5-6-2021

An exploration of embodiment, narrative identity, and healing in Dungeons and Dragons

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An Exploration of Embodiment, Narrative Identity, and Healing in Dungeons and Dragons

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of

Masters of Arts

School of Writing Rhetoric and Technical Communication

May 2021

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Preface

As part of discussing my personal embodiment and healing journey in this thesis, I recount personal narratives dealing with suicide and suicidal thoughts. There is also an image depicting graphic content with depictions of blood. Reader discretion is advised.

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Abstract

An Exploration of Embodiment, Narrative Identity, and Healing in Dungeons and Dragons is composed of two sister articles: the first is titled *Me, Myself, and My D&D Character: The Recursive Process of Embodiment and Narrative Identity in Dungeons and Dragons*, and the second is titled *Dungeons and Dragons as a Site of Healing: Towards Embodied Writing as Healing*. Dungeons and Dragons, or D&D, is a fantasy role-playing game where a Dungeon Master, leader and rules referee, leads a group of players acting as fantasy characters, or avatars, through a story together where outcomes are determined by rolling dice. Since players role-play their designated characters alongside other players, I pose that D&D is a rich and recursive process where players embody their characters through experiences similar to and different from their own lives. This recursive process of embodiment and narrative identity, I pose, also has significant use in allowing players to heal through these embodied experiences. Using an ethnographic approach to autoethnography, I observe in the first article my own experiences playing D&D both as player and Dungeon Master to understand the recursive process between a player, their character, and the other players/characters in the game. In the second article, I take this understanding that D&D is a recursive embodied experience and explore my own healing journey playing my two most recent characters, Shasta and Edris. I found that a character's embodied experience can interact and overlap with the player's embodied experience, and that D&D provides opportunity for self-reflection through these experiences to heal and grow.

Me, Myself, and My D&D Character: The Recursive Process of Embodiment and Narrative Identity in Dungeons and Dragons

Abstract

Dungeons and Dragons is a tabletop fantasy role-playing game where a Dungeon Master guides a group of players through a story. Players create characters by choosing a gender, race, class/job, background, and these characters serve as the players' avatars for playing the game. Much research has been done to explore the history of Dungeons and Dragons, its effects on its players, and its uses as a tool for building community and relationships, developing social skills, and more. I posit that Dungeons and Dragons is an inherently rhetorical act and use autoethnography that borrows from ethnographic data-collection to examine the recursive process of identity formation and embodiment while playing Dungeons and Dragons. I define narrative identity as something inherently written into a player's character and embodiment as something unintentional or subconsciously experienced in a character. I found that players craft characters that combine similarities, divergences, and aspirations to their own personal self, and that all characters a person role-plays in Dungeons and Dragons represents an aspect of their self. I also found that a player's avatar enacts a recursive process of narrative identity affecting embodiment and embodiment affecting narrative identity simultaneous to the players' recursive process for themself. Players can reflect on both recursive processes for the self and for the character and adjust either process based on these reflections while being able to do so privately without speaking explicitly with other players. Because this research is

autoethnographic and only provides suggestive evidence, I conclude by requesting broader ethnographic research be done on Dungeons and Dragons and the nature of embodiment and narrative identity both with players and their characters.

"While you're talking at the bar, suddenly you hear a woman scream from outside the tavern. If you look out the front saloon style doors, you see her pointing in horror up at the sky," the Dungeon Master says sitting behind a screen that shields her notes from the other three people sitting around the table."

"Lilith will hop from her seat at the bar and run outside to see what the woman is pointing at," says one player at the table.

"Okay," says the Dungeon Master skimming through notes, "roll a perception check to see what you see. What are Sir Gregory and Braxien doing?"

"Sir Gregory will run out and pull out his greatsword," a man says to the DM. Then to the remaining player beside him, he whispers, "you don't think it's the dragon, do you?"

Before Braxien's player can respond, Lilith's player rolls a 20-sided die on the table. "That's a 16… plus 5, that's not bad. 21 for perception!"

"21? That's really good!" says the Dungeon Master from behind her screen. "You see a glimmer of red high up in the sky… and two, large wings beating through the air. It's the dragon."

"Wait, wait! Braxien would finish chugging their ale and rush out to join the group," says Braxien's player.

"Okay," says the Dungeon Master, "but I will need you to roll a Constitution saving throw to see if you can keep it all down."

Braxien's player grimaces. As the party's wizard, Braxien doesn't have the highest Constitution score. They roll their 20-sided die, but once they die lands, they don't add up numbers. Instead, Braxien's player lets out a nervous laugh. "Um, that's a natural 1."

"Ouch, that's an auto failure." The Dungeon Master says. "You try to chug the ale, but it's too much for you to handle right now, so you have to spit it out. Unfortunately, it gets all over the bartender."

"'Sorry' says Braxien as they set two gold down on the bar before rushing out to the rest of the group."

"Once you join the rest of your party, you can see plain as day the vibrant red scales of a very familiar dragon. It lands on the top of the tavern facing you all, and the townsfolk all start running inside buildings screaming 'Dragon!' and 'Gods help us!' The Dragon from its perch lets out a strange humming noise that you can only assume is a chuckle before it says 'I followed you here, little ones. You can't run forever.' and the dragon licks their lips."

"Ah, oh no, oh no. This is really bad." says Sir Gregory's player, "Gregory says, 'do you have any tricky spells up your sleeves, Braxien?'"

Braxien's player doesn't speak, only shakes their head with a solemn no.

"Ok, everyone. I'm going to need you all to roll for initiative." The Dungeon Master flips through her notes until she finds the Dragon's stats. "It's time for combat."

—

Above is an excerpt of a group of four players playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons: a fantasy role-playing game where a Dungeon Master guides a group of players and their characters through a story. I have played Dungeons and Dragons for almost five years and I am still learning something new about it every day. At its heart, Dungeons and Dragons, or D&D, is a game about telling stories, and even though there are multiple rules for creating characters, determining their strengths and weaknesses, and otherwise running the game of make-believe smoothly, I am often learning more than just the mechanics of how the game works. Often, I am learning about what the game *does*: how it impacts its players in ways I never thought possible from a simple fantasy storytelling game.

When I first started to feel what it is like to play D&D, it felt akin to reading a good book or watching a good movie: D&D could invoke emotional responses just as strong, and sometimes stronger, than some of my favorite books and movies. However, D&D still felt entirely distinct compared to a book or movie, and I think that is because D&D is communal: no one person is in control of the story, and everyone gets to build their characters and tell the story together. And while a person can watch a movie with their friends or read a book that someone else has read, there is something that makes those experiences something inherently independent and personal.

As someone who has also studied writing, rhetoric, and technical communication for almost six years now, it is clear to me that the rhetoric surrounding D&D is something unique that I have wanted to explore since I was first introduced to the game because the game is a deeply rhetorical act. I was originally drawn to the concept of collaborative storytelling/writing, but I started to see parallels to embodiment as well—specifically in

how players create their characters and then how they decide to role-play them. For example, sometimes people implant parts of themselves into characters on purpose, and other times they do so subconsciously. I will explore this relationship between a player and their character. First, I will provide background into D&D, embodiment, and narrative identity. Next, I will demonstrate how I chose to analyze my own experiences playing D&D to write this autoethnographic piece. And finally, I will summarize my research highlighting key moments and patterns and discuss what these experiences say about D&D, embodiment, and narrative identity.

What is Dungeons and Dragons?

D&D is a tabletop role-playing game where players design their own characters and then role-play those characters in a variety of situations that the Dungeon Master chooses. Mechanically, each player chooses a race/species, class (or job), and background for their character that affect their abilities and statistics in the game. The Dungeon Master runs the game by narrating events as characters progress through the story, but players have ultimate control of what their characters would like to do. The scenario at the beginning of this article shows how each player has agency over their own character's choices, like when Lilith ran out to see what was wrong, and Braxien tried to finish their ale before going out to help. This means the story is never fully in one person's control, and to further add to this experience, outcomes of character decisions

are often determined by rolling a 20-sided die. The higher the number rolled, the more likely the character is to succeed.

Let's look back at the opening example of D&D play. Each character has their own stats—Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma—and these stats grant characters numerical bonuses that they add or subtract to dice rolls to determine the outcomes of a certain situation. For example, the Dungeon Master asked Lilith's character to roll a perception check, and Lilith's player added the dice roll (16) to their Wisdom bonus (+5) to calculate the number for the character's perception check. The Dungeon Master—guide through the story and rules referee—determines if 21 was high enough to spot the dragon flying through the sky. While every character has their own strengths and weaknesses, no character is limited in what they can attempt to do—only in how likely to succeed they are. And even still, characters are always at risk of failure, like when Braxien's player rolled a 1 on the 20-sided die to drink their ale: what resulted was a failure, but as part of the story, it added something new and exciting that the players could react to, like by placing the gold coins on the counter and running away.

The beauty of D&D is that at its core, it's a game about storytelling that hinges upon the players' embodied performances of their characters. There is no winning or losing, and while immediately it might seem the Dungeon Master is pitted against the other players, the Dungeon Master is much more of a guide and facilitator through the story. I think Vox describes D&D well in their video, *Dungeons and Dragons, explained*:

> All of us are role-players. We go through our lives playing different parts for the people around us. Some we get to choose. Video producer. Podcaster. Co-worker.

> Some, we have no control over. Black. Female. Queer. Even with our friends, we can fall into patterns of behavior that eventually become expectations. The wisecracker. The cool girl. The shy one. Roles we're so used to playing, we don't think of them as roles anymore. They're just us. D&D gives you permission to be something different. To surprise yourself. And that can be really scary. When you do something in D&D... you're trusting everyone at the table to take you seriously. And you're trusting the other players to have your back… That shared vulnerability is what makes D&D different from any other game you play with your friends. (2018, 6:18-7:33)

It is this collaborative creation of identity and sharing of that identity that lends D&D to be studied in psychology. One YouTube series of psychologist D&D players showcases how D&D can have psychological effects on players in good ways and in bad ways and discusses how to improve people's experiences playing D&D with some psychology tips (*Psychology at the Table - YouTube*). D&D is even cited as creating an environment that might help combat issues like depression by encouraging players to "be social and engage in hobbies" (*Tips for Dm's/Gm's Psychology at the Table; Depression*, 2017, p. 3:00-3:06). Other research in the field of psychology explores how D&D players meet their social needs by playing D&D, like participating in democracy, creating camaraderie, experiencing safe conflict and drama, and wrestling with morality (Adams, 2013).

A group of players can come together to play D&D in several ways. In my personal experience, both of my games started because several mutual friends and I

wanted to play the game. Often, the Dungeon Master is the player connecting all the players together, but this is not always the case. In other instances, players can sign up to play a D&D game at their local game store. These D&D groups normally range anywhere from four to eight players. There is no limit to how many people can play, but D&D groups try to stay around four to eight players so that all players have space to role-play and have their turn in the spotlight. Regardless of how players meet or how many players there are, there comes a point where they must trust one another well enough to play their characters vulnerably in front of the other players.

For players to best determine if they trust their D&D group, they choose D&D groups with similar playstyles. Some groups, like my own, focus on the narrative aspects of the game. However, there are plenty of other ways to play D&D. The game was originally created for a dungeon-delving adventure-style game, and some players prefer that playstyle. Finding a group with a similar playstyle can help players feel comfortable at the D&D table and to trust the other players as they came to play the game for similar reasons. After finding a group with similar playstyles, many D&D groups have a "session zero" where the players get to meet one another, discuss the themes of the game, and determine what elements of the game players are comfortable playing and embodying. For example, for my own session zero where I was the Dungeon Master, I explained what the in-game setting was like, that I would be telling a more narrative-style game, and asked the players if there were any topics or themes players wanted to be off-limits. Players felt that explicit sexual content shouldn't be discussed by any of the players, and we all agreed to avoid those scenarios in the game. In another game I played in, the DM asked the players what television rating they would give the game to get an idea of the

rating players would be comfortable. However, D&D is not a faultless game without negative interpretations from both outside and inside the community, and I want to address some of these claims.

