



Aaron Trammell

How
Dungeons & Dragons
Changed the
Way We
Play

HOW
Dungeons & Dragons
CHANGED THE WAY
WE PLAY

BUY

Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture

A series edited by TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski

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Dungeons & Dragons
CHANGED THE WAY
WE PLAY

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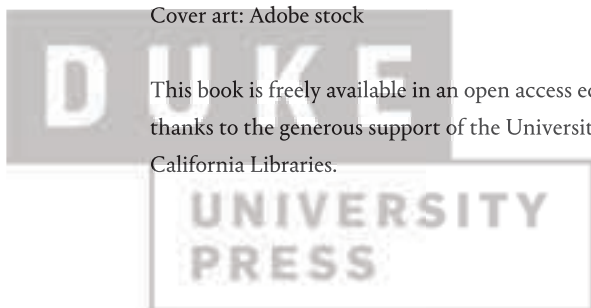
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For Ziggy. May every game you play bring joy, and
may every die you roll hit twenty

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We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that appeals to the human imagination, and so we find the dragon in quite distinct places and times. It is, so to speak, a necessary monster, not an ephemeral or accidental one, such as the three-headed chimera or the catoblepas.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1957)

Introduction

A funny thing happens when you speak with people about *Dungeons & Dragons*. Depending on who you talk to, you get a different account of the game. For some people, *Dungeons & Dragons* is an experience like no other—a sublime fantasy world full of pixies, goblins, princes, and princesses limited only by imagination. They think that the game is liberating. *Dungeons & Dragons* presents an opportunity to bend the rules and conventions of society by inhabiting a fictitious self. For others, the game evokes a nostalgia-soaked zeitgeist that predominantly features the trappings of adolescent masculinity. For these players, leather-clad succubae ride dragons against a backdrop of incandescent lightning and heavy metal. For a time, the game held a reputation as a crunchy and mechanical affair—a bewildering catacomb of rules and exceptions. In both cases the game asks us to contend with the limits of imagination. It shows how the idea of role-playing can constrain as much as it can liberate, by allowing players to tinker with their community's rules around race-, gender-, sex-, and class-based presentation. Like the many chromatic dragons that are described in the pages of its manuals, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a necessary monster. It grew in popularity alongside the rise of the personal computer and provided de-

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signers with a means to classify people, culture, religion, and more through a singular design architecture.

Role-playing games throw shade on the rosy, enthusiastic, and overly positive light that the counterculture of the 1960s is generally cast in. As a story world, *Dungeons & Dragons* was the gaming equivalent of Jimi Hendrix's iconic subversion of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Instead of bent strings expressing an idealized and brave countercultural sensibility, *Dungeons & Dragons* provided players with the mechanics of gaming: grids, pencils, and manuals. Where Hendrix found notes that screamed to new heights in joy and agony, *Dungeons & Dragons* encouraged players to burrow ever deeper into their own idiosyncratic culture. Role-playing games let players shelter themselves from the narratives of civil rights activism and nuclear holocaust that thrived in concerts, cafés, and streets. Developed in the nihilistic decades that followed the summer of love, *Dungeons & Dragons* speaks to the conservative, isolationist, and xenophobic tendencies of counterculture as much as it speaks to the power of the imagination to liberate.

I was touched when I visited a local college to enjoy a performance of *She Kills Monsters*, a 2011 play by Qui Nguyen that has steadily gained popularity in the independent theater circuit this past decade. The play tells the story of Agnes Evans, a high school student who mourns by playing her queer and recently deceased sister's *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure. The play gripped me because of how it spoke to the importance of *Dungeons & Dragons* for these characters and the author. Within the narrative, Evans's sister remains in the closet. She is depicted as being isolated and anxious as she digs inward, seeking answers to questions she cannot directly ask. Here, *Dungeons & Dragons* serves as a refuge for her hopes, dreams, and desires. Yet if we are ever to celebrate *Dungeons & Dragons*, we must first strive to understand what its actual influence on our culture has been. Specifically, we must understand its impact on game design.

This is a book about the consequences of design. *Dungeons & Dragons* innovated influential mechanics that were largely based on the dreams, fears, and even prejudices of its designers. These innovations have become blueprints for countless other games that were designed in the decades after the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. The influence of their design innovations has been both for the better and worse. For every *She Kills Monsters*—which shows how *Dungeons & Dragons* helps at-risk youth cope with bullying, isolation, and identity—there is also a *Kingdom Death: Monster*, a blatantly misogynistic tactical board game that includes depictions

of graphic rape on its miniatures. It's challenging but important to consider these two narratives side by side because they bump into one another in an awkward fashion. In a world where things are increasingly black and white, we must consider the gray if we are to understand the nuance of popular culture. Good, bad—*Dungeons & Dragons* is the game with the gift. It has done what no other game has done, and its impact should not be understated. Not only is *Dungeons & Dragons* a staple of today's media landscape but, as this book reveals, it is also a tool kit for classifying and transforming culture into game mechanics.

