

A READER RESPONSE APPROACH TO STORYTELLING AND TABLETOP GAMES:
THE PLAYER'S EXPERIENCE OF DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND ITS
PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By

Noah Hansen

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English

April 2023

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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Noah Hansen

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota
State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Anastasiya Andrianova

Chair

Dr. Sean Burt

Dr. Sigurd Johnson

Approved:

April 18, 2023

Date

Dr. Sean Burt

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a role-playing game (RPG) that has exploded in popularity since its conception in the 1970s. This paper aims to examine how D&D, and other RPGs like it, can be utilized within an academic setting by utilizing Reader Response theory. This theory, pioneered by theorists Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, would serve to measure the impact that D&D has on the players. Using an IRB approved study, this paper views the emotional impact, literary experience, and individual connections that participants make while playing D&D to show the worth that D&D has as a literary tool and pedagogical device. These responses from participants would also lead to viewing D&D as a pedagogical tool by taking inspiration from Simulation Games, Devised Theatre, and the use of Reader Response within the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have helped me get to where I am today. First, I would like to recognize the work and care that Dr. Andrianova had when taking on the role of my advisor. This paper would not be in the state that it is in without your help. Thank you for getting me timely feedback when I've submitted drafts to you incredibly late into the night, or more accurately very early in the morning. Next, I would like to recognize the friendships that I formed with my Cohort. You are what kept me sane as I moved towards the daunting challenge of writing this paper. Shoutout to Kerri and Kayla for always being there to answer questions or more importantly, to keep the stress away. Finally, thank you to my family for believing in me while I underwent this academic journey.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RPG.....	Roleplaying Game
D&D.....	Dungeons and Dragons
DND.....	Dungeons and Dragons
DM.....	Dungeon Master
GM.....	Game Master
IRB.....	Independent Review Board

1. INTRODUCTION

I was already familiar with Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) the first time I sat down to play it with a group of friends. Like many other new players, my introduction to the game came from hearing the tales and stories that friends experienced during their games. It is through these shared stories of the game that I found myself with an itch to somehow play D&D. It would be a few years after hearing the adventures of others that I would finally be able to role my own dice and experience my own adventures. This adventure would arrive from a different role-playing game (RPG) set in the DC Comics universe. Instead of a *Lord of the Rings* type of adventure game, this hero focused RPG was more akin to a *Daredevil* or *Avengers* type of adventure. This gateway to D&D would introduce me to some of the friends that I would game with for many years to come. I would no longer be an outsider yearning to play this game. During this time of trying to get my gaming group together, I was constantly creating potential characters and the background and stories that made these characters up.

While my friend group was getting together to play D&D, a new show was taking the internet by storm, and was even inspiring the games in which I was playing. *Critical Role*, an online D&D game that follows a group of professional voice actors and friends showed just how magical this game could be. This show, along with the inclusion of D&D into things like *Community*, *South Park*, and *Stranger Things* (and more) sparked a D&D renaissance and captured the hearts of thousands of others and made people want to play D&D again. I was captivated by the stories that these players in *Critical Role* were taking part in. Like a true nerd, I would rush back from marching band practice to catch the beginning of their livestream. *Critical Role* showed what an “ideal” game of D&D could look like through the players engagement into the game and the friendship that was on display. It even inspired jargon within the D&D

community, with one such phrase being the “Mercer effect,” named after the Dungeon Master, Mathew Mercer. Screen Rants article on the topic, written by Christoph Langum describes it as such, “Because the new players are only familiar with the tabletop RPG at the peak level of entertainment *Critical Role* offers, some expect for their experience to mirror the show’s quality” (Langum). New players (and some old) would expect their table/group to replicate the experience that they have seen on the show without considering that the players on *Critical Role* have experience in D&D, acting, and even improv. The Mercer Effect has spawned many other articles, forum posts, and video essays on YouTube debating the positive and negatives this has on the game.

Today, the stories that Matt Mercer is sharing with his group of friends have been picked up by Amazon and can be watched in *The Legend of Vox Machina*, on Prime Video. *The Legend of Vox Machina* is faithful to the events that the players experienced at their table and follows campaign one of *Critical Role* (at the time of this paper they are currently on campaign three). This conversion of game to streamed show highlights the value that these stories have to individuals. Viewers of the game saw and experienced the story when the players were sitting around the table and saw there was value in the story which led to the creation of an animated series. The stories at the table came to life on the “silver screen”, or the streaming equivalent of it. What is unique to *The Legends of Vox Machina* is that it was originally funded through Kickstarter, so thousands of people thought these stories were worth the investment.

Within the preface of the *D&D Player’s Handbook*, Mike Mearls says it best when he describes D&D:

Playing D&D is an exercise in collaborative creation. You and your friends create epic stories filled with tension and memorable drama. You create silly in-jokes that make you laugh years later. The dice will be cruel to you, but you will soldier on. Your collective

creativity will build stories that you will tell again and again, ranging from utterly absurd to the stuff of legend (Mearls 4).

These stories are essentially lived experiences for these players of the game. Players say, “remember when I did this” instead of “remember when my character did this”. The stories told within D&D are personal, emotional, and as shown above, even profitable.

To those that are unfamiliar with this amazing game, D&D is a game where there are multiple players with separate roles. Specifically, the role of Player (big ‘P’) and the role Dungeon Master/Game Master (DM or GM). Of the two roles the more significant role (if slightly) is that of the DM. The DM is a player that narrates most of the stories and events that take place within the game. They act as the mediator between the other Players and the game world that is being interacted with. According to the *D&D Player’s Handbook* “One player, however, takes on the role of Dungeon Master, the game’s lead storyteller and referee. The DM creates adventures for the characters, who navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore” (Mearls et al 5). When the player wants to open a locked door or attack the dragon wreaking havoc on the player’s favorite town, the DM will interpret the desires of the Players against the challenge that desired action may pose for the player to succeed in. This is usually done by rolling dice and comparing the number of the die role against the number set by the DM. The higher the number the more likely outcome of success. After, it is up to the DM to narrate the success or failure of the Players actions.

The other role is that of the Player. While the DM controls most of the world and is still considered to be a player, in this context the Player only (usually) controls the actions of a single character that they have created within the rules of the game (compared to the DM which will control multiple characters and monsters). This interaction between Player and DM drives the game forward and the narrative that is being told. This storytelling collaboration is unique to

D&D and differs than the “standard” storytelling devices that we may find in the written novel. “Because the DM can improvise to react to anything the players attempt, D&D is infinitely flexible, and each adventure can be exciting and unexpected” (Mearls et al 5). This ability to change the story on a whim, for all players, drives the unique storytelling ability. With this change in storytelling medium moving away from an established norm with the written novel, a new way approaching literature and storytelling can be found within roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons. D&D is not the only roleplaying game available to play, however, it is the one in which I find the most familiarity with.

This “value” and “worth” associated with these stories, or stories like these, is what I will gain insight in. This paper aims to examine that collaboration found within a campaign of D&D. A campaign is a game of D&D that follows an overarching story arc that may take months to years to complete. This will be accomplished through an IRB (Institutional Review Board) approved study where the Players emotional thought process and decision-making process will be evaluated using surveys and questionnaires. All with the goal of capturing the collaborative process that D&D lends itself towards. Each individual Player experiences and approaches the game in separate ways. Because of the individuality included in the collaboration, one Player’s experience and understanding of the game’s story/narrative will usually differ from the other Player’s experience and understanding. This difference in understanding between Players at the same table is at the core of what I wish to further explore and examine.

The study was conducted over a period of several months, which brought with it several D&D sessions over those months. These sessions, primarily the responses from these sessions, were what was to be examined. Participants, the Players within the game, would share their emotional feeling at the beginning of the game as well as what they feel like they have

contributed to the story. This was all an attempt to see what outside influences were taking place within the game. Players were bringing something to the game, this was their life experiences. These experiences differ from the player across from them. It is this difference between the players at the table and the way they interact with the story of *Decent into Avernus*, a D&D module created by Wizards of the Coast, the publisher and owner of Dungeons and Dragons. A module was chosen for this study as a way to have a published entity in which to compare the responses from players with.

Interviewing participants within the study was the primary way in which I gathered information. The responses to questions that I gathered from those participating in the Dungeons and Dragons study. One of the most important aspects of effective interviewing is to create an environment in which the participants would feel free to share their perspectives on the questions asked. An environment where the participant is at ease is important for a successful interview process. Utilizing surveys as one of my research methods means that I can compare the research work that I have with the live experience with players of D&D. The responses from these participants will be able to show how Reader Response theory interacts with a medium like D&D. I will use the range of responses that I receive to show the evolution of the participants' entanglement, or connection, they have on the story, as well as the impact the story has on them. These survey/interview questions also act as a guide when I examine how the literature would approach the participants and their responses.

The first section of this paper will primarily focus on establishing the theory that I will use. I will do this by showing how these theories act in relation to textual material while also showing the importance that such an approach has on text. The second section of this paper will focus on using the data and responses collected through the study through the lenses of the

theories that I have established above. It is here where I will see the ‘transactions’ taking place among those sitting at the same table and experiencing the same story. The Players’ experience with the story through the characters they created affects the knowledge and understanding of the story. The last section of this paper will focus on understanding what this Reader Response theory approach to Dungeons and Dragons means by bringing it together through pedagogy. D&D is interactive fiction that can be utilized to create stories and narratives that would not be possible anywhere else. Examining D&D’s place among literature through the lenses of Reader Response theories and its use within the classroom shows the literary worth that roleplaying games hold.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Every reader of a book enters an unspoken contract, a handshake with the text, to transport them into another world. This contract is a two way one between reader and text, there is no room for others or even the author of said text to share in this (figurative) binding document because of the personal nature of reader and book. This contract takes hold on the reading of the document, where the reader starts to form their understanding and interpretation of the text. The interpretation of the material comes from the individual. Even if the individual shares their understanding and interpretation of the contract, that opens interpretation between the individual and the one listening to what the individual has to say. They are not part of the original contract because they must come to their own understanding. Even if they share an understanding of the text between others who have read the same material, this would still be a separate contract. This contractual transaction that takes place between reader and text is aptly named, Transactional Reader Response theory. This can be defined as, “transactional reader-response theory analyzes the transaction between text and reader” and “both [text and reader] are necessary in the production of meaning” (Tyson 173). While using this theory to examine the more traditional set up of reader and text works well, I am applying this theory, and Reader Response itself, which at its base level focuses on the reader’s response to text (Tyson 169), to the tabletop roleplaying game, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). The difference between the two Reader Response approaches can be found in the importance placed on the interaction between text and reader that is found in Transactional Reader Response. D&D is a game that involves a transaction among multiple people, not just a reader and text. This collective and collaborative narrative device

challenges what one might consider storytelling because of its use of a game to help facilitate the story's creation.

In the past, games have not been considered to have literary worth. We can see this argument in the words of famed cinema critic Roger Ebert: "Ebert argued that game players' ability to make decisions is 'the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control'" (Gershon). Putting aside "The Death of the Author" (Barthes), which Ebert clearly does not ascribe to, given his comment on authorial control, the notion of what makes serious film and literature is one in the reader's hands, not the critics. However, today we see successful video games attract Hollywood's gaze to various levels of success. Most recently, the success of the show *The Last of Us*, inspired by the video game of the same name, shows that games have proved Ebert wrong. The control of the player is what enhances the story and spirit found within the game. This control by the player is not detrimental to the narrative that is taking place. If this were not the case, then the litany (*Sonic the Hedgehog*, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu*, *Resident Evil*, *Uncharted*, etc.) of other games wouldn't have been made into movies or television shows (quality not judged). As narrative driven video games and what I will be showing with Dungeons and Dragons continue to find great success, critics like Ebert will continue to be proven wrong. D&D can act as the vehicle for this proof.

