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The Hero Never Leaves the Tavern: Complicating Narrative in Dungeons & Dragons

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ABSTRACT

THE HERO NEVER LEAVES THE TAVERN: COMPLICATING NARRATIVE IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Northern Illinois University, 2019
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This thesis aims to explore how Dungeons & Dragons complicates storytelling elements such as the role of narrator and audience and the structure of the hero’s journey. Using the Game Trailers Archive’s Tabletop Adventures series as a case study, I analyze over 50 hours of gameplay along with studying Dungeons & Dragons’s history and what influenced its creation and narrative style. This study is meant as an examination of the role of audience and narrator in Dungeons & Dragons and the game’s narrative elements using the lenses of Wayne Booth’s theories on the narrator, as stated in his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, and Joseph Campbell’s theory on the monomyth, or the “hero’s journey,” as stated in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While Dungeons & Dragons has been studied for its psychological and philosophical qualities, very little research has been conducted on the game’s literary qualities and its relationship between the author and their audience. This thesis serves a jumping-off point into an area of study that is ripe with topics and themes to be studied.
THE HERO NEVER LEAVES THE TAVERN: COMPLICATING NARRATIVE IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

BY

CHRISTOPHER NELSON
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

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Thesis Director:
Dr. Joe Bonomo
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I would also like to thank my friends and family for the many simple and not-so-simple ways they showed me their love, support, and encouragement.

Lastly, my wife Kelli Nelson, for holding my hand and telling me that she believes in me.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my little sunflower, Annandale Frances Nelson.
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INTRODUCTION

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a fantasy, tabletop role-playing game (RPG). It was created and designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and published in 1974 by Tactical Studios Rules, Inc. (TSR) in 1974. Initially, the duo was unable to find a publisher for the game. Gygax, however, deeply believed the game would be a success because, at the time, there were no other games like it. Along with friend and fellow gamer Don Kaye, the two invested their own money to create TSR to publish the game (Whitner, 2015). D&D’s origins date back before the game’s creation to another game created in 1971 by Gygax called Chainmail.

Chainmail was a tabletop wargame based on medieval combat. It was played with miniature figurines, a map of the battlefield, and a battle grid where specific battles took place. Gygax borrowed these elements from Chainmail to create D&D, but instead of focusing on controlling entire armies Gygax made the focus individual characters (Kushner, 2017). Gygax included a fantasy supplement in the Chainmail game based on the creatures and magic spells of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series (DM It All, 2019). The core concepts of Chainmail, along with the scoring and ranking systems fantasy supplement, became the first edition of D&D and are still relevant in today’s game four editions later.

Since Gygax included Tolkienian lore in his games, many believed he was influenced by Tolkien’s work. This is not entirely true. While he did borrow races and their lore from Tolkien, he was more interested in the high-fantasy, Conan the Barbarian short stories by Robert E. Howard. One of the stories most cited as a source of inspiration is The Tower of the Elephant, where Conan hears tale of a jewel kept atop the Tower of the Elephant. Conan navigates
dangerous obstacles and foes and scales the tower to retrieve the jewel (Howard, 1933). This is the emphasis of early D&D; action, raiding the dungeon for loot and magical items, not narrative and character motivations. That came in later through supplemental material (Matthew Colville, 2016).

The first edition of the game only gave the players two customizable features: Race and Class. Players only had four races to choose from: Human, Elf, Dwarf, and Hobbit (later changed to Halfling after TSR received a cease and desist letter from Tolkien’s estate), and three classes to choose from: fighting man, wizard, and cleric (Gygax, 1974). Now, D&D is on its fifth published edition and offers the players more customizable options. Not including supplemental material, the fifth edition offers the players more choices for customization including nine races and 12 classes to choose from. For even more customization ideas, fifth edition offers 13 customizable backgrounds for players to choose from, something not found in the first edition handbooks (Mearls et al., 2014). The fifth edition *Dungeon Master’s Guide* even offers suggestions on how to expand campaigns with overarching stories, suggestions on how to create towns, cities, and dungeons, and magical items for the players to quest for. (Mearls et al., 2014).

