French, Emma (2024) *'How Do You Want to Do This?': Dungeons & Dragons as transformative fantasy.* PhD thesis

https://theses.gla.ac.uk/84805/

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses
https://theses.gla.ac.uk/
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

University of Glasgow | School of Critical Studies

‘How Do You Want to Do This?’: *Dungeons & Dragons* as Transformative Fantasy

Emma Louise French
BA English Language & Literature Oriel College, University of Oxford
MLitt Fantasy University of Glasgow

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Critical Studies
College of Arts
University of Glasgow

© Emma French, 2024

Abstract

This thesis examines *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D)* as a source of transformative fantasy. It explores the processes by which *D&D* players creatively revise, reimagine, and rebel against the conventions of fantasy that are condensed and handed to them by the *D&D* game text. Approaching fantasy as both a literary and transmedial phenomenon using Helen Young's term, 'fantasy genre-culture', which places fantasy's 'textual practices within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy', this thesis argues that *D&D* is capable of encompassing many of the above aspects of genre-culture. It also allows players to react to these different discursive aspects of fantasy through play. Utilising Jessica Hammer's framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary authorship in her work 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', this thesis examines how each of *D&D's* author figures – the game designers, the Dungeon Master/Game Master, and the player – interact and respond to fantasy genre-culture, working to preserve and/or contribute new meanings to the communal definitions and conventions of fantasy. I examine examples taken from actual play media, to demonstrate instances where *D&D* gameplay has either reacted to canonical fantasy texts such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter,* or produced revisionist approaches to fantasy's prevalent textual conventions, such as race. It is often through a direct confrontation with rules – generic convention preserved and reduced down into inflexible game rubric – that a challenge to fantasy's 'stereotypical' mould occurs.

In particular, I argue that the contemporary context of *D&D* – that is, the advent of *D&D* actual play as a form of fantasy media, in which *D&D* games are broadcast and consumed as their own fictional fantasy narratives – means that the texts and meanings produced by DMs and players, as secondary and tertiary authors, have a greater sway over fantasy genre-culture than ever before. These once fannish, amateur, and often private contributions to genre-culture are now public and professional, while often retaining their transformative approach to fantasy. My chapters close-read examples from *D&D* paratexts and tie-in novels published by Wizards of the Coast, alongside actual play texts such as *Critical Role, Dimension 20,* and *The Black Dice Society.*

Table of Contents

List of Figures....4

Acknowledgements....5

A Brief Note on Citation Practices....6

Author's Declaration....7

Introduction....8

- Key Definitions....12
- Methodology....15
- Structure and Approaches: Chapter-by-Chapter....19

Chapter One: *Dungeons & Dragons* and Fantasy Genre-Culture....22

- *D&D* and Fantasy Literature....25
- *D&D* and Fantasy *Scholarship*....27
- Roleplaying Game Scholarship and *D&D*....38
- *D&D* as Transformative Fantasy and Transformative Fanwork....48
- Conclusion....60

Chapter Two: Playing with the Rules of Genre – *D&D* as Literary Intertext....63

- *D&D* and Literature: The Artistic Merit of Formula....64
- *D&D*'s Literary Franchises: The Case of *Dragonlance*....69
- *D&D* as Shared Language....77
- Subversions of Formula: *The Colour of Magic* and *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*....85
- Conclusion: *D&D* as Formula and Formulaic Subversion....94

Chapter Three: 'What a Nice Story – Let's Do It Again' – *Critical Role*, Iterative Play, and Fantasy Genre Awareness....101

- *Critical Role*: An Overview....104
- Beginnings: Player Characters as Expressed Relationships to Fantasy Genre-Culture....108
- Middles: Players' Narrative Agency and Fantasy Literacy....121
- Endings: The Balance Between Primary and Tertiary Texts....130
- Conclusion....138

Chapter Four: 'You were not born with venom in your veins' – *D&D's* Drow Elves, and Actual Play Reinterpretations of Dark Otherness....143

- Diversifying and Decolonising *D&D* in 2020....144
- Race, Monstrosity, and *D&D*....148
- The Primary Text: Drow as Dark Other....152
- The Case of Drizzt Do'Urden....158
- Secondary and Tertiary Authorial Agency and Race....165

Deconstructing Dark Otherness: *Critical Role's* Kryn Dynasty 169

Monstrous Matriarchy: Lilith in *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep*................176

Drow as Transformative Fantasy: Tanya DePass and *The Black Dice Society*..............183

Conclusion 191

Chapter Five: 'The Summer of Aabria' – Communal Authorship and Authority in Actual Play Franchises 196

Aabria Iyengar and 'The Summer of Aabria'...199

D&D, Authorship, and Authority..202

No Longer 'Secondary' Authors: DMs as Auteurs 205

Collaborative Authority: Difference and Deference 215

'Difference and Deference in Worldsharing': *Critical Role: Exandria Unlimited*........218

Difference and Deference as a Response to Fantasy Literature: *Dimension 20: Misfits and Magic*..228

Conclusion..238

Conclusion 243

Bibliography 252

List of Figures

Figure 1: female reimaginings of Gandalf the White (Kasara the Beige) and Samwise Gamgee (Galfast Hamhead) in *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep*. 'Episode 2: Volcano of Violence', https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep/season:1/videos/volcano-of-violence, (2:00-2:05)..10

Figure 2: a typical set up for *Critical Role* Campaign 2. 'The Endless Burrows | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 50', *YouTube.com*, (20 December 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRFetHZDSg4, (1:06:17)……………………………...105

