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Tabletop Role-Playing Games, Narrative, and Individual Development

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Introduction

In 1982, Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) was created. BADD was a group consisted of parents, teachers, and clergy who were worried about the spiritual and mental development of children, who they saw were at risk of being corrupted by a single game—*Dungeons & Dragons*. The group campaigned again and again, warning fellow parents about the detrimental effect that this game could have on a child's life. They believed *Dungeons & Dragons* had a kind of power over its players—a power that could create meaning and even take children to their eternal doom. This is just one argument for the idea that tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* have the power to create meaning in a person's life and influence their development. However, BADD was misinformed on how this meaning was created and how an individual's development can be impacted by these games.

This paper will analyze the arguments against the use of tabletop role-playing games, using *Dungeons & Dragons* as a specific example. Moving from these arguments, it will describe the way in which these kinds of games create meaning in a person's life. Finally, it will look at how this meaning can impact personal development, whether positively or negatively.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Before beginning a conversation about how these games create meaning, it is pertinent to discuss how they operate. A tabletop role-playing game is a form of role-playing that is structured around the use of paper, pens or pencils, and a player's imagination. A group of players (usually between three to six) gather together and take on preset or created identities of characters. The players are supposed to act in a way appropriate for their

characters while they play the game. A game master—known as the Dungeon Master in *D&D*—creates a setting for the players to interact with. The main mode of communication happens verbally, with players telling fellow players how their character interacts with the world or other characters, or with the player actually verbally speaking as the character in a given situation.

An example of this would be as follows: Devon is a game master, and Katie and Keith are two players. Katie is playing as a ferocious dwarf soldier and Keith plays as a cunning elf thief. Devon describes a scene: before both players is a long, dark hallway; an eerie grumble rises out of the darkness. Devon then asks both players what they would like to do. Katie, acting in a way appropriate for her character, says that she wants to charge down the hallway brandishing her biggest axe. Keith, likewise acting in a way appropriate for his character, decides that it may be best to let Katie run in first while he sticks to the shadows.

The example above shows a simplified way of how gameplay works. You can see that it was the job of the game master (Devon) to create a setting and to describe it to the players. It was the job of the players (Katie and Keith) to make decisions based on this information and their characters' identities. After the two players make a decision, it will be up to the game master to then tell them the outcome and describe the new situation to them. This cycle continues as long as it is needed to reach an objective and finish the game or the session.

Unlike most other games, tabletop role-playing games do not have a set single objective. When playing a pre-made adventure created for use in *D&D* (and other similar games), there is usually some kind of end objective for the players to strive towards (such as defeating a dragon and saving a town); however, there is nothing stopping the games from

continuing after these objectives have been filled—and many of the games usually do continue for some time. Therefore, it may be more accurate to state that these games are focused on the creation of a narrative involving the players and the game world—in other words, games like *D&D* are about creating a story.

Dungeons & Dragons: The Fame and Fear

The most popular tabletop role-playing game, and the one that solidified tabletop role-playing games as a genre, is *Dungeons & Dragons* (or *D&D*). *D&D* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, with the first edition hitting stores in 1974 (Laycock 43). Gygax and Arneson were both adept at game making before they met in 1972 (41). Gygax's greatest success was a game called *Chainmail*, which was a wargame inspired by Henry Bodenstedt's *The Siege of Bodenburg* (36, 38). Arneson's greatest success came from a game he called *Blackmoor*, in which players role-played as modern individuals in a fantastic setting (40). Both Gygax's and Arneson's games were first and foremost wargames, but Arneson's game began to take on slight role-playing elements.

When the two came upon each other at Gen Con (a major gaming convention invented by Gygax himself), they began talking about making a new game together (41). It took months of the two collaborating, and at least one prior game being concocted, but they finally created the structure for a game that would become *D&D*. This game was heavily inspired by the wargames they had created before; however, it also included a heavy focus on the player's character. This can be seen in the three different kinds of characters the game originally allowed someone to play—a wizard, a soldier, or a cleric (42). Ironically, these three character types—or classes—also mirror the original fantasy, religious, and historical influences of which the game was comprised.

The game did not initially find any substantial audience. One problem was that the full equipment needed to play the game was not provided when buying the pre-packaged set (43). Another problem was that the rules of the game were incredibly complex for amateurs; one journalist wrote that the game, “at least of first reading, is only marginally less complicated than a Ptolemaic analysis of planetary motion” (Laycock 44). Eventually, the game found an audience in college students and military personnel and, after this group’s interest, the game took off; players continued to invest in supplements for the game, increasing revenue for Gygax and his company (44).

This popularity was short lived. The 1970s saw the birth of *D&D*, but they also saw a steady rise in America’s fear of brainwashing and cults. The Cold War, movies like *The Manchurian Candidate*, and new studies in psychology helped “brainwashing” become a trigger word throughout America, eliciting fear from many patriots and parents. (76-77) Many Americans feared that Communist states—or other “evil” groups—were trying to secretly control their youth. Parents were suspicious of uncommon things, including new games.

In 1979, a young college student named James “Dallas” Egbert went missing (77). Dallas’s parents hired William Dear, a private detective, to find Dallas and bring him home (77). While investigating, Dear learned that Dallas had recently been introduced to *D&D* (77). Dear was suspicious, and he concocted a theory that Dallas had gone missing because of the influence this game had over his life (77). Joseph Laycock states that, at one point, Dear even went so far as to state that someone else—a mysterious Dungeon Master—may have been influencing Dallas and using him in a real-life game (77).

Of course, the reality of the situation was quite different. Dallas had been under major pressure from his family, who believed him to be a child prodigy (82). Dallas had also been involved in the Gay Council at his college and, as Laycock states, “was apparently coming to terms with his own sexual identity” (82). On top of the social and familial pressure placed on Dallas, he suffered from mental and emotional problems, and even experimented with recreational drugs (82). What Dallas did was in response to these pressures, and the actual story looked something like this:

On the night of his disappearance, Dallas entered a network of steam tunnels underneath the university. He brought a bottle of Quaaludes with him, intending to end his own life. He survived the suicide attempt and went into hiding at a friend’s house. Dallas continued to travel for several weeks, staying with acquaintances, many of whom he had met through the gay community. His hosts were aware that people were looking for him and were generally reluctant to shelter him for long. He eventually ended up in New Orleans, where he again attempted to poison himself.