Since its launch in 2014, D&D fifth edition, now owned by Wizards of the Coast, LLC., has published three core rulebooks, three supplemental rulebooks, four premade campaign guides, 11 premade adventure modules, and four starter sets including two cross-promotional sets featuring popular television shows *Rick & Morty* and *Stranger Things*. The inclusion of these shows is an example of the game’s resurgence in popularity, but D&D has influenced pop culture long before fifth edition.
Since its inception in 1974, D&D has had a significant cultural impact around the world. It has been featured on the television shows *Freaks & Geeks, Community,* and more recently *Stranger Things.* The game has even spawned its own animated television series, magazine, novel series, and film series (with a new film slated to come out in 2021 (IMDB, 2019)). More importantly, its “open world” storytelling has influenced video games like *Borderlands* and *Grand Theft Auto.* It’s numerical scoring and leveling system has become a template for hundreds of RPGs such as the popular computer games *The Sims* and *World of Warcraft.* D&D’s core rules have even been adapted to create RPGs for franchises like *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars,* so players can play in those fictional universes, or live out their favorite scenes from the books and movies (Gilsdorf, 2009). Even celebrities such as Vin Diesel, Patton Oswald, and Stephen Colbert have expressed their admiration for the game, breaking the negative stereotype that D&D was only played by basement dwelling, anti-social outcasts.

**How to Play Dungeons & Dragons**

In a game of D&D, there are players and there is a Dungeon Master (DM). There needs to be a DM for the game to work. The DM controls the world that the players play in. They control the enemies the players fight and other characters the players encounter. These characters are called Non-Player Characters (NPCs). The player must choose a race and class they want their character to be. Then, the players must create their backstory. What motivated them to become an adventurer? Where did they come from? How were they raised? These are just some of the questions players can take into consideration when creating their character. It can be as descriptive, or as a minimal as the player wants it to be. According to David Ewalt:
A good backstory can make or break a game. It lends depth to the fictional world, provides the player with motivation for future decision-making, and breathes life into a collection of numbers and rules” (Ewalt, 2013, p.12)

Lastly, the characters roll dice to determine their character’s six core attributes: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. The higher the player rolls, the stronger their attributes are.

Like player backgrounds, the DM’s story can be as detailed and extensive as they want it to be. They can send the players on an epic quest across the continent or drop them in front of a dungeon and tell them to raid it. This is called the “campaign”, a term leftover from Gygax’s days as wargame player (Matthew Colville, 2016). Once the game starts, the DM describes the environment to the players. The players, playing characters in the game, describe what they want to do. Then, the DM narrates the results of their actions.

Not all actions are guaranteed. Some actions require a dice roll to determine whether they are successful or not. This is determined by the DM. The DM determines the difficulty of the action and puts a numerical value on it from 1-20. If the player rolls higher than that number, they succeed. The higher the dice roll, the more likely it is for the action to succeed. The character’s attributes also factor into whether the action succeeds or not. For example, if a player is trying to jump a 15-foot gap, the DM will make me roll to see if they succeed. The DM places 10 difficulty rating on the action. If the player rolls and get lower than a 10, their character fails and might not make the jump. The exchange between the DM and player might go something like this:

DM: You’re on the rooftops of the city being chased by bandits. The only thing between you and escape is a 15-foot gap separating the two buildings. What do you do?
Player: I step back and take a breath before sprinting to the edge and jump to the rooftop across the way.

DM: Roll for an athletics check to see if you make it.

Player: (rolls an 11).

DM: You spring with all your might and launch yourself across the gap. You don’t clear the gap, but you come close enough to grab the edge of the building, saving yourself from plummeting to your death. You struggle, but you are able to pull yourself up onto the roof, while the bandits shout insults and declare their revenge on you from across the way.

Matthew Colville, author, former lead-writer for the video game developer Turtle Rock Studios, and independent producer of D&D supplemental material states:

Dice model the likelihood of success or failure when we do not know what will happen. Dice represent the future, and the future is, ultimately, unknowable. If a horse is favored to win a race, does it guarantee it will? (Colville, 2018)

Colville has over 30 years of experience playing D&D as both a player and DM and has produces his own Youtube channel where he streams D&D campaigns and offers advice to players and DMs through his series “Running the Game”.

The DM also makes dice rolls to determine if their NPCs’ actions succeed or fail. These dice rolls are often done behind something screening the players from the DM. The DM is screened off from the players to hide any notes or maps they are using to narrate the adventure, preventing the players from figuring out what will happen next. Since the DM’s rolls are hidden from the player, they have the option to lie to the player about their results. This act is called “fudging a roll.” This is a topic debated among DM’s, each weighing-in with their own opinions.

