

# Dungeons & Dragons on the University of South Florida Campus

## **Introduction:**

“The old men hold dice. White, simple, well-worn dice, the kind you'd find in a Monopoly game. Around them, the world is in turmoil. 'Drought, famine, war. People are desperate,' says the man at the head of the table. Everything is chaos. Everything is on fire.' A clamor surrounds them: Ten tables with so many people there's barely room to stand are littered with glittering dice, a flotsam of pop and chips, and metal figures swinging tiny swords and axes...[researcher's edit]"What edition are they using?" whispers a youngster at an adjacent table. They're using simple rules, as they have since the game was published, swept the world, went through four editions and made millions. Before that, even. "Who are they?" asks the youngster, Tyler Swanson, 23, of River Falls, Wis. The first in the world, many say, to play Dungeons & Dragons.” (Vezner 2009, 1).

The excerpt above is taken from an article written by Tad Vezner in the “Saint Paul Pioneer Press” newspaper in St. Paul, Minnesota. According to the article, the “old men” mentioned in the first sentence are arguably the first people in the world to play the game Dungeons & Dragons. This meeting is a somewhat somber occasion as shown when the person acting as Dungeon Master, Bob Meyer states, “The king is dead” the king being the co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), David Arneson who passed away in March of 2009. The date of this article is June 28, 2009. Thus, the king/co-founder is dead. The article continues by stating that it was in Arneson's basement in “the early summer of 1970” and that the group met at least

once a year since then to play. The last time they played was the winter of 2008 so the game in this article is the first without the presence of David Arneson (Vezner 2009, 1).

### **Background Research:**

#### **The History of Dungeons and Dragons:**

Long ago, in a land far to the north, two men sat in their basement and for a time shuffled off their mortal coils and became creators. Together, they created a game; a game so unique and captivating that are considered legends among their followers. Those men are David Arneson and Gary Gygax. Over time, their creation spread throughout their native culture and became known by many within that culture. That creation and their legacy was the game of Dungeons & Dragons.

According to an interview with creator Arneson, Arneson and Gygax met a Gen Con Convention in 1970. Gen Con (Geneva Convention) is an annual gathering for “hobby” gamers that originated at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in 1967; hence the name “Geneva Convention” or Gen Con. According to the Gen Con website, the convention started off as “a small gathering of war game enthusiasts” (<http://www.gencon.com/2010/corporate/aboutus/history.aspx>). This enthusiasm for war games is what drew the mortals Arneson and Gygax to Gen Con in 1970 where they would bond over their love of war games and learn of each others’ membership of The International Federation of Wargamers. War gamers are those who played battle re-enactments using little tin soldiers on model battle fields, which had been a pastime off the middle class over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Veugen, 82). The following year at the next Gen Con, Arneson and Gygax began their collaborations on what would become known as the pencil and paper role playing game, Dungeons & Dragons (<http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p1.html>).

Before the initial collaboration, Gygax had already been working on a project that would provide the foundation for Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). As mentioned in the paragraph above, Gygax was a member of the International Federation of Wargamers. In fact, he was also one of the founders. Due to love and interest of the medieval time period, Gygax created a sub-branch of the federation called the Castle and Crusade Society. However, initial and later interest in the society was low and dwindling. This absence of fervor led Gygax to incorporate more fantasy elements based on such authors as J.R.R. Tolkien, Fritz Leiber, and Robert E. Howard who all wrote fantasy novels at one time or another. These additions were compiled together into an adventure game officially known as “Chainmail: Rules for Medieval Miniatures” in 1971. For his collaborations with Arneson, Gygax’s “Chainmail” became the precursor and the foundation for D&D and its rules (Veugen, 82).

Like many creators and ideologists before them, Arneson and Gygax had trouble distributing their creation to the masses. No one would buy their product for distribution. However, in October of 1973, and with the financial assistance of a benefactor named Don Kay, Arneson and Gygax were able to fruition the company Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). With TSR in place, Arneson and Gygax had their merchant stall and began to distribute Dungeons & Dragons to the citizens of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in January of 1974 (Arneson and Gygax interviews). According to an obituary for Gary Gygax, through TSR, D&D became an underground hit on campuses around the world.

