



Dungeons & Dragons: An Assembly that Solves the Posthuman Predicament

V i v i a n J o h n s o n

When considering the current status of our world, it is easy to feel discouraged, as if there is no way out of inevitable doom. In reality, an escape is right around the corner, possibly in a nearby apartment: Dungeons & Dragons. Before laughing off this proposal, reflect on whether you have played before. If you have, you are aware that Dungeons & Dragons is a collaborative, community-based game. Not only does the game encourage imagination and moral development through the choices that build story; it also provides an opportunity to establish real connections between players of any background. When observed through Rosi Braidotti's perspective on posthuman potential and Kyle Parry's theory of assembly, acts of collaborative meaning-making can promote human connection as a method for alleviating the posthuman predicament. I propose that through empathy and reflection, Dungeons & Dragons as an assembly provides a solution to the posthuman predicament, humanizing the world through the interactions between those at the table.

Dungeons & Dragons is a fantasy Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG) that traditionally consists of four to five players and one Dungeon Master, who controls the world and its other inhabitants (NPCs, monsters, etc.). Perhaps the most crucial part of Dungeons & Dragons is developing player character. Each player creates one character whose story and abilities they will enact during the game. Building a character consists of choosing: a class (fighter, rogue, wizard, druid, barbarian, monk, paladin, cleric, warlock, sorcerer, ranger, bard); a race (Human, Elf, Dwarf, Halfling, Tiefling, Dragonborn, Half-Orc, Half-Elf, etc.); a background (what skills life has equipped them with); and a backstory (what happened to the character before events of the campaign) (Mearls et al. 11-13). By combining each of these elements, players build a unique character with their own limitations. From there, players get to choose how they will act, how they will fight, their ideals, the list goes on. The second crucial structural detail of Dungeons & Dragons is the campaign. A Dungeons & Dragons campaign is an ongoing, collaborative storyline, constructed by the Dungeon Master and played through by the characters. Because the Dungeon Master can choose to create their own campaign or use a pre-made one, the options and opportunities to create stories are endless, giving true creative freedom to the formed assembly.

Now, having established what a game of Dungeons and Dragons entails, I will clarify what I mean by calling it an assembly. According to Kyle Parry, there are three major defining characteristics of an assembly. The first major characteristic is the materials for assembly, which may be divided into two types: constituents and positions (46). Parry defines the constituents of an assembly as the objects/things being combined in assembly, which can be almost anything (46-47). and He defines positions as the organization and presentation of constituents in the assembly (52). Parry's second defining characteristic is the actions of assembly, claiming that there are two types of actions: selection and configuration. Selection is the action of choosing which constituents to include and exclude from the assembly, while configuration is the action of organizing the constituents into their positions (broadly in context and narrowly between constituents) (56-57). Finally, Parry discusses the drive to assemble. The drive to assemble is the natural human desire to see things as assemblies: to take separate objects collected together and see meaning between them (59). Parry then extends this definition to also include the drive to participate in assembly, the natural human desire to create through this process of meaning making (64-65).

The *Lost Mines of Phandelver* campaign is a particular example of a Dungeons & Dragons campaign working as an assembly. The *Lost Mines of Phandelver* is a pre-made campaign divided into four parts. The first is Goblin Sorrows, which involves the players starting off as travelers to Phandalin before they are suddenly ambushed by goblins before they arrive (Baker and Perkins 6-7). The second part, Phandalin, begins when the players reach the city and discover it has been overrun by terrorists called the Redbrands, who have taken control of Tresendar Manor (14-15). The third part, Cragmaw castle, begins when the players decide to rescue their friend, Gundren Rockseeker, from the evil King Grol as well as retrieve the map for the lost mines (35). Wave Echo Cave is the final part where the players fight against the Black Spider before he takes over the Forge of Spells within the mines of Phandelver (42). Though the campaign has a "suggested" trajectory as listed, the choices and ways of arriving there are vast. Collectively, players choose to follow certain leads or not, each which give their own bits of information towards the plot.

Now, using Rosi Braidotti's lectures, it is time to define what the posthuman predicament is. According to Braidotti, humans at their core, desire uniqueness, improvement, and advancement (9). Braidotti argues that the "excesses of the Capitalocene" are the major way humans are losing uniqueness as well as destroying the world through advancements. By looking to profit from all that lives, the Capitalocene unifies all species under the imperative of the market economy (12). The issue lies in the fact that our advancements today have begun to strip away our unique qualities as humans. How do we fulfill both our innate desire for uniqueness and advancement?

