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Dungeons and Development

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a 47-year-old tabletop roleplaying game. There are many complexities to both the game and its role in society. Since one of the core mechanics of D&D is rolling an icosahedron, a twenty-sided die, here is a twenty-part analysis of 5th Edition D&D.

1. Fundamental - What do you need to know to start playing?

While many people might send you to various corners of the internet, ask you to read three or four books, or even watch a few live sessions before picking up a die, there is a much easier way to explain this. In D&D, you tell a collaborative story with friends. You are guided by the Dungeon Master, the narrator of the game, as everyone plays as a fictional character within the game. When presented with a scenario, such as a troll lazily keeping watch over a castle's entrance, you are then asked "What would you like to do?" There is no wrong answer here. It is up to your imagination to decide what happens next. However, things can go wrong. After declaring an action, you roll a d20, a twenty-sided die, to determine how accurately your task was completed. While there are a variety of

different things that could influence that roll, the simplest is an advantage/disadvantage system. Suppose your bookish wizard attempts to translate some runes above a door. Since the character should be good at that, the Dungeon Master may ask you to roll with advantage by rolling twice and taking the higher result. If that same bookish wizard was to try to force the door open with her nonexistent strength, disadvantage may be necessary. The player would then roll twice and take the lower of the two results. This process is repeated indefinitely until a satisfying conclusion or cliffhanger is reached. To some, D&D might be a bit confusing. There is no win or loss condition, and there is no objective endpoint. It is an open world of adventure, a system of creation with a plot waiting to be written by you.

2. Technical - How do you learn all the rules?

If, after a simplified game or two, you decide to take up the adventuring life and learn more about D&D, the assortment of resources available to you may seem a bit overwhelming. From character creation to spell selection, the thousands of pages of choices are often more frustrating than freeing. What is necessary? What is superfluous? Wizards of the Coast, the parent company of D&D, advertise three different variations of a starter set, along with its list of the three core rulebooks: the *Player's Handbook*, the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and the *Monster Manual*. However, much of the information included in these manuals is only necessary in certain situations. For example, the latter third of the *Player's Handbook* is a library of spells and the entirety of the *Monster Manual* is a bestiary, only necessary to the Dungeon Master. (*Monster Manual*) In learning this, you have the freedom to skip around in the books and treat them differently than a standard

novel. Also, recognize that even the “experts” have little memorized and commonly use these titles as references mid-game. Since there are already many how-to guides, both official and unofficial, it is unnecessary to re-state them, but having a starting point like Chapter 1 of the *Player’s Handbook* can be useful.

3. Customizable - How do you then break all those rules?

After explaining where to find hundreds of “rules”, I should probably inform you that there are only really two rules that matter: have fun and what the Dungeon Master says goes. With so many rules and conditions, it is helpful to focus only on the ones that directly affect your character and its environment. However, with an environment that constantly shifts around you, it can be a workout to remember which spell effects apply at any given moment. Because of this, some rules may get lost. In this case, the Dungeon Master is likely to make something up and everyone at the table is expected to roll with it. As long as this rule is then kept consistent through future play sessions, it is labelled a “house rule” and play continues from there. (*Dungeon Masters Guide: Dungeons and Dragons*) In a game full of technicalities, most players, Dungeons Masters and player characters alike, would prefer to keep up the tempo than break character to hunt through the books for the “correct” ruling. While it is possible for these accidental rulings to occur, it is also possible, and highly encouraged, to intentionally rewrite the game. In the preface of the *Player’s Handbook*, Mike Mearls, the head designer of the 5th edition, wrote “D&D is your personal corner of the universe, a place where you have free reign to do as you wish.” (Mearls) Homebrewing, the common term for brewing up your own creations, is a very popular way

to add things like robots, superheroes, or even the occasional cellphone into your personal high fantasy world of wizards, wyverns, and wilderness.

4. Logistical - What else needs to be considered before starting a game?

This is a lot of information, so the question of where to begin might arise. To find a game, there are communities on nearly every social media site and most local game stores have some system of coordinating groups of players. While scheduling a start time is the trickiest part, things like expected run time, location, and provisions should also be considered. Contrary to common belief, consistency is only sometimes key. There are two main types of games in D&D: campaigns and one-shots. While campaigns are long narratives that take months or even years of weekly games to explore, one-shots are simpler self-contained stories. They can be a great option for experimenting with a new group to play with. Before you even play, the group should have a Session Zero, an out-of-character conversation where things like expected tone, goals, and party composition are discussed. If everyone is playing a highly combative character and no one is playing a character with healing magic, the Dungeon Master may have to adjust the adventure to better suit the group. Also, at Session Zero, player etiquette, like limited phone usage, accountability, and out-of-game communication is discussed. While D&D is a game, it is also an event, and many choose to have conversations before the event so that everyone is in agreement about how to have a great time.