In 1997, TSR was sold to Wizards of the Coast, another gaming company that continues to distribute updated Dungeons & Dragons handbooks and Dungeons & Dragons merchandise in addition to its other products. By 1997, both Arneson and Gygax were no longer officially involved in TSR, but in their own individual ways, each creator continued to influence and shape

their creation into what it is today. That is, until, as one epitaph put it, David Arneson and “Gary Gygax Fails Fortitude Save” (Gary Gygax obituary). Making reference to a part in D&D where a player rolls a dice to prevent its occurrence, such as vomiting or poisoning, both creators failed in their fortitude saves against death. Unfortunately, one cannot be resurrected in the game of life. However, according to some religions, there is a chance they can come back to the game as new characters and start a whole new campaign.

**The Rules of the Game:**

In the game of Dungeons & Dragons, there are two major figures; the players and the Dungeon Master. The players are the people who create their own characters which they will control during the course of the campaign. The Dungeon Master or D.M. is the person who constructs the campaign for the players to play through. When I say the D.M. constructs the campaign, I mean that he or she determines the environment, the story, the challenges the players must face, etc. Even the Dungeon Master’s Guide for D&D states, “Dungeon Mastering involves writing, teaching, acting, refereeing, arbitrating, and facilitating” (Cook et al. 2003, 6). Thus, there is a lot involved in being a D.M. for a D&D group. However, the D.M. is not the only one with responsibilities in the game. Players must constantly keep track of their character’s stats, alignment, items, etc. They must also keep track of information given by the D.M. which may be needed to move on in the campaign (Cook et al. 2003).

As can be inferred from the above paragraph, Dungeons & Dragons is not a game that can be set up in a matter of minutes and finished in an hour. It is a game that requires a good deal of commitment and has a lot of variables to keep track of to avoid confusion. Fortunately, there are manuals available at most major book stores and hobby stores which contain all of the rules and options available for a D&D campaign (Snow 2009, 24). At the bare minimum, there are three core books that a first time D&D player can purchase which contain all of the rules and

stats they will need to know during a D&D game. These are the Dungeon Master's Guide, the Player's Handbook, and the Monster Manual (Cook et al. 2003).

As the name suggests, the Dungeon Master's guide contains all of the information a Dungeon Master needs to know to construct and implement a D&D campaign. The Player's Handbook is also a good reference for a D.M. to have because it contains the information about the different types of characters a player could create. Thus, the Player's Handbook is also an essential tool for players because it contains all of the information about the choices they have for designing characters and equipping them for the upcoming campaign. In addition to these two books is the Monster Manual which contains a large selection of monsters, their stats, and abilities for the D.M. to choose from and place where he desires in the campaign. Armed with these three containers of knowledge, one can create a world of their own and others can journey through these other worlds rather than the world they live in for a while (Cook et al. 2003).

After a D.M. has setup his or her campaign and the players have created their characters, the campaign can start. During the campaign, players must say what their character is doing or saying in the current situation whether it is saving an innocent citizen, mugging a beggar, or anything else that could potentially happen in the scenario. During some scenarios, the players must roll dice to determine if they can perform certain actions or if they are successful with certain actions such as persuading an informant. This rolling of the dice also transfers into potential battle scenarios which the players may face to continue to the next event in the campaign. At the bare minimum, the game continues in this manner until either the players reach the end of the D.M.'s campaign, the D.M. decides to end the campaign or stop for that particular session, or all of the character's die and the D.M. decides there is no way for new characters to enter the campaign (Cook et al. 2003).

The above paragraphs of this section are a very basic summary of a Dungeons & Dragons game. The fact that there are three core books over three hundred pages in length of relevant material speaks volumes about how involved this game can be. However, these books just provide the basic rules and the required information to learn how to play D&D. There are other books which contain pre-constructed campaigns and additional material for players and D.M.s to utilize in their campaigns. In addition, D.M.s and players can create new material and scenarios to use with the basic D&D rules as guidelines as is the case with the D&D group observed for this project. For this group, the D.M. created his own world, cultures, and monsters; he even included some extra abilities for the players to choose from like a cloaking ability for anyone who wanted to have a rogue class character. There is a lot of flexibility in D&D. The only limit is the imagination of the group involved (Cook et al. 2003).

