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Dungeons & Dragons as transmedia vehicle of the 20th century literature
in pop culture

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DECLARACIÓN DE AUTORÍA Y ORIGINALIDAD DEL TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

Yo, Jorge Vallejo García, con documento de identificación 77141160 B, y estudiante del Grado en Estudios Ingleses de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Granada, en relación con el Trabajo Fin de Grado presentado para su defensa y evaluación en el curso 2019/2020, declara que asume la originalidad de dicho trabajo, entendida en el sentido de que no ha utilizado fuentes sin citarlas debidamente.

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MEMORIA

El estudio de los discursos culturales presenta la posibilidad de entrar y diseccionar de forma académica, entre otros aspectos, textos y productos de consumo cultural que nos rodean, más allá de las artes clásicas. La creciente repercusión que parece haber de narrativas alternativas es un punto interesante a tratar desde mi conocimiento sobre esta vertiente discursiva. A la vez que la televisión, el cine, la literatura o el teatro entre otros buscan renovarse, la aparición de nuevos medios multimedia en Internet parece haber conseguido que narrativas que han pasado desapercibidas durante los últimos años logren un gran calado en la cultura pop. Por ello, se planteó como intención principal de este análisis dar una visión más académica a lo que parece un simple entretenimiento. Como aficionado a este tipo de narrativas, veo en las mismas un universo más allá del simple entretenimiento, ya que estas pueden llegar a conmover, hacer reír o intrigar tanto como los géneros literarios que se suelen estudiar de forma académica. Partiendo de esta premisa, el Trabajo Final de Grado busca un estudio de las características, los causantes y las consecuencias de los juegos de rol de mesa o TTRPGs para responder al por qué de su creciente fama. El continuo visionado de retransmisiones de partidas o entrevistas donde directores de cine como los hermanos Russo declaran su afición por estas narrativas es, además, uno de los factores para constatar la firmeza de este tipo de entretenimiento en la cultura pop (IGN, 2019). A pesar de esto, y por razones de concisión, he preferido atenerme desde el principio a una premisa más sencilla, exponiendo los ejemplos que he creído más relevantes y que podrían explicar el fenómeno de una forma más directa.

La búsqueda de fuentes e información en un comienzo ha sido exigente, dada la naturaleza del propio trabajo y la escasa obra académica en las materias más actuales respecto a la publicación de directos en plataformas como Twitch. La organización del estudio ha acotado bastante la búsqueda de textos más periféricos respecto a lo que se busca tratar en este trabajo, aunque mostrando líneas de investigación futuribles como el impacto de los juegos de rol en la comprensión de la interacción social o el uso de estos en contextos educativos como recursos para el aprendizaje. La mencionada estructuración de los puntos a tratar ha dado lugar a dos partes claramente diferenciadas en las que a su vez se toman dos ejemplos que influyen de manera distinta la narrativa

de los juegos de rol. Por tanto, el plan original, aunque ha sido reordenado ligeramente para dar mayor coherencia al desarrollo del análisis, ha acabado manteniendo cuatro ejemplos principales. La hipótesis que muestra la estructura final busca establecer en el ejemplo de *Dragones y Mazmorras* un vínculo entre los factores de su reciente explosión en la cultura pop y el origen de estas características, extraídas de la fantasía medieval del siglo veinte, con especial incidencia de J. R. R. Tolkien y la cuestión humana del terror cósmico en la obra de H. P. Lovecraft. La bibliografía recoge por tanto desde fuentes más comunes como artículos académicos o libros sobre la literatura mencionada, hasta artículos de opinión, películas, series y otros productos audiovisuales, sin olvidar la mención a la prensa digital. Todos ellos conforman la que pienso que es una base suficiente para soportar el estudio llevado a cabo.

En consecuencia, el proceso de desarrollo del trabajo ha constado de una búsqueda, no solo en el ámbito académico, sino también de aquellos ejemplos que han dado lugar a este estudio, llevándolos desde el disfrute subjetivo de los mismos, al análisis de por qué un 'hobby' de nicho ha alcanzado la posición de la que hoy goza. El papel de motor central en cuanto al desarrollo de la trama y la percepción que el espectador tiene del mundo de *Stranger Things* es un claro ejemplo de la incidencia que ha tenido en productos audiovisuales de consumo masivo. La búsqueda de fuentes para esta primera parte ha acabado siendo más expositiva en cuanto a referencias, lo que ha llevado a proponer una respuesta en el uso de la nostalgia como recurso de creación de referencias para que la audiencia se sienta reconocida en las mismas. Sin embargo, el uso de *Dragones y Mazmorras* ha servido, no solo como guiños estéticos, sino como parte central distintos textos modernos, como *Stranger Things* o *Community*. Por otro lado, se ha intentado dar otra explicación que de respuesta también a la creciente comunidad de jugadores y aficionados al rol. Retomando como eje central la experiencia que cada semana emite *Critical Role*, se ha intentado explicar el éxito del juego mediante el éxito de este grupo de actores de doblaje. Para esta parte se ha tomado como referencia la gran cantidad proyectos en colaboración con la editorial del juego o Amazon. Además, he creído conveniente explicar de la forma más objetiva posible todo lo que implica, como jugador y como espectador, la narrativa maleable de los juegos de rol mediante uno de los episodios más famosos de *Critical Role*.

En lo concerniente a las influencias de la literatura del siglo veinte en *Dragones y Mazmorras*, el análisis deriva en los textos ya mencionados de J. R. R. Tolkien y H. P.

Lovecraft, principales valedores según la hipótesis inicial, del estilo narrativo del juego. A partir de este punto, he creído conveniente centrar el punto de vista en qué elementos en la literatura de cada autor recoge el juego para condensar el mensaje final de cada género. Volviendo a la premisa del análisis objetivo de la experiencia subjetiva de la que nace la afición por esta narrativa lúdica, *Dragones y Mazmorras* parece aunar en su discurso la posibilidad de que el jugador manipule su propio arco frente a personificaciones de ideas abstractas del mundo real. La dificultad en esta sección, sobre todo a partir del análisis del terror cósmico de Lovecraft y su aplicación de *Dragones y Mazmorras*, ha causado que los conceptos a tratar se reduzcan. Por ende, las secciones del punto dos no se centran tanto en el estudio exhaustivo de los elementos introducidos, sino en la replica de las sensaciones que el juego pretende imbuir en el jugador con estas referencias.