Jacob Budz, host of the Youtube channel XP to Level 3, admits to never fudging dice rolls and surmises that fudging dice rolls takes away from the authenticity of the game if the
players find out (XP to Level 3, 2019). Matthew Colville, on the other hand, approaches this subject from a narrative point-of-view. Coville explains:

We use dice because we are not storytellers, we are DMs running the game … We fudge dice rolls because we are storytellers and it is our responsibility to create drama. (Colville, 2018)

Colville even offers a solution to the players finding out about fudged dice rolls. He suggests having a die already showing the result the DM wants and if a player challenges the roll, then the DM can just lift up the dice with the result they want for the players to see (Colville 2018).

**Audience-Driven Narrative**

Fudging dice rolls aside, D&D is an audience-driven narrative, meaning the audience control where the story goes and how their character develops over the course of the campaign. They are responsible for acquiring information to drive the story forward. In a novel, the author has full control of the story. The audience is only allowed the information the author gives them. If *D&D* were a novel, the DM would be the author, and players would be the audience. No other medium offers the audience the kind of narrative control that D&D does.

In literature, the closest experience to D&D would be the second-person narrative or the “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel. Second-person narratives are told using the “you” pronouns. An example of second-person narrative is this excerpt from Jay McInerney’s novel *Bright Lights, Big City*:

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. (McInerney, 1984, p.1)
This point-of-view puts the reader in the shoes of the protagonist, but it does not give them control of the narrative. McInerney controls the narrative and only tells the reader the information he wants them to know.

The “Choose Your Own Adventure” narrative was made popular in 1979 by Edward Packard. These stories take the second-person narrative a step further than the traditional second person narrative. In a “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel, the reader is given options on what their character will do next. In Packard’s novel *Escape from Tenopia #1: Tenopia Island*, the reader is faced with a decision:

“Your heart is in your mouth because you’re afraid you’ll find the passageway sealed off. But it’s still open! Soon you’re standing once again on the surface of Tenopia! You’re only at the beginning of your journey, but at least you know a lot more than before.

TO CHECK MAP, SEE PAGE 17

If you head northeast, turn to page 20.

If you head south, turn to page 16. (Packard, 1986, p. 7)

In this example the audience has control of the narrative, but only to a certain extent. Packard gives the reader two options: head northeast or head south. What if the reader wants to head north or straight east? The reader is not given these options. Therefore, they cannot do them because the content is not made available by the author.

Another form of audience-driven narrative is video games. *Grand Theft Auto* is a video game series first launched in 1997 and has since become one of the most popular video game franchises of all-time. Modern editions of the game feature a “leveling up” system like the one Gary Gygax developed for D&D. More importantly, the developers of the game created an open world for their players to cause chaos in. This type of gaming is called a “sandbox” game.
In a sandbox-style game, the player is given an objective and they can accomplish that objective any way they see fit. For example, one of the simplest missions a player might encounter in *Grand Theft Auto V* is to deliver a package to a location somewhere across town (Rockstar Games, 2014). The player can go about this any way they want to. They can walk there or take one of their vehicles. If their vehicle is not fast enough, then they can hijack a new one. It could be a sports car or a van, or any variety of vehicle. The player can even take any route through the city that they want to. However, what if the player wants to go through the sewers?

Unfortunately for the player, this is not an option. The player can only do what the developer has programmed into the game. Again, this is not the case for D&D. All the content comes from the minds of the players and the DM. As long as it fits into the world and lore that the DM creates, the players can do it.

**The Narrator**

In a game of the D&D, the DM is the author of the story, since they are creating the world for the players to roam free in. They set up the central conflict, describe the world to the players, and creates characters for the players to interact with. Since D&D is a game, there is always the possibility that the players might think the DM is trying to deceive them. This should never be the case. The DM’s job is to provide the players with information their characters would already know and any information they find out along their journey, much like the narrator would in a novel. For example, in *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, if Tolkien tells the reader that there is gold in the Lonely Mountains, there must be gold in the mountains when
Bilbo Baggins and the Dwarves arrive (Tolkien, 1994). If the DM tells the players there is treasure in a dungeon, then there must be treasure in the dungeon.

