure hooks such as these can instantly draw players into your story.

The beginning of a good adventure should be exciting and focused. You want the players to go home looking forward to the next session, so give them a clear sense of where the story is headed, as well as something to look forward to.

**Middle:** The middle of an adventure is where the bulk of the story unfolds. With each new challenge, the adventurers make important choices that have a clear effect on the conclusion of the adventure.

Over the course of the adventure, the characters might discover secrets that reveal new goals or change their original goal. Their understanding of what's going on around them might change. Maybe rumors of treasure were a trick to lure them into a death trap. Perhaps the so-called spy in the queen's court is actually a scheme concocted by the monarch herself to seize even more power.

At the same time the adventurers are working to thwart their adversaries, those adversaries are trying to carry out their nefarious plans. Such enemies might also work to hide their deeds, mislead potential adversaries, or confront problems directly, perhaps by trying to kill meddlers.

Remember that the characters are the heroes of the story. Never let them become mere spectators, watching as events unfold around them that they can't influence.

**Ending:** The ending encompasses the climax—the scene or encounter in which the tension building throughout the adventure reaches its peak. A strong climax should have the players on edge, with the fate of the characters and much more hanging in the balance. The outcome, which hinges on the characters' actions and decisions, should never be a forgone conclusion.

An ending needn't tie everything up in a neat bow. Story threads can be left hanging, waiting to be resolved in a later adventure. A little bit of unfinished business is an easy way to transition from one adventure to the next.[152]

A typical game session follows the adventure structure above; the stakes are set at the start, then a period of development in the story, dungeon, or characters follows, ultimately leading to a climactic ending. Such a structure is only typical;

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[152] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide, Fifth Edition* (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014), 72. Please note that the layout has been simplified from the original.

numerous sessions, especially those part of a campaign, deviate from this structure, for example by lacking any sort of story development—instead, the players just spent three hours shopping around in a town.

Alternatively to preparing content themselves, DMs may resort to using pre-existing material, such as pre-written adventure modules published by *Dungeon & Dragons* creators over the years, or even content shared online by other players—so-called 'homebrew' content.

To take all this into practice, a typical session starts with the Dungeon Master addressing the gathering players and introducing this particular session. If it is a new campaign, or standalone session,[153] the players likely require an introduction to the (immediate) setting—the game world—and any number of plot details that may have led up to the present. If the session is part of an ongoing narrative, it usually suffices to recap the events of the previous session(s).

If it is the first session of a campaign, or the characters are otherwise introduced for the first time, the player characters will need to be introduced to the other players—and the other characters inside the game world. This is typically done by a description of the characters by the players themselves or the DM, detailing the appearance and race, and sometimes class or even deeper personalisation. Some details may be left to discover in the game, through roleplay.

In the introduction to the session, an aforementioned 'adventure hook' is likely included, to give the party an objective—or several—to pursue. Like the adventure hooks mentioned above, they serve to introduce the party to the unfolding issue or the antagonist, and to give a reason for the player characters to be/get involved in the adventure.

The adventure can then properly begin, with the DM and party developing the story together. A DM might, for example, start detailing the party's immediate surroundings in a dungeon, offering them three different directions to follow, or present them with a map of the city they are in, and ask them where they want to go. It is often up to the players to decide how the story unfolds, with the DM responding to their questions and decisions, usually determining through dice-rolling how successful they are, and then narrating how exactly it unfolds.

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[153] Such standalone adventures are typically termed a 'one-shot', because it is an adventure intended to be played within one game session.

While they need not be included in every session, a typical adventure should exhibit what has been termed "the three pillars of adventure." This concept, found in most, if not all, editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, prescribes that any adventure can be divided into three parts, and that while "[a]dventurers can try to do anything their players can imagine, [...] it can be helpful to talk about their activities in three broad categories: exploration, social interaction, and combat."[154] Wizards of the Coast's fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Rules* gives further definition of this:

> **Exploration** includes both the adventurers' movement through the world and their interaction with objects and situations that require their attention. Exploration is the give-and-take of the players describing what they want their characters to do, and the Dungeon Master telling the players what happens as a result. On a large scale, that might involve the characters spending a day crossing a rolling plain or an hour making their way through caverns underground. On the smallest scale, it could mean one character pulling a lever in a dungeon room to see what happens.
> **Social interaction** features the adventurers talking to someone (or something) else. It might mean demanding that a captured scout reveal the secret entrance to the goblin lair, getting information from a rescued prisoner, pleading for mercy from an orc chieftain, or persuading a talkative magic mirror to show a distant location to the adventurers. [...]
> **Combat** [...] involves characters and other creatures swinging weapons, casting spells, maneuvering for position, and so on—all in an effort to defeat their opponents, whether that means killing every enemy, taking captives, or forcing a rout. Combat is the most structured element of a Dungeons & Dragons session, with creatures taking turns to make sure that everyone gets a chance to act. Even in the context of a pitched battle, there's still plenty of opportunity for adventurers to attempt wacky stunts like surfing down a flight of stairs on a shield, to examine the environment (perhaps by pulling a mysterious lever), and to interact with other creatures, including allies, enemies, and neutral parties.[155]

This is the bulk of a *Dungeons & Dragons* session. In terms of duration, a session may take anywhere from an hour to several hours or more, depending on availability of the players and the amount of content prepared.[156] When the prepared or alloted time is up, or when the party has completed their task, the session ends. If the

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[154] Mike Mearls et.al., *D&D Basic Rules, Version 1.0* (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast, LLC, 2018), 6, https://dnd.wizards.com/what-is-dnd/basic-rules.

[155] Mike Mearls et.al. *D&D Basic Rules*, 6. Please note that the layout has been simplified from the original, and that non-applicable parts are replaced with ellipses.

[156] With some improvisational skills, a DM may theoretically be able to continue a session indefinitely, although extensive improvisation may well be, and is typically, detrimental to the experience.

session marks the end of an adventure or campaign, the DM may wrap up the session with an epilogue, detailing anything from the future of the party members, to the result of their actions, and so on. Otherwise, a DM might simply call the end of a session, or effort to end the unfolding narrative on a cliffhanger to excite the players for the next session. Everything else is 'out of game;' the players have to reconvene at a later date to continue playing.

## 2.2. History

The history of *Dungeons & Dragons* is a long and tumultuous one, with many actors and factions involved. It will prove impossible to disclose the complete history of *Dungeons & Dragons* here, thus for the sake of space this thesis will keep to the integral events,[157] which already prove extensive.

### 2.2.1. Creation and early history (1968-1980)

In its very earliest form, *Dungeons & Dragons* was an amalgam of the works of America-based wargame enthusiasts Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.[158] Gary Gygax, met with Dave Arneson at the second Lake Geneva Wargames Convention (1969),[159] and both expressed a desire to collaborate on new wargaming rules.[160] In the years to come they would meet frequently as friends and members of IFW and Gygax' subgroup of the IFW focussed on medieval-themed wargames, the Castle & Crusade Society. In 1971, the medieval wargame system *Chainmail*,[161] written by Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren, was published by Guidon Games.[162] Although *Chainmail* focused

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[157] For a chronological overview of *Dungeon's & Dragons'* history, see Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure," *Wizards.com*, Wizards of the Coast LLC, last accessed 3rd of May 2022, https://dnd.wizards.com/dungeons-and-dragons/what-dd/history/history-forty-years-adventure.
For more on the history of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other wargames and role-playing games, see Jon Peterson's http://playingattheworld.blogspot.com.
For more on the creation and early history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, up until the resignation of Gary Gygax from TSR (see below), see Jon Peterson, *Game Wizards*: *The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons* (2021).

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[159] The Lake Geneva Wargames Convention was initially hosted by Gygax as an informal meeting meant for members of the IFW, but in the years to come it would grow exponentially, to become the highly popular, still active, tabletop gaming convention *Gen Con*. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure," *Wizards.com*, Wizards of the Coast LLC, last accessed 28th of April 2022, https://dnd.wizards.com/dungeons-and-dragons/what-dd/history/history-forty-years-adventure.

[160] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

[161] *Chainmail*'s ruleset was itself partly based on the earlier "LGTSA Medieval Miniature Rules," another collaboration with Jeff Perren. Jon Peterson, *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, The MIT Press, 2021), 17-18.

[162] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

mainly on historical medieval combat, a lengthy appendix was included which described the application of the ruleset to fantasy combat, presenting rules on magic and magic users, as well as mythical creatures.[163] Dave Arneson soon adapted the *Chainmail* ruleset to a fantasy setting of his own creation, *Blackmoor*, and created a form of wargame which was amongst the first to use a now basic concept: each player would (only) portray a single character in a group of fantastical fighters instead of an entire army, and delve into underground dungeons to face monsters, puzzles and traps. In the fall of 1972 Arneson demonstrated the gameplay he had developed for his *Blackmoor* to Gygax, who was instantly blown away.[164] Over the course of late 1972 and 1973 they expanded Arneson's ruleset and playtested the material of what they would eventually title *Dungeons & Dragons*. In January of 1974, the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was published by Tactical Studies Rules Inc (TSR), founded by Gary Gygax and Don Kaye.[165] This first edition consisted of three separate booklets[166] which were shipped together in one cardboard box selling for $10 a piece.[167] Both its first and second print sold out rapidly, and *Dungeons & Dragons* continued to accrue accolades and rule expansions over the next few years.[168] Dave Arneson joined Gygax and Kaye at TSR in 1976, but would resign from the company near the end of that same year, to pursue an independent career.[169]

In 1977, the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset was divided into 'Basic' and 'Advanced' to be more applicable to varying audiences.[170] This year also saw the

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[163] Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part One: The Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Dungeons & Dragons," *nerdist.com*, Nerdist, December 26 2017, https://nerdist.com/article/the-story-of-dd-part-one-the-birth-death-and-resurrection-of-dungeons-dragons/.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Naturally this edition can only be considered 'first edition' in hindsight; at the time, it was simply *Dungeons & Dragons*, and it would take until 1987 for a new edition to even be considered (see below).

[166] *Men & Magic, Monsters & Treasure*, and *Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*.

[167] Around $58—or €55—today. For the time, this was considered an exuberant amount of money for a (board)game, fueling the circulation of pirate photocopies. Ibid.

[168] Ibid.

Accolades include the first major *Dungeons & Dragons* convention tournament, and the first Gen Con to be sponsored by D&D creator TSR in 1975, as well as the first professional magazine devoted, first partially, then entirely, to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Expansions include the 1975 supplements *Greyhawk* and *Blackmoor*, detailing Gygax's and Arneson's personal settings, respectively, as well as adding rules for the now iconic Thief, Paladin, Monk and Assassin classes, and the 1976 *Eldritch Wizardry* and *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes*. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

[169] "An Interview with Dave Arneson," *Pegasus*, no.1, April–May 1981, 4. Accessed via Internet Archive *Wayback Machine* on 3rd of March 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20090321222949/http://www.judgesguild.net/guildhall/pegasus/pegasus_01/interview.shtml/.

[170] As the name suggests, the *Basic Set* sought to streamline the earlier ruleset to serve as a more approachable introduction to the game. Advanced *Dungeons & Dragons* added upon Gygax's earlier ruleset, adding more depth to the game.

introduction of the first, now iconic, *Monster Manual.* More improvements and supplement publication would follow.

