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## **WHY WE WRITE;**

### HOW *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* SUBVERTS AND DEMOCRATIZES NARRATIVE AND AUTHORSHIP

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas,  
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# FACULDADE DE LETRAS

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## RESUMO

### **Porque escrevemos: como *Dungeons & Dragons* subverte e democratiza a narrativa e a autoria**

Esta dissertação dedica-se à análise da cultura das massas e das novas dinâmicas que esta estabelece entre criadores e consumidores. Especificamente, entra no mundo dos fãs e de como estes influenciam os média e a sua própria cultura com muito mais facilidade do que o podiam fazer outrora. O tema principal deste estudo é o mundo dos jogos de interpretação de papéis e o seu crescimento num contexto em que o público está longe de ser passivo e cada vez mais facilmente critica e avalia os filmes, videogames e as séries que lhes são apresentados. Tendo em conta o poder que o público, o leitor e o jogador estão a obter, na era da informação e a ritmos vertiginosos, é-nos possível examinar a popularidade de *Dungeons & Dragons* (e, conseqüentemente, outros jogos de interpretação de papéis) como uma extensão desta mudança no equilíbrio dos poderes narrativos presentes nos nossos média mais populares. Será também analisado o impacto tecnológico nesta mudança, assim como os novos métodos de identificação entre fãs e as interações dos mesmos com o cânone que lhes cabe interpretar – o chamado fãnone. Uma vez que o poder narrativo se articula diretamente com o de autoria, o conceito da morte do autor, de Roland Barthes, será usado recorrentemente, ao longo deste estudo, para examinar vários objetos da cultura de massas e as interações que potenciam. Assim, na primeira parte, o tema será contextualizado a partir dos debates sobre a influência da cultura de massas; na segunda parte, a ênfase recai sobre o jogo *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) e a forma como é distribuída a agência narrativa pelos participantes. No final, apresenta-se uma breve reflexão sobre a cultura de massas que visa determinar em que medida se justifica o otimismo ou o pessimismo que têm marcado as críticas sobre os seus efeitos no público.

**Palavras-chave:** *D&D*; discurso da narrativa; autoria; cultura de massas; comunidade de fãs

## ABSTRACT

### **Why we write; how *Dungeons & Dragons* subverts and democratizes narrative and authorship**

This thesis is meant to analyze popular culture and the new dynamics that it establishes between creators and consumers. Specifically, it delves into the world of fans and fandoms, and how they influence their own media and culture a lot more easily than they ever formerly could. This analysis's key theme is the world of tabletop role-playing games and its growth within the context of an audience that is far from passive, and continually has an easier time evaluating the movies, videogames and series that it engages with. Keeping in mind the power that the audience, the reader and the player are quickly obtaining in the information age, it then becomes possible for us to look into the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* (and, subsequently, the remaining tabletop role-playing games) as an extension of this shift in the balance of narrative power present in our most popular media forms. The technological impact in this change shall also be analyzed, much like the new methods of identification among fans and their own interactions with the canons that are up to them to interpret – the fanon. Since narrative power is directly articulated with that of authorship, the concept of the death of the author, by Roland Barthes, shall be a recurring mention in order to

examine many elements of popular culture. Thus, in the first part of this study, the theme shall be contextualized through the debates pertaining to popular culture. In the second part, the emphasis is entirely given to the game *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* and the distribution of narrative agency among its participants. By the end, a brief reflection about popular culture shall be made, with the intention of determining if the optimism and pessimism that are so commonly attributed to it are justified.

**Keywords:** D&D; narrative discourse; authorship; popular culture; fandom

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## Acronyms

- AI – Artificial Intelligence
- DM – Dungeon Master
- DMPC – Dungeon Master Player Character
- DMNPC – Dungeon Master Non-Playing Character
- *D&D* – Dungeons and Dragons
- KDP – Kindle Direct Publishing
- NPC – Non-Playing Character
- RPG – Roleplaying Game
- TPK – Total Party Kill
- TTRPG – Tabletop Roleplaying Game
- WotC – Wizards of the Coast

## Introduction

The written word's role in society has greatly fluctuated over the years. While largely accessible to the public, literature is still held in high regard and placed on a prestigious pedestal. On the other hand, the written word is no longer synonymous with only literature, inspiring several communities to analyze and dissect all kinds of media they indulge in, from professional wrestling to filmmaking, from a writer's point of view.

No longer is a writer a singular person of the highest esteem. Thanks to both easier publishing from Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing and several websites willing to publish fanfiction for any franchise, no matter how obscure, the roles of writer and reader have become far more easily accessible and thus, more widespread.

These two roles and their growing proximity are, in large part, thanks to the internet. The written process has become more episodic and audience driven as more and more feedback becomes extractable from the readers.

Few cultural elements of modernity showcase these changes in the literary narrative like *Dungeons and Dragons* (henceforth *D&D*) and its ascension to the mainstream. Long gone are the days when it was confined to the stereotype of the woefully unpopular hobby to be partaken in in a dark basement. So are the days of literature being anything but a mandatory aspect of public education, or a sole, individual experience.

This thesis will examine how *D&D* innovates upon the narrative formula of storytelling. Before that, however, it is important to at least acknowledge the past debate on popular culture and its impact on society. It is important to also pay attention to the increased interaction between writers and readers, readers and readers and even media analysts and their own audiences, the latter of which is a fairly recent creation. Lastly, it is imperative to look into the forms of media that have generally enabled this sort of curiosity, before *D&D*'s significance can be expanded upon. As such, this thesis ought to first look into the factors *extrinsic* to *D&D*, and only then explain how a game with such humble beginnings could signify so much in light of such recent developments.

I believe it best to clarify, right here at the beginning, that most of the arguments and characteristics of *D&D* that I intend to elaborate on and describe can indeed be applied to most



other tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs from now on). The main reason I opt to refer to the whole genre through a single name is because of the title being a lot more recognizable to audiences overall disconnected with the TTRPG world than any of its alternatives. Because of this, it becomes a lot easier to conflate *D&D* with any TTRPG, a mistake I myself have committed in the past, which prompts me to clarify this from as early on as possible.

There is a range of media as wide as writing itself that can be analyzed on this topic. As with all theses, we will have to be selective. The most comparable form of media to *D&D*, apart from Tolkienesque fantasy literature, would have to be the modern videogame, as companies strive to make their own stories branch out more and emphasize freedom of choice. With the invention of massive multiplayer online roleplaying games and text adventures (the latter of which will be expanded upon later), it can be said that there have been multiple attempts to emulate *D&D* in the digital world, with varying degrees of success.

Despite the above statement, it is always important to turn back to traditional literature for the sake of comparison, be it related to *D&D*, videogames, or text adventures. This might be the most critical part of this thesis, as its goal is to portray popular culture, and to a greater extent *D&D*, not just as a democratized version of storytelling, but also as an extension of what can traditionally be done with the structures of who tells said story.

Before we can even begin, however, it is important to define, as basically as possible, the very rules and concept of *D&D*, so as to make this thesis as accessible as possible to all potential readers.

*D&D* has made it to mass media on several occasions, meaning even the most disconnected person with fantasy will have probably witnessed it in its most stereotypical form. Most of those people, it is fair to assume, will probably think of a group of outcasts locked in a basement while rolling an unconventional set of dice and, perhaps, adding some dramatic voices to the game.

It is interesting how much of this stereotype aims specifically at the player, rather than the game itself. While it is true that *D&D* initially appealed mainly to outcasts, as the genre of fantasy enabled them to live an alternative life (Conquest of Dread, 2019), the fact still stands that the game is now far more widespread instead of the niche subculture it was in the previous century.

Instead of talking about who does and does not play *D&D*, however, it is more productive to describe what *D&D* actually is, for anyone who does not know. *D&D* should be described, first and foremost, as a game of imagination, or an exercise in collaborative creation (Mearls, 2014, p.2). Using imagination, *D&D* players delve into an imaginary land and must envision how an inhabitant of said world would deal with the problems it presents them.

The difference between make believe charades and *D&D* is largely structural. The consequences of any action taken by the players are determined not by anyone in specific, but by the dice they roll (*D&D* Essentials Kit Rulebook, 2019, p.3). There are certain other determinants that decide the success rate, such as the difficulty of the task being attempted, but the dice should be seen as the true key factor that revolutionized gaming from the moment *D&D* was conceived.

Another distinguishing feature of *D&D* is its own storytelling. A player acts as the very characters' narrator, detailing much of what they see, feel or hear as they trek through the world of their setting. This player is called the Dungeon Master, henceforth referred to as the DM. The DM will be given their own chapter in this study as the role is an important one to the ensuring of the narrative's collectivization. For now, it should suffice to say the DM is a referee, a narrator, and the controller of every entity in the setting barring the party itself (Baker; Perkins, 2014, p.2). It is largely thanks to the DM that *D&D*'s potential is practically limitless.

To very basically let any reader imagine a *D&D* table, this description should suffice. Three players, Alice, Bob and Carol, are sitting at a table. Alice, the DM, has prepared an adventure for the other two. Bob and Carol have prepared their own characters and their backstories. Alice begins by describing a regular tavern where the two characters must meet so they can get started. Bob wants his character to arm wrestle one of the patrons, while Carol would rather try to rifle through another patron's pockets. With Alice's permission, they both roll dice and, depending on the outcome, Alice tells them what happens next. After Alice's input, both players may again choose what to do, and then be told what to roll to try to do that, thus preserving the game's flow.

A newbie glancing at this simple description is probably able to figure out that no amount of planning that is humanly possible can ever prepare a DM for all the choices their players might make. Even in the event of a DM being able to predict a majority of the players' actions, the

chance of a dice roll going astray and making a player unexpectedly succeed or fail at a task is always there too. This is why improvising is both vital and arguably one of the best parts of *D&D*, as each adventure may take unexpected turns. This need for improvisation in the development of the storytelling process shall be delved into later on.

There is a great focus on turn-based combat that, as far as this thesis is concerned, has less relevance than the narrative structure of *D&D* itself. The iconic turn-based 'action' ought to still be acknowledged, despite its lessened significance to this study. It is also important to note that turns make a narrative easier to share and democratize, as shall be further expanded upon later.

For now, this should give any reader the bare minimum knowledge about *D&D* needed to go through this thesis. The flow of DM-player decision making, in particular, is perhaps the most important aspect to understand and keep in mind, when it comes to analyzing this game's narrative aspects.

## 1. Pop Culture and the Democratization of Narratives

### 1.1. Acknowledging Past Debates

It might not be surprising to learn that *D&D*, videogames, and pop culture in general have been subjected to fairly harsh criticism in the past, and that their status as something mainstream today is the product of an ideological struggle that fought to make them less maligned and more worthy of value.

*D&D* and videogames have been subjected to a few instances of moral panic in the past. Videogames have been accused of inciting violent behavior and *D&D* was somehow linked to Satanism and witchcraft by the American religious right in a lengthy demonization campaign during the 80s. A concerned anti-occult mother, Patricia Pulling, went as far as founding the advocacy group BADD, Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BBC, 2014). Almost 40 years ago, the stigma of demon worship, suicide and ritual cannibalism has largely been dropped in favor of that of geekiness and a lack of social life. It is, in my opinion, safe to say that *D&D* and most RPGs do not instill horror or fear in the average person.

However distant those discussions and slandering grow, it is important to remember them and to be aware of their conclusion (or, perhaps more accurately, their current state, as any argument can be resurrected if enough attention is paid to it). In this case, the ability to mobilize fear and suspicion towards any particular type of media (usually a new one) is worth noting. For now, suffice to say that the association between *D&D* and Satanism or suicide has proven to be untrue at best and ludicrous at worst.

*D&D*, along with several other kinds of media that shall be mentioned in my arguments, will be tackled here in a broader sense; popular culture. From disparagement, to its political potential, to the debates that predated it and reincarnated thanks to its evolution, most of this chapter's analysis will be devoted to popular culture, rather than the tabletop game itself. More specifically, it will pave the way to the many forms of interaction between different types of media in the past and present alike.

There is, obviously, a precedent to these interactions between media, which is intertextuality itself. Books have referenced one another for centuries, so much that it is not at all uncommon even today for works of fiction to use Shakespearean knowledge and quotes as a quick way to

establish their characters as intelligent, for instance. However, given the great variety of media that this study will analyze, it makes a lot more sense to instead focus on mediality – that is, the way different kinds of media interact with and influence each other. This brings this essay into media studies territory, which is easily where most works looking into *D&D* should delve. These interactions have only increased in modern times. Several movies now draw parallels between their plots and those of famous books, with varying degrees of subtlety. If one then includes holy books and often-satirical references to history’s most maligned works like Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (politically incorrect YouTube Poops often edit it in as a punchline)<sup>1</sup>, then it is safe to assume all of these modern interactions between books and their younger media siblings are very much ubiquitous.

It is, however, practically impossible to discuss popular culture and the relation between culture and the masses without addressing the Frankfurt School debate, to which the Birmingham School ideas I previously mentioned are indebted. In essence, what it boils down to is whether popular culture really empowers the masses or if it just grants them the illusion of control, as allowed by the powers that be. Walter Benjamin, in particular, should be given attention for his optimistic outlook towards the future of mass media.

Before delving into Benjamin’s own views, however, the distinction between culture, culture of the masses, and popular culture must be made. Raymond Williams (1976) promptly points out that the word is among the hardest to define in the English language. As he accurately pointed out, the word ‘culture’ originally came from ‘cultivation’, which would move from animals and plants (*agriculture*) to the spiritual progress of humanity (Williams, 1976, pp. 77-78). The three broad categories of the twentieth century that the word was mostly used as were those which denoted a particular way of life associated with a given group of people, the general development of an individual or the practices of artistic activity (Williams, 1976, p.90).

Benjamin touches upon the culture of the masses, or mass culture. In his day, mechanically reproduced art had just leaped into prominence, and the masses were becoming increasingly exposed to literacy. Mass-media was a growing factor in the world he and his Frankfurt School

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<sup>1</sup> *YTPs*, or YouTube Poops are semi-popular videos that consist of editing one or several sources to make them more entertaining. The example I gave above can be testified by an edited version of the 2016 Republican Presidential Debate (“YTP: Donald trumps everything and everyone” by TheMarklar01, 2016), where Jeb Bush, upon saying he ‘read a book about this’, ends up sharing the screen with the notorious book in question.

contemporaries knew. The debate about whether this emerging culture would be good or bad for the masses is what will be discussed shortly.

Popular culture, lastly, embodies a significant deviation from the culture of the masses. It has a significant link to consumerism and commercialism and has propagated thanks to new media such as modern filmmaking, the internet and videogames. Appropriation and simplification abound with popular culture, to varying degrees of praise or condemnation. This debate can be seen as the spiritual successor of the Frankfurt School's, one that the Birmingham School's intellectuals have taken sides in. Multiple definitions have been given for popular culture. To Williams, four different meanings are assigned to it. Popular culture either encompasses works that are liked by many people, lesser works, works made by the very people themselves, or works that are made with the intent of winning over the people (Storey, 2001, pp.5-6). This can be seen as somewhat overgeneralizing, if not outright contradictory. After all, if popular culture is simply what is not 'high culture' by one criteria, it is still possible that certain elements of said 'high culture' reach a second criteria of being liked by many people (Storey, 2001, p.6).

Given the history of the mass culture debate and the plethora of dictatorships that have consistently made use of it for their own ends, it might pose as a bit of a challenge to stand by Benjamin's optimistic views. However, this thesis will only make sense by doing exactly that. When the topic of popular culture is broached, the equivalent stance to Benjamin's will also have to be adopted for the sake of consistency.

Benjamin divides art value in two poles. The first, cult value, is attributed to art that draws its value from simply existing. In his example, a caveman drawing an elk to scare off spirits would constitute a piece of art with explicit cult value originally, as it hardly mattered if others saw the elk painting or not (Benjamin, 2007, pp.224-225). The second, exhibition value, is the value a work gets due to its visibility.

Most of our media falls roundly on the second category nowadays, but exhibition value was still taking off in Benjamin's day. He quotes several critics imposing ritual value on movies, thanks to the debate about whether they should be considered art (Benjamin, 2007, p.227). However the power of the poles may have shifted, the debate about whether videogames may be called art, not to mention *D&D*, still elicits the imposition of cult value in such media from both sides of the argument.

*D&D*, especially, if it may be called art but certainly a cultural form, cannot be valued by any other measure than its exhibition value. When a DM designs a dungeon, a quest, a world or a setting, they fulfill no purpose until given to players to explore and complete them. It is purely reliant on plurality; at least one more person besides its designer must behold and interact with it.

Benjamin also noted that writing and publishing were becoming a lot more accessible to all. Thanks to that, in fact, any reader could become a writer or interact with a publisher (Benjamin, 2007, pp.231-232). Despite his optimism, Benjamin points out, in another of his works that the rise of the novel is a great factor in the decline of the storyteller (Benjamin, 2007, p.87). The novel writer, inversely to the storyteller, stems from isolation, not needing the experience and human contact the latter required to convey their tales. It is the novella's direct opposition to reality that grants it credibility, in direct opposition to the storyteller, whose grounded roots grant them the respect and wisdom necessary to be heard (Benjamin, 2007, p.87). It can only be said that his reality has only become more intense with the creation of the internet and the increasingly solitary lifestyles that abound in the modern world. As was already previously mentioned, the existence of KDP alone means that anyone with a computer can publish a book. His statement of readers becoming writers also rings especially true today, as enjoyers of all kinds of media now may feel tempted to produce their own variants of such content, though that shall be touched upon in a later chapter. Modernization has also further dismantled the role of the storyteller by confining death to specific locations such as hospitals. Death, over the years, has become less omnipresent and considerably less permanent as a human thought (Benjamin, 2007, p.93). By confining a dying man to a hospital, a more and more frequent occurrence, his heirs deprive him of his means to pass on his life learned wisdom – the essence of storytelling (Benjamin, 2007, pp.93-94).

Another factor Benjamin points at to explain the demise of the storyteller is the overvaluing of information over storytelling (Benjamin, 2007, p.90). While information is 'consumed' and does not last beyond the moment it is new, storytelling has significantly more longevity. Facts, present without an explanation, are to Benjamin the mark of skillful storytelling (Benjamin, 2007, p.90). The lack of explanation allows the story's listeners to infer their own meanings and wisdom from it.

Additionally, Benjamin points out the moral panic that the thought of the masses engaging in art caused. The key issue, it seemed, was about how the masses just used art as a way to distract themselves, in comparison with the contemplation required for the appreciation of art for the elites. Following this logic, the lack of effort and concentration alone were enough to invalidate the concept of art itself (Benjamin, 2007, p.239).

How similar the concerns about much of pop culture have been in recent years is noteworthy, to say the least. The whole fearmongering of videogames making children stupider is often backed up by how little mental effort videogames take in comparison to books, even if the person saying this will openly admit to being unable to play the games themselves.

To counter this criticism, Benjamin argues that architecture, humanity's oldest art form, is entirely viewed, made use of and appreciated by distracted critics. The need for shelter means humans hardly ever concentrate on buildings, instead noting their existence as they make use of them. As with architecture, the masses become distracted critics of film and art, thanks to their developing habit of inspecting it in that state of mind (Benjamin, 2007, pp.239-240).

This remarkably optimistic view can be extended to many other aspects of pop culture that Walter Benjamin did not live long enough to witness. In fact, videogames can be seen as escapist fantasy as much as movies themselves. Time does seem to have validated Benjamin's perception of films, as few nowadays would dare call into question whether they qualify as art.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have presented a rebuttal to Benjamin's ideas about culture and the influence of technology on cultural forms, namely in its relation to profit. Their view was that the culture industry, a concept introduced by their critique, was authoritarian and fundamentally economical (1947, p.96). Worse than subjecting the masses to whatever the system desires, the culture industry identifies and organizes the very consumers, making their own tastes a part of said system. To them, the charade is such that, in true capitalist fashion, even the competition is false, as the illusion of choice becomes more and more dispelled with less variety in movies (1947, p.96).

