

University of Richmond

UR Scholarship Repository

Honors Theses

Student Research

4-28-2023

Dungeons & Dragons: Fractals of the Human Self

Katie Anderson

University of Richmond, katie.anderson@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Katie, "Dungeons & Dragons: Fractals of the Human Self" (2023). *Honors Theses*. 1675.
<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses/1675>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Dungeons & Dragons: Fractals of the Human Self

By Katie Anderson

Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Richmond, VA

April 28, 2023

Advisor: Dr. Jan French

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I have conducted my research and undergone the writing process for this paper, I have come to realize that the completion of an honors thesis is very similar to a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign. This is especially true in consideration of the sheer amount of people and characters it takes to truly conduct and complete an adventure. Speaking like the Dungeon Master I am, I would like to take this opportunity to start this adventure of a paper with an opening monologue of sorts. For the sake of brevity, thank you to everyone who has been with me throughout this process. For the inner child of the internet in me and those of like-mind reading this, there is a TL; DR included at the end of this section. You are welcome in advance.

Now then, first and foremost, I want to thank my Honors Thesis Advisor, Dr. French. Plainly put, this thesis would not have even been a thought without her. I am forever grateful that I was able to take her Field Methods in Ethnography course Fall 2020 which prompted me to do fieldwork on *Dungeons & Dragons* in the first place. I distinctly remember the end of class one day where Dr. French told me that I should do an honors thesis, and that if I did it would be a continuation and evolution of my existing work. That conversation truly shaped not only my trajectory at the University of Richmond, but also my life. This project has taught me how much I am truly capable of. I could never ask for a better advisor, supporter, and honorary grandma. In addition to Dr. French, I would also like to thank the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at large for supporting me in this quest. *Dungeons & Dragons* is not a traditional topic for an anthropological study to say the least, but the department has always encouraged this project and continued to push me as an anthropology student.

Next, I would like to thank my mom, who has listened to me rant about this game for who knows how many hours in the last three plus years. This game has become such a core element of my life, spanning highs and lows to the frankly downright bizarre, and she has always been my greatest cheerleader. I know that having your child spending hours a week behind a computer role playing sounds really strange in practice, but you have always supported me, and for that I am eternally grateful. To my

brother, thank you for our late-night conversations where luckily our hands are full of better drinks than tavern mead and ale. The fact that the mental math kid between the two of us is *not* the *Dungeons & Dragons* player still blows my mind. While you can go on for hours about sports and their statistics, thank you for always finding the time to talk about the nerdy stuff with me too. To my dad, whose storytelling has undoubtedly influenced the stories I create. While never the biggest fan of “nerdy” materials, our shared love of history finds itself interwoven in the development of my world and the characters that reside within it. I would also like to thank my friends back home in New Jersey and those at my second home here in Richmond. Going through this process has not only taught me a lot about this game, but also a lot about myself. The last few years have been incredibly difficult, so thank you to those of you who have stayed by my side, even when I was not so deserving. Whether it be sitting with a cat on my lap as we chat or video calls that go to near sunrise, these moments have taught me so much.

Last, but certainly not least, a major thanks to each and every one of my party members. It is through y’all I have been taught the greatest gift of all, chosen family. You have been my rock through this entire process, and without your support of this project, I would never have made it this far. Together we have conquered so many obstacles both in and out of game: monstrosities, human emotion, and *really* bad out of context quotes just to name a few. But it is through these challenges we have created something truly unique to ourselves - a community. While this paper only has my name on it, this is for us. Being part of this group and watching it grow has been such a joy and I love you all -- my absolutely chaotic bunch. Here’s to where we started from, where we currently are, and where we will be in the future.

Now...let’s get started shall we?

TL; DR

A heartfelt and sentimental thank you to everyone who has been a part of this research and paper process. I am speaking about my honors advisor, family, friends, and *Dungeons & Dragons* party members. If you are reading this, you probably do not need to roll an insight check to know you are included, so thank you.

ABBREVIATIONS AND NECESSARY TERMINOLOGY

5e	Fifth edition; current version of <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> (2023)
Ability Score Modifier	The core six abilities (Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma) that affect the amount added onto a dice roll
BBEG	Big Bad Evil Guy, a major villain in a plot
Campaign	The specific game/story being told using DnD
Caster	A character class type that can cast magic
Character Sheet	Location where all the information about a character is stored
Class	The main category that defines a character's abilities
D&D/DnD	Abbreviations for the game <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i>
DM	Dungeon Master; the person in charge of the story
D20	An icosahedron; the most used dice in DnD
Edition	Published revisions to DnD mechanics, oftentimes done in half or full step installments
Homebrew	Rules agreed upon to use at the table that are not explicitly written in official source material
Martial	A character that cannot cast magic and uses weapons
Module	Pre-written adventures that can be used to run D&D games
NPC	Non-Player Character: characters created and controlled by the DM
One Shot	A campaign completed in one session
Party	A D&D group, often refers to the players as a whole
PC	Player Character: the characters played by the players themselves
PvP	Player against player actions

Race	Character ancestry/bloodline
RAW	Rules as written
RP	Role play
RPG	Role-playing Game: a style of game that is dependent on player role play interactions
Server	A private online chat room created and used via Discord
Session	A meeting to continue playing a specific campaign
Stats	Character based abilities and scores that affect how a character is played mechanically
Subclass	The specialization a character takes within their class
The Table	The figurative/physical space where DnD is played

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	1
ABBREVIATIONS AND NECESSARY TERMINOLOGY	3
INTRODUCTION	6
Dungeons & Dragons: A History	8
Dungeons & Dragons: Mechanics	8
ESTABLISHING THE RESEARCH	10
1. Research Methods	10
1.1. Immersion into the Community	10
1.2. Behavioral Observation	14
1.3. Linguistic Analysis	14
1.4. Direct Communication	17
2. Establishment of Space	18
3. Literature Review	21
3.1. Foundations of Digital Ethnographies	21
3.2. Identity Fractals	22
3.3. Immersion through Role Play	23
3.4. Level Up in Power	25
SETTING THE SCENE	26
1. Developing the World	26
2. Introducing the Cast	27
2.1. Assemblage of the Party	28
2.2. Rolling the Dice on Dungeons & Dragons	30
2.3. The Community and Their Fractals	31
ROLE PLAY AND COMMUNITY	32
1. Development of Character	32
1.1. The Individual Experience	32
1.2. Personal Fractals	34
1.3. The Rule of Cool	35
1.4. Being a ‘Good’ Player	37
2. Development of Community	38
CONCLUSION	39
REFERENCES CITED	41

INTRODUCTION

It was a bright day as I walked from my dorm building to our meeting place. Despite it being late afternoon, the sun still shone brightly overhead, somehow lifting my spirits despite the looming anxiety I felt as a pit in my stomach. Cutting across the courtyard barren of people, I felt myself mentally preparing the speech I would be giving upon everyone's arrival to the session. There had been a long gap in between sessions, and I was eager to return to my players. Sooner than expected I reached the large, oversized doors of our meeting place of choice - the University of Richmond's Chaplaincy building. Swiping in, opening the door, and immediately hooking a right into the main conference room, I felt myself sigh upon realization that no one else had arrived quite yet. The conference room is a fitting piece to the university's style of decor - 1970s mixed with Victorian era stylings of bookshelves and dark woods. The "conference table" is a mix of four square tables pushed together to create a long line where I quickly set myself up in the middle of it.

Unzipping my backpack, the contents of the pack are soon sprawled across my designated square: phone, laptop, two chargers, a notebook, my campaign journal, a bag full of dice, a book crafted into a dice tray, and three bottles of Dr. Pepper. After being satisfied with my elaborate set up, I began setting up my computer. With the Wi-Fi reconnected, I load my internet browser to ensure all the web pages I need are pre-set and go about opening Discord. Clicking into the server's voice channel, I am greeted by the familiar two-tone load-up sound. Completing a preliminary sound check, I boot up the music bot, filling the conference room with Sanskrit music. The set-up is complete, all there is left to do is wait for everyone to arrive.

Sitting at my desk as I write out this depiction of events, I cannot help but feel a sense of nostalgia looking back at where it all began. First and foremost, I feel it is important to introduce myself. My name is Kaitlyn "Katie" Anderson, and at the time of writing this, I am a senior at the University of Richmond, double majoring in Anthropology and Geography. Throw in some references that I'm from

Northern New Jersey and you pretty much have the standard undergraduate ice breaker introduction. This presentation, however, fails to reflect the connections I have to this research.