**Additional Research:**

Based on my initial observations and the three rule books, I decided to focus my attention and thus, my initial research of Dungeons & Dragons on character construction, group relationships, and on the role of the dice. With regards to character construction, I found multiple articles about creating and playing a character. In addition, I found articles that examined potential ties between a player and his or her character. As put by the author of an obituary for Gary Gygax in the Economist, “his invention--a blend of mathematics, theatre and imagination--allowed his players to live in them” (2008, 102).

Part of playing in a D&D game is the ability for players to become the characters they create and control. During a campaign, some players may speak and act like their characters for the entire D&D session even if the group is discussing something unrelated to the game. This dichotomy of characters can be explained as such: in D&D there are two types of “characters” a player can act as. They are defined as the in-game character and the out-of-game character; the

in-game character being the created character and the out-of-game character being the player him or herself.

Not only are there two characters being played through a single player, but there are two ways to play a character as well. As put by Paul Mason in his article “In Search of the Self: A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory” a person can play “from” a character or play “to” a character. “The former referred to a more immersive, unconscious approach (akin to method acting) while the latter described a consciously crafted simulation of personality through player choice” (Mason 2004, 5).

In part of a study done by Joris Dormans on pencil and paper role playing games (D&D being a pencil and paper role playing game), Dormans took a look at the function of characters in role playing games. What she found was, “Some players use roleplaying games as emotional and psychological playgrounds, experimenting with their own character or acting on otherwise suppressed personality traits” (Dormans 2006). Based on these articles, it is safe to infer that a created character in D&D can be a personal as a player wants it to be. For some, creating a character is an expression of creativity, for others the created character can be an outlet the player utilizes for his or her own purposes. Also, a character can just be that; a character with no personal attachment (Tychsen et al. 2007, 40-48).

Since Dungeons & Dragons is a game that involves multiple people, there is a social element to it that has an affect on those in the group playing the game. According to Mason’s article, during the evolution of D&D as a multiplayer role playing game (RPG), “the players tended towards co-operation rather than conflict” (Mason 2004, 4). Thus, in D&D, players usually, and in many case must, work together. However, if all the players are working together, then where is the opposition? Due to the lack of opposition between characters during the first

few years of D&D, “the role-playing referee [Dungeon Master] had to provide opposition” in the game (Mason 2004, 4). Originally, the D.M. was meant to act more like a referee between characters (Mason 2004, 3-4).

As a brief note, the relationships mentioned in the previous paragraph existed more in-game than out-of-game; similar to how there are in and out-of-game characters. I could not find any research on interactions between players as opposed to their created characters. I also could not find any articles on how Dungeons & Dragons players interpreted the role dice played in their D&D campaigns. What I have found regarding dice and D&D is what is available in the rule books. There are multiple types of dice that can be utilized in a D&D campaign and the number rolled on a die represents the result of an action made by a character in the campaign.

Though I could not find much information on group interactions or dice in Dungeon & Dragons games, I did find articles about opposition to the game of D&D. According to a chapter in the book The Satanism Scare, some Christian fundamentalist claim the playing D&D is akin to worshipping the devil. Even though it is a game that involves role playing, even role playing sinful acts counts as performing sinful acts such as practicing magic. In response to this claim, players state that D&D is just a game that does not have a huge affect on the players. According to the authors of this chapter, the opponents to D&D are taking the game more seriously than those who play D&D (Martin and Fine 1991, 107-110).

**Objectives:**

For this research I was not looking for anything specific about Dungeons & Dragons groups. I was not even sure what I would find when I went to my first observation. In the process of crossing the threshold of the doorway I had passed through the veil between worlds and entered a world that I have only seen glimpses of in popular television cartoons such as Disney’s Recess, Cartoon Networks’ Dexter’s Laboratory, and in video games such as Rockstar’s Bully.



However, as I familiarized myself with my surroundings during that first session, I picked up on some topics that were prevalent in the dialogue passed amongst the adventurers. It was these domains that I decided to focus my attentions on while observing the adventurers as they worked their way through the story concocted by the Dungeon Master. The first of these topics was a player's character. While playing D&D, every adventurer took on a new identity including the Dungeon Master who took on multiple identities over the course of the session. In addition, being the focus of the story that led the adventure immediately made the characters and the construction of them a very important aspect of D&D.

The next domain that plagued the speech of the adventurers was that of the different dice utilized in game play. Nearly every action taken by the characters during game play required a roll of one or two dice to determine anything from whether an attack was successful or whether someone dropped their weapon in the middle of combat. With so many factors affected by the simple act of rolling a piece of plastic with numbers painted on it and so many variations, these dice must be an important factor in D&D.