5. Theatrical - What makes rolling dice fun?

D&D is a tabletop roleplaying game. It is not simply strategy-based nor is it designed to have “perfect” characters. While optimizing one’s character is possible, there are no tournaments nor is there a ranking system like professional sports leagues or eSports. Despite thousands of pages of spells, creatures, and possible adventures, no one D&D game is exactly like another. Unless it is recorded, D&D cannot be relived or replayed. It is a living story, and depending upon who you are playing with, many of the best moments will be outside the realm of its mechanics. There are many popular podcasts of people playing D&D. These games are akin to soap operas and radio plays popularized decades ago. While D&D provides plenty of tools and tables for writing your character’s backstory, the motivations and morals of a character are only truly discovered during gameplay. Will your ranger save her falling falcon or will she instead use her turn to confront the fast-approaching ogre? These split-second decisions become character defining moments as the battle and the fun continue.

6. Legal - In a game about creating worlds, what is considered “stealing”?

With a game full of character creation, world exploration, and complicated mechanics, the question of intellectual property rights will inevitably arise. When a highly creative Dungeon Master wishes to share his custom items with others, the questions of who legally owns what and to what degree it can be shared may occur. Wizards of the Coast answers these questions by promoting the selling of player created content within the world of D&D in collaboration with the digital marketplace OneBookShelf through the Dungeon Master’s Guild, an online store full of fan-made monsters, modules, and

mechanics for D&D. These creations are perfectly legal so long as they comply with the publishing information in D&D's Open Game License. (Tito) Usually, this includes an attribution of D&D and Wizards of the Coast material at the beginning of the new work and/or an acknowledgement of the Community Content agreement through the Dungeon Master's Guild.

7. Historical - How was D&D created?

In 1974, Gary Gygax published three books, *Men & Magic*, *Monsters & Treasure*, and *Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*. ("History: Forty Years of Adventure.") This was the beginning of an era of adventurers everywhere. After a sold-out run of 1,000 copies, Gygax began working on the next edition of his legacy. While the current version is labelled 5th, there have been more than five clear variations of this beloved game. In 1977, the original game, now known as the *Basic Set* split into a basic version and an advanced version. Barely a year later, the Advanced 2nd Edition was published. Throughout various improvements, such as the introduction of supplemental adventure books and the creation of a D&D-based trading card game, the 2nd edition managed to excite audiences for nearly two and a half decades. At the turn of the century, the 3rd edition was released. Despite adding five new character classes (nearly half of the current dozen), many fans saw issues with its clunky new mechanics. Shortly after in 2003, Wizards released a revision to the third edition that is now formally known as 3.5. While 3.5 was much more palatable to fans of the original game, Wizards of the Coast continued to innovate. The 4th edition is known as the lost edition, as most players of 3.5 either continued to play it or switched to the backwards-compatible new tabletop roleplaying game Pathfinder (loving nicknamed

3.75). From 2008 to 2013, little was done in the way of innovation, but in 2014, the 5th edition was released. For the last seven years, fans have generally been satisfied with the direction of the game. Though Gygax died in 2008, an unfortunate time for both his fans and his creation, his project lives on as “the World’s Most Popular Role-Playing Game.” (as stated by the front cover of the *Player’s Handbook*)

8. Controversial – Is D&D an appropriate game for kids?

In 1980, a group of mothers started the organization MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, to combat the issue of alcohol use by teenagers and young adults. In 1982, adults of all sorts created BADD, Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons. In this new organization, the morality and messaging of D&D was questioned. Concerns were rampant. In an example of extremes, one grieving mother sued the publishers of D&D claiming the game was the direct cause of her son’s suicide. (Stackpole) While her case and a few like hers were quickly dismissed, the anxiety surrounding this allegedly detrimental game persisted. While their concerns about adolescents being greatly shaped by their choice of media was largely correct, the idea that serious problems arose from a tabletop game reliant on player creation, imagination, and freedom was invalid. Additionally, there were concerns that the game mentioned otherworldly forces. However, it is important to note that even the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a popular Christian youth book series, contained fantasy fiction. And the accusation that playing D&D is a mind-numbing activity is about as accurate as accusing a child of wasting their time reading.

