

THE PALADIN ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF DUNGEONEERING

Introduction

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is often described as a childhood game of “Cops & Robbers,” but with rules to settle the inevitable “I shot you first!” This paper considers the implications of adding rationalized rules to imaginative play in order to describe the relationship between disenchantment and (re)enchantment in the modern world because games “...all bear some marks of their origin; and the circumstances which accompanied their birth and contributed to their rise affect the whole term of their being” (Tocqueville 17). *Dungeons and Dragons* is primarily considered in terms of Max Weber’s discussion of the protestant ethic and the irrationality of rationality; concurrently, this essay also demonstrates the utility of *D&D* as a means to explore any number of cultural and social questions.

Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment and Disenchanted Enchantment

Weber famously described modernity as a phenomenon characterized by ever-increasing rationalization and bureaucracy. The spread of rationalization carried the assumption that world was completely knowable, eliminating the human experience of mystery and unpredictability in what, following Schiller, Weber described as the “disenchantment of the world” (“Science as a Vocation” 133). This disenchantment was understood as inextricably connected with the protestant ethic that shaped modernity, and in his memorably lyrical proclamation, Weber suggested that these trends would continue “until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt” (*Protestant Ethic* 181).

Recent scholarship on modernity has investigated how proclamations of total disenchantment and rationalization overlook the important ways that modernity has also been defined by re-enchantment. Richard Jenkins has argued that disenchantment and re-enchantment

are mutually producing phenomena which cannot be divorced from one another. “Formal-rational logics,” he argues, “can themselves be (re)enchanted from within, or become the vehicles of (re)enchantment,” and conversely, the enchanting elements of play and desire do not necessarily exclude “the schemes and strategies of organized, utterly rationalized and disenchanted, capitalism” (13, 18). The perpetual entanglement of these two seemingly opposed forces leads Jenkins to call for a discussion about the place of enchantment in human nature, especially in areas such as playfulness (29). As will be seen, a game like *D&D* makes an excellent case study for exploring the relationship between disenchantment and (re)enchantment, in part because the tensions between these two forces are made explicit in the game.

George Ritzer has developed two concepts useful for thinking about the current state of disenchantment and (re)enchantment. The first, “McDonaldization,” uses the fast food industry as a metaphor to describe the rationally optimized systems of modern consumer society. In many ways, McDonaldization, with its emphasis on control, standardization, and efficiency, could be viewed as one of the crowning achievements (or, just as accurately, one of the greatest tragedies) of modernity. Yet as Ritzer has demonstrated in his more recent work, even McDonaldization is not the straightforward disenchanting force it might appear to be. When describing modern “cathedrals of consumption,” he develops the concept of “disenchanted enchantment” to explain how modern means of consumption are being “supplanted by even newer means that are infinitely more enchanted, spectacular, and effective as selling machines” (Ritzer, *Enchanting* 207). Needless to say, Ritzer’s opinion of disenchanted enchantment carries a characteristically Weberian pessimism.

Developing a more optimistic interpretation of Ritzer’s “disenchanted enchantment,” Michael Saler has argued that a dual-minded stance towards fictional worlds, developed around

the birth of the twentieth-century, has produced a characteristically modern form of enchantment which he labels “the ironic imagination” (*As If* 30). Looking at the “public spheres of the imagination” that developed around fictional worlds such as the England of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth, Saler sees a form of engagement that “permits an emotional immersion in, and rational reflection on, imaginary worlds, yielding a form of modern enchantment that delights without deluding” (*As If* 30). This ironic imagination, which playfully treats imaginary worlds of enchantment as if they were real, is neither mere escapism nor delusion, according to Saler. Instead, they develop habits of mind that “help us to embrace contingency and difference and to question essentializing narratives” (*As If* 200). By presenting enchanted (and sometimes haunted) worlds in the rationalized and disenchanted form of manuscripts replete with maps and complex linguistic reconstructions, Saler argues, the ironic imagination also suggests that other aspects of modernity should be approached with a similar mixture of emotional engagement and ironic detachment. Saler’s work thus represents a significant contribution to the growing discussion of interrelationships between disenchantment and (re)enchantment.

Where Saler focuses on the role of belief and skepticism in disenchanted enchantment, this essay explores the ways that (dis)enchantment shapes not only what people believe about their play, but influences the way that they play, down to the structure of the rules governing play. While Ritzer emphasizes the antagonistic aspects of the relationship between disenchantment and (re)enchantment, and Saler highlights the ways that the two forces can be reconciled, the history of *D&D* presented below demonstrates that the tensions of (dis)enchantment can be productive even without being reconciled. The game makes an excellent case study of these issues, because it follows Jenkins’s insights about the importance of play for

understanding enchantment and is part of a direct line of descent from the ironic imagination's early twentieth century development to its contemporary proliferation (Saler, "Clap your Hands" 621).