2.2. What is Dungeons and Dragons?

As stated in the introduction of this paper, within the preface of the *D&D Player's Handbook*, Mike Mearls describes D&D:

Playing D&D is an exercise in collaborative creation. You and your friends create epic stories filled with tension and memorable drama. You create silly in-jokes that make you laugh years later. The dice will be cruel to you, but you will soldier on. Your collective creativity will build stories that you will tell again and again, ranging from utterly absurd to the stuff of legend (Mearls et al 4).

While I'm sure that Ebert would claim this as nothing more than a children's game, there is the foundation of literary pillars within what Mearls is describing. The "collaborative creation" of stories that lead to "tension and memorable drama" can be used to describe many published literary works today. This is to say, that D&D will survive the scrutiny of Reader Response theory (while Reader Response theory does not necessarily scrutinize per se, it does offer insights in ways to look at D&D). Reader Response resonates with Mearls' description of what D&D is through the emotional response that are described. Reader Response is also still new to the collaborative aspect of this storytelling. It is in this collaboration that D&D will shine.

Dungeons and Dragons, or D&D (DnD), is a tabletop roleplaying game created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson sometime in the 1970's. This game was heavily influenced by popular fantasy (*Lord of the Rings* and *Conan*) and wargaming games (Chainmail) of the time, so a marriage of the two styles led to the game that is known today. This creation also led to a contemporary style of storytelling that was not necessarily intended by the two creators, *interactive fiction*. D&D became a storytelling medium, in which the player (in this instance a player would be the reader if this were a novel) and Dungeon Master (author) interact with the narrative that is being created. It is the collaboration of the Dungeon Master and Player that creates the story that is being told.

Interactive Fiction is a type of literature where the reader takes an active role within said literature. According to Richard Ziegfeld, author of *Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre*, "Interactive fiction is literature delivered via software rather than print books. Available software permits options of three types: graphic/visual, audio, and those that involve author/reader" (341). This style of fiction emerged with the evolution of technology because it allowed the reader that active role. However, Ziegfeld describes interactive fiction through the lens of this technology

(video games), where introduction of player control allows the player to decide when to interact with the story and when the author (or game) parses the response from the reader (Ziegfeld 347). With this definition of interactive fiction given, it is clear that D&D fits within the components that Ziegfeld describes. D&D has visual, audio, and author/reader interactions. While D&D can certainly be played through “theatre of the mind”, where the DM describes what the players are doing using little to no visuals (physical maps, character models/miniatures, set pieces), instead relying on their narrative abilities to have the players imagine the scene within their heads. D&D thrives when the DM pairs their narration with visuals for the players.

The DM can also use music to set the scene and add ambience to the session. Indeed, music plays a significant role in an average D&D session. It can set the ambience similar to how movie or television soundtracks are introduced to enhance the experience of the viewer. It adds another sense for the player at the table to experience. They may be looking at a battle going on before them through the various minis, while bombastic battle music inspires them, or what would be a soundtrack from a horror movie that builds suspense for the player. It can also be used to help populate a scene with noise (diegetic sound) that would be happening during a given scene. I have, as the DM, used folksy sounding music of a mandolin or fiddle when my players are in a tavern as that is what their characters would experience, and I have used the sound of hammer hitting metal when my players visit a blacksmith for a new weapon. This use of music and sound helps transport and immerse the player into the environment that the game is currently in.

2.3. Reader Response Theory

Reader Response Theory, “[a]s its name implies, reader-response criticism focuses on readers’ responses to literary texts” (Tyson 169). Reader-Response theorists hold two common

beliefs: “1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and 2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning...” (Tyson 170). Reader response theory focuses on the readers’ emotional reaction and their approach to literature as its driving force. Reader Response is significant because it highlights the individual reader. This reader has their own agency and experience with the text they are engaging with. The focus on the individual and how they respond to the text is what I am looking for when examining D&D. The focus of the player and how they respond to the situation in front of them. However, just using this notion of reader response is not enough. That is where other theorists come in.

Let us examine Louis Rosenblatt, one pioneer of Reader Response Theory. Rosenblatt introduced something called the Transactional Theory to Reader Response. Essentially, the reader and the text must engage in a transaction to find meaning. Agung Marhaeni helps define what this Transactional theory is. “The transactional theory emphasizes that what print carries is only meaning potential that interacts with the potential the reader brings during reading. As a reader sees the text, he uses his linguistic/experiential reservoir to interact with the text” (Marhaeni 207). Using this definition helps examine the mode in which we should approach the text according to Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt states that the reader must approach the text in an “aesthetic” way over that of an “efferent” one for a transaction to occur (Tyson 173). Tyson defines what each mode of viewing is:

Efferent:

When we read in the efferent mode, we focus just on the information contained in the text, as if it were a storehouse of facts and ideas that we could carry away with us (Tyson 173)

Aesthetic:

When we read in the aesthetic mode, we experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgments. (Tyson 173)

Reading a text, mainly understanding that text, cannot happen without this transaction. It is an automatic process that a reader will go through. In the case of D&D the reader is a willing, active, and conscious participant in the story's outcome. They are the players sitting around the table engaging with what the DM is relaying to them. While Transactional Reader Response theory determines that this transaction is often a subconscious outcome for the reader.

Transactional Reader Response differs slightly from that of traditional Reader Response. In traditional Reader Response theory/approach, the reader's reaction to the text is what determines the meaning of the text. It is reactive. In transactional Reader Response theory, the reader interacts with the text (like you would with non-transactional Reader Response. What I would consider traditional Reader Response), but the text in this case does not have a final meaning. This reader has a transaction between the text's assumed meaning and the individual's interpretation of the text based on their personal experience and emotion. It goes beyond just the reactive nature of the Reader Response theory and adds another layer of reflecting on the reasons why this reaction may have happened (looking at individuals' life and emotion at the moment of reading). Traditional Reader Response also allows for the theorist to examine responses using additional theoretical lenses. The relationship between text and reader can be paired with other theoretical lenses like psychoanalysis and feminist theories to supplement those readings. Those lenses can be used because of the connection that those readings have to the text and that the text cannot be separated from its intentions (Tyson 172). Though these other lenses will not be used for my purposes.

Wolfgang Iser, another prominent Reader Response Theorist notes the importance of engagement, or more specifically, entanglement, with the text. “This entanglement of the reader is, of course, vital to any kind of text, but in the literary text we have the strange situation that the reader cannot know what his participation actually entails” (Iser 295). However, in the case of D&D, we do know that participation from the player is required at the table (the equivalent of the text), though not specifically what decisions they will make. D&D (and games like it) has this type of entanglement through its participation. This entanglement that the player experiences would “open up” the player to the workings of the game, which in turn results in the player leaving behind their own preconceptions (Iser 296). The player does this to, “suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text” (Iser 296). Experiencing this unfamiliarity leads the player to start identifying in some capacity with the game itself through the unknown. The engagement of the player comes from interacting with the unfamiliarity in some compacity and the player’s imagination that is utilized.

Iser’s approach to the literary text is somewhat different than that of Rosenblatt as Iser takes a phenomenological approach to reading and the reading process. He surmises that the reader provides the meaning towards the text with what the author has given them. He states:

If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative in this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play (Iser 280).

The author here lays the foundation, builds the playground, but the reader is the one playing on the slide and building the meaning from what they are reading. Without this structure

the reader would not find any meaning in entering the field. While shifting the focus to D&D, just like how the reader's imagination and decision making is required so they can "enter the field", in D&D this same requirement of the reader (player) is required. The entanglement for the player comes from the unknown. While they are immersed and participating in the game and the story, it is ultimately the DM that holds all the secrets and determines when the next monster gets released or trap gets sprung. The players then determine how they react to the situation they find themselves in.

Reader Response theory, as has been established above, describes the relationship between the reader and the text. The understanding of the text is shaped by the reader and their own experiences rather than an implied meaning given by the text. However, how does something like Reader Response, that relies on a reader and a text, interact with D&D? While there is no traditional reader and text in D&D, there are elements of reader and text found within the game. The role of the reader is most closely linked to that of the player, and the role of the text is linked to that of the game. The game itself is narrated by the Dungeon Master.

When a reader engages with a text, they create meaning from what they are reading. This same process is undergone with the player engaging with the narrative found in D&D. However, where the reader engages with the text directly in a more traditional setting, the player engages with the text (game) through the lens of their character. This engagement, or entanglement if we were to think of Iser's approach to D&D, through a lens happens because the character has agency within the world to interact with the narrative being told. Since the player (reader) has control of the character, then the meaning of the narrative that they create is filtered through that character before being interpreted by the player (reader). The players themselves are still creating this meaning. The experiences of one of the players will differ than the experiences of the other,

like Reader Response, in that the reader creates meaning for the text and each reader will approach the text in a different way. The player experiences D&D through the lens of their own character as well as their own experiences that are brought in with the game.

The text of D&D is the game itself. Because of this, the DM plays an important role as narrator and arbiter of the game. While the game itself is interacting with the players (readers) and being interacted with by them, the DM is the one that is explaining what is happening and how the world is reacting to the agency the players have. Like the text in a Reader Response approach, the players are the ones that are ascribing meaning to the events around them.

Transactional Reader Response fits with D&D in that the transaction taking place between player and game, the experiences that the players are bringing to the game which shapes their understanding, is the meaning potential. “The transactional theory emphasizes that what print carries is only meaning potential that interacts with the potential the reader brings during reading” (Marhaeni 2007). This meaning potential is the experiences that the players have had in their life that they are bringing to the game.

The difference between the DM and the players is that the DM is acting as a semi-omnipotent narrator. While the DM may not know what the players will ultimately end up doing, they will know how the world reacts to the agency of the players and have an idea of how the current plot of the campaign (the current story narrative that is being played) will interact with the player’s agency too. The DM, like the players, is making meaning with the story. However, the goal of the DM is to narrate a story that all players are engaging with. The goal of the player is to engage with the story through their character. This different approach to the game results in a different meaning making being undertaken by those at the table. The DM’s meaning making is

attached to being the “most-knowing” mediator and arbiter of the game while the players meaning making stems from interacting with the game through their own characters.

2.4. Literature Review

A review of literature relevant to applying reader response theory to D&D includes scholarship on gaming. While the various parts of the following review originate in different disciplines, there is a thread that connects them together, which is the focus on the individual and their interactions with the text, or in the case of gaming, with the game itself. Much of the meaning from the text comes from how the individual interacts with it.

Iser brings forward a phenomenological approach by arguing for reader-engagement with the text through the text’s use of reader imagination. In this case it is up to the reader to make sure that they gain understanding of the text through their imagination with it. “If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field” (Iser 280). This resulting boredom that the reader would experience would turn them off of the text before them, thus resulting in a text that has no engagement from the reader. “A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (280). Here Iser places an importance on the text’s ability to be engaging so that the reader will find pleasure in what they are reading. Iser also brings forward an idea that time plays an important role on the reader’s understanding of the text that they are reading, “it is impossible to absorb even a short text in a single moment” (285). This “time” that Iser brings forward as an idea corresponds with the continual growth and learning that a reader will undergo between views of a text. “When we have finished the text, and read it again, clearly our extra knowledge will result in a different time sequence” (Iser 285). This time sequence that Iser is

describing is the additional time reading the text. In reading through a text again, the individual has more knowledge than they had on their first viewing. While the text may have remained the same, the individual's knowledge has changed between reading.

Kelly Angileri builds on Iser and his thoughts I laid out above when writing that the text needs the reader to become "actualized" and that labeling something a literary work does not describe the text or the experience of the reader with that text (Angileri 66). Angileri is stating that the meaning of the text comes from the reader of that text. The reader brings that meaning potential to whatever text is before them. The meaning of the text, Angileri would argue, comes from one's own personality. The text enters the mind shaped by this personality and becomes what Angileri describes as a "foreign self" (66). Angileri explains how the "foreign self" and "normal self" (own personality), "Our normal self must possess the capacity to adapt to the foreign self or the two would be unable to interact. Each time we confront a text, each time we encounter the "self" of another, another part of our real self comes into play" (66). The individual interacts with the "foreign self" using their experience, or "normal self", to comprehend what is before them. They are undergoing a type of retrospection by thinking about their experience and how it compares to the "foreign self" before them.