In his 1995 book *Trust in Numbers*, Theodore Porter explains how quantification in the social sciences is closely related to scientific positivism—a belief that the methods of science (and only science) yield objective truth. Quantification is therefore closely related to our social understanding of how truth is made. Thus, abstracting all things to the representational world of numbers lends a pseudoscientific air to quantification in game design. For sociologists Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, quantification is tied to classification—and classification has consequences. Classification can be as simple as including or excluding a racial category on the census, or, in *Dungeons & Dragons*, perpetuating racist stereotypes by contrasting humans to demihumans, a category that includes elves, half-elves, orcs, gnomes, and kobolds. For Bowker and Star, the decision to categorize is neither good nor bad, but it is dangerous.¹ It often directly affects how governments allocate resources, how doctors decide who lives and who dies, and even who is represented in the media. The racist disciplines of phrenology, eugenics, and social Darwinism all crib from the marriage of classification and quantification. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the quantified elements on a reference table became an efficient tool of world-building that was rubber stamped onto other future innovations because it could be quickly generated.

The impact of quantification on everyday life today cannot be understated. *Dungeons & Dragons* entered the public consciousness at a time when the countercultural movers of the 1960s were aging, entering the workforce, and turning their energy inward through self-help, diet fads, and home exercise programs. Numbers, it turns out, are a useful way for apprehending and understanding one's body and mind. Where social institutions such as hospitals and banks had previously used data to understand society on a macro level through BMI, credit scores, 401(k)s, and more, the 1970s and 1980s heralded the shift toward the interiorization of quantification. In 1974, virtually overlapping the time that the original *Dungeons*

& *Dragons* was being shipped and sold, the very first mass market personal computer, the Altair 8800, was also on its way to stores. At this moment, the tools of quantification were more accessible than ever before, and they were being marketed as a way to increase personal productivity. The narrative remained constant. It seemed that through quantification, anything could be mastered.

This drive to mastery, excellence, and even supremacy coincides with the simultaneous global popularization of neoliberalism throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Unlike liberalism, which matches a belief in free markets with a view that the state should regulate them, neoliberalism suggests that the regulation of markets, and thus one's finances, career, and physical and mental health, are the responsibility of the individual, not the state. *Dungeons & Dragons* gives players the ability to dabble at being heroes through character sheets that break bodies down into traits that can be modified to interact with any challenge, no matter how far-fetched. It allows one player to take on the role of the omnipotent dungeon master, who holds the authority to control all but a roll of the dice. After all, neoliberalism presumes a good deal of uncertainty, particularly in market economics.

Thus *Dungeons & Dragons* is both product and purveyor of late twentieth-century neoliberalism. Its rise occurred at the same time as the rise of the personal computer, and it offers a similar promise: through quantification, both self and society could be controlled and mastered. Throughout this book, I return to these themes and consider the cultural impact of *Dungeons & Dragons*' architecture on the lives of players who enjoyed the game, as well as the design of other, similar games that borrowed its mechanics. My focus remains tethered mostly to the game's quantifiable aspects because the game's connection to the phenomenon of role-playing has been thoroughly addressed elsewhere by role-playing game studies scholars.

What Is a Role-Playing Game?

Imagine for a moment that you are seated around a table with five of your best friends. You all keep pencils, scrap paper, dice, and character sheets to the side. As small talk subsides and cash is pooled for pizza, the game master recaps last week's adventure: "You stand tall over the corpse of a slain multiheaded hydra. Xena, your warrior, is badly wounded and bleeding out. Rusty, the dwarven thief, is nowhere to be found. In the distance,

you can hear the chanting of goblins returning from a hunt. What do you do?” You all confer and eventually decide to confront the goblins. The player controlling Rusty declares that they will leap from the shadows and stab the Goblin King in the back. She rolls a twenty-sided die, and success! The Goblin King falls dead. The melee begins; dice are rolled to determine its outcome; notes are taken to track damage. Shortly afterward, the goblins retreat, and you and the rest of the players track the treasure you have found and the experiences you have earned on your character sheets.

At another table on the other side of the world, the game is played differently. Instead of pizza and beer, the players sip wine and nibble charcuterie. In this game, the players rarely roll dice. Instead, they engage in high-stakes intrigue in Queen Mildrit’s court. Mildrit is a close childhood friend to Sir Hammond and asks our heroes to go undercover to root out spies at her annual costume party. When the dice are rolled, it is to check to see if the characters can lie, influence, or romance the other characters at the ball. The dungeon master narrates the responses of the queen and her colorful court as the players are sucked into the web of intrigue ahead of them.

Both of these games are *Dungeons & Dragons*. In the first example, I emphasize the game’s combat mechanics because they are fundamental to the feel and vibe of the game. In the second example, I highlight the dynamics of role-playing that have been integrated into the game, because that is the other half of the story. Although most games will typically take a balanced approach, oscillating between rule-driven combat and improvisational storytelling, there are player groups that choose to specialize in one or the other.

