

Dungeons and Dragons and Literate Activity: Locating Writing (Research) Identity

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In this article, Madi Kartcheske discusses the role of Dungeons and Dragons in developing her confidence as a writer. She breaks down the influence of tabletop role-playing games in her creativity and her ever-expanding writing community.

I've always been equally enchanted and intimidated by writing; I wanted to be the lone writer sitting in her beach house, staring wistfully at sea over a cup of black coffee, struggling with writer's block in a fashionably frustrated manner. Instead, my parents gifted me a clunky gray PC without access to the Internet, and I spent my days starting and stopping stories in the 1998 version of Microsoft Word. I desperately wanted to claim a writing identity. Still, mountains of one-page documents sat untouched in my hard drive, and my fear of failure prevented me from doing much writing outside of school assignments.

When it came time to take my first "real adult" step in applying to college, I wanted to forge my path and, once and for all, become a writer. I thought the official title of "college student" pursuing my bachelor's degree in creative writing would magically fix whatever issues I was having with writing. But, of course, it wasn't that easy. My professor would assign 1,000 words, I would start and stop a paragraph repeatedly, and then I would churn out a string of incoherent words to turn in at the last second. It was demoralizing! How am I supposed to live my dream of being the intensely prophetic hermit routinely writing the next great American novel if I can't reliably write a single flash fiction story?

As improbable as it may seem, developing my confidence in writing has run parallel to my journey as a budding Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) player. I started listening to *The Adventure Zone* when I was a sophomore in college and I have played a few pickup games in recent years. When the time came to write my first *Grassroots* article as a certified graduate student, I knew I could find a topic by fulfilling my goal: to play in a long-term game (called a campaign). I signed up for a Discord server and got set up with six strangers that I've gotten to know over the past few months we've been playing.

Suddenly, I was spending hours at my laptop and my grandfather's typewriter, hunched over them, furiously typing real, actual words. It seemed that I'd become equal parts the kind of writer I've always wanted to be and absolutely nothing like her.

Looking back, it seems obvious why D&D propelled me into being an excited and productive wordsmith, and explaining that process will, I hope, raise implications for writing and storytelling. With a reputation for being nerd-exclusive, this tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) uses its **literate activity system**, highly social and historically situated components of the writing process, which change based upon its contexts, as the foundation of the story. Instead of hiding the process by which authors create text, D&D makes the activity system visible and allows its authors to access and manipulate it explicitly. As I've been co-authoring a story about a high-elf variant half-elf warlock, I've been re-inventing my writing (research) identity.

The Writing I Thought They Did

Dungeons and Dragons is pervasive enough now that many people have some **antecedent knowledge** or understanding based on their prior interactions. Though I had friends in high school who played D&D and my Dad played TTRPGs when he was younger, I still assumed it was mostly for middle-aged men who wanted to pretend to be cool for hours on end. I was overwhelmed by the different handbooks, the unfamiliar language, and (most of all) how cringy the whole thing seemed.

Essentially, I thought the general lore of D&D was negligible. The writing was dry, boring, and served one purpose: to help middle-aged men play in medieval fantasy land. I also presumed the players, maybe, had to do some complex, boring math to figure out whether their created character was allowed to hit a giant dragon—a character I always guessed to have a predictably tragic backstory.

I don't know where I got those particular images from—perhaps the odd episode of a sitcom or an overheard conversation—but my image of D&D

began to change around the time that the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* was released in 2014, known commonly as D&D 5e or simply 5e (pronounced “five ee”). My favorite podcast hosts released a joke episode of their comedy advice podcast where the three brothers and their dad played a session of D&D together. It was so well-received by their audience that it extended into its show, *The Adventure Zone*, and the hosts begin the very first episode by addressing the discomfort felt by those who share this antecedent knowledge:

Griffin: Let’s. . . I mean, let’s talk about our D&D experience, because I think we’re all pretty uncomfortable right now, and it seems like a pretty good icebreaker (McElroy, 00:02:47).

[. . .]