In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt brings forward an idea from Dewey and Bentley of "transaction." This idea of transaction applies to the reader and what they bring to the table, or book, when engaging with the text. Like the notion of phenomenology that was brought forward before. Judith Rae Davis views Rosenblatt through the lens of teaching. Davis views "transaction," or the reading process associated with it, as nonlinear. This has to do with the reader and text engaging with each other at a specific time and place (Davis 73). Rosenblatt puts this idea of a transaction among the reader and text a little more eloquently by relating to this

idea of music and poetry. The reader of a poem or novel experiences the prose and rhythm in the “inner ear,” where the text is guiding the reader’s creation of meaning (Rosenblatt 305). In either view of transaction, Rosenblatt’s or Davis’s, the transaction and meaning gained from the text is a personal interpretation of the text. This personal interpretation is also shown by Alayne Sullivan who shows that the magnification on the reader’s private motives in the literary understanding they form falls within the field of aesthetics of Reader Response. This theory, according to them, offers an entirely personal approach to literature (Sullivan 90). This personal approach to literature seems to be a common thread among these theorists.

Rosenblatt and Iser would agree about the importance the text has in capturing the reader’s attention. The text must be engaging enough for the reader’s imagination to allow meaning to take hold for the reader according to Iser, and the reader creates their own meaning by listening to the rhythm of the words entering their “inner ear.” Though Iser’s approach falls on the text to engage with the reader, Rosenblatt does not make that distinction, instead what the reader brings to the text (which Iser does consider with the importance of time) is what is important in the “transaction”.

A Reader Response reading of texts allows the reader (us) to break from the often-pedagogical norms of trying to assume authorial intent when it comes to a text, or even the notion of importance given by an authority/peer figure. This is something that Patricia-Ross French brings forward in their writing, “Reader-Response Theory: A Practical Application.” They work with David Bleich’s idea (differing from Rosenblatt), where people are more selfish when it comes to their thinking and how they interact with the world (French 29). Though one can certainly make a connection to Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and that of Bleich’s approach. French warns against forcing the “correct” literary answer onto students through the

instructor. In doing so the student becomes “alienated” from their own interaction with literature (French 29). Patricia Harkin discusses the shift in expectation from identical readings of text to ones where a semblance of originality can be found thanks to a reader-response focused approach (412). With no “right” idea of correctness regarding literature, applying this to the free will of the player within role-playing games shows an acceptance for any possible outcome afforded to the players.

The reader plays a large role in understanding the text that is before them. They are deciphering the author’s meaning, or at least what they believe to be that meaning. The act of “role-playing” within a game like D&D may seem like a new concept, however, people experience and play with “roles” all the time. This is shown by Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust:

All people play and play with roles: we take up, define, and negotiate a wide array of social roles that, though often structured in meaningful and consistent ways, are enacted uniquely from one person to the next. People play roles, and roles play a significant part in defining self. Just as we actively and fluidly construct the roles we play, those roles also define and structure self in broad social, cultural, and temporal frameworks of meaning. (Waskul and Lust 338)

This socially learned ability that individuals have with “role-playing” means that a shift towards experience narrative and story through games is not that farfetched. By learning narrative and story through these roles, D&D (and games like it) can be a tool for educators to use within their own classrooms.

Shifting focus from Reader Response theory towards games scholarship, Job Robson, and Aaron Meskin, introduce this idea of self-involving interactive fictions, in “Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions.” These are interactive fictions because the player (the reader if this was a book) interacts with the material and can influence the outcome of that material’s narrative in some way (Robson and Meskin 166). This influence over the text, or in this case the game, comes from the engagement of a player. Waskul and Lust outline this importance in their

interaction in “Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing” when they define the role of the player within the game according to the rules of the game as well as the social expectations (or “roles”) the player falls into (338). These connections to the player, and the role that they undertake through playing, result in different experiences for the player. This experience is what connects the game and player with the theories discussed above.

Games offer a glimpse into narrative structure and story that is consumed differently than the traditional novel. Traditional, in the sense that there is a reader consuming a text and gathering meaning from the text. Whereas games offer meaning through the playing of said game. The story and text come through the events that the players find themselves in. Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin, in “Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions” offer a look into the differing interaction the reader (player) has with video games.

The self-involving interactive nature of video games is best highlighted by focusing on the degree of first-person discourse that is found talk about our interactions with them. Gamers typically make a variety of first-person claims concerning the games they are playing (“I defeated the dragon,” “I was killed by the creeper,” and so on) and this is reflected in the use of the generic second-person in much video-game criticism. We argue that this talk should be taken seriously; the player’s actions genuinely make things about the player true in the fiction of the video game (Robson and Meskin 167)

The sense of self within games differs from a reader and text. There is a barrier experienced there by the reader and text which is removed from video games. Jonathan Ostenson, in “Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom,” examines how video games can give the narrative importance that video games can explore. One of the main influences over stories in video games is the character, and Ostenson examines that importance of character through the lens of narrative. “The most important narrative element of this story was the character” (Ostenson 75). The character within video games is controlled by the player. Thus, the player experiences the “I did this” that the character did. Waskul and Lust

also show the importance of the player character within “Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing,” when they say:

Finally, and perhaps most ironically remote in these gaming sessions, each “player-character” is also a person. Participants in fantasy role-playing games are not only personas and players; they may also be called students, employees, adolescents, adults, spouses, parents, and a wide variety of other statuses they occupy and roles they play in everyday life (337).

The character is something that the player becomes when experiences the game. It is vital for the characters to experience this shift into a character, so they become a role-player for the game.

2.5. Conclusion

Reader-response offers an avenue to examine Dungeons and Dragons as a medium of literature. This connection/intersection between game and theory has interesting implications towards the classroom as well. Not only through establishing the benefits that a reader-response approach has to the classroom, but also how implementing interactive fiction like D&D, as well as methods learned from simulation games, brings entertainment and investment within the classroom.

The theorists Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser lay the foundation of Reader Response that will be utilized within an examination of D&D. It is in the following section where Reader Response will meet D&D and truly be tested against an emerging style of interactive fiction. Further, a contemporary examination of these theorists through theorists like Davis and Tyson allows for a more up to date use of Reader Response theory. We can see this use of reader response within the classroom through theorists such as French, Harkin, Robson, Meskin, and Waskul and Lust, as well as a way to bring Reader Response and games together. The interplay between theory and practice is explored in the next section, where I examine an

Independent Review Board approved study of my own Dungeons and Dragons game. Each player experiences the game differently, and Reader Response will guide that inquiry.

3. STUDY

3.1. Introduction

The first step in understanding how Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and Reader Response theory interacts was through an IRB approved study. I could have discussed D&D through a hypothetical game interspersing the theory with my occasional insight and experience playing the game. That, however, would not provide direct observations to the game and theory that I wished to work with. The participants of this study were asked a series of questions to understand what outside influences may have impacted *their* story and how they may be bringing that into the game. This shared experience among participants/players at the table means that they are like musicians in a larger band. Each instrument (player) contributing to the ensemble (game) providing the different emotional moments of crescendo and decrescendo. The players are the ones interacting with the tone and speed that the conductor (DM) has given. As players in the ensemble, they are experiencing the music as different instruments would, however, just like the music of an ensemble each instrument is collectively engaged in this story telling. As Players within the game, the participants are consuming different aspects of the story. In that way, the collective story has a different meaning to each player. This is why a Reader Response approach to this type of storytelling offers the best way towards understanding how a storytelling medium like D&D can be useful.

3.2. Methodology

On deciding that the best way forward would be through a study. A group was needed, and I recruited seasoned players who consented to participate in my study. I would take over the role as Dungeon Master (DM) in this instance. This would allow me the greatest flexibility while running the game as well as leading the study. I would take on the challenges of conducting the

story while the players would then interact and shape it with their own responses. The players agreed and expressed their consent to participate in the study, which consisted of asking questions before and after play to get an idea of the emotional state of the player and any impacts of their personal life have influenced the story before them. I also gathered information on where they think the story is going and what moments of the game stood out to them¹. This would help differentiate responses from everyone and allow me to see where my implementation of reader-response theory was the most impactful. There were three players/participants that took part in the study. As the DM, and the person running the study I attempted to remain as unbiased to the study as I could. However, as has been set up in the first section through Iser and Rosenblatt, individuals approach text, or in this case the game, with their prior knowledge and history. While my observations to the study are grounded in the study and the theory in which I am engaging the responses with, these are still my interpretations of the data that I have collected.

Two of the players had extensive prior experience with D&D, and one player was new to the game. While not the focus of the study, being able to see the differences in response from experienced players and novice players may give insight into how games like D&D could be implemented within the classroom by showing the struggles or focus that these new players gravitate to. This is only one player, so the sample size may need to be expanded for a more concrete and acceptable pedagogical implementation.

For this study I chose to use a module titled *Descent into Avernus*. This is an official module sold by *Wizards of the Coast*, the current owners of the D&D intellectual property. Modules are essentially story shells, so the DM does not have to create their own

¹ The specific questions can be found in the Appendix D on p. 70 and below.

adventure/story. There are benefits to using an original story, but also to using a narrative that has been decided for you. This creation of an original adventure is what would be considered a *homebrew* adventure. Not running a homebrewed game would allow me to reference the *Descent into Avernus* book as well as free up time so that I do not have to create my own story. Instead, I can shape the story's shell into what would work best with the players at the table to gather the greatest possible engagement with the story.

I immediately noticed a framework in working with the study's information that I could utilize which comes from Rosenblatt herself:

Much discussion of literature seems to imply that communication is a one-way process. The author, we say, communicates to the reader. The reader is thought of as approaching the text like a blank photographic film awaiting exposure. Actually, the reader and the text are more analogous to a pianist and a musical score. But the instrument that the reader plays upon is – himself. (Rosenblatt 304)

There is no author present in this type of interactive fiction, and because of that pressure is therefore placed on the players around the table to become a collaborative author through communication. The communication in this instance is not “one way” which Rosenblatt states earlier. Rosenblatt's analogy between the pianist and their musical score parallels the connection between the Player and the game. The tool that the reader uses in this case is the character that interacts with the game.

3.3. Inductive Methodology

I analyzed the data present within the study following two approaches. The first, an Inductive Thematic Analysis approach and the second, an Inductive Coding approach. The first process is defined by Braun and Clarke provide a definition in “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology”, “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic”

(Braun and Clarke 82). In examining the collected data from the study, I determined the best “key words” when gathering emotional responses and determined an importance in noting the literary connections being made by the study’s participants. These groupings that were created happened after the data was collected, fitting with the inductive thematic analysis approach. The connections and patterns found among the participants responses led to the categories and data presented within this paper.

These categories that I determined are seen later in this paper where I share the emotional responses of the participants. When collecting the data, I saw a pattern and determined that a section noting the evolution of these responses would be important for readers to understand the paper. Thematic analysis “An account of themes ‘emerging’ or being ‘discovered’ is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers” (83) In parsing the data and assigning the patterns I was taking an active role.

The other process that I conducted my analysis of the study’s data was through using an Inductive Coding approach. Inductive coding has the researcher creating the patterns as they find them. According to Clary-Lemon, Mueller, and Pantelides in *Try this: Research Methods for Writers*, “Instead of bringing a prescriptive set of patterns to a text and then looking for those patterns, you approach your data with openness” (Clary-Lemon et al. 85). This openness with the data is where the meaning making with the data takes place. Once the data is examined, the researcher notices those patterns “next, as you notice connections between ideas and words in the text, you develop codes that describe those patterns” (85). Again, this is the process undertaken for the study’s data.

