

Projecting Into The World Of Dungeons And Dragons

ALEX DECKNADEL

WR 122, Fall 2019

Introduction

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a roleplaying game that relies on the “theater of the mind,” or imagination. It is a well-renowned game that is not often discussed in the context of a discourse community because it is a game played by small groups of people. Because players must communicate with one another throughout the game, *D&D* is a game of rhetoric as much as it is a game of imagination. Players have to think and act as the characters they have created when playing *D&D*. It has been noted previously by Dr. Wayne D. Blackmon, in a case report titled “Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult,” that one of his patients played *D&D* and states, “Players are encouraged to *become* their characters in the course of the game . . .” (Blackmon 629). While this is certainly true to people who play *D&D*, there is a lingering question: how does a player project themselves as a character in *D&D*? I aim to answer this question in the context of discourse communities, focusing on rhetoric and language more than writing, although writing is still involved. I argue in this essay, through the research I have done, that a player can project

themselves in *D&D* by creating, or using, a character, in order to interact with other characters, and utilizing various lexis to interact with other players.

Methodology

When researching how players project themselves, I decided to perform observations of the *D&D* group I play with and chose to observe different sessions. This is because while there is a main group of players, other people join from time to time, so observing different and newer players gives greater insight into how a discourse community grows. I have been involved with a handful of sessions with my *D&D* group while playing as different characters, and a select few of these were observed for my research. Since there were different sessions that I could observe because of my involvement with the group, it was very convenient for me to use this method of research rather than allot times for interviews and drafting surveys.

While observations were very convenient and I was able to get permission from my *D&D* group for them, these observations rely on my interpretation of the rhetoric and actions the other players made during the sessions. Interviews and surveys could have supplemented these observations by getting clarification from players as to their logic behind creating certain characters and tricks they find helpful for engaging in *D&D* gameplay. However, most of the players in my group expressed that they did not want to do interviews or surveys when I mentioned that I was conducting research on *D&D*. In addition, I already know the players to the degree where I can identify certain characteristics they usually add to characters in other types of games. This helps

alleviate the lack of interviews and surveys in my research. Therefore, my observation of different sessions was the appropriate choice for my research.

Observations

The first session I ever played was with the group I currently play with, and almost everyone, including the “Dungeon Master” (DM), had not played *D&D* proper before. Since we began a campaign with new players, the DM introduced the campaign, *The Sunless Citadel*. At the beginning of this campaign, the characters started off in a tavern and had to introduce themselves to each other. Because the members of the group were inexperienced, the inexperienced players (myself included) found it hard to act as our characters and were very reluctant to initiate conversations with one another. This may also be due to the fact that the inexperienced players had not developed backgrounds for their characters, thus were trying to decide how their characters behaved. This first session showed that players were having trouble getting into the mindset of their characters because they created the basic stats and alignment of their characters without fleshing out their character before the session. I had a significantly easier time because I had a background planned out for my character and could guess what my character would do. The pace of the game was also significantly slower because it took extra time to ask questions about what we could do, since most players did not read the handbook and were unsure of all the rules. We also had to figure out how to do certain actions on the website we were using and ask the DM if we were allowed to perform certain actions during combat or exploring. The first session was incredibly slow and some of these issues would persist in future sessions.

We had to introduce a new character in the next session of this campaign because someone in our group wasn't present for the first session. Essentially, there was a smaller repeat of the previous session because the player that joined was very much like other players in the last session. Most of the group still asked which skill to roll to perform certain actions because of our inexperience with the game. While the questions asked gradually decreased in the following sessions for this campaign, players still asked from time to time when we were performing actions they weren't used to doing. As this campaign did not rely on character backgrounds, it was harder for people to be in character as they only had a certain alignment and certain ideals and morals to follow for their character. In contrast to this campaign, someone else in the group decided to host a single-session campaign that relied on developed characters.

