Adventures in Collectivve Freedom: Collaborative Storytelling in Tabletop Roleplaying Games and the Search for Grassroots Meaning-Making in Modern Media
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Adventures in Collective Freedom

Collaborative Storytelling in Tabletop Roleplaying Games and the search for
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Abstract

The following research aims to investigate the medium of tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) as an example of collaborative, participatory media culture. To do so it studies Dungeons and Dragons, as the most popular example of TRPG and, more specifically, the published D&D story *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, in comparison to its actualized form as a recorded game session. The analysis focuses on locating points of divergence from the source material in the players' choices, as well as on elements that point to their status as a narrative community. The theoretical frameworks used for the analysis include Henry Jenkins' work on media convergence, which is used to describe the current state of mainstream media production with relation to economic and technological factors and Buyng-Chul Han's crisis of narration, which this analysis considers TRPGs as a possible answer to. The main thesis of the analysis that follows is that, through its elements of collaboration and participation, its emphasis on the collective and the freedom it offers its players to adapt and localize its content, D&D fosters the formation of bottom-up narrative communities, which can point towards a possible culture of free and truly democratized media.

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Introduction

It becomes increasingly difficult to make sense of the world through narrative. In his recent book *The Crisis of Narration* (2024)*,* philosopher Byung-Chul Han assumes that highly pessimistic position. Mass media, especially in their digital forms, have eroded the community-building aspects of narratives, turning their audiences into individualized consumers of information. The analysis that will follow uses Han's book as one of its two separate starting points. The other is a simple observation from the field of popular culture: At some point during the past decade, despite the declared decline of narrative, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), the formerly niche game where groups of friends engage in epic narrations of fantastical adventures, has somehow found its way into the mainstream. The following chapters will offer an exploration of the game, the manner in which its narratives are created and the types of stories it can be used to tell. It will be considered under the light of the *Crisis of Narration*, not as an exception that disproves it, but as an outlier case that might offer a way out of it. This introductory chapter will establish the main theoretical foundation for the analysis to follow.

First and foremost, there is a need to address the game's rise from obscurity itself. We could approach the "D&D Renaissance" simply in terms of the increase in the game's sales and popularity in recent years (Whitten, 2021). However, the surrounding cultural shift, both in the game's contents and the wider landscape of media products that are in some way connected to D&D, suggest that there is a lot more happening here than an incidental trend in consumption.

A significant milestone in these developments would be, without a doubt, the game's fifth edition, introduced in 2014. Following a very controversial edition of the game, the designers of "DnD 5e" created a streamlined, beginner-friendly game, that was easy to learn and play, while at the same time paying homage to design and narrative elements of previous editions, emphasizing the "legacy" of decades of D&D. Of even greater importance are some significant design choices for the new edition, which embraced a more inclusive approach to its writing, with gender-neutral language becoming the standard for all D&D publications and its illustration, with more diverse representations of the game's character archetypes. The books' artwork largely moved away from stereotypically sexualized representations of female characters, that are so common in fantasy and the choice of a black female character in the games' section for "Human" is not without symbolic significance. This shift is clearly more than

an aesthetic choice, and is indicative of the designer's preferred way of approaching the game itself. The *Player's Handbook* for fifth edition (the rulebook with all the information on how to create characters for the game) encourages players to "think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations of sex, gender, and sexual behavior", noting that "You don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender" (Crawford and Mearls, 2014). More recently the game's publishers have announced that the term "race", clumsily adopted from the genre of Tolkinesque fantasy novels and used to refer to different species that players can choose from to make a character (Elf, Dwarf, Human etc) will not be used in the game anymore, due to its racist historical connotations (Anderson, 2022). Overall, it is easy to spot the shift in tone in Dungeons and Dragons recent publications. The publishers' aims seems to be a more inclusive, more socially conscious and at the same time more beginner-friendly product that challenges D&D's reputation as a predominantly white male teenagers' hobby, as well as its stereotypical perception as a rather dull affair, which involves more bookkeeping and math than any actual fun.

Parallel to those changes (or, maybe because of them, although the proof for this kind of causality is a challenging endeavour at best), a number of related cultural phenomena came to add to and, at the same time profit from, D&D's rise in popularity. Newly established streaming services, such as YouTube and Twitch, allowed for the creation of long-form video content covering niches of entertainment that could have never found a slot in television. In these platforms, "actual play" shows introduced online audiences to the concept of D&D as a show. Critical Role (https://critrole.com/), with its cast of Hollywood voice actors, moved the game away from its stereotypical representations in film and television (that of bespectacled young men engaging in awkward theatrics), and presented the game with a veneer of Hollywood allure, as something that could be just as easily enjoyed by a group of attractive, smart and charismatic people, instead of simply nerds.

Additionally, in the spirit of the times, D&D has taken a turn for the transmedial. Adaptations of and intertextual connections between the worlds of Dungeons and Dragons have, in fact, existed for decades; it could even be argued that its genre of pulpy sword and sorcery lends itself to franchising of this kind. However, like the game itself, its adaptations haven't truly enjoyed mainstream recognition for most of the game's existence. Film adaptations of the game like the homonymous *Dungeons and Dragons* (2000) and its sequels *Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005) and *Book of Vile Darkness* (2011) have a reputation for their campy, b-movie-esque quality. Video game adaptation fare slightly better, with cult classics like *Planescape: Torment* (1999), yet D&D had been strangely absent from the AAA (Triple-A, an industry term for high-budget video-games) scene of recent decades. This too seems to be

changing. A new film adaptation, titled *Dungeons and Dragons: Honour Among Thieves* (2023) was a well-received blockbuster, breaking with the tradition of its direct-to-video predecessors, while mainstream video game successes like *Baldur's Gate 3* even succeeded in inspiring parts of their audience to seek out the original inspiration behind the game and get interested in the Dungeons and Dragons roleplaying game (Meehan, 2023).

Having established, Dungeons and Dragons' recent popularity, however, one cannot fail to notice the ways it diverges from the norms of the current media landscape. In fact, it is this exact divergence that might be a useful guide in determining how to best study the narratives that come out of a Dungeons and Dragons game and how those narratives can point to solutions to pressing current matters regarding the state of modern storytelling. To delve deeper into all of those issues, we must first consider Dungeons and Dragons through a lens that sheds light to the current state of affairs in media; both on the level of the material relationships that govern their production, as well as the types of cultural products that tend to be created in such an environment: that framework, is the Media Convergence.

Convergence and Transmedia
The current state of the media franchise

The existence of a Dungeons and Dragons storyworld that escapes the confines of the game itself and spreads into a massive number of novels, comic books, video games and films suggests that it might be useful to consider it under the growingly popular label of transmedia and the broader cultural phenomenon that theorists like Henry Jenkins and Ithiel de Sola Pool have described as the "media convergence" (Jenkins, 2008).

A working definition of transmedia, as offered by Jenkins is that of narratives which unfold "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins, 2008). Unlike the readers and viewers of traditional media, transmedia audiences are invited to assume the role of information hunter-gatherers, consuming new installments of their favourite franchise/storyworld in order to enhance their understanding of it and follow its long, ongoing storylines (Jenkins, 2008).

A prerequisite for the prominent existence of transmedia projects in the culture market, is the collection of social and economic phenomena Jenkins refers to as the media convergence. In his work, Jenkins describes the convergence as a phenomenon that allows for "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple

media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want". The convergence, he notes, is not a process with a definitive beginning or ending but, rather, a tendency for separate entities of the culture industry to come together, mainly due to changes brought to media production by the advent of digitization. The ease of creating and distributing any type of media (text, image, video, audio) through the same channels and using the same technologies (simply put, the computer and the internet) allows for the merging of previously separate industries (publishing houses, film studios, radio stations etc) and the emergence of massive media conglomerates, that can manage their intellectual properties across media and create sprawling interconnected, transmedial stories, mainly to ensure audience engagement with as many of their products as possible.

The age of media convergence brings significant changes not only to the production of media, but to audiences as well. Apart from the aforementioned shift to the "hunter-gatherer" attitude to media consumption, the creation of fan communities through social media platforms, creates audiences that are eager to engage in "collective meaning-making", debating and developing fan-theories about their favourite franchise/storyworld. Fan-made content, such as artwork, music and fan-made prose fiction (fanfiction) inspired by famous media franchises, such as Harry Potter, or Star Wars, can nowadays be found online in staggering quantities. Jenkins presents this shift in a cautiously optimistic light. He sees the emerging figure of the fan/producer as a sign of the democratizing effect of new technologies on media production. The top-down "corporate convergence" coexists, sometimes harmoniously, others antagonistically, with a bottom-up "grassroots convergence". Once audiences realize the democratizing potential for participation that new technologies bring, Jenkins argues, they will naturally demand "the right to participate more fully in their culture" (Jenkins, 2008). Whether this will lead to an acceptance of the new state of things and a deeper synthesis of producer and consumer, or to a more antagonistic and control-oriented approach on the side of corporations, Jenkins concludes, is the defining question for the future of popular culture.

It is important to note that, for the time being at least, all evidence points to the later. Audience participation is welcome when it happens in the context of paratext (for example, a conversation in a forum about a popular TV show), but rarely are fans given control over the actual text in a media environment where intellectual property is guarded as the most precious resource. When audiences of new media are given choices as, for example, with elements of interactivity (e.g. the creation of a character in an online video game), their choices are essentially a combination of pre-created traits, (such as variations on a character's appearance or lists of abilities to choose from), rather than true expressions of the players' creativity. For

the most part, the model of media creation remains a top-down one; and it often enforces this structure in an even more aggressively hierarchical manner than before. Dungeons and Dragons is no stranger to this dynamic. In a recent controversy surrounding its intellectual property, the game's publisher was found to have been preparing a change to its previously open licence, which essentially allowed third parties (often small publishing companies made by fans), to produce content for the game using the Dungeons and Dragons system of rules. D&D's publishers essentially aimed to extract royalties from such third parties, which caused a massive backlash by its fan community (Evans-Thirwell, 2023).

A parallel development to keep in mind, one that Jenkins himself did not foresee in 2008, but which can definitely be linked to the phenomena of media convergence, is the transition of large media companies to subscription models, which we could also describe as the shift from profit to cloud rent (Varoufakis, 2023). A media platform like, for example, Netflix or Disney+, doesn't simply sell a product (films in physical or digital form), but rather extracts a monthly rent from users for the continued use of its platform. This shift has obvious effects on media production, since platforms need to sustain a continuous stream of new content that justifies the renewal of users' subscriptions. Massive transmedia narratives with ongoing storylines are obviously fit for such an environment. Additionally, the shift to cloud rent has an added benefit for the involved companies; the collection of great quantities of user metadata, containing information on the audience's preferences and behaviour patterns, to be used for purposes of marketing and R&D (research and development) (Varoufakis, 2023).

This mode of media production naturally favours recognizable brands that fans have a previous connection to and can look for across platforms and media. This can, in turn, explain the avalanche of sequels, prequels, adaptations, reboots and spinoffs that have characterized the pop culture of the past years. In the search for new properties with even the slightest degree of recognizability, a large number of fictional worlds previously considered niche entertainment, but at the same time offering a vast untapped archive of material for adaption, entered the mainstream and transformed into billion-dollar transmedia franchises; Dungeons and Dragons is, of course, one of them.