Dungeons & Dragons is structured somewhere between the free and chaotic composition of an activity like make-believe and the mechanical, rule-based play of a game like chess. It, like other role-playing games, melds both elements (free play and rules) into a form all its own. In a role-playing game, like in make-believe, there are rarely winners and losers as player goals veer toward collaborative storytelling rather than all-out victory. Individual player scores are rarely kept or accounted for. Additionally, players perform the role of a single character in the game world and are frequently expected to take on the role of their character when in conversation with others. In this sense, role-play is the play of actors who are expected to embody the characters they play as they interact with others. But unlike stage plays in theatrical forums, in role-playing games, there is no script. Characters are instead bound to the conventions established by

a set of rules maintained by a referee or judge. These rules govern everything in the fictional world of play—the way that character’s bodies interact with their environments, and the way that magic and other forces operate. For example, if your character falls from a hill, you will suffer damage and lose health points. The game’s rules explain to both the players and the judge (or dungeon master) how to maintain these elements. Finally, the rules offer parameters for the judge to establish other characters and settings to fill the world. In this sense, the referee embodies the sum of all elements external to the players themselves.

There is a great deal of scholarly interest in role-playing game studies. In the introduction to their 2018 book *Role-Playing Game Studies*, José Zagal and Sebastian Deterding break down research on role-playing games into four categories: play, games, roles, and media culture. This book focuses on media culture, which implies both the representation of role-playing games in the media and the representations contained within role-playing games *as* media. Because these two perspectives inform each other, it is important to understand what the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* represent to players and how these representations go on to circulate in a greater ecosystem of game design.

Research on role-playing games has been significantly fleshed out by the scholarly communities that research such games. The *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Knutepunkt* books both foreground articles that use role-playing games to better theorize both games and play. These articles often approach role-playing games from the perspective of frame theory (which asserts that the context of play matters) and also theorize the separation (or its lack) between players and characters. This research is fascinating in how it theorizes role-playing games as enigmatic and iconoclast—games that, as Zagal and Deterding argue, “merge role-play and rule-play.”² There is certainly some truth to this observation, but by capturing the mean it misses the margins. Some groups may lean into the aspects of role-playing that are role based; others may latch onto the rule-based aspects of role-playing games.

In this book, I combine a close reading of the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* with historical context about the values of the game’s authors. It is important to interrogate what Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum term “values in design” specifically because the values of designers reach the hearts and minds of fans, hobbyists, and consumers globally.³ For this reason specifically, I am most interested in the original design of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which had a tremendous impact on the development and growth

of the game as a franchise.⁴ In turn, the franchise, as Matt Barton has meticulously cataloged, has greatly affected the development and growth of other franchises, including *The Elder Scrolls*, *Ultima*, and even *World of Warcraft*.⁵ But where this approach is formal in nature and agnostic to culture, my analysis considers the cultural history of *Dungeons & Dragons* throughout its development. *Dungeons & Dragons* was not developed in a vacuum. Its players and designers thought about and engaged with the Cold War, hippie counterculture, and even the rise of big Hollywood. What was happening around *Dungeons & Dragons* was just as consequential to the development and conceptualization of it as the rules of the game itself.

The close attention given to culture in this book means that I had to leave some stones unturned. For instance, I do not delve too deeply into the concept of role-playing; the concept is already well covered by others.⁶

Also absent is a general discussion of play. Although I recognize the importance of audience agency in games, and I even take great lengths to complicate foundational theories of play in my 2023 book, *Repairing Play*, this is not a book about play. My interest here is to consider the work of designers and the complex intermingling of ideas and design. Indeed, it is up to us—the players of games!—to resist the most conniving and insidious aspects of design. Through a consideration of *Dungeons & Dragons*' design, I hope that we might ultimately develop those tools.

The Egg Wizard

Although *Dungeons & Dragons* was ultimately a collaboration between several members of the wargaming counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, no single individual has been so completely associated with the franchise as Gary Gygax. Along with Jeff Perren, Gygax designed the game's precursor, *Chainmail*. Then with Dave Arneson, Gygax updated these rules into the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. He was one of three founding members of the company, TSR, which he ran for a time as CEO.⁷ By the time of his death in 2008, his name had become so associated with *Dungeons & Dragons* that the *Colbert Report* ran a segment memorializing his impact on the hobby. Although many others have contributed to the *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise, there is no figure whose name is as well associated with the game as Gygax.

However, in many ways, Gygax's reputation may cloud our understanding of his true impact on the design of *Dungeons & Dragons*. As the franchise

strives to be more inclusive with every new release—prominently featuring women and people of color as heroes in the pages of its manuals, offering rules that allow players to design antiracist characters, and priming players on the importance of consent when role-playing—it feels increasingly dissonant to return to the original manuals and encounter illustrations of women in chain-mail bikinis as well as brown, Black, and East Asian characters sidelined to powerful white male heroes. Perplexingly, as the game’s popularity has increased, so too has the notoriety of Gygax, who has become a folk hero among a particular contingent of fans even though his innovations promoted a conservative vision of gaming worlds. His complex mathematical formulas continue to govern the sexist and racist worlds that *Dungeons & Dragons* helped build.

