Martin Boote, Caldon Bowden, Gary Gullage, Adam Henderson, Nathan Lantz, Nick McCarthy, Landon McPhee, Matthew Newton

Dr. Jason Hawreliak

IASC 3P98

15 December 2019

# A Complete Analysis of Dungeons and Dragons

## Introduction

Dungeons and Dragons is a tabletop roleplaying game originally developed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in attempts to combine wargaming and fantasy storytellings into one medium. Eventually it caught on in popularity, leading to a massive cultural phenomenon that exists until today. Starting in the 1970s with Chainmail and the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons till the 3rd, 4th, and 5th editions of Dungeons & Dragons that define the 2000s, one would be hard pressed to find someone who has not at least heard of this massively popular dice, pen, and paper roleplaying game.

When looking at the cultural contexts for the editions of dungeons and dragons and its related mediums (this includes Chainmail, Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, D&D Basic, Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2nd Edition, 3rd Edition, Pathfinder, 4th Edition, 5th Edition), many interesting choices and changes can be observed. Some of these changes were discovered to be financially motivated, while others were made in seeking the game's "identity"; that is, what the game seeks to be. Moving forward through the editions, one can see a clear movement towards less of a wargaming product (as was very present in chainmail through till the 2nd Edition) to more of a storytelling medium which defines the later 2000s style of play (as seen in

3rd, 4th and 5th Editions). This can be found not only in how people remember playing these editions, but particularly in the terminology and design concepts found within the books themselves.

In aims to track the changes and important choices within the timeline of dungeons and dragons, the writers of this paper analyzed the following milestones: Chainmail, Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, Dungeons and Dragons Basic, Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2nd Edition (or simply 2nd Edition), 3rd Edition, Pathfinder, 4th Edition, and the 5th Edition of Dungeons and Dragons. After analyzing the mechanics of, reviewing the cultures of, and playing through all these editions, we found that Dungeons and Dragons serves poorly as a medium for tabletop gaming, and far more superiorly as a medium for storytelling.

In this timeline-analysis paper, we will be looking at the aforementioned editions including their core issues, strengths, and observations that can be gleamed. The paper will begin with *A Barrier to Entertainment*, discussing chainmail and its main issue of a lacking in creativity, but also the lessons learned from it going into future iterations.

Then, in *What Caused Dungeon and Dragons; 4th Edition?*, we discuss what informed decision making in the previous edition of d&d: 4th Edition. Most of the issues found in this edition were an attempt to attempt a new style of play, but as discussed in that section, much ended in having to step backwards.

Then in *Failings at Storytelling* we address the mechanics and culture surrounding the early editions of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons and 2nd Edition. The core issues found in this section revolve around the lack of choice, but are revised in later editions.

Afterwards in *Publishers and Their Influence,* the relationship of the publishers and developers is addressed and how those relationships affected their corresponding editions' content. It is in this section where the hands off approach has greatly benefited the product, allowing 3rd party support to drive forward the popularity.

In *Character Creation, Roleplay, and Storytelling*, we look at how each edition actually functions and supports the aforementioned subjects. The dynamics, or experience of each edition is broken down, complete with commentary on how those editions feel to the parties involved in playing it.

*Open Source Gaming* looks at the open gaming licence and what it meant for the development team and community. Connecting with the previous section, but specifically delving into how open source add-on content has allowed the community to support the game with an endless stream of available content.

In *The Success of 5th Edition*, we address the successes of the edition and specify why it works so well in the modern day. This looks at the edition in isolation, specifically attempting to determine why 5th edition is successful, particularly focussing on the ways in which it becomes accessible to the public.

Finally, in *Storytelling Evolution*, we hammer home why and how 5th edition has succeeded in their transition towards less of a tabletop game and more of a storytelling medium. It is the attempt of this paper to show that the evolution of dungeons and dragons is one that drives the medium towards one of storytelling, rather than its roots in tabletop wargaming.

**A Barrier to Entertainment**

Chainmail as a war game succeeds in its goal of simulation of medieval tactical warfare, but as far as telling a story is concerned the only story present in Chainmail is that of historical or source context. Chainmail was released when wargaming was in its infancy as far as battling miniatures on a complicated map were concerned. Chainmail's rules were designed for players to simulate and strategize with miniature figures representing their real world counterparts in medieval combat, with a fantasy supplement being created for people to simulate battles from their favourite fantastical battles, such as that from the Lord of The Rings and other fantasy stories as referenced in the official fantasy supplement. Gary Gygax, as well as others who played Chainmail, a creation of Gygax and Jeff Perren, showed interest in trying to have "campaigns" in the system and play through a series of battles as part of stories. These ideas coalesced in a campaign created and ran by Dave Arneson which featured an edited version of Chianmail's rules to fit in how he wanted to play the game with Gygax. This is the game that Gygax claims inspired the inception of Dungeons & Dragons The Tabletop Roleplaying Game. Chainmail's design doesn't inherently lend itself to the kind of play that Arneson had inspired. It is meant to be either simulated or competitive as most war games are, but Gygax similar to many modern day Dungeons and Dragons players had philosophy in his rules and designs that fit better in creative games and spaces.

"Follow the spirit of the rules rather than the letter" (Chainmail, 8) is a line from Chainmail, and was Gygax's design philosophy of tabletop rulesets, both for Dungeons and Dragons as well as Chainmail. A philosophy that many war game enthusiasts will tell you, does not belong in war games, as their inherent competitive/simulative nature, meant that players

wanted rules that were absolute, and can not be called into question except for extreme circumstances. War gaming certainly has its place as shown by the popularity of Game's Workshops' Warhammer 40'000 franchise, but Gygax found his stride in creating tabletop roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons, as proved by his continued development and creation of D&D long after its first print.