I was first introduced to the concept of *Dungeons & Dragons* two years before I would manage to sit at a DnD table. In the fall of 2017, my high school put on the play *She Kills Monsters* which is a show using *Dungeons & Dragons* as the set piece for a comedy that also explores concepts of love, acceptance, and grief. Over five years later I still have the opening monologue memorized, a core memory to the journey I would eventually walk. Over the years sitting at several DnD tables, my name has expanded beyond the simple moniker of Katie Anderson. As of now, the list also includes Corvina Kentworthy, Azarath, Bethany Harp, Kahlana Novsh/Valsharess, Harlow, Jimu, Ylenia Rusnac, and Galena Flannery. Each of these names encapsulates a different story, a different life, yet each of them is a part of my journey. This research however reflects a different position in the realm of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the driver's seat and behind the Dungeon Master's screen. Ever the one for dramatics, I can think of no better way to introduce myself as a Dungeon Master than through my original source material.

*In a time before Facebook, Worlds of Warcraft, and Massive Multiplayer Online RPGs,
there once existed simply a game.*

*Forged by the hands of nerds, crafted in the minds of geeks, and so advanced in its advanciness it would take a
whole fifth edition to contain all its mighty geekery.*

*And here, in the land of Virginia during the year of 2023, one of the rarest types of geeks walked the earth.
A Dungeon Master without fear, prejudice, or a penis.*

*This nerd was a girl-nerd, the most uncommon form of nerd in the world and her name was Katie Anderson.
(Lights come up on KATIE ANDERSON, a young adult decked out in full leathery D&D fantasy armor with a
coolass sword in hand. She is surrounded by a horde of Kobolds [goblin-like creatures].)*

(Suddenly they attack!)

(A fight ensues before the battle scene fades to black)

But this story is not about her.

Adapted from the screenplay of She Kills Monsters

But this story is not about her. There is a half-truth in this statement. If I were to further alter this line, it would read 'but this story is not *just* about her'. The inclusion of 'just' in this sentence reflects the community created by the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. It would be impossible to conduct anthropological auto-ethnographic research on this subject as ties to a community- a party, are a vital component to the game. I have participated in several D&D parties, but for the last two years have acted as one of the

leading members of a group we as a community like to call Cantrips and Chaos - and that is who this research is all about. This research is about a Dungeon Master, her players, and the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. But I'm sure you're asking: *What the hell is Dungeons & Dragons anyways?*

Dungeons & Dragons: A History

Dungeons & Dragons (commonly referred to as D&D or DnD) was originally created by game designers Ernest Gary Gygax (1938-2008) and David Arneson (1947-2009). First published in 1974, D&D combined RPG role playing with combat mechanics for martialists and casters, along with a set list of rules compiled into a manual that was able to be purchased along with other items such as dice, figurines, and pre-written adventures known as modules. In the near fifty years of *Dungeons & Dragons*¹, the rules as written (RAW) have changed and evolved. As the game has aged, there have been periodic updates to the game with the publication of new "editions" of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The current edition of D&D is abbreviated to be called 5e (Fifth Edition) but in reality, is the seventh republication of the game (not including the upcoming version currently in play testing). Originally published by Gygax's company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), *Dungeons & Dragons* has been owned by *Wizards of the Coast*, a subsidiary of *Hasbro, Inc.* since 1997. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a multi-million-dollar enterprise including materials copyrighted by *Hasbro* but also independent companies that benefit from the source material. The list of content and contributors is vast, extending from corporations that rake in millions of dollars every year like *Critical Role* to independent creators who share their creations for free online. With the rise of the internet and an even further larger boom in popularity in recent years with pop-culture references such as *Stranger Things* and the film *Honor Among Thieves*, as well as the global COVID-19 pandemic, *Dungeons & Dragons* has millions of fans and players across the globe and has created a vast online community.

Dungeons & Dragons: Mechanics

As a basic overview of how the game works, a Dungeon Master oversees the overarching plot line created, and the players interact with the story and world the Dungeon Master has created. This

¹ *Dungeons & Dragons celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2024*

includes role playing with other players as well as NPCs, characters created and played by the Dungeon Master. Oftentimes the Dungeon Master is considered to be the main narrator of the adventure, creating the framework, and providing the additional information to make the world feel authentic. However, it is important to note the importance of the usage of “main” narrator, not “sole”. Overall, DnD is built upon the paradoxical tension between free exercise of narrative imagination and complex rule-based limitations (Mizer 2015, 5-6). Players also have the ability to affect and drive the story forward through their desires and actions. A player wanting to interact with the world or the Dungeon Master wanting a scenario to occur within the game, usually results in the Dungeon Master prompting a player or multiple players to roll dice, usually a twenty-sided die, or in the DnD community commonly referred to as a D20. The outcome of the dice affects the result and is interpreted by the Dungeon Master, resulting in an effect that alters how the game continues onwards. This is an example of one such scenario in game:

DM: You enter a room that appears to be functioning as a makeshift office. There are items sprawled out across the small room. Trinkets and artifacts lay across several surfaces, and a large desk fills the back of the room.

Player: I want to look around the room to see if there is anything that seems especially important or what we’re looking for.

DM: Make me an investigation check.

Player: *Rolls a D20* that’s a 12?

DM: You find several items in the room that contain magical properties as well as gold, but you do not see anything of particular use in finding the specific item you are looking for.

Roleplaying and the usage of statistics influences the development of the story, oftentimes in ways that were not originally accounted for by the Dungeon Master.

In addition to basic role playing, each player’s character has different abilities dependent on a variety of choices made by the player. Some of these options are race, background, class, subclass, proficiencies, and feats. Rather than explain in detail the purposes of each of these choices, it is better to

visualize like a tree with several branches and branches going off the main branches. These decisions made by the player for their character continue to evolve throughout the campaign as characters continue to level up and improve existing abilities and/or gain new ones. Character customization begins at level one and can span to level twenty. However, campaigns start at any level of the Dungeon Master's choosing. For this particular campaign, the party studied in this research started at level twelve and encompasses a wide variety of customizations that directly and indirectly influence both the storyline and session gameplay. The characters created are the foundation of the story created through the *Dungeons & Dragons* medium and aid in defining what makes DnD what it is.

ESTABLISHING THE RESEARCH

Now that we have briefly answered the question “what is *Dungeons & Dragons*?” we now come across a secondary question, “how is this research considered to be under the academic umbrella of Anthropology?” To me, the definition of anthropology is continuously evolving as the discipline itself is still trying to figure out exactly what it is. It is a discipline that continues to evolve as the world around it demands. Regardless of the changes that the discipline faces, at its core, cultural anthropology studies how people who share a common cultural system develop both the physical and social world they have constructed, and therefore are transformed by the cultural ideas, behaviors, and physical environments they themselves have created. It is through this definition that *Dungeons & Dragons* is able to find itself within the confines of cultural anthropology. As a result, it is feasible to utilize anthropological research methods to conduct analysis on the game itself and the subcultural groups that are developed because of it.

1. Research Methods

1.1. *Immersion into the Community*

At its foundation, *Dungeons & Dragons* is dependent on the creation of a community. This requires the ability to immerse oneself into that communal cultural environment. When I was first proposing this research to the Department of Sociology & Anthropology in the early spring of 2021, I was

already playing in two separate DnD groups, though we had not yet created Cantrips and Chaos. While I cannot claim that Cantrips and Chaos was created for the purposes of my research, it did serve as a strong foundation to jumpstart my research. I adopted the position of a Dungeon Master to immerse myself in the culture. In other words, the distinct position of a Dungeon Master allowed me to run my own campaign. A Dungeon Master yields the main power to control the narrative but is heavily dependent on those they are working with to develop the story. As a DM I structured a narrative that allowed for high levels of role play amongst players themselves, encouraging PC RP, and this increased my access to observe others' behavior.

The ability to analyze DnD is dependent on the collection of anecdotes and stories. The purpose of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is to develop a story, therefore it only makes sense to pull from the stories being created to further analyze the culture that is being created surrounding the game itself. The collection of data in this context is dependent on thick data - focusing on a small group (in this case, a DnD party). The result for me was a heightened awareness of the incredible depth of meanings and stories that were developed from the data (Wang 2013). The collection of data is dependent on fieldwork, a key approach to the anthropological paradigm. While all elements of the paradigm are interrelated, this research itself focuses on ethnographic methods with smaller ties to cross-cultural comparative perspectives and holistic perspectives to fully flesh out the data. Already a part of a DnD group and Dungeon Master, the process of starting ethnographic data was relatively straightforward from the immersion perspective. Immersion into the community, however, delves further than simply running a DnD campaign.