In a critical review that dissects Gygax’s oeuvre, board game reviewer Efka Bladukas refers to Gygax as the “Egg Wizard.”⁸ He chose that moniker not only because of the aggressive, punitive, and biologically essentialist mechanics that Gygax built into *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁹ He also called him the Egg Wizard because of the aforementioned aura that Gygax maintains within the community. In other words, he took pleasure at the egg he threw onto the faces of the players who encountered his designs. Yet he maintained a reputation that would suggest that he was a powerful and clever wizard, not a charlatan stage magician throwing eggs.¹⁰ Perhaps the Egg Wizard’s final and most impressive trick has been to forever define himself as the sole purveyor of *Dungeons & Dragons*’ success.¹¹ In other words, Gygax’s shadow continues to loom large over the franchise.

Lest we confuse a parlor magician for a genius, with clear eyes we must work to untangle Gygax’s influence from the system of *Dungeons & Dragons*—a game that can be attributed as much to the 1970s Twin Cities wargame community as it can to Gary Gygax—in order to reveal the design innovations that were completely his. There is already ample scholarship supporting the conclusion that Gygax did not invent the role-playing game on his own.¹² Rather than simply bust this mythology, however, I turn my attention to a more analytically valuable and accurate point: although he was not the sole progenitor, he did innovate systems and mechanics that led to role-playing games as we know them today. Exploring these innovations of quantification and classification helps us understand how role-playing games can paradoxically both carry a problematic and enduring set of -isms (racism, sexism, ableism, colonialism, and heterosexism) while also serving as a site of joyful creativity.

The contradiction between essentialism and abstraction sits at the heart of game design. It is true that Gygax and other designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* in his cohort may have imbued some rules with their own values—for example, the perspective that men are biologically stronger than women—but each player approaching the game is given an opportunity to play with this rule and decide what sense it makes. Does it reinforce social stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, or is it an opportunity to play with and challenge these stereotypes? The open-ended ambivalence of rules, play, and culture comprise the heart and soul of game design. *Dungeons & Dragons* allows us to imagine how absolutely anything could be classified and incorporated into a game experience.

Gary Gygax led the quantification revolution in role-playing games that designers now take for granted. He quantified morality and mythology with the alignment table, which helps identify a character's moral and legal bearings. He even thought through how abstract theories of sociology, political science, and anthropology could be turned into quantifiable rules that govern fantastic worlds. This process of converting cultural concepts and abstract processes into numbers is as creative as it is troublesome. While it gives thematic weight to the abstract world of numbers in game design, it also reinforces inaccurate cultural stereotypes about race, class, gender, ability and sexuality. Ultimately, understanding Gygax's influence demands a recognition of the attention to detail that went into every chart, description, and image in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gygax had the ability to imagine even the most absurd stereotypical fictions as numbers on a chart in a game.

The devil is in details—but in the case of Gygax, details are scarce. Each biography that has been written about Gary Gygax is at least somewhat fictional. David Kushner and Koren Shadmi's 2017 book *Rise of the Dungeon Master* is literally a graphic novel. Michael Witwer's *Empire of Imagination* (2015) is written in the style of a biopic. It begins with the line, "It was a bleak and blustery October evening as a graying, portly man hastily exited a light-industrial office building in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin."¹³ I don't mean to discredit these books; both are intriguing depictions of Gygax's life and impact. Instead, I want to contend with how Gygax's influence as a *game designer* has always been more mysterious and less chronicled, almost as if he knew he was always the Egg Wizard, performing parlor tricks for an audience that confused his illusions for real magic. The liberties Gygax took as a game designer when designing historical games were part of what made his

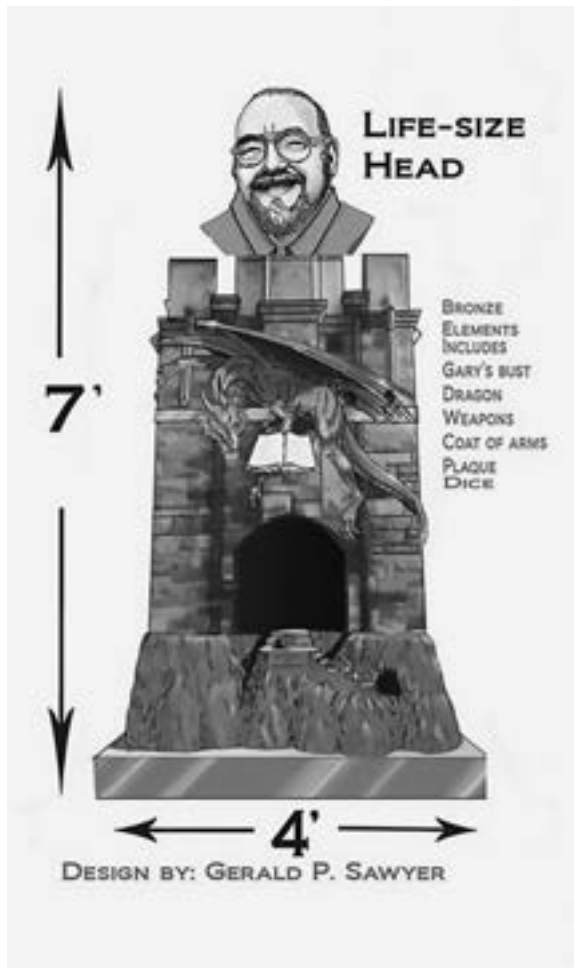


FIGURE 1.1. Plans were drawn up in 2014 for a life-size statue of Gary Gygax in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, that was never completed.

contributions interesting and idiosyncratic. There could be no eulogy more fitting than these biographies, which take liberties with his life and history as well. However fitting Gygax's biographies are, to approach him as a game designer requires questioning his overbearing mythology.

