

Critical Success: Technology and the Rise of Tabletop Gaming

The turn of the last century cemented the societal changes that have since dictated our increasingly virtual daily lives. The Y2K problem, borne from the way computers are programmed, informed us that our reliance on technology can not be severed from the unique issues it creates. Only weeks after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Apple's introduction of the first iPod offered an escape from the horrors of reality into the solemn space of separated individuality. Personally, when my life becomes difficult to manage, I prefer to find solace in my escape to the fantastical world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, perhaps the most well known tabletop roleplaying game (RPG). While these events do not occur simultaneously, they act as checkpoints for viewing the overall forward march technology has taken, inching into every facet of our lives. As technology advances, so too does our sense of individuality, as well as our ability to parse through mass information to find our individual truths. This particular combination of increasing technological advances and an emphasis on individualism, paired with the decreasing economic output of the great recession and a decreasing emphasis on Christianity in America has allowed an avenue for the rise of tabletop gaming.

First and foremost, technological advances have been the driving force behind the astronomical growth in popularity that tabletop gaming has experienced. While the 2000s ushered in the era of cell phones and personal computers with high speed internet, the 2010s matched these contributions with an explosive interest in smartphones with internet based capabilities, social media platforms, and virtual content streaming. At this point in time, it seems, the average American can stop what they are doing at any given point and consume an endless stream of media, no matter where they are. In short, we owe our newfound interconnectedness with technology to “software—all sorts of new applications—in conjunction with the creation of

a global fiber-optic network that has made us all next-door neighbors” (Friedman). As a result, technology's rise has given millions access to an abundance of information. Thanks to the internet and the millions of users who believe in democratized information, tabletop gaming has spread to an abundance of new players. There are a variety of applications that help make tabletop gaming more accessible. For example, video conference software and online ebooks allow a group to take part in a gaming session virtually.

However, with free information comes corporations that stifle its flow and attempt to capitalize on recreating systems that access it. Similarly, capitalism's incessant need to make every product all encompassing means that for every product, there is a frenzy of media about and around that product. For tabletop gaming, that means a number of side games, extra literature, web series programming, and podcasts accompany primary products to transform a traditional gaming experience into a life consuming obsession. For example, podcasting has brought a newfound appreciation for tabletop gaming as “Role-players are taking microphones to their games and people are listening, and these people are not just pre-existing fans of the games they play” (Dicicio). This means that as media spills into new platforms, corporations gain access to novel ways to reach new consumers. In this case, these consumers are novice tabletop gamers.

Additionally, tabletop gaming has crept its way into some of the most popular media franchises. Perhaps the ultimate case of capitalized nostalgia, the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a show based around the tabletop franchise *Dungeons & Dragons*, has become one of the most viewed programs of the past few years. Seeing as, “The release of *Stranger Things* Season 4 made it only the third title to ever break the 5 billion weekly viewing minute mark” (Nielsen), it is no understatement that tabletop gaming has made its way into the minds of the majority of

Americans. Even if every viewer of *Stranger Things* doesn't become a *Dungeons & Dragons* role playing gamer, the series has spurred explosive growth in the international interest of tabletop gaming that has led to a massive increase in the number of new players.

In fact, the growing support of democratization of knowledge gives low income communities the opportunity to share in the fun of tabletop gaming. Democratization of knowledge, or the acquisition and spread of knowledge outside of elite groups and into the hands of a wider population, is a term of art that has seen widespread use since computer software became ubiquitous around the turn of the century. This discussion of information access usually boils down to the concept of open-source software, or software that is made freely available and redistributable. Before the advent of the internet, most information was harder to access. If you wanted to learn how to fly an airplane, you had to shell out the cash necessary for pilot's school; simply reading about aviation at the library couldn't cut it. Now, aspiring aviators can take to the sky virtually via various flight simulators, operable on personal computers. Similarly, if you wanted to play *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1980s, you or someone you knew had to own a copy of the game books. Today, however, a vast collection of tabletop gaming resources are available free online. This growth in free information grew from the open-source software movement. Early in the 21st century, the marriage between democratization of knowledge and the fantastical worlds of tabletop gaming began:

In March 2000, the company Wizards of the Coast (WOTC), the incontestable leader of the sector and owner of D&D, announced the release of the third edition of its RPG, under an open license label... explicitly aimed to promote reciprocal compatibility between RPGs... (and) drawing over from open-source principles inspired by the software industry. (Lecocq and Demil 894)

Essentially, ideals from the software industry bled into the world of tabletop gaming. When faced with the option of open-source information, industry leaders concluded that the resulting rise in popularity would eclipse the short-term drop in profits. Even though new players would be starting out at a lower cost, the implementation of an open-source strategy could be used, “to create an entry induction phenomenon, by giving others access to knowledge that has previously been proprietary” (Lecocq and Demil 897). In other words, by giving new players a taste of tabletop roleplaying, companies reach new markets of consumers that can be converted into lifelong customers.

In tandem with technology, the economic stagnation of the great recession gave a younger generation of gamers more time and reason to seek out activities like tabletop gaming that offer an escape from reality. While technology never stops advancing, economic growth takes its own course. During the great recession of the late 2000s, American consumers experienced this paradox. As economic growth halted and millions of Americans defaulted on their home loans, so too did consumers come home with new iPhones, tablets, and a new generation of gaming consoles. As the recession droned on, millions of new high school and college graduates were left to compete over a dearth of employment opportunities. “Over the past two generations, particularly among many college grads, the 20s have become a sort of netherworld between adolescence and adulthood” (Peck). In a way, the great recession extended the adolescent period for millennials, and Generation Z experienced a similar lengthening of this proto professional period with the COVID-19 pandemic. This demographic analysis of younger generations is easily observed in the *Dungeons & Dragons* player community. According to statistical analysis from Wizards of the Coast, the parent company of *D&D*, over eighty percent of current players are millennials or younger (Corliss). This is especially intriguing, considering

all of these players were not yet even born when the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was written in the early 1970s. However, just because an activity seems arcane does not mean it cannot be popular. After all, few expected vinyl records to make a comeback after the advent of online content streaming. Moreover, with a longer childhood comes a greater longing for a sense of childlike wonder, often offered to us in the form of consumerist nostalgia by the same media companies that vied for our attention during our actual childhood. In the same vein, the world of tabletop gaming offers a glimpse into the world of millennial childhood: the era of *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and three dimensional high fantasy video games. Essentially, tabletop gaming offers a more mature flavor of the same high fantasy tropes experienced by millennials and Generation Z during formative years.

This commodification of childhood memories is the perfect recipe to boost the player base of tabletop gaming. As technology has granted corporations the ability to steal away a consumer's attention with a moment's notice, the next step is, of course, to use nostalgia to profit off of this attention. Seeing as modern tabletop gaming has been around since even before the inception of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, it is a prime source of nostalgia for its intellectual property owners to capitalize on. Those who began playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with its first edition are just as important consumers to the business as those who only just began. Interestingly, this nostalgia-based consumerism even creates opportunities for connection and community growth. In fact:

Much contemporary nostalgia is built on briefly popular consumer goods that unify, however loosely, narrow age groups. Instead of places or events shaping these brief 'generations,' goods link otherwise separated individuals. Nostalgia today is increasingly

about microidentities. In fact, consumed nostalgia lets us ‘put on’ multiplicities of identities across the movement through life. (Cross, Katherine Angel 29-30)

In a sense, nostalgia-based consumerism has the ability to both bring together unique generations of people while also placing emphasis on individualism. For tabletop gaming, a shared goal mixed with a variety of unique identities creates adventures out of a melting pot of personalities.