Figure 3: 'star razor exalted' by @ambikyu on twitter. *Twitter.com*, (25 October 2020), https://x.com/ambikyu/status/1320387595805876225...127

Figure 4: An illustration of drow matriarchs guiding slaves through the Underdark. *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2018), p.52……………………………………………………………………………….156

Figure 5: The Bright Queen and her Court, lit by the Luxon beacon. *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2020), p.34……………………………173

Figure 6: a screenshot of Lilith's battle mini. As a drider, Lilith is the largest player mini in the campaign. 'Lilith: Battle mini', *Dimension 20 Fandom Wiki*, https://dimension20.fandom.com/wiki/Lilith?file=Lilith_Battle_Mini.png.........................178

Figure 7: Official artwork of Fen from the *Black Dice Society*. 'Characters', *Black Dice Society Wiki*, https://black-dice-society.fandom.com/wiki/Characters................................187

Figure 8: Promotional image of *Dimension 20*. Promotional images following 2021 have since positioned Mulligan amongst other players and GMs. Dimension 20, *IMDb*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9646546/...200

Figure 9: Photoshopped mock-up of *Summer of Aabria* 'Tome' by 'Sam/LotusFlair' (@darling_sammy), https://twitter.com/darling_sammy/status/1410681432893050880......211

Figure 10: Published map of Tal'Dorei, updated in 2021 to include Iyengar's creation 'Niirdal-Poc'. *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (Los Angeles: Darrington Press, 2021), p.282……………………………………………………………………………..….221

Acknowledgements

Although beginning a PhD in 2020 was an isolating experience, my sense of isolation eventually proved to be a lie. This thesis would never have been possible, without the support of a huge number of people!

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Matthew Sangster and Professor Timothy Barker for their invaluable support, positivity, and insightful feedback. I know that every academic piece I have written has become stronger, through your help. Thank you to Matt for also supervising me through my MLitt dissertation, and for encouraging me to pursue academia even further! Thank you to the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic Core Team, and Professor Dimitra Fimi specifically, for providing me with many wonderful opportunities to discuss my research, and for taking the time and effort to build and nurture a rich, vibrant scholarly community that it is truly a joy to be part of.

Now… time to thank that rich, vibrant scholarly community! I want to say thank you to Grace, Katarina, Mariana, Marita, Meg, and Luise for all being inspirations and wonderful, supportive friends. I felt very alone at certain points in the thesis writing process. Because of you all, I now can't imagine ever feeling alone in Glasgow, ever again! Thank you also to Fran and Brigitte, who may not be fantasists and may not even be in Glasgow (rude), but who have always been my sisters in academic solidarity.

I want to thank my parents for everything they've helped me bring to this project. My father, David French, for leaving me a love of fantasy and storytelling to inherit… and mum and Chris, for doing the actual hard work of putting up with me while I've been working on this! Thank you both for your kindness, love, support, and belief in me. Additional thanks to Jester and Vex (the cats, not the characters), for many cuddles during my corrections.

And finally, to every single friendship I have made through… you guessed it! Playing *D&D*! Every table I've been at – good and bad, silly or serious – has informed the thinking behind this project, but thank you to all the people I currently play with, for providing a welcome escape from a sometimes-scary reality! Thank you especially to Katie and Karen, who have stuck with me from the first game I played before this PhD ever started, to becoming my biggest supporters in the first game I ever DM'ed. I love making stories, overanalysing decisions, and most importantly, romancing fictional characters with you both – let's keep doing it together, for many years to come!

A Brief Note on Citation Practices

All links included in this thesis were accessed on 10th June 2024, unless otherwise stated.

In the case of authors whose preferred name is now different from the name under which their academic sources were published, their preferred name is used throughout the text of this thesis. This means there may be occasional, marginal discrepancies between in-text references, and the name cited in my footnotes and bibliography.

All quotations taken from actual play shows use transcription from the official subtitles provided by the companies themselves, typically uploaded to the closed captions on YouTube and/or dropout.tv.

Author’s Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signed: Emma French

Date: 10-06-24

Introduction

> **Brennan Lee Mulligan (Dungeon Master)**: This was supposed to be the evil game! This was the evil one! D&D is too powerful a force for good in the world! I'm like 'wow, working together and being united in social situations really makes me see that we *are* all in it together!'
>
> 'Episode 5: Bloodlines and Lifelines', *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep* (1:52:34 – 1:52:56).

The above quotation is taken from the penultimate episode of the 2019 actual play series *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep*. This recorded *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) game played by professional actors followed a very simple premise: it reimagines events of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* from the perspective of the losing side, the forces of evil. After the unexpected death of 'Sauron' (here Zaul'Nazh), six players and their characters – each a Dark General and part of Zaul'Nazh's ruling council – attempt to navigate the power vacuum left behind in this version of Mordor.

Brennan Lee Mulligan's exclamation marks a pivotal moment in the campaign, where the story's trajectory unexpectedly changes and escapes even the grasp of the Dungeon Master (DM). Despite the supposed 'evil' alignment of the party, the players choose to ally with one another, and rally collectively behind a single heir to the throne. As a result, the final battle map which Mulligan prepared as a stage for them 'to have to fight each other to the death' and 'immediately gonna be in competition' [*sic.*] is hastily repurposed for a siege against an external force, as competition becomes collaboration.[1] Despite the DM's intentions, it has not occurred to the players in their reading of the text that this competitive outcome was even a possibility.