Their critique is not without its flaws. A lot of the viciousness it attributes to films sounds suspiciously similar to criticism made to newer forms of media in comparison with, more commonly, books. The worry that movies (or any more recent media form) hinder human



imagination, in particular, has been repeated by several less-informed parents and several pundits whom, while certainly not worried about the consolidation of power by the ruling classes in an exploitative capitalist system, were certainly clutching their pearls about the children being exposed to such evil. The consumerist element is one element where the two sides meet and agree upon its detriment to society. Even today, consumerism is a much-maligned practice in the eyes of many, although its definition seems to get blurrier with use. Even in the instances where the definition of consumerism is known by whomever uses that label, it is entirely possible that the label is being unfairly attributed to an activity they simply disapprove of. Videogames, in particular, are a target of this, as shall be expanded upon later.

There is, however, an important detail that can never be subtracted from any analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism; the time period they lived in. As survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and many other atrocities ushered in by dictatorships during the twentieth century, it is understandable that both of them would be skeptical, to say the least, about mass and popular culture. After all, to them, it was that very emerging concept that enabled so many average men and women to become mere onlookers during those atrocities<sup>2</sup>. To assume it reduced humans to hollow shells was not a long stretch.

Benjamin, inversely, perished in 1940, and even if he himself had fallen victim to Hitler's regime, he would have done so without witnessing the worst horrors Nazi Germany would partake in during the following years. This turn of events, in itself, has granted his opponents in this debate greater credibility, thanks to their justified wariness towards much of popular culture and the behavior of the ruling classes.

The authority Horkheimer and Adorno are given, however, is not boundless. Their own experiences have been marked by a time that is now past. Neither man witnessed the end of the Cold War, nor the growth of the internet into the colossal commodity we see it as today. Just like Benjamin's death prevented him from witnessing key events that would perhaps change his mind, so did theirs stop them from adapting their worldview to newer developments in popular culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Many other events, as is general knowledge today, have contributed to the rise of Hitler in Germany. Nationalism, the extortionate Treaty of Versailles, the vacuum left behind by the old monarchies which was promptly filled by fascism and communism are among a few of the circumstances that are probably more directly linked to Nazism than any culture belonging to the masses.

This thesis will argue in favor of Benjamin's view; that popular culture has the means to empower individuals and the masses, using *D&D* as its preferred example of such an instance. It will, however, strive to avoid ideological absolutism, given the very clear examples of popular culture being used in the past to manipulate the masses. Its goal should, in other words, be to find a balance between Benjamin's worldview and Adorno and Horkheimer's, in light of events that none of them ever got to witness.

There is, however, an extra logical step to be taken if my goal of linking Benjamin's ideas to popular culture is to come to fruition. Since his argument was actually in favor of the culture of the masses and the power it gave them, another debate must be visited and analyzed in order to create this needed link between the latter and popular culture.

John Fiske defines popular culture as a victory, no matter how small, of the subordinates in a society attempting to draw meaning from something made in the contrarian interests of their elites (Fiske, 1989, p.2). At the risk of weakening my own argument so early, however, I must argue that the struggle Fiske mentions has become a lot less ubiquitous in recent years. The world of the twenty-first century is vastly different from the one at the time Fiske wrote his own definition. In his day, I would say, capitalism had yet to morph into the all-consuming all-appropriating unrivalled ideology that we witness today, to the point that it has become quite hard to find a single Western idea or movement that is not, in any way, backed by large capitalists. This does not, in my opinion, disprove Fiske's definition, however. On the contrary, I would argue that the ruling class's modern complacency has, if anything, loosened the restrictions of what popular culture can be, thus opening up the possibilities for its interpretations as well. One such example would be, curiously enough, in a Disney cartoon; *The Owl House* (Disney Television Animation, 2020). On the sixth episode of this cartoon, when one of the main characters has to purchase medicine at an extortionate rate (a rather pertinent parallel made with a certain capitalist great power and its healthcare system), the following exchange occurs:

Eda: A thousand snails?! What kind of game are you playing?

Tibbles: *Capitalism*. Where everyone wins – except you.

It should be fairly obvious that the capitalist system is still the dominant one, perhaps now more than ever, since most ideologies that challenged it in the past century were defeated in the geopolitical scheme of things. This might be, in part, why these sorts of messages are currently authorized by the ruling class. Capitalism, as a hegemonical ideology that spreads more and more through globalization, no longer needs to be alert to ‘subversion’ among its ranks. This was obviously not the case during the Cold War, where the paranoid societal circumstances would make it a lot harder for such a joke to be made. This argument does not disprove Fiske’s point, though – in fact, it strengthens it. As he aptly points out, popular culture is a way for the subordinate to operate and slowly progress within the system that oversees them, a less radical alternative to full-on opposition (Fiske, 1989, p.11).

I would argue gradual concessions are just as preferable to the ruling class as they are to many of their subordinates, simply because of their appeasement factor. This appeasement factor is, in my opinion, not only the explanation of why the elites grow more complacent, but also the reason why anticapitalistic jokes like the one above can be made in children’s cartoons. Why I would call an anticapitalistic joke appeasement is due to the increased disillusionment with the system that can be found in the Western world. While still far from being majoritarian, the fact is socialism exists in the United States. Bernie Sanders’s two presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020, while unsuccessful, still serve to attest that there is at least a mainstream interest, one that carries votes, in either toppling or reforming capitalism to be fairer. As long as there is interest in it, I would say, capitalism will gladly sell it back to the populace, even if it is a sentiment hostile to itself, as the iconic photograph of Che Guevara’s face on shirts, posters and pins can possibly attest.

Benjamin noticed the political potential of the culture of the masses, and it is not unfair to assume his stance towards popular culture would not be too far off. Depending on the stance adopted, this appeasement model can be seen as a nice way to slowly bring about cultural change to society or as a dishonest way to quell unrest without making significant concessions (Fiske, 1989, p.11). Much like Lenin himself had hopes that Russia lost the first World War, so that the lives of Russian peasants became miserable enough to start a revolt, it is possible to wish for a more ruthless and unyielding form of capitalism, so as to make complacency with it much harder (Fiske, 1989, p.11).

Fiske also touches upon the circumstances during which the interests of the subordinate and the system align, albeit for different reasons. The example he resorts to is that of arcade videogames. As anyone who has ever been to one can testify, an arcade was often packed with difficult videogames that bordered on the impossible to beat with a single coin. Their difficulty and monetization were effectively thought of as two sides of the same coin, and this, at first, was mimicked by console games (videogamedunkey, 2018). Interestingly, this was also what made them so satisfying to the players. By placing the capitalists as their opposition, gamers were encouraged to make the most out of their coins. This happened by the mere incentive of spending as little as possible in an arcade machine. Here, skill and expenses were inversely proportional. This meant a gamer with talent could spend a lot longer on a machine with a single coin than a bad one with the same amount of money. Gamers and capitalists, in other words, had opposing interests, where the gamer being good at the game actively undermined how much profit the capitalist would get (Fiske, 1989, p.81). The interests of the player and the capitalist do conflict, but they both stand to have something to gain. In the capitalist's case, obviously, the player's money, and in the player's case, less obviously, the enjoyment of 'beating' the system by giving as little money as possible for leisure thanks to their own skill.

One of Fiske's more interesting points is one that, curiously, became less fallacious as time went on. When he wrote about them, videogames were majorly confined in arcades, and the few already playable on consoles were simplistic, to say the least. Despite this, he quickly went on to distinguish them from other popular art forms in the sense that they gave players control; videogames, to him, lacked narrative authority, letting the player instead be the author, even if they could not alter the outcome (Fiske, 1989, p.89). I would like to point out that, for the most part, all a player could really choose and influence back then was whether to fire/attack, *where* to fire at, where to go and, based on their own skill (often involuntarily) when to lose. If I were to, for example, bring up the already dated game *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), I would be able to point out that, not only does a player have a say in what objects Ethan, Scott, Madison and Norman interact with, but also in many of their choices, which would in turn influence whether they live or not to see their consequential ending.

An argument can be made that, even in this instance, a player is not really an author, as their entire range of possibilities and planned. To counter this, Fiske argues that no author has limitless power; that much like an author that must conform to structural norms and other such

rules, a player in a videogame is given limited power not unlike an author's, even if people misunderstand the latter's real degree of control (Fiske, 1989, pp.89-90). Limited control in authorship will reappear throughout my essay, though it seems satisfying to leave the subject here, for now.

The role of the author has also been debated extensively in the past. While it is fairly uncontroversial to argue that, for the most part of literary history, authors have been placed on pedestals by most of their critics and readers, a certain shift in this paradigm has happened in the last century. The role that the market played in the author's dwindling power should not be underestimated. It may be romantic to assume the masses of readers simply rebelled and seized some narrative power for themselves. The duller truth, however is that this change is owed to economic factors, primarily changed due to the development of mass culture. This topic, however, shall be a reoccurring event throughout my text, to be touched upon during two different chapters further ahead.

It is interesting to note that authorship has often been linked with life, or at least the warding off of death. This proved to be true not only among Western cultures such as the ancient Greeks (of which I will talk about later), but also among Arabian narratives, the most famous example perhaps being *The Thousand and One Nights* (Foucault, 2000, p.206). Before delving into the subversion that suggests the latter is dead, it is important to perhaps ask *what* an author is. Using Saint Jerome's criteria to determine a person's canon, an author must fulfill four requirements. First, the quality of their works must be consistent, with books of lesser quality being removed from the canon. Secondly, their ideology or theory must be coherent. Contradictory books to the author's general philosophy must also be removed. Thirdly, the author's stylistic identity must be identifiable, with words or expressions unfamiliar with their style being also excluded. Lastly, an author's work can never reference an event that occurs historically after their physical death. There must be a chronological location to an author's writing that ultimately ends at the day of their demise (Foucault, 2000, p.214).

These four criteria, in other words, give us an image of an author as a consistent being; with consistent views, rhetoric and quality put into their writing, as well as a historical figure with a concise chronological location (Foucault, 2000, p.214). Though this definition lacks some of the nuance expected from real humans (namely growth, maturation, improvement or even the

plain act of realizing one is wrong and thus changing one's mind), it is perhaps the simplest way to delve into this complex issue. An author, for the sake of this argument, is a consistent, ephemeral human being with a fixed style and set of beliefs.

The removal, or at least the pushing of the author figure to a corner consists, according to Roland Barthes, of attributing to them the meaningless role of the entity who writes (1977, p.145). The reason why the role is meaningless is because the value is now being placed in the reading instead. In other words, placing an author on a work serves as a way to strangle out its potential readings, a very welcome bonus to any critic attempting to 'solve' a work's interpretation (Barthes, 1977, p.147). By instead rejecting this 'solution' that hails from a person that is granted a higher status and credibility, Barthes ends up conceiving a revolutionary form of liberation of the reader and what they may and may not interpret from a work. To put things on even simpler terms, it is through the readers' many eyes that a pluralistic view is possible, but those eyes can only gain the power that the author loses. This rebalance of power places the reader in a position that goes far beyond mindless consumerism, where they instead rationalize and criticize the piece of writing that they are given, as well as socially and culturally encouraged to do so. The potential to empower the powerless is certainly there. This view is not without its own criticism, however. A person more intellectually gifted than I, for example, if given enough time, could most likely offer Barthes an interpretation so intentionally fractally wrong that the latter would be prompted to say 'I did not mean it like that'. It is nonetheless important to keep this dualistic perspective of narrative power in mind from now on, as it too shall reappear in chapters to come.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's own writing, towards which we will go back later on, it is possible to detect a hint of Barthes' philosophy, albeit a more moderate one.

"I cordially dislike allegory, and have done ever since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other resides in the purposed domination of the author."

J. R. R. Tolkien (1966)

While in his own words, Tolkien describes a conflict between applicability and allegory, the logic is effectively similar. Where an allegory would impose an author's point of view and strangle out all others, applicability would instead encourage the readers to make their own meanings from the work. To me, applicability does, however, still conserve some of the author's power, given that it is up to them to let the audience speculate about their work's meanings.

I will argue in favor of Tolkien's more moderate view of the balance of power between author and reader throughout this study. The main reason why my choice is thus is because of the (so far) fundamentally human aspect of *D&D*, upon which I will elaborate later on. Despite this, Barthes's terminology will be reoccurring as we delve into the roles found in *D&D*, as well as the many other examples where the author-reader dichotomy becomes muddled, if not outright challenged.

To finish this chapter, I would like to address the consistent demonization that popular culture seems to be a victim of. It can be seen as ironic that this study will attempt to find a link between these formerly maligned pieces of media and literature, when the latter has so often been used to shed a negative light on them. Interestingly, one of the arguments made against the stigmatization of videogames is one that I intend to go against. Steven Johnson (2005, p.21) argues that it is disingenuous to compare videogames to novels, as the novel-like aspects of games are less relevant to them too. To me, this statement has become less valid over time.

It ought to be noted that Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good for You* was published in 2005. While the videogame industry had already overtaken Hollywood in terms of profits, its products were yet to reach the stage we are currently witnessing. Titles have become more story-driven, so much that in some cases their reduced difficulties and intense storylines edge them closer to film than videogame territory.

Recent games like *Red Dead Redemption II* (Rockstar, 2018) have great investment in voice-acting, narrative themes and plotlines, and some critics even point at their neglect for the gameplay aspects of that same game. However, there was clearly a market for it all the same. *Red Dead Redemption II* has been showered with praise and awards which suggests Johnson's praise for books (2005, p.23) as the most efficient conveyers of complex information might be contestable if the genre keeps evolving.

Every other argument Johnson makes, however, should be seen as seminal in the fight for the de-demonization of popular culture, from the dishonestly diminishing reports of the benefits of gaming to the book-centric atmosphere that made so many older analysts and commenters view it as a threat. In fact, his first key argument, “the nonliterary popular culture has been steadily growing more challenging over the past thirty years.” (Johnson, 2005, p.23), rings even truer with this recent development in the videogame industry.

It is worth noting that popular culture has also grown to encompass more than the few pieces Johnson defends in his work. YouTube, in particular, has created hundreds of entertainers who are, in general, maligned by mainstream news outlets and concerned parents worldwide. In other words, as long as media marches on and adopts new forms, someone will most likely be ready to call those forms evil.

To link Johnson’s arguments further to *D&D* (apart from the fact it is part of popular culture), it should be noted that videogames have been nodding off to its genre for a while now. For many years, while consoles had relatively low power hardware, digital *RPGs* were often turn-based. While this formula was certainly handier for the given hardware at the time, it was also an efficient way of paying homage to the turn-based nature of *D&D* combat (Call, Whitlock, Voorhees, 2012, p.23). Evidence of this can be found, interestingly, in newer games. *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (Larian Studios, 2017) and *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* (Owlcat Games, 2018) are both examples of games that, despite the much wider possibilities of modern hardware, still opt to emulate *D&D*’s turn-based mechanics, dice included.

With the above in mind, it should not be too difficult to establish a link between videogames and *D&D*. In terms of writing, this essay will treat the first as a more rigid form of narrative than the latter, but both still as less restrictive than the traditional written word.

It should be noted, however, that much like Johnson, this thesis does not intend to undermine the literary form of storytelling. Replacing or even demonizing the traditional form of storytelling is not only counterintuitive, but also hypocritical. Literature was, in many ways, the root that influenced many elements of the two storytelling methods mentioned above. It is not difficult for anyone to find evidence of literature’s benefits to the human mind, thus making it a colossal task to even try attacking it. Using that same logic, new forms of media should not be seen as threats to books but, in many instances, instead as compliments to them. It is



increasingly common to find franchises of books and videogames becoming intertwined. *The Witcher* (1993-2013), by Andrzej Sapkowski, started as a Polish fantasy series popular mainly within Eastern Europe. It was mainly thanks to the videogame of the same name (CD Projekt Red, 2007) and its sequels that there was enough interest in the Western hemisphere for the books to start being translated to English on that same year (Whitbrook, 2015). This effect is not dissimilar to the *Harry Potter* films giving J. K. Rowling more readers or the *Game of Thrones* series doing the same for George R. R. Martin. These colossal examples should, on their own, dismiss the moral panic that views popular culture as a looming threat that will replace books if not contained.

The perceived threat to books gains a little more relevance if we correctly acknowledge that visual culture has been on the rise for the past decades. There are indeed several clues in modern trends that suggest media engagement only increases thanks to the visual. Books themselves have adapted to visual culture, however, mostly thanks to the creation of the increasingly popular graphic novel. While it may be fair to say there is 'less' reading in the engagement with these books, the notion that books are coming closer to their extinction becomes entirely invalid.

There may, however, be more to *Game of Thrones* than that. It was, after all, a phenomenon in modern television, breaking records and expectations of the scale a series could reach, the special effects it could employ and the massive audiences they could attract. As of season seven (which is a better metric for the show in total than the eighth and final one, for reasons I shall expand on later), the key demographic audience that enabled it to break records yet again was that of adults between eighteen and forty-nine years of age (Otterson, 2017). While it is possible to further dissect these statistics by analyzing gender, not only would I argue that the age is the more interesting aspect of these numbers, but also that, at least in the early seasons, the difference between the sexes was always less than twenty percent, slightly skewed towards men (Watercutter, 2013). The reason why I must draw attention to the numbers is because of the great changes that occurred during these people's lifetimes. A person who was forty-nine in 2017 would have been born in 1968, one year before the internet was born and a couple of short years before the decade when videogames became an industry through arcade machines. From then and onwards, both the internet and the videogame medium would grow and continue to hold more influence over modern society. This probably makes it fair to say that the younger

the people are from here onwards, the more familiar they can be presumed to be with both concepts. More importantly than introducing a new kind of media to these people, however, are the leaps that visual culture took during their lifetimes, finally becoming dominant long before *Game of Thrones* even reached their screens<sup>3</sup>. There is, in other words, a link of proximity between this demographic slice and many of the changes that happened during the last century, something that is worth noting now that TV watchers are growing older (Friedman, 2016).

Going back to the *Witcher* novels, it is interesting to point out that videogames and books can interact inversely too. *The Infernal City*, written by Greg Keyes in 2009, is one of his two books based on the popular *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks, Bethesda Game Studios, 1994-2020) series, and many franchises follow suit. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005) are a couple of more prominent examples of this practice. This should not be a surprise. All three of these examples have a lengthy story that spans several different releases spaced out between several years. Fans, if truly captivated by those stories and not just the games themselves, will naturally feel tempted to look further into them. More interestingly, it is also likely that fans are instead ‘found’ by said works, mainly due to several factors that are only and increasingly present in our modern world. The internet, bringing together many different fan cultures from across the globe, has a multitude of ways to introduce a person to a new kind of content they formerly knew nothing about. Once we discuss the impact of technology on storytelling and authorship, we will explore these possibilities more thoroughly.

With all of this under our consideration and acknowledgement, I believe us ready to proceed into the more contemporary chapters that lie ahead. Many of these topics and theories will resurface in several upcoming chapters, as I have already pointed out, where they will be expanded upon. For now, this introduction will suffice as a first theoretical step; a foundation for the upcoming chapters.

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<sup>3</sup> As an extra side note, *Friends* (James Burrows, 1994), another incredibly successful show which still remains the most popular American sitcom 25 years later is popular mainly among viewers between 35 and 54 years of age, followed closely by 18-34 year olds (Stoll, 2021). While the differences between the three presented groups are not that wide, it is nonetheless a noteworthy similarity that once again draws a significant barrier between older generations and those who were born in the 60s.