The Invisible Rules of Play

D&D is built upon a paradoxical tension between free exercise of narrative imagination and complex rule-based limitations. Game sessions tend to have between four and ten players. One player, identified as the "Dungeon Master" (DM), is tasked with developing a fantasy world and describing its spaces and inhabitants to the other players. Each of these players develops a single character that inhabits and explores those imaginary spaces, interacting with and—when appropriate—slaying its inhabitants. Yet players do not develop the spaces, characters, or interactions through the freeform imaginative license of the storyteller as traditionally understood; each step is guided and limited by the rules of the game. Many features of the setting are represented numerically with scores (referred to as "stats") assigned to various character attributes (i.e., strength or dexterity). The difficulty of various tasks, such as hitting a monster or dodging a trap, is also represented numerically. Success in an action is then determined through dice rolls, which are compared to these stats. For those not familiar with the game, the best explanation may be a fabricated example of game play:

DM The room opens out in front of you. It's thirty feet wide and sixty feet long.

There's a wooden door in the wall across from you. In the middle of the room there is a stone dais three feet high. On it is a stone statue, winged, with a hideous face. A small fire is burning in a depression in the stone before it, and thick aromatic green smoke rise from it.

AL Anybody in the room?

DM No.

BOB Wingfoot the Thief advances cautiously into the room, probing the floor with his collapsible bamboo pole.

AL Egbert the Dwarf stands in the doorway, his crossbow cocked and ready.

DM With a clatter of stone wings, the gargoyles come off the wall and swoop at you.

AL Shut the door!

BOB Let me out first!

DM The gargoyle reaches the door, striking at the back of the retreating thief....

BOB Who has vaulted out the door like a human arrow, landing cat-like on his feet.

DM What's the probability of doing that?

BOB I'd guess about the same as climbing sheer walls [a formally defined probability in the rules], (Rolls two dice) Look at that! I made it!

DM O.K. But probably knocked the dwarf and into the doorway. (Rolls dice.) The dwarf is knocked down (adapted from Holmes 11-14).

Actual play is often more confused than this simplified example, as players attempt to understand the DM's description and argue with the adjudication of results, but it gives a general sense of the way that *D&D* combines the free play of the imagination with rationalized rules.

Rationalization in the Pre-History of D&D

Given the connections that Weber traces between the protestant ethic and rationalization, it is worth noting that *D&D* finds its distant origins in the wargames or *Kriegspiel*, of the 19th century Prussian military. In these games, military leaders practiced military tactics using counters to represent troop formations. The outcome of combat was determined through combination of umpire rulings and dice rolls to simulate the influence of chance (Mackay 13). This abstraction of combat through a combination of rules, chance, and human intervention provided an efficient system for testing tactics in an environment that afforded more control than the vagaries and messiness of actual warfare. It should not be overlooked that *kriegspiel* takes something that was “just for fun,” playing soldiers, and systematizes both its means and ends. This seems to fit Weber's description of Puritan asceticism turning “all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer” (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 78). Rationalization of play is thus an entrenched habit in the history of *D&D*, stretching back to some of its deepest roots.

Around a century after the initial development of *Kriegspiel*, H.G. Wells wrote a book detailing an amateur war game he and his friends had begun to play. He describes *Little Wars* as “a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent

sort of girl who likes boys' games and books" (Wells 2). Wells described the *Kriegspiel* of his day "a very dull and unsatisfactory exercise, lacking in realism, in stir and the unexpected, obsessed by the umpire at every turn, and of very doubtful value in waking up the imagination" (35). This seems a very predictable outcome after a century of rationalizing the game, and the soldiers viewed *Little Wars* as a way of countering that trend, in that "a *Kriegspiel* of real educational value for junior officers may be developed out of the amusing methods of Little War" (35).

In many ways Wells's game served as a re-enchantment of the war game. Instead of tokens, *Little War* placed toy soldiers and custom-made scenery on the nursery floor. Instead of the rulings of umpires and the rolling of dice, Wells and his friends shot spring-loaded toy guns at the soldiers, holding that "Rash is the man who trusts his life to the spin of a coin" and that the "inordinate factor of chance eliminated play" (8-9). They developed the rules of the game through tinkering, making choices based not merely on simulation but on what they found fun (12). Perhaps as a result, a sense of whimsy pervades the text, as when he describes "The Battle of Hook's Farm" in character as "General H. G. W., of the Blue Army" (22).