A pesar de haber querido afirmar mi hipótesis inicial respecto al peso de las influencias en la creación y evolución del juego con los años, las relaciones establecidas en un principio con la obra de los dos autores mencionados no han podido mostrarse como equitativas, siendo el concepto de la fantasía medieval de Tolkien un elemento clave en el juego, en comparación al elemento añadido, aunque representativo del universo 'lovecraftiano'. Aún así, el lector de este texto, como se explica en las conclusiones finales, no debe tomarse los juegos de rol como historias estancas con elementos fijados, sino como la infraestructura moldeable para la creación de historias propias. Es esto lo que hace, en definitiva, que la narrativa pueda adaptarse continuamente a los nuevos medios. Si bien la extensión bibliográfica no apoya en su mayoría esta idea de una forma directa, ya que no se refieren al rol de manera explícita, si que ha servido como base para establecer argumentos a favor. Como apunte final, creo que hay que poner en relevancia la dificultad de establecer una relación triangular entre tres productos distintos pertenecientes a tres generaciones distintas pero que sin embargo comparten un ideario común que los une. Aunque la relación existe, hay ciertas conexiones que han de ser explicadas con bastante claridad para entenderse, como por ejemplo el uso de los elementos lovecraftianos en *Stranger Things* a partir del imaginario de *Dragones y Mazmorras* propuesto por los protagonistas. Aún así, este texto creo que responde a las dudas que se le plantean a la par que puede dar pie a futuras investigaciones en las aplicaciones de los juegos de rol como instrumentos de interacción social.

ABSTRACT

With the new possibilities of social media and streaming services, some narratives like table-top role-playing games seem to find their way through pop culture. Their repercussion and referencing in TV shows and the Internet support the increasing awareness in pop culture at the same time that this sort of games is re-configured to meet the modern times in media, keeping their essence of pen, paper and friends around a table. This dissertation analyses the influence of the game in modern texts through its highest representative, *Dungeons & Dragons*. The successful show *Stranger Things* serves the purpose of analysing how the nostalgia created around the eighties and its aesthetic use of *Dungeons & Dragons* as vehicle for the main elements of plot and the focalised vision of the same. The live streaming of role-play sessions has also helped in this spread of the community, like *Critical Role*, allowing a higher engagement of the audience through the ease of the relaxed atmosphere of friends enjoying their hobby, yet reaching almost a professional level of production and writing. The analysis also discusses the roots of this game in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and H. P. Lovecraft, highlighting several points of the game like the characterisation of the races, influenced by the concepts in Tolkien's literature and the addition of a dark element from the cosmic horror genre, introducing recognisable elements of vulnerability, horror and antagonists' new definitions.

KEYWORDS: *Dungeons & Dragons*, Lovecraft, role-playing games, *Stranger Things*, streaming, Tolkien, transmedia.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WHY *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*?

The concept of culture and its influence in the daily life shows a paradoxical situation where two factors co-exist: the fascination created by the modern narratives and an invisible barrier between the so-called arts and the mass consumption media. One even may dare to say that the consumption of cultural texts has increased to cover a vast range of sources adapted to the taste of the receptor. The appearance of streaming services with exclusive content or podcasts broadcasted on audio platforms such as iVoox, Spotify or even on YouTube conform what might signify a next step into the evolution of the consumption of culture. By this, one may have a glimpse of the specialisation and flexibility of the content to be watched, read or listened, in comparison to the fixed timetable of the ordinary television and radio (Morgan, 2019). This growth in production has fostered therefore an increase in terms of creativity and innovation to come up with new and fresh products. However, everything is already done and in terms of narrative, this is clearer than ever, although this may be one of the causes for the evolution of culture. The repetition of successful formulas like the "Hero's Journey" plot narrative readapts and takes the best – or at least that is the intention – from previous texts. The reason of this can be found in the logic of experience and the fact that if the target is familiar with the format but not with the new nuances added, they will recognise patterns but still be surprised.

In addition, it is interesting to note how more and more cases where the usual receptor turns out to produce a new text in the cultural scene can be found, mostly as a podcast or as a live streaming. Now, anyone can upload their own program or show strictly fixed to their personal taste. Although the main purpose of every person while creating something new is to innovate, through videogames, transgressive chatting or even bringing back tabletop games as an excuse to offer an appealing product to gather around as a community with the same interests. In the case of this last example one finds an extraordinary blend of several factors involved. The first, and probably the most important stands as the addition of a new link to the chain of the transmedia effect created by the continuous influence of previous texts, first through adaptation and expansion of the same (Harvey, 2015: 60). Such texts, therefore, undergo a process of re-adaptation and interpretation to fit the new media. Although the concept of

transmedia may sound contemporary, one just has to think in how classic artistic movements created at their time a web of codes and influences for later trends and crafts. It is for this main reason, apart from others that will be commented as the analysis progresses, that new sources of streamed entertainment and specifically those based in tabletop games and role will serve for the purpose of studying the transmedia process in modern culture and the revival of past trends within this.

In an era flooded by videogames, high technology entertainment and virtual reality, factors like the one previously commented put on the table a question mark in how such a divergent narrative has reached the fame and popularity it is getting in the most recent years as several media have already noticed: "More than 40 years after the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) hit shelves, video platforms Twitch and YouTube are leading a renaissance of the fantasy roleplaying board game — and business is booming." (Whitten, 2019). What is more, collected data in 2019 by the Wizards of the Coast in Figure 1 show the astonishing community increase, hence social impact, of the 5th edition of the game, regarding sales, age and sex ratios in the community (Morics, 2020).