I discuss Gygax's role in designing *Dungeons & Dragons* a great deal because I think it is important to challenge the idolatry which the fan community engages in today.¹⁴ Other works like Shannon Applecline's *Designers and Dragons* series take up this challenge by promoting the many independent and less storied game designers that Gygax's reputation occludes. In

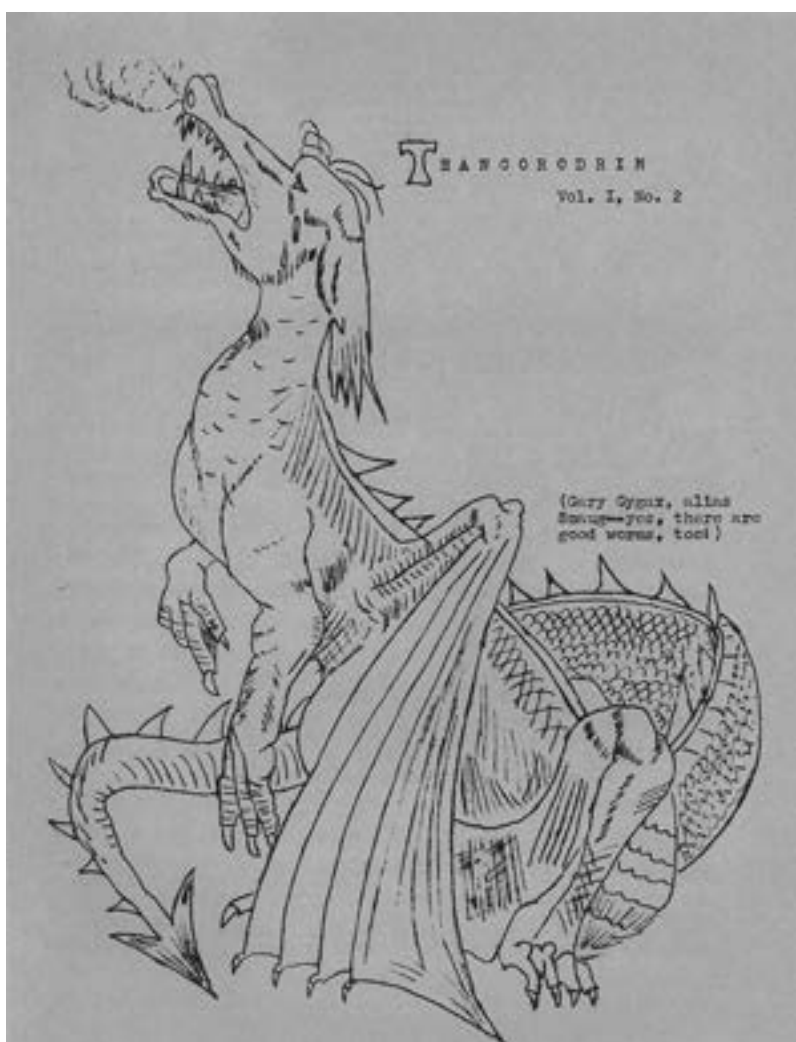


FIGURE 1.2. Gary Gyax was notorious in hobby game circles, as evidenced by this 1969 fanzine cover for *Thangorodrim* likening Gyax to Smaug, the dragon from *The Hobbit*.

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this book, I center my analysis on quantification and classification in order to challenge the prevailing narrative that Gygax was a legendary designer of role-playing games.

The Architecture of *Dungeons & Dragons*

If *Dungeons & Dragons* were a video game, it would be built on a software architecture. For every cultural detail or description that players might encounter, there is a corresponding numerical chart in a book to explain how that detail should be managed through probability. In other words, absolutely everything is categorized and quantified. Across all manuals, we see how even the fantastic—nature, myth, and religion—can be imagined through a set of probabilistic statistics and numeric tables. From bodies to city and wilderness encounter tables, *Dungeons & Dragons* proves how simulations could represent not only reality but also the fantastic. Quantification and classification together comprise *Dungeons & Dragons*' single overarching design architecture.¹⁵ Understanding how the architecture of *Dungeons & Dragons* was developed means obtaining a better understanding of the countercultural motif that so inspired the early scene of designers. One early fanzine, *Thangorodrim*, specifically catered to hobby *Diplomacy* players interested in modifying the game's core rules. These modifications could accommodate any number of real or imagined settings, like feudal Scotland or Middle-earth.¹⁶ Seeing other players modify *Diplomacy* to reflect the characteristics of fantastic worlds even affected Gary Gygax's (an avid player) own design proclivities.