Dungeons and Dragons as an Outlier
The modern media franchise and the Crisis of Narration

The relevance of this analysis of the narrative arts in the age of media convergence, stems from the fact that Dungeons and Dragons sits very awkwardly within the current

paradigm of media production. Investigating the contradictions and outright clashes of Dungeons and Dragons and similar cultural products with the dominant paradigm, can offer us some truly valuable insights. Firstly, it might give us some idea of what it means to "fight back", in the struggle for more democratized, more participatory media. Secondly, by studying the types of narratives that such outliers tend to generate, we might also look for solutions to the current sense of cultural stagnation that permeates attitudes around popular media, or what philosopher Byung-Chul Han, describes in his recent work as a "crisis of narration": an inability of modern storytelling to serve a source of meaning-making for our lives (Han, 2024). To do this, we must first explore the ways in which D&D diverges from the norm of media in the age of convergence.

At a first glance, as discussed in the subsections above, Dungeons and Dragons seems to fit rather well under the umbrella of "transmedia storytelling". The existence of D&D novels, video games and comic books, all set in the same storyworlds (predominantly the Forgotten Realms, the most popular out of the many D&D storyworlds, that has come to be considered as the "default") support this point. However, there are some important differences to how the D&D transmedia entity functions compared to other similar franchises, especially when it comes to how they handle narrative. A comparison, at this point, might be useful.

The World of Warcraft (WoW) franchise is one that shares the same genre territory as D&D. Set in a similar world of elves, wizards, and dragons, the story of its war-torn world is also spread through multiple publications, with the World of Warcraft MMO (massive multiplayer online) video game being the designated entry point for most fans. WoW's story progresses with new "patches" (software updates to the game) that add new storylines for players to follow, often resulting in climactic events (usually a battle of some kind) involving multiple dozens of players. It is important to note here that WoW players participate in the story, but they do not really *guide* the story. Regardless of the freedom of movement allowed for through the element of interactivity (will you defeat an enemy using power X or power Y?) all of WoW's pivotal story moments have been written, animated and acted out by voice actors long before the players sit in front of their computers to participate in the narrative. In franchises like WoW these bits of diegetic information that come with each patch to progress the story are an integral aspect of how audiences understand their engagement with the narrative. The terms "lore" and "canon" are prominent in any fan discussion, referring respectively to the collected total of information on a fictional setting and to the established "true" events, in cases where two texts from the same franchise happen to contradict each other (which often happens in projects involving dozens of separate creative teams). "Lore" and "canon" become topics of heated debate when fans engage in the "the compiling and structuring of details about a

fictional world (Ekman and Taylor, 2019). This process has been described as "aggregate world-building" by scholars such as Ekman and Taylor (2019) and it can often exhibit communal aspects as in the case of fan-created paratext like wiki pages. Notice, however, the clear hierarchy exhibited in such cases. A WoW audience member might have spent hours editing a wiki article, or customizing their character in the game, bringing their looks and abilities closer to how they want to express themselves in the world of the game. But without a new patch from the publisher, the character is static, stuck in a digital world where there is nothing to do. Wiki editors have no new lore to add to their site and forums have no canon and possible foreshadowing for further stories to debate. The flow of information that allows for all other interactions to take place, is top-down.

Dungeons and Dragons differs from this paradigm due to its structure as a game. D&D's narratives might stem from a published product to some extent (even when making their own stories, groups of players are using the game's rules after all), but their actualized forms are shaped around a table, amongst groups of friends. The publishers of the game acknowledge this. "The Realms are a place to create and tell your stories, about your adventurers and their deeds", reads the introduction to the Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide, a book containing details on the Forgotten Realms, one of the game's most popular storyworlds (Kenson, 2015). Likewise, many other D&D books contain similar messages. Regardless of the existence of other pieces of media (novels, comics, video games) set in the same universe, the version of the Forgotten Realms that the adventures of a group of players take place in is completely their own and, in preparation for the game, they are welcome to agree upon which elements of the storyworld they are going to use, which they are going to interpret differently, and which they are to completely ignore. Those published narratives set in the same storyworld might, of course be used by players as intertextual points of reference but, at the end of the day, the only events that matter in a D&D game are those narrated around the table. There is no need to wait for the next piece of "lore" from the publishers, when players can choose the developments of their own stories; not is there any authority that could enforce "canonicity" around the table. Once a game of D&D begins, its story belongs to the players alone.

D&D's interesting position in the current media landscape can be observed on the economic level as well. Dungeons and Dragons has a very low entry cost, as far as hobby products go. The three core rulebooks (the *Player's Handbook, Monster Manual*, and *Dungeon Master's Guide*) are all a group of players really need to play the game for months, or years, provided that they are willing to come up with their own stories and create their own storyworld. In other words, there is not much to sell in the context of a monthly subscription model. WotC's first attempt at one such model, D&D Insider, was launched in 2008 and shut down in 2014,

while a newer similar model is rumoured to be in development (Kobek, 2019). The repeated attempts to make such a model successful, could be said to make apparent Hasbro's (the company owning the D&D franchise) intention to shift its model into cloud rent. But it also showcases the difficulties in finding a way to collect data from the analog experience of players around the table (Mizer, 2019). All of the above seem to contribute to the reported difficulty of Harbro to monetize Dungeons and Dragons, in accordance with its business goals (Carter, 2022). Despite the game being more popular than it has never been, it seems to be considered ill-fitted for the current culture industry.

Of course, the business details of Hasbro's handling of the Dungeons and Dragons franchise are beyond the purposes of this thesis. What is of importance, however, is the manner in which D&D's' outlier status in the current media landscape might present alternatives to the types of narratives that such an environment tends to produce. My thesis takes for granted a soft version of the McLuhanist adage "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1994) that I would formulate as follows: the particular structural elements of a medium, along with the manner in which the culture industry produces and distributes products of that medium, will influence the types of narratives that tend to be produced under those conditions. It follows, then, that, in order to understand the condition of media in any given context, focusing on an outlier case can offer us valuable insight for how the mainstream tends to function..

The films produced by Marvel Studios, a major cultural product of the past decades, can serve as another valuable here, of a franchise/storyworld that fits neatly into the current paradigm of media production and the phenomena of the media convergence. An equally niche and "nerdy" pastime for much of their history, superhero comics were a perfect fit for the converging culture industry, since they offered decades-worth of interconnected stories to be adapted across different platforms and media, from the big screen, to Netflix and Disney+ (Marvel, circa 2024). The films and series of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, make heavy use of their "easter eggs" and "secret endings", seeding hints for future storylines for an audience hungry for information-hunting. In the case of top-down organization, the figure of executive Kevin Feige, the transmedia hyper-author, responsible for coordinating multiple separate teams of creators for the purposes of a cohesive narrative, looms over the MCU, a specter of absolute control, for an audience that awaits the announcement events for new films, as much as (if not more than) the films themselves (FilMonger, 2020). The Marvel Cinematic Universe is, for our purposes, the triumph of top-down organization. Fans are expected to cheer and participate in the "collective meaning-making" (Jenkins, 2008) by hunting for hidden clues, but

their participation is peripheral to the product, that has more to do with new media marketing than an actual expression of participatory culture.

It is important to note here that, while MCU still enjoys a massive audience, after almost twenty years of existence, it has also created in a number of fans a sense of cultural stagnation, with new instalments of ongoing stories, placing their protagonists against crisis after crisis, in a never-ending *now*, without a closure on the horizon (Hughes, 2024). In this example, one might see Han's *Crisis of Narration* (2024) perfectly represented.

Narratives, Han writes, used to be "our anchor to being", a communal process of making sense of the world through stories. Modern media, however, have transformed stories into information, and "narrative" into simple "storytelling". Much like the constant stream of new pieces of "lore" for the information-hungry crowds of World of Warcraft and Marvel films, this new form of storytelling cannot function as a system of meaning-making, merely a product for consumption. Han's interest, of course, goes beyond the quality of stories found in popular culture. Narrative constructs community, he stresses; so, if our stories are merely products, then our communities are communities of consumers, little more than atomized individuals connected by their ephemeral engagement with a media franchise, or social media platform (Han, 2024). I pose that Han's conception of the Crisis of Narration should be considered in the context of the fight for a bottom-up culture of media, as described by Jenkins. Or, in other words, when talking about the effect that a top-down hierarchy of media productions has on culture, this informatized disenchantment is exactly what we are talking about.

It is, however, essential, to focus our analytical targeting on possible solutions. Undeniably, the world of today's media looks like a much bleaker place than when Jenkins wrote his book on the convergence in 2008. The internet is much more commercialized and hierarchical than the wild west of anarchic possibility imagined in earlier decades and the idea of new media as a democratizing force is now looked at with caution rather than utopian optimism. The zeitgeist seems ripe for Han's brand of pessimism. "No amount of storytelling" he writes, "could recreate the fire around which humans gather to tell each other stories. That fire has long since burned out. It has been replaced by the digital screen, which separates people as individual consumer" (Han, 2024). There is, however, another angle to consider here. There is no particular reason (other than our culture's general tendency for techno-solutionism) to conflate the vision of "bottom-up" and "democratized" media with the new and the digital. Maybe some kindlings of the fire of narrative can, in fact, be found burning around a simple table; where a group of friends roll dice and play an odd game, whose only obvious purpose is none other than to tell each other stories.

A Way out of the Dungeon

Possibility and Probability in modern storytelling

The main contradiction at the heart of the media convergence has probably become clear by now. On the one hand, the hegemonic position of the media conglomerate, with its vision of absolute, algorithmically-aided control over its product and its audience. On the other, the dream of a grassroots participatory culture, where the border between creator and audience member has been blurred into insignificance.

This dialectical dynamic between top-down control and bottom-up freedom has a central place at the theoretical axis of my thesis. It permeates all of the relevant levels or fields of analysis that we might consider relevant for our context, from the level of material and social conditions that can be observed around the game of D&D (the relationships between publisher and fans, as discussed above), to that of the game's own design history, and the manner in which its narratives are formulated, as I will explore in the following chapters.

To look at the bigger picture, that of the cultural condition of modern society, we might find a framework to articulate this contradiction in the works of Arjun Appadurai (2013) on the "anthropology of the future". In his work, Appadurai detects one of the main contradictions of modernity and how we imagine its future in the tension between what he calls "ethics of possibility" and "ethics of probability":

> "By the ethics of possibility, I mean those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what I have called the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship. This ethics is part and parcel of transnational civil society movements, progressive democratic organizations, and in general the politics of hope. By the ethics of probability, I mean those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that flow out of what Ian Hacking called "the avalanche of numbers," or what Michel Foucault saw as the capillary dangers of modern regimes of diagnosis, counting, and accounting. They are generally tied to the growth of a casino capitalism which profits from catastrophe and tends to bet on disaster.

This latter ethics is typically tied up with amoral forms of global capital, corrupt states, and privatized adventurism of every variety."

Narrative games of all kinds, with their tension between player choice and game mechanics are the perfect cultural field to observe this tension at play. Video games, for example, have been studied as systems of absolute control on the side of the designer, where, despite the illusion of choices, players are essentially free to choose from among a number of pre-determined choices (Mitchell, 2018). Games like Dungeons and Dragons, on the other hand, based mainly on interpersonal interaction, offer the potential for an incalculable number of outcomes in their narratives, as wide and varied as the creative input of the players involved.

There is also an important collaborative element to this interaction, not only on the level of narrative (D&D tells stories of groups of heroes working together), but also on the discursive manner in which the narrative is created, through various instances of back-and-forths and suggestions, until a consensus is reached on the events of the story. This discourse is often also full of references, jokes and off-hand remarks made by the players about the fictional world and its narrative, often based on common cultural understandings of the game and its genre, but also of the players' own cultural context. To frame this in the context of our guiding theorists, it would be useful to note that Apadurai's work (2013) stresses the importance of imagination and myth-making in the creation of localities. Or, as we might put it with Han's work in mind, narrative communities.

