

## Heroes of Zon Dállá:

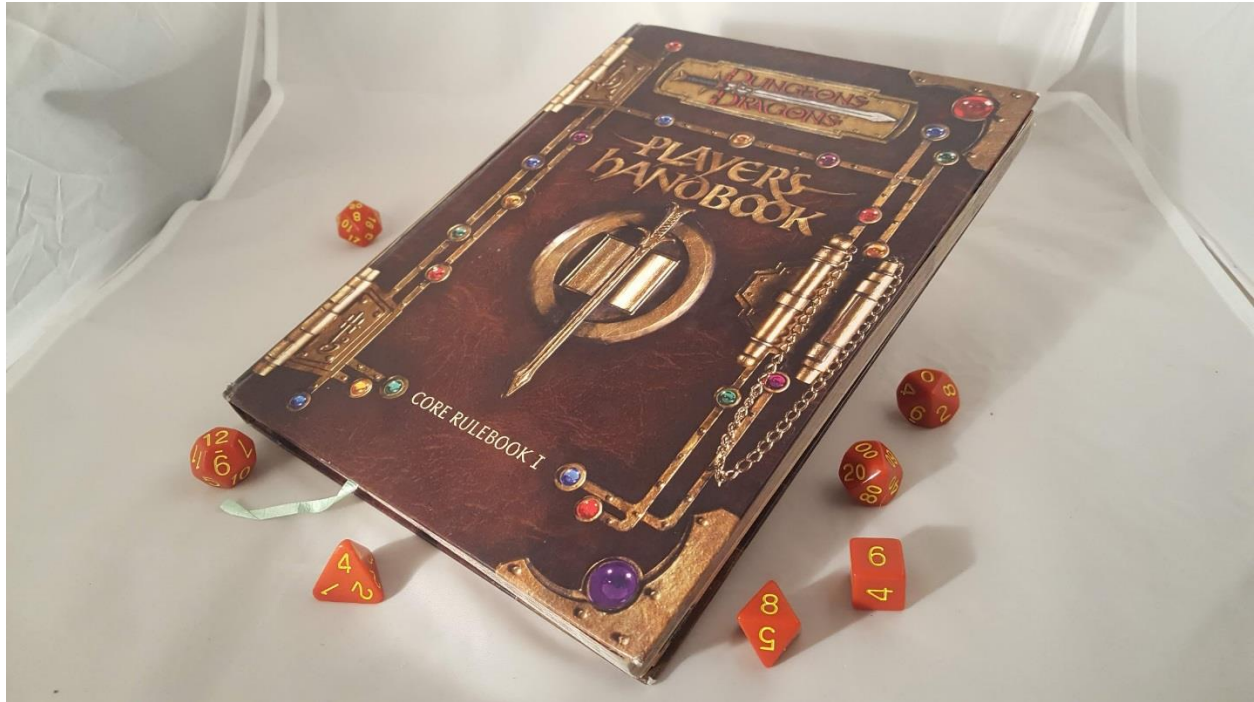
### A Photographic Ethnography on Dungeons & Dragons

Matt Hollowniczky

When I was around eleven years old, I was introduced to the game Dungeons & Dragons at a friend's birthday party. While the three of us had a fun time playing this game with his older brother, I am sure that none of us knew the part this game would play in our lives and the lives of other friends.

Dungeons & Dragons is a tabletop roleplaying game that was created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. In this game, players take the role of a character that they create and go on quests with other adventurers, all being played out by a group in person. Through this game, players engage in cooperative storytelling, making decisions and changing the outcomes of the plot, or at times creating completely new ones organically through play. Groups can go on single adventures or sometimes play an entire campaign, in which the same players and characters go on a string of related adventures to tell an overarching story. Over the course of the past ten years, a group of friends and I would play this game, sometimes weekly and at others maybe only a few times a year, at one point culminating in a set of two campaigns that took place simultaneously for nearly four years. With this report I hope to introduce people to our gameworld, Zon Dállá and the adventurers who wrote its History, and explore the ways in which this simple game has had an effect on the lives of people who have played it together for so long.