After this second suicide attempt, he contacted his family. (82)

Sadly, despite finding his way back home, Dallas later decided to end his life through suicide (82).

The theories that Dear created were just as much fantasy as *D&D*’s narratives; however, the audience to which these theories were delivered was one that was already suspicious of the game, and it quickly latched onto any proof that the game had brainwashing powers.

A second hit to *D&D*’s new popularity was found in Patricia Pulling and Bothered About *Dungeons and Dragons* (BADD). In 1982, Patricia Pulling’s son, Irving, committed

suicide (103). Patricia Pulling blamed *Dungeons & Dragons* for influencing her son's decision to end his own life, and so she created BADD in response (103). The kind of campaigning that BADD enacted caught the attention of an audience which was afraid of brainwashing; even more relevant to the audience's opinions was a series of cult scares known as the "Satanic Panic" that happened around the same time (103). Parents were scared, but BADD's campaigning soon caught the attention of law enforcement as well. Law enforcement seminars were held, and Pulling even acted as a witness in specific court cases relating to the subject of cult crime (103).

Both of these examples show how *Dungeons & Dragons* was labeled as an evil influence in the life of young adults. William Dear, Patricia Pulling, and BADD all thought that these games could impact an individual's life and negatively affect young adult's development. Sadly, these views never truly left America's cultural mindset, and there are still many people today who believe these games to be negative influences—especially in law enforcement settings. Joseph Laycock points out that the police department of Natchez, Mississippi has a specific section of their website focused on "warning signs of occult involvement" (103). In this section, the department describes how one of the signs of cult activity is playing fantasy role-playing games (103). Another article, this one written in the New York Times, tells about how the Wisconsin court system has opted to ban *D&D* from their prisons; the court made this decision because they believe that the game can promote "gang behavior and fantasies about escape" (Schwartz para. 5). One inmate tried to argue the decision, but the court upheld its ruling and confiscated his *D&D* materials—including a 96-page manuscript he wrote for the game (para. 3). In neither of these cases was there any substantial evidence pointing out how these games have a negative effect a person's life; both

the Wisconsin court system and the Natchez police department simply assumed this to be the case. They believe that these games can and do create meaning in a person's life. Ironically, research shows that their assumptions are correct—just not in the way that they think.

Narrative and Meaning in *D&D*

Before a discussion on how tabletop role-playing games can create meaning in a person's life, it is important to establish that these games can act as narratives. This is more controversial than it may seem—for years, ludologists (people who study games) and narrativists have argued whether or not games can function as narratives. Jennifer Grouling Cover, in her book *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, argues against this traditional view. She believes that most of the debate has been focused around video games and their relationship to traditional narratives (Cover 57). Tabletop role-playing games, however, function as a much-needed link between the two (57).

Traditional definitions of narratives have mainly been based on the structure of oral storytelling (57). The traditional definition possesses two important attributes: first, it presupposes the existence of one or more narrators who tell a story to one or more narratees; second, it requires the existence of a linear cause-effect relationship (57-58). In other words, there must be someone telling the story, someone listening to the story, and the events in the story must be connected.

Arguments against games being included in the narrative tradition mirror these two traditional attributes. The first line of arguments is based on the fact that games have non-linear progression—the cause and effect relationship is not what is traditionally seen in narratives (58). The second line of arguments have been that games should be excluded the label of narratives because they usually lack a clear narrator (58). While the lack of narrator

is not a problem for tabletop role-playing games—they obviously do possess narrators and narratees in the game master and the players—arguments based on non-linear progression prove somewhat problematic.

Arguments Using Narrative Form or Elements

Cover mentions a specific argument given by Espen Aarseth against the narrativity of games. Aarseth argues that the term “narrative” refers to a specific form, specifically including a linear progression, and that games do not follow this form (Cover 58). In other words, games do not necessarily have the structured progression of events that traditional narratives do. This does not mean that games cannot have stories or be fiction, which Aarseth believes is a different attribute altogether, but narrativists would argue that the lack of this linear progression would keep games from being qualified as narratives (58). Cover argues that stories should not be dissected in such a way as to separate discourse (the way the story is told, or its form) from stories; this is because stories are fundamentally linked to their discourses. As she states:

For these particular ludologists, a story (or at least a storyworld) can exist without an actual narrative. Narrative is seen as the particular way that discourse unfolds, and it is seen as separate from the plot of a story. However, as I have shown in the previous chapter, story is not as separable from discourse as one might imagine. (58)

Cover further argues that stories may come out of different forms, but these forms are complementary to the story; to try to separate the story and the story form is detrimental—it fundamentally changes the story being told (58). Because of this, she believes that ludologists need to be careful not to simply dissect narrative forms from storytelling in these games, and alludes to the fact that Aarseth has committed a fallacy in doing so (58).

A continuation of this argument against the narrativity of games is based on the idea that games possess elements that narratives do not. As Aarseth states, “to claim there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories” (5). Cover states that this is an understandable position, especially as other ludologists, like Janet Murray, hold to the idea that narratives and games are inseparable and generally lump all games into a single category (Cover 58). Aarseth and other scholars simply try to argue for the uniqueness of games and their ability to exist outside of the confines of a narrative. Cover acknowledges this, but she argues that it is still wrong to ignore the role that narratives play in games (58). Games are complex and “can fit in both a narrative and a spatial aesthetic” (59). Simply put, games allow for players to interact with the game world but to also interact with a narrative plot that is woven throughout these worlds. Cover then speaks about how scholars like Jenkins and Ryan argue that, by trying to separate narratives and non-narratives in games, scholars are creating binaries; it would be more prudent for scholars to start looking for the narrative elements that these games do possess, rather than trying to qualify them as one thing or another—in other words, to find a middle ground (59).