Justin: I think for a lot of people, *Dungeons & Dragons* was the last bastion of nerd-dom; the nerdiest thing you could do. [. . .] And it was like, the failsafe, like, emergency, —Well, at least I don’t play *Dungeons & Dragons*. But the good thing is, now LARPing is a thing (McElroy, 00:04:05).

The Adventure Zone is now in its fourth season, has multiple volumes of a graphic novel adaptation, and is in the works for an animated series. They even cosplay at live events! It’s clear that they’ve become comfortable with the experience of playing the game. But most people don’t get that far. The antecedent knowledge a vast majority of us carry about *Dungeons and Dragons* prevents us from even attempting to play. The amount of effort that players must put forth to start a campaign—acquiring rulebooks, learning mechanics, becoming comfortable with language like “death save,” “spell slot,” and “D8”—why would I put in all this effort for something I know to be so unforgivably exhausting?

Along with the rise in popularity of Actual Play/Real Play podcasts with shows such as *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role*, another cultural milestone shattered the rest of my misunderstandings about D&D—Netflix released the first season of *Stranger Things* in 2016. The show plays on our antecedent knowledge:

Features of the Show	Our Antecedent Knowledge
The show is set in 1983.	This game is nostalgic for adults today, not something aimed at younger folks.
The protagonists are a ragtag of outcasts (reinforced by letting us know that Nancy dressed up for their campaign four years ago, but she won’t do it now that she’s <i>cool</i>).	This game is only played by people widely regarded as weird or different.
The kid’s first campaign takes weeks of planning and runs nearly ten hours.	This game is for folks who have that kind of time and don’t have anything better to do.

D&D, for the first few episodes, is perfectly recognizable to us, and we're more than happy to root for these loveable underdog kids. The show uses our antecedent knowledge to get us on board. But as the season progresses and the kids become cool, so does D&D. They start using language from the game to visualize the unexplainable—they theorize what happened to Will based on how he played his character, the Demogorgon is named for a monster, and the upside-down is visualized by flipping the gaming mat. D&D soon becomes the framework the underdogs use to save the world in the show.

Stranger Things' representation changed D&D for me and tons of other folks, contributing to a rise in popularity for more and more folks to start playing, myself included. I started playing pickup games here and there, acting as Dungeon Master (DM) for some and role-playing as a character in others. Though the writing I did never felt dry or dull, it was pretty straightforward. D&D was no longer the irredeemably nerdy game I thought it would be, but I was still mystified by the rules and conventions of the game. Like the writing process, I was passionate about parts of it, but my antecedent knowledge kept getting in the way. I couldn't get invested because it seemed as if there was something I was missing. Is the game just kind of lame? Am I just kind of a bad writer? I didn't realize the potential D&D held, both as a game and as a lesson in writing, until I started my first full-fledged campaign.

The Writing We Do in Community

It's not easy to get a campaign together. A good-sized party is between five and seven players with a committed, detail-oriented DM willing to put in a lot of time and energy to create a story that can stretch for multiple months. At the beginning of the semester, the group I joined had a DM who used the same world lore between the two campaigns he guided. So, moments after being added to the group's Discord, we had access to various regional maps, a pantheon of gods to choose from if we needed them, and a general synopsis of the world's history and current events. After that, it was up to us to develop our characters and their backstories and determine the game mechanics we would need.

Even being familiar with the genre and understanding the roles we each play and the fundamentals of playing, I was overwhelmed. The DM presented so much information—how was I ever going to live up to all this?

The game itself seems intimidating. The rules are housed in three main books, priced at \$50 apiece. Furthermore, there are multiple supplemental books

with additional information, each priced at \$50. The principal first step is selecting your class (like your occupation), such as a wizard or fighter, and selecting your race (like your species), such as an elf or orc. Next, you must determine how those selections impact what your character can do—spellcasting abilities, charisma or dexterity statistics, and your character’s attack and armor class. Then, you adjust the modifiers, select spells to prepare depending on the upcoming situation, and decide on a set of dice to use.