By 1980, a total of around 250,000 units of *Dungeons & Dragons* products had been sold—impressive for the time. Over the next 5 years (and beyond) TSR would grow into a million-dollar company with offices in Los Angeles and Great Britain, owning a number of subsidiaries,[171] several copyrighted settings and other assets like the *Dragonlance Saga* novel series.[172]

### 2.2.2. The Satanic panic (1980-1985)

This same period of TSR's and *Dungeons & Dragons'* exponential rise in popularity and economic strength coincided with the heyday of the 1980's phenomenon known as the 'Satanic panic'. This movement of radical (religious) criticism, which originated in the United States in the early 1980's, saw members of the Christian community condemn many aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream for its perceived links to satanism and promotion of Satanic worship, among them *Dungeons & Dragons*. Criticism against *Dungeons & Dragons* specifically began in 1982, with media coverage of the suicide of 16-year old high school student Irving Bink Pulling II. Despite a number of far more likely psychological and social influences,[173] as well as doubt as to whether Irving actually played (TT)RPG's, the media interpreted his suicide as directly linked to *Dungeons & Dragons*.[174] Patricia Pulling, mother of Bink Pulling, attempted to sue TSR for causing the death of her son, but the case was dismissed in 1984.[175] Patricia Pulling then partnered with Illinois psychiatrist Thomas Radecki, director of the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), founding the anti-RPG organisation 'Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons' (B.A.D.D.), which sought to counteract the perceived Satanic threat posed

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[171] Chief among which the Dungeons & Dragons Entertainment Company, creator of the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon series (1983-1985)

[172] Copyrighted settings include Gygax's own *Greyhawk* and *Mystara*, which was introduced alongside the D&D *Expert Set,* an extension of the *Basic Set*. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

[173] Including "drug addiction, a long history of chronic depression, confrontation with parents over sexual orientation [and] public humiliation in the school environment." David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture 9, no. 1 (2005).* Accessed via Internet Archive *Wayback Machine* on 3rd of march 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20130104131941/http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art9-roleplaying-print.html.

[174] David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right."

[175] Ibid.

by *Dungeons & Dragons* and other (TT)RPG's.[176] Considering that *Dungeons & Dragons* was heavily influenced by myth, folklore and fantasy fiction, the game contained a lot of content that could be perceived as heathen or Satanic,[177] providing ample targets for the Satanic panic's religious critics. Despite this, neither *Dungeons & Dragons* nor TSR suffered much from the Satanic panic; in fact, the increased media attention during the Satanic panic caused an especially potent rush on *Dungeons & Dragons* products between mid-1979 and 1982.

### 2.2.3. The ambush at Sheridan Springs (1985-1986)

One substantial change had occurred by the time *Dungeons & Dragons* had receded from the public critique of the Satanic panic, namely the departure of creator Gary Gygax from his own company, TSR. Despite being inseparable from the image of (early) *Dungeons & Dragons*, Gygax left TSR in the fall of 1985 when, after a period of wavering sales, Gygax found the assembled shareholders at their board meeting eerily receptive to his musings on resignation from the company due to disagreements on authorial copyright.[178] Gygax was formally requested to consider resignation, refused, and was voted out of his position as President and Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of TSR—a corporate move termed 'the Ambush at Sheridan Springs' by the community, after the location of the meeting.[179] Due to a number of background factors, such as the incorporation of TSR in 1975, the unfortunate death of Gygax's preeminent business partner and friend Donald Kaye, as well as private selling of stocks to third parties and other corporate intrigue, Gygax's stock share was inadequate compared to the assembled total to affect his treatment.[180] Legal efforts and court cases lasted until late 1986; in October Gygax resigned from the company.

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[176] Ibid.
[177] Demons, devils, rituals, warlocks, polytheism and so on.
[178] Jon Peterson, "The Ambush at Sheridan Springs."
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid. For a detailed discussion of these background factors, see Jon Peterson's chapter "The Ambush at Sheridan Springs" in his *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, The MIT Press, 2021), or Peterson's online article "The Ambush at Sheridan Springs: How Gary Gygax Lost Control of Dungeons & Dragons."

*2.2.4. The end of TSR (1986-1997)*

With Donald Kaye passed away and Arneson and now Gygax resigned, none of the original minds behind the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset remained with TSR. In order to engage with the contemporary market, growing evermore satiated and competitive, the new management of TSR pursued a number of "extremely questionable business practices," which would "ultimately lead to the downfall of TSR."[181] Despite the launch of several new campaign settings,[182] the release of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Second Edition* (AD&D 2E) in 1989,[183] further efforts in novel publications and hit-and-miss expansion into other media, TSR could not recover from the declining sales, and would ultimately go bankrupt from printing debts if nothing changed.

In June 1997, TSR was purchased by Seattle-based game company Wizards of the Coast, the creators of the widely popular *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game.[184] The takeover was not the idea of Wizards of the Coast, however. First, the CEO of Five Rings Publishing,[185] Bob Abramowitz, visited TSR to meet with management about their current predicament, and was given the option of buying TSR. Five Rings Publishing did not have the funds to acquire TSR, but Abramowitz instead approached Wizards of the Coast CEO, Peter Adkison, to use his offer to buy out TSR, as long as they would also purchase Five Rings Publishing. Adkinson, like many other 'gamers' of the time,[186] thought that owning and working on *Dungeons &*

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[181] Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part One."

[182] In chronological order (until 1997): the *Forgotten Realms* in 1987, *Ravenloft* and an expanded *Mystara* in 1990, *Darksun* in 1991, the Al Qadim campaign setting *Arabian Adventures* in 1992, *Planescape* in 1994, the *Birthright* campaign setting in 1995. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure," *Wizards.com,* Wizards of the Coast LLC, last accessed 3rd of May 2022, https://dnd.wizards.com/dungeons-and-dragons/what-dd/history/history-forty-years-adventure.

[183] Which, among other things, made a number of changes to the existing class system and skill-proficiency system, removed the Half-Orc as a player character race option, and codified the "To Hit Armor Class 0" (or THAC0 for short) system—a system which was used in AD&D to determine whether or not a combatant (player or monster) was successfully hit. Hereby the Defender's armor class (AC) was subtracted from the attacker's THAC0; if an attacker's D20 roll was higher than this number, they would hit. Wikipedia s.v. "Editions of Dungeons and Dragons," last modified April 13, 2022, 20:48, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Editions_of_Dungeons_%26_Dragons.

[184] Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part Two: How Wizards of the Coast Saved *Dungeons & Dragons*," nerdist.com, Nerdist, December 27 2017, https://nerdist.com/article/the-story-of-dd-part-two-how-wizards-of-the-coast-saved-dungeons-dragons/.

[185] Another Seattle game company, and creators of an equally successful card game, *Legend of the Five Rings*.

[186] Here 'gamers' is to mean those interested in 'analog' boardgames, wargames, role-playing games, and the like; it was at this time not yet (fully) associated with the playing of digital games or video games.

*Dragons* would be a dream come true.[187] By the end of 1997, TSR had been fully transitioned into Wizards of the Coast, with their office in Lake Geneva disbanded and many of its employees welcomed at Wizards of the Coast.[188] Adkinson made sure to set things right with Gary Gygax for his treatment by TSR's management, by compensating him and his family in exchange for a "clean bill of health on the intellectual property."[189] Adkinson's actions would prove fruitful; the Gygax family, as well as veteran fans, responded kindly to Wizards of the Coast's acquisition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and Gary Gygax would even go on to collaborate with Wizards of the Coast on occasion.[190]

### 2.2.5. Wizards of the Coast; 3rd, 4th, and 5th edition (1997-present)

Under Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeons & Dragons* was revived and quickly expanded. Licensed video games, such as *Baldur's Gate* (1998) and *Planescape: Torment* (1999) brought AD&D to digital consumers and popularised *Dungeons & Dragons* among a wider audience. In 1999, Wizards of the Coast celebrated the 25th birthday of *Dungeons & Dragons* with a 'triumph tour' of sorts, termed 'the Silver Anniversary Tour', which travelled to game stores throughout the United States. They also released an anniversary boxed set to further cement their claim to the intellectual property of *Dungeons & Dragons*.[191]

In 2000, a new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, third edition (D&D 3E) was published by Wizards of the Coast, being the first overhaul of *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset since the release of AD&D, and the first edition made entirely separate from the original *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset or its creators. This new edition introduced the now standard 'd20 system', which figured gameplay mechanics around the rolling of a 20-sided die (commonly referred to as a d20) and adding certain bonuses to that roll on the basis of a character's statistics, hoping to be equal or more than a certain target number.[192] Although much of this edition was still based on the previous AD&D, notions of 'basic' and 'advanced' rules did not continue into new

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[187] Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part Two." Gary Gygax had feared *Dungeons & Dragons* would some day fall into the possession of corporations apathetic to the gamer community. At least with Wizards of the Coast it would remain 'by gamers, for gamers'.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Peter Adkinson, quoted in Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part Two."

[190] Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part Two."

[191] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure"; Ben Riggs, "The Story of D&D Part Two."

[192] Monty Cook et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook I v.3.5* (Renton, Washington, USA; Groot-Bijgaarden, Belgium: Wizards of the Coast, 2003), 4-5.

editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Wizards of the Coast.[193] In the same year, Wizards of the Coast published their Open Game Licence (OGL), and their first System Reference Document (SRD), which allowed third-party products to be created based on D&D 3E, spawning a lively community and industry of third-party creations.[194] Other highlights of the early 2000's include the release of the first *Dungeons & Dragons* feature film (2000),[195] the return of Gygax's original *Chainmail* wargaming system in the newly revised *Dungeons & Dragons Chainmail* Miniatures game (2001), the purchase of tabletop convention Gen Con—still tied to Gary Gygax—by then ex-CEO Peter Adkinson,[196] and the emergence of a boom in fantasy novels set in *Dungeons & Dragons* settings like *Dragonlance* and *The Forgotten Realms*.[197]

In 2003, a revision of Wizards of the Coast's third edition ruleset, known as v3.5, or 3.5E, was released, with the goal to expand upon the lists of races and classes, while also streamlining other rules to prevent confusion.[198]

In 2004, Wizards of the Coast's first original campaign setting, *Ebberon*, was released after a 2002 community campaign setting design contest. Wizards of the Coast also celebrated the 30th anniversary of *Dungeons & Dragons* with novelty books and set releases as well as the first "Worldwide Dungeons & Dragons Game Day" on October 16.[199]

At Gen Con 2007, Wizards of the Coast announced the development of a new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. By 2008, the core sourcebooks for Fourth Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D 4E) were available for purchase. D&D 4E saw a complete overhaul to game mechanics, in that many spells and character abilities—generally called 'Powers' in D&D 4E—were heavily categorised, giving all

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[193] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."
[194] Ibid.
[195] The creation of a *Dungeon and Dragons* feature film had been a long-held goal of Gary Gygax, who had attempted such a production back in the 1980's. Jon Peterson, "The Ambush at Sheridan Springs."
Interestingly, while Gygax played no part in this 2000 production, it did include a cameo by *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator Dave Arneson. Gygax himself would be cast to play himself in an episode of Rough Draft Studios' *Futurama* (1999-2013) that same year. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."
[196] Adkinson would move the location of Gen Con to its current home, Indianapolis, effectively establishing Gen Con in its present form. Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."
[197] The immense *Forgotten Realms* had been a popular setting since its first appearance under TSR. Wizards of the Coast adopted 'the Realms' as their flagship setting, and it remains the preeminent setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns and adventure modules until present.
[198] Monty Cook et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 4.
[199] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

classes a similar line-up of 'at-will', 'per-encounter' and 'per-day' powers.[200] In essence, D&D 4E was optimised for board-game styled gameplay, whereby encounters were resolved on a gridded tabletop battlefield populated with miniatures.[201] Once again, Wizards of the Coast released a Game System Licence (GSL), enabling third parties to produce Fourth Edition compatible products.[202] Expansion and adventure module publication for D&D 4E would continue until 2012.