## 1.2. Defining ‘Narrative’

The word ‘narrative’ has seen some extended usage in modern times that, while not very relevant to this study, should still be acknowledged before being discarded. In the modern, non-academic usage, the best way to possibly define the word ‘narrative’ would perhaps be as ‘worldview’, though usually a distorted one. In an era with fake news and considerable skepticism aimed at media outlets and governments alike, the expression ‘to push a narrative’ is meant to imply that there is an attempt being made to cloud the public’s perception of reality in some way. I must, before all else, point out that there is a considerable deal of difference between ‘narrative’ and ‘narrative discourse’, which I will soon expand upon. Despite my chosen title, the fact is narrative itself – meaning the series of events present in any story – cannot, as an objective concept, be democratized. Narrative discourse, on the other hand, as the subjective interpretation of the narrative itself (Genette, 1980, pp.27-29) and the telling of the story proper, can indeed be democratized and balanced between multiple storytellers. Hence, while I will refer to narrative and its power dynamics several times in the upcoming chapters, the fact is it will mostly be in reference to the narrative discourse.

The concept of narrative cannot be democratized before it is even defined. Although my study will focus on a specific narrative genre, namely fantasy, narrative theory is still useful to us in order to pin down the essential components of this concept. This does not mean such a task is simple. Unfortunately, most scholars differ on its definition and complexity, some believing a single event is enough to become narrative, others narrowing its definition down to at least two events that are logically correlated. For the sake of simplicity and to avoid delving into a parallel discussion, this thesis will employ H. Porter Abbott’s compiled definitions of narrative, the latter being, in their most summed up form, as follows: “narrative is the representation of an event or series of events.” (Abbott, 2008, p.13) Abbott, shortly afterwards, equates an event to an action. Before this, he also denoted narrative’s purpose in measuring time through said events. More importantly, narrative is credited with an ability to expand or contract the concept of time (Abbott, 2008, p.13).

It would be far from controversial to say *D&D* perfectly matches this initial definition. Be it through combat, the game’s primary focus, or through dialogue, *D&D* is almost, if not entirely action driven. Combat-wise, the actions themselves are divided in turns. Each character is given a turn, and a limited amount of actions can be performed during said turn. This way, it is not

difficult to envision a series of events, in this case the whole fight, as it is happening. While several factors influence a fight and its outcomes (initiative and surprise attacks, to name a couple of them), one of the most traditional aspects of *D&D* is its turn-based combat, which might be the most organized way to handle and simulate combat in a non-digital environment.

Turns are, in fact, a display of the malleability of time when put at the service of a narrative. A fight in close quarters may take only a few seconds, even if the decision-making in each turn lasts a lot longer. Inversely, a siege or a battle between two armies can mean a turn lasts several minutes, if not hours. To put things into perspective, I ought to provide a couple of examples of fights through the lens of a TTRPG, written in chronological and turn order. For the sake of simplicity, why Alice and Bob (to recover my previous example) are battling and whether one or the other is an NPC will be left up to anyone's guess. With that same aim, the math behind each fight and the rules will also be kept out of this example.

Turn one (A): Alice tries to throw a punch at Bob, which he dodges.

Turn one (B): Bob retaliates, hitting Alice and damaging her.

Turn two (A): Alice strikes Bob, this time hitting him.

Turn two (B): Bob hits Alice one more time.

Turn three (A): Alice, low on health, drinks a potion to restore it.

Turn three (B): Bob swings again, this time missing.

Turn four (A): Alice attacks Bob and lands a critical hit, thus knocking him out.

My second example, however, will follow a much bigger event.

Turn one (A): Alice's army marches to the top of a hill.

Turn one (B): Bob's army crosses a river.

Turn two (A): Alice's army hastily sets up some palisade walls.

Turn two (B): Bob's army spreads out around the hill.

Turn three (A): Alice orders her men to rain down arrows upon Bob's troops.

Turn three (B): Bob's army charges uphill.

Turn four (A): Alice's army charges downhill, wiping out Bob's troops.

Neither example should be considered very accurate for TTRPGs, it must be said. Not only would there be some math and chance behind each attempted action, there would also be some time for the players to think things through, under normal circumstances. However, both examples should be enough to prove that turns can last however long the narrative needs them to. In the first example, we clearly witness a fistfight that is over in four turns and even less minutes than that. In the second one, we are shown a battle where a turn could last up to hours.

Abbott's work further breaks down the concept of narrative by calling it "the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse", whereas story becomes the sequence of events itself, and the narrative discourse its representation (Abbott, 2008, p.19). A story itself, in turn, requires not only events, but also entities to go through them. If those entities have sentience, sapience, or both, those may be, by Abbott's own criteria, called characters. Here, I would both disagree and go a bit further. While Abbott does indeed open the possibility to call inanimate objects, planets and the such entities, I would argue that, in modern storytelling, it is entirely possible for a character to completely lack human characteristics and yet still be called a character.

A trope has been codified by the videogame *Portal* (Valve, 2007), called Companion Cube (TVTropes, 2013), where an audience, perhaps incited by the media they interact with, develops empathy for an inanimate object. In the videogame in question, the player is given a "Companion Cube", an inanimate cube with hearts drawn on it, which is then used to solve several puzzles before being lost in an incinerator. Another example, perhaps more famous, is in the film *Cast Away* (2000). There, a stranded man feels forced, due to isolation, to befriend a volleyball whom he names Wilson. Said ball has now become an icon on its own, referenced by series and videogames alike. While the reasons for an object to draw sympathy from the audience are varied (ranging from the cuteness factor to the writing, to the materialism of our society), my argument is that said object does qualify as a character *because* of the attributes that the audience projects into it in order to feel empathy for it. Both the "Companion Cube" and Wilson are effectively treated as characters, and in my opinion deserve to be called such.

Other examples include toys, blankets and pet rocks, which often feature in multiple pieces of media too.

It is interesting to note that a story can never be seen. An audience is exposed to its narrative discourse and, event after event, builds the story mentally (Abbott, 2008, p.20). More interestingly, for a story to come to life thanks to narrativization, a bit of inference and mediation is needed. Perhaps more surprisingly, this even applies to writers themselves. Discovery writers – meaning writers who explore their own story as they plot it – can often lead themselves to unexpected places, Leo Tolstoy being one such case when he wrote the novel “Anna Karenina” (Abbott, 2008, p.20). *D&D*, if presided by a flexible DM, is discovery writing at its core. This topic shall be brought back later on, when the DM’s authority is delved into. For now, this concept of stories being constructed by their audiences will be put on hold.

Another element that Abbott defines is narrativity. In a way, narrativity can be described as what makes a narrative something for its own sake (Abbott, 2008, p.25). Abbott himself admits the issue to be contentious and very much a gray area. To avoid overcomplicating things, narrativity should be seen as a subjective element that grants ordinary phrases a narrative bent. An example that might situate most about this definition would be the following sentences:

“Hector sharpened his sword. Then he left the tavern.”

“Brooding, Hector sharpened his sword. Then, grumbling, he left the tavern.”

While the medieval elements may have already given the first sentence a bit of narrativity, the second one, without a doubt, feels a lot more like it belongs on a story being told for its own sake. The Sisyphean attempts to further narrow the definition of narrativity are of little use to this thesis, and should probably be given their due attention elsewhere. What is important to retain from these examples is that narrativity is the element that makes it feel right to call something a narrative or a story. Using my own example once again, it is possible to infer that there is a level of subjectivity to qualifying something as a narrative. Concepts like marks of narrators or their perspectives are not universally agreed upon, after all.

The term’s broadness gives it a few limitations, namely the endless debate its mere mention may start, but also the advantage of making sense to most people familiar with any kind of

storytelling. While it is ultimately up to player skill and imagination, *D&D*, even in stereotypes, is often associated with high levels of narrativity, often derived from Tolkien's own work.

With Abbott's rather broad approach to narrative, it is again not too bold to assume *D&D*, even in sessions with little to no narrativity, would, without a doubt, fit within it according to his work's definition. What may be argued in *D&D* to not be narrative would, most likely, boil down to certain parties that go astray and, without much coherence, wander around the world in a quasi-random fashion attacking everything in sight. Among *D&D* players, this is known as a "murderhobo" playstyle, one that is notorious and often frowned upon by people who are more devoted to their characters and storylines. It would be as fair to assume most *D&D* games to be "murderhobo" sessions as it would be to assume most videogames are just ultraviolent copies of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, a misconception that, ironically, took some years to debunk.

Further in his work, Abbott delves into the figure of the narrator. Given, again, the upcoming chapter about the Dungeon Master as both an author and a narrator, there is little to add to this chapter apart from the fact that the first figure should not be conflated with the latter (Abbott, 2008, p.68). The remaining aspects that define the kind of narrator a story has shall too be saved for the analysis on the figure of the Dungeon Master. Abbott's detailed definitions do, however, ignore the requirements for engaging narrative, as that quality, whether absent or not, does not disqualify a narrative from existing. Despite this, engaging narrative is one of the many reasons why *D&D* still exists and captivates millions of players.

Allowing people to think they are part of the story, often subconsciously, is vital for the creation and telling of successful stories. It has been argued, in fact, that this kind of empathy is one of the requirements to create future citizens of the world, ready to behave humanely towards others.

Martha Nussbaum, for instance, argues that there are three key ingredients to properly cultivate this humanity in students (Nussbaum, 1998, p.42). All of them, it can be argued, are trained and promoted by playing *D&D*. The first; critical examination of oneself and one's culture, is often done subconsciously by any player upon first dabbling with character creation. It is possible to argue, in fact, that any act of writing that forces us to either create or otherwise delve in cultures that are not our own can bolster our humanity and empathy. The most common example of this

would perhaps be worldbuilding; the design of a world's cultures and inhabitants. A well-written fictional culture can both change a writer's perspective as well as a reader's, opening them to ideas that they never considered or questions they never asked (Terrible Writing Advice, 2018).

An example of a thought-provoking fictional cultural element can be found in J. P. Beaubien's "Aeon Legion: Labyrinth" (2016). The story is effectively about time travel, and preventing the associated disasters of tampering with it. It is mainly set in the Edge of Time, where all of time merges together, creating a place that is practically a utopia. The main character, a twenty-first century American girl, is taken to that place, and responds negatively when a local girl offers to hold her hand. The girl is quick to analyze her reaction, finding out that in American culture, handholding has romantic connotations. Promptly, she tells her that in the Edge of Time, handholding is merely a display of friendship. This might not seem too groundbreaking; there are, after all, far greater cultural elements that would be harder to question. However, it provides us with an almost innocuous example of a fictional cultural element that gets the reader thinking. After all, *why* do we see handholding as romantic? Whatever the answer may be, it is not illogical to also consider handholding a gesture of friendship. Thus we are brought to question and see our own culture with different eyes.

Nussbaum additionally argues that humanity should take the first place in anyone's thoughts of themselves (Nussbaum, 1998, p.43). Fantasy and *D&D*, in this regard, have often boasted a somewhat contentious system. One of their key features is the idea of several 'races' (although species, in certain cases, might be a more accurate term) populating a fictional world. While humans are often painted as a single race, with skin color being either relegated to nationality or outright ignored as far as identity goes, most if not all 'races' are still seen as 'people', to the point where the players are often given control of any of them in most settings. People, in this case, is an obvious replacement to humanity, as now being a person is indeed what binds all those 'races' together.

Lastly, Nussbaum brings up narrative imagination. In her own words, to have narrative imagination is "to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself; to be an intelligent reader of that person's story" (Nussbaum, 1998, p.44). This is her final ingredient to cultivate humanity and, perhaps quite obviously, the part where not only



*D&D*, but also reading in general, offer the most help. Interactive storytelling takes narrative imagination to the next level, where the audience often really *is* part of the story being told. However, even the average character-driven plot in a book can be seen as an attempt at tricking the audience into viewing the events as if the character is themselves.

The last concept that needs to be brought into light is that of the author themselves. More specifically, due to the fact that humans are ever-changing individuals, the *implied* author, meaning the kind of person that wrote or created the story at the time (Abbott, 2008, p.84). Traditionally speaking, the implied author holds a lot of power over their work, oftentimes considerably more than the narrator. Audiences often seek to interpret the message of the implied author, along with the goal of the story they tell.

The power dynamic of author-reader, further extended to storyteller-listener, has long been challenged, perhaps being a lot more complicated than most give it credit for. When touching on fans and their relationship with the franchises they enjoy, this dynamic will resurface. For now, however, let us assume the author is just a figure traditionally associated with the control of the narrative, and thus save the topic of authorship for later on.

On ‘narrative’, a single question remains that ought to be broached still in this chapter. We must ask ourselves ‘What is *D&D*’s relationship with narrative?’ To put things as simply as possible, narrative is what pushes *D&D* forward the hardest. This is not to say that *D&D* is always or even mainly story driven (sometimes, as we will soon find out, it can be fairly anarchic). What it means, however, is that first, and obviously, players’ input can and should affect the game’s narrative and secondly, perhaps more perplexingly, the game’s narrative is not entirely material (Shank, 2011, pp. 9-10). What this means, according to scholars like Jennifer Grouling Cover, is that a flawless transcript of a campaign, with everything players say in and out of character, would still not be equal to the game’s narrative (Shank, 2011, p.10). Looking at the non-material side of the game’s narrative, it can be argued that the player’s experiences, impersonations and lived memories are the key components that constitute the other half of the narrative. Having re-read transcripts of campaigns I have designed and participated in, I can attest that the mere

words, without circumstance, lose a lot of their meaning, even those that were not spoken but instead written from their conception<sup>4</sup>.

One link between *D&D* and narrative that may hold more interest for this study, however, is the comparison Nathan Shank makes to episodic television, citing among other things the multiple, linked sessions that are often linear in terms of storytelling (2011, p.9). Shank later points out that episodic television, during its early stages, is made inconclusive in order to make the future alterable in case the audiences do not like the direction their series is headed in (2011, p.29), before declaring that *D&D*, both due to real-life scheduling restraints and the players' own desire for an endless story, has inconclusiveness practically ingrained in its own mechanics (2011, p.30).

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<sup>4</sup> *D&D* players are strongly, if not imperatively encouraged to take notes during their sessions. It not only helps the players keep track of important information about the world they are exploring, but also helps the whole party keep track of where they left off.

### 1.3. Defining ‘Fantasy’

In order to avoid hasty steps into the dissection of the many forms of media that shall be discussed later, it is perhaps wise to first define, at least briefly, the genre of fantasy and some of its conventions. As this thesis will indicate several times, fantasy will prove to be a source of inspiration for much of the entertainment listed later on, as well as a constant root and source of guidance for the analysis of many conventions in said forms of media. Fantasy, in its broadest terms, can be seen as a genre not only applicable to literature, but to media as a whole. In this thesis, fantasy will be discussed and addressed as a genre for books, oral storytelling, videogames and, of course, tabletop roleplaying games, the most prominent of which being *D&D*.

The most fundamental aspect of fantasy as a genre would have to be its speculative nature. Whether it draws from folklore, ancient mythologies or from Tolkienesque roots themselves drawn from folklore, fantasy often requires the conjugation of a fictional setting of varying sizes. Certain elements, such as an abundance of magic and a medieval setting, have become a truthful stereotype about what fantasy stories tend to have in abundance. One such example is the trope Mordor, which is an umbrella term to describe any uninhabitable or otherwise hellish land that houses evil (TVTropes, 2013).

It has been argued that fantasy should be placed and viewed as the opposite of realism and any genre with any high emphasis on verisimilitude (Attebery, 1992, p.3). Fantasy should not, however, be viewed as a completely abstract concept with no bearing on real life whatsoever. In many cases, fantasy is used not just as a means of escapism, but also as a means of putting into perspective many aspects of human life in either comical or gruesome ways. From Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels to Joe Abercrombie’s *The First Law* ones, there is usually something *more* besides the speculation and the fiction to keep readers engaged.

This is largely due to the mimetic needs of fantasy. Imagination might play a large part when it comes to the creation of fantasy, be it in thought or as a genre, but it cannot do everything. The reason why is because any purely fantastical work, if such a thing were even conceivable, would be entirely alien to human minds, as none of its concepts or narrative events would make sense to the readers (Attebery, 1992, p.3). Similarly, an entirely mimetic story would be a mere report of real events, as any fantastic elements, meaning anything pertaining to imagination of the writer, would not be present.

Fantasy can and does often transcend language. One needs not even delve into pop culture to find examples of textless, wordless fantasy. From statues to paintings, even rudimentary ones, we are able to deduct fictitious value. While it might prove challenging to create a definition for fantasy that encompasses rupestrian art as well as modern depictions of the mythical depths of human imagination, the fact is many human creations may be labelled ‘fantastic’ (Attebery, 1992, p.5). Using this same logic, a realistic TTRPG campaign set in Chicago where the players are Prohibition-era mobsters is just as fantastic as a stereotypical *D&D* campaign where the party’s objective is to bring down an undead host that is ravaging a fantasy land.

While we could definitely argue that fantasy, as a genre, has few defined rules, and we instead know it thanks to its proximity to the prototype. (Attebery (1992, p.13), in his work, quotes an argument about a beanbag chair and a barber chair having nothing in common, yet both being qualified as the same thing), it is perhaps unwise to use an argument best applied to furniture or inanimate objects to a whole genre. Putting again the *Discworld* novels next to *The First Law* ones (these are, in my opinion, practically polar opposites when it comes to the fantasy genre, which is why I believe it productive to compare them often), we can clearly see that both deviate significantly from what is ‘reality’ in their own way. An important addition to make and expose upon is the exact value of belief to fantasy literature. In other words, it is important to ponder whether the beliefs of the author influence the genre their work falls in. Brian Stableford (2009, xlv) aptly points out that whether or not authors in the past believed the entities and events they wrote about were true, the fact was that they too could distinguish the supernatural from the mundane. Were it not the case, the concept of a miracle would be completely divorced from theology, as mundane and supernatural would blur into one another and be virtually indistinguishable to past writers. Whether it was Homer’s telling about the Olympian gods intervening in the war of Troy, or Dante writing about his vision of Hell and its

residents, those writers, no matter how religious, knew that what they described, even if possible, strayed far from what was mundane. So, even if we may feel reticent to call their works fantasy<sup>5</sup>, we must at least admit the supernatural elements present in them.

This brings us the perfect occasion to draw the distinction between fantasy and the fantastic. While one is certainly linked to the other, the two should not be confused. The creator of the concept, Tzvetan Todorov, will be our guide in the definition and exploration of the fantastic as a concept. ‘Hesitation’ may be the central keyword when defining the fantastic. When confronted with a situation that leaves it ambiguous whether the rules of reality are being followed or not, a reader (and perhaps the character they are accompanying too) may be prompted to question if the ‘reality’ being presented to them is not in any case, a dream or an illusion. Supernatural and uncanny events *are* a very efficient way to create hesitation in a reader while they behold a story, although there is more complexity to the fantastic than just that. Todorov created an axis, a spectrum of qualifications for literature, between which the ‘fantastic’ serves as a transitional boundary (Lem, 1974, p.230). The four sub-genres, each mutually exclusive, are the uncanny, the fantastic-uncanny, the fantastic-marvelous and the marvelous (Lem, 1974, p.229). These shall be explained once we try to distinguish fantasy from other genres it is frequently lumped together with.

Tolkien’s role in shaping fantasy as the genre it is must be given its due importance. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) is so often instantly thought about whenever fantasy is brought up that simply dismissing it as a coincidence would be a colossal act of self-trickery. Fantasy may have existed long before Tolkien even drew his first breath, as Shakespeare himself would testify<sup>6</sup>, but its codification and general structure did not. It was only when Tolkien published his work that ‘other writers’ became instead ‘fantasy writers’, with a core around which to rotate (Attebery, 1992, p.13). The cultural impact of *The Lord of the Rings* in the creation and definition of the fantasy genre, vague as it may be, is the key reason why even the least

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<sup>5</sup> I would also argue that the term ‘fantasy’ still holds a very negative stigma, which may be what makes so many people reluctant to use it. Using this logic, it is possible to consider several (if not all) holy books fantasy which, given the stigma, can be seen as insulting. Fantasy is still somewhat associated with childishness and make-believe nonsense, which certainly makes using the label a contentious issue.