First there are claims, that D&D's themes of magic and evil have resulted in homicides and suicides, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. In my own experience, this is often referred to as the "satanic panic" by members of the D&D community. These claims that playing D&D could lead to rage or self-harm are likely more a result of the general public's misgivings about the game that they believe has satanic undertones than the result of an actual correlation. Despite these rumors, in fact, researchers have found no correlation between D&D and homicide/suicide (Kim, n.d.). Furthermore, John H. Kim cites several sources that demonstrated D&D's potential positive effects, like how role-playing helped women suffering with depression (Hughes, 1998) and how young boys with a history of "acting out" were able to use D&D as a healthy outlet and develop social skills (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Much of psychology's research on D&D disproves the rumors' suggested correlation between playing D&D and homicidal/suicidal behavior, and in modern day, D&D's reputation has mostly moved past these stereotypes.

D&D has also been criticized for its representation of race and gender in that it can encourage racial stereotypes with fantasy races—like how orcs are predominately savage and evil, and elves are predominately good—and that the game is predominantly played by men and perpetuates problematic representations of gender—like how earlier editions of D&D put strength limitations on female characters, or art of female characters objectified women (Garcia, 2017). D&D is currently in its fifth edition, and the most recent version has attempted to eliminate problematic representations of race and gender

within the game (Garcia, 2017) and has been actively making changes throughout 5th edition "over the last six years" to "make D&D as welcoming and inclusive as possible" (Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons | Dungeons & Dragons, 2020). That said, there is still progress to be made in this area as players and Dungeons Masters themselves must work to make every D&D table inclusive.

D&D is a game that encourages its players to make the game their own, and conscious Dungeon Masters and players can help to challenge the issues of gender, race, and inclusion written into the game's rules and inherent in its history, but it takes *all* players at the table to make a D&D game more welcoming and inclusive. In the public community, Critical Role, a D&D group that streams their games online, actively welcomes guest players of diverse backgrounds, like people of color, openly LGBTQ+ players, and players who openly struggle with mental illness ("Gaming for Social Change with 'Critical Role' and 'Dungeons & Dragons,'" 2019). In my personal experience as a Dungeon Master and player, I have seen how easy it is for written stereotypes to surface at the D&D table with statements like, "goblins are just evil," but I have also been a part of groups where the Dungeon Master actively tries to subvert these stereotypes by making the players play as goblins defending against stereotypical D&D "heroes." This only shows that there still exists a history of misogyny, racism, and sexism in D&D, and that until people of diverse backgrounds are included in the creation of D&D content both on a corporate and table-to-table scale, the game will still grapple with these inherent issues. It is important to acknowledge both the game's written history of sexism, racism, and exclusion as well as the game's invitation to have DMs and players rewrite the system especially in how it relates to a player's embodiment and narrative identity. And

while I acknowledge D&D's history here, I encourage others within Rhetoric and Composition to further explore these issues so as to make D&D a more inclusive space for all people, as this topic easily deserves a full study of its own and not just the brief overview given here.

With this overall context of D&D games, I will now define embodiment and narrative identity, and give background to these areas of study.

D&D, Embodiment, and Narrative Identity

Personally, I find embodiment difficult to define because of its abstract nature. The verb "embody" is defined as "to give a body to (a spirit) ... to cause to become a body or part of a body," or "to represent in human or animal form" (*Definition of Embodies,* n.d.). To me, this suggests that embodiment at its base involves taking something abstract and grounding it in a physical form, most frequently a body. In the study of embodied cognition, "many features of cognition are embodied in that they are deeply dependent upon characteristics of the physical body of an agent" (Wilson & Foglia, 2017). This provides a basis for understanding that embodiment is how a person's internal and external environment affects the body and vice versa.

In Rhetoric and Composition, embodiment is popularly explored in how we embody ourselves in online spaces where there isn't a physical body to inhabit (Almjeld,2014; Fancher, 2016). As Almjeld suggests, people in online spaces "embody a desired subjectivity" and "rhetorically craft a sort of avatar or signifier for themselves to

interact with others" (2014, p. 73). How people choose to write themselves in online spaces is reminiscent of how players narratively write themselves into their D&D characters. Therein lies a relationship between our embodiment and our narrative identity.

The relationship between people's embodied selves and narrative identity is explored in Ding's article, *The dynamic and recursive interplay of embodiment and narrative identity*, where embodiment is "the non-reflective aspects of human beings" and where "narrative identity... focuses on the capacity for reflective self-understanding" (2019, p. 186). In this definition, embodiment is inherently subconscious, and narrative identity is something people purposely choose. Ding also suggests that the embodied self affects narrative identity, and that narrative identities can also affect the embodied self in a recursive process (2019). This process has been explored in a variety of contexts, but this recursive process has not yet been explored as it relates to D&D by asking how character creation and role-playing in D&D affect a person's embodiment and narrative identity. As a D&D player and Dungeon Master, or narrative leader in D&D, I hope to address this question via an exploration of my own autoethnographic observations.

Now that I have defined embodiment and narrative identity and given background to these topics, I will provide context to the games of which I play. Since these games are the subject of my study, it is important to understand the narratives and the characters in them to truly see how the rhetorical act of embodiment takes place in the game.

Summarizing my D&D Experience

For each of the summaries that follow, I will both give context to the overall story of the campaign as well as the backstories of the characters I play. For the game where I act as Dungeon Master, I will give a brief overview of each of the characters before offering a summary of the game's events. Even just in these summaries, be on the lookout for how embodiment and narrative identity manifest in each of these D&D games.

Summary of Shasta's Story

Shasta was born in a large, urban city. He never knew his father because he left at birth, and when Shasta was seven years old, he lost his mother to a deadly disease. He blamed himself for the loss of his mother and the disappearance of his father, and growing up on the streets, he grew to believe if he was a strong enough man, that he could earn the approval of his father, then his father would return. To become as masculine and strong as possible, Shasta planned to become a holy knight of Pelor, a god much like our world's Christian god. But not just anyone could become a holy knight. Instead, Shasta planned to rob one of the holy knights of their armor and equipment and impersonate a holy knight himself. However, he robbed the wrong man, a member of the city guard, and was caught in the act. As the situation escalated and the guard attempted to restrain and arrest Shasta, Shasta retaliated and killed the guard in the heat of the moment.

Panicked, Shasta then ran away to join in the exploration of the forest that had been blocked off with a magical border for centuries. He used the armor and equipment from the guard to impersonate a holy knight of Pelor when he joined the adventuring party with a ranger, two druids, and a monk. He maintained the lie that he was a holy knight until one day the party suspected that Shasta might be a spy. They confronted him, and Shasta revealed that he was lying about his identity though he wasn't a spy. The party was very accepting of Shasta's true self, and it helped reassure Shasta in his own identity, though he still needed to explore his need to impress his father. The party continued to explore the forests to find out why the magical border had fallen, but unfortunately, this Dungeons and Dragons group stopped playing together and the campaign was over before the story could resolve.

Because Shasta grew up without a father figure and lost his mother at an early age, Shasta's experiences on the street led to a lot of misconceptions about the world and its people. Shasta struggled with loneliness, self-acceptance, and a masculine identity, and I chose for this to manifest mechanically in Shasta's low Wisdom stat, the stat that determines the character's perception of the world and of people. Shasta's struggles are important to note because the struggles of loneliness, self-acceptance, and masculinity are ones that I also struggle with, especially when I first created and played Shasta.

Summary of Edris's Story

Edris is a half-orc: someone who has half orc blood, similar to the orcs in Tolkien's Middle Earth, and half human blood. In this world, half-orcs are common and aren't as racially stereotyped as "evil" like Tolkien's half orcs. Edris was born into a

moderately wealthy noble family in a thriving industrializing city. He knew both his parents, loved them, and knew that they loved him also. He also had a twin sister, Nahluko, whom he loved dearly as well. Edris and Nahluko were homeschooled by their father, and while Nahluko excelled, Edris dreamed of adventure. When he was seventeen years old, he left his family to wander the desert as a nomad for six years where he also learned how to be a druid, or a wizard who focuses on nature magic and can become animal shape shifters.

Edris returned to his family after six years in the desert when he escorted a traveler, a wizard researcher named Yannock, across the desert and to the city Edris grew up in. There, Edris reunited with his sister and alongside Yannock and several other party members, discovered that there was a survivor of an ancient, nearly extinct race who posed a threat to the planet. Edris and the Snottage Crew (a portmanteau for their transportable snail shell cottage that the party camped in) were tasked with finding ancient artifacts scattered around the world to help them vanquish the unnamed, ancient survivor before they could corrupt and destroy the planet.

One significant event in Edris's story that I will discuss later includes when he was forced to cut off his own hand. When the party was traveling through the arctic regions of the continent to retrieve one of the artifacts, Edris and the Snottage Crew met an Arch fey—a powerful creature from another plane of existence who was owner of the ice fields and bound to not lie—named Tamlin. Edris gave Tamlin his name, and with it, Tamlin tried to cast a spell on Edris. Edris stood up for himself and attempted to make Tamlin leave the party alone, but this only angered Tamlin into trapping the Snottage

Crew on the ice fields until the whole party died or Edris gave Tamlin his right hand. Edris eventually cut off his own right hand to save the party and continue their quest.

This story exemplifies Edris's willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of his friends, especially his sister, Nahluko. It is important to note that throughout Edris's journey, he would act as encouragement and conflict-mediator for the group and would spread himself too thin in doing so. The adventuring party was known to be slow to trust one another and abrasive and combative in extreme circumstances, and Edris believed that the party could only succeed if they functioned as a team and as a makeshift family. However, like when Edris cut off his hand, he would often help the party to his own detriment. Going back to the hand incident as an example, Edris needed both hands to cast spells, so making that sacrifice robbed him of his ability to cast spells as a means of helping the party.

Summary of the Campaign I host as Dungeon Master

Since I act as the Dungeon Master and lead storyteller for this D&D group, I will need to summarize the basic events of the characters in the Hateful Eight Campaign.

First, there is Viryn: he is half human and angel and has lived over eighty years. He was alive during this world's last war where he acted as a traveling healer. After the war, he continued to travel and act as a healer keeping his face hidden from people who might recognize him and that he doesn't age. He feels out of place in the world, and seeks to understand his family's past (why he is part angel and part human while neither his parents were) and his magical powers (where did he get them?)

Cain is a human cleric who made a deal with an old deity, Peace, to keep himself alive. He had a terrible illness granted by an evil witch that nearly took his life, and though the deal he has made has kept him alive, he is still very sickly and weak. Though, what Cain lacks in physical prowess he makes up for in mental fortitude and knowledge acting as the party's resident librarian. He seeks a better life from the deal he is made with Peace.

Boiman is a human mercenary from the desert where he used to guard caravans. He is a tactician in combat and likes to make plans and battle strategies so that the party succeeds in their fights against monsters. He hates to be wrong but seeks to earn enough money to one day start his own caravan and live happily with his family.

Barakus is half devil and half human and discovered that he had a half-brother who was a human named Sheamus. When his half-brother was taken by a devil to Hell, Barakus vowed to get him back. Barakus, once a common thief, made a deal with a devil for the power and knowledge to free the only family he cares about from literal Hell. He is secretive and mischievous often to his and his adventuring party's disadvantage.

Bratos is a goliath barbarian from a tribe on the borders of civilization. He left the tribe to find adventure, and upon venturing to one of the other barbarian tribes across the continent, Bratos discovered that he had been banished from his home tribe for abandoning them when they needed warriors to defend the border of civilization. Bratos hadn't known of the coming threat, but to earn his place in his tribe again, he swore to visit the other barbarian tribes to prove himself worthy of returning to his home. Bratos is reckless and faces conflict head on, which can often place the party in difficult situations.