Narrativity and Game Mediums

The argument about the relationship of narratives and games is an important one, because it determines how we analyze and study both genres. A major problem with this discussion has been that its only focused on new and emerging games—the majority of which are video games (59). For example, games like Tetris have been examined for their narrative elements (or lack thereof). Tetris does not seem to function as a narrative since it lacks a narrator and a narratee, and since there is no major progression of events in a cause-effect relationship. Newer games, most notably role-playing video games, may be able to

claim that they are narratives; however, these games do not always focus on the story being told—rather, players are encouraged to explore areas and participate in sometimes seemingly unrelated activities. Because of this, narratives and ludologists have argued that these games may possess narrative elements, but that they may not fulfill the necessary requirements to be counted as complete narratives.

As mentioned above, tabletop role-playing games do fulfill both of these requirements. As such, Cover argues that there needs to be a re-focusing of the argument, and that tabletop role-playing games should be examined as a bridge between narrative structures and games (59). Tabletop role-playing games are unique, and could “shake the foundation of narrative and game studies in a way that a more modern critique cannot” (59). It is possible to examine these games through literary criticism because they do seem to function as narratives, or at least seem to possess narrative elements—which consist mainly of setting and plot (although possible sub-elements may be characters, progression of time, themes, etc.). These games specifically lend themselves to reader-response theory, due to their ability to be interpreted in a number of ways.

Role-Playing and Meaning

Psychological Creation of Meaning

Reader-response theory is a branch of literary criticism that deals the relationship between a reader and a text. The major premise of reader-response theory is that readers work with texts to create unique meanings. In other words, interpreting a text is an interactive activity which requires the participation of a reader (Bressler 69). Charles E. Bressler gives this example: imagine that children are outside of a house and are trying to look inside. One child looks through the front window, because they are close to it, and sees one scene;

another child looks through a window on the right side of the house, and they see something different; still another child climbs up a ladder and looks into a window on the second story, which gives them yet another new scene; and finally, a child looking through the kitchen window sees something else (65-66). All the children see different rooms of the house, and each one has a different experience—but this all happens when they as individual agents interact with the same object in different ways. Reader-response theory states that reading literature is similar to the above example: different readers will respond to a text and create meaning based upon personal experience (66).

The analysis that reader-response theory offers carries over to any form of text—including games. In the case of tabletop role-playing games, this is the relationship between the players and the game narrative. Generally, reader-response theorists posit that a person's worldview impacts the interpretation of specific text—the term “worldview” here implies the “the set of assumptions or presuppositions that we all hold, whether consciously or unconsciously, about the basic makeup of our world” (331). Norman Holland, a reader-response theorist who was heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, had a slightly different view. He posited the idea that within everyone are “identity themes” (Bressler 80).

The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary & Cultural Criticism states: “American ego psychology postulates that an individual's life is held together, like a novel, by a single recurring element— an “identity theme”—which is unique to the individual” (148). Put more simply, identity themes are lenses through which people interpret the world around them. For example, a person wearing glasses with red lenses will see everything around them in red hues; someone wearing glasses with blue lenses will, likewise, see everything around them in blue hues. Identity themes work in much the same way; they “tint” a person's worldview so

that they interpret events and the world around them in a specific way. Furthermore, identity themes are unique to each individual, as they are shaped by one's experiences in life. Unlike the idea of "worldviews," identity themes are not simply assumptions held by a reader—instead, these themes are created at birth and change through a person's life as they experience the world (80). These themes are also closely related to personal identity, and hence the term "identity themes."

Players of tabletop role-playing games experiment with identity themes every time they play these games. This happens in many ways, the first of which being that players draw from their own identity themes when creating a character. Holland posits that a reader works through their identity themes when they interact with a text; this interaction becomes "a matter of working out [their] own fears, desires, and needs to help maintain [their] psychological health" (80). When making a character in a tabletop role-playing game, players are expected to create a complex character with personality traits, objectives, and even flaws. A player needs to be able to take on the role of their character, and therefore many players tend to make (whether consciously or unconsciously) characters that reflect their own identity themes. Bressler writes that a reader "transforms a text [in this case, their character] into a private world, a place where one works out (through the ego) his or her own fantasies, which are, in fact, mediated by the text so they will be socially acceptable" (80). If what Holland says is true, then there is much that can be found out about a player by analyzing their character. So, for a player, these identity themes make it easier for them to relate to their character, but it also makes it easier for them to recognize their own identity themes and how they impact their worldviews and behaviors.

Think, for instance, about the example given earlier of Katie, Keith, and Devon playing *D&D*. Suppose that Keith is a very timid person in real life; when he was asked to make a character so that he could play *D&D*, he automatically went to what was comfortable (i.e. normal) for him and decided to make a character that was quiet and cunning—this is why he ended up creating an elf thief. Keith made his character in this way because he was trying to create a character that relates to his identity themes (i.e., social anxiety, independence, etc.). If Keith were to reflect on his decisions made during the character creation process, he may end up learning things about himself that he would otherwise not observe. This is possible because Keith now has the character (created in conjunction with his worldviews and identity themes) that he can analyze for answers about himself.

A second way in which these games can create meaning is through players taking on roles different from those normal to them. In their article titled “Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing,” Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust speak about the relationship that a player shares with their character. Unsurprisingly, the major relationship that the two share is the player role-playing as the character. Role-playing is a normal exercise of humans; as Waskul and Lust point out:

All people play and play with roles: we take up, define, and negotiate a wide array of social roles that, though often structured in meaningful and consistent ways, are enacted uniquely from one person to the next. People play roles, and roles play a significant part in defining self. Just as we actively and fluidly construct the roles we play, those roles also define and structure self in broad social, cultural, and temporal frameworks of meaning. (Waskul and Lust 338)

In other words, people naturally take on roles, and these roles impact how people view and portray themselves to the world around them. A simple example of this is when an adult becomes a parent. Whether consciously or unconsciously, an adult that takes on the role of a parent also adopts certain behaviors and attitudes that they see a parent as having; the role allows the adult to orient and define themselves in a changed world. The same thing happens when a player takes on the role of a character. Depending on what the character is like, a player will adopt the behaviors and attitudes of that character when they role-play as them. This reflects ideas from the psychoanalytic position, of which Norman Holland was a proponent.

