

She Kills Monsters

This fall, I was hired as the Dramaturg on UVA's production of SHE KILLS MONSTERS, directed by Marianne Kubik. You can find the notes and resources that I collected for the cast, as well as some production photos and scans from the Second Edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Handbook.

Some credits:

Costumes by Cee-Cee Swalling.

Lighting by Lauren Duffie

Projections by Mona Kasra

Set Design by Milo Bue and Jeff Kmeic



SHE KILLS MONSTERS, UVA Department of Drama. All Photos by Michael Bailey.

She Kills Monsters Dramaturgy

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Note on content: the information in this guide is the result of my research and reading; I often quote directly from internet sources and use quotations and notes to indicate this. The information on mechanics is largely condensed from the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Second Edition Player's Handbook.

SETTING

Athens, Ohio

(info curated mostly from Wikipedia)

- Located in Southeastern Ohio along the Hocking River about 65 miles southeast of Columbus.
- Home of Ohio University (large public research university with an enrollment of 36,800 students across all campuses)
- Early industry in the area included salt and iron production as well as coal extraction. Today the largest employer in the county is Ohio University.
- As of the 2010 Census there were there were 23,832 people, 6,903 households, and 1,842 families residing in the city. The racial makeup of the city was 86.4% White, 4.4% African American, 0.2% Native American, 6.1% Asian, 0.6% from other races, and 2.3% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 2.4% of the population.
- As is typical of university towns, Athens is considered progressive for its Democratic political leaning, presence of international communities, use of alternative energy, emphasis on sustainability and "smart growth" etc.
- The heart of the uptown is Court street and several cross streets and visitors can find small shops, banks, offices, restaurants, coffee shops, bars, etc. Think typical college town.
- In spooky trivia, Athens is home to an annual Block Party, which has become a "Massive international spectacle." Ohio University has been cited as the world's most haunted institution of higher education, and Athens is one of the ten most terrifying places on earth and the "World Capital of Halloween."

1995

- Bill Clinton is sworn in for his second term as US President.
- Grammy-winning pop singer Selena murdered on March 31. The Grateful Dead play their last concert. Alanis Morissette's Jagged Little Pill won album of the year.
- The Oklahoma City Bombing, April 19, 1995: 168 people, including 8 Federal Marshals, were killed in the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City.

- The last episode of *Full House* aired. Other popular TV shows included *ER*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends*.
- Top films included *Toy Story*, *Braveheart*, *James Bond; GoldenEye*, and the original *Jumanji*. Filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg announce the Dogme 95 movement.
- Operation Desert storm ends in November.
- OJ Simpson found innocent of murder on October 4.
- Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated on Nov. 4, 1995 by right-wing Israeli Yigal Amir at a peace rally in Israel. The Israeli peace process is shattered.
- In Dayton, Ohio, a peace treaty was signed between Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia & Montenegro.

D&D Mechanics

First developed in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson from Gygax's wargaming module, *Chainmail, Dungeons and Dragons* is a collaborative role-playing game. The game is led by a Dungeon Master (DM, today often called Game Master or GM) who adjudicates the gameplay according to the rules of whatever system is being used and directs the story, designs combat encounters, and plays all of the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) (barkeepers, villains, town guards, viziers, monsters). Each player builds a Player Character (PC), selecting their race, class, alignment, skills, and equipment. Together the PCs are "the party."

Styles of play vary widely depending on system and DM preference. For example, in *SKM*, the module that Tilly describes is pretty "on the rails," meaning that the player (Agnes) does not have a lot of control over the direction of the story. She is on a clear quest to find the Lost Soul of Athens. Many games are "sandbox games" where the DM basically builds a world with a few initial conflicts and players get to choose which of these leads they'd like to pursue.

Dungeons and Dragons requires the use of various many-sided dice, the primary one being a twenty-sided dice often called a d20. Other dice include d12, d10, d8, d6, and d4.

Building a Character in Second Edition D&D

Note: I'm trying to get a copy of the Player's Handbook in case anyone wants to make a character sheet for their character; however my personal copy is too delicate to scan so I'm waiting to see if the library can get one! You can find a character sheet template for 2E in the dramaturgy drive!

