

# You Die, Then What? Engaging with Mortality in Collaborative Fantasy Narratives

PIA HOLSTE

*Fictional narrative texts frequently explore concepts of death and dying through their protagonists. Fundamentally, readers understand fictional characters as human consciousnesses that experience the events of the narrative, up to and including death. Fantasy narratives offer writers and readers the opportunity to ask: How would this human consciousness react not only to its own death, but to its resurrection? Moreover, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) based on fantasy conventions place the reader in the role of the protagonist. This paper argues that TTRPGs bring participants even closer to the experience depicted in the narrative, allowing them to reflect on death from a unique perspective.*

*Fiktive Erzähltexte erkunden durch ihre Protagonist\*innen oft Konzepte von Tod und Sterben. Grundsätzlich verstehen Leser\*innen eine fiktionale Figur als ein menschliches Bewusstsein, das die Ereignisse in der Erzählung bis hin zum Tod erlebt. Fantasy-Geschichten bieten Autor\*innen und Leser\*innen die Möglichkeit, zu fragen: Wie würde dieses menschliche Bewusstsein nicht nur auf den eigenen Tod, sondern auch auf sein Wiederauferstehen reagieren? Auf Fantasy-Konventionen basierende Tabletop-Rollenspiele (TTRPGs) versetzen Leser\*innen darüber hinaus selbst in die Rolle der Protagonist\*innen. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie TTRPGs Teilnehmer\*innen näher an die in der Erzählung dargestellte Erfahrung heranzuführen und es ihnen ermöglichen, den Tod aus einer einzigartigen Perspektive zu betrachten.*

## Introduction

Death is one of the most catastrophic events a person can face. When it occurs in a narrative, it irrevocably removes the character from the story. The reader or viewer of that story then finds themselves dealing with the emotional impact of ‘losing’ a character to whom they might have grown attached. Fantasy narratives, however, do not necessarily have to treat death as permanent in the same way that realistic ones do. Readers see fictional characters’ deaths

undone in a myriad of ways, ranging from magical efforts to divine interference. As such, stories of this genre expand on the manner in which death can be portrayed and examined in narratives.

There are many subcategories within the realm of fantasy that make use of resurrection in some way or other. Prominent examples can be found in classic works like J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, wherein "various degrees of mortality" (Chandler and Fry 100) are brought up and explored through different characters. The influence of these genre staples can be traced all the way to current forms of fantasy media, including table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). *D&D* first entered the public sphere in the 1970s and 1980s following the success of *Lord of the Rings* (Gifford 107). It enjoyed a tremendous surge in popularity in recent years, due in part to the emergence of so-called actual-play podcasts and web series such as *Critical Role* (Scriven 1), an actual-play *D&D* series that has grown from a hobby production into an immensely popular franchise (Teh). Many of these games remain remarkably faithful to staples of the fantasy genre, utilising fantasy species like elves and dwarves or character classes such as wizards and sorcerers. *D&D* players create their own imaginary character along these lines and embody them in a fictional world, often becoming emotionally attached to them just as much as they do to characters in conventional narratives – if not more (Coven 115). In doing so, the game allows players to become active participants in the creation of a story, whereas they would normally remain relegated to the passive role of 'recipient'. Many players find their characters at risk of dying through the course of their adventures; the spectre of death and mortality thus remains an important part of these narratives.

In this paper, I examine the question of how readers respond to character death in fantastical fiction. When death is no longer the ultimate end, some facets of its meaning for those who suffer through it are irrevocably changed, while others remain the same. In the following, I will first explore how insights from cognitive literary studies enable us to understand how death and resurrection is experienced in fiction. Secondly, I examine the unique qualities

in experiencing death and resurrection offered by TTRPGs, using *D&D* as an example.

## Experiencing Death in Fiction

Any depiction of death in narrative aims at the heart of what many people latch onto the closest when reading: characters. As Monika Fludernik claims, narrative is rendered understandable through the reader's ability to recognise a "human agent or experiencer" (*Narratology* 49) in a text. Even in narratives that seem to lack any sort of mediating voice, readers understand the text insofar as it portrays human experience. Likewise, Alan Palmer states that when consuming any fictional narrative, "readers create a continuing consciousness out of the isolated passages of text that relate to a particular character" (15) and follow that individual thread through the story. The story-internal character becomes the "experiencer" (Fludernik, *Narratology* 49) to which the reader can attach themselves in order to guide and structure their own reading process.