The present study elaborates on the hypothesis that this kind of narratives can, not only bring fun, yet also cultural growth in the social fabric and renewed literary aspects from previous generations. Videogames, as a

Figure 1 (Morics, 2020)

contemporary example of role-play, develop a virtual world where real expectations can be met through self-made fiction. They have managed to shape societies and behaviours into a set of archetypic behaviours, making the players feel the build their own story in a bigger world. Nevertheless, the roots of this trend emerge from table-top role-playing games and as the virtual homologue expands its codified limits, the analogic re-adapts through modern tools to meet the consumers' boundless imagination (Bainbridge, 2010: 2). Videogames have new ways of experiencing a text through visual interaction and communication. The natural evolution of virtual role-play, regarding the players' decisions and consequences seems to progress still slower than the community's demands on the matter, bringing about table-top games that allow the game to adapt to the player and not the other way around. Thus, the ultimate aim of this essay is to provide a full research of the role-playing games and the streaming phenomenon through its mayor exponent, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the reasons that have taken a niche hobby to an increasing entertainment over the world. This is meant to be carried out in both directions: from *D&D* in the pop culture to the pop culture in *D&D*, analysing several cases that may answer to its presence in the mainstream. Moreover, this game will be discussed in connection with certain genres within the literature of the 20th Century that might have inspired essential features such as the work and universe from H. P. Lovecraft or J. R. R. Tolkien. The purpose is to corroborate or to dismiss these authors as a main influence, directly or indirectly, in the role-playing creation. As a whole, the case of study will lie upon the relation between 20th Century narratives and the current pop culture with role-playing games as mediation to achieve a successful adaptation.

To accomplish this analysis, several voices will be kept in mind, both from outside and inside the platforms and from different media in order to obtain the information as recent as possible. This last factor is essential when it comes to these matters concerning ever-changing, evolving media. If it is true that insiders from the role-playing world such as the cast from Critical Role – quintessential name for this revival as it will be commented throughout the development of the essay – the intention for this is to have a bigger picture and closer glance to how this media growth is lived from the inside and the outside. Nevertheless, the objectivity of this text will be kept in order to carry a proper analysis on the subject.

As final conclusion, this analysis will try to provide a substantiated prediction based on the results of the study as well as shedding some light on the possible future or evolution of the role-playing games community and influenced productions, regarding as well whether they are receptor and adapters of previous cultural sources.

MEDIEVAL FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING GAMES IN POP CULTURE

Stranger Things: The 80s revival through Dungeons & Dragons

In 2016 one word was the cause of fear and fascination all around the globe. One of Netflix's most worthwhile productions arrived at their audience's screens. Four kids from a small town had to face an outer-worldly monster to take their friend back from what appeared to be an alternative dimension connected to their reality. This premise seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, however, it presents in a succinct way the seed of its "raison d'être". The spectator, through the protagonist vision of American kids in the 1980s, explores and discovers phenomena of unknown origin, and as so, conceptions and taken action will be filtered through their eyes before reaching the spectator's. The first minutes of the show present this group of friends spending the evening playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in the basement of one of the players. The scene leaves proof that they are not the coolest kids in town, but they enjoy. Self-made paper maps, a mother hurrying the kids to end for today and a poorly prepared attack strategy shape a domestic portray of which the intention is to evoke a nostalgia that will be kept in every detail of the show. Tension, then, scales as the dangerous foe is captured in a close-up shot and the premonitory spelling of its name cast a brief, fearful silence: the Demogorgon. Up to this point, less than five minutes into the episode, *Stranger Things* (2016) displays the core of the environment they want to be seen. A text that seems new but is supported in three pillars that may not match at first but that are completely connected: the 80s setting, role-playing games and within this, an otherworldly terror. Still, there is a reason to be commented before entering into the proper analysis about *Dungeons & Dragons* in the show; and this is why has this setting been chosen instead of others.

Figure 2: Stranger Things S1E01

Previous shows in modern television had used *Dungeons & Dragons* as an excuse for an episode or two, like NBC's *Community* (2011), a comedy based on the malfunction of a study group in a communitarian university. It is in its second season that the spectator is brought to similar setting of players gathering around the table to build a story of knights and wizards to save the honor and encourage one of them (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012: 442). Although this episode was aired back in 2011, the version of the table-top game the play is not the 4th edition, released in 2008 and consequently, the obvious choice by the scriptwriters. Instead, the group decide to play *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1978), and early version of this game that complemented the 1st edition. Gillespie and Crouse discuss the reason for this decision proposing that replicating the retro-gaming, through a uniform aesthetic that goes from the visual to the actual performance, a sense of nostalgia is created to engage the viewers to the episode.

A clear connection may be established between both shows as through an early version of a table-top role-playing game (or TTRPG) they build not only a plot around it, but within it, developing the characters from the prototypical roles that could appear in the game. The text can be simplified as one finds easier arches to follow: the evil foe that wants to dominate everything or the group of the most unexpected heroes to fight darkness. This narrative is well-known to everybody, easy to follow but sufficiently chaotic to still expect anything. The construction of present codes is given by the influence of a past to which producers and audience want to come back, almost as a comfort zone. Like the Romantic
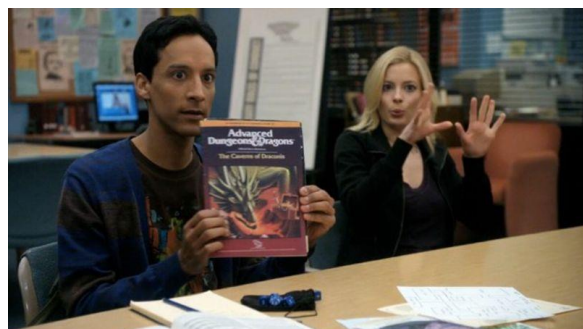

Figure 3: Abed and Rita from *Community* S2E14

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idealisation did with medieval and ancient times, the contemporary world seems to reconfigure the early past, highlighting the late 20th Century and the beginning of the technological era as a place where one was allowed to gaze into the future but was still attached by the analogical limitations of that time; the place where TTRPGs were born, establishing the concepts for videogames, but with paper and dice. Another possibility to explain the phenomenon of this revival lies upon the gothic view of the 'gaze' defined by Lacan and the Lacanian school. Lacan's conception of the 'gaze' corresponds to the object-cause of desire. The factor that makes an ordinary element the reason of desperate need is the uncanny detail from it that makes it slightly off (Landrum 2017: 140). "The Romantic Gothic looked back to the past to find their 'gaze', the element of desire and beauty, although that beauty were in ruins or had directly collapsed. This creates a bond with the past and how it haunts the present", Landrum adds. Thus, it could be said that the partial vision of the object-cause of desire – the past in this case – provokes an understanding of that specific moment in history through the context given nowadays, filling the gaps of the unknown data with idealistic details. As its ultimate consequence, due to the constant referencing to the pop-culture of the 80s, *Stranger Things* is definitely an actor in this process in the 21st Century (Landrum 2017: 142).

