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***It Crits Different: Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons and Tabletop Roleplaying
Games as an Oral, Collaborative, and Immersive Genre of Literacy***

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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Abstract

With the introduction of multimodality enhancements to literature, such as e-books and audiobooks, alongside the resurgence of Tabletop Roleplaying Games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, there has been little consideration for how these two seemingly unrelated fields marry into a new opportunity for literary development. These games often have a fundamental purpose: storytelling. Storytelling has long since been an oral tradition which has been converted into its literary form: books. Books tell us their story without the need of company and are often written by a sole author. However, with more and more Tabletop RPGs coming into popularity, storytelling is reverting back into a collective ritual. However, the story is complicated by chancing the dice, multiple players weighing in on the narrative, and the intrinsic immersive nature of these games. Even so, Tabletop RPGs are now paving the way for a new method of narrative: one that is being created and shaped as the players involve themselves at the table, but also by the luck of the rolls, what backstories each player contributes, and even the music and battlemaps created. Therefore, these methods of storytelling are quickly evolving into a new genre of literacy, featuring immersive and interactive narration alongside multiple-authorship. This type of storytelling, influenced by not only the Game Master, but also the players, battlemaps, and dice, truly becomes a new type of literacy that Crits Different!

I. Introduction: You Find Yourselves at a Tavern...

You find yourselves in a tavern with a motley group of strangers with a common goal: save the town from the roaming gnoll bandits before there are no townspeople left to save. Many *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns often start off with a similar exposition in order to introduce the players to one another and invest themselves in the storyline. Games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* are often shunned by pop culture due to its typical playing crowd, despite many celebrities being avid players, including Joe Manganiello, Steven Colbert, Matthew Lillard, Deborah Ann Woll and Vin Diesel, to name a few. It has even recently been showcased as a favorite pastime for the characters in Netflix's *Stranger Things* and serves as a framework for the group's approach to the Demogorgon. However, there has always been a sense of inhibition towards fantasy roleplaying games, not only within the pop culture sphere, but also the academic sphere. The goal of the players is often to embark upon heroic quests in order to prove their characters' worth and achieve great riches and feats. Sound familiar? Try this scenario:

The monster corners you in his cave. His enormous, grotesque, singular eye peering down at you while his mouth salivates at the thought of your flesh as his next meal. However, your character was cunning enough to entice the cyclops to share a humble drink. While he was sleeping through his drunkenness, you stealthily crept up to the mouth of the cave where the gargantuan monster lay sleeping. With your trusty dagger, you thrust the blade into the eye and fled. Bleeding out and thrashing, the monster bellowed out, "Who stabbed me?" You answer, "Nobody!"

This is a famous scene from *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus displays all of his greatest feats: cunning and patience. Characters going on quests to retrieve their worth, or take back something which has been stolen, is a trope greatly revered in Homer's works. *Dungeons &*

Dragons is not so different from the epics heavily studied, because both have roots in oral narrative. And while academia typically consumes these works in writing, epics were traditionally performed in front of a crowd with heavy interaction. Tabletop roleplaying games share many of the same characteristics that are considered within fictional literature genres, and should not be shunned due to their performative gameplay and outrageously fictitious monsters and characters. *Dungeons & Dragons*, and by extension Tabletop Roleplaying Games, should be considered a new genre type of literacy, featuring immersive interactive oral narrative and collaborative authorship.

II. Background: There Be Dragons Here...

Foremost, literacy, as a means of reading and writing, is a mode of transmission that, historically, has not been widely accessible. The consolidation of those who could read and write was an oppressive tactic and a privilege few had before school systems were put into place. While literacy rates have changed drastically and thus the accessibility to common forms of stories, so has the significantly older tradition of storytelling. Reading, as encountered in schools or for pleasure, is a singular task between the reader and the book. Practices, such as reading out loud, are not as common beyond grade school, because students are not yet at the age of reading comprehension and verbal comfort. Storytelling was, and arguably still is, a group experience. Before Gutenberg's printing press, stories fell into the hands of few who were lucky enough to receive a handwritten copy of a book. But even before that, literacy was not a prerequisite to storytelling. Stories were spoken, sung, and passed down orally through the commonly-known Celtic bard and the like. Modern literacy can include practices that still reflect competency of a subject, however do not include reading or writing. However, renowned oral historian Walter

Ong describes the shift from orality to written literacy in his famous book *Orality and Literacy* that,

Despite the oral roots of all verbalization, the scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention (Ong 8).