Escape from the Bloodkeep, and this moment in particular, is a perfect illustration of the central concern of this thesis: the multifaceted relationship between the fantasy tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) *D&D* and fantasy literature, or more broadly what Helen Young terms ‘fantasy genre-culture’.[2] When describing this campaign early in its run, Mulligan explained, ‘*Escape from the Bloodkeep* is our first foray into an actual world of high fantasy […] which will have a lot of very familiar aspects from […] the primary source of a lot of *D&D* lore’.[3] In this description, ‘high fantasy’, J.R.R. Tolkien’s subcreation of Arda, and ‘*D&D* lore’, all become interchangeable. There is an implied close intertextual relationship between *D&D,* definitions of fantasy, and the fantasy canon. Like Brian Attebery, Mulligan treats *Lord of the Rings* as a presumed universal signifier of fantasy – the centre of fantasy’s ‘fuzzy set’, which renders the genre recognisable to others.[4]

---

[1] Dimension 20, 'Escape from the Bloodkeep: Behind the Scenes', dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/videos/escape-from-the-bloodkeep-behind-the-scenes (7:17-7:38).

As a parody of *Lord of the Rings*, *Escape from the Bloodkeep* mimics many of its characters and structures. It makes overt intertextual references to Middle-earth’s mythos, albeit through a playful lens: players encounter characters such as the wizard ‘Kasara the Beige’, the halflings ‘Galfast Hamhead’ and ‘Drova Longfoot’, and the human ranger ‘Stalker’. Reliance upon *Lord of the Rings* as an intertext also allows for certain players to demonstrate their subcultural capital as fans of Tolkien. ‘Subcultural capital’ is a term proposed by Sarah Thornton, modifying Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’ by applying it specifically to the context of fan subculture, divorced in part from economic class. Subcultural capital ‘can be *objectified* or *embodied* […] in the form of being in the know’: it demonstrates in-depth, insider knowledge of the object of fandom, as a display of status within that specific community.[5] While Mulligan as DM mostly alludes to the Peter Jackson movie adaptations that are presumed legible to all players at the table, he – along with players Erika Ishii, Matthew Mercer, and Michael Trapp – also reference Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* throughout. The subcultural capital of being a fantasy reader, or well-versed fantasy fan, is a valuable resource at a *D&D* table. A player or viewer who comes to *Escape from the Bloodkeep* with a greater awareness of Tolkien’s works will likely recognise more references, and as a result interpret the text differently from someone entering blind.

Escape from the Bloodkeep might seem derivative of *Lord of the Rings*: a replica fanwork that intensifies players’ affective connections by incorporating them into the action of a world they love. However, this is only one interpretation of the text, that is harder to sustain as the campaign's narrative progresses. Critical interpretations of Tolkien's thematic structures – and thus fantasy's conventions – are engendered into this campaign from the very beginning. For instance, it reimagines all members of the Fellowship as women, addressing concerns regarding the gender imbalance within Tolkien and high fantasy more generally (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, players discuss the metafictional purpose evil serves within fantasy both in and out of character, satirically deconstructing its typical textual markers, and thus interrogating wider fantasy genre-culture.

---

[2] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.9.

[3] ‘Escape from the Bloodkeep: Behind the Scenes’ (2:29-2:41).

[4] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.12-14.

[5] ‘Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p.11.

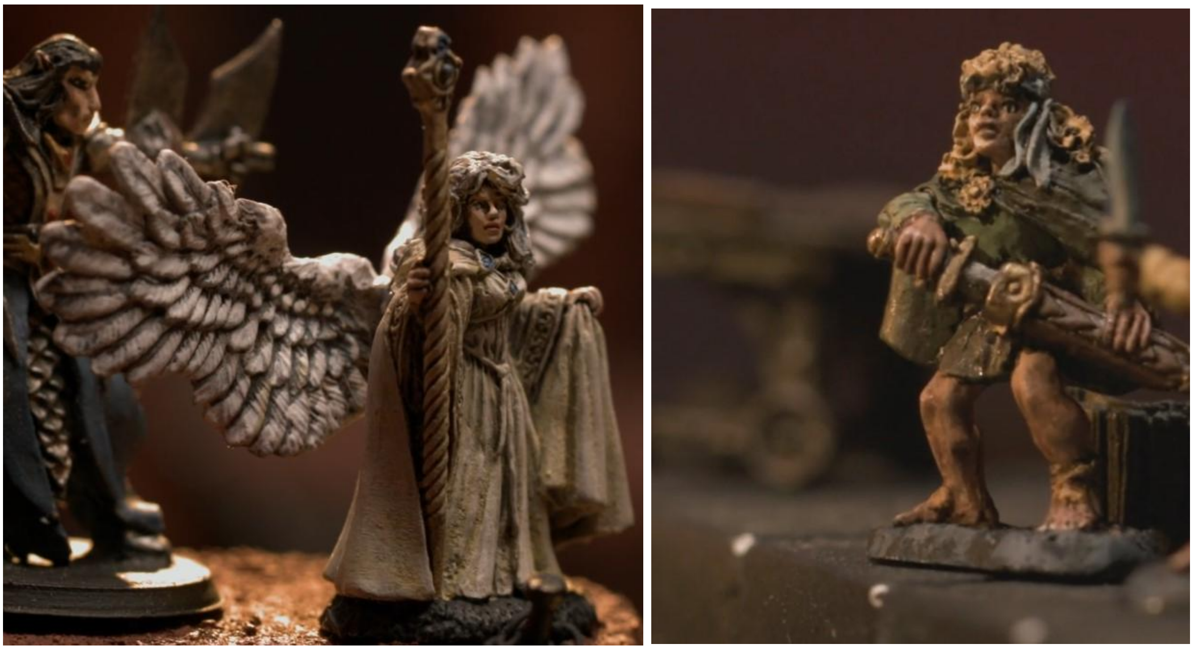


Figure 1: female reimaginings of Gandalf the White (Kasara the Beige) and Samwise Gamgee (Galfast Hamhead) in *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep.* 'Episode 2: Volcano of Violence', *dropout.tv*, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep/season:1/videos/volcano-of-violence (2:00-2:05), [screenshots taken by author].