The methodology for obtaining information in this report was done in two ways. The first was a set of two questions that was sent to members of this gaming group. The second was through a set of photos taken by me and members of this group of their character sheets, drawings, and notes from throughout the years of playing the game. An attempt was made to obtain the character sheets for every player who had taken part in one of the two four yearlong campaigns, although it was not always possible to do so as such things have a habit of being lost over the course of time. An effort was made to also obtain notes of the two Dungeon Masters, or DMs (Game referees) to give an idea into the shared world that the two had built over the course of the campaigns. Photos have also been taken of relevant items, such as rulebooks used at the time.



1. When I met up with my friend for his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday I had no idea that we were going to do something that would continue to affect us to this day. This is a photo of the Player's Handbook for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition of Dungeons and Dragons, the one used by my friend's brother when he refereed our first game ever. The two of us can still recall that first game vividly, from my dragonborn fighter's death at the foot of a brown bear to encountering a mad wizard in his lair built into the side of a cliff. While the deeds of our characters were nonsensical and the plot of the adventure incoherent, this first game introduced us to the creative potential we had for storytelling.

Throughout the following year, despite not actually knowing the rules of Dungeons and Dragons, we created and shared a simplified version of the game with our friends. After awhile we began to play the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the game, before returning to our roots with the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. It is this edition that we used the most, around four years, before switching over to the 5<sup>th</sup> edition when it was released in 2014.

Gp. 200

Equipment:  
 (M) Dwarven WarAxe 8lbs. Slaying  
 Iron Halfplate (+7AC) (-7 skills) (+0 dex)  
 Masterwork Stone tower shield (+4 AC) (-10 skills)  
 2 gives cover  
 Masterwork stone tools (+2)  
 Flask Cheap Dwarven Ale  
 Backpack w/ Bedroll and various tools  
 Jockeyed Gauntlet (tower shield) (+10 to disarm)  
 Feet

1. Weapon Focus Dwarven WarAxe (+1 to hit)
2. Dodge (+1 AC to selected target)
3. Endurance (+4 to nonlethal damage resistance)
4. Disarm (Stable but disabled at -1-9 hp)

Skills

	Stonecraft	Intimidate	Climb	Swim	Jump
Bonus	+6	+5	+4	+2	+3
Percept	+2	+0	+0	+0	+0
Ability	+0	+2	+2	+2	+2
Other	+0	+0	+0	+0	+0
Armor	-0	-0	-17	-34	-17
Total	+6	+7	-11	-30	-12

	Search	Sense Motive	Appraise
Bonus	+0	+0	+0
Acid	+2	+0	+2
Ability	+2	+2	+2

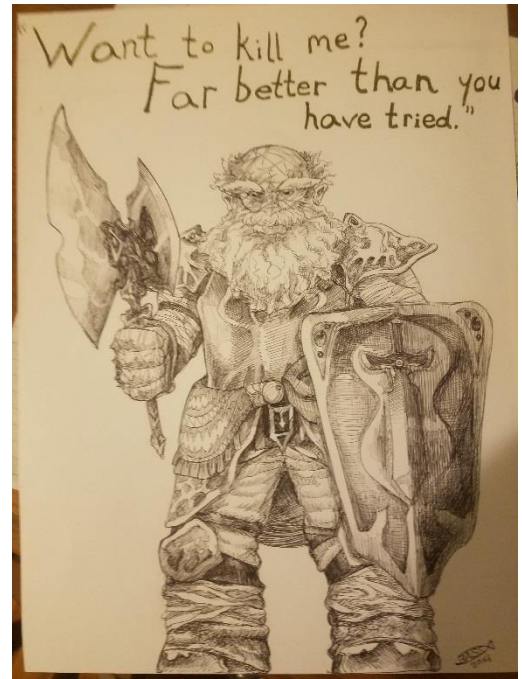
Urknoc StoneSword  
 Dwarven Fighter Lv. 3

Str.	14	+2	AC: 21	Int. 1
Con.	14	+4	Fort. +7	Darkvision 60ft
Dex.	13	+1	Ref. +2	Deity: Moradin
Wis.	14	+2	Will. +3	Weight: 181 lbs.
Int.	10	0	B.A.B. +3	Height: 4ft 8in
Cha.	7	-2	HP: 37	Weight w/ gear: 352 lbs.
			Current: 1	Age: 48 years

