DiGRA 2024   Workshop Proposal

Transformative and Subversive Adventure Writing for *Dungeons & Dragons*

Facilitator: Dr. Brian McKenzie, Maynooth University

This workshop responds to the question: why isn't the hegemonic RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) the site of more work by writers interested in transformative and subversive play? In January 2023, Wizards of the Coast released its System Reference Document (SRD), a base collection of rules for *D&D*, under a CC-BY 4.0 license. The SRD, combined with two self-publishing platforms, Drivethru RPG and DM's Guild, offers opportunities for independent writers to reach a vast audience of gamers. Furthermore, the SRD serves as the basis for many so-called third party publishers to produce content for *D&D*. These publishers often seek content from freelance contributors. There are, of course, practitioners and scholars who produce independent games that are subversive and transformative (Flanagan 2009; 2021; Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2015) but content for *D&D* itself limited. A recent work by Premeet Sidhu used the SRD to make an RPG adventure based on *Animal Farm* (Sidhu 2023). However, this was not a *D&D* adventure as such, but an indie RPG that used the SRD.

Critiques of *D&D* are numerous and highlight inherent misogyny and racial stereotypes in its rules (Stang and Trammell 2020; Garcia 2017), its reliance on violence (Albom 2021), and the presence of colonial tropes in content (Hines 2023). Given these critiques, it is perhaps understandable that critical game writers eschew *D&D*. Nevertheless, the hegemonic position of *D&D* necessitates that it be a site of praxis (Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert 2023). This workshop asks participants to consider how transformative, subversive *D&D* adventures can be made for distribution through mainstream, commercial channels and, further, to begin the process of creating such an adventure. As such, in this workshop participants will engage with the constraints of commercial publication in the context of a critical design process that aims to create subversive, transformation play (Hook and Coulton 2017).

Brian McKenzie is Associate Professor at Maynooth University where he serves as the subject leader for its first-year seminar. He is also one of the instructors for Maynooth University's micro-credential course "Writing for Role-Playing Games." Brian is a freelance writer for *D&D* and a games researcher. His article, "Dungeons & Dragons and Digital Writing: A Case Study of Worldbuilding," examines how speculative fiction writing can be used in a writing composition course (McKenzie 2023). "'Murders on the stage, tortures, woundings and the like': Dungeons & Dragons Adventures as Tragedy," forthcoming in *Analog Games Studies*, uses Aristotle's *Poetics* to examine D&D adventures in terms of genre function.

This four-hour workshop is structured into five writing practicals:

- Navigating commercial publishing: writing a pitch
- Technical writing: working with the SRD
- Understanding Drivethru RPG and DM's Guild
- Adventure writing
- Peer sharing and feedback

The expected outcome for this workshop is that participants will leave with a better understanding of how to navigate commercial *D&D* writing either as an independent author or a freelancer. A further outcome will be for participants to start writing a *D&D* adventure. To facilitate feedback, this workshop will be limited to ten participants chosen on a first-come, first-served basis by emailing either the facilitator or DiGRA's Workshop panel.

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Stang, Sarah, and Aaron Trammell. 2020. "The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons." *Games & Culture* 15 (6): 730–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059.