These critical revisions were in part engineered by the DM, who wrote these non-player characters (NPCs), and designed a game where his players adopt the perspective of the evil Other. However, in the moment outlined above, the players refuse to fight each other and remake the premise of the story again. The narrative's meaning is suddenly, unexpectedly changed in a way the DM could never predict. Defying both fantasy's and the DM's understanding of evil, the players produce a new text, one that responds to the conventions of fantasy but denies them authority. A new version of Mordor comes into being, with a meaning independent from the texts that have come before: 'what a […] bizarrely touching story […] a bunch of like very damaged people […] all found meaning and hope in each other'.[6] Rather than remaining a faceless horde, Mordor's forces are protagonised, and this forms a point of empathetic connection that erases their Otherness.

Mulligan argues that it is the social structures of *D&D* that result in this unexpected turn, that 'being united in social situations really makes me see that we *are* all in it together!' This is partially true: *D&D* is, by definition, a collaborative medium, in which players must work together cohesively. But *D&D* also engenders a collaborative approach to narrative, one that dismantles the authority of a singular author: no one, not the DM, and certainly not Tolkien, holds sole ownership over the story being created.

Interpretations of the text must be shared, and consensus must be reached. One notable aspect of *Escape from the Bloodkeep* is that its cast is mostly female and non-white players, each of whom consciously or unconsciously bring new, subversive, and critical readings of Tolkien's text literally to the table. These readings have as much validity as the DM's vision for the game, and eventually supersede it. Here, critical and subversive perspectives on the centre of fantasy's 'fuzzy set' have agency. Even Mulligan's reimagining of Arda is not preserved, but changes to incorporate a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.

Escape from the Bloodkeep is thus not a replication, but a reimagining of Tolkien's text. *D&D* has facilitated a transformative response to *Lord of the Rings,* connected to wider thematic concerns within fantasy. The players make this text, and thus fantasy as a concept, their own. While subversive from its inception, in the hands of the players, the narrative exceeds even the DM's expectations. What results is a new text – one that utilises the conventions of fantasy genre-culture, but also interrogates, challenges, and dismantles them.

This thesis hopes to explore the processes by which *D&D* players creatively revise, reimagine, and rebel against the conventions of fantasy handed to them by the *D&D* game text. It approaches fantasy as both a literary and transmedial phenomenon. Using Young's term, 'fantasy genre-culture', it places fantasy's 'textual practices within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy'.[7] This thesis argues that *D&D* is a text capable of encompassing many of the above aspects of genre-culture. Utilising Jessica Hammer's framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary authorship in her work 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing ‘Texts’’, this thesis will examine how each of *D&D’s* author figures – the game designers, the Dungeon Master/Game Master, and the player – react and respond to fantasy genre-culture, working to preserve and/or contribute new meanings to the communal definitions and conventions of fantasy.[8]

---

[6] 'Escape from the Bloodkeep: Behind the Scenes' (11:03-11:13).

[7] Young, p.5.

In particular, this thesis argues that the contemporary context of *D&D* – that is, the advent of *D&D* actual play as a form of fantasy media, in which *D&D* games are broadcast and consumed as their own original fantasy narratives – results in the meanings produced by DMs and players, as secondary and tertiary authors, having a greater sway over fantasy genre-culture and its discourses than ever before. These once fannish, amateur, and often private contributions to genre-culture are now public and professional, while still retaining their transformative approach to fantasy.

Key Definitions

Daniel Mackay notes that ‘every role-playing game rulebook has an obligatory section […] titled “What Is A Role-Playing Game?”’ – the same is also true for academic texts on the subject.[9] I have attempted to make my job easier by employing a narrower focus in this thesis than TRPGs as a genre, thus avoiding having to find a definition that encompasses many different permutations of roleplaying, and the minutiae of many different rulesets. Instead, my thesis focuses on one long-running TRPG text, *Dungeons & Dragons,* and even more specifically on *D&D 5th Edition,* published by Wizards of the Coast (WotC). While I do mention previous iterations of *D&D* in gestures to its now fifty-year history, the concerns of my research directly pertain to *D&D 5th Edition*, published in August 2014.

The reasoning for this spotlight on *D&D 5th Edition* is two-fold. Firstly, *D&D* defines itself as a *fantasy* roleplaying game: the introduction of the *D&D Player’s Handbook* states that ‘The *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery’.[10] *D&D* is a text that, from its inception in 1974, has defined itself as part of and in response to the fantasy genre – as will be discussed during the literature review. I focus on

---

[8] Jessica Hammer, ‘Agency and Authority in Role-playing ‘Texts’’, in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.70).

[9] Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001), p.4.

[10] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player’s Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.5.