Figure 1: A snapshot of my desk right before playing.

Whew! It’s a lot to take in. And akin to writing, I had no idea how anyone got good at this; there are so many things to get wrong!

It isn’t until you start playing that the game becomes simple. When we get past the fancy jargon and the hefty price tag, we can see how D&D makes its literate activity system visible to its writers.

At its core, the fifth edition of D&D is a storytelling game. The DM creates and presents a conflict, and the characters respond, relying on their wit and chance dice rolls to overcome it. D&D is a real-time negotiation of interests, desires, and personal entertainment, all of which can conflict with our character’s interests. The DM writes the conflict, and the players write their reactions.

Players use the rules to help shape and guide their narratives, almost identical to how we use **genre** in writing, as a general guideline composed of conventions that writers constantly use to render the thing recognizable. It would be hard to play together if we didn’t have a common language to draw from. For example, if my half-elf warlock has Darkvision (the ability to see in complete darkness as if it were dim light for a range of sixty feet) and a fellow player’s dwarven paladin has Darkvision (the ability to make their vision purposefully darkened to avoid the effects of blinding light or fire), then we would have a challenging time role-playing at the same table. If our understanding of these terms are too different from one another, then we’ll spend more time arguing over how Darkvision works rather than saving a village from a band of marauders. So, the game stops, the fun stops, and, ultimately, the writing stops.

The rules of D&D are, in fact, a genre. They are constructed, followed, and broken by their players. For example, a huge component of spellcasting

is spell components (which I don't pretend to know enough to explain fully). *The Player's Handbook* describes them as "the physical requirements you have to meet in order to cast [the spell]. Each spell's description indicates whether it requires verbal (V), somatic (S), or material (M) components. If you can't provide one or more of a spell's components, you are unable to cast the spell" (*The Player's Handbook*, 204).

That, to me, sounds boring. Don't get me wrong—there are some interesting implications of not being able to do a verbal spell while sneaking around a silent cave or needing enough of a rare gem to cast a high-level spell. But part of the creativity and fun inherent to D&D is finding unique and fun ways of approaching a problem. For example, if my character is carrying something with both hands and wants to cast a spell, she needs to gesture to cast it, which requires two free hands. So, the constraint of not being able to release until I say, "Rhubarb puts down the jug she's carrying, casts the spell, then picks up the jug again," might be much less fun than just letting her do the action as mentioned earlier.

In every game I've ever run or played, when the rules stop being fun, we get rid of them. Who cares if the big, expensive book says I'm not allowed to do this fun and exciting thing? The rules, the genre, should be flexible enough to accommodate what I'm doing. Instead, we pass around PDF versions of the books to save money, provide summaries of rules while we play to help new players, and invent new "homebrew" rules to fit our games better. When DMs are super picky about rules, they give good reasons for doing so—maybe they want this dungeon to be challenging and pedantic for the sake of the story. Perhaps we're in a town where law and order abide above all, so we have to be careful not to leave any taverns without paying our full tab, no questions asked. The point is to find fun, productive ways to tell a story, not make a player obsessively gather incense to transform their familiar from a bird back into a cat (no shade, *Critical Role*).

One of the reasons D&D 5e can allow for so much flexibility is because the story is designed to be impermanent. Apart from Real Play/Actual Play podcasts and videos, these campaigns will never be experienced by anyone who isn't actively creating it. The game lives in its players, and it's affected by the things around it. We can obtain sneak peeks of it through notes or memes in a group chat, but the story never leaves the room.

Since it is near impossible to remove any campaign's story from its original context, we can see the direct impact of the whole literate activity system as it's playing out. My writing research identity impacts how I produce my character—how she talks, reacts, and problem-solves—but the activity system is much broader than that. Am I exhausted from the week, struggling

to stay engaged, or am I well rested and energized, needing to be careful not to interrupt or talk over other players? Are we in a public place such as a library? A semi-public place, like an apartment complex with thin walls, or private space, like a spacious house with access to a stocked refrigerator? Do we have an inside joke about one of the characters that keep leaking into the story? Did someone just watch *Sailor Moon* and is now spending a lot of time inserting magical-girl transitions into every scene? The writers are hyper-aware of how these factors impact the story because we make it in real time.