In 2012, Wizards of the Coast announced that it was developing a new version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and invited over 175,000 fans to participate in early playtesting of the upcoming version, enigmatically dubbed 'D&D Next' at the time.[203] This marked the first time a *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset would be developed partly via public playtesting (to such a degree).[204]

With D&D 4E out of commission, Wizards of the Coast focussed on the development of their new version, while also pursuing a few new avenues like boardgames and online roleplaying games (MMORPG's).

In 2014, playtesting and development culminated in the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition (D&D 5E), coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the game as a whole.[205] D&D 5E brought a number of new mechanics meant to simplify the rules and streamline gameplay, with the introduction of the singular proficiency bonus,[206] a flat armour class,[207] simpler saving throws,[208] more traditional race and class-based features and spellcasting,[209] as well as the "advantage/disadvantage"

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[200] Wikipedia s.v. "Editions of Dungeons and Dragons."

[201] Griffin McElroy, "Here's how Dungeons & Dragons is changing for its new edition," *Polygon.com*, Voxmedia, LLC., Jul 9, 2014,
https://www.polygon.com/2014/7/9/5882143/roll-for-initiative-understanding-the-next-edition-of-dungeons-dragons.

[202] Griffin McElroy, "how Dungeons & Dragons is changing."

[203] Jon Peterson, "Forty Years of Adventure."

[204] Ethan Gilsdorf, "Players Roll the Dice for Dungeons & Dragons Remake," *nytimes.com*, The New York Times, January 9, 2012,
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/arts/video-games/dungeons-dragons-remake-uses-players-input.html.

[205] Ibid.

[206] In earlier editions, a character's proficiency bonus—that is, a bonus to dice rolls made for actions that use skills, weapons, items, and so on, that a character has a proficiency or training in—would vary from ability to ability. In D&D 5E, such dice rolls would now use a single proficiency bonus that increases with character level. Mike Mearls et. al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 173-174.

[207] Instead of the numerous defensive values of previous editions.

[208] In 5th edition, saving throws were reworked to be situational checks—that is, dice rolls made by the player to reflect a sudden reflex or effort of 'saving' oneself from an oncoming danger, from falling rocks to poison to mind control. These rolls were based on the six core abilities of a character—strength, dexterity, endurance, wisdom, intelligence and Charisma—instead of the flat d20 rolls of previous editions. Mike Mearls et. al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 179.

[209] Instead of the at-will, per-encounter and per-day powers of D&D 4E.

mechanic, whereby conditional and situational bonuses to dice rolls were simplified to the rolling of two d20's and taking the highest result in the case of advantage, and the lowest in the case of disadvantage.[210]

In the years since the release of its fifth edition, interest in *Dungeons & Dragons* has increased immensely, judging by the widespread familiarity—even if only basic—of *Dungeons & Dragons* among the worldwide public, especially among younger generations; one could even argue *Dungeons & Dragons* has become 'mainstream' in the modern internet community, and certainly in 'geek culture' and other alternative subcultures.

D&D 5E has remained in active rotation until as recent as September 2021, when, during their annual digital festival, D&D celebration, Wizards of the Coast announced that they are working on a new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, aimed to release in 2024, the 50th anniversary year of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The new edition, already affectionately dubbed '5.5E,' will be, as announced by Wizards of the Coast executive producer Ray Winninger "completely compatible with [...] fifth edition products,"[211] but will appear more streamlined and easier to understand to any audience.[212] Very little details are known about the new edition as of yet, although Wizards of the Coast has announced more information would be shared by the end of 2022.

## 2.3. New Media and Dungeons & Dragons

Before moving to the discussion of medieval orality in *Dungeons & Dragons* in the following chapter, it will be useful to touch upon the influence of modern media on *Dungeons & Dragons*, since much of the examples in the next chapter will be sourced from the internet and digital media.

Influence of modern media on *Dungeons & Dragons* started to increase exponentially around the late 2010's. The rise in popularity of the public internet and the development of new audio-visual technologies over the course of the late 20th

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[210] That is, when the action performed is positive—or negatively— influenced by any conditional or circumstantial elements. Thus, rolling to see if a character is able to spot a creature on a clear day with special vision goggles would result in a roll with advantage, while the same action in pitch darkness without aid would result in a roll with disadvantage. Wikipedia s.v. "Editions of Dungeons and Dragons;" Mike Mearls et. al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 173.

[211] Dungeons & Dragons, "Day 3 - D&D Celebration," *Youtube.com*, September 26 2021, video, 8:12:19 to 8:12:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxb8xiDU5Kw&t=29440s.

[212] At least, that is what can be gathered from the player race and monster statistics (or 'statblocks') released as teasers during 2021's D&D Celebration event.

century and early years of the 21st century created new avenues of interaction between the public and *Dungeons & Dragons*. While forums and text-based long-distance *Dungeons & Dragons* games had existed since the 1970's, digital speech-based communication allowed for the game to be played more easily and intimately online. Similarly, the emergence of digital sound files and file forms such as the mp3 sparked the creation and popularity of podcasts. *Dungeons & Dragons* was easily incorporated into podcast form: playing groups could record their games and distribute them to listeners. In 2008, for example, the first 'season' of the highly influential *Acquisitions Incorporated*, a podcast created by webcomic website *Penny Arcade*,[213] in cooperation with Wizards of the Coast,[214] was released on the Wizards of the Coast's Website.[215] By 2010, the group would gather at gaming culture convention *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX) to continue their campaign of *Dungeons & Dragons* on-stage in one of the convention centre's theatres, in front of a live audience. This would be among the first instances of the 'live game,' where *Dungeons & Dragons* would be played in front of a live audience of involved fans, a big step from the typically private house games with friends or even the pre-recorded podcast.[216] A game of *Dungeons & Dragons* had become an event in and of itself, a kind of play that an attending audience could enjoy; playing and running *Dungeons & Dragons* was becoming a lucrative job opportunity.

Further digitalisation of *Dungeons & Dragons* came in the years after the release of the fifth edition (2014-present). Recent years have seen a stark rise in popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*, both publicly and online, no doubt due to further globalisation and further development of digital culture over the past decade. Pre-recorded *Dungeons & Dragons* games in podcast or video form, like the aforementioned *Acquisitions Incorporated*, remained a relatively niche form of internet entertainment until the latter half of the 2010's, when video sharing

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[213] Written by Jerry Holkins and illustrated by Mike Krahulik since 1998. The two would go on to found the now immensely popular American gaming culture convention *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX) in 2004. documenting their process on youtube and becoming two of (among) the earliest (gamer community) internet celebrities.

[214] Their table consisted of Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, as well as creator of the *PvP* webcomic, Scott Kurtz, who frequently collaborated with Holkins and Krahulik. The first season saw Chris Perkins and James Wyatt in the role of Dungeon Master (Wyat taking over from Perkins after 4 sessions); both Dungeon Masters were game designers at Wizards of the Coast at the time, and 'high ranking' game and rule designers at Wizards of the Coast have continued to DM *Acquisitions Incorporated* over the years.

[215] It would later be uploaded to other streaming services, as well as *Youtube* and *Penny Arcade*'s website and *Acquisitions Incorporated* spoof website.

[216] Live convention games would also be recorded for the purpose of distribution online.

websites such as *Youtube* and live streaming websites such as *Twitch* rose in prominence in regards to digital entertainment. In 2015, the first episode of season one of *Critical Role*,[217] a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign originally presented by geek culture website *Geek & Sundry*, was streamed live via *Twitch* and later uploaded to *Youtube*. *Critical Role* would soon prove to be extremely popular not just with *Dungeons & Dragons* fans, but especially with the wider public who may or may not be familiar with *Dungeons & Dragons*; consequently, *Critical Role* would introduce a lot of people to the game. The cast of *Critical Role* would eventually split from *Geek & Sundry* in 2019, continuing their 'show' with larger creative freedom, and have proven successful until present. *Critical Role* certainly exemplifies the potential of *Dungeons & Dragons* games to serve as a regular form of episodic entertainment, closely reflecting more mainstream media like movies and series,[218] and indeed *Critical Role* would be followed by many more 'roleplaying shows' and online live games until present. Wizards of the Coast would later adapt to the popularity of video sharing, live streaming, and (online) live games, by increasing their online advertising efforts, and collaborating with popular personalities in the community.[219] Similarly, Wizards of the Coast launched the digital rules companion website *D&D Beyond* in 2017, and new product releases have been teased and explored in multiple online forms—videos, articles, sponsorships, and so on. Until recently, product release events were meticulously streamed, complete with special live games with known online roleplayers and roleplaying groups, until moving to entirely digital events from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic until present.

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[217] The 'cast' of *Critical Role* is made up entirely by professional voice-actors: Orion Acaba (who left *Critical Role* in October 2015), Laura Bailey, Taliesin Jaffe, Ashley Johnson, Matthew Mercer (the Dungeon Master for the group's regular content), Liam O'Brien, Marisha Ray, Sam Riegel and Travis Willingham. Having been a friend group long before, their game started in a different role-playing system, *Pathfinder*, which they played for two years before switching to fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons* for the sake of their new 'programme'. Being voice-actors, the cast of Critical Role succeed in making their sessions immersive and dramatic, further enhancing their entertainment value.

[218] Further illustrated by the readiness to use such terms as 'episode', 'season', cast and other terminology otherwise found in the cinema-and entertainment industry.

[219] Numerous Dungeon Masters have been approached to co-write or advise on new D&D 5e products, while *Critical Role*'s campaign setting *Exandria*, originally created by Dungeon Master Matthew Mercer, has been featured in a number of official Wizards of the Coast Publications.

## CHAPTER 3: MEDIEVAL ORALITY IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

This chapter will combine the discussions of the previous chapters in order to answer this thesis' central question: in what ways does *Dungeons & Dragons* mimic modes of medieval oral narration? To discover whether the hallmarks of (medieval) orality are indeed present in a (typical) game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the oral characteristics defined by Walter J. Ong will once again be presented, now illustrated through written, audio and audio-visual *Dungeons & Dragons* material.

