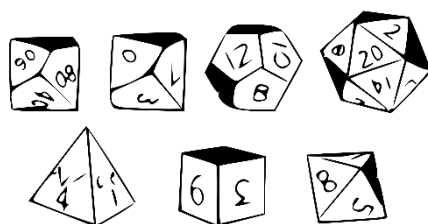


Exploring Online Dungeons

Streaming Dungeons & Dragons as Transmedia Extension

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ABSTRACT

The most recent edition of tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) has gained much popularity. This is often contributed to the presence of D&D in popular media and of players live-streaming their D&D game online. This form of live-streaming has also garnered popularity online. D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast has also started their own official D&D streaming channel on the platform Twitch. This paper examines the relationship between these official streams and the game itself through the lenses of paratext and transmedia. This allows insight into how these streams extend the game into a new medium and illustrates how these streams can influence the perceptions of the viewer on the game. These aspects in the streams will be examined in order to argue that Wizards of the Coast's move to regularly live-stream Dungeons and Dragons sessions compliments the transmedia aspect of Dungeons and Dragons as a franchise.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This research will focus on how Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) employs online streaming and which implications this implementation has for the experience of the game. D&D is storytelling game where players play out a story as characters. There is a game leader called the Dungeon Master who adapts the story to the actions of the characters. The most recent iteration of the tabletop roleplaying game, D&D 5th edition, is the most successful one as of yet, and it has garnered a large following online.¹ This edition embraces the use of online media, and the game seems to benefit from this by having a broad reach and economic success.² There are multiple digital platforms for the distribution of different kinds of content related to the game and it has also established a significant online presence. One of the most important media through which D&D has become popular is online streaming and as such this streaming plays an important part in transforming the experience (DeVile 2017).

There are many streams of groups playing D&D, the most popular of these being the show *Critical Role*, which started in June 2015. Since then, many more D&D streams have arisen, most of which take place on the Twitch streaming platform. The publisher of the game, Wizards of the Coast also uses Twitch for streaming and has an official D&D Twitch channel. Wizards of the Coast already streamed D&D but have since started putting out a lot more shows on their channel. They also put out different types of shows relating to D&D. The content on the official D&D Twitch channel will be the subject of this research.

1.1 Social relevance

On first glance, Dungeon and Dragons might seem like an unimportant societal subject to examine, yet it has a broad reach. That is why it is essential to unpack the impact and reach it has.

Dungeons and Dragons is a compelling case to look at, since people are actively engaging with imaginary worlds. These imaginary worlds can have an impact on culture, as was the case with, for instance, the imaginary world of *Lord of the Rings*, which is now part of the shared vocabulary of global popular culture (Hassler-Forest 2016, 27). With a tabletop roleplaying game (henceforth TRPG) like Dungeons and Dragons, imaginary worlds form when a small group of people play together. They are therefore very localised. A lot of the information about the fictional world the players play in is fixed. However, every D&D play session gives rise to new interpretations, seeing as the players are free to act however they desire in the fictional world. This freedom gives rise to new stories and adventures. Shared elements of play and fictional worlds of D&D can influence the shared vocabulary in a similar way to *the Lord of the Rings*. That is why the transmedia representation of D&D, like streaming, is interesting to examine, as it can reveal what elements remain prominent.

There are many TRPGs but D&D is especially relevant due to its prominence in popular media. D&D is a game that has been tightly interwoven with 'nerd' and popular culture for a long time, not always in a positive light. In recent years, it has been increasingly featured in many different popular mainstream media such as tv shows (Chalk 2018). This prominence in media over the years makes D&D an especially interesting topic to analyse as part of contemporary media culture.

These worlds are not created without outside influence, rather they are shaped by them. The stories in a franchise like *Lord of the Rings* can have a significant impact on the game and the realisation of imaginary worlds while playing (Carbonell 2016). Many elements of that fictional world have found its way into the game, for example in the type of creature a player can play, such as an orc or halfling. Similarly, popular D&D streams can influence how people use the game to construct these worlds offline. They do this either intentionally, for instance by players looking for inspiration, or unconsciously, through players mirroring parts of the stream.³ In this way, the streams form a link of interpretation with the game itself and effectively become part of the paratext. Paratext is a term which will be expanded upon later but this effectively influences the interpretation and perception of the main text, D&D in this case.

It is important to critically examine how media influence people's capacity to imagine these worlds, especially since many media make it hard to imagine alternatives to our current world and political

systems. Those media can reaffirm the current state by presenting a form of fantastical capitalism and reproduce neoliberalism's structure of feeling (Hassler-Forest 2016, 11). An example of further issues is that TRPGs have been problematic regarding diversity in the past (Jones 2018; Stokes 2017; Trammel 2014). D&D, with its recent success, is a good case to examine any potential negative or positive influences since it lets people imagine these aforementioned alternative worlds.

1.2 Research Questions

To focus the research a few research questions will be used to examine the D&D streams. The main question is; How does Wizard of the Coast's move to regularly stream Dungeons and Dragons compliment the transmedia aspect of Dungeons and Dragons as a franchise? To examine this properly, the research will use the following three sub-questions. First, the focus will be on how the streams extend the experience of the analogue game Dungeons and Dragons. Then, it will shift to uncovering how the streams address the diversity of the intended player of Dungeons and Dragons. Lastly, the focus will be on what role the streams have within the larger whole of the Dungeons and Dragons franchise.

In order to examine these questions a focus on the relationship between the streams and the game is necessary. Therefore, a textual analysis focussing on paratextual elements will be used to examine the streams. The specifics of this type of analysis will be explained further into the text.

1.3 Academic Relevance

The research into the D&D streams will contribute to three ongoing scholarly discourses, namely the discourse on D&D and other TRPGs, on streaming and Let's Plays and on transmedia. Below, all three discourses will be summarised, and the original contribution to each will be indicated.

First, academic literature on D&D and other TRPGs often focus on the representation of race and gender. Even though the current edition of D&D is praised for its inclusiveness in terms of race, gender and sexuality, D&D and the TRPGs in general, were not that inclusive in the past (Jones 2018; Stokes 2017; Trammel 2014).

