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Why *Dungeons and Dragons* Is Art

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Before there were Role-playing Games, there was *Dungeons and Dragons*.

When, in 1974, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax published *Dungeons and Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures* in a print run of one thousand copies at GenCon (now known as *Original Dungeons and Dragons*), there was no terminology to describe the type of game they had created.

You can feel the anxiety that must have caused in the game's ponderous subtitle. For those of us who came to the RPG hobby after the 1970s, it's hard to imagine a world without a plethora of different RPG options to cater for every taste; a variety of genres, a range of complexities, differences in tone and style, multitudes of fantastic worlds to explore and dozens of different game systems to facilitate that exploration. But once upon a time, D&D was a unique mutant: a miniature wargame that didn't use armies, or terrain, and needed five people to play at a time—four people to play as heroes, and one person to play as the world.

The rules for *Dungeons and Dragons* evolved from Gary Gygax's miniature wargame *Chainmail*, published by Tactical Studies Rules. In the 1970s miniature wargaming was a niche and fairly nerdy hobby, even more so than today (if you can credit that). Most wargaming was historical, using armies of lead soldiers to simulate battles from history, or to create historically believable match-ups. In the era before Games

Workshop, *Chainmail*, with its rules for spells and monsters, was an oddity, though with the huge popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* at the time it was perhaps an inevitable oddity. So there's something quirky: *Chainmail* required that the game-players threw out any idea they were re-enacting a battle. Obviously, since the battle *could never have happened*. So whatever stories the little lead soldiers would tell around the little lead fireside, they would be completely new. The rules of *Chainmail* would **simulate** the workings of reality to determine the outcome of the battle - and the ending of a story which had never before been told.

When Dave Arneson got his hands on Gygax's rules, the oddity of *Chainmail* was transformed again, into an aberration. In *Chainmail*, one lead soldier represented twenty men—a rather considerate abstraction, given the limited bank balance of your average wargamer. But Arneson tilted the other way. With the friends he was playing with, each figure stood for just one man—or, since this was a fantasy game featuring miniature knights and wizards, one hero. And each player had only one figure to play with. Crucially for the history of RPGs, it blurred the lines between the hero represented by the figure, the figure itself, and the person playing with that figure. One player, one figure, one hero—one *character*.

But the character wasn't Arneson's only innovation. The word "campaign" as used in wargaming comes from its equivalent in military terminology: a series of linked battles. In wargaming, if the player stands for anything in relation to their army, it's either the army's general, or perhaps the spirit of the nation riding behind the army, directing the actions of the little lead men as they go about their deadly business. In a campaign the player maintains that role between games, carrying the same flag through a series of battles.

When Arneson was running a campaign for his friends, he was acting as arbitrator and also scenario designer, and they were acting not as the spirit of a nation, but as individual characters. The players carried their heroes from one game to the next. The characters gained histories. The characters gained stories. And so too did the world through which they were adventuring. He may not have meant to when he started tinkering with *Chainmail*, but Arneson invented the first ever wholly original RPG *campaign setting*: a fantastical world

which existed purely so that people who weren't its author could tell stories in it.

The parts themselves were not revolutionary. They were not even new. Humans have used figurines in games to represent people since before Chess. They have played roles on the stage (or around the campfire) for centuries, and have been improvising for as long as there have been children. They have modeled real-world probabilities using randomizers (dice, usually) at least since H.G. Wells's *Little Wars*. They have imagined fantastical worlds since they first saw the stars, spoken about them since they had voices, and written about them since Gilgamesh.

But it was the combination of the parts—the rules of simulation with the narrative continuity of campaigning and the blurring between player, character and figurine—that created something entirely new, in the worlds of game-playing and of story-making, something that was in its own way brilliantly revolutionary. If you want to learn about Role-playing Games as a distinct artistic medium, look to *Dungeons and Dragons*. Putting it another way, if we want to understand the *aesthetics* of role-playing, this is the place to start.