The shift from orality to literacy was not just a methodological shift, but also a hierarchical shift. Ong explains how non-written forms of story not only were diminished; they were now regarded as non-academic. The scholarly “impression grew that, apart from the oration (governed by written rhetorical rules), oral art forms were essentially unskillful and not worth serious study” (Ong 10). The Celtic Bard no longer had his place within the court of storytelling and regarded conversation with inventions such as Gutenberg’s Printing Press, and later on the institutionalization of schooling. Instead of just being fired, the bard was now among some of the lowest castes of communication.

There are rigid ways to express narrative besides using ‘literature’ as a description. Ong goes on to explain that “the term *literature* essentially means ‘writings’, to cover a given body of written materials [... however, there is] no [other] comparably satisfactory term or concept to refer to a purely oral heritage, such as the traditional oral stories, proverbs, prayers, [...] or other oral productions,” similar to how the term *literacy* can encompass knowledge over a specified area and not the person’s ability to read and write (Ong 11). Disregarding the aforementioned ‘oral heritage’ of these examples also explains how current scholars do not consider oral to be worthy of academic relativity. Such as the idea as being recognized for published, written

recorded research instead of lectures or oral presentations in academia. Nonetheless, “oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche” (Ong 14). Once transposed to written form, the verbal performance is not as readily dramatized or produced in a sense of “high art” as Ong describes; instead, the psyche’s purpose is to read for comprehension, not read for performance. Verbal performances are meant to be engaging on a theatrical and artistically stylized plane. Due to the inclusion of performance as a central purpose of oral storytelling, there is less perceived academic relativity of oral narratives than written ones.

Another aspect of storytelling that was lost when transcribed was the narrative collaboration between multiple orators and the audience. Like a game of telephone, each time a story passes through another orator, the story changes. Whether it be a drastic change or a minute change, the story is very rarely the same between two people. Connelly and Clandinin who did research on “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry” explain that humans are storytelling organisms who “individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly and Clandinin). The narrative is how the human experiences the world, leading to the concept that educational research can be constructed and reconstructed as personal and social stories. “The central task is evident when it is grasped that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (Connelly and Clandinin). Therefore, interaction of the narrative that comes through oral retelling gets lost once that narrative is printed on a page where, very often, a singular author takes the credit.

However, in a study done by Richard L. Hart's "Co-Authorship in the Academic Library Literature," there are many benefits lost when a singular author composes a narrative. Some benefits include increased overall quality, mutual expertise, diversity in ideas, division of labor, collaborative learning, more publications, and mentorship. Connecting to the bard, "The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung [... Therefore,] the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer," (Ong 146). By neglecting the history of narration and literacy, along with the processes and traditional formation of them, literacy and narrative becomes a very lonesome practice.

There are some ways in which oral heritage is remembered, the most notable being the epics and Shakespearean plays. Especially regarding the epic, a story which is now accepted into literary canon and also has oral origins, is one of the most prominent examples of how oral narratives are a fundamental aspect to many academically-relevant pieces of literature. Similar to theatrical performances read in school such as Shakespeare, "Oral performance is thought of as a variant of writing, so the oral epic plot is thought of as a variant of the plot worked out in writing for drama" (Ong 143). The interaction between audience and multiple authors and performers is very evidently lost when studied in written form while discounting its origins. The transposed written form of plays does not include the personality of both the characters and the players, such as space-awareness, facial expression, vocal tone and physical emotion. The understanding of all of the aforementioned qualities is instead limited to strictly close text reading and annotation mentioned as part as written stage directions. Therefore, the loss of the oral performance limits the interactivity of the text— even including the full competency of the narrative.

Tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* share many common traits with oral narratives, one of them being written off by scholars and research. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a fantasy roleplaying game created by Ernest Gary Gygax and David Arneson in 1974 when it started as a small leaflet book with only three ‘classes’ (professions that gave each character a certain skillset and ability) and four races that the players could choose from (Hosch). Since then, it has had many editions and additions to these classes and professions, including monsters, campaign settings, items, and spin-off tabletop roleplaying games (TRPG’s) like *Pathfinder*, and more complicated versions like *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (AD&D).

From the perspective of someone who has never played a TRPG or is very new to the hobby, it can seem like a strange set of rulebooks, a cryptic piece of paper called a ‘Character Sheet’, lots of wild antics and imagination, tiny –yet somehow very expensive– figurines, and *copious* amounts of different dice. The players begin making their characters by choosing a race and class, both which offer the player unique abilities and strengths based upon their choices. For instance, races like elves have darkvision, but gnomes have the ability to speak with small beasts (*Player’s Handbook* 23, 37). Classes such as the wizard allows them to perform great magical feats, but are very physically weak. However, the barbarian has no magical abilities, but is extremely strong (113, 47). These are all considerations to make before even touching the d20 (a twenty-sided dice most commonly used in *D&D*). From there, the player roles for six ability scores: strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma. The scores assigned to these categories (called ability modifiers) will determine how much of a boost a player gets to add to a certain ability *check* when, say, the rogue is trying to pick a lock. Of course, these scores also play into the way the character is played through qualifiable traits, such as their personality, allegiance, and their alignment towards good and evil.