There is definitely a shift in how D&D is presented, which makes it interesting to examine how the streams try to establish what types of people play the game. The research will add to the current body of literature by examining how the game is represented in digital media, on Twitch in this case, instead of analysing the game on its own. The research itself will explore the players and the type of characters they play as a way to reveal how the intended player of D&D is framed in the streams. To examine this, the concept of the implied player will be used and this paper will expand upon the concept to see how paratext influences the perceived implied player (Aarseth 2007).

Chalk has chronicled the prominence of D&D in popular culture and its increased popularity therein. He identifies the rise of the streams as a new genre of D&D content (Chalk 2018). His research, however, only indicates the rapid rise in popularity of the streams. This research will expand upon this by examining different aspects of the streams and how they expand the D&D franchise.

Second, the research will also add to the literature on streaming and Let's Plays. Most literature focuses on streaming of digital games and not those that stream analogue games (Pellicone and Ahn 2017; Nguyen 2016). This will, therefore, extend the literature. Streaming analogue games and TRPGs, in particular, have distinct differences compared to streaming digital games. The translation of the experience of an analogue game to a digital platform is one of these differences, another being that the players now also fulfil the role of a live actor in the streams. The research will investigate how these factors are represented in the streams and help further current and future research on the streaming of TRPGs.

Third, looking at D&D through the lens of transmedia will add to the discourse on transmedia storytelling. D&D can provide a different type of case to other, more traditional examples like *Star Wars* and the *Lord of the Rings*. One of the main differences is that it originated as a game rather than literature or film. Since it is a roleplaying game, it also comes from a different form of storytelling, one

that does not feature a singular story. Transmedia story worlds typically turn into a brand themselves (Scolari 2009). D&D has always been transmedia in nature, although only to only a small extent in the beginning. The game has its fantasy story worlds like the successful Dragonlance, Eberron and the Forgotten Realms. A focus on transmedia will shed light on how streaming media can shape the image of a brand.

Deterding and Zagal have written a book about RPGs, *Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (2018). Their focus is mainly on how RPGs function on and through different media platforms but they do tackle transmedia story worlds. The fictional story worlds of RPGs can be extended through transmedia storytelling. The focus of the book, however, is on the games and not the non-game transmedia extensions of these games. That is where this research will expand on the transmedia aspect with a relatively new type of transmedia extension.

2 THEORY

Three main theories will be used to illustrate the way the streams compliment the D&D transmedia franchise, namely paratexts, Let's Play theory and Transmedia. All these theories focus on extending and expanding a text into another medium or text. Together these can be synergised to examine how D&D is extended to the format of a stream and what the relation is to the game itself. The following section will introduce these concepts and combine them.

2.1 Paratexts

When focussing on the relationship of the streams to the game itself, the concept of paratext can illustrate the dynamics within this relationship. The media surrounding the central media artefact are often neglected, even though these media can shape the experience and understanding of a media artefact, like D&D, before someone can even start to consume it (Gray 2010).

In this framework, the Twitch channel is part of what is called the paratext of the game according to the definition of Gray, who extends the definition of Genette (Gray 2010, 6). Genette's theory on paratexts mainly focusses on literary works, but he does propose that it could be extended to other media (Genette 1997). Gray followed up on Genette's proposition by extending this definition into other media texts (Gray 2010).

Paratexts are texts that are not part of the main 'text' itself, which is in this case the content on the Twitch channel. They can be many things, such as disk cases, posters, reviews, and trailers. Gray also shows why paratexts are an important subject to analyse. He shows how they could frame and influence the way people perceive the actual media text itself. Paratext can, for example, generate meaning before the actual text is consumed (Gray 2010). That is why Genette described them as thresholds of interpretation (Genette 1997). This potential to create meaning can be taken into the actual play of the game itself, where it will influence the perception of the imaginary world.

The distinction between text/paratext is analytical. There is not always a clear distinction between the two. While the cover of a book or the poster of a movie is clearly linked to the text and forms a paratextual extension, in some other cases this distinction is not as clear. The relation of D&D streams and the roleplaying game could be viewed the other way around, where D&D informs the interpretation of the streams. That is why the concept of paratext will mainly be used as an analytical tool instead of a categorisation. It allows a focus on the power relation between the two texts and how it shapes the understanding of a primary text, indicating which text is more important and has more weight in shaping the franchise.

To properly examine the content of the official D&D Twitch channel, it is important to acknowledge that a channel is a form of promotion for the game. In particular, since the channel is owned by Wizards of the Coast, the channel can be seen as a platform to promote and support the game. When examining from this angle, the influence on the player's perceptions of D&D and the imaginary world created through play comes into view since promotional materials "give us the resources with which we will

both interpret and discuss that world" (Gray 2010, 1). This means that even though the content is 'advertising', it also extends the original 'text'.

David Jara has looked at the rulebooks of TRPGs through the lens of paratext to show how they can give the 'primary authors' influence over the stories that arise during play (2013). He reveals how stories within these books can influence the stories that arise during play since the players are inclined to produce a story that matches what they expect of it (Jara 2013, 51–52). The D&D streams also similarly produce stories while simultaneously shaping the expectations of the viewer.

In transmedia, similar power relations can be found. One or more texts serve as satellite text to the main one as mothership (Freeman and Gambarato 2018). In this way, paratext and transmedia can be used in conjunction with each other to more aptly describe the media relationship of the streams and the D&D game itself. In this case, the D&D streams can be seen as texts on their own, but in relation to another text, it becomes clear it also serves the other text, like the D&D game. In this case, the streams have both a transmedial and paratextual relationship with the game. The research will use paratextuality, when needed, to highlight relationships between text, the game, and the content on the twitch channel.

2.2 Let's Plays as Paratextual Genre

When examining the streams, this paper uses theory about 'Let's Plays'. Let's Plays are videos of people playing games which are similar to these streams as they also show people playing games, albeit video games instead of tabletop games. Let's Plays are inherently paratextual in nature. The video forms another threshold of interpretation for the game that is played within the video.

The research on the subject of Let's Play that will be used is that of Nguyen. He notes how these players perform the role of a player in these videos. The roles are "...constructions and performances of playing personalities" (Nguyen 2016). The streams of D&D, in this case, feature a double performance, namely that of a player and that of the character they play in the story world. One performance, that of the character, will give insight into the framing of the game. The other performance, that of the player, will help reveal what type of players play D&D. These two types show that these streams feature layered performances that come with this new genre of Let's Play.