During the study through experimentation with the rules and philosophies behind the design of Chainmail most members of the study found that the entertainment from the game came from player interaction more than the game itself. This was a trait that was constant across much of the study, and likely is a large reason for the shift from table-top wargaming to roleplaying. Opinions of many of the members were that interacting with other players, improvising story elements, and injecting context into the experience improved the game. This is the core of the most recent edition of Dungeons & Dragons, and is part of the "roleplaying" in the title of the kind of game Dungeons & Dragons is. Role Playing certainly improved player experience with Chainmail, but it was not part of the game by the rules. This is in fact by design since a campaign in Dungeons & Dragons is not the same as a game of Chainmail. Their principals don't align, as in Chainmail both players are trying to win. Dungeons & Dragons by contrast is a collaborative experience by most accounts.

Other tabletop wargames like "Warhammer 40K" and" Bolt Action" are competitive and Chainmail was no different, appearing at the first "Gencon", a tabletop gaming convention hosted in part by Gary Gygax locally. Chainmail went through three editions of print with some editing to the rules of the game, but largely it didn't change. Wargaming before Chainmail was built on small communities of players forming groups, such as the "Society of Ancients" which

was a non-profit organization promoting wargaming. There were a lot of different rulesets and not all of them were titled and most weren't published. Gygax's own rules for Chainmail were inspired by local rulesets he played with in the Lake geneva Tactical Studies Association. This history of wargaming came from an interest in true tactical studies of medieval warfare. An educational topic for many, but for the entertainment value as a "game", was hard to market to a wider audience. Chainmail's fantasy supplement though, inspired many later wargames focused around both the fantastical worlds of fiction as well as sci-fi. These wargames were made less for simulation, and were geared toward competitive play, as well as war campaigns with stories associated with it. Chainmail had it's faults as a wargame with oversights on possible rules that could be questioned, as well as its faults as a game to bend rules for entertainment purposes. But where Chainmail failed it planted the beginnings of different ways to play tabletop games.

The public has also proved that this was the preferred shift, as there is no modern rendition or evolution of Chainmail, but Dungeons and Dragons in its 5th edition is one of the most popular tabletop roleplaying games to date. Chainmail's design lacked the freedom to develop stories, while this was by design it limited players creativity, and was likely the reason for its limited popularity. Amongst other factors such as availability, the barrier to entry of owning miniatures and space required to play the game.

Ultimately enjoyment is what keeps people playing a game, and the lack of creativity in Chainmail's base design, leaves that level of entertainment to be desired. Dungeons and Dragons first print and design of the combat system according to Gygax were inspired by Chainmail, as can be seen by many of the spells similar to that of the fantasy supplements. D&D combined Chainmail's competitive/simulative battles with narrative. Dungeons and Dragons' systems and

rules show inspiration from a lot of Chainmail's early rules, such as the measure of units speed, their ability, armour, and the addition of randomness from a roll of the dice that would determine the outcomes of unit confrontation. All of these systems are present in some shape or form in all editions of Dungeons in Dragons, calling back to its wargaming roots. The key reason for Gygax's shift away from traditional wargaming was fantasy and the ability to create more than the rules had in place. Gary Gygax wrote the rules as inspired by Perren for Chainmail because he came from a culture where if there weren't rules to play any kind of game, people wrote rules then and there.

When Gygax moved forward away from Chainmail, he held onto that philosophy, hence why Dungeons & Dragons has always left it open to players to create their own worlds, classes, races, and rules for the game to expand on the groundwork the handbooks make. In Chainmail the handbook recommends that when the rules don't cover something that comes up in play, to agree on a rule with the other player, write the rules down, and play as if it were official from there onward. This system of "Home brewed" content to add on to the rules of the game is what inspired so many "roleplaying" based rules, and what likely inspired the rules Gygax played with from the creation of Arneson that inspired Dungeons & Dragons.

**What Caused "Dungeon and Dragons; 4th Edition?"**

After the success that was 3.5 Edition, Wizards of the Coast wished to bring Dungeons and Dragons to a more mainstream audience and turn it into a multi-million dollar business. They needed to create an edition that would appeal to gamers of the time, outside of their current player-base. WotC began to hire groups of younger designers who aspired to create an edition to call their own, something that emulated the habits of popular MMOs (The Escapist, "The State

of D&D: Present."). The environment these designers came from was the primary cause for the sweeping changes made to the new 4th Edition in comparison to its older counterparts and created a massive divide in the Dungeons and Dragons' player-base, almost ruining WotC and tarnishing their good-will. That is not to say the 4E was universally disliked, as there were many who started playing Dungeons and Dragons through 4E and continued to enjoy it. However, there is an argument to be made that the attempted "video-gaminess" of the edition did far more to damage the franchise, and while it did capture moderate attention of a mainstream audience it ultimately failed to appeal to their older players.

4th Edition's development began with the hopes of bringing Dungeons and Dragons "in line with modern gaming trends and tastes" (Barber, Graeme. "4e D&D, The After Action Review."). Without a doubt, WotC had seen the popularity of recent war-games such as the Warhammer 40K series and had expressed an interest to "return to its roots", likely alluding to the long-past Chainmail war-game that had not been integrated into the Dungeons and Dragons of the present. Along with that, WotC saw the massive success of MMOs like World of Warcraft and began to construct a system that would attempt to replicate the ability and combat mechanics of those games with skills like daily and utility powers that each player can use (Heinsoo, pg. 29). WotC was set on making another war game, relying on tactical combat and established character roles in a squad. These choices, amongst others, were made to the edition under the implication that this was what "modern" gamers wanted to play. Many of these changes did not sit well with the current player base, with many wondering why concepts that they had considered "sacred" to the series had been cut completely from it (The Escapist, "The State of D&D: Present.").