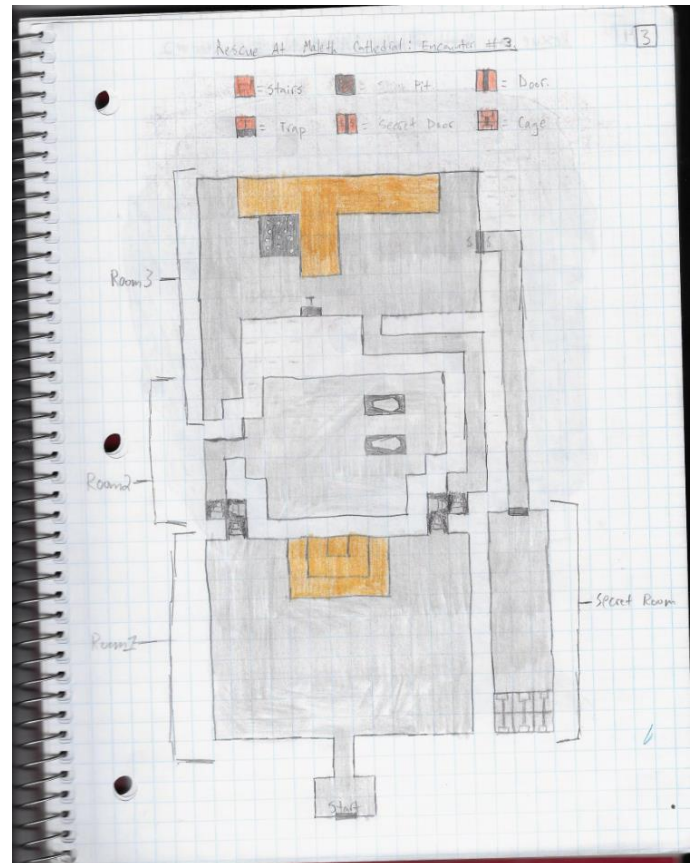
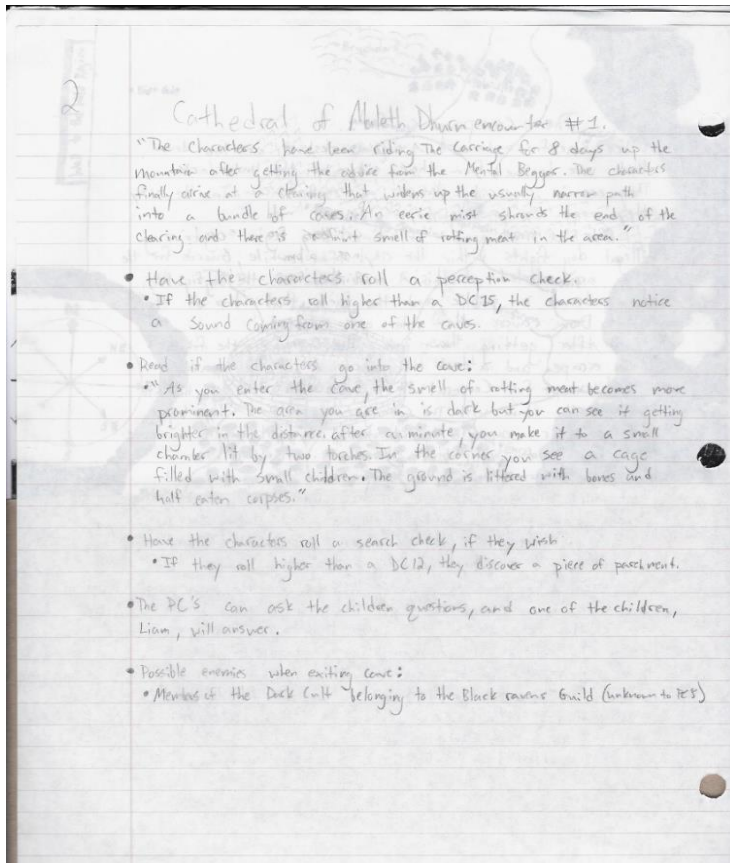
Attack  
 Dwarven WarAxe +6 1d10+2 damage  
 crit. x3