The source material used in this chapter is far from exhaustive. *Dungeons & Dragons* has produced an immense amount of material since its creation in the early 1970's, ranging from official releases to fan-created content. This chapter will base its analysis on a representative selection of suitable material from the corpus of official and fan-made *Dungeons & Dragons* media. Specifically, this chapter will use official publications from *Dungeons & Dragons*' most recent edition (fifth edition), such as the fifth edition *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Basic Rules*. In addition, approximately eleven hours of audio and audiovisual recordings of *Dungeons & Dragons* games have been analysed. This material has been taken from various podcasts and live game recordings of the gaming group *Acquisitions Incorporated*.[220] This includes their first podcast 'season' of eight episodes (total runtime 5:45:00) released between May and July 2008,[221] as well as two of their live games: their first *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX) live game recorded on 9 September 2008 (total runtime 2:03:07), and a later PAX South live game recorded on 18 November 2017 (total runtime 3:07:41). All *Acquisitions Incorporated* material used in this chapter has been accessed via the "Portfolio" page on *acq-inc.com*, *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s official website.[222] Furthermore, all *Acquisitions Incorporated* games were(/are) recorded and released in cooperation with Wizards of the Coast.[223] As part of their cooperation with Wizards of the Coast, *Acquisitions*

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[220] Whose creation and work has been previously discussed in chapter 2.3.

[221] As before, 'season' here is used to indicate the episodic nature of the *Acquisitions Incorporated* podcast. Despite being recorded in two sittings (see footnote 261), the first season was released in eight separate episodes of approximately 30-45 minutes. Similarly, the *Acquisitions Incorporated* website refers to these recordings as "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep [1-8]," with "PVP denoting the cooperation between *Penny Arcade* and *PVP* webcomic creator Scott Kurtz.

[222] See the following URL: https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio?sort=asc. Wizards of the Coast also lists all *Acquisitions Incorporated* live games on their Dungeons & Dragons *youtube* channel. Please note that episode numbering such as in the early seasons disappears in the titles of live games, which are (only) indicated according to what year and which *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX) they were recorded.

[223] Along with the cooperation of other parties, such as Scot Kurtz' *PVP* and the World Wrestling Federation (WWE), as well as a number of sponsors and charities.

*Incorporated* games have been primarily DM'ed by official *Dungeons & Dragons* game designers.[224] Because of this, their games are especially useful to this thesis, since one may not get closer to the source of how *Dungeons & Dragons* is meant to be played than games overseen by the game's own (current) designers.

Returning to Ong's "psychodynamics of orality,"[225] the ten characteristics of orality are sure to provide a reliable insight into the 'level of orality' in *Dungeons & Dragons*; the more characteristics are found, the more *Dungeons & Dragons* may reflect oral tradition. At the same time, some characteristics may not be found at all, or only when Ong's definition, or use of examples, is greatly stretched. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to seek medieval orality in *Dungeons & Dragons*, especially considering their overlap.

### *I. Mnemonics and formulas*

*Dungeons & Dragons* has always been distributed in writing of some medium or another. Likewise, the preparations described in 2.1.1. typically necessitate the DM to prepare written notes for an upcoming session. Unless the session or campaign is entirely improvised, the DM will need some form of written notes to store key information such as important NPCs.[226] While the extent of note taking varies between DMs, the notes help to remind the DM of previously prepared material. In a sense, DM notes can be considered of mnemonic value, since they promote remembrance by the DM of their prepared narrative. However, these mnemonics are not recorded in the mind of the performer—the DM in this case—but in writing, contradicting Ong's definition of mnemonics.

Equally, a DM typically does not codify their preparations, at least on paper, in such a way as to perform them entirely from memory like the *scops* and *skalds* of the medieval period, through alliteration, rhyme, and so on. That is not to say that *Dungeons & Dragons* involves no oral formulas at all. Codifying expressions do occur in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game, but they are likely included for their stylistic or narratival value rather than as mnemonics. For example, a DM (or designer) may include alliterating place names such as 'the Fairy Forest' in their adventure setting,

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[224] See footnote 206 and 207 for more on the members of *Acquisitions Incorporated*.
[225] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.
[226] 'Non-Player Character,' denoting all characters in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game not played by any of the players; they are instead portrayed by the DM.

while players may alliterate the name of their characters,[227] such as *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s Binwin Bronzebottom.[228] In both cases, the alliteration may simulate real-world (historic) naming tendencies which promote remembrance, but it may just as well be down to personal or stylistic preference of the DM, designer, or player. Moreover, while the alliteration may indeed promote remembrance of the subject, it is most likely not intended, since such information is typically written down to begin with.

Similarly, while rhyme is present in *Dungeons & Dragons*, it rarely functions to help the DM remember their material. Instead, rhyme occurs as a part of the world or plot,[229] such as in a prophecy or riddle. In many cases, such rhymes serve only as narrative hooks or immersive puzzles, rather than to aid the group in remembering (part of) their story.

Besides alliteration and rhyme, other formulaic expressions can be found in *Dungeons & Dragons* games. A DM is likely to use a variety of stock phrases throughout a game session, particularly at certain structural moments like the beginning and end. So it is that DM Chris Perkins' introductory words at the 2010 PAX Prime game of *Acquisitions incorporated*, "When last we left our intrepid group [...],"[230] are rather universal; DMs are likely to use this or a similar phrase to start a recap of the adventures of their own group as well.[231] Most DMs will close a session with a phrase such as "and that's where we will end today,"[232] or Chris Perkins' (theatrical) "The End."[233] A third instance of overt formulas are moments which heavily involve game mechanics, such as combat and a variety of 'rolls'—skill check

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[227] Naturally the DM may also name NPC's in such fashion.

[228] A Dwarf Fighter played by *PVP* webcomic creator Scott Kurtz, who played alongside DM Chris Perkins and *Penny Arcade*'s Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik (among others) until 2017.

[229] The term 'in-world' is commonly used here to describe an element that is 'true' only inside the game world, and while indirectly encountered by the players through their characters, should not be taken out of its immersive context.

[230] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Acquisitions Incorporated - PAX Prime 2010 D&D Game (Part 1)," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game (via *Youtube*), August 5, 2010, 7:02 to 7:04, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-prime-2010.

[231] For more on the recap, see IV. below.

[232] A staple of *Critical Role*'s DM Matthew Mercer.

[233] See Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Patrick Rothfuss, Kate Welch, "Acquisitions Incorporated Live - PAX South 2018," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game (via Youtube), February 21, 2018, 3:06:51 to 3:07:00, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-south-2018.

and saving throws,[234] as well as attack rolls.[235] Phrases like "roll for initiative," or "give me an arcana [or other character skill] check" are present in all *Dungeons & Dragons* games, with little variation. However, mechanically-bound stock phrases only have mnemonic function as far as the mechanical aspects of *Dungeons & Dragons* are concerned; they help the group to recognise certain mechanics and give structure to the game, but not to (partially) remember the narrative as by Ong's definition.

At the same time, various official *Dungeons & Dragons* publications present methods of (scriptural) preparation—tips and tricks to creating sessions, adventures and campaigns. As discussed in 2.1.1., *Dungeons & Dragons* games are found to contain some typical structures, like the three pillars of adventure. Besides providing a theoretical overview of a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* game, such structures also help the DM create their own adventures. Akin to the formulas of (medieval) orality which help an orator remember and perform, these structures provide a way to systematise the creation and running of a *Dungeons & Dragons* game. They are, in a sense, the formulas to creating a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure. Efforts to systematise *Dungeons & Dragons* are found in both official and unofficial *Dungeons & Dragons* materials. Take, for instance, the "elements of a great adventure" prescribed in the fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

> **A credible threat:** An adventure needs a threat worthy of the heroes' attention. [...]
> **Familiar tropes with clever twists:** [...] Familiar story elements are fine as long as you and the players occasionally put a spin on them. [...]
> **A clear focus on the present:** An adventure is about the here and now. [...]
> **Heroes who matter:** An adventure should allow the adventurers' actions and decisions to matter. [...]
> **Something for all player types:** [...] An adventure needs to account for the different players and characters in your group, drawing them into the story as effectively as possible. [...]
> **Surprises:** Look for opportunities to surprise and delight your players. [...]

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[234] Skill checks are dice rolls that determine the outcome of a particular action performed by a character, on the basis of one of their so-called 'skills' which in turn are tied to one of five of a character's six attributes. Saving throws are dice rolls made to 'save' the character from certain harms, also tied to their attributes. See Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook,* 174-175

[235] Dice rolls which are made to determine whether a character is able to hit an adversary in combat. See Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook,* 194-175.

> **Useful maps:** A good adventure needs thoughtfully constructed maps. [...][236]

Lists such as this one provide the DM with an easy-to-consult overview of elements that should be included in their (new) adventures. Official publications even promote their use. The fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, for instance, introduces the elements above by noting that "the best adventures have [these] several things in common;"[237] the elements are presented as the formulas for all great adventures.

Similarly, *Dungeons & Dragons'* digital community has produced methods of preparation, like the "five room dungeon," a highly systematic form of dungeon creation:

> An idea by [user] JohnnFour [...], it's a pattern for making a quick dungeon delve. Five simple steps, and you get enough for at least a session around the kitchen table, maybe two, and the heroes feel like they really earned their experience points.
> [...]
> The five rooms are: Entrance with Guardian, Puzzle/Roleplaying Challenge, Trick or Setback, Big Climax, and then Reward/Revelation.[238]

This method provides the DM with a step-by-step approach to creating adventures. Like the elements of a good adventure above, the five rooms of the five room dungeon constitute the basic building blocks, the near-universal commonalities, which the (online) community perceives should be included in a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* game. This may be similar to how certain themes and type-scenes of a given oral culture constitute the essential building blocks for oral narratives of that culture. Thus, an oral performer need only remember the typical structure belonging to their

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[236] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*, 72. Please note that the layout has been simplified from the original, and that non-applicable parts are replaced with ellipses.
[237] Ibid.
[238] 1d4chan, s.v. "Five Room Dungeon," last modified January 8 2021, 21:50, https://1d4chan.org/wiki/Five_Room_Dungeon. The five room dungeon was first prescribed in march 2007, by a member of roleplaying forum *Strolen'sCitadel* (strolen.com) member by the username Johnfour. Since then, Johnfour—now John Four—has created their own website, *roleplayingtips.com*, to share their tips and distribute their work through digital publication. The five room dungeon has become a well-known method of easy dungeon building, being covered by numerous roleplaying and 'nerd culture' websites such as *nerdsonearth.com*. According to 1d4chan, Wizards of the Coast used John Four's method for their pre-fabricated dungeon "Kobold Hall," detailed in the fourth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, without acknowledgement of the original method. While the similarities are striking, it cannot be confirmed if Wizards of the Coast 'stole' John Four's method for their own publication.

culture's oral tradition, not the exact words, to recall an old story or compose a new one.[239]