Wayne Booth, literary critic and author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* would appreciate the roll of the DM. According to Booth, the goal of the author should be to give the reader a clear sense of the fictional world and its moral problems (Booth, 1961). Booth focuses on the author, the text, and the audience and the interaction between the three. As the title of his book suggests, Booth focuses on the rhetoric of fiction and suggests that the author uses the narrator to pass along the author’s ideas. One of the concepts that Booth develops is the idea of the unreliable narrator. Booth states:

> I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied narrator’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not. It is true that most of the great reliable narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus “unreliable” in the sense of being potentially deceptive. But difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability a matter of lying… (Booth, 1961, p.158-159)

Once the audience discovers that the narrator is unreliable it transforms the way the text is read. The focus of the audience shifts from what the narrator is saying to whether the can trust the narrator, or to what degree the narrator is telling the truth.

The roll of DM is determined before the game and does not change until the game is complete or a new game starts. Like the author, the DM creates the story for the players and the characters that the player interacts with. Like Tolkien, if the DM tells the players there is gold in the mountains, then there must be gold in the mountains when the players get there. The DMs narration must be reliable. An unreliable DM in D&D complicates the game. It creates a shift in gameplay from the players and DM working together to the players working against the DM.
The DM can incorporate an NPC who is unreliable, but the NPCs narration must be separate from the DMs.

**Dungeons & Dragons and The Hero’s Journey**

Since its inception in 1974, D&D has been heavily influenced by the fantasy genre. A common narrative used in Fantasy literature is the epic quest. A common archetype found in these epic quests is the hero’s journey, or the “monomyth”, a termed coined by literature professor and critic Joseph Campbell. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell examined stories and myths from cultures around the world throughout history and recognized a common thread among them. These threads became the elemental components of the hero’s journey. Campbell breaks the hero’s journey down into 17 steps that are grouped into three stages. Campbell describes this pattern as the hero venturing from the ordinary world into the unknown, or supernatural world, where the hero faces challenges and obstacles trying to prevent them from achieving their goal. The hero emerges victorious and returns to the ordinary world to bestow his knowledge on his fellow man (Campbell, 2004).

The first stage of the hero’s journey is the “Departure” stage. It consists of the steps: “The Call to Adventure”, “Refusal of the Call”, “Supernatural Aid/Meeting the Mentor”, “Crossing the First Threshold”, and “The Belly of the Whale”. In this stage, the hero receives their call to adventure and departs the world that is familiar to them for the unknown. Often, the hero will refuse the call or is apprehensive to leave and is urged on by a mentor figure or a magical artifact. Before the hero’s departure, the status quo needs to be established. The status quo shows the life the hero is living before they receive the call to adventure. It is not important
if the character is living a good life or a bad life before the call. The important part is how they change during their adventure and how they break from the status quo when they return.

The second stage of the journey is the “Initiation” stage. It consists of the steps: “The Road of Trials”, “Meeting the Goddess”, “The Woman as Temptress” “Atonement with the Father”, “Apotheosis”, and “The Ultimate Boon”. In this stage the hero navigates the new world and faces many challenges and trials that transform them into the person they need to be to accomplish their goal. It is common for the hero to fail one of these challenges or experience dead, whether their own or that of ally, along the way. This is also where the hero lets go of whatever is in their past that is holding them back in order to achieve their ultimate goal.

The final stage of the journey is the “Return” stage. It consists of the steps: “Refusal of the Return”, “The Magic Flight” “Rescue from Without” “The Crossing of the Return Threshold” “Master of Two Worlds”, and “Freedom to Live”. During this stage, the hero has already achieved their ultimate goal and must return back to the ordinary world. The hero can be reluctant to return or may be forced to return by supernatural means. Once they are back, they must reestablish themselves in the ordinary world and use the experiences and knowledge they obtained during their journey to help improve the ordinary world. The hero is content in the ordinary world and no longer fears death or any uncertainty the unknown world brings.

It is important to note that the hero’s journey is not meant to be an outline for how to construct a “hero” narrative. It is meant to be used as a tool to understand story structure and character development.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Before choosing a game to conduct my case study on, I reviewed several D&D campaigns available online through YouTube, Twitch.tv, and by podcast. Since the launch of the fifth edition rulebooks, D&D has gained quite a following on streaming video websites. Channels such as Geek & Sundry, D&D Beyond, and the Dungeons Dudes all offer livestream campaigns that have over a hundred thousand subscribers (D&D Beyond, Dungeon Dudes, 2019). Geek & Sundry’s popularity exceeds them all, boasting over two million subscribers (Geek & Sundry, 2019). Part of their success comes from the fact that the players and DM are all professionally trained actors and voice actors. While their campaigns are entertaining, it is not the most accurate portrayal of how the average person plays.