Step 1: Roll Ability Scores. Each character needs to figure out what their base abilities are represented by six categories: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. These abilities affect the characters' abilities to do certain actions and determine their effectiveness in combat. In second edition, the standard way of determining starting ability scores was to roll 3 six-sided dice for each ability. This creates ability scores ranging

from 3-18, with averages from 9-12 which are considered “normal.” Each raw score has a corresponding bonus that’s used in other calculations in the game.

Step 2: You must now select a race (like species) from traditional high fantasy categories, including Dwarves, Elves, Gnomes, Half-elves, Humans, and Halflings. Depending on which race you choose, you often have to make some adjustments to your ability scores for size.

Note: You can play a character of any gender--gender has literally no effect on any of the character-building process, or on the combat math. Female fighters are equally as tough as male fighters, etc.

Step 3: Next you select a class! Base classes in second edition are grouped into 4 categories: Warrior (including Fighter, Paladin, and Ranger), Wizard (including specialized and general Mages), Priest (including Druid and Cleric), and Rogue (including Thief and Bard). Non-human characters can combine classes (multi-class) in combinations that depend on their race; humans can dual class, changing their class when they level up.

Step 4: Choose your Alignment! There are some class restrictions to this, listed below:

Paladin: lawful good

Ranger: lawful, neutral, or chaotic good

Mythos Priest: any acceptable to deity

Bard: any neutral combination

[I’ve put some example alignment grids in a separate folder so you can get some examples of what a character alignment might look like in practice]

Step 5: Record Saving Throws and THAC0 (To Hit Armor Class 0, the number a character needs to roll in order to hit a target with an Armor class [defense] of 0). Essentially, you’re figuring out some of the math around your character’s attack abilities and certain defense capabilities. (Second Edition Combat mechanics are notoriously difficult to grasp, so I’m just skimming over them here)

Step 6: Roll Hit Points. Depending on class, your character gets a certain amount of hit points at each level, determined by rolling a dice:

Warrior classes: 1d10 / level

Priest classes: 1d8 / level

Rogue classes: 1d6 / level

Wizard Classes: 1d4/ level

This means that warriors are the hardest in combat and magic users are (typically) the most vulnerable. There are ways to magically boost your defenses to reduce the likelihood that one gets hit in the first place, so magic users can still be very powerful in combat.

Step 7: Based on class, size, and how encumbering your equipment is, players next figure out how many squares they can move per combat round using a chart found in the Player's Handbook. Things like difficult terrain and combat affect how far or fast a character can move.

Step 8: Depending on class, your character gets a certain number of weapon proficiencies, non-weapon proficiencies, and languages. Weapon proficiency is a character's knowledge and training with a specific weapon (fighters have the most slots in this category and can spend slots to specialize in their weapons). Non-weapon proficiencies are non-combat related skills (the rogue has the most slots in this category), such as animal handling, herbalism, disguise, mountaineering, knowledge of local history (again all depending on class). Your proficiency gives you certain advantages when tasks that would be aided by your proficiency arise in game.

Step 9: The final step is to figure out your character's starting funds using a chart in the book and select equipment like weapons and armor for your character.

Combat

If you play a modern version of Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, or d20 Modern/Future the mechanics of second edition look pretty different than what you're likely used to, especially relating to Armor Class. I'm not going to go deep into these differences here as they aren't consequential to SKM; however, I'm happy to send you the relevant chapter from the 2E book if you're interested! Here's a brief outline of how combat generally flows:

Combat is conducted in rounds. PC characters and NPC characters (usually the monsters one is fighting) can only do one basic action in that round; for example, making an attack, casting a spell, drinking a potion, moving to the limit of the movement rate, or searching a body. Characters can also conduct what are sometimes called "free actions," which include things like shouting warnings or brief instructions, changing weapons, and dropping other excess equipment.