By showing a possible way the game can be played, streams can reveal parts of the implied player. The implied players are constructed by the knowledge and skills a player needs to have in order to be able to play the game and the actions a player needs to perform in order to continue playing the game (Aarseth 2007, 132). Let's Plays as paratext show the performance of a player of a particular game and by doing so give an interpretation of what the implied player might be. This image of the implied player is likely an inaccurate one, however. Real players, for example, only partly go along with the implied player or can fully go against the game's exactions of a player in transgressive play (Aarseth 2007, 132–33). It does still give an impression of the knowledge and skill they need to have and what kind of actions the player needs to be willing to perform. As a piece of paratexts, it gives the viewer an impression of what kind of player the game is intended for. Furthermore, it can influence how viewers interpret what is expected of a player of the game.

Streaming video can also display much additional information next to the game. Research by Anderson shows what kind of means people that stream on twitch use to represent themselves. Overlays and webcam video, for example, can be used to represent themselves on a stream. They also use multiple ways to interact with their audience (2017).

D&D, however, imposes the question of whether these theories still hold up. Firstly, the game is meant to be played with multiple people at the same time. It is not so much about a singular person but a group of players. Secondly, the game requires people to act like the character they are within the game for extended periods, which takes time away from acting like a 'D&D player' and from interacting with the audience. Lastly, the players on the different D&D streams on the official channel are not on their own separate channels. This means these streams are part of a larger whole, instead of representing a single player or a single group of players.

2.3 Transmedia Story Worlds

As stated, the concept of transmedia will be used to help analyse the streams and illustrate the context of these streams. Henry Jenkins coined the term and defined it in his book *Convergence Culture*. He defined a transmedia story as a story that "... unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006, 95–96). In the case of the streams, they continue the stories within the fantasy worlds of D&D. Senior producer of D&D Christopher Perkins stated that the stories they release now are transmedia oriented and are synchronised over multiple platforms (Critical Role 2019, 1:03:48).

They, however, do not tell a singular story, which is true for many transmedia franchises. That is why Jenkins has amended the definition so that it does not need to contain a singular coherent narrative. Hassler-Forest, for example, shifts the focus to transmedia world-building instead of a singular narrative. Transmedia world-building emerged from a set of layered and interlinked cultural, social, and industry practices (2016, 5). The experience of a world across media is important for the transmedia experience. Klastrup and Tosca point this out with their concept worldness. The worldness of a transmedia world is the actual shared experience of the fictional world and not the piece of media or the story itself (2004).

D&D comes with many elements that are unique to the game and the story worlds it produces. In D&D there are many shared tropes and elements, like a range of iconic creatures such as illithids, owlbears and beholders. These elements can become iconic for the franchise, even being featured in other media like the series *Stranger Things* (Chalk 2018). These elements have also been integrated into the official D&D story worlds.

Three core features can be found in all transmedia text and shape their worldness, namely the features Mythos, Topos and Ethos. Mythos is the backstory of the world, which is "...the central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). Topos involves "...what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). Lastly, Ethos "...is the form of knowledge required in order to know how to behave in the world" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). These aspects are at least partially defined in the game, which gives D&D an innate worldness. This worldness is another indication of the strong transmediality of D&D and will be examined in how it is extended into the streams.

To see how D&D is extended, the seven principles of transmedia storytelling from Jenkins will be used for the analysis to give insight into the dynamics of these texts (Jenkins 2009b). Jenkins made an overview of the largest transmedia principles that are identified and discussed within the academic field. The first principle he lists is Spreadability vs Drillability. Spreadability refers to the property of a piece of media to spread easily and gather a large viewership quickly. In contrast, Drillability refers to the part of media that elicits a more active engagement with the piece of media and by doing so, encourages long-term engagement. These terms are not mutually exclusive. Media can be designed to have both (Jenkins 2009b). In the case of D&D streams, they do not seem designed to spread easily because of their long run time. Next on the list is Continuity vs Multiplicity. This is where Jenkins moves away from the notion that transmedia storytelling needs to have a singular coherent story across media, which is what continuity refers to. Multiplicity refers to multiple different stories with the same elements and people but giving a new take thereupon, like putting it in a different genre (Jenkins 2009b). This concept is especially useful for D&D where there are lots of stories with the same elements, worlds and sometimes characters. The principles continue with Immersion vs Extractability. Immersion refers to the consumer feeling like they become part of the story world. Extractability, on the other hand, refers to what the consumer takes with them from the story into the real world "...as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life" (Jenkins 2009a). A viewer of the D&D streams could extract ideas from the show to put in their games at home.

Next, there are four singular concepts, the first of which is Worldbuilding. This refers to making stories and facts to establish a fictional world. The focus of this principle is media that explore and expose the fictional world. This strongly interlinks with the concept of worldness. It is about the experience of a

fictional world. Seriality is another principle and focuses on the fact that some transmedia is produced to consume in a particular order (Jenkins 2009a). While the shows themselves have very strong seriality, they are not part of a larger series within the D&D transmedia constellation. Subjectivity is the next principle and one of the most relevant for D&D. With this principle, the transmedia expands the world by focussing on the experiences and perspectives of secondary characters. This reveals the multiple subjective experiences of the fictional world (Jenkins 2009a). In the case of D&D, there are no set primary characters since the game relies on the players to play the characters of their own story. The streams show the experience of the players playing D&D and the experience of their characters, which can offer many points of identification. The all-female show *Girls Guts Glory*, for example, features many female figures that female players can potentially identify with. This also relates to the last principle, Performance. This refers to the fans and producers actively performing their relationship to the transmedia texts and each other. Fans use parts of the texts to perform their fan activities, and the producers actively consider how the fans will engage with and use the texts (Jenkins 2009a). In the case of the D&D shows, the fans can make fan art, or try to imitate a character or playstyle depicted in one of the shows. The producers of the shows and the twitch channel, in general, can try to steer the fan performances in a certain direction.

3 METHOD

To fully understand the relationship between the shows on the Twitch channel and D&D this paper will use the concepts from paratext to perform a textual analysis of the streams using Genette and Gray (Genette 1997; Gray 2010). The method will use theory from McKee's on textual analysis as a base (McKee 2003). This method together with the transmedia concept introduced earlier to highlight the element relevant to answering the main questions (Jenkins 2009a, 2009b).