Roll to Detect Traps

Let's take a typical D&D session. Abel, Beccy, and Charlie are gathered around Dominic's dinner table. Dominic is the dungeon master. There are stacks of paper all over the place, with maps, crude doodles and tactical diagrams. Dominic is rifling through a stack of notes he made earlier, looking for the list of treasure hidden in a room the players have just raided. Beccy and Charlie are pretending to be a Dwarf Fighter and an Elf Wizard respectively, arguing whether they should press deeper into the dungeon or return to town with the dire news of a troglodyte uprising. Charlie is rifling through a setting book and eating left-over pizza. There are loads of dice, everywhere. What, if anything, is *artistic* about that? Sure, everyone's enjoying themselves, but is anyone having what might be called an *aesthetic* experience?

The parts that make up a game, session, or campaign of D&D are extremely varied, ranging from the content of a published D&D book to the performances of the players and the

dungeon master. Each of those elements might be artistic in its own right. D&D is made up of lots of components which can be artistic, at least under some circumstances.

Let's take the campaign setting book that Charlie was reading (he won't mind, he doesn't exist). Inside the book are stories, maps, the history of an imagined world, descriptions of the people and creatures that would live there if it was real. It's heavily illustrated. It's pretty much a travel guide to a place that doesn't exist, mixed together with a bunch of tables of numbers and game rules. The tables and rules give you a system to work out what would happen if you took an imaginary holiday there. So D&D involves pictures and stories, both of which may be artistic to some degree.

Then there are the performances being given by Beccy and Charlie. There's art in a good theatrical performance, bringing out the internal motivations of a character by exploring their physicality and speech. Improvisation is an art form, found in the Italian theater tradition *Commedia Del Arte* and the TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, and, unless Beccy or Charlie have prepared a speech in advance, they'll both be ad-libbing like crazy. A game of D&D will involve plenty of improvisational performances, though you might not call a D&D session improvisational theatre, since it is rarely performed for an audience except the players.

On top of this, the session as a whole has a narrative of its own, which feeds in to the wider narrative of the campaign that Dominic has put together. It's a narrative that shifts as the players take unexpected decisions, which means Dominic doesn't have the final say about what will happen in the story he has invented, but some pretty cool stuff can emerge from that unpredictability; RA Salvatore's tale of *Wubba Wubba* is a fantastic example.¹ D&D can resemble a collective act of uncontrolled myth-making.

But we've got to be careful here. It's deceptively easy to say that *D&D* is artistic because it's like something else. Picking out a bunch of artistic things that can be part of a D&D session won't tell us what it is about D&D that gives it a *unique* aes-

¹ At time of writing, <http://youtu.be/PzpgAQpcp8o> will take you to a video of this hilarious tale. If the link is dead, google Wubba Wubba. We suspect the tale will live forever.

thetic character. Staring at the oil-painted backdrop on a theater set and studying the intricate period costume won't clue you in about Shakespeare. In picking out these various things D&D has in common with other art forms we're catching elements of the role-playing experience, but it's the peculiar way these elements are brought together that makes it an artistic medium in its own right.

Another problem with a "sum of its parts" argument is that most of the aesthetic elements that go to make up a D&D game are, in and of themselves, middling at best. The performances of a D&D player might be passable, but they're rarely inspired. The art in a D&D book is frequently awesome (Fourth Edition raise your head), but rarely has any dimensions beyond that. The stories in most D&D setting books are second-generation rip-offs from Tolkien and Robert E. Howard. The stories that you create around a D&D table with your fellow players don't always bear recitation: "Beccy cast Force Cage on the troglodyte Arachnomancer, and the Arachnomancer tried to Summon Swarm—except the spiders all appeared inside the cage and she was like 'Agh no, no, spiders, no, eating my face, eating my face, fail!' It was totally epic." Epic perhaps, but rarely as exhilarating to hear as to experience.