9. Technological - Does D&D have an online equivalent?

D&D cannot have a technological equivalent. There is a problem of invisible walls. Even in the most complicated role-playing games like Skyrim, there are only so many options. There are a finite number of places to explore, non-player characters to talk to, and side quests to accomplish. What about a game with none of that? Like a sandbox game? If you compare D&D to something like Minecraft or Terraria, you will quickly realize that there is not enough flexibility in the world's structure. There is a limited supply of resources and a limited set of legal crafts. In a game where the only limit is literally one's own imagination, computers do not yet have the ability to mimic human creativity. Can D&D be combined with technology? Absolutely. One of the most popular tangential industries to D&D is online gaming. Virtual tabletops have become increasingly prevalent. These programs often have a variety of features: customizable battle maps, online dice rollers, digital character sheets, even audio and video capabilities to communicate virtually with friends. However, while the computer can help to declutter and streamline your game, there is not yet an electronic equivalent to the human mind.

10. Mathematical - How is a game based in statistics and probability engaging?

At the core of D&D, there are dice, many different kinds of dice. Without them, D&D is no different than an improv night at a local theatre or a book with many authors. D&D utilizes the five platonic solids—a tetrahedron, a cube, an octahedron, a dodecahedron, and an icosahedron—and two decahedrons. While the cube, the d6, is most commonly rolled in other tabletop games, and the icosahedron, the d20, is mostly commonly rolled in D&D, the other five dice are often used to determine the weight of

healing, damage, and various other spells. Besides proficiency bonuses, numerical constants given based on a character's innate abilities, the most widely used modification to a normal roll is advantage. This involves rolling the die, usually the d20, twice and taking the higher result. On average, advantage assists players by about 2.3 units. While many D&D players are likely to not be the biggest fans of math outside of the game, D&D creates tension by having every action have both a five percent chance of failure and a five percent chance of success. These scenarios, called "Natural 1" and "Natural 20", often lead to absolute joy or utter devastation around a table. Knowing that even the most outlandish ideas have a small possibility of success, a success that is determined by nothing but chance, allows players the freedom to be ridiculously creative with their reactions to various situations.

11. Psychological - How does playing D&D effect your brain?

Much like any other pastime, spending a considerable amount of time on this activity will likely have significant effects on your behaviors. Since D&D is a relatively social pastime that combines both collaboration and competition, the byproducts of prolonged exposure to its high intensity problem-solving and world-building are predominantly positive. While you might be somewhat concerned about potentially developing gaming disorder, a problem that can occur with any highly engaging game, it can be prevented like any other addiction: proper priorities. However, the risk is most definitely overshadowed by the reward. Various studies have shown that playing D&D reduces social anxiety and improves creativity, self-efficacy, and social skills compared to those who do not play. (Spinelli) While these studies do admit to a lack of perfectly random

sampling, as blindly finding participants who play D&D is near impossible, the results are still fascinating. (Sargent) Also, with what little research has been done, only correlational studies have been completed thus far. Are more creative people drawn to D&D? Or does D&D improve one's creativity?

12. Educational - How is D&D used as a resource in education?

D&D is a highly structured environment disguised as a highly chaotic one. While there might be a herd of pegasi flying around your head or you might encounter a group of pixies asking for directions, much of the game is incredibly methodical and procedural. The action economy is incredibly robust, so it is clear how much movement each character has on a given turn. Since so much of the game is pattern-based, it can be used as a strong tool for education, specifically with English literacy and creative writing. At Winthrop University, Professor Christina Stiles used role-playing games as the foundation of her creative writing course. At the end of the course, Stiles claimed “they have game-designer experience, and they shared the gaming medium as it was meant to be shared: at the table. And Ravensberg [the fictional world they created during the class] is a living place in our minds.” (Winthrop University) By creating and publishing a shared universe, they grew as writers, leaders, and designers. Professor Stiles plans to continue to incorporate roleplaying games like D&D into her curriculum. She is not the only one to successfully incorporate D&D into a curriculum. In a 2017 study, Professor Kaylor had very successful results with gameplay in teenagers. Though her intent was to discover the optimal relationship of educators in a gaming setting, her findings were astounding. Students who played tabletop roleplaying games usually spent more time with leisure reading, though the genre of

reading was not affected. (Kaylor) Knowing these benefits, schools should be encouraged to adopt D&D into their methodologies to explore both the power of play and the linguistic benefits that occur with students. (Youakim)