The relationship between the shows and the game is more complicated than when using traditional promotional material. The shows on the channel can run for years just like the stories for the players at home. It is also possible to play in the same imaginary world for years, which makes the streams run parallel to the player's game for a long time. These kinds of characteristics are what are important to examine in a paratextual analysis.

For Genette (1997), these characteristics are firstly spatiality, which concerns location, then temporality, which focuses on the date of appearance in relation to the main text and when necessary, the date of disappearance. Then there is substantiality, which is its mode of existence, verbal or other. The final two characteristics are pragmatics, which are the characteristics of its situation of communication concerning its sender and addressee, and lastly functionality, which are the functions that its message aims to fulfil (Genette 1997, 4).

Gray builds upon these and focuses on how these are able to influence and generate hype, which is how pretext can influence the general audience perception (Gray 2010, 2–3). An analysis of a paratext furthermore allows for an understanding of the shows in a commercial sense, since paratexts are vital to the industry: "The industry desperately needs its paratexts to work, since both industry and audiences habitually count on paratexts' relative success or failure as an index of the success or failure of the text as a whole" (Gray 2010, 39)

4 CORPUS

The content that will be the focus within this framework is the game D&D and the streams. The streams are the content that is being examined while the game serves as the reference for both the transmedia and paratextual relationship. This makes D&D the main text in this media constellation.

It is not simple to determine what D&D is. The product that is sold are books with rules and information (Crawford et al. 2014; Mearls, Crawford, and Perkins, 2014; Mearls et al. 2014). The stories themselves only arise with actual play, and the books are tools used within the games as reference material. It is an issue that is common within the larger field of game studies. Bogost illustrates this by addressing the distinction between games as texts and games as played experiences (Bogost 2009), an important distinction to keep in mind while examining the game D&D.

The channel started as a place where developers of the game could stream sessions. The channel has since grown and developed at the same time where TRPG live streams as a genre started to arise. While the channel might not have the most popular D&D shows, it is important to note that it did not simply follow the trend but has actively been involved since the beginning with popular shows like Acquisitions Incorporated (Chalk 2018).

The official channel has much content, which is impossible to examine at once in a single analysis. To contextualise, a brief rundown of the different shows on the Twitch channel; Community shows, D&D content discussion and lastly D&D Let's Play, by far the biggest category of content. The research will address various episodes from different D&D shows, limited to the shows that are D&D Let's Plays. Limiting the research in this way is useful for both analytical and pragmatic reasons. The focus on Let's Plays will allow for a more specific analysis of this type of content. To examine the other content, the research would become too broad and would lose focus.

To gain a proper focus, the analysis will focus on three shows on the official channel. The analysis will focus on two episodes for each show, and the findings will then be confirmed by skimming multiple other episodes to confirm what is regular for these shows. As a result of this, the research can include findings from episodes besides the two specified. The three shows that were chosen for this research are *Dice, Camera, Action!*, *Girls Guts Glory*, and *Inkwell Society*.

Girls Guts Glory was chosen because it features an all-female cast, which contrasts with earlier stereotypes and trends within TRPG fan culture (Trammel 2014). The first season was originally an edited series put on the *Girls Guts Glory* YouTube channel, but it got adopted to the official channel. This will also give insight into how the channel adopts content from other sources. For this show, episode 4 of season 2 and episode 2 of season 4 will be used (Dungeons & Dragons 2017b, 2018b). *Inkwell Society* was chosen because it has an unusual genre and style compared to other streams while still coming across as a D&D stream. This show is also not produced by Wizards of the Coasts themselves but by a group called Maze Arcane, which originally streamed on their own channel but moved to the official channel. The episodes used of this show are episode 14 and 23 (Maze Arcana 2019a, 2019b). *Dice, Camera, Action!* was chosen because it is a show that is not shot in a studio and will give a perspective on how that is done. This particular show was chosen in contrast to other similar shows because it is run by the senior producer of D&D, Christopher Perkins. That makes this the only continuous show currently on the channel which is run by D&D developers. For the analysis, episodes 72 and 123 are going to be used (Dungeons & Dragons 2017c, 2019). Each of these shows is unique in their own right and might not cover all aspects of the D&D twitch channel. However, each show on the channel has something unique about them, and these three shows provide a useful variation in how shows can differ from one another.

5 ANALYSIS

The analysis will focus on the three shows in the two-part structure. Firstly, each show will be addressed individually as an aesthetic phenomenon in and of itself. This will contextualize how each of these shows is structured and will reveal a range of ways D&D can be represented by these streams. The second part will focus on remediation and extension of D&D elements as a transmedia phenomenon.



Figure 1. frame of *Girl Guts Glory* season 4 episode 2 (*Dungeons & Dragons* 2018b)

5.1 Girls Guts Glory

Girls Guts Glory was originally a series that was independent but sponsored by Wizards of the Coast. They eventually got picked up by Wizards of the Coast as an official show on the twitch channel. In the transition, the type of content changed. The streams were originally an edited web series of a D&D campaign. The play time was edited down, and the content cut between different camera angles. This made the content feel closer to a traditional television show. This meant that a lot of the technicalities of the game were edited out in favour of telling the story that arose through play. In season two the show became a live stream on the D&D twitch channel. Now the show featured the entirety of the play session like other streams on the official channel. This meant that all the facets of the game were shown more and therefore were more connected to the game. In this transition the stream became a different type of paratexts. The “substantiality”, its mode of existence, changed to a more long-form stream format which shows the entirety of the play session (Genette 1997, 4). Some aspects of the previous format remained. The show opened with a parody parental advisory screen, which was kept for one season after they moved to the official channel.

The substantiality of the show changes more over time. Less radical than after the format change. The changes are mainly in look and feel. The players seem to sit at a table in a different location each season. In season 2 the set looks like a greenhouse with many plants and in season 3 the set looks like an American diner. Other aspects like overlays and extra information on screen change to compliment the set. The only thing that does not change is that they sit around a table in the centre of the set to play the game. While this may help keep the audience interested, it also gives the impression that the game can be played in many different settings.