Why should we think that D&D has anything distinctly artistic about it at all then? There's a bunch of things we enjoy about it that aren't straightforwardly aesthetic at all. It's a *social activity* where we get to spend time with our friends, and all kinds of fun follows from that on its own: good banter, friendly rivalries, and running jokes. It's also a *game*, and this means it provides all sorts of possibilities for success and failure: scouring dungeons for treasure, saving towns and villages from despotic overlords, and plain old leveling up. But D&D has got more to it than this; something that makes it a completely different experience than playing *Monopoly* (or even, dare we say it, *World of Warcraft*) with a bunch of friends. It is about working with (and sometimes against) your fellow players to overcome a series of challenges, but it's not *just* this.

There's a special spark that comes alive when you're playing a really good game of D&D. It's not just that the game is fun (although a really good game of D&D is always fun.) It's something that only really exists in the moment that you're playing; although hearing a great campaign outline or reading

a fantastic source book will give you a tingle down the spine, a feeling that something brilliant is waiting to happen and you can almost guess the shape it will take. Whatever it is, it's close to what we feel when we encounter a great piece of art. It may come about as a result of the interaction of the different elements that make up a D&D session, but it's both more than them and fundamentally different from them. Whatever it is, this peculiar aesthetic experience is something that came into its own with *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Experience Points

That's all very well for what the aesthetic experience of role-playing isn't. In that case, what is it? To get a grip on this we have to get a bit more more general: what is an aesthetic experience, full stop?

The most famous answer to this question comes from Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant came up with a theory that explains what is special about the pleasurable, exhilarating, maybe even terrifying experiences you get when you encounter great works of art—the shiver down your spine when you're listening to *Mars, Bringer of War*—that separates them from run-of-the-mill, everyday pleasure and amusement you get from, say, a youtube video of a kitten falling off a chair.

Crucial to Kant's theory is an understanding of what's going on in your mind when you have these different kinds of experiences. Some things just push your buttons. The kitten video hits a big red button in your brain marked 'cute response'. You enjoy it in pretty much the same way that you enjoy a really tasty meal—you chew, you swallow, but the pleasure is a more or less *passive* response to what you experience. The aesthetic experience of art is more *active* than that. It kicks your brain into gear and forces it to make sense of what you're experiencing. Kant thinks that the feeling of pleasure is a *result* of this *cognitive* activity, rather than something added on top of it.

This is only part of the story though. Doing a crossword puzzle can be both fun and a good bit of mental exercise, but that doesn't make it art. Keeping track of all the robots, collapsing buildings, and explosions filling the screen when watching the latest *Transformers* movie is harder than following the other-

wise complex camerawork of *Citizen Kane*, but that doesn't necessarily make it more enjoyable, or more artistic (or even, artistic at all . . .). A D&D combat can be a lot like both: trying to remember who's keeping the arachnomancer busy, who's taking care of which of her spidery minions, and working out how best to deploy your resources (feats, spells, artifacts, and the like) to save the day. Yet some D&D combats are awful grinds, others are just a bit of fun, and some reach beyond this to become downright spectacular, in a way that makes a crossword look mechanical and a Michael Bay movie look frivolous. If we're going to say anything interesting about what makes these moments border on art, then we need to figure out what's special about the cognitive activity art encourages.

Suppose you're mulling over a famous painting in the National Gallery in London, something with lots of fat naked people in it (they've got whole wings of the stuff!) The aesthetic experience you're having involves contemplating it in an active way. There's one way your mind is active, all the time, whenever you're experiencing stuff. Your mind is continually *recognizing* the properties of things. When you look at the painting, you recognize the brush-stroke pattern. Maybe you recognize the particular paints that have been used, or the wood the frame's made out of. That doesn't make for much of an experience—you can, and do, recognize all those same things whenever you see a painted wooden chair. But there are a couple of ways that recognizing the way a thing is does give us a more interesting experience, though not an aesthetic one.

