



SERIOUS FANDOMS—AN INTERVIEW WITH LINDA CODEGA

Evan Torner & Linda Codega

Abstract

AGS Editor Evan Torner interviews Linda Codega, who writes not only journalism but long-form critique, fandom analyses, speculative fiction, and experimental tabletop role-playing games. Codega has extensively reported on Wizards of the Coast's initial abandonment in January 2023 of the Open Game License (OGL) for *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).

Keywords

interview, TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, D&D, Wizards of the Coast, Open Game License, OGL, fandom, journalism

"D&D has its merits, but none so great or as impactful as its players."

Linda Codega (they/them) has become one of the most important voices in tabletop gaming, thanks to their tireless reporting on Wizards of the Coast's initial abandonment of the Open Game License (OGL) for Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in January 2023.¹ They describe themselves as a "queer, nonbinary Southerner living in Yankeeland" who writes not only journalism, but long-form critique, fandom analyses, speculative fiction, and experimental tabletop role-playing games.² A more serious and dedicated fan of contemporary genre fiction and gaming would be difficult to find. AGS Editor Evan Torner was able to drop them a few questions during their busy writing schedule.

Evan Torner (ET): It has already been an eventful 2023 for you. How has life been as a tabletop gaming journalist these past few months

Linda Codega (LC): It's not an exaggeration to say that January was one of the most eventful months in tabletop history. To have the biggest industry in the game (I'm sorry) brought low by journalistic investigations was both overwhelming and wonderful. There was always another story, another angle, or another investigation to take on, and I'm still not out of the weeds. My name is

¹ Linda Codega, "Dungeons & Dragons' New License Tightens Its Grip on Competition," *Gizmodo*, January 5, 2023, <https://gizmodo.com/dnd-wizards-of-the-coast-ogl-1-1-open-gaming-license-1849950634>.

² See <https://lincodega.itch.io/>.

going to be forever tied to *D&D*'s OGL, and that is... a wild feeling. Regardless, [January was] a historical month in tabletop gaming, and the next few months, if not the next few years, will reference January 2023 as an inflection point for the industry.

ET: Some of us are puzzled that *D&D* got this big in the first place. In the late 1990s, and also in the 2010s before its 5th Edition, *D&D* was clearly behind the design curve in TTRPGs and was considered kind of a lumbering embarrassment. What changed to make it this ultra-contested IP?

LC: Fan engagement! Plain and simple people started to care about tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) when fans started posting about playing *D&D*. It's one of the first, and has always kind of had this cultural capital, so when folks latched onto creating content, they went for *D&D* because it was a brand in a way a lot of the other TTRPGs weren't. It's just kind of "The Classic RPG" and it got popular because fans made it popular. *D&D* has its merits, but none so great or as impactful as its players.

ET: Let us dial it back even further. How did you get into tabletop gaming journalism? Many of us at AGS are professors and would love to know how higher education or other intellectual communities helped you arrive where you are.

LC: Oh, this might be a disappointment, but my higher education experience was less than ideal and didn't contribute much to my post-school career. I really got started in TTRPG journalism when I was working full-time at a marketing job and feeling incredibly unfulfilled in my work. In my spare time, I decided to start pitching articles to various outlets about my hobbies, which happened to include TTRPGs. One byline led to another, and I landed a staff writing job at *io9* last year, where I write about all things nerdy, which can be overwhelming.

ET: OK, so higher education is a dumpster fire, no matter where in the world you look. What particular nerdy communities embraced you and your work?

LC: Definitely found a lot of support in writing groups and online. Just people like me who were looking to have fun making up stories. Finding people who love your work is always important, even as you try to leverage your work into great opportunities.

ET: What do you see as your primary duties in doing tabletop games journalism? How does it differ from journalism on other media or topics?

LC: For me, I try to focus on what indie creators are doing; how they're pushing change, and what they're doing to support creators and peers in the industry. Indie creators are pushing boundaries every week and anything that a big company does, an indie designer made trendy three years ago. I also think that a lot of gaming companies have been able to get away with a ton because of their



Figure 1: Linda Codega, from their *io9* author profile. Used with permission.

cultural status, which has bred bad behavior and engendered a lot of horror stories. Unfortunately, this isn't that different from other media; entertainment companies of all stripes are a dream job for a lot of creatives and designers, and that allows these kinds of companies to take advantage of workers, which takes shape in a lot of different ways.

The biggest difference for me is reviewing games vs. reviewing other pieces of media. It's just a different experience that requires different kinds of considerations. Playing the game is always a bit of a barrier, and working to get a holistic gaming experience isn't always the easiest. The personal investment in games is very different than other media and I think that figuring out how good a game *is* versus how much you enjoy occupying your own imagination is an interesting line to walk within criticism.

ET: What is the difference, in your experience, between reading and playing a game?

LC: The final result.

ET: What seems to be your method or philosophy in handling the social media side of your job?

LC: It can be distilled pretty effectively as "don't take shit, but don't take shit personally." I'm terminally online, and I recognize that my kind of weird, off-beat posting is part of my silly little personal brand that happens to be my personality. More than any of that, social media is a necessary evil: it's how I find sources, connect with the industry, and watch trends. It's important that I stay active on social media for those reasons, so why not have fun with it?

ET: This sense of playful delight is also why your game reviews are fun to read. What is the importance of having emotional investments (especially in fandoms) when it comes to journalistic writing?

LC: Honestly, the trick is to care just enough to put your all into your work but not care enough to take it personally when people disagree with you. You need to care about what you put out there, you need to really love your own voice and your own ideas, and respect that they are simply your ideas. Eventually other people might care, but the end goal should always be to articulate your perspective to the best of your ability.



Evan Torner, PhD (he/him) is Associate Professor of German Studies and Film & Media Studies at the University of Cincinnati, where he also serves as Undergraduate Director of German Studies and Director of the UC Game Lab. He is co-founder and an Editor of the journal *Analog Game Studies* and coordinating editor at the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. His fields of expertise include East German genre cinema, German film history, critical race theory, science fiction, role-playing game studies, Nordic larp, cultural criticism, and second-language pedagogy.