Dwarf bonuses  
 Stonecunning: +2 search unusual stone work  
 do not have to be actively searching  
 Stability: +4 to resist being bullrushed  
 or tripped while standing  
 +2 bonus to resist poisons, spells, and spell  
 like effects  
 +1 on attack rolls for Orcs and Goblins  
 +4 to AC to dodge giant type Logres, trolls,  
 hill giants, etc)  
 +2 appraise stone and metal  
 +2 craft stone and metal

Languages: Dwarven, Common, Terran



2. During the years that followed that initial game of Dungeons and Dragons, Urknoc Stonesword became an ongoing character in the adventures we created. Created by my friend who introduced me to the game, the dwarf fighter is one of the most well known of the dozens of characters each of us has created in our time with the game, especially for not having been present in a long-running campaign. Throughout the years his life story would be written out to include events that did not take place within the game, fleshing him out as a character. When the player behind Urknoc Stonesword graduated from high school this drawing of him was made to commemorate the character. "One of the most important aspects of role-playing games were the sense of community they provided me" the player of Urknoc Stonesword told me recently. They not only provided him with a community of like-minded people throughout middle and high school, they helped him in finding friends once he went off to college. "I proposed playing D&D with a lot of people I was friendly with but did not hang out with outside of classes and clubs. It ultimately worked as my closest friends at school are people who were in my D&D playgroup."



3. These two images were created in 2013. At the time, my friend had been running two campaigns simultaneously and came to the realization that he wanted to play a character in one. I was asked to take over the role of Dungeon Master (game referee) for one of his groups, and I was happy to oblige. These are some of the notes and one of the maps that I wrote for the first adventure I made with this group, "The Cathedral of Maeth Dhurn." At this time, I had only been the Dungeon Master on a few occasions, so this campaign would be my first real test of running a game. One thing to take notice of is the bullet point in which members of the Black Raven's Guild are listed as possible enemies to randomly encounter. At this time I had been playing in the second campaign run by my friend, and the Black Raven's Guild were a notable enemy faction within his game. Although I had not discussed with him, nor even considered, having a shared game world at this point, this was done as a joke, as he was now going to play in the campaign I would be running. This single note I made to myself would lead to us soon begin fleshing out a shared world for our two games to take place in.



4. This is the character portrait of my friend's character, Aust Nargon the half-elf archer. We have been friends since kindergarten and began playing Dungeons and Dragons together when we were around eleven years old. Despite being good friends outside of the game, we look back at the game as an important aspect of their teenage lives. "It's a chance to imagine and exercise your mind while all the while getting to hang out with great friends" says the player behind Aust Nargon. It is easy to look back at Dungeons and Dragons as just a game, but it can play a much larger role. Every week our groups would be put into situations that were at times nearly impossible to imagine (such as the time one group had to fight a vampire with weapons that had no effect on him) and work together to determine solutions to these problems (in this case, sharpening silver coins to become throwing weapons). This solution is certainly not the only one that was possible, and the fact that the only limits to solving these problems are the imaginations of the players turns Dungeons and Dragons into a great tool for teaching problem solving. Although the situations these groups would often face could never happen in real life, the skills they helped to grow would carry over outside of the game. I know I personally have become much better at problem solving because of the game, and it is likely my friends have too.



5. This is half of a map of the world of the two campaign, known as Zon Dála. The other half of the map was at one point drawn out but has since been lost, with only notes that had been written down remaining, along with the memories of the players. Each of us would build up the world as adventures took place and we would often use world building from one each other to flesh out our individual campaigns. Zon Dála is a continent that was divided into two distinct halves of West and East, something which was mostly done out of necessity. I ran a campaign in the western part of the continent while my friend's campaign took place in the eastern half, something which allowed the characters to make significant changes in the world without us having to worry about interactions taking place between the two groups. Eventually this would change, as two years into my campaign the players migrated east. This was a huge change in the game world, as now both groups of players (a total of around eleven

people) were acting out adventures in a small setting. The actions of one group would affect the game world, which in turn would affect the other group. It was at this point that the world felt more real to everyone than ever before. Because each campaign took place separately, players would talk to each other outside of the games to learn about the ways in which their actions had changed the others' campaign.

**DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**  
**CHARACTER RECORD SHEETS**

Character Name: Deker Blackfrow  
 Class: Ranger Race: Drow Alignment: Neutral Level: 7 Deity:

Size: Medium Age: 20 Gender: Male Height: 5'10" Weight: 150 Eyes: Red Hair: Black Skin: Black

**ABILITY SCORES**

STR	16	+3
DEX	17	+3
CON	14	+2
INT	11	+0
WIS	12	+1
CHA	11	+0

**HP** 50 **AC** 14 **INITIATIVE** 13 **BASE ATTACK** 7

**SAVING THROWS**

Fortitude	17	+3
Reflex	17	+3
Will	17	+3

**MELEE** +7 **RANGED** +5

**WEAPON**

WEAPON	TOTAL ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
Heavy Crossbow	+7	1d10	19-20x2
WEAPON	TOTAL ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
Morikwasht	+10/5	1d8+2	x2
WEAPON	TOTAL ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
Drow Low Heavy Crossbow	+11	1d10	19-20x2

**ARMOR/PROTECTIVE ITEM**

ARMOR/PROTECTIVE ITEM	TYPE	ARMOR BONUS	MAX DEX BONUS

**SHIELD/PROTECTIVE ITEM**

SHIELD/PROTECTIVE ITEM	ARMOR BONUS	WEIGHT	CHECK PENALTY	SPELL FAILURE

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**DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**  
**CHARACTER NAME**

Character Name: Deker Blackfrow  
 Class & Level: Ranger Level 7 Background: Justin Sample Player Name: Justin Sample

Race: Drow Elf Alignment: Neutral Experience Points:

**ABILITY SCORES**

STR	15	+2
DEX	17	+3
CON	14	+2
INT	11	+0
WIS	12	+1
CHA	11	+0

**HP** 50 **AC** 14 **INITIATIVE** 13 **BASE ATTACK** 7

**SAVING THROWS**

Fortitude	17	+3
Reflex	17	+3
Will	17	+3

**MELEE** +7 **RANGED** +5

**WEAPON**

WEAPON	TOTAL ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
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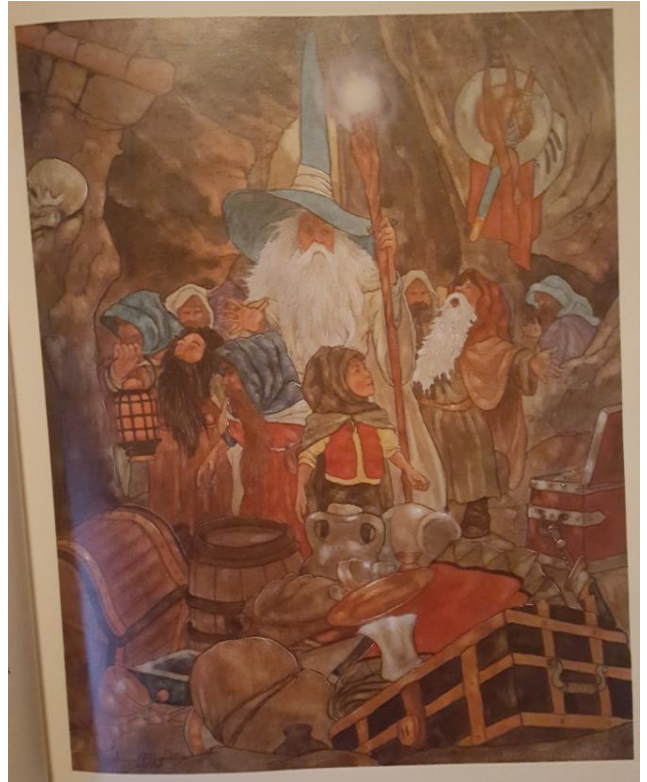
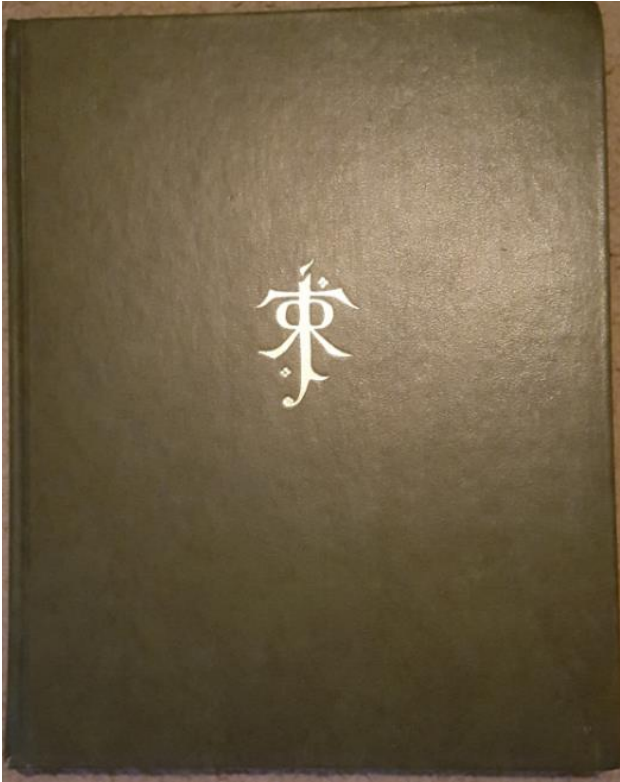
6. These are the character sheets of Deker Blackfrow, the drow-elf ranger. When the two campaigns began in 2013, my friends and I had all been using the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Dungeons and Dragons. When the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the game was released the following year, we had no intentions to switch to it, but over time we had learned about some of the rule changes that appealed to us and switched over to the new system towards the end of the year. Despite going through many different variations of the Dungeons and Dragons rules during our time with the game, the campaign that I ran starting in 2013 is the only one that spanned multiple editions.

The player behind Deker told me that he always enjoyed the intersection of socialization and creative expression that Dungeons and Dragons provided. "I often daydream and come up with stories or fantasies in my head. Role-playing games offer me a unique chance to express my creativity socially. I haven't really gotten that anywhere else." This is a sentiment that I can relate to as well. I have always liked to create stories but am not much a writer. Dungeons and Dragons provided me with the ability to plant the seeds of a story and then watch as my friends took it to places I could never have imagined.



7. Two years into one of the long running campaigns, one of the players had to leave to go off to college. His character, Dijon Machelli the half-orc monk left the campaign with him but did so a few months before the player. After fighting off werewolves as they sailed towards a secluded island off the coast of Zon Dállda, the group came across a tribe of refugee half-orcs, and Dijon decided that it was his purpose to join this tribe and aid them in the formation of their society. All of this took place months before the player had to leave for school. When playing the same character for such a long period of time, a player begins to truly feel their character come to life, sometimes even being willing to end their own participation in a game if they feel their actions are what the character would do. Dijon's player knew he would not play with the group in this same formation ever again but felt that his character would make the choice to help the group of refugees, leading to an emotional but fitting end to his journey as an adventurer. His absence could almost immediately be felt in the following game sessions, but his character lived on in the world through the stories of both players and characters.





8. A copy of the Hobbit, one of the earliest books that made me interested in the fantasy genre. Many of the friends that were in our Dungeons and Dragons group initially became invested in the game due to their prior interest for fantasy literature, while for others the game generated this interest. Despite being a fan of fantasy, it was not until after I had begun playing the game that my love of the genre truly blossomed. On the topic of the fantasy genre, the player behind the half-elf ranger Lewa told me “before D&D I was somewhat interested in similar areas like Lord of the Rings, but D&D showed me that there was so much more to it and how much I loved it.” My friend also notes the value the game had to him on not only furthering a love for literature but also for allowing for his own creativity to shine. “Spending time with friends after school in high school, and after work today playing D&D is a great hobby that helps to nurture imagination and creativity.”