The process commented by Landrum may be the cause of the cyclical trends that continuously influence the new narratives. Culture, at this stage, returns to itself to be re-fuelled. In recent years, the increasing aesthetic from the 80s that has coped music, television and cinemas looks stronger and more perfectionated than ever. Landrum defines the work done by the *Stranger Things* creators, the Duffer brothers, as a "tapestry of signifiers from the 80s" (2017: 137-138). This takes from the selection of songs in the soundtrack to the general development of the plot that "could have been borrowed from the pages a Stephen King's novel". This latter point might be argued with some of the ideas previously exposed in this text. The visual narration, along with the script, make it explicit to the audience from the very first minute that the core of the plot is driven as if one would be watching a campaign of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Of course, due to the popularity of Stephen King's horror revolution in the best-selling narrative may have drained into the TV show's plot as this continuously mixes adventures and terror. However, the influences of King and the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Gary Gygax and David Arneson, find their way through the cosmic horror of

H. P. Lovecraft to a large extent. To this, it must be added the devotion that King felt for the writer, declaring that Lovecraft should be considered as "the 20th Century's greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale" (Simmons, 2013: 3). Moreover, the inclusion of Gygax and Arneson as Lovecraft's writing adepts comes not only for the inspiration that he might imbued into the game creator, but for the complete adhesion of the 'Great Old Ones' within the *Dungeons & Dragons* lore. Nevertheless, the influence of Lovecraft in the game will be left for discussion further on in this analysis.

Stranger Things may adapt to the audio-visual media Stephen King's writing style based on terror, madness and the innocence of a kid facing and ancient creature like in *IT* or *The Shining* as the closest references. As will be developed further, there exist a referential similitude with Lovecraft as inspiration for King, but this exercise of transmedia carried out by the Duffer brothers extracts its characteristic terror explicitly from the famous TTRPG by Gygax and Arneson, again, connected to Lovecraft. Nevertheless, it is their vision and context, overtaken by the current world affairs, the cause of their aesthetic beauty, old-fashioned but full of hopes deposited in their future; this present. For this, it can be stated why a game such as *Dungeons & Dragons* is used as the vehicle of one of the most successful TV shows of the latter years. The portray of a generation and the concept of transmedia itself that it may represent makes from this source a perfect reflection of the innocent belief in fantasy. The audience experiments this feeling while absorbed by a story of this nature, where both reality and fiction are blended as TTRPGs did back in the 80s until today.

The 'Critical Role' of streaming in the cultural spread of role-playing games

Whether or not *Stranger Things* triggered the boom of role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) or *Pathfinder* (2009) in the mainstream is subjected to tangent factors and participants. Nevertheless, the importance of the show for these texts compete directly with new media of easy access. These might have been also the cause of this new trend in the entertainment field. Games have evolved in the society's vision from an idle pastime to a mental exercise that sets a challenge for the player, creating an experience of engagement with the text (Mäyrä, 2006: 104). To this, it can be added the inherent interactivity of the media. Stories are not told anymore, at

least as they were. The evolution of games might have found its maximum exponent in role-playing games or RPGs, both through analogic and digital sources. Players cannot be defined as so, instead, they acquire the role of characters. Now, the option to be an active participant of the plot and yourself at the same time allows a greater engagement with the narrative and the experience. Creation is also permitted and, over all, encouraged. The new platforms and developments have reached the possibility to offer choice and personalisation of the text and as a consequence, the made the game the player's story. The plot is built through the player's decisions. This opinion is supported by Laycock's perception of the human as a narrative creature. It is through narration the world is rendered and lived, thus, making it as real as one attends to it (2015: 185). Having said this, one may dare to imagine Cervantes' Don Quixote playing a 'human paladin' to the amazement of Sancho, or the late consequences of the actions undertaken by *Dungeons & Dragons* session that got out of hands in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), after being put under arrest for killing a historian. In short, a fantasy world may be as realistic as the experience engagement of the players.

Another possibility to engage with a story is through the performance of other people with that world, who create from their alternative decisions and improvisation an experience as valid as that one would create when there is not enough imagination or possibilities. The youngest generations of this century grow up surrounded by technology and as a consequence, they learn at an early stage to coexist and benefit from their advantages. The Internet has become over the years a source of countless products made by and for the audience. YouTube or Twitch have blurred the line that separated the creator from the consumer, who in these platforms share the same codes and appreciations (Taylor, 2018: 79). *Dungeons & Dragons* leads the community created around TTRPGs within the streaming trends of the current days.

Figure 4: Critical Role's Dungeons & Dragons live-streamed session

The 5th edition of the successful game by Wizards of the Coast, owner company of the product and part of Hasbro, set new records in 2014, when this was released, doubling digits and reaching the numbers of the first

editions (Whitten, CNBC, 2019). As Whitten continues exposing, first on *Geek & Sundry* and afterwards by their own, great part of the renaissance of role-playing games in the pop culture stems from *Critical Role*. This project was originated by a group of voice actors that started streaming segments of their weekly sessions, but this has grown until becoming a mass phenomenon. Since then, the exponential growth they have undergo gave place to eight more adjacent projects to please the fans' demands, covering the whole process of the game, from the character creation to the aftermath and impressions the last session causes on the player. Along their way, as one accompanies them episode by episode, the progressive improvement of set, equipment and the increase of events, merch or sponsors are easily noticeable.