5th Edition due to this thesis' dual focus on *D&D* and *D&D* actual play. Several critics have identified the design choices of *5th Edition*, which removed more complex rules and tailored the game more towards roleplay, as a change within *D&D* subculture that triggered actual play's popularity. *D&D 5th Edition* is perceived as 'a streamlined, accessible game system that […] made it easier for new and returning players to jump in', undoing radical changes in the *4th Edition* which alienated portions of the player base. [11] This encouraged the creation and consumption of actual play media, as *D&D* became more appealing to content creators and easier for viewers to understand. I focus on *5th Edition* here, as it provided the rules and parameters within which the actual play media I analyse was made.

Therefore, whenever this thesis refers to *D&D* (or, in time, the 'primary text') it will be discussing *D&D 5th Edition*, unless otherwise stated. *D&D 5th Edition* is a TRPG, which Jennifer Grouling defines as 'a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience'.[12] *D&D 5th Edition* advertises fidelity to this definition and also places emphasis on narrative, identifying itself as 'an exercise in collaborative creation', in which 'your collective creativity will build stories that you will tell again and again'.[13]

The means by which these stories are built is typically through combat encounters, narration, improvised performance of player and NPC dialogue, and the rolling of dice. One player 'takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM), the game's lead storyteller and referee', managing the mechanics of the world and the NPCs, while other players will typically control one character of their own making, who participates in the communal narrative of an adventuring party.[14] At its most basic, *D&D 5th Edition* gameplay unfolds as follows: '1. The DM describes the environment […] 2. The players describe what they want to do. […] 3. The DM narrates the results of the adventurers' actions'.[15] These results are typically mediated through the ruleset, which offers a series of 'skill checks' and other rolls, which are then resolved through dice. According to WotC, 'anything is possible, but the dice make some outcomes more probable than others'.[16]

---

[11] Stephanie Hedge and Jennifer Grouling, 'Introduction', in *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.1-16 (p.3).

[12] Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), p.168.

[13] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.4.

[14] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.5.

[15] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.6.

The final definition that needs to be outlined here is that of *D&D* actual play or 'actual play media'. Actual play refers to 'the live streaming or recording of people playing role-playing games to be consumed by others in the form of videos and/or podcasts'.[17] Derived from an earlier term, 'play reports' shared on internet forums like *The Forge*, today 'actual play' typically refers to edited and unedited television shows, livestreams, and podcasts that record professional or amateur TRPG players interacting with one another both in- and out-of-game.[18] The first of these was Penny Arcade's *Acquisitions Incorporated* in 2007, which was livestreamed and also performed live as on-stage entertainment at the PAX gaming convention.[19] However, this form of media rose to particular prominence in 2014-15, when two high profile shows, *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, began airing. It has since only increased in popularity.

D&D actual play shows typically stage a *D&D* game for both player and audience enjoyment, focusing primarily on the fictional fantasy narrative, while also showcasing social interactions between the players and DM. Although actual play shows may primarily be known for the story being conducted in the imaginary world, parasocial bonds can also be formed with players, and excitement generated through the risks of gameplay – e.g. the potential success of a roll. In 2021, actual play producer Orion Black noted that 'what I think people are starting to realize about tabletop products shows in particular is that it's reality TV'.[20] Both the game frame and the social frame hold interest for viewers. While this thesis is focused on the fictional narratives produced in actual play spaces, Black's argument usefully demonstrates how *D&D* can encompass both the 'textual' and 'social practices' of a genre-culture.

---

[16] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.5.

[17] Shelly Jones (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.5-18 (p.5).

[18] Evan Torner, 'Actual Play Reports: Forge Theory and the Forums', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.20-31 (p.20).

[19] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, '"Kill her, kill Her! Oh God, I'm sorry" – Spectating *Dungeons & Dragons'* in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy*, ed. Christopher Robichaud, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp.175-188 (p.176).

[20] Orion Black, quoted Kam Burns and Kayla Sharpe, 'Live Dungeons & Dragons Shows Are Inviting More Players to the Table', *Wired,* 21 Oct 2021, https://www.wired.com/story/live-dungeons-and-dragons-actual-play-shows-inclusive-diversity/, para.38.

Evan Torner has attempted to ameliorate all definitions of actual play, both past and present, into the following: 'actual play of a tabletop roleplaying game means playing a system and/or scenario and documenting that play somehow for oneself and others'.[21] This is useful for understanding how actual play has evolved as a term, and illustrates how audiences evaluate actual play narrative – not only as fiction, but as a game that can be played with varying degrees of skill. However, in this thesis, the term 'actual play' refers directly to the shows, livestreams, and podcasts that are created and performed with the intent of being consumed as a fictional fantasy narrative, and as entertainment.

Methodology

In this thesis, I will conceive of and examine *D&D* as a transformative response to fantasy genre-culture. I will categorise and interpret the responses *D&D* generates through Hammer's framework of 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', in which she separates a roleplaying game out into three 'primary, secondary, and tertiary texts, with corresponding primary, secondary and tertiary authors'.[22] Hammer creates a hierarchy out of this author chronology: with the primary text belonging to the Game Designer or 'world-builder' (here, WotC), the secondary text belonging to the DM or 'story-builder', and the tertiary text created by the 'story-player' (player), who reacts to the primary and secondary text, and – in Hammer's eyes – finalises and completes the text as a whole.[23]

I take issue with Hammer's notions of hierarchy, and instead frame these texts as an assemblage of different author figures that all react to and interact with one another, rather than each taking a chronological turn in text production. However, each of the three texts Hammer identifies hold a different position within fantasy genre-culture, and her separation is also useful when discussing the transformative relationships individual authors – and each type of authorship – have with fantasy. Primary authors typically seek to condense and taxonomise genre-culture as it exists in their present, while secondary and tertiary authors may have a more transformative, affective, and individualised approach to a genre-culture, which is then expressed through their play. Therefore, this model is useful for articulating how *D&D* functions, and what authority it holds, within fantasy genre-culture.