Moreover, there is a certain 'flow' to the typical *Dungeons & Dragons* game, in that the events of a session, adventure or campaign occur in a particular order (see Chapter 2.1.1.).[240] For example, a session will always need some form of introduction, either to set the stage for a new adventure, or to recap (a) previous one(s).[241] An example of such an introduction can be found in the first podcast episode of *Acquisitions Incorporated*, when DM Chris Perkins[242] introduces the party[243] to the 'base town' central to the adventure:

| | |
|---|---|
| Chris Perkins: | "Well, the adventure is taking place around a small village—a fortified village, called Winterhaven. This place is one of those very very faint points of light and the darkness I was talking about, and [pause] they've been having a lot of problems of late—" |
| Jerry Holkins: | "So it's an opportunity to build some PR basically" |
| Chris: | "Yes, absolutely, you guys want a reputation; here's a great place to build one, and Winterhaven is remote enough, but is—it's on a trade road, so it does have some—some stuff going on there, but it's a—there's a lot of trouble around there and they've been having it for a long time and [pause] actually we're going to sort of, jump in the middle of things here and say you've already had a few encounters with some of the local wildlife—" |
| Jerry: | "Okay so when you say wildlife, do you mean animals or—" |
| Chris: | "I mean actually goblins and kobolds and other monsters—" |
| Jerry: | "I see" |
| Chris: | "And you've been, basically, beating them back and cleaning out the—the surrounding territory from [sic] these horrid little raiders—" |
| Jerry: | "Incursions" |

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[239] For more on the schematics in oral tradition, see also David K. Crowne's "The Hero on the Beach: An Example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 61, no. 4 (1960), 362-372.
[240] Thus, the flow becomes something like: (if necessary) make a character; introduce the adventure (which may setting or character introductions); present adventure hook; begin the adventure; enter the adventure location; explore the dungeon, fighting lesser enemies along the way; reach and battle the boss monster; receive reward; end adventure (perhaps with an epilogue or cliffhanger).
[241] For more on the recap as a characteristic of orality, see IV. below.
[242] Who was and still is a game designer for *Dungeons & Dragons* at Wizards of the Coast.
[243] Jerry Holkins, playing the Half-Elf Cleric Omin Dran; Mike Krahulik, playing the Human Wizard Jim Darkmagic; Scott Kurtz playing the Dwarf Fighter Binwin Bronzebottom.

| Chris: | "Exactly, and trying to get to the root of the problem of why they are suddenly all stirred up and and getting into Winterhaven people's face" |
|---|---|
| Jerry: | "Exactly, so are we here under a contract from the sort of nominal leadership or?" |
| Chris: | "You had heard from a trader—you had been elsewhere, and a trader coming from Winter Haven said 'oh there's so much—there's so much wrong up there we, we got to stop; we're not going back there anymore, and you're like 'oh we can solve this problem [chuckling], I'm sure there's money in it, and so you went up and you started to kick the crap out of a bunch of kobolds and goblins on behalf of the local mayor—" |
| Jerry: | "There we go" |
| Chris: | "—There [pause], and he's sort of taking a shining to you at this point, and you've learned, while kicking the crap out of goblins and kobolds, that they seem to be taking their orders from—they were taking their orders from a figure named Irontooth [...]"[244] |

Already, in the span of about four minutes, the party has learned a lot of information about their surroundings and the reason for their adventure. This is critical to the players to have a grasp of the situation. The inclusion of an introduction, like other staples already discussed, is something of a prerequisite to an adventure.

Likewise, the 'flow' can be found in combat encounters,[245] as there is a typical order to them. In most adventures, encounters are incremental, so that the players meet progressively more or stronger enemies.[246] Thus, in the first adventure of *Acquisitions Incorporated*,[247] the party encounters its enemies in order of power and/or number: a swarm of rats, a goblin, two goblins, five zombies, and finally three stronger goblins, one of which is the boss monster.[248] In contrast, it is rare, if not

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[244] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep1," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, podcast audio, May 30, 2008, 16:56 to 18:41, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/penny-arcade-pvp-s1-ep1. Please note that here and after the transcription is partially taken from *Youtube*; editing is my own. Intelligent verbatim is used throughout.

[245] Commonly abbreviated to simply 'encounters'.

[246] In line with their own incremental power, represented by their character's level.

[247] Equivalent to Season 1, episodes 1 through 4. While partially linked through NPC's and, unsurprisingly, player characters, the latter half of season 1 details the exploration of a different dungeon than the former half.

[248] Acquisitions Incorporated Wiki, s.v. "Acquisitions Incorporated: Season One," last modified 5 April 2022, 03:18, https://acquisitionsincorporated.fandom.com/wiki/Acquisitions_Incorporated:_Season_One#Episode_1.

discouraged, to have the party face the boss monster as their first encounter.[249] Such a change in order would be the same as moving the climax of a narrative to the first chapter or scene, nullifying any satisfaction from (plot) development and some ultimate accomplishment. A systematic order of encounters constitutes yet another formula of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The crucial difference between the preparatory methods discussed here and the mnemonics of oral tradition has already been alluded to: the former is typically written down, while the latter remains in the mind of the performer. While the oral performer prepares mental mnemonics, the DM uses written notes to 'perform' their *Dungeons & Dragons* session; this is not mnemonics by Ong's definition. However, by presenting these numerous methods in official publications, the creators and (later) designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* suggest, perhaps even force, a certain 'official' way of thinking about what should be prepared for a typical session. In doing so, *Dungeons & Dragons* designers prescribe an experience for the DM that is not entirely unlike that of an oral performer: the oral performer is required to create mental mnemonics for a new composition; the DM is required to create notes that help to support their own 'oral performance'—running a *Dungeons & Dragons* session. In a way, a DM's written preparations may be similar to the—albeit speculative—early written versions of oral narratives like *Beowulf*, which may have been used, at least during the transition period of oral tradition to writing, as cues to help the orator learn the narrative by heart, and to support their oral performance.

While mnemonics are not strictly present in *Dungeons & Dragons* by Ong's definition, the game's designers have presented (/present) methods for the creation of an adventure through various rulebooks and publications, which helps to establish a system of preparation that is not unlike that of the medieval oral performer, albeit without the use of mental mnemonics.

## II. Additive rather than subordinate

*Dungeons & Dragons* is an extremely verbal affair. Aside from written preparations, the bulk of the game occurs in verbal form; the time spent at the game table is a time of verbal roleplaying interactions, explaining player and NPC actions, and reacting to rolls and other outcomes. In turn, the majority of verbalisation lies with the DM, who describes and explains pretty much everything in the game, barring a few player

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[249] For more on the boss monster, see chapter 2.1. above.

movements. While the DM may present their descriptions as a monologue, their words, as much as those of the other players, are part of the 'natural flow of speech,' and may be interrupted by others, as illustrated in the transcript above.

Moreover, A DM's description typically contains a lot of additive language like 'and' and 'also'. Understandable, considering the fact that a DM often aims to provide a detailed description to the players for the sake of immersion and better understanding of the situation. This detail is typically produced by additive language rather than subordinate, which might take away from the information, or qualify information previously given. Thus, the additive 'you find yourself in a dark and humid room, the smell of sulphur fills your nostrils, and the walls feel wet to the touch' are far more typical than a more subordinative version: 'you find yourself in a room, but it is dark so you cannot see; you hold your breath but are struck with the smell of sulphur.' See also another example from *Acquisitions Incorporated* season one, with additive language underlined:

| Chris Perkins: | "you have appeared to enter some sort of secret armory. There are some decrepit looking racks of weapons on each side of the room here; <u>there's also</u> a suit of armor, which I'll describe momentarily, stashed in here with a wall plaque |
|---|---|
| Jerry Holkins: | "Non-goblin sized?" [chuckling] |
| Chris: | "No, in fact—" |
| Jerry: | "That would affect its grandeur, I guess—" |
| Chris: | "—(inaudible) these two weapon racks <u>and then</u> the ragged suit of armor in the alcove; the armor doesn't look particularly grand it looks like it might have been grand at one point, but it's sort of fallen into disrepair"[250] |

Additive language is used here to give the fullest description of the environment as perceived by the player characters. Even when no explicit additives are used, new information given 'adds' to the previous by adding more details to the environment already forming in the minds of the players.

Taken a step further, a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure can be additive overall. The aforementioned flow of narrative and the increment of dangers means that new information, and new dangers, always add upon previous experience(s) of

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[250] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep4," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, podcast audio, June 20, 2008, 5:08 to 5:41, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/penny-arcade-pvp-s1-ep4.

the party. Exploring a dungeon, for example, is overtly additive: behind the first room is another room, or a staircase leading deeper into the dungeon; every room or dungeon feature adds to the next until the dungeon is (fully) explored. Although the DM has likely prepared all this, it is certainly an additive experience for the players. Equally, with the first goblin slain, the party will likely encounter a larger number, or a greater enemy, in the following room(s), and so on. Over the course of a campaign, players typically encounter an increasingly broadening world and narrative; from their opening encounters, the party moves on to other locations, towns and cities, and uncover more of the (prepared or prescribed) plot. For instance, in their first town the party might gather rumours of an illness affecting the lands, and in the next town they discover that the illness is real and man-made by an evil wizard, only to find out in the capital that the evil wizard is actually the king, and so on.

This incremental nature of an adventure is also advocated in official *Dungeons & Dragons* material, such as in the so-called 'Tiers of Adventure' described in the fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

> As characters grow in power, their ability to change the world around them grows with them. It helps to think ahead when creating your campaign to account for this change. As the characters make a greater impact on the world, they face greater danger whether they want to or not. Powerful factions see them as a threat and plot against them, while friendly ones court their favor in hopes of striking a useful alliance. [...] As the characters resolve one event, a new danger arises or the prior trouble transforms into a new threat in response to the characters' actions. Events need to grow in magnitude and scope, increasing the stakes and drama as the characters become increasingly powerful. [...][251]

These tiers scale with the experience level of the player characters, so that their adventures and influence increase every four levels: "Local heroes" (level 1-4), "Heroes of the realm" (5-10), "Masters of the realm" (11-16), and "Masters of the world" (17-20).[252] It is clear that a *Dungeons & Dragons* narrative grows in scope relative to the time spent playing.

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[251] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*, 36. Please note that the layout has been simplified from the original, and that non-applicable parts are replaced with ellipses.
[252] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*, 36-38.
Fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons* rules prescribe that a character can amass experience to grow in power up to level 20. In general, a player character cannot surpass level 20, as this threshold divides mortal beings from immensely powerful creatures and gods.

*III. Aggregative rather than analytic*

It has proven difficult to find aggregative expressions in this thesis' primary sources. While expressions such as pithy phrases are likely not entirely excluded from *Dungeons & Dragons*, they are not as overt as might be expected. Aggregative expressions can be found in names of some locations, like with "the Savage Frontier," "the Lands of Intrigue" and "the Unapproachable East," to name but a few from Wizards of the Coasts' *The Forgotten Realms* setting.[253] Besides such locations, however, aggregative expressions as defined by Ong have been hard to illustrate. Despite existing for a number of decades, there are no generational customs in *Dungeons & Dragons* which dictate, for instance, that all mention of dragons must be preceded by the term 'terrible.' Equally, pithy phrases such as the "beautiful princess" and the "sturdy oak" mentioned by Ong,[254] while perhaps present in individual games, carry little to no significance across *Dungeons & Dragons* as a whole.

More overt are the stereotypes and tropes of medieval literature and fantasy fiction on which *Dungeons & Dragons* is heavily based. Thus, most of the monsters encountered in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game are stereotypically evil, while others are typically good or blissfully unaligned.[255] Similarly, while no player character is at all the same, there are certain typicalities to classes. For instance, while no wizard character is forced to be a wise old man with a staff and a pointy hat, such an image is likely dormant in the minds of the players and DM.[256] However, neither of these stereotypes are considered the same as Ong's aggregative expressions, pertaining mainly to content rather than stylistic characteristics.