These form the core players for this D&D group with several other players coming and going depending on their availability. The party met in a tavern where they eventually took a job together to protect a town from raiding goblins. When they cleared the goblin hideout, they discovered that the magical seal that protected the world from monsters, devils, and demons from the other planes from invading was breaking. The party decided to collectively work together to discover why the seal was breaking and to stop any evil forces that had broken through.

These summaries are meant to give context to my own experience embodying my characters as well as context for the characters and story of the campaign I lead. These summaries not only provide context, but I think they can also show how D&D can be a rich environment to discuss embodiment and narrative identity. Next, I will explain how I chose to analyze and reflect on my own D&D narratives.

Methods

Autoethnography is the methodological framework for this study as it allows me to reflect on my own experiences as a D&D player and Dungeon Master. This reflective framework offers a unique lens in which to observe and analyze how I and my own players embody or narratively write our D&D characters. Reflecting on my own meaning-making is a fitting way to analyze and understand the rhetoric of embodiment and narrative identity in D&D since I have logged at least 340 hours of play over the past four years.

Autoethnography is a strong choice of methodology through which to explore my topic since it seeks to analyze the communities a researcher is a part of from a personal perspective that gives value to one's experiences. As Liz Przybylski points out in her book *Hybrid Ethnography*, "we and our collaborators juggle" different selves, and that "we often make—or aim to make—multivalent identities that incorporate them all" (2021, p. 33). I am drawn to explore this concept of juggling identities because D&D players often more explicitly interact and reflect on their embodied selves than a person might in everyday life. Through autoethnography, I can reflect on my own embodied self and think specifically about the "juggling" that takes place in a storytelling tabletop game, which has implications for how embodiment might play out in other spaces. However, another aim of using autoethnography for this study is to create a gateway for future ethnographic studies on D&D as it relates to embodiment in Rhetoric and Composition.

To attain a full view of embodied rhetorics in D&D, I chose to include both my experiences as a player and my experiences as a Dungeon Master. To best structure my data gathering so that I was not writing into my data what I hoped to find, I developed a method of data collection to help eliminate self-fulfilling prophecies. I wanted my autoethnography to mirror data collection and analysis found in ethnography. Ethnography "requires participation, observation, record keeping, and interpretation before you move into the last stage of ethnography" (Przybylski, 2021, p. 55). To create a similar practice, I recorded a list of observations for the two major D&D groups I am currently a part of:

- I play Edris in The Wilds campaign named after the setting the game takes place in, and
- I am the Dungeon Master for The Hateful Eight campaign named after the Quentin Tarantino film of the same name.

For each session I played or "Dungeon Mastered" during the period of October 2020-January 2021, I recorded a summary paragraph and wrote down a list of observations about the session. These observations ranged anywhere from how I was feeling, how I noticed others reacting to certain moments, or what I or others said about the session. I kept these notes strictly observational and copied down everything I noticed during the session. After collecting these observations with the summaries to help give context, I would later interpret the data before finally moving to the final stage of reflection.

These session observations are not my only data set. Since I have played two characters for extended periods of time in two different campaigns, I decided to answer questions about these characters to reflect broadly on my embodied and narratively written experiences. These questions included both characters I have played for at least several months:

- Edris who I currently play in The Wilds, and
- Shasta, the character I played prior to Edris in The Forest campaign.

The questions I answered for each of these characters attempt to dive into how I created them and why, what it is like to play those characters, and potentially if playing them has affected my own embodiment in contexts outside of D&D. Here are the questions I answered about Shasta and Edris:

- How did I create the character? What parts of myself did I intentionally place into the character?
- What is it like playing the character? Is it enjoyable? Is it difficult? Why?
- What struggles did each character face? Were these at all reflective of struggles I face in real life?
- What good moments did the character experience? Were these at all reflective of good moments I've experienced in real life?
- What lessons did I learn by playing the character? Were these lessons about myself or about the world around me?
- Have I healed or grown by playing these characters? How?

After gathering observations and answering questions about the two characters I have played, I interpreted the data by searching for patterns of thought or feeling, or generally finding phrases that resonated with me in a way that demonstrated embodiment or narrative identity. This structure helped me "re-inhibit and re-examine the experience from a different perspective, through a longer lens of time" (Owens, 2020, p. 16).

Findings

I found that Dungeons and Dragons gives its players the capacity to explore their own embodiment in three ways. First, players can explore aspects of characters that are the same as their selves. What makes this experience critical in thinking about a player's embodiment is the ability for players to amplify or minimize the characteristics of themself as they so choose. For example, someone who enjoys flowers may give their character the same feelings, however the character might receive more enjoyment or less enjoyment from flowers depending upon what the player chooses to write. Through my observations of sessions I played or "Dungeon Mastered" and in answering questions about my characters, I found a total of eleven written instances where I discuss the convergence of my character and myself: of those instances, six were about playing Edris and five were about playing Shasta.

Second, players can explore aspects that are divergent from their own character. Going back to the same example, a person who likes flowers has the agency to build a character who hates flowers. Again, players have creative liberty to determine why and how their character doesn't like flowers, and this aversion to flowers can take many shapes. The player could be allergic, have color blindness so as not to enjoy them as much as others, or have a negative association with flowers because of a past memory. These divergences from the self could be written into a character's backstory but could also manifest as a person playing a character of a different gender or race. These choices allow players to explore identities that they couldn't in real life or wouldn't feel comfortable exploring in real life. Furthermore, players get to explore divergent identities

in D&D where the community isn't surprised by and often expects players to play characters vastly different from themselves. In my observations and reflections, I wrote sixteen instances of a divergence between the character and the self: eight were from playing Shasta, four were from playing Edris, two instances were divergences players I DM mentioned to me, and the last instance was where I as a Dungeon Master was distracted in a session while trying to stay focused playing non-player characters. This last instance shows that even the Dungeon Master who plays multiple side characters can also experience differences of embodiment between their self and the story they are helping guide the players through.

Finally, players can explore aspects of themselves that they aspire to be. This can range anywhere from common aspirations of character, like the character's attitudes and goals, to mechanical aspects, like a character's physical or mental stats. Players are not restricted in making a character of equal intelligence, strength, or charisma to their own, and unlike the divergences of character discussed in the last paragraph, what makes these aspirations inherently different is that they are aspirations the player themselves have even if they have not yet been achieved. These aspirations of character are of the player's own desires of the future or who they wish to be, and the divergences of character discussed previously can be better characterized by the conflict or butting of heads between a player and their character. In my observations and reflections, I found seven written instances of aspirations of character: six of those instances were about playing Edris, and the final instance was an observational statement from Cain's player. There were no occurrences of aspirational character traits discussed about Shasta, which derives

from the fact that Shasta was written to explore my flaws and did not get to finish developing as a character.

Any character a player creates will be some combination of these three aspects of character: similarity of character, divergence of character, and aspiration of character. Next, I will discuss examples of these three patterns as they emerged while playing D&D.

Similarity of Character

Creating a D&D character is an inherently unique process of embodiment because in a fantasy game like D&D, players are free and encouraged to play heroic, weird, or fantastical characters that serve as no representation of the player themselves. However, even when creating a character vastly different from the player, there are likely connections between the narrative identity of the player and the character. After all, players only have access to their own experience when it comes to understanding and empathizing with their character's experience. Therefore, players often narratively write similarities between themself and their character, and sometimes players include similarities of character unintentionally.

First, I will speak to my own experience narratively writing similarities of character. Shasta was created to explore my own struggles, so Shasta was written with "my own negative qualities multiplied by ten" and that "all of his struggles were based on my own loneliness, questions of masculinity, and lack of self-confidence." I wrote these traits into Shasta to explore the issues I personally struggle with in a contained, safe environment. I felt comfortable exploring my struggles through Shasta because I was able to do so privately: the other players at the table helped me experience Shasta's journey

through shared struggles and the players had no idea they were helping me explore such issues.

In my experience, however, players don't prioritize putting negative similarities into their characters and instead place more positive similarities to better enjoy role-playing the character. For example, I wrote when answering the question about creating Edris that "I placed all of my desire to hike the Appalachian Trail into [Edris]." Edris and I share a similar love of the outdoors, hiking, and adventure, and the resulting experience playing Edris was much more refreshing than that of playing Shasta.

However, since I didn't write similarities between Edris and I's struggles, I eventually ended up embodying some of my natural struggles in Edris. For example, I narratively wrote Edris to be selfless with his time and money which derived from a shared desire to be altruistic, but in role-playing that, I soon realized that Edris was sharing his time and resources until he got burnt out. In role-playing a shared desire to be selfless, I embodied my own experience with getting burned out trying to be altruistic. Again, narrative identity determined how I embodied Edris and similarities in virtues also translated into similar fatal flaws. In another instance, I wrote that "[Edris's] 'I want to call myself worthy' line was a Dylan and Edris line. It's from the same feelings of incompetence/uselessness." I never wrote Edris to have feelings of incompetence or uselessness, but when Edris lost his hand as part of the story, these struggles that I personally face manifested in Edris too. After the session where Edris cut off his hand, the Dungeon Master texted me to ask if I would be ok and to apologize for what happened. I responded with several messages:

> I'm just trying to process. I almost feel like I need to mourn because I would have never written this into Ed's story. What happened was so blindsiding, but I think that's true of life. There's nothing that can be done about it now, and ultimately, Ed and I both have to learn to live with it… Let us both go through this… It's just a game, and at the same time, it's so much more than that.

These texts demonstrate a connectedness between player and character by showcasing how Edris, the character, and I, the player, both needed to mourn the loss of Edris's hand. This was an important part of Edris's identity because for Edris to cast spells, he needed both hands. I had anticipated for Edris to potentially die during the campaign, but what I hadn't planned for was for Edris to lose such a vital part of his identity that would lead to him questioning his usefulness to the group.

I noticed throughout my observations that similarities in character often led to a deeper connection to the character. The language I used to discuss events of The Wilds campaign used the exact phrase "Edris and I" six times, implying a strong connection between Edris and I's shared narrative identities and embodied experiences. After I noticed "Edris and I" being used, I sifted through my observations again and found there were fourteen instances where I refer to Edris and I having the same reaction to an event, Edris and I wanting the same thing, or references to "us." I didn't have any of these same instances with Shasta, and that leads me to discuss what it is like to play a character whose identity and embodiment diverges from the player's own.

Divergence of Character

In my gathered data through observations and reflections, I explicitly wrote about far more instances of the divergence between a player and their character than similarities or aspirations of character. These divergences of character were, however, much easier to notice as I was playing and reflecting because I was in conflict with the character I played. Even my players for whom I DM verbally noted without my prompting when their character's thoughts, attitudes, or actions diverged from their own. There were moments of role-play in the game where characters were in direct conflict with one another, but players would often state out-of-character that they weren't personally hurt by the game's conflict and were instead excited about the opportunity for "character development." In my own experience, the blatant divergence of character is best exemplified in my experience playing Shasta.

Divergences of character while playing Shasta often manifested as our clashing thought processes. In my research, I note that "while playing Shasta, I was juggling my own thoughts versus Shasta's thoughts." This is best seen in how Shasta and I would interpret the same situations: "there are moments Shasta views as good, and then there are moments I view as good for Shasta. They don't always align." What resulted in these instances where mine and Shasta's views didn't align was an embodied response where I would feel frustrated or conflicted. I discuss the difficulty playing and embodying Shasta in the following reflection:

> I had mixed feelings playing Shasta. There were times he was fun to play because Shasta would set up fun role-playing moments for other players to react to. On the

> other hand, role-playing Shasta also required that he self-sabotage his own growth, and these actions were often hard for me to role-play. As a player, I often attributed this to playing a character with a low Wisdom stat: I decided that his low Wisdom stat would manifest as a lack of understanding typical social behavior and understanding normal social cues since he had been raised on the streets. If anything, it showed me just how much I personally understood social cues when I would be forced to respond badly with Shasta.