If we *desire* something, we'll be satisfied when we recognize that it's come about. If I want my chair yellow, I'll be satisfied if it's yellow, and pissed if it's purple. If I think that a chair should be good at supporting my bulk (if I think that durable ass-support is the chair's function), I'll be appreciative when I recognize a sturdy hardwood chair, and derisive of a chair made out of balsawood; not because I need to sit down, but because seeing something that is fit for its purpose can be pleasurable in itself.

But back at the National Gallery, what do you honestly *want* a painting of three fat naked people to be like? What kind of *function* do you think it should have? The cool thing about the aesthetic experience is that it can come out of things which a. we don't necessarily want to be a certain way, and b. are

utterly pointless. Trying to explain why things that are useless and sometimes even unpleasant can be so enthralling is why we invented aesthetics in the first place. The experience we have when we encounter art isn't concerned with the function or desirability of whatever causes it. As Kant puts it, aesthetic experience is disinterested.

Kant's original idea is that the pleasure we feel in aesthetic experience comes from the *process* of cognition, rather than from its *result*. In other words, it's not *what* we understand the object of our experience to be, but *how* we go about understanding it that's important.

Imagine that you're walking along a badly lit street in thick fog. Something appears on the edge of your field of vision. It might be a person—it looks like a person. Or maybe two. Maybe it's one person and a dog—but who would walk a dog this late at night? Whoever it is (or they are), they're wearing something yellow. Maybe it's a woman in a dress (a dress, in this weather?), or maybe it's a policeman in a fluorescent jacket. You're not sure. You continue to run through possibilities, imagining different scenarios, trying to detect patterns in the fog, and comparing these to what you know about dogs, dresses, policemen, and everything else.

Normally you'll come to some conclusion about what this indistinct shape is. Either you walk closer and get a better view, or you come up with a plausible hypothesis, or you give up and go home for a cup of tea. What happens if you don't, though? What happens if you simply get caught up in the process of imagining and understanding? This is what Kant thinks happens when we experience the *beauty* of a moment. The cognitive processes that normally let us make sense of things go into a short-circuit, analyzing and re-analyzing, testing theories, making mad new combinations, and generally experimenting with their own awesome capacity to apply different models to the things around us. Kant calls this a state of *free play*.

What goes on in free play differs between types of aesthetic experience. Listening to a good piece of classical music stimulates your ability to trace intricate patterns in sound, pulling out interlocking melodies, counterpoints, and repeating themes. Quality theater plays on your capacity to track social relationships, finding juicy subtexts in dialogue, picking out the com-

plex interactions of plot and metaphor, and concocting dozens of shifting maps that pin those different elements one to another in constantly varying ways. On top of this, no two art works of the same type ever stimulate your cognitive processes in exactly the same way. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Waiting for Godot* fire up some of the same machinery in your mind, but the raw materials they feed in are really different.

So, aesthetic experiences are caused by all kinds of cognitive free play. But why does any of this feel good? Where does the pleasure come from?

Seeing that something fulfils its function is satisfying to us. It's a pleasure to see a damn fine bowie knife, not because we plan to skin a deer carcass, but because it's fine to see something that is so perfectly itself. Anything that has a function could, in principal, be a source of satisfaction and pleasure for us, if we get evidence that the thing is well made for its function. Despite his claim that aesthetic experience is disinterested, Kant does think that something like this happens when our minds enter free play. The difference is that it's not the *object* of experience that fulfils the function, but the cognitive abilities of the *subject* who experiences it. We enjoy free play because it demonstrates our mind's ability to do what it's supposed to do. What is it supposed to do, you ask? It's supposed to build *worlds*.

As we said earlier, our mind is always recognizing the way the things around it are, categorizing and cataloguing the various things we encounter in experience. There's more going on here though. It's not just a matter of making sense of the *particular* things we encounter in experience—a book here, a fridge over there, a bunch of cars going by outside—as if we were making a list of the furniture of the universe. We also have to relate these different encounters in various ways, drawing intuitive and conceptual connections between our experiences, picking out relevant similarities and differences, revealing the *general* patterns that underlie them. This is what it is for our minds to create a world. They take the disparate bits of information provided by experience and use them to build a single picture of how things are, making sense of everything *as a whole*.