These approaches to the study's data were necessary. The participants had their own agency, albeit within the confines of the questions asked for the study, so if prerequisite categories were already created, there would be a higher chance that a response does not fit within the study. Taking the reactionary approach with the data collected was the best opportunity in finding those patterns and determining what they may mean for literature and pedagogy.

These types of reader focused approaches to text make the most sense given the hands-on nature that a game like D&D is. We can break away from trying to understand authorial intent, like what Patricia-Ross French makes note of in "Reader-Response Theory: A Practical Application." This is possible through a reader-response approach, but also because there is no author present within a D&D game, though, I will concede, there is a writer/creator of the overarching plot that characters will find themselves a part of. However, the characters themselves write the ending to their story through an agency that Players acquire through their character.

As stated earlier, what makes this study valuable is the use of a collective storytelling experience. The questions that I pose to the participants of this study, who act in the role of the Player in the game, work to understand the participants' thought process. These interactions with the game impact the participants understanding of the narrative and story. There are differences in the interactions towards the game that are not shared in this collaborative setting because of the characters and roles that the Players possess. There is still individuality, and this study works to explore that individuality within the collaborative space, by asking questions that are influenced by the theoretical framework I explored above. These questions are listed below:

Before the Game Session Questions:

- How are you feeling right now? Feel free to go as in depth or as vague as you would like.
 - Why might you be feeling this way?
- What, if any, big life changes happening to your right now?
 - How do you think that is affecting you?
- What is the current story of the game that is being played?
- What do you think your impact on the game and story is?

After the Game Session Questions:

- What experiences, thoughts, or knowledge does this adventure/game evoke?
- What do you identify with, and how does this identification affect your response to the adventure/game?
- In your view, what was the biggest event that happened during the game?
 - Why did this stand out?
 - Did your character influence this view at all?
 - How so?
- Are there any other moments from the game that stood out to you?
 - Why did they stand out?
 - What did those moments mean to you?
- In your view, where do you think the story is going for the game as well as for your character?
- How are you feeling right now? Feel free to go as in depth or as vague as you would like.
 - Why might you be feeling this way?

As is evident from the questions that I posed above, emotional experience as well as narrative understanding plays a large role in what I am examining. Experience, as well as connection to the game from the participant is what helps create the collaboration that interactive fiction like D&D has. More of the study's documents can be found in the Appendix.

3.4. Results

This study focused on the responses of participants as they engaged with the D&D game. As was the focus of the study, questions that would ascertain the emotional state that the participants were in were gathered as well as what connections that each participant was making with the story before them.

All three participants of the study noted that outside influences affected their emotional state coming into the game. There was a total of 31 responses between the three participants. One of the participants missed two of the sessions when the group met. Before each game was played the participants answered a survey gathering their emotional state. These surveys would be utilized with Reader Response theory.

Of the 31 responses that were received for this study, 20 of them would be defined as having *only* “negative” emotion attached to the player coming into the game. A negative emotion is defined as one that distracts or hinders the participant from engaging with the game. The 20 responses that had only “negative” emotions consisted of (figure 1):

- 11: Tired/Burnout
- 5: Stress
- 4: Irritated/Frustrated
- 3: Anxious
- 2: Distraction
- 1: Reluctance

The respondent used Tired/Burnout keywords in conjunction with other responses at times as well. This is why there are more keywords than responses. Five responses had “tired” as a standalone response.

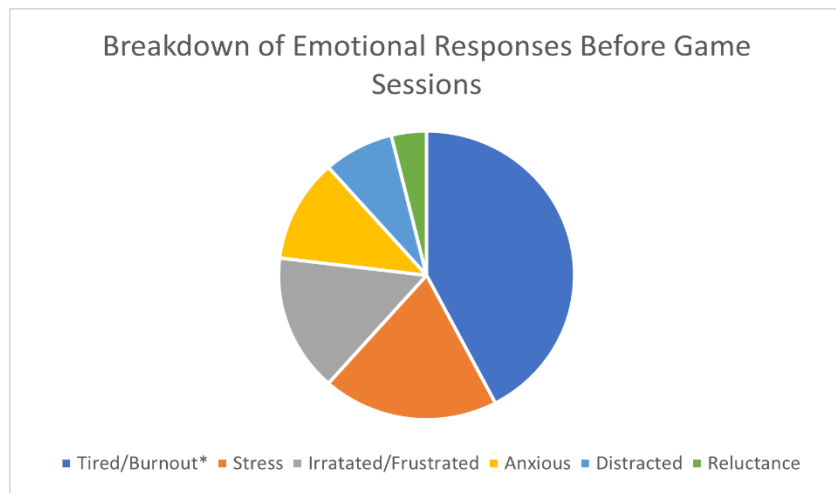


Figure 1. Pregame Negative Emotional Responses

Seven responses from the participants were *only* “positive.” These did not include any mention to the participant having any “negative” emotions. There were an additional four responses that included a “negative” emotion attached to their positive one that are not included in the “negative” data points. These responses include what would be considered “mixed” as they include both “positive” and “negative” words. Those responses consisted of (figure 2):

- 11: Excited
- 4: Tired/Burnout

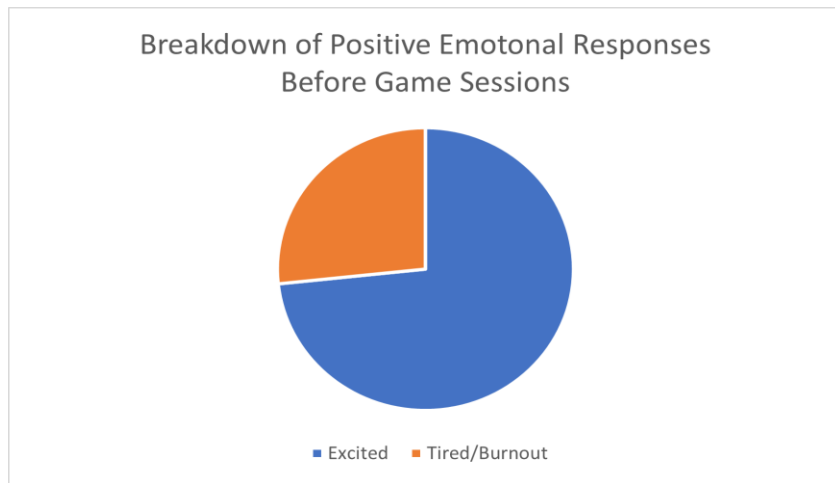


Figure 2. Pregame Positive Emotional Responses

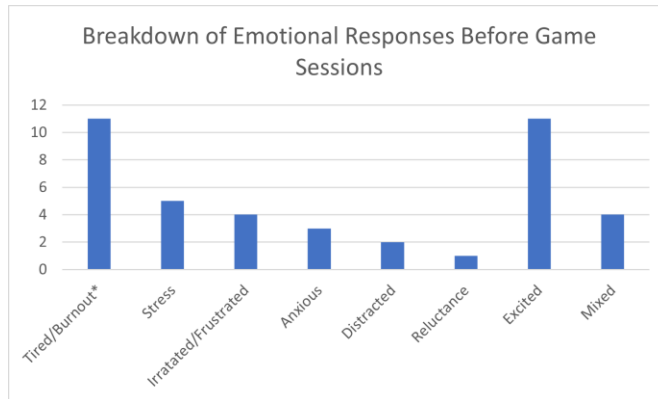


Figure 3. Combined Pregame Emotional Responses

The above data (figure 3) was collected before each D&D session began, but there was also data collected after each session. This set of data consisted of 30 responses, as one

participant did not answer the questions for one week. The data consisted of both “positive” and “negative” emotions in response to the game. The “negative” emotions consisted of (figure 4):

- 3: Tired
- 2: Anxious
- 2: Frustrated
- 1: Melancholy
- 1: Bored

The respondent used these keywords in conjunction with other responses as well. “Tired” showed up in only three of the responses as a standalone response.

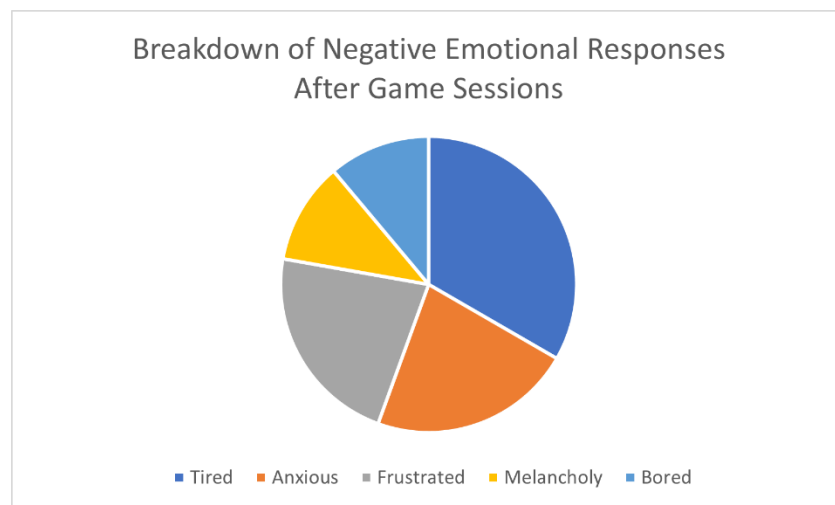


Figure 4. Postgame Negative Emotional Responses

Overall, the data that the study collected at the end of each session leaned positive. There were 3 responses that indicated a neutrality to their emotion. They were neither “excited” nor “tired” with the game they were playing. That is denoted below as a “mixed” response. The “tired” keyword was again attached to responses and was also included in the “mixed” responses. The “positive” keywords were (figure 5):

- 13: Happy/Exited/Good
- 1: Satisfied

The “Mixed” responses were:

- 4: Tired but...
 - 1: ...Relief
 - 1: ...Satisfied
 - 1: ...Intrigued
 - 1: ...Good
- 3: Ambivalent

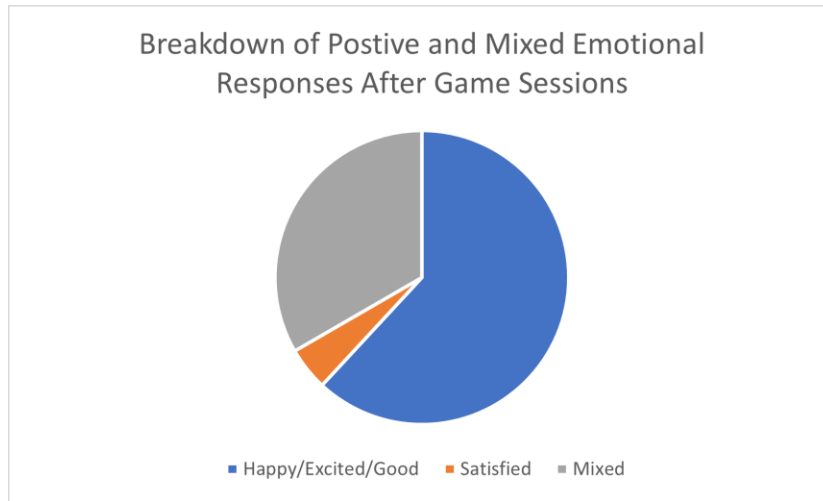


Figure 5. Postgame Positive Emotional Responses

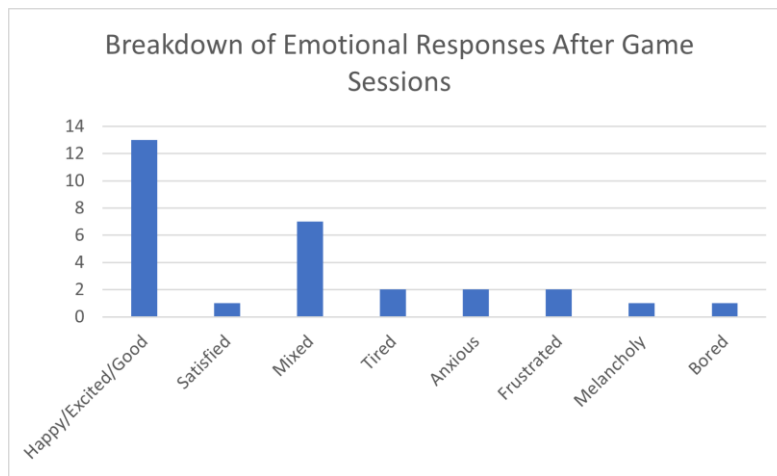


Figure 6. Combined Postgame Emotional Responses

As the data above suggests (figure 6), the emotional state of each player shifts in some way throughout the gaming session. Originally 20 responses from the participants were “negative” and 7 responses were “positive” with 4 responses being “mixed.” After the gaming

session, 14 responses indicated having a “positive” emotion and 7 indicated having “mixed” emotion. Leading the remaining 9 responses to have “negative” emotions in some way. There was a shift in some of the participants starting with a “negative” emotion towards a “positive” or “mixed” emotion. With the evolving state of mind that some of the participants went through, the participants approach to the game would change with it. They would no longer bring the emotional state to the game as the original emotional state would be supplanted, more likely than not, with a “positive” or “mixed” emotion.