Many other aspects of *D&D* play come from imagination and luck from rolling a twenty-sided die. Combat is one of the most complex aspects of *Dungeons & Dragons* and also one of the most imagination-necessary facets. The players only have a fixed number of hit points (the amount of damage they can take before they fall unconscious) and abilities based upon what class and race they took for their character. The players need to strategize their combat movements in order to avoid a TPK— a total-player-kill. The wizard only has so many spell slots which determine how many spells they can cast in a day, however may have spells that can target a twenty-five foot circle of area. The barbarian does not have area-effect abilities, but can *rage*, which means they are harder to deal damage to and are stronger; thus they hit a singular enemy for a lot more damage. Strategy is not only used within combat, and combat is not the only way to advance the story. The limitless possibilities given to the players is what makes it so unique, and also very intimidating.

David M. Ewalt in his book *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It* describes some of the player logistics as, “Unlike boardgames, which limit the player to a small set of actions, or videogames, which offer a large but finite set of preprogrammed possibilities, roleplaying games give the player free will” (Ewalt 8). *Dungeons and Dragons* came near the end of the Vietnam War, and the seemingly limitless possibilities of action in a fantasy world fighting drastically different problems serves as a form of escapism from everyday life. However, it also reflects struggles with others and identity which can be imaginatively battled through in *D&D*. This battle is through narrative and story, an oral narrative.

Dungeons & Dragons, alongside other fantasy roleplaying games, also have a history of being shunned not just by academics, but also the Church. Especially in the 1980s, TRPGs and

other fantasy-based literary works were heavily involved in controversies that opposed practices seemingly promoted within the game (Waldron). An integral aspect to *D&D* is the otherworldly, the evil, the demonic, and the acceptance of a legion of multiple gods instead of a singular altruistic one. Practices such as witchcraft, pagan rituals, murder, and demonology were heavily criticized and were even removed for the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, but later returned when Wizards of the Coast released the third edition from 2000 to 2003 and even addressed these topics explicitly (Ward). These inclusions led to what can be referred to as a moral panic surrounding the fantasy gameplay world. However, viewing the game and those like it as forms of escapism explain how invested players take the roleplay so seriously, although the impact of the game is heavily reliant on the mental expenditure of the players themselves. The panic surrounding *D&D* has subsided and those involved with fantasy RPGs are less associated with occultism and more akin to ‘nerd culture’ and those who are very interested in comics, games, and fantasy.

There are two main groups within a *Dungeons & Dragons* game: the player-characters (PCs), those who are fighting the big bad evil guys and interacting with the world, and the Dungeon Master, the creator of the unique world and story –or the enactor of premade campaign settings if they so choose to buy published modules and subscribe to those storylines– and the person who plays literally any other character or creature the PCs may encounter. The Dungeon Master in the core rulebooks of *D&D* is very often referred to as the “author” or the “narrator” of the story (*Dungeon Master’s Guide* 4, *Player’s Handbook* 5). However, this does not accurately represent the full scope of interaction between the players and the Dungeon Master where both parties are responsible for the development of the narrative and the progression of the campaign world. Much like improvisation comedy, a campaign, or a group that plays *D&D* together on a

regular basis, starts off with a prompt, the most iconic being, “You all find yourself in a tavern...” (Ewalt 8). There is, of course, loose plot events that will spur the players to take part in the story, but how the players reach those events, participate in them, and hopefully eventually overcome them, is the interactivity of the narrative between the Dungeon Master and the PCs.

TRPGs grasp the connectivity between audience and orator, two parties which influence the story. Although both are written off as non-academic, *D&D* is also akin to Livejournal Roleplaying, or roleplaying in forums and threads. These forums take form in multiple genres, such as fantastical, historical fiction, science fiction, and are not strictly limited to *D&D*. Sarah Wanenchak describes how books and sole-authorship differ in interactivity in a similar way to TRPGs:

Writing is usually done from third-person point of view and in past tense, although players are free to choose whatever tense and whatever point of view they are most comfortable with. Although this can create a slightly jarring effect on a reader, it does nothing to impede the mutually grasped coherence held and maintained between players (Wanenchak).

The connection between the ‘players’ on these Livejournals and forums is paramount to the execution of the narrative being roleplayed. There is an understanding that each individual contributing to the thread is also a contributor to the overall storyline and impacts other players. Livejournals differ obviously from *Dungeons & Dragons* in that these threads and forums are primarily typed instead of spoken, however both integrate collaborative authorship, similar to collaborative writing in academia, and interactive narrative that best reflects oral heritage.

