

# Cross-platform storytelling in *Dungeons & Dragons*: How players use technology to explore and create stories in D&D

**Ruby Edwards**

The School of Computing and Information Systems  
The University of Melbourne  
[raedwards@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:raedwards@student.unimelb.edu.au)

**Martin Gibbs & Lucy Sparrow**

The School of Computing and Information Systems  
The University of Melbourne  
[martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au), [lucy.sparrow@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lucy.sparrow@unimelb.edu.au)

**Tamara Kohn**

The School of Social and Political Sciences  
The University of Melbourne  
[tkohn@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:tkohn@unimelb.edu.au)

## Keywords

Dungeons & Dragons, D&D, storytelling, digital tools, tabletop role-playing, communication, transmedia narratives, identity, symbolic boundaries

## INTRODUCTION

*Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) is a collaborative fantasy tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) which has garnered a significant following since the original edition's release in 1974. The game involves a group of people who each play an in-game character, or player-character (PC), and a Dungeon Master (DM) who acts both as a referee and the provider of critical information about the game world. The PCs navigate a fantasy setting together, completing quests, slaying – or perhaps befriending – dragons, and generally making choices that tangibly affect the game world. The DM narrates the world to the players as they move through it, as well as directly interacting with them by playing their own side characters. Together, the players and the DM collaboratively tell a story of their characters and their adventures as they navigate and influence the game-world (Bowman 2010; Fine 1983; Hollander 2021; Waskul 2006).

D&D is now more popular than ever, and players are increasingly integrating a range of online and digital tools into their D&D experience (Scriven 2021). Some of these tools are used to facilitate hybridised play, i.e., by rolling virtual dice (Yuan et al. 2021), for communicating with other players both during and outside of the game session (Hedge 2021), or playing remotely (Roques 2021), among numerous other functions. While many of these programs or platforms were created for the purpose of being used for TTRPGs – one notable example being virtual tabletop platforms like Roll20, which allow players to replace more traditional pen-and-paper components of the game with digital versions of the same – there is also the potential for players to adapt tools that are not designed for D&D in unexpected ways. Whilst not specifically related to D&D, one example of this creative use of technology can be found in the play of hybrid digital boardgames, where individuals used a vast range of digital tools (including communication software like Zoom, various companion apps for specific boardgames, dice rolling apps, Excel, Photoshop, and PowerPoint) to enable and enhance their distance-play experience (Sparrow & Rogerson 2023).

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

This study's overarching aim is to interrogate which digital tools participants commonly use, why they use them, how they do so, and what trends can be identified in participants' engagement with D&D and technology. In doing so, the study will present an anthropological perspective of the digital tools used by participants during their engagement with D&D, viewing digital engagement through the lenses of fantasy gaming as a social world (Fine 1983, 242), fantasy games as a playground for different selfhoods (Bowman 2010, 127), and porosity of boundaries between fantasy and reality (Waskul & Lust 2004, 339). Additionally, there is the potential and precedent in the literature to view D&D players, DMs, and content creators as belonging to communities of practice (e.g., Gibbs, Wadley & Ng 2012), another approach which I will likely explore in the later parts of the study.

As the integration of digital tools into D&D is a relatively recent phenomenon, there has been little scholarship to date on the relationship between digital tools and D&D experience. However, there are some interesting studies in this space, including: work by Plijnaer et al. (2020) on how data visualisation impacts the game experience in D&D; Ang et al.'s (2023) preliminary exploration of using a virtual DM with human players; and Buruk & Özcan's (2016) design-focussed study using physical augmentation to enhance player experiences, among others (see also Tang et al. 2023). In this paper I aspire to contribute to this area by providing a more comprehensive overall explanation of the kinds of technology being used by players, how they are using it, and what the effects of these digital elements are on the play experience. However, as this is a prospective study, this presentation will focus on my motivations for the study, chosen methodology, and potential contributions.