Carl G. Jung, a student of Sigmund Freud and a psychoanalyst himself, wrote about how all people possess both a personal and collective unconscious (Bressler 131). Both of these unconscious worlds of thought are present in a person at all times; they make up all of the past experiences of a person, and the past experiences of the human race as a whole, that influence a person's actions despite not being immediately present in a person's mind. Just like identity themes, the personal unconscious is unique to each person (131). Waskul and Lust allude to how people are influenced by their views of a role, and Jung would agree; above just the immediate ideas associated with a role, people also call upon their unconscious views of a role to determine how they should act in a given situation. Furthermore, after a person has taken on a specific role, the experiences that they had in that role become part of their personal unconscious and identity themes.

This is shown in Waskul and Lust's article when they speak about how role-play interaction does not stop with gameplay; they state that roles cannot be as neatly compartmentalized as one might think (351). The player is always asked to navigate multiple

roles when role-playing—they possess their identity as a player, the character’s created persona, and other player-character roles (337). Navigating these roles may seem easy at first, as a player knows that there is a difference between their real-life self and their character persona; however, Waskul and Lust point out that these roles tend to “bleed over” into one another, creating new forms of meaning for every other role (351). A player’s real-life identity may unintentionally impact an important decision made by their character; likewise, a character’s identity may influence decisions a player makes in real life.

Another example proves helpful here: suppose that Katie, who plays a fearless dwarf soldier, is actually anxious about many things in real life. In the character creation process, she consciously decides to make her character different than herself. When Katie role-plays as her dwarf soldier, she adopts some of the characteristics of her dwarf, and is able to overcome her usual anxiety in the controlled setting of the game. Moreover, Katie’s personal unconscious and identity themes are impacted during this experience, and therefore the game is able to impact her real-life self. This is because now, as Katie goes through life, her personal unconscious and identity themes will take into consideration the experiences that Katie had during gameplay (such as being brave) and will view circumstances in light of this new knowledge. This goes to show how the psychological interaction with the text of these games can lead to personal worldviews to change and for players to have greater realms of experience to draw upon (whether consciously or unconsciously).

Escapism and Religious Creation of Meaning

Personal escapism can also create meaning in these games. Traditionally, a negative connotation has been associated with the idea of escapism. The word conjures ideas of people who try to live in an imaginary world, not wanting to deal with real-life issues or

situations. However, escapism is a natural part of the human experience, and people exercise it in a number of ways: for instance, people try to practice escapism when they watch television shows or become immersed in a deep conversation to distract themselves. J.R.R. Tolkien writes in favor of escapism when he explains that it should not be seen as the “Flight of a Deserter” but instead as the “Escape of the Prisoner” (Tolkien 80). He states, “Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in a prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks about and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it” (80). Tolkien is saying that escapism through literature or other means is not inherently wrong. Trying to immerse oneself in literature can be therapeutic, as it allows one to momentarily escape the pressures of life. Of course, Tolkien’s view on the subject is formed in a large part by his religious beliefs; Christianity has a long history of supporting the idea of temporary escapism from the world’s struggles.

Escapism allows the reader to temporarily escape from their world of meaning and analyze it from an outside perspective. For instance, people read fantasy books like *Harry Potter* or the *Lord of the Rings* because it allows them to escape reality by entering an imaginary world. However, along with this comes another kind of new world—a world of different meaning. Power structures are rearranged, social contracts are rewritten, and even the morality of the worlds are changed as metaphysics are reimagined. When readers enter these new worlds, they are able to notice how these new worlds of meaning differ from their own. Because of this, these books provide not only a place for temporary escape, but also a new way for readers to evaluate their own worlds of meaning.

Escapism in literature is also closely related to how religions create worlds of meaning. Laycock also argues that tabletop role-playing games create meaning that is similar, if not related, to the meaning that religion creates. Escapism is a fundamental part of this, and this can be seen in Tolkien's idea of escapism, which uses images that are closely linked to religious imagery (180).

Laycock states that “[t]he keys to this process are imagination and play” (180). Fantasy worldbuilding is similar to the way in which religious traditions create worldviews through their narratives; this creation allows for an organized and systematic view of the world, in which people are able to find meaning (180). A religious person is able to orient themselves in the world because they have a world of meaning which they can use to evaluate the world around them and their own actions. Similarly, fantasy literature (and role-playing games) provide this same kind of orientational system. Because of this, Laycock believes that religious worldviews and the worlds created by fantasy role-playing games “are products of a single faculty through which human beings create meaning together” (180).

Laycock draws from the thinkers Émile Durkheim, Johan Huizinga, and Victor Turner to explain how these games—and the escapism they provide—bring about meaning in a player's life. The first feature of role-playing games that allow for them to create meaning is “a dichotomy between the profane...and the sacred” (181-182). Laycock uses Durkheim's research saying that “the sacred” stems from physical objects, or activities; part of this can be collective activities or “rituals” that a group uses to bring about a sense of excitement or vigor—especially events outside of day-to-day activities (182). Special meaning arises out of these activities and shapes the worldview of the people involved—hence why specific activities give rise to cultural identity.

Huizinga's theory of play relates to this idea of the sacred. For Huizinga, play is another social interaction in which day-to-day life is left behind and emotions are freely expressed (182). Play is something that exists apart from reality, and is always in danger of "defilement"; because of this, it is treated as sacred in much the same way as important cultural or religious activities (182). For people who play, there is an expectation that one will respect the play environment and the immersion of the players—if this immersion is broken, then play has been defiled. Even apart from this, play naturally involves the creation of order in the use of rules (182). In this way, play tries to structure reality and therefore creates meaning and assigned values as it decides what attitudes or actions are acceptable and which are not.