Immersion is a key part of RP and getting involved in a DnD game, but immersion into a community is a core element of ethnographic fieldwork. Robert M. Emerson writes that an ethnographer seeks deeper immersion in other's worlds to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. Immersing oneself into a community creates firsthand relations and provides easier access to evidence that may be more subtle or unobserved through simple observation or interview methods alone (Emerson 2011, 18). Therefore, simply observing a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign session is not enough. To best

understand the dynamics in place, it is necessary to become a part of the community and immersed in the structure at play.

A *Dungeons & Dragons* party structure is dependent upon the creation of a hierarchical system. This system is unique to this specific group dynamic and is not necessarily something that is exact nor replicable amongst other DnD groups that exist. In this context, the hierarchical structure functions at two levels: the group level and the individual game level. While functioning separately, the two structures function at the same time, therefore affecting each other. At their core, the power structures are similar in nature in that there are two tiers: the Dungeon Master and the players. This is conducive with Bourdieu's definition of symbolic power which highlights the cultural significance of power in a society in order to maintain order and continue pushing forward (Pellandini-Simányi 2014). Symbolic power aids in the explanation of the deeper complexities that exist within a cultural subtext rather than assuming it is one entity trying to take full totalitarian control.

With *Dungeons & Dragons*, at the group level, there are two tiers of power that are broken down into Full-Time Dungeon Masters, Part-Time Dungeon Masters, and Full-Time Players. The Full-Time Dungeon Masters are at the top of the hierarchy and take on larger amounts of responsibilities than the other members of the group. While Part-Time and Full-Time both include Dungeon Master in the title, Part-Time Dungeon Masters have the same overall responsibilities as full-time players on a day-to-day basis.

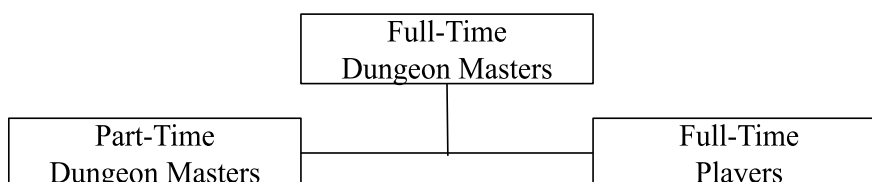


Fig 1. A basic breakdown of DnD positions of power

The Full-Time Dungeon Masters, in addition to running campaigns every week, take on the responsibility of ensuring that the group continues to function and grow at a managerial level. They are the ones responsible for creating the monthly rotating schedule, checking player availability, maintaining the group

chats and servers, along with other smaller tasks. The two-tier system is simple in how it divides one group from another, creating categories. The simplicity of a basic chart, however, fails to reflect the more complex nature of the structure. This is where it is necessary to consider the secondary hierarchical structure: the individual game.

In an individual game, once again there are two tiers, but only two categories: Dungeon Master and Player. A streamlined version of the structure containing only one person holding the title of Dungeon Master and everyone else at the second tier holding the title of player. This is where it is necessary to combine the two hierarchies together. While in a single game there is only one Dungeon Master, there are Full-Time Dungeon Masters that also are Full-Time Players. While at first glance it may just seem that people can hold multiple titles, it influences interactions both inside and outside of the game itself. A Dungeon Master may rely on the advice of other DMs on how to make specific rule decisions or work on the development of plot lines through brainstorming.

This does not go without saying that current player-only party members are not necessarily removed from this process. Players that do not become DMs may have specialized skills that aid the overall party, such as mapmaking, music finder, or meme creator, just to name a few. In addition, at the time of publication, all eight party members that exist, have some experience Dming. The range of time spent as a DM varies greatly, from a singular one shot to multi-year campaigns. Failure to acknowledge the intelligence and background knowledge of those at the table would also fail to account for the power at play. As a result, a linear structure model does not properly visualize the nature of this party's power dynamics. Instead, a more comprehensive, but albeit complicated chart, would look more like this:

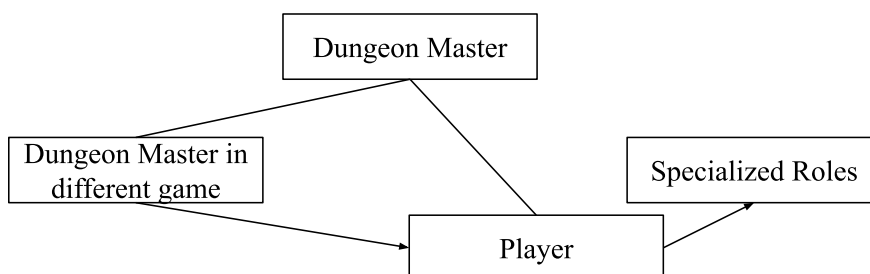


Fig 2. An accurate breakdown of a D&D party's roles and power structure

But how did such a complicated structure come to be? In a “traditional” Dungeons & Dragons group, there is one main Dungeon Master and players, but here with this group, Cantrips and Chaos, there are three main games running at the same time with additional one-shots and short campaigns thrown in by other members. As one of the main DMs who is also a full-time player at other tables, for this research it was vital to utilize both mindsets and considerations of the symbolic power I personally had at different tables in order to conduct further analysis.

1.2. *Behavioral Observation*

When functioning within a community, there are specific behaviors that emerge from the development of said community. Like a game mechanic in *Dungeons & Dragons*, behavioral observation occurs through both passive and active perception. Passive perception in a DnD game functions similarly to participant observation – one is able to notice things about people and the environment without directly interacting with the actors at play. In comparison, active perception functions like active participant observation – one is directly interacting with the actors at hand to study and learn more about them. An ethnographer cannot and should not attempt to be a fly on the wall, being instead a fully passive observer (Emerson 2011, 9). However, at times it is necessary to actively sit in a conversation and allow members of the community to act on their own accord without direct influence. Regardless of the type of perception, behavioral observation is a key component of fieldwork, specifically within the context of the game. Depending on the immersion within a community, behavioral observation takes place by listening to conversations, participating in conversations, and observing non-verbal components of behavior. As a Dungeon Master, I oftentimes bounced between being active and passive, depending on the context of the situation. To understand the deeper context and dynamics at play, it is also necessary to comprehend the language being used.

1.3. *Linguistic Analysis*

Like behavioral analysis, linguistic analysis is divided into separate categories depending on context. For the community being studied, there are three main methods of communication: verbal, written, and memes. Each of these methods serves their own purpose but also interacts with each other to

create an even larger context. In addition to the linguistic types, it is necessary to understand the language being used and developed by the community at large. *Dungeons & Dragons* as a greater-scale culture has specific words and short forms to describe different components of the game. These words are what resulted in the development of the glossary at the beginning of this paper and emphasizes the importance of linguistic context. However, this specific group is a subculture developed from the greater context of global DnD players, and therefore has developed an even further elaborate system of communication that is specialized to the group itself.

Verbal

Verbal communication, as the name suggests, focuses on the words that are being specifically uttered. This includes conversations that happen at the table both in and out of role play as well as conversations held as a group outside of the game context. When communicating to each other, there is a mixture of language used: Standard American English, specific DnD language, and slang either developed by the group culture or borrowed from outside contexts. As a result, there is a unique language system that is developed by the group for the group, resulting in a continuous influence on the group members themselves. For example, a slang word like “pog” (a slang term that functions as a reactionary term similar to wow or awesome) was not something that was a part of my general vernacular prior to this group being created, but now it is a word used and referenced by me because of the group structure.

Verbal components are also influenced by the context in which they are uttered. Specific phrases take on different meanings depending on this context. A quote like: "I'm so sorry Katie for my homophobic and misogynistic outburst. I'm going to take off my clothes" takes on a very different meaning when you realize that it is the player describing what his character is about to do in the game rather than the player themselves. Language found in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game functions on an expected level of absurdity, coupled with grace and humor. This grace, however, does not stop this community from forever maintaining what was said in absurdity.

Written

Words spoken are like a tube of toothpaste, once they're said, they can't be put back into the tube and everyone will always remember if you said too much. At least, that is the mantra of this community. On the server, there is an entire written channel dedicated to the transcription of out of context quotes. The quotes themselves are absurd in context, but as a community, going back and reading quotes months later when the context is forgotten brings an additional level of humor and community bonding (or roasting depending on who you ask). But written linguistics in this context goes beyond momentary transcription into the realm of developing a more permanent style of language for the community. Certain slang terms are not well suited to verbal language, such as abbreviations, and therefore solely exist in the written context. Written language is a vital source of passing information amongst players as well as DM to players within a game context, or to simply chat. A DM may send the contents of a letter given or the spelling of a newly introduced NPC to the party so that players can reference it later, or a player can start a conversation in the server when a game is not presently taking place. Written language works to further the bond between community members just as much as verbal communication.