The lack of overt aggregative expressions may be caused by the fact that, especially in later editions, *Dungeons & Dragons* designers have stressed originality of content. As already mentioned in the elements of a great adventure: "Familiar

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[253] Steve Kenson et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, Fifth Edition (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014), 11.

[254] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.

[255] All *Dungeons & Dragons* creatures are morally divided along the axes of 'good-neutral-evil' and 'lawful-neutral-chaotic', which together make up a creature's so-called 'alignment,' a categorisation of a creature's moral view. See Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Monster Manual, Fifth Edition* (Renton, USA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014), 7 and Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*, 122.

[256] These typicalities are supported by game mechanics to a degree, since the wizard class benefits most from the 'intelligence' stat, with the result that many wizard characters have roughly the same statistics. This extends to races as well, with certain classes benefiting from being combined with a certain race.

story elements are fine, as long as you and the players occasionally put a spin on them."[257] In other words, *Dungeons & Dragons* is not about copying the tropes of medieval and fantasy literature, but about adapting them into something new. While again related more so to content than stylistics, the creative use of stereotypes advocated in *Dungeon & Dragons* rulebooks may help to explain the deficiency in aggregative expressions. Put simply, by prescribing DMs to use, but not overuse, certain literary tropes, *Dungeons & Dragons* designers promote(d) the neglecting of established stylistic hallmarks of previous editions. This means that any generational stylistic residue, such as aggregative expressions of previous generations or iterations, can be adjusted or even dismissed for the sake of originality. Besides, any *Dungeons & Dragons* game is individual, in that it is typically separate from all other games. This means that even if one particular gaming group or DM uses aggregative expressions, they need not be present in other games, even if they are 'generationally descendant.'[258] After all, the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a whole likely has not existed for long enough to have produced uniform aggregative expressions, compared to the centuries of (stylistic) development found in oral cultures.

## IV. Redundant or 'copious'

As discussed in chapter one, oral performers are faced with the challenge of having "nothing to backloop into outside the mind" when preparing or performing an oral narrative.[259] This results in redundancy and repetition, which help the performer remain in the 'present' of the narrative, and hold the attention of the audience. While the DM has the luxury of (being able to prepare) written notes or other resources, the act of DM'ing itself is almost entirely oral. Thus, while not entirely the same as in oral tradition, the DM may regularly rely on redundancy and copiousness. Perhaps the most striking example of this recaps performed at the start of continuing narratives such as a campaign. Even an entirely new adventure might have some form of recap included in its introduction, as the DM might begin by summarising the (recent) history of the setting. Take for example the recap given by Chris Perkins at the start of *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s 2010 PAX Prime game:

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[257] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*, 71.
[258] Such as when a new generation of players is in direct contact with an earlier generation like parents who who taught *Dungeons & Dragons* to their children.
[259] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39

Chris Perkins:   "When last we left our intrepid group [pause] Binwin, Omen and Jim Darkmagic came together to plunder Shadowfell keep. they made off like bandits and omen hit upon the idea 'hey why don't we start a company [pause] we'll call ourselves Acquisitions Incorporated, but we're going to need to hire some folks' and the first person that they found was an intern named Eofel[260] and together they set off to help the town of Fallcrest secure a tower on the edges of civilization. It was shortly thereafter that Binwin ran into some family problems: His father had stopped drinking because—[laughter]"

Scott Kurtz:   "Terrible"

Chris:   "—A rival dwarven clan, clan Ambershard, [booing and hissing]—"

Mike Krahulik:   "Hate those guys"

Chris:   "—of the Aspen Ambershards basically stole his daddy's mine and ran him out of business and it seems like they're just buying up property all over the place. So to get back at them, Binwin and his friends struck out against the Ambershard Manor in Hammerfast and stole the invulnerable coat of Arn—Take that Ambershards![261]"

In a few sentences, Chris Perkins summarises the events of the past three or more sessions,[262] constituting three 'seasons' of Acquisitions Incorporated. Here, the recap serves not only to remind the players of previous events, but also helps the audience attending the live game or watching the recording at home without previous knowledge of *Acquisitions Incorporated* to get up to speed with their adventures.

At the same time, the game at hand is not about the past, but about the (near-)future actions of the party during the session, responding to new developments rather than old information. Thus, the information given in such recaps, while likely phrased differently than their first occurence, is both copious and

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[260] An Eladrin, or 'Feywild Elf' Avenger/Paladin of the wilderness goddess Melora, portrayed by actor Will Wheaton. Will Wheaton joined *Acquisitions Incorporated* for seasons three through six.

[261] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Acquisitions Incorporated - PAX Prime 2010 D&D Game (Part 1)," 7:02 to 8:13. Chris Perkins moves on into the introduction hereafter, which will be omitted here.

[262] It is not mentioned in how many sittings a single season was recorded for podcast purposes. It is likely that the latter half of season one was recorded at a later time, as the players comment as such, and the DM Chris Perkins has been exchanged for James Wyatt.In this case the events of around three, spanning over.

redundant; the events therein have passes, and are only marginally, if at all, necessary for the enjoyment of the session at hand.[263]

## *V. Conservative or traditionalist*

*Dungeons & Dragons* has undergone a lot of change. It may therefore be illogical to call *Dungeons & Dragons* conservative or traditionalist. Yet, despite considerable differences between editions in terms of mechanics, the basic concept of 'players portraying heroes going on adventures crafted between themselves and a narrating game master' has remained nearly the same.[264] Chris Perkins also alludes to this consistency while explaining D&D 4E to his players in season one of *Acquisitions Incorporated*:

> Chris Perkins: "The idea behind fourth edition, like the previous editions of D&D is you guys are a group of adventurers who have been working together you—"
>
> Jerry Holkins: "Professionally"
>
> Chris: "—You battle monsters, you acquire treasure, you gain levels, [pause] you basically complete quests—sometimes personal quests, sometimes group [coughing] quests. When you kill monsters and complete missions you get experience points, and that's what gets you up in levels and the longer you play the greater the rewards"[265]

Fourth edition, in other words, presents similar gameplay to earlier editions, while fifth edition also continues this trend. Similarly, the tropes established in *Dungeons & Dragons'* first edition still hold true today for both published and fan-made content, albeit with modern twists. There is a sense of continuation throughout the game's history, as creations in newer editions regularly source material from earlier ones. Thus, *Dungeons & Dragons* creations are traditional and conservative to a degree. Moreover, *Dungeons & Dragons* designers (have) draw(n) heavy inspiration from historic literature as well as traditional medievalist fantasy, which itself also

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[263] Compare this, for instance, to *Beowulf* where the titular hero makes numerous additions to his own recap of the events that transpired at Heorot (the slaying of Grendel, and so on) when returning to his king Hygelac. These additions are puzzling, and may be evidence of Beowulf wishing to hide certain details of his deeds at Heorot, while elevating others, for the sake of his social standing with Hygelac and the economy of honour. John M. Hill, "Chapter Four. The Economy of Honour in Beowulf" in *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 85-107.

[264] See chapter 2.1. above, as well as footnote 138 for illustration.

[265] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep1," 1:49 to 2:20.

draws from (quasi-)historical sources. This makes *Dungeons & Dragons* the latest in a line of medieval adaption and medievalist tradition.

What is more, the role of the DM has remained basically identical across editions, and may be seen as a kind of 'keeper of knowledge' described by Ong. Put differently, the DM is similar to the *scop* or *skald*, in that they are tasked to record and recall the knowledge of their community—the narratives and game rules of their player group. Equally, only the DM knows the full scope of the world and narrative of their game. Where needed, players must look to the DM for information about the world, characters, or plot.[266] Thus, the DM becomes a kind of sage of their fictional world and of their group's shared story.

## VI. Close to the human lifeworld

Like (medieval) oral narration, *Dungeons & Dragons*' narration rarely leaves the confines of the party. Only per the DM's wishes will the perspective move away from the player characters or their direct surroundings to something more broader, like a scene elsewhere, or the eyes of an NPC or villain. Similarly, the typical perspective of a *Dungeons & Dragons* session rarely leaves the 'here and now,' since the game is primarily about the player characters' actions and reactions to what happens in the present. Even if a perspective or temporal shift is necessary, the party usually 'comes with it.' A party might journey into the dreams of another character, or experience the illusory images of a past event; players observe the event from 'inside' their character. Experiencing such shifts through roleplaying, like characters being faced with a painful memory, can also be considered 'character-inclusive.' An exception to this is the aforementioned recap of past adventures, since this is (typically) presented 'outside the narrative' by the DM to the players, not the character. While the characters were involved with the events at the time, they have no influence on the recap.

Once the players 'disappear' and the characters 'appear', the latter become the centre of attention of the game, and narration will always remain close to their experience in/of the narrative.

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[266] See for instance Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep1," 4:30 to 5:55. Here Chris Perkins shows intimate knowledge of the game world and mechanics by, in quick succession, presenting Jerry Holkins with a near-full list of the deities found in their world, and then explaining to Mike Krahulik the difference between the Paladin and Cleric classes.

## VII. Agonistically toned.

As its name suggests, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game full of dangerous environments and monsters. The typical *Dungeons & Dragons* world "is a very dark place."[267] Chris Perkins uses the following metaphor to explain the *Dungeons & Dragons* world in season one of *Acquisitions Incorporated*:

> Think of it [a *Dungeons & Dragons* world] as points of light in the darkness—that there are these places of safety and sanctuary, and all of these dark places in between that the brave wander, and some of them even come back from these places [...].[268]

This element of dangerous wilderness and ruins amongst very few enclaves of safety or civilisation—although cities bring the adventurer new dangers altogether—has remained constant throughout editions. The prevalence of locations such as the aforementioned "Savage Frontier," or the darkly-named "Hellgate Keep" and "Tomb of Horrors" in *The Forgotten Realms*,[269] and similarly-named locations in other settings, attest to this emphasis on conflict and struggle. It seems clear that in *Dungeons & Dragons* there is no adventure without danger. After all, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a narrative which, like a tale of (fantasy) fiction, needs an antagonist, or several, to provide conflict for its protagonists—the player characters.

Likewise, while not its sole focus, *Dungeons & Dragons* places much emphasis on combat. One needs only to consider the vast number of pages of *Dungeon & Dragons* rulebooks dedicated to weapons, armour, offensive spells and so on, to illustrate the prevalence of combat. No doubt due to its origins in wargames, *Dungeons & Dragons* has always included extensive rules on combat mechanics. In fact, it is the most systematised aspect of *Dungeons & Dragons*, with other aspects like exploration and roleplaying allowing for far more creative freedom. Similarly, an edition's 'basic rulebooks' typically include a guide on monsters like the *Monster Manual*, while most other rulebooks prescribe at least some form of combat in a session. Thus, *Dungeons & Dragons* rulesets are presented in such a way as to expect

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[267] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep1," 8:22-8:40.
[268] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Penny Arcade/PVP, S1 Ep1," 8:22-8:24.
[269] Steve Kenson et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, 7, 48, 86. See also Wikipedia s.v. "Tomb of Horrors," last modified June 26, 2022, 04:37, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_Horrors.

combat to be necessary during play, thereby aligning with the agonistic nature of its setting.