In the excerpt from my response to playing Shasta, I attribute his divergence of character to his low Wisdom stat, or the stat that determines one's perception of and insight into the world around them. I narratively wrote Shasta to have low Wisdom, and I was required to role-play his low Wisdom even when I personally wanted to take a different course of action. On one hand, I note that playing Shasta showed me my own strengths. In this instance, the divergence of character between Shasta and I was able to help me further understand myself even if our identities and experiences were different. However, I also wrote that my experience playing Shasta required me to "put my own gut reactions in check," which ultimately "required a lot more work to get into character" that was often frustrating. I note that my negative experiences trying to embody Shasta through divergences of character pushed me to design my next character, Edris, with a higher Wisdom stat.

The divergences of character I noted with Edris were more positive than those I noted with Shasta as I often preferred Edris's character to my own. For example, while reflecting on how Edris no longer resented Tamlin for taking Edris's hand after Edris got

a prosthetic, I wrote that “I’m still a bit bitter about it, but I think Edris has basically moved on.” In this instance, the conflict between Edris and I didn’t feel as damaging as it had with Shasta because I liked Edris’s character better than that of my own. I note later that “playing Edris has helped me tap into my own emotional reactions, when they’re valid, and when they're not.” So, divergences of character do not always make for negative embodied experiences. I feel it is important to understand how the relationship between a player and character’s differing thoughts, mindsets, and courses of action can affect the player’s embodied experience.

Aspiration of Character

I was much more likely to put aspirations into Edris than I was into Shasta because Shasta was written to explore many of my negative habits. There were instances where the traits I put into a character were inspired by my own aspirations rather than traits I saw myself as already possessing. Playing Edris, I identified with his “blatant course of purposeful action” as something “that I wish that I had.” Edris’s commitment to a given path in life is still not something I as a person possess, but that only makes the moments I role-play these aspects of Edris so meaningful and refreshing.

I also note Edris’s ability to speak up for himself as a characteristic I wish I had for myself. These were aspects of Edris that I hadn’t initially written but discovered upon playing Edris. Practicing the embodiment of these ideals also gave me the experience and courage to start embodying these ideals myself. I note this in my reflections about Edris’s ability to speak up to others when I write, “playing Edris, I’ve slowly come into my own when it comes to raising concerns to people I care about.” This indicates that

embodiment and narrative identity are a recursive process. I didn't initially write Edris to be so willing to speak out against others so easily, but once I was aware and found that I liked that characteristic, I began to write it more willingly into Edris. Narratively writing this attribute into Edris's character gave me practice embodying those ideals to then use in real world situations as well. I can say confidently that being outspoken with Edris has given me more courage to do so myself.

Even Edris's class as a druid was reflective of something I wish I could be in real life, though something I know I can never do. Druids get their understanding of magic from nature, and it is their bond with nature that gives them their abilities. They can shapeshift into animals, communicate with animals and plants, and make plants grow stronger. I write that these desirable abilities and traits "[make] playing Edris enjoyable because his abilities are ones I find interesting as well as relate to." Though these traits aren't necessarily aspirational for myself, it is a chance for me to role-play having abilities I could never have in real life. In fact, it is the ability to live out fantasies of having magic, powers, and amazing skill sets that draw people to play D&D.

Players can also write aspirations into a character through metaphors and symbolism. For example, Cain's player saw Peace, the old deity Cain made a deal with to stay alive, as a personal representation of that player's own anxieties and struggles. Throughout the campaign's story, Cain was able to find a way out of his deal with Peace who often abused their power in the deal. When confronted with Peace again, Cain was no longer bound to his service and Peace no longer had power to exert over Cain. I wrote an observation stating that Cain's player thought "confronting Peace was 'cathartic' since he was the personification of some of the player's anxieties and struggles." The player

has since expressed great pride in Cain's growth as a character, and how experiencing that healing process was beneficial. Cain's player was able to live out their own aspirations of freedom and empowerment through symbolism in one of the game's non-player characters.

Discussion

I have already looked at the similarities, divergences, and aspirations I and my players have placed into our characters. In my experience, any D&D character is going to be a conglomerate of these three pieces. Sometimes these three pieces are written into a character willfully, like mine and Shasta's struggles and Edris's love of nature. Similarities, divergences, and aspirations of character can also be narratively written not only in the characters' story, but also in the character's mechanical pieces, like Shasta's low Wisdom compared to Edris's high Wisdom. In other instances, similarities, divergences, and aspirations emerge through the embodiment of the character, like when I discovered the similarity that Edris and I have in putting the needs of others before ourselves to our own detriment or discovering how Shasta's divergent responses to conflict required me to (frustratingly) keep my own responses to myself. Categorizing these experiences has allowed me to better reflect on the relationship between narrative identity and embodiment as it relates to D&D, so let's take a closer look at the nature of embodiment and narrative identity as I have come to reflect on them.

After sifting through my observations and answers to my questions, I can see how the differences between Shasta and Edris reflected on my own embodied experience playing these characters. To summarize these experiences, Shasta was difficult to play, and I had a love-hate relationship with the character while Edris was fun to play, and I liked who Edris was as a character. The contrast between Shasta's and Edris's narrative identities reflected in my own embodied experiences. Upon reflection, it wasn't Shasta and I's differences that made him frustrating to play—I have differences from Edris too—but it was Shasta's self-sabotaging nature and contrasting values as a person that made him frustrating and difficult to play. I related to Shasta's experiences, but not his process of dealing with those experiences.

In contrast, I didn't always relate to Edris's experiences: I am not from the desert, I can't cast magic spells, I can't turn into animals, and never lost my hand. However, I related to Edris's process in dealing with these events. If Edris were a real person, I could easily find myself being friends with him because we share common interests but also because we both value growth for ourselves and for those we interact with. I don't share these values with Shasta, I only share in his struggles.

Inherently, there are parts of D&D characters that players write into the character regardless of whether they personally relate to those experiences or not. Players can anticipate events and how their characters would react much like how people can anticipate events and how they would react in real life. However, just like in life, D&D can create events players didn't anticipate and players are forced to improvisationally make decisions for their characters based on how they are written. The easiest example of this is Edris's choice to cut off his hand: I could have never anticipated having to choose

between death and cutting off Edris's hand, but knowing the values, backstory, and stats written into Edris's character, I knew he would choose to cut off his hand. These character moments can challenge a character's narrative identities just as events in life can challenge the player's own narrative identities. And it is these moments that shake or rattle narrative identity that creates truly embodied experiences in D&D that I feel surpass that of books or movies. Dings says the following:

> In our narrative endeavors, there is a constant back and forth between (dis)engaged reflection and engaged interaction. During reflection, a course of action is decided upon. Then, during this course of action, the lived body provides feedback: our bodily phenomenology informs us as to whether we are acting in line with our narrative concerns or not. If not, then we are once more urged to reflect. This cycle continues until we are "doing what we want to be doing." (2019, p. 205)

What makes this reflection process so unique in D&D is that the player is simultaneously asking themselves "what would my character do?" as well as what they themselves would do. Since this reflective process is one that continues even while role-playing D&D characters, this seems to suggest that one's embodied self can influence their narrative identity and/or their character's narrative identity, and their embodied experiences role-playing that character can affect their own embodied experience. These embodied experiences aren't always positive. For instance, after a session I Dungeon Mastered where the party and their players watched a villain murder a child, one of my

players experienced a panic attack. Speaking with the player afterward, they mentioned that the panic attack was triggered by the reactions of the players and not the situation the characters were in. Regardless, the player's embodied experience was brought about by the group's experience playing D&D together, and it is important to understand the impact D&D games can have on a person's embodiment.

The process of writing a narrative identity for our D&D characters is different from the narrative identity of online spaces, like Almjeld explores with online dating sites when she says that "the web seems to offer even more opportunities to write oneself into a desired subjectivity…and become whoever one wishes to be online" (2014, p. 73). Unlike online dating profiles, D&D players aren't expected to create avatars that represent themselves but create whatever character they want to play. Players can choose to play a character of any race, gender, or background even if it is not reflective of their own identity. D&D is also a space where once players create a narrative identity for their character, they make sense of the game's events through their character's identity, like when "a part of the environment… is already altered so as to fit one's narrative or narrative concerns" (Ding, 2019, p. 199). However, the environments D&D characters face can help the player further define the narrative identities of their characters, and potentially open the door for players to further develop and craft their own.

D&D allows players to test out different narrative identities more freely than they would be able to in real life as well. Ding says that "regarding narrative self-understanding, the emphasis is on two core components of narrative agency: goal-setting and meaning-making" (2019, p. 199). D&D players can practice new patterns of goal-setting and meaning-making through role-play. For example, my experience playing

Shasta allowed me to explore struggles that Shasta and I share in new ways since Shasta would react in ways I wouldn't. While Shasta and I's narrative goals were different—I wanted to overcome my loneliness, lack of self-confidence, and questions of masculinity while Shasta wanted to pretend these issues didn't exist—I was able to define through Shasta's experiences what I was not willing to do in my own life. Shasta proved to me how ineffective ignoring his struggles of loneliness, confidence, and masculinity were, and it encouraged me to embrace my identity in those struggles. Something I know Shasta would never do.

The experiences I had role-playing Shasta's narrative identity influenced my next character's narrative identity: "Playing Shasta was one of the major reasons I decided to play Edris as a druid with a high wisdom stat," and "I think [Shasta] paved the way for Edris." Playing multiple characters with different narrative identities allowed me to experiment with my own narrative identity. The recursive process of embodiment influencing narrative identity and vice versa could change from character to character as their goals and patterns of meaning making changed. And though each of my D&D characters were very different from one another, they were still representations of or avatars for myself in some way. Therefore, creating and playing D&D characters grants the opportunity to explore different parts of oneself, and in doing so, players can develop self-relationship and self-identity with and through the characters they play.

Conclusion

Dungeons and Dragons is a game where players have creative freedom to write the narrative identities of their characters by choosing to include or exclude parts of their own narrative identity. While role-playing their characters, players are placed into their characters shoes where their own embodied experiences can align with or diverge from their own character's embodied experiences. Ultimately, players give their characters similarities, divergences, and aspirations both in the writing of the character and the improvisational embodiment of the character.

Dungeons and Dragons allows players to practice the recursive process of narrative identity and embodiment affecting their character in tandem with the recursive process that happens with their self. Because the recursive processes of a player and character can conjoin, diverge, and so on, players are actively comparing their self to their character. Players can then better reflect on the self and redefine their own narrative identity if they so choose.

Further research could be done in this area to further quantify these experiences since all this research is only reflective of my own experience. Because players have different narrative identities, their means of goal setting and meaning making can be vastly different from my own and will reflect in their character-building and role-playing processes. I hope future research on D&D can further explore embodiment, narrative identity, and how these two concepts interact as these concepts are deeply complex even within my solitary experience. As studies in psychology suggest, further understanding how D&D affects narrative identity, embodiment, and relationship with the self could

help determine how D&D can be a tool for developing social skills, combating depression, and establishing community. I know in my experience reflecting on Shasta and Edris, I have been able to see myself from a third-person perspective and see aspects of myself in my characters. When I say, “I love Edris,” it feels like I’m saying, “I love myself,” and for someone, like Shasta, who struggles with self-confidence, I am thankful for that opportunity.