Yet it would not do to overstate the derationalization achieved in *Little Wars*. As compared to the *D&D* tomes that came later, its ten pages of rules are impressively modest, but nonetheless constrain free play with rules such as "A gun is in action if there are at least four men of its own side within six inches of it. If there are not at least four men within that distance, it can neither be moved nor fired" (Wells 15). This is not the free play of a child as described by George Herbert Mead, in which the player "passes from one role to another just as a whim takes him" (153). In Mead's terms *Little Wars* is not play, but a game, for "The game has a logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained;

the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict” (158-9). In this sense, although Wells derationalized his game relative to *Kriegspiel*, it remains a game in which each players’ actions are partially constrained by both the rules and that which they partially present: the attitudes of the other players, which Mead describes as organizing into “a sort of unit...the generalized other” (154). When writing his fictional “field report” Wells was free to assume the role of General H.G.W. with minimal constraint, but when actually playing the game this was far from the case.

We find, then, two important concepts in the prehistory of *D&D*. The first is a historical trend, in which a game becomes increasingly rationalized over time until it becomes dull and unbearable to the players. At this point an innovation is introduced which re-enchants the game, at least partially. The second states a similar point synchronically: there is a tension at the heart of a game like *Little Wars*, in which the players seek to exercise their imaginations through the rationalized constraints of rules. That this is at least sometimes successful can be seen throughout Wells’ descriptions. The question that remains is whether these two habits, the free exercise of the imagination and the fascination with rules, are ever able to establish a kind of *détente*, or whether the latter inevitably chokes the vigor from the former.

The Adventurer’s Paradox

Shifting our history to 1960s America, we find a situation with some similarities to the early twentieth century *Kriegspiel*. Miniature wargaming, as the amateur hobby growing out of Wells’ game was called, had increased in both popularity and complexity (Mackay 14). Specialized figures made of lead and pewter replaced general-purpose tin soldiers, and spring-loaded guns were laid aside in a return to resolving combat through dice rolls.

Like most systems, the wargaming responded to increased density by developing a division of labor. Instead of the British Imperial setting of *Little Wars*, players could choose from any number of historical periods in which to set their combat, including Classical Rome, Napoleonic Europe, and the Middle Ages. This diversification created its own limitations through drawing attention to historical accuracy, however. This meant that players were constrained not only by the rules of the game but by the limits of realism.

Games set in the Middle Ages were perceived as especially limited in this regard, and Medieval gaming was considered “a very dull period of war games” (Fine 13). As with Wells fifty years before, this dullness led to innovation that sought to derationalize the game and re-infuse it with a play spirit. In what would prove to be a momentous occasion, a gamer in Wisconsin changed the rules:

I was the first one to come up with a violation of the basic concept of warfare of the period. We were fighting an ancient game. Very dull again. And I'd given the defending brigands a Druid high priest, and in the middle of battle, the dull battle, the Roman war elephant charged the Britains and looked like he was going to trample the army flat, the Druidic high priest waved his hands and pointed this funny little box out of one hand and turned the elephant into so much barbeque meat (Fine 13-14).

In so doing, Dave Arneson had come up against a social fact. The players reportedly responded with disgust at this violation of the rationalized system of the game (La Farge). Nevertheless, Arneson pressed on with his innovations, and when his fellow players next met, they were in for a further surprise:

They found a model of a castle on the sand table. They thought it was going to be some place in Poland, which they would storm or defend. Then Arneson told them that they were looking at the ruined castle of the Barony of Blackmoor, and that they were going to have to go into the dungeons and poke around. The Napoleonic miniatures people weren't thrilled; they would have preferred to storm the castle. But they agreed to poke around. And around, and around (La Farge).

Despite the initial reaction, Arneson's ideas appear to have struck chord in the gaming community, given the events that followed.

Arneson was not, of course, operating in a vacuum. His group had already developed an interest in “multiplayer games, where different players have different abilities and goals, and nonzero-sum games, where players can get ahead without cutting each other down” (Schick 17). Another player in the group, Dave Wesely, had already experimented with changes that were revolutionary in their own way and possibly more important. Instead of just having each player take on the role of a general commanding troops, when Wesely ran a wargame set in the fictional German town of Braunstein, he also assigned other players non-military roles with individual goals (Fine 13). Although Wesely viewed the experiment as a failure because it descended into chaos, it was an important development in the tension between rationalization and enchantment because it led the players to adopt the role of the (in this case fictional) other in the game, emphasizing the play aspect of adopting roles rather than the game aspect of the generalized other (Mackay 14). The players were intrigued by this possibility, and the idea of taking on the role of an individual character was central to Arneson’s Blackmoor campaign.