For my case study, I chose a lesser known game called Tabletop Adventures ran by the now defunct gametrailers.com on the YouTube Channel, Game Trailers Archive. I chose their game based on four criteria:

- The game must feature 3-4 players (not including the DM)
- They are using the fifth edition rules
- The players must be inexperienced at playing D&D
- The campaign must be a completed campaign

I feel these criteria make the game and its story easier to track and feel more authentic compared to ones being played by experienced actors and storytellers and players well-versed in D&D play. A completed campaign brings closure to the players and the
characters they are playing. The rules the players are using factored the least in my decision. A well-crafted game can be played using any of the editions, but the fifth edition rules are the ones I am most familiar with.

In addition to the case study, I researched Wayne Booth’s ideas on narration and narrator as well as Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” concept. Looking at D&D through the lens of Booth and Campbell I learned:

- The reliability of the characters’ narrative based on morality and necessity
- To what extent the DM can be an unreliable narrator
- How the players’ creative freedom affects the Hero’s Journey
- How the DM has to adjust the story based on the actions of the players.
RESULTS

The Game Trailer Archive Tabletop Adventure campaign was produced weekly over the course of a year. Consisting of 37 episodes, each ranging between one to two hours, the channel provides over 50 hours of gameplay. Ben Moore, the campaign’s DM, takes the party from the small mining town of Phandelver to the underground lair of Sylvia the Spider Goddess, where the final battle takes place. The adventuring party consists of four players:

- Ian Hinck, playing Leilia Meliamne, an Elven Druid
- Elyse Williams, playing Pervince Tosscobble, a Halfling Bard
- Kyle Bosman, playing Andry Highhill, a Halfling Rogue
- Michael Huber, playing Hogger, a Half-Orc fighter

Like characters in any story, the GTA players have their own strengths and flaws, fears, interests, and agendas. By the end of the campaign, they have grown and transformed into fully realized characters. Pervince goes from a cowering follower to a brave hero who stands beside his allies in battle. Andry learns that there is more to value than gold and riches. Hogger learns to work with his allies, who he now sees as his family. Lastly, Leilia no longer seeks revenge and has accepted her past.

Gameplay Observations

GTA uses a low-production quality approach that adds a more accurate portrayal of how players partake in the game. Each episode has the same set up. The players and Ben, the DM, sits
around a folding table. Ben sits to the right of the group, sometimes behind a wall of open folders to hide his notes, and the players sit to the left. The presentation has the feel of five friends sitting around a table playing a game and having a good time. The group knows they are being filmed for a streaming audience, but it does not affect the way they play the game. This is because they are used to being filmed. All five players worked for GameTrailers where they are often filmed reviewing and streaming video games.

Episodes are cut short, but it does not interfere with the flow of the game, as the players continue where they left off the following week. Some weeks, the episode is cut short leaving the players and viewers with a cliffhanger ending. This gives the episodes a produced feel, but in my experience as a player, this is a trick DMs also use to keep their players interested and excited to play again.

It is important to note that in some episodes the DM is sitting behind a screen to hide his notes and some episodes he is not. This makes it hard for him to fudge dice rolls and manipulate the story. It also makes the consequences greater for the players who run headlong into battle. A few high damage attacks could take out a player and the DM would not be able to hide the rolls from the players.

**Dungeons & Dragons and the Narrator**

At the beginning of the campaign, the DM starts by having the players introduce their characters. This is the first time the roll of narrator switches from the DM (the author) to the players (the audience). During their introduction, the players narrate their backstories to each other. This is the first occurrence of the unreliable narrator. Pervince Tosscobble explains to the
party that he received a private gift from a female fan. It is later revealing in Episode 3 “A Mighty Flood” that the item was not a gift, but something he stole and when he tried to return it, she rejected his offer. Pervince took that to mean she wanted him to have it.

Pervince proves himself to unreliable again when relaying information to his allies. In Episode 2 “The Howling Terrors” Pervince stumbles across the body of a dead goblin. On the goblin’s person, Pervince finds some gold and a love letter from the goblin’s wife. When asked by his allies what he found, he tells them he did not find anything and that they should continue on their way. Andry, in the same episode, lies in a similar situation. He is separated from the group and investigates a stack of empty crates finding gold and a large emerald. Andry pockets the gold and returns to the party. She has no use for the large emerald, so she offers it up to Leilia and Pervince, telling them that the emerald was all she found.