Dungeons and Dragons as a Site of Healing: Towards Embodied Writing as Healing

Abstract

Dungeons and Dragons is a fantasy role-playing game where a group of players create characters and enact a story where the success of characters' actions is determined by rolling dice. I pose that the act of creating and playing a character in Dungeons and Dragons is inherently rhetorical in that players write and embody characters that they themselves can learn and grow from. I compare embodying Dungeons and Dragons characters through a communal narrative to the process of writing as healing since both use self-reflection and storytelling as a therapeutic process to cope with traumas, develop agency, and/or instill personal growth. Using an autoethnographic approach, I answered a series of questions to analyze my own experience playing two Dungeons and Dragons characters, Shasta and Edris. After reflecting on my answers to these guided questions, I found that embodying these two characters allowed me as a player to learn from my characters' mistakes and traumas, maintain a degree of removal from my characters' experiences to improve my own insight, and grow from playing one character to the next where the progression of my personal growth mirrors that of shifting from playing Shasta to playing Edris. Because I only analyze and reflect on my own experience playing two characters, I conclude that my experiences are only suggestive evidence that Dungeons and Dragons can be used as a means of therapeutic writing when the player chooses to actively participate in such. Therefore, more research needs to be done on other players' experiences writing and embodying their characters to further determine if Dungeons and

Dragons is a means of writing as healing and understand the process of employing it as a means of middle ground mental health that exists somewhere between self-care and clinical treatment

Currently, the world is amid a global pandemic that has altered our normal way of life. People are asked to minimize contact with other people, often including family and friends. Public places now operate so that everyone must wear masks and social distance. Such measures have been necessary to maintain safety in the context of a novel infection. However, such safety has come at the expense of our mental health. Even while acknowledging the varying degrees of privilege many of us live with, interview any student at any university, or ask anyone in the workforce and see just how much the Covid-19 pandemic has added a new degree of stress that we all must cope with. Yet the pandemic itself limits the ways we can cope by eliminating the amount of contact we can have with others. I have friends who claim to be "touch starved," and our access to hobbies we used to engage in have been mired in a layer of new complexities and cautions. Even going out for a drink now, an everyday activity that young people engage in, means navigating familiar spaces with discomfort.

Naturally, this added stress is difficult to deal with, and it leaves many wondering what they can do to cope without being able to turn, in most cases, to pre-pandemic coping mechanisms. People are thus confronted with two options. First, one can go the medical route and receive a mental health diagnosis to receive acute care. The underlying issue with this approach is that many feel what they are experiencing does not necessarily warrant clinical care; they truly don't need therapy or medication. Instead, everyday

methods of maintaining mental wellbeing, such as spending time with friends, having casual conversations with coworkers, or participating in group exercise classes are just gone. However, if a person deems clinical care inappropriate, it often seems like the other option is to participate in self-care culture and, thus, ascribing to the idea that a person should take care of their mental wellbeing by, for example, getting a healthy amount of sleep, eating right, practicing yoga or other contemplative practices, or getting eight hugs a day. The issue with these methods of self-care is that they can trivialize the severity with which someone is struggling with their mental health by implying that they simply need to take better care of themselves. The implication taken is that their lack of self-care is likely causing mental distress—a tactic that blames the person suffering for their mental health struggles.

This is where I would like to introduce the concept of middle ground mental health: a means of mental health that lies somewhere between the small coping mechanisms of self-care and a full clinical diagnosis that requires medical attention. I don't think middle ground mental health only exists because of the pandemic, but I do think the pandemic—through its numerous difficulties and stressors—has made the full spectrum of mental health much more visible. Many are likely suffering from what I would call middle-range mental health concerns. They need more than self-care. Yoga will likely not do the trick. But they also don't necessarily need medication and therapy. What they might need, instead, is something more impactful than self-care and less intense than clinical care. The writing as healing movement, which is, to be fair, often discussed in relation to self-care, presents an interesting framework through which to think through what a middle ground approach to mental wellbeing might look like.

Writing as Healing as a Potential Middle Ground Therapy

First, writing as healing can be defined as the use of journaling or reflective storytelling to assist people in processing and coping with trauma no matter how large or small. Writing as healing or therapeutic writing can also extend beyond means of coping with mental and physical injuries/disabilities/traumas, but also personal growth and agency. Writing as healing has existed often as writing groups (Anderson, 1998; Batzer, 2016; Rinaldi, 1996; Ryden, 2005). Writing as healing, however, doesn't always have to be initiated by designated healing writing groups. For example, people who make use of journaling and written self-reflection participate in solitary therapeutic writing practices (Haertl & Ero-Phillips, 2019).

Writing as healing is important in that it provides a middle ground for healing. I would argue that much of the discourse of self-care involves lifestyle changes, like exercise, changes in diet, or other such routines to take care of oneself. Writing as healing does not completely fall in this category because it asks its writers to engage in serious reflective processing that might then lead to lifestyle changes that better fall into self-care. In opposition, one might see writing as healing's use in clinical approaches to mental health as evidence that it fits fully within clinical settings and not as a middle ground. However, writing as healing groups have existed without a mediating therapist (Anderson, 1998; Batzer, 2016; Rinaldi, 1996; Ryden, 2005) and writing as healing can also be employed on a personal basis (Haertl & Ero-Phillips, 2019). Writing as healing, therefore, exists on a spectrum where in some cases, it can be clinical and in others it can

exist as a middle ground for healing, and it's this middle section of the spectrum that I advocate for here.

Writing as healing has been used by a variety of people groups for a variety of different reasons. First, writing as healing has been used to process through physical injury and illness. For example, it has been used by people with physical disabilities who learned to view physical disability as an opportunity for mental/emotional/spiritual growth (Rinaldi, 1996), by people diagnosed with cancer to process through their diagnosis and experience with the disease (Ryden, 2005), and by those wishing to write about their journey through their physical health (Owens, 2020). Writing as healing has also been used to process difficulties ranging anywhere from stress to traumatic events, like by medical students as they processed the difficulties of their field trying to take care of patients (Anderson, 1998) and by survivors of childhood sexual abuse who hope to develop understanding for themselves and other survivors (Thompson, 2004). These examples demonstrate how writing as healing has been used to deal with varying levels of physical, mental, and emotional stress, trauma, and illness.

When people use writing as healing, they can also be referring to their own personal growth. Haertl and Ero-Phillips state that of their research participants that used therapeutic writing personally, "Nearly all participants spoke of personal growth from writing through (a) increased personal awareness and perspective, (b) reflections on one's life, (c) greater sense of self-identity and understanding and (d) enhanced personal self-worth" (2019, p. 20). Writing can also extend in this way to create space for writers to advocate for themselves by writing across communities and "deliberative processes and the possibilities of community engagement that promote healing, justice, and social

connection" (Kells, 2012, p. 101). This social activist dimension of writing as healing is particularly important in that writing can not only be a means of healing for the writer's self, but also for improving public perceptions of a given community. Writing as healing lends itself also to personal growth and advocacy as well as to therapeutic purposes. Again, writing as healing could be used anywhere on the continuum between mundane and clinical, but I specifically look to see how writing as healing mediates in the middle.

One topic that takes a large amount of the body of literature on writing as healing involves its presence in the writing classroom. Some within this subdivision of the literature believe that writing as healing has a positive impact in the classroom (Moran, 2004; Batzer, 2016) For example, In Benjamin Batzer's article focusing more significantly on trauma writing in the classroom, he states that "writing is an act of authority, an act of reclaiming the power the vise-like grip of pain robs from us" (2016). Molly Hurley Moran integrated therapeutic writing into her writing classroom because it could have "psychological and academic benefits" where student therapeutic writing "leads not only to emotional health but also to improved prose style" (2004, p. 103). These scholars argue that therapeutic writing has benefits even within the writing classroom.

However, there are difficulties in integrating healing writing in the classroom, and some in the field discuss nuance or even negativity in their discussions of writing as healing (Micciche, 2001; Worsham, 2006; Krizanich, 2015). Laura Micciche draws attention to the fact that writing professors are not trained counselors and raises the question of when therapeutic writing needs to be kept in the classroom and when it needs to be deferred to a therapist (Micciche, 2001). Krizanich, who studied five books

published by people diagnosed with mental illnesses, argues that attempts to use writing as healing whether in or outside of the classroom can sometimes affirm victimhood and encourage negative stigmas toward mental illness by readers (2015). Narrative healers might also run the risk of "narrative fetishism" where they substitute narrative pleasures for the real therapeutic work of "mourning" (Worsham, 2006). These scholars argue, therefore, that therapeutic writing can elicit reactions from both readers and writers that could hinder a writers' healing, and writing professors are not trained to handle these difficulties as a trained therapist would be.

Debate on whether writing is healing is an appropriate pedagogical approach in writing classrooms makes it easy to see how there are many difficulties in using writing as a means of narrative healing, growth, and agency. There remains a dialogue surrounding the use of writing as healing in Rhetoric and Composition studies, and my research seeks to further understand the nuances of writing as healing through the lens of Dungeons and Dragons by answering the debate between "writing as healing is beneficial for writing students and should be used," and "writing as healing is inappropriate for use in writing classrooms and belongs in therapy" through theorizing Dungeons and Dragons as an embodied, social act of co-creation that heals through symbolic recasting. Next, I will give background to Dungeons and Dragons and show how it can act as a lens through which to further study and understand healing writing and its potential as a mental health middle ground.

Background on Dungeons and Dragons

Dungeons and Dragons is a fantasy role-playing game where players create characters that they then act out in the telling of a co-created story that the Dungeon Master leads. Dungeons and Dragons was originally published in 1974 by Earnest Gary Gygax and his friend, David Arneson (Hosch, n.d.). Since the game's initial publication by Gygax's own company, TSR, the game grew and was eventually acquired by Wizards of the Coast in 1997. Throughout the games' growing popularity, the game went through several editions where there were amendments to the rules and mechanics. Today, the game is currently in its fifth edition first published in 2014 by Wizards of the Coast, which states in the *Player's Handbook* that the game "shares elements with childhood games of make-believe" but "gives structure to the stories" (2014, p. 5).

Players can form a Dungeons and Dragons group in many ways. One common way is that common friends come together with an interest in playing the game. Local game stores are also known for hosting games for anyone locally who wants to play. There is no true limit to how many people can play in a Dungeons and Dragons game, but most games try and get a range of roughly four to eight players. This allows enough players to interact with one another around in the game, but not too many players that it infringes on any one person's play time.

It's also important that players all feel comfortable with the other players around the table and trust them well enough to play the game. First, players often choose groups that have similar playstyles to their own. For example, I wanted to run a more narratively driven game, so I prefaced to all my players that I would be running Dungeons and

Dragons in that way before they agreed to play. These prefacing conversations often happen in a "session zero" where the players and Dungeon Master all gather to discuss the playstyle, themes of the game, and potential themes that are off-limits. This is also valuable time for players to get to know one another outside of role-playing their characters. While the game is being played, there are strategies to maintain safety for all players, like being able to pause from the game and speak out of character when gameplay might be triggering negative responses in a player. These "safety tools" are helpful means of maintaining safety at the table and trust between players, and more structured strategies are being spread within the community to help make Dungeons and Dragons a better experience for all players (Vecchione, 2018).

To best explain and understand how Dungeons and Dragons is played, it's easiest to see the game firsthand. There are many examples of people playing Dungeons and Dragons online, like Critical Role (*Critical Role*, n.d.) and Dimension 20 (*Dimension 20 - YouTube*, n.d.). The following excerpt is a summary from my own Dungeons and Dragons game, and it will be used to give an example to help explain how Dungeons and Dragons works:

"*Krog, you face a man sitting at the edge of the fountain. Cain, as you run down the spiral steps towards the fountain at the bottom of the dark chamber, you would notice that a figure starts to stir at the edge of the fountain—a man in scale armor and robes—and inside the fountain, there appears to be the bodies of two men also in scale male." I explain to my players.*

"I cast dimension door, and I take Viryn with me to teleport down beside Krog at the base of the stairs," says Grimboi's character. I, the Dungeon Master, know the range of the spell is 500 feet, which is more than enough to teleport to the base of the stairs, saving Grimboi and Viryn the trouble of running down to catch up with Krog.

"Ok. Krog, you see as a magical red gate opens up and beside you, Grimboi and Viryn emerge."

"'You are the first visitors I've received here in a long time,' the man says at the fountain."

Viryn's player clears his throat and begins to speak in Viryn's character voice. "'We know who you are, and we're not here to hurt you.'"

"Roll a persuasion check," I say to Viryn's player.

He grimaces knowing that a failure to persuade the man at the fountain could end badly—possibly in bloodshed. But he rolls the dice and adds his persuasion bonus, and then he smiles. "24."

"24. Nice. 'Alright, then. I suppose we can talk for a moment. Who might you be?' says the man at the fountain as he sits up slightly." I say. "And at this point, Cain catches up to the rest of the party out-of-breath. What do you do?"