The final domain I decided to focus on was not so much spoken about out right, but was always present like the proverbial elephant in the room; everyone knows it is there, but they do not talk about it. The final focus of my attention was the interactions of the players with each other and their interactions with the Dungeon Master. Dungeons and Dragons is a social game that involves cooperation and talking. Thus, if there is tension amongst the group, their may be more than just monsters to prevent the adventurers from completing their campaign.

**Research Methods:**

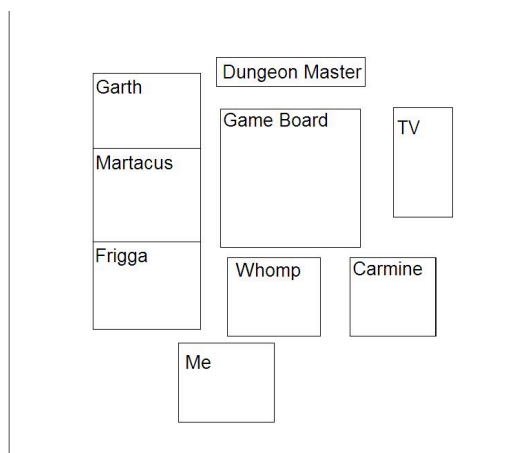
This study is exploratory in nature and inductive in its investigation. Thus, there will be two methods utilized for this investigation: indirect participant-observation as the exploratory

method and semi-structured interviews with the members of the group as the inductive part of the investigation.

The first method utilized in this research was indirect participant observation. What I mean by indirect participant-observation is that while I could not participate in the Dungeons & Dragons game itself I was able to participate in the socialization involved with the game. So, while observing the game interactions, I sat outside of the group around the game board in the middle of the room and conversed with players while I take notes on their interactions. A particularly memorable example of my participation was during the second D&D session I observed. In the game story, the adventurers were investigating a string of murders that appeared to be committed with the same style weapon. Eventually, the adventurers had exhausted all of their leads and could not think of what else to do. They also could not just give up the investigation because it was a major point of this particular campaign. While they tried to figure out what to do next, I remembered that during the investigation the Dungeon Master said that the murder weapon was of an uncommon make. So, I suggested that the adventurers bring the weapon to a blacksmith and have him examine it. It turned out that was exactly the lead the adventurers needed to continue.

Since I could not participate in the D&D game itself, I sat outside of the circle the players made around the game board and took notes. Sitting outside of the group during game play has its pros and cons. Some of the positive aspects were that I could take notes without having to keep track of my own character in the game. In addition, the chair I sat in is higher than the rest so I could see just about everything everyone was doing while they played the game and socialized. There was one player I, unfortunately, could not see entirely because of where my chair was located as shown in diagram 1 below. Another negative affect of this arrangement was

I did not get to experience playing Dungeons & Dragons for myself. The reason I was not able to fully experience D&D was mostly circumstantial and partially personal for the D.M. When I inquired about participating in the D&D game, there were already enough players by the D.M.'s standards. He prefers to play with no more than five other players. I will expand on this preference for a certain number of players under the results section of this ethnography when I discuss D&D relationships.



**Diagram 1**

Overall, indirect participant-observation has proved very informative. The Dungeons & Dragons group has a mix of veteran players and new players so when something was explained to the new players I also gained insight into what was being explained and was able to increase my functional knowledge of the game. Also, rather than just reading a rule book to learn about D&D, I had the ability to watch a game being played out and how it progressed and evolved over time. In addition, by not being a direct member of the group itself, I could focus on player interactions and not be distracted or distract anyone with my note taking. My only regret with this method of observation was I would have loved to gain the full experience of playing a D&D game.

As stated at the beginning of this section, the second method of research for this project was one on one, semi-structured interviews with the members of the Dungeons & Dragons group being studied. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by me. During the interviews, I also took notes with the permission of the participants. Out of the six people in the D&D group, only one person opted out of participating in the interview. The person who opted out was Carmine, a rogue from the land of Sprota on his first Dungeons & Dragons adventure. While ideally it would be great to have at least one interview with all of the players I was able to get an interview with at least one of the new players, the veteran players, and the Dungeon Master.