<sup>6</sup> *The Tempest* (1611), may be Shakespeare’s most notorious play with a significantly fantastic element influencing and shaping the story.

interested soul in fantasy will ask if a fan of the genre has read it. Tolkien's writing has codified so many fantasy tropes, in fact, that this thesis will have to go touch upon a few of them to, at the very least, explain their presence in *D&D* and its relatives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tolkien's tropes are now widely known, to the point where their subversion is becoming less and less uncommon. The recent surge in Heroic Fantasy and Low Fantasy – genres which often deal with less black and white morality and far more flawed heroes as the protagonists – is a series of subversions of Tolkien's traditional High Fantasy setting. These terms, while originally struggling to thrive (Stableford, 2009, p.198), have recently not only become more seminal in the identification of different fantasy works, but also changed slightly from their original meaning. The term High Fantasy, for example, was originally intended to classify works set in alternative worlds from ours, whereas Low Fantasy would qualify fictions set mainly in our primary world (Stableford, 2009, p.198). Meanwhile, Heroic Fantasy was defined as a hero-centered story, also readily applicable to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Stableford, 2009, p.197). The changes in these terms were such that Tolkien's fantasy prototype no longer even fits the definition, instead being seen as the codifier for High Fantasy (TVTropes, 2013). Moreover, Low and Heroic Fantasy now have grown to not only be about heroes and the presence of magic in the setting, but also the story's tone and its scope. Heroic Fantasy and especially Low Fantasy tend to be less about epic scales and overcoming evil, and instead more about individuals and their personal goals (TVTropes, 2013). A few of Tolkien's more enduring fantasy tropes will also tie in flawlessly with a videogame or a roleplaying formula, as will be discussed later on. This may help, partially, to explain why fantasy seems to be such a leading genre for so many pioneering pop culture elements.

*The Lord of the Rings* still holds much influence over the fantasy genre as we know it, much of it completely split from Tolkien's meticulous worldbuilding. Perhaps the one mandatory aspect of fantasy that is unequivocally present in the genre is the impossible. As Attebery (1992, p.14) puts it, there must be "some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law". It is fair to assume that different definitions of the impossible are not only allowed, but very likely. Given the transgressions of natural laws are as varied as fantasy itself, it is a hollow goal to attempt to push for a more concrete, universal term for this first component of the fantasy genre.

This fraction with reality and its laws, while not enough to breach fantasy apart from science fiction or many horror works, does at least split it quite successfully from most fiction. Verisimilitude, interestingly enough, becomes something that disqualifies a work as fantasy, especially when it comes to reality itself. If a work *could* happen or have happened in the mind of the average reader, it can be written off as a work that does not belong to the fantasy genre.

How does, then, fantasy become distinct from horror or science fiction? It is worth looking into Tolkien's motive in order to answer this question. His aim to dispel the illusion that the world was boring and wonderless. To him, the way to bring back the wonder of first viewing the world was to turn it into something alien. This process, he called 'recovery' (Attebery, 1992, p.16). In other words, the junction of something fantastic with something mundane was meant to 'recover' the mundane object in the reader's eyes, making them once again view the latter with wonder.

This detail is, perhaps, enough to draw a distinction between the three genres mentioned above. Science fiction, despite often being tied to senses of wonder and perhaps even gifted with a bit of 'recovery' itself, often tends to have a focus on speculative science and existentialism a lot more than on the mundane. While often capable of pushing the boundaries of imagination even more than fantasy does, it categorically teeters between verisimilitude – hence the 'fiction' in its name – and 'recovery'. This is to say, in other words, that science fiction has often a 'reality' that is dependent on technology, while fantasy leans a lot more on the magical and the arcane. The result is that certain aspects of science fiction have managed to become reality<sup>7</sup>, a feat that is much harder for fantasy as a genre to emulate. Science fiction, in Todorov's axis, belongs to the 'pure' marvelous category. There are certainly extramundane elements in the story. They are, however, rationally explained, following laws established in-story that modern science rejects (Lem, 1974, p.230).

Todorov attributed the 'pure' marvelous four subdivisions of its own. The hyperbolic marvelous has its roots in narrative overindulgence, where a narrator might purposefully exaggerate certain elements of a story. The exotic marvelous stems from incorrect past perceptions, where what to us may seem as completely impossible would seem rational and

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<sup>7</sup> One such example is the TASER, inspired by the novel *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (1911) which, by the title alone, is enough to deduce how such a weapon came to be patented.

possible back in the day it was written. The instrumental marvelous qualifies whenever a fabulous item features in a story. Lastly, the scientific marvelous would be what science fiction would qualify as. Here, the ‘facts’ contained in a narrative are explained in a logical manner, even if said logic is not acknowledged by contemporary science (Lem, 1974, p.230).

Horror too is a broad category, as are the things that can strike fear into humans. While fantasy and horror sometimes do overlap, as fantasy is a surprisingly versatile genre, their goals are often opposed, even if their methods are similar. The combination of the alien and the familiar can both instill a sense of wonder or a sense of fear for the unknown. That may be where the distinction between horror and fantasy lies, as their intended effects on the readers’ minds are contrary to one another. Returning to Todorov’s axis, we can easily confirm that the uncanny is a primary element of any horror story. It is entirely possible to write a horror story resorting only to the “pure” uncanny, meaning that which can shock, astonish and frighten. If a horror story presents only elements that are rationally possible, there is no indecision, hence no fantastic element according to Todorov (Lem, 1974, p.229). Should any of said elements at least imply that the supernatural was somehow involved, the story leaps into fantastic-uncanny territory, provided that a rational explanation is provided at the end. The opposite scenario, where a story is concluded by leaving out no other explanation for any of its events but the supernatural, lands on the fantastic-marvelous (Lem, 1974, p.230).

One question, however, remains. If fantasy really is one of the most prominent genres in both videogames and TTRPGs, why is that the case? This can be seen as a bit of a circular question. Is fantasy what shaped the games to become like this, or was the game formula first devised before it being decided that fantasy would suit that purpose best?

A brief look into the job of videogame writing may elucidate us. The hard truth is that most of the time, those who write a game’s story also do something else on the team. Not only that, but the writing is also not usually done in the early stages of development, but by the end. It is, in other words, meant to service and show off the game’s mechanics, rather than the writer’s vision (Miyamoto, 2018). This means that, while the genre may already be chosen from early on, a lot of fantasy elements in a videogame may instead be written in in order to justify or better suit certain game mechanics.



As mentioned above, fantasy's purpose was originally to recover the splendor and charm of real life. In my opinion, while videogames are more explicitly escapist in nature, the goals of the two directly support one another. A person in need of escapism is often in need of some 'recovery', most likely due to a world that no longer awes or instills wonder in them. Not only does fantasy help set up a videogame's rules and mechanics, but it also might appeal to a large percentage of the audiences of the videogame industry.

Another speculation of mine is that the target audience of fantasy may have been the ideal, initial audience for videogames as well. Much like *D&D*, and indeed much of the media that shall be discussed later on, videogames have in the past been a part of an 'outsider' culture. Cheaper, faster internet, as well as the advent of mobile games in 2007 have made this stereotype obsolete and no longer true (Chikhani, 2015). With videogames now covering sports, cooking, relaxing simulators and several niche genres, it can be said that the industry has learned that a diverse range of customers means greater profits, and the time of videogames as a geeky, unpopular hobby is long past us. This shall be a recurring theme in this essay too.

Whatever the reason may be, the fact is that fantasy is still a very dominant genre in many of the types of media to be analyzed in this thesis, *especially D&D*, hence my effort to expose and note all the technicalities and particularities that we have been over throughout this chapter. The tropes, conventions and expectations of Western fantasy are, as a rule, unimportant although, when relevant, they shall be discussed.

## 1.4. Fans, Wikis and Fandoms

If the appreciation of modern media had to be distinguished from all its previous forms, a mandatory element to mention would have to be the fandom. While anyone can be a fan of a work just by enjoying it, it takes significantly more effort to become a part of its fandom.

Fandoms are loosely defined groups of fans that make their appreciation of a given work part of their identity (EmpLemon, 2020). Whether they spend their time roleplaying, sharing memes related to whatever the fandom is built around or discussing theories related to its setting, fandoms have become a large part of online discourse and entertainment. The fandom differs from simply “liking” a piece of media. A lot of people “like” *Star Wars*, but a significantly smaller percentage of them will devote the time to look into and dissect its worldbuilding, characters and writing.

Two websites whose growth marks the current century as the age of the fandom are TVTropes.org and Fandom.com. Their audiences and purpose are, in many ways, similar, and each deserves an analysis of its role within the scope of a fandom and, more importantly, as a new steppingstone in the ever-changing power dynamic between figurative author and reader. As I will try to prove in this section, the existence of fandoms and the proliferation of their online spaces will be held as a signifier for the increased interpretative power consumers and readers have over the media they engage with.

TVTropes brands itself as “the all-devouring pop culture wiki”, meant to document most pieces of media thanks to written contributions of their own fandoms. By their own words, “troping” is the act of documenting and discovering tropes in media (TVTropes, 2017). In addition to its documentation of movies and books, TVTropes has extended its range to videogames and their design, fanfictions and even wikis such as theirs.

A wiki is an interesting phenomenon to document. In many ways, it serves as a “lighter” and additional way to indulge in a videogame or another given product. It is now common to witness gamers spending much of their time curating their favorite game’s wiki instead of playing it. Ironically, they write and read for hours about a game’s story, its theories, or just guides on how to get past particularly difficult parts. A wiki is, generally, a place a fan might temporarily access because of a question they have, but a place only a member of a fandom would ever frequent.

This extra form of media enjoyment forms can be seen as an expanded club that encompasses the internet, binding strangers together in their interest for a certain franchise or product. In a way, this is just a more accessible and wider form of communication about any given product that is available to the masses.

TVTropes, in its own way, embodies a wiki that covers media in a range so extensive that it covers the Holy Bible, *Grand Theft Auto* games and Japanese animation all at once. While popular franchises certainly get a lot more coverage than the rest, TVTropes enforces the rule of there being “no such thing as notability” (TVTropes, 2013), meaning that most creations qualify for documentation there.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *D&D* has already been “troped” extensively in TVTropes. There, it is fairly recognized as the codifier of several tropes, as well as treated as one of the main contributors to several pieces of media, from novels to videogames (TVTropes, 2011).

This rule, as well as the rise of wikis all over the internet, is an important factor to document the fairly recent democratization of storytelling as a whole and its implications. In fact, wikis have become so prominent that their *own rise* has been documented on TVTropes. There, troopers call it the Wiki Rule, or the notion that “if it exists, there is a wiki of it.” (TVTropes, 2017). The list of wikis in the Fandom.org domain (formerly Wikia) is so large that, if downloaded as a .txt file, it takes up 10 megabytes of space (TVTropes, 2016).

A wiki, unlike an encyclopedia, is susceptible to the masses’ judgement and editing. This means that, again, its authority dwindles. While admins and moderators still exist and ensure most things written are done according to their standards and goals, the amount of content a non-author can add to most such places surpasses an encyclopedia’s by far.

The comparison of a wiki to an encyclopedia almost begets the mention of Wikipedia. While its model is emulated by several wikis, the merits of Wikipedia stray further from pop culture and fandoms and closer to information and neutrality. Even then, Wikipedia’s significance as an intended encyclopedia where everyone can add their contribution should not be downplayed.

This, of course, makes most wikis vulnerable to misinformation and vandalism or, as some have taken to calling it, “wandalism”. “Wandalism” can be done in several ways and, depending on the wiki, it can even be seen as something amusing and worth archiving. Most wikis can

undo most “wandalism” with a couple of clicks, but certain elaborate tricks may take longer to fix.

Another side effect of the voice everyone is granted is the occasional edit war. An edit war is yet another term coined thanks to wikis, where two or more users keep trying to change an article so it describes a certain topic in the way they want, usually by reverting each other’s edits.

This chaotic management and the listing of its least fortunate consequences may incite the belief that wikis are anarchic messes with little to no cohesion. This, however, is generally not true. The still-existing hierarchy of most wikis, as well as the presence of experienced editors and readers, ensures that a populated wiki is not, as a rule, left in chaos for too long. The “wandals” and edit wars are, to put it mildly, a minor interaction in an average wiki, especially less-known ones without much controversy in their topics.

Wikis can tackle a variety of subjects, going much further than media. While it is fair to assume politically-charged wikis (a whole other topic that may continue to gain relevance in the future) generate the most controversy, edit wars and arguments can break out over anything related to fictional media too.

A wiki has several perks that mere Wikipedia articles, most of them solitary, would never achieve, especially in the eyes of a fandom. Whether more details need to be documented, or the neutral point of view fails to do the work justice, or even if discussion about the topic is wanted, wikis can become meeting points for people with similar interests all over the world. While it is possible to, for example, find a Wikipedia article about Samuel Vimes or many other characters from Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*, less-known works will have less articles devoted to them. Joe Abercrombie’s *The First Law* (2006) trilogy, as another example, has one article for itself, and one for the author. If a person wants to read or write about Logen Ninefingers or Sand dan Glokta, they will have to resort to the Fandom website.

Fans and especially fandoms are, in my view, the entity that best symbolizes the decreased power and authority of the author; not necessarily a sudden or even subtle shift of power, but a tipping of the scales a bit more towards the audience’s favor. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this would be the ability with which a fandom can now show its displeasure with the direction

a work is heading in. *Game of Thrones* may have been revolutionary as far as series, cinematography and budgets go, but it is mostly remembered for its loathed final season. Much of the criticism was aimed at characters lacking concrete motivations or their former intelligence, becoming shallow husks of their original selves and the pacing in general being too fast. Such was the fan outrage that a petition to rewrite the final season without the two showrunners reached one and a half million signatures. The reviews, perhaps unsurprisingly, plummeted during the last season (Fortress of Solitude, 2019). Not only did the fandom's discontent become nearly impossible to ignore, but many of its members decided to outright *reject* the disappointing ending and instead crafting their own through fanfiction. I shall return to this part on a later chapter, as fanfiction itself is a topic that warrants a lot more depth than a single paragraph.

Fans and fandoms cannot be mentioned without at least a mention of the modern interpretation of a work's canon. The word itself is vast enough to make any attempt at defining it daunting. However, in the world of fiction, 'canon' (or *fanon*, a growing portmanteau of the words 'fan' and 'canon') is basically used to denote what a fandom, collectively, believes to be 'official' in a story. That is to say, a certain event, in a certain fictional world, is widely regarded as having happened 'for real' in that fictional universe. Once again, the biggest contrast that fanon is paired with, is fanfiction. Returning to *Game of Thrones* yet again, it would be very strange to see someone upset just because Daenerys Targaryen was killed off in an obscure fanfiction. It did, however, upset thousands of fans to see her getting killed off 'for real', by writers with actual power over the fictional universe. Again, a single person rejecting the fanon does not cause many ripples. It is, after all, impossible to please everyone. Even something packed full with fanservice and pandering would have its share of disapproval from fans and non-fans alike to whom that sort of thing does not appeal. When a large portion of the fandom disapproves of the fanon, however, situations like that of *Game of Thrones* occur<sup>8</sup>.

Another particularly recent egregious moment that, in my opinion, perfectly illustrates these increasingly frequent conflicts between fans and their content producers, would be Marvel's

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<sup>8</sup> It is especially common nowadays to find this sort of occurrence in long-running, popular franchises that must be retconned or reinvented for one reason or another. A mixture of corporate pandering and the increased political slacktivism present in media consumption is often responsible for the reimagining of certain characters or worlds. Of course, the problems arise when what has already been established by the fanon must be rewritten, alienating several fans who had grown invested in the world or plot that may have effectively been wiped out.

*Secret Empire* series (2017). It is there that Captain America is eventually shown to be, in fact, part of Hydra. It is worth noting that two Jewish men designed the character in the 1940s, debuting him from the start as an opposing force to Nazism (Shiach, 2017). To see him working for Hydra, a fascistic organization antithetical to what Cap was originally designed to be, has naturally enraged a lot of fans. While the death threats (Riesman, 2019) or the accusations of Nick Spencer being a Nazi or anything close to it (Shiach, 2017) once he defended his decision to make the story that way are completely unjustifiable, the fact is this outrage only came to be due to fans' awareness not only of how a character is constructed, but also of the intent and legacy of those who have constructed it. Whereas the *Game of Thrones* fandom felt outraged mainly because the quality of the writing plummeted, Marvel's fans were disappointed because, even if the writing may have been acceptable, their beloved character was put through a plotline that was completely uncharacteristic of him, and thus felt betrayed. I would argue here that the outcome of both, once we look at the consequences in the realm of writing, is still very similar. Poor writing can, and in *Game of Thrones*'s case *has* been reflected in uncharacteristic behaviors and the breaking of previously established rules in a fanon. Inversely, even if a written work is handled masterfully, if the writer misunderstands or has a vision completely opposite to what the character is meant to be, will still lead to a very similar sense of betrayal by the fans, because to *them*, even if something is well written, it may still be completely contradictory to what they know about their franchise. In short, it is safe to assume fan loyalty is mostly related to their knowledge and expectations about a given setting, and pushing back against it tends to be a losing bet.

This would perhaps be a good time to return to the concept of the death of the author, by Roland Barthes. Given my extended familiarity with the *Game of Thrones* controversy, I shall confine this analysis to that example, instead of Marvel's. The disappointed fans' disregard for the outcome of the *Game of Thrones* series can be seen as a willful discarding of the official<sup>9</sup> ending, to instead write or conceive their own endings, or in hopes that George R. R. Martin's books deviate significantly from what the series showed. Stannis's supporters, for example, chose to treat the season from the latter's death on as anathema. Daenerys's supporters did so during the final episodes of the last one. It speaks volumes, to say the least, that we live in an era when a creator's vision may be disregarded if it does not please an audience. There is clearly a much closer link to the reader's enjoyment than their interpretation, however, in that many

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<sup>9</sup> Using the word 'canonical' here is problematic, as that word would suggest there was consent when such an ending came to be. In reality, there was anything but.

members of the audience discarded the ending because of disappointment with it. In this instance, perhaps, it may be argued that Barthes's concept is not fully applicable here. I should, however, point out that this disappointment has, in many ways, sprouted from the fact that viewers did not interpret the characters to expect such behavior from them. Humans are capable of forming parasocial relationships with fictional characters, not unlike those they form with each other. Not only does this help explain the disappointment with the season in question (Kessler, 2019), it sets up an expectation for those relationships. In other words, if a writer suddenly betrays the image that they constructed for an audience about a given character, there is going to be backlash. In this instance, it is possible to say that a writer (or an author, using Barthes's terms) that wants their audience (in Barthes's terms, readers) to show support or approval for the work in question, may often be restrained by the original confinements of their creations. Another example of fan backlash after an out of character moment (in the readers' eyes) is the ending of the series *How I Met Your Mother*, where the character growth of its main cast did not seem to lead to the canon ending<sup>10</sup> (Kessler, 2019). While the writers chose to stand for their chosen ending, an alternative one was eventually released. This may not have been due to fan backlash (as Carter Bays's tweet confirms, the alternative ending was created thanks to the team's indecision between the two possibilities from the start (Kreps, 2014)). There were, however, several disillusioned fans who must have chosen to interpret that ending as the 'real' one. It can be said, in this one instance, that a single franchise, in its end, was divided into two parallel fanons, both with similar levels of credibility thanks to the author's equal involvement in them. This is not to say there is not a 'real' ending, as most people would, some perhaps grudgingly, admit that the first ending is indeed the one backed by the show's canon. It is, instead, meant to illustrate how fans do not necessarily rally behind someone *other* than the author, should their story no longer satisfy them.