This example is just one way the game could be played. In the excerpt above, I am the Dungeon Master: narrator, rules referee, and actor for any non-player characters, like the mysterious man at the fountain. In the above scenario, four players play four

characters: Grimboi, Krog, Viryn, and Cain all with their own backstories, backgrounds, skills, and stats. All these pieces, specifically the stats and skills, are written on a character sheet that players will create when the game begins and then will reference while playing the game.

Crucial decisions in Dungeons and Dragons are determined by rolling dice and adding/subtracting a bonus depending upon the character's strengths and weaknesses. For example, Viryn's character rolled a persuasion check for Viryn to talk with the man at the fountain. Viryn (with a +5 Charisma stat) was much more likely to succeed at persuading the man than Krog (with a -1 Charisma stat), and that is partly what influenced Grimboi to teleport Viryn to the base of the fountain room. It is important to note that all the players are working together to tell a story. And while it might seem as though the DM acts as an antagonist, it's the DM's job to make sure the game is enjoyable for everyone playing. Therefore, Dungeons and Dragons is a game that seeks to build community with its players by having them tell a story together. No one person is in complete control, a lot of what goes on will depend on a roll of the dice, and that's what makes the game so exciting.

The communal and storytelling aspects of Dungeons and Dragons have already been explored as a means of minor therapy: it's a social game and engages many people's hobbies. These just so happen to be some of life's natural cures for depression that has not reached clinically significant levels (*Tips for Dm's/Gm's Psychology at the Table; Depression,* 2017, p. 3:00-3:06). Dungeons and Dragons is also a great way for people to meet their social needs, like in Aubrie Adams' case study which discovered "that players fulfilled needs related [to] democracy, friendship, extraordinary experiences, and ethics"

(2013, p. 83). The degree of removal between a player and their character allows for players to take risks they wouldn't take in real life. The essence of the game includes teamwork to complete tasks, which range anywhere from fighting a dragon to solving a murder mystery, and the completion of these tasks can feel rewarding to the players—especially if their characters receive rewards like money, magical items to make their characters stronger, or just the satisfaction of making the in-game world a better place. With these characteristics of the game combined, Dungeons and Dragons creates a pleasurable, rewarding, and potentially healing experience for its players.

Though there are benefits to playing Dungeons and Dragons, the game does have a history of inherent issues when it comes to race, gender, and sexuality written into past editions of the game. Dungeons and Dragons inherently encourage racial stereotypes with fantasy races, like how dark-skinned orcs are predominately savage and evil, and fair-skinned elves are predominately good. Being initially created and played by men, the game's history has problematic representations of gender where early art of female characters objectified them in revealing armor (Garcia, 2017). Dungeons and Dragons is currently in its fifth edition, and the most recent version has attempted to eliminate problematic representations of race and gender within the game and has been actively making changes throughout 5th edition "over the last six years" to "make D&D as welcoming and inclusive as possible" (Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons | Dungeons & Dragons, 2020). That said, there is still progress to be made in this area as players and Dungeons Masters themselves must work to make every game table inclusive for all players. It is important to acknowledge both the game's written history of sexism, racism, and exclusion as well as the game's invitation to have DMs and players rewrite the

system. And while I acknowledge D&D's history here, I encourage others within Rhetoric and Composition to further explore these issues to make Dungeons and Dragons a more inclusive space for all people, as this topic easily deserves a full study of its own.

Methods

I chose autoethnography as my primary methodology because it allows space for self-reflection to determine if Dungeons and Dragons is a method of writing as healing and how it compares to other means of writing as healing. After all, a key component of writing as healing is self-reflection (Haertl & Ero-Phillips, 2019, p. 20), and self-reflection is a vital piece of autoethnographic research as well (Przybylski, 2021, p. 69). For this reason, using autoethnography is a way to practice and engage in writing as healing as part of the research process. Furthermore, I chose to start with an autoethnographic inquiry to eventually provide space for ethnographic research on Dungeons and Dragons within Rhetoric and Composition studies. Because even though I have logged at least 340 hours playing Dungeons and Dragons, everyone's experience playing the game is different. Therefore, the autoethnographic research performed in this study can and should expand into other players' experiences with the game—something I might explore in the future in the form of an observational study with a group of players with whom I do not play and with whom I have no relationship.

That said, even in choosing autoethnographic methods, I still wanted to maintain some objectivity where possible since Dungeons and Dragons creates a unique experience for each individual. Thus, I wanted to gather and code data in a systematic way that borrows some methods from ethnography. To best determine how Dungeons and Dragons is a means of healing writing, for example, and to better write and reflect on my experiences as a player, I developed a series of questions to answer about each of the two Dungeons and Dragons characters I've played over the past four years. These questions were used to guide the writing and reflecting processes and to make sure my reflections were cohesive and balanced between each of the characters I play. These two characters are the following:

- Shasta, from the Forest Campaign, who I played from 2018-2020
- Edris, from the Wilds Campaign, who I started playing in 2020 and still currently play.

Shasta and Edris were chosen because not only are these characters the most recent characters I have played, but they are also the two characters I have played the longest, each at least over a year. This continuity provided enough content to write about as well as a large enough timeframe to see results of writing as healing through playing these characters. The basic storylines for these characters will be summarized in the following section to give better context for the guided reflective questions used. The questions for reflections are as follows:

1. How did I create the character? What parts of myself did I intentionally place into the character?
2. What is it like playing the character? Is it enjoyable? Is it difficult? Why?
3. What struggles did each character face? Were these at all reflective of struggles I face in real life?
4. What good moments did the character experience? Were these at all reflective of good moments I've experienced in real life?
5. What lessons did I learn by playing the character? Were these lessons about myself or about the world around me?
6. Have I healed or grown by playing these characters? How?

I developed these questions because they would uncover the basis for how the characters were created, what my embodied experiences were like while playing each of the characters, and finally how these characters facilitated my own growth and healing. While the first four questions are meant to build upon each other in ways that deepen awareness of character development, the answers to questions five and six will provide a look into the growth and healing experiences associated with Shasta and Edris. Therefore, I designed these questions as such that they should not only indicate whether I as a player healed by playing Shasta or Edris, but also what aspects of these characters contributed to or hindered my own growth and healing.

Partway through the research process, I realized it would be difficult to determine if I underwent healing through Dungeons and Dragons if I did not also discuss my own personal life experience: it wasn't enough to answer questions as to whether I felt I healed by playing Dungeons and Dragons; I needed to compare my characters' experiences to my own real-life experiences at the time I played these characters. Therefore, I consulted my personal journal to list what experiences I was going through during the time frames in which I played Shasta and Edris. The research not only consults the experiences listed in the journal entries, but also considers the tone of these journal entries to create a timeline of my own personal life events and attitudes during the four-year timeframe that I played Shasta and Edris.

Summaries of Shasta and Edris

To understand how I as a player was able to use Dungeons and Dragons as writing as healing, I need to summarize the events of Shasta's and Edris's stories. I will start with Shasta's story in the Forest Campaign, and then summarize Edris's current story in the Wilds Campaign.

Shasta's Story

Shasta was born in a large, medieval-style city to a poor mother. His father left shortly after Shasta was born, so he never knew his father. Growing up, Shasta blamed himself for his father's disappearance and believed that if he himself were more manly, his father might return. When Shasta was about seven years old, his mother grew sick with a terrible illness, and because he and his mother were poor, she wasn't able to see a doctor to survive. She passed away and Shasta was orphaned.

As a young orphan living alone on the streets, Shasta grew to idolize the Paladins—or holy knights—of the god, Pelor (a God of the Sun reminiscent of Christianity's God). He again saw becoming a holy knight as something his father might be proud of and the easiest way that he might move past his life of survival and poverty on the streets. By the age of seventeen, Shasta worked up the courage to steal the armor and supplies from a Paladin of Pelor to impersonate a holy knight himself. However, this plan went wrong in several ways. Intending to rob a Paladin of Pelor, he accidentally robbed a guard for the City Watch instead and therefore didn't steal the proper equipment. He was also caught by the guard he attempted to steal from. As the situation escalated and as the guard tried to restrain Shasta, Shasta killed the guard in the heat of the moment for fear of going to prison and becoming a failure.

Around this time, the city Shasta was from was sending brave adventurers to a forest outside the kingdom that had been sealed off with magic for centuries. The barrier had recently fallen, and the kingdom was recruiting explorers to venture into the once-sealed forest to see what secrets it held. Shasta used the guard's armor to create a disguise as a Paladin of Pelor and pretended to be sent by the kingdom to investigate the forest. He

joined a small adventuring party with a Ranger named Elros, two Druids named Astraiah and Keyana, and a Monk named Zara.

Shasta kept his identity a secret from his party but would purposefully put himself in harm's way multiple times to further pretend he was a brave Paladin and prove to himself that he was a man worthy of his father's approval. Keeping up this act, however, was very strenuous and stressful for Shasta, and he lived in constant fear that his party would see through his lies. One night after drinking too much ale, the party overheard Shasta talking to himself in his tent about "being discovered" and that "maybe they (the party) are onto us (Shasta and his facade personality)." The party confronted Shasta the next day worried he might be a spy of some sort, and he revealed to the party that he was lying about his identity, but he was not a spy. Sadly, this was the end of Shasta's story as The Forest Campaign died off shortly after Shasta revealed his true identity but had yet to overcome his insecurities with himself—especially in terms of others' opinions of Shasta.

Shasta's backstory meant that he grew up without a family for much of his life, and thus had developed a lot of bad habits and distorted views of himself and others. He was a compulsive liar that used lies as a means of protecting himself and attempting to impress others. When Shasta was confronted by his adventuring party, he was slowly letting down his protective barriers and becoming true friends with Elros, Zara, Astraiah, and Keyana, but he still had a lot of growth ahead of him before he was truly comfortable with himself and being himself around others. It is also important to note that much of Shasta's struggles with loneliness, self-acceptance, and masculinity were directly inspired by my own struggles in real life, even though they manifested differently for Shasta.

Edris's Story

Edris was born to a small noble family in the City of Glass and Bronze: his father was a well-educated human who became a stay-at-home dad, and his mother was an orc who ran a monster training business and zoo. Edris has an older sister, Evaine, and a twin sister whom he holds very close, Nahluko. Growing up, Edris's father was his teacher, but Edris much preferred the outdoors and daydreamed about stories his grandmother had told him about the family ancestors and the lands they came from. By the age of seventeen, Edris chose to run away from home not because it was a bad environment for him, but because he wanted to experience his family's homeland and find out who he was.

Edris ventured to the rocky wastes and desert wastelands his family was from and struggled to survive the harsh conditions until he met a Quetzal bird spirit who showed him how to use nature magic. As Edris grew to use these powers, he was able to travel nomadically through the desert and grasslands, sometimes acting as a guide for other travelers. He grew closer and closer to other nature wizards, or Druids, and developed a closer bond with the Quetzal spirit that helped him. Edris traveled the desert for six years, and though he found the lifestyle that made him happy, he longed for his family to be there with him.

One day, Edris rescued a wizard, Yannock, on the run from the winter continent. Yannock was trying to get to the City of Bronze and Glass. Edris chose to be his guide, and he knew doing so would mean returning home and confronting his family. When he arrived, he found that his parents had another son, Tromlin, while Edris was away, that Edris's older sister had gotten involved in a shady research organization, and that

Nahluko had become cold-hearted and closed off towards him. Edris, Yannock, and Nahluko eventually discovered that there was an evil entity wreaking havoc across the world, and they all joined an adventuring party to try and stop the planet's destruction. This is where the Wild's Campaign officially began.