There were also mentions of popular culture and other literature across the participants’ responses. Knowing where the participants came from in terms of their literature background is important to examine, especially with regards to the Reader Response theories. Below are important participant responses when examining Reader Response across 11 weeks. Only the responses that reference other media are being shown.

What experiences, thoughts, or knowledge does this adventure/game evoke?

Participant 1:

Week 1: “Reminds me of a heist, not quite mission impossible. The gothic architecture described makes me think of Dracula and other gothic novels and movies.”

Week 2: “Again this reminds me a lot of a heist, like Oceans 11 or 8 or Mission Impossible gone wrong. That or like Die Hard.”

Week 8: “Adventure, mystery, rough-and-tumble. It evokes the hero’s quest but like one of those bad b-grade films where the heroes are bumbling buffoons[sic]. The comedy retelling of an epic hero tale (Robinhood: Men in Tights, or Monty Python and The Holy Grail come to mind).”

Week 9: “The “bad” D&D adaptation movies from the 90s, the B-film fantasy adventure movies that poke at the tropes and “holes” in fantasy genre. TV show Merlin.”

Participant 2:

Week 1: “It’s hard to point towards specific experiences, but the session tonight had a bit of a Pink Panther vibe to me. It felt like comedic version of a spy or heist story, with a combination of stealth/subterfuge and comedic elements.”

Week 3: “So, the room with the meat hooks immediately brought to mind a few different horror games, as well as that one scene from The Punisher where he captures a henchman and “tortures” him by lighting a blowtorch at the same time that he puts a popsicle on the guy’s back and claiming that he’s burning the guy. Which is probably why my reaction then turned into “let’s knock this guy out and interrogate him.”

Participant 3:

Did not make any reference to already established media.

Participants also made other connections during the game. One of these connections was with their character and how it evolved throughout the course of playing as the Players grew comfortable with the character they were controlling. Another connection related to their prior experiences with D&D or the social dynamics of the table. More specifically, how they interact with each other and how they are relating to this social dynamic and where they think their place is within it.

What do you identify with, and how does this identification affect your response to the adventure/game?

Participant 1:

Week 3: “I identify with being scared as we move through? As an adventurer being reminded of horror movie protagonists, I want to encourage everyone to be attentive to traps and things.”

Week 4: “Hero or leader given how Cinder was enthralled and how Roxeanne seems to follow direction from Cinder or Dahlia. We’re like vigilante sleuths.”

Week 7: “I identify with my character; I sympathize with Cinder almost dying because my character almost died.”

Week 8: “My character; by limiting my perspective to my character I feel like more I control one aspect of the game.”

Week 9: “I identified with my character the most; I feel able to speak my mind and respond to the world around me as an aspect of myself.”

Participant 2:

Week 2: “I’m actually really enjoying the dark humorous aspect of the game at the moment. It’s a style of humor that I enjoy anyways, and it gives me a little bit more leeway as a player to be chaotic.”

Week 6 “So the biggest thought is just “I don’t know if we’re heroes,” which is mostly a joke, but honestly so much of the Vanthampur estate was just this grey area that it’s kinda hard to seriously think of us as the good guys sometimes.”

Week 11: “I wasn’t thinking about this before, but I was recently a guest player in a homebrew game that did a rescue mission to hell in one arc. I played a refugee who had been dragged to hell along with the survivors of a plague that had hit a fairly large city. The DM for that game and I had a lot of discussions about how to run hell both before and after that arc. I’m having trouble remembering some of the specifics, but I do know we talked a lot about how to make hell feel more dangerous without making it so lethal that it was basically an insta-kill.”

Participant 3:

Week 2: “I identify with my character’s shyness because I’m new to the game so it feels like we are in the same boat most of the time.”

Week 3: “I identify with my character’s want to succeed and also to be included in a friend group.”

Week 8: “I identify[sic] with the goal driven nature of the game, trying to complete a mission[sic].”

Week 10: “I identify with the narrative because I’ve played a lot of similar fantasy games before.”

What each participant focused on and connected with during the game differed between them. Participant 3 was the novice of the group and their responses to these questions reflected that. There were not fewer in-depth responses from this participant about the connections that they were making. However, this was a new player in the game of D&D and because of this it took longer for them to become more comfortable with the game. Should this game continue beyond the study, Participant 3 would become more experienced with the game and the acts of storytelling and roleplaying associated with it.

3.5. Discussion

From this point forward, and with permission from each participant in the study, I will be referring to the participants in the study (the Players of D&D) by their character names. The more experienced Players at the table consisted of Dahlia, a Dark Dwarf sorcerer, and Cinder, a Hill Dwarf cleric. The more inexperienced member of the party was Roxanne, a Mountain Dwarf barbarian. This selection of race and class at the beginning of the game (what is called a session 0) already indicated that the Players would experience the game in different ways. A race is “one of many intelligent humanoid species in the D&D world” (Mearls et al. 11), and a “class” “broadly describes a character’s vocation, what special talents he or she possesses, and the tactics he or she is most likely to employ when exploring a dungeon, fighting monsters, or engaging in a tense negotiation” (Mearls et al. 11). In the case of the study’s group the participants decided to play as Dwarves, however there are also Humans, Elves, Half-Elves, Orcs, and more as playable races. The “classes” that the Players select will grant them different skills and specializations within the game. As the name implies, sorcerers are more inclined to use magic to accomplish their goals. The cleric class is in-tune with a higher power and usually grants the Player healing capabilities, though in the case of Cinder that relationship with his chosen god was an interesting one. The barbarian class is one that takes and delivers damage to the enemies that it faces.

While “race” plays a role within D&D by offering different in game effects, it differs from how we may look at race in the real world. While we certainly can view D&D through a racial lens, and there is a history with D&D and using racial stereotypes which would have much to offer on examination, that is not the focus of this paper. For our purposes, “race” is being used to describe the species of humanoid creature that each Player chose.

The most notable comments appeared in the surveys given before the game sessions took place. In most of the sessions that took place, the Players were bringing what I would label as “negative” emotions to the table. These “negative” emotions mostly consisted of stress that the Players were under from either school, work, or even unexpected life events happening. In some instances, this level of stress directly affected the engagement of said Players. They could not enter a creative mindset to play the game effectively. Iser notes that text needs to be engaging and creative in order for the individual’s imagination to enter the fold. An effective approach to D&D requires that the Players are engaged in some form of creativity so they can connect with the text. If the Players cannot “enter the fold”, or they find it difficult to do so because of outside influences, they are not playing the game effectively. Gaining this player engagement requires the DM to encourage the player to engage with the game. Either through dialogue and conversation, or through the perils of combat.

The “Transaction” from Rosenblatt’s Reader Response theory that was taking place between player and game stemmed from Players who were under stress. They were bringing a kind of emotional baggage to the game and how they were interacting with it, or in some cases was the reason why they did not interact in the first place. This is important to note because of what Reader Response theory is. As mentioned in Section 1, Reader Response theory focuses on the readers reaction and their approach to literature. It highlights the individual reader through that reader’s agency towards the text. If the mindset of the reader, or in this case the Player, was in a “negative” space, then the results from the reader may reflect that. With Transaction Reader Response, this mindset is even more important to consider. The reader has a *transaction* between the text’s assumed meaning and the individual’s interpretation of the text based on their personal experience and emotion.

It is important to notice the emotional mindset of the individual Players when considering utilizing roleplaying games like D&D in an academic setting. Even when not dealing with RPGs the mindset of students is important to consider. “Compared to their predecessors, today’s students (who, remember, tend to check their smartphones every 15 minutes or less) are likely to take significantly longer to complete schoolwork and to feel much more stressed as they do so” (Rosen 10). Rosen’s study focuses on students’ attachment to their smart phones, however the data suggesting that distractions for students cause their work to take longer is important to note. The emotional distractions that students face also impact their work in some way. “Research has shown that experiencing positive emotion may improve problem-solving ability, facilitate recall of affectively neutral and positive information, and improve decision making” (Garner 298). One of the benefits of the D&D sessions that has been shown, was the shift in emotional experience that the Players were undergoing. While the emotional response from the Players were initially “negative”, in most instances the Player shifted into a “mixed” (tired but...) emotional state or a wholly “positive” one.

Throughout the process, Players were connecting to what was happening in the story to popular culture. One of the first major plot points within the first chapter of the module was to sneak into the antagonist’s villa. During this moment, Dahlia connected with popular culture. As well as media that that they enjoy:

Week 1 Dahlia “Reminds me of a heist, not quite mission impossible. The gothic architecture described makes me think of Dracula and other gothic novels and movies.”

Week 2 Dahlia: “Again this reminds me a lot of a heist, like Oceans 11 or 8 or Mission Impossible gone wrong. That or like Die Hard.”

These heist movies where something goes wrong encapsulates what Dahlia was feeling when sneaking through the villa and ultimately getting caught by the butler and maids located

within. We also see that Dahlia's responses change. At first, they are not quite like *Mission Impossible*, but the more that they engage with the story, their response evolves to include it.

The connection to popular media is like what Cinder felt when experiencing the same narrative points, however Cinder related more to *Pink Panther* with the comedy that he felt was coming through. Same vein of heist and spy movie that Dahlia felt, but there was more comedy associated with it. This shared experience among these two Players led to one participating in a more serious approach to the game, where the other took on a more comedic approach. When both these players were engaging with prior consumed media, they were engaging in an *Aesthetic* reading of the text. "When we read in the aesthetic mode, we experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgments" (Tyson 173). These connections that the Players were making ultimately would lead them to approaching the challenge of sneaking into the villa in different ways. Where Dahlia approached it like *Mission Impossible* or *Die Hard*, movies in which the protagonists and antagonists are no stranger to killing to accomplish their goals, Cinder instead chose to approach this section of D&D as inspired by *Pink Panther*. Inspector Clouseau never kills anyone, or at least does not kill anyone in the 2006 remake *The Pink Panther* starring Steve Martin.

These thoughts between the Players were not a conscious decision. In engaging with the story that was unfolding, the actions that they undertook lead to them either killing to enter the villa and remain undetected or trying to remain out of conflict as much as possible. However, where Cinder may have wanted to approach this section as a *Pink Panther* like break-in to the villa. Dahlia actions within the game meant that this option of engaging with the story evolved

into one that contained the comedic elements associated with the bumbling idiot in Inspector Clouseau as well as the action and stakes of *Mission Impossible* and *Die Hard*.

