

Håkon Gravem Isaksen

Adaptations & Archmages

A thesis on adapting the tabletop role-playing game to fantasy film

Bachelor's project in ENG2900

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli

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Department of Language and Literature



NTNU

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Abstract

There are certainly exiting possibilities in examining the tabletop role-playing game in general and D&D in particular within the context of literary studies. While games, gaming and gamers make for an interesting field of study in and of itself, recent developments in game studies seems to have favored the videogame and left the tabletop role-playing game behind. This thesis will attempt to approach the tabletop role-playing game in a novel way through the context of adaptation studies. While adaptations of written literature to film generally, and of fantasy literature to fantasy film specifically, have featured more frequently in academic study, there is little to be found in relation to the adaptation of a tabletop role-playing game to film. This thesis finds its starting point in the movie *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) but will also, due to the relative scarcity of previous academic writing on similar or comparable subjects, explore adaptation across the domains of roleplaying games and cinema film at a more general level.

Sammendrag

Det finnes mange spennende muligheter i det å undersøke bordrollespill innenfor rammene av litteraturstudier, både på generell basis og spesielt for D&D. Spill, spilling og spillere er i seg selv interessante studieobjekt, men moderne spillstudier fokuserer i liten grad på bordrollespill sammenlignet med videospill. Denne oppgaven har til hensikt å undersøke bordrollespill på en ny måte med adaptasjonsstudier som kontekst. Adaptasjonsstudier med fokus på tekst til film generelt, og fantasy litteratur spesielt, er allerede etablert, men det finnes lite akademisk arbeid som tar for seg adaptasjoner av bordrollespill til fantasyfilm. Denne oppgaven tar utgangspunkt i adaptasjonen *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000), men vil også undersøke adaptasjon av bordrollespill til film på et mer generelt nivå grunnet fraværet av tidligere utdypende undersøkelser innenfor denne tematikken.

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List of abbreviations

D&D – Dungeons & Dragons (specifically the game)

TRPG – Tabletop role-playing game

DVD – Digital Versatile Disc

CGI – Computer-generated imagery

Introduction

Dungeons & Dragons (2000) was released to underwhelming audience response despite tracing its origins to the popular and beloved, however quite niche, roleplaying game of the same name and being distributed by the same New Line Cinema that would later find tremendous success with *The Lord of the Rings*-trilogy. The cause of the wholeheartedly negative reception, should one choose to be informed by the reviews posted online, was lackluster performance by actors, bad directing and an overall “cheap look”. Despite this, further projects to adapt the world of D&D to film was undertaken throughout the 2000s, spawning two direct to DVD releases. The most recent project, set to be released sometime in 2023, once again seeks to project the fantastical world of D&D onto the silver screen and has left an ever growing mass of pop-culture orientated “nerds” waiting hopefully.

This thesis will not seek to simply criticize or review the filmic merits of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) but rather to examine the adaptation of the original source material of the tabletop role-playing game into the new contexts of fantasy film. This will entail a closer examination of the role-playing game as a system of social interaction, of development and participation in narrative construction and the medial experience of live action roleplaying contrasted to that of the medium of film.

1 What is Dungeons & Dragons and tabletop role-playing games?

Coe provides a brief summary of important components related to the playing of TRPGs. It is generally played in a group, there are certain commonly accepted rules that are applied, a designated person assumes the role of game master and certain items such as multi-sided dice are used in determining outcomes of actions in play (Coe, 2017, p. 2844). The players create characters and participate actively in both the development and experiencing of a narrative under the direction of the game master (Coe, 2017, p. 2844). In simple terms, this is what constitutes the basis for TRPGs. There are however many more intricacies that contribute to the understanding of the gaming experience as a whole, and frankly makes it more of an appealing subject for academic study.