Lastly, Laycock refers to Victor Turner's expansion to the idea of liminality, or the existence of an "in-between" state (183). Sacred spaces, like that of play, exist between established worlds of meaning—as players enter into the sacred space, there is a sense in which they have left the old world of meaning (reality) behind and are moving towards a new world of meaning (183). During this transition, one's status or identity is in limbo. The person begins to take on new roles and identity when they enter into the new world of meaning, and as such re-interpret what behaviors or ideas are acceptable and which are not.

Again, an appeal to Keith, Katie, and Devon proves helpful. When Keith and Katie begin playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, the first thing that they must do is take on their new roles as characters. In order to do this, both players must "shed" their old identities and put on new ones. The liminality here exists between reality and the imaginary game setting. It is in this liminality that Katie and Keith are able to choose what roles or identity they will be in the game's world of meaning—and, in the examples previously given, we see how they re-

interpret themselves in this process. For Devon, the Dungeon Master, the same thing happens; however, Devon's new role or identity is that of the Dungeon Master, which comes complete with its own set of expected behaviors and values.

It is not hard to see that Laycock's description of role-playing games' processes of creating meaning are filled with religious language; this is because Laycock sees role-playing games as an outgrowth of the natural desires that draw one to religion, as well as any other value systems to which one ascribes themselves in order to create meaning. He states that this religious similarity is the reason why many people labelled *D&D* as a cultish game when it was first published—those who experienced the game's power had no other way to describe it (52). For them, *D&D* was at its root religious and had the ability to act as a powerful influence on one's life, similar to any religion. Laycock points out three other themes found in *D&D* (and other RPGs) that are similar to religion: first, they contain morality, gods, and other religious imagery; second, they express idealized or romanticized times and places; and third, they allow the player a space in which they can look back at reality and analyze it (52-53). With these similar themes, it is understandable why the unstable society of the 1970's and 80's would deride a game such as *D&D* for being religious—and, due to its difference from traditional religion, why they would accuse it of being corruptive.

Whether *D&D* is religious in nature or not, Laycock argues that what is offered in the game is a reflection of reality (186). More specifically, the game offers a reflection of the *player's view* of reality; therefore, it is wrought with their biases, ideas, and preconceptions. These kinds of worldviews are able to be played out in a way that would not be acceptable in the real world. This exaggerated form of behavior allows for self-observation and analysis—

Laycock even describes the process as “amenable to psychoanalysis,” which again connects back to Jung’s and Holland’s theories (187).

Examples of Creation of Meaning

Research has been performed to test how role-playing impacts people. It is useful to include a few examples here in order to show how the above discussion applies to a real-world setting. One example is given in Charlotte Doyle’s article titled “Interpersonal Dynamics in Role-Playing”; in this article, Doyle tries to draw connections between how people’s stereotyped image of a role and impact how they exhibit behaviors when they take on such a role (Doyle 1011). Doyle delivers a case study focused around two groups of participants—one group role-playing as police officers and the other playing as protesters. The group role-playing as police officers was asked to guard one section of a room (including a television set), while the group of protestors was simply asked to get past the police officers and to touch the television. Doyle documents how, over time, each group began to exhibit behaviors that they saw as normal for their respective group (1011). The participants role-playing as police officers began to ignore protesters’ actions and used force to stop them; the protesters, likewise, began to heckle the police officers and physically force themselves through their lines (1011). Each session was more violent than the last as the participants took their respective roles more seriously (1012).

The way in which Doyle describes participants taking on roles and exhibiting behavior appropriate for them beckons back to Waskul and Lust’s research. The participants saw the behavior they generally associated with a role—such as violence for the police officers—was the same behavior that they were allowed, even encouraged, to exhibit. In the liminal state between the real world and imagined world, each of the participants was able to

take on new roles and identities to match their preconceived view of the role. Participants also began to take the game more seriously, as the “sacred space” was further developed and solidified. The idea that the game mattered and should be treated as such grew until it allowed the participants the ability to break outside of their previously held social contracts and create completely new worlds of meaning. This shows how role-playing can actively influence a person’s behavior by rewriting their own identity and the worlds of meaning to which they appeal.

Another example of how these games work to create meaning can be seen in Amy B. Goldstein and Sandra W. Russ’s article, “Understanding Children’s Literature and Its Relationship to Fantasy Ability and Coping.” In their article, Goldstein and Russ speak about how fantasy literature can impact a child’s development by helping them to cope with strong emotions. A part of this relates to reader-character identification and role-play (or pretend play), and can be connected with tabletop role-playing games.

Research points to a connection between role-playing and an increase in adaptive functioning—the ability to act independently and handle the stresses of life in a positive way (Goldstein 107). Also, it has found that children who role-play often have more positive emotions and less negative emotions (107). For instance, children who role-play are better able to work through negative emotions like anger; because of this, they feel happier more often. Goldstein and Russ looked at children who read literature and tried to gauge how it affected their emotional behavior. Their study found that children do not necessarily possess a strong understanding of the stories they read, and this may reduce their ability to find and apply meaning from the stories to their lives (123). However, their study also found that children with a higher fantasy ability (ability to pretend, etc.) did, in fact, have a higher

ability to cope with strong emotions (122). Furthermore, they connect this fantasy ability in reading to fantasy ability in play (122-123).

The fact that children ability to play pretend positively correlates with their ability to cope with strong emotions connects with the idea that role-playing allows one to compartmentalize reality and practice escapism, as mentioned above by Laycock. However, beyond this, it seems that role-playing allows a place for people to process emotions in an indirect way. For instance, children may displace their anger onto imaginary objects or people, and, in this way, find a socially acceptable outlet for it. Of course, Goldstein and Russ point out that a young audience is not able to understand literature well enough to interact with it, and the idea of displacement shows how children may still draw meaning from their fantasy ability without necessarily processing their actions on a conscious level. Again, tabletop role-playing games work in much the same way, and allow for a place where players can process emotions through displacement.