Memes

The final means of communication uses memes. This may sound bizarre, out of context, but it is a vital method of linguistic communication in this subculture. A meme is defined as “an image, a video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, it is often copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). As a result, a meme combines the two previously mentioned linguistic forms and transforms them into its own method of communication. The Cantrips and Chaos group's memes originally functioned in the traditional meme format that is common across several social media platforms: a bit of text and then a pop-culture meme format to accompany the text. The text in question would reference something that happened in game or created a likely hypothetical situation in game.



Fig 3. Meme created by Hannah on the group's GroupMe

The development of memes however has developed in recent years to incorporate video and audio files, along with text. These memes follow more in the style of TikTok or Instagram, rather than a traditional picture with words meme format. In addition to function through the lens of linguistics, memes are also part of visual ethnographic research. As a member of the community, I am one of the largest contributors to the new video meme format, which acts as a humorous method of documenting campaign events. Interacting with the linguistic methods at hand, not only allows both for better integration into the community, but also better understanding of the group dynamics.

1.4. *Direct Communication*

The final method of communication conducted through this research was a more direct approach through the usage of interviews. Direct communication allowed for one-on-one conversations about personal experiences without the influence of other players. These interviews were formal in structure, with a set list of base questions but allowed for adaptability depending on how the conversations went. This allowed for a degree of control to be maintained throughout the interaction but also improved upon an ongoing relationship (Davies 1999, 4). Interviews were conducted on a rolling basis and included community members that varied in hierarchical structure in attempts to maintain a broader perspective of the group. One of the key factors in the interviews was the continuation of the same digital space. This was done through the usage of Discord to maintain a constant location - whether it be through informal

conversations, campaign sessions, or more formal settings. The creation of space is crucial to the development of community and therefore was necessary to recognize the comfort that a familiar space brings when discussing potentially uncomfortable and/or personal topics.

2. **Establishment of Space**

The establishment of physical space is a key element to the definition of a culture through a cultural anthropology lens. Traditionally speaking, a physical space is a specific geographic location or a specific type of geographic space. Having a physical space is important to placemaking and a sense of identity, but how does that function within *Dungeons & Dragons*? The landscape of this game is unable to be defined to a single specific geographic location. Traditionally, *Dungeons & Dragons* has the visualization of people sitting around a physical table, therefore defining a physical space. However, with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, like many other activities, the once static location has become one of fluidity. In this case, a hybrid system. But DnD has always gone beyond the physical landscape, and in recent years, so has anthropology. Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor came together in 2012 to affirm the fact that anthropology has the capacity to be analyzed over a digital landscape. These digital systems can include video games, online chat rooms, and many more online platforms, but what exactly is being used in this context? Conducting research in a digital environment not only requires understanding as to how to conduct field research, but also considerable expertise in the mechanics of the technology being used as well (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 74). It is a complicated system of mental, physical, and digital, that fosters a need for greater context and explanation of what these systems are.

GroupMe

The initial program used for communication by the Cantrips and Chaos group is GroupMe. A messaging application popular with University of Richmond and other universities alike, the GroupMe software allows for large group chats to be formed. The group chat is the location of announcements, reminders, and sharing of media. Because the current members of the group originated at the University

of Richmond, utilizing GroupMe acted as a solid foundation for general communication. However, as the group has continued to develop with people graduating and new outside members joining the wider community that is being developed, the GroupMe presently has a smaller landscape than when the group was founded two years ago. It still remains an important platform but in comparison to the following locations, it has been reduced further in communication and informational contexts.

Roll20

Established in 2012 as a digital-tabletop platform, Roll20 gives users access to play traditionally in-person tabletop games online. The website saw a surge in subscribers and monthly users during the pandemic, exceeding 8 million members in 2021 alone. Even for those that play in person, it is a useful tool due to the sheer size of the website's archives of stat blocks, spells, visual aids, and many more. In the context of this campaign, Roll20 functions as a location to visualize spaces as well as provide easy access to character sheets. The visualization of space through the usage of Roll20 is crucial due to its intention of implementing maps of a space. As a result, Roll20 symbolically functions as the physical table upon which players virtually are able to "sit around." This visualization of the physical table is then coupled with a secondary program: Discord.

Discord

Released in 2015 as an instant messaging social platform, Discord allows users to communicate via several avenues. This includes, text messaging, voice calls, video calls, and sending of media and files. Most of this content is included in what is called a server. A server is a closed system that includes several channels. These channels are divided into different roles. Within the server, each member of the server is assigned a different role or several roles. These roles are customizable by those that are deemed "admins", or those that are in control of the server. In the Cantrips and Chaos server, there are eight different roles that can be assigned. These include: Admin/God, DM, Librarian of the Compendium, One-Shot DM, Player, Music Approved, Popcorn Holder, and Uninitiated. Like the roles assigned to each

player (Dungeon Master and Player), these roles also function as creating a hierarchical structure. As pictured below, Discord automatically ranks roles in the right sidebar from highest to lowest.

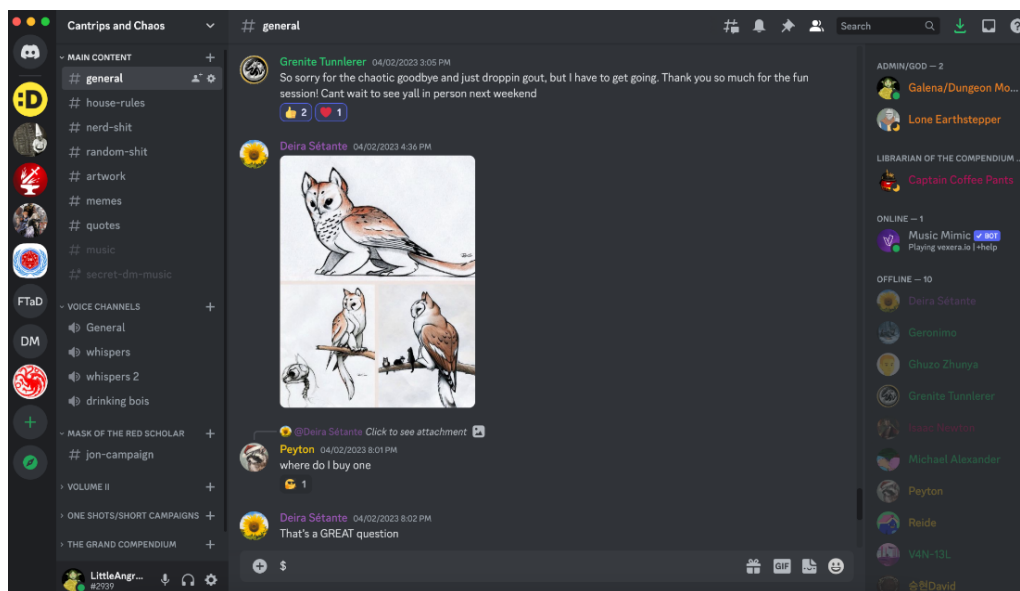


Fig 4. Screenshot of the Cantrips and Chaos server visualizing the different functions of the established space

On the opposite side of the screen, there are multiple channels set in place. These channels do not serve hierarchical purposes, but each channel has its own specific designated use, as defined by the title of the channel. These channels assist the group in the development of a complex landscape that is consistently working both separately and tangentially.

Both inside and outside of a campaign session, the Discord functions as the main gathering hub, creating a digital landscape for community members to congregate. Furthering the linguistic analysis available in this research, the server's multiple channels and functions allows for text, verbal, and memes to exist in the same space as communication would exist in a traditional physical landscape.

