How *Currere* Helped Two Monks, a Wizard, and Me
Applying *Currere* to Character Creation Can Improve the TTRPG Experience and Enhance Autobiographical Reflection

By Paul Reiff
Independent Scholar

"We make in our measure and in our derivative mode."

—J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"

I retired just over a year ago, and life in retirement has been terrific! It has been a time of relaxation as well as reinvention. My wife and I moved into a beautiful new home in a warm and welcoming neighborhood. I became a grandfather, and my grandson lives only minutes away. I keep busy with a variety of activities, some of which are perhaps predictable for a 60-year old retiree—working on projects around the house, learning to play pickleball, and, best of all, babysitting my grandson. I was looking forward to all of this as retirement approached, but one activity that I am thoroughly enjoying caught me by surprise. I rediscovered a game that I loved playing as a high schooler in the early 80s: Dungeons and Dragons (D&D).

D&D is a captivating game that has many unique elements. Unlike most games, the goal is not simply to "win." Rather, the goal is for players to contribute to the creation of a story that evolves over time. They achieve this goal through working collaboratively and letting their imaginations run wild. Games, which can occur in-person or online, can last a single session or they can involve countless sessions with players meeting weekly for years.

Of course, D&D, like any tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG), is not entirely free-form. The core rules, such as those in the *Player's Handbook* (PHB, 2024), provide a shared framework and delineate specific game mechanics, and the Dungeon Master (DM) is an essential player who acts as referee, performs as non-player characters (NPCs), describes settings, and much more. However, the rules ultimately exist merely to facilitate player participation and creativity, and a good DM encourages imaginative contributions from players to determine the direction of the narrative, to make the details more vibrant, and to personalize the adventure. Arguably the most significant way these individualized imaginative contributions happen is through role-play, and that begins with character creation; in other words, it happens the moment a player participant creates a player character (PC).

In my recent forays into the world of playing D&D, after determining the basic outline of my PCs following the options and templates explained in the rules, I moved beyond the suggestions in the PHB for creating a PC's backstory and opted to apply the method of *currere*. The results were characters that I could believe in and that felt authentic. In the sections that follow, I present three PCs—Azana, Carbon, and Harnish—that sprang to life from my imagination and that were reified using *currere*. Then, I turn the inquiry around and consider what these biographical choices reveal about my autobiography, my perceptions, and my identity.

Azana and Devotion

I created Azana as a character to bring to a local game store that sponsors a D&D night every Saturday. One of the drawbacks to this group is that membership varies week to week. I never know who will show up at the table, and Azana never knows who will be joining the party—maybe a tiefling sorcerer, an orc barbarian, or a dwarf paladin? Some advantages to this kind of in-person gaming include the tactile and aural satisfaction of rolling your myriad multi-sided dice across the table and the personal connection of looking your fellow gamers in the eye. The setting for the adventure, which the DM dreamed up from his imagination, is a mysterious, magical mansion located between dimensions with countless subterranean levels that beg for exploration by the characters and that promise gold, glory, and danger.

Azana is a pugilist in the style of Chuck Norris or Connor McGregor, relying on choke holds, body slams, and head butts. In D&D terms, he is classified as a human monk. Muscular and sinewy, Azana has been hardened by the rigors of life at sea, made obvious by the nautical tattoos that cover his body head to toe. In combat, these tattoos glow and radiate an iridescent sea-green, and they magically swirl and shift to imitate his various attacks. And of course, he sprinkles sailor jargon into his speech, using expressions such as "Shiver me timbers!" and "Hold fast, matey!"

As a youth, Azana lived in a small seaside community with his parents, eking out a modest living by fishing, growing grapes, and making wine. But his parents died before he was fifteen, and the call of the sea was irresistible, so Azana adopted the sea as his home, joining the crew of a vessel in port, and never looking back. Azana reveled in the hardships and dangers of a sailor's life until one day his ship was wrecked. After weeks adrift, knowing he was on the brink of death, Azana prayed fervently to Poseidon for rescue. Poseidon heard his prayers, guided him to safety, and restored his health. In return, Azana devoted himself to his patron. And incredibly, he discovered that the more he gave of himself to Poseidon, the more Poseidon gave to him! As he grows in prowess and skill, he knows the power flowing through him emanates from Poseidon (When invoking his patron during battle, Azana grunts oaths such as, "By Poseidon's briny beard!"). Feeling stronger and more confident than ever, Azana is eager to test the limits of his power and see just how strong he can become. He is ready to follow any rumor or venture to any destination in pursuit of action and adventure.

