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Gygaxian Gameplay: The Evolution of Dungeons & Dragons

*“Roll for initiative!”.* These were the words that harkened a new era in gaming. The publishing of *Dungeons and Dragons* (or D&D) by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 brought with it a take on tabletop gaming that had never before been envisioned. Like many other memes within human culture, tabletop RPGs (or role playing games) like *Dungeons and Dragons* have taken on new forms as they move through and are viewed by different societies. From offshoots of the original, to completely new interpretations, there is no doubt that tabletop RPGs have evolved drastically since their creation in the 70’s. These changes are in line with other evolutionary changes viewed in biological and memetic evolution as described in Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* as well as through the ideas of symbolic inheritance systems described in Eva Jablonka’s *Evolution in Four Dimensions*.

Before one can look out how tabletop RPGs have been transmitted throughout human culture and how they have changed over time, one must first observe the origins of tabletop RPGs. Up until the 1970’s, tabletop gaming was dominated by the wargame genre, which includes such classic games as Chess, Risk, and Battleship. These games, in general, can be defined as “zero-sum contests” in which there is a clear winner at the end of the game, with the emphasis of the game being placed on victory over your opponent (Mason). Another important feature of wargames that set them apart from RPGs is the control the player has over the “pieces” of the game. More specifically, wargames are iconic for the player taking control of larger units on the board rather than a single player/piece/token. This game structure was absorbed and combined with fantasy fiction upon the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a game widely considered to be the very first tabletop RPG created.

There were many factors that set this new genre of gaming apart from its predecessors. *Dungeons and Dragons* shifted the focus of the player from controlling multiple units on a board to controlling a singular character. This character is assigned 6 major statistics including strength, dexterity, wisdom, intelligence, charisma, and constitution. These statistics had never before existed in gaming, and statistics similar to these had never before been assigned to a single player character but rather larger units (Tresca). Another huge jump *Dungeons and Dragons* made in tabletop gaming was putting less of an emphasis on a physical board and/or pieces and more of a stress on theatre of the mind during gameplay. Finally, *Dungeons and Dragons* threw the idea of definitive victory out the window in favor of placing more importance on the actual gameplay itself, with many D&D games lasting for several sessions over the course of several weeks. The game is usually played around a table, with about a half-dozen players and one game master, who serves as the arbiter of the rules and the primary storyteller. A majority of the game is, as the genre title suggests, players role playing and interacting with characters within the story, whether that be through simple conversations or through intense combat. When players aren’t fighting monsters or talking with NPCs (or non-player characters), the players are left to their own devices, allowed to do whatever they so desire as long as the DM (or Dungeon Master) deems it within the rules. This freedom of choice is another major defining factor of the genre that sets it apart from every other tabletop game genre. As described by David Ewalt in his book *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It*, “Players are both audience and author in D&D; they consume the DM’s fiction but rewrite the story with their actions. And as authors, they’re free to make their own decisions.” (Ewalt 7).

After the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the tabletop RPG genre gained ground in the gaming community. Tactical Studies Rules (or TSR), the company formed by D&D co-founders Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, proceeded to edit, reformat, and publish new editions of the game up until the company was bought out by Wizards of the Coast - a division of Hasbro. This new company has continued to edit and publish new editions of the game to this day, altering the rules based on community feedback and market competitiveness. Throughout every edition of D&D, the transmission through and reception by the gaming community has changed alongside the rise of the internet and the increase in interconnectivity between different societies and cultures.

The actual gameplay of *Dungeons and Dragons* is unique unto itself. Most games are set in campaign settings, which essentially are worlds in which the players live in and interact with. Once a campaign setting is established (usually by the DM), players can begin to create their PCs (or player characters). This is done through a set of steps laid out in the *Player’s Handbook*, a rulebook that lays out the basic rules and mechanics of the game. Polyhedral dice are rolled to determine stats, and these stats play a factor in decisions that players make as they play. Most decisions made by players will involve a roll of some kind, usually using a twenty-sided dice and adding some sort of modifier that is determined based off of the stats rolled earlier. These rolls can be made for reasons ranging from trying to persuade an NPC to side with the players in a risky decision to trying to hit a dragon with a fireball spell. These rolls, and the subsequent rules that are tied to them, are the most limiting factor of the game. Besides them, the players are free to chart their own path through the world, all the while being directed by the DM who determines the consequences of the player’s actions. There is no technical end to a game of D&D. Rather, the game continues as long as the players and the DM wish it to continue, as they are free to do what they so choose in the world. Thus, many D&D games can last for years on end, with no real end in sight. All of these gameplay mechanics are what made the original publication of D&D in 1974 stand out, as this type of never-ending, open ended gameplay had never before existed in the gaming community.

Now that the basic understanding of the origins, history, and gameplay of *Dungeons and Dragons* has been laid out, one can examine ties between the game’s change over time and the evolutionary ideas presented by both Richard Dawkins and Eva Jablonka. These ties will be analyzed from a biological evolutionary standpoint by comparing the ideas of symbolic inheritance of information, change over time due to a selective system, and variation/mutation through reproduction of D&D, evolving from its original iteration to today’s most recent market version.