The question here is if their success shares any connection with the revival experienced in the media. Numbers corroborate the role they play in this community. *Critical Role* imbues the passion of the players spending an evening playing one of their favourite games into a production that is second to no entertainment product from television. In words of Whitten, it does not simply offer an interesting as well as complex plot full of recognisable elements, but it teaches about the game and how to play it (Whitten, 2020). This group of voice actors is not the only example of this trend on the social entertainment. In the last year, the sector of TTRPGs streaming has suffered an increase of the 1,142% over 2018 with approximately 19.5 million viewing hours aggregating Twitch and YouTube (Farough, 2020). The community has grown at an incredible pace, absorbed by the stories and how they are told. This last factor may be what explains the popularity of the streamed role-playing games campaigns. The naturality in the performance adds an extra sensation that what is happening is real and that the decisions made by a character are product of the context and not only a studied response to cause a shocking plot-twist. Improvisation plays a key role in the final outcome of a campaign, both from the players and the 'Dungeon Master' or director. It must be kept in mind that the very nature of TTRPGs is to set a framework of rules for the players to interact, but this is not bonded to the restrictions of a programmed code as video-games are. Thus, director and players are free to do whatever it is allowed in the campaign, making up decisions on the run, only conditioned by the posterior roll of the dice.

Intelligence and strategy are direct participants on the table, sometimes with an unprecedent mastery. In episode 93 from *Critical Role*'s second campaign, Jester, one

of the characters seals a deal with an evil witch to break her friend's curse by making her enchanting her with a blueberry cupcake with disadvantaging effects on the director's rolls. As this chaotic scene is described and performed, the rest of the players murmur nervously, containing their breaths due to the tension (Critical Role, 2020). This atmosphere reflects how a professional Internet show that could perfectly occupy a slot in the television schedule, still maintains the core elements of the opening scene of *Stranger Things* or any *Dungeons and Dragons* session in a friend's basement. Players interact in a sort of warm camaraderie and real engagement on fantastic matters (Adams, 2013: 76). This can perfectly explain the success of *Critical Role* by means of how they act as a reflection of the community they hold and represent.

While in a normal TV show the tension is built meticulously, leaving no room for details that could take the spectator out of the atmosphere created, streaming products of this kind leverage their spontaneity and lack of script to create their own code. They transform the text while they improvise, taking as reference what they have watched, read and listened to during their whole lives. This is the immediate outcome of the passively − and actively − consumed pop culture (Laycock, 2015: 201). In texts like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the creator is not the writer of the source book or the campaign; at least, not the only creator. The interpretation of a written scene while it is carried out by the Dungeon Master's performance deals with this last one's cultural influences. Improvising may be hard for a casual director or even for a player. The mental speed to create scenes, characters, settings and fights requires from the cultural archives stored in their minds. Therefore, the easiest way to accomplish a quick performance for the player is to retrieve references from other shows, books or even posts on the Internet that serve for the purpose. It can be dangerous as well to overuse cultural references as they can turn a malleable story into a collection of clichés, mining the originality of the product. This is essential to keep the audience clinging to the screen for a next episode, something Critical Role and many other streamings achieve every week.

In short, the spreading of streamed sessions of *Dungeons & Dragons* supports the influence of the game and the TTRPGs as a new element of the pop culture, creating new communities and transcending to other media such as a TV animated show with Amazon (Chaudhry, 2019) or releasing additional modules like *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (2020) (Whitten, 2020). These open a new dimension of influence of a niche hobby that can become something else in the foreseeable future.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS AS INTERACTIVE ADAPTOR OF FANTASY LITERATURE

After this exposition and analysis of the causes attached to a cultural phenomenon such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and the TTRPGs, the next step is to discuss the very nature of the game. Since Gygax and Arneson released the 1st edition in 1974 and during its development, many influences – unavoidably direct at times – have conformed part of the core of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The already mentioned Tolkien or Lovecraft, apart from Robert E. Howard with *The Conan's Chronicles* (1989) and other sources, establish the base for what the game intends to replicate and offer to the player. The greatest exponents of subcultural genres from the 20th Century literature are put into the hands of the audience to manipulate them and participate from them as one always imagines to do while reading them. The aim of the section is to dissect the main and most direct influences of the literature from the last century within the game's lore, analysing the process of character creation and the most prototypal uses given to each race and class, as well as where do they come from and why. Furthermore, it will be discussed the adaptation of the specific features that are brought to the game and how they diverge from the source due to the transfer from one text to another. The importance of this game and genre comes from the inheritance from previous narratives that have been progressively introduced as canon material through its five editions.

Until now, *Dungeons & Dragons* has been analysed as the vehicle in pop culture for the renaissance of the TTRPGs, a way of bringing recognised narratives from the 20th Century into this generation's influences. From now on, the scope of study will comprehend the main influence from other texts in the game, and not the other way around, as has been done in the previous section. This will try to explain whether *Dungeons & Dragons* is at the same time adapter and adaptation of other narratives. The idea is to carry out this study through the first and more important elements found under the front cover of the game's rule books. These will be, therefore, the character creation and in a second ground, the origin of several group of foes. Both heroes and villains represent an elaborated world building, given that it is through the main features of those who inhabit the realms of *Dungeons & Dragons* that the setting comes alive.

World-building through Tolkien's fantasy concepts

Gygax appreciation of war games' players lacking imagination is that of being unsuitable for his creation (1974: 3). Arneson and Gygax pretended the players to outperform their work with imagination, to transform and analyse their references in terms of fantastic literature. In words of Ryan Vu: "RPGs must be seen as a degraded form from the standpoint of a critical theory that seeks to defend and justify the fantasy genre's purposiveness" (2017: 282). Notions of literary and transmedia analysis of the players are not acknowledged by them, understanding the appearance of references in-game and bringing their own gestures on the table. However, there is a comprehension the course of action of the game in matters concerning the development of culture through the mentioned gestures and references. Players build their code, most of times limited to the people around the table, over the code established by Gygax and Arneson.