In writing Azana's backstory, I deliberately tried to answer these questions: "Why is this person suddenly stepping out from their ordinary world and venturing into a new one *now*," and, "Why is this person suddenly growing so powerful *now*." As in many TTRPGs, PCs in D&D accumulate experience points, or XP, that allows them to "level up" and become stronger in the game by, for instance, gaining extra attacks per round or dealing more damage per attack. Azana's backstory explains the source and reason for these power-ups.

Moreover, I tried to envision his past (the regressive step), to look the other way and consider what his future may hold (the progressive step), to describe his biographic present (the analytical step), and to weave the various strands together to construct his identity (the synthetical step). I think the result is a compelling PC to play, but also, given the world of fantasy and imagination he inhabits, a believable one.

When I took a step back and asked myself, "What events in my life may be represented in Azana's biography," I made some intriguing connections and saw some clear parallels. Although the differences are myriad (for instance, I have no experience with martial arts, no experience as a sailor, and just two small tattoos), we are alike in terms of surviving a traumatic experience and devoting ourselves to something as a result of working through the trauma.

The Covid pandemic certainly felt like a shipwreck moment. I felt unmoored and adrift as if lost at sea. And in the midst of the catastrophe, I found relief in exercise. Like many Americans, I bought a Peloton cycle and began a routine of regular physical fitness. This grew from cycling for twenty minutes two or three days a week, to my current regimen of exercising for 60-90 minutes daily. I added a Peloton rowing machine to the equipment collection, took up yoga, Pilates, and strength training, joined the neighborhood track club, and started running in local 5K races.

Like Azana, I have discovered that the more I give to the god of exercise, the more he gives back to me! One could say that Azana found salvation in Poseidon, while I found salvation in Peloton. The depth of the importance of exercise to me, and the significance of it to my life right now, became evident as a result of creating the character of Azana and then reflecting on where those choices came from and what they revealed. It was a surprising and rewarding moment of self-discovery.

Carbon and Balance

I created Carbon for use in online play. Our group meets every Friday using Start Playing, D&D Beyond, Roll 20, and Discord. Advantages to playing online include the vivid, immersive virtual environment and connecting with people from all over the world. Our group has players from Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, and even Austria. Disadvantages include all the things that cause me to flashback to trying to teach online during Covid and quarantine—someone forgets to "unmute" or someone's mic cuts out and you miss critical information (The DM announces, "The door slowly opens and you are shocked to see … . Quick, what do you do?" An anxious player pleads, "Um, you cut out. Can you repeat that?").

Carbon's comrades are Giljoy, a halfling rogue, angsty as she is angry; Boaz, a bugbear soldier, running from his responsibilities to his child and baby momma; and Silas, an elf fighter, who has a carefree swagger despite owing a hundred souls to an impatient demon. The setting for their adventures is the city of Waterdeep in the Sword Coast of the Forgotten Realms, a well-established location presented in *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* (Perkins et al., 2018), one of a plethora of books published by Wizards of the Coast that provide the DM with everything he needs (maps, adventure hooks, clues, side quests, NPCs, and more).

Carbon is a 7' tall, 200 pound humanoid dragon. In D&D terms, he is a dragonborn monk with black dragon ancestry. He walks on two legs and has arms like a human, but he also has the scales, horns, and tail of a dragon. From an early age, Carbon demonstrated an inner struggle to reconcile two conflicting impulses—civility and barbarity. As a child, due to his violent and unpredictable outbursts, Carbon was abandoned by his parents and entrusted to the care of a monastery. The orphan Carbon gradually responded to the training and discipline of the halfling monks and learned to control his rage and savagery. But the cultured personality remains only a thin veneer under which lurks the vicious and turbulent alter ego yearning to break free. Calm Carbon is pacific, reflective, and curious; wild Carbon fights like the xenomorph in *Alien*, throwing quick punches, savage kicks, devastating head butts, and bone crushing tail whips, with a single-minded focus on carnage.

Creating Carbon was a lot of fun. I thought that a character modeled after the archetype of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or Bruce Banner and the Hulk, offered a lot of opportunities for intriguing role-playing, but I also tried to better flesh out his identity by considering his past, future, and present.

Why has he left his ordinary world and taken up adventuring? Carbon's dual nature—one cultivating wisdom and self-control while the other craves destruction and violence—finds satisfaction in adventuring. Why is he suddenly adventuring *now*? The monks who raised Carbon were halflings, the D&D equivalent of the diminutive hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* series (see Tolkien, 1954/2002). Like Buddy the elf in the movie *Elf* (Favreau, 2003), Carbon didn't realize the burden his relatively gargantuan size placed upon his adopted community. There simply came a time when the halflings, who were eager to see Carbon set out on his own, finally compelled him to venture forth. How is his future interwoven with his past? Carbon hopes to acquire enough influence and wealth to found his own monastery some day and help others as he was helped. He hopes to pay it forward.