---

[21] Torner, 'Actual Play Reports', p.20.
[22] Hammer, p.70.
[23] Hammer, p.72.

The majority of scholarly studies of *D&D* and its relationship to fantasy have tended towards auto-ethnography. In their works, Gary Alan Fine, Daniel Mackay, Jennifer Grouling, Antero Garcia, and many others all utilise evidence from games that they either ran or participated in with peers and friends, drawing on their own experiences of play as the major basis for their argumentation. These authors typically provided transcripts of recorded games, as well as interviewing players or narrating anecdotal evidence of individual characters, with varying degrees of formality.

While autoethnographic research and personal gameplay presents a viable body of evidence to draw on, in certain cases, this approach can result in biases. Jennifer Grouling argues there are ‘three types of game play – the dramatist, the simulationist, and the gamist’, with a focus on story, realism, or mechanical optimisation respectively.[24] Unless participating in games across this spectrum, scholarly analysis becomes partially dictated by what play the author wishes to participate in, potentially colouring their findings. Mackay also notes that ‘through our play my players and I developed a lasting friendship and our own idioculture’.[25] Idioculture is a term coined by Gary Alan Fine, referring to the ‘system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction’.[26] Alongside developing personal relationships, prolonged gameplay with a specific group cultivates and sustains a shared understanding of the world, including a particular conception of fantasy genre-culture, held solely by that player group.

In the case of Mackay’s study, and others, an autoethnographic focus also results in only certain player demographics receiving attention. Mackay’s main body of evidence was a game comprised of ‘Wesley as Dom Ixhil Contelliat, Josh as Minya Mardin, Neal as the crazed korred Kurgo Shinsplinter […], Darren as Gwendolin the Mad Mage, and me, the gamemaster’ – these players were all men. Even when his study broadens out to include games played at conventions, Mackay does not mention a single non-male player.[27] This bias has pervaded other academic studies of *D&D*: when examining the treatment of race and gender within the games he observed and participated in, Antero Garcia noted ‘the players during this campaign were predominantly white and predominantly male’, admitting this to be a shortcoming of his particular research method.[28]

---

[24] Grouling Cover, p.170.

[25] Mackay, p.116.

[26] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.136.

[27] Mackay, p.6.

While I have played in and run *D&D 5th Edition* campaigns throughout the duration of this research, and fully admit that this practice has coloured my perspective on the game, in this thesis my primary body of close reading evidence is the recorded gameplay of others, rather than my own. Actual play presents a new and currently underexamined wealth of evidence for *D&D* scholars to draw upon, having developed relatively recently, and flourished within the bounds of the *D&D 5th Edition* system. The popularity of this new form of media has greatly increased *D&D’s* visibility within fantasy subculture and the mainstream. Shelly Jones notes that ‘in 2017, 9 million people watched others play *D&D* on Twitch, immersing themselves in the game without ever having to pick up a die’. This immense popularity and large viewership has, Jones argues, ‘become a phenomenon in modern culture’, contributing to a currently ongoing ‘golden age of tabletop roleplaying games’.[29]

Actual play shows showcase primary, secondary, and tertiary authors – as even when edited, these shows often portray players’ negotiations of the rules present within the primary text, alongside their interactions with the DM and each other’s characters. Actual play shows have also spawned a large paratextual body of theoretical discussion, such as *Dimension 20: Adventuring Academy*, *Critical Role: Talks Machina/4-Sided Dive,* and *The The Adventure Zone Zone*, as well as interviews, media analysis, fan forums, and Q&As, in which players reflect extensively on their own gameplay and praxis. In certain cases, my acts of close reading are conducted when all three texts are considered ‘complete’: while players experienced these narratives as improvisational, a viewer may now approach these texts years later as an archival artefact, potentially (albeit somewhat inaccurately) regarding an actual play narrative as a static text. Being able to approach actual play shows at a relative distance complements my approach to other literary texts within fantasy genre-culture, and, unlike an autoethnographical approach, prevents my own opinions or academic theories posing any active intervention in the text's creation, although it obviously colours my readings of said text.

---

[28] Antero Garcia, ‘“I piss a lot of people off when I play dwarves like dwarves”: Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games’, *Teachers College Record*, Vol.123 No.13, (2021), pp.1-26 (p.7).
[29] Jones, *Watch Us Roll*, pp.5-6.

However, it should be noted that actual play entails its own set of biases, and limits my study to a particular demographic of professional players. Grouling notes that 'in order for the TRPG to fulfil the purpose of creating a narrative, the entire group must share this goal'.[30] Presence at a professional and recorded table entails inevitable player awareness that they are performing for an audience, and creating a fictional, serialised narrative to be consumed. This results in actual play games typically having an emphasis on narrative and storytelling, over combat and ludic mechanics. As such, my examination of these *D&D* narratives as original and creative contributions to fantasy genre-culture is aided by the fact that this is often the explicit intention of the given player group. Actual play has, in fact, contributed to a shift within *D&D's* 'gaming capital' – what Mia Consalvo uses to refer to what gains players status within any particular gaming subculture – towards valuing performance and storytelling skill above (or in addition to) skill in mechanical gameplay.[31]

However, I believe that the intentionality behind actual play complements my theoretical use of Hammer's hierarchy, as well as my wider preoccupation with *D&D's* place within fantasy genre-culture. The audience presence within actual play – either subconsciously in the mind of the player, or physically present in-person or in a *Twitch* chat, Discord server, etc. – produces a self-conscious relationship to authority in the player. The people that Hammer terms secondary and tertiary authors become aware that they are, in fact, authors. Players tangibly feel their status as an authority, and know their text is a text, to be received and interpreted by an audience beyond the players at the table.