Kant thinks that we're always *reflecting* on our experience in this way, even if we're not always aware of it. The reason this

doesn't produce the pleasure we get in the experience of the beautiful is that we're too focused upon making sense of the *things* we're experiencing to notice what we're *doing* in making sense of them. It's only when the process of understanding stops aiming at anything in particular and instead starts roaming wildly—experimenting with new patterns and combinations of ideas—that we have a chance to experience it on its own terms.

What we encounter in this moment of creative free play is our own ability to make the sorts of connections needed to make sense of the world as a whole. We experience the sheer *power* of our own mind, and it feels good. This experience differs depending on which of our cognitive abilities get stimulated, but regardless of whether we feel the range of our capacity to sense emotions in the face of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, or our power to grasp the abstract ideas at play in Asimov's *Foundation*, it gives us pleasure to feel the reach of our own intelligence.

Now, we don't need to agree that this is all there is to art. We also don't need to use the word 'beauty' to describe what it is about art that causes aesthetic experiences. We don't necessarily want to say that a great piece of art is beautiful, even if it has an important effect upon us, as the word has a number of common meanings that can lead discussions astray, so we'll stick to talking about 'artistic' and 'aesthetic' things. This works well for talking about the aesthetics of RPG campaigns. Most players wouldn't call a D&D campaign beautiful, no matter how good it was, and even if they're certain that it's more than *simply* enjoyable. Despite this, Kant's account of aesthetic experience captures something very important, and it will help us explain why there is something very special indeed about the aesthetic of RPGs.

Saving the World

So, as Kant sees it, an aesthetic experience is caused by the disinterested free play of our mental faculties. The cognitive processes that enable us to make sense of things stop aiming at a fixed goal and start experimenting wildly. This lets us take pleasure in our own sheer capacity to understand the world. We've also seen that the specific character of the aesthetic

experience depends both on *which* faculties are involved, and *how* they are involved: painting is different to poetry, and Rimbaud is different from Rilke. So if role-playing is aesthetic, we can explain the unique character of the role-playing experience by finding the distinctive ways in which it deploys our cognitive abilities.

We want to suggest that the way role-playing games *simulate* worlds generates a unique aesthetic experience. It's the peculiar way a game of *D&D* takes our capacity to create a picture of *the real world* and uses it to build a picture of a *fictional world* that makes it different from other forms of art.

RPGs don't have a monopoly on fictional worlds. Novels, movies, and plays all weave fictional worlds around us using various devices, and the aesthetic experiences they engender stem in part from our sense of experiencing another world. How does the simulation of a world in a role-playing game differ from one we find in a book, movie, or play?

The most obvious difference is that role-playing is *interactive* in a way that reading a book, watching a film, or attending a play (usually) isn't. Rather than simply *immersing* ourselves in the world as it is revealed to us through a prescribed experience, when we role-play we take a hand in *creating* the story ourselves, and thus in building the world it implies. In this respect, tabletop RPGs like *D&D* are far more similar to video games like *Fallout*, *Elder Scrolls*, or (again) *World of Warcraft*. (Not really surprising when you think how many videogame developers cite First Edition *D&D* as a major life experience.) These all have worlds which are revealed through interaction, and which are responsive to players' actions, to a greater or lesser extent.

But when it comes to interactivity tabletop RPGs (and to a lesser extent live action RPGs) win hands down against even the most interactive of available video games². The Games Master (or Dungeon Master) can mediate between the rules, the setting, and the players' imaginations to an unlimited degree, whereas for any videogame there will always be some limits—limits to the plausibility of cause and effect, limits to

² We're not trying to start a fight. Computer games do very many other things extremely well. They can throw bucketloads of dice far faster than even the best dungeon master, for example.

geography, limits to emotional realism, limits to your possible actions, and so on. In a pen and paper RPG it is always possible to burrow deeper, provided the players and DM are up for it. In a pen and paper RPG players are *directly* engaged in drawing the boundaries of the game world, rather than just uncovering them. Hand in hand with this, role-playing involves a lot more imagination than computer gaming. If you want to see a towering citadel of glass in your game of D&D, it's you who has to imagine it.