Although the rules and lexicon for TRPGs can distract and deter people from studying and even playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, it should be the complex integration of

player-Dungeon Master dynamics, immersion of narrative, interactivity, and collaboration which encourages academia to give TRPGs more literary credibility instead of brushing it off as a ‘nerd game’ or a result of Satan’s interference in Gary Gygax’s mind. The investment and collaborative nature of the game is what spawns a deep and rich narrative experience into another world.

III. Immersive Narration: The Infamous Metagame Pigeon

In order for the fantasy-world-experience to be effective and satisfying, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game heavily dependent on both the Dungeon Master’s and the players’ investment into the narrative. The immersion of all participants is linked to the strength of the storyline and satisfaction throughout the campaign. It is not as passive as one-way dialogue, like the process of reading books or watching a play, but instead uses constant dialogue between players and player-Dungeon Master interaction. This type of enthrallment and immersion can be called Interactive Drama. However, there is a much needed balance between player control and story narration; a tip in too little or too much control makes the story either no fun or too overwhelming. When done in a balanced approach, interactive drama cultivates a deep character interaction as well as story development, allowing the players to take upon the persona of one’s character (Flowers, et. al). Enthrallment with the story and its participants allows for a richer narrative experience. Similarly, “narrative is particularly important in primary oral cultures because it can bond a great deal of lore in relatively substantial, lengthy forms that are reasonably durable – which in an oral culture means forms subject to repetition” (Ong 141). The connection with the narrative is paramount to the succession of actions taken by players, acting both as the storytellers and the story-involved, otherwise the campaign turns into a heavily illustrated improvisation scene.

Immersion and enthrallment is integral to narrative function and process of storytelling within *D&D*.

Immersive gameplay is also necessary for in-game narrative choices, such as problem solving. Through enthrallment, “gameplay becomes an important part of the invention process, helping [players] creatively discover problems and rhetorical solutions within the gamespace,” and thus interactive commitment is integral to the narrative process (Cook, et al.). In *D&D*, a problem can not always be solved through combat, though combat is a large mechanism contributing to the game. Instead, mental challenges such as combating an underground goods smuggler in a way that the players can max out their treasure, or outwitting a gargantuan clay golem who is able to disable magical powers with an areal ray are examples of non-combative problem solving. The engagement of the players in the setting is key to resonant narrative and interesting story development, which in turn keeps the characters hooked for longer. The enthrallment and immersion of the characters in the world constructed allows for a more creative space where players are allowed a wider range of imagination beyond what is simply presented to them on a surface level.

Using in-game narrative problem-solving, the same practices exercise ability to problem-solve in social scenarios. Considering all of the players enthralled in a session where they are trying to pick the lesser of two evils, or perhaps solve the puzzle to open the cave in order to escape, these high-intensity and critical-thinking involved situations call for a social connectivity among the players. It is very evident when the connection between the players lacks, as the perceived stress of the problem will raise tensions palpably, leading players to react to a fantastical problem the same way they would a real-life high-stakes issue. *Dungeons & Dragons* allows people to practice problem-solving skills under these circumstances without the real-

world high-stakes consequences (although they may lose their character in the worst outcome). The problem-solving approach even extends to a metagame level, wherein the pandemic, a game that is prized for taking place in a physical space where verbal expression is most easiest, is being reimaged to account for the distance being put between players and Dungeon Master currently. Using platforms such as *Roll20.net*, *D&DBeyond*, and *Fantasy Grounds* to aid in the more visually-bound elements of the game such as maps and character sheets, alongside platforms such as Discord and Zoom to use for voice chat features aids in recreating a tabletop atmosphere, sans tabletop.

The way in which the players create enthrallment is through rich linguistic speech. As a game dependent upon the oral relation of the plot, scene, setting, dialogue, etc., the players must craft a linguistically creative speech in order to keep the gameplay interesting and productive. *D&D* has a special lexicon and jargon specific to the game which only makes sense in gameplay context. It is up to the players and Dungeon Master to construct a reality through linguistic and rhetorical strategies for themselves and one another (Carlson). They must participate in theatrical communicative patterns in order to hook each other in their turn as well as define their character's reality. Although the lexicon of *D&D* may seem difficult and confusing to people unfamiliar with the game, this exclusivity also allows for deeper immersion into the narrative and the world created by both the players and the Dungeon Master because it creates a type of 'in-crowd.' The 'in-crowd', in turn, fosters a deeper connection to others in the same campaign or people who play *D&D* at large. It is also an opportunity to interact socially, in the same sense that there are not as many stakes as the "real world," given that a character can interact experimentally using a different approach than the player uses personally, without physical consequence.