Montola (2009, p. 22) establishes a distinction in the study of games, as either the study of games as formal systems or the study of games as social processes. He makes clear that the social processes inherent in any game are important to the game’s play in practice, and thus a

study of a game as only its formal processes will be missing important and interesting observations (Montola, 2009, p. 22). If one were to study D&D as nothing but its formal processes, one might indeed find many layers of intricacies in rules and system design. This is in and of itself important for the development of functioning formal conditions for gameplay, yet this thesis will emphasize a broader view in accordance with Montola (2009).

Montola (2012, p. 113-119) further highlights that producing an accurate definition of role-playing games is not easy and several attempts have been made at defining role-playing games in meaningful ways. For this thesis, the definition presented by Cover (In Montola, 2012, p. 115) seems to make the most sense and prove the most useful. It states that tabletop role-playing games can be defined as games or game systems that involves collaboration between a small group of players that, along with a game master, engage in face-to-face social activity for the purpose of creating narrative experiences. Such a tabletop role-playing game also necessitates a base system of rules, that when coupled with role-play produces a role-playing game (Cover, 2010, in Montola, 2012, p. 115). It is also important to note that the formal foundations of D&D are quite dynamic, and have seen re-iterations several times throughout its history in the form of new editions. Though the evolution of these editions mandates academic study in and of themselves, this thesis will not attempt this.

An important notion is that of the distinction in defining *role-playing in games* and *role-playing games* where Montola (2012, p. 114) states that role-playing can be understood as a separate attitude adopted in conjunction with a game system, for example D&D, to then create the experience of a role-played game. This also entails that D&D can be played without the role-playing mindset, and conversely that the role-playing mindset can be applied to things not designed as role-playing games (Montola, 2012, p. 114).

Montola (2012, p. 57-58) further states that role-playing is fundamentally make-believe or pretend play and engages players in what is referred to as *deliberate* imagining, where TRPGs stand out as particular examples of this. To further discuss and understand elements of this deliberate imagining, one has adopted the concept of diegesis from film studies. There are however differences relating to diegesis between cinema film and the role-playing game in the fact that even while engaging in simultaneous and interconnected playing, the players are never able to reach an identical understanding of what is true in the diegesis (Montola, 2012, p. 67). More than one diegesis has to not only be created, but also somehow related in co-existence to

other diegeses. According to Montola (2012, p. 67-68) there are thus frequent possibilities of equifinality conflicts within role-playing diegeses, yet these are often successfully negated. Through active and continual player participation and reiteration, as well as the presence of the game master as an arbitrator, equifinality conflicts can be resolved within the TRPG context (Montola, 2012, p. 67-68).

The subjective reception and semiotic decoding associated with cinema is not feasible within the context of a TRPG and consequently players of such games might use numeric rules, implicit and explicit genre statements along with maps, props and illustrations to deal with the intersubjectivity of role-playing expression (Montola, 2012, p. 67-68). There might also be differing diegeses constructed as part of an art experience through cinema film, yet these usually remain invisible. As it relates to role-playing games, the audience of a role-playing performance is also the role-players themselves, and thus the performance can partly be observed and understood solely by the creator (player), underlining that performance in TRPGs is aimed at a *first person audience* (Montola, 2012, p. 90-91).

Another important notion relating to the understanding of diegesis in relation to TRPGs is the term *hyperdiegesis*. In Montola (2012, p. 70) hyperdiegesis is explained as an extensive and detailed narrative space which is never fully encountered or explored. The hyperdiegesis is also often constructed in reference to timelines and histories, and thus provides a departure from the perception of the subjective diegesis that is dominated by the present in its temporality (Montola, 2012, p. 71). In relation to TRPGs, the hyperdiegesis is often provided through commercially available and pre-existing source materials and the game master is tasked with portraying the present in relation to the broader hyperdiegetic context, effectively utilizing the pre-existing hyperdiegesis as a foundation which they are also free to change and adapt (Montola, 2012, p.71-73). Montola (2012, p. 73) also notes that in role-playing games, equifinality has to be established in both the subjective diegeses and the hyperdiegesis in order for play to proceed, and that TRPGs due to their nature are effective in enacting such equifinality.