The party needed to visit four ancient ruins to retrieve ancient artifacts to destroy the evil, unnamed entity from returning and destroying the world. They first ventured to the watery section of the globe, then to the wintery section where Edris and the party encountered an Arch Fey, or powerful otherworldly creature that was bound to a strict set of verbal laws that take language very literally. Edris angered the Arch fey, named Tamlin, and as an "equal payment" in Tamlin's eyes, Edris had to cut off his own hand in sacrifice, thus losing his ability to cast spells (because one needed both hands to cast spells). Thankfully, Edris and the party found someone who could make magical prosthetics, and Edris gained a new hand made of vines to help him cast spells again. The story continues as Edris and "the Snottage Crew," (short for the party's transportable "snail shell cottage") as they liked to call themselves, ventured to the next ruin in the center of the winter continent.

All throughout this venture, it's important to understand Edris's role in the party. He considers most of the party members family, and he feels especially attached to Nahluko, who is his blood family. However, Nahluko isn't the sister he remembers from six years ago because of the events that transpired after Edris left her, and he is constantly trying to rebuild their relationship all while giving Nahluko space to grow and mature through her own traumas. Edris sees himself as the glue that keeps the party together, and he feels the party needs to feel like a family if they are going to try and save the world.

But because the party is slow to trust one another and quick to lash out in emotion, Edris often sacrifices his own mental health and wellbeing to make sure the party stays together. This is especially apparent when Edris is forced to cut off his own hand where he sacrifices even a physical part of himself.

Knowing Where the Characters Came From

With these summaries, it's easier to see how I as a player can heal by playing my characters. As Kim Hensley Owens states in her article about writing through her healing process for her physical injury to her right hand, "Health-related writing allows a patient-writer to take control of her health narrative, to come to specific beliefs and understandings about her health, and to determine what actions are necessary" (2020, p. 15). Just as Owens was able to take control of her health narrative with her hand, I can take control of my own personal narrative with Shasta and Edris because of the aspects of myself that I placed into these characters.

In the answers to my first research question, I note that Shasta's struggles with loneliness, masculine identity, and self-acceptance stemmed from my own insecurities and struggles when I first created him. I intentionally built Shasta to be an exploration of my own identity by playing a character who struggled with the same issues, though to a more significant degree. For Edris, I note in the answer to my first research question that having played Shasta for an extended period had inspired me to create a character with more of my positive attributes. When I answer how I created Edris, I note that I placed positive ideals I held for myself into Edris's character, like the desire to help others and

build intimate relationships as well as a longing for adventure over monetary success. The following sections will explore how playing Shasta and Edris helped facilitate my own healing writing process by taking control of my personal narrative of struggles, growth, and healing.

Dungeons and Dragons as Writing as Healing

As previously discussed, I define writing as healing as the use of journaling or reflective storytelling to process and cope with varying levels of stress, trauma, and to eventually experience personal growth. This definition is strongly tied to writing one's identity as a means of personal growth and agency as well. I identify writing as healing as a potential middle ground practice between clinical service and self-care since it can provide systematic, reflective healing practices ranging anywhere from personal application to designated therapeutic writing groups depending on a person's needs. I have also discussed how Dungeons and Dragons has been used by professional psychologists to help heal through depression and develop social skills through communal storytelling. Likewise, I have performed research on how Dungeons and Dragons players embody and narratively write their characters, and how they are able to explore their identities in doing so (Crigger, 2021).

However, though healing has been defined, it can be difficult to define when someone enacts healing. In my own experience, I can go through a healing process

without being fully cured or healed. Enacting healing, therefore, is not dependent upon becoming miraculously healed, but by some other measure. Through my experience playing Shasta and Edris, enacting healing did not remove my struggles, but only gave me the attitude and tools to feel confident facing those struggles and to grow through them not despite them. This in turn creates a stronger sense of self that determines how I will interact with future struggles in my own life. How I enacted healing will be explored in this section.

Below, I will discuss the answers to the research questions I wrote for both characters I play, Shasta and Edris, and how my choices to narratively write these characters potentially contributed to my own enacted healing in ways that exceeded self-care yet did not go as far as clinical mental health care. I saw this taking place in three ways: learning from my characters' mistakes, developing improved hindsight that facilitated stronger reflection, and adapting through changes in embodiment from one character to the next.

Learning from My Characters' Mistakes and Traumas

By playing Shasta and Edris, I was able to recognize when these characters made bad decisions and to reflect on these decisions in terms of how they might work in my own personal life. I even made use of my characters' in-game stats to explore my own identity and personal growth.

As I mentioned, I created Shasta to explore my own struggles with masculinity, loneliness, and self-acceptance. What made Shasta's journey one completely divergent

from my own was the amount of tragedy written into his character, yes, but also, I purposefully gave him a lower Wisdom stat, or the in-game stat that has to do with one's perception of the world and other people, that I would have to role-play. Because of this choice, Shasta would often make judgements about the world that were false because I was role-playing his low Wisdom stat even when I wasn't rolling dice to determine outcomes. Thus, I was constantly at odds with Shasta's bad decisions—even though we struggled with similar issues. Shasta thought his elaborate facade to pretend to be a Paladin was his only chance to be accepted, but I as a player was able to have a different, outside perspective:

> I understood that the facade was actually making it more difficult for people to accept Shasta. Everyone could feel something "off" about him. In these moments, I as a player wished Shasta would let down his facade so that people could get to know the real him, but these thoughts were spoken to Shasta and me both. By reminding Shasta to be himself, I was reminding myself, too.

This reflective writing exemplifies how I was able to recognize Shasta's mistakes, but it also opened the door for me to reflect on my own experiences as a person. Shasta's facade was obviously elaborate to me, but his own facade made me question if I had any of my own. And I did: I reflected on my own performative identity and how I sometimes speak in a deeper voice when around men I don't know, how I am always thinking about whether the way I walk/sit looks "gay" or not, or how I try to sound like I have an

ambitious life plan when people ask me what I want to do after I graduate. Seeing how Shasta's relationship improved with his party after they discovered he wasn't a Paladin also encouraged me to see how my own facades stopped me from being genuine with myself and others. In my answer to the question about the lessons I learned playing Shasta, I state that "recognizing in the moments that I played Shasta those habits that were harmful to him, I was able reexamine my own and learn more about how to accept myself and respect myself for who I truly am and not just who I aspire to be."

This reflection in Dungeons and Dragons mirrors that of writing as healing in how "writing down personal reflections helped participants elucidate meanings of thoughts and interpret how they should express themselves and treat others" (Haertl & Ero-Phillips, 2019, p. 19). Dungeons and Dragons creates a unique opportunity to reflect because it can stem from the character one plays and the world that character inhabits rather than directly reflecting on the player's self and world. I have also had conversations about the lessons I have learned playing Shasta with other players, and in this way, I begin to make the healing process a social one where we all share in one another's lessons in healing. Dungeons and Dragons functions like writing as healing in that it "[assumes] that writing is a form of action that has personal and social consequences" (Micciche, 2001, p. 131). Thus, Dungeons and Dragons is comparable to healing writing in that it encourages reflection on a personal and social sense.

However, it is still possible to fall into the same pitfalls as healing writing in terms of narrative fetishism and mourning, and it's likely these issues would surface in different ways. Narrative fetishism within Dungeons and Dragons might mean always writing a character's happy ending in a way that doesn't allow the player to process their

own struggles in what their character faces. I could have easily written Shasta so that he impersonated a Paladin and succeeded so that I would not have reflected and had such valuable takeaways. I could have also easily played a character with no trauma written into their backstory that was reflected in their character stats, and I have no way of knowing if I could have gained such value in reflection from Shasta. This means that my inherent desire to process my own struggles through Shasta are what manifested because I wanted them to, and more research would need to be done to determine if one could learn from character mistakes as well if they never intended to explore their character's mistakes. Still, if a group comes together to play this game and encourages each other to create and play characters that symbolically recast their own traumas and struggles, there is real potential for a group to work through such things without the mandate that they divulge the exact nature of that trauma to each other. Further benefits of the distance between a player and the character they create are discussed in the next section.

Degree of Removal that Creates Improved Insight

As I have discussed, Dungeons and Dragons creates a unique opportunity for reflection. To further expand on this concept, I will next discuss how the degree of removal between a player's self and their character's self gives the player greater hindsight—and therefore insight—into their character's traumas. As well, the player can get the benefit of playing out a trauma without disclosing the exact nature of that trauma to other people. This phenomenon is best explored in my experience playing Edris when he cut off his own hand.

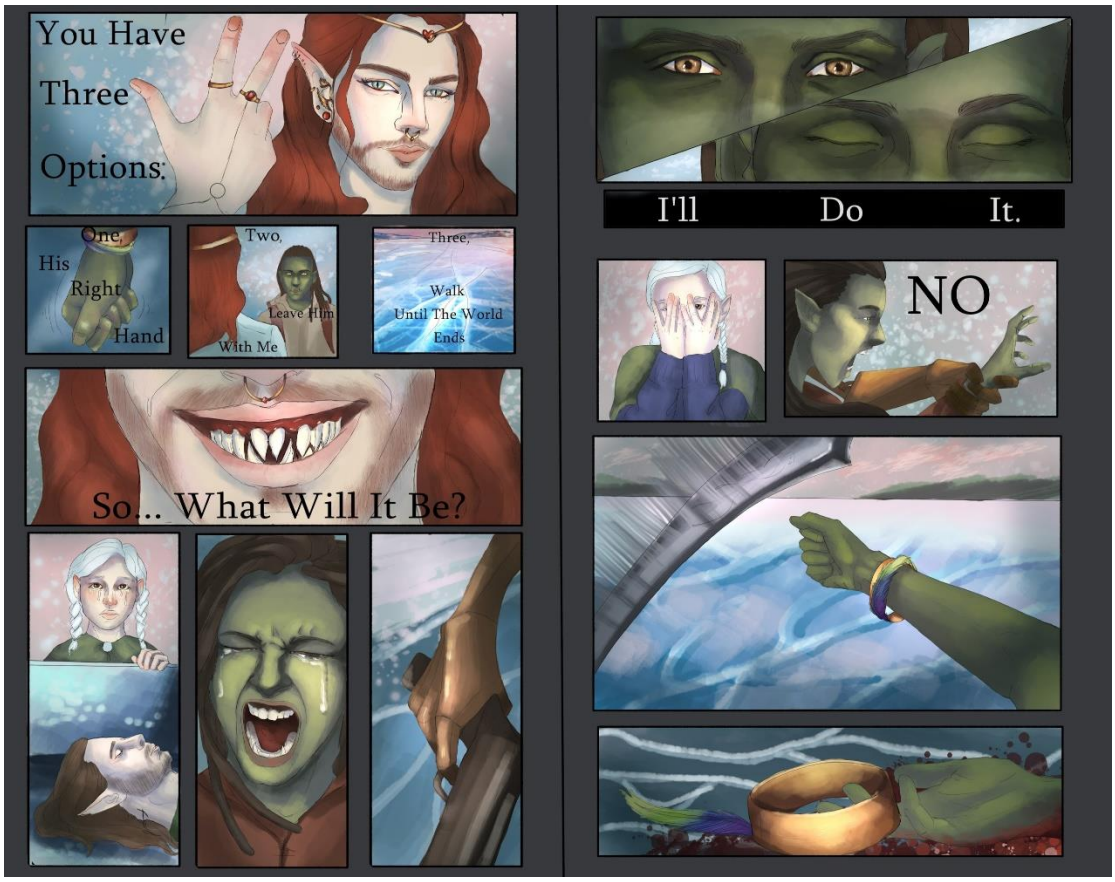

Figure 1: *Edris cuts off his own hand*, drawn digitally by the Dungeon Master (Cantilina, 2020).