What was perhaps the most controversial of changes made to Dungeons and Dragons was neglecting non-combat mechanics in its entirety. While it was still narratively possible to tell a cohesive story, there was little mechanical means of doing so outside of the character's Charisma skills. This lack of social mechanics is most apparent in the class system. While each class has a wide variety of powers to use in combat, there are no powers in the Player's Handbook that are meant to be used in an out-of-combat scenario. In other editions, certain classes had spells that could be used outside of combat to influence a social encounter (such as a "Charm" spell), and the removal of those skills therefore removes the possibility of making a peaceful or otherwise non-combative character. The lack of choice in character creation becomes even more apparent when choosing options to expand your character. Multiclassing was removed as a feature and was replaced by feats your character could take to get a very basic skill from the desired class, such as the Rogue's sneak or Cleric's healing word (Heinsoo, pg. 208). Once that was taken, you would be allowed to replace a few of your powers with ones from the class you took the multiclass feat from. This system was essentially a heavily simplified multiclass feature from older editions, which allowed you to take entire levels in other classes as opposed to your primary choice. This allowed for an unparalleled amount of ways to build a character in any style you could choose, and the design limitations brought forth by the 4th Edition method where done so to structure and limit how the players could play for the purpose of balancing combat. The combat of 4E was known to flow quite well, achieving a level of balance and cohesion that few other editions were able to achieve (The Escapist, "The State of D&D: Present."). However, the changes made to the D&D formula in 4E had ultimately done more harm than good.

In an interview with Mike Mearls, Head of D&D Development at the release of 4E, offered an explanation into how this wargame-focused edition happened. He claimed that during the era of 2nd Edition D&D there existed the beginning of an “RPG decadence” (The Escapist, “The State of D&D: Future”). He stated that 2nd Edition had very heavily focused on having the Dungeon Master tell a linear story to the players, where they would go from point-to-point and sometimes roll their dice. Clearly, this was not enjoyable to the players, and only really served as a narrative platform of the DM’s choice. He went on to say that 3rd Edition had taken a 180 degree turn and began to focus on giving the players power. In this system, the DMs have flexibility to do what they wish and they players can build their characters to their liking, which is why 3.5E was one of the most popular editions of Dungeons and Dragons even after 4E’s release. It had something for both the DM and the players to feel a sense of agency in how the game ran. 4E’s creation had tilted the balance of agency further away from the DM. As stated by Mearls, "I think we've hit the second era of RPG decadence, and it's gone the opposite way. It's all about player power now - the DM is just the rules guy - and the DM can't contradict what the players say. [The game] is taking away from the DM, and that's where I worry because other types of games can do that better. I might as well play a board game, 'cause I'm just here enforcing the rules. Without the DM as the creative guy, what's the point?" (The Escapist, “The State of D&D: Future”). The choices made by the development team of 4E very much reflect this outcome. Considering 3.5E’s popularity once focus was set on gameplay rather than narratives, it seems plausible that the gameplay aspect of 4E was “over-developed” when compared to other aspects of the game simply because WotC thought that this was what players wanted. However, this structure had the undesired consequence of making the DMs role seem less impactful. As if

they were there to facilitate the game and nothing more. As far as player choice went, the game allowed for less-creative players to build a character using the building blocks provided, but in turn provided very little options for creative players to customize their characters.

With the release and modest popularity of 4E, a divide was created in the community as a whole. Those who played 3.5E, and those who played 4th edition. Mearl states that this created a false sense of community, as in reality there were two that never interacted with one another (The Escapist, “The State of D&D: Future”). Each edition appealed to a very different player-base, with the divide being inevitable. What WotC needed was a way to strike a balance between what made each edition enjoyable, as well as remember what made 3.5E popular. Great DM flexibility to tell a story and player choice in how to enjoy the game. In hindsight, Mearls claims that many of these design choices were made because they had "lost faith of what makes an RPG an RPG," (The Escapist, “The State of D&D: Future”). In time, they began to have faith in RPGs again and decided that a war-game, no matter how balanced and how meticulously structured, was not the D&D that fans had grown up playing.

**Failings At Storytelling**

Storytelling mediums come in different forms, one of those forms are tabletop games. Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Second Edition had attempted to bring more storytelling into the fold of the roleplaying system. Since its predecessor had a focus on mechanics, this edition did as well. However, there were key aspects of the second iteration that had the edition falter when it came to telling stories. In this era, the game is somewhat nostalgic, but many of its systems and themes are outdated.

Second edition had trouble with coming out as a “storytelling” experience as it was advertised. Many times, over there was an authority over what the player could and could not do as well as rulings that made the edition confusing to understand. During the study of the game, it felt like there were too many rules regarding what the player could and could not do as well as having strict guidelines about different things that the player can and cannot be. A classic example of being stuck in mechanical ways is when it came to the Paladin class. The paladin is a derivative of the Fighter class, but there are also additional rulings that force the player to a boring character concept. There are set rules within the class that the player must follow into the dot in order to keep using the class. There are multiple instances as well within the edition about this, however the Paladin has the most rules behind it of what the player can and cannot do. If the players are meant to be telling a story with a dungeon master, having harsh and morally ambiguous rules throws off what that player’s story could be as well as what kind of story is to be told.

Another factor of what second edition brought out when it came to storytelling was the lack of how the story played into the rules. The second edition rules were very authoritarian and invested deeply into the favor of the Dungeon Master. In this culture when the edition was released, newer players were bogged down with the development of “rules-lawyering” and the culture of the dungeon master versus the players. This was only the case because the ruleset was prominent enough within the world that it threw storytelling out the window, as well as being somewhat flexible for arguments at the table to occur. This also had invested into “house rules” as well, making new players turn away from those that know the game and older generations of

dungeon masters with a very hard ruleset. The culture of second edition was that the dungeon master was in charge, not about the dungeon master and the players telling a story.

To further define what heroic storytelling is, it's the act of having the player feel that they are a hero within an epic tale. This harkens to tales such as Lord of the Rings and other such stories set within the fantasy thematic world. In fact, much of the inspiration for the earlier editions of Dungeons and Dragons were based on Lord of the Rings. The inspiration was mainly about the Elf and Dwarf classes within the older editions because of their tropes coinciding with what the books represented the races as. Most of the epic tales told into the second edition worlds were the beginnings of creativity and storytelling. However, second edition fell on harder times with trying to tell their stories because of the dynamic systems that the game had already set the player with (rulings, limited customization, etc). These kinds of limitations also led to how second edition was often referred to as awkward.