Additionally, since the story only exists because we engage with it in real time, it's impossible to make perfect. We aren't tied to our decisions a month ago, a week ago, ten minutes ago if they don't serve our purposes now. Similarly, NPCs (non-playable characters which the DM controls) can change throughout sessions based on what we remember. The physical distance between a player and an enemy can also shift if we need to retcon an action, and a character's attitude may turn slightly before or after taking a bathroom break. So, the story is constantly in flux, it's never perfect, and it's not hung up on continuity or solidity. It just is.

D&D storytelling isn't different from "real" writing, but these activities are sometimes invisible when alone. We assume that since a single person is in charge and the text is presented as a physical artifact, these unstable factors don't apply. Instead, playing D&D together reminds us that the world around us impacts every aspect of how we produce texts.

I can imagine you reading this article, circling every time I've said "we" and "together." You might be thinking, "Madi, it's different! When you co-author something in real time, you have to pay attention to more stuff!"

My response? "Yes, yes, reader. I might be inclined to agree with you if I didn't also do *so much* writing by myself . . ."

The Writing We (Might) Do Alone

I mentioned above that most, if not all, of the genre conventions of a campaign are entirely optional. Most parties play with a "take what you like, leave what you don't" policy, interacting with the genre conventions only so much as they make the game recognizable and fun. The nature of D&D is that it's flexible and fluid, saturated with homebrew content and rule-breaking and general absurdity.

Keep all that in mind as I say this: the writing we do on our own as players are explicitly optional. Commonly, players will keep notes to

remember what has happened in sessions. Most players appreciate their past selves for taking good notes, but some are more than happy to jot their hit points down on a napkin and promptly throw it away. I'd never been a particularly intense note-taker in one-shots, but this campaign was different in many ways. Since I was going to play for an extended period with online strangers, I wanted to make sure I had some support systems in place for myself to alleviate my anxieties about walking into the space. So, I did what any self-respecting zillennial would do: engage in some recognizable genre research via YouTube videos. Here, I could flip through videos of players creating detailed scrapbooks, aesthetically pleasing bullet journals, and even players who take detailed notes while in character.

A quick aside, role-playing is ridiculously difficult for me. And when something's difficult, I have a lot of trouble doing it. However, I know that role-play is a massive part of story development in D&D, and, honestly, it's what makes playing fun for me. I get the chance to step away from what Madi might do and, instead, step into the shoes of a half-elf warlock named Rhubarb Sophic. She's a socially ambivalent archivist studying sentient arcane artifacts who made a pact with a goddess of divine redemption, is slowly becoming immortal, and (it maybe goes without saying) she's way cooler than I am. She approaches the world differently, and it's fun to figure her out.

But roleplaying is a super vulnerable, uncomfortable step. Much like writing the first few pages of the novel, I've been kicking around, opening my mouth, and speaking as if I'm someone else is scary. What about my antecedent knowledge of folks who enjoy D&D being publicly humiliated? So, if my sheer force of will isn't enough to get me to play, I must rely on other systems to take those risks. This, for me, took the form of my notes.

I knew Rhubarb would be a no-nonsense nerd, following the adventure looking for artifacts. Still, that foundation wasn't strong enough to risk stupidity in front of a bunch of strangers. So, I wrote about her backstory, detailing her life from an omniscient perspective. That wasn't enough; the backstory gave me more information about her, but it didn't let me practice *being* her.

I turned to role-playing my notes. Rhubarb is an arcanologist who studies arcane or magical items. I know little about field reports, but I know that many ethnographic studies in the humanities are relatively basic and boring to the outside observer. I would never break my notes into arbitrary categories or write from an unbiased, outside perspective. However, Rhubarb would.