Enthrallment also leads to the phenomenon of “meta-gaming,” in which the players blur the lines between themselves and their fantastical characters, often leading the characters to know or play with in-game information that the characters would not otherwise have known. For example, a player asking other players to weigh in on a situation where both their characters are not present in the same room physically, therefore breaking character in order for player-player interaction. In a way, the players create characters that represent themselves or a better (often *cooler*) version of themselves, therefore the personality and characteristics of the players bleed through the narrative lines and into the gameplay. It is also important for the players to note where the narration begins and the player-player or player-Dungeon Master inquiry ends, such as clarifying rules or understanding a plan of action before going into battle. Therefore, because of that lack of distinction between narration and inquiry, these two categories are blurred together in a mix of experience and storytelling (Nephew). Meta-gaming is often related with improbability of the characters’ actions and knowledge of the outcomes, and is viewed as something negative. However, meta-gaming is also complementary to enthrallment, because the investment of the players into the characters also deals out a type of meta-gaming where the player’s experience influences the character’s actions even though they are technically two separate entities.

Thus the presence of meta-gaming can be correlated with the achievement of the narrative *on* and *with* the players, regardless of how negatively meta-gaming is received. In the widely renowned and popular *Dungeons & Dragons* podcast and show *Critical Role*, where “a group where a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors sit around and play *Dungeons & Dragons*,” meta-gaming is shunned (Mercer). Nonetheless, meta-gaming is made into an aspect of their campaign and dubbed the “Metagame Pigeon,” named after the voice the players imitate to try and

influence the other players even when their characters are not present together. In situations presented by *Critical Role* where the Meta-game Pigeon is present, it is due to the players being so immersed in the narrative and roleplay that they are breaking the fourth wall between themselves and their fictional characters in order to secure a favorable outcome the group is working towards.

IV. Epics in Literary Canon: Epic Representation

The epic is perhaps the genre with the most recognizable roots in oral culture which also historically showcases interaction between audience and orator of the narrative. “Most, if not all, oral cultures generate quite substantial narratives or series of narratives, such as the stories of the Trojan wars among the ancient Greeks” (Ong 140). Those who have studied Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Virgil’s *The Aeneid* may have watched a modern rendition of a performance with a man and a lyre and an intricate melody. Similar to the way Shakespeare’s works are studied today, epics are also done a similar disservice by being confined to written transcription instead of performance. Although the epic poem with its text structure and features tends to ignore oral roots, dramas still include transcriptions such as stage notes and instructions for actors.

Nonetheless, the epic is very unique in its parameters of narrative. Walter Ong describes it better,

[T]he material in an epic is not the sort of thing that would of itself readily yield a climactic linear plot. If the episodes in the Iliad or the Odyssey are rearranged in strict chronological order, the whole has a progression, but it does not have the tight climactic structure of the typical drama (Ong 144).

A strictly linear chronology of the narrative may not serve to the narrative impact the performer is trying to present to the audience, and could contribute to the enthrallment of the audience due to the switching between perspectives and timelines, or brief moments. Thus, the epic utilises an

unconventional – by modern perspectives – method of narrative which encompasses oral performance, music, and nonlinear narrative.

But why study epics in their unintended format? The inclusion of Homer and Virgil into Classics, and by extension literary canon, falls upon the idea that “Greek and Roman literature are equally valuable and fundamentally inseparable” and that they both contribute heavily to Western literature, ideas, and morals (Graziosi). The preference to written literature versus oral narrative falls back on the shift in hierarchy once literature was a more commonly-available product. However, literary canon is subject to scrutiny and the idea that introduction of works into literary canon simply on ‘outstanding merit’ was refuted by Barbara Herrnstein Smith. She claims that literary canon should be based on their “springs” or “the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture” and its ability to reflect on that culture (Graziosi). The representation of a people or culture in narrative weighs heavily on a culture’s canon.

Representation matters also in how people choose their personal canon. Modern developments in literary representation have been made in the production, consumption, and marketing of diverse books. Similar to how many Humanities classes study Homer and Virgil because of how they speak to fundamental values the Western society holds, we study ourselves through the books we choose to read. Likewise, the characters that are created in TRPGs are also a self-reflection. Whether it comes from a desire to change or an exploration of what the players already are, PC’s are very personal to the people playing them because there is so much decision being put into the character including traits, abilities, characteristics, battle mechanics, and spells. Creating characters is a time investment, but the process is also an emotional investment. The self-reflection is even more personal because it is ultimately the player who is making the narrative choices for the characters and vicariously suffering the consequences of said choices.