Quantifying the fantastic started within the rules of Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren's *Chainmail*, a medieval wargame and immediate precursor to *Dungeons & Dragons*. The game broke with the general conventions of wargames by offering players a fantasy supplement where things like magic could be introduced into the game. The process that Gygax used to develop magic in this supplement became an industrial logic for how quantification can be used to understand the fantasy in other environments. As described by Jon Peterson and summarized here, Gygax's logic is as follows: take a thing (a catapult hurling boulders!) that serves a concrete role on the battlefield; consider how that thing might be represented by a similar phenomenon in a fantasy battle (a wizard hurling fireballs!); and replace the first thing with the second.¹⁷ Crucially, after you swap the two things, leave the statistics that were used to describe the first thing intact. The

game designer just has to modify their descriptions to better describe the fantastic element. Voilà! The industrial logic of how the fantastic could be represented through quantitative game mechanics was Gygax's pioneering innovation that he would stamp again and again into the games and supplements that he would later develop. This innovation, of course, would bleed out to corners of the wargaming underground, a term I use to describe the vast network of hobby war-gamers in the 1960s and 1970s that far exceeded Gygax's reach. Gygax pioneered this innovation and through *Dungeons & Dragons* he popularized it.

The design architecture of *Dungeons & Dragons* is an artifact of the times as well. Although Gygax and many of his colleagues were too old or too conservative to embrace the free love counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, their designs nonetheless play with a number of groovy vibes that persisted in the zeitgeist.¹⁸ These designs speak to the idea that all knowledge and spirituality could be synthesized and understood through a set of quantitative and numeric values. This belief in a real yet invisible mathematic structure guiding the complex rhythms of society, nature, and history is similar in scope to the abstract and pseudoscientific harmony of the cosmos and music of the spheres that was commonly shared in 1960s counterculture.¹⁹

Similar echoes of how mathematics were a path to truth, power, and virtue were being developed in an entirely different arena: the 1960s-era military-industrial complex. While the 1960s counterculture saw mathematical "harmony" as a way to escape escalating Cold War tensions and civil rights disputes in North America, the military saw mathematics as a way to plan for the inevitability of warfare. Made famous in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove*, Herman Kahn was a mathematician working at the RAND Corporation who argued that statistics could be used to engineer a livable society after nuclear war.²⁰ In his best-selling book, *On Thermonuclear War*, he argued that statistics could be used to show how to manage irradiated food. In this way, math could help make difficult moral decisions about who gets to eat the healthy food (the young with long lives ahead) and who should eat the poisonous food (the old and about to die). Documentarian Adam Curtis, in *The Trap* (2007), critiques this as a pathology of game theory that was particularly poignant in the 1960s: "You can always trust the numbers." Gygax may not have been reading Herman Kahn, but many in this design community were.²¹ To understand the ideological underpinnings of his design, we must first understand the common sense norms of his community and culture.



FIGURE 1.3. Early issues of *The Dragon* drew on 1960s counterculture for inspiration, as shown by its pastoral motif, its Tolkienesque aesthetic, and the logo's psychedelic font choice. Cover of *The Dragon* #15 (June 1978).

Dungeons & Dragons was influenced by this Cold War rationality. The left-leaning counterculture of the 1960s passed the designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* by, but they were deeply plugged into the predominantly male and politically disparate American wargaming underground; this multifarious group of hobbyists directly corresponded with the military strategists working at the RAND Corporation.²² Despite the community's ties to the military, the game's connection to it was never explicit. Instead, the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* reflect the hierarchical aspects of militarism. Rules are models of structure: who reports to whom. Rules also exist to guide who is allowed access to what information. Perhaps most importantly, rules dictate who has the authority to write and set new rules.

The hierarchical infrastructure of *Dungeons & Dragons* counterintuitively imbued a sense of mysticism to cold and rational statistical tables. It also mirrored the structures of authority that are found in the church. Even when texts are common and shared, a pastor or priest's interpretation of the holy text is meant to be given more weight than that of a layman. The same holds for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Even though any player could feasibly read the rules, it falls to the dungeon master to interpret them. In many cases, it even falls to the dungeon master to decide which statistical table is most relevant to use.

I draw my conclusions from a decade of archival research that has spanned institutions. I have visited the Ray Browne Popular Culture archive in Bowling Green, Ohio; the RAND Archive in Santa Monica, California; and the Center for International Studies collection at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I have collected a variety of materials myself, consuming the entirety of *The Dragon* magazine CD-ROM collection. I even visited Lake Geneva, Wisconsin—Gary Gygax's hometown—and explored the original TSR Hobbies building, along with Gygax's old house, his memorial, and his reading collection at the local library. As a historian, my goal with this book has been to situate *Dungeons & Dragons* within the popular culture zeitgeist of the twentieth century. In practice, this has meant carefully teasing out parallels to several key tensions occurring simultaneously: the Cold War, globalization, multiculturalism, and, of course, the rise of the personal computer. I focus on tensions and dissonances because they help draw attention to points of conflict without historical consensus. This historical project thus aims to better connect the history of tabletop games with the cultures that they were embedded in within the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In this book, I focus on understanding the perspectives

and values of designers specifically because their lives help us better understand the cultural context of the design of *Dungeons & Dragons*.²³