Montola (2012, p. 81-82) also makes a case for creativity as being important to the role-playing game, stating that we can understand role-playing games as *creative games* and consequently as being reliant on creative play. All participants, from players to the game master, are enabled

to offer creative input on mostly everything concerning the game in play, and through effective game mastering adapt gameplay in response to player improvisation (Montola, 2012, p. 83-85).

There is an ongoing discussion related to whether role-playing constitutes storytelling and whether role-played games contain narrative, also connected to the larger discussion of whether narratology is an appropriate tool for studying games (Montola, 2012, p. 86). Role-playing games can be understood as providing short snippets of narration and are also connected to the understanding of narrative as a predetermined sequence of events, regarding the game master's narrative aspirations (Montola, 2012, p. 87-88). Role-playing games can thus produce narrative experiences, although role-playing does not constitute storytelling in a traditional sense (Montola, 2012, p. 89).

Cover (2005, p. 6-8) establishes clear connections between the TRPG and the literary while also establishing the TRPG as episodic. This entails that the early inception of the TRPG, and conversely D&D, were inspired by fantasy literature and that the mode of play, where players and a game master meet in sessions, can be compared to television shows (Cover, 2005, p. 6-8). Cover (2005, p. 13) also highlights another typicality of the nature of TRPGs, where the adventure or story the players participate in is often continuing over an extended timeframe, often spanning several years. While this is typical, it is not the only accepted mode of play, and players will sometimes engage in so called "one-shots", where a single gaming session encompasses all play and plot.

Cover (2005, p. 33) also establishes how TRPGs evoke spatial, temporal and emotional immersion in some part due to the story and in other parts due to the gameplay. The way in which the TRPG evokes immersion is thus quite unique and differs from other media. The TRPG also seems to specifically enable *productive interactivity* which entails that player action has direct and tangible effects on the world and that "the player takes a truly interactive role in the production of text" (Cover, 2005, p. 62-63).

Upon this basis, I find it becomes possible to imagine adapting D&D to pose certain specific constraints and opportunities. Firstly, how is the adaptation influenced by the fact that it cannot effectively make use of any coherent, single source as its basis for visuals, narrative and content? Secondly, how will an adaptation of D&D be influenced when adapted into a format that severely limits interactivity and where the role-playing mindset is traditionally not

employed? Are there ways in which the cinema film might also strive for the importation of the role-playing mindset, or at least facilitate an approximation of the source material?

2 Approximating the role-playing game

The case of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and cult film experience illustrated by Austin (2008) stood out to me during research for this thesis, as perhaps the case in which the role-playing mindset mentioned earlier was made most apparent and plausible in the context of cinema film viewing. However, due to the brevity necessitated by the limited scope of such a short thesis, I find it impossible to sufficiently cover and examine this topic at this time. I will however maintain that it is deserving of further study in the future.

Both the fantasy film and the role-playing game can be understood as wanting to establish an environment in which a person or a group of people are enticed into interacting with, experiencing and immersing in a world other than the real one. There are, however, certain differences in how they go about achieving this. The differing modes of presentation each represent inherent constraints and opportunities within their formal contexts, which, to a certain extent, dictates the ways a person, as audience or player, might be allowed, expected or motivated to engage in the experience offered. They also both attempt in their own ways to create a believable diegetic environment. As mentioned earlier, there is one crucial difference regarding the diegeses apparent for either viewing a film or participating in a role-playing game, namely the intersubjective, multiple diegeses inherent in the TRPG, as opposed to the more intrasubjective diegesis experienced while viewing a cinema film.

Earlier references to Cover (2005) highlight that the very nature of TRPGs includes elements of immersion and interactivity that are medium-specific and thus impossible for a cinema film to incorporate. Nichols (2010, p .73) highlights that participation in cinematic worlds usually involve three categories of participation which he calls *emotional investment*, *intellectual engagement* and *ideological involvement*. These are reminiscent of categories of immersion found in Cover (2005), yet the fact still remains that while similar categorizations of immersion might be made, the ways in which the TRPG and cinema film goes about achieving this is contingent on medium specific conditions. While the ways in which narrative might contribute to immersion are similar across the two media, the TRPG maintains the very structure of gameplay and individualized, long time investment of players as a major feature in its foundations for immersion.

Furthermore, Mack (2016, p. 102) argues, albeit in relation to videogames, that interactivity is a key feature of the modality of games and that such interactivity is impossible to recreate in film. He further states that while the interactivity associated with games cannot be recreated, other aspects can be mimicked and provides some examples from selected movies (Mack, 2016, p. 102-105). I found his arguments on how the visual style of a movie, in his example related to mimicking a videogame-aesthetic, to be particularly interesting in relation to *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000). In the movie, there are clear signs of how CGI, set pieces and special effects are used to visually represent fantastical elements from the source material. Monsters such as dragons and beholders, along with portrayals of magic, are all examples of this and are thoroughly familiar to players of the game.

It is also interesting to note that, in relation to what is portrayed in the movie, the filmmakers will have had to select a specific visual aesthetic that might not resonate broadly with the viewing audience if one considers them avid players of D&D. As established earlier, according to the way hyperdiegesis and diegesis is constructed as part of the role-playing experience, each player and player group might have differing interpretations and visualizations of monsters, characters and other elements present. This indicates that while movies, such as those exemplified by Mack (2016), might attempt to mimic or approximate a game aesthetic or visual style, the diversified nature of visual expressions related to D&D might prove an especially difficult case to effectively mimic. *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) does however also provide narrative and verbal cues along with its visual representations of monsters such as the beholders, and I believe that this is done in order to reinforce connections to the source materials beyond simply visual representations.

The previously mentioned equifinality conflicts might also be relevant in this regard. While one traditionally would contain the equifinality conflict to within one medium, there are opportunities of viewing the film and source material as having hyperdiegeses that are intertwined through the source material, and that in viewing the film's representations of features from the game a player might experience that his or her previously established hyperdiegesis diverges from what is shown. The players of TRPGs are familiar with negating and overcoming potential equifinality conflicts within the setting of the game, but when confronted with the film's representation in an individual viewing situation, they also no longer have the opportunity to collectively reiterate or participate, and there is no game master present to arbitrate.

In the section on videogame mechanics, Mack (2016, p. 105) also makes an interesting point on how movies such as *The Matrix* (1999) directly employs the concept of character-avatars familiar from videogames in the movie. While such a direct narratively established character-avatar relationship is not found in *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000), I find it interesting how the characters within the movie closely mimic both established fantasy tropes, as well as features adapted from the game mechanics of the formal rules of D&D. This goes further than just a visual inspiration, as the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual* provide guidelines for the very way a certain class, character or monster is expected to act or otherwise feature. These are also more established and firmly rooted general conventions that might infer a familiarity with individual players and across gaming groups, as even though the exact visual style and representations might be localized to individual diegeses or gaming group hyperdiegeses, the source materials of the rulebooks are foundations of all groups playing D&D.

In the film, the characters of Ridley and Snails resemble thieving *Rogues*, while Profion embodies an evil *Archmage*. These, along with the monsters, dragons, elves and dwarves, are all clear references to the source material and rulebooks. Such wider connections to the source material that go beyond simply visual representations present a way in which the film might still mimic or approximate the source materials through relying on commonly accepted and acknowledged formal features of the game. It becomes not as much the question of depicting the definitive visual representations, but using those means possible within the context of film to provide a believable representation in total.

Mack (2017, p. 103) also mentions, that while an appropriate “computer” aesthetic might be implemented from video games, not much more beyond the visual style is usually incorporated, and while narrative elements may have a connection to the source material or an intended context, they go little deeper than surface level. I find this interesting in relation to *Dungeons & Dragons*, where a similar dynamic seems to be at play. The narrative of hero-figures undertaking a quest that will aid the good against evil is not something inherently belonging to the D&D source material. There are however many examples of such narratives being used in playing the game, and they are implemented by a player crowd typically familiar with fantasy literature. This points to an interesting opportunity for further study on how D&D as a game itself can be viewed as an adaptation of a myriad of fantasy literature and influences, and again

how D&D might inspire new fantasy literature adaptations, yet this will not be explored further in this thesis.

Situating *Dungeons & Dragons* in the modern fantasy context, it also becomes interesting to view it in relation to such successes as *Game of Thrones*, and consequently to imagine it as a possible television adaptation. As Martens (2000) shows, there were initially plans on launching the adaptation of D&D as a television series, rather than the cinema film it would eventually become. While speculation in what might have been is not a major concern for this thesis, it nevertheless highlights an interesting approach to adapting the source material. As stated by Cover (2005, p. 7) the nature of D&D as a role-playing game is normally quite episodic, and as such one might imagine that the format of a regularly scheduled television show might prove a good match. It is also interesting to note, that one of the most recent adaptations of D&D, *Critical Role*, features voice actors being recorded while playing the game in sessions and then distributed digitally as episodes on YouTube and podcast services.

As stated earlier, the film will have a difficult time in representing *the* quintessential visual style of whatever feature within D&D simply because establishing such a definitive visual style from the source material is difficult. It nevertheless has an opportunity of providing a very convincing representation in its own right. Visual representations in film might indeed go above and beyond what is typically found during gameplay. Westers (2019, p. 5) states that the role-playing setting lacks nearly any form of visual representation. His comparison of TRPGs to the medium of videogames also provide an interesting notion in that it compares the strongly visual medium of videogames to TRPGs, and is thus interesting also in comparing the film medium to TRPGs.

While I might well concede that Westers (2019) makes some good points, I find his statements to perhaps be too severe in claiming that the TRPG lacks nearly any form of visual representation. I would rather moderate this stance into saying that one might not find a very coherent or unified visual representation in D&D. He is somewhat correct in saying that TRPGs are mostly reliant on narration for their experience, but in doing so he quite simply discounts the visual representations found in the source books and also the tendency of players to utilize visual representations as aids in their establishing of subjective diegeses and hyperdiegeses. It can nevertheless be maintained that film is a medium where the visual is more prominent than in the TRPG.

While scenery, locations and staging are not mentioned explicitly by Mack (2016), I find that they provide an excellent opportunity for the film medium to go beyond the limitations of the TRPG and as such can be understood as a major part of how the adaptation mimics or approximates the source material. While props and visual aids are a part of the TRPG, there is still a heavy reliance on individual imagination and make believe in establishing representations of the diegesis. In this regard, the cinema film offers the possibility of utilizing its inherently visual character and providing representations that go far beyond what is available to the average role-playing group. Examples of this are the scenes where the location of the Sedlec Ossuary is used to provide the viewer with an explicit visual representation of the backdrop for the ongoing action. In playing the game, a game master might use a picture of the Sedlec Ossuary to much the same effect, although the film has the opportunity to integrate such visual representations in a much more streamlined fashion.

As further established by Westers (2019) there is also frequent use of mediated sound in the context of TRPGs. While not inherently a part of such games, the game master might utilize mediated audio to construct soundscapes at both diegetic and extra-diegetic levels (Westers, 2019, p. 11). This is not unlike how both Davison (2007, p. 212-213) and Nichols (2010, p. 64-65) describe the functions of audio in film. Thus, it seems that the use of diegetic and extra-diegetic sound is quite similar in outlook across both the TRPG and the cinema film. However, a crucial distinction is that the game master is tasked with managing whatever sounds or musical scores concurrently with ongoing play, while cinema film allows for a more thorough planning and coordination of audio in advance of the audience actually experiencing the final product.

In the same way that a game master might play ominous music during tense moments within the gameplay, perhaps as the players are engaged in combat against a villain, the movie might do the same. This is exemplified in several of the combat encounters in *Dungeons & Dragons*, such as the scene at 01:01:25, where the evil henchman Damodar fights and kills Snails. In the same way that the movie uses merry music to situate the viewer in a tavern at 00:20:30, the game master might play a “tavern soundtrack” to situate the players in an in-game tavern. Generally, I find it well within reason to assume that audio in both film and TRPG serves mainly the same functions and appear in many of the same ways. There are certain limitations, as mentioned above, and furthermore in that the capacity for simultaneous and multiple sounds occurring at the same time is quite difficult within the TRPG context. Simultaneously playing

a musical score and an ambience of world sounds is more easily managed in the planned and controlled context of the film and the same goes for sounds that might appear as narrative cues.

The use of mediated sound is also something of a more established part of modern TRPG context, as Westers (2019, p. 4) indicates that digital technologies such as YouTube and Spotify provide easy access to virtually endless audio content for this use. While Westers (2019) seeks a more scientific reasoning for the uses of mediated audio in tabletop role-playing games, I also find it plausible that the modern fantasy film has contributed to or influenced this aspect of modern TRPG practice, or at least provided a source of inspiration.

As mentioned earlier, the game master within the context of the tabletop role-playing game can be understood as having to facilitate the main construction of narrative in a TRPG setting and in doing so must possess familiarity with the hyperdiegesis belonging to the role-playing game in question. Their starting point in this is constituted in part by the formal game system and hyperdiegetic framework provided in the commercially available background literature, such as the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Player's Handbook* and *Monster Manual*. This seems to me quite similar, in both function and starting point, to the roles of directors and writers within the context of cinema film in general, and particularly related to the adaptation of D&D. The directors and writers of *Dungeons & Dragons* seem to have much of the same basis for narrative construction and development as a typical game master would have, in the sense that the commercially available background literature form the majority of the fixed and constant foundations of a world in which to situate their plot. The movie also utilizes an opening narration, which is reminiscent of how a game master might begin a gaming session by establishing the frames of the narrative and the world in which it takes place.

There also seems to be a key difference in how the nature of narrative is understood between the two differing media, namely that the cinema film possesses a certain finiteness regarding that which is experienced, as opposed to the TRPG where it appears to be far more fluid. As previously mentioned, players and game masters are at liberty to alter or interact with nearly any aspect of narrative while playing. As Montola (2012, p. 89) mentions, role-playing games produce narrative experiences, but the gaming experience as a whole constitutes far more than storytelling. In contrast, the experience of film viewing and the narrative within seems based around experiencing a given and set narrative that is predetermined and unalterable.

While the finite product that the cinema film viewer might experience excludes the intrasubjective establishing of diegeses that typically feature in playing the game, there is still some collective imaginative element to the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000). All those involved, from concept artists, writers and set decorators are engaged in the creative process of filmmaking with the director and as such can be paralleled to the players engaging with their game along with their game master. Cover's previously mentioned definition of role-playing games as involving players and a game-master engaged in collectively creating a narrative experience, could perhaps with minimal changes be used in describing the work of a film's creative team. There is however a glaring difference in that the latter produce an experience that a viewer takes part in with little involvement in its conception, whereas the viewer or audience in a role-playing setting are simultaneously acting in the creation of the experience with which they engage.

3 Conclusions

It is apparent that the film and TRPG are two very different media, and as such the ways in which they are experienced also differ. Where the film is more visual, finite and individually oriented in its diegesis, the TRPG is more collective, fragmented and constantly reiterated through play. They may share a common foundation in the formalized source materials, yet are reliant on utilizing their mostly distinct medium specific qualities in portraying this common foundation and thus offer different ways for players and audiences to engage with and experience it. Studying the adaptation of a TRPG to cinema film also illustrates how, even without a coherent textual or narrative base, a successful adaptation can still be achieved.

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