I also gave a lot of thought to Carbon's ideals. His worldview is heavily influenced by his belief in the importance of *balance*. Personally, he strives to reconcile his savage and civilized natures. Educationally, his monastic training reinforced the importance of balancing self-mastery of body and mind. Spiritually, he worships Yondalla, a halfling deity who manifests the aspects of both the fierce protector and the generous provider. Politically, he is aligned with the Harpers, a semi-secret organization that seeks to monitor and maintain the balance of power structures throughout the realms.

Carbon's membership in the Harpers came about as a result of game play. Due to the nature of TTRPGs, characters change and grow as the narrative unfolds. In this case, Carbon had to choose a faction to join. The DM presented various options that included, but were not limited to the Emerald Enclave, concerned primarily with protecting the natural world and the environment; the Lord's Alliance, concerned primarily with the economic stability of financial markets and protecting the interests of merchants and rulers; the Zhentarim, a shadowy network of spies, smugglers, thieves, assassins, and others of that ilk; and the Harpers, concerned primarily with maintaining balance throughout the realm to ensure no person, group, or interest dominates the others. I thought carefully about which group Carbon would naturally gravitate towards. Once I made the decision that he would join the Harpers, it seemed completely appropriate for him. And when I reflected on what the choice of the Harpers might reveal about me, it also seemed entirely appropriate.

I am certain that Carbon's concern with maintaining balance throughout the realm is an expression of my own anxiety about the current political climate in the US, in which democracy itself seems threatened. Under Donald Trump's presidency, our nation seems to be sliding toward autocracy and authoritarianism, and norms of political tradition that usually maintain a system of checks and balances seem to be collapsing and eroding. Furthermore, in a world of Trumpism, it's not enough to merely disagree with others—opponents must be mocked, silenced, or destroyed. I believe a healthy dose of balance is desperately needed if we are to preserve what Abraham Lincoln often referred to as the American experiment. Lincoln's words capture a sense of the fragility and tentativeness of our political system. It needs constant attention and care. The Harpers represent hope that the center can hold and that balance can be sustained, so of course Carbon and I would be attracted to it. No other choice would have made sense for him or for me.

HARNISH AND LIBERATION

I created Harnish so I would have a back-up character. You never know when you will be invited to join a new campaign or when one of your characters will be reduced to zero hit points

(and die). Fortunately, he's just warming the bench for now, since Carbon and Azana are alive and well.

Harnish Ewan MacMiller (AKA Arnie or Mac) has the mien of a soldier. In D&D terms, he is a human wizard. With close-cropped hair, upright posture, and neatly stowed gear, he stands as if ready for inspection. Harnish eschews the traditional garb of wizards. He doesn't carry a staff or use a wand, he doesn't have a beard, and he doesn't wear a pointy hat or flowing robe. Harnish was born into a family of modest means. His father dabbled in myriad ventures as a brewer, cobbler, and tinker, but he excelled at none. Harnish, on the other hand, demonstrated early on a surprisingly profound proclivity for magic.

Although unsure how to pay for it, his father sent Harnish off to wizarding school. Harnish applied himself as much to his schooling as to working odd jobs in neighboring libraries and monasteries, earning a wage as well as studying ancient tomes and scrolls when possible. Despite his efforts, upon completion of his studies, he had debts to pay, so he put his pyromancy skills to use in the army as an artillerist and eventually paid back his student loans.

Now, having earned his education at wizarding school, served his time in the military, and settled his debts, he feels completely liberated. At last, he is free of the rigor of the academy and the routine of the army. He is free to make his own plans, free to pick his own missions, and free to choose his own adventures!

In writing Harnish's backstory using *currere*, I tried to create a past and future that had significance and relevance to his present situation and synthesize all three into a coherent identity. When I stepped back and asked myself in what ways the choices I made for his life story are a reflection of my own life story, I was stuck. I'm no wizard, haven't served in the army, and am not attracted to playing with fire. But then I realized that Harnish's sense of liberation and freedom mirrors my frame of mind in retirement.

After 35 grueling years as an English teacher, trying to crawl my way out from beneath mountains of essays to read and papers to grade, I certainly feel free at last! I am thoroughly enjoying spending time however I choose each day. This shared sense of liberation seems so obvious and apt to me now that I wonder how I initially missed it. However, on reflection, I am surprised to see the *depth* of my feelings. The process of reflection makes me realize just how very confined I felt then and how incredibly free I feel now and how excited I am to embrace the future.

Hopefully, these three examples have demonstrated how *currere* provided a framework that brought these PCs to life, enhanced character creation, and improved role-playing. As they continue to explore dungeons and fight dragons and have adventures, I am looking forward to seeing how they evolve—and I am looking forward to learning more about myself along the way.

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