The working hypothesis for the analysis that follows, then, is the following: As a storytelling medium, Dungeons and Dragons diverges from the type of cultural product that fits neatly into the current paradigm of media convergence. As such, it allows for the creation of narratives characterized by grassroots collaboration and an emphasis on possibility instead of a top-down flow of information and a probabilistic approach to potentiality. Through the collective freedom it grants its players to create and narrate with each other, it can foster community in a manner that (while not constituting a solution on its own) might point a way out of the Crisis of Narration and towards a bottom-up, truly participatory media culture.

In the following chapters, I conduct a narratological study of the story of a Dungeons and Dragons game. The chosen texts for this analysis are the first chapter of the published D&D story *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (Baur and Winters, 2014) and its actualization as a game session, which will be studied in the form a transcript of the session's recording, along with any relevant paratext. More on the peculiarities of the roleplaying game medium and the reasons that influenced the choice of text and methodology can be found on Chapter 1.

Chapters 2 and 3 should be considered "mirrors" of each other, since they will be concerned with the analysis of the published story and its actualized session accordingly. The work of Mieke Bal (1997) will be the main tool for the narratological part of the analysis, along with Wolfgang Hallet's work on multimodal fiction (2018).

My analysis has the twofold aim of examining the narrative created through a game of Dungeons and Dragons as (i) collaborative and non-hierarchical and (ii) communal and localized. To achieve this, I will use the comparison and contrast between the published story and its actualized game session, to locate (i) cases of debating and consensus-reaching for establishing narrative events, cases where the assumed hierarchy between Player and Dungeon Master (more on those terms on Chapter 1) is challenged and (ii) cases of divergence of the game session from the published story, in terms of significant plot differences, or elements of localization.

It is my intention with this thesis to conduct an investigation of the relationship between the genre of the published roleplaying game book (gametext) and its actualized game session, a direction of game studies that has not been thoroughly followed to date. On a wider scope, I wish to highlight the medium of tabletop roleplaying games as an important case to consider in the wider search for a democratized (and possibly non-commercial) media culture. Future endeavors building on the first of the two could include the more thorough study of gametexts from D&D and other games as narrative texts. That field of study is still uncharted territory, although recent works, like Carbonel's (2022) *Dark Trident* showcase the importance of gametexts as foundational for understanding not only games, but also the literary development of the modern genres of the fantastic. As for the second consideration, it is my opinion that future research should focus on the even more understudied connection of D&D and similar tabletop games to the counter-cultural currents of the late 20th century, zine publications and the DIY ethos that permeates the culture of the game to this day.

1. Describing the Game

Before moving any further, it is important to establish the parameters of the analysis, as well as the peculiarities of the medium of roleplaying games, which must be taken into account before attempting an analysis in the first place. Scholarly work on roleplaying games is a relatively new field and the medium is complex enough that in order to properly describe it one would need to borrow from more "traditional" literary studies, as well as the study of transmedia and multimodality, game studies and performance studies. This thesis will not attempt such an all-encompassing descriptive feat, but will focus primarily on topics of narrative.

This chapter will serve as a review of relevant literature, as well as an initial introduction to terminology which will be used throughout the next chapters, and which can either come from scholarly bibliography, or from the gaming world. These include a brief description of the game itself, as well as a numbers of problematics related to the structure of the game's narratives and the manner in which players interact with the game and with each other. The problem of defining the text of a roleplaying game for the purposes of analysis will be explored, along with the proposed solution in the form of this thesis' methodology of a comparative study between a roleplaying gametext and its actualized game session. Finally, a brief note will be made on the genre of "Actual Play" shows and why, despite their apparent suitability, they were not considered as a potential case study.

1.1 What is Dungeons and Dragons?

The Dungeons and Dragons roleplaying game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery. It shares elements with childhood games of make-believe. Like those games, D&D is driven by imagination. It's about picturing the towering castle beneath the stormy night sky and imagining how a fantasy adventurer might react to the challenges that scene presents.

These are the first lines from the *Player's Handbook* for the fifth edition of Dungeons and Dragons (Crawford and Mearls 2014). For players discovering the game in recent years, this could possibly be the very first description of D&D they ever encounter. It is, then, ironically fitting that the official definition, offered by the game's own publishers begins with telling its readers what D&D "is about" rather what D&D *is*. Dungeons and Dragons, as well as the wider genre of games in which it belongs, are a notoriously difficult concept to explain to the non-initiated. Before moving any further, then, it would be useful to attempt a working definition.

Dungeons and Dragons is one of the first and, to this day, the most popular, table-top role-playing game (TRPG), also known as a pen-and-paper role-playing game. TRPGs grew out of the older (and still existing) genre of miniatures wargames, where players would collect, assemble and paint armies of plastic or metal soldiers and, through complex sets of rules, simulate historical or fantastical battles on a table covered in miniature terrain. As is often the case with such niche hobbies, games grew in complexity, to the point of designers creating rules for taking into account the psychology and personality of each individual soldier on the table. This element of personalization and focus on subjectivities and individual narratives, led David Arneson and Gary Gygax to create the rules of what would soon become Dungeons and Dragons. The focus moved away from large miniature armies altogether and, now, each player would control a single character from a group of Tolkienesque heroes, who would explore caves and underground complexes (dungeons) motivated by gold, glory, or a combination of both. In the years that followed, it was the emerging community of players rather than the creators, who first noticed that this style of play could no longer be called a wargame, and the term and gerne of the TRPG was born (Peterson 2020, 2012)

The "G" in TRPGs stands for "game", which is another notoriously hard term to define, especially if we take into account that, in order to define "game", we should also offer a solid definition for "play". The differences between *game* and *play*, or *game* and *toy* offer additional sources of potential confusion, especially in languages like my native Greek, where they are all represented by a single word family (παίζω/παιχνίδι). A thorough investigation of the rich bibliography on the theory of play and games is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, for understanding play, the foundational work of Johan Huizinga (1949) is an important starting point. Huizinga places play at the center of human behaviour, as an act that predates culture. He emphasizes the voluntary nature of play, whose only goal is enjoyment. Children, Huzinga writes "play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom". Play is also a step out of the real. Similar to ritual, it represents a temporary suspension of ordinary life for a limited time, in the duration of which the participants constitute a "play-community" (Huizinga, 1949).

Additionally, however, play requires of its participants to respect a set of rules, with no deviations, lest they be branded a "spoilsport" (Huizinga, 1949). This is where the term "game" really, comes into use, as a system that allows for play to happen. In contrast to a toy, "something that you play with" (Schell, 2008) but which has no specific pre-determined way to be interacted with, a game has structure and rules, a clearly set duration and a goal (Schell, 2008). A ball is a toy; football is a game. In Huizinga, then, we can start observing the first hints of the problematic which will connect this analysis to the wider context of the media convergence and Appadurai's conception of the ethics of modernity. Play "is free, it *is* in fact freedom" (Huizinga, 1949), an act whose only aim is pleasure and whose byproduct is the being "apart together" (Huizinga, 1949) of its participants, who willingly enter into un-real conditions that foster community. Play also "creates order, *is* order" (Huizinga, 1949). To play is also to submit to a strict set of rules and to enter into a world governed by probability, where outcomes can often be calculated with simple statistics. That both of these elements can coexist in culture with no apparent disharmony should make apparent the importance of the study of games in the context of modernity.

For Zagal and Deterding (2018) role-playing games "sit in the intersection of four phenomena—roles, play, games and media culture". Their inclusion of the two additional elements of roles and media culture creates a more complete picture of the TRPG as a narrative medium. Players of TRPGs are invited to create a character, an inhabitant of the fictional storyworld of the game, whom they are going to be impersonating in a process half boardgame, half theater. The theatrical aspects of D&D create interesting potentials for studying the game in parallel with genres of participatory theater (see, Boal's Theater of the Oppressed). Daniel Mackay's (2001) book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* argues that the mechanical, rules-based elements of games are in fact peripheral to a TRPG. Instead, the appeal and goal of a roleplaying game, he argues, is exactly the process of getting to act out one's character, making TRPGs less a genre of game and more of a new kind of performing art (Mackay, 2001).

Additionally, the fourth element of "media culture" draws attention to the kinds of narratives that are often the focus of such games. One might be inclined to call stories that come out of a TRPG session derivative. A more positive way to describe them, however, would be as narratives that showcase a sophisticated cultural understanding of genre conventions. TRPGs did grow out of the wargaming communities of the 70s, but the groups that really embraced the new medium and helped it evolve, where the clubs of science fiction and fantasy readers of the same era (Peterson, 2022). When taking this detail into account, it is easy to see the development of the narrative aspects of D&D as a kind of communal storytelling, which

refines and reuses a network of narrative tropes familiar to the "play-community", in order to tell new stories in the style of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and Jack Vance, but with completely new worlds, plots and protagonists (Peterson, 2022).

Following Zagal and Detering's thinking, then, we might rewrite a definition (admittedly less flavourful than the one found in the *Player's Handbook*) which describes D&D in a manner that suits the needs of this thesis:

> Dungeons and Dragons is a system of collaborative storytelling, where a group of players act out (*play*) a cast of imaginary characters (*roles*) who participate in adventures inspired by a common understanding of the fantasy genre and its conventions (*media culture*), using a set of rules to determine success or failure in their attempts to influence the narrative (*game*).

In the following subsections, some structural elements of the game and its narrative will be explored in greater detail.

1.2 The TRPG social contract and the Player/Dungeon Master distinction

Based on the definition in the previous subsection, Dungeons and Dragons is, simply put, a system of structured make-believe. The word "structured" is of importance here; and it could be argued that it is that element of structure which allows for any narrative sophistication to emerge.

Players of D&D know that there is a set of commonly agreed upon rules that permeate every game session, which could be likened to a social contract. Some of these (but not all) are rules in the literal sense, clearly delineated in the game's rulebooks. For example from the *Player's Handbook* (Crawford and Mearls, 2014), which describes the action of making an attack against an enemy:

> When you make an attack, your attack roll determines whether the attack hits or misses. To make an attack roll, roll a d20 [note: a 20-sided die] and add the appropriate modifiers. If the total of the roll plus modifiers equals or exceeds the target's Armor Class

(AC), the attack hits. The AC of a character is determined at character creation, whereas the AC of a monster is in its stat block.

In a game of make-believe, children might argue over whose version of events "actually happened". In a TRPG, the rules function as the establisher of objective fact. Common adherence to the rules, then, ensures the believability of the storyworld and the cohesion of the story.

Other parts of this TRPG social contract are not hard, codified rules, but are borrowed from the world of theater and relate to the game's performative elements. Simply following the rules is not enough for a game where the players are expected to mimetically act out their characters. This additional set of "soft rules" include etiquette, such as letting a fellow player finish speaking instead of talking over them and more complex concepts that require a conscious focus on the fact that the point of the interaction is to create a coherent and fulfilling story (what is often referred to as meta-gaming). The "yes, and" rule of improv is another such "soft rule", which states that participants should not disregard the additions to the narrative made by the previous speaker (which in improv terms would be a "no"), but instead accept it as narrative fact and add to it, in order to progress the plot. This does not mean that players are forced to be agreeable during the game, but rather that they have to respect each other's choices when it comes to their additions to the "reality" of the plot (D' Amato, 2019).

For establishing and enforcing these rules, resolving situations not covered by rules or where rules might be contradicting each other, and communicating how these rules of etiquette will be followed around the table, the game assumes the existence of a referee. There are, in fact, two distinct roles for the participants in a Dungeons and Dragons game. Each game will commonly have between four to six participants referred to as Players (from here on, capitalized, instead of *players* when referring to game culture in general) who, as described above, will take the role of one character each. An additional participant to the game will take the role of the Dungeon Master. A clear definition of these two roles is offered by the game itself in the *Player's Handbook* (Crawford and Mearls, 2014):

> In the DUNGEONS& DRAGONS game, each player creates an adventurer (also called a character) 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. One player, however, takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM). the game's lead storyteller and referee. The DM creates adventures for the characters, who navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore.