Later, in Episode 5 “The Password is ‘Murder’”, Pervince encounters a group of female NPCs. He notices they are looking at him in admiration because the party defeated the Redbrand Gang that is terrorizing the town of Phandalin. Pervince acts bravely during the battle, but when he narrates to the adventure to the girls, he is shy and nervous and lies about the part he plays in the battle.

As a narrator, the DM’s role is to describe what the characters see, play as all the NPCs the characters encounter, and explain to the players any information their character would already know. Plus, they must have a solid understanding of all the game’s rules and gameplay mechanics. There are times during the game where the DM is unclear when explaining something and it affects the gameplay in some way. To correct this, he will stop the progress of the game and explain what happened. If the mistake is small, then he will retcon the story to
include it. If it is a larger mistake, then he will make it up to the player however he sees fit. With all the information that the DM needs to know, mistakes are bound to happen. I feel his solution for rewarding players and retconning his mistakes is fair, but at times it takes away from the reality of the narrative.

As previously mentioned, there are episodes where the DM does not use a screen to hide his notes and dice rolls. This makes it harder for him to curate the experience for the players. However, it is unclear whether the DM fudged dice rolls when he did have a screen.

For the first part of the game, the DM plays directly from the premade adventure *The Lost Mines of Phandelver* that is included in the fifth edition starter set. Premade campaigns make telling the story easier, but they do not account for everything. This is evident when the players encounter the NPC Sildar Hallwinter, who is being held hostage by a creature called a bugbear. Sildar has information vital to the players and the progress of the story. The writers of the adventure expect the players to be heroic and save Sildar. The guide only gives the DM two options to work with: rescue Sildar and set him free to do what he wants or rescue Sildar and have him join the party (Baker and Perkins, 2014). Neither of these options happen. The players let Sildar be killed by the bugbear. At the end of the episode, the DM explains how costly that move was and how he must find a new way to give the players the information that Sildar had.

**Dungeons & Dragons and the Hero’s Journey**

The hero’s journey focuses on an individual protagonist. Game Trailer Archive’s Tabletop Adventures does not have a central protagonist. The focus of the game is on the group,
how they establish themselves in the world, and how they come together to work as a team and become a family. However, the GTA party’s experiences reflect the trials of the hero’s journey.

**STAGE I: Departure**

The game starts mid-adventure, so there is no description of what the ordinary world is like for the players except for what they describe in their backstory. The DM explains that he knows each character has a goal they want to accomplish and hopes the can reach a personal conclusion to their stories at the end of the campaign. The players receive the Call to Adventure in Episode 5 “The Password is ‘Murder’”. They must go to the lair of Sylvia the Spider Queen and stop her from trying to take over the world. The party quickly deliberates and agrees that Sylvia must be stopped. There is no refusal to the call.

The party receives supernatural aid throughout the entire campaign. For the most part, this comes in the form of upgraded weapons and magic potions. There is no individual weapon or talisman that is central to their survival.

**STAGE II: Initiation**

The focus of the gameplay takes place during the Initiation stage of the hero’s journey. Episodes 9-13 contain most of the trials the players encounter in this stage. This is where the players are transported to a magical realm where they enter the labyrinth of the Shadow Queen, an evil necromancer who works for Sylvia the Spider Queen.

One of the trials the party faces is the Riddle of the Byger. In Episode 8, the party comes to a dead end and in their path is the face of a byger, a tiger-like creature with a large open mouth, carved into wall. Etched into the wall above it is the riddle “Those that want to move along, must give something of themselves.” The players deduce that they each must make a
sacrifice to the Byger to move on. Each player draws blood to sacrifice to the Bygar, but it is not enough, until Hogger abruptly chops off his hand and sacrifices it to the Bygar. This is more than enough to pass, but with Hogger severely wounded Pervince helps heal his ally. This act helps unify the party and Hogger gains a new appreciation for his allies.

The Shadow Queen represents the Goddess and the Woman as Temptress. In Episode 12 “Holiday Hijinks”, Andry and Pervince fall under the influence of the Shadow Queen and begin to be lured away from their journey. Hogger, again, saves the day by defeating the Shadow Queen. Much like Pervince saved Hogger’s life, Hogger saves Pervince’s life strengthening the party’s bond.

In the final episode “Season Finale”, the party finally achieves the goal they set out to complete. They defeat Sylvia the Spider Queen, restoring order to the world and the party is transported home.