So, I began to write her story through these reports, treating herself as an object of study and hypothesizing about her emotional responses as if she could only observe her feelings. I got to practice her experiences with loss, adventure, and unexplainable events. The original intention was to put all my notes into one place and assist my admittedly poor memory after each campaign session. Instead, the field reports helped me practice getting into character, performing research on the character herself, and knowing how to make her recognizable. Since I could practice Rhubarb Sophic before entering the space, I felt ready to take risks and contribute.

But it wasn't just the content of the notes that helped me feel more secure. The **production**, the tools I used to create the text, aided the process immensely. I began thinking about the technology that a fantasy character may have access to, and I thought about my grandfather's typewriter. I use it for random writing projects here and there, but its old wooden case primarily acts as a laptop stand on my desk (the irony of placing a laptop routinely on top of a typewriter does not escape me). I thought since Rhubarb would be more likely to use an analog writing method than a MacBook, producing her field reports that way would lend some accurate aesthetics to it.

The typewriter is tricky to operate as it hasn't been used in decades. Some keys malfunction because of the lack of upkeep, leading to stray letters in random places, strikethroughs, and ugly blots of White-Out. Editing is time consuming while using this physical medium, so the format is never perfect. If I forget a line of a field report, I have to find somewhere else to put it on the sheet. If I run out of space, I can't go back and delete unnecessary words, and I'll have to go back and retype the whole thing or switch out the pages. I have to decide which mistakes I can live with and which errors I need to correct.



Figure 2: My grandfather's typewriter.

My typewriter editing is wildly different from how I've written personal work in the past. I agonize over paragraphs, getting stuck after an introduction. Using the typewriter is a physical reminder, asking me to negotiate my time, energy, and enthusiasm with each line. Is it worth retyping the whole report to replace a single verb? Seeing these mistakes as I play is another reminder that there are mistakes, I can live with. If I flub an attack

or my dialogue is awkward as I play, there are ample opportunities to redirect and six other players to save the scene.

This writing practice led me to research I didn't even know I needed to do!

One of the players in my campaign off-handedly asked me for the description of Rhu's glasses. It caught me off guard and thrilled me at the same time! I spent ten hours (that I really could've used for higher-priority responsibilities) sculpting, painting, and repurposing materials until I had something of hers in my hands. Upon looking at the finished product, I suddenly knew Rhu better. She takes care of her stuff, even when it's old and rusted. She prefers intricate designs, but they must be functional, too. I can hold and manipulate and *wear* something that she owns, making her



Figure 3: The glasses I made for my D&D character.

more real than anything I've ever written before.

The fact that D&D doesn't *live* anywhere tricks me, as a writer, into taking more risks. And those risks result in confidence, and a depth of knowledge that excites me makes me want to learn and create even more.

The Writing I Do Alone, in Community

You, I assume, at this point: Okay, so, cool. D&D is an interesting literate activity system. Why does this matter? When are you going to tell me how to be a better writer?

Me, of course: Sorry, champ, there's nothing that will *make* you a "better writer."

Playing D&D didn't buy me a house on the beach so I could stare wistfully out at sea, and it didn't minimize the obscene amount of milk that I put in my coffee. It didn't turn me into the writer I thought I wanted to be. But I started playing D&D, started writing this story of a nearly-immortal half-elf, and it made me curious. What tools can I use to make writing Rhubarb less intimidating? What practice can I do to help support the ideas I want to write? How can I remind myself that the rules are supposed to exist when it's productive and get rid of them when they stop being fun?

I think these fundamentals—utilizing creative tools, practicing, and having fun—have made me a more comfortable writer. But it’s not as though playing D&D *gave* those things to me. I’ve always been able to do this. I’ve always had these skills available to me. The magic of playing Dungeons and Dragons (pun, unfortunately, intended) makes these things *accessible* to a writer. The entire literate activity system centers on the fact that the writing process is complicated and fluid, so writers can’t help but tap into their instincts to produce innovative text! Being a “better” writer isn’t gaining some quick skill that will change your life. It’s paying attention, being curious, and having fun.

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