With some additional information on the DM's role, taken from the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Crawford and Mearls, 2014):

A Dungeon Master gets to wear many hats. As the architect of a campaign, the DM creates adventures by placing monsters, traps, and treasures for the other players' characters (the adventurers) to discover. As a storyteller, the DM helps the other players visualize what's happening around them, improvising when the adventurers do something or go somewhere unexpected. As an actor, the DM plays the roles of the monsters and supporting characters, breathing life into them. And as a referee, the DM interprets the rules and decides when to abide by them and when to change them.

The DM is often understood to be the narrator of the game. In other TRPGs, such as the World of Darkness line of games (Bridges, 2004) the term "Narrator" is actually used for the analogous "DM role". Along with the obvious connotations of the word "master", as well as the fact that the DM essentially controls the entire world apart from the four to six protagonists of the story, this might create a sense of hierarchy, which might in turn influence one's perceptions on authorship, when it comes to who creates the story in a D&D game. It is true that there is significant gameplay asymmetry between the Players and the DM. In many ways, they could be described as playing different games, the Players approaching the session with deep actor-like investment to a single character and the DM as an exercise in worldbuilding and plot structure, having to first create the world and situations the Players will be interacting with and, during the session, to adapt their prepared material on the spot, based on choices made by their Players, which the DM might have not predicted.

In narratological terms, each person around the table in a D&D session, functions as a separate narrator, shaping the same story from different points of view. Players narrate the actions of their own character in the first person ("I draw my sword", "I move five feet towards

that monster", "I kneel to examine the locked chest" etc) or act as their character in dialogue with other players, often assuming the character's idiolect and mannerisms.

The Dungeon Master is responsible for the world around the characters and can narrate focalized information offered in the second person, as sensory input ("you open the chest to see a pile of gold pieces and a vial containing a strange crimson liquid"). Additional sensory input might be added, if the Players ask for more information ("is the liquid clear?") and in such cases, focalization might be game-ified and systematized. The DM might call for a "check" (a roll of the dice aiming for a specific number and above), in order to reveal certain information.

They will also offer wider descriptions of the setting, which assume the adventuring group as a common, collective focalizor ("the four of you walk through the doorway to find yourselves looking at a sleeping dragon, upon a pile of treasure"). Finally, the DM is also expected to act every other character in the world, either helpful or antagonistic, commonly refereed to as NPCs (non-player characters).

1.3 The Player/Character distinction

In structural approaches to narratology, a semantic axis can be used as a tool for character analysis. A schematic representation of opposed characteristics, like "'large' and 'small' [...], rich-poor, or man-woman, kind-unkind, reactionary-progressive" (Bal, 1997) can become the basis for organizing the relevant information that can be inferred from a text with regard to its characters. In TRPGs, a similar practice is not a tool for structuralist analysis, but a formal part of the medium, in the form of the character sheet.

A rather bureaucratic-looking structured form (either printed or digital) the character sheet contains all of the essential details for a D&D character. How strong, fast or resilient a character is, what they carry on them at any particular time, as well as narrative details that do not translate into the game system itself, such as character flaws or ideals are all noted on designated spaces on the sheet. A character will have a Race (an outdated term borrowed from the fantasy genre, which has been removed from more recent D&D publications, as discussed in the Introduction) which essentially means either a Human, or one of the many fantasy species to be found in a D&D setting (Elf, Dwarf etc.). Class refers to one of the archetypal disciplines Players can choose for their Characters, each giving them additional

attributes (Fighters are better at the use of weapons, Wizards can cast spells, Rogues have the "Sneak Attack" ability, which allows them to make better ambushes, etc).

At the heart of this systematization are the six Ability Scores, six numerical attributes that give a brief overview of the abilities of any character, either PC or NPC. These are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma and each of them is also linked to a number of Skills, more specialized activities in which a character gets better, the higher their linked Ability Score is (for example, Athletics is the skill that covers physically challenging activities such as climbing, running long distances or swimming. It is linked to Strength, so characters with a higher Strength score have a better chance at succeeding in any situation that calls for an Athletics check). The first three of the Ability Scores are strictly related to the characters physicality and as a result cause very little player/character overlap. No player around a D&D table will be expected to perform feats of strength or shoot a bow, so the success or failures of such acts is left to the Ability Scores and dice rolls. With the latter three Abilities, however, things get slightly more complicated. Intelligence in D&D corresponds to education, or general knowledge. Wisdom refers to an ability to absorb and analyse information from the world, a combination of perceptive ability and empathy, and Charisma is a set of attributes from psychical attractiveness to eloquence, that in one way or the other make one appear likeable and trustworthy. In all three of those Abilities, clear dilemmas arise when players are confronted with choices between their groups' success and being faithful to their character. What if a player can help their group solve a riddle presented by their DM, but are playing a character with low Intelligence and Wisdom? What if a player has thought of a creative way to navigate a complex social situation, but are playing a character with low Charisma? There are many solutions to such dilemmas, and they usually come back to the social contract between participants and how they perceive the game. But discussions around such topics gave rise to the distinctions of talking, thinking, or acting "in" and "out" of character (Peterson, 2020).

In player groups it is often considered important to differentiate between talking "in" and "out of character". This is to avoid miscommunications that might influence the narrative (for example, a Player commenting on some aspect of the story, while the characters are trying to hide themselves from enemies, specifies that this comment was not made by their character in the diegetic world). Similarly, this distinction helps with addressing the gap between "Character knowledge" and "Player knowledge", where a player with intertextual knowledge of game's setting might have access to information that their character wouldn't. The "in" and "out" of game modes of communication is a useful framework for interaction in the context of the game itself. For our purposes, however, we will need a much clearer categorization of the

modes of communication that take place during a D&D session. I propose the following four: the mimetic, diegetic, ludic and non-diegetic modes.

The mimetic mode is essentially the same as talking "in-character". Players and DMs act their characters in a theatrical manner, imitating the character's mannerisms and speech patterns, which may differ from their own. It is often the case with newer or shyer players to avoid mimesis in their games, preferring instead to summarize what their character said instead of acting it out, but in narratively complex games of experienced players, the mimetic mode often takes a large percentage of game time. The diegetic mode can be described as focalized first person narration. The Player is not acting out their character, but are engaging with the gameworld by describing their actions. The ludic mode takes place on the level of mechanics and involves any interaction with the game as a system of rules. The DM asks for a roll. The Player rolls the die and informs the DM on the number. The DM informs the Player if the roll succeed and then switches back to diegetic narration to describe the effect of the roll in the storyworld. Finally, D&D is, first and foremost a social experience, and as such, it includes multiple occasions where participants break character or pause their engagement with the game to interact with each other. The non-diegetic mode covers communication that takes place outside of the diegetic world and outside of the game's system. Observations and comments, inside jokes, or enthusiastic applause for a fellow player who just rolled a 20 (an instant success in most types of dice rolls), all fall under this category.

1.4 Campaigns and Campaign Settings

Games of Dungeons and Dragons might consist of a single session of a few hours. However, the most common style of play is an episodic story of multiple sessions, called a campaign, a leftover term from D&D's wargaming roots. Accordingly, the systematized fictional storyworld that the players engage with throughout the length of a campaign, is referred to as a campaign setting.

DMs are encouraged to make their own setting, with Tolkienesque quantities of locales and cultures, pantheons of deities, timelines of historical events, maps and genealogical trees of royal lines. However, there are also multiple published campaign settings to choose from for DMs to run their campaigns in, or to use as sources of inspiration. The manner in which such storyworlds are structured, is reminiscent of the collection of genre tropes and cliches

which Dianna Wynne Jones calls "Fantasyland", in her humorous dictionary *A Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (Jones, 1996)*:*

> "**FANTASYLAND** [capitalized and bold letters as they appear in the original] is all the country on the MAP, usually a whole continent complete with OFFSHORE ISLANDS, and sometimes including also the OTHER CONTINENT, when this lies near enough to be reached either by Slave GALLEY or on Dragonback. There is plenty of room in it for numerous COUNTRIES, for much space to have been laid waste by earlier WIZARDS' WARS, and for still more space to be emptied by the shrinking of the VESTIGIAL EMPIRE. The WEATHER in both these emptied spaces is likely to be peculiar. The Management of course reserves the right to alter the shape and name of the continent at will and to move MOUNTAINS about whenever necessary."

In the case of D&D, such derivative, or even banal elements, serve a very important role as common cultural reference points for DMs and Players to communicate the aspects of a campaign setting. Whether playing a game set in the medieval fantasy world of Dragonlance, the post-apocalyptic deserts of Dark Sun, the industrialized kingdoms of Eberron, or a world crafted by their own DM, players can expect it to include Elves, who are graceful but snobbish, Dwarves, who are loyal but stubborn and, of course, Dragons, in any of their diverse shapes and forms.

These settings often come in the shape of transmedia franchises, with novels, comic books and video games set in the same world. However, as already discussed in the Introduction, despite their incredibly detailed history, geography and political dynamics, it is always made clear that the *version* of a campaign setting a DM will introduce their players to is their own. Details should be disregarded if they do not suit the needs of the story. In this way, Dungeons and Dragons as a franchise creates a stark contrast to other fantasy media, where the continued engagement of audiences is ensured by continuous additions of content (or "lore", as it is often referred in gaming circles) to an ongoing story. Instead of ongoing narratives disseminated by the publisher for top-down consumption, D&D campaign settings function more like frameworks to be used, modified, or even completely ignored. The *actual* story is only what happens around the table.

1.5 Gametexts and Gametools

Carbonel (2022) describes the collection of books, objects, apps, digital files, and any other element a group of Players and their DM might use in a TRPG as belonging to the categories of either a gametext or a gametool.

Gametexts are texts in the more colloquial sense: that is, books. In the case of D&D they include the three main rulebooks of the game (the *Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual*). Additionally, they might include the guide to a campaign setting, containing additional information for running games in that particular storyworld, along with atlas-like descriptions of its locales and history. Finally, gametexts can also be published adventures, stories for Dungeon Masters to run for their Players as written, or to adapt into a campaign of their own creation. *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (Baur and Winter, 2014) is such a published adventure that will serve as the main case study of this thesis.

Gametools are somewhat similar to what the theory of literature calls paratext, but in contrast to paratexts, they are central and not peripheral to the experience of the game (Carbonel, 2022). Some are considered essential (a set of polyhedral dice and a character sheet to keep all details on one's character on), while others (for example, maps of a territory provided by the DM, miniatures to represent how characters are positioned during a battle, apps that function as quick references to specific rules and others), are left to the needs and preferences of each group.

This multiplicity of gametexts and gametools that make up a single D&D session, creates complications when it comes to determining the descriptive tools to study the game and its narratives. This difficulty will be examined in the following subsection.

1.6 The problem of text

The problem of defining what the text of a roleplaying game actually is has been noted both by scholarly work on the topic (Carbonel, 2022), as well as non-academic books aimed at players (D' Amato, 2019). Carbonel's *Dark Trident*, draws attention to the importance of gametexts, works created by RPG publishers that present players with either an adventure for DMs to run for their players, or a detailed storyworld with its own history, geography and politics for DMs to set their own adventures in. Carbonel (2022) notes that the study of gametexts as

individual works of fiction can offer interesting insights on TRPGs' structures and history, as well as the role of gametexts in the development of the modern fantastic. However, gametexts can tell us very little about how the game is actually played.

Usually, the largest part of a gametext is meant for the eyes of the DM alone. Players are expected to create a character, in collaboration with the DM, while taking into account the limitations or genre conventions of the particular story they are about to participate in. But, apart from these limitations and/or suggestions, not much can be found in the gametext about the players' characters. It is essentially a narrative text without protagonists, or with protagonist-shaped gaps to be filled out during the game.