While there may have been many rulings that limits creativity, there was also the fact of self-inserted lore within the edition as well. Taking a look at the monster manual for the edition, there are many paragraphs that break up what a monster can do with the edition's own story that in no way contributes to how a monster should act or what they would do. Most notable of the monsters are the Death Knight. A death knight is supposed to be an oath broken knight come back from the dead, however second edition gives many paragraphs about what order they are from their own lore instead of describing how they act.

While this argument has been about how rulesets dampen the experience of a player, there is also the factor of second edition being customized and repurposed with "house rules" as

well. Some analyses also dictate that their experiences with the edition ended up with the dungeon master having their own rules set apart from the main ones. Second edition also introduced the idea of "heroic storytelling" instead of the set of rules that influenced first edition greatly. It introduced the idea of flexibility. The core books of the edition were enough to get players started and into a world without having to dungeon crawl. There were vast descriptions of worlds, planes, and lore that had been put into monsters and other locations that the edition has created to assist the dungeon master. A popular and most interesting place that was introduced was the plane of Sigil, which had the most player interest at the time.

Second edition set building blocks for storytelling, but it was by far the worst way of telling stories because the rules still came first and there were still two sides of the table when it came to rules: dungeon master versus players. The failings of this edition came down to its writing and rulesets, which unfortunately killed off storytelling.

**Publishers and Their Influence**

Dungeons and Dragons had trouble starting out at first. Gygax and Arneson had created a game with a set of rules and fantastical world building but had no publisher to begin revealing it to the public. The offers to many companies failed and not a single company wanted to be associated with a role-playing game. What ended up happening is that they self-published. In this instance is where TSR (Tactical Studies Rules) was first created to manage the game that was created as well as create a home for the developers to keep working on their venture. In 1983 the company was dissolved and Gygax formed TSR Hobbies Inc.

When TSR was still in its golden ages they were publishing more than just Dungeons and Dragons. However, hard times set in when Gygax was occupied with making cartoons. This is when trouble also started to arise with the publisher.

TSR's policies had begun to change because of the cultural spite around the game that introduced demons and devils into the media at the time. This sent shocks through some communities as they began to complain about the youth and the "toxicity" behind it. TSR would eventually have a policy change, practically limiting what they could create as well as push to the public. This went as far as just renaming certain things within the game and needing to change many things about their new release at the time: Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2nd Edition.

Since the policy changes as well as the new licensing agreements, TSR was eventually dissolved as Gygax made his own company, leaving 2nd Edition as well as many of the other games that were created in the dust. TSR sued Gygax, but ultimately failed which sent TSR under in 1992. Eventually, Wizards of the Coast purchased TSR in 1997, which Dungeons and Dragons has stuck to since.

Wizards of the Coast had a different mindset behind publishing than TSR did. The release of the Open Gaming License being the clearest difference. While TSR keep a tight hold on Dungeons & Dragons Wizards was willing to open the game up to the public. Wizards primarily kept their hands off the publishing of 3rd Edition leaving things up to their designers and 3rd part creators. However, much like TSR and the demon panic Wizards eventually stepped in on what could and couldn't be published under their OGL. After Valar Project attempted to

publish *Book of Erotic Fantasy* using the d20 System, Wizards stepped in. They made changes to the d20 System Trademark License before the book could be published that now required a "quality standard" that required publishers to meet "community standards of decency". Besides these small changes that were primarily to keep Wizards in control of what could and could not be published they kept their hands off the design of Dungeons & Dragons.

As Wizards moved on to the publishing of 4th and 5th edition they began to incorporate other publishing sources besides physical books. Whereas in 2009 they shut down the sale of PDF and online sale sources such as DRIVETHRURPG.com in 2016 they partnered with OneBookShelf and online retailer to open up to the online market. This coincide with an online community program that allowed creators to make and sell content using Wizard properties called DMsGuild. Wizards also released a cross property book, *Guildmaster's Guide to Ravnica*, which tied the company's two biggest properties together: *Magic the Gathering* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. 5th Edition also brought with it is own updated version of the OGL in the form of SRD5 which has lead to many 3rd party creators. Altogether Wizards has kept their hands mostly off of the publication of Dungeons & Dragons since their acquisition of it. This and their openness to 3rd party publisher has allowed the system to flourish as not just a game but as a storytelling medium.

**Character Creation, Roleplay, and Storytelling**

One of the fundamental parts of the whole role play part of Dungeons and Dragons is having a role to play. And because the general purpose of D&D is to tell stories, these roles are referred to as characters. Back when the idea was somewhat more novel, people were content to play characters that were given to them. But as the game developed and people became more

comfortable with the idea of role playing imaginary characters, there was a transition to players wanting to make their own characters.

Naturally, the point of the rules being to codify and standardize things, so that play is fair, there must be rules for character creation. And keeping with the storytelling thing, it's more fun if the characters progress in some way over time. Thus, we get an idea of the level system that has stuck around for the entire time the game has developed, and a notion that the players should start at the bottom of the scale for narrative progression purposes.

The character is intrinsically tied to the character sheet. Throughout the game's development there has been a bit of a back and forth between editions about how much information the player needs to have written down versus how much the DM should be able to interpret and infer when particular actions are undertaken. The character sheet started out pretty simple and got more complex as the mechanics of the game were further developed. There was a peak of sheet complexity in Third Edition and Pathfinder, which were absolutely jammed with information, and then a decent to where we are now at Fifth Edition. Fourth edition is a bit of an outlier, with a lot of the information being put on little cards for player powers, because of their relative complexity, being similar to spells in most editions.