The third player, however, did not make connections to popular culture through the study. Though they did connect with the character troupes associated with the ‘comic relief’ role. They were more focused on the game’s aspects itself rather than the narrative that was presented towards them. In their study response, they expressed sharing a level of hesitancy and shyness as the Player with their character Roxanne towards the game.

Roxanne: “I identify with my character’s shyness because I’m new to the game so it feels like we are in the same boat most of the time.”

This hesitancy and shyness were contributed to still learning the game itself according to the Player. In time, however, Roxanne noted a splitting from what the character was experiencing and what the Player was thinking as familiarity with the game took place. This engagement especially took off when the party found a Tressym, a cat with bird-like wings, because of the love that Roxanne has for cats.

Iser discusses the importance of engagement in connecting with the text. Roxanne perfectly encapsulates what Iser is describing when he defines engagement as *entanglement*, “This entanglement of the reader is, of course, vital to any kind of text, but in the literary text we have the strange situation that the reader cannot know what his participation actually entails.” (Iser 295). The participation of Roxanne was focused on understanding the game and the mechanics associated with it. When the Player becomes more confident with Roxanne, a deeper understanding of who the character became was undertaken, and as was mentioned above, all it took was finding a cat for the Player to find this entanglement. With this burgeoning entanglement that Roxanne was undergoing, it was only a matter of time before they would have contributed more to the narrative story that the party was a part of.

Another moment that drew inspiration from popular culture was an interrogation scene conducted by Cinder. In this moment Cinder evoked the movie *The Punisher*, where the titular character interrogates a criminal by hanging them upside down threatening him with a blow torch. In the game, Cinder had grabbed a cultist to interrogate and set him on meat hooks. A brutal interrogation occurred in which Cinder found out these cultists were truly fanatical after many broken bones. This is something that the Player themselves had indicated as a connection in the after-session survey that was given.

Cinder: "Torturing the cultist: I accept full blame for this, but this was a moment that once we entered it, I felt weird because I hate torture scenes. I still think it was a good scene, and I think I found a good way to end it quickly, but torture scenes always make me uncomfortable."

This interrogation scene with Cinder left the Player feeling conflicted with the events that transpired. The Player does not enjoy these scenes in the media that they consume, yet here they were conducting this brutal event. When used as a narrative tool, D&D can provide Players with different experiences that they may not have thought they would encounter.

As I have stated before within this paper, D&D is a collaborative storytelling experience. This collaboration leads to stories that all Players had input in creating. During one of these collaborative moments, Cinders morals were tested when Dahlia continued to attack a pack of fleeing wolves after they had run off from combat. It was in Dahlia's character to continue attacking, because the wolves were the ones who started the engagement. However, Cinder as the player dislikes harming animals, especially animals that had already given up and were fleeing, stood out to him. Dahlia's actions within the game directly resulted in an emotional response by another player. Should the game have continued past the study's decided deadline, I'm sure this would have been a catalyst for future in-game discussion among the party members.

Players were asked what connections they were making throughout the process of the game. Their connections to popular culture and literature have already been discussed above, but those were not the only connections that they were making. During the process of the game and over the weeks and months that the survey was conducted, the players were slowly starting to identify with the characters they created. In Dahlia's first response, they were having trouble identifying with the experience around them.

Dahlia: "I tried to identify with my character, since that's what I have control over."

In this instance Dahlia "tried" to connect with their character which suggests that the imaginary thread that links the player to their character was not quite there yet. Juxtapose this initial statement with a later statement from Dahlia,

"I identified with my character the most; I feel able to speak my mind and respond to the world around me as an aspect of myself."

In this way Dahlia was able to influence the game based on their "true self", or the self that is outside the game. Their experience with the character matured in a way that they were using their personal influence mixed in with their character's decisions.

Roxanne also begins to identify with their character throughout the study. Though Roxanne was able to identify with their character faster than that of Dahlia. Roxanne makes note of this connection through the emotion she was feeling.

Roxanne: "I identify with my character's shyness because I'm new to the game so it feels like we are in the same boat most of the time."

This connection guided their play, as during the game they did not engage in as much discussion among the group. This is noted in one of Dahlia's responses:

Dahlia: "Roxanne[sic] seems to follow direction from Cinder or Dahlia"

Roxanne evolves through the story, as one of her final responses states the connections they are making to literature.

Roxanne: “I identify with the narrative because I’ve played a lot of similar fantasy games before.”

This evolution in Roxanne’s response (and what the similar responses show in the Results section) indicate the experience that Roxanne was gaining as the game went on. Iser mentions this type of evolution when he indicates that the reader approaches the text differently each time the reader approaches it. “When we have finished the text, and read it again, clearly our extra knowledge will result in a different time sequence” (Iser 285). In the case of D&D the player continues to come back to the game with each session. They learn from their previous experience and bring that newfound knowledge to the next game.

Connecting to the game is important for the Player to fully engage in the game. This connection happens through the entanglement that Iser mentions. “This is why the reader often feels involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real to him, even though in fact they are very far from his own reality” (Iser 283). The Player is immersed in the game. The stress and struggles of the character feel real to them. Dahlia points out these emotions:

Dahlia “I identify with being scared as we move through? As an adventurer being reminded of horror movie protagonists, I want to encourage everyone to be attentive to traps and things.

The Player points out the dangers the character faces. They are low on resources and in danger of being ambushed by enemies. To Dahlia and the Player, these emotions are real and there is a clear danger before them. These emotions that Dahlia feel do not necessarily relate to what Roxanne or Cinder experience. Cinder’s experience differed from Dahlia’s, they recognized the horror aspect of the current game session, but instead of being afraid they wanted to take the initiative and find information.

Cinder: “So, the room with the meat hooks immediately brought to mind a few different horror games, as well as that one scene from *The Punisher* where he captures a henchman and “tortures” him by lighting a blowtorch at the same time that he puts a popsicle on the

guy's back and claiming that he's burning the guy. Which is probably why my reaction then turned into "let's knock this guy out and interrogate him."

Cinder moved away from the fear and related to something else. Whereas Dahlia connected to their experience with D&D, Cinder connected to a past movie that they watched. This differences in responses are also something that Iser notes, "The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the "reality" of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" (Iser 283). The connections that Players are making throughout the game differ from each other. Dahlia, Cinder, and Roxanne connected to different parts of the narrative that they were engaged with.

3.6. Conclusion

D&D brings a narrative structure forward that connects and engages the Players in different ways. It has also shown an ability to affect the emotional state of the Players in a positive way. This change in emotion shows an importance to the connections that the Players are making, as well as an importance to any future use of D&D or RPGs in an academic setting (which will be discussed in the next section). Dahlia, Cinder, and Roxanne found importance in differing points throughout the game by connecting with their character and the experiences that those characters were going through, and they also connected to various media that the Players experienced in the past.

D&D provides a medium to engage with narratives and stories through the responses that the Players have to the said narrative. With the data that was collected here, and through the use of Reader Response theory on those responses, D&D (and games like it) can find its place within the classroom. Dahlia's, Cinder's, and Roxanne's engagement with the game showcased the value that D&D has.

4. PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

4.1. Introduction

Education is always in search of the “next big thing” when it comes to teaching and the classroom. When pondering how D&D might be implemented within the classroom, I came upon a pedagogical strategy that has already been established that is like D&D in that students take on roles in a similar way to D&D. This strategy? Simulation Games. D&D and simulation games offer an innovative and interactive approach to pedagogy that has potential in appealing to the new generation (and old) of students. While I will concede that implementing D&D and simulation games within the classroom is no easy task, the reward for the instructor and the results of the students may persuade others to give it a try. Reader Response has played a major role in this paper so far and it also deserves a mainstream place within the classroom.

Throughout this paper, Reader Response has shown that the unique responses that individuals have towards text offer new and exciting insights into the literature and narrative. Reader Response’s utilization within D&D and simulation games is one of these interactive approaches mentioned above. Dahlia, Cinder, and Roxanne engaged with the same narrative in front of them in different ways. These connections that the Players made to their characters as well as other media that they have engaged with previously become a kind of “lived experience” or memory that the Players can recall easily. This connection will be examined in-depth within this section as a tool that instructors can utilize, but more importantly as a benefit to RPGs and Reader Response within the classroom.

4.2. Simulation Games

This idea of simulation games sounds like the popular movie starring Mathew Broderick titled *War Games*, but the implementation is different. For starters there is no threat of nuclear

annihilation by competing world superpowers. Instead, the classroom provides a safe space to try out new ideas and learn, while still maintaining the excitement short of nuclear annihilation.

Simulation games as a concept most closely resembles that of roleplaying games like D&D, and they have a history already of being involved within the classroom. According to Csenge Virág Zalka, in “Adventures in the Classroom: Creating Traditional Story-Based Role-Playing Games for the high School Curriculum”, simulation games can be defined as “Similar to role-playing games. They involve a group of players and a “game director” who work together to recreate a situation within the classroom and try to solve problems and issues together” (Csenge Virág 178). With this close older cousin of roleplaying games having already seen use within the classroom, an implementation of D&D into course curriculum only has a barrier of needing to appeal to potential suitors of this pedagogical tool.

One of the main benefits that simulation games provide students is that they encourage what is known as “learning by doing.” We see this approach throughout English classrooms, even my own classroom, where students will show their knowledge of a given genre through activities that challenge them through what they learned. If the genre that students are working with involves a rhetorical analysis, activities that have the student locate the strategies the author is using in their writing offer a hands-on approach to the genre. If students see that the author is trying to appeal to the readers emotion by evoking strong imagery of animals being harmed, then it gives the students an extreme example of that rhetorical strategy. This approach helps cement that fresh knowledge into the students’ understanding by having them engage with whatever course objective is outlined. In trying to accomplish a goal given by the instructor, whether that be a short activity or a simulation game, the student undergoes this “learning by doing” by trying to accomplish whatever objective is before them. If that student happens to fail at the task, it is

another teachable moment and offers reflection to the student so they may learn what they can do to succeed next time. Csenge Virág explains how simulation games approach this “learn by doing” model, “Simulations require participants to apply their freshly gained knowledge right away instead of learning it and storing it for later. Information is ingrained through immediate practice and application, which leads to a more permanent form of knowledge” (179). With instructors creating lesson plans through the lens of roleplaying games, students retain that important knowledge. There is also the benefit in “learn by doing” that with roleplaying games, the student will be engaged and motivated through this fun activity. “Publications discussing simulation games put a great emphasis on the way the concept of “gaming” motivates students, sparks their interest, and keeps them creatively engaged and entertained and thus attentive through the whole learning experience” (Csenge Virág 179). This approach can spur engagement from students and get them excited for learning.

I will concede that implementation of simulation games requires additional time and effort for instructors. As stated by Mark Heyman in *Simulation Games for the Classroom*, “In many schools class periods are too short to include a whole game session in one class, together with the preparations, and one game usually takes up several periods from start to conclusion” (Heyman). A teacher with the freedom to design their own curriculum would want to decide from the start that they are using a simulation game and then design their curriculum around that. In creating a class this way, most of the time spent in class would be on the simulation or on discussions stemming from the simulation to be effective. There would be little time remaining for anything else within the classroom. Corinne Auman notes in “Using Simulation Games to Increase Student and Instructor Engagement” that a simulation games approach to the classroom would require “a major shift in classroom pedagogy” to what is labeled “inquiry-based learning”

(Auman 155). How an instructor might use simulation games stems from what they are trying to accomplish. Instructors would require a question or problem that is engaging enough for students and is strong enough to support such a method of learning. “The instructor must identify a problem or issue that provides a strong platform for engaging the course material. Once this problem is introduced, the following investigation and discussion is where the learning takes place” (155). Undertaking a simulation game approach within the classroom does not require the curriculum to be designed solely for such an approach.