Additionally, the performative element of RPGs means that much of the narrative (and the perceived experience of it) will depend on the specific situations around the table. This "liveness" of RPGs shares similarities with theater, even more so with its improvisational genres, making each session "an unrepeatable stretch of events and experiences here and now, at a particular juncture of time, space, and people, with some opening to the unexpected and spontaneous" (Hoover, In: Zagal and Detering, 2018). The performative element of the game, what is being said around the table and the actions taken by the players that the gametext's publishers could never have predicted, is an integral element that has to be taken into account when defining the RPG text.

Additionally, the ludic aspects of an RPG offer equally valuable information needed to comprehend its narrative. The character sheet, for example, with its numerically codified attributes of each character would be a necessary piece of text for the narrative analysis of a D&D session.

In order then, to fully describe an RPG session, we would need to grapple with both the liveness of the game, as well as the multimodal aspect introduced by the group's choice of gametools. We would need to consider the gametexts, if any, a transcript/recording of the game session, gametools including character sheets, maps or miniatures used by the group, along with any notes kept by the Players and the DM during the game. In order to focus on the liveness and player choice aspects for the game, the following methodology is proposed: A comparative narratological analysis between the chosen gametext (the first chapter of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, chosen for its reputation as a beginner-friendly adventure) and its actualization as a game session (which will use a transcript of the session, along with all the relevant gametools/paratext) that investigates the input of participants in the narrative.

This approach considers the gametext and the actualized session at the same time as separate texts to be compared and contrasted, but also as pattern and final product, or potential story and actualized story.

1.7 A note on "Actual Play"

Before moving any further, a brief mention should be made on "actual play" content and the reason why such shows were not considered as a potential study case.

Streaming shows that showcase a roleplaying game session as a piece of entertainment in its own right have been rising in popularity in the past years, from shows produced by teams of professionals, such as Critical Role and Dimension 20, to smaller amateur projects in a similar style. These "actual play" shows might contain hundreds of hours of streamed content, which could be considered a valuable archive to base an analysis on.

However there is an important difference between "actual play" and a private game session played at home. "Actual play" is produced with a viewer in mind. The most popular such shows have casts of professional actors, with training improvisational theater and a focus on creating a show that is fun to watch, rather than fun to experience. These differences can lead to different design choices by the game's DM. Brennan Lee Mulligan, Dungeon Master of *Dimension 20* remarks that, when designing combat encounters for Players in a home session, making the challenges easier can be enjoyable for Players, since, for example, a battle designed to be less challenging, will make them feel that their characters are powerful. On the other hand, when designing with a viewer in mind, every combat has to be potentially deadly, to create higher stakes for an audience watching from their screens. Player experience in actual play is of secondary consideration, with viewer experience being the primary concern (Dimension 20, 2019).

There is much to be said about contact with Actual Play inspiring players to run games that are more dramatically sophisticated, a phenomenon pejoratively referred to as the "Mercer Effect" (from Matthew Mercer, DM of the show *Critical Role*) due to the stress it puts on new players to achieve professional levels of acting (Langum, 2023). However, such considerations are beyond the purposes of this analysis.

Instead, the type of game session chosen as a case study for the purposes of this analysis is one closer to the "real-world" context: one based on relationships between friends and acquaintances, with the focus on player enjoyment and not monetized.

The following chapter will attempt to analyse the narrative aspects of the gametext part of this comparative study, the first chapter of the published adventure *Hoard of the Dragon Queen.*

2. The Gametext: Concrete Villains, Abstract Protagonists

A gametext, when consider on its own, as a piece of narrative fiction, makes for a very idiosyncratic read. It is, in fact, the blueprint of a story, rather than a narrative in its own right, but in contrast to other forms for which the same claim could be made (a film screenplay, or a theatrical manuscript) the gametext is even more abstracted in relation to its final product, that is, the roleplaying game session (a single meeting between players, lasting a few hours) or campaign (a series of sessions forming an episodic narrative).

The gametext is, in many ways, a story without all the necessary elements relating to its main characters. "Backstories" and motivations, the ways in which the protagonists will interact with the world and its secondary characters, as well as whether or not they will actually succeed in their goal and whether or not they will make it out alive, are all details of the narrative left out of the gametext, to be agreed upon between the players and the DM before the game, or to be determined during the session, by players' choices or rolls of the dice. What a gametext *does* contain are secondary characters, either friendly or adversarial to the adventurers, a setting, often with intertextual connections to other gametexts, and "plot points" which DMs are expected to read and prepare in order to present them to the players during the session.

The gametext requires multiple modes of literacy to be properly understood. A certain understanding of narrative and the conventions of the fantasy genre is presupposed. Additionally, a good understanding of the game's system of rules is necessary, both to decipher the codified attributes ("stat blocks") of all the adversaries and challenges players will encounter during the game, but also to properly adjust those challenges, since the creators advise DMs to "adjust the adventure's difficulty by reducing or increasing the number of enemies present in a given encounter", if their group of players is smaller or larger than the four-player average (Hoard and Winder, 2014).

The analysis of the first chapter of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* that can be found in this chapter will mainly focus on the gametext's status as not quite a narrative, but rather a pattern to create stories out of. Making use of Greimas' actantial model, it will attempt to describe the "protagonist-shaped gaps" in its structure and focus on the role of multimodality in bringing together D&D's narrative and ludic aspects in a single text. Last but not least, an important part of this chapter will cover the gametext's attempt to foresee Players' choices and how this tendency ties with the dynamic of freedom/control and possibility/probability that permeates TRPGs and the culture of modern media.

2.1 The Absent Main Character

The first few pages of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* offer a brief outline of the entire story, for DMs to get familiarized with key aspects of the plot. The adventurers enter the story following a caravan on its way to Greenest, a peaceful village in the countryside of the Sword Coast, on the continent of Faerun, which is considered the default setting for the current edition of the game. However, the gametext does note that "you can adapt Tyranny of Dragons to different regions of the Realms or to a different setting with a bit more preparation on your part. Change the names and locations to suit your campaign" (Baur and Winter, 2014). The adventurers find the village under attack by a marauding warband of kobolds (small, lizard-like humanoids) and human followers of the goddess Tiamat, the evil queen of dragons. A dragon also accompanies the raiders but is "not an enthusiastic participant" (Baur and Winter, 2014) in the attack. This first encounter is expected to lead to the adventurers' group being dragged into a story of conspiracies and secret societies, facing a cult which plots to release the goddess from her imprisonment in another dimension.

The plot of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* could be described as a rather formulaic fantasy story. The idyllic village under threat, the invading army of monsters, the imprisoned god whose cult aims to bring them into the mortal world and, of course, the dragons, are hardly new for the fantasy genre. In the first chapter, which is the object of this analysis, the characters are expected to find the village of Greenest under attack. They, presumably, find their way to the village keep, where the governor, seeing a new group of combat-able people arriving at his door, gives them missions around the village. Later at the same night, the adventurers have a brief encounter with the dragon. At dawn, a warrior, who appears to be the leader of the raiders, stands in front of the walls of the keep and challenges Greenest's finest warrior to a duel. This can be one of the adventurers or a non-player character (NPC) that they met during the game. The duel ends, probably, in defeat. The warrior's stat block is explicitly made for him to be an overpowered character that the adventurers can meet again in the future (there is always a chance for especially lucky dice rolls, however). Regardless of the outcome of the duel, the attackers leave, the villagers begin rebuilding and the governor meets the adventurers for a briefing, in order to present them with a follow-up mission (Baur and Winter, 2014).

What is missing in all of this, as already established, are the main characters. Their motivations for getting involved in the story, the ways in which they will interact with all the friendly and opposing characters and the probabilistic elements of how their dice rolls will judge their success or failure in battles and other challenges, are all absent. On the issue of who the

players' characters are and how they get involved in the narrative, *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, offers only the following:

> "The adventurers might be on the road from one town to another or returning to their homes after a trip away. Alternatively, they could be accompanying a merchant or wealthy traveller as bodyguards. Many restless young people of Faerun have had their first taste of travel and adventure as caravan guards."

It becomes obvious rather quickly that the choices offered here (along with any number of additional ideas that the Players and DM might come up with) are far from tangential and might, in fact, colour the entirety of the campaign under an entirely different light. Will the adventurers fight against the attacking cult as altruistic heroes or with the calculated business sense of mercenaries? Will they do so with the safe detachment of a foreigner, or as villagers of the destroyed Greenest, driven by thoughts of revenge? All of these, the gametext tells us, are details to be added by the Players and DM.

In many ways, one might be inclined to conclude that the gametext form is, in fact, not a narrative at all, since the main character, and drive of the plot are not yet present. This structure, on the other hand, might be very familiar to generations that grew up with the medium of video games, especially games that offer their players an open world to freely explore. The distinction between storyworld and plot, or to put it more specifically, the view of storyworld as a fictional space structured in a way that allows for stories to emerge from it, belongs to the narrative approach of "spatial storytelling" (Jenkins, 2003). While this approach might be adequate for game design, or a starting point for analysing gametexts that do not focus on plot, it fails to fully describe the scaffolding-like structures that a published TRPG story uses in order to categorize the concrete information that was put there by the designers and the potential narrative input of the DM and Players.

The actantial model, proposed by A. J. Greimas, might offer a more useful lens to consider the relationship between gametext and actualized session in a D&D narrative. A structuralist framework, influenced by the work of Vladimir Propp, the actantial model approaches story in terms of three categories of paired opposites, or six actants (Greimas, 1983). These are:

(i) The category of "Subject" and "Object", whose connecting relationship is desire. In the context of a classic folktale, these could be a hero and the missing person the hero is looking for (e.g. a princess).

(ii) The second pair of actants consists of a "Sender", who launches the action by presenting the Subject with a mission and a "Receiver", who enjoys (or suffers) the consequences of the action. In our folktale example, the Sender could be recognized as the princess' father, who sends the hero on a quest and the Receiver could be a combination of all three previous categories (the hero succeeds and gets to marry the princess, the princess is rescued, the king is relieved). In more complex stories, however, the Receiver might not overlap with other categories. Greimas cites the example of the Quest for the Holy Grail, with God as the Sender, who reveals the vision of the Grail to Arthur's knights and the entirety of humankind as the Receiver, benefitting from the blessing of the holy quest.

(iii) Finally, the third pair of actants is that of "Helper"and "Opponent" which can be easily understood as characters or forces that aid the subject in the pursuit of their desire, or oppose them. In the folktale example, these could be the traditional imagery of beneficial spells, magical swords, animal guides and friendly characters, opposed to the evil witches, dragons and curses that the hero will encounter on their journey.

A visualization of the actantial model can be seen below:
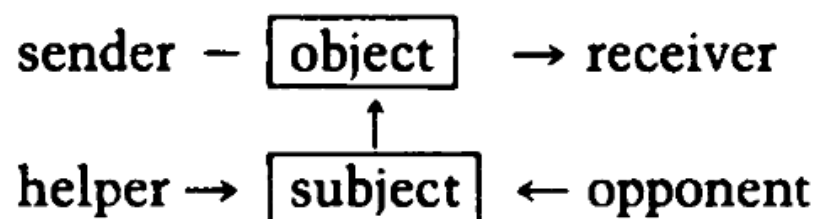
When trying to fill this scheme using what elements are to be found in *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, we quickly find out what a D&D gametext offers and what it leaves out:

(i) First and most obviously, there is not a Subject yet. The party of adventurers exists only as references to their potential actions during the game. The Object-actant presents a greater complication. Depending on the level of complexity of the characters created by the Players, their Object might turn out to be something as simple as "saving the village of

Greenest", which can be said to already appear in the book, to more complex motivations, of which saving the village would only be the first step, which the gametext has not predicted.