There is no easy way for me to describe what it was like to role play Edris making the decision to cut off his hand. Tamlin, the Fey, tried to cast a spell on Edris after Edris had attempted to befriend him. Edris knew Tamlin had tried to cast a spell and stood up to Tamlin for having done it. Later, however, Tamlin trapped the party on an ice field where they could only escape if Edris cut off his hand. In the moment, I knew that Edris wouldn't ask for anyone to try and stand up for him, because given Fey's strict rules, someone would pay the price if Edris didn't. When Edris cut off his hand, I had a strong embodied response: my hands and arms were shaking, my voice quivered so that it was hard to speak, and I was on the verge of tears. Edris and I both felt bullied, let down by

the other players, and sad that Edris had lost his ability to cast spells. I processed through this experience in the following text message to my DM:

> Ed was bullied. It's just sad because it didn't help Edris to be nice to Tamlin. Ed was friendly, bought one of his rocks, and was willing to travel with him. And even with that, Tamlin tried casting a spell. It didn't matter what the spell was supposed to do, it mattered that Tamlin was so quick to betray Ed's hospitality and trust. And what did Ed get for saying that wasn't ok? He lost a hand. It feels unfair. And don't take this as me complaining. Lol. I'm just trying to process. I almost feel like I need to mourn because I would have never written this into Ed's story. What happened was so blindsiding, but I think that's true of life. There's nothing that can be done about it now, and ultimately, Ed and I both have to learn to live with it. Don't you dare give us an easy way out, or else all of this loss would have been for nothing. Let us both go through this.

In this text message, I as a player am processing through the trauma both I and my character experienced. Because our Dungeons and Dragons group only meets once a week, I as a player had to process these events for a full week before getting to enact what happened with Edris immediately after cutting off his hand. In doing so, I as a player was able to process the trauma from a third-person perspective. I both felt the trauma of the event as part of the event, but also saw the trauma from a third-person perspective to process it in the week leading up to playing Edris again. Even in the text

messages that I sent immediately after the session, I was starting to display my future excitement in the new challenge Edris was confronted with and the prospect of getting to role play his healing experience, and the games that followed were some of the most emotional and memorable Dungeons and Dragons games I have ever played.

This example shows how the degree of removal from the character to player gives the player ample opportunity to process events with even greater insight. For example, my texts with the Dungeon Master eventually revealed that cutting off Edris's hand was one of the better outcomes for having met Tamlin. I as a player learned this long before Edris did, but it meant I was excited to get to role-play Edris when he discovered these lessons on his own. This experience resembled that of Thompson's research participants who wrote through trauma when he says, "the language of overcoming and the newfound strength that the survivor has experienced on the road to recovery" (2004, p. 670). In essence, I got to heal through Edris's trauma twice: once as a player, and a second time as Edris. I was able to learn from both when I reflect on what it meant for me to say that I love Edris as a character and extension of myself: "Playing Edris allowed me to detach from myself, in a way, and love myself from an outside perspective." This journey was formative for Edris and I both because this event only made me love Edris, and thus myself, even more.

I would also like to highlight how this experience allowed me to think about disability in a new way. In my reflections, I note that "I learned from Edris that losing a valuable part of your identity can mean more than losing your life." This experience reminded me of Jacqueline Rinaldi's research surrounding healing writing for those with disabilities when she states that "in its healing function, rhetoric identifies and treats our

perceived sense of personal and social shortcomings" (1996, p. 822). Edris had to come to terms with the shortcomings that would come along with losing a hand by learning a new way to cast spells and eventually go through the process of making a magical prosthetic. Although, it is important to note that just as role-playing Edris gave me an experience comparable to a true physical disability, the degree of removal I possessed—to step into my own identity as an able-bodied man—meant that the experience cannot be completely true to real life experience with disability. The significance of Edris losing his hand could not translate, in my experience, to the loss of my own hand. However, Edris losing his hand did act as a metaphor for what it might feel like to lose a valuable part of my own identity. Edris losing his hand meant losing the ability to help others with his magic, but it challenged him and I both in how to help and support people. I am thankful for the opportunity that Edris cutting off his hand gave me understanding into the nature of losing a vital part of one's identity and what it could look like to mourn and move on.

My Dungeons and Dragons Healing Timeline

So far, I have explored writing as healing through two different experiences playing Shasta and Edris. I practiced aspects of therapeutic writing by playing both characters, but in this section, I discuss how the timelines from Shasta to Edris demonstrates healing. In other words, from one character's story to the next, I was able to learn and grow from the struggles of Shasta into the triumphs of Edris. To do this, I will look at journal entries from my own life around the time I played Shasta and compare how they changed when I started playing Edris. Because even though I was playing each

of these characters only once a week, my previous section demonstrates how even when I was not playing, I was still considering my characters' growth and healing narratives.

In September 2018, the month that I first started creating Shasta for the Forest Campaign, I wrote in my personal journal about knowing my purpose in life, especially in terms of profession as I was soon to graduate in December of 2018. I also wrote in my personal journal that "I'm not inspired, I'm tired" and that "I [feel like] a boy. A cold, shivering, helpless boy" about my struggles with my masculinity and finding relationships. By the end of the month, I played my first session as Shasta—a character who truly was a cold, shivering, helpless boy. I had intended to create Shasta as a means of exploring my masculinity, but I hadn't consulted my journal before creating the character. This coincidence surprised me when looking back and comparing my personal journal timeline to my Dungeons and Dragons timeline.

Throughout the time that I played Shasta, from September 2018 up until March of 2020 when the campaign fizzled out due to the pandemic, I graduated from my undergraduate career, got a full-time job working at Subway for James Madison University (JMU) Dining Services, and generally felt confused as to where I should be and what I should do. In January 2019 after I just started working at Subway, I journaled that I had numerous emotional breakdowns. The summer of 2019 before I started my graduate degree wasn't much better: that summer, I stayed in my apartment alone while working at a different Subway restaurant since dining services were closed and volunteered at a part time internship. I was isolated and lonely. By May 2019, I journaled about finding out I lost a high school acquaintance to suicide, and by August 2019, I was having suicidal thoughts myself. I went into my graduate program at one of the lowest

points in my life, and for the first time in my life, I went to the JMU Counseling Center. I never truly felt like I had recovered from my depression, loneliness, and insecurity until Spring of 2020. That isn't to say I only had negative and lonely thoughts throughout this period, only that it made up most my personal journal entries.

To give an idea, the tone of most of my journals from September 2018 to Spring 2020 had a depressive—almost helpless—tone. My journal entries include lines like "I talk and think too much" in May 2019, "Am I happy? Not right now" in June 2019, "hopelessness" in July 2019, and "No one can love me because of how much I hate myself" in November 2019. The first mention of getting better was January 2020 after attending counseling and resting over winter's break when I mentioned that "I feel like a better, stronger person." From January-March of 2020, my journal entries tried to be more positive, but I was still bringing up issues of insecurities and fears without mentioning the confidence or willingness to push through them: my journal entries felt resistant to change, particularly in regards to my studies, my best friend and roommate who was soon to get married and "leave me," and my family in rural Appalachia whom I could never live near because my degree in writing would likely drive me to a city if I wanted a decent salary. The only silver lining to these journal entries were those where I discussed hiking.

It was these desires to go hiking that eventually led me to create Edris. As I wrote for the first reflection question about creating Edris, "I ultimately decided to place all of my desire to hike the Appalachian Trail into the character: Edris was a man who was trapped in a situation he didn't want to be a part of, and he dreamed of adventure to the point where he ran away from his family whom he loved." In January 2021, I wrote in

my personal journal that “I’ve learned some lessons in contentment.” referring to “going with the flow.” These ideals are ones I gave Edris when I first created him in April of 2020, and the language I use for Edris eventually emerged in the tone of my writing with phrases like, “I’m doing alright” in January of 2019, and “honestly, I’m really happy” in February 2021. The tone of my journal entries started to shift during the timeframe that I was playing Edris, a character whose personality includes a lot of the ideals I strive for.

In the answers to my sixth reflection question as to whether I healed from playing Shasta, I wrote “I don’t know that I healed playing Shasta, but I think he paved the way for Edris.” Earlier for the first reflection question about creating Shasta, I wrote “I love [Shasta], but I love even more who he could become.” To me, Edris was the logical next step after having played Shasta, so in a sense, Edris is who Shasta became. Likewise, Edris is eventually who I became. Shasta, like myself, struggled with his masculinity, self-acceptance, and loneliness. Transitioning to playing Edris allowed me to play a more aspirational and uplifting character who did not face the same internal struggles as Shasta. Playing Edris helped me find confidence in my own identity, and today, though I still face issues of loneliness, self-acceptance, and masculinity, I know that I can face these struggles because I have filled Edris’s shoes.

Now, in 2021, looking back at my journal entries from 2018, 2019, and going into 2020, I almost don’t recognize myself from the person who played Shasta to the person who played Edris. I have healed from Shasta to Edris. I don’t question my identity as a man like did playing Shasta, and I don’t feel the need to perform stereotypically masculine. I still struggle with self-confidence, but loving Edris as a character and seeing how Edris has stemmed from myself has shown me just how much I do love myself, and

I'm willing to keep learning and getting better at loving myself with my deeds and not just with my words. And though I still face feelings of loneliness from time to time, I no longer face these issues with Shasta's fear, but with Edris's confidence. My future still contains uncertainty, but I feel better equipped now to face that future than I did in 2018 when I first created Shasta because I have experience being the me I want to be in role-playing Edris. And finally, I want to be clear: I am not suggesting that playing Dungeons and Dragons alone brought about my healing, but being connected to a healthier character did fixate my mind on healthier thoughts and thus, contributed in some way to my healing. I find my experience playing Dungeons and Dragons incredibly valuable in finding myself.

Conclusion

Dungeons and Dragons offers a unique approach for therapeutic writing. The narratives of a player's characters allow the player to reflect on their own choices, learn and grow from the character's mistakes, and write healing narratives that can be more easily explored because of the game's degree of removal and opportunity for insight.

As this research stands, there is only suggestive evidence that Dungeons and Dragons acts as therapeutic writing. Even before I planned on writing this thesis about healing writing and Dungeons and Dragons, I created my characters to explore my own struggles and facilitate my own personal reflection and growth. More research needs to

be done to determine if other Dungeons and Dragons players have similar experiences even without the same intent and background that I have. It is also important to understand that all Dungeons and Dragons groups are different, and that means that even though I had plenty of opportunity to create healing narratives for my characters, other players don't always emphasize the narrative aspects of the game. It is also true that because of the problematic history of Dungeons and Dragons and its treatment of race, gender, and sexuality, that other players don't have safe playing spaces and communities like I have had. Much like professors, Dungeon Masters and their players often aren't professionally trained psychologists that can facilitate therapeutic writing in a healthy, beneficial way. More research surrounding Dungeons and Dragons needs to be done to determine if the game is an appropriate middle ground approach to mental health that can be employed by everyday players. Until more research is done, players of Dungeons and Dragons can and should reflect on their own experiences playing the game and learn if and how the game can facilitate writing as healing.

As someone who has also had experience working in a classroom, and because of the vast body of literature on writing as healing in the writing classroom, I can see how there could be further parallels between enacted healing in Dungeons and Dragons versus enacted healing in the writing classroom. Like Dungeons and Dragons players, students in the writing classroom must be willing to trust their fellow students to explore aspects of their identity and healing journeys in their writing. Also like the Dungeons and Dragons table, students and professors in the classroom need to be mindful of others' enacted healing journeys and help create the space for safe exploration, encouragement, and respectful feedback on such issues. The safety tools used at Dungeons and Dragons

tables could prove helpful once translated to classrooms to create safe and trusting classroom environments. More research could be done analyzing the differences and similarities to embodied healing in these two spaces, and clear boundaries need to be made so that these spaces don't infringe upon clinical therapeutic healing practices.

Furthermore, I recommend that one of the best ways to determine if and how Dungeons and Dragons can facilitate healing the way middle ground therapeutic writing can would be to try playing the game. For me, playing the right character helped me to think healthy thoughts and to reflect on my passions instead of my struggles. I love Edris and feel as though he came alongside me to help pull me out of a dark place in my life. Even without my own healing journey, I feel a deep kinship with Edris, Shasta, and the party of great players that have helped take part in their stories. With consideration and effort, I do think Dungeons and Dragons could be a fun and beneficial means of communal, therapeutic writing, but if not, it is still a wonderful game that creates great stories with great characters that players will love almost as much as the people they play with.

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