Arneson and Wesely’s games illustrate again the pattern of rationalization and re-enchantment we have already seen, although their attempt at re-enchantment is perhaps more successful than Wells’s. By requiring the players to take on the motivations and personality of another, their games engaged the imagination in ways that abstract troop movements could not. Yet something more was also at work in Blackmoor Castle. Rather than taking on the role of a banker or mayor, as in Braunstein, Arneson directed the players to take on the role of adventurers. Georg Simmel describes the adventurer as someone who “treats the incalculable element in life in the way we ordinarily treat only what we think is by definition calculable” (194). In playing adventurers, then, the players take on the role of individuals who mix spontaneity and predictability in much the same way that the game they play mixes the

rationalization and enchantment. One way of understanding this parallelism is to posit that the players' habits of play came to shape the content of the game.

To state this in psychological terms, the importance of adventuring to the development of *D&D* can be viewed as a sublimation of the general pressures of Weber's iron cage (*Protestant Ethic* 87). Simmel describes the connection between adventuring and everyday life:

When the professional adventurer makes a system of life out of his life's lack of system, when out of his inner necessity he seeks the naked, external accidents and builds them into that necessity, he only, so to speak, makes macroscopically visible that which is the essential form of every 'adventure,' even that of the non-adventurous person (191).

Using the systematic rules of a game to experience the unsystematic life of an adventurer appears to reverse this relationship. Sigmund Freud describes the way that civilization inflicts trauma on its members through requiring "the non-satisfaction...of powerful instincts," an insight remarkably similar to Weber's idea that Puritan habits seek to eradicate spontaneous enjoyment (Freud 742; Weber *Protestant Ethic* 78). Because the iron cage inflicts rationalization on individuals through an ever-increasing body of systems and rules of behavior, the attempt to use similar systems and rules to model the free life of adventuring could be seen as part of what Freud calls a compulsion to repeat. Speaking of children's play, Freud says that they "repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of" (611). Similarly, the habits of play developed by Wesely and Arneson exemplify these themes in Freud and Weber's work.

1974: The Birth of a Game

The final pieces of the *D&D* puzzle came together when Arneson began corresponding with a fellow member of the Castles and Crusades Society (a medieval wargaming enthusiast club), Gary Gygax (Fine 14). Gygax had independently innovated a situation similar to

Arneson's infamous druid experiment, and went on to create *Chainmail*, a new set of medieval wargaming rules with an entire supplement dedicated to introducing fantasy elements into the game (Gygax and Perrin; La Farge). Gygax and Arneson's correspondence lead to the 1974 release of *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. These three short volumes (The Little Brown Books) combined the Arnesonian concept of dungeon exploration with Gygax's *Chainmail* rules.

The fusion of rationalized structure and imaginative flexibility is implicit throughout the Little Brown Books. The introduction explicitly states the connection: "[The rules] provide the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity – your time and imagination are about the only limiting factors..." (Gygax and Arneson 4). Although the rules span over one hundred pages, and are often highly technical (e.g., "A Sleep spell affects from 2-16 1st level types (hit dice of up to 1 + 1), from 2-12 2nd level types..."), the emphasis is on flexibility and imagination (Gygax and Arneson 23). It was assumed that individual groups would maintain the creative spirit that produced the game: "New details can be added and old 'laws' altered so as to provide continually new and different situations....If your referee has made changes in the rules and/or tables, simply note them in pencil (for who knows when some flux of the cosmos will make things shift once again!)" (Gygax and Arneson 4).

Despite this emphasis on imagination, flexibility, and limitless possibility, *D&D* is also a very American (i.e., Puritan) production in many respects. As with the Prussian spirit of *Kriegspiel*, it seems that Gygax's inherited habits as a second-generation protestant Swiss-American influenced the development of the game. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the rules for character advancement. As a result of their adventuring, characters in *D&D* become increasingly powerful over time. This is modeled through the accumulation of "experience

points:” accumulate enough points and you advance to the next level. This quantification of human development already carries hints of rationalization, but the true Protestant twist comes with the linking of experience points with the accumulation of treasure. Characters receive some experience points from killing monsters, but the vast majority comes at the rate of one experience point for one gold piece collected (Gygax and Arneson 18). This can be seen as an application of the Protestant ethic that Weber describes as epitomized by Benjamin Franklin:

“[Making money] is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate person of his life” (13).

From this perspective, character advancement in *D&D* makes literal and visible the Puritan connection between accumulation of wealth and divine favor.