Of course, there are more quixotic nuances to diversity in TRPGs than in most literacies. However, the representation and parallel between the fantasy world and in real life. One of the characters in *Critical Role* is a goblin, Nott the Brave, and goblins are very notorious thieves and chaotic-leaning individuals. Although Nott the Brave is a mischievous trickster, her character is also no more flawed than the other characters. Matthew Mercer makes it a point to describe the world's apprehension and distaste for goblins, given their reputation, thus Nott is subject to a lot of antipathy and distrust from much of the places the players travel to. Similarly, many of the players on the show have explored sexuality through their characters, even if their player sexual identity does not match the character sexual identity presented.

The 5th edition *Player's Handbook* explicitly mentions the lack of adherence to gender and sexual identity of the player, explaining that the players have a choice in the fourth chapter of the handbook explaining personality and background.

[The players] don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous, for example... [the players] can also play a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male. Likewise, [the] character's sexual orientation is for you to decide (*Player's Handbook* 121).

Matthew Mercer also introduced a gender-nonbinary character into his campaign, Expositor Dairon, as a mentor to the campaign's monk, Beauregard Lionette. *Critical Role* and TRPGs where character creation is in the hands of the players are an example of a text that reflects heavily on modern values and beliefs, though still reliant on traditional Western value systems as presented by *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. Afterall, the show is mainly about the heroic feats each of these characters fight to achieve in their fantastical journeys.

The idea of representation and exploration of individuality is further promoted through the game as well. According to the *Dungeons & Dragons* website,

One of the explicit design goals of 5th edition D&D is to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs. We want everyone to feel at home [...] and to see positive reflections of themselves within our products. “Human” in D&D means *everyone*, not just fantasy versions of northern Europeans, and the D&D community is now more diverse than it’s ever been (Wizards of the Coast).

The idea of representation through *D&D* is also extended through how some races are portrayed throughout the canonical universe. Much like how current social climate harbors prejudice against certain races and ethnicities, the same has been true for peoples spoken in certain published modules. The *Wizards of the Coast* team has explicitly mentioned a few cases of rectifying a parallel of prejudice in their gameplay, such as how “orcs and drow are just as morally and culturally complex as other peoples,” working with a Romani consultant to best culturally represent a group of Vistani people in the popular module *The Curse of Strahd*, and also “incorporating sensitivity readers into our creative process” (Wizards of the Coast). The reflective nature of character building within TRPGs is an innately personal process, and by guiding players new and old to see the complex heritage of all races is an endeavor being made mainstream, which feeds into the ‘springs’ of canon that inherently serves to tell people more about themselves and the society in which they live.

The epic is one of the literary genres that most recognizes and identifies with its oral origins. The medium of study shifted when the literary hierarchy shifted, thus prioritizing written narrative over spoken narrative. Two well-known epics still studied broadly throughout academia

are *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, both accepted into Western literature canon. Acceptance into canon is not so much dependent on its literary merit, per se, but its ‘springs’ or reflections back on the culture it is supposed to represent. Springs such as heroism, wisdom over strength, reasoning, self-reliance, and other struggles that remind how society and technology may change, but human nature progresses at a much slower rate. Reading western canon pieces such as *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *The Divine Comedy* realizes common traits that western society either struggles with or struggles toward. Characters in *Critical Role*, and through the oral narrative of playing the TRPG, *also* reflect a Western culture, although more modern in perceived values and belief systems than its epic predecessors. *D&D* campaigns, using *Critical Role* as an example, are using role playing games as a medium for self-reflection and should be recognized as a ‘spring’ back on current culture, similar to how other works of literature and texts are being used. These TRPGs campaigns may even be more *accurate* depictions of Western culture because there is little to no script and is highly reliant upon player interaction with the narrative. As aforementioned, human nature progresses at a much slower rate than technology or civilization, however it would be erroneous to say that current human nature does not have different complexities than that mentioned in *The Odyssey* or *Inferno*. For instance, Mercer’s inclusion of gender nonbinary people and *Wizards of the Coast’s* vouch for diversity in a positive light serve as a more accurate depiction of western society. And if the campaign is homebrew – meaning it is almost entirely the creation of the Dungeon Master without using adventure – then there is more flexibility and immediacy to what is being roleplayed. There are no editors and publishers for campaigns other than the players themselves.

V. Collaborative Authorship: What I Say Goes in the Crick!

Collaboration on works of fictional literature is not something often showcased in modern fictional writing. Accreditation is typically only rewarded to the singular person who wrote it, regardless of inspiration, ideas, editing, and proofreading. *Dungeons & Dragons*, along with other forms of TRPGs, capture a unique stance on narrative where it is informed *and* performed by multiple authors: the players and the Dungeon Master. Multiple authorship is more common in STEM-related disciplines and research, whereas with majority liberal arts-related disciplines –especially fiction writing – has become a practice not unlike reading, a lonesome journey. However, what makes TRPGs a literary anomaly and exceptional is its focus on collaboration. In practice, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game reliant on the players’ interaction with the game world.