By stepping away from this capitalist way of living and focusing on connection, humans can begin to reclaim their uniqueness and restore balance to our broken world. Dungeons & Dragons fulfills the requirements of an assembly and can be used to solve the posthuman predicament. According to Parry, an assembly must have constituents, positions, selections, configurations, and the drive to assemble. Dungeons & Dragons fulfills each of those categories. The constituents in Dungeons & Dragons would be the individual narrative components of the overarching campaign story, such as the player characters created or the interactions with other player characters. The positions are a bit more nuanced as they rely on the narrative components of the individual table. The selection would be each player's choice to include or exclude certain narrative elements within the story. For example, the choice of character, the choice of abilities of that character, and the choice of relationships with other characters would all be players enacting selection. Configuration in Dungeons & Dragons is the action of the player choosing to incorporate a narrative element into the story at a particular moment in time. The drive to assembly, when seen through Dungeons & Dragons, simply means that each player, and anyone observing the game, takes individual separate narrative elements and makes a story out of them in their own head. They can understand the story directly from the assembly itself. So, Dungeons & Dragons is an assembly of narrative elements created by a group in a collaborative game setting.

The constituents of the assembly of Dungeons & Dragons can be any number of narrative elements, from characters' names and abilities to their relationships with other characters to their backstories and goals. All of these narrative elements that the players create in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign contribute to the overall assembly through selection and the positioning of them in the overall story. Each player contributes however much or little they wish to contribute. Additionally, the campaign itself is a large collection of sub-constituents that is organized and selected by the Dungeon Master. This fundamental narrative is the central focus of the assembly, and all other players build around this core constituent of the assembly. The order in which these narrative elements intertwine describes the positioning of the constituents, as a narrative element that is revealed at the end of a story (or the campaign) and impacts the audience much differently than when shared at the beginning of the narrative. In this way, the constituents and their positioning are innumerable, which is how Dungeons & Dragons promotes the uniqueness of each campaign and each player, as they know that no other game of Dungeons & Dragons could be the same as theirs.

While the Dungeon Master is indeed one of multiple assemblers of a Dungeons & Dragons campaign, they could also be considered the primary assembler. As noted earlier, the Dungeon Master selects and positions the most fundamental constituent of the story: the campaign being played by the group. This includes every other character in the world, the politics, natural world, and other aspects of the narrative world that is being played in. For this reason, the Dungeon Master contributes more individual narrative components to the story than any other player, simply due to that power to control the rest of the world.

However, this does not mean that the Dungeon Master is the only necessary assembler. Without each of the players contributing the main characters of the narrative, the world would be empty and the narrative thin. All of the players are necessary to the story, but the Dungeon Master occupies the unique role in the assembly of tying all of the constituents together under the umbrella of one cohesive narrative plot. It is important to note that, while this distinction is interesting and important for the description of Dungeons & Dragons as an assembly, it is not a critical part of the argument that Dungeons & Dragons mitigates the posthuman predicament, as the Dungeon Master benefits from the satisfaction of uniqueness just as thoroughly as all of the other players.

In summary, Dungeons & Dragons serves as an assembly that helps to solve the posthuman predicament by establishing uniqueness for each player and a sense of collaboration through the building of empathy and teamwork between its players. In the modern world, we are increasingly becoming currencies, commodities, data points (Braidotti). We are becoming less human. Despite technological advancements having never been done before, the technical advancements we currently see are stripping away our uniqueness as humans, which inevitably causes us to question the ethics of the world. Dungeons & Dragons is an effective posthumanist pastime that encourages self-autonomy among people, the ability to express our uniqueness through stories that help to alleviate the effects of the posthuman predicament. As explained Wilde and Evans in “Empathy at Play,” games can promote and create empathy in their players through the “intra-active” relationships between the characters in the game, and even by instilling understanding in a player for their own avatar, or character (796). Players can create characters they understand, play as them, and through that, empathize within the D&D world and story vicariously. The creation and promotion of empathy is a robust tool to combat the posthuman predicament, as empathy inherently humanizes the empathizer. By understanding and experiencing others’ emotions through their characters, the players of a Dungeons & Dragons combat the posthuman predicament through the development of both uniqueness and empathy.

In conclusion, Dungeons & Dragons as an assembly provides a solution to the posthuman predicament by humanizing the world through those at the table. In our modern world plagued by the posthuman predicament, Dungeons & Dragons provides hope that there are ways to rehumanize ourselves in the face of dehumanization caused by the Capitalocene. Not only does it solve this issue, but it brings joy and friendship to those that play. Dungeons & Dragons is a pastime in which “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 tell again and again, ranging from the utterly absurd to the stuff of legend” (Mearls et al. 4). So, as our world falls before our eyes, roll for initiative, and take part in assembling together to make changes for the better.

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