It is still on this topic that I will justify why my chosen stance on this subject is closer to Tolkien than to Barthes. It should be noted, first of all, that fans did not outright discard the authors, as much as they discarded their ideas. This is evident in the hundreds of thousands of fans that signed a petition in order to get HBO to redo the final season (Kessler, 2019). Even if the authors' vision for the final season was dismissed, their importance was not. A fanon, I would

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<sup>10</sup> This is quite ironic, as that ending had been planned from the beginning of the series. The debate of whether the fans or the writers are right can constitute the essence of Barthes's theories about the power struggle between author and reader if it took the step to serialized writing.

argue, is very hard to separate from a single author under normal circumstances. It can be seen as ironic that the talk of authorial consolidation of power came up when discussing *Game of Thrones*. Martin's power, while jeopardized once it was shared with people closer to the fandom<sup>11</sup>, was once again vindicated by the displeasure said fandom felt during the final season. Among the discontentment, some people chose to wait for George R. R. Martin's 'real' ending, while others wanted a better ending for the series. In either case, however, their reliance on the author's input was explicit, to say the least. A third alternative to these two approaches, however; one that goes further in the act of deposing the author, will present itself in a later chapter.

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<sup>11</sup> This brings us back to long-running franchises again. The fact is that the longer the franchise lasts, the likelier it gets for it to be purchased by a corporation or simply change writers. In other words, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain a growing fandom, especially since new writers and new fans alike are often far more willing to retcon and relaunch something that old fans and old writers would be far more attached to. Unless a single writer is deliberately inconsistent in their handling of their fictional world, it is very hard for a single person in charge of a franchise to invoke this much outrage from a fandom.



## 1.5. On Writing and Its Analysis

To say *D&D* requires and stimulates creativity may no longer be a controversial statement, unless we are to confine ourselves in fringe political discussions. I would argue, however, that much of its interest stems from the players and the DM's passion for writing and comprehension of how it works (or fails to do so). This chapter will be devoted to the increase in the interest people have been showing about the writing process and storytelling.

It may be somewhat surprising to learn that a growing number of people on the internet are devoting time and energy to analyzing writing and discussing some of its pitfalls. Knowing that, however, it should practically be expected for many in such communities to use the language and terminology of TVTropes, which is a common occurrence among said circles (TVTropes, 2013; Overly Sarcastic Productions, 2017; TVTropes, 2013; Terrible Writing Advice, 2020). The first example, in particular, is so directly linked to the kind of subject that interests TVTropes that her own drawing wound up on its page on the trope Five Man Band.

In this chapter, our two main focuses shall be the increased audience for media criticism online and the conversely increased audience for writing guides in general. While the main website that shall be dwelt on is YouTube, a few others shall be looked into too, albeit more briefly. Media criticism is a very popular genre in YouTube, where channels of varying sizes and approachability tackle different pieces depending on the reviewer's tastes, views and opinions. While videogames and movies tend to be the most popular foci, certain channels have taken to focusing on books and less-known pieces of media. It is worth noting that this is largely thanks the shift in YouTube audiences' taste for commentary channels.

The growth in demand for this type of content may not be nearly as impressive as the second one mentioned above. The legacy of commentary channels on YouTube dates back to a relatively controversial figure whose channel went by the name LeafyIsHere. It is impossible to effectively pin down who invented the commentary channel due to the vast amount of content creators that exist in the website. It is, however, known, that LeafyIsHere capitalized greatly on this genre, and became the dominant channel for a long time once it took off (EmpLemon, 2018). Although that early, caustic kind of commentary had little to do with the one seen today, the fact still stands that commentary channels have grown to be among the most reliable archetypes for youtubers to follow, and LeafyIsHere's success was an early testament to that.

While ‘commentary channel’ is a label that includes media criticism, the term might not automatically prompt people to think about that kind of content. Instead, commentary channels have become more commonly associated with politics, religion and culture wars that have slowly taken over many online spaces<sup>12</sup>. This is the primary reason why, although many far less confrontational alternatives exist, I will attempt to avoid the term ‘commentary channel’, instead favoring ‘media criticism’ or another alternative along those lines.

Nowadays, media criticism channels are so common it is actually possible to find a channel for almost any approach, tone or set of beliefs one might desire. This variety is a true testament to how wide the audience for popular culture has become, and how much it cares about the quality of the product it is given. It must be noted that monetary incentives certainly play their own part in the shaping of a channel’s identity, and oftentimes the most viable strategy is to hold off sharing controversial opinions so as to reach the widest audience possible. Anything too reactionary, too progressive, or overall too sectarian might cripple a channel’s ability to appeal to the maximum number of people possible. The fact that many content creators aim to maximize views (and thus profit) by toning down their own personality can be seen as both a good and a bad sign. The obvious bad side is the seeping of capitalist interests into the average content creator on the platform. The somewhat harder to notice upside to this, however, is that this proves how diverse audiences have become for the same kinds of content. Content creators becoming aware of their growing audience’s differences is in my opinion an underrated phenomenon that is, ironically, taking place in the online world, where most people are faceless. It must be acknowledged how deeply the commercial aspect of popular culture influences it, and its ups and downs will continue to feature later in this study, as they already have earlier on.

An interesting side-effect of this growing audience for criticism is that the criticism itself becomes a target of metacriticism. In other words, audiences have grown increasingly aware and critical of the products they enjoy, and this puts a critic under unprecedented scrutiny. This

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of this abound, from video essays criticizing other video essays to rants and commentaries about trendy political events or topics. It must also be noted that media criticism itself may be put in the service of political commentary or worse, propaganda. The topic of cultural warfare is certainly worth expanding upon academically, especially since it seems to be moving towards being yet another segment of popular culture in itself, as consumers become more engaged (though not necessarily more informed, it must be admitted) with media, and devoted to aligning their tastes with something that matches their views.

means that, should a critic proclaim that a movie widely seen as mediocre is instead good, chances are they will face backlash. One example of this is the YouTube channel AngryJoeShow, whose stellar review of James Gunn and David Ayer's film "*Suicide Squad*" (2016)<sup>13</sup> proved to generate a lot of controversy (AngryJoeShow, 2016). While it is fair to suggest that a lot of this stems from mob rule and other such effects, it still stands as an example of how a critic's word was not taken as gospel, and instead was met with disapproval and skepticism. The phrase 'everyone is a critic' has never been truer, for better and for worse.

It must be said the above point makes it sound like we are actually lurching towards a tyranny of sorts, where the audience dictates and demands to be appeased by the critic. I cannot deny that the internet, in particular, makes the creation of cults of personality around content creators a very frequent occurrence<sup>14</sup>. To link this to the internet, however, is somewhat disingenuous. The concept of 'public opinion' has emerged practically a century ago, and the stereotypical wrong angry mob wielding torches and pitchforks has in itself been a trope that can be dated back to the days the Bible was written in. To talk about tyranny or mob rule among audiences as a phenomenon of today only is to discard a consistent human tendency to follow the crowd throughout the centuries. It is impossible to mention 'public opinion' without bringing up Walter Lippmann's controversial work of the same name. According to Lippmann, the omniscient citizen is an impossible ideal, one that truly hampers the concept of democracy as long as it is applied to something more complex than a village (Lippmann, 1922). Among his unkind comparisons to the fools that must be led by elites in any consumer society, the words 'herd' and 'barbarian' stand out. Looking at online echo chambers through this lens may make it sound like Lippmann's little faith in the masses is justified, as they are more eager to follow others than they are to think critically. While it is impossible to attribute critical thinking to any echo chamber, I would still refuse to call my previous AngryJoeShow example such a

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<sup>13</sup> While I do not consider myself in a position fit to define objectively whether the movie is bad or not, it is a lot easier to find negative reviews than positive ones. In other words, while not necessarily wrong, his opinion can at least be called woefully unpopular. The fact that some people gave the movie a 10/10 before it even came out, only for it to substantially go down once it aired is further proof that this divide may be less about movie quality and more about brand loyalty to DC. While some may still (with some reason) consider this just mob rule, it is worth noting that YouTubers swaying their fans (sometimes to the point where it borders a less serious personality cult) is a far more common occurrence than this.

<sup>14</sup> Using a rather coarse term from the internet, this is often called 'circlejerking'. The expression is meant to convey the idea of a group of men in a circle engaging in masturbation, a fitting comparison to a fruitless online discussion where every single person holds the same beliefs and the same opinion gets reinforced over and over again. Alternatives to this slang include groupthink and echo chambers, which convey similar ideas, though in a slightly less negative way.

thing. Returning to the angry mob trope, it is possible to find countless examples of YouTubers making the joke before or after stating an unpopular opinion, and nearly always, in my experience, the response has been generally positive<sup>15</sup>. In other words, my belief is that the best course of action as a critic is not to foster an echo-chamber among one's followers, but instead to be self-aware enough to know when something is bound to go against what is considered mainstream. It is less of an issue about self-censorship than it is about self-awareness.

Modern YouTube may not be what anyone thinks about when the enlightenment of the masses is brought up. Its reputation (and, to put it bluntly, a lot of its popular content too) are not stellar, to say the least. I would argue, however, that beneath the vapid exterior of clickbait, formulaic videos and ruthless capitalism, the website has somehow managed to foster a certain kind of intellect and concentration among the users that decide to dig a little deeper.

First and foremost, it is important to note that YouTube's copyright system is remarkably strict, sometimes beyond what is reasonable to expect. This means many reviewers must resort to loops of the same footage to prevent their videos from being taken down. Without video support, there is usually a demand for the spoken word to be pertinent and captivating, and book reviewers and writers must plan their own videos accordingly too. In this regard, it is fair to assume the screen and the pen are often exposed through similar formulas on YouTube.

Once more returning to the topic of *Game of Thrones* and the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books, we once could have found a fitting example of a critic on YouTube. Formerly known as Ideas of Ice and Fire, the channel Quinn's Ideas has largely moved to covering and discussing Frank Herbert's "*Dune*" franchise (1965). However, before doing so, his videos critiquing the series and expounding on the books' universe with his own theories easily had the most engagement.

It can be seen as remarkable that a person's own voice and script accompanied by some fitting artwork of the book in question are enough to hold a viewer's interest for several videos. There is a plethora of lengthy videos on YouTube that still bolster high levels of engagement, many of them with over an hour of length. This brings us back to Johnson's point on popular culture making us smarter. Most of us have already heard the concern of YouTube, along with its

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<sup>15</sup> A good example of this would be The Cosmonaut Variety Hour's review of the Sam Raimi Spider-Man trilogy (2018), in which he quite openly admits he may be 'pushing it this time'. Despite the significant number of dislikes, the acknowledgement that such an opinion was going to be controversial made it, paradoxically, better received by his viewers.

modern media peers, turning children into zombies with the attention-span of an insect. I would take this opportunity to instead argue, inversely, that learning to navigate through YouTube content to find creators that are truly worthwhile boosts not only a person's attention-span, but also their knowledge about topics they are passionate about.

## 1.6. Text Adventures, Fanfictions and Videogames; Technology's Impact on Interactive Storytelling

Interactive storytelling has a longer history than we often give it credit for. Ancient Greece, to use the most known example, relied on it not only for entertainment like we do today, but also to perpetuate their community's values (Beitz, 2014, p.3). One such value, *kleos*, would be the immortality a hero would earn to himself and his family, bestowed upon them by none other than the poet, after a sufficiently heroic feat was accomplished (Beitz, 2014, p.3). In this instance, the level of interactivity between narrative and the audience was the encouragement for heroism. Heroic deeds would hopefully inspire poets across the land to narrate them. In turn, the poets and their epic tales would inspire the young to outdo the previous heroes. More than inspiration and assimilation, however, these stories were also meant to teach people about each other, to let them see things through different perspectives and thus feel more empathy towards one another (Beitz, 2014, pp.3-4). Looking back at Nussbaum's arguments for the cultivation of humanity, I would say the potential for her ideas applied to narrative have already been noticed, perhaps not in entirety, millennia before us.

Recent technological advancements, however, have made it easier for people to interact with narratives and play a part in the storytelling. While neither can still compare to a human's improvisational skills, a videogame with multiple endings has a lot more flexibility than a book, as far as user input goes. We must note it is fallacious to assume technology was needed to give birth to this structure of storytelling. Ayn Rand's play *Night of January 16<sup>th</sup>*, dating as far back as 1934, already allowed the audience to judge the defendant as either innocent or guilty (Branden, 1986, pp. 122-124). It is still not unfair, though, to point out that technology has effectively revolutionized the concept of storytelling as we know it. From text adventures to the reappropriation and continuous appreciation of the same story parts, narrative would be in a much more static place without modern technological developments. The invention of the text adventure can be seen as an attempt at automatizing *D&D* for single-player games. The recent developments in artificial intelligence still make it very possible that in the near future, *D&D* sessions will be fully managed by a machine which is tasked with all the creative process of the story.

To find developments on such a front, one needs to look no further back than the 60s, where non-narrative software was already being designed and could be seen as interactive fiction. A very early example of AI's potential in this kind of environment gained visibility through the computer program SHRDLU. Designed between 1968 and 1970 by Terry Winograd, SHRDLU's purpose was to be a program that could actually understand language and obey commands thanks to it (Winograd, 1971, p.13). In this case, the program itself was likened to a basic robot with the ability to see and move geometric pieces with different colors or sizes around on a table (Winograd, 1971, p.14). It is worth noting that Winograd's goals, both technological and linguistic, had nothing to do with narrative in general. To sum up his project's objectives, we can say that SHRDLU was designed in an attempt to make a machine learn human language and to make its creators understand how human language works (Winograd, 1971). The step forward that this project embodied, however, should not be downplayed. With three different shapes, three different colors and multiple sizes, amounting to a total of nine different objects with various characteristics, the program was able to distinguish them all. More importantly than that, it did so while memorizing much of its own movements and the positioning of the objects while they happened (Winograd, 1971, pp.35-60).

SHRDLU's groundbreaking work is now likened a lot more to text adventures built for amusement rather than academic purposes. There are certain differences that must be accentuated, however. The most obvious difference between SHRDLU and a regular text adventure would perhaps be the lack of 'interpretation' on behalf of the machine in case of the latter. Most text adventures, as a rule, are designed before being played. In other words, the machine does not interpret what the player means when they say they want to go forward. Instead, the machine has already been programmed to have a particular answer or an array of them, should the player tell it to go forward. In other words, a traditional text adventure will dispense text that it has been given in response to input that has been predicted by its maker beforehand. SHRDLU, meanwhile, has too many possibilities to take this approach. The machine will 'understand' when the player tells it via text to grab the big blue pyramid, much like it will understand the remaining shapes and colors and react accordingly to the request. The line between SHRDLU and text adventure, however, is becoming thinner. AI Dungeon, for example, is a project that seeks to create an endless text adventure that is entirely regulated by AI and the storytelling conventions it already knows. In this instance, the human entity that

feeds the text adventure with text to react to the player is gradually stripped away, replaced by artificial intelligence.

AI Dungeon is directly linked with *D&D*, in that its creator, Nick Walton, sought at first to create an AI DM (Lim, 2020). It can be said that a text adventure, in many cases, is an attempt at automatizing the role of a DM, so this development comes across as more of an eventuality than an inexplicable leap in a random direction. There is a clear distinction between AI Dungeon and the traditionally built text adventure. In my opinion, the easiest way to currently design a text adventure would be through Quest, an online program that makes programming knowledge optional to do just that. For that reason, Quest and its creations will be the main comparisons I shall make to AI Dungeon.

Quest itself can be compared to a Microsoft Office program, where a creator can add text and assign it to various options, rooms or objects, depending on the kind of project. To give an example of a text adventure I myself designed, the player starts trapped in the basement of a garrisoned fort, with the objective of escaping. The ‘things’<sup>16</sup> they can see in this room are a mouse, a backpack (its contents unknown until it is opened) and their own bindings. A third category, apart from rooms and objects, is the ‘verb’ one. As a creator, I had to predict the best I could which verbs the players would type to interact with the objects. ‘Open satchel’ is a far more obvious choice than, for example, ‘talk mouse’, but both are still plausible choices in a fantasy setting. Needless to say, verbs I did not believe would ever be typed, such as ‘wash mouse’, will just compel the text adventure to reply “I don’t understand your command”. In other words, all of the text adventure is dependent on my input. It will only go as far as my predictions, as a creator, went. In the case of that particular escape mission, the game was as linear as possible, barring a few treasures that could optionally be acquired. This limitation does not exist with AI, as AI Dungeon testifies. The machine, in this case, actively interprets what the player types and reacts accordingly to it. The game goes as far as encouraging the players to type complex orders instead of simple ones with one verb and one noun only, and will even attempt to recognize the player’s character’s speech, whenever something is typed between quotation marks.

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<sup>16</sup> Objects in this specific case include anything at all apart from the location itself. This explains why characters, invisible objects and decorations are included in this category. Quest then lets creators attribute different characteristics to their objects to make the distinction later on.



As might be expected, AI Dungeon's primary focus (and thus its most developed one) is fantasy. Anyone familiar with text adventures will know they too branch out from fantasy formulas, so much that RPG elements seep into them. One example of an RPG trope that was imported to text adventures is that of scaling gear. This trope, ironically enough, goes even further back to fantasy literature itself – Bilbo Baggins obtaining Sting in “*The Hobbit*” is one such example (Call, Whitlock, Voorhees, 2012, p.17). While many players would argue the purpose in both RPGs and text adventures of scaling gear is to better equip characters for the challenges presented by the world they are in, the fact is that this also helps uphold the fantastic construct that immerses the players in the first place.

Text adventures, much like gamebooks, offer readers ramifications to their stories that were largely unheard of in mainstream videogames until decades later. The first one, *Adventure*, was designed around 1975, by Will Crowther, in the latter's effort to entertain and bond with his children. While its original form was mostly based on real life with fantasy elements, *Adventure*'s discovery propelled it towards a more fantastic setting, once again drawing inspiration from Tolkien's writing. This formula found a lot of success while computers lacked the power for much competition as far as entertainment went. Nowadays, it is still entirely possible to both design and play recently-made text adventures for diverse genres, although fantasy, perhaps unsurprisingly, remains the most numerous option (cite textadventures.co.uk and its data).

Gamebooks, on the other hand, are trickier to link to *D&D*. In fact, their formula is often distant enough for many of them to not even be automatically associated with fantasy or RPGs in general. One good example of a real-life gamebook, however, is the self-explanatorily named *Choose Your Own Adventure* franchise, which still has its own links to fantasy. Only released four years after Crowther's invention, it would go on to sell 250 million copies of more than 180 different books in the next following decades (Lodge, 2007).

A gamebook differs from a text adventure in the way the ‘freedom’ of the narrative is given to the player. In a text adventure, the narrative is built step-by-step, with each event often being marked by two or three lines in the text that keeps moving upwards. No doubt, Abbott's early definition of narrative fits this in a very literal sense. The player is expected to take matters into their own hands and often do every little action needed to proceed, sometimes even against a

timer provided by the adventure itself, where a continuous event pops up in response to their every action, until either the time runs out or the player solves whatever puzzle must be solved.

Meanwhile, gamebooks take a different approach, in that the player is often a watcher of ‘their’ own story. The decisions are much fewer and more spread out. Sometimes entire pages go by before the reader has a say on whatever happens. However, it is fair to assume that the reader’s decisions carry a lot more weight in gamebooks, as a single choice might often lock them out of a series of endings and set them on the path towards several others. While there is no way to truly quantify the amount of ‘freedom’ and decide which of the two forms of media grants the most of it to its players, there is one undeniable fact about both; the democratic narrative ‘freedom’ they grant their players or readers is still entirely dependent on the author.

It may be favorable to compare this with locking a child in a room full of toys. The child might feel like the possibilities are endless, and they might indeed suffice for a long, long time, but any mathematician will point out that the child, if given enough time, will exhaust all the possibilities for the toys at their disposal. This same argument can be made for videogames, no matter how modern, and it brings us directly to their topic.