The balance of specific versus generic skills and abilities is tightly mixed in with the character sheet. Basic had the most generic system, mostly using flat ability score rolls, or the DM just deciding on the spot whether an action is successful or not for narrative purposes, much like the author of a choose-your-own-adventure novel. The Thief class is something of an exception here, with their skill rolls, which is what would eventually evolve into the more

universal skill tables. Somewhere toward the middle we have Fifth Edition, which uses a simplified skill table, and has the DM interpreted on the fly which ability modifier to use with which skill, adding the flat proficiency bonus if it's relevant. Then we have Third and Pathfinder, where the skills are broken out into more specific skills, and proficiency bonuses are assigned by the players at level ups, as a more granular way to have character growth in specific areas of interest.

The systems that govern skills have significant impact on how roleplay occurs. By way of example, let's consider a river crossing. Imagine a little used road crossing a river; the bridge has rotted away, the river isn't too deep, and the flow is relatively calm. Swimming across looks decidedly different across the various editions.

In Third Edition, the most complex skill system, the player would roll the dice and add a lot of modifiers that they've built up over time. If they've put a lot of skill points into the swimming skill as they've leveled up, they'll have an easy time of it, as that is the biggest modifier to the result of the roll. The skill system grants the greatest advantage to players who put their skill points into skills that they think will come up later, making the Intelligence skill important for learning as many skill levels as possible, to avoid being caught off guard by skill checks. This places more emphasis on the stats of the character, rather than how the player approaches the situation in a creative / roleplay sense.

In Fifth, the moderately complex system, more input from the DM is present. The default ability score for swimming is Strength, but the rules have provisions for the DM to change that based on circumstances. Perhaps the river of shallow and calm but remarkably wide, and the

character's endurance is more important; the DM could call for the check with Constitution as the base modifier. This is less problematic for players in this edition, because the bonuses are smaller, and proficiency isn't tied to the skill directly. Even if a player is asked to make the check with their lower CON score instead of their higher STR score, they can still use their proficiency in Athletics to help them out.

Then there's the simpler editions, like Basic and Advanced. The DM is mostly in charge of the success of the attempt to swim the river, so they likely go through a thought process something like:

Will anything interesting happen if they fail to cross the river?

> Yes? Alright, they make a good effort, but are dragged down river to the interesting thing.
>
> No? Alright, they make it across without much difficulty, stop to catch their breath, and carry on their way.
>
> Maybe? Alright, let's have them roll for it.

All told, the character sheet represents the information that is most important for the player to have easy access to, lying on the table in front of them. What information is on the sheet versus what information must be run through the DM to be useful informs how the narrative flows. The more information in the player's hands, the more control the player has over their character's abilities in certain areas, and how their character develops in granular ways. The more information in the DM's hands, the more unified and directional flow of the narrative is. A

balance must be struck between the two, the DM guiding what happens, the players guiding how it happens.

The character sheet is the most direct connection that the player has to the essential elements of the character, so what is on it has the greatest effect on the player's ability to roleplay the character.

**Open Source Gaming**

3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons marked a huge change to not only the system but to the entire ecosystem of TableTop Role Playing Games. With 3rd Edition came the Open Gaming License and the d20 System which gave birth to hundreds of new TTRPGs. Up until this point Dungeon & Dragons had always been the sole property of TSR and then Wizards of the Coast but the creation of the OGL opened the gates for all sorts of creators to engage with D&D's system. Essentially it made the game open source and turned an entire generation of players from just players into players and creators. While it primarily meant that other publishers could create their own new systems using the d20 mechanics it also meant that creators could publish content about D&D without the worry of legal action.

The OGL has a fundamental change on the players of Dungeons & Dragons, especially those that favoured the role of the Dungeon Master. In previous editions the primary course for content in your games was to use published material. This was supported by the systems, AD&D, Ad&D 2nd, and Basic all were heavily tied to their books. Basic is the best example of this where not just campaign content was provided in books but character progression, mechanics, and more were all only accessible through the official published material. Dungeons & Dragons was the creation of Gary Gygax and only his material was the real and true D&D

afterall. OGL changed this. With the OGL Wizards of the Coast was giving everyone the green light to create what they wanted for the game and making it easy by releasing the d20 System to help creators along.

3rd Edition was a step away from both the Advanced line and Basic line to unify the two and give players more freedom and choice. It moved the game closer to a storytelling medium than a game, a tool for creators to make their own adventures, mechanics, worlds, and more rather than simply a game. It worked, 3rd Edition and the subsequent boom of d20 System games kept D&D alive, but it also created its biggest competitor. For the first time fans of the game has some power over the progression of Dungeons & Dragons and how it would evolve and grow. When Wizards of the Coast released 4th Edition the fans spoke and instead of moving on to the new edition as they had before many simply left for a new system, Pathfinder.

Pathfinder is a prime example of the power that the OGL had on the culture and ecosystem of TTRPGs. Lead by the lead design of 3rd Edition this d20 System game became a powerhouse in the industry after the release of 4th Edition. It was a clear message from the fans that what they favoured over the more gamey mechanics-heavy 4th Edition was the freedom to tell the sort of stories they wanted. With Pathfinder players could play in any of their favourite settings from 3rd Edition or earlier, such as *Greyhawk, Dragonlance, Forgotten Realms, and Eberron.* Since Pathfinder was designed with compatibility with 3rd Edition in mind, players were able to continue to play within the worlds they had already fallen in love with.

Most importantly though, 4th Edition did not have the OGL. Creators, such as Piazo who created Pathfinder, had no way to continue to interact with the fans they had made back in 4th Edition. While Wizards of the Coast did open the system up two years later with the Game

System License it was significantly more restrictive than OGL and saw much less use. Players clearly favoured their freedoms under the OGL than the new mechanics released by Wizards. 4th Edition was the first time in D&D's history when the game was not the top selling TTRPG in the world, dethroned by Pathfinder. Wizards listened to their community however and with the release of 5th Edition they brought the OGL back.