If it's the fact that RPGs allow us to simulate worlds in an interactive fashion that distinguishes the experience of role-playing from the experience of *reading* a novel, what distinguishes it from the experience of *writing* one? If you want to create a world, why not just cut out the middle man and *design* it directly? You can even do this collaboratively with your friends, dreaming up a setting, characters, and narrative arcs without having to play it out with dice and character sheets.

We won't claim that there's nothing aesthetic about the act of composing a work of art, or dreaming up a fictional world in the process, but we think it's different from the peculiar aesthetics of role-playing. Compare the experience of the DM with that of the players. The DM's experience is closer to that of an author: they design (or at least curate) a campaign setting, they outline each game session's plot, and they act as the ultimate arbiter of the consequences of the characters' actions. But it's not the finished story at the end of a campaign that makes running a game enjoyable. Rather, it's the way the story shapes *itself* in front of your eyes, the way it runs away from you, flips off in unexpected directions and suddenly revolves around seemingly superfluous details, none of which you could never have expected in advance. Who knew that instead of handing over the holy relic the party would blackmail the corrupt cleric who hired them to steal it? Or that the local Lord's taste in prostitutes would turn out to be so important?

The DM *guides* the creation of a story, setting constraints, negotiating options, and ruling on outcomes, but the *process* of creation is bigger than him. The contribution of the players and the rules they play with is indispensable to flesh out the game world and create the story that unfolds within it. It is the *collaboration* of the DM, the players, and the rules that means things happen that no one could plan in advance.

Although the aesthetic experience of *running* a game is certainly different from that of *playing* it, it's the way the collaborative process of simulating a world extends beyond the expectations of everyone involved that characterizes both. We'll call this the *depth* of a game world. We experience this depth when we see the *consequences* of our choices spiral out of our control, producing interesting and unforeseen results, suggesting new and exciting ways in which the world can be filled in.

This often happens in cases of both great success *and* great failure, such as when, in a climactic battle with a giant spider demon, the wily sorcerer is able to use *Polymorph Other* to turn it into a small purple platypus, because the DM unwittingly picked the only high-level monster without magic resistance; or when trying to scam some gold between dungeons, the hapless rogue fumbles his *Bluff* check and gets the whole party locked up by the town guard, turning the rest of the session into an elaborate prison break. It also happens when the players' actions throw up unusual situations that encourage creative improvisation on the part of themselves and the DM, such as gatecrashing a half-orc wedding (what will the vows be?) or converting a church of halflings to the god of thieves (just how much chaos will ensue?). It's these experiences of depth that make RPGs a truly unique artform.

Deep in the Dungeons

How does this fit into the Kantian story we've been telling? What does the experience of depth have to do with cognitive free play?

When you admire a painting, your mind freely experiments with different ways of making sense of it. Although we can influence each other's understanding of artworks by talking about them, the free experimentation here is a largely *personal* matter. It's something that goes on in your mind and no-one else's. The artwork is also *independent* of this free experimentation. The painting is neither produced nor changed by the way you experience it. What's special about the experience of role-playing is that neither of these things is true of it: the story is *collectively produced* by the process of experimentation. This isn't to say that we fuse into some sort of weird hive mind

when we role-play together, or that the choices another player makes are somehow dependent on what you think about them. Rather, we're claiming that the free play we experience when we role-play *just is* the process of collaboratively generating a fictional world.

But hold on a minute. Earlier we said that when our minds enter a state of free play, they stop trying to reach a *finished* understanding of what they're experiencing. Yet in D&D it seems as if that's exactly what we're trying to do. We're focused on uncovering as much of the world as we can, and *pinning it down* so that we can achieve our various goals. We want to know what nefarious plans the corrupt cleric has for the holy relic we've stolen, so we can thwart them, or just how the Lord is protected when he visits his favorite brothel, so we can exploit his vices. Our success or failure often depends on how good a picture we've built up of the parts of the world we're dealing with.