In 2E, combat proceeds in this order:

1. DM decides what actions the monsters or NPCs will take (but doesn't reveal this to players)
2. The players indicate what their players will do (broadly)
3. Everyone rolls initiative to determine the order that everyone acts in the round (this is done before every round, as the modifiers one adds to their roll might change depending on how the combat proceeds). Lowest initiative goes first in 2E.
4. Attacks are made and actions are taken, in the order of the initiative rolls.

This whole process repeats until one side loses or surrenders.

Play Styles

As I indicated above in the discussion of “on the rails” vs. “sandbox” games, there’s significant variation in play style amongst parties and DMs. In my circle we often talk about “role play” vs. “roll play” to distinguish play styles. “Role players” are those who make in character decisions and character-building and leveling choices to support a rich and nuanced narrative (even if that means taking on the occasional disadvantage). For example, I’m currently playing a Paladin whose religious order is against needless death; I’m the party’s best fighter, but I regularly choose not to engage in combat, much to the chagrin of some of the other characters. This tension adds to the story and makes my character more complex.

Some players are more into what we call “roll play,” but is also known as min/maxing or power-gaming where a player selections race, class, and proficiency combinations in order to make them the extremely powerful, usually in combat. Sometimes this results in finding weird loopholes in the game mechanics or particular combinations of abilities that end up giving a character a seemingly unbalanced advantage. Sometimes certain spells or abilities are not loopholes, but still seem to be overpowered. (Min/maxed characters and exceptionally powerful spells are both referred to as “OP” or over-powered).

Almost every game I’ve ever been in also has a “rules lawyer:” a player who can quote the handbooks and rule books at length with shocking detail and precision. Uncoincidentally, this person is also usually the most notorious power gamer in the group. This person usually tries to bend the rules to their advantage or call other players or the DM out when they bend them. DMs often bend the rules to make better stories (or even write their own modules, like Tilly) and can override rules lawyers by declaring house rules. Some DMs even create house rules for extra fun; for example, in my house, if our cat climbs on the table and bats at a dice, whoever has to roll a d20 next has to use her roll.

D&D Culture

Scholarship/ Essays

[Access to the Page: Queer and Disabled Characters in Dungeons & Dragons](#)

Michael Stokes, 2017

This article traces the changes in how Dungeons & Dragons (and the similar gaming system, Pathfinder), represent queer and disabled characters, and how the mechanics have changed to accommodate those characters. In the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master’s Guide (1979), crippling disabilities are equated with “death,” and therefore considered undesirable character traits: they engage in a compulsory able-bodiedness. Stokes points out that there’s a silence in early editions of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons on sexuality, with some versions of the Dungeon’s Master’s guide saying the sexuality “should not be part of the game” [KS Editorial Remark: I have never been part of a game where player characters did not comment on, joke about, or pursue side quests related to sex, regardless of the rules books. This is a good reminder that players “hack” the

game to reflect their own interests and beliefs; D&D players frequently adjust and augment the rules]. Later versions of Dungeons & Dragons (starting in 3rd edition) provide more detailed rules for playing characters with various disabilities; however, these are often used more for character flavor and don't usually affect the battle math.

[How Dungeons and Dragons Become So Wonderfully Gay](#)

Kody Keplinger, 2019

A short article detailing how conscious efforts in fifth edition D&D and online platforms like Roll20 are changing the demographics of players. The author also reflects on how roleplaying games offer LGBTQ+ folks to explore their identities in a low stakes environment: "At their core, tabletop roleplaying games are a form of collaborative storytelling. Players create and control characters and work with each other, as well as their dungeon master, to build a narrative. This does, of course, appeal to a wide variety of people, as demonstrated by the massive popularity of Dungeons and Dragons, but for the LGBTQ+ community specifically, this has the potential to serve something deeper. It enables queer players the opportunity to explore aspects of their identity in a low-risk environment that we have a level of narrative control over."