Indeed, if we are to take Thorstein Veblen seriously, the connection between development and conquering monsters is equally notable in this regard. Veblen describes the attribution of merit to wealth accumulation as a development of the “predatory spirit” that expresses itself through warfare and holds that “A honorific act is...little if anything else than a recognized successful act of aggression” (14, 17). Tying achievement to combat, then, is a more direct application of this ethos than the “gold-for-experience” rule. Later versions of the game eschewed offering experience points for treasure, but did not change the established habits.

Looking at the birth of *D&D*, we see an intensification of the adventurer’s paradoxical approach to system. On the one hand, the proliferation of rules represents a further extension and organization of Mead’s generalized other. On the other, we have a system that encourages the players to attempt whatever their imaginations can conceive, and the creators of that system encouraging players to shape and modify it to their needs. Gygax and Arneson note:

“We are not loath to answer your questions, but why have us do any more of your imagining for you? Write to us and tell about your actions, ideas, and what have you. We could always do with a bit of improvement in our refereeing” (36).

The Early Evolution of the Game

The first thousand sets of *D&D*, assembled by hand in Gygax’s basement and funded out of pocket by Gygax and his business partners, Don Kaye and Brian Blume, took eleven months to sell (Gygax, “View from the Telescope” 5). The second run sold quickly, taking only six months, and growth continued geometrically from there, reaching 7,000 copies per month in March 1979 (Fine 15). In between those two points, something very interesting began to happen. As *D&D* became more commercially successful, players began to inadvertently answer Gygax and Arneson’s parting question from the end of the Little Brown Books. In 1976, the publications editor for TSR (Gygax, Kaye, and Blume’s company explained the problem:

As originally conceived, D & D was limited in scope only by the imagination and devotion of Dungeon Masters everywhere....But somewhere along the line, D & D lost some of its flavor, and began to become predictable. This came about as a result of the proliferation of rule sets; while this was great for us as a company, it was tough on the DM (Kask).

The paradox between the iron cage and the enchantment at the heart of the game had at least partially resolved itself in just a few short years and, as has happened in so many other areas of civilization, it happened at the expense of enchantment (Ritzer *Enchanting*; Weber *Protestant Ethic*). Although not speaking of *D&D* directly, Ritzer phrases the difficulty well: “It is difficult to imagine the mass production of magic, fantasy, and dreams....The mass production of such things is virtually guaranteed to undermine their enchanted qualities” (*Enchanting* 88; cf. Benjamin). One answer to the question “Why have us do any more of your imagining for you?” then, is that the game carries the seeds of its own disenchantment within it.

Yet this is perhaps unfair to both TSR and *D&D*. Not only was *D&D* partially a *product* of protestant ethics, it was also released *into* a world suffused with those values. In order to experience the free play of imagination promised by *D&D*, players not only had to navigate the paradox inherent to the game, they had to overcome their own habits as members of a rationalized society. To the extent that *D&D* sought to invert the adventurer's paradoxical approach to systems, it required the overthrow of established habits. Yet such an overthrow is not easily achieved, and as James reminds us, even "the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing" (31).

From William James' perspective, what this early history of *D&D* demonstrates is not that the claim to play limited only by the imagination was false, but that it *failed to become true* for many players. For James, "the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (135). To the extent, then, that players failed to graft new habits of play "upon the ancient body of truth" they possessed, the ideas behind those habits failed to become true. In the face of this failure, *Eldritch Wizardry* and other supplements represent the repeated efforts of game designers at "fulfilling the original premise of danger, excitement, and uncertainty" (Kask).

Advanced D&D

Meanwhile the struggle between rationalization and enchantment took a new turn with the release of *Advanced D&D* (*AD&D*). *AD&D* represents a move towards standardization that has shaped the game down to present day. In the first announcement of *AD&D*'s pending release Gygax claimed, "We know the limits of the game and how best to expand its parameters without sacrificing uniformity from campaign to campaign. Imagination and variety are desirable, but a thousand variant games are anathema" ("View from the Telescope" 6). The religious language of

anathema is notable here, as it invokes a standard of orthodoxy in the game, in which too much deviation is not radical innovation but heresy.

In the *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide*, Gygax explains some of his motivation in seeking to standardize the game: "If ADVANCED D&D is to survive and grow, it must have some degree of uniformity, a familiarity of method and procedure from campaign to campaign" (*Dungeon Master's Guide* 7). This connection between the growth of the hobby and the need for rationalization fits Weber's observations about bureaucratization in the political sphere: "Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern *mass democracy*, in contrast to the democratic self-government of small homogenous units" (*Economy and Society* 983). It is thus not surprising that the massive growth of the body of players (estimated at 150,000 in 1979) led to a more bureaucratic approach to the game (Gygax, "Dungeons & Dragons: What it is" 29).