There are many upsides to collaborative narrative that are lost when the burden of writing fiction shifts to a singular person. In Tom Flanagan’s study on the process of “Scripting a Collaborative Narrative” Flanagan uses the term *Interpretive Structural Modeling* when referencing a work or idea created as a group, which allows that story or narrative to evolve and be designed. While the design process may help the discovery, the “context” is discovered by the design team themselves. Flanagan also explains the process in which the team needs to approach in order to make a narrative which accommodates everyone in the group, noting that the group will work slower together than on their own. Because of the design process as a group, the narrative also has interrelational influence on the output of the narrative. Although the work may progress a bit slower, the interconnectivity of the narrative and the authors is more profound than if a singular author were to try and make many connections by oneself.

Even in younger children, collaboration on narration and comprehension has promising results. In a book by Pietro Boscolo and Katia Ascorti, “Effects of Collaborative Revision on

Children's Ability to Write Understandable Narrative Texts," the study particularly evaluates the verbal and nonverbal interaction between children when revising texts. There was a significant increase in comprehension and writing within the classroom between groups who used a collaborative method when reading and revising one's own papers. The students were able to anticipate their peers' need for comprehension, as well as the ability to check for comprehension when revising and writing. Although TRPGs do not use writing as the medium for its stories, the interrelational connectivity is still being strengthened by collaborating with one another. A work of multiple authors is going to establish a story with bolstered affiliations of the authors. In other words, collaborative narrative in TRPGs ensures that the narrative being crafted is representative and inclusive of all players. Collaboration fosters an atmosphere where individuality is encouraged through players and how each character's race or class can contribute something unique to the perceived narrative problem, alongside the player's individuality in how they gameplay

As mentioned in the introduction, there are many other strengths of multiple authorship, including increased overall quality, mutual expertise, diversity in ideas, division of labor, collaborative learning, more publications, and mentorship. The unique perspective *Dungeons & Dragons* adheres to is that the burden of creativity, imagination, and narration is not solely on one person. There is an underlying understanding of all parties involved that the richness and achievement of the PCs are dependent upon the players interacting with the world and one another. In many cases, before a campaign begins, there is a "session zero" where the Dungeon Master(s) will meet with the individuals creating characters to discuss what the players have chosen for their character backstories. This is where the players roll those stats (charisma, intelligence, etc), choose the race, class, initial feats and spells, and develop a playable

personality. If the Dungeon Master is using a homebrew world –again, meaning it is their own creation and not strictly using any published adventure module– then these choices greatly impact how the game world functions, what the character’s home town might be like, and much more.

Using *Not Another D&D Podcast (NADDPOD)* as an example, the character Moonshine Cybin is a “Crick elf Druid and heir to the Crick MeeMaw. Her people were ostracized by the High Elves to the dank shores of the Crick, where they set up their stumps and threw a rager of a crawdaddy boil” (Naddpod.com). Moonshine, a homebrew character made entirely by Emily Axford, was created to be a very stereotypical hillbilly-esque character, therefore the Dungeon Master had to accommodate ‘The Crick’, her hometown, to reflect that. There have been multiple instances *before* Moonshine went to her hometown whilst in the setting of the campaign where she would constantly reveal more attributes about her hometown to the other players without having discussed them beforehand. As a result, the Dungeon Master took note of all of them as they went, so that when they finally came to The Crick, all of those characteristics were accounted for. Things like a ‘time-out bag’ that the “youngin’s” are put in when they misbehave, the overly reproductive “nannerflies”, and the outlandish legal system where her familiar, a possum named Paw Paw, is an esteemed lawyer. To these effects, the profound relationship between Moonshine and her hometown is directly the result of the interaction of the player and the Dungeon Master, as well as inter-player interaction. Many of the instances where Moonshine revealed more lore on The Crick was instigated by other player-characters, usually in response to the comedic and outlandish characteristics Moonshine claims is customary in her hometown.

Another example of player and Dungeon Master-informed world building is with one of the guest appearances on *Critical Role*, Michaela Jean “Mica” Burton and her introduction into

the show as a temporary Player-Character, an aasimar druid named Reani. Matthew Mercer revealed in a talk show spin-off of *Critical Role* called *Talks Machina* that Mercer had originally reached out to Burton with a simple layout of the underground city of Uthodurn and general culture and types of non-playable characters (NPCs) which would be there. Burton had responded to Mercer with four pages of backstory, in which she explained her ranks in Uthodurn and even created the people she would have had interactions with, such as the stubborn forge and a conniving oddities trader. A lot of the group-interaction with Uthodurn was heavily influenced by Reani's placement and backstory in that society, as well as her own personal motivations and values. The collaborative nature of backstory and world-building falls into the narrative as an integral part to effective gameplay, especially in a homebrew campaign.