It is also useful to briefly note that the book used in this study, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, has been denounced by many parents as a book that possesses content too mature (scary, etc.) for a young audience. However, many of the children who read the book were not found to have any negative emotional or mental effects after reading the story. The idea that this literature can impact children in a negative way is shown to be unfounded, and could be connected to arguments stating that tabletop role-playing games produce negative emotional and mental effects in young audiences due to their mature content (such as violence, etc.).

The Nature of Created Meaning

The above discussion draws on research to see how tabletop role-playing games create meaning. Even though it finds ways that this meaning arises, this is not enough—even BADD and other opponents to these games believe that they can create meaning. Because of this, it is necessary to answer one simple question: is the meaning that these games create beneficial or detrimental to a person’s development? This section aims to provide examples of how this meaning can be used in a beneficial way for one’s development.

Stéphane Daniau, in his article titled “The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games: From Play Skills to Human Skills,” speaks about the potential for these games to produce meaning in a person’s life and how it can be used in a beneficial way. Near the beginning of this article, Daniau point out that role-playing is a natural phenomenon for many young mammals (Daniau 425). Role-playing helps young practice necessary behaviors for survival and social interaction, and, in this way, is a useful tool. Daniau also lists many of the ways that humans naturally role-play, including children’s role-playing, theatre and drama, role-playing in games, etc. (425). Daniau looks at this last kind of role-play—specifically, tabletop role-playing games—and how they can be used in an educational setting.

Through multiple case studies, Daniau concludes that players *do* change based on their play experience, and he seems to allude that a well-informed game master can actively affect what change is brought about through gameplay (439). However, the question is how much change a game master can actually influence. In Daniau’s research, he found that, despite crafting specific game encounters to include existential experiences, players still influenced the game with their own existential themes rather than those crafted (433).

Because of this, it seems that the games' influence over a player is mostly formed around the ability to teach them about themselves and to enhance their already present knowledge (434).

This is important to note, because it means that the purpose of a game is not the only major influence on what meaning the players receive from the game. Players are able to actively influence what meaning is promoted and formed through gameplay. This means that arguments for the games being able to “brainwash” individuals are not supported by research.

Rob Crandall and Charles Taliaferro expand upon this idea of existential development on the part of the player in their article, “To my Other Self: Reflection and Existentialism in *Dungeons & Dragons*.” One of the major points put forward by the authors is that “[t]he player...creates the character, which then influences the player” (Crandall and Taliaferro 77). The authors propose that many of the actions that a player takes as a character are “addressed” to the player (77). A player will act in a way that they need—for instance, Katie being a fearless dwarf when, in reality, she is anxious. The players therefore write and direct the game in a way that is conscious of their real-life selves, and, in this way, that can have a dialogue with themselves about existential matters. This dialogue does not always have to be positive, and sometimes players will act viciously in a game (78).

Even more important than this is the fact that a player, if they are to be affected in a large way by the game, must be reflective and use this dialogue between player and character (79). While there may still be some of an impact on the player if they do not—as they are forced to face situations in which they experience betrayal, hardship, fear, etc.—they still have control over their external actions and behavior, and can choose whether or not to accept new meaning. It is only through reflection and introspection that these experiences can impact an individual and can bring about growth.

This research points to the fact that these games can have both a positive and negative impact on a player, depending on how the game is used and how the player interacts with it. However, it also shows that players are not helpless during this process; fundamentally, it is the players who make the decision on whether or not to be reflective or accept the new worlds of meaning that are offered to them. This means that arguments put forward by BADD and other opponents to tabletop role-playing games are not well-founded and preach a fear that is vastly overestimated.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Tools

Now that it has been established that these games create meaning and can act as positive influences on one's life, it is useful to discuss how these games can be used in an effective way to bring about personal growth and development. The following are examples of how scholars have already used tabletop role-playing games for these purposes.

Therapeutic Tools

In his article, titled "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult," Wayne Blackmon speaks about how *D&D* was incorporated into therapy sessions in order to help a young man with schizoid behaviors express his emotions and later cope with them. Blackmon speaks about how he treated the patient, a young white male that he called "Fred," for at least ten years (on and off) after Fred attempted suicide (Blackmon 624). Initially, Fred did not want to open up to Blackmon, and used multiple defensive mechanisms (such as intellectualism) in order to stop progress in therapy; after a year, Fred began to participate in a *D&D* group and brought materials from these games to his session (625-626). Blackmon did not want these materials to be used to interfere with treatment, but he allowed them anyway (626). Shortly after, Fred began using

his experiences in the game group to talk in a displaced way about his feelings; six months after initially bridging the materials, he was able to speak about his feelings without using the game (626).

Blackmon's research is based on using games like *D&D* to help a person reflect on their emotions and identity. Blackmon speaks about this when he recounts how he asked Fred what his characters felt in certain situations, if Fred had ever felt similar emotions, and, if so, then when (627). Obviously, this kind of reflection is exactly the kind of reflective activity that Crandall and Taliaferro speak about, and it can be seen influencing Fred's ability to understand himself—specifically, his identity themes, personal unconscious, and emotions. Blackmon drew from Freudian psychoanalysis when trying to evaluate this case study, and in doing so posited that it was displacement that comes about through fantasy role-play that ultimately led to a successful use of a tabletop role-playing game as a therapeutic treatment—Blackmon believes that Fred, through his time playing *D&D*, was able to “become familiar with his own unconscious” and work through his strong emotions (629).

This is a high-level therapeutic use of these games, as the aim in this example is to understand and help someone who is going through a strong emotional crisis. However, there are other ways that these games can fulfill a therapeutic role. Aubrie Adams, in her article titled “Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons,” speaks about how these games can be used to effectively fulfill social needs. Her research, which consists of observations of a game group, focuses on four themes of needs: democratic ideologies, friendship maintenance, extraordinary experiences; and good versus evil (Adams 69).