For the five interviews I was able to conduct, each participant said yes to being interviewed with an audio recorder and I was able to record the entire interview and take notes on the interviews. Three out of the five interviews were conducted outside, one was conducted in the interviewee's room, and one interview was conducted in a quiet room in the Student Center on campus. For all of the interviews, the locations for the interview was either chosen by the participant or agreed upon by the participant. No interviewee appeared distraught or uncomfortable because of the interviews or their locations.

One of my indoor interviewees was interviewed with Whomp W. WhompWhomp. He is a monk who, like Carmine, is on his first Dungeons & Dragons adventure. Overall, this interview went well. Since this is his first time playing Dungeons & Dragons, I was not able to gather a lot of information on his experiences playing Dungeons & Dragons or much of the more minute details of D&D itself. However, I was able to record his thoughts on playing a Dungeons & Dragons game for the first time. As for the interview location, it was very quiet with minimal distractions so there was no problem with recording the interview.

The other indoor interview took place in the meditation room of the Student Center on the University of South Florida Campus. This room is off in a corner, somewhat hidden, so that there is minimal noise being filtered in. As the name implies, this room is meant to be quiet and since it was unoccupied it provided a perfect place for an interview. This was the location of my interview with Garth who has been playing D&D for almost 3 years. I was able to gather much information from him because of his experience.

The other three interviews took place outside in public areas that were not crowded. On the audio recorder, everyone is audible so regular outside noises did not impede the recorder and thus the interview is not impeded by the surrounding environment. Some of the interviews had some challenges though. The interviews with the Dungeon Master and Frigga occurred on days with an increased wind speed. Though the wind is noticeable for both interviews, it does not overpower their voices on the recorder. Instead, the challenge with the wind was keeping my notebook pages from blowing around while trying to write on them.

The remaining interview is my interview with Martacus the Ferrous, a paladin of the Iron Fist. What made this interview slightly difficult was he had a group of friends that he had been sitting with before the interview at a table a few feet away in front of the Subway sandwich shop on campus. For the most part, his friends were respectful and tried not to disrupt the interview. However, there were some occasions where they called over to him to show him something and there was a point where someone came over and sat down without saying anything. Despite these distractions, we made it through the interview and I was able to gather a large amount of information from Martacus.

Ultimately, every interview is different and presents its own challenges. Some are easier to overcome than others, but just because there might be problems does not mean an interview

should be cancelled. Interviews are just too useful of a method to casually push aside when doing ethnography. Based on my experience I will definitely be utilizing this method in the future. I was able to gather a large amount of information despite the difficulties of each interview and all of my participants appeared willing to share their stories about their exploits in this D&D campaign.

**The Setting:**

It is Sunday afternoon on the University of South Florida Campus. For some students, it is a day of rest. For others it is a day of work; both job work and homework. However, for a small group of students, Sunday afternoon is a day to gather around the game board, assume the identity of another, and go on a quest that can last for hours at a time and take weeks to complete.

For this group, the location for meeting is the dormitory room of three of the adventurers. The room houses four males. When entering the room, one first enters the kitchen where exotic foods such as ramen and fluffer nutters (peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches) are prepared and served to the adventurers. Through the kitchen lies the gathering place (common area), which is just the right size for the game board and for the players and Dungeon Master to sit around it as they go through their adventure. To the left and right of the gathering place are two short corridors that lead to the living quarters of the residents.

Before each session, the players clear the gathering area in which they will be playing and then they place the game board in the center for everyone to see. Chairs of various sorts are placed or maneuvered around the game board so everyone can sit down and reach all of the materials for the game. All major distractions are removed or turned off. Once everyone is situated and has updated their stats from the previous session, the game can begin.