(ii) The category of Sender and Receiver is reserved for NPCs (non-player characters), especially those of a non-threatening status. Governor Nighthill, the leader of Greenest's community, makes an appearance once the adventurers manage to reach the keep. He can "give the characters a quick briefing on the tactical situation" and, from that point on, he is assumed to be the one sending the adventurers on missions for the remainder of the battle (Baur and Winter, 2014). The entire village of Greenest can be described as the Receiver, if we consider the chapter as a single narrative unit. If decide to break into the individual smaller missions that the adventures are sent to during the battle, we find various Receivers: Lilan Swift and her husband, Cuth, whom the Players can help reach the keep for safety, Eadyan Falconmoon, the local priest, Escobert the Red, a Dwarf knight who is in charge of the keep's defences and more, all detailed throughout the first chapter, can be aided by the Players in various ways (Baur and Winter, 2014).

(iii) On the final category, we find one actant that is seemingly easier to spot and one that presents a bit of a complication. Opponents, quite obviously, belong to the gametext and are explored in great detail. The cult of Tiamat, with its followers, leaders and monsters get descriptions, often very detailed ones[1], information on their personalities and behaviour under different circumstances that the DM can use[2] and, of course, ludic elements in the form of their "stat blocks". However, their role as Opponent-actants in textbook is based on the assumptions that the Players will find their actions objectionable in some way, or at the very least be tempted at the prospect of payment by the villagers, if they help them face the raiders. On the topic of Helpers, there is much less be found here, especially if we consider the book's first chapter as its own text. In the context of the entire book, one could claim that the governor and people of the village do play the role of Helper. If one of the adventurers agrees to the duel with the leader of the raid, they are later on treated by "a team of healers with healer's kits and +4 bonuses to Wisdom (Medicine) checks attend to the wounded or dying character, and Governor Nighthill gratefully offers two *potions of healing* to the wounded character" (Baur and Winter, 2014). Again, this is based on the assumption that the Players will position themselves

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[1] "From the darkness, a creature strides into the dim light of the dying fires around the keep. Although it is shaped roughly like a human, it is at least seven feet tall, its skin is covered in blue scales, its fingers bear wicked claws, and its face has the muzzle and reptilian eyes of a dragon" (Baur and Winter, 2014).

[2] For example: "Captured kobolds are terrified; they say whatever they think the questioner wants to hear. They know that they're working for the Cult of the Dragon and for the "dragon lady" (Rezmir), and that they're after loot" (Baur and Winter, 2014).

as the village's defenders. However, the trappings of folktales invoked by Greimas, the spells, swords and animal familiars of the folktale hero, are categorized in D&D as character abilities, to be picked by the Players during character creation. In many ways, D&D stories can be said to involve groups of heroes who become each other's Helper.

Having established the actantial model and how it applies to D&D, I will return to it in Chapter 3, after all of the missing elements have been added during the actualized game session.

Before moving further, it is important to note another interesting byproduct of the characters' minimal presence in the gametext: the fact that, in most cases, the book refers to them as a group. In the first page of the first chapter of the adventure DMs are presented with a yellow textbox, a form used in the current edition of D&D gametexts to signify that the DM should read the following passage to their players verbatim or paraphrase:

> "For the past several days, you have been traveling a road
> that winds lazily across the rolling grasslands of the
> Greenfields. Sundown is approaching when you top a rise
> and see the town of Greenest just a few short miles away.
> But instead of the pleasant, welcoming town you expected,
> you see columns of black smoke rising from burning
> buildings, running figures that are little more than dots at
> this distance, and a dark, winged shape wheeling low over
> the keep that rises above the center of the town. Greenest
> is being attacked by a dragon!"

The choice of narration here appears to be the second person plural. It could be argued that this is a case of sheer practicality. Not only does the gametext not have information ofn who the characters are but, even from the point of view of the DM, addressing every Player separately, to give slightly different version of sensory information ("you top a rise and see the town of Greenest", "you see columns of black smoke") could become too time-consuming and uninteresting for a group of Players.

What this narration choice manages to do, however, is to imply a sort of group focalization, where the party of adventurers see, hear and receive information as a unit, emphasizing the community-building aspects of the game. This phenomenon will be more thoroughly analysed in Chapter 3, when similar instances of group focalization are located in the transcript of the game session.

2.2 Multimodality: Maps, tables and textboxes

Up to this point, I have been referencing examples taken from the gametext of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (descriptions of characters, tips for the DM etc), without really touching upon the manner in which those excerpts are presented to the reader. When considered in the context of how they structure and present information, TRPG gametexts are, first and foremost, multimodal texts. Before moving to the final subsection of this Chapter, this multimodality needs to be examined, in order to differentiate between the types of information it aims to communicate.

To analyse a multimodal text is to descent from the level of content, to that of typography, font sizes and colours, page arrangements and graphic design (Hallet, 2018). There is an incredible amount of detail such an analysis could go into, but for our purpose, there are two basic axes of categorization to keep in mind when looking for modes of communication in the gametext: firstly, is this information aimed for the DM alone, or for the Players as well? And, secondly, does it convey plot information or ludic information?

The main body of text of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* is meant for the DM's eyes alone. It is clearly defined by not being restrained within a box, table or other graphic element and by covering most of the page. Most of the information about the story and how to run it can be found in passages from this mode. These can be descriptions of the behaviour and motivation of various characters, notes on locations and even focalization details, such as the following, describing how the conditions in Greenest will influence the sensory information the Players' adventurers will have access to:

> **Light.** Burning buildings and a half moon provide dim light throughout the town. The inside of the keep is brightly illuminated.

Passages are also often accompanied by ludic elements. The switch between narrative and ludic is done seamlessly, as seen below:

> To reach the keep, the characters must make it past three groups of raiders. A group consists of 1d6 kobolds and 1d4 cultists. If the group contains six kobolds, one is a winged kobold (urd).

1d6 and 1d4 refer to a six-sided and four-sided die respectively. In order to include this particular passage into the game, the DM is expected to roll for the number of enemies their Players encounter and follow the results. We can see the element of probability making its appearance in the game, although in other modes of the gametext, its presence becomes even more apparent.

Modes of the gametext which contain information meant to be shared with the players lean more heavily on the narrative aspects of the game and are diegetic. In *Hoard of the Dragon Queen,* a yellow textbox signifies a passage that the DM should paraphrase or red verbatim to set the scene, like the following:

> Without warning, five humans dash out from between two buildings on your left. A limping man and three young children race across the street into more shadows, and a woman carrying a round shield and a broken spear turns and faces back in the direction from which they came. Eight kobolds stream out of the alley on the family's heels and fan out around the woman, who looks determined to delay the creatures for as long as possible.

The textbox ends here, but the same scene is then continued in text formatted in the previously described manner of text meant for the DM only. This passages adds some information which the Players can discover through roleplay, such as the names of the family members, as well as elements which interpret the scene in ludic terms for the DM:

> The woman is Linan Swift, and her husband is Cuth. Linan is a **commoner** [note: bold lettering taken from the original, meant to signify the existence of a stat block for this type of character in another part of the book] but with 8 hit points. Her attack with the spear is +2 to hit for 1d6 piercing damage. Her husband is down to 2 hit points from an earlier fight. The children move at speed 20. They can be carried, but a character carrying a child has disadvantage on attack rolls and cannot wield a two-handed weapon.

By comparing these two passages, it seems like the emphasis of the designers when it comes to the Players is on immersion. The first excerpt leans more heavily on description and on setting the emotional context of the scene. The emphasis on the DM's part of the text

is on practicality, giving them information on how to translate this scene into the game. It also tries to predict some of the actions the Players might take when encountering this situation, assuming that the children's lower speed (adult Humans move at a pace of 30 ft. per turn in D&D) might result in the Players deciding to carry them in order to move faster. This emphasis on prediction will be examined in more detail later.

Maps are another mode of the gametext meant to be shared with Players. An important trope of the literary fantasy genre (Ekman, 2013), maps often appear in TRPGs as points of spatial reference for Players and DMs. In *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, a map of Greenest, marking all of the village's important areas can be used to create a better sense of location and direction, as the adventurers move around, completing their missions. In the book's introduction, an additional map depicts the wider region of the Sword Coast, along which the characters are expected to travel in later chapters of the adventure.

Finaly, another relevant mode of the gametext which is meant for the DM alone, but is visually separate from the main text of the book, are the tables of "random encounters" a staple of D&D from previous editions of the game. Random encounters are adversaries, allies, or other points of interest that the group of adventurers might come across in a specific area or context. During the attack of Greenest, DMs can create encounters with opponents for their Players to fight, using the following table:

EPISODE 1 ENCOUNTERS

d8	Encounter
1	6 kobolds
2	3 kobolds and 1 ambush drake (see appendix B)
3	6 cultists
4	4 cultists and 1 guard
5	2 cultists and 1 acolyte*
6	3 guards and 1 acolyte*
7	1d6 townsfolk being hunted by raiders (roll a d6 to determine the raiding group)
8	1d6 townsfolk hiding

* Acolytes have *command* prepared instead of *sanctuary*.

Tables such as this one are meant to be an easy way for DMs to prepare for the session. Do the Players insist on spending too much time in a location where the main text of the adventure does not give them much to do? The DM can roll for a random encounter to keep them engaged. Even if the DM decides to pick form one of the choices in the table, without rolling at random, the encounter table still represents a spectrum of probability, a finite number of potential outcomes whose relationship with the rest of the game seems to encapsulate the contradiction within a D&D gametext, or the game in general.

On the one hand, the text insists, "this is your story". On the other, it tries to systematize its world and predict the outcomes of Players' choices in a manner that seems entirely antithetical to that freedom, while at the same time being necessary for the gametext to function as a piece of printed media. This dynamic will be more thoroughly examined in the next subsection.

2.3 Possibility and Probability in D&D

The first chapter of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* ends with the following passage:

> It's assumed that when characters first see the fighting in Greenest, they will rush to its defense. If they don't, and they're traveling with others, then the NPCs they're traveling with suggest that an immediate attack might turn the tide or at least save many lives. If characters still sit out this fight, they see about half of the attackers leave around midnight, with the rest retiring in small groups over the next few hours. When the sun comes up, even a quick inspection shows that over half of the buildings are heavily damaged and much of the town's wealth was carried away. Hundreds of injured people are crowded into the keep or are found hiding in cellars, but most of them will survive.

Here we can see, once again, the function of the gametext as a predictor of the Players' behaviour, which tries to systematize all possible outcomes of their choices in order to provide the DM with the advice to properly run the game in each case. This practice is, first and foremost meant to be a guiding tool for DMs, especially newer ones, who might be caught unawares of the many ways in which their Players' choices might diverge from the gametext. It is also a way to ensure that the Players won't diverge so far from the intended story that it would render the rest of the book un-playable.

In this design philosophy, we can clearly locate the dynamic at the center of this entire analysis. It permeates the culture of modern media and traces of it can be found in all the main theorists that we have considered so far:

(In Appadurai) The modern world aspires to create "ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce

greater equity". At the same time, it tries to categorize the world into quantifiable variables, in an ethics that values "probabilistic thinking, gambling, scientific modelling, pricing, and risk-assessment". (In Jenkins) The conditions of the media convergence encourage participation and collaboration, while also allowing for the hegemonic control of corporations (In Huizinga) "Play is freedom" and, at the same time, "play is order". (In the gametext) D&D's publisher tells its customers that they can use the contents of the gametext however they want. At the same time they go into great pains to ensure that the Players never move outside the predetermined paths made for them.