As such, much of readers' emotional engagement with a story concerns their feelings with regard to its characters. To paraphrase Fludernik once more: we understand characters as people experiencing the narrative, and "people have minds" ("Naturalizing the Unnatural" 17) to which we can attribute parameters of personhood and consciousness. This lies at the core of what many people find enjoyable about reading:

Whether or not we like to admit it, voyeurism has a lot to do with the pleasures we take in narrative fiction: where else but in a novel can we penetrate into the most guarded and the most fascinating of realms, the inner workings of a foreign consciousness? [...] [W]e are [...] more likely to be affected by what happens to people we know than by the fate of strangers; and by virtue of the authority of fictional discourse we know certain fictional characters [...] better than they know themselves, perhaps even better than we can ever hope to know ourselves. (Ryan 149–50)

Liza Zunshine introduces the similar concept of ‘mind-reading’. She describes how the process of reading “engages, teases, and pushes to its tentative limits our mind-reading capacity” (4). Essentially, readers explain fictional behaviour as intentional manifestations of characters’ thoughts, beliefs, and desires. She then continues to argue that imagining what a character might be feeling is in itself a pleasurable and enriching activity. In his theory of experientiality, Marco Caracciolo describes that readers may ‘enact’ fictional consciousnesses while reading; quasi-inhabiting a character’s mind to the best of their cognitive and empathic ability while referring to their own knowledge about the world in order to do so (4). Even beyond the cognitive level, he posits that narrative texts invite “the reader to engage with the bodily-perceptual experience of a fictional character” (103) and to focus on how it would feel to be in that situation. Throughout the reading process, the reader thus connects with what they construe to be the minds and consciousnesses around which the narrative revolves.

The theories described above generally claim their applicability only to those narratives that are to some degree realistic insofar as they are “based on cognitive parameters gleaned from real-world experience” (Fludernik, *Narratology* 35). It therefore makes sense to differentiate between more realistic and fantastic narratives in this context. Jan Alber speaks of “unnatural” narratives when referring to texts contradicting “real-world cognitive parameters that are derived from our bodily existence in the world” (26). However, he argues that in these contexts, the fictional consciousness the reader constructs as the central experiencer of the narrative remains intact and ‘human’ in its cognitive and emotional functioning. According to him, even texts that violate the parameters of real-world existence can nevertheless be incorporated into an experiential reading since

the unnatural primarily concerns the question of “what it is like” for humans (characters, narrators, or readers) to experience the transcending of physical laws, logical principles, and standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge and ability. Even though unnatural scenarios and events contradict real-world parameters, we can still recuperate them in terms of what one might call second-order “experientiality” [...]. At the end of the day, all examples of unnaturalness can be read as saying something about us and the world we live in. (36)

What, then, can narratives say about the way in which readers experience death? Stories have always been used as vehicles to discuss complex topics, death and dying chief among them. Going as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the ability of tragedy to elicit strong negative emotions from the reader (catharsis) has been acknowledged as one of the main reasons for engaging with fiction (Ryan 148). Death is usually regarded as one of the most tragic things that can happen to a fictional character — or a person, for that matter; not least due to its profoundly unknowable nature. In talking about death, we encounter the limit of what “the story-telling of others with experience” (Gullette 67) can teach us. When the topic of death is addressed in fiction, however, it becomes imaginatively accessible through the experience of a character. Fiction in any form offers unique opportunities for readers to “process and reflect on their own real-life experiences through the imaginary worlds inside” (Gifford 103). We can observe fictional consciousness in as much detail as we want, making inferences even about what we are not explicitly told, and engage with various questions: what might this dying character be feeling right now? And what does that mean to the reader ‘experiencing’ this death through them?

It is important to note that the feelings of sorrow and distress that readers may feel when encountering these topics are by no means lesser or ‘fake’ because they have been elicited by a fictional narrative. Previous studies such as the one conducted by Goldstein indicate that the levels of sadness caused by observing fictional narratives tend to be roughly equal to those caused by nonfictional narratives or recollections of sad personal events. That same study finds, however, that one thing does set narrative apart from actual personal experience: the degree of anxiety felt in response to

it. In other words, while readers do feel sad about a tragic event happening in a narrative, they do not feel *anxious* in response to it, as they do when the same event occurs in real life (Goldstein 236). Zunshine explains this phenomenon in terms of cognitive categorisation, stating that once a story or event is “tagged” as fictional – as opposed to factual – in a reader’s mind, it becomes a freely available practice ground to engage one’s “Theory of Mind, which is ever hungry for more material to work on” (78), and to attribute mental states to fictional minds as indicated by the narrative. Similarly, a tragic event unfolding within a narrative will impact the reader emotionally; but it will not have an effect on their physical real-world surroundings or their life beyond the reading experience. It remains contained to and by the narrative, restrained behind the cover of a book or the screen of a television – or, in the case of a TTRPG, to the game table.