**The Story:**

During my interview with the Dungeon Master, he divulged unto me, under an oath of secrecy, the story he created for this campaign and where he wants to go with it in the spring semester of 2010. Though in the first session of the campaign he stated that none of the characters knew each other and that their meeting seemed random, in reality there was a secret known only to him about the true destinies of the characters. Here is what he had to say about the story he was basing the campaign on:

“They’re random people it seems. Totally different walks of life. Frigga’s a shaman from the fringed northern wastes. Martacus is a paladin of the Iron Temple. They’re all completely different; didn’t know each other at all. They were called together by Abalard, the patriarch of the country of Duregar, who has been investigating rumors and artifacts and anything he can get his hands on about the original founding members of each of the countries, which there are 8. He believes that each of the players and all of the other people he called together have a special bloodline that relates to those ancestors. And they do, as can be seen by the activation of the temples as they walk into them. He’s trying to figure out exactly how that bloodline works and if he can harness any of the energy that’s gained from activating the temples. Right now he’s sending them on quests to activate the temples, they’ve done 6 out of the 8 [as of this interview]. Next week we should finish up the last two. At the same time as this is going on, little be known to anyone else, a wrinkle in space has sort of allowed for an alternative dimension to start seeping through. The players don’t know this yet, but it’s going to get worse as they activate the last two temples. Not because of the temples, but because of something totally unrelated. The power of the temples, though, will help them combat this darkness. At some point most of the world is going to be sucked in and enveloped in darkness and their going to have to reverse the process. The reversal of the process should be to focus of next semester and fully reversing it is

going to be the conclusion to the campaign with a side effect in which they get sucked into one of three different alternative universes depending on which they choose. Those I'm going to develop better, but they essentially relate to time, life, and divinity.”

**Characters:**

Here is a quick glance at the players/characters involved in the D&D group I observed for this paper.

**Dungeon Master:**

[No Picture Available]

Name: D.M.

Age: 19

Major:

Years Playing: approximately 8 years

**Player 1:**



Name: Martacus the Ferrous

Age: 19

Major: Anthropology: Archaeology and Biological

Race: Human

Class: Paladin

City of Origin: Duregar

Years playing: 2.5 years

**Player 2:**



Name: Garth

Age: 19

Major: Bio Med/Pre Med

Race: Human

Class: Artificer

City of Origin: Hyladon

Years Playing: Approximately 3 years

**Player 3:**



Name: Frigga

Age: 19

Major: Political Science and Environmental Science

Race: Human

Class: Druid

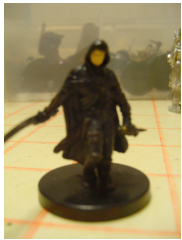
City of Origin: Lands in the North

Years Playing: 1 year



**Player 4:**

Name: Whomp W. WhompWhomp  
 Age: 19  
 Major: Psychology  
 Race: Human  
 Class: Monk  
 City of Origin: A Monastery  
 Years Playing: First campaign

**Player 5: No Interview**

Name: Carmine  
 Age: 18  
 Major: Computer Science  
 Race: Human  
 Class: Rogue  
 City of Origin: Sprota  
 Years Playing: First campaign

**Character Creation:**

During my interviews with the players, I asked them why they constructed the characters as they did. One trend that appeared was that most of the players (the males in this case) chose characters that were either different, personality wise, from themselves or they picked a character type they would not normally pick. As an example of personality difference, Garth as a character has a chaotic alignment meaning that he does what he wants when he wants without concern for the other players. As a person, Garth's player said that he is still chaotic, but less so than Garth. According to him, it was a chance to do things he would not normally do. An example of picking a different type of character, Whomp's player normally picks mages or spell casters in video games. For this campaign, he said he wanted to pick something different; in this case a monk who does not use magic.

Since only one group of D&D players was observed and there was only one female in the group, I cannot say that this applies to all female players. However, Frigga was the only

character who the player said was a personification of herself because a) Frigga is a female character and b) Frigga has a leadership personality as the player views herself as having.

Another factor that the players said affected their choice of character was that for this campaign, there needed to be at least one character that fell under one of four archetypes: fighter, magic user, rogue, and healer. In this campaign there was one of each archetype and one extra fighter. For some players, the campaign also influenced the back story for their characters; some characters more than others. For instance, Carmine's back story is that he is a rogue from the city of Sprota which the characters eventually visit. A more integrated back story is Martacus'. Martacus is a paladin of the Iron Fist which grants him privileges in the city of Duregar which houses the temple of the Iron Fist.

#### **Dungeon Master/Player Relations:**

Dungeons & Dragons is a game that involves multiple people. As shown in the previous paragraph, the campaign the Dungeon Master creates affects the choices of the players with regards to constructing their character and visa versa. This is just one example of the relationship between players and the D.M and an example of how players and the D.M. work together in D&D. During my interview with the D.M. for this game, he said that when creating a campaign, he values the suggestions and input of the people playing through his campaign. However, this is not the case for all D.M.s as my interviews and observations revealed.