As the players do when the perform a role in the game, or masters whilst rendering their world through description, Arneson and Gygax did it at the time of developing their "magnum opus" in 1974. The core of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a whole game is a mix both of narration and mechanics, this is: what to play and how to play it. The mechanics of the game are explained by Laycock to find their roots in the strategy wargames, whereas the setting and basis of the possible stories to be told inherits the fascination with history, myth and fantasy that arose in the 1960s (Laycock, 2015: 31-32). Two clear exemplars of this trend might be C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien. Both developed and built fantasy worlds that reflected their experiences and context, treating in-cover topics such as religion, mythology and culture. Most of what they have written reaches these days as the basic canon for the conception of fantasy people have. Elves are of an otherworldly beauty and intelligence, aging as the world does, slowly and sagely. As a general concept, they hate dwarves, a greedy and hefty race with devotion for confrontation and gold, always living in self-mined cities under the mountains. Humans, on the other hand bring with them the death of magic and the end of the minoritarian races from the woods. These are little insights about what the perception of modern society on the stereotypes of fantasy are; images and concepts that come to one's mind when "elf" or "dwarf" are named. Other races, such as the "hobbits" or the "orcs" are born from Tolkien's mind instead of being re-adaptations of the occidental folklore. Of course, and as it happens with *Dungeons & Dragons*, there will be always a source of inspiration from where these fantasy representations find their origin.

The question here, targeting the work of the British author, is to which extent the game adapts the world of Arda and the Middle Earth. In terms of paying tribute, adapting or copying, the truth is uncertain depending on the many points of view that arise from controversy. *Dungeons & Dragons* – or its first publishing house, Tactical Studies Rules –, as every growing company is liable to corruption, not because of a ring, but because of the royalties and authorship disputes (Laycock, 2015: 46). In the end, Tactical Studies Rules would be compromised and sued by other companies as many of the concepts and terms that appear in the game. These are the cases of Hollywood magnates or companies derived from right-owner trademarks, as Laycock exposes subsequently. Thus, what once were know as hobbits, balrogs or ents were renamed as halflings, treants, and balor demons (Laycock, 2015: 47). For the purpose of this analysis, this fact provides a quintessential clue of were the roots of *Dungeons & Dragons* can be found. Apart from the legal issues arising from authorship, one clearly distinguishes the features of what Tolkien wrote onto the pages of *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1968) or *The Silmarillion* (1977). Whether this attempts on the legal field or not, the job of Gygax and Arneson was in translating merely written, hence somehow passive races into playable characters, without losing what made them be singular. However, the initial idea for the Middle-Earth and all contained within it, was to be a shared world built by different creators, in words of Tolkien (Harvey, 2015: 67). In terms of adaptation and world building, although it is carried out in a different setting outside Arda, the creation of the British author is used by many as source of inspiration and as key elements within their own works, like it happened with the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Figure 5: Halfling, treant and balor demon from *Dungeons & Dragons*

All these references used by Gygax and Arneson survive and grow through the game, as well as it is done in every text that carefully adapts this sort of stories like Peter Jackson's trilogy of the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), in the case of Tolkien's homonymous saga. The extensions and filled gaps a source undergo in the new

languages to which they are adapted mark a "before and after" in how the text will be understood by the audience, becoming increasingly complex, as well as richer (Schiller, 2018: 102). In the case of how *Dungeons & Dragons* is rendered and the specific characteristics it demands for being functional for the player, the conceptions majorly borrowed from Tolkien are measured according to the descriptions, behaviours and perceptions one expects from the different races and monsters, dealing with their cultures and religions. Thus, and following the vision of Tolkien, dwarves need to have a great constitution and strength, in contrast to the wisdom and dexterous gracefulness of the elves.

At the time of creating a character, the player faces six main skills that will measure and modify the randomness of a rolled die. Race and class will be the first two decisions he or she will have to make. Looking down into the pages of the Player's Handbook or any other accessory book to select a race, one finds that each of them alters and add several skills. This is made to fit the description of how a race should behave and the degree of minimum mastery in that specific skill. The game, provided that the origin and inspiration of several races are based on the concepts developed by Tolkien, tried to transfer the exact characteristics of each of them into active elements. Thus, one may acknowledge with certainty that the dexterity and wisdom of the elves is not only implicit in the original source, but explicit in the playable adaptation. With new codes like a TTRPG can signify to novices in the matter, every connection that can be established with previous references means a world. As this is a role-playing game, there may be preconceptions and sketches of what is wanted to be performed: a high-elf, a mountain dwarf or a friendly halfling of the hills. The carbon copies that half of the races displayed in the core book of *Dungeons & Dragons* entail, bring with them not only legal problems. They portray a warm welcome to any person keen on playing a medieval fantasy game of this kind, providing multiple already known choices right at the beginning. As a consequence, a sense of familiarity with the game, along with some sort of hint about what might on be good at or can do is caused on the player. To know about the *Lord of the Rings* is ultimately to know about *Dungeons & Dragons*. The previously mentioned elves and dwarves, the halflings, half-elves or the softened version of the orcs, the half-orcs, draw a landscape of similitudes with the Middle-Earth from the beginning. This experience is taken to other elements of presentation in the game, like the excuse of a tavern to initiate the plot mechanism, where it is most

probable to encounter the first confrontation, as well as the rest of your party like Frodo and his friends did in the tavern of 'Prancing Pony' with their pursuers the Nazguls and their saviour Aragorn, respectively (Cowan, 2019: 5).

Previous fantasy designed a medieval fable like C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) or an epic of barbaric lands as in *The Conan's Chronicles*. In Tolkien one witness a major development of the world and the races, following archetypes yet in an organic fashion. History in the Middle-Earth proves the changing of the races: friendship, treason and enmity, the progress of cultures like Numenor and their fall. Fantasy abandons part of the anachronic time lapse in which it is situated to tell the antecedents of their era. Ruins are not only abode for sorcerers or greedy villains; they resemble a past time of glory and decay, and the inhabitants of those lands know what they are. Races are presented with certain realism, they have a reason to be as they are, they have an origin and a culture that shape their personalities beyond the needs of the mere fantasy setting, they do not simply are, but become. Elves are less of a pixie and more of a human, for example, facing the solitude of eternity and stuck in their traditions in an evolving society. Ultimately, races in fantasy since Tolkien seem to have derived towards a humanising appearance, more appealing to the reader, hence to the player for wanting to become one of them.