Similar to the epic Celtic bard, Walter Ong describes this interaction and how "The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the [...] memories of songs sung. In working with this interaction, the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer" (Ong 146). Similar to the oral song interactivity features Ong describes, the gameplay in tabletop roleplaying games itself is heavily reliant on not only the interaction between players and Dungeon Master that result in immediate actions and consequences, but also the greater game world as a whole. The collaboration of authorship in the fantastical universe starts before the characters introduce themselves in the tavern, it is permeating within the world and each character's backstory is stitched together by lore and experienced through overarching gameplay and interaction with one another. The collaborative nature shared between oral song and TRPGs is a return back to the oral model the bard features, such as implementing music, atmosphere, voice acting, and improvisation based on audience reaction. Although in most works of fictional literature, multiple authorship is not

common, it is what drives *Dungeons & Dragons* to be such an immersive and interactive experience, very unique to TRPGs.

VI. Conclusion: Would You Like to Roll for That?

Dismissing tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and other game systems would be to ignore the return to orality in literacy. Not only do TRPGs serve as a form of escapism and entertainment, they are also springs which could more accurately reflect modern society, given that they are composed of personal character-building and improvisation. When looking at TRPGs in a holistic sense, it may be difficult to comprehend the academic and literary phenomena that have been listed; collaborative authorship, immersive narrative, etc. However, this is also in part due to the lack of regard for TRPGs – and other games– in general. Zooming in on individual aspects of these game systems and functions, alongside extraordinary examples of narrative gameplay provided by *Critical Role* and *Not Another D&D Podcast*, it is very apparent that these nerdy games are more than what they are being written off for.

One of the first barriers encountered when considering TRPGs as a literary genre is its almost purely oral nature. As aforementioned, there is little in the way of written words being used as primary functions of gameplay. Writing usually takes place on the Character Sheet, spells, items, and backstory, but the stronghold of narrative and gameplay is orally transmitted– items on the Character Sheet are even orally communicated when the PCs introduce themselves. When considering how oral literature can still be *literature*, as Walter Ong had described how *literature* innately means ‘writing’ and ignores all oral origins of stories, I came across audio and ebooks. The oral communication of the literature does not discount its literary-ness, per se, but instead it is another form of consumption for readers– or listeners, in this scenario. Nevertheless, many audio-books were first written and *then* read aloud. I then turn to what is called an

“Audible original,” which are books on the very popular audio book app and website *Audible* that were produced to be spoken first. These productions include voice acting with sound design, music, and “immersive audio experience” (citation). The effectiveness of the audiobook is reliant on these outside factors such as music, acting, and sound effects to relay the narrative of the book.

The introduction of technology into these narratives also is also a very recent and unique development which has been a key aspect to TRPGs— namely *Dungeons & Dragons*. Foremost, the dissemination of these texts is primarily through the internet. Recordings— both video and audio— are circulated through multiple platforms where podcasts and VODs (videos on demand) are watched. These include Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, and the game-streaming platform Twitch. Most of these platforms allow the consumer to watch or listen to these campaigns at little or no cost. Twitch has a subscription service in which the lowest-tier subscription at \$5.99 USD allows the viewer access to channel-specific emotes and immediate, 24/7 access to VODs post-stream, which means exclusive access to content if the stream is not uploaded to other platforms like podcast apps or YouTube. The wide accessibility of these streams differs from traditional books in that it has the potential to be more easily consumed by the public.

These campaigns, using *Critical Role* as an example, also use dynamic music and lighting to achieve immersive content both for the players and the listeners. The use of music, whether jovial and lighthearted for a tavern or dynamic and fast-paced for a tough battle, is another aspect integral to the immersive experience not immediately in other traditional consumption of books. The adaptation of technology into the storytelling experience, when used moderately, is an effective tool which enhances the enthrallment of the narrative. Even so, Tabletop RPGs are now paving the way for a new method of narrative: one that is being created

and shaped as the players involve themselves at the table, but also by the luck of the rolls, what backstories each player contributes, and even the music and battlemaps created. Therefore, these methods of storytelling are quickly evolving into a new genre of literacy, featuring immersive and interactive narration alongside multiple-authorship. This type of storytelling, influenced by not only the Game Master, but also the players, battlemaps, and dice, truly becomes a new type of literacy that Crits Different!

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