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Myth, Religion, and Communal Storytelling in Fantasy Roleplaying Games (Abstract)

At the beginning of this summer, I proposed to examine two linked hypotheses about the religious content of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*. First, I hypothesized that *D&D* is structurally similar to the oral storytelling used in some religious traditions; second, I proposed the idea that *D&D* may, by virtue of its built-in religious game elements (such as gods, clerics, divine magic, and the like), encourage non-religious players to undergo spiritual experiences by proxy.

By studying Mackay's text *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* and comparing it to my own experiences in several *D&D* games, I discovered that *D&D* is, indeed, a framework within which people create stories in a decentralized and collaborative way. It blurs the line between narrator and audience, uniting its players in a simultaneously playful and engrossing ritual of performance, which can then be worked into a story-object of deeply personal and even mythic significance.

My research on *Critical Role* revealed that, in a *D&D* webseries, the narrator-audience divide is re-established as a boundary between the "cast" of the series (i.e., the players) and the viewers who spectate those players' game session. Yet this separation quickly collapses again as fans begin to engage with the show and influence the series' development, as described by Robyn Hope in her essay on *Critical Role*. Fans of *Critical Role* further assert their own narrative agency by drawing inspiration from the webseries to start their own *D&D* campaigns. Thus, the *Critical Role* fandom is a global community formed around the *D&D* ritual.

While this ritual is not sacred in any traditional sense, the act of playing *D&D* is liable to become a religious experience, not so much *by proxy* as *metaphorically*. Inhabitants of the modern world, disembedded from any strong religious framework, often draw on symbolic reinterpretations of traditional myths in order to craft their own personal philosophies with which to make sense of the world. It is in this way that players can find spiritual meaning in *D&D*: the story which emerges from a game – usually a tale of heroes, gods, and cosmic battles between Good and Evil – becomes another mythic building block in the individual player's private spiritual edifice, strengthened in