The Hybrid Space

Now that we have addressed the digital landscapes for this community, it is important to address there is a specific geographic landscape component as well. As a majority of community members are still current University of Richmond students, those who reside on campus or near campus will gather at the campus' chaplaincy building to run the in-person portion of sessions. These sessions do not exclude

members of the community that cannot make sessions in person, but instead a hybrid system has been developed. This hybrid system includes the usage of discord video calls to allow online users the ability to interact with those that have the capability to be both in person and online simultaneously. While there is an additional sense of community driven by the inclusion of a physical community space, it does not deter from the relationships developed through the digital landscape. On the server and in the community there are members that have never met each other in person, but there are still strong connections and friendships that have formed over the years. Additionally, the usage of the physical location of the Chaplaincy is a temporary space, as going forward following this upcoming graduating class, there will only be one member remaining on campus, forcing an inevitable shift to a full digital landscape.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Foundations of Digital Ethnographies

The comparison of digital landscapes to the traditional notion of a landscape is not a new concept in the realm of Anthropology. My personal introduction to ethnographic digital landscapes came from Tom Boellstorff's works, specifically his 2012 book, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. With the opening paragraph of the first chapter, I feel like Boellstorff perfectly encapsulates the importance of digital landscape and ethnographic research within this realm:

Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of place, performance, creativity, and ritual. The social lifeworlds that emerge within them are very real. They represent a complex transaction between their designers, who have certain goals and desires about what people will do [...] they draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices. Just as in the physical world, people within virtual worlds perform and cycle through different roles and identities (Boellstorff 2012, 1).

A digital arena is just as real as a traditional landscape with the capacity to develop and grow its own cultural and subcultural landscapes. Since the writing of this instructional book on conducting ethnographies in a digital format, the internet has continued to expand and evolve over the last decade. In

2012 memes were just solidifying themselves as a key method of communication and humor on the worldwide web, but now have become inseparable from greater internet culture. The work of Boellstorff and his co-authors set the stage for other ethnographic work to receive acceptance by using the digital landscape.

3.2. *Identity Fractals*

Diving into the digital landscape, we come across research that focuses on different aspects of identity. One such text is *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* by Zach Waggoner. Waggoner focuses on the relationships between “real-world” and “in-game” identities, finding that real-world identities continually impact virtual identities of the characters created (Waggoner 2009). Waggoner highlights the identity theory of James Gee whose theoretical view of identity creates categories of real-world identity, virtual-world identity, and projective identity - allowing for a dynamic and complex relationship between the virtual characters and the player’s sense of identity and self. Gee’s theory of identity further explains that because players can create multiple identities/characters across different virtual environments (Jones 2013).

Pulling away from the digital landscape, the concept of different frames of self exists within the traditional anthropological landscape as well. A person has their core identity, but an individual exists as a social being and therefore acts in different manners depending on those around them. This implies that a person is neither singular or plural, adopting and evolving different identities. Being a member of a group implies that others do the same - continuously influenced by others and building upon oneself while simultaneously affecting others. It is with this process of continual personality development that Roy Wagner develops the term of “fractal person” (Taylor 1990, 1024).

It is from Wagner’s definition of a fractal person and Gee’s theory that I have developed the concept of *Dungeons & Dragons* characters as ‘identity fractals.’ Fractals are defined in the discipline of mathematics as a never-ending pattern that are infinitely complex and self-similar across different scales (Fractal Foundation n.d.), often pulling from chaos theory. While I am as big of a fan of Dr. Ian Malcolm (cue the *Jurassic Park* theme music) as the next guy, chaos theory is not what is important here, but the

concept of self-similarity across the different scales. A DnD character will be uniquely different from the player that is playing said character, but the differences do not detract from the fact that the similarities between the two is what holds the two together. Instead, the person and the character continue to evolve through their connection to the group, further expanding the two identities.

The concept of identity fractals balances on the concept of trust within the community setting. Developing a character, therefore a new identity, is both a personal and community based process. Oftentimes from an outsider's perspective, it is assumed that only the “main” identity of a person is their “real” identity (Bowman 2010, 12). However, when playing within a DnD session, the “real” identity of a person transitions several times within a session with varying degrees of shifting between identities. Trusting others to understand the different personalities on display and continuously developing acts to further the concept that characters and players add to the interconnected nature of people and their communities. To explain the differences between two identities within the context of DnD requires the usage of immersion to characterize the idiosyncratic divisions between the two.

3.3. *Immersion through Role Play*

Further explained by Bowman, the act of immersion is a ritual where groups of individuals set aside their individual “main” identities and come together with new identities - new fractals (15). The concept of immersion is further delved into with Arnold Van Gennep’s *liminality* and Victor Turner’s *communitas*. Van Gennep describes this as a three-step process:

Disengagement	the individual is symbolically removed from society and own identity
Liminal Stage	the individual is secluded from society and under constant surveillance
Reunion	the individual is reintegrated with new statuses

This process creates a level system in which a participant travels down in a single line towards its conclusion as a form of rite of passage through social cohesion - a process labeled as *communitas* by Victor Turner. The purpose of *communitas* is to infuse everyday social statuses with ritual, being tied to the “common good” for a community (Turner 1969). The rite of passage separates a participant from their

original status (Forth 2018, 2) and through ritual they are granted a new identity status. *Communitas* creates a leveling of hierarchy in communities forming a bond. This bond, a sense of oneness, where a Dungeon Master has the capability of maintaining their role, but also allowing others to take up the mantle of Dungeon Master and other imposed titles.

Additionally, while a solid anthropological foundation, in this context, the rigidity of Van Gennep's *liminality* process is not fully conducive to the study at hand. In a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign session, the transitions between roles (inside and outside of game) are too frequent, resulting in jumping between stages several times rather than a singular transition downwards. Instead, the three-tier process when handling conversations conducted in a *Dungeons & Dragons* session acts more like slidebars with varying levels of immersion into role play scenarios. The adapted system is once again in three parts:

Exterior	the player is fully connected to their “main” identity outside of the game
Liminal Stage	the player is in between identities, alternating between first and third person when discussing their character
Immersion	the player has fully assumed the identity of their character

The levels of immersion can transition quickly, oftentimes changing multiple times within a single conversation. One such scenario is something like this:

Player 1: Okay, so what exactly should I do?

Player 2: Well, we're trying to get information about the missing blade and how she came into work with the Valtic Empire, so maybe start there?

Player 1: Okay, I like that idea. Geronimo will walk into the interrogation room and sit down.

DM: Okay, you sit down across from the suspect, she looks exhausted and has been chained up.

Player 1: Hey so uh, how are you doing? You know I have this funny story and...

NPC: What exactly do you want?

Player 1: *looks to other party members out of game uncertain of how to respond*

This bouncing between levels of immersion emphasizes the fact that the experience of role-playing immersion is unable to be divided from in and out-of-game social contexts (Bowman 2018, 2). This concept is connected to the theory of shared involvement, developed by Calleja. Calleja's focus on video game players immersion is not a perfect match to how *Dungeons & Dragons* is played, but it does highlight the cooperation and community communication between player and NPCs which is seen in DnD through the concept of involvement (Calleja 2007, 83). Calleja's frames of involvement are intertwined as they are always in relation to each other, once again highlighting the concept of my personal concept of fractals. The acts of involvement and role play are heavily intertwined with each other, but there is one final main actor at play as well: power.

3.4. *Level Up in Power*

Power structures are a vital part of *Dungeons & Dragons* mechanics at the game level, creating a balance of power between the Dungeon Master and their players. The Dungeon Master sits at the symbolic head of the table holding the most power, but players themselves in their actions attempt to gain more power to control the story in their favor by their actions and dice rolls. The hierarchical structure between players and the Dungeon Master establishes a struggle of symbolic power between the two groups. The Dungeon Master attempts to maintain power and control over the space through the usage of storytelling, scenarios, and interactions with the players through the usage of NPCs. However, the players themselves are also attempting to gain more power from the Dungeon Master through their actions as well as their dice rolls. The players are not attempting to overthrow the power of the Dungeon Master, but rather gain symbolic profit on their existing assets (Pellandini-Simányi 2014, 655). The game of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a result ends up being a dance to balance the existing power structures, which can quickly become lopsided if issues arise. Working with a structure that places seven people under a single person, maintaining the structure is a continuous process. It is through this process that a Dungeon Master is able to balance between personal and player desires to develop a world and a campaign. Now that we have taken the time to discuss theory, how about we dive into the world I developed?

SETTING THE SCENE

My friends, welcome back the world of Iad. It has been four years since the previous campaign ended. The characters and events that have transpired are deeply embedded in the current day, but those characters have rejoined the fold of the world. Today we start anew, with new faces and a new story to tell. We remain on the continent of Hielle, but shift our view to the east, The Free States of Tarvan. A vibrant desert kingdom, the Free States are both rich in cultural diversity and economic wealth through its extensive trade routes. However, there is a snag in kingdom peace. The Free States of Tarvan have been in conflict with the Valtic Empire of the north for decades over a piece of territory - territory that would guarantee control over the Straits of UMBERLEE.