A class designed for this type of pedagogy would be best for students; however, instructors may design a small unit focused on simulation games if they wish to gather practice before deciding if this was something they wished to have been the primary focus. It also shows that a little extra involvement by the teacher is needed to get student engagement.

Language is heavily involved with simulation games because of the nature that information is shared among those participating in the game. This use of narrative also helps to create stories that students can follow. The stronger the narrative, the more engaged students are with what they are participating in. This is something that Csenge Virág notes as well, “Traditional stories, as many professional storytellers are aware, have the inherent capability of providing these engaging narratives” (181). Arguably, the more engaged a student is with the material in front of them the better they will learn from it. Providing a pedagogical means for students to have this engagement and stake within what they are learning.

Kent State’s Center for Teaching and Learning (KSCTL) lists teaching strategies that instructors can follow when trying to implement simulation within their course. KSCTL states that three elements of simulation are necessary to have effective simulations. Preparation, Active Student Participation, and Post-Simulation Debrief are the necessary parts of simulations.

Simulation games require “intensive pre-simulation lesson preparation” (Center for Teaching and Learning). Active student participation excels when the instructor “make[s] it difficult for students to become passive during the simulation” (Center for Teaching and Learning). In the post-simulation debrief the discussion that students have leads to a deeper understanding of whatever the simulation was about. During this time instructors should “prepare question[s] to ask during the debrief to ensure students see alignment between the simulation and the course goals” (Center for Teaching and Learning). While Kent State’s Center for Teaching and Learning does not offer a shell for instructors to follow, the university does offer a checklist that instructors can follow when designing their own simulation games course or activity to make sure they are providing the best simulation to their students.

Simulation games may be beneficial in all levels of education. James Brewbaker shows this in “Simulation Games and the English Teacher”, “the student involved in a simulation has every reason to listen attentively, speak convincingly, read perceptively, and-in many instances - write forcefully, simulation gaming brings this traditional goal of English nearer to realization” (Brewbaker 105). The investment by the student in participating in the simulation game creates the traditional goals of the English classroom that Brewbaker listed. However, these goals stretch far beyond that of being exclusive to the English classroom. Auman describes what a simulation game may look like, “Students were given the simulation information, along with their assigned role (parent, teacher, etc.) and their winning objective. In order to “win” the game, students would need the school board members (neutral students) to vote to implement their winning objective” (Auman 156). These scenarios are some of the ways in which to implement simulation games within the classroom, but how would that look like with Dungeons and Dragons? One can model and build off the success that is found with simulation games.

Within the study the participant's goal within the narrative was to prevent a disaster from taking place within Baldur's Gate, one of the major cities within D&D lore. Through their investigations into a shady cult, they were able to stop any of the plans that were put in place by the antagonists of the study's narrative. While the narrative of the adventure module set up the goals that the Players would work towards, the Players themselves could go about solving the problem and accomplishing the goal as they saw fit. During this entanglement with the game's narrative, the Players made connections with previous consumed media. Dahlia made connections to *Die Hard*, *Mission Impossible*, and the *Oceans* franchise, while Cinder made a connection to *Pink Panther* because there were shades of a heist genre within the game's narrative. As the game progressed both of those Players made connections to Horror elements, and one even took it a step further and mimicked what they have seen within *The Punisher* movie. In this mimicking of genre, the Players engaged with the familiarity of their consumed media. Within the classroom, a simulation game evoking the same response from a student could lead to that student mimicking a genre or course objective that they are currently learning. It is in this mimicking of the genres and course goals where the notion of "learn by doing" thrives.

4.3. Reader Response in the Classroom

D&D is a type of interactive fiction because the players are the ones that help to create the meaning found within the narrative. As has been stated earlier, interactive fiction is a type of genre that has the reader, or in many instances a user, affect the narrative in some way. One of the most common instances of this genre would be video games, where the player takes on an active role in the narrative. Such an approach to narrative links interactive fiction with simulation games and offers a way to use D&D in the classroom. In my own experience as an instructor utilizing role playing games within the classroom, the game was used to help the students obtain

a better understanding of creative writing, specifically with characters and world building when it comes to writing a novel. There was no real structure to this class activity outside of groups determining who would act as the DM for this quick game as well as goals for the players, set by the instructor, in creating characters to populate whatever brief narrative was created by the DM. Other than the goal of creating a character set by the instructor, the events in the brief narrative and whatever goals arose from that narrative were created by the DM (student) and whatever the players wanted to do in that world. This would fit under what Cseng Virág notes as, “Games encourage ‘learning by doing’” and “The entertainment and challenge provided by games create strong motivation” (179). In participating in this game in the classroom, the instructor wished for us to learn more about the importance of narrative aspects. We took on the roles of the characters within an incomplete and emerging narrative which showed what parts of narratives we may lack in our own writing, and what we may have already had a grasp of. In doing this the instructor used interactive fiction, and simulation games, to instruct us to be better writers.

Taking on the role of the player forced us as students to pay closer attention to what was happening. This motivation, as mentioned above, was created from a desire to have fun, an attempt to create the best character, and to contribute to the narrative in an interesting way. Cseng Virág once again notes how this approach may affect students, and what may have been happening in my own experience with the character I was playing. “This deeper connection to the characters and the imaginary world they exist in enhances the storytelling experience and ingrains acquired information deeper into the player’s memory as personal experience” (Cseng Virág 184). This deep connection between the character stems from the personal connection the player has with the character. The player may take up the first and second pronoun when discussing the character, thus moving them away from an impersonal third.

This type of teaching is also beneficial for the instructor through the responses that they receive from students. “The increase in student engagement is beneficial not only for the students but for the instructor, as well. When your students are engaged, it is infectious. I went to class excited to hear what students had to say and see what they would teach me about the topics” (Auman 160). I am sure that my instructor looked forward to seeing what narratives were created given the short notice that was given. A class designed for this type of pedagogical approach would create more appealing narratives for the student, as they are directly experiencing the events that are happening. These events, as Cseng Virág points out, are ingrained in the player’s memory as personal experience. These narratives allow for more exploration in character, setting, and narrative development by all those playing, all things that an instructor would look forward to seeing in their student’s work. This meaning gained by exploration follows Reader Response approaches to texts.

While the students are actively engaged, the teacher has a relatively hands off approach in this kind of pedagogy and acts as facilitator of student collaboration. Meaning making comes primarily from the students and their interactions with their peers. As Dixie Lee Spiegel puts it, “Because the teacher is not the arbiter of meaning, students in a response-based program become responsible for monitoring their own meaning-making and for identifying, exploring, and resolving their own question” (Spiegel 46). Much of what has been discussed above has students reacting to given scenarios or creating their own narratives with the help of their peers. The instructor, much like the DM, is the mediator to answer any questions that come up from the student’s own work. In doing so, the student gains information from what they have deemed to be important in their exploration.

The Reader Response approach within the classroom allows the student an opportunity to have agency with their learning. They can take control when finding meaning. This individual work builds the reader's ability when it comes to understanding texts. Spiegel notes, "Students who participate in reader response approaches have been shown to become more reflective and more critical readers and to move to higher levels of thinking and richer understandings of literature. They move from being the passive readers ... to readers who take the time to think about, wonder, and reflect upon what they have read" (Spiegel 45). Within the classroom, Reader Response leads to students being able to branch out in their understanding of texts. There is no "right" way in approaching the text and no "right" way in how to respond to said text. Gregory Shafer shows how this approach has affected students within his own classrooms, in "Reader Response Makes History":

Thus, in establishing a reader response approach to a history/literature unit, we decided to eliminate the authoritarian voice of the textbook and replace it with a series of works that captured the swirling and conflicting voices of the period. With each book, speech, essay, or polemic, we should debate history rather than simply absorbing the conclusions made by textbook authors and passed down as law. (Shafer 65)

In Shafer's case, the students were part of a joint history and literature unit. Using Reader Response, Shafer placed the focus of the unit on debating history, and the discussion that comes out of it, instead of taking the author's meaning as the final of discussion. While the death of the author has already been discussed in circles throughout academic settings, it should be reiterated that the author no longer has a say in what they have written once pen gets placed to paper.

Reader Response in the classroom's benefits go far beyond students' willingness and ability to participate in discussion surrounding the topic. The stress of responding with the "correct" answer towards the instructor is alleviated when all responses are wanted and expected. It also benefits from removing peer pressure from the student giving the response. If the "correct" answer is whatever the student determined when reading the material, then this

removes the pressure from the student. This results in more unique and engaging discourse surrounding a given topic. Spiegel makes a case as to why Reader Response is useful within the classroom, “They [students] take ownership of making. They form personal but not egocentric interpretations of text and show an appreciation for that differ from their own. They are able to respond to literature in complex and sophisticated ways. But also show growth as readers” (Spiegel 46). The use of Reader Response within a classroom setting challenges students to give their own thoughts and put their own voices out there for others to listen. In doing so, the answer that the student may give is not necessarily incorrect, as they concluded based on the information before them. The English classroom does not rely on the concrete that the more scientific disciplines rely on. There is no math formula to solve English questions.

Dr. Jenna Copper offers guidance on how to implement Reader Response within the high school classroom in her blog “How to Engage Your ELA Students with Reader Response Lens”. Within her blog she offers different Reader Response assignments that range from Free Writing, Journaling, and Discussing, as well as offering an activity/assignment for students to gather familiarity with this type of approach in the classroom by utilizing film trailers as a way for students to connect with their emotional responses.

Following a Reader Response approach to the classroom is simple, as the instructor is the one that reinforces this mindset in the students. There are no extra activities that an instructor must incorporate into their classrooms (outside of potentially tweaking a few instructions given to students), so any classroom and most academic fields can choose to use reader response as a way of understanding texts. The instructor will just need students who are willing to utilize their diverse backgrounds to connect with the texts that are reading.

4.4. Devised Theatre

Playing D&D requires the player to perform in some way as the player enters the game world through a character. The player takes on a role within the game. This act of performance the player undertakes becoming someone they are not connects to an actor performing a character. They become a persona to play a part in a larger story. This idea of players becoming actors during the game led to the Theatre discipline and how they approach texts that will be performed. One approach to theatre sounds close to the way that D&D stories are told. This is called devised theatre. In devised theatre, “the creative artists either begin with no text at all (starting from an idea, a painting, a question), or they select a text (or texts) as their source material (plays, novels, poems, short stories, etc.) and begin to work collectively to fashion a new performance that grows out of the idea, question, or text” (Mahoney and Brown 145). The Players at a D&D table approach the game in a collective and collaborative manner. They do not necessarily know where the story will end up, but they begin together at the start of an adventure with all the possibilities before them. This notion of “devised theatre” fits well within the structure of D&D as the story that is told is filtered through the DM by the actions of the Players and their responses to the events and challenges the DM throws at them. The Players may have an idea of what they want to do during the game, whether that is in something as high stakes and deadly as combat or something as amusing as bartering for the tiniest bit of money off the item they want to buy.

These actions affect the game, and when every character gains this agency within the game a resulting effect is collaboration as no one Player is allowed to overrule the other. “In essence, it is an exercise in constant problem solving. Having no script from which to rehearse but still having an opening night deadline (or class final deadline) presents a problem that the

students work to solve. It empowers them to think holistically in regards to storytelling” (145). This problem solving that Mahoney and Brown mention is the essence of D&D and other RPGs itself and it is the essence of fantasy literature itself. The hero faces a challenge that they must overcome. During their journey they face ever-growing challenges before they become strong enough to complete the journey that they set out on. Every decision that the Players make in D&D is an effort to overcome an obstacle and since the Players have their own agency to decide how to overcome those obstacles it benefits them to be as creative in their problem solving as possible. The creativeness of the Players also oftentimes leads to memorable storytelling experiences that they will share among friends for many years to come.