Although all versions of the game quantify and classify the world, there are subtle differences between the different editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* that inform the different values that designers had when developing the rules. These rulesets move from the explicitly biased rule books of the original red-boxed *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* to the far more progressive fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The critiques in this book are mostly directed at the work on *Dungeons & Dragons* that were published by TSR before the game's second edition. I choose this period because of their profound impact on game design and popular culture. Although the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* became far more popular with players, these early editions were the versions that pioneered the boilerplate of quantification that I identify and critique. In the text, I choose examples from a plethora of sources that I feel best illustrate my critiques. These sources are indicated in the notes for those interested in matching the critique to a timeline of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The cultural influences that surrounded *Dungeons & Dragons* led it to influence the systems of quantification that have now become ubiquitous in computer role-playing games.²⁴ One goal of this book is to show how the systems of quantification that underpin *Dungeons & Dragons* preceded what we typically think of as quantification: data read by computers. The quantifiable architecture of *Dungeons & Dragons* streamlined the movement of role-playing from paper to computers, and eventually to internet-based games—for example, *Ultima Online* (1997), *World of Warcraft* (2004), and even *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011).

This book's other goal is to set the record of inclusivity in game design straight. As *Dungeons & Dragons* grows to become a more inclusive franchise, it is tempting to forget that the road toward progress is long and bumpy. The early designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* held many conservative viewpoints; in many cases, they actively designed the game to be consumed by a predominantly white male audience. This book's goal as a historical text is to complicate this smooth narrative of progress. The world of hobby gaming, as well as the worlds of electronic gaming that have been inspired by these tabletop worlds, are still rife with bigotry, racism, sexism, and homophobia. By interrogating the design history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, I hope to compel readers to see how *Dungeons & Dragons*' quantified worlds crystalized and popularized the values of its designers.

The Values of *Dungeons & Dragons*

The aim of this book is to highlight how *Dungeons & Dragons*' influence as a game is directly related to how well it accommodates the abstraction of all aspects of life as numerical quantities. Because this argument is broad in scope—there are more facets to life than there are words in this book—I aim to support this argument by highlighting the portions of the game where these practices of quantification are the most apparent: the body, culture, religion, gender, technology, the self, and the monstrous.

Now more than ever, as computers grow ubiquitous and conversations around the existential implications of artificial intelligence increasingly permeate our news cycles, it is important to consider, as Bowker and Star would encourage us, the consequences of classification. These implications are holistic because quantification in *Dungeons & Dragons* had downstream implications for game design more broadly. The logic of classification that has been popularized by *Dungeons & Dragons* is now used by most games to tell stories. Because this logic relies on a set of tropes that assert a bigoted worldview, there are huge implications for whoever has the opportunity or even desire to participate.

The stories that games can tell are limited by the ways that quantification is leveraged within them.²⁵ Today, most games embrace abstraction in order to provide players with a meaningful interactive experience. In this book, I question the logic and history of this kind of abstraction. I assert that *Dungeons & Dragons* is both product and producer of quantified logics. *Dragons are necessary creatures, after all.*

The game was produced in the early 1970s, during what can only be described as a cultural hangover from the idealism of the 1960s. While people grew ever more frustrated and paranoid with the esoteric realities of the Cold War—government corruption, war in Vietnam, and existential dread—big business was quietly globalizing. Players rolling dice at the dining room were able to escape these pressures in the fantasy world of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The game was necessary as an escape from the neoliberal values that would govern the US economic approach to the Cold War while also reinforcing these same values within its player base through logics of quantification and classification. These logics became so ubiquitous in game design that they are still the industry standards of design today. Yet these values perpetuate an unjust system that privileges a conserva-

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tive and bigoted worldview that has centered white men at the expense of all others.

When you step away from the curious histories contained within this book, it is my hope that you'll see how influential *Dungeons & Dragons* has been to the games that were designed after it. If you peer even closer into this text, you'll glimpse the architecture of a connection between game design and late twentieth-century culture. More than just a product of its time, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a living chronicle of the anxieties, stories, and values of the people who made it. Therefore, to begin, we must first take a moment to understand the characters in this story and the communities that they were embedded within.

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Notes

Introduction

- 1 Bowker and Star choose the term *dangerous* because they think that the distinctions of classification are not moral ones. For example, the gas line connected to an oven is neither good nor bad, but it is dangerous. It's necessary for cooking, but at the same time, haphazard tinkering with it might cause a gas leak or even an explosion. Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 5–6.
- 2 Zagal and Deterding, *Role-Playing Game Studies*, 3.
- 3 Flanagan and Nissenbaum, *Values*.
- 4 Scholarship on *Dungeons & Dragons* that meets the game where it is today is fascinating, although it is not the subject of this book. A good many of the essays in Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal's 2024 collection *Fifty Years of "Dungeons & Dragons"* well cover our contemporary moment.
- 5 Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops*.
- 6 For those looking for a sociological perspective on role-playing games, see Fine, *Shared Fantasy*. For an anthropological and education-focused take on the topic, see Bowman, *Functions of Role-Playing Games*. For a close reading of the ritual- and play-based aspects of role-playing games, see Schallegger, *Post-modern Joy*.
- 7 For readability, I refer to Tactical Studies Rules, TSR Hobbies, and TSR Inc. all as TSR. Tactical Studies Rules was founded in 1973 and rebranded to TSR Hobbies in 1975. There was another rebrand in 1983, when the company became TSR Inc. The rebrand in 1983 came with a significant drop in sales, which eventually culminated in Gygax's ouster as CEO in 1985. This sequence of events is well detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Riggs, *Slaying the Dragon*.

