D&D

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

A glance into the world of Dungeons & Dragons as well as the culture around it

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Introduction

D&D, or Dungeons and Dragons, is a tabletop role-playing game known by most for its interjections in popular visual media. Usually people will get together once a week for a couple of hours and immerse themselves into a universe entirely different from our own. Recently D&D has found itself in a revival. More and more people are beginning to set up their own dungeons and their own parties of friends to meet up and destroy the big bad evil in the end. With this revival of the tabletop role-playing game comes an entire revival in it's culture as well. What happens during these sessions? More importantly, what has happened outside of these sessions that has given D&D a second wind in current culture and media?

Hypothesis

Originally when we ventured into our observations of the D&D group, we did so with the intent to research how current media related to the culture of D&D. We were interested in the seemingly sudden surge of D&D in common media. New podcasts, Youtubers, and even shows were coming out of the woodworks and talking about Dungeon & Dragons. However, as our observations went on we realized that we were more interested in the development of D&D culture in society. What created this surge of interest and why was it suddenly found everywhere we look? This caused our main research question to shift. What is D&D culture and how has D&D changed in the eye of popular culture over time?

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the culture and happenings within D&D and its weekly sessions. We wished to explore how D&D has evoled both within itself but also throughout pop culture in "normal" society. Through our research we discovered tht the sudden increase in popularity is probably due to the increase of positive representation of D&D in digital and visual media. Culture within D&D groups has also grown and now includes its own rituals and insights. This report explores both the internal and external D&D culture and its influence on a group of D&D players.

CONTENTS

Observations

The Dungeons and Dragons group we observed is comprised mostly of men in either their early 20's or mid 30's. During the observations one of us sat and watched while the other actually joined in and played with the group. This created two very different points of view for us to draw our observations from as the session went on. Out of the pair of us, one has been immersed into the world of D&D, while the other only knew of D&D from media depictions of the game.

Introduction to the Group

Since one of us was to be playing with them for the first time, the topic came up about how the group met. For the most part, the members have no outside relationships to each other and only socialize when there is a game session. Today's session also happened to mark the beginning of a new campaign for the group. Prior to this, the group would meet at a local game shop and play there under different rules and with a different campaign[1].

There is a term "Adventure League"[2] which I feel I must get into before we get further. This group of D&D players began as an Adventure League. Many D&D groups play with the same people on a regular basis and do not meet if one member cannot make it so as to maintain consistency in the story. Adventure League, or "AL" however, will meet every week regardless of who comes and who does not.

AL is made to take into account the life of the average person. Things come up or people go out of town; this is a fact of life. AL

keeps that in mind by allowing sessions to still occur without constant attendance. This also means that AL groups tend to be larger than regular D&D groups and thus more chaotic and more inconsistent. AL is also different to regular homebrew D&D in terms

Term Definitions

1. Campaign
The story-line which the adventures follow

2. Adventure League
An adaptation of the rules sponsored by the owning company, Wizards of the Coast

3. Homebrew
The concept of "house rules" but within the context of D&D

4. Dungeon Master
The "leader" of the group who runs the campaign

5. Character Sheet
A character sheet holds all the information about a player's character. This includes their health, attacks, and inventory

of rules as there is an extra rule set which applies to AL groups.

These groups usually meet at a game store or other 3rd party location and consist of people who only know each other through these weekly sessions. With the start of their new campaign and new location, our group has started to play "regular" D&D but with the attendance flexibility they are used to from their past AL sessions. There are also homebrew[3] elements to the game.

Starting the Session

The group convenes almost every Friday at one of the player's homes. They used to meet at a game store nearby but decided to move due to space constraints. I heard many complaints about the small size of the room as well as the fact that the room did not have air conditioning. These were not considered favorable conditions.