The first of these areas, democratic ideologies, is based in the idea of participation in a group; Adams found that the members of the *D&D* group that she studied were constantly keeping open lines of communication between one another (74-75). They each valued open communication and encouraged each other to speak up and voice their opinions. The second of these themes, friendship maintenance, happened as a natural outgrowth of the game. The players were not often able to meet up in real life, and they used the (in their case, virtual) game space as a structured way to interact with one another and keep friendships strong (77). At this point, Adams takes the time to emphasize that people who play role-playing games do not fit the social stereotype of “social pariahs”—as she states, “D&D was shown to be an inherently social phenomenon” (77). Extraordinary experiences, the third theme, was shared by players who had experiences that were not normal for them (78). At some level, every player had extraordinary experiences (sadly, there are not many actual dragons to slay anymore, but players of these games are still able to perform such actions in the game world); however, for some players, what would be “normal” for others would be extraordinary for them. Adam gives the example of two of the participants: one of these players was a homosexual man, who was able to play a heterosexual woman in the game world; another player was unable to walk in real life, and the game world allowed a place for him to participate in the day-to-day activities of a non-handicapped individual (78-79). The game space allowed for these extraordinary experiences to come true and fulfill other needs of the players. Lastly, players experienced the theme of good versus evil when they entered the game world, because in the game world good and evil are semi-tangible objects, both capable of impacting the settings around the players. This theme relates most directly to moral participation, in which players are able to make decisions about how they should

behave (81). Adams also point out that, despite being able to act in an immoral fashion in these games and not receive any consequences, that players still actively strove to act in moral ways; this may point back to Crandall and Taliaferro's research which states that players will work through the game in order to learn more about themselves (81).

Adams's article shows a much softer approach to using tabletop role-playing games as therapeutic tools. For her, they simply fulfill individual's needs that may not be fully taken care of otherwise. In this way, these games help a person to further their psychological health and, in some cases, their growth and development.

Educational Tools

Another way that these games can function is as educational tools. In Mike Cook et al.'s article, "We're Just Playing: The Influence of a Modified Tabletop Role-Playing Game on ELA Students' In-Class Reading," the authors talk about how tabletop role-playing games can be used in an educational setting to bring about better learning. Specifically, they deliver a case study of Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" being used in an English Language Arts classroom (Cook et al. 200). Students were split into separate groups, and each group was asked to participate in playing out sections of the book as specific character types (205). Before the students played the game, they were introduced to the text and given instruction in reading to make sure they had optimal understanding (205). During the gameplay sessions, students were given objectives to fill and then guided towards these objectives by the game master (206). After playing the games, students were then asked to reflect upon their decisions and how these decisions connected to the text (206-207).

After observing students participate in this study, the authors found three major themes: as they state, "students in the current study (1) made decisions that were informed by

the story, (2) experienced the narrative through the lens of their characters, and (3) engaged in collaboration, both within and across groups” (209). In other words, students were found to have been engaged (immersed) in the literature and pulled from it in order to gain knowledge of what actions to take, and in this they also communicated with their peers often. These are some of the basic ways in which the use of the modified tabletop role-playing game was able to improve learning outcomes in the classroom.

It is useful to note here that Cook et al. used reflection at the end of each game session in order to increase learning. Again, this points back to Crandall and Taliaferro’s research, highlighting how, if these games are to be used for optimal learning, they should include a reflective portion.

Another way that these games can be used as educational tools can be found in Michele Valerie Ronnick’s article, “Classical Mythology in the ‘Dungeon.’” Ronnick draws out the complex classical mythological influences found in *Dungeons & Dragons* and attempts to show fellow teachers how it could be effectively used in an educational setting (Ronnick 117-118). Ronnick believes that these games can be used to give students a new way of analyzing classic mythology or even be used to reinvent specific events in order to learn more about their causes and possible effects (117-118). Even further, just by being able to “interact” with history in this way, students may become more interested and immersed in their learning (118).

Ronnick does not offer any specific examples of this happening in the classroom, and her approach is much less specific than that of Cook et al.; however, both articles point out that tabletop role-playing have the potential to be useful educational tools. These games are especially good at helping players become immersed in situations and narratives. Many

professors and teachers are already moving to use tabletop role-playing games (or variations of them) in order to increase learning outcomes in students and provide a more interactive learning environment.

There is at least one more way that researchers have thought about using *D&D* and other games (both role-playing games and non-role-playing games) in order to promote learning among youths, and this is by introducing such games into educational environments in order to increase attendance and participation. Kat Werner, in her article titled “Bringing Them In: Developing a Gaming Program for the Library,” describes how libraries can begin to incorporate certain games (including tabletop role-playing games like *D&D*) in order to effectively increase the number of young patrons who attend and participate in events (Werner 790-791). These games can sometime relate back to literature found in the library, which can be incorporated into the events to help students become more literate. While this way of using the games does not necessarily say anything about the games’ ability to change a person’s life, it is still useful to mention this research here as it is a legitimate use of the games in order to promote learning.

Personal Development Tools

Finally, these games have the power to act as tools for personal development. This is a general term that encompasses any of the learning outcomes not included in the other two groups; however, it specifically highlights the ability of these games to help people expand personal interests or abilities. Ethan Gilsdorf, in his TED Talk titled “Why *Dungeons & Dragons* is Good for You (In Real Life),” speaks about how he was able to overcome personal struggles and eventually grow his personal abilities through playing *D&D*.

Gilsdorf first talks about how *D&D* helped him to overcome a personal crisis. When he was around nine years old, Gilsdorf's mother was, as he describes, "stricken down by a crippling brain aneurysm" (Gilsdorf 05:52-05:55). Gilsdorf was stuck trying to figure out how to deal with the aftermath of this incident and the impact it had on his life. As he states:

She was unpredictable she did strange things. And as a kid, I was scared. I was already a hopeless introvert, and this situation made me feel even more powerless, as if my world had been turned upside down, as if I was trapped in the maze of my own adolescence. And so these games allowed me to escape my fears and to enter into a fantasy world where I could be someone else — someone with power, someone with control, someone with agency. (Gilsdorf 6:02-6:30)

Gilsdorf used *D&D* in order to escape his reality and cope with strong emotions. Again, this idea connects back to Goldstein and Russ's research. These games are more than merely therapeutic. however, and Gilsdorf goes on to draw out even more of their uses.