The Princes of the Free States of Tarvan have declared a tier-one state of emergency, conscripting those residing into the kingdom to work towards the war effort. War strategies, medical staff, and garrison membership positions are being assigned in the city of Neveah - a city bordering the conflict. This is where we shall begin our new tale. A city currently in peace with the shadows of war running long. Only time will tell how long tranquility will last.

1. Developing the World

The world where the campaign takes place is a homebrew setting of my own design. The Free States of Tarvan are styled as a city-state kingdom with a mixing of several real-world and fictional cultural references. Some of these references include the *Avatar the Last Airbender* universe, Arabia, India, ancient Egypt, and the Byzantine Empire. The inclusion of several intentional references is paired with ideas that are organically developed through brainstorming and further world development. The diversity of the work is intentional, as it attempts to create a fantastical setting that feels real and authentic. The cultural diversity is then heightened through the inclusion of several different DnD races to add further fantasy elements.



Fig 5. Map of the DnD setting, the Free States of Tarvan. This map was created by James

During the period of research, the party traveled from the city of Neveah to Janah. As we explore the map, there are other cities within the Free States that the party has yet to visit, but still hold significant importance to events happening in the story that are in the background not affecting the players directly currently. But what is most important to this research is not the setting nor the specifics of the campaign sessions, but the players themselves.

2. Introducing the Cast

Before diving into the individual players and characters, some additional contextual information is in order. This *Dungeons & Dragons* party, including myself, encompasses eight people. The inclusion of eight people is evidence of the further development and expansion of the subcultural environment caused by the playing of this game. The original context of this group came from an executive meeting for the University of Richmond's Model United Nations organization. Starting off with the five officers, the group has since picked up and dropped off members in the last two years. Currently on the main server there are more than eight members, but for the context of this research, the eight serve as the core.

2.1. *Assemblage of the Party*

*You all meet in a tavern and- *record scratch* wait hold on, how the party members met in real life not in game. Eh hem, let's start over shall we?*

It was a warm Wednesday evening in March 2021 in the Gottwald Center for the Sciences. A Model United Nations club meeting has just ended, and the club's executive board was chatting as they cleaned up for the night. Three of the five executives were discussing a DnD game two of the executives were playing in and giving a recap to the third officer. The other two executives looked puzzled before one cut into the conversation stating how she thinks the game sounds cool and would want to try playing sometime. The second executive agrees. As a cohort, the Treasurer offers to run a game of her own for the executive board after the semester ends, to which all executives agree.

While an oversimplified version of events, this gives the general background of how the original group was formed, long before the name Cantrips and Chaos came to be. The original 2021 game fluctuated between four and six players, with at least four Model UN officers included. In the two years since that original game, the group has continued to evolve just as the players themselves have continued to grow and go on with their lives. At the time of writing this paper, the breakdown of party statistics was as follows:

The Party				
School Year	Current Occupation	Ages	Gender	Location
3 alumni	7 full-time students	23	5 cis male	5 On Campus
3 seniors	2 graduate students	22	2 cis female	1 Richmond
1 junior*	5 currently employed (at least	21		1 NOVA
1 sophomore	part-time)	19		1 Mississippi

*Graduating early

Fig 6. A chart breakdown of Cantrips and Chaos' demographics

The party is most diverse in its different graduating class brackets looking at the statistics at face value, but the inner workings of the group further diversify when considering the dynamics between the players themselves and their connections outside of the table.

As initially stated, the group was founded originally by members of the Model United Nations executive board. However, like most relationships, there are greater bonds that tie people together into other subcultures on a university campus. Relationships between members of a specific community can vary greatly at the kinship level, as demonstrated by Cantrips and Chaos.

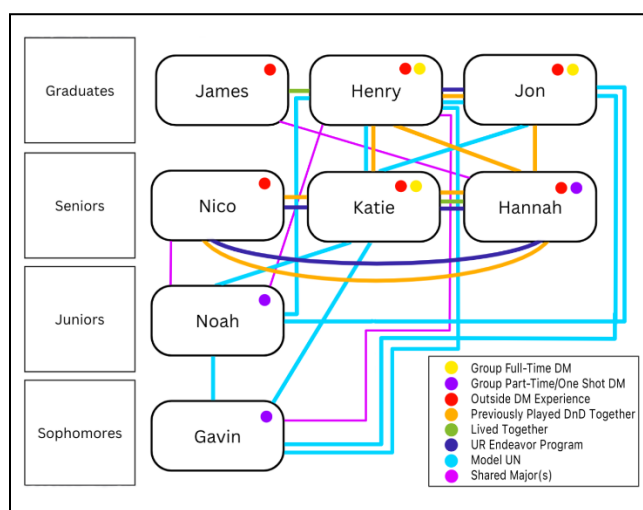


Fig 7. Kinship chart representing the connections between group members. Thinner lines represent indirect connectors ie happening to be within the same major(s).

Dots within the name bubbles reflect Dungeon Master experience

Specific members have stronger kinship ties such as myself to members of the community, while others may have originally only had a handful ties at varying strengths before joining the group. As the group evolved, the outside kinships have weakened in their influence on the greater community, most specifically through the ritual act of a university graduation ceremony. The most important kinship ties to remain are as foundational members of this *Dungeons & Dragons* subculture. But perhaps rather than focusing on the kinship between the players, we should take a step back and come to understand why this group of eight people wanted to play *Dungeons & Dragons* in the first place.

2.2. *Rolling the Dice on Dungeons & Dragons*

Speaking from personal experience, theatre is a common jumping off point for diving into playing DnD. Jon and I both have direct high school experience with theatre acting, participating in over a dozen performances between the two of us. Nico, while not an actor himself, was theatre-adjacent in high school through the people he was friends with. Theatre provides the opportunity to step out from one's personal definition of self and directly get into the mindset of role playing a character. Other activities also take on the persona of playing a character different from yourself, such as Model United Nations or Mock Trial. Henry, Noah, and Gavin all had strong ties to one or both of these communities in high school/university therefore also a stepping-stone to playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. But simply being involved in specific outside activities does not make everyone interested in developing a community surrounding a specific topic, nor is it necessarily a fool-proof precursor to playing DnD.

Dungeons & Dragons at its core is a group activity, and without a group to play with, a passion for the game only goes so far. So, what exactly drew people into this rabbit hole? A large part is Internet culture. *Dungeons & Dragons* has a huge online community and following and is easy to stumble across it and get sucked in. For a community member like James, it took being recommended to watch one YouTube video to dive further into the greater community. For others it was word of mouth. You hear other people are creating a group and it's enough to pique their interest, much like community member Hannah with the group we both originally started together on our DnD journey two and a half years ago. In the case of this group *Dungeons & Dragons* is not a culture that you are born into, but it's part of a greater phenomenon of chosen community and family. Blood may be thicker than water, but it is not thicker than the door the party has spent 30 minutes trying to open instead of just attempting to use the door handle. Perhaps too niche of a DnD reference, but the main point is that joining a group like this is a means of further strengthening the bonds between friends and developing new friendships, DnD is the ritual activity that functions at the core of the community.

2.3. *The Community and Their Fractals*

Now that we have established the group as an entity and their connections to each other, it is important to address the individual and their respective characters/secondary identities. While not a full backstory drop for each of them (sorry to my players reading this, y'all aren't getting the full scoop on everyone *quite* just yet) at least pairing names will be necessary when discussing and analyzing going forward. At the time of this research, each person has taken on a singular character persona, making the total count of identities involved in the research fourteen. The pairings are as follows:

Gavin/Damiris Gutaranu	Gavin (he/him): youngest member, keeps himself incredibly busy Damiris (he/him): human, young man on his first quest against villainy - sees the world in black and white (good v. evil)
Hannah/Deira Sétante	Hannah (she/her): senior, lover of LOTR and fiber arts Deira (she/her): dragonborn, young woman attempting to save money to afford living in a HCOL city for her wizarding PhD program
Henry/Dr. Frederick Wolf	Henry (he/him): alumni, history lover, and Dungeon Master Dr. Frederick Wolf (he/him): changeling (human presenting), middle-aged crime lord/Thieftaker General trying to secure his private assets
James/Grenite Tunneler	James (he/him): graduate student, resident DnD therapist Grenite (he/him): dwarf, middle-aged craftsman looking for a place his skills are of use away from the dwarven tunnels
Jon/Lone Earthstepper	Jon (he/him): law student, storyteller, and Dungeon Master Lone (he/him): elder elf who has wandered for centuries attempting for the first time to live in the present
Nico/V4N-13L "Van"	Nico (he/him): senior, resident DnD rules and lore expert Van (they/he): automaton, young construct learning what it means to be a person
Noah/Geronimo	Noah (he/him): junior, resident socialite Geronimo (he/him): gnome, elderly-posing pacifist trying to keep the world peaceful through his optimism and music

Seeing the pairings together, the differences between the players and their characters are quickly apparent due to differences in race, age, and abilities. But what is not seen at this surface level, is the effort put into building these characters and the process of tying two entities together. The ritualistic process of developing a character as an individual and then using the character to deepen a connection to the greater group through the act of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is a unique and oftentimes deeply personal experience.