The group converses through a Groupme group chat and within it make sure the next week's game is still on and ask what they should bring. Only on rare occasions when the DM, or Dungeon Master[4], cannot make it to a session is it canceled. Four of the groups members live either in the apartment where the game is now hosted or within the same apartment complex and hang out a while before the session begins. They are the main outliers in terms of the relationships within the D&D group as the rest of the members do not socialize outside of these days. Otherwise, the group will slowly trickle in around 6:50 with food or beer or other drinks as sessions typically run from 7:00pm to 11:00pm.

While the session formally begins at 7:00pm, the playing of the game will not usually start at that time. Most players will speak to each other about what food they

brought or perhaps ask for a beer from the mini-fridge in the corner of the room. A few procrastinators will run to the computer in the room next door to print out their character sheet[5] at the last second.

Rituals

Almost every culture has it's own rituals and superstitions. Maybe yours is broken class or salt over the shoulder but for D&D players it's usually dice.

One ritual that I noticed at the beginning of the game by some of the players was the rolling of their 20-sided die, known as a D20. It's rolled a few times and sometimes the dice is put away while other times it is kept. The superstition here is that some dice roll "well" while others roll "low". Almost as if the dice have moods depending on the day and need to be checked.

Most things in D&D are determined by rolling numbers on a die and the higher the roll, the more beneficial. If a D20 is rolled several times before the game and does not produce high numbers on those rolls then it is considered to be rolling "low" or "bad" and is put away in favor for dice which have been rolling "high" or "well".

Realistically and statistically dice roll randomly with equal chance on every side, but there must be magic in D&D dice because this superstition always played true. I tried keeping a set of dice that I found to row low and every time I used one, I would fail my roll.

D&D Media

Right before the game began, there was a conversation brought up by one of the players that interested me. He brought up a set of D&D digital media called the D&D Humble Bundle. There was a full conversation on the

purchase of this for the betterment of the group. Only one person would have to buy it for everyone to benefit from it. Apparently this bundle contains different campaigns and One-Offs[6]. This was the only instance during our observations in which external D&D media was discussed.

The Game Begins

Once all preparations are finished and all players are at the table, the game can finally begin. In this group there are usually around 8 players including the DM that make it to a session. The group begins by taking turns recapping and summarizing the previous session. Since at least a week passes between each session and there's usually one person there who was not present the week before, it is important to begin every session with a summary of the events from the previous game.

This is arguably where the chaos really begins. Perhaps it is because the group is mostly men or perhaps it is just the spirit of the game itself, but at almost any point in time there are several people speaking over each other and fighting for voice. Unlike in most other situations however, this isn't considered rude or abnormal. It's almost like a sign of brotherhood to speak to each other in this way. The recap of the previous week took longer than expected because people would interject with jokes, side-stories, or

perhaps even missed details.

This is where the DM must step in in order to insure that the group will actually get to the game. The DM has DM'd for a very long time and has experience with the

environment of D&D and it's complications. He is always able to quickly interject into side comments and turn them back to the main conversation without dismissing anyone or their opinions. Everyone here is sharing and it is encouraged to speak in this way. To overlap people and even raise your voice to be heard amongst the clamor. All players here are equal and have an equal voice. This includes the DM. While he does technically hold the "seat of power", he is not considered godly or above the rest of the group. There is a sense of brothership and equality in the chaotic way this D&D group speaks to each other.

The Unplanned, Planned Campaign

Eventually the group is able to get across the previous events and move on to the game itself. D&D is a game which does not traditionally rely on any sort of board or field. All elements, except for fights, are spoken aloud. There is also no set path in D&D and players can essentially create any story they wish so long as they can justify it through storytelling of their own.

Fig. 2
Character sheets contain everything about a person's PC, or "Playable Character". This includes their past, their name, health, and most importantly their stats. A character's stats will add bonuses to rolls.

This group has just started a new campaign which is supposed to be about living the life of a pirate on the many seas of the world. Most campaigns have their own campaign book and while it does consist of NPCs[7], location descriptions, and plot devices, it does not account for every possibility.