Videogames have endured a lengthy war to fight for their place in academia. The progress they made on this field can only be mimicked by the progress they made in mainstream society and, proportionally, in technological advancements. The fact is, despite the attempts, many of them successful, to link videogames to other kinds of media, they are fundamentally different from most of what came before them. There is a required input for something to happen on the screen, a sort of dependence on the player’s actions. More than that, it gives the player access to a navigable screen and an avatar of sorts to assume control of (Wolf, Perron, 2005, p.12). Of course, these differences were only seriously noted once videogames became an allowed topic in academia. This growth of the media form into acceptance by intellectuals and society alike will not be exclusive to it; as we will soon find out, but it certainly has become an interest general enough to link different fandoms and to influence other kinds of media with its sheer economic and popular power. With this in mind, it is possible to return to our previous comparison between the room full of toys, gamebooks and videogames. Several games are praised for their branching gameplay and storyline, often rightly so, but never is a player allowed to deviate from the courses created by the developers. The most a player can do is cheat

or exploit it, and even then, their aim will often be to just reach the goal created for them a bit more easily<sup>17</sup>.

The above criticism is not meant to, in any way, undermine or negate the pleasure of engaging with any of these forms of entertainment. On the contrary, engaging with and producing these kinds of media is often a substitute for TTRPGs when no other players are available, as I myself can testify. It is, however, meant to illustrate how *D&D* and its many siblings still manage to keep ahead of technological storytelling thanks to the fact that, assuming the DM is good at their role, the players will not head towards any ending or outcome without directly or indirectly consenting to it.

Another form of criticism that is often directed towards videogames is meant to tackle their consumerist nature, much like a lot of new media. Videogames, however, are not as much consumed as they are interacted with. Just like *D&D*, a lot of new media has shattered the old paradigm of the audience being confined to the role of consumer. Instead, it is more accurate to call them ‘viewers’, considering the increased agency and production they engage in when it comes to new kinds of media (Roig et al, 2009, p.90). There is significant overlap between this and the rise of the wikis in the age of the internet. If there are people tending and writing dozens of articles about a single videogame, one they might not even play anymore, has said game really been consumed? Rather, I would argue, it has pushed its viewers to interact with it outside its existence and even create by themselves content that is directly linked to it.

The rise of new media has provoked a shift in paradigm about how users deal/interact with it. New media has become easier to appropriate, and it has enabled the people to produce through it. In other words, the way to ‘consume’ this kind of media is wildly different from how old media was engaged with in the past. It is no longer accurate to pin the users down as mere ‘readers’ in this dynamic. Instead, there are writerly behaviors to be found in the public and its interactions with new media (Roig et al, 2009, p.90).

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<sup>17</sup> There may, for example, be ‘bad’ and ‘good’ endings to a game. This may matter to a player invested in the story, but neither the good nor the bad ending go beyond what a developer ‘plans’. Both options (and all the following alternatives that may also be programmed in) are entirely handed to the player’s range of possibilities from the beginning by the storyteller. Looking at it from the story’s point of view, there is no way for the player to escape the confines created by the videogame’s programmer and writers. This is inverse to a *D&D* session, where the end of a story often is not ‘programmed’ in any way, and might surprise all the storytellers involved.

The advent of the internet has also greatly impacted, if not entirely enabled, the idea and concept of fanfiction. I do not think the idea of writing about characters of another author's work is either novel or dependent on technology. If we want to look back at such concepts in the past, we could certainly find elements of fanfiction in *Faust*, where Helen of Troy makes an appearance, or *The Lusiads*, where several Olympian gods, long past the time of their worship, participate and influence the story's outcome and events. Examples of characters and settings being intertextually used, relying on the audience's previous knowledge of them abound, from Arthurian tales to Christian retelling of Greco-Roman stories for their moral.

The key distinction between fanfiction and my previous examples is, in my opinion, the purpose of the writing itself. Fanfiction is often written out of a necessity, a desire to spend more time in a given setting, with its given characters. It is seldom written for a commercial purpose, or even publishing outside of obscure corners on the internet. A fanfiction exists primarily in function to an author's work, using Barthes's terms, rather than on its own. It is clearly, even by its own name and admission, a work that admits being made by a reader. It may be helpful, in this instance, to analyze Foucault's response to Barthes's concept of the Death of the Author. In short, Foucault argues that the figure of the author cannot be simply taken away; the "author-function" is still important, if not essential to textual interpretation (Fathallah, 2017, p.20). Fanfiction ties into this in several ways, especially when it comes to analyzing the power held by this function and giving an audience a collective consciousness about its structure.

Let us return to *A Song of Ice and Fire* once more. This time, instead of its serialization, we shall focus on the author himself. George R. R. Martin has, over the years, adopted a rather unpopular stance on fanfiction; one that reasserts his authorial power and seeks to control it. There is a long, paternal tradition that links authorship to fatherhood, a trope Martin himself resorts to in order to assert his dominance (Fathallah, 2017, pp.115-116). According to him (2010), protection of his creation and its economic worth are the key reasons for his opposition to the genre. It is aptly pointed out that Martin's role as an author is stripped of its absolute power when he gets involved in the *Game of Thrones* series, which went as far as being called 'fanfiction' by its own showrunners (Fathallah, 2017, p.117). Despite its glaring criticism by the final seasons, the series (at its strongest, at least) earned itself Martin's approval, despite Martin's 'children' being used in many ways he did not originally intend them to. It is interesting to note that Beinhoff and Weiss, the showrunners, refused to consider themselves

authors, despite their clear power and authority to make several changes to the show<sup>18</sup> (Fathallah, 2017, p.117).

Martin may have made his opposition to fanfiction clear as day, but the fact still stands that fanfiction, even of Westerosi characters and events, exists. The TV series may have played its part in this. It is entirely possible to find fanfiction based on the series instead of the books, in order to be respectful to Martin's wishes (Fathallah, 2017, p.119). A problem arises when these fanfictions reference book-exclusive events *and* when book and series coincide. The line that divides the two is fluid, to say the least (Fathallah, 2017, p.119). A few fanfictions have gained so much traction (in particular during and after the show's final season) that they were even recommended by other websites (Fortress of Solitude, 2019). This is, however, redundant when it comes to an author's ability to restrain what can and cannot be done with their work. The fact that fanfiction exists *despite* the author's condemnation is worthy of inspection through the lenses of Roland Barthes's philosophy.

I should, at this point, explain thoroughly that, although my view of fanfiction is positive, none of that favorable view is owed to its own quality. Being the massive dumping ground of content that the internet is, the quality of fanfiction can range from terrible to on par with, if not superior to the original author's writing. For the point I make about it, though, the quality (or lack thereof) of fanfiction has little bearing on the matter. I will, however, present two reasons to see fanfiction (including the stereotypically terrible kinds) in a favorable light. One will be from a reader's perspective, the other from an author's. The first, encompassing the majority of the population's point of view, may be the easiest to explain, especially as it may then help explain the latter too. There is one key reason to both read and write fanfiction, that motive being passion. Fanfiction is a work explicitly written by readers, most likely *for* readers too. The authorial position is mostly stripped away, as anyone's interpretation (writer and reader alike), is worth the same in a non-canonical setting. This interpretative freedom only has value because of the devotion the fans have to a given work. It is very rare (if it at all happens) for someone

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<sup>18</sup> Among these, some of the most notable ones are the change of Arya Stark serving as Tywin Lannister's cupbearer instead of Roose Bolton's, the exclusion of Victarion Greyjoy and Trystane Martell's very reduced role, and the controversial Sand Snakes plotline that was panned by most fans. These three examples prove, in my opinion, that deviation from Martin's vision has not always necessarily upset the fandom. Arya's servitude to Tyrion was quite applauded by most fans, while the omission of Victarion Greyjoy is hardly ever brought up in such discussions.

to write a fanfiction about something they are not devoted to, or at least invested in. As an author, even if Martin's comparison of my creations to my children would ring true, I will certainly be tempted to feel proud should anyone enjoy my characters enough to want to write and spend more time with them. This is not to say, again, that I would without a doubt enjoy reading or even the concept of the fanfiction at hand, but that is beyond the point. It is not written for an author, in any case, but for their readers. This is not to say that an author enjoying their fanfiction would not thrill them<sup>19</sup>, obviously. It is, however, fair to say that many authors may become uncomfortable with what people on the internet, many of them in total anonymity, may feel like doing with their characters, myself included. The reason an author ought to like fanfiction, in my opinion, is not linked to its quality or content, though. The mere existence of the fanfiction should give the author a sense of achievement; after all, it is *their* work that the readers are actively choosing to spend more time with and expand upon. In my opinion, the *real* reason an author ought to worry would be a sudden decrease in fanfiction related to their own work, as that would imply interest in their creation was dwindling.

It is worth noting Tolkien, despite being mentioned as an example of a moderate stance on Barthes's philosophy earlier on, too showed his objections to the concept of fanfiction. When at first confronted by it, his first reaction was to dismiss both the work and its creator in a rather unpleasant way, going as far as calling one of the fans brave enough to send him their fanfiction an 'ass' (Abrahamson, 2013, p.53).

*"I do not know what the legal position is, I suppose that since one cannot claim property in inventing proper names, that there is no legal obstacle to this young ass publishing his sequel, if he could find any publisher, either respectable or disreputable, who would accept such tripe."*

J. R. R. Tolkien, letter 292

This may at first make Tolkien very similar to Martin when it comes to their opinion on fanfiction. While I would be more inclined to excuse the first's squeamishness when it comes to the prospect of someone else using his creation, mainly thanks to the time period he lived in, I would still suggest that his previous words were primarily directed at the prospect of

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<sup>19</sup> This, in TV Tropes, is called the Approval of God, as in any instance where a creator shows approval for any creation made by their fans.

publication, rather than the simple creation of fanfiction. I must clarify this is not yet another attempt to somehow coerce agreement with a modern worldview out of a dead person's words. I am fairly aware that such a thing is seldom productive. All I see myself safe in pointing out, in this case, is the primarily legal concern about copyright and publishing that immediately sprung to Tolkien's mind, a fitting concern for a man first dealing with the concept of someone else touching his intellectual property.

Still on this topic, Tolkien did eventually consider the burden of worldbuilding entirely his, further alluding to his distaste for having others interfere with his work (Abrahamson, 2013, p.54). It can be a bit risky, if not dishonest, to imply that letting his fans handle some of the worldbuilding would be entirely beneficial. While it would certainly share a burden that would be too much for any mortal man, and fans do often have as much passion as their authors for the world they built, if not more, it must still be acknowledged that people have different views and ideals that can alter the shape that the worlds they build take<sup>20</sup>. This is not to say that every single fan is unfit to help their author in the art of worldbuilding, or even an assessment about the value of the work created by them. It is just an argument less based in law, unlike those made by both Martin and Tolkien, and instead based on the quality of the written product for the rest of the fans.

It should be fairly obvious that having the chance to work on worldbuilding with an author is practically every fan's dream. While I am certain that my previous argument may be unpleasant to a few people, I must still reiterate that I draw value from fanfiction in a way that I believe coincides with Tolkien's statements about allegory. To me, fanfiction is not just a representation of a written work's longevity and relevance to netizens. To me, the act of reading fanfiction, especially the most popular works, is a way to better grasp popular perceptions among a fandom about certain characters, plotlines or endings. In other words, it is a way for the author to draw meaning from the drawn meanings of their fans.

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<sup>20</sup> I am all too aware, for example, that despite my passion and immersion in the world of "*A Song of Ice and Fire*", my writing style would not be compatible with George R. R. Martin's. This is not to say anything about the quality of my writing in itself (not that I can even compare it to Martin's), and it must not be misunderstood to refer to discrepant quality. It is, instead, meant to draw on style and tone, two critical elements of writing that determine not only how stories end but also how worlds are built. I, and without a doubt thousands of other fans, would simply be unable to create a tonally coherent canon with the rest of Martin's writing if I were given the chance.

A fitting way to conclude this chapter would be to simply state that Tolkien, much like anyone in his day, was very much unprepared to the level of involvement fans would have in the agreed-upon construction of a fanon. Technology, of course, has made many of these changes possible, but it would be disingenuous to assume the gradual increases in literacy for the popular have not played their part too. By this, I mean the level of competence we can expect from fans and anyone in the 'reader' position, which has steadily grown as media engagement has become more and more colossal, marketable and widespread<sup>21</sup>.

These factors, combined, should give us enough of an idea about the current state of popular culture. If anything, we can expect these trends to become reinforced in the future with more developments in this same direction. With all of this in mind, I believe us ready to finally let go of the topic of popular culture and its empowerment of the 'readers', to instead finally move on exclusively do *D&D* and its inner rules, social constructs and subconscious agreements between players and DM alike. Everything we have discussed this far will still feature in specific points, particularly when we deal with Barthes's author-reader dynamic and power relations, but also popular culture's increased role in most people's daily lives. Finally, however, with all of this in mind, we can set aside this admittedly lengthy and theoretical first half to really analyze the object I set out to study in the first place and how it ties into everything that has been discussed this far.

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<sup>21</sup> The invention of streaming services like Netflix and the new problems they create, namely the design of series to be binge-watched instead of engaged with in moderation, is a fairly significant development in the world of popular culture, and yet another reason why it has become easier to link different fandoms together and have significant overlaps among their demographics.



## 2. *Dungeons & Dragons*: Narrative Power for All

### 2.1. The Dungeon Master as an Author and a Narrator

The figure of the DM might be the most important aspect of *D&D*. Not only is it their job to ensure that the table has its fun and to regulate any conflicts the players might have, but they also play a great role when it comes to the narrative flow of the sessions. Before delving into the DM's role itself, we must first ensure that a narrator's role is fully understood. It must be acknowledged that having a narrator is not a requirement for there to be narrative (Abbott, 2008, p.68). Conversely, some TTRPGs do away with the role of the DM, instead opting to go for a more rounded distribution of narrative power<sup>22</sup>. As Barthes pointed out, and many more people nowadays know, the author and the narrator are different entities. In fact, he would go further and state that 'in no way' should the two be confused (Barthes, 1966, p.282). While there is an ongoing debate about whether, in certain cases, an author and a narrator's identities can overlap, these cases are primarily autobiographic, and thus largely unimportant to the topic of *D&D* or TTRPGs in general<sup>23</sup>. Abbott divides the narrator in three important parts; voice, focalization and distance (Abbott, 2008, p.69).

The voice of a narrator, in its simplest definition, is the answer to the question "Who is speaking?" when we read something. More traditionally, we expect first-person and third-person narration, even if second-person narration experiments have surged in recent years (Abbott, 2008, p.70). This, however, fails to take in account a great amount of narration that takes place in *D&D* sessions. Here, second-person narration is abundant, as it suits naturally to the progressing storyline that requires reader input to keep moving forward. It is, in fact, so prevalent, that the game overview of the rulebook provides an example of one such voice right away (*D&D Essentials Kit Rulebook*, 2019, p.2).

"DM: All right, Amy, let's see how sneaky you are. Make a Dexterity check.

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<sup>22</sup> One example of this is the game *The Quiet Year*, although some may dispute its qualification as a TTRPG. The game, in short, is about a small group of people surviving after a lengthy war, having one year before a vague threat reaches them. Who the war was against and who embodies the impending threat is up to the table. Players take turns deciding how events turn out, slowly moving through the year's four seasons, without anyone being in 'charge'. How the community ends up faring against the threat is also collectively decided by the end.

<sup>23</sup> Separation of the self and the player character is, in fact, a crucial step of proper roleplaying for reasons that will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Amy: With my Stealth skill, right?

DM: You bet.

Amy (rolling a d20): I'm pretty sneaky – that's a 17.

DM: OK, there's no sign that anyone notices you. And you're looking inside?"

There is room for us to ponder if some of the previous quoted dialogue does actually qualify as narration, rather than a simple interaction between two people at the table. The DM, does, after all, order players to roll their dice, as well as clarifying any doubts they may have, along the usual narration that is to be expected. Regardless of the answer to the previous question, however, it is fair to say that the DM's last line qualifies, indeed, as narration, as it moves the story forward and, subtly, hands it back to the players to keep moving it along. It is worth noting that, were we to consider the DM's clarifying of rules and ordering of rolls to be narration, we would perhaps also be forced to consider the questions and roll announcements from the players to be narration too. They, especially the latter, are essential to push the events of the story forward, no less than the DM's own depiction of them unfolding.

The second element expanded upon by Abbott, focalization, is somewhat more complex to apply to *D&D*'s narration. In the frequent scenarios where a narrator is a story's focalizer, the series of events is seen through their eyes. Despite this, it is entirely possible for a narrator to use a character's point of view to focalize, letting the reader see the action through the latter's eyes (Abbott, 2008, p.73). The second alternative is both far more practical and ubiquitous in *D&D*. The most common scenario in *D&D*, by far, is one where the DM knows more about what is going on than the players. An important wisdom check that plays a part in most sessions is the Perception check. Meant to aid players in the detection of the presence of anything in their surroundings, this roll serves as a signifier to a character's general awareness (*D&D* Essentials Kit Rulebook, 2019, p.31). This, in other words, directly influences the focalization of the game at a given moment. Looking back at that same example from above, it would be possible for Amy to have to roll Perception to be able to find anything important when looking into the place she is sneaking into. While the point of view would, without a doubt, be her character's whether she passed or failed the check, the level of detail would change significantly depending on the outcome.

Lastly, distance refers to the degree of involvement a narrator has in the story being told. The variation here, as Abbott testifies, borders on the infinite (Abbott, 2008, p.74). Narrators can be active main characters, passive bystanders, or mere reminiscing storytellers reflecting about their own past. Perhaps surprisingly, there is some variation to DM involvement in a *D&D* story too. The term Dungeon Master Player Character (henceforth DMPC) or Dungeon Master Non-Playing Character (often shortened as DMNPC) carries with itself several negative connotations. As the acronym implies, its creation lets the DM play alongside the party. The reason why it tends to be looked down upon is because there is a great risk that the author's world will start revolving around said character, neglecting the rest of the party. Those who are unfamiliar with *D&D*, and who have read until this point, may be a bit confused by the definition of a DMPC. After all, it is the DM that controls every character (if we may include animals and the such in this category, as I have argued in favor of earlier). Would that not qualify as 'playing'? While the definition of 'playing' in this instance may be hard to define, and while I and many others would certainly argue the role of DM is meant to be as enjoyable as that of a player, it may be important to create a distinction here. Under the assumption that everyone in *D&D* is 'playing', it is a lot more accurate to affirm that the DM's 'playing' is different from the players' in a lot more ways than it is similar. The DM does indeed control the enemies the party faces and play out their turns. The DM does control the characters with whom the party interacts, and is usually allowed to have some tag along on their journey. The DM does not, however, usually *quest*, at least in a traditional way. This means that, under the normal circumstances of *D&D*, the DM's characters are not actively 'playing'. They can have goals (a final boss, assuming they possess rationality of some sort, tends to have a goal, no matter how primitive. Several other non-playing characters – henceforth NPCs – may also have goals in which the party plays a witting or unwitting part in achieving) and be roleplayed as, but their role is not that of a protagonist. This is the key distinction between a regular NPC and a DMPC. While one will usually be necessary and will not compromise the narrator's distance from the story, the latter will have the same goals as the party, a much greater degree of importance than any other character created by the DM, and will obviously bring the narrator much closer to the action in terms of distance. In other words, a DMPC blurs the line between DM and player, but not the other way around. While this may be a somewhat controversial statement, for the reasons above, I believe and argue that some narrator distance is, in most cases, a must for well-structured and fair sessions.