[Roleplaying the Other: The Queer Experience](#)

HOFFNER, 2019

"The tradition of using role play to explore aspects about oneself is as grand and old as the hobby itself. The ability to do this in the relative safety of a group a player trusts is valuable to anyone but even more so to marginalized players. The world is a scary place and sometimes it just isn't safe to explore aspects of yourself in public. Roleplaying games have an allure for people looking to do that. D&D and other games like it were instrumental in my own journey and played an important role in my eventual coming out. The thing is my story is not particularly rare. Many of you probably know and play with queer gamers yourself. It goes beyond the players, though. With RPGs you have the ability to shape the fiction and that includes building a world with room in it for people from a wide spectrum of personal experience. This means if someone's fiction does not include marginalized identities then a choice was made to create the world that way, even if the choice was made unintentionally. On the flipside, this means RPG fans can create worlds with things they want to see in their game even if those things are not well represented in popular fiction."

[Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books](#)

Jaakko Stenros, 2015

This article points out that many early RPG gaming books, when they mentioned homosexuality at all, viewed it negatively. None of the most relevant examples are from D&D, but other similar. Stenros also importantly reminds us that "since role-playing games are shared social game experiences that use textual sources as starting points and not as determining guidelines, the actual practice of role-playing may have had content markedly different from the guidebooks."

“Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ Role-Play” in Queerness in Play

Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros, 2018

This chapter explores the way that players can carve out space for playing characters with queer identities, emphasizing the ways that players manipulate rules to allow for queer roleplay.

Character-World Dialectics on the American Stage: Gaming, Role-playing, and Wrestling with Idioculture

Warren Kluber, 2018

This article argues that contemporary theatre’s reinvestment in dramatic character was influenced by the development of game-worlds and gaming culture. He uses SKM as one of his key examples. I’ve reproduced some of the most interesting passages in full here, but the entire article is found in the drive:

“However, as the status of character declined in the postmodern theatre, it gained stature and drawing power in new forms of “participatory culture” structured around role-playing games, in which participants create and enact characters within a “gameworld.” The concept of a game-world was first theorized by sociologist Gary Alan Fine in his 1983 ethnography of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D): playing communities as a “frame” that brackets the “finely woven worlds [that] are real to characters that inhabit these fantasy worlds” and reinforces their internal structure and logic.⁶ The gamers’ shared investment, belief, and labor in creating the game-world, Fine explains, are the foundation for their “idioculture,” defined as “the system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs” that the group members are “continuously engaged in producing” as they “build a shared reality.” (209-210)

“In the three plays that I am examining [including SKM], characters enter the game-world looking to express something about their “selves” that is inaccessible and unrecognized in their everyday social worlds” (214)

“Gamers and wrestlers frequently attest to being their “true selves” in the game-world and not in everyday life. A player of the popular MMORPG Second Life testifies that “in Second Life I find that I can truly be myself, my inner self”; another says of her avatar, **“this is how I see myself on the inside.”** Speaking of his adolescent fascination with D&D, actor Vin Diesel explains that “[w]hat kept us hooked was the search for the character that represented our higher self.” And a twenty-three-year-old indie wrestler named Donny describes his “elation at having [his] self affirmed” by the recognition and applause of the crowd; getting into character to prepare for a match, he proclaims, “Now, I am somebody!” But the dichotomies of inner and outer, private and public, and true and false selves break down to reveal a far more entangled relationship among role, self, and character. In Dungeons & Dragons & Philosophy Rob Crandall writes that **“[w]ith every character I make,**

I bring a new side of myself to the foreground, for the examination of myself and others.”

And Tom Boellstorff asserts that “virtual selfhood is not identical to actual selfhood,” quoting a Second Life “resident” who explains that players “suppress some aspects of their personalities and accentuate others.” Self-manifestation is only ever partial: as some qualities come into focus through the role an individual plays, other parts of the self are obscured and excluded” (219-220)

[When Dungeons and Dragons Set off a “Moral Panic”](#)

Clyde Haberman, 2016

This article addresses the “moral panic” surrounding D&D in the 1980s, where people were worried that the game encouraged demon worship, witchcraft, and magic. Fears began in 1979 when some insisted that the disappearance and eventual suicide of a Michigan State student was linked to his D&D playing.