As the name of the show suggests, all the players in this particular show are female. However, not all the characters they play are female. One of the players plays a male dwarf as a character in the game. The show has had two special episodes named Boys Butts Blory which did have male players join in for one session. This reveals a part of the “functionality” of the streams as paratexts (Genette 1997). Namely, showing woman playing D&D, which is a contrasting picture to past misogynist notions of women within D&D (Trammel 2014).



Figure 2. Frame from *Inkwell Society* episode 14 (*Maze Arcana* 2019a)

5.2 Inkwell Society

Inkwell Society is a show produced by *Maze Arcana* for the D&D Twitch channel. It was originally run on the *Maze Arcana* channel, but all the *Maze Arcana* shows have moved to the official D&D channel. *Maze Arcana* uses people who could be labelled D&D celebrities in their streams, and one of the players of *Inkwell Society* is such a celebrity, Satine Phoenix (Chalk 2018).

One of the things that make *Inkwell Society* unique is the genre it tries to portray. The show describes itself as “Neon Noir”, which deviates from the standard fantasy genre associated with D&D. This evokes the similarly titled genre of neo-noir and its connotations and tropes. In neo-noir, vivid colours like neon lights are associated “... with degeneration, deconstruction and death” (Glitre 2009, 26). The story of the show is set within one of the main official settings of D&D, Eberron. The supplement for this setting in the 5th edition format is currently in playtesting. The setting itself is not neon noir but still in the realm of fantasy but is adapted to fit the aesthetics and story tropes of neon noir. The story, therefore, features magically coloured lights and slang such as ‘sugar’ when some female characters address male characters.

Many parts of the show also reinforce the neon noir theme like a cinematic intro video and the overlays. In the intro video, the players portray their characters in costume. This introduction is in the neon noir aesthetics and features bars and alleys on a rainy night with neon coloured lights. The set also reinforces the theme by using lights in red and blue, which give the impression of neon lights. The backdrop is black curtains, creating contrast and a darker atmosphere. The only thing that stands out is the backrest of the wooden throne of the DM, which still fits within the larger context of the setting. This creates a hybrid in both the narrative of the game as in the TRPG *Let’s Play* genre. The show actively performs “worldbuilding” by taking one of the D&D world and extending it in a unique way with the genre (Jenkins 2009a). While this adds to the transmedia value of the show, it also has the paratextual “functionality” of broadening the perception of how the game can be played (Genette 1997, 4). The story does not need to fit a stereotypical fantasy setting.

In a similar manner, the show also offers a subtle different approach to characters. Instead of showing a character’s class like the other shows, it shows their occupation or similar descriptor. For example, two of the characters have the descriptor of an occupation, coroner and lounge singer, while another character had descriptor battle-scarred. This shifts the focus on a roleplaying aspect of the character instead of to a part of the game mechanics, which frames the mechanics as less important in this regard.



Figure 3. Frame from *Dice, Camera, Action!* episode 123 (*Dungeons & Dragons* 2019)

5.3 Dice, Camera, Action!

Dice, Camera, Action! is one of the longest running shows on the channel, and it is the first continuous campaign on the channel. The game is run by one of the developers of D&D, who functions as the Dungeon Master of the game. The players themselves come from positions within the video game world as let's players and show hosts and are not part of the D&D development team.

In contrast to the previous two shows, *Dice, Camera, Action!* is not shot in a studio in the same room. It uses webcams instead to show the players and to facilitate the communication between the players. The players are in what looks like a room within their homes. Further adding to the image is the fact that they wear headphones and sometimes have microphones within their frames. This gives the show the aesthetic of a group of friends playing D&D over the internet instead of the more clearly produced shows with a set and hidden recording equipment. The substantiality of this show is therefore different from the rest. It more closely resembles a traditional Let's Play stream, which gives a more intimate impression. The “pragmatics” of the stream as paratexts also change because of it (Genette 1997, 4). The players seem more approachable. However, the game is still led by one of the designers, which gives him more authority regarding the game.

Another factor that sets this show apart from the others is that it consistently plays through every adventure module when it comes out (*Dungeons & Dragons* 2017a, 5:48). In contrast, the other shows use their own original adventures. The fact that the Dungeon Master is a developer allows him to start leading into the next adventure before it is released so that the adventure can start around the time the adventure is released. The show, therefore, shows how these releases can be weaved into a singular consistent narrative. It does so with an authoritative figure running the adventure. This aspect of the stream has the “functionality” of showing what is in the adventures and how they can be incorporated into any ongoing D&D story (Genette 1997, 4).

5.4 Overarching Elements

It is clear that each of these streams has a unique style in their respective shows. Now the focus will be on what the streams have in common in framing D&D, which reveal the Overarching Elements that connect the streams to the game. The main factor that links the stream to the game is that they represent the game of D&D being played. That is why here the focus will be on how the streams extend the transmedia qualities of different D&D elements of the game, such as characters and encounters. The

way these elements are presented forms a paratextual layer of what the game is and what the experience of playing it is.

The streams are established as a digital media extension of the analogue game Dungeons and Dragons by remediating the experience of playing a D&D session. In contrast to transmedia, remediation translates aspects of one medium to another (Straumann 2015, 254–57), in this case, the game into the stream. The streams take elements of the game and try to represent them in the medium of the live stream. In some cases, the aspects are taken as they are and filmed while other elements are made to be more specifically suited for the video format. The streams are not straightforward remediation since there are elements that are not present during normal play of D&D. These aspects are what make these streams transmedia extensions of the game. In a constellation of transmedia objects, each medium does what it does best (Jenkins 2006, 96). That is why now the elements of the streams will be examined to show the way they broaden the experience of D&D.

There are two main sides to D&D as a roleplaying game. On one hand there is the roleplaying aspects of the game where the players act out their characters with dialogue and by making the decisions. The section on roleplaying in the rulebooks does not contain any rules but different approaches to roleplaying freely (Crawford et al. 2014, 185–86; Mearls et al. 2014, 245–46). On the other hand there are the game aspects in the more traditional sense, which are the rules and mechanics. These allow and restrict characters in the game to perform certain actions and resolve them. These main sides are interwoven in TRPGs like D&D. The following section will look at elements of the stream that highlight one or both of these aspects of the stream.