Above this opportunity for coping, Gilsdorf also speaks about how *D&D* provides other avenues of personal growth and development. These five other ways are (1) "collaboration and teamwork," (2) "preparedness, innovation, and problem solving" (3) "character building builds character" (4) "empathy and tolerance" (5) "the power of narrative and the imagination" (07:28; 09:27; 13:17; 16:14; 18:13). Most of these categories are self-explanatory, and much of Gilsdorf's talk connects back to the research presented so far. Cook et al.'s research also pointed out how these games promote a sense of collaboration among peers; outside of the classroom, this interaction is much like the friendship maintenance mentioned by Adams. The idea that these games allow players to build character harkens back to Crandall and Taliaferro's research. Even the idea of an increase in empathy and

tolerance connects back to Goldstein and Russ's research, which states that children who pretend play (role-play) more often are better able to handle emotions and maintain social interaction. Gilsdorf's main point is that these games are an underutilized way to help people, whether young or old, to develop.

Micah L. Mumper and Richard Gerring also write about how people can grow in personal empathy and moral development in their article, "Leisure Reading and Social Cognition: A Meta-Analysis." While Mumper and Gerring do not directly talk about tabletop role-playing games, they do speak about literature; as has been discussed, tabletop role-playing games can fulfill the same narrative function as literature, and therefore is it useful to include this outside viewpoint. Mumper and Gerring gathered other case studies in order to find if there was a correlation between leisure reading and the ability to understand and represent another's mental status, as well as empathize with them (109). The study found that there was, in fact, a positive correlation between reading in this way and the ability to represent and empathize emotions (116). What this means is that people who regularly experience literature in a casual way are better able to navigate the social and emotional structures. Applied to tabletop role-playing games, this implies that those who play these games for personal pleasure may actually be more emotionally aware and better able to relate to others (which counters the stereotypical view).

Lastly, these games are also good places for people to develop long lasting relationships with others. Jeffrey L. Nicholas takes on an Aristotelian view of friendship in his article, "'Others Play at Dice': Friendship and *Dungeons & Dragons*." Nicholas outlines how these games allow a place for one to progress from having "friends of utility" to friends

of “pleasure” (Nicholas 203; 207). This happens as players begin to share experiences together.

At first, players have need of one another because of the skills that they lack. For instance, in the example from earlier, Katie may only need Keith’s help because he is sneaky and able to get past traps, etc. However, as players spend time together, they bond over the experiences that they share—not just in the game world, but also outside of it. Players also begin to take pleasure in one another for being themselves. Lastly, if players begin to play long enough, they have the opportunity to become what Aristotle called “true friends”—friends who share deep bonds that span differences and even time (212). Nicholas comes to the conclusion that tabletop role-playing games have the ability to bond people in any of these ways, or, at least, to provide a place where these kinds of relationships can form (215). Also, Nicholas believes that it is only through these kinds of relationship that a person can grow in certain moral ways—for instance, a person can only learn how to be loyal if they have someone to be loyal to, etc. (210). In this way, these games also help to further one’s moral development alongside of their relationships.

It is easy to see that many of these examples of personal growth and development relate to a person’s social ability. This is important, because beyond just being able to relate to others and navigate complex social contract, this kind of ability also helps a person to define themselves in such social structures—in the end, a person is still part of the social structure, and these games allowed a person to further understand others, as well as themselves.

Why this Discussion is Relevant

This paper has established that tabletop role-playing games act as narratives that can create meaning, and, in this way, can be used to impact individual mental, educational, and personal development. Despite this, one may still ask, “Why is this relevant?” The answer to this question relates back to the examples of fear directed towards *D&D* and other tabletop role-playing games mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

While studies have presented convincing evidence that these games do not corrupt the youth that play them, the general fear directed at the game has never completely left the cultural view of them. Again, this is expressed on the Natchez police department’s website, as mentioned by Laycock, and the ban of *D&D* materials in the Wisconsin prison, as told by Schwartz (Laycock 103; Schwartz para. 5). This shows that there are still many people, including people in places of authority, that believe the games are harmful for youth and adult alike.

Thankfully, *D&D* and other tabletop role-playing games are still around, and have not been completely destroyed. On the contrary, these games are now re-emerging in popular culture. For example, shows like *Freaks & Geeks*, *The Goldbergs*, and even *Stranger Things* offer episodes that either incorporate *D&D* or are based around characters from the show playing the game. On top of this, famous celebrities have begun to take part in *D&D* groups, and have even recorded gaming sessions for mainstream viewing (the streaming group *Critical Role* has hosted many of these sessions).

Since these games are re-emerging in popular culture, now is the best time to talk about how they can bring about positive change in a person’s life, rather than being a

detrimental influence. This paper's discussion is based around the idea of denying that stereotype.

Conclusion

These games function as narratives, and, as such, interaction with them can produce new worlds of meaning for players. As players interact with these worlds of meaning, players are able to ask questions about themselves and the world around them, which can lead to their own identities and worldviews being changed. Because of this, these games can be used as valuable tools for educational and personal growth.

Teachers can implement these games into the classroom setting in order to get students more immersed in learning, and to help students develop stronger peer-to-peer interactions. Therapists can use these games and the meaning they create to help patients overcome personal crises and cope with strong emotions. Even leisure players can use these games in simple recreational forms, and in doing so can improve their social relationships, their moral growth, and their personal abilities.

In the past, tabletop role-playing games have been condemned based on their power to create meaning, as many feared it was religious in nature. However, despite the bad reputation given to these games in the past, research has proven that tabletop role-playing games simply create meaning in a similar way as religions—namely, through the creation of narrative. Because of this, these games are beneficial to play, and that those who enjoy them generally find themselves happier and in better control of their emotional, mental, and relational well-being. This is a relevant discussion to raise, as modern popular culture has seen a new interest in these games. Hopefully, moving forward, people will begin to re-

evaluate these games and see that power that they hold—along with the potential they have as tools for individual development.

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