**STAGE III: Return**

The Return stage of the journey happens in the last half hour of the final episode. It is meant more to wrap up the game and give the players a small amount of closure. It is mostly told through narration by the DM with the players providing addition commentary, but there is very little role-playing during this. The players decide that their characters will celebrate their victory together before going their separate ways.
DISCUSSION

As someone who plays D&D, I have always been interested in the game’s creative elements and the freedom the players have over their character’s destiny. Until conducting my research, I never realized the game’s narrative and rhetorical potential. Backtracking through the history of the game’s development to its creation led me to the fantasy literature that inspired the creators. After understanding the literary traditions those stories followed, I was able to focus my critical lens on the narrative elements and how well it fits the monomyth arc. This process was extremely helpful considering very little research of this kind has been done on the D&D.

Conclusion

From the information I have gathered and reviewed, I can verify that while the DM has a story in mind for the players, it up to the players to tell the story. The players have their own intentions and desires. The DM, whether using a homebrewed campaign or a premade adventure, can plan for certain scenarios to happen, but the players can completely derail those plans. In Episode 4 “Chasing Danger” the party let the character Sildar Hallwinter be killed while he was being held hostage. Sildar was supposed to provide the characters with information that drives the plot forward, but now the DM must figure out another way to give the players the information (Game Trailer Archive, “Chasing Danger”, 2016). Like a story, the narrative is limited to the writer’s imagination. However, unlike a story, the narrative is not limited to the narrator. The players can change the narrative as long as it does not violate the integrity of the fictional world.
While conducting my research, I was surprised to find my idea of who the story’s narrator is has changed. I had a preconceived notion that the DM was the narrator and the players were the audience. Based on my research, this is not entirely true. *D&D*’s style of storytelling allows for the role of narrator to shift between the DM and the players, meaning the role of the audience shifts as well. At the start of the campaign, the characters narrate their backstory to the DM and the other players. The players have the option to be as truthful as they want, or withhold information from the other players, but the DM must know the truth and the withheld information so they can adjust the story accordingly.

There are times throughout the campaign where the party splits up. When they meet up again, the characters narrate their experiences to each other. They also narrate their experiences to the people and creatures they meet during their journey. The players can lie to each other and to the NPC’s based on necessity. In the episode “The Mighty Flood”, both Andry and Pervince lie about the treasure they acquire while separated from the group, (Game Trailer Archive, “The Mighty Flood”, 2016) and later, in the episode “The Password is Murder”, the party bluffs their way into the Redbrand gang’s hideout posing as ale deliverymen (Game Trailers Archive, “The Password is Murder”, 2016).

The “unreliable narrator” is more complicated in *D&D*. The DM has the ultimate authority over the game. Therefore, their narrator must be reliable. This keeps the players focused on the story of the game rather them worrying about if the DM has their own intentions in mind. The DM fudging dice rolls can constitute as being unreliable, but this is done more to curate the gaming experience rather than to deceive or trick the players. The DM can insert an NPC into the game that be unreliable, but it cannot be the DM’s narration that is unreliable. It
must be the voice of the NPC. The difference between the DM and the DMs unreliable NPC is that the characters cannot directly address the DM, but the can address the NPC. Players can be suspicious of the NPC (and other characters) and can act on those suspicions in-game. However, the players’ ability to act on their suspicions is based on the characters abilities and dice rolls. The player is not given the opportunity to fudge dice rolls and is bound to the fate of their dice rolls.

Unreliability is more complicated for the players. They can be reliable and unreliable simultaneously. The are being reliable because they are, as Booth states, “acting in accordance with the norms of the work.” For example, because the GTA campaign is set in a medieval, fantasy world, the players are not introducing any modern or science fiction elements to the story. Players can also be unreliable because they deceive each other and withhold information each other.

In a group of two or more players, there is no central protagonist. *D&D* is a journey that focuses on the group rather than the individual. Each player’s character has their own growth and development, but the individual character is not the central focus of the campaign. Each player has their own Hero’s Journey, but the group, as a whole, go through the steps of the hero’s journey.

After reviewing the Game Trailer Archive’s campaign, I am still unsure if the party completes Campbell’s archetype. The “Departure” stage is summarized at the beginning of the campaign by each player, who has their own “Call to Adventure”, that led them to where they are when the campaign starts. Also, the party does not start in the ordinary world. They are not an established group and they are not doing something they normally would. The “Return”
stages of the journey are also summarized at the end of the game by the DM. The players add commentary to summary, but they do not role play through them.