ROLE PLAY AND COMMUNITY

1. Development of Character

1.1. The Individual Experience

So how exactly does a DnD character get created? We have already discussed at a mechanics level the concepts of race and class, but how do these statistics become a person? A DnD character is developed through two components: mechanics and backstory. The mechanics are the rules set in place by the 5e system that create a system of statistics that create in-game advantages and disadvantages (positive and negative traits) within that system. But a backstory, while attached to the mechanics to some capacity (such as the background stats for a character), the actual development of a character's backstory is an individual's own creation outside of the game mechanics. A backstory is exactly what it implies, it lays out the history of a character prior to the start of a game. These writings vary widely in length and level of detail. Across the seven players that sat at my table, I had backstories that ranged from two pages to fourteen. No, a longer backstory does not necessarily mean it is better than a short and concise one, but it aids in the analysis of how building a DnD character is a unique experience that varies from player to player. It is from this point we take the two halves of character creation and create a chicken vs the egg question. Character and mechanics are directly related to one another and influence each other's development towards creating a fully fleshed character, but which one comes first? This is where we get our chicken vs egg argument, and like that argument, the answer is dependent on who you speak with within the group. The decision to start in one place in comparison to the other reflects what the player

finds most important in the context of a specific game. A player, for example, may decide they really would like to play a specific class and then build a character's backstory from that initial mechanical decision.

This is how Dr. Frederick Wolf came into existence. Henry wanted to try out a homebrew class, and then built his character's personality and backstory around the class he selected. Frederick as a character is dependent on the mechanics outlined by his class and subclass to function in the role Henry created for him. Another method of utilizing mechanics first would be rolling the main six ability scores—Strength; Dexterity; Constitution; Intelligence; Wisdom; and Charisma; and then from the results of those dice rolls, decide a class and continue on with building a backstory.

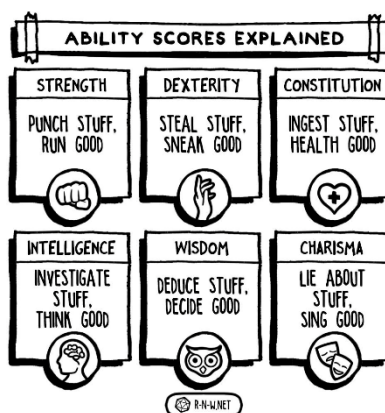


Fig 8. A meme explaining the significance of 5e's ability scores²

There are certain classes that cannot be played well mechanically without decent dice rolls. In DnD 5e mechanics, each class has proficiencies in two saving throws of the ability scores listed previously. Therefore, you traditionally, at the very least, would want both of those scores to be decently high. This is not to say that a fighter, which has proficiency in strength and constitution saving throws, would not benefit from say a high charisma or intelligence score. It is just not vital to the main mechanics of the fighter class. However, a class like paladin may only have two saving throws proficiencies, but it utilizes a third ability score modifier within the class mechanics. Therefore, choosing a class that functions with the dice rolls you have been dealt is a necessary component to building a DnD character.

² Graphic source: <https://www.r-n-w.net/>

For example, when Nico originally rolled his stats for V4N-13L, they were statistically significantly below the average dice roll, making it not only near impossible to play the character build he wanted, but also almost impossible to mechanically play a character well at all. While the issue was resolved by allowing him to reroll his stats, it should be known that having some poor stats does not necessarily equate to having built a poor character. Some players, like Henry, oftentimes purposefully choose to have one ability score modifier be negative, having it align with what makes sense for the character overall.

The notion of who a character is comes from the backstory. A player who decides on the backstory and development of a character prior to the selection of specific game mechanics are focused on their perceived importance of storytelling. A prime example of this is Lone Earthstepper. Jon fully developed the background of Lone, writing a several page short story for Lone. At the end of writing the backstory, he then took his time to research the different classes and subclasses to determine mechanics that fit the type of character he wanted Lone to be based on his backstory.

I would note that in this specific game, the majority of players focus on the choosing of a class and mechanics before fully fleshing out a character backstory. Unlike Damiris' view of the world however, the creation of characters is not a simple black or white answer to the chicken or the egg dilemma. Mechanically and thematically a character can be written on paper, but it is not until the character is introduced to the other players and the greater campaign world does the character begin to take on what they truly are.

1.2. Personal Fractals

It is here that we return to the concept of fractals of the human self. The writing of a character and the implementation of mechanics merely provide the framework for the character, but it is the player themselves who provides life to said character. As previously mentioned, a DnD character is a continuation of a person, creating a new fractal that is attached to the original identity. Talking to my players, it became clear that it is not possible to build a character that is completely divorced from oneself. A person developing a character backstory has certain blinders on, rendering the character as a written skeleton. It is the players themselves who fill in the gaps, creating a fusion between character and

player (Jon, personal communication, December 27, 2022). Characters can have significantly different physical traits and personalities than the player themselves, but there is always a piece of the player found within the character.

The importance of the similarities lies with intention. Speaking from personal experience, I have both intentionally and unintentionally inserted parts of myself into the characters I have played. It is a well known personal trope that my characters tend to have a specific paternal dynamic that is prevalent in the backstory. Originally it was an unconscious choice, but through further research and personal reflection, it became obvious it was one of my personal blinders that influence how I build characters. While not always as pointed, personal traits have a myriad of ways of influencing how a DnD character is played. The most prevalent of influences are seen in the decision making process, specifically depending on decisions made that highlight ethical or moral dilemmas. Players expressed that it was more difficult to remain in character and commit to a conscious decision if it went against their own morals, even if the “correct” decision would be to follow what aligns with the morals of their character. But beyond the constrictions of morality, what is it that drives players to act in the manner which they do, both as a character and as a player at the table?

1.3. *The Rule of Cool*

At its core, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a fantasy game where larger than life events occur. Whether it be the existence of dragons, the ability for people to cast magic, or the knowledge that there is an official DnD item called “bottle of boundless coffee.” While the DnD 5e system is incredibly vast, containing hundreds of pages of official rules and mechanics, oftentimes the official books are intentionally vague with how ruling should work. Instead of having a specific rule for every hypothetical scenario, the base game rules serve more as a skeleton that the DM has to fill in on the fly. It is with this sandbox form of empty space that players are able to get creative with their attempts at actions and decision making (oftentimes to the dismay of the Dungeon Master). Players try to push the boundaries of what their characters can do. One way this can be done is by asking the DM if they can slightly shift an existing mechanic, such as using a spell for something other than its intended purpose. However,

sometimes a player is not looking for a small tweak in mechanics, but something much larger in concept. And this is where we land upon the ‘Rule of Cool.’ Every DM uses the Rule of Cool in a different way, but the overarching theme is that an action is allowed to go through, even if it goes against RAW, as long as it improves the story, makes the table happy, and does not completely destroy the world and plot in the process.

One specific example I have from my own table involves the most iconic *Dungeons & Dragons* monsters to exist, an adult dragon, and two players who decided to become humanoid torpedoes. Two players decided that in efforts to take down a dragon, they were going to fly several hundreds of feet above the dragon, drop down on top of it, and attempt to ground the creature. Originally when they said they wanted to do this, I reminded them that fall damage was an official DnD mechanic, and they would die from that height. However, I was then in turn reminded that fall damage has a cap, so after a certain distance threshold, no more additional damage is taken. Rather than ruin what could be a cool moment to the players, (even though it would completely ruin my original combat plans as the DM) I decided to allow a Rule of Cool moment to happen. Allowing the Rule of Cool moment to go through signifies the mutual trust that is necessary between players and their Dungeon Master. At the end of the day what matters most is what will make everyone happy and what makes for good storytelling, and this is a silent agreement that crosses the power dynamic threshold. As a result, the two players were able to torpedo through the dragon, killing the beast, and manage to survive relatively unscathed - all to the joy of everyone at the table. The reason why the Rule of Cool works exceptionally well for player motivation is because it is a one time deal. After the players were done torpedoing a dragon, one of the players who had done it, Nico, said to me “don’t allow the metal man [V4N] to exploit fall damage again” (Nico, personal communication, March 5, 2023). This instance is a one time scenario, but the players continue to know that they can try to do “cool” things.