The study will draw on data collected from approximately 25 informal interviews. Within this sample, 10 participants will be players, 10 will be DMs, and an additional 5 will be content creators or D&D streamers. The purpose of including these distinct groups of participants is to allow for potentially different perspectives of and objectives for using digital tools in D&D, which will likely vary depending on participants' roles within the game and reasons for playing. Additionally, by utilising an informal interview methodology, my goal is to leave the interviews largely open to participant direction – as this is an exploratory study, I aim to be largely guided by participant experiences in terms of the direction and content of the interviews, whilst also having a set of core interview questions to rely on for key information.

In this presentation, I am seeking feedback on my approach to this study, in addition to opening up prospective discussions with others in this space about potential areas of interest and inquiry that may inform both this study and future studies within my PhD project.

## **BIO**

Ruby is currently a Doctoral candidate at the University of Melbourne, with an academic interest in tabletop role-playing games, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the ways in which players create meaning and engage with sociocultural issues through fantasy and roleplay. They previously wrote their Honours thesis on storytelling and collective memory among the Welsh diaspora in Melbourne and have carried their interest in these processes into the field of game studies.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Ang, C., Cortel, R., Santos, C. L. & Ong, E. 2023. "Fable Reborn: Investigating Gameplay Experience between a Human Player and a Virtual Dungeon Master". In *Extended*

- Abstracts of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA)*. Germany, April.
- Bowman, S. L. 2010. *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Buruk, O. T. & Özcan, O. 2016. "WEARPG: Game Design Implications for Movement-Based Play in Tabletop Role-Playing Games with Arm-Worn Devices." In *Proceedings of the 20th International Academic Mindtrek Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2994310.2994315>.
- Fine, G. A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gibbs, M. R., Wadley, G. & Ng, S. 2012. "Using "Simple" Technology to Support Geographically Distributed Communities of Practice". In *IEEE Conference on Technology and Society in Asia*. October.
- Hedge, S. 2021. "Dungeons and Digital Affordances and Dragons: Extremely Online TRPGs". In *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*, edited by S. Hedge & J. Grouling, 58-73. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Hollander, A. T. 2021. Blessed are the Legend-makers: Experimentation as Edification in *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Political Theology* 22, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1890933>
- Mike Mearls. 2014. *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition*. United States: Wizards of the Coast.
- Plijaer, B. A., O'Neill, D., Kompier, E., Wallner, G. & Bernhaupt, R. 2020. "Enhancing the Game Experience of Tabletop Role-Playing through Tangible Data Visualization." In *The Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (CHI PLAY)*. Canada, November.
- Roques, N. 2021. "Multi-Windowed Play Commitments: The Virtual Tabletop Role-Playing Game". In *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*, edited by S. Hedge & J. Grouling, 58-73. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Scriven, P. 2021. From Tabletop to Screen: Playing Dungeons and Dragons during COVID-19. *Societies* 11, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11040125>.
- Sparrow, L. A. & Rogerson, M. 2023. "Lessons from Homebrewed Hybridity: Designing Hybrid Digital Boardgames for Distanced Play". In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, Volume 7 (CHI PLAY)*. November.
- Tang, K., Gasque, T. M., Donley, R. & Sullivan, A. 2023. "It Has to Ignite Their Creativity": Opportunities for Generative Tools for Game Masters." In *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3582437.3587204>.
- Waskul, D. & Lust, M. 2004. Role-playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-playing. *Symbolic Interaction* 27, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333>.
- Waskul, D. D. 2006. "The Role-playing Game and the Game of Role-playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life". In *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. P. Williams, S. Q. Hendricks & W. K. Winkler, 19-38. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Yuan, Y., Cao, J., Wang, R. & Yarosh, S. 2021. "Tabletop Games in the Age of Remote Collaboration: Design Opportunities for a Socially Connected Game Experience." In *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI'21)*. May, Yokohama, Japan.