5.4.1 Roleplaying

The roleplaying aspect deserves its own section since it is the part that is most strongly represented in these shows. The shows spend most of their play time on roleplaying. In D&D there are no set rules to the number of combat encounters in a given session, which is the more rules intensive part of the game. There is only a suggestion of the number of combat encounter in an adventuring day which refers to a day within the story world (Mearls et al. 2014, 84). There is no set amount of time for combat, and the shows take this freedom to focus on the roleplaying aspect of the game. It is common to only have one combat encounter in an episode, sometimes an episode has none. The focus on roleplaying means that there is a stronger focus on character development and story progression. Combat requires quite some time to resolve what takes only seconds or minutes within the storyworld, while roleplaying has the story play out in real time, allowing for more engaging storytelling. Besides making the show engaging, it also gives the impression that this is the common structure of the game, especially since the game provides no hard rules in this regard.

When a player is roleplaying, they need to switch between themselves and the character they are playing. Most of the characters in the shows use a specific speech mannerism, voice or both. When the player switches back to talking as themselves, they return to their way of talking. This also creates a clear distinction between the player and the character for the viewer. However, some players play a character whose voice is close to their own, or they do not always switch. In the case of *Girls Guts Glory*, there are some players who will also use their character voice when not talking as their character in the story. For example, they declare the actions their characters are going to do in the voice of the character. This can sometimes make it unclear if they are talking as their character or referring to the game and its mechanics.

These mannerisms can help to convey the personality of the character but can also help convey the world and the genre. All three shows are set in a medieval-style fantasy world and adopt jargon from that setting. Players can talk about knights and castles as well as magic and fairies. The jargon and references can become quite specific when shows are set in the same world. For example, *Girls Guts Glory* and *Dice, Camera, Action!* are both set in the Forgotten Realms, one of the official fictional worlds of D&D. The roleplaying can also be influenced by the genre like, for example, *Inkwell Society*, which has an even more specific genre. The players can adapt things from the noir genre into their roleplaying. This part is essential to conveying the setting to the viewers. While the DM can help set

the tone of a scene with descriptions of the characters and the environment, most of the story is established through the roleplaying of the players. Through this dialogue the player help reveal parts of these D&D story world and how players contribute to the “worldbuilding” (Jenkins 2009a).

While the players perform their characters within the setting and genre, they also have their own personality. The shows show the “multiplicity” of characters that can be played from the same or similar concept. One of the ways that the players establish their character is by the class they play. In both *Dice, Camera, Action!* and *Girls Guts Glory* there is a character whose class get their power from their faith in a good god named Lathander. The characters are both good natured but are played drastically differently. Evelyn is an optimistic warrior that will fight for a good cause. Fauna has a more childish personality and the player uses a nasal child voice when roleplaying her. This shows that mechanical aspects can play an important role in how the character is performed but do not have to. The focus on roleplaying within these streams also includes an emphasis on the wide variety of characters one can play. This becomes clear when watching more than one of the official shows. It is part of the “functionality” of these streams as each of the streams try to do something unique in this regard (Genette 1997). *Inkwell Society* also try to offer unique characters by defining them by other defining features than class as discussed earlier.

5.4.2 Costumes

Costumes are a common occurrence in the content on the D&D channel. *Girls Guts Glory* and *Inkwell Society* both feature costumes to a certain extent. The costumes are not consistent throughout all episodes. Sometimes people were more or less of their costumes in different episodes. While not technically part of the game it does support the roleplaying element of the show. It reminiscent of old segments in media where D&D was used for laughs and where groups of male D&D players in costume were ridiculed (Chalk 2018). In these streams, however, the costumes are not framed in a negative light. They are used as visual aids for the audience and the other players and used as a natural part of roleplaying when worn. These visual aids extend D&D more into the visual medium of stream and simultaneously increasing the “immersion” by closing the distance between the player and the character they play (Jenkins 2009a).

Only the games that are streamed from feature costumes. *Dice, Camera, Action!* typically does not feature costumes. The exceptions are some of the special episodes, in episode 115, for example. In that episode, they performed on a theatre stage in full costume, which has an even bigger effect.

5.4.3 Character Art

An element that is not necessarily part of playing D&D is character art. The game itself does not come with the art of the characters the players can play. The appearance of the character is left up to the player. The character sheets, which are the sheets where the player can fill in all the character details, feature an area for a character portrait where the player can make a sketch or paste a reference image (Crawford et al. 2014). This is also not mandatory, yet art is a big part of the game. The books provide

pictures for all the races and classes players can use to make a character (Crawford et al. 2014). It is a natural extension of the game to have specific art of the characters of the game.



Figure 4. Image of the characters from *Dice, Camera, Action!* in a tweet on the official D&D twitter (Dungeons & Dragons 2018a)

In the case of *Dice, Camera, Action!*, the characters are drawn by a graphic artist. There is a picture featuring all of the characters that are sometimes shown in the show. The avatars taken from the group picture featuring the face of every character is always shown underneath every player next to the nametag of the

character. In this way the characters are showed in manner similar to the rule books and are shown as a recognizable character.

The other two streams have a different approach. *Girls Guts Glory* and *Inkwell Society* display pictures of the players in a costume resembling their characters. While the characters of *Inkwell Society* are accurately portrayed, the more eccentric characters of *Girls Guts Glory* are not. The player who plays a dragonborn, a humanoid dragon, does not portray features like scales and a snout. To indicate the race of the character, she does breathe fire in the picture. It is not clear whether this is done out of practicality or to keep the player recognizable in the picture. It does bring the character closer to the players and shows the diverse cast of both players and characters.

In *Girls Guts Glory* and *Inkwell Society* the art is shown in an extra on-screen space when a character has focus. In contrast, *Dice, Camera, Action!* always features the less prominent avatars underneath the player. These different renditions of characters add a layer of “immersion” to the story (Jenkins 2009a). The art gives the viewer a visual aid either continually or when needed, which helps to imagine the scenes that arise during play. It also reinforces the “multiplicity” of characters that can be played by showing visually distinct designs. Finally, A show can also feature fanart as a way to show character art. In the case of *Dice, Camera, Action!*, fanart is shown before the show starts. In this way, fan “performance” is also featured in the show (Jenkins 2009a).