Directly or indirectly, the heritage left by Tolkien leaks through from the beginning chapters of everyone's early journey in *Dungeons & Dragons* to the narrative basis of the game. A greedy dragon with unimaginable treasures fighting a group of adventurers is not only the plot of *The Hobbit*, but also the synopsis of many *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns. Underground cities mined by dwarves turned into gigantic caves infested with goblins make from the dwarven city of Moria an archetype of final dungeon in the game. Furthermore, it stands as the most evident reference from previous narratives in the game, getting adapted to fit in the new cultural texts and remain relevant to the new generations, as major influence of the genre. Wizards of the Coast are not the only ones that have re-versioned a narrative that has transcended the original pages, but they have served as hinge between analogic and digital interactive media.

Lovecraftian terror in *Dungeons & Dragons* and its application to medieval fantasy

The exposition of the major influences in the medieval fantasy literature within *Dungeons & Dragons*, allows one to see great part of what it offers to the world. Nevertheless, the replica in the formulas stated by Tolkien within the phenomenon might puts in but nothing new to the genre, with the exception of the game mechanics, adding little to the world creation in the end. In order to stand out from the rest of medieval fantasy narratives, *Dungeons & Dragons* seems to have acquired specific elements from peripheral genres. As it was done at the time with the *Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, several hints, which again move from the nuance to the explicit name, may reflect a direct reference to the world of H. P. Lovecraft that can be firstly noticed in the connection between *Stranger Things* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. At first sight, the triangular link between Lovecraft, the Duffer brothers and Gygax seems random, derived from the three different generations and the apparent lack of connection with one of the pieces when the other two are related. The relation here can be easily established with a few background guidelines.

In the previous section, the analysis has focused in the connection between the introductory elements of the game and Tolkien's influence in medieval fantasy narratives, the different races in *Dungeons & Dragons* in this case. As it has been commented, too, a second factor plays its role within the character creation process: the class. This last stands for the occupation of one's character before joining an adventurer's party. Most of them fit the usual roles in this kind of setting, finding rogues, paladins, wizards or bards, for example. Many of these attends to a specific use of the abilities, weapons or magic and even here some elements display clear references to other texts, like the barbarian class in reference to Howard's *The Conan's Chronicles*. However, these are still kept within the boundaries of the medieval fantasy genre where one is focused either in magic or in swords as a tool for confronting the dragon that devastates the villages and towns nearby.

The world of *Dungeons & Dragons* has been filled out not only with fantasy, but also with other landscapes, in this case, landscapes of horror and devotion to the unknown. And through the needs of a show to run its plot, one comes across the first hint of the transmedia relation between Lovecraft and *Stranger Things* through *Dungeons & Dragons* as vehicle of the process. The main villains of the show, the

'Demogorgon' and the 'Mind Flayer' stand for the names given by the protagonists to otherworldly creatures. Although the first began as the Prince of Demons in the first edition of the game, with the release of the subsequent updates, its story has evolved until being positioned as one of the patrons suggested in the fifth edition for the Warlock class (Crawford, et al., 2014: 109). The characteristic of this class, unlike other spellcasters, is that they bring out their magic from a demi-godish lord in exchange for their servitude. This seek of a secret and utter knowledge, finds its dark purpose in extra-terrestrial creatures of unimaginable power or in documents forbidden for the mortals. At this point, the nature of the game shifts from the fantasy, giving place to something else, kept from the sunlight. When the player has assimilated the 'Tolkinian' fantasy code, the game lets foreshadow this new layer. The conception of a deeper world in lethargy, capable of a new level of horror and destruction provides a radically different background for characters, campaigns and enemies, yet still set in the fantasy background. The similitude in the opening description of the class does not only meet with the basis of Lovecraft's world story-telling, it also gives place to the introduction of elements like the ancient and cursed *Necronomicon* or in a more strict and direct way, the introduction of 'Great Old Ones', the mentioned race of powerful creatures hidden in the depths of this world. Choosing this class entails a posterior pact with a patron, which will bind both of them, mortal and entity, to a contract. Sometimes this last may be signed with a fiendish creature of great relevance, like the Demogorgon, at other times, this might be attained with greater and more ancient creatures as it is the case of Cthulhu, the most famous god from Lovecraft's lore. Tolkien had Morgoth and Sauron, who were archetypes of evil lords in seek of power and domination through strength and selfishness who strayed from the right path (Bergen, 2017: 108). However, the Lovecraftian trends develop a craving seek for knowledge, and through this last, domination. They keep, preserve and collect the world's deepest secrets. In the game, a large list of foes follows this precept: Mind flayers, beholders, liches, ullitharids or mindwitnesses, among others. Behind the first layer of witches, dragons and epic quests, as said, cults to long-forgotten gods or dark societies of an ancient race scheme to prepare the world for their

Figure 6: Mind Flayer from *Dungeons & Dragons*

coming, always manipulating the feeble minds among shadows, following precepts beyond Good or Evil, as these concepts belong to the human conception.

In this case, the authorship problem that was given with the naming of certain inhabitants of the world of *Dungeons & Dragons* does not appear. The cause of this may be explained through the own nature of the Lovecraftian universe, as this is given in the way Tolkien conceived his world, with the participation of many. It was Lovecraft himself who added external creations to his world, like Robert Chamber's 'Hastur', the King in Yellow, in opposition to Cthulhu that ended up being one of the main representatives of the literature associated to the American writer (Mackley, 2013: 124). Therefore, the freedom that exists regarding this literary universe may stand for a reason of inclusion in the game created when audiences collectively share their experiences of it. This cosmic, unattainable horror takes part in the Lovecraft story-world, which in the end is "a shared mental model of an indistinct world that is unified by a specific thematic focus" (Leavenworth, 2014: 333). The malleability of the very source and how it is bred by other texts makes it the most suitable for its adaptation in a TTRPG, participating both from what has inspired it and from what has been inspiration for. Cosmic horror does not stand for a literary subgenre, but it portrays an entity in itself, with very fixed elements, but allowing all freedom of creation from them.