The Rule of Cool applies to specific situations, but oftentimes players want to just in general be able to do cool things. DnD is a fantasy game for a reason, and players want to be able to play out fantasies they wouldn’t otherwise be able to do. One player put it as “doing cool for the sake of being

cool.” The ability to do something cool is an inherently personal motivation, which conflicts with the nature of DnD being a team based game. This is where a player’s motivation falls in line with being a team player - a good player. But what actually constitutes being a ‘good’ player?

1.4. Being a ‘Good’ Player

In and of itself, defining something as good is subjective. When it comes to being a player in a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, how each person defines what constitutes a good player therefore varies. Despite the variations, based on player input, it is possible to divide a player’s abilities into three categories: immersion, teamwork, and sportsmanship. Immersion functions on the basis of the levels of immersion developed earlier in this paper. A player that is able to remain in the third tier of immersion for longer periods of time consistently, then they are considered by other players to be a good role player. If a player struggles with immersion however, that does not necessarily mean that they are automatically a bad player. The three parts of a player work together to flesh out a player’s own capabilities, acting as a real-life set of stat blocks in a way.

Arguably, the two most important components of a player are teamwork and sportsmanship when it comes to functioning in a group setting and developing a community. Teamwork in this specific context, is defined as the ability to sacrifice the desires of an individual for the benefit of the group as a whole. This acts in opposition to the Rule of Cool, instead pushing individual players to work collaboratively towards a common goal. The concept of teamwork is a balancing act in DnD, where ideally players will have access to spotlight moments, such as the Rule of Cool concept, but also can integrate into a team dynamic. Like many cultural settings, there are oftentimes players that are naturally leaders of a party as well as naturally followers. These dynamics usually match out of game personas, giving an additional layer to the connection between character and player. Adding the final layer of depth, sportsmanship applies to a player in the traditional sense of the word, acting with etiquette and respect for others involved in the game. Sportsmanship and teamwork are in many ways similar in definition, but sportsmanship places an emphasis on attitude. One issue some players face is becoming something known as a “power player.” A power player is focused on controlling the narrative from a role play stance as well

as combat without considering the other players and characters at the table. Oftentimes a power player becomes difficult to work with, resulting in others feeling like they need to walk on eggshells in and out of session. While everyone has their self-centered moments, such is the life of a human being, a power player lacks the sportsmanship necessary to be considered a good player. Each player brings a unique set of skills to the table and varies in range on the three categories that “define a good player.” It is the individuality of each player however, that drives the development of the community.

2. Development of Community

Dungeons & Dragons as a greater community brings together a large group of people into a single topic of interest, but the people that make up this community are not homogenous in nature. You will find people who come from different backgrounds, ethnicities, sexualities, cultures, personality types, and so much more. Even in a subculture like Cantrips in Chaos that appears to be more homogeneous in nature physically, there are still stark contrasts between players. It is through these differences that a player community develops its own unique subculture within the greater community of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Expanding upon the idea of players uniquely developing characters and backstories, the development of these characters further develops the world and campaign the Dungeon Master creates, therefore further developing the community and its dynamics at the immersive game level.

As a result, there are two separate communities that are developing simultaneously as well as affecting one another. Character dynamics within the game affect how players interact with each other outside of the game when discussing the specific campaign as well as DnD itself. One such example is when players work together outside of the table to develop a plan for the upcoming session, such as a specific conversation or potential battle strategy for an upcoming combat. This is where it becomes more apparent that characters are an extension of the player rather than a separate entity. Characters continue to exist even when there is no immersion involved. However, characters do not always reflect out of game relationships, but instead reflect the types of characters people choose to play. From my own personal experience, when I sit player-side with Cantrips and Chaos, there is one specific player that in character I very rarely get along with. Usually our characters have contrasting personalities and morals, resulting in

arguments and personal clashes. These clashing personalities however, do not reflect the kind of friendship we have outside of the table. This difference in dynamic reflects the tiered cultural system that is developed through playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and creating a close knit community. Differing levels of immersion differentiate what culture you're interacting with.

CONCLUSION

Dungeons & Dragons at its core is roleplay based storytelling, which implies the idea that the game is a work of fiction. While the world of Iad and the Free States of Tarvan does not exist on planet earth, the experiences and emotions felt by the players and their characters within the world are very much real. Players use extensions of themselves, their characters, to interact with the world around them, forging relationships and new lines of fate and destiny. Characters are fractals of their out of game personas, attached to one's base personality and expanding outwards. The development of a character is heavily influenced by a player's own history and frame of reference, but also the ritual of immersion. Immersion is the core part of this process, allowing players and their Dungeon Master to jump between the two worlds interchangeably. These worlds run parallel and simultaneously with each other during campaign sessions, allowing players to interact with both. At the end of the day, the DnD group Cantrips and Chaos has fostered a subcultural dynamic that functions at two different levels. Players have the unique capability of developing characters that reflect themselves and directly impact a world that is different from their own in meaningful, and sometimes truly chaotic ways.

The development of a positive and collaborative space starkly contrasts with the American mindset of individuality and competition. Americans have continuously moved further from a community-based mindset in recent years, focusing more on the individual rather than a collective whole. But the bonds fostered through *communitas'* level of rituals in a DnD community setting allows for the fractality of people to creatively blossom and maintain a healthy level of competitive spirit. As the world shuttered itself inside, the online *Dungeons & Dragons* community not only survived, but thrived in a way never seen before. It emphasizes the human desire for personal fractals to exist and be explored in a

community setting. This is what Cantrips and Chaos set out to do - foster a community and cultural setting that allows players to develop and grow their DnD playing skills and friendships. Nurturing each other's RP allows players a safe environment to escape the grasps of a narcissistic and toxically individualistic culture, one of life's true BBEGs.

On online forums, *Dungeons & Dragons* groups are stereotypically known to struggle to remain together for long stretches of time. But Cantrips and Chaos has so far managed to defy these stereotypes, spanning two years at the time of publication with future plans that span for many more years to come. Much like a DnD campaign, the future is uncertain, guaranteed to have unexpected twists and turns and a whole lot of chaos thrown into the mix. But that is what a *Dungeons & Dragons* culture is all about, taking a roll of the dice and fighting the punches until the game comes to an end. The campaign from this research may be on hiatus, but the culture and influence of Cantrips and Chaos lives on. And this is where our journey ends...or is it merely just the beginning?

TL; DR

An anthropological ethnographic research paper analyzing the personal and group dynamics that fosters a subcultural community within the greater *Dungeons & Dragons* cultural base.

REFERENCES CITED

BOELLSTORFF, T., NARDI, B., PEARCE, C., & TAYLOR, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.cttq9s20>

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. (2010). *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. McFarland

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. (2018). *Immersion and Shared Imagination in Role-Playing Games*. Routledge

Calleja, Gordon. (2007). *Revising Immersion: A Conceptual Model for the Analysis of Digital Game Involvement*. Authors & Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA)

Davies, Charlotte Aull (1999). *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*. Routledge

Emerson, Robert. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. The University of Chicago Press

Forth, Gregory. (2018). *Rites of Passage*. The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology

Fractal Foundation. (n.d.). *What are Fractals?* <https://fractalfoundation.org/resources/what-are-fractals/>

Jones, Sherry. (2013). *Identity Theory (James Paul Gee)*. Debategraph

Mizer, Nicholas J. (2015). *THE GREATEST UNREALITY: TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF IMAGINED WORLDS*. Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of Texas A&M University

Nguyen, Qui. (2011). *She Kills Monsters*. Samuel French, Inc.

Oxford Languages (n.d.)

Pellandini-Simányi, Léna. (2014). *Bourdieu, ethics and symbolic power*. *The Sociological Review*

Taylor, Christopher C. (1990). "Condoms and Cosmology: The 'Fractal' Person and Sexual Risk in Rwanda." *Social Science & Medicine*, 31, no.9: 1023-1028.

Taylor, Christopher C. (1990). "Condoms and Cosmology: The 'Fractal' Person and Sexual Risk in Rwanda." *Social Science & Medicine*, 31, no.9: 1023-1028.

Turner, Victor. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Routledge

Waggoner, Zach. (2009). *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*. McFarland

Wang, Tricia. (2016). Why Big Data Needs Thick Data. *Ethnography Matters*.

<https://medium.com/ethnography-matters/why-big-data-needs-thick-data-b4b3e75e3d7>