Pop Culture Representation

Gamerz (2005), film: from IMDB: “A love triangle with a twist of fantasy! The hero is Ralph, a young nerd from a bad neighborhood who's on his way to university for the first time. Ralph is completely downtrodden in life, but he escapes from a cruel reality that he can't control by creating insanely detailed fantasy game worlds (as in fantasy games such as "Dungeons and Dragons" or "Tunnels and Trolls"), in which he is firmly in charge, as "Game Keeper". When Ralph arrives at university he immediately takes over the fantasy role-playing society from the resident Game Keeper in a ruthless coup. His new players include neurotic risk management student Davy, metal-head theology student Hank and - most importantly - the beautiful Marlyn, a crazy Goth chick who believes she is an elf. She's the ultimate object of geek lust, and Ralph falls for her hard. But there's a fly in the ointment: Ralph's old enemy from the hood, minor dope dealer Lennie who has undergone a near-religious conversion to all things fantastical having watched a LORD OF THE RINGS triple bill while on acid. The seeds of a bitter love triangle are sown, and the story soon snowballs towards an inexorable apocalyptic explosion of freakish, geekish angst!”

The Gamers (2002), film: “One late night in a college dorm, four socially inept geeks immerse themselves in a fantasy world of their own creation. As their characters journey through forbidden kingdoms, ancient ruins, and the forsaken wilderness, the players attempt to solve a mysterious puzzle that could ultimately mean the difference between getting a life and death. Who is The Shadow? Where is The Princess hidden? Will any of them ever find a date? And how long do they have before their annoyed neighbors call the cops?”

Stranger Things (2016), tv: Early episodes give a great picture of what it's like to game with friends. Fun just to get a sense of seriousness with which players take their adventures and think about their characters.

Riverdale (Season 3, 2019), tv: There's a whole plotline in this season about "Gryphons and Gargoyles," a game that most of the major characters play that is made to resemble D&D and incites violence and moral panic throughout the town. Everyone is concerned with how the game is blending into the "real" world, and it seems as though it's responsible for murders and suicides throughout the town. This plotline and the moral concern over the teenagers playing the game recalls the so-called "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s where games like Dungeons and Dragons came under fire for apparently leading kids toward witchcraft and demon worship.

Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-help for Elf-help (2011), book by Shelly Mazzanoble: a humorous self help book written by one of Dragon Magazine's columnists.

Penny Arcade, webcomic: "A longstanding webcomic, created by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, references and even depicts humorous instances of bizarre campaigns, and other Dungeons & Dragons subject matter; implementing dice-rolling humor and other game dynamics."

Order of the Stick: "satirical webcomic that features a cast of characters in a world that loosely operates by the rules of Dungeons & Dragons."

Critical Role, web series: Critical Role is an American web series in which a group of professional voice actors play Dungeons & Dragons.

The Adventure Zone, podcast: a biweekly comedy and actual play podcast where you can listen in to people playing D&D (or similar) role playing games, following them through campaigns.

Geek Theater

Qui Nguyen, along with his company, Vampire Cowboys, is one of the most well-known practitioners of so called "Geek Theater." Geek theater is sometimes used to mean plays whose content falls under the category of speculative fiction--fantasy, sci-fi, horror, etc. Sometimes fandoms and Geek culture feature prominently in these plays. Nguyen has said that his wife came up with the term to describe what their company was doing in grant applications--making theater that appeals to geek culture.

"There's too many of them!": Off-off Broadway's Performance of Geek Culture

John Patrick Bray, 2014

"When defining the aesthetic of Geek Theatre, the playwright Crystal Skillman has suggested that there is aesthetic fluidity rather than strict parameters for Geek plays: 'While

all Geek Theater plays are very, very different—some plays put an original genre story on stage while others follow real characters who are actual geeks living in the geek community (as in this play)—both approaches are using genre for their characters to discover something greater. I think we are all excited to use genre to explore the story of the outsider, which we pour our hearts into because it is indeed personal. The story of the outsider longing to find their place in the world is one everyone relates to,” (125)

Some Geek Theatre Plays:

Universal Robots by Mac Rogers

Geek! By Crystal Stillman

Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom by Jennifer Haley









GREEN GRIFFO

EMIRIKOL
THE CHAOTIC

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