13. Cultural - Why has D&D become so popular?

From Netflix's *Stranger Things* to CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*, from TNT's *The Librarians* to ABC's *The Goldbergs*, D&D has become a staple of nerd culture in popular media. While often presenting characters who participate in D&D as geekier and more socially aloof than the rest of the world, the prevalence of D&D in these shows has had an opposite effect on the world beyond the silver screen. Actor Joe Manganiello and talk show host Stephen Colbert have no qualms with telling the world about their favorite hobby—D&D. Various celebrity endorsements, coupled with the rise of Critical Role, a 5-year-old D&D live play show, have brought a renaissance to D&D. Critical Role started as a group of friends playing D&D. Now, it is a major name in entertainment, complete with clothing, accessories, dice, a comic book series, an official D&D module, custom Funko Pops, an animated series, a board game, and an upcoming novel. While Critical Role is a slight outlier in terms of success, there are hundreds of other live play and discussion-based shows online about D&D, many of which started because of Critical Role. In the spring of 2019, they raised over eleven million dollars to fund their new show. (Leger) While this was an amazing success for their company, it was, perhaps more importantly, a signal to the rest of the world to take this game more seriously.

14. Social - Is D&D a worthwhile hobby?

While some might think of D&D as a ridiculously niche game or an attempt at bringing back the 80's, the community built around D&D tells a different story. D&D has become a subculture, a collection of individuals bonded by shared experiences. Through popularized anecdotes, specialized jargon, and the occasional cliché, fans of D&D have developed a shared universe to exist in, separate from the real one. While not all people will be familiar with all experiences, there are many unifying factors. Much like how a group of friends may have inside jokes, D&D players have codified much of our experiences, including humor. One of the best examples of this is my search history. While “ua 5e” may look like gibberish to many, it is not. It stands for Unearthed Arcana for 5th edition D&D and is the name given to unpublished, untested material written by official creators of D&D. Much like in an occupation or a scholastic secret society, having a shared vernacular is a strong sign of both the extensive and intensive nature of the subculture created around D&D.

15. Political – What real-world issues have been examined through playing this game?

On November 17, 2020, the book *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* was released. While supplemental material to the 5th edition was nothing new, this guide was revolutionary. It introduced Custom Origins. For the last 45+ years, one of the primary ways basic abilities were determined was through racial modifiers. For instance, an orc would naturally gain a bonus to his strength, while a half-elf would receive an addition to her charisma. While not directly challenged or questioned until the last decade, D&D perpetuated the problematic idea that one's ancestry directly influenced one's skills. While

lineage will sometimes have an effect on innate abilities, *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* addressed the need for a more nuanced justification than simply the type of humanoid. Even though a roaming band of gnomes may have more experience with strength-based activities, multiple editions worth of material would state they are more naturally dexterous. While the idea that race affects one's capabilities still exists in D&D, as it was reflective of the climate in which it was originally written, additions like Custom Origins and other revisions to outdated portrayals of stereotypically evil races, like drow and dragonborn, have resulted in great strides toward making D&D a more enjoyable world for all.

16. Professional - Can a tabletop roleplaying game be the center of your career?

From the “starving artist” motif to the question of “are you really going to play games for the rest of your life?” a career based in D&D may seem risky or impractical to some. However, when considering the success of Wizards of the Coast compared to many other product-based companies, it is clear that there is some path forward in the gaming and technology industries. Look at entertainment giants like The Walt Disney Company or Hasbro. They are highly successful business models based on the enjoyment of other people. Both nearly 100 years old, these companies have proven that recreation is more than just a fad. While some positions are a bit more speculative than others, like digital content creators or actors, there are many highly standardized positions that surround D&D. Strictly within Wizards of the Coasts, there are engineers, game designers, community managers, branding specialists, and many other professions. (“Careers.”) D&D has seen a consistent 30-50% increase in annual sales over the last five years. (Baird)

In making D&D central to your career, there are two primary avenues: corporate work or fan funding. While the former is more protected, the latter affords more creative freedom, a primary benefit for fans of the game.