The single-session campaign that relied on character development was called *Murder at the Old Wolf Inn*, in which "player characters" had to have developed backgrounds and us players had to be familiar with and rationalize our reasoning for performing actions with certain skills. These were actions like investigating a drawer, examining an object or room, or checking to see when a character is lying. So, I created a different character when I played this session and acted more in line with how this character should react to situations. Another player also was able to do this, but there was a new person playing with us in this session who did not interact much. Another member was using a character created by someone else as well and did not interact as much, even though he was in our campaign for *The Sunless Citadel*. I can reason that these players did not interact as much because they did not have a strong idea of their

characters before the start of the session, and thus were not as fully immersed into the game. Similarly, the new person also was playing as a character they did not create. I had a similar experience myself in another *D&D* session, which is why I can guess as much.

The single-session campaign I had that similar experience in was called *A Wild Sheep Chase*. In this session, the characters were created by the DM, and we each had to choose which character to play as. The players had to adjust to playing characters with fleshed out backgrounds and roles they wouldn't normally play as. I played as a leader of a mercenary company who was basically a samurai. Because I only had the background information provided and the character was already "Level 4," I did not know much about the character and was not as comfortable playing as that character as I would have been with characters I had developed. I was not as productive or immersed in the session because I was playing a character I didn't know well enough and was playing outside of roles I was comfortable with. It was something I noticed not only within the session, but in myself because I prefer not to take leadership roles. Hence, this difference actually hindered my ability to play. In short, I felt disconnected with the character I played because I did not understand the character well enough to effectively play in the session. Now that I have summarized my observations, I would like to further discuss how people project themselves through interactions.

Argument and Discussion

Based on my observations and published sources, I can discern behaviors and actions from fellow players and myself. I have already mentioned from my own experience and observations that people seemed more engaged in *D&D* sessions when

they had created their own characters and had a better understanding of how to act as their character. This process is guided by character sheets which people use as templates to lay out their character's morals, flaws, ideals, background information, physical traits, abilities, equipment, and so on. The character sheet provided in the *Player's Handbook* is a tool that I and many other players use to create characters. Following the rules and lore listed in the *Player's Handbook* and other guidebooks published for *D&D*, a player can create a character that can be generally be used across different campaign settings and worlds. While the majority of my experience is within the world of the Forgotten Realms, a setting often used in video games (e.g. *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and *Icewind Dale*), different campaign settings can be chosen, and characters can be rewritten to fit within a particular setting. Writing out character sheets helps players keep track of their character and allow players to determine a course of action during certain situations, like combat or training.

Throughout my observations, I noticed that there is a connection between the player and their character. These characters essentially act as avatars for the players within the fantasy of *D&D*. The players determine what the characters do, then their characters perform the action. This is notable in Blackmon's case report, as he encouraged his patient to discuss the events of his *D&D* adventures with him with a focus on the emotions and motivation for his actions. His patient noted that his "lawful evil" character performed actions against a rich "non-player character" (NPC) such as killing his sons, planning to marry his daughter, and take the riches of the character. The patient then related the motivations behind this to his feelings of wanting to murder his

deformed brother because he got all the attention and love from his parents, with these feelings arising over and over again (Blackmon 627). In short, the patient had channeled murderous rage into a character and his character acted out in a way that reflected his emotions and morals. He created a character that he could relate to, then had his character act out fantasies of murder and rage that he felt when he was younger.

A person does not just create a character by writing things down in a character sheet; they have to act as their character by speaking the words the characters say and describing to the DM what actions their characters perform. Nathan Shank touches on this in his essay, “Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the Dungeons and Dragons Narrative.” Shank notes that “D&D players speak their characters into existence” (Shank 194). He immediately follows this up by saying that players also speak as themselves while playing *D&D*. This accentuates the fact that players have connections to their characters in such a way that there is a need to distinguish to the party when they’re doing something as a player and doing something as their character when interacting with other players.

I have also noticed that the DM and the players converse using game terminology. This allows for a smoother progress within the game. It is also noticeable that if a 20-sided die is rolled (called a d20) and is either a 1 or 20, those rolls are called “critical rolls.” A 1 signifies a “critical failure” and a 20 signifies a “critical success.” These rolls, because of their implications, often have the effect of having the players react rather strongly compared to other die rolls. In short, these players react because a roll of such magnitude is bound to have an effect on the group of players. One such example is

when I rolled several “critical failures” while using a sling as a druid. It would almost always deal damage to my party members. Because of this, there is a running joke about the sling being cursed and being able to damage a paladin who had a very high defense and would hardly get hit. The presence of specific terminology not only reveals the presence of a community, but also allows players to create their own jokes and references.