5.4.4 Intro Videos

Each of the three shows has an intro video before the show, clearly not a typical part of D&D. However, they help extend D&D into the medium by giving an impression of the storyworld and game. The clearest example is *Inkwell Society*, which has an intro video of a tavern in a dark neon-lit alleyway. The intro is a live-action sequence of the players in costume in both the tavern and the alley on a dark rainy night. This is in line with the show’s neon noir genre within a fantasy setting, which gives an impression of the story world. The intro also helps establish the cast and their characters with the credits during the video.

Dice, Camera, Action! also depicts the characters in the intro with credits. The show has a new animated intro each season depicting the player characters and elements of the story. The videos of the first three seasons have a comical theme to them. This gives the impression that the story will include some jokes and comedy, which the show does contain. The intro video of the latest season has less humour but has the style of an old cartoon with the music that accompanies the video, still providing a light-hearted upbeat image of the show like the three videos before it.

The intro of *Girls Guts Glory* is very brief and not as elaborate as the others and more focused on introducing the game. The show starts with a parody of the ‘Parental Advisory’ label. This short sequence shows joke elements that the show contains like for example “Terrible Accents” and “Girls only kind of following the rules...”. While this is shown, female voices whisper the labels and similar sentences. This parody gives a more humorous impression of the show and establishes the way the game will be approached within the show.

These intro videos resemble practices of tv shows and in this manner, these intro videos fully adapt D&D to video by focussing on what the medium does well. It is fitting for a Let's Play of TRPGs to adopt things from a serialised television show since these shows also tell episodic original stories. Like other intro videos they provide a focused look on what the show is about and can reveal what aspects will be important during the game.

5.4.5 Sets

The shows filmed in one location have décor and set pieces where the players sit for the show. The game is typically played around a table and both *Inkwell Society* and *Girls Guts Glory* feature a table within different types of sets. The *Inkwell Society* very clearly tries to emphasize the aesthetic of the neon noir world and by doing so, immerses the viewer more into the world and story that arises through play. On the other hand, *Girls Guts Glory*’s sets do not emphasize the world but highlight the act of

playing the game. The sets seem to be fun locations where players can play D&D, like a garden or a diner. These sets increase the “immersion” to the experience of playing D&D instead of the stories that arise through play (Jenkins 2009a).

In a webcam show like *Dice, Camera, Action!* it is not possible to have a set because they do not film in a single location. The room the players are in at their homes serves as the stage, which gives the impression of playing the game at home. In special episodes where all the cast members are actually in the same place, the show does use a set or an actual stage with an audience. Special episode 115 for example is on a stage with extensive décor helping to enhance the story world.

5.4.6 Encounters

As mentioned earlier combat encounters are the more rules intensive parts of the game. In D&D there are ‘encounters’, which are situations characters must progress through using their skills and abilities. While a group of characters is typically equipped with skills and abilities to deal with things like social interactions, a lot of the abilities they have are meant for the battling of entities in the fictional world. When a so-called combat encounter starts, a sort of mini-game within D&D is initiated. The game becomes turn-based where each of the characters involved gets a turn. In the minigame, the game is slower because each player needs to think and declare what they are doing. While the game slows, each round of combat takes only six seconds in the story world. This happens once or twice in almost every episode.

There are two methods in the rules for resolving, the least technical one being what is often called ‘theatre of the mind’. In this form, all the players imagine what is happening within the battle based on how the dungeon master describes it. With these encounters, there is no visual representation in the stream of what is happening. The viewer, therefore, relies on the descriptions from the dungeon master and players to understand what is happening in the battle. *Dice, Camera, Action!* uses these types of encounters. This form of encounters translates rather easily to the format of a stream since the audio presented and “remediated” in video form (Straumann 2015). *Dice, Camera, Action!* does sometimes show images as visual aids to further illustrate what is happening.

Another way is to use a physical representation of the battle which uses a grid to determine distance (Crawford et al. 2014, 250–51). This can be simple drawn or printed maps to represent the surroundings, which is what *Girls Guts Glory* uses. Another way to represent the surroundings is to use miniatures of buildings, rooms and objects. That is the way *Inkwell Society* represent the encounters. The players and the dungeon master use tokens or miniatures to represent the characters and creatures on these maps. These encounters also use narration but take further advantage of the video format by having a visual representation of the battlefield. The two shows use part of their frame to show a video feed of the battle while an encounter is going on. This approach takes better advantage of the visual aspects of the medium in order to remediate the game. This way, the viewers have a continuous visual representation of what is going on. While it is not the only way to handle encounters in D&D, this method does offer more immersion.

5.4.7 Extra peripheral information

These shows show a lot of other visuals and information on screen besides the players and the game like others streams (Anderson 2017). The streams have an overlay that goes around the different video frames like a picture frame. This frame is mainly used to show and highlight specific game elements. However, the graphic design does help to enhance the style like the colourful neon overlays of *Inkwell Society*.

One way to visualise the game aspects is by showing elements of the different characters within the rule set. Each character has a set of abilities, scores and modifiers which can be displayed on the overlay. *Dice, Camera, Action!* featured a bar with the primary scores of each of the player characters, for example. The bar reveals to the viewer what the character might be good at and what their weaker points are. *Girls Guts Glory* and *Inkwell Society* also show the scores but only when the character portrait is shown.

Another way to represent the characters is by using labels. The shows feature labels with player name and character name. These labels often come with more basic information like race, class and level. *Inkwell Society* is unique in the labels it uses since it shows not a class but a primary descriptor of the character like opportunist, coroner, and lounge singer. These descriptors are not a reference to any of the game mechanics but are references to who the characters are.

These additional bits of information that are shown are not necessary for understanding the story. However, it does give the viewer a broader understanding of what is happening both in the story and in the game. This extra peripheral information adds an extra layer of information a viewer can drill into and increases the “drillability” of the show (Jenkins 2009b).

6 CONCLUSION

Now to conclude the research, all these findings will be brought together to answer the questions and show how the streams complement the D&D transmedia franchise. Firstly, the research has examined how these different streams extend the experience of D&D into the video format. The streams, however, do not merely extend the experience but adopt them to the Let’s Play format. This takes better advantage of the video format which is optimal for transmedia, where each medium does what it does best. It is also an effective strategy to remediate the game in a different medium.

