



BOOK REVIEW: *FIFTY YEARS OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

Victoria Luna Brennan Grieve

Abstract

A review of *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, which gathers together essays addressing the history of *D&D*, its personal and cultural influence, critical examinations of *D&D*, and ruminations on the future of game.

Keywords

book review, TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *D&D*, game design, game history, players, popular culture

Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal, eds. *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*. MIT Press, 2024. 392 pages, Paperback w/ 16 B&W illustrations, ISBN 9780262547604

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) may very well be the most important game ever created. *D&D*, having evolved from the niche wargame *Chainmail*, is widely regarded as the first tabletop role-playing game. It is unlikely that David Arneson and Gary Gygax understood the impact their game would have back in 1974, but in this "golden age of *D&D*"¹ we can understand its influence on many aspects of culture including contemporary fiction,² live performance,³ and even educational practice.⁴ My own teaching philosophy relies heavily on my 20-plus years of experience as a Dungeon Master, and I count myself among the many people who have been positively impacted by *D&D*. The book *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons* is both exploration and celebration of this truly remarkable game.

¹ Sidhu, Premeet, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal, eds. *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*. MIT Press, 2024.

² MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, Jaakko Stenros, Staffan Björk, and William J. White. "The impact of role-playing games on culture." In *The Routledge handbook of role-playing game studies*, pp. 333-351. Routledge, 2024.

³ Mackay, Daniel. "The fantasy role-playing game: A new performing art. McFarland & Company." *Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina* (2001).

⁴ Brown, Bryan, Benjamin R. Doolittle, and Katherine A. Gielissen. "Medical educator as game master: what dungeons & dragons can teach us about small group learning." *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 15, no. 4 (2023): 428-431.

Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons is a collection of essays split into four broad groupings: the history of *D&D*; the influence that *D&D* has had on individuals and culture; critical examinations of the evolution of *D&D* through its many editions; and ruminations on the future of *D&D*. Each of these sections opens with a selection of vignettes quoted from game designers about their experiences with *Dungeons and Dragons*. Each vignette is casual in tone and emblematic of the section they introduce, providing a welcome break between the denser text of the academic essays. The essays themselves vary in topic and focus but are all compelling, well-researched, and well-argued. . The opening essay, “Is This the Golden Age of *Dungeons and Dragons*?,”⁵ is written by the editors (Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal) and explains the framework the rest of the book will take while also setting the tone as a reflective celebration of the legacy of *D&D*. Given the nature of reviewing a collection like this, I will be providing thoughts and commentary on the essays that resonated with me the most. This is not to say that the other essays aren’t worth reading, just that I will be focusing my attention to be mindful of time and space.

The essay “Fantasy Games at Fifty: An Academic Memoir” is a meditation on the study of *D&D* by Gary Alan Fine, author of *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, which was published in 1983. Dr. Fine is among the very first academics who studied the phenomenon of role-playing games, and his reflection here acts as a fine introduction to this first section. I found his reminiscence of his ethnographical process to be a delightful contrast to the more theory-based aspects of games studies seen today.

The next two essays are specifically focused on the evolution of certain design elements that are fundamental to *D&D*. Jon Peterson’s Essay “Exploration and Experience: The Game Changers” follows the process by which tabletop wargames changed over the years, and argues that Gygas and Arneson’s approach “proved particularly innovative.”⁶ For example, experience points grew out of victory points awarded in traditional head-to-head wargames, allowing a player to feel the investment into their character more acutely; while exploration created an imbalance of knowledge between the gamemaster and the players, allowing novelty and mystery to drive the game forward. Evan Torner’s essay “Combat in *Dungeons and Dragons*: A Short History of Design Trajectories” provides an excellent history of how the simulation of combat changed through the years of wargames and how that process directly impacted the early editions of *D&D*. Part of this is an investigation on the primacy of violence in the medium and how the mechanics of a game can, unintentionally, promote an ideology. Understanding the evolution of the game’s procedural rhetoric is important because “Those who seek to play, run, or design in the *D&D* space will discover that, more than exploring a dungeon or negotiating character relationships, combat dominates runtime play.”⁷

⁵ Sidhu, Premeet, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal, eds. *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*. MIT Press, 2024, p.1.

⁶ *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, p.23.

⁷ *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, p.59.

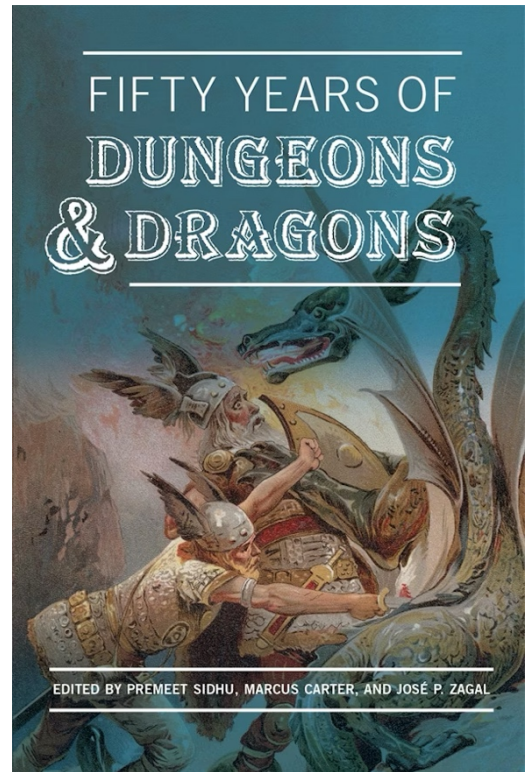


Figure 1: The book cover of *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*.