For example, in this session our "goal" as a group was to make enough money to buy our own ship so we could abandon the annoying captain that we worked under currently. In order to do this we picked up a quest at the local town. We were meant to investigate an abandoned home on the hill and rid it of its ghosts inside of it for a reward. Upon approaching the house we realized that we would probably get more money if we bought the house ourselves while it was still haunted, killed the ghosts, renovated it, and then sold it on the market for a quick turn-around.

While the haunted house was mentioned in the campaign-book and so was the quest to clear it out, our approach to the problem surely was not. This is the part of D&D which enthralls so many. It's the ability to make any possibility a reality in a universe with almost no borders. In my experience from the sessions and gameplay I've observed of D&D, it is very much common to have this sort of sporadic and random turn of events. Something chaotic always occurs during gameplay which leads the group down a new path no one could have predicted when writing the campaign. It is up to the DM to decide what happens when their players create a whole new part of the world that wasn't foreseen.
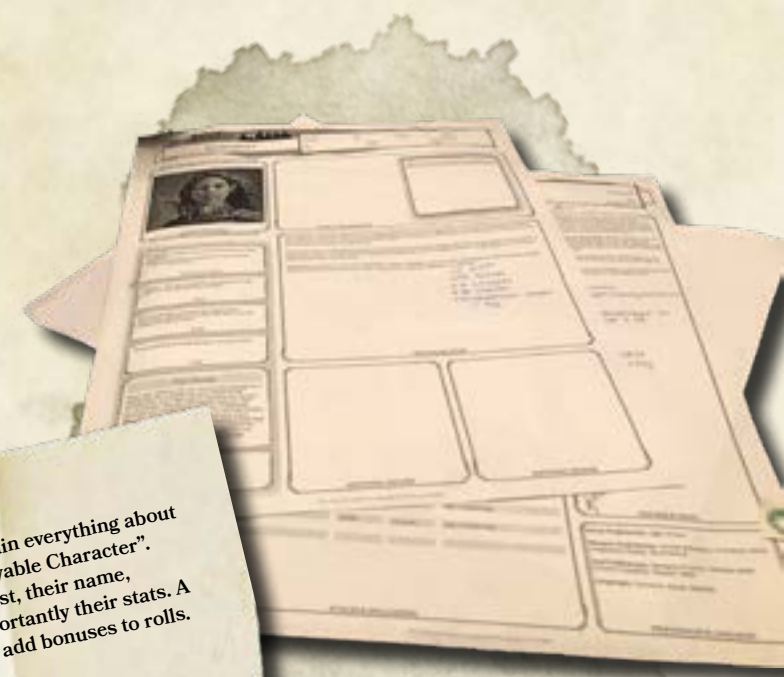
The First Dice Roll

While players can technically set out to do whatever they want in the D&D world, they can not just suddenly wish it into existence. This is where the dice come in. Dice must be rolled to determine if a player's character is successful in what they set out to do. This is why dice are rolled before the game starts to ensure more successes.

For example, in order to break down the locked door to the haunted house, a strength check[8] must be made. If a D20 is rolled above a certain number then it is a success! The door is broken down and the party may enter. If it is not a success, however, then there can be consequences. Perhaps the player is hurt trying to break the door down or maybe it's as harmless as the door simply not opening.

There are two special numbers on a D20 which hold more significance than the other 18. Those numbers are the 20 and a 1. Rolling a Nat 20[9] is considered the best thing you can do in 20. Not only is it usually an instant success, it is an amazing success. Rolling a Nat 20 usually results in over-the-top results in whatever you tried out to do.

As a real life example, if the Nat 20 instance were to be applied to buying a snack out of a vending machine then it could result in all the snacks suddenly flinging themselves off the shelves and into your arms.

Nat 20's are always applauded and rejoiced by the group. Even though it is random and has equal opportunity to appear like the other numbers, it is considered rare and as such is always celebrated when it graces a member of the group.

Rolling a critical failure, or a natural 1, however, has drastic consequences. This usally results in a dramatic and severe negative reaction. The only person who is happy to see a 1 rolled is the DM because it means he is able to inflict an evil amongst their player. In the case of the vending machine analogy, rolling a 1 would result on the vending machine suddenly falling on top of you and crushing you.