17. Commercial – How does one game have so much success?

While D&D can be thought of as a solitary unit, there are many different products that comprise the world of D&D. From revised rulebooks to specialized rebranding (like *Rick and Morty*, *Star Wars*, and *Stranger Things*) to newer modules, Wizards of the Coast have been consistently releasing new products for the last 47 years. (“D&D For Beginners Learn About the Game.”) In the last year alone, there have been three completely new adventure books published, *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden*, *Candlekeep Mysteries*, and *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft*. While these three modules are quite tonally distinct (high fantasy, mystery, and horror, respectively) each of these come with a multitude of new story hooks to provide more variety for the player. Since some people have been playing D&D for nearly five decades, it is necessary that Wizards of the Coast keep creating new products, both to ensure their own financial stability and to renew player interest. While all of these books have been major successes, D&D has also released various related products, with varying degrees of success, like board games, trading card games, and the occasional coloring book.

18. Tangential - What other industries have been helped by the rise of D&D?

Not only does D&D itself benefit from the rise in popularity of the game, but many other groups have seen mutual success. From artisans to actors, D&D has been the catalyst

for a variety of different occupations. For example, Wyrnwood, a woodworking company, has experienced multiple million-dollar Kickstarter campaigns due to their gaming tables, largely popularized by their functionality for D&D. When I asked one of their employees what he thought about Wyrnwood before joining the team, he did not call Wyrnwood a woodworking company or a furniture making company, instead he labelled their work as a “gaming periphery company”. (“About Us.”) There are many other craftsmen that have benefitted from the success of D&D. One of the most obvious examples is small businesses. Trinkets, like hand-poured dice, enamels pins of popular characters, and even leatherbound books for notetaking, have become increasingly popular. Other games have also profited from the success of D&D. Both the resurgence of game stores as a whole and the cross-promotion of other board and tabletop games on D&D streams have even helped brands like Ravensburger, a Swedish puzzle company, gain traction in the United States. Many people have also begun to make a living simply playing D&D. Much like people will pay to watch their favorite sports teams or musicians, gamers have begun to create business models online. From shows with strong watch times partnering with advertisers to beloved fan favorites creating their own merchandise to well-known game masters becoming Dungeon Masters for hire, people have discovered how to monetize D&D. Not only has this happened individually, but also industrially. Currently, there is a D&D movie, starring Chris Pine, set to release in November 2021 and a 24-episode Amazon Prime Video animated series about a live play game set to release sometime next year.

19. Personal - Why do I play D&D?

Some people find brotherhood with their teammates, and many swear by the friends they make in fraternities and sororities. While I understand this sense of community, these more “normal” activities were never quite where I belonged. I have found a home at the gaming table. When I was first introduced to D&D freshman year, I was a bit overwhelmed. But as I spent time learning how to distinguish a bonus action from a held action, I fell in love with the game. Supposedly, it takes 10,000 hours to claim expertise at a skill, and I have spent just over 1,500 hours learning, watching, playing, discussing, and adventuring. I have a way to go before I can claim the title of expert. However, in that time, I have had a few epic encounters. While the creator Gygax died in 2008, his son Luke continues to play the game, and I have been fortunate enough to speak with him a few times about his character and how it has changed from edition to edition. I have also helped Jason Charles Miller, a country and rock artist as well as professional Dungeon Master, write original songs about D&D characters on his show *Bardic Inspiration*. My research was featured on Critical Role Stats, a fan run database that tracks the rolls of the show, when I analyzed the distribution of rolls per episode. (CritRoleStats) That was not my first time combining Dungeons and Dragons with advanced mathematics though. In eleventh grade while using an algorithm I wrote and skills acquired in my AP Computer Science class, I created an app that determines which D&D character class you should play. (Bratton) While attending Arkansas Governor’s School last summer I co-founded the D&D club, a club that allowed me to make lasting friendships despite the virtual nature of the program. There, I was the Dungeon Master weekly. D&D is so important to me that I wrote about my love for the game in my application essays for college. During the Covid19 worldwide pandemic, I

started playing D&D online through Clubhouse, an audio-sharing app, where I now have over 1,400 followers. From coding to networking to performing, D&D has been a major part of my life. Whether I am playing in a game that is being listened to by hundreds on Clubhouse or silently creating a D&D world in my head, I am excited to continue my adventures as I further my education at Columbia University in the City of New York.

20. Overall – Should you play D&D?

Yes, see perspectives one through nineteen.

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