### The Cathedral of Maleth Dhurn

#### Start

#### Village of Fjalmon

- Broken down village
- Walls around are crumbling, lacking the materials for repair now that mines are depleted
- Center of the village has a shrine to Belor
- Dingy tavern on east side of village, the Lonely Spirit, owned by Gwyneth Varn

#### The Ranting Priest:

- A priest, Father Ryklar, stands beside the shrine to Belor preaching of a great artifact that remains in the abandoned Cathedral of Maleth Dhurn
- If the priest is questioned about this, he will ask for the party to recover the Mace of Disruption for him so that he can bring it to a church to the East
- Asking anyone else in the village will point the party in the direction of the mountain pass and warn about the dangers along it
- Villagers will also mention that a medicine woman lives in the mountains off of the pass and she may be willing to provide help
- The priest and innkeeper will suggest that players acquire cold weather clothes for their trek into the mountain

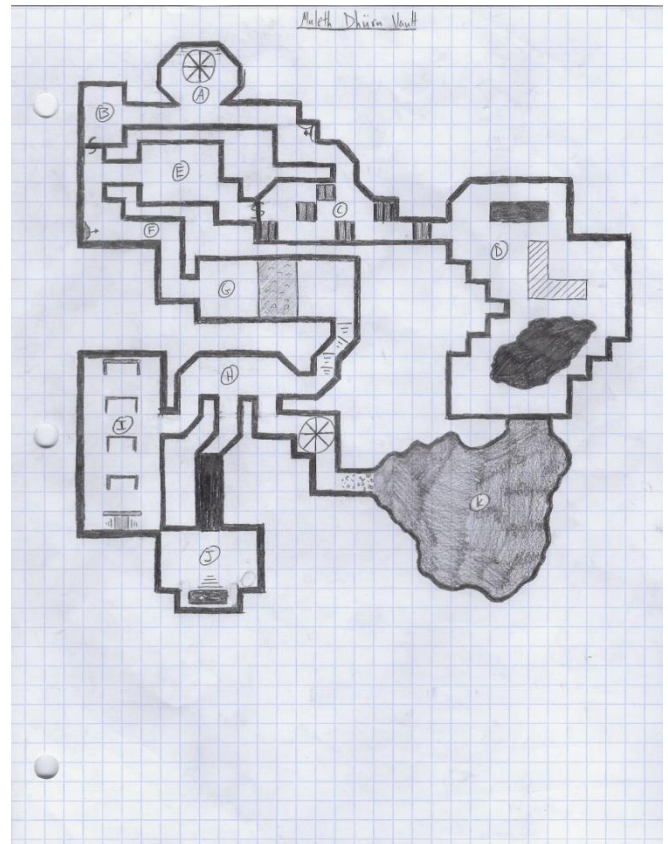
#### Mountain Pass

#### Random Encounter Table

1	5 <u>Direwolves</u> (321) and 1 <u>Winter Wolf</u> (340)
2	1 <u>Owlbear</u> (249)
3	1 <u>Brown Bear</u> (319)
4	2 <u>Saber Tooth Tigers</u> (336)

#### Werewolf Hunters:

- On a DC 11 listen (Wis) check, the PC's can hear screams for help coming from a nearby cave
- In the cave are a dwarf and a man preparing to kill a chained-up man (Swashbucklers, Volo's Guide 217)
  - Human- Martin (right side of head has severe burns)
  - Dwarf- Thokul (missing some front teeth)
- The chained-up man is a lycanthrope, but promises to leave the town in peace if he is let free



9. Six years after I first ran my adventure “The Cathedral of Maleth Dhurn” to start off my three-year long campaign I wanted to use what I had learned to improve what I thought was an interesting premise for an adventure. Compared to my old notes, which mostly served to have a few small reminders to myself, I wanted this version of the adventure to be easy for somebody else to run. I made sure that the notes included all the necessary information for my friend to organize the adventure while making sure that they also would not overwhelm the dungeon master and players with lore and background I had amassed over the past six years. I updated the map to make it more interesting mechanically as well as to solidify improvised moments from the original adventure in a way that made more sense with the story. Going back to this adventure to make my edits brought with it both a sense of pride and a sense of sadness. I am proud with where my writing skills have gone in the past six years and how I have grown in my ability to think critically about my work and understand the ways in which it can always be improved. Despite this, it makes me a bit sad to look back at the old notes from a time when I had never written out a full adventure. At times I feel nostalgic for the time of my life when I could play dungeons and dragons each week, especially at a point where I have not played any more than single session games since coming to college.