Stories belonging to the fantasy genre push the limits of ‘natural’ narratives. With regard to mortality, for instance, they introduce the possibility for death to be only temporary by bringing characters back from the dead through magical means. I propose that this departure from the real does not fundamentally change the way readers engage with the event of character death. Fantasy stories of the kind discussed in this article generally introduce ‘impossible’ human experiences before a character comes back from the dead. Both readers and, if applicable, characters have already incorporated the storyworld’s fantastic rules into their mental concept. I argue that as long as it is not trivialised, death remains a key event in the story that can elicit a range of strong responses – and revival, in any of its forms, becomes another such event. Readers employ a variety of strategies to make sense of the meaning death carries in a story, whether thematically or literally (Caracciolo 5).

Here, the death of Gandalf the Grey in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* can serve as an example for temporary deaths in fantasy stories as it strongly impacts readers and characters alike:

[Gandalf] staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. “Fly, you fools!” he cried, and was gone. The fires went out, and blank darkness fell. The Company stood rooted with horror staring into the pit. [...] They stumbled wildly up the great stairs beyond the door [...]. Frodo heard Sam at his side weeping, and then he found that he himself was weeping as he ran. *Doom, doom, doom* the drum-beats rolled behind, mournful now and slow; *doom!* [...] Grief at last wholly overcame them, and they wept long: some standing and silent, some cast upon the ground. (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 431–32; original emphasis)

Similar to Frodo and company, the reader might be shocked and surprised at the sudden turn of events; they may feel sadness, maybe even something approaching grief, at the loss of this beloved character. Furthermore, as several of the characters remark (525), the loss of Gandalf significantly reduces their own strength and thus heightens the perceived threat of the forces of evil. As these events unfold, the reader must come to terms with the emotional fallout alongside the characters. His revival later on does not cheapen his previous death, but provides its own form of emotional and narrative impact. Gandalf emerges visibly harrowed by the experience of death (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 654); it has changed him significantly and lastingly. As the omnipotent deity Eru Ilúvatar, creator of all, decides that Gandalf has not yet played his part to its end, he returns him to life with renewed strength. This divine intervention becomes a sign of support from a higher power, giving hope to the Fellowship that their mission is no longer doomed to fail, no matter how bleak things seemed. The following passage exemplifies this change:

“Do I not say truly, Gandalf,” said Aragorn at last, “that you could go whithersoever you wished quicker than I? And this I also say: you are our captain and our banner. The Dark Lord has Nine. But we have One, mightier than they: the White Rider. He has passed through the fire and the abyss, and they shall fear him. We will go where he leads”. (653)

Gandalf’s characterisation here closely matches that of a “Christ figure”, descending into hell before coming back to life (Stucky 4–5). This depiction underlines his death and subsequent resurrection as central turning points in the narrative.

## Experiencing *Dungeons & Dragons*

How does this situation change, however, when the reader themselves is in charge of constructing Gandalf's interiority? That is the question asked of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) players. The narrative of TTRPGs is created in a much more collaborative and interactive process than it is in more traditional literary formats. The external communicative structure of a novel tends to be quite simple: the author produces the text, which is then received by the reader. In games such as D&D, on the other hand, we encounter many more roles at play than just author and reader:

In such games [TTRPGs], a group of players [...] take on the roles of fictional characters in some alternate universe. They generate basic statistics that represent the acquired skills and physical attributes of these characters. One of these players will serve as the referee and design this universe, creating settings to explore and opponents to confront. Players will usually join these characters into a single group to solve these problems, occasionally using dice to decide the outcome of events—whether a character wins or loses a fight, succeeds or fails at a difficult physical task, and so on. [...] Players carry over their characters from one playing session to the next, and the next events they encounter may continue the action of earlier sessions or may introduce entirely new events and opponents. (Punday 113–14)

As such, the narrative is constructed through a joint effort between what Punday refers to as the “referee” – usually called the Game Moderator (GM) – and a group of players steering their imagined characters through the world. Discussing the manner in which narratives engage their readers, Ryan refers to “the three basic components of narrative grammar: setting, plot, and characters” (15). In a sense, the GM provides and populates the setting;<sup>1</sup> the players provide the central characters around which the narrative revolves; and through continuous interaction with each other, all partici-

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1 This intentionally implies that the GM also provides minor characters to the story-world. However, due to the multifaceted role of the GM, they remain “far more removed from those characters than do the players” (Cover 104). Their possible embodiment of these minor characters will thus not be examined closely in this section.



pants create the plot together. Despite being correctly described as a game in most contexts, there can thus be no doubt that *D&D* is also “fundamentally narrative in nature” (Punday 114). The story becomes simultaneously a top-down construction to the extent that the GM, the source material, and the rules provide a basis for the storyworld, *and* a bottom-up process via the players and their characters determining how the story will proceed. In this collaborative construct, everyone involved is both empowered by and limited to their role of co-author. Engaging in a game of *D&D* as a player is just as much an act of creation as it is one of reception.