This micro-community experience is similar to a story shared by C.J. Ciaramella in his article “The Radical Freedoms of *Dungeons and Dragons*.” He reached out to anonymous Reddit users about playing *D&D* in prison, and he received a reply from a former Texan inmate. The inmate stated, “I’ve taught murderers, gang bangers, and straight up Neo-Nazis to come together and work as a team to slay vampires, save the world, and most importantly, set aside any preconceived notions and attitudes for the common goal of having fun and getting one’s head out of a TRUE Dungeon” (qtd. by Ciaramella 58). This story shows that even inmates will try to set aside their differences and create their own community inside a prison revolving around *D&D*. And because they can communicate using terminology from the game, they further enhance the discourse community by interacting with one another through *D&D*. This is also supported by another story within Ciaramella’s article about how the podcast *Ear Hustle* showed that there is a shared space inside the San Quentin State Prison in California where inmates from all different groups gather together to play *D&D* (Ciaramella 58). *D&D* allowed a new community inside the prison to arise and even change the “territories” owned by the different races inside San Quentin. In short, these events

happened because small groups of people playing *D&D* create their own little community from members of the different groups and allow themselves to interact with one another through *D&D*.

The variable nature of people and psychology may have others disagree with my view that one projects themselves into the game through interaction with others. However, *D&D* is a game of rhetoric, as I said earlier, and is played with a group of people. Games played with others have to have some amount of interaction. As noted in the *Player's Handbook* for the 5th edition of *D&D*, published by Wizards of the Coast, there are three pillars to any campaign in *D&D*, which are exploration, combat, and social interaction (*Dungeons and Dragons: Player's Handbook* 8). Even the company publishing the game states that social interaction is one of the three most important aspects of *D&D*. This is because people have to interact with one another in order to move through a campaign. Also, Anton Garcia discussed in his article "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games" about how people's experiences reflect in *D&D*. He states, "If people, as participants in *D&D*, mediate lives and experiences within the virtual world of the game, the ways this world is bound by culturally informed rules systems play a significant role in shaping the experience and limitations on players' experiences" (Garcia 233). He directly ties a person's experience in reality to how that person plays *D&D*. Thus, people are projecting themselves into the game through interaction.

Conclusion

As I argued through this piece, players project themselves in *D&D* by creating characters and utilizing various lexis to interact with other players. I have seen this in my own experiences and by observing other players, and it is supported by research conducted by others who have discussed *D&D*. The information I have collected is relevant to my argument because it highlights the interaction amongst people and characters. The scholastic research I have seen is more psychological and sociological, but that can easily translate to further research about the writing and rhetoric employed by players. As I have only glimpsed into the psychology of players while role-playing, there is room for further research into the similarities and contrasts between the experiences of the players and the experiences of the character, as Blackmon's patient showcased. *D&D* is a game where the sky's the limit, thus research about *D&D* should also only be limited in such a way.

Works Cited

- Blackmon, Wayne D. "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 48, no. 4, Fall 1994, pp. 624–632. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1994.48.4.624.
- Ciaramella, C. J. "The Radical Freedom of Dungeons & Dragons." *Reason*, vol. 50, no. 1, May 2018, pp. 52–59. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=128534998&site=ehost-live.
- Dungeons and Dragons: Player's Handbook*. 5th ed., Wizards of the Coast, 2014.
- Garcia, Antero. "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture & Activity*, vol. 24, no. 3, July 2017, pp. 232–246. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691.
- Shank, Nathan. "Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the Dungeons and Dragons Narrative." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 1, Feb. 2015, pp. 184–197. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12242.

Author Bio

Alex transferred to Western Oregon University from Chemeketa Community College during the 2019-2020 school year after working several jobs over the years in retail, manufacturing, and construction. He initially dropped out of college during his first year because he couldn't focus on school work. However, his experience has given him a renewed focus on his education in Information Technology. He is currently working towards a major in Information Systems.