Yet we don't need to constantly reinterpret *everything* in order to be in a state of free play. This is clear from the way we enjoy novels, films, and other forms of art based on simulated worlds. For us to be drawn into the fictional world in a way that encourages us to play with various ideas and associations, we need a relatively fixed understanding of what we're playing around with. What's important is that we have the resources to keep on interpreting (and creating, in the case of RPGs) different features of the fictional world so we get a good mental workout. The story has to keep unfolding in an interesting way.

What about disinterestedness then? Just like any other story, the tale we tell when we're role-playing isn't *for* anything, but aren't we implying that the *purpose* of role-playing just is to make a good story? Well, yes and no. As we've already pointed out, a role-playing game is not just a group exercise in world building. It's a *game* in which we face various challenges and strive to achieve new goals: getting enough experience points to level up, stuffing our characters' swag bag with loot, and thwarting the villain's plan to destroy the world. It's a *social activity* in which we aim to have fun: one-upping our friends, playing pranks on NPCs, and cracking some good jokes. And it's also about *playing a role*: trying to keep our decisions in line with our characters' personality and history.

The elven ranger will give up anything to find the man who killed her brother, while the dwarven warrior would rather cut off his own nose than sell his father's ax, even if he needs the money to achieve his (or his player's) goals. Although most good role-players will make the odd decision to keep the story interesting—to further the plot, speed through an otherwise boring encounter, or to keep the party together—this probably isn't the main goal that they have in mind when they're gaming.

All this means that we always have a whole bunch of in-character and out-of-character goals that exist in tension with the task of producing a good story (as well as with each other). This draws our attention away from the overarching narrative and our role in making it. Most of our in-game choices are made as if we don't have any part in *designing* the world of the game, or the story that takes place within it, and this contributes to the experience of depth. It keeps the interplay between the players, rules, source material and DM that generates the world genuinely *free*, stopping our collaborative world-building from aiming at some fixed thing. It also gives this world a kind of *autonomy* from us, letting us experience the world as if it is unfolding *itself*, even though all its elements are contributed by us. It allows us to see the choices we make as spontaneously coming together to form a coherent picture of a world which is full of potential *surprises*, even though it doesn't exist.

This autonomy is enhanced by the *rule frameworks* that constrain our choices and inform us of unexpected consequences, and by the use of dice and other *randomizers* that inject small amounts of chaos directly into the world: all the parts that come to D&D from its heritage as a simulation-style game. So, while the players' interests are important to the experience of role-playing, it's not because the players collectively plan their actions to ensure the game satisfies them, but because the more or less messy interaction of their goals helps *embed* the players in the game world.

We're now left with the big question: why do we enjoy the experience of depth? Why do we get such a kick out of projecting ourselves into imaginary worlds that seem to unroll before us, playing the part of heroes in tales that zigzag in unpredictable directions? Or simply: why is role-playing aesthetically pleasurable?

The short answer is that, just as we enjoy admiring an Old Master's landscape, listening to Beethoven's Ninth, or reading *A Hero of Our Time*, the depth of a *fictional* world displays the ability of our minds to effectively build a unified picture of the *real* world, and this is pleasurable because it demonstrates our minds as fit for purpose. The long answer goes on to tell us how role-playing does this differently from painting, music, or literature, because it highlights different *aspects* of our world-building ability. Painting and music tend to stimulate cognitive abilities that let us make sense of *specific parts* of the world, tracing *patterns* in our sensations and *associations* between our concepts. These are only *means* in relation to the *end* of understanding the world as a *unified whole*. In contrast, the simulations involved in literature and RPGs evoke our capacity to pull all this together into a single consistent picture, *imagining* whole sections of the world and *reasoning* about how they relate to each other. They demonstrate the power of our minds to fulfill their world-building function holistically.