The ninth essay, "You're Going to Be Amazing" by Esther MacCallum-Stewart, explores the impact of the popularity of actual-play performances like *Critical Role* on the expectations of newer players getting into *D&D* via that fandom. It is a fascinating feedback loop to explore: *D&D* becomes more popular with the fifth edition coming out in 2014; *Critical Role* begins in 2015 and becomes widespread in the culture; fans of the show try playing the game and become confused that high narrative performance was not the default mode of play. This essay forms a solid partner to the thirteenth essay, "An Ensemble of (Role-) Players?" by David Harris and Josiah Lulham. The authors explore the effect that playing *D&D* has had on actors and performance throughout the various editions of the game. Originally Gygax was critical of those who placed storytelling before the gameplay in *D&D*, admonishing this "thespianism" as detracting from the intent of the game.⁸ However, as the subsequent editions of the game were created by authors who had played *D&D* through a variety of communities, they held differing views as to the ludic experience and shifted the mechanics of the game toward embracing improvisational narrative and away from the simulationist framework of its origin. This then shows the full trajectory: a game made by a creator resistant to the primacy of performance, to that game inspiring many to go on to perform professionally, and finally to those performances leading new players to be confused at the default systems embodied in the game.

"Spelling with Dice", by Dimitra Nikolaidou, explores the influence of *D&D* on authors of fiction. The essay suggests that modern fantasy authors have been heavily influenced by *D&D*, both in the maintenance of outmoded stereotypes but also as inspiration to explore and break away from these same conventions. Considering that *D&D* was heavily influenced by fantasy and science fiction (in fact, the first edition of the *AD&D* books had an appendix solely focused on listing the readings that inspired the game), it is not surprising that authors who played the game would be influenced in turn. The novel element of this essay, for me, is the examination of how that influence on authors from *D&D* has been largely ignored and uncatalogued. *Dungeons and Dragons* provides both exposure to and exploration of cultural elements baked into the system and settings, allowing fiction authors to be inspired to explore further. "The discourse on representation, visibility, and cultural hegemony that dominates discussions of speculative fiction today appears to have been previously negotiated within gaming groups."⁹ This reciprocal relationship suggests avenues for game designers to be mindful of their impact both at the table and after the game concludes.

Essay fourteen, "Forging Family Through Queer *Dungeons and Dragons*," rounds out section two with an application of queer theory to explore how queer players have been able to create strong, familial bonds through play. As a queer woman myself, I found this essay particularly personal and inspiring, especially since my wife and I bonded over a shared love of role-playing games. The author, Jay Malouf-Grice, relates a familiar story: a band of social misfits find each other and become close through the trials and tribulations of their character personas. Finding connection like that when you are otherwise an outsider to common culture reflects the stereotypical adventuring party narrative in a knowing yet powerful way. The author is thorough in their exploration of these dynamics, especially when relating a chance encounter with another gaming group (this one made up exclusively of gay cisgender men who replicated many of the exclusionary elements of greater society - i.e., misogyny, transphobia, and exclusion of perceived outsiders). Having experienced these dynamics personally, I was deeply engaged with this story. I would imagine that it could be even more powerful for someone unfamiliar with the dynamic of queer found-family to read, particularly if they can relate to the adventuring party dynamic.

⁸ *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, p.199.

⁹ *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, p.173.

The third section consists of essays that provide a critical examination of an aspect of *D&D* and how it shifted through editions, but the one that I found most impactful was “Hack the Orcs, Loot the Tomb, and Take the Land.” The author, Daniel Heath Justice, relates his personal experience growing up in a poor Midwest town as an indigenous person. The description of his rusting, post-Gold Rush town in Colorado and its treatment of native American burial sites was heart-breaking, even more so given the comparison of it to the ruins and tomb-robbing of the typical *D&D* module. His exploration of personal identity through making characters who themselves dwelled at the edges of society reflected my own experience. I grew up in a town that had once been prosperous due to the railroad industry, but had since degraded following the collapse of said industry. Furthermore, as a queer person in the 1990s, I didn’t relate to popular culture and often found myself excluded from many aspects of society. Justice’s articulation of colonialism present throughout the canon settings of *D&D* helped contextualize unease that I had felt having played in several of them. It is good to remember that *D&D*, despite these faults, provides a space for all manner of person to explore who they are and what they value, and to celebrate the projects that these players go on to author and design.

In the end, the variety of critiques on display throughout this collection serves to highlight how broad an influence *D&D* has had. The interdisciplinary nature of the book does mean that jargon from an unfamiliar expertise can slow a reader down from time to time, but the interconnectivity of essay topics helps smooth that friction considerably. This interconnectivity serves as further proof to this widespread influence of *D&D* in that essays deliberately reference other essays in the volume, which allows them to be in conversation with each other. That simple element gives weight to what I take as the overall argument of the book: that *Dungeons and Dragons* has had a massive and complex impact on individuals and culture, whether you have played it or not. Anyone who designs or studies games will find value in this collection, regardless of personal familiarity with *Dungeons and Dragons*.



Dr. Victoria Luna Brennan Grieve-Georner (she/her) is a faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh, where she champions the concept of ludic instructional design. She teaches in a wide range of topics, from pharmaceutical development to game narrative critique, and specializes in analog game design. She also holds a PharmD and specializes in the clinical care received by queer patients, serving in an advocacy role across campus and beyond. Most importantly, she lives with her wife and three perfect cats, whom she spoils mercilessly.