At the center of this contradiction, or at least, the part of it which concerns TRPGs, we find the creator of D&D himself, Gary Gygax. Described as a quite eccentric figure, who emerged out of the wargaming scene, Gygax' writings are full of contradictory sentiments similar to the dynamic described above. In one piece of writing he argues that freedom, fluidity and creativity are essential parts of the game: "If the time ever comes when all aspects of fantasy are covered and the vast majority of its players agree on how the game should be played, D&D will have become stale and boring indeed" (Peterson, 2020). In the first page of Gygax' book, *Role-Playing Mastery* (1987), the following passage sets the tone of the entire work:

> If you have spent hundreds of hours involved in role-playing games, you might think you are a "master" already. Well, you are no doubt good at what you do, and having fun at it, or you wouldn't still be doing it. But unless you are part of a small, active minority, you have far more to learn than you imagine.

The authoritative voice of someone claiming to be part of some sort of Dungeon Master elite is entirely antithetical to the proponent of minor disagreements and multiple interpretations of rules that Gygax presents himself as in the previous quote. Being simultaneously a writer and a publisher, Gygax seems to be torn between his belief that the D&D game should be an open system, that can be modified according to a player group's (read: narrative community's) needs, and the reality of D&D as a product that has to survive in a competitive market. If all groups of players approach the game however they want, then what is the point of selling them rulebooks in the first place?

3. The Game Session: Choices and Dice Rolls

The TRPG session combines elements of board game and performative art. It is participatory and characterized by "liveness", meaning that the lived experience of the players taking part in it is an integral part of the medium (Zagal and Detering, 2018). A more thorough analysis of a TRPG session, then, would have to delve into the territories of ethnography, using surveys or interviews with the DM and Players, before and after the game, which would focus on their process of character creation, themes they aimed to explore during the game and how that preparation resulted into their in-game choices. Such an approach is beyond the scope and limitation of my thesis, but it could form the basis for future research. For the current analysis, I will consider my text of an actualized session to be the recording of a game session, along with any relevant pieces of paratext.

The transcript that will be used throughout this chapter is taken from the recording of a D&D session played in Thessaloniki, Greece, in the 25th of April 2024. It will be used as a point of comparison with the gametext, studied in the previous chapter.

The original session was played in the Greek language and has been translated by myself. When indicating speakers in passages from the transcript, the names of the participants have been replaced with the names of their characters, in order to retain their anonymity.

3.1 Enter the Characters: Revisiting the actantial model

When the Players and DM sit down to actually play a session of D&D based on a gametext, we can see our half-finished version of Greimas' model finally taking shape. Subjects whose desire drives them towards Objects, and characters' supernatural abilities that fill the role of Helper are all to be found here.

The session begins with one of the first deviations from the gametext. Instead of starting with the introductory text about finding the village on fire, the DM begins the story during the journey of the caravan. He informs the Players that they are heading to Greenest because "the largest fair of the surrounding area" takes place there, adding more elements to the initial Object for the group. "It is sunset, you can see the open fields and the colours of the sky are beautiful", he continues. As the caravan makes a brief stop, the adventurers find themselves

sitting around the same fire, which is used as an excuse to have the Players introduce themselves and describe their characters to each other. And so, we are given the first example of how a Player's character is described:

> **Yuzu:** A dark-haired Halfling with a ponytail, fair skinned, with brown eyes. Wears a thin coat and leather armour. He has a bunch of equipment, from which you can tell that he is a craftsman who specializes in armour and shields. He also has a small obsession with calligraphy. The shields that he makes have his signature on them, he is really artistic with his job. And he travels to Greenest to get a job. Also, although he never wears it, he carries with him a mask shaped like a fox's head. His last name is Tinklemetal, which comes from the fact that he is really gentle with the metal he works with. He has generally been very kind when not drunk. He can be a little more abrasive when he drinks, but he always apologizes the next day. While on camp I spend my time checking if any of the caravan guards need repairs for their weapons and armour.

> **DM:** You have been very helpful and people in the camp have acknowledged that.

This short dialogue does multiple things at once and it might be useful to elaborate before moving further. First of all, the character is, for the most part, described from the outside. Other Players have no real insight into his thoughts and emotions, but his physical appearance is described in great detail. He has a clear Object (to get a job at the village) and, although we still do not know much about him, his fox mask will probably get the attention of any participant familiar with the fantasy genre, as a possible magical item (Helper).

As other Players take turns describing their characters, we can see how descriptions can take a more clearly collaborative tone, when more inexperienced or hesitant Players are involved:

> **Diabal:** A tiefling around 1.85; horns included. He has auburn hair with pink highlights, a slightly playful aura. How does he help with the camp…

> **DM:** You could be entertaining the children with stories.

> **Diabal:** Yes, that's what I was thinking.

DM: You have Minor Illusion [note: one of the game's magical spells], don't you?

Diabal: No.

DM: Prestidigitation? [another spell]

Diabal: Yes.

DM: By using Prestidigitation you can, for example create sparkles, so when you're telling a fairy tale the children get more excited. Roll a Performance check to see how well that works.

Diabal: [rolls] 10 plus 6. 16.

DM: Well, with a 16, as the kids are gathered around you and you tell them a story about a playful spirit from the Feywild, you use Prestidigitation to make sparks jump from the fire. They are enthralled and they applaud. For the rest of the caravan, what you do is taking care of their kids while they're working, but you are doing this for yourself, you are enjoying telling stories. But the parents appreciate having you to keep the children out of trouble.

We can see then, how the DM, or a Player with more experience at the game, or at storytelling in general, can attempt to "pitch in" and offer ideas on how to enhance a description, set a more engaging scene, or even on how a newer Player can engage with their characters' abilities more creatively. Notice, also, the seamless switch from the diegetic to the ludic mode of communication, when the DM asks for a specific roll.

Of course, a character in Dungeons and Dragons is more than their description and their in-game interactions. In fact, they are made in such a way that would make them a structuralist's delight. The character sheet belongs to the category fo texts that Carbonel (2022) describes as gametools, similar to a piece paratext, but integral to the game, instead of peripheral. It is, in fact, a sheet of paper or digital file that contains all of the relevant information on the character that the player might need to reference. This is what the character sheet to the first character to be introduced looks like:

Yuzu Tinklemetall
CHARACTER NAME

Halfling (Stout) — RACE
Guild Artisan (Smith) — BACKGROUND

ALIGNMENT EXPERIENCE POINTS

FIGHTER
3
Rune Knight
MARTIAL ARCHETYPE

+2 PROFICIENCY PASSIVE PERCEPTION

INSPIRATION PASSIVE INSIGHT

AC 15 **INITIATIVE +3** **SPEED 25**

Hit Points Maximum **31** Temporary Hit Points

STRENGTH
14 (+2)
- ◇ 4 SAVING THROWS
- ◇ 4 ATHLETICS

DEXTERITY
16 (+3)
- ◇ SAVING THROWS
- ◐ 5 ACROBATICS
- ◐ 5 SLEIGHT OF HAND
- ◐ 5 STEALTH

CONSTITUTION
17 (+3)
- ◇ 5 SAVING THROWS

INTELLIGENCE
12 (+1)
- ◇ SAVING THROWS
- ○ ARCANA
- ○ 3 HISTORY
- ○ INVESTIGATION
- ○ NATURE
- ○ RELIGION

WISDOM
10
- ◇ SAVING THROWS
- ○ ANIMAL HANDLING
- ○ INSIGHT
- ○ MEDICINE
- ○ PERCEPTION
- ○ SURVIVAL

CHARISMA
8 (-1)
- ◇ SAVING THROWS
- ○ DECEPTION
- ○ INTIMIDATION
- ○ PERFORMANCE
- ○ PERSUASION

HIT DICE Used / Total **3** d10

DEATH SAVES
SUCCESSES ○○○
FAILURES ○○○

NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
strange curved blade	+5	1d6 +5 slashing
Shortbow	+5	1d6 +3 piercing (80/320)
Kanto	+5	1d4 +3 slashing

ACTION SURGE 1 **EXTRA ATTACK** **INDOMITABLE**

ADDITIONAL COMBAT FEATURES

RACIAL TRAITS
- Lucky: reroll 1's on attk, ab, s.throw
- Brave: adv against frightened rolls
- Nimbleness: move through creatures that are at least one size larger
- Stout Resilience: adv on s.throws against poison, and resistance to poison dmg

PROFICIENCIES
LIGHT ARMOUR ⊙ SIMPLE WEAPONS ⊙
MEDIUM ARMOUR ⊙ MARTIAL WEAPONS ⊙
HEAVY ARMOUR ⊙ SHIELDS ⊙

LANGUAGES
Common, Halfling, Giant

TOOLS & OTHER PROFICIENCIES
Calligraphers, Smith tools

FIGHTING STYLE — LEVEL 1
Dueling: +2 to dmg when wielding a one-handed weapon

SECOND WIND — LEVEL 1
On your turn, you can use a bonus action to regain hit points equal to 1d10 + your fighter level. Once you use this feature, you must finish a short or long rest before you can use it again.

ACTION SURGE — LEVEL 2
On your turn, you can take one additional action on top of your regular action and a possible bonus action. You must finish a short or long rest before you can use this feature again.

At 17th level, you can use it twice before a rest, but only once on the same turn.

MARTIAL ARCHETYPE FEATURE — LEVEL 3
Rune Carver: 2 Runes, DC = 8 + PROF + Con
*Fire Rune: x2 prof for checks with tools. 2d6 fire dmg as part of the attk, Str st to restrain. While restrained +2d6 at the start of every round, repeat st at the end.
*Stone Rune: Adv on INS ch and 120ft darkvision. Reacc to cr's that end turn within 30 ft to make a WIS check. If fail they're inc (0ft) for 1m.

EXTRA ATTACK — LEVEL 5
You can attack twice, instead of once, whenever you take the Attack action on your turn.

The number of attacks increases to three when you reach 11th level in this class and to four when you reach 20th level.

MARTIAL ARCHETYPE FEATURE — LEVEL 7
3 lvl: Giant's Might (uses = prof) as a BA
- Become Large (if there's room)
- Adv on STR and Str sthr
- Once on turn an attk can make +1d6

INDOMITABLE — LEVEL 9
You can reroll a saving throw that you fail. If you do so, you must use the new roll, and you can't use this feature again until you finish a long rest.

You can use this feature twice between long rests starting at 13th level and three times between long rests starting at 17th level.

MARTIAL ARCHETYPE FEATURE — LEVEL 10

MARTIAL ARCHETYPE FEATURE — LEVEL 15

MARTIAL ARCHETYPE FEATURE — LEVEL 18

Yuzu's character sheet informs us that he is, in fact, a Rune Knight, a warrior utilizing the runic alphabet of Giants to create magical effects (Crawford, 2020). The Helper part of the actantial model with relation to this particular character is, then, fully understood when we consider both the ludic aspects of the game, as wellas the intertextual information taken from other relevant gametexts: Yuzu can achieve heroic feats due to the magic he was granted or taught from Giants, sometime before the beginning of the plot. We can also see that Yuzu has

a Charisma score of 8, below the average of 10, which indicates that the "abrasiveness" described by his Player is also numerically represented in the game's mechanics.

The party is, then, completed by the introductions of its last two characters: Cassander, a pink-gold dragonborn (reptilian humanoid), who wears an armour made out of fish scales and who has been helping the caravan as a sentry. And, finally, Forca, a centaur who left her savannah homeland to see the world and has been helping by working as a heaver. The introduction of characters as individuals has a special significance for games of Dungeons and Dragons. In many ways, it represents the true beginning of the session, now that the formalities have been taken care of and the actual adventure can begin. From this point onward, the adventurers will be far more than individual characters for the rest of the duration of the game. The process of circular introductions, has given birth to the adventuring party.