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- 8 A title that holds another delightful though perhaps unintended connotation. Gary Gygax's full name was Ernest Gary Gygax, or EGG.
- 9 In a forum post, Gygax describes himself in the following way: "As a biological determinist, I am positive that most females do not play RPGs because of a difference in brain function. They can play as well as males, but they do not achieve the same sense of satisfaction from playing." Gygax, "Q&A with Gary Gygax."
- 10 Bladukas, "Sleeping Gods."
- 11 The *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise is the accumulated result of many people slowly but surely contributing small things (an article here, a rule book there) to it overall. In the early days of the game, these people were often Gygax's friends and close war-gaming collaborators. Today's resurgent popularity of the game has been due to the work of fans pushing for more diverse representation, clear rules, and clever revisions that have made the game less racist, sexist, and homophobic.
- 12 Jon Peterson offers an excellent synopsis of the reasons that Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson ought to share coauthorship in the introduction of his book *Playing at the World*. For a perspective that champions Dave Arneson, the documentary *Secrets of Blackmoor*, directed by Chris Graves and Griffith Mon Morgan III, offers an excellent starting point.
- 13 Witwer, *Empire of Imagination*, 2.
- 14 In 2011, a memorial fund was set up in an effort to erect a statue in Gygax's honor in his hometown of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Several periodicals began their obituaries for Gygax in 2008 by honoring him with the title of the "Father of Role-Playing Games." Although the bust was never actualized, a plaque sits today at the Riviera fountain next to Lake Geneva. Fans regularly pilgrimage to see Gygax's hometown as if they seek his spiritual presence to revere as the inventor of role-playing games. Dice are even rolled at the Riviera fountain plaque for a blessing. See Gygax, "*Dungeons & Dragons* Creator Dies"; Gygax, "Gary Gygax."
- 15 Some might argue that role-play works in tandem with classification and quantification as part of *Dungeons & Dragons*' design architecture. To this suggestion I would contend that without role-play, *Dungeons & Dragons* would still resemble the game we know today. However, without tables, quantification, and classification there would be no game . . . only make believe.
- 16 Miller, *Thangorodrim*, 1.
- 17 Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 168.
- 18 In addition to the issue of quantification that this book contends with, visual motifs of hippie counterculture can be found in many of TSR's products. Early issues of *The Dragon* would feature images with pastoral (back-to-the-land) themes, and the magazine's logo, which is illustrated with dragon scales, presents an earthy and gnarled psychedelic concept that was also used at the time to market Tolkien's work.

- 19 Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 75.
- 20 Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Worlds of Herman Kahn*.
- 21 Larry Peery did much of the work connecting the American war-gaming underground to documents on game theory circulated by the RAND Corporation; see Trammell, “Ludic Imagination,” 174–75.
- 22 Trammell, “Ludic Imagination,” 184.
- 23 My book *The Privilege of Play* (2023) dives deeply into how fans negotiate and navigate game design during this period. Because the literature on both designers and fans is so rich, and for purposes of argumentation, I have drawn a soft, permeable line between the two. I ultimately hope that interested readers will enjoy both.
- 24 Nick LaLone and Michael Tresca show the tremendous impact *Dungeons & Dragons* had on the development of computer role-playing games that would follow. See LaLone, “Tale”; Tresca, *Evolution*.
- 25 Story games, live-action role-playing games, and, ironically, tabletop role-playing games all have the potential to be exceptions to this point.

1. A Short History of *Dungeons & Dragons*

- 1 Turner and Larson, “Networked Celebrity,” 55.
- 2 Dave Arneson and Dave Wesley surely meet a good deal of this definition as well. Outside of the hobbyist community, however, they lack the notoriety of Gygax, so I think it would be inaccurate to consider their celebrity as adequate to the definition of “network intellectual.” Although a good deal of Gygax’s notoriety is due to his own self-aggrandizement and promotional strategies, in this book I prefer to focus mainly on the role of *Dungeons & Dragons* in popular culture. I therefore choose to follow Gygax, who engineered a reputation as the creator of *Dungeons & Dragons*, despite the game’s explicitly shared authorship with Arneson or Wesley’s innovation of first-person role-playing.
- 3 Fred Turner argues that Stewart Brand’s work in creating the networks that consumed the *Whole Earth Catalog* was a direct predecessor for the bulletin board systems that would define the early internet. Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 3.
- 4 One member of this community, Walter Buchanan, was an early adopter of *Dungeons & Dragons* and wrote Gygax a letter asking for several somewhat pedestrian rule clarifications. The letter reveals how the wargaming community was focused on the game’s quantitative mechanics as opposed to the performative mechanics of role-playing.
- 5 Hill, “Board Game.”
- 6 For more on *Avalon Hill General*, see chapter 2 of my book *Privilege of Play*.
- 7 Lakofka, “Avalon Hill Philosophy,” 2.