Combat is indeed often necessary, since a *Dungeons & Dragons* session or campaign is typically built around some form of struggle which the player characters must resolve. Even in a narrative full of intrigue or subterfuge, struggle of some kind is still present, most of which is resolved by 'rolling initiative' and starting combat.[270] It is safe to say that *Dungeons & Dragons*, like oral narratives, is highly agonistically toned.

### *VIII. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced*

Like the (medieval) oral performer, the DM intends their narrative for a particular audience—in this case their players. Even if a session is played online, the audience is unavoidable, since they are right in front of the DM, as with the *scop* or *skald* who performed in the filled courts and feast halls of their time. This creates a kind of intimacy between the DM and their players. Additionally, a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* is typically played at someone's home or another familiar setting. In other words, *Dungeons & Dragons* creates, but also necessitates, a kind of community and communal feel, similar to how (medieval) oral storytelling establishes a "communal soul,"[271] as Ong terms it. Similarly, Ong points out that the storyteller and the audience in oral culture are prone to 'mingle.' Of course, *Dungeons & Dragons* takes this audience interactivity to the extreme, since the audience dictates the narrative almost fully. The fifth edition *Player's Handbook* gives a short example of this:

Dungeon Master (DM): After passing through the craggy peaks, the road takes a sudden turn to the east and Castle Ravenloft towers before you. Crumbling towers of stone keep a silent watch over the approach. They look like abandoned guardhouses. Beyond these, a wide chasm gapes, disappearing into the deep fog below. A lowered drawbridge spans the chasm, leading to an arched entrance to the castle courtyard. The chains of the drawbridge creak in the wind, their rust.eaten iron straining with the weight. From atop the high, strong walls, stone gargoyles stare at you from hollow sockets and grin hideously. A rotting wooden portcullis, green with growth, hangs in the entry tunnel. Beyond this, the main

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[270] Rolling initiative, in this case, refers to the rolling of dice prior to combat, to determine the so-called 'initiative,' or order by which the game's turn-based combat will unfold.
[271] Walter J. *Ong, Orality and Literacy*, 46.

> doors of Castle Ravenloft stand open, a rich warm light spilling into the courtyard.
>
> Phillip (playing Gareth): I want to look at the gargoyles. I have a feeling they're not just statues.
>
> Amy (playing Rival): The drawbridge looks precarious? I want to see how sturdy it is. Do I think we can cross it, or is it going to collapse under our weight?
>
> [...]
>
> Dungeon Master (DM): OK, one at a time. Phillip, you're looking at the gargoyles?
>
> Phillip: Yeah. Is there any hint they might be creatures and not decorations?
>
> DM: Make an Intelligence check.
>
> Phillip: Does my Investigation skill apply?
>
> DM: Sure!
>
> Phillip (rolling a d20): Ugh. Seven.
>
> DM: They look like decorations to you. And Amy, Rivais checking out the drawbridge?[272]

This example, from an official sourcebook no less, serves to illustrate the prominence of audience interactivity in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Interactions such as this one are typical to the game; the DM describes a scene or approaching problem, and the players choose how to interact or react. Without the choices of the players, the story may not progress at all. This level of interactivity is an essential part of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The example above is a rather straightforward format: the DM describes a scene and/or issue first, the reaction of the players comes second. However, it is interesting to note that in practice group interaction can prove far more ad hoc or even intrusive. Take for example the interaction below between (primarily) DM Chris Perkins and Patrick Rothfuss during *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s PAX South 2018 live game:

> Chris Perkins: As you sneak deeper into the tomb past the entrance door, you make your way down a hall where you can see corpses—fresh ones, that appear to have been crushed, stabbed, shot, burnt, decapitated, immolated, and partially dissolved.
>
> Mike Krahulik: All the same corpse?! [Laughter]
>
> Jerry Holkins: This place sucks!
>
> Mike: Yeah that guys has got [sic] a bad go of it.

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[272] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 5. Please note that the layout has been simplified from the original, and that non-applicable parts are replaced with ellipses.

| | |
|---|---|
| Chris: | One of them was like a 12th level adventure so that's probably true, you know— |
| Kate Welch: | Well after that it would be like 'look a pile of campfires,' how would you even tell if they are corpses at that point— |
| Patrick Rothfuss: | Now you did not [pause] use the word looted [Laughter] |
| [...] | |
| Chris: | Roll a d4 for me Pat. |
| Mike: | This is never good . |
| Patrick: | Are these mine? Okay. [Patrick rolls dice] One. |
| Chris: | Okay, now roll percentile dice.[273] [patrick starts rolling dice] |
| Jerry: | You have what it takes Pat. |
| Patrick: | 83 |
| Chris: | 83. Okay you find a glass vial with a bubbly clear liquid inside of it and the top of the vial is as a stopper with a little heart |
| Jerry: | Champagne! [laughter][274] |

In this live game example, the DM attempts to describe a scene but is interrupted multiple times by the players, and must on occasion restart or add information to his previous exposition. Roleplaying his character,[275] Patrick Rothfuss interjects by asking if the corpses hide any treasure.[276] Crucial here is that Patrick poses a question that Chris did not expect to answer. For the next few minutes—indicated in the quote above by an ellipsis, coinciding with another conversation at the table less related to the topic—Chris Perkins can be seen leafing through the fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, particularly its section on treasure and magical items. The haste at which this is done suggests that Chris did not expect this response, and tries to find a suitable item to have the party find.[277] If it wasn't for Patrick Rothfuss, the party would have likely moved past the corpses without finding any valuable items at all; instead this unexpected action provides the party with valuable treasure. This is one example of how the players can progress the story in unexpected ways, with the DM having to improvise a response. The DM is the game's narrator, but they are not its

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[273] See footnote 139 for more on percentile dice.

[274] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Patrick Rothfuss, Kate Welch, "Acquisitions Incorporated Live - PAX South 2018," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game (via Youtube), February 21, 2018, 15:08 to 17:00, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-south-2018.

[275] Viari, a Human Rogue (thief).

[276] Referred to here as 'loot'.

[277] The fact that Chris resorts to the Dungeon Master's Guide and not to the adventure module Tomb of Annihilation, on which the 2018 PAX South live game was (partially) based, further suggests that Patrick's action is unexpected.

sole authors; it is the interactivity between the preparations of the DM and the actions of the players that shape the story of the game. In short, there is no *Dungeons & Dragons* without players making decisions; it is the agency that makes the game enticing.

What is more, the introduction of the aforementioned 'livegames' has created a new kind of audience, which will be termed the 'meta audience', since they function slightly differently and outside the audience recognised above—the players. The meta audience constitutes the audience attending the game live at the venue or, in the case of an online *Dungeons & Dragons* livegame, tuning in via the streaming website. While the players can directly interact with each other and the DM on stage and influence the narrative through their decisions, the meta audience can really only watch and respond to the actions of those on stage. As mentioned in chapter 2.3., a *Dungeons & Dragons* session is basically transformed into a play or live performance for this meta audience, who react not only to the actions and achievements of the characters inside the game world, but also to the conversations and jokes made outside of it. This relationship can be illustrated by *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s first livegame at PAX Prime 2010, where the meta audience can be heard responding to things that happen to the characters within the narrative, as well as the conversations of the players at the table. So it is that the meta audience loudly celebrates together with the players on stage when Scot Kurtz' Binwin Bronzebottom deals the final blow to one of the sessions' boss monsters (a hydra),[278] and can even be heard to shout suggestions to the players, or remind them of rules they may be forgetting.[279]

Thus, the participatory nature of *Dungeons & Dragons* is realised, since both the direct audience—the players—and a possible meta audience assert influence on the narrative and actions taken within the game world.

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[278] See Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Acquisitions Incorporated - PAX Prime 2010 D&D Game (Part 10)," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game (via *Youtube*), August 5, 2010, 3:32 to 5:56, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-prime-2010. Note also the meta audience reaction at the rolling of a 19 by Scott Kurtz to hit the hydra. Rolling dice is perhaps the most frequent point of meta audience response, as it is also the most emotion-enlisting moment in *Dungeons & Dragons* games.

[279] See for instance Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Acquisitions Incorporated - PAX Prime 2010 D&D Game (Part 7)," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game (via Youtube), August 5, 2010, 3:25 to 4:20, https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-prime-2010. Note the contrast in response in this short fragment: first a grateful response from Will Wheaton for being reminded of a useful rule, and then an irritated (though likely ironic) response from Scott Kurtz on behalf of Will when suggestions continue.

*IX. Homeostatic*

Homeostasis is another characteristic which is difficult to illustrate in *Dungeons &*
*Dragons*, at least by Ong's exact definition. This is because a group of *Dungeons &*
*Dragons* players, if they are considered as a form of 'oral community' in Ong's sense
of the term, do not fully dismiss previous memories that have no present relevance,
just as terms and expressions do not lose their previous significance. While a
*Dungeons & Dragons* game does transpire in the present life experience of the player
characters, there is no equilibrium of development in terms of narrative content. In
other words, the narrative remains in the present, but that does not mean that past
events are dismissed entirely. Everything that happened before is remembered, by
both the characters in-game and the players who portray these characters. So it is
that players might be hesitant to pick a fight with a Beholder, or a dragon, because a
previous encounter with that monster proved disastrous for their characters. This is
especially true for a (long-running) campaign, where past sessions essentially
constitute the history of the characters' adventures; any point in such a narrative
therefore works upon previous actions and previous memories. While a standalone
adventure or one-shot may not present as much opportunity for 'historical baggage',
it does not mean the characters, or players, cannot act on previous information. Both
players and DMs may have prior experience(s) with the game, which they acquired in
previous sessions, thus bringing it with them to other games. This is why (long-term)
fans of *Dungeons & Dragons* can understand the danger of meeting a Beholder as
above,[280] or discuss at length the adventures of their previous characters. In short,
*Dungeons & Dragons* games are remembered long after they have ended.

As a similar contrast, *Dungeons & Dragons* has remained in essence the same
in the course of its development, but the details of each edition have changed the
game to such an extent as to hardly be called homeostatic. For instance, the now
typical d20 system was not incorporated into *Dungeons & Dragons* until third
edition, and it was such a big change as to essentially render previous sourcebooks

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[280] See for instance Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, "Acquisitions
Incorporated - PAX Prime 2010 D&D Game (Part 8)," *Acquisitions Incorporated*, recorded live game
(via Youtube), August 5, 2010, 7:58 to 9:14,
https://www.acq-inc.com/portfolio/details/pax-prime-2010. As part of *Acquisitions Incorporated*'s
first live game, the audience could affect the game by responding to a series of poll questions. In this
instance, the poll decided what deadly creature the party would have to face. Significant here is the
discussion between the players about which monster they would not prefer to fight, their reactions no
doubt based on previous experiences.

useless to the new edition. Put differently, while the look and significance of 'the dragon' has remained largely the same between editions, its statistics and mechanics have changed a lot from what the 'original community' of first edition *Dungeons & Dragons* players would have encountered. The lack of homeostasis is also no doubt helped by the fact that *Dungeons & Dragons* communities have access to a large corpus of written records, including the sourcebooks for present and past editions. Player experiences can therefore be grounded in over 40 years of *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition, even though the narrative played out in games is rather present-sighted.