While System Reference Document 5.0 is not nearly as comprehensive a license as the d20 System was it remains open enough to allow for creators to create their own content for the system. While the SRD5 is not the only reason for 5th Editions successes it means that Wizards of the Coast is aware of what has led to their successes in the past. 5th Edition Dungeons & Dragons made a number of changes from 3rd and 4th edition to make it more compatible as a storytelling medium than as a game and this is just another one of them. Storytelling over mechanics is clearly something valued by the fanbase, and with the OGL, all sorts of creators are able to tell their own stories without creating barriers; like forcing players to learn all new rulesets and mechanics. 5th Editions OGL is a clear commitment by Wizards of the Coast for its push to make Dungeons & Dragons more about telling stories and less about mechanics and so far it's working.

**The Success of 5th Edition**

5th Edition's success derives from it riding the "geek culture" wave that hit Western audiences in the 2010 era. More so than ever, liking what would be typically known as "nerdy" things became in fashion to the point of it becoming completely mainstream. *Iron Man* met audiences with massive praise being given to the film, anime streaming sites like Crunchyroll began to blow up, and graphic tees filled with nostalgia crept back into the world of streetwear

fashion. Almost everywhere you looked, from TV to music to fashion, you could find some piece of media that came from a previously considered uncool source. 5e was released at such a time where the public was finally ready for Dungeons and Dragons to hit the mainstream, but it needed to build up some clout for itself first. 5e was in playtesting for many years prior to its release in 2014, and its story-centric approach compared to 4e shows the dedication Wizards of the Coast put in this time around.

For starters, 5th Edition was significantly easier to pick up than previous editions, and somehow provides players with more options than complex editions like 4th. The character creation process was streamlined, stats were combined and simplified, skills felt more meaningful, and different styles of play became open for experimentation so any player could be exactly who they want to be. Combat became quicker and easier to understand, but with many unique intricacies and mechanics for combat-focused players to enjoy. What really took the cake was the roleplaying and worldbuilding value brought by 5e. 4th Edition was held back in this regard due to its combat focused mechanics and structures, like the “Encounter Powers” system. 5th Edition was made to be flexible and provide fun for the players, and left a lot of open ends for DMs and GMs across the world to experiment with, like new skill checks, professions, and out of combat abilities and spells. This edition was made for players to create whatever story they wanted, whether it be a combat and glory filled quest, or a subtle and suspenseful murder mystery. This gave players, returning and new alike, tons of breathing room to experiment with what their characters could be good at, what flaws they have, what they hold dear in life, essentially anything related to personalizing a character, 5e had it.

It was at this point that Dungeons and Dragons transitioned from a tabletop dungeon crawl game to a storytelling medium. Dungeon Masters were given enough resources and creative freedoms to create challenges where hacking and slashing may not be the best answer, as well as giving players a way to completely bypass combat with certain spells and skills. This is what separates D&D from other similar roleplaying games of its time, and propelled it well above Pathfinder, its main competitor. ICv2 reported that Dungeons and Dragons was at the forefront of sales for roleplaying games in 2017, with Pathfinder sitting in second. While a spike in sales was the trend when Wizards of the Coast drops a new expansion to their rulebooks, 5e still retains highest in sales compared to all previous editions. Many new players began hopping on the Dungeons and Dragons hype train that was building steam in western geek culture, but were still a bit unsure of the public reception of the game due to its former "uncool" status. This all changed when a live streamed game of 5e Dungeons and Dragons, known as *Critical Role* hit a streaming website: Twitch.tv.

Airing in 2015, professional voice actors treated audiences with a livestreamed game of 5th Edition, but with a high production budget and improv experience. Critical Role was aimed at D&D veterans and newcomers, and racked up 68 million views in total (counting both seasons). Critical Role quickly grew on Twitch from a modest D&D home game held by experienced players, to an entire community constantly reciting jokes and quotes from the show, to even sporting merch. Matthew Mercer, creator of Critical Role, famously created a Kickstarter to fund a segment of Critical Role to be animated, with a goal of $750'000. It shattered the goal, reaching their desired amount within an hour of launch, and ended with 7.3 million dollars in the bank. This kickstarter quickly turned into a publicity stunt for Critical Role, skyrocketing their

view count and weekly watchtime, with Critical Role Season 2 garnering 135,000 viewers for their first episode. Critical Role would then take another step further into the mainstream, when founder Matthew Mercer would be given an interesting opportunity on prime time television.

Airing in May, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* featured Mercer on one of his episodes, with the two teaming up for Red Nose Day 2019, a charity created to help end child poverty, Mercer led Colbert on a trip through memory lane by playing a one-shot Dungeons and Dragons adventure with him, and had his character created by Colbert's fans. Colbert and his trusty bee companion went on a quest for the "Crimson Orb of Generosity", a play on the Red Nose theme from the fundraiser. The two spent about an hour at the table, with half of it being allocated to Colbert reminiscing about his childhood days, playing AD&D with his teenage friends. Colbert seemed right at home at the table, and even brought his own fantasy-themed props. Though it was fairly recent, this event truly put Dungeons and Dragons back in the mainstream light, and finally in a positive light as well. Long since were the days of "Satanic Cults" and "Geek Culture", now famous actors, TV personalities, athletes and more were "coming out" about their love for the game, whether it be from their childhood, or more recent. Critical Role again saw a boost in viewership after Mercer's event with Colbert, which not only allowed them to increase their production value, as well as increase their focus on other projects like Talks Machina and Relics and Rarities, Critical Role's podcast and Deborah Ann Woll's 5e game, respectively.

In all cases, the combat was never the driving factor for viewers to watch Critical Role and other 5e live streamed games, it was always the story. Though some meme-worthy things

may happen while battling a pair of mimics hiding as mannequins, Matthew Mercer's extreme level of detail and care for his games, as well as Dungeon Masters across the world, the epic adventures, or misadventures, each D&D party gets into is what keeps everyone coming back to the table, or to the stream. 5th Edition has become about unity. No longer is it Dungeon Master versus the players, its both sides coming together to create a story they can all remember for years to come. 5e not only refined their structure of their game, but the spirit of it.