Symbolic inheritance of information is described by Eva Jablonka in *Evolution in Four Dimensions* as “the use of symbols as a diagnostic trait of human beings, because rationality, linguistic ability, artistic ability, and religiosity are all facets of symbolic thought and communication.” (Jablonka 189). Essentially, it is the capability of humans to transmit thoughts and ideas to future generations, not through biological means but through different aspects of human culture such as art, religion, and politics. Several memes within human culture follow this idea of symbolic inheritance, and *Dungeons and Dragons* is no exception. From the start, D&D was a game of world building. Through the process of creating individual characters, allowing these characters the freedom of choice described above, and portraying these ideas through conversations between friends around a table, D&D fulfills this concept of symbolic inheritance by not relying on biological advantages or selections. Rather, the inheritance of the games information relies on the use of language, the identification and understanding of religions, and the knowledge of fantasy tropes present in human culture. All of these concepts in turn rely on the basic idea of symbolic communication inherent to the human species seen through the spoken and written language. Thus, it is clear that D&D has direct ties to symbolic inheritance of information.

Along with symbolic inheritance, D&D also exhibits changes over time due to pressures from selective systems. This is especially seen in the revisions and supplements made throughout the game's history. The first of these supplements, a short booklet that outlined the basics of the Thief and Paladin class named *Greyhawk*, was published within a year of the game's first publication in 1974. This served as a jumping off point for a several years of new content and materials coming out one after the other, building on the original game. The game was eventually divided into two versions: a basic set and an advanced set. These two arose in 1977 out of the community of players becoming more diverse with varying levels of role playing skill, and thus not being able to fully enjoy the complicated rules of the original 1974 game. The latter of these two versions, later named *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, gained ground in the gaming community, with several adventure compendiums and player supplements being published throughout the next 10 years. In that time, TSR published an electronic version of the rules due to the drastic rise in personal computers. By 1977, TSR was bought out by Wizards of the Coast, who continued the legacy of listening to community feedback, publishing new supplements, and eventually revising and putting out new editions of the game. To date, *Dungeons and Dragons* has gone through 5 edition changes, and is currently on D&D 5E. In addition to publishing new editions of the game, Wizards of the Coast created a D&D video game in 2013 to compete with the drastic rise in computer gaming in an attempt to remain relevant in a more technological market (Peterson). Today, D&D has an ever increasing following. This can be attributed to the game’s many changes made over the years to cater to an increasingly wider audience, as well as the rise in the game’s online presence through media outlets such as YouTube and podcasts. It has also seen a resurgence in television, sporting a key role in Netflix’s hit series *Stranger Things*, after which saw a resurgence in players getting back into the seminal game.

Finally, variation and mutation of *Dungeons and Dragons* can be traced by observing the many offshoots that spawned from the creation of D&D. Some of the first RPG games created after the original release of *Dungeons and Dragons* included *Tunnels and Trolls, Traveller, GURPS,* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*. All of these gaming systems adopted themes first laid out in D&D, namely the use of character sheets for keeping track of individual PC information, the use of polyhedral dice as a core mechanic of the rules, and the idea of a game master that officiates the game. All of the games mentioned above took these gameplay themes and converted them into new settings and genres, simplified the rules, and expanded the basic ideas of role playing. Here, it is a good idea to draw analogies between Richard Dawkins’ meme theory presented in his book *The Selfish Gene*. A meme, according to Dawkins, is the genetic analog within human culture. Memes are the various forms of culture that replicate and spread throughout society in much the same way that genes do, i.e. memes that are more successfully competitive will be imitated (reproduced) and continue to spread as long as a host exists to comprehend the meme. Obviously, as with genetic reproduction, meme reproduction is not perfect. Thus, variations exist when memes are copied imperfectly (Dawkins 196-198). This can be seen clearly by looking at the legacy that D&D left behind, particularly the games and ideas that remained and spread long after the original 1974 publication. One great example of this is the splitting off of a group of Wizards of the Coast employees in the early 2000s to form their own publishing company called Paizo. This new company took the 3.5 edition of D&D and constructed their own roleplaying game named *Pathfinder*. This new game had all of the basic rule mechanics found in D&D 3.5, but rather than publish new versions of the game, they continually built off of the originally copied material, adding new features to keep audiences interested. This is a perfect example of variation through reproduction of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and thus further proves that D&D exhibits evolutionary behaviors.

All of these explanations of the various aspects of *Dungeons and Dragons*’ cultural evolution can also be tied back to biological evolution in a broad sense. To do this, one can again look to Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as well as Dawkins’ *Selfish Gene*, both of which lay out and expand upon the ideas of biological evolution and natural selection. Natural selection, according to Charles Darwin, is the advantages of certain genetic variations allowing an organism to survive and reproduce at a higher rate than organisms of the same species that do not have the same variation. Dawkins expands on Darwin’s idea with his selfish gene theory. This theory breaks down the mechanism of natural selection as being the individual gene, with advantageous genes being passed on through reproduction at a higher and more successful rate than other genes. If one compares genes in the biological sense to the individual rules in *Dungeons and Dragons*, it is clear that D&D can be compared to biological evolution. Rules that are advantageous in their environment, that is rules that are appealing to the gaming community and ultimately make the game more enjoyable, will be copied and reproduced in the next edition of the game that gets published.

*Dungeons and Dragons* clearly exhibits evolutionary behaviors, both culturally and biologically, based off of three main concepts. It first demonstrates symbolic inheritance systems such as language, religion, and cultural tropes because of its lack of reliance on genetic evolution and more on cultural ways of communicating. Second, it shows change over time due to a selective system, as seen by the numerous updates, revisions, and supplemental materials published in order to make the game more competitive in a changing market. Finally, it displays variation and mutation through reproduction, as seen by the several offshoots of the game such as *Traveller, GURPS,* and *Pathfinder*. Overall, *Dungeons and Dragons* is a prime example of a cultural meme that models the ideas of biological and memetic evolution.

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