In the world of D&D there are many types of D.M.s. Some D.M.s like to try to place hidden caches of items or money for the players who like to look in every nook and cranny. Other D.M.s like to try to kill all of the players. One example of this type of D.M. was named by Garth when he said, "don't be like Ken" who is another D.M. Garth and the D.M. of the group I was observing knew. This statement led to a slight discussion of good vs bad D.M.s. Apparently, good D.M.s like to work with the players while still posing as the opposition. Bad D.M.s are

“douche” (jerks) to the players who assert their authority over the players of their campaigns; meaning they decide everything and they are always right about conflicts.

Player/Dungeon Master relationships are not the only potential arenas for conflict. There are also the relationships between players. As the D.M. put it, “group relations can make or break a game”. Originally, the players in D&D were supposed to be in opposition of each other with the D.M. as a referee. Today, it is the D.M. who is in opposition to the players. Thus, players need to work together to make it through the D.M.’s challenges.

In my interviews with the veteran players, they all expressed similar ideas as to what they would consider a good group or player vs a bad group or player. In general, a good group was relatively small in size and consisted of people who really wanted to play D&D. An even better group was one where everyone really gets into the persona of their characters. One example mentioned by the D.M. was Martacus’ player. According to the D.M., when Martacus’ player plays in the campaign, he becomes Martacus in voice and action. During my observations, I noticed that up to a point, all of the players fell into the persona of their characters making this group a good group in the eyes of those within.

For the definition of a bad group, some of the main characteristics mentioned were that it consisted of people only partially interested in the game, those who messed around too much to the point of distraction, and those that did not really become their characters. Garth mentioned that one of his worst experiences playing D&D was while he was in a campaign of 10-12 people about half of whom were interested in playing. On a more individual level, a common topic brought up under bad groups was that of “power players”. Power players are the people who play to win, beat the D.M., and try to be as powerful as possible rather than enjoy the game for what it

is. In a game that involves cooperation, a player that centered on him or herself could cause conflict between players.

### Role of the Dice:



In the photos above are multiple forms of an object familiar to anyone who has played board games such as Monopoly, Sorry, and Risk. That's right...these are dice which, according to Frigga, is the symbol of Dungeons & Dragons. In Dungeons & Dragons, the action of rolling the dice is utilized for just about everything in the game. It determines the stats of characters, determines battle damage, dice can even be used to determine whether a character vomits in his helmet from the stench of rotting corpses when entering a room. Martacus can attest to that example.

When asked about the role dice play in D&D other than to determine stats, everyone referred to dice as fate or chance. In a way, given the opposition between the D.M. and the players, the dice act as a neutral party. During our interview, Frigga even said that without the dice, it would be the D.M. who decided everything which would cause more friction between some D.M.s and their players. According to Martacus, the dice "accounts for real world events" and adds "excitement" to the game. Whomp shared similar sentiments. Based on these responses, the dice in D&D are more than pieces of plastic.

Another example of how dice are more than just pieces of plastic is that there are "dice superstitions" that are self imposed on the dice. According to the D.M., dice superstitions "couldn't hurt to have" basing this statement on the idea behind the theory of "Pascal's Wager

about God". To summarize, Pascal says that it is a winning situation to believe in God because if he does exist, those who believe go to Heaven; if God does not exist, there are no consequences after life (God in this case is God as portrayed in Christianity). If a person does not believe in God, however, while that person will suffer no consequences after life, if God does exist there will be consequences. Thus, it is better to be safe and believe in God

(<http://www.iep.utm.edu/pasc-wag/>). Translated into D&D it is better to believe in superstitions because one does not suffer if they are wrong, but if the superstitions do have a positive affect it is better to believe in them and use them to the fullest advantage.

In addition to learning about Pascal's Wager, I learned about some other superstitions while observing this D&D group. One of the more directly related superstitions was praying to the "dice gods". Another superstition was rolling out the "bad" numbers before playing a game or rolling out the lower numbers so you roll higher numbers during the game. One of the D.M.s personal and somewhat unconscious superstitions was being the only one to use your particular set of dice; I noticed that for each game the D.M. was sure to give the players the same set of dice to use that they had from the beginning. A final superstition was if a dice is rolling well, switch to another dice before it starts rolling bad numbers.