So how does a DM really quest? Let us assume the role is rooted into logic-based cause and effect (and it is, as I will later exemplify). A ‘quest’, for the sake of the argument, is any arbitrary problem that we actively prioritize solving. Both player and DM alike have narrative problems to take care of, although the means for each to solve them differ significantly. For now, the focus will be on the DM’s quest. In an effort to make a world responsive to player input, the DM’s ‘problems’ will mostly be the need to directly respond to players’ actions through characters and world alike. It is comparable to a set with several moving parts, where player satisfaction is dependent on said movements making sense and feeling like natural responses to the players’ deeds and choices. This makes a DM’s quest one that is both dependent on the party and mostly extrinsic to the story’s protagonist characters, meaning those controlled by the players.

An interesting element that Abbott ties these previous three elements to is the narrator’s reliability. Interestingly enough, the narrator here is directly linked to the author, as their reliability is measured by how far they go from the author’s usual norms. More importantly, perhaps, is still the ability of unreliable narrators to turn the difficulty of narrating a subject into the subject itself being narrated (Abbott, 2008, pp.75-76). In fiction and moviemaking, it has become increasingly common to make the audience mistrust their narrators. From Molly Keane’s book, “*Good Behavior*” (1981) to Todd Philips’s movie, *Joker* (2019), the audience frequently finds itself wondering to what extent the narrator (or their point of view, when it comes to most movies who employ their version of this) is telling the truth. In the first, Aroon St. Charles will often use her own good behavior to disguise or mislead the reader about the cruelty she and her family suffer at the hands of each other. The horrible things that happen throughout the story are continuously and deliberately unpronounced in the name of good manners. Meanwhile, the movie makes the audience doubt what is happening, not because of what Arthur Fleck tells the audience, but because it is unknown if what he experiences is induced by his own madness and daydreaming or not.

Depending on the DM, a session can be more or less plotted, restrictive, and even enjoyable. This, in the end, often leads to the incorrect interpretation that the DM ought to be likened to an, or more often *the* author of the party’s story. While it is true that the DM tends to have a mightier narrative voice than the party, to think of them as an entity that gets to abuse or even hold said powers in an absolutist fashion is erroneous at best. It is entirely possible for a party

to oust a DM that, somehow, fails to maintain entertaining sessions or in any other way proves to be an unsatisfying choice to be the narrator of the story at hand.

A particular term that has risen among RPG communities when it comes to tyrannical DMs, for example, is ‘railroading’. This term is, ironically, associated with DMs whose behavior is very much author-like, so much that most deviations from the story they have plotted are not tolerated. The expression stems from the fact that players often feel like they are stuck to a railroad, moving in a direction whether they like it or not. Returning to the comparison with videogames and their interactive nature, ‘railroading’ can be likened to a linear storyline with no branching. Even in cases where a game gives the player several ways to achieve the same goal, namely killing an enemy, it can be considered a linear experience, and, importantly, not necessarily one that is not fun too when it comes to videogames. Linearity is a far bigger problem in a TTRPG than in most videogames. This way, its polar opposite would be the sandbox videogame, where players are given total freedom to explore and interact with the world they are given. Whether there is a narrative focus at all<sup>24</sup>, or if it is up to the player to imagine their own story<sup>25</sup> is beyond the point.

The issue of freedom on *D&D*, however, is less black and white than the former paragraphs might hint at. While strangling out player agency and pushing them insistently towards the DM’s story is, without a doubt, an unpleasant experience, the fact is that subtle ‘railroading’ often plays its role and makes sessions considerably more enjoyable too. An example of ‘railroading’ that most *D&D* players would probably condone would be, in a story that may only begin by having players stay inside a city, for the DM to somehow create circumstances that make leaving it impossible, at least temporarily. The players’ freedom is being as limited as if the DM simply said that their characters did not want to leave the city, and thus made them stay. However, the key difference is that one feels like a natural part of the setting, a simple

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<sup>24</sup> For this, I would give the example of the game *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018). There is a whole ocean for the player to dive into and explore. There is a wide range of objectives that the player may set for themselves, including items to craft, resources to gather and fauna to scan. Despite this, an overarching story pushes the player towards certain goals whenever they see fit to fulfill them.

<sup>25</sup> One example of this would be that of the game *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Interactive, 2020). In it, the player takes the role of a ruler in Early Medieval Europe, North Africa or Asia and simply lives through their life. Whether they romance their courtiers, expand through endless wars or reform their own religion is up to them. Upon their death, the character’s heir takes over whatever part of the realm they inherit. In 1453, the game ends in a rather abrupt fashion. There is no way to ‘win’, in CK3. All that is up for the player to do during a campaign there is to set up their own goals and forge their own dynasty’s story however they see fit.

rule that must be obeyed, while the other is usually an obvious yanking of control of the player character and their agency from the player.

It may be argued that Walter Benjamin's idea of increased freedom thanks to the evolution of mass media is threatened by this sudden definition and existence of 'railroading'. After all, if people are just given the illusion of a choice, their freedom is little more than a worthless title that has no bearing on the reality around them. There is, however, a single argument that can deflect this kind of criticism, said argument being the fact that, in its subtlest cases, soft 'railroading' never truly restrains a player or stops them from acting however they want.

In other words, the player will often get an idea of what will happen should they push against the barriers created by the DM. Very often, of course, the consequences of these actions are character injuries, deaths, or even a dreaded TPK. Some may still view this as authoritarianism on the part of the DM, though, from the point of view of the setting, it is no less authoritarian than a real-life person being stranded on an island and drowning if they try to swim away from it.

It is worth admitting that this sometimes-necessary method of storytelling does present an unfortunate implication about how much *D&D* is a democracy. As far as this shows, to someone who has never played the game, the power of the DM is significantly superior to the party's, to the point that the first can softly impose deterministic restrictions on their behavior. Even if the latter can vote them out, a clever DM will make sure the party is never dissatisfied enough to do so. A more cynical mind, however, might counterargue that democracy is *exactly* that.

Managing discontentment, ensuring people's needs are seen to and presenting oneself as a reasonable choice to lead are all tasks that a DM is expected to fulfill. In the language of *D&D*, a party's needs will most likely be far from Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>26</sup>, but a good DM will keep different needs in mind when designing their campaigns. Depending on the party, challenging encounters, likable characters and a steady stream of loot (this once again ties back to Bilbo and fantasy tropes in general) are among the things that may qualify as 'needs' for a DM to see to. Real-life factors, such as settling player disputes or even providing snacks may

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<sup>26</sup> In Maslow's hierarchy, human needs are divided into five strata of a pyramid, going from the most essential at the base, namely water, food and shelter to the lesser priority of self-actualization at the top. It is fair to assume the term 'needs' in this context is completely different from the one traditionally associated with the word.

also help a party have a positive association with their DM, as the table's atmosphere often matters as much as the setting, if not more.

The topic of the table's atmosphere also brings us closer to the topic of the party's role in the telling of these stories. Suffice to say that, much like a DM, there are duties and rules they too must follow if harmony is to be preserved. Those shall be delved into during our next chapter.

Treading back towards the death of the author, now while we look into the DM's role and purpose, there is certainly room to make an analysis. Like Fiske argued earlier, there is a lot more freedom to a player, in this case the party, to the point that I will later consider their own involvement a co-authorship. However, if we look at the relation of powers through Barthes's eyes, we can still conclude they are closer to the position of readers, while the Dungeon Master remains closer to the position of author, simply because of the control he holds over the world itself being explored by the other players. Despite this, I would be far from believing the readers, in this case, are utterly powerless until the DM's input is cast aside or entirely disregarded. To give another example about the game itself, I will this time reference a lone episode in a session I played as the sole player in an RPG, apart from my DM.

Exploring a basement, my character came across a spider. Using a spell to bring down language barriers between all beings, he was able to speak to the creature. Like all spiders in that world, this one was a servant of a deity dedicated to deceit and intrigue (a fact both I and my character were unaware of). In their short dialogue, the spider promised great power if my character were to head back to his headquarters and murder one of his allies.

This example may not come across as a big moral challenge to most of us, and I would agree. The reason I give this example, however, is not because of the dilemma itself, but because of the effect it had on both me as a reader, and my friend as an author (using Barthes's roles, that is). On the surface, the first choice to be made was of course the one where I decided whether or not my character would commit such an act. On a more logical level, however, it would be up to me to determine whether or not that little critter was lying or, even if it was not (its matron entity, even if it truly offered its patronage to all spiders, was far from the most trustworthy being, as it may have already become clear), if my character was really being offered anything other than a grisly demise after doing the spider's bidding. On the author's side, the effect is a lot different. I should, first of all, point out that this encounter with the spider was *not* what my

character had set out to find in that basement, nor was it close to the goal. By putting this spider in that corner and prompting it to make such an offer, my friend had basically consented to the possibility of my character derailing the whole story he had worked on so far, just because of this unexpected encounter. Whether or not it was likely to happen (it was not, admittedly) is of less importance than the fact that, at that specific moment, the whole narrative flow could have been completely redirected to a whole new, much darker storyline, all because of a reader that got too ambitious.

While we are still dissecting this spider side quest, it is beneficial to also look at how the DM, as an author, sometimes behaves as a reader, rather than an author. The reason why my character was unlikely to take the spider's offer was because it did not suit his personality for a multitude of reasons. My friend, even if ready to turn the story around if necessary, had read my character well enough to be willing to gamble with his prepared storyline. The players, in this instance, become authors of their own characters, leaving it up to the DM to read them instead.

This would be a good time to address the link between being a DM and a discovery writer. Sticking to the analogy where the DM is an author, the closest comparison that can be made to traditional writing would be one where the protagonist characters do not belong to the author, even if the setting does. While it is true that the author can edge characters towards a certain goal, how they get there (or even if they really choose to move towards said goal) is generally not up to them. Using this same logic, where the parts of the narrative are not all under the control of the same person, we can conclude that the party, too, engages in discovery writing. The DM's improvisational and discovery challenges are based around making sure there is a cohesive worldbuilding logic ready to be employed should the players stray from their expectations (a very likely turn of events in most scenarios). The party's, in turn, is directly linked with the embodiment of a character delving into the unknown; a world that the player might not know much about. Their challenge is to give the character a realistic attitude and response to all the things that they discover as their journey progresses. Another example of the same session under the perspective of both a player and the DM may help to better illustrate this.

A group of adventurers arrives at a village, on their quest to defeat an evil sorcerer. There, they shop for supplies, before deciding to break in the shopkeeper's basement without the latter



noticing. Underneath the shop, they find a collection of bloody knives that are suspicious, to say the least. The party decides to investigate if she has partaken in a murder of sorts. Written in such a detached way, this may not seem like such a great example of discovery writing. It takes a closer look to truly understand the complex relationship between DM and party improvisation needed to create such a small paragraph of a story. We shall start with the player, being perhaps the most obvious.

The party is given a brief description of the town by the DM. They collectively agree to buy adventuring supplies before hitting the road again. Our player is taking the role of an adventurous, greedy, lovable rogue, a fairly common fantasy archetype. While the rest of the party is shopping, she asks the DM if she can spot anything out of sight from the shopkeeper. A hatch, protected by a thick lock, sits by the backdoor. Upon sneaking towards it and picking the lock open, she manages to slip inside the basement. Instead of the valuables she had been hoping for, however, she comes across the bloody knives, which she brings to the rest of the party. Being naturally curious, the rogue is among the members who vote in favor of investigating, and thus, the majority.

Here, we already get to see some improvisation that plays off what the players know about their own characters. The rogue player used her character's greed to go down the cellar and, once it became apparent that riches were not in sight, she based her character's actions on adventurousness and curiosity, two more traits in accordance with the entity she built for this campaign. Having not expected any of the previous events to take place, all of this character's behavior can be seen as improvisational discovery writing. Conversely, in the voting of what to do next, the remaining party members will have probably improvised their own characters' reactions to seeing the bloody knives. Perhaps the righteous paladin, despite disapproving of the rogue's methods, still voted in favor of bringing the shopkeeper to justice. Perhaps the grizzled knight, on a personal revenge quest against the aforementioned evil sorcerer, voted to ignore the shopkeeper altogether, eager for a chance of payback against his nemesis. The fact that this whole event (for now) is so disconnected from their main quest only adds to the improvisation, as one of the few things the party can expect from a quest is, eventually, its end. Lastly, we must see this episode through the eyes of the DM.

The players finally arrive at the village and agree to buy supplies. As the party barter with the shopkeeper, the rogue player asks what she can see in the shop. Quickly, the DM decides to place a hatch under a heavy lock, not yet even certain about what would remain under it. Once the rogue asks to sneak towards it and try to open it, the DM makes up his mind about what to put inside the basement. Instead of loot, the rogue finds a few bloody knives and the party, without knowing so yet, begins a little side-mission to find out that a certain shopkeeper has been stealing and eating pigs stolen from her neighbors.

Even when put into words, it may sound like the DM had a mission like this in mind for a while. However, it is fair to argue that it would be quite difficult to predict the rogue's behavior (especially before she even asked to look around the shop) and maybe even the party's vote results. There is also the fact that a DM does not need to think everything through in one go, one that often gets forgotten or is outright unknown by people who have never tried the role. It is very possible that, by the time the party was voting, all the DM had conjured up yet was the collection of bloody daggers and little else, only then deciding to instead push for a non-murder twist.

The DM's improvisation and freedom are, ironically enough, the ones people least tend to think about. It might be because of our tendency to look at the DM as a figure of authority, and our oftentimes incorrect belief that authority equals increased, unconditional freedom. A DM is, in many ways, as bound to rules as the party (their constraints will be discussed after this chapter). This binding, however, is a lot less visible than that of the players, mainly because the DM is trapped within the confines of classic storytelling, while the players are mainly restrained by principles of consistent writing (again, this shall be returned to later). I shall explain.

Let us suppose, in an instance, that a party of players meets at a tavern. This is a TTRPG fantasy trope, one so common it can be seen as a lovable cliché (TVTropes, 2013). For the sake of the argument, it shall not be questioned or delved into here. With all the roleplaying that takes place, a tavern brawl eventually breaks out (again, this tends to be expected in these scenarios). A guard then shows up, controlled and narrated by the DM, of course. Contrary to player expectations, instead of installing order, the officer instead grabs a torch and burns down the whole inn. There is, so far, nothing wrong with this. The players, while finding this odd, will probably want to look into the guard's reasons for acting this way. There is a lingering

assumption that there must be some logic behind the man's actions. Should the players' investigation be fruitless or worse, yield proof that the guard had no reason to act as he did, the party would either be outraged or assume that the DM was throwing a tantrum and doing the writing equivalent of turning the game table over. In other words, the DM is only free to have the guard burn down the establishment if they are willing to properly explain it to the party eventually. Would that not mean the DM is far from absolute power? To me, this demonstrates quite clearly that even the DM has to answer for their own decisions, being as bound to the confines of narrative logic as the party members they supposedly hold authority over.

Using Robert McKee's (1998) plotting structure, we can distinguish between three storytelling possibilities, where the most common one is the classical design's archplot. In the classical design, the story moves forward linearly and consistently. The archetypal hero's journey is a perfect example where a sole protagonist actively pushes back against antagonistic forces and has few, if any, breaks in the timeline. The minimalist design has an open-ended story that focuses on a multitude of passive protagonists during their internal conflicts. Lastly, the antiplot defies most of the traditional plot structures, making use of consequences, inconsistent realities and a non-linear chronology to tell its story (McKee, 1998, pp. 44-58). Needless to say, it takes a considerable amount of skill to write an antiplot, let alone make use of it as a DM. This is mainly due to players' expectations being deeply rooted in the classical plot design. If the DM *was* to have a guard burn down the inn where their players had met, their natural response would probably be to look into the guard's motives, like see if he had been bribed, possessed, or if he had any scores to settle with anyone at the tavern. Very rarely, if at all, would a *D&D* player ponder if the guard had chosen to do it on a whim, or just because. This way, the DM's own freedom is restricted by the kind of story they are allowed to tell, which in turn is restricted by the kind of story structure they are allowed to adopt.

It should, theoretically, be possible to envision a game where the DM is completely free, but for that to happen, their players would need to be entirely open to the idea of things just happening because the DM said so and felt like it. Without that specific mindset, the party would be a lot more likely to assume the DM would simply be lashing out at them for not doing what they wanted, as already stated above. Another obstacle that 'impedes'<sup>27</sup> the DM from

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<sup>27</sup> The reason for the quotation marks on this word is because I intend to argue in favor of a more neutral way to look at this lack of complete freedom in the next chapter.

acting entirely freely is the party itself. Let us imagine that, in that same story, it is not the DM who has a character burn down the inn. Instead, let us imagine one of the players, or better yet, the whole party, decided to torch it on a whim. Especially in a session where the classical design for plotting is used (meaning most of them), the DM is practically expected to make the world react to the party's deeds. If we dig even deeper into this scenario, we can figure out just how much a DM's devotion to a realistic setting can jeopardize their own freedom.

For the sake of the argument, we will once again revisit this scenario, right before the party sets the tavern on fire. The DM has a session prepared. As soon as the party meets at the inn, a bounty hunter is meant to request their aid in dealing with a bandit king of sorts. However, the party ends up opting to burn the tavern down before the story hook can be delivered to them<sup>28</sup>. The bounty hunter does not need to die in the fire for it to be realistic, though it is very likely that the character will not be very eager to ask for the help of the arsonists that endangered his life. More importantly, in the context of realism, would probably be the town guards that would now be very interested in apprehending the party and trying them for arson. A clever DM could still work their way around these consequences, though it may be a challenge to keep the intended story going until this new problem is taken care of. Should a DM act like nothing happened, the party may, again, react oddly to such a turn of events.

With this in mind, I would conclude the chapter analyzing the DM's role and sum of powers and freedoms. To me, these distinctions are enough to draw some distance from the 'author' archetype that Barthes demands the 'death' of, while still attributing a semblance of specialness and authority to the DM.

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<sup>28</sup> In these instances, it is common for the DM to warn the players that such a course of action would be unwise, though a party usually *can* power through the warnings and face the consequences. The DM also may have the option to make the roll necessary to do this particularly hard, though dice can be unpredictable. To immediately forbid it or stop the attempt, no matter how foolhardy the party's plan may be, is generally agreed to be railroading.

## 2.2. The Party's Co-authorship and Own Narration

For this chapter, it is necessary to deviate from Barthes's reader/author dynamic. This is because, while the party does satisfy the role of reader in a few aspects, its role is still too complex to be restricted to just that. Simply put, the party's role is authorial in several instances; instances which in turn force the DM to reactively adapt the story to what they do and say. Knowing this, it can be argued that this dynamic relegates the position of author and reader between the two entities back and forth. In this chapter, the party's quests will be discussed, as well as their freedom in comparison to the DM.

Perhaps it would be wise to look at what a party is expected to do to better understand its role in the construction of a narrative in *D&D*. As players with equal power (in most cases), they are expected to be on equal footing and with the same amount of control over a story. It is far more interesting then, in my opinion at least, to inspect different players' notes about the same session. This is especially true if those very notes are taken in-character<sup>29</sup>, as different players, with their different characters, may have wildly different perspectives towards certain NPCs, events, or even story directions that the party goes in. The DM's notes, while usually more objective and complete, especially when it comes to the potential directions of a story, will tend to prevail over other accounts as the DM has full knowledge of what is happening while the players are not looking. It is in the players' notes, however, that a less absolute form of truth can be found. If one player finds a particular NPC's antics and jokes amusing, while another finds them irritating, we are probably unable to determine if either of them is right. If a complex decision comes up during the story, and players have different ideas on what the right thing to do is, the players' notes, unlike the DM's, may provide conflicting information that is not necessarily incorrect on either side. A certain nuance can be attributed to these notes that cannot be attributed to the DM's 'absolutist' version, as players, ideally, know just as much about their setting as each other.