**Storytelling Evolution**

Dungeons & Dragons has evolved and changed a lot throughout the years since its inception. Almost every aspect of the game has changed, down to the philosophy by which it is designed. Back in 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson wanted to make a game where you and your friends could roleplay fantasy characters, going on adventures to kill monsters and get loot. Nowadays, however, D&D has evolved to become its own unique medium for storytellers to let their minds go wild for their players.

The biggest change that occurred throughout the life of D&D that moved the game towards becoming a narrative medium was the evolving methods of character creation. In the games first iterations, players had little to no freedom with what they were allowed to make. Common fantasy races such as Elves and Dwarves were restricted to being their own entire class of character, and if you didn't want to play a character the way the game told you to, you were stuck with being an ordinary human. Want to play a Dwarf who can cast magic? Early D&D says no. Fortunately for people who wanted to make their own fully customized character, the game would eventually evolve to allow players to play any combination of class and race, no matter your ability scores, decision to player as a caster or martial character, or any other factor, it all

came down to player choice, which allowed for much more freedom with the character creation system.

Now that character creation was fixed for the players, how has the game evolved to allow Dungeon Masters to craft stories instead of combat encounters? Well, that part is much more complicated. The first reason can be partially attributed to OGL and its effect on D&D. OGL allowed people to publish books using the D&D game system for sale on the open market, as long as they gave reference to the official sources. With OGL, people were able to buy entire campaigns to run at their table, without the hassle of having to make your own world and story. The biggest barrier preventing people from running these grandiose stories, was simply put, making them is a lot of work, and it's really easy to just open up a Monster Manual, draw a dungeon on a map, and send your players after it. Some people who might want to make their own original stories might not have the time to dedicate to writing stories. But with the option of buying entire campaign guides off the shelf of a game store at hand, tons of people began running stories in the worlds others created, such as *The Forgotten Realms* by Ed Greenwood or *Castle Ravenloft* by Tracy & Laura Hickman. People still buy these campaign books to this day even, the publishers of Dungeons & Dragons, Wizards of the Coast, regularly publish official campaign guides for Dungeon Masters to use for their players, such as "*Curse of Strahd*" or "*Storm King's Thunder*", both created by the Wizards RPG Team.

Another thing that changed greatly from the games inception to its shift to a focus on storytelling, was just the general culture around the game. As mentioned earlier, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson wanted the game to just be about fighting monsters, that's why the character creation system wasn't very complex, to make character creation fast so you can just jump

straight into the action, but as these campaign modules through OGL became very commonplace at tables, the culture of the game shifted away from the games original vision, and as that happened, Dungeon Masters obtained one very important thing they previously didn't have, inspiration. Storytelling is already hard enough with sources to draw inspiration from, but D&D had little to nothing aspiring storytellers could use to draw inspiration. All they had was popular fantasy stories such as *Lord of the Rings,* and if they wanted to adapt those to use in a Pen and Paper scenario, they'd have their work cut out for them to create a cohesive story in a system that wasn't designed for it, and had no resources to show how to adapt them, but then OGL happened, and the storytellers had hundreds of sources to draw inspiration and relate their work to. Players were given the tools to make good characters, and Dungeon Masters were given the tools, resources, and inspiration to make stories for those characters, and thanks to those changes made to the culture of D&D, the game has changed from a bunch of people killing random faceless monsters at a game store to enjoying well thought stories either made by either a creative friend or a team of creative designers. Either way, these changes to the game shifted the game in a much more inspired direction.

The final nail in the coffin for what D&D is today, ie. a medium for storytelling, and improv acting with you friends rather than just playing a game, is Wizards of the Coasts "Adventurers League", the ongoing official campaign of Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition. Back in the days of old, D&D was mainly played at game stores, the places where you'd buy the books in the first place. The reason for this was that, simply put, it's hard to put together a group of friends to consistently play D&D with, scheduling conflicts are the bane of every tabletop game player ever. Going to game shops to play games circumvented that problem, because you could

just hop into any group of people who happen to be there, make some friends, and play D&D. That hasn't changed at all even today, people everywhere still gather at gaming stores to play games like Magic: The Gathering, Yu-Gi-Oh, and of course, Dungeons & Dragons. Wizards of the Coast has managed to change how people play the games at these stores however, with their Adventurers League. The idea behind Adventurers League is simple, you create a character using the rules in 5th Edition D&D, and you take that character with you when you go play in Adventurers League games. Wizards has even included a tracker on their website that allows you to search for nearby game stores that host Adventurers League. Now how does this play into storytelling you may ask? Well, traditional Adventurers League requires you to play using the source books that Wizards of the Coast have published, which are very heavily story driven, and cover many different genres and tones to tickle the fancy of whatever the players want. Want to play a gothic horror campaign? *Curse of Strahd* is there for you. Long gone are the days of simply slaughtering nameless monsters in a random tomb, Wizards wants you to follow along with the stories the Wizards RPG Team has worked hard on, and make friends along the way. The spirit of the game stays the same, but Wizards added far more substance to it by focusing on these story driven modules, and the overwhelming success of 5th Edition speaks volumes for how the rest of the fans feel about that shift.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, after all the aforementioned information is considered, Dungeons and Dragons never really served well as a medium for tabletop gaming. When you consider the earlier editions (Chainmail, Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, D&D Basic, 2nd Edition, 3rd Edition, and 4th Edition), the mechanics and thesis of the editions seem to conflict with one

another. While always claiming to be a roleplay heavy game, you find arbitrary restrictions on what role you can play being applied. When freedom is considered, there are restrictions on how much freedom you can have. As iterations go onward, a pull away from restrictions within the mechanics themselves can be seen, pushing more toward an open adventure game.