In many ways, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* represents the pinnacle of the rationalization efforts of this edition of the game. Within its pages, Gygax not only works to set a standard to which all players would adhere, he also further rationalizes the process of play. The introduction to the work states this as one of Gygax's explicit goals: "I have made every effort to give the reasoning and justification for the game....How much rationalization can actually go into a fantasy game? There is some, at least, as you will see..." (9). "Some" may be an understatement here, as Gygax proceeds to spend over two-hundred pages of densely packed text developing a rationalized system of play. Here it is appropriate to turn again to Mead, whose thoughts remind us how far this development has come from the unrestrained play of the imagination: "There is a definite unity, then, which is introduced into the organization of other selves when we reach such a stage as that of the game, as over against the situation of play where there is a simple succession of one role after another" (159).

Perhaps the most striking example of this, as in the previous version of the game, comes from his handling of character advancement. As before, the gaining of experience points is tied to treasure accumulation and monster slaying, but GygaX also adds a recommendation for standardized evaluation of the player's performance:

Briefly assess the performance of each character after an adventure. Did he or she perform basically in the character of his or her class? Were his or her actions in keeping with his or her professed alignment? Mentally classify the overall performance as:

- E – Excellent, few deviations from norm = 1
- S – Superior, deviations minimal but noted = 2
- F – Fair performance, more norm than deviations = 3
- P – Poor showing with aberrant behavior = 4

.....
Award experience points normally. When each character is given his or her total, also give them an alphabetic rating – E, S, F, or P. When a character's total experience points indicate eligibility for an advancement in level, use the alphabetic assessment to assign equal weight to the behavior of the character during each separate adventure – regardless of how many or how few experience points were gained in each. The resulting total is then divided by the number of entries (adventures) to come up with some number from 1 to 4. This number indicates the number of WEEKS the character must spend in study and/or training before he or she actually gains the benefits of the new level. Be certain that all decimals are retained, as each .145 equals a game day (*Dungeon Master's Guide* 85).

Weber says that the characteristic principle of bureaucracy is “the abstract regularity of the exercise of authority, which is a result of the demand for ‘equality before the law’ in the personal and functional sense,” and this passage perhaps represents that aspect of *AD&D* more than any other (*Economy and Society* 983).

Ironically, GygaX's ambition for systematizing the game may have actually helped to preserve some of the enchantment of the game. If only because of the sheer breadth of topics considered, in many ways the tome is more of an esoteric meditation on the art and science of running *D&D* than a step-by-step instruction manual. Around the time of the publication of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, GygaX often compared the *D&D* books to Aristotle's *Poetics*,

implying a philosophical approach to the topic with ambitions towards rationalization rather than a fully systematized work in itself. In this sense, some of the adventurer's approach to rationalization remains within the text: Gygax sets his imagination loose on the paradoxical hope that a systematized game can also be an enchanted game. Unfortunately, in so doing, he also set loose a suggestion that resonated too strongly with established puritan habits to be ignored: perhaps the reason that *D&D* continued to struggle with disenchantment was that it was only imperfectly rationalized, and all that was needed was to continually develop this rationalization.

This appears to have been inadvertent; writing in 1979, Gygax spoke out against the idea:

Americans have somehow come to equate change with improvement. Somehow the school of continuing evolution has conceived that D&D can go on in a state of flux, each new version 'new and improved!' From a standpoint of sales, I beam broadly at the very thought of an unending string of new, improved, super, energized, versions of D&D being hyped to the loyal followers of the gaming hobby in general and role playing fantasy games in particular. As a game designer I do not agree, particularly as a gamer who began with chess....I envision only minor expansions and some rules amending on a gradual, edition to edition, basis ("Dungeons & Dragons: What it is" 30).

In his optimism Gygax underestimated the extent to which "truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them" (James 39). As later developments demonstrate, the puritan ethos into which *AD&D* was released could not leave the game only partially rationalized.

Mc D&D

With the *Dungeon Master's Guide* Gygax charted a course for the further rationalization of *D&D*. At some point in this process is perhaps more accurately described as McDonaldization, that subspecies of rationalization famously described by Ritzer to elaborate "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (*McDonaldization* 1). We now turn to the McDonaldized present of the game rather than analyzing each step in the

progression. It is likely that new insights would be gained along the way, but proceeding directly to the present moment offers a starker contrast in which to view the changes that have occurred in the thirty-odd years since the publication of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

D&D is now produced by a subsidiary of international toy corporation Hasbro, Wizards of the Coast. Much to the chagrin of players who had invested time and money into the (incompatible) previous edition, Wizards published the most recent (fourth) edition of the game in 2008 (Zonk). The game describes itself as “New and improved!” which is a sentiment that Gygax had hoped to avoid: “This is the 4th Edition of the D&D game. It’s new. It’s exciting. It’s bright and shiny” (Heinsoo, Collins, and Wyatt 7). As will be demonstrated, the current form displays all four of the main features that characterize McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer *McDonaldization* 1, 12-15).