But the pleasure we get from role-playing isn't the same as the pleasure we get from reading (or even writing) a story. This is because the experience of depth reflects another dimension of the process of making sense of the world: it's *dynamic*. The real world is real because it *resists* our attempts to understand it. It can always throw something up that forces us to rethink how we look at it. The models we build of it are often incomplete and frequently just wrong. This means that we must constantly *revise* our picture of the world: filling in specific details, tweaking general principles, and resolving inconsistencies. It's this back and forth that makes the process of understanding the world a dynamic one. The fictional worlds we encounter in novels, movies, and similar art-forms activate our capacity to construct a picture of the real world, but only role-playing mimics the *friction* we encounter in bumping up against an autonomous reality. Role-playing presents us with our own power not just to construct a consistent world, but to do so in response to external constraints. The experience of depth is pleasurable because it demonstrates our ability to cope with the *reality* of the world. Deliciously ironic for a medium occasionally accused of escapism.

Back to Reality

As the first, indisputable role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons* brought this bold new aesthetic into the world.

Since its inception, D&D has gone through numerous editions, and spawned an industry of imitators, variants and blatant ripoffs. These have tilted the balance that D&D established between playing a game, playing a character, telling a story and experiencing a world: becoming more simulationist (*GURPS*) or more easy-going (*Storyteller*); more closely tied to a single character's emotional experience (*Call of Cthulhu*) or abstracted towards politics (*Reign, Vampire: The Masquerade*); more game-like (D&D Fourth Edition) or more narrative focused (*Polaris: Chivalric Tragedy at Utmost North, Dogs in the Vineyard*); establishing greater synergy between rules and theme (*Unknown Armies*) or making generic rules systems for any type of game (*GURPS, FATE, FUDGE, ORE, BRP, Hero System, OGL*).

D&D (and modern retro-clones such as *Castles and Crusades* and *Labyrinth Lord*) strikes an excellent balance, particularly for the artform's first attempt. We don't want to suggest that D&D is the greatest RPG ever made; nor that it will be the most aesthetically invigorating game that you could play. But it has a few things going for it.

We've spoken about the need for in-game goals to promote disinterestedness. The adventure focus of D&D on heroes killing monsters, finding loot and saving the world is a dependable, bread-and-butter goal, which most players will follow of their own accord. When it comes to in-character goals, the archetypal fantasy characters enforced by the class and race system ensure that even the hammiest actor can easily slip into a role. As for giving cues for a narrative for the DM to develop, the heroic quests for magical macguffins that D&D suggests are a dependable staple.

The fantasy setting is also a strength. A fictional world needn't be like ours to be coherent, and the *depth* of a world isn't the same as its *realism*. Many game settings (such as in the *World of Darkness, Call of Cthulhu* or *Unknown Armies* RPGs) use the real world as a basis from which to extrapolate, and that can be a great boon for fixing down certain points of agreement to make play and simulation easier (not to mention

being useful for lazy DMs like the authors). But the aesthetic experience of a successful, believable but fundamentally *unrealistic* world can take things to a new level, as we experience our mind's incredible flexibility in creating coherent worlds out of disparate or absurd parts.

There's more to be said about the distinctive aesthetics of role-playing. The debate about the significance of and tension between the *game* part and the role-playing part of role-playing games may benefit from this aesthetic model. We can add a new concept to our aesthetic toolbox for discussions of art objects: the 'RPG aesthetic', as real and valid and unique an aesthetic as can be found in cinema, theatre, painting, sculpture, music, dance, literature and more. Likewise, RPG creators may do well to bear it in mind when they make their games. How will they affect the RPG aesthetic of their game by striking away from the template established by Gygas and Arneson?

And if nothing else, we would suggest you get out your dice, call up some good friends, get round the table, and have a profound moment of aesthetic bliss as you unconsciously recognize your own innate ability to weave worlds out of nothing more solid than play acting, rolling dice, making jokes, eating pizza, getting tea stains on your character sheet, arguing with the DM, storming into dungeons, and of course, hunting down dragons.