However, several questions remain unresolved taking only this answer as valid. The *Call of Cthulhu* TTRPG, homonymous to the essential book within this lore, developed a similar strategy as *Dungeons & Dragons*, transforming and adapting the original text into an interactive narrative. Nevertheless, if well it is true that players might perform their role within that certain universe, this game confronts the same problematic than any text focused in a specific source. The eclecticism of *Dungeons & Dragons* as agglutinant of several sources may not only gather several fandoms and offer different visions of the game's possibilities in the players' hands. The blending of its sources and the influence caused among them changes the general vision. It is not only medieval fantasy, terror or mythology; it provides a darker vision of the world as well, where strange forces and forgotten legends conform a medieval era of uncertainty, fear and adventure to unveil what is yet to know. There is no figure resembling Evil to fight against, it is the inherent Evil itself, at least through the eyes of the player, what one faces in the end. One may fight against what one knows, but the strength of that one cannot see but imagine, imbuing fear to the heart with the victim's own thoughts, may

be a greater rival than any dragon or undead army. This factor may have motivated the nature of the Mind Flayer in *Stranger Things*, invisible for most part of the show, only seen as a shadow in the distance, until the final encounter.

Adams' study and its in-game treatment on fantasy and role-playing points out the involvement of the players with the reality. There exists a suggestion of morality as playground for the distinct character arches that may arise during a campaign. What is the most probable to happen is that the players choose to fight evil, following social conventions and becoming heroes of their world (2013: 80). The introduction of such unimaginable forces might provoke a revolution of the basic concepts of a medieval fantasy narrative. The inevitable awakening of arcane gods to satiate their hunger, the expectative of a fate that cannot be changed may bring a new depth to what has been thought to be fantasy. This can turn an innocent adventure into an inner search of answers, looking for any valuable information against the powerful enemy. The players, therefore might choose between fighting to prevent the dominance of a superior race that will enslave humanity and becoming crazy in the process or to join the forces of a Great Old One, in servitude for their utterly desires in exchange of a knowledge out of the mortal reach, or even rebellion against them after finding that true. The dimension the Lovecraftian work provides to *Dungeons & Dragons* can equally nourish the possibilities of the game and the depth of its narrative.

What Gygax and Arneson firstly proposed with *Dungeons & Dragons* was a simple recreation of the medieval fantasy and battles with the players as narrators of their story. Nevertheless, the inclusion of what at first looks like a completely different genre entailed a step forward with respect to other competitors in the market. As was stated at the very beginning of this analysis, any cultural product that one may consume nowadays is a reformulation of a previous text. The present similitudes between the medieval fantasy in *Dungeons & Dragons* and the main features of Lovecraft's work and resemble a perfect ground to maintain the essence of the game, but making this last to stand out the average games from that genre. Subsequently, *Dungeons & Dragons* allows a characteristic approximation of Lovecraftian spaces, to the role-playing community and hence to the contemporary pop culture (Sederholm & Weinstock, 2015: 447). It must be recognised once more the weight of the Lovecraftian lore in the development of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the shape of Great Old Ones as a class definer or 'illithid' monsters with mental control like the Mind Flayers. The application of these

elements as well as their organic adaptation within the medieval fantasy world transformed the ordinary setting proposed by the game into a much richer universe. It is not only a matter of introducing elements, however. The key is how these have been melted into the organic possibilities of the text, creating in the process a product that set the basis of the genre, but at the same time brings something different to that specific market.

However, these elements by themselves cannot be said to stand out as essential to the game, as in the case of Tolkien's influence. They resemble an interesting nuance in *Dungeons & Dragons*, an added flavour to the role-playing experience, yet its acknowledgement is diluted in the fantasy, making harder it than other influences to be recognised as basis to the game. Lovecraft's work, in the end, appears in the text as a secondary source of reference, presenting additional elements to the ordinary fantasy that have leaked down in the narrative over the years to become one of the most charismatic factors of the game, as it conforms part of the common image given of the game in pop culture.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this analysis, the main statement towards the current situation of the games within culture revealed the growth of the sector in the latter years. More specifically, it was proposed that those games of performative nature like RPGs and TTRPGs were living a second life in pop culture. The final aim for this essay was to study and delve into the reasons of this new entertaining tendency. For the sake of this, an analysis about how the impact of the role-playing games has been driven through the example of the table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons* as main exemplar and paradigm of this sort of texts. The development of the essay has been carried out in two directions, being these in relation to the game in the culture and the fantasy literature as origin for the game.

The resolution of this first stage has been taken considering two examples, which concerned the global entertainment culture, in which succeeding shows like Netflix's *Stranger Things* can use the game as a legitimate excuse for its plot in order to

focalise the narration through the eyes a group of kids, and in the way, growing a sense of nostalgia and childhood memories in the audience. The second example in the transmedia effect of *Dungeons & Dragons* in pop culture media has brought to a conclusion the extended use of streaming platforms as the main tool of expansion for role-playing narratives. This has been stated to be caused by the spontaneity of this media and content creators in this like *Critical Role*. Gygax's creation has managed not only to actualise the texts commented, bringing them to a position of relevance in modern narratives, but to become an influence even for current narratives on television and the Internet. This confirms the initial statement of TTRPGs as the new participants in pop culture and opens the question of how will the community evolve in the comprehension of interaction in the future, considering the advantages of this narrative.

Finally, a retrospective to the roots of the game has driven the study onto its direct influences, found in the literature of the 20th Century. The analysis has treated two authors as the main influencers for the relevance and distinction of *Dungeons & Dragons.* In conclusion, it has been found the title to be adaptor of essential narratives and sagas within the medieval fantasy, with the addition of terror and cosmic elements to be distinguish within the ordinary fantasy as well as providing an element of vulnerability for the players. This last has been stated to be an added value to the text, given the impact of its elements in the pop culture vision towards the game. The analysis of the factors and texts influencing the game has led to the conclusion that *Dungeons & Dragons* is not only a game of fantasy, but the vehicle for fantasy narratives to their adaptation to modern times and interaction needs of the society, yet finding several levels of inference of the referred sources in the game's final resemblance. The answers found in this dissertation lead as well to possible new lines of research concerning how players may face the socio-cultural questions a literary work presents through its adaptation to role-playing games and how this affects to the understanding of this same questions concerning the relation of the human towards the universe and the ethical concepts in right and wrong in modern society which arise from the game's literary influences in the end. Still, Dungeons & Dragons must not be presented as a static discourse; the game's nature allows it to adapt and get adapted in order to fit and enhance the aspects the players want to develop in their journey.

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