Within the study there was a moment of contention (unknowingly to any of the other Players) when Dahlia chased down and killed fleeing wolves. These wolves had originally attacked the group as they were travelling, however once a few of them were killed by the Players, they quickly decided to flee. Cinder’s player dislikes violence against animals, and when the wolves were no longer hostile that would have been the end of the fight.

Cinder: “I generally dislike violence against animals in games and will usually choose not to attack fleeing creatures in general. It’s not a hard line, and I sometimes get a little bit more vindictive and violent, but those moments tend to stand out to me in a not-so-great way.”

However, Dahlia decided to continue with the attack. In continuing with the attack Dahlia continued to write the story where Cinder had put down the pen. This could be seen as Dahlia *writing* over Cinder given the Player’s reaction to the event, however it is the collective action of the group that led to that moment, and ultimately the outcome of the encounter with the wolves. While this is an overall small moment within the story, it was memorable enough for Cinder to comment on. This collaborative moment could create tension for the group to role play, leading to more story collaboration and character growth for all Players. In this small moment, especially

when compared to the larger story, the Players were engaging in devised theatre because the story that was being told was created through collaboration (even if it was against the Players usual ideals).

Devising connects with the act of playing D&D because both are performative, but they also relate because of the way that the actor/player approaches the acting/game. The approach that they take stems from all the prior knowledge that they have gained in the process of engaging with the genre. “Devising offers the upper-level Theatre student an opportunity to synthesize all of their theatre training and put it directly into practice by giving them the freedom to create a new work” (145). This is like the experience that the player comes to the table with. They use their prior training, or in this case experience, to engage with the game. Using their prior experience directly relates to Transactional Reader Response as the story that the characters are creating is being filtered (or undergoing a transaction) through their prior knowledge with the game and any other connections that they have made previously. This was seen within the study’s results, as the characters of Dahlia and Cinder connected with film before the Player connected with the character itself. The “theatre training” that Mahoney and Brown describe was the “experience” that Rosenblatt mentions in Reader Response.

Within Mahoney and Brown’s study, they used an interdisciplinary approach to one of Oscar Wilde’s plays. They brought an upper divisional Theatre class with an upper divisional English course to discuss the play. During this time the Theatre students would also create their own reinterpretation of the play with the help of those English students. The approach that the students would take stemmed from this “Devising Theatre” concept. The results of this study were overwhelmingly positive for the students and is mentioned by the author. “Their [Theatre students] use of theatrical metaphor through movement, selection of properties, costumes, and

music deepened in comparison to students who had taken the course in previous years” (149). Using an interdisciplinary approach with devising theatre led to the student’s engagement with the course as well as students gathering a deeper understanding of the text. This coalition of English students and Theatre students provided a learning experience that benefited both. The English students were “able to see whole themes and complicated textual concepts come to life, transforming the discussion of a somewhat dry and strange play into an exciting, passionate debate” (149). Both disciplines learned through devising. The theatre students utilized the knowledge that they gained through the English students to create a more nuanced approach to their own performance and the English students were able to “see” the play they were reading. An approach to D&D within the classroom may very well emulate the tools of “devising theatre”. It also opens a possibility to create relationships across disciplines.

4.5. Conclusion

Simulation Games, Reader Response Theory, and Devised Theatre offer an avenue where D&D and other RPGs can find a place within the classroom. The most important aspect of these three and their connection to D&D is the role of the individual. The experience of that individual is what shapes their understanding of the text, film, or game. When a classroom takes a reader focused approach to their curriculum, the responses are more meaningful to the student because the student is pulling from their experiences to gain the transaction with the text. While the implementation of some of these pedagogical approaches to the classroom is more difficult than others, the benefits of these approaches are evident. Whether that is using simulation games to provide students a hands-on approach to their learning or a devised theatre approach that might bring two disciplines together, the collaborative nature of these approaches leads to higher learning. With how the game of D&D itself is played, it overlaps many of these established

pedagogical approaches. It carries the role playing associated with simulation games, the Transactional Reader Response aspect (and interdisciplinary collaborative use) of devised theatre using prior knowledge and experience, and finally the importance of the reader (player) itself as seen in Reader Response.

The study has shown that the Players are constantly making connections with their character and with their wealth of literary experience. When they are solving problems within the game, they use those connections for inspiration with what to do next. However, these actions that they take are the Players own, the Player has that agency and ability to solve their problems wherever they may find the answers. This agency that the Player has may have been the connection that I found originally with Reader Response, where the meaning of the text comes from what the reader makes of it. There is agency taken by the reader, they are not beholden towards the authorial intent. The author died long ago and cannot speak on what the text means, yet within the classroom the author still carries a voice. In introducing Reader Response within the classroom and in introducing pedagogical strategies where the student takes agency with the text, the importance of “meaning” is given by the voices present and alive in the classroom.

D&D is one of these ways in which the student is given agency in their learning. The voice and agency given to the player is what ultimately decides the outcome of the story. With the connections that players make when playing D&D, the learning done, and knowledge gained will be engrained in that player. D&D shares common narrative, storytelling, and learning tools that have been seen in pedagogical approaches listed above. Its next stop? The classroom.

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent

Form:

A Reader Response/Affect Theory Approach to Storytelling and Tabletop Games: The Player's Experience of Dungeons and Dragons.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time.

Please ask the Principal Investigator (Anastassiya Andrianova) or Student Researcher (Noah Hansen) any questions you have about the study or about this form before deciding to participate.

Who is conducting this study?

This study is being conducted by Dr. Anastassiya Andrianova (principal investigator) and Noah Hansen (student researcher).

Why am I invited to participate in this study?

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are familiar with and have experience playing interactive tabletop games, like Dungeons and Dragons.

You should not participate if you are not familiar with or have never played interactive tabletop games, like Dungeons and Dragons, or if you have had unpleasant experiences with such gaming in the past.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to gather and examine participant responses to the story being presented in the game Dungeons and Dragons. The objective is to determine the literary worth that this medium has as a storytelling device.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of questions about your overall

interpretation and experience of events happening within the story and game before and after playing the tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons.

Each session will take approximately 3 hours; there will be one break at the halfway point (and upon request). This includes 10-15 minutes for questions before and 10-15 minutes for questions after the gaming session. Because of the ongoing nature of a game session, participation will

include multiple game sessions. The range of sessions can be anywhere from 5 sessions to 25 sessions.

You will not be asked to participate in any additional or external interviews or surveys.

Where will the study take place?

The study will take place in the NDSU English offices located in Minard Hall 318E30.

What are the possible risks or discomforts I may experience during the study?

While participating in this study, you will not experience any risks or discomforts. No such risks or discomforts are currently foreseeable. We will inform you about any significant new information we learn that may relate to your willingness to continue participating in this study.

What are the potential benefits to participating in the study?

Participating in a game of Dungeons and Dragons is potentially an enjoyable, interactive, and educational experience. Being exposed to the different experiences individuals have when engaging with the same story, participants can learn more about affect, emotion, and how social contexts shape readers' responses.

What measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data or to protect my privacy?

Research records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available without your permission. To protect confidentiality of the study records and data, the following measures will be taken: all responses will be anonymized; files containing individual responses will be kept on a secure computer and accessible to the researcher and principal investigator only; qualitative data will be presented in summary form with names omitted and minimal direct quotation.

Will I incur any costs from participating or will I be compensated?

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Will the information I provide be used for anything other than the current study?

The information you provide will be used as data for a master's paper.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences.

You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions *about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury*, please contact the IRB Administrator, Kristy Shirley, (701) 231-8995, kristy.shirley@ndsu.edu.

Whom can I contact if I have questions about the study?

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information *about the study*, contact Dr. Anastassiya Andrianova, Principal Investigator, anastassiya.andriano@ndsu.edu and Noah Hansen, Student Researcher, noah.hansen@ndsu.edu.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to participate in this study, “A Reader Response/Affect Theory Approach to Storytelling and Tabletop Games: The Player’s Experience of Dungeons and Dragons.” Make sure you understand what the study involves before you sign. If you have any questions about the study after you agree to participate, you can contact the research team using the information provided above.

___ Yes, I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

___ No, I do not agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s Name: (print) _____

Participant’s Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Principal Investigator Name: (print) __Anastassiya Andrianova _____

PI’s Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Researcher’s Name: (print) __Noah Hansen _____

Student Researcher’s Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello,

My name is Noah Hansen, and I am a graduate researcher conducting a study titled “**A Reader Response/Affect Theory Approach to Storytelling and Tabletop Games: The Player's Experience of Dungeons & Dragons.**” This study is part of my Master’s Paper in English at North Dakota State University, under the supervision of Associate Professor of English, Dr. Anastassiya Andrianova.

I am recruiting participants to engage in a study surrounding the game of Dungeons and Dragons. Participants would be asked to play the game as normal, that is, as you would during a game night experience with friends, but with one exception: before and after each session of the game is played, you would be asked a brief set of questions (4 questions before the game and 5 questions after the game). Those questions would essentially deal with your current mood that day, thoughts on the game, and what you think the story is. Your responses will be anonymized to protect your privacy.

To participate, you would want to make sure you are available twice a month to meet and engage with the game for approximately 3 hours at a time. The sessions will run for 4 months in fall 2022, totaling 8 game sessions. You can drop out of this study at any point without any penalty, and we will find someone to replace you.

Please reach out to me, Noah Hansen (noah.hansen@ndsu.edu), if you’re interested and so we can go over the Informed Consent form required as part of an ethical study procedure. (You will need to sign this form before the first game session.)

Also, feel free to reach out to me (noah.hansen@ndsu.edu) or to my supervisor, Dr. Andrianova (anastassiya.andriano@ndsu.edu) if you have any questions or concerns!

Thanks for your interest and willingness to participate in this study of story-telling in Dungeons and Dragons!

~Noah Hansen

APPENDIX C. EXEMPT FORM



08/16/2022

Dr. Anastasiya Andrianova
English

Re: IRB Determination of Exempt Human Subjects Research:
Protocol #IRB0004428, "A Reader Response/Affect Theory Approach to Storytelling and
Tabletop Games: The Player's Experience of Dungeons & Dragons"

NDSU Co-investigator(s) and research team:

- Anastasiya Andrianova
- Noah James Hansen

Approval Date: 08/16/2022

Expiration Date: 08/15/2025

Study site(s): The research will be conducted in the English graduate student offices in Minard
318. The setting is meant to be casual and comfortable (i.e., not a classroom).

Funding Source:

The above referenced human subjects research project has been determined exempt (category 3)
in accordance with federal regulations (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, *Protection
of Human Subjects*).

Please also note the following:

- The study must be conducted as described in the approved protocol.
- Changes to this protocol must be approved prior to initiating, unless the changes are necessary to
eliminate an immediate hazard to subjects.
- Promptly report adverse events, unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, or
protocol deviations related to this project.

Thank you for your cooperation with NDSU IRB procedures. Best wishes for a successful study.

*NDSU has an approved FederalWide Assurance with the Department of Health and Human
Services: FWA00002439.*

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Before the Game Session Questions:

- How are you feeling right now? Feel free to go as in depth or as vague as you would like.
 - Why might you be feeling this way?
- What, if any, big life changes happening to your right now?
 - How do you think that is affecting you?
- What is the current story of the game that is being played?
- What do you think your impact on the game and story is?

After the Game Session Questions:

- What experiences, thoughts, or knowledge does this adventure/game evoke?
- What do you identify with, and how does this identification affect your response to the adventure/game?
- In your view, what was the biggest event that happened during the game?
 - Why did this stand out?
 - Did your character influence this view at all?
 - How so?
- Are there any other moments from the game that stood out to you?
 - Why did they stand out?
 - What did those moments mean to you?
- In your view, where do you think the story is going for the game as well as for your character?
- How are you feeling right now? Feel free to go as in depth or as vague as you would like.
 - Why might you be feeling this way?