**Conclusions:**

As the title of this section states, I will be going over some conclusions I made based on my observations and interviews of this Dungeons & Dragons group about D&D and about this group in particular. A major running theme within D&D is that the game is like a portal to another world. It is a chance for those involved to escape their reality and live another's even if it is for a few hours. For some people, this escape of reality goes deeper in that they have the chance to be someone different than themselves and do things they would not normally do.

Another common theme was that for a D&D campaign to work well, it requires the cooperation of the D.M. and the players as well as a commitment from all involved. As stated before, the best groups are those that have people who are playing for fun and really get into the role playing aspect of the game. The best games involve not the players, but the players as their in-game alter egos. D&D is not a game for someone who is too self conscious or is not willing to put in the effort required of them.

Based on the findings of this research, I would say that a topic worth further investigating is the role of the dice in D&D. I think a cross comparative study of how players view their dice and of dice superstitions would bring to light how D&D is more than a game. There is a culture surrounding this pen and paper RPG that deserves further study which can also be extended to other RPGs of all mediums. What makes this a subject worth studying is how much of an impact D&D had on American culture let alone all of the other major RPGs available now. The massive multiplayer online role playing game World of Warcraft comes to mind given its claim of over 10 million users and growing and the number of hours people dedicate to it.

One final theme I want to acknowledge with this D&D group in particular is the central figure behind this group. During my interviews, I asked each interviewee what or who they thought was the most central part of D&D. I received a different answer from everyone. However, there was a central figure that stood out in all of my interviews and that was the D.M. as a person out side of the game. In all of my interviews, there was some mention of how the interviewee's relationship with the D.M. drew them into D&D and affected how they played the game. Thus, even though Dungeons & Dragons is a game at its core, there is a community of people that surround it and they are just as important outside of the game as inside it.

## Bibliography

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams

2003 *Dungeon Master's Guide, Version 3.5: Dungeons & Dragons Role playing Game: Core Rules*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast, Inc. (get info from Chris)

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams

2003 *Monster Manual, Version 3.5: Dungeon & Dragons Role playing Game: Core Rules*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams

2003 *Player's Handbook, Version 3.5: Dungeon & Dragons Role playing Game: Core Rules*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

David Arneson Interview

2004 David Arneson Interview: GameSpy sits down with the co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons* and talks with him about the game. <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p1.html>, accessed November 23, 2009.

Dormans, Joris

2006 *On the Role of the Die: A Brief Ludologic Study of Pen-and-Paper Roleplaying Games and their Rules*. <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>, accessed October 7, 2009.

Gen Con

2009 Gen Con LLC: History. <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p1.html>, November 23, 2009.

Gygax, Gary

2004 Interview by Jon Birnbaum. Gary Gygax Interview. Game Banshee, <http://www.gamebanshee.com/interviews/garygygax1.php>, July 20.

Gary Gygax

2008 *Economist* 386(8571):102-102.

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource

2005 Pascal's Wager about God. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/pasc-wag/>, accessed October 27, 2009.

Martin, Daniel and Gary Alan Fine

1991 *Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is "Dungeons & Dragons" a Breeding Ground for the Devil? In The Satanism Scare*. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, eds. Pp. 107-110. Hawthorne: Walter de Gruyter, Inc.

Mason, Paul

2004 In Search of the Self: A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory. *In Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, eds. Pp. 1-14. Finland: Ropecon ry.

Snow, Cason

2009 Tabletop Fantasy RPGs. *School Library Journal* 55(1):24-25.

Tychsen, **Anders**, Doris McIlwain, Thea Brolund, and Michael Hitchens

2007 Player-Character Dynamics in Multi-Player Role Playing Games. Paper presented at the Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference, Tokyo, September 24-28.

Veugen, Connie

Here Be Dragons: Advent and Prehistory of the Adventure Game. 77r-94r.

Vezner, Ted

2009 For D D's Old Masters, the Fantasy Still Thrills: Despite the Passage of nearly Four Decades, a Group of Dungeons Dragons Pioneers Still Gathers at Least Once a Year to Play the Famous Fantasy Game with Origins in St. Paul.2009. *The America's Intelligence Wire*, June 28: 1.

Wizards of the Coast

2009 Dungeons & Dragons. <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/welcome>, accessed September 28, 2009.