The streams extend both main aspects of the game, roleplaying and the game in terms of rules and mechanics. In the act of remediating the game on twitch the focus shifted more towards the roleplaying aspects of the game. The streams take the freedom that is within the rules of the game to feature more roleplaying, which favours the perspective of this playstyle over a more game focussed style, which for example can feature more combat encounters. While the time spent on roleplaying these characters is a big factor of the focus, there are other aspects that help extend this part into the streaming format. The shows feature visual and audio-visual elements like the costumes, art and intro videos that enhance the roleplaying. This can be done in multiple ways, *Inkwell Society* uses the elements to enhance the characters and world, while *Girls Guts Glory* focuses more on the experience of a group of friends, roleplaying with sets that emulate different play locations and an intro video with meta commentary. The less featured game aspect is mostly present during the combat encounters. Two of three streams feature a visual representation of these encounters, which is better suited for the audio-visual format. The only other element that helps remediates the game aspect is the extra peripheral information, which brings some of the game mechanics to the forefront. The overlay used for this is effectively adopted from the Let’s Play stream format that other channels use (Anderson 2017).

That the focus is on roleplaying is in line with other Let’s Plays. Roleplaying allows more focus on the personality of the players, which is an important part of Let’s Plays (Nguyen 2016). In the case of these streams the personality of players and the personality of the characters they play are just as important for roleplaying. While these are important, the focus on all the extra elements is not to enhance the image of the streamer like regular Let’s Play streams but to enhance an aspect of the game (Anderson 2017). Another difference Let’s Plays and the D&D streams is that the shows rarely use the Live functions of twitch, to interact with the audience for example (Anderson 2017). This might be because the content is also shared on YouTube after it has aired on Twitch. In short, shows use the Let’s Play format but deviate from common streaming practices in order to properly extend and enhance the gaming experience for the platform.

These shows elements also revealed how the streams address the diversity of the intended player of Dungeons and Dragons. The “multiplicity” of stories and the many “subjective” experiences shown in these streams colour the way the viewer constructs the intended player of D&D, like a threshold of interpretation (Genette 1997). The streams imply that D&D can be played in many different ways and configurations. In a broad sense, *Girls Guts Glory* shows examples of how a woman can play D&D, countering earlier established stereotypes. *Inkwell Society* shows the diversity in the type of characters one can play in D&D, while *Dice, Camera, Action!* shows a more average group of players and characters (Trammel 2014). In a more specific sense, the length of these shows offers a continual view on how these players continue to play and carry on the game from episode to episode. It does not only

show the many ways the players can play their characters but also how to deal with certain aspects of the game like combat encounters.

Another important aspect of the implied D&D player that arises in these shows is the skill and knowledge that they need to have. The focus on the roleplaying aspect of D&D puts more weight on the improvisation skill of the players. The focus on roleplaying makes it easier to watch for people with a limited understanding of D&D, but it does shift the focus to that skill. Besides that, the player also must have a grasp on the tropes within the fantasy genre. The stories that are played often feature and sometimes rely on fantasy tropes. In this way, the streams both expand and constrict the impression it gives of the implied player. The player can come from a broad range in terms of the type of person that might play the game but is restricted in their knowledge and skill. The fact that each of these streams is relatively unique next to the other provides a broad range of options viewers can identify with and counters issues of diversity by showing a diverse cast. While these streams were chosen for their uniqueness, most other streams have something of their own that sets them apart. The show *Rivals of Waterdeep*, for example, has a cast consisting of only people of colour (Dungeons & Dragons 2018a).

The role the streams have within the larger whole of the Dungeons and Dragons franchise also shines through all the elements of the stream. From a transmedia angle, the role falls within some of the transmedia principles (Jenkins 2009a, 2009b). Firstly, the content is very drillable. The length of the content in itself reveals that significant time investment is needed for fans to get the information out of the stream. An episode can take a few hours, which certainly does not make them very spreadable. This also restricts the role it can play since it is very unlikely that a viewer follows a lot of these shows simultaneously. A viewer is likely to pick the few shows which they like best.

Secondly, streams follow the principles of multiplicity and subjectivity. There is a multiplicity of different types of shows and each of them featuring many different subjective experiences. There are shows for varying people and interests all within the D&D context. Just within the three shows examined here, there is a big difference in the types of stories that are being told and the character that is played, even though they all fall within the fantasy genre. This is achieved by mixing in a genre like neon noir, for example.

Combining this within a paratextual perspective, it is clear that there is a broad spectrum of perspectives and interpretations of what D&D can be within these streams. These different takes on D&D can shape the interpretations the viewers have of D&D, stretching it to include more diverse stories and characters than the typical fantasy story. The impression these streams give is that anyone can play anything together with their friends, a positive image which welcomes everyone to buy and play D&D. It becomes clear how the regular streaming of D&D compliments the transmedia aspect of the franchise. The D&D streams compliment the franchise by extending the game into a medium where people can watch the game and let the audience see that everyone can play.

This research has explored the way these game streams function as a representation of the game and as part of the D&D transmedia constellation. The research was, however, limited to three shows that are published on the official Twitch channel. This allows some insight into how this is used as part of the officially endorsed content. There are also shows not by or for the official channels which are even more popular. One of these is the show *Critical Role*, which broke crowdfunding records for a project to animate part of the story of their campaign (Whitten 2019). These other streams could be a valuable subject for future research. Other types of content on the official channel could show other ways the channel is used as a transmedia expansion of D&D. Other parts of the game and streams are also potentially valuable research objects. An ethnographic approach to the rapidly grown fanbase of the game or the streams could reveal insights into the sudden increase of the appeal of the game. The most recent version of D&D would be a good subject for analysis to see how it engages its players. There is a lot more to unpack about the way D&D has rapidly gained popularity in the past few years, which is why it is highly worthy to keep an eye on.

7 ENDNOTES

1. “Dungeons & Dragons had its best sales year since it was acquired from TSR Inc. by game publisher Wizards of the Coast in 1997” (Weiss 2018). The publisher also said that they had seen unprecedented growth since the release of 5th edition D&D (Weiss 2018).
2. This edition of D&D has established a significant online presence through streaming (Hall 2015).
3. There are online discussions, on, for example, Reddit that share how a popular D&D show like *Critical Role* influenced their D&D (Reddit 2016).

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