10. This is a drawing I made in high school of my character Öskar Balderk, a Dwarf Paladin. I played this character for three years in a long running campaign run by my friend. One of the best aspects of Dungeons and Dragons, or roleplaying games in general, is the ability to create and play as a character that contains characteristics different from yourself. For me, one of my favorite things to do in Dungeons and Dragons was to play a religious character. I have been raised non-religious my entire life, but religions have always been very interesting to me. While I do not believe in any deities, I do find the concept of one to be interesting. By playing as a paladin in Dungeons and Dragons, I made myself into a devout member of a religious order whose actions had to abide by a strict set of guidelines put forth by his deity. I loved being able to play as a character that was so different in his beliefs from myself, and despite this being a game, I feel that it has helped me to understand real world religious belief better than I had before.

As the campaign went on, my character went through many adventures, and throughout all of it he felt like a very real person. My sister (who also played in this campaign with me) describes her favorite aspect of role-playing games as "being not only able to play characters, but to create characters that feel like people." All of the people that had played in one of our long campaigns can look back at their characters and talk about them as if they really existed. Long-term storytelling of this sort allows for true character growth to take place and I feel that playing such a game can lead to the creation of extremely realistic characters, even if they live in a fantasy world.



11. This is a photograph of me and my two best friends at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire last October. While I am still wonderful friends with all of the people that I played Dungeons and Dragons with, we have all spread out. One of my best friends is someone I would not have befriended had he not overheard an offhand comment I made regarding Dungeons and Dragons, but he now lives in Florida, making it difficult for me to see him. Like me, many of my friends have been unable to play role-playing games since they began attending college, and many of us are only able to meet up a few times a year. These two friends, despite us all going to school in different locations, always manage to stay in touch, with us sometimes contacting each other weekly. Whenever we are all home from school, we spend time together and even while at school we manage to occasionally play a video game together. While neither of these friends are people I met through Dungeons and Dragons, our friendship was greatly strengthened by our times playing the game. The one friend is the person who introduced me to the game on his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday and who worked with me to create our game world. The other friend is someone who I was not very close with until we had begun playing Dungeons and Dragons, and he has since become the most important friend I have. Of all the things that Dungeons and Dragons has done for me, the lasting friendships it has helped create and strengthen are by far the most valuable.

In the writing of this paper, I got back into contact with my friends to get their thoughts on the impact Dungeons and Dragons has had on our lives. Despite us never having ever fully been out of contact our interaction has been noticeably diminished since high school. Writing this paper has made me yearn for the days when I could see all my friends in person even just once a week and take part in the creative process of playing out a story. In talking to my friends for this project, I have become aware of the many ways in which this game was able to impact its players. To some it was an outlet to create incredible stories that others could play out. For others it was a way to exercise the mind in a way that was, at the time, more engaging than school. Even still, some found the act of creating and playing characters with realistic needs and motivations to be the most engaging aspect of the game. Even years after we have ceased our campaigns together, the game's influence on our lives is still prominent. In high school we played Dungeons and Dragons with friends we had known for years, but in college the game provided some of us with the opportunity to forge new friendships. In high school our group of friends would see each other every day at school, but today the game is one of the only ways for some of us to stay in contact with our friends. I personally have benefitted greatly from the aspects of social interaction and improvisation that were fostered from the playing of this game, both of which have helped me throughout my college career.

If I can stress anything with this paper, I want to make it clear that the impact that the game Dungeons and Dragons had on my group of friends is not unique. Since its creation in 1974, countless groups of people have made lasting and meaningful memories with this game, and to this day people continue to do so. Dungeons and Dragons is more popular now than in has been in nearly twenty years, and as new audiences are introduced to this game more people will discover the truly magical influence it can have on their lives. The possibility for creative and meaningful social interaction through this game are virtually endless, limited only by the imaginations of those who play it.