

Dungeons and Dissonance: Coherence in GLAM Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper presents ongoing research into the use of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) (Wizards of the Coast 2024) in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM). Although research into the application and perceived effectiveness of games in GLAM spaces is growing, particularly for museums (Champion and Emery, 2024; Grace et al. 2025), there is an underdeveloped understanding within the sector of how best to leverage games toward whatever goals an organisation might have. Games are implemented for a range of purposes, most often educational or with a view to mediate visitor interaction with collections or content (for examples see: Beale 2011, Schaller 2011, Seale et al. 2024). D&D, which is widely popular (Sidhu et al. 2024) is often adopted as a 'blank canvas' game—a pre-structured set of mechanics combined with relatively malleable content that can easily be remodelled to communicate content (Petousi et al. 2022, Seale et al. 2024). While there is relatively little issue with this in the context of home-games, the appropriation of D&D in the GLAM context is more complex.

We adopt the term coherence to describe the relationship between various game elements. Games that have low coherence have mechanics, setting, or narratives that are only loosely coupled. In D&D's case, the long tradition of modifying the game through home-brew mechanics and content speaks to this flexibility (Felczak 2024). By comparison, games with high coherence display a tighter relationship between elements. This is exemplified by Brenda Romero's *The Mechanic is the Message* series (Brathwaite 2009), where Romero posits that closely aligning mechanics with a game's

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meaning enables a higher form of communication. We suggest that coherence is a spectrum, and that low-coherence games are not, by default, worse or less impactful play experiences than high-coherence games. Rather, we use incoherence to describe games where the relationship between these elements creates problems for the player experience.

Jesper Juul describes the relationship between a game's world and its rules as "a two-way process where the fiction of the game cues [the player] into understanding the rules of the game ... the rules can cue the player to imagine the fictional world of the game" (2005, 163). When a rule creates a contradiction in the fictional world (or vice versa), Juul declares the game to be incoherent. Ludonarrative dissonance is one example of incoherence. When a game's ludic mechanics and narratological message are in significant disagreement, players experience a disconnection from the emotional and intellectual resonance of the game (Hocking 2007).

We distinguish between internal coherence, which considers how the elements of a game align with each other, and external coherence, which refers to the relationship between the game and the context in which it is being played. External coherence draws more on the Forge-era concept of coherence in role-playing games (Edwards 2001; Gleichman 2009). Edwards (2001) uses the term to convey how well a game's design and a group's playstyle support a shared, purpose for play. For GLAM organisations, context includes not only the intended purpose of the game but also the organisation's content. Therefore, a game is externally incoherent when the game and the content don't align, and externally coherent when the ephemera and techniques of play are in supportive conversation with the content.

This conflict has been discussed (Schaller 2011, 2014; Seale et al. 2025), with a focus on the "inherent attributes" of content, and whether players must "pay attention to those attributes in order to make thoughtful choices" (Schaller 2014). This framework is insufficient here, as attributes are not where coherence occurs—incoherence results from conflicts in meaning that the player derives from communication between the interactions with rules, fiction, and content (Hocking 2007; Juul 2011). We use external (in)coherence to support our analysis of GLAM games as experiential communication tools that are played and understood by participants, rather than as static artefacts described by attributes and analysed by consultants.

The combination of D&D's broad appeal and the flexibility it derives from its low coherence makes it an attractive game for operationalising a variety of goals (Polkinghorne et al. 2021; Seale et al. 2024; Sidhu 2023). However, an important consideration is D&D's lack of external coherence with GLAM spaces, problematised by the game's colonial legacy. D&D's problematic elements are well documented, including: how it reinforces Whiteness by positioning it against an exoticised, non-Western Other (Garcia 2017; Hollander 2021); that it essentialises ideas of race and subscribes to colonial rationalisations of racial hierarchies (Premont and Heine 2021); and that the Monster Manual—D&D's ersatz bestiary—leverages colonial imaginings of the monstrous female to produce "abject bodies" (Stang and Trammell 2020). While these structures can be subverted by players, who may establish different norms and world-building for their games, D&D's low internal coherence means that superficial changes will not alter the underlying assumptions of the game. As such, it is possible that institutions attempting to teach decolonised and inclusive content through D&D may end up using colonial tropes to do so. This is not to say that D&D

should never be adapted for the GLAM context, rather that it should be done with clear intentionality and in service of critical reflection.

Future research on the coherence of games in GLAM spaces will endeavour to develop a framework by which GLAM organisations can assess their content and goals, examining those for coherence with prospective games. We propose a three-part research question to guide further exploration of this topic:

1. What are the key reasons GLAM institutions turn to D&D?
2. Are there any mechanical changes that can be made to D&D to reduce incoherence, and how easily can they be implemented by institutions?
3. What might an RPG system designed for-purpose in GLAM institutions look like?

In designing a future study to approach these questions, which methodologies are best positioned to do so will also be an area of consideration. We additionally hope to provoke interest in the field of roleplaying games in a GLAM context, as a growing field of interest that is societally relevant and analytically rich.

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