This participatory aspect puts players in a very different position to that of a reader engaging with a non-interactive narrative. Where the reader is usually forced to observe from the distance, in TTRPGs, the players become a vital part of the text-creating process. Their characters are at the centre of the narrative that develops through the course of the game; they effectively become the hero of their own fantasy story, and the decisions they make while role-playing their characters steer the course of the plot in a very real sense. In light of this, players take great pains to come up with rounded, multifaceted, and individualised characters “whose actions are psychologically realistic” (Punday 114) and authentically representative of the complexities of their personhood. The game instructions specifically emphasise that players are encouraged to attempt to embody their character as follows:

Roleplaying is, literally, the act of playing out a role. In this case, it's *you* as a player determining how your character thinks, acts, and talks. Roleplaying is a part of every aspect of the game [...]. When you use active roleplaying, you speak with your character's voice, like an actor taking on a role. You might even echo your character's movements and body language. (Crawford et al. 185–86; original emphasis)

Players who follow this advice mentally put themselves in the shoes of their character and “self-narrate the experiences, decisions, and feelings of their persona-character” (Gifford 105). In order to better understand and portray its inner workings, they thus enter the minds of their characters to get a sense of who they are. Instead of using third-person narration, players may speak about their char-

acter's actions as if they themselves were performing them: *I* am going to go over there, *I* will try to hit the monster with *my* weapon (Crawford et al. 5). Rather than looking for a human experiencer who they can follow through the narrative, *D&D* players are in the privileged position of being able to become their own experiencer. The emotional distance that usually exists between a reader and the characters in more traditional narratives is thus reduced to a minimum as the focalisation of the narrative becomes multifactorial, being accessed through a variety of different viewpoints.

Through all of these mechanisms – the linguistic connection between player and character, the interactive nature of text creation, and the focus on player agency – *D&D* involves the player intimately with the text itself in ways non-interactive narratives usually cannot. That is not to say that the immersion is necessarily absolute; it is rare that a person feels so utterly immersed in the story that they literally forget they are engaging with fiction, a phenomenon that Ryan calls “Alternate World Syndrome” (10). In fact, as I argue, it is in many ways vital that the protective layer of fictionality be maintained in these settings. It should also be stated unequivocally that a player and their character are by no means the same, and should not be regarded as such. There is, however, an undeniable exchange that occurs between the “related and contiguous categories of the self” (Gifford 108) that a player exhibits when channelling their character in the context of *D&D*. The act of playing a character can almost be seen as a direct manifestation of Caracciolo's experientiality:

[T]here is a two-way movement between the background and narrative: like experiential machines, stories need experiential input, but also produce some output, since they can bring about a restructuring of each reader's experiential background by generating new “story-driven” experiences. (5)

In other words, players use their past experiences of the real world in order to extrapolate what their character might feel. It is, to paraphrase Zunshine, a mind-reading – and mind-constructing – exercise in which the player is both led through the narrative and leads

it themselves via their character, quasi-experiencing the events of the story as them.

### **Death in *Dungeons & Dragons***

How does this manner of cognitive involvement impact the way in which participants react to and engage with character death? The communicative situation within *D&D* provides players with a unique opportunity to examine what death means to them individually and how it impacts those around them. This applies in both the emotional and the thematic sense, as players oscillate between the intra- and extradiegetic dimensions of the narrative.

To begin with, the player themselves is directly impacted by the event on an extradiegetic level. Since the player's participation is made possible through their character, the character's death means that the player is excluded from the narrative from this point forth – at least temporarily. The player thus finds themselves in the interesting position of being able to directly observe how their choices influence the way the narrative unfolds without them. Having taken such an active role in steering their character, there is an opportunity to ask questions: should I have done something differently? *Would I*, given the chance? Additionally, the impact of that death becomes much more emotionally immediate. Through the course of the game, the player has invested time, thought, and energy into imagining their character as intricately as they would any human person, and then done their best to inhabit that imagined mind as if they were one and the same. They feel sadness, they feel grief, the same way that a person might feel these emotions when someone they know dies in real life (Sidhu and Carter 1057).