While amateur players may simply participate in *D&D* games for fun – and this is certainly a motive amongst professional players as well – actual play practitioners are aware that they are taking on the mantle of author, even within a transformative, fannish space. Players are aware they are existing within a milieu of other texts, and may also become invested in saying something unique as a result. As someone examining secondary and tertiary player texts as responses to fantasy literature and fantasy genre-culture, self-conscious and self-reflexive play provides clearer discussions of authorial intent. A player intent on storytelling, but also on leaving a mark on genre-culture, leads me to a rich body of evidence regarding what such readers and players think *needs* to be said.

---

[30] Grouling Cover, p.129.

[31] Mia Consalvo*, Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p.4.

Utilising actual play as my primary source of close reading evidence allows me to acknowledge that, in the current landscape, certain *D&D* texts have more status and power within fantasy genre-culture than others. It also allows me to examine what authors do, when gifted with this greater amount of agency and authority.

Structure and Approaches: Chapter-by-Chapter

This thesis examines how *D&D* facilitates transformative, subversive responses to fantasy genre-culture, and what form these subversions may take. It utilises the new genre of *D&D* actual play as close reading evidence of these trends.

Part One of my thesis examines the relationship between *D&D* and literary fantasy. This is partly because I approach *D&D* from a background in literary scholarship, but also because my framing of *D&D* as 'transformative fantasy' is in direct response to other literary critics' approaches to the game, which often argue it is a 'mere' derivative of fantasy literature in which existing texts are replicated, rather than interrogated or responded to. Chapter One provides an overview of previous academic studies of *D&D* conducted by both fantasy and Game Studies scholars, and how these have shaped negative perceptions of the game's place in fantasy genre-culture. I provide a more in-depth overview of my key methodologies – the works of Young and Hammer – and the other major academic discourse which I am co-opting and utilising in my analysis: namely Fan Studies' discussions of transformative fanworks and fanfiction, particularly in the context of fantasy subculture itself. I explore transformative fanworks and their overlap with *D&D*, emphasising *D&D's* nature as a participatory fan culture but also a narrative-driven medium.

Chapter Two provides a discussion of *D&D's* positioning and portrayal within fantasy genre-culture through a study of literary fantasy texts which utilise *D&D's* imagery and textual artefacts. I argue that *D&D* is often used and intertextually referenced as a means of representing and consolidating fantasy into its most conventional form, but that a confrontation with these conventions solidified into rules often results in challenge or subversion.

Part Two examines *D&D* gameplay and the game text directly, through the close reading of actual play shows. Chapter Three uses one long-running, high-profile actual play show, *Critical Role* (2015-), as a case study to examine the process by which *D&D* gameplay develops players' understanding of fantasy genre-culture. I explore how literacy in genre convention develops over time, specifically through an understanding of the *D&D* ruleset, and iterative play. I compare and contrast *Critical Role Campaign 1: Vox Machina* (2015-2017) and *Critical Role Campaign 2: Mighty Nein* (2018-2021), arguing that the cast start to produce more complex readings of fantasy, and that *Campaign 2* showcases a greater desire to subvert the structures and scaffolds of fantasy convention, as a means of exercising player agency.

Chapter Four looks at the role *D&D* and *D&D* actual play has had in interrogating and changing one aspect of fantasy genre-culture that has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years: fantasy's treatment of race, and its coding of racial Otherness as monstrous. Using the *D&D*-specific race of drow or 'dark elves' as a case study, I will first explain how the *D&D* primary text solidified wider practices of racial coding within fantasy genre-culture into the inflexible rules of the game-world. *D&D's* conflation of race, biology, and morality then bled out into other fantasy media. As fans become more critical of fantasy's racial coding, they have begun to question these conventions, revising *D&D's* rules of race during play. Therefore, this chapter also examines secondary and tertiary authors' approach to the drow as a primary text artefact. I close-read subversive secondary and tertiary narratives that directly challenge and deny fantasy's conventional representations of Otherness. This chapter also argues for the role that *D&D* actual play now has within *D&D's* business model as a transmedial franchise, and how this has increased player influence within fantasy genre-culture. Subversive secondary and tertiary texts are no longer private but public, broadcast to thousands. Certain *D&D* players can now be considered official contributors to fantasy genre-culture, and their narratives have the power to incite change both within the primary text, and the wider fantasy community.

Chapter Five looks more closely at how actual play is altering *D&D* subculture, and shifting perceptions of *D&D* within fantasy genre-culture. It does this through examining the discourses of authorship now deployed within *D&D* actual play, demonstrating how fans and audiences seek to endorse *D&D's* capacity for authenticity, originality, and compelling fantasy narrative through the construction of the 'author figure' or auteur. Fans have begun to amass a 'canon' of *D&D* authors, with a particular emphasis on the status of the DM or Game

Master, as a high-profile authority. While I challenge this conception, cataloguing the inevitable difficulties of attempting to legitimise *D&D* through the lens of a singular authorship model, I also highlight how these discourses demonstrate the shift in power towards secondary and tertiary authorship within the *D&D* space, and thus how more power is given to transformative fantasy. Ultimately, this chapter argues that *D&D* can only be understood within a communal or collaborative model of authorship, that rejects the traditional markers of authenticity and originality deployed by literary scholars. However, this does not mean that authentic and original narratives cannot be found in *D&D*. In fact, a collaborative model of authorship generates a multiplicity of perspectives with a far greater capacity for producing subversive, transformative readings within fantasy genre-culture.