Role playing Elements

There is one other element prevalent in the internal culture of D&D that must be discussed. That is the element of role play within the game. Role playing is not at all required and everyone can role play to their own level of comfort. For one player who plays a robot, this means speaking in a "robot" accent and regarding humanoid characters "flesh bags". For others it can be an accent or a voice. For most, however, it is doing what you think your character would do.

There are 9 main character types, or alignments, in D&D. These alignments affect what a character might do in any given situation. So while the player might help an old woman who has a kitten stuck in a tree by calling 911 or climbing up themselves, their chaotic good character might chop the

Lawful Good	Neutral Good	Chaotic Good
Lawful Neutral	True Neutral	Chaotic Neutral
Lawful Evil	Neutral Evil	Chaotic Evil

tree down haphazardly to rescue their cat. As seen in the chart above, the alignments range from Lawful Good to Chaotic Evil.

Another element that contributes to how a person might "play" their character is the character's backstory. D&D is a chance to let your imagination go wild in every direction without limits. The same robot character I mentioned before has an interesting backstory created by its player. This character was originally a small appliance which evolved over time. As such, when the character calls upon its ancestors for strength during battles, it summons toasters.

Social Value

D&D holds a lot of social significance for some of the members in this group. Once you leave the social hub of high school or even college, it can be hard to find time to dedicate to a social event. D&D is this such dedication.

All the players I interviewed about D&D mentioned how much they look forward to it every week. Most of them even express disappointment within the groupchat when the DM sends out a last minute cancel. It's a safe place with like-minded people where everyone has something in common: a passion for D&D. Even when there are personal disagreements within the group, which did come up during our observations, no one wanted anything more than to

continue playing. D&D is a form of organized chaos that provides an escape from the lull of the every-day. There are things that happen during these sessions that could never happen in the real world and that's something that is worth returning to every week for four short hours.

Once our chaotic session, in which we ended up trying to run off television stars, The Property Brothers, off a cliff with sea bears, ended; I found myself wanting to tell people about it. I felt like I had to share everything I just experienced with people who weren't there. It was such a unique experience and such an amazing time that it felt wrong to keep something like that to myself.

I found myself drawing comics and even posting on social media about specific events or instances within our session. It's through these social media posts that I discovered through the comments how many of my friends also play D&D. I know so many people who are like myself and have only just picked up the hobby. D&D is as addicting as it is rewarding. But in the end, I always find myself with a D&D hangover. Four hours of any task is a lot, but I still look forward to it every week just like I know the rest of our group does as well.

The session ends with goodbyes and a quick cleanup of the living room. Everyone heads out and goes their own ways home and we do not see them until the next session.

Interviews

When members of the group were asked how they first found out about Dungeons & Dragons, all players responded that they found the tabletop game through some sort of digital media. Two of the three players asked cited specific television networks that portrayed D&D negatively. D&D in this instance was shown to be a cause for bullying against the players by others on the program. The third person mentioned several Internet channels and personalities as their main introduction into D&D culture. Websites such as Reddit and 4chan were also mentioned when we asked about the initial exposure to D&D.

First Contact

When asked about their first positive encounter with D&D, members of the group mentioned hearing about it through someone they already knew or where friendly with. Their exposure typically involved people that were already familiar in these players' lives. If the introduction to positive aspects of D&D were not found through relationships built in real life, they were introduced through

Fig. 3
A full dice set contains 7 die. A D20, D12, D6, D4, and two D10's.

dramatic digital content, more specifically either via chat rooms or video. One player mentioned that his first positive experience involved natural exposure to it as the culture of D&D began to grow in the mid 2010's. All players connected their positive experiences with their decision to implement the game into their own lives. Ultimately, their decisions to start playing were strongly connected to some element of persuasive storytelling.