*X. Situational rather than abstract.*

In a fantastical world like those typically presented in *Dungeons & Dragons*, there is very little that can be considered 'abstract'. The presence of dragons and other mythical creatures is as 'real' as a steel sword or the (medieval) bakery around the corner. Much of what in the real world would be called abstract is entirely normal in a *Dungeons & Dragons* world, while magic is used as a frequent catch-all for anything that appears indescribable. Some monsters, like the Beholder, evade real-life logic or biology, and thus must be described more simply, as in the fifth edition *Monster Manual*:

> A beholder's spheroid body levitates at all times, and its great bulging eye sits above a wide, toothy maw, while the smaller eyestalks that crown its body twist and turn to keep its foes in sight.[281]

While it is a creature unlike anything else, the description above paints a decent picture of what a Beholder may look like, even though the description has not used much more than simple shapes and (albeit unnatural) facial features. This holds true for many of *Dungeons & Dragons*' iconic monsters, although the majority of them retain at least some recognisable form, such as the humanoid Orcs or the chimeric Owlbear.[282]

Even something closer to Ong's definition of abstract, such as emotions or experiential abstracts, are given more substance in *Dungeons & Dragons* their personification, in gods or other divines. So it is that Sune, goddess of love and

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[281] Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Monster Manual*, 26.
[282] A creature about equal parts bear and owl. See for instance Mike Mearls et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Monster Manual*, 249.

beauty in *The Forgotten Realms*,[283] is commonly depicted as "the most beautiful woman in the Realms, with sweeping, radiant, red hair and incredible charms."[284] Through this depiction, the abstract concept of love is personified, given a face, and in turn made more tangible to both the character in the game world and the players outside it.[285]

At the same time, when modern times somehow enter *Dungeons & Dragons*, they are actually considered abstract, since they are foreign to its pseudo-medieval society.[286] In these cases, the modern world is typically described in situational terms, terms which the (medieval-style) characters think in. Thus, when *Acquisitions Incorporated* accidentally travels to real-life Renton, Washington, during the PAX South 2018 game,[287] DM Chris Perkins must describe the city of Renton and the head office of Wizards of the Coast as follows:

> You appear to be in some sort of weird city, but like Omu,[288] the buildings— have sort of—they're sort of flat and brickish [sic] [...] and you seem to have landed on the roof of one of these structures [pause] quite high up you think, a few stories. [...] As you step out onto this [roof], it's sort of pebble-y [sic] ground on rooftop, there's a little bit of a ledge around the edge of the roof; you also see the roof is quite vast, you're on one corner of this building on the roof but there are other protrusions coming up out of the building, some of them gleam and the Twilight light. You also hear crows, lots and lots of crows, and you see whole flocks of them flying around, and it does not feel tropical. [...] As you get to the edge and you look down you see that the ground around the building is black and there are these thin iron or metal spires coming up that shed a downward light upon what look like chariots, made of glistening metal, all completely enclosed. [...] When you look right down, this building seems to be situated in the middle of this black landscape [pavement] fields around it and you must be about four stories up on this building and as you cast your eyes downward you see that the building's walls are made of glass. [...] There is a glowing sign right on the side of the building below

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[283] Steve Kenson et.al., *Dungeons & Dragons Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, 21,37.

[284] Julia Martin, Eric L. Boyd et.al. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Forgotten Realms, Faiths & Avatars* (Lake Geneva and Cambridge: TSR Inc, 1996), 149.

[285] Their tangibility is helped further by the fact in *Dungeons & Dragons*, gods are typically more overtly present, either in physical form or in response to prayers.

[286] The frequency of modern incursions depends on the setting and/or mindset of the gaming group.

[287] Will Wheaton has not appeared in *Acquisition Incorporated* games since season five (PAX Prime 2011), while Scott Kurtz continued to be in games until 2017. Afterwards, a number of new players have joined *Acquisition Incorporated* games, Such as fantasy author Patrick Rothfuss and game designer Kate Welch, who join Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik for this game. Chris Perkins was still DM of *Acquisitions Incorporated* at the time of recording.

[288] A mezoamerican-style city which the party explored only hours before.

you, it's mounted to the wall of the building [...], it's got a weird curve, it's yellow, black and purple, and the biggest word you see on it is 'Wizards' [laughter].[289]

A figure from a medieval fantasy society should have no idea that what is described above is actually a modern city. Therefore it is described in terms familiar to the world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which typically lack electricity, let alone pavement and skyscrapers. Chris Perkins uses only situational terms and expressions to achieve foreignisation from the scene, even for the players. In this case, the players recognise the description only as a modern city after the mention of the "thin iron or metal spires" (street lanterns) and chariots, "made of glistening metal, all completely enclosed" (cars);[290] only at the reveal of Wizards of the Coast's neon signage do they understand that they have been transported to the roof of Wizards of the Coast's corporate headquarters in Renton. In this way, a kind of role-reversal has taken place: what is mundane in the world of the players has become abstract to the world of their characters. These examples support the situational nature of some of *Dungeons & Dragons*' descriptions.

With that, this chapter has given an analysis of the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* in relation to Walter J. Ong's psychodynamics of orality. While it has proven fruitful to investigate *Dungeons & Dragons* in this way, it is clear that not all of Ong's characteristics can (easily) be found in this particular TTRPG. *Dungeons & Dragons* remains heavily influenced by written tradition, through its rulebooks and other material, meaning that a number of Ong's psychodynamics cannot apply to the game at all, or only with heavy speculation or concession. In practice, however, writing does not seem to negate, but enhance the otherwise primarily oral experience of playing/running a *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Furthermore, the written resources, though not (exactly) in line with Ong's theory, establish rules, systems and methods which harken to a previous time of oral composition and transmission of fantastic adventures, thus reintroducing a lot of the elements inherent in (medieval) oral tradition.

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[289] Chris Perkins, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Patrick Rothfuss, Kate Welch, "Acquisitions Incorporated Live - PAX South 2018," 1:29:24 to 1:34:00. Please note that for the sake of concision, only Chris Perkins' words are transcribed here, and that non-applicable parts are replaced with ellipses. It is recommended to watch the fragment in full to experience the reactions of the players and the attending audience at the final reveal.
[290] Ibid.

**CONCLUSION**

This thesis has argued that the tabletop Roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* reintroduces elements of medieval oral tradition. First, this thesis has defined what makes a work oral through Walter J. Ong's characteristics, or "psychodynamics" of orality,[291] with a number of excursions into Mark W. Edwards' type-scenes. The presence of these characteristics in medieval orality were then illustrated through examples from medieval oral narratives such as *Beowulf* and the Norse Poetic Edda. Second, it has detailed the popular tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*, by presenting an overview of its basic gameplay loop, history, and contents of a typical game session. Third, it has applied Ong's psychodynamics of orality to *Dungeons & Dragons* by considering the game through each of Ong's characteristics, to find if Ong's characteristics are present in *Dungeons & Dragons*. These were illustrated with examples from written and audio(-visual) *Dungeons & Dragons* media. What was found was that the majority of Ong's characteristics can be demonstrated in *Dungeons & Dragons*' gameplay and/or content, while a few prove difficult to find.

Mnemonics and formulas can be found in the mechanical and individual typicalities and stock phrases used during a session, while a DM's preparatory notes and the (narrative) structural schemas prescribed in official sources serve to promote a system of preparation not unlike that of the oral performer. Addition is inherent in both the narration of the DM and the additive nature of game content like the dungeon. Redundancy is found in the recaps and/or introductions that typically precede the game proper; the game's basic uniformity across all its different editions illustrates some conservatism, as does the role of the Dungeon Master as a kind of 'keeper' of knowledge. *Dungeons & Dragons* is close to the human lifeworld since it revolves around the direct experience of the player characters, rarely leaving the party's point of view. Just like many works of medieval orality, *Dungeons & Dragons* is agonistic, rife with battles and multiple types of struggle, being amongst the game's primary focuses. Empathy and participation are equally inherent in *Dungeons & Dragons*, due to the direct contributions of the players to the unfolding narrative, while the introduction of livegames has resulted in another, superimposed audience which contributes to the game in other ways. Lastly, situational descriptions and

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[291] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.

abstractions have a particular relation to *Dungeons & Dragons*, since it is a game in which only the non-fantastical is actually abstract, so that the most experiential descriptions are actually those pertaining to modern concepts like modern cities or skyscrapers, which must be described from the temporal view of a (fantasy) medieval adventurer.

What proved difficult to illustrate was the presence of aggregation and homeostasis. While there are some aggregative expressions to be found, especially in relation to location names and naming conventions, and while they may be more common among individual game groups, aggregative expressions are far from universal in use across the whole of *Dungeons & Dragons*; the game simply does not exist long enough for aggregation to have developed. *Dungeons & Dragons* relies on fantasy tropes and archetypes to create some uniformity, but these cannot be considered to function like Ong's aggregative expressions. Lastly, homeostasis by Ong's definition cannot be prominent in *Dungeons & Dragons*, since the experience of a player or DM is rarely constant. Memories of previous games or editions influence choices in, and the experiences of, later games. Equally, while the foundations of *Dungeons & Dragons* have remained the same, its mechanical details have changed greatly across its different editions, and thus can hardly be called homeostatic. Thus, many, but not all, of Ong's characteristics are provenly present in *Dungeons & Dragons*, while medieval orality does align with Ong's theory completely.

The deficiencies mentioned above do not mean that *Dungeons & Dragons* inadequately reintroduces medieval oral characteristics. *Dungeons & Dragons* has a major contrast with medieval orality: the performance, while almost fully oral, is supported by many pages of written resources, including official publications and informal content. By this fact alone, *Dungeons & Dragons* cannot be an exact replica of medieval orality. However, this thesis has proven that the first creators and later designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* have managed to promote many of the characteristics that are intrinsically oral, if not medieval(ly oral), in the game's various official publications. In doing so, they have created a game which mimics medieval orality in its gameplay experience, characteristics and narrative content.

This thesis has only analysed a single TTRPG, and its analysis has relied primarily on only one theory on defining orality. In future, Ong's psychodynamics of orality may be applied to other (TT)RPG's besides *Dungeons & Dragons*, perhaps in an attempt to discover a (TT)RPG which is entirely like (medieval) historic orality. Ong's theorem could even be used to create an ideal (TT)RPG from scratch. To further investigate the orality of the (TT)RPG, it may be interesting to consult various game masters or even (TT)RPG designers about their own observations on the subject, particularly whether these people are actively aware of the presence of oral elements in the games they run and/or create. Furthermore, what this thesis has not done is more thoroughly investigate *Dungeons & Dragons* through sets of (medieval) literary type-scenes, although such an analysis would be useful in order to investigate the similarities between this game and (medieval) orality in terms of content.

This thesis has also sought to prove *Dungeons & Dragons* and other TTRPG's as valuable resources to modern scholarship, by demonstrating the relation between medieval orality and *Dungeons & Dragons*. By considering *Dungeons & Dragons* and other TTRPG's as a 'window into the past,' or (partial) simulation of historic, communal storytelling, these games may provide new insights into already established theorems of various fields. By playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, one can have a (small) taste of medieval orality; one can take on the guise of the audience, and sit around the campfire of old, listening to and sharing in the fantastical stories of heroes and dragons, albeit half-obscured by the smoke of time.

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