On the story-internal level, where the player mainly exists and acts as their character, they are now, suddenly, dead. However, the player is still able to think as their character and thus finds themselves grappling with existential questions most people do not get to see answered in their lifetime: how do those around me react to my death? Am I happy with how I am remembered? Do I have regrets about the life I have lived? Having inhabited their mind to such an

extent, it is possible for the player to work through these questions *as* the character, even after their death; it is a unique opportunity for post-mortem introspection. As such, the event of death becomes at least partially something that happens *to the player* as much as it does to their character (Sidhu and Carter 1053–54).

One popular example illustrating how *D&D* expands on the ways in which people can engage with and reflect on intense emotional experiences through narrative is the web series *Critical Role*, which was already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. By the time one campaign comes to an end and a group of characters is retired, “the cast has lived in their characters’ head-spaces for ‘hundreds and hundreds of hours’” (Teh), and many of the characters have come into contact with death in one way or another. Several of the players involved in the show have spoken about the ways in which their characters have enabled them to explore aspects of themselves and their real-life experience, stating, for instance, that a character they played in the game “was a vehicle for [them] to sort of ask questions and understand human beings in a way that [they] needed help with, at the time”.

“When I look back at the stories we created around the table, I don’t think, ‘Yeah, that’s where we rolled dice, and I came up with a funny little speech, and we performed well, and it was a nice show,’” [Liam O’Brien] said. “No — *I saw that happen. I thought I was going to lose my sister. I fell in love. I found redemption. I risked everything, and gained the world. All the moments together with my best friends are just burned into my brain, and I will remember memories with them as much as I remember holding my children for the first time, and spending time with my father in his later years*”. (my emphasis)

Although the acting and production value seen on *Critical Role* has in many ways gone beyond what one would consider the typical player’s home game, it nevertheless exemplifies what is possible when participants are able to lean in to the physically and emotionally embodied aspect of playing a character. In a very literal sense, they can find themselves able to experience a range of emotions elicited by events they would and could never witness in real life – and take introspective lessons from it just the same.

The sheer magnitude of both death and, when it occurs, resurrection, is reflected in the rules of *D&D*, which encourage taking death seriously despite the possibility of revival. A common method for resurrecting dead characters is by use of spells such as ‘Resurrection’, ‘Raise Dead’, and ‘Reincarnate’. These spells all carry high material costs, and several of them incur in-game consequences:

Coming back from the dead is an ordeal. The target takes a -4 penalty to all attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks. Every time the target finishes a long rest, the penalty is reduced by 1 until it disappears. (Crawford et al. 270)

When these technical repercussions are incorporated into the narrative, their gravity reflects the intensity of the experience for both the player and their character. It cannot simply be shrugged off as a minor inconvenience, but is shown through the mechanics of the game to have a profound impact for which the narrative must account.

Consequently, the possible emotional intensity of a *D&D* game cannot be overstated. Moments of death and resurrection in *D&D* become “imbued with meaning that exists within, and can transcend beyond, game boundaries” (Sidhu and Carter 1056). Behind that aforementioned protective layer of fictionality, it is possible to “experience emotions without need for self protection” (Goldstein 233). After all, the game will eventually end, and the player will be able to leave these feelings behind if they want to; or they might choose to contemplate the matter further.

## **Conclusion**

Fiction enables writers and readers alike to engage with issues that cannot be easily resolved, giving room to a multitude of possible paths forward. Fantasy narratives go even further in that they imagine a world beyond the possible range of human experience. In TTRPGs, this process is expanded upon as players are asked to

imagine *themselves* as the individuals experiencing the events of a story, however impossible these might be.

With the introduction of themes such as life, death, and mortality, TTRPGs like *D&D* push players to imagine what it might be like for the game's events to really happen to them – through the self they have chosen to embody for the occasion of one particular game. Unlike in non-interactive narratives, in which the reader must follow the story as intended by the author, here the player gets to decide what aspect of death they want to examine. It is an opportunity to ask deeply personal questions and get tentative answers. Individual experience and what facets of meaning one draws from it becomes central, determining how the events of death and possibly resurrection will impact both the narrative and the player as a person.

This type of narrative offers a unique opportunity to deeply examine individual aspects of how one thinks about and conceptualises death. Just like in non-interactive narratives, certain insights about human existence “come not despite the nearness of death, but because of it” (Gullette 81) – and a game of *D&D* might bring a person as close to that moment as safely possible.

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