3.2 The Heroic "we": How Dungeons and Dragons handles collective stories

As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, the gametext of a D&D adventure makes use of a kind of group focalizor, as it details sensory information concerning the entire party, who seemingly see, hear and experience things not as individuals, but as groups. In the gametext, such a practice makes sense, since the characters are not known yet. The fact that this style of narration continues to be utilized throughout the session itself, with the DM utilizing the group focalizor, suggests that it is a choice worthy of further consideration. For example:

> **DM:** You see a lot of kobolds, causing mayhem everywhere.
> [...]
>
> **DM:** After having killed the kobolds, you see a door opening, and out of it emerges a man with a child.
>
> [...]
>
> **DM:** As you walk towards the castle, you see two groups of cultists, accompanied by drakes in chains, who move in circles around the hill.

This handful of examples out of many more showcase a tendency that is from a grammatical coincidence. In fact, one could argue that they are a structural element of the types of stories D&D aims to produce.

"Never split the party", goes a common piece of DM advice. At its face, this tip aims to avoid logistical difficulties. It is, after all much harder for the DM to run multiple synchronous scenes taking place in different locations for a group of adventurers that decided to go different ways; not to mention, incredibly boring for the Players who wait for their turn. It does however also point to a certain narrative direction.

D&D is a system meant to tell stories about groups. Its characters are structured to be competent at a limited set of skills. Their abilities are considered complementary, as an adventuring party will have to rely on its wizard for handling magical traps, its fighter for being the first line against attacking enemies and so on. Take another piece of classic advice, this time, directed towards new Players: "Don't make a lone wolf". Players influenced by the more solitary experience of video games, or simply too shy to act their characters, often tend to gravitate towards brooding characters of few words, who refuse to act as part of the group. This type of rugged individualism, the consensus of D&D players seems to be, make for a very boring character.

It is easy then, to start seeing the connections between D&Ds linguistic, narrative and ludic elements. The consensus-reaching and the borrowed etiquette of improv, aiming at a better communication between players, is in perfect alignment with how characters are expected to collaborate and use their respective strengths for the good of the group.

In this context, the introductory phase of Players describing their characters and how they react to meeting the rest of the party, could be described as an integral structural part of a D&D plot. Before all of the adventurers come together, and their status as a group is established, the plot cannot truly begin.

3.3 Make it your own: Localization and bottom-up play-communities

We have established, then, that D&D is structured in such a way that it can tell stories about groups and that part of its ethos and general philosophy aims to inspire the Players to behave in a supportive, collaborative manner. Is that, then, enough to consider a group of D&D players a community? Are their stories a true expression of the group's view of the world,

an authentic attempt at meaning-making, or are they, as Han would argue, merely a fleeting interaction based around a product? Offering a definitive answer to those questions would be a challenging endeavour to say the least, but a good place to start looking for answers would be in conjunction with Jenkins' conception of the conflict between top-down control and bottom-up audience freedom in modern media.

Let us return to the transcript for a simple example. Not that long after the Players have introduced their characters, the DM introduces a character of his own making, the caravan's leader. Things quickly take a turn for the silly:

> **DM:** Just so you know, we're not spending the whole night here, because I don't want to lose the first day of the festival. The kokoretsi they make there is amazing.
>
> [Everyone laughs]
>
> **Yuzu:** Excuse me. What is a kokoretsi?
>
> **DM:** Only the most beautiful food you can taste in your life.
>
> [...]
>
> **DM:** He moves on to describe this as if it's the highlight of the festival, the year, his life maybe.

Kokoretsi, the Greek meat-based dish usually served on Easter, becomes a running joke throughout the session. There are obvious ways in which that showcases the status of RPGs as a communal experience. Jokes are a common part of interactions among friends after all. However, the analysis of these passages can lead us to even more useful insights to that same direction, if we delve deeper.

Let us consider the "media culture" aspect of TRPGs, as described by Zagal and Detering (2022) in the Introduction. Players use games like D&D to tell stories inspired by their favourite works of fantasy. Jack Vance is often cited as an important influence on Gary Gygax (Peterson, 2020). Tolkien is another; and he is of special importance, since his shadow looms over the genres of the fantastic to this day. Most of the fantastical elements of D&D (the elves, dwarves, magical artifacts etc) can be traced back to folklore and mythology, but it was Tolkien who explicitly used that folklore and mythology in the context of worldbuilding. His influences were predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Finnish (Tolkien, 1995), resulting in much of the

fantasy that followed also involving feudal societies of some kind, with kings (bad and good), knights, and dragons.

This culture-specific influence is important to consider when trying to determine the position of a cultural product in the top-down/bottom-up dynamic. D&D (despite its designers' attempts to make it more diverse in the latest edition) is still full of Tolkienesque, western and northern European influences. Its world is stil one of feudal villages, protected by knights and plundered by roaming bandits and monsters. The "races" Players can choose from to make their characters cover tropes ranging from Norse myth (elves and dwarves) to explicit Tolkien references (Halflings are essentially D&D's version of Hobbits) to Christianity (Tieflings are humans whose bloodline involves some kind of demonic ancestor. They have horns, tails and reddish skin). So, a group of D&D players coming from a different cultural background (in this case, Greek) are presented with a simple dilemma: do they aim for authentically representing the cultural context of the gametext, or do they localize it, bringing it closer to their own cultural experience? It is doubtful that a group of players will explicitly ask this question, however choices in both directions can be located in the transcript.

The Players comply to the cultural context of the gametext to some extent. For example, although the session is played in Greek, their characters have names that follow English naming conventions and which do not inflect. Switches from Greek to English also happen often and quite seamlessly when they communicate on the ludic level, about an ability or spell from the English language rulebooks. However, in areas where this is possible, especially when making jokes, Players often engage in such localizing behaviour, adding elements from their own cultural context and creating something uniquely intercultural in the process.

This practice, I would argue, points to the direction of the Players solidifying their status as not only a play, but also a Narrative Community. In a wider media landscape that favours the fan-consumer, patiently waiting for the next piece of storytelling from their favourite media franchise, ever-depended on the top-down hierarchy of the culture market, they have instead managed to made the game truly theirs.

Conclusions

The relevant structural and narrative aspects of the game of Dungeons and Dragons as a storytelling medium have, at this point been explored. The comparison between gametext and actualized game session have revealed the intricacies of the game and the way in which seemingly contradictory elements can coexist within the medium, with their interactions giving rise to stories.

Additionally, I have attempted to consider the D&D game against the backdrop of the declared "Crisis of Narration" and to investigate the ways in which its collaborative and participatory aspects might function as community-building factors, which point to a way out of the Crisis detailed in the work of Byung-Chul Han. Han's work points to the atomizing effects of new media, as well as the informatization of the world, as the causes of a sort of disenchantment, where modern culture can no longer generate narratives as a means of making sense of the world. My analysis, hopefully managed to highlight Dungeons and Dragons as a truly collaborative medium where, despite the imposed sense of hierarchy (the distinction of Dungeon Master and Player and the conflict between the gametext's probabilistic approach and the Players' freedom to choose), every participant functions as a narrator, who adds to the whole in order to construct a cohesive narrative. Additionally, the instances of localization found in the transcript of the game session, point to a form of organic, in-person interaction, where common cultural signifiers are introduces into the storyworld, regardless of its publisher's intentions. What outside interference does exist in the form of the gametext can easily be ignored as the players see fit, since the game prioritizes their own interaction above all. In those aspects of the D&D medium, then, we can see its players as a possible narrative community, one which creates its own mythologies and symbols (or examines the ones already existing in the players' cultural context), with the pretext of a game.

Some possible weaknesses and limitations of the thesis should be mentioned at this point. First and foremost it would be fallacious, or even dangerous to think that, simply because a piece of media is bottom-up and participatory, it automatically guarantees the wellbeing and freedom of expression of its participants. Very often, the opposite is true. A simple online search for the term "D&D horror stories", will reveal countless accounts of abusive DMs, dysfunctional player groups and experiences with racist, sexist, queerphobic, or exclusionary behaviour of any kind. However, it might be useful to investigate whether such behaviours are limited to D&D and TRPGs, or if they are an endemic problem of game cultures in general. In games with a stricter top-down structure of official tournaments and heavier emphasis on the official rules, such behaviours have proven constant trouble to event organizers. Fan forums

on card games and their multitude of tournaments will offer countless examples of "problem players", who are either needlessly competitive or outright aggressive. In the world of wargames, TRPGs' army-building ancestor, things seem to get even more intense. Games Workshop, publisher of the widely popular Warhammer 40.000, had to issue multiple statements in recent years on the topic of banning players with visible neo-nazi symbols on their clothing and/or miniature armies from events (Parlock, 2021). Behaviors ranging from highly confrontational aggression to outright far-right radicalism have been an issue for gaming communities in general. The reasons for that, possibly involving the perceived status of "nerd" media as the uncontested cultural territory of young white men, could be the topic for an entirely separate research, but the state of such communities suggests that D&D's bottom-up communities are hardly the source of the problem.

Another, much more pressing possible criticism might focus on the status of D&D as a brand and the pitfalls of looking for radical solutions in consumption. As discussed in the Introduction, the environment created by the media convergence and the economic model of modern media conglomerates is one that favours, recognizable brands. D&D as a cultural product of the 70's fits within a trend of older media being polished and rebranded for a market based on nostalgia. Remember, here, that, apart from being the most inclusive and progressive, the game's recent edition is also the one that has invested the most in paying "homage" to the game's past. This situation seems to ring worryingly close to Mark Fisher's conception of a culture that tries to "persist without the new", as expressed in *Capitalist Realism* (2009). An inability to imagine alternatives to the current state of things, Fishers suggests, leads to an inability to progress. "A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all" (Fisher, 2009). Under this frame of analysis, the "D&D renaissance" is not so much the flourishing of a previously overlooked form of entertainment, but rather a symptom of a culture were no "shocks of the new" ever truly rise to challenge the state of things (Fisher, 2009). Old media are simply retrieved from cultural memory, in an ouroboric nostalgic re-examination of previous eras. No example demonstrates this more clearly than D&D's prominent inclusion in the Netflix show *Stranger Things*. Influenced, among many others, by the works of Stephen King and Steven Spielberg, the show includes D&D among the vast collection of vintage americana that it uses to portray an aestheticized version of the 80's. A study of elements of nostalgia in D&D, influenced by but not limited to the writings of Fisher seems to promise intriguing possibilities.

In a similar context, D&D's supposed "openness" should be studied in conjunction with the fact that its open licence is, in fact, a tool for dominating the TRPG market, by incentivising smaller publishers to create content for *its* system of rules, instead of their own products. No true discussion around bottom-up culture would be complete without a brief reference to the existence of dozens of TRPG systems made by smaller publishers, or fully self-published,

which are lost into obscurity due to D&D's market hegemony. Regardless of that, however, all of the structural points of analysis found in the previous chapter could easily hold for any TRPG one could buy or freely download. D&D's dominance on the market simply translates to popularity among an audience who encounters those structural elements for the first time through Habro's game. Nevertheless, future research in the same direction, should consider studying other, less prominent TRPGs, especially with a focus on the DIY part of the scene.

To conclude, it would be both hyperbolic and naive to claim that Dungeons and Dragons presents us with a solution to the current state of cultural production, all by itself. No piece of media can do that. But in its elements of participation, collaboration and emphasis on creating new content that goes beyond or fully disregards the game's official books, we can locate the building blocks of what a different state of media *might* look like.

The battle for a democratized, bottom-up media culture is far from over. But delving deeper into such niche forms of storytelling that are slowly finding their way to the mainstream, might hold the key in discovering what the media of the 21st century will end up looking like.

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