Efficiency

In a McDonaldized system, the rationalized structure provides “the optimum method for getting from one point to another,” allowing “workers in McDonaldized systems [to] function efficiently following the steps in a predesigned process” (Ritzer *McDonaldization* 12). The fourth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* provides just such a process for aspiring Dungeon master, listing point-by-point steps for preparing a game session. Furthermore, it provides a separate process depending on how much time the dungeon master is able to invest. In a recommendation comparable to being offered a value meal, the first step for one-hour preparation is “Select a published adventure to run” (Wyatt 18). Within 4 hours, the dungeon master will be able to develop their own adventure according to their simple formula: “Design a major quest to lead the characters on the adventure, a handful of minor quests to spice things up,

and at least two or three definite encounters and a like number of possible encounters” (Wyatt 18).

By way of comparison, Gygas forewarned the readers of his guide that “What lies ahead will require the use of all of your skill, put a strain on your imagination, bring your creativity to the fore, test your patience, and exhaust your free time” (*Dungeon Master’s Guide* 86). He too mentions published adventures, but it carries the tone of a concession: “There is nothing wrong with using a prepared setting to start a campaign....On the other hand, there is nothing to say that you are not capable of creating your own starting place” (*Dungeon Master’s Guide* 87). Even though Gygas’s work contained the seeds from which the efficiency-oriented model of development would grow, he emphasizes craft where fourth edition streamlines process.

Calculability

McDonaldized systems also lead those within them to “emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of their work”, and this is perhaps the area where *D&D* currently displays the greatest degree of McDonaldization (Ritzer, *McDonaldization* 13). Early dungeon masters were given rough guidelines for design principles such as stocking dungeons with creatures of varying ferocity and treasures of varying value or how long characters might take to advance in level, but in fourth edition all of these concepts are reduced to numbers. In the section on encounter design, dungeon masters are told that “on average, it takes a character eight to ten encounters to gain a level,” and presented with a table (Figure 1; Wyatt 104).

ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTY	
Level of Encounter	Number of Encounters
Level - 1	1 encounter
Level + 0	3 encounters, 1 major quest
Level + 1	3 encounters
Level + 3	1 encounter

Figure 1. Quantified encounter design in fourth edition.
(Wyatt 104).

Furthermore, each encounter is constructed by spending an XP (experience point) budget, with each monster in the combat costing a set amount of experience points. To further simplify the process, dungeon masters are presented with “encounter templates.” A hard version of the Commander and Troops template, for example, calls for a “Commander of level $n+6$,” “3 troops of level $n+1$,” and “2 artillery of level $n+1$ ” (Wyatt 57-8). The numbers crunch extends even down to the level of monster design, by which dungeon masters can create new monsters through meticulously balanced formulas (184). In this system, the essence of the monster or encounter or monster is the formula; the qualitative aspects are like a skin overlaid on this framework.

Of course, quantitative calculation has always been a part of *D&D*; a business partner of Flint Dille, one of Gygax’s friends and collaborators, has said that “to understand *D&D*, you have to understand that Gary thought like an insurance actuary. *D&D* is fantasy fiction through actuarial science” (Macris). In fourth edition, however, the quantitative aspects have expanded to cover aspects of the game that even this “actuarial science” left to the free play of the imagination. Through a mechanic called “skill challenges,” the game converts a role-playing event such as negotiating with a local duke into a quantitatively governed dice-rolling session, described as “Level: Equal to the level of the party; Complexity 3 (requires 8 successes before 4 failures)” (Wyatt 76). Gone is the uneasy treaty between rationalization and enchantment; here, the system is all-encompassing.

Predictability

One of the most compelling features of McDonaldized systems is their predictability. When a customer walks into a McDonalds and orders a Big Mac, they know that the product they receive will be the same every time, whether they are in New York City or New Orleans; they also know that it will be delivered with the characteristic McDonalds speed (Ritzer

McDonaldization 13). To a certain extent, the calculability of fourth edition *D&D* creates this predictability; players know that each level of their advancement will consist of eight to ten encounters and that they should receive ten “treasure parcels”, one of which will be a magic item four levels higher than them (Wyatt 126). Yet this predictability is not limited to the game system alone; it also extends to the approach to play encouraged by Wizards of the Coast.