Most importantly, the step “Refusal of the Call” is not completed. The “Refusal of the Call” is meant to show the audience the risks that are involved in the journey and gives the audience a clear picture of what the hero is leaving behind. The lack of the “Refusal of the Call” step complicates the idea of Campbell’s hero’s journey. I think there is no refusal because the players know this a game, and nothing is really at stake for them. If their character dies during their quest, then they can always create a new character and pick up where they left off. Also, refusing the journey means the story does not continue. The later has happened to me in one of my early experiences as a player.

In our campaign, our party was sent to rescue a newborn princess that was kidnapped during the night. Two of the players in my party were playing as bards who excelled at performing and another was charismatic rogue with a drinking habit. My character was a righteous paladin bound by my duty to the king. Our DM informed us that we all would know of a tavern that we were familiar with that we could stop at to gather information and provisions for our journey. When we arrived at the tavern, my character set off to gather information with our rogue, while the two bards offered to perform for the crowd. It did not take long before the other players put their personal interests ahead of the story. The bards showed more interest in performing for the crowd, while the rogue spent the remainder of the time drinking, conning, and pickpocketing the tavern’s patrons.

This continued for the rest of our session and into the next. Despite nudges from the DM and my attempts at convincing them to leave, the story our DM created came to a screeching
halt. While I was working with our DM, the other players were busy telling their own story. This is how D&D complicates the hero’s journey. If the heroes decide to never leave the tavern, they are choosing to tell their own story. They are experiencing the DMs world rather than telling the story, unlike the GTA campaign where the players intend on complete the game thus completing the story.

In the GTA campaign, the lack of “Refusal” is complicated even further due to the fact that these players have nothing to lose. Hogger and Leilia have already lost their homes and their families, and Andry does not have a clear reason to be on the adventure. There is nothing keeping them from going on the adventure. Since D&D is meant to be played in a group, the “Refusal” switches from the hero refusing to go on the adventure to the hero refusing to work with the other party members.

The lack of “Refusal” is only an issue for the secondary audience. I briefly touched on this earlier, but streaming D&D online has created a secondary audience of people viewing the game. The lack of “Refusal” in these streaming campaigns can hinder audience investment in the characters. However, like the primary audience (the player), the groups reliance on each other and the relationship the characters build make up for the lack of refusal. Characters, Hogger, for example in the GTA’s campaign, might be skeptical or afraid of working with their party members, but eventually learn to trust and rely on them.

While D&D is a game about storytelling, it is not meant to be a story. When players gather to play D&D, their goal is to play a fun, adventure game, not to tell a story, as opposed to a group of writers working together to write a novel, screenplay, comic book, etc. D&D is about storytelling because a story is created as the game is being played. Every game has a unique
story and characters. The experience of working together to complete the campaign is a shared one where the players actions directly affect the game. One can argue that this makes D&D a more personal experience than reading a novel or watching a movie. Everyone at the table walks away with a story to tell. These stories might not be how they rescued the princess or slayed the evil Spider Queen, but the moments in-between where a character willingly sacrifices his hand to the Bygar to escape the labyrinth of the Shadow Queen, or the frustration of being stuck in a tavern while your fellow party members drink, dance, and sing.

**Further Research**

As previously stated, very little research has been done on the narrative qualities of D&D. Forging my own path has been difficult with no other research to engage with. Fortunately, there is a wealth of information available online and among players and DMs alike about the history of the game and the many ways we play. During my research, I have uncovered topics of interest that go beyond what I have studied. These topics include the blurring between fiction and nonfiction, metatextuality and intertextuality, and the recent phenomenon of live streaming campaigns. The latter creating a secondary audience which is there to be entertained by the story and characters.

Significant technological advancements in how we communicate and how we create and share content have been made over the last five years. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitch.tv and software such as Skype and FaceTime have made it easier for people to not only play the game, but to create content that entertains others. Improvisational entertainment is not a new concept, but in D&D case, the primary audience is the players doing the improvisation and the secondary audience is the viewers watching the campaign. This begs the question of who
the game is being put together for, the players or the audience and how does it affect the way DMs create a campaign for their players.

Lastly, the Game Trailer Archive’s D&D campaign is one of many campaigns available online. It is not a reflection of every campaign, but based on my experience as a player, it is an accurate portrayal of how the game is played and how a story is told in this setting. Further research on multiple campaigns could show patterns or variations in D&D storytelling, as well as how they follow literary traditions and how they complicate narrative.
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