A Positive Experience

The group provided that there was a distinction between their first time ever hearing about D&D and their first time hearing something positive about the game. This distinction proves how media representation can build ingrained stereotypes in people that are hard to change. Even the players' impressions of D&D have changed dramatically from when they were outsiders to now as regular players.

The specifically said they were surprised at the diversity that embodies the D&D community. One member of the group outright admitted that he expected to come into contact with more a more anti-social culture, but found that players were way more well-rounded than he assumed they'd be. They were surprised to find that they "actually have social lives outside of the table".

One member's answer focused less on the people who associate with the fandom, and was more focused on the manner in which the game is played in. Their assumption was that the game involved far more role play than it actually does. Instead most players are not as invested in method acting their role and more interested in

bonding together happenings with the game with trending memes and pop culture references.

Negative Remarks

When addressing their first time hearing something negative about the game, it usually was tied directly to the media, or at least to what others inferred about players from the media. There were varied responses as to what exactly about D&D was depicted in a negative manner. Some players cited that it was how the players themselves were portrayed in a negative light. Other members of the group pointed out that it wasn't the D&D fans themselves that were depicted unjustly, it was how they were teased by others that may have caused concern. D&D is usually a source of bullying in old visual media and shows as it was what the "loser/geek" archetype would do.

The players agree that over time, D&D's iconic cultural mark has evolved from something that is addicting but isolating to something more positive that builds communities. This evolution has occurred over the last five to ten years. The words 'mainstream' and 'acceptable' were two frequently used descriptors our players gave when asked how D&D is being perceived now. One member even ventured the claim that the game is even more familiar with the general public than anime. The most popular source for D&D related entertainment between the was YouTube, although Podcasts seemed to have a similar appeal about them.

Topic of Conversation

When asked if they discussed D&D with non-players, answers ranged in severity. Feedback was representative of

everything from 'never' to 'only to convey practically relevant information', to finally more Evangelical-type discussions that try to persuade non-players to start playing themselves. As a follow up question, members were asked if they've ever tried to defend the game to people who fall prey to believing the old, yet common stereotypes. Only one player had placed themselves in the role of the savior of the game, but he failed to change that person's mind, as they were already too attached to their beliefs about the 'nerdiness' of the game.

Social Benefits

All players agreed that their social lives have been enriched by incorporating D&D into their routine. Multiple members disclosed that the game has boosted their abilities to network in the workplace. The players' agreed that the schedule for the game has given them an opportunity to socially commune with people from different walks of life, one AL member went as far as saying that they would not have 'even tried to hang out with' without the context of the game to keep them seeing each other regularly. As the familiarity with the other players is built up, a communal connection is fostered that can then be substantiated with or without the game.

Results

It would seem that with the rise of digital media depicting D&D, such as YouTube or other streaming services, also came a rise of D&D popularity. One big example might be the inclusion of D&D and D&D elements in the Netflix Original, Stranger Things. Stranger Things is set 10 years after D&D was first made and is during a time when the "in the basement" play

stereotype was true. They name their villains after D&D monsters and even use D&D grids in order to strategize their fights. This has even resulted in a D&D/Stranger Things collaboration which created a Stranger Things One-Off campaign.

D&D culture in itself has developed and is much more widely accepted as being more than just for "loser geeks". With its wild adaptation into popular media it has gained mass acceptance in popular culture which has resulted in a huge increase of new players and parties.

Even the players, who all play on average 4+ hours of D&D a week, were skeptical of the culture before they became regular players. Now almost all of them involve themselves in not only D&D culture within their group but also outside of sessions by watching D&D media on digital media platforms. Many of these players even own accessories for the game such as figurines, fancy dice sets, or dice towers.

The positive exposition of D&D and its experience in popular culture has expanded its fan base and resulted in new masses of players interested in playing the table-top RPG. With a surge in new groups comes a surge of new social possibility and internal culture within these groups. There is a reinforcing feedback loop between the two as they continue to grow together. D&D will continue to evolve within itself and within our society as long as there are people like us who continue to be intrigued by it.