In 2010 Wizards launched a new program called “D&D Encounters,” “an exciting weekly campaign that plays out one epic encounter at a time” (Wizards of the Coast, “Official Home Page”). The basic idea of the program is that each week players around the country gather at their local game store to play in a short adventure distributed by the company. Because the adventures are centrally distributed, on any given week every game store running an Encounters event has the same adventure as every other. Just as the customer ordering a Big Mac knows that they will get the predictable McDonalds product, so too a player attending an Encounters event knows that they will be getting the official Wizards of the Coast experience. Advertisement of D&D Encounters also emphasizes the ease with which players can fit the game into their busy schedule: “Each session only takes 1-2 hours to play, so it’s easy to fit your game in after school or work. And each week there’s a new and exciting challenge. Jump in anytime!” (Wizards of the Coast, “Event (D&D Encounters)). In more ways than one, D&D Encounters represents a fast food version of the *D&D* experience.

Control

If a McDonaldized system is going to be maintained, it is important that an efficient means of control is employed over the elements of that system (Ritzer *McDonaldization* 15). Attempts at maintaining control over *D&D* go back to Gygax, but his means of achieving that goal were relatively limited, requiring that he convince players of his own personal expertise:

“TSR desires to maintain quality and consistency of play in D&D. We know the limits of the game and how best to expand its parameters without sacrificing uniformity from campaign to campaign” (Gygax “View From the Telescope” 6). Wizards of the Coast uses technology to maintain control over the game in a more subtle, but also perhaps more effective way:

Finally, you can enhance your game with a subscription to *D&D Insider* (D&DI)...an online supplement to the pen-and-paper game. D&DI gives you a ready source of adventures, new rules options to try out, and an array of online tools to make your game go more smoothly” (Wyatt 7).

If Wizards can succeed at convincing players that D&DI is *convenient* (“make your game go more smoothly”), they need not necessarily convince them that the content provided is *better*.

One important aspect of D&DI is the D&D Compendium, a searchable database of all the games’ rules. If Wizards wants to change a rule, they do not need to convince players to change the way they play, they simply update the entry in the database. Everyone subscribing to the service will see the new rule as written the next time they access the database. This system also connects with their Character Builder (“Building and editing your characters has never been easier!”), which only lists powers, skills, races, etc. that exist in the database (Wizards of the Coast “Event (D&D Encounters)). Players can theoretically develop customized, homebrewed characters and rules, but once they have bought into the McDonaldized system, they often find it too inconvenient. Wizards even provides the extra-convenient “Choose for me” button every step of the way for the player who is overwhelmed the pre-cooked options presented to them.

The Irrationality of Rationality

We have arrived, then, at the point where *D&D* has fallen submitted to the Weberian claim that “rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities” (Ritzer *McDonaldization* 16). Pursuing the phantom of a completely rationalized game that Gygax inadvertently summoned, developers have created a situation in which players are supposed to exercise their imagination

by selecting (or having selected for them) pre-packaged fantasy characters and sending them into ready-to-explore “adventures.” Speaking of the previous version of the game, which is not even as fully rationalized as the current, game designer William Connors has said that “the heart and soul of the game was gone. To me, it wasn’t all that much more exciting than playing with an Excel spreadsheet” (La Farge). To Weber’s “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart,” perhaps one could add “players without imagination” (Weber *Protestant Ethic* 87).

Aftermath

This situation seems quite dismal for imaginative expression in *D&D*. Recent years have also brought potentially promising developments that reflect Weber’s belief that while the iron cage is “bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production” it can only do so “until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt” (*Protestant Ethic* 86). While it is not clear what the *D&D* equivalent of fossilized coal might be, or how it could be exhausted, changes to the conditions in which the game exists may be enough to at reinstate the game’s uneasy truce between rationalization and enchantment. A growing collection of players are using the internet to publish simulacra of older versions of the game. These “retro-clones” are often made available free of charge, which could free them from some of the rationalizing habits built into the standard economic models of game development. The community that supports and plays these games is loosely referred to as the “Old School Renaissance,” These groups may be the “great rebirth of old ideas and ideals” that Weber suggested (*Protestant Ethic* 87). What the history presented here suggests is that even if the movement is successful at pushing back the rationalization of the game, it is not likely to fully exorcise it. It may be that completely solving the paradox between rationality and enchantment at the heart of the game is not desirable. As

with Simmel's adventurer, perhaps the feature that captures the modern imagination in *D&D* is approaching lack of system as if it were a system.

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