We can also see Dungeons and Dragons functioning a lot better as a storytelling medium. With institutions like the Open Gaming Licence and general open source approach, content is available for any storyteller's necessity. With the basic rules freely published and an implied statement of "feel free to do away with any rules that don't fit what you are wanting to do", players have been given a free licence to do whatever they want. The growing community that is supported by this behavior gets more and more people involved ultimately leading to the reason why 5th Edition is so successful.

To leave off this paper, a personal note from those who participate in its writing. All writers of this paper are avid members of the tabletop roleplaying scene. Some of us design content for them, some of us have developed them, but we have all played in and run them. As game designers ourselves, we know that all products improve through iteration, trial and error, and open communication with their audience. That's the lesson found in Dungeons and Dragons. The success of D&D is not because of a single talented individual who designed the game 40 some odd years ago, or the teams that have worked on each edition since. It is a result of the open communications behind Dungeons and Dragons and its audience that has created an evolving experience that can be found the same way nowhere else. Through that trial and error they found out that their game was better suited targeting a different kind of demographic: an

engaged community that wants to sit down with other people and tell fantasy adventure stories with one another.

## Works Cited

Alimurung, Gendy. "How Dungeons & Dragons Somehow Became More Popular than Ever." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 25 Apr. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/how-dungeons-and-dragons-somehow-became-more-popular-than-ever/2019/04/18/fc226f56-5f8f-11e9-9412-daf3d2e67c6d_story.html.

Barber, Graeme. "*4e D&D, The After Action Review.*" *POCGamer*, 12 June 2018, https://pocgamer.com/2017/12/30/4e-dd-the-after-action-review/.

Bulmahn J., Cook M., et al "*Pathfinder: Core Rulebook (6th Printing).*" Paizo Inc., 2009.

Cook, David. "*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition, Player's Handbook.*" Lake Geneva, WI, USA : [New York] :TSR ; Distributed to the book trade by Random House, 1989.

Chalker, Dave "*Our Greatest Hits: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition."* Critical-hits.com, 26 January 2012. https://critical-hits.com/blog/2012/01/26/our-dd-greatest-hits-advanced-dungeons-dragons-2nd-edition/

"Chainmail." Acaeum, https://www.acaeum.com/ddindexes/setpages/chainmail.html.

D'Anastasio, Cecilia. "*D&D's Dungeon Master Guild Wants Players to Monetize Fan Content.*" Kotaku.com, 29 July 2016. https://kotaku.com/d-ds-dungeon-masters-guild-wants-players-to-monetize-fa-1784518350

Gaming Report. "*D20 News: Book of Erotic Fantasy Loses D20 license.*" GamingReport.com, 23 September 2003. https://web.archive.org/web/20031120193937/http://www.gamingreport.com/article.php?sid=10243&mode=thread

Gygax, Gary and Arneson, Dave. "*Basic Dungeons and Dragons, 3rd Edition*." Revised by Mentzer, Frank; Published by TSR Hobbies Inc.; 1983

Gygax, Gary and Perren, Jeff. "Chainmail, 3rd Edition". Published by TSR Hobbies Inc.; 1975.

Gygax, Gary. "*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Players Handbook: Special Reference Work."* TSR Games, 1978.

Heinsoo, Rob. "*Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook: Arcane, Divine, and Martial Heroes."* Wizards of the Coast, 2008.

ICv2. "Wizard of the Coast Ends PDF Download Sales." ICV2.com, 6 April 2009. https://icv2.com/articles/games/view/14693/wotc-ends-pdf-download-sales

Kelly, James Floyd. "*Before 'D&D,' There Was 'Chainmail.' But Before 'Chainmail'...*" GeekDad, 23 Jan. 2016. https://geekdad.com/2016/01/before-dd-there-was-chainmail-but-before-chainmail/.

Kuittinen, Petri M. "*Very Important Game People in the History of Computer and Video Games*". University of Art and Design Helsinki. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80711451.pdf#page=51

Leitman, Paige. "D&D Adventurer's League and a More Narrative Style of Play." Gnome Stew, 14 Mar. 2019, https://gnomestew.com/dd-adventurers-league-and-a-more-narrative-style-of-play/.

Laycock, Joseph P. "1. The Birth of Fantasy Role-Playing Games." Dangerous Games, 2019, pp. 31–50., https://content.ucpress.edu/chapters/12896.ch01.pdf.

Mearls, Mike, et al. "*Monster Manual: Roleplaying Game Core Rules*." Wizards of the Coast, 2008.

Peterson, Jon. "*Forty Years of Adventure.*" dnd.wizards.com, 2015. https://dnd.wizards.com/dungeons-and-dragons/what-dd/history/history-forty-years-adventure

Scriv the Bard. "An Evolution of Storytelling." Scriv the Bard, 14 Mar. 2019, https://scrivthebard.com/2018/08/26/an-evolution-of-storytelling/.

"Stephen Colbert's D&D Adventure with Matthew Mercer (Red Nose Day 2019)." *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3658C2y4LlA.

Tito, Greg. "*The State of D&D: Present.*" The Escapist, 28 Dec. 2011, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/features/9293-The-State-of-D-D-Present.

Tito, Greg. "*The State of D&D: Future.*" The Escapist, 30 Dec. 2011 http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/features/9294-The-State-of-Dungeons-Dragons-Future

"Top 5 Roleplaying Games--Spring 2017." *ICv2*, 25 July 2017, https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/38060/top-5-roleplaying-games-spring-2017.

Tweet J., Cook M., Williams S., et al "*Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook I v.3.5.*", 2003.

Vin, and Unpossible Labs. "How Well Is 5th Edition D&D Selling?" *Unpossible Journeys*, 15 Oct. 2019. https://unpossiblejourneys.com/how-well-is-5th-edition-dungeons-and-dragons-selling/.

Wizards of the Coast. "*Open Game License: Frequently Asked Question.*" Wizards.com, 26 January 2004. https://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20/oglfaq/20040123f