While it is harder for a *D&D* player to impose their will during a campaign or otherwise derail it, it is still entirely possible. A lot of the ways a player can jeopardize a session stem from them

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<sup>29</sup> While I have only done this once, I can attest writing in the style of my character did help at least getting in his shoes a bit more easily, which, again, helped me when it came to roleplaying and writing him better. It must be conceded that this, admittedly, takes a while, and not everyone has that much free time between sessions. As such, while it pays off, this method may still be less preferable to plain notetaking just written right as the session takes place.

somehow undermining the story. An unruly player can, for example, kill a character with an important story hook before they have a chance to give it to the party. An even unrulier player may steal from, or even attack their fellow players, which is an even more effective way of sabotaging a campaign since it ruins the atmosphere at the table when done without other players' consent.

There is, however, a concept that is excluded from interfering with other players or the DM's wishes and which is equally frowned upon. The idea of 'metagaming' revolves around a player (who also takes on the role of writer and reader) not writing or controlling their character organically, instead making it behave like it is aware it is in a game. This often happens in the shape of uncharacteristic actions that make a character more powerful and less consistent, although seeking power may not always be the end goal of the person doing the metagaming.

An example of metagaming would be possible if a player was repeating a given campaign. In the adventure "*The Dragon of Icespire Peak*", the party is eventually required to attack a manse (p.44), their mission only being complete once the evil orcs dwelling in and around it are vanquished. A day after their attack, a counterattack is meant to happen in a different location (the quest giver's<sup>30</sup> lodge (p.24)), with a fixed number of enemies that is leveled depending on the party's size. Should the characters not be present, the orcs are meant to take over the lodge easily, although the NPC would escape (p.47). Supposing only one player in this game, apart from the DM, knew this was meant to happen, they could metagame. A way to do this, for example, by urging the party to rush back to the lodge, even though the other players would rather go elsewhere, all while being unable to come up with an in-character explanation for this request. The reason for the player themselves to act this way could either be narrative (helping the owner keep the lodge) or exploitative (killing more orcs would award a bit more experience points to their character). Either way, it would be relying on knowledge that the character did not possess and betraying the narrative construction of the campaign.

The importance of the DM's role is also mainly given to them due to the party's disruptive potential as an uncoordinated, difficult to predict element of the narrative. The DM's role as a mediator, in particular, is meant to have a preemptive solution to any possible divisions between

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<sup>30</sup> Quest givers are a popular term to describe characters whose purpose is to hand out tasks for other, more central characters. It is more often linked with videogames than *D&D*, but the function is very much identical.

party members. Some DMs make it forbidden for players to fight each other from the beginning to prevent a lot of narrative conflicts that have the potential of destroying the story. This, once again, brings us back to the question of how much freedom the players truly have. I would, this time, add another problematic to this question. How much freedom *should* the players truly have?

As I have already made clear, the DM is not entirely free, much like the party they narrate for. As twenty-first century Westerners living mostly in liberal democracies, we ought to admit that we see freedom as a very important societal value due to our cultural conditioning. It may be somewhat politically incorrect, following this logic, to imply that there is such a thing as too much freedom anywhere. However, in the narrative exercise of *D&D*, I would argue that is indeed the case.

Let us, for a moment, imagine what complete freedom would look like inside a *D&D* game. In order to do that, we must first ask ourselves if freedom, in narrative terms, extends to freedom from logic as well as narrative constraints. In other words, we must ask if the guard (or any player), in a truly free *D&D* session, *can* or not burn down the inn for no reason. *D&D* itself has once delved into this issue, as curious as it may seem.

A well-known system that determines character actions in *D&D* is the alignment of the latter. Based on morality, the alignment system is meant to pinpoint how a character thinks or behaves. Its two axes are that of 'law' vs 'chaos' and 'good' vs 'evil', with nine total possible combinations; Lawful Good, Neutral Good, Chaotic Good, Lawful Neutral, True Neutral, Chaotic Neutral, Lawful Evil, Neutral Evil and the ill-reputed Chaotic Evil.

It may seem somewhat ironic that the alignment system is being brought up on the topic of freedom. I myself can testify that I have seen it more often curtail my actions (both in videogames and roleplay-wise) than enhancing them. However, the Chaotic Neutral combination has a very negative stigma around itself, mainly due to an incorrect perception many players (especially problematic ones) have of it. In short, what many people assume Chaotic Neutrality means, is that a character can and will act completely randomly at every turn, sometimes bordering on inconsistency. Chaotic Evil characters suffer from a different, but equally negative stigma. Is this it, however? Could this be the pinnacle of narrative freedom

that we have been discussing all this time? My short answer would be no, but it gets slightly more complicated than that.

Chaotic Neutral characters, much like all the others, still have rules to determine their conduct. For the answer to the question above to be a yes, we would need to assume that the rules applying to Chaotic Neutral characters are incorrect, and it is by disregarding them that true freedom is attained. I will propose, however, that freedom in such a high degree does not only pose a threat to narrative cohesion, it betrays its very idea. The two concepts *can* and *do* coexist in *D&D*, as I have already demonstrated in this study. However, one imposes limitations on the other. Similarly to how characters must remain consistent in a narrative, so do we have rules to follow, even in countries that proclaim themselves as free.

The Chaotic Evil alignment, perhaps not surprisingly, does not inflict this narrative-threatening randomness upon the story. Its negative reputation, instead, stems from the fact that it is especially prone to turning a normal campaign into a ‘murderhobo’ session. Again, having characters predisposed to attack random NPCs, many of whom may have story hooks or be quest givers themselves, can be quite frowned upon. This does not, perhaps, betray the narrative flow one bit. Chaotic Evil characters are often mistrusted due to how *consistently* terrible they are, in fact. It does, however, often sabotage another element that, while not technically part of a story or narrative, is still equally important to any *D&D* session; player enjoyment. While there are certainly tables out there that definitely enjoy a ‘murderhobo’ session or even a whole campaign, and I should not pass any judgement on them, if a player or players who want that are in the minority at a table, they have the potential of ruining it for everyone else involved.

Player enjoyment is perhaps the most crucial element of a successful *D&D* campaign. I would argue that it matters more than either freedom or narrative coherence. Should players enjoy a session without either of the previous two, including the DM, I am of the belief that the session ought to be tailored to accommodate said wishes. Victory in *D&D* is the textbook definition of a social construct. Granted, the pre-built campaigns that can be purchased in stores *do* have a starting and finishing point. However, nothing stops players from maintaining their sessions after the final boss is defeated. Should we consider victory to be a simple campaign where everyone had a good time, a team of heroes that slays an evil dragon without any enjoyment will have ‘won’ less than a team of heroes who just sets out to find a missing dog for a petty



reward and has fun doing it. It must be noted, however, that the bigger the party, the harder it will be for everyone to get exactly what they want.

One of the hardest parts of roleplaying in *D&D* may be coming to terms that neither you nor your character are *the* main character. Granted, everyone in the party is given their due focus (or so they should, anyway), but no one is supposed to be the ‘leader’ or the ‘protagonist’. Failure in doing this might be the biggest reason why ‘problem players’ even exist, which in itself is a big reason for campaigns to go awry. The logic for this can, once again, be mirrored in writing. It is ill-advised, especially in online circles, to base a written character on oneself, at the risk of making said character too flawless<sup>31</sup>, neglecting other characters their due focus. These issues only become more contentious when a game meant for everyone’s enjoyment becomes jeopardized because of them.

The biggest break off from Barthes’s author-reader dichotomy lies, in my opinion, in the party. In a balanced session, no character holds more power over the narrative than others. There may be some characters more powerful than others, as is often the case with so many games. That in itself can either be a balancing issue or even a plot-point. Story-wise, however, a weak and a strong in-game character alike have the same power to derail or to improve a campaign with their choices and presence. Nearly all characters have the ability to insult a powerful ruler and get the party in trouble. Inversely, nearly all characters can be given an engaging backstory and delight a table of players when properly roleplayed and developed. In other words, the story’s flow has little to do with character power in itself, but instead with the way players write and control their characters.

The party’s existence and the power they share together is, to me, the point where we may no longer look for a ‘death’ of any ‘author’. It is simply too difficult to fit the existing dynamic in *D&D* into a dualistic mold of power, especially once we take into consideration that the party *further* splits power between its members, rather than just acting as a single, hegemonic entity and counterweight ‘against’ the DM’s power. I would even further argue that the word ‘against’

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<sup>31</sup> The term ‘Mary Sue’ is a very negative expression meant to condemn the writing of fictional characters with no flaws to them. It originated from Paula Smith’s short story “*A Trekkie’s Tale*” (1973), meant to satirize the abundance of flawless female characters in *Star Trek* fanfiction, although it now is far more widespread than either the story or the franchise in question. In modern terms, a ‘Mary Sue’ is a term that applies to any written character, male ones included, that is overpowered, perfect or too close to it. Even the term’s prominence and in some cases misuse probably demonstrates how widespread the critique of writing has become in online spaces.

itself creates another problem, which is the false notion that the DM is somehow meant to be the party's adversary, rather than the storyteller<sup>32</sup>. An author might lose their usefulness and power as soon as their writing is published, but the same cannot be said for either the DM or the party members. For them, their usefulness and power lasts throughout the whole campaign, until it either ends or they leave. This, ironically, lets us finish this chapter, and our discussion about the roles at the table entirely, going against a notion that I have returned to several times over this study.

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<sup>32</sup> Much like the non-existence of a main character, forfeiting the notion of the DM being an opponent to beat is another often crucial step when it comes to ensuring everyone at the table enjoys *D&D*.

### 2.3. The Reach of Dungeons and Dragons Beyond Western Fantasy

It is no secret that the fantasy genre is deeply rooted and associated with European folklore, often set in the technological equivalent of the High to Late Middle Ages. Attempts to modernize and industrialize fantasy worlds can be considered a relatively new phenomenon in both literature and videogame alike.

An arguable upside of capitalism would be its incentive to be inclusive. When the aim of a product is to be sold to as many people as possible so as to increase profit, the capitalist is encouraged to make sure it appeals to as many demographics as possible.

TTRPGs, in the past, have had a multitude of approaches to the ‘Other’, although they have become more nuanced and respectful over the years. One such example is the *Maztica Campaign Set*. The title, admittedly, does a good job at making its readers associate it instantly with the right concept; the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations. An issue with it, however, can be found in its content, as Cortés’s conquest and quest for gold is definitely emulated in-game. While it is of my belief that this sort of theme, while offensive to some, on its own can be explored by anyone to whom it appeals, its depiction of the natives would be where I would draw the line. Unfortunately, the set portrays most natives as primitive and incapable of having any agency, which is a deep understatement of what the pre-Columbian empires truly were<sup>33</sup>.

Recently, however, Wizards of the Coast (henceforth WotC) has renewed its efforts to appeal to a broader demographic, striving to incorporate more cultures while at the same time trying to stamp out negative stereotypes that have real-life counterparts. In the wake of the George Floyd riots in the last year, WotC’s *D&D* department announced in a series of tweets that they would strive to make their content more inclusive from then on. Not only that, WotC also proceeded to apologize for their previous prejudiced depictions of ethnicities and gender that are no longer acceptable in modern society (Frayna, 2020). One such way to modernize the game would be to no longer make alignment race-enforced. This means orcs and goblins, traditionally evil races, can instead have their alignment as their players see fit. Another way

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<sup>33</sup> It may even be said that native agency, historically speaking, was a much larger factor for the Spanish conquest than we often give it credit for. It was Aztec vassals, after all, that sided with the Spaniards in their own acts of rebellion against their former conquerors (Minster, 2020). This kind of rebellious agency cannot be expected to vanish just because a new power takes over, another misconception that the *Maztica Campaign* reinforced.

they have engaged with this issue was by ending racial penalties. An orc, for example, would formerly get an intelligence penalty just for being an orc. This change opened up certain possibilities, for example to play as an orc wizard (Zambrano, 2020). This might open up its own can of worms<sup>34</sup>, but it at least shows an effort is being made towards making *D&D* reach more people than it used to.

Can it be said that capitalist interests are not behind WotC's decision? As an outspoken critic of progressive capitalism, I would say no. Would that mean it is a bad thing from the start? Not necessarily. What is best for business may, after all, also be what is best for the consumer every once in a while. Granted, this mindset does help further establish the domination of society by capitalist interests, even when it does benefit the masses and not just the elites. This too, however, is already deviating from the central point of this chapter.

Whether we acknowledge the capitalist interests behind these changes or not, the fact still stands that there is an inherent interest in making *D&D* appealing to a broader audience. And the audience for *D&D*, in these modern times where the internet and globalization shape our world (and broadcast much of American culture) on a daily basis, has indeed never been broader.

*D&D* has, ironically, started as something entirely secluded to a marginalized community. This term may at first prompt us to think about racial or sexual minorities, but, in this case, it refers to something broader than that. To put it in very common terms, *D&D* started out as an appallingly geeky hobby, one entirely associated, again, with the stigma of the basement-dwelling 'loser' rolling dice with his<sup>35</sup> equally unpopular peers. There was more than religious zealotry in play with *D&D* foul reputation. In fact, I became first familiarized with *D&D* thanks to American cartoons and series that made me associate it with the bullying of nerds by their peers than with their persecution by religious parents. While my country was never influenced enough by American culture for me to ever see *D&D* even taking off back when I was in school, I still witnessed the negative stigma that was commonly associated with nerds and geeks. This,

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<sup>34</sup> It might rub certain people the wrong way to assume portraying orcs as less intelligent is offensive to certain ethnicities, for the obvious reason that said ethnicity is still being likened to an orc, with or without the intelligence penalty. The fact that a minotaur and a gnome's differences are basically portrayed as race-related instead of species-related is, again, a whole world of possible unfortunate implications that a poor choice of words can create.

<sup>35</sup> The stereotype was practically always masculine too. It may have been a fair stereotype; as of 2020, after the franchise grew exponentially, still only 39% of its players identified as female (Hoffer, 2020). It would be a lot more inaccurate now to suggest *D&D* has an exclusively male appeal, though.

I can safely say, has changed. It is a bit hard to pin down why, but the fact is geek culture has made into the mainstream. It may be argued the advent of the internet and the removal of the stigma associated with nerds are two of the reasons why that happened (Bergmeier, 2019).

These two factors, in particular, are what leads me to conclude *D&D* and the world of TTRPGs cannot either remain confined to the genre of Western fantasy or return to that state. Not only is there a monetary incentive to keep expanding it, there is also a continually growing and varied audience that will take matters into its own hands through ‘homebrewing’<sup>36</sup> should WotC fail to properly accommodate everyone.

To me, this is another element that, in combination with everything I have already described about the game, allows it to be the closest thing to a democratized version of writing and authorship. If we are to look at TTRPGs as products of their mediatic environments, we can safely assume these features did not just randomly come to be, but instead evolved thanks to a growing population that has become more and more involved with and sensitive to its media engagement.

I believe the potential of all these factors combined, given what I have already exposed upon, is most apparent. *D&D*, as a game initially meant for an excluded clique of people, was obviously meant to give people an escapist way out of their reality; a way for them to live the life of another individual and do great deeds while off on adventures. In the hopes of avoiding doomsaying or delving too deeply in a condemnation of modern society, I’ll simply settle by stating the progress of society has not made the demand for escapism any lower. And as societies become more accommodating to people from different walks of life, the more we can expect the means of escapism to broaden and expand.

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<sup>36</sup> The practice of setting up your own campaign, sometimes with its own rules, worldbuilding or even number system. This can range from a great new game mode to a terrible implementation of inferior ideas to the existing ones.

## Parting Thoughts

I will admit that, when I set out to work on this, I hardly had expected to end up covering as much popular culture as I did. I had, from the beginning, the idea that sharing a story through TTRPGs was a truly great accomplishment for modern-day writing and storytelling. My expectations were not any broader than this very specific scope.

However, as I touched upon several other issues pertaining to popular culture, I slowly began to truly share Walter Benjamin's optimism towards the future. This is not to say I can safely consider whatever is popular to also be beneficial for those who engage with it. On the contrary, I have, even while writing this thesis, consciously condemned a lot of popular culture trends in what I would willingly consider somewhat hypocritical moments. Two thoughts came to mind once I delved deeper into my objections to some of the more contentious elements of modern popular culture.

My first thought was one of doubt towards the many pieces of media that I condemned or otherwise shunned. I could see how Adorno and Horkheimer's scathing opinions on movies, and later the moral panic associated with *D&D*, could mirror my own concerns quite easily. I am of the belief that generational divides have been deepened with the progress of technology, and what appeals to the newer generations may already be beyond what people my age and older are able to appreciate. There will always be suspicion aimed at modernity and its products. I have little to do but admit I cannot possibly be fit to assess these new trends, lest my opinions join the well of past out-of-touch voices whose concerns most of us now find ridiculous.

My second thought was slightly more optimistic. I tried to think back about my own engagement with media when I was younger and still coming to grips with the wide range of entertainment that the internet could provide. The harsh truth I reached, one that many of us may vehemently try to deny, was that I was not much, if at all better than those who now delve in these new kinds of media. I would even openly admit much of the media I entertained myself with was downright atrocious, requiring either low effort to produce or no effort to consume<sup>37</sup>. Despite this, I grew up and was able to later on revisit many of the cartoons, videogames and

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<sup>37</sup> I got to, for example, experience YouTube's growth firsthand, and the content present in it during its primordial days, while varied, could very much be a total waste of time. I would admit that, amusing as it was, my early days on YouTube would hardly constitute anything that the generations before mine would call anything other than a waste of time.

YouTube channels I used to engage with, and neither my nostalgia nor my past dealings with subpar content stopped me from distinguishing what had quality from what did not have it.

I cannot ever speak on behalf of the Frankfurt School intellectuals or their opinion on this turn of events. I would indeed wager that slow concessions designed to keep the capitalist system we live in afloat would still enrage both Adorno and Horkheimer today. Even Benjamin's own optimism would perhaps wane a little when confronting just how cemented capitalism has become thanks to popular culture. This stems, obviously, from anti-capitalist thought, which, while present in some parts of this study, was far from the object that it focused on. As such, I must concede that my praise is entirely divorced from any worldview that predicts or seeks a fall for capitalism any time soon.

With the above in mind, I can still proclaim that I am of the belief popular culture is not done with the empowerment of the masses. I believe technological progress will only increase in speed, while the number of people directly interested in deconstructing and critiquing the writing in their media will only grow in numbers. This is not to mention the growth of an audience identity and the 'relaxation' of the ruling class when it comes to enforcing hierarchies.

Following this same line of thought, it is hard to foresee anything different for *D&D* and TTRPGs in comparison to videogames, series and movies. The dynamics between the involved parties may be different, but the franchise's circumstances are not. All the outer factors that have propelled the remaining kinds of media forward should do the same for *D&D*. The inner factors, which as I have highlighted are what truly sets *D&D* apart, will change and mutate as people do. Newer technology and, more importantly, newer mindsets for aspiring writers will probably have a lasting impact on how TTRPGs evolve in future editions.

There is perhaps more to this topic than the simple empowerment of the masses that I have chosen to focus so much of this essay on. If we were to turn back to Williams's definition of culture, we can infer that these changes to our own culture of storytelling may how we, as humans, behave towards one another. More specifically, our relation to storytelling and narration is among the biggest changes we have come to experience, and one I would suggest is not entirely through yet. The rise of the branching storyline in several videogames as its own marketable feature is evidence of this.

I would conclude this thesis on the bright thought that we may be just scratching the surface of what democratized storytelling can look like. *D&D* has already come a long way since it was first conceived. Its rules have not been the only element that has changed; its role in society has evolved too. In retrospect, the changes *D&D* has and is going through are still minimal in comparison to the widespread changes popular culture has gone through. A reason for this may be because *D&D* has less difficulty giving its players the story they want than a videogame or a series might have. This is not to say *D&D* is perfect and beyond improvement, however. It is merely an optimistic thought that enables us to imagine how much further we may still see storytelling go, not just in the shape of TTRPGs, but also in the more mundane, mainstream form of traditional media.



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