Chapter One: *Dungeons & Dragons* and Fantasy Genre-Culture

> ‘The many worlds of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game are places of magic and monsters, of brave warriors and spectacular adventures. They begin with a foundation of medieval fantasy and then add the creatures, places, and magic that make these worlds unique.’
>
> - *D&D Player’s Handbook,* p.5.

> ‘Your world is more than just a backdrop for adventures. Like Middle Earth, Westeros, and countless other fantasy worlds out there, it’s a place to which you can escape and witness fantastic stories unfold.’
>
> - *D&D Dungeon Master’s Guide,* p.4.

This first chapter examines how *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) has historically been positioned within the fantasy genre by scholarly discourses. This thesis hopes to complicate previously held perceptions of *D&D* as derivative of other fantasy media, and instead establish *D&D* as an active and proactive space, of extreme value to fantasy genre-culture. Not only does *D&D* archive texts and dominant trends within genre-culture, it offers fans and readers agency to replicate or remake those conventions. By acting as authors, players provide contributions to fantasy genre-culture that reflect audience reactions to its key discourses.

In the above quotations, taken from the introductions of two of the three major texts of the *D&D 5th Edition* Starter Kit, discourses surrounding the fantasy genre are woven into how *D&D* introduces itself. Both the *Player’s Handbook* and the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* explain *D&D’s* plethora of rules, but these initial paragraphs induct their readers into an understanding of what *D&D* is and how it works as a tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG). While learning what *D&D* ‘is’, players are also inducted into a definition of fantasy, one presumed universal enough to require only brief gestures. Fantasy is the imaginative space of ‘magic and monsters’ and ‘brave warriors’, it is also a ‘place to which you can escape’. Like many others who have attempted to define the genre, Wizards of the Coast (WotC) offer two well-known imaginary worlds as touchstones for readers: both Middle-earth and Westeros have their basis in literary fantasy, but are widely legible to a transmedial audience.

Some aspects of this definition are more implicit. While *D&D* self-consciously cites 'medieval fantasy' as its foundation, both 'Middle Earth' and 'Westeros' perpetuate medievalism in a particular mode. These texts contribute to a Eurocentric definition of fantasy's stereotypical style, and both are authored by white, Anglophone men. Their endorsement by WotC also secures Westeros and Middle-earth's their positioning in a mainstream fantasy canon.

This introduction is illustrative of *D&D's* relationship with fantasy. *D&D* is a game that endorses and secures certain perceptions of genre. It presents presumed universal touchstones, that in their very assumptions of universality, entail a set of biases. This stereotypical perception of fantasy is one that *D&D,* through its own traditions, has perpetuated: the action-adventure mode of Swords & Sorcery pulp fiction which inspired *D&D's* initial ruleset has become encoded into wider fantasy gaming through *D&D's* own influence and acts of reproduction. A 'generic' medieval setting that implicitly centres Eurocentric perceptions of history and the white subject is also replicated in the image of Faerûn and the Forgotten Realms (*D&D's* main setting).

This may seem generic, but is actually fantasy filtered through a very specific set of lenses: that of the game designers at WotC. If it feels generic or stereotypical, this may result from the game designers being a somewhat homogenous group. Though women are credited as illustrators, producers, and additional contributors, the core group of game designers, rule developers, writers, and editors of the 2014 *5th Edition* are all men. As were the core group of six led by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who produced the first game in 1974, and are credited on the same page.[1] As they designed the game, they communally negotiated a definition of fantasy, coloured by a certain set of privileges: their Westernised, US- and middle class background, as well as their masculinity. These privileges inform their understanding of fantasy: the texts they consumed result from an Anglocentric publishing model, and are enjoyed as a result of the readers' own identities. *D&D* then cemented and expanded their shared definition. As a major fantasy product, *D&D* contributes to a mainstream perception of fantasy skewed towards the white male subject (however inaccurate this is to the realities of the genre itself).

All this to say: the *D&D* game text, even in its opening lines, is reacting to and perpetuating certain understandings of what fantasy means. It refers to other fantasy texts, even in defining itself: framing itself as an intertext, and a means to deepen relationships with fantasy. It offers to intensify this relationship either through immersion (inhabiting an imaginary world) or through creation (creating an imaginary world, in a manner akin to the authors cited). Both of these modes are participatory: players go from passive readers, to participants or co-creators. In this process, the *Player's Handbook* argues, each world becomes 'unique'.

---

[1] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.2.

This relationship to literary texts can be glossed as one-way, and linear: *D&D* creates a generic world that emulates and is derivative of the 'type' of fantasy of which Westeros and Middle-earth are exemplary. However, I find it more productive to also acknowledge *D&D's* own canonical status. Invented in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), *D&D* was the 'first' TRPG: it defined this 'new type of game', to the point where its own focus on fantasy meant that 'TRPGs [were] often viewed as a unity of form and content' and 'often alternatively called "fantasy role-playing games''.[2] *D&D*, as the 'prototypical example of a TRPG', is also a canonical fantasy text.[3] While *D&D* may refer to the literary fantasy canon in order to lend itself the legitimacy of literature, all three works – J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and *D&D* – have contributed to mainstream perceptions of