

Dramaturg's Notes

She Kills Monsters roared onto the stage in 2011 when it premiered at The Flea, an Off-Off Broadway theater. Since then, the play has enjoyed great success, especially on college campuses and in high schools. *She Kills Monsters* won the 2013 AATE Distinguished Play Award and the 2012 ITBA Patrick Lee Award; it was nominated for the 2012 GLAAD Award.

Two more versions, or editions, if you will, have been written since: *She Kills Monsters: Young Adventurers Edition* and *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms*, which you're going to experience tonight! *Virtual Realms* was written in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, giving theatre groups a way to perform *She Kills Monsters* even when live theatre was impossible. It premiered at the University of Maryland School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies on May 7, 2020 and continues to take virtual audiences by storm!

She Kills Monsters is far from playwright Qui Nguyen's (pronounced "kwee gwen") first foray into sci-fi, fantasy, and all things geek. A self-proclaimed "playwright, screenwriter, geek," Nguyen co-founded Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, which won an Obie Award in 2010. Some of his other geek-tastic plays include *Fight Girl Battle World*, *Men of Steel*, and *Alice in Slasherland*, among others. He also wrote the award-winning play *Vietgone*, which tells the story of how his parents met in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and its sequel, *Poor Yella Rednecks*. Nguyen recently co-wrote the screenplay for *Raya and the Last Dragon*, an upcoming animated adventure from Disney.

Who better, then, to write a coming-of-age story set within both the real world and a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) game? The famous - and at times infamous - fantasy role-playing game was created by Ernest Gary Gygax and David Arneson and published in 1974. The game was popular with fantasy geeks from the start, but not everyone shared their enthusiasm.

During the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, D&D was blamed for promoting witchcraft and devil worship in addition to supposedly causing suicide and murder amongst its players. These claims have since been disputed and are taken much less seriously today, with no direct links found

between playing D&D and violence. In fact, a good D&D campaign promotes many healthy qualities such as teamwork, empathy, and of course imagination. Well-known authors, actors, and intellectuals have even credited D&D for inspiring them as teenagers.

With the rise of geek culture and popularity of movies and TV shows like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*, D&D has become even more popular and widely accepted. The game's popularity has also been helped by shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, whose protagonists enjoy D&D campaigns, and of course *Stranger Things*, whose pre-teen heroes use the game to make sense of the creatures attacking their hometown.

Today, D&D has tens of millions of fans all over the world. There are D&D books, movies, and TV shows, as well as numerous editions of the game and myriad gaming accessories. The game can be played in-person or online, with online groups attracting players from all over the world and in-person groups gathering in living rooms, coffee shops, and anywhere else they please. One lucky group of adventurers even played their campaign in Langley Castle in Northumberland!

The pandemic has, of course, caused most D&D groups to move online, but even then gamers have found opportunities for creativity, imagination, and camaraderie. The popular podcast *Critical Role* started when some friends moved their D&D campaigns online and decided to share their adventures with the world, inspiring many who were stuck at home during lockdown.

Dungeons & Dragons has recently been in the news for its portrayal of different "races," an issue many gamers were discussing and debating long before 2020. In the game, "race" and "class" have different meanings than in the real world. For example, humans, elves, and orcs are each a different race, while class defines one's skills and abilities (such as wizard, bard, or tracker) rather than socioeconomic status. For decades, some races, such as orcs and dark elves, have been portrayed as generally, or even inherently, unintelligent or evil, mirroring ugly stereotypes in our own world.

Wizards of the Coast, the company that publishes D&D, has recently announced plans to diversify its creative team and give gamers greater agency and flexibility when it comes to designing their characters. Some fans are doubtful that this will be enough, while others don't think the game needs to change at all. Perhaps we could all learn from Tilly, that rarest of all geeks, and her Newlandia, a world in which a paladin, dark elf, and demon queen quest together and even the most fearsome demon lords dream of retirement and *Pokemon Go*.

She Kills Monsters is not only set in the magical world of Tillius the Paladin, of course. It is also set in the very real town of Athens, Ohio, which has a population of about 24,000 and is home to Ohio University. Go Bobcats!

In their real lives, our characters deal with challenges such as bullying, homophobia, and grief. They are also living through the COVID-19 pandemic, as our play is set in September 2020. D&D helps them escape from and eventually confront the painful challenges in their lives, giving them strength and, in Agnes' case, greater empathy for other people.

These days, we need teamwork, imagination, and strength more than ever. We hope this play will remind you that you too are "Strong. Powerful. And magical." *She Kills Monsters* reminds us to take no one for granted, and shows us how others' supposedly silly or geeky obsessions can mean so much more than we realize. Who knows what wonderful truths a simple game might reveal about ourselves and the people we love?

I'd like to end these notes with a quote by Qui Nguyen. In a 2017 interview with *American Theatre*, Nguyen said "Everyone deserves a chance to see themselves onstage." He was talking about his play *Vietgone*, but I think the quote is appropriate for *She Kills Monsters* as well. So, whether you're a demon queen, paladin, or cheerleader, we hope you see yourself tonight and realize how awesome you are. Let's go "kicketh some ass"!