While nostalgia-based consumerism profits off a person’s past, tabletop gaming companies have a unique advantage in profiting off of a person’s future. That is, it offers a glimpse into the life a player wants to live. One important factor of tabletop gaming is character customizations. Since players are encouraged to role-play as fictional characters, hours are spent writing background lore for characters in each “campaign,” or series of adventures that a group of players will undertake. When looking at a standard character sheet, a player realizes the litany of ways they can become someone new. Sections for personality traits, ideals, and even a character’s charisma, or persuasive ability, are embedded in the fifth edition character sheets for *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D Character Sheets). Naturally, players have a tendency to sprinkle in aspects of their own lives or personality traits into the characters they create. In turn, a tabletop gaming campaign can act as a refuge for marginalized identities to flourish. For example, “As more queer people begin playing D&D, the LGBTQ+ player community grows more visible, which, in turn, appeals to new players because of traditional media’s lack of representation” (Lichtenstein). So, when a young transgender teen comes home to a rejection of their identity by their family, the world of tabletop gaming offers escape in refuge. In some games, players have found, “the rich campaign setting gives players a tremendous amount to think about: gender and sex are extremely fluid, sexuality is normatively polymorphous, and the class politics of the game invite much critical reflection” (Cross, Gary 77). Essentially, roleplaying in an inclusive

setting gives marginalized individuals an opportunity to experience a greater sense of acceptance. The real world is dark and unforgiving, and suspending yourself in a fantasy world that allows you to literally fight your demons is cathartic and rewarding. So, when a group of strictly queer gamers plan a campaign together, they can construct a world free of hate. Or, they can construct a world in which the haters are just another band of goblins to slay. They're your demons, and active roleplay means you get to fight them in the manner of your choice. In short, just as *Stranger Things* made tabletop gaming more popular amongst the greater population, queer representation sparked more popularity amongst a unique cross section of people. Consequently, tabletop gaming opens avenues for safe expression of individuality, an endeavor the importance of which can not be understated.

In part, the tabletop gaming industry catapulted into mainstream popularity because it was able to outgrow its mortal enemy: American Christianity. Unfortunately, the spread of tabletop gaming to new communities has not always been so fruitful. The early years of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the mid 1970s were marred by slanderous attacks from religious and moral groups in the United States. "This was the start of the 'satanic panic', a mass hysteria over supposed satanic ritual abuse that pointed the finger at Dungeons & Dragons and other supposedly demonic forms of popular culture" (Jeffries). Back then, before the internet granted skeptics with speedy fact checking abilities, claims of satanism held more legitimacy in public discourse. Since then, however, Christianity in America has been on the decline, and so too have attacks on seemingly satanic pursuits. This decline of Christianity is most clear when viewed through the lens of generational religious affiliation. "More than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly larger proportion than among millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent)" (Cox and Bowman). While Christianity

has been less popular with all age groups in general, younger generations have the lowest religious affiliation rates. This means the rate at which people distance themselves from Christianity is intensifying as fewer people raise their children under Christian beliefs. Since fewer people believe in the central tenets of Christianity, fewer people are being swayed away from participating in activities that are labeled as satanic, including tabletop gaming. Even so, technology once again plays an important role in this phenomenon. With a smart phone in hand, most Americans have the ability to fact check the assertions that are thrown their way. Had this fact checking technology been available in the 1970s, perhaps potential players could have realized that the stories they heard about *Dungeons & Dragons* were not connected to satanism in the first place. Today, of course, tabletop gaming companies grow their massive player bases from the contemporary consumer's ability to fact check and review a product before they make a purchase.

While the 2000s gave us cell phones and iPods, and the 2010s gave us smartphones and digital media streaming, the 2020s have already leveled up technological growth by growing platforms for video communications. During the coronavirus pandemic, the video conference software Zoom granted people the ability to socially communicate in groups while remaining physically solitary. Once again, the paradox of technological growth paired with economic downturn has widened the avenue that tabletop gaming has used to grow its popularity. Just as tabletop gaming rose to the public spotlight in the 2010s, it continues to enchant new players with a world of wonder and magic that allows an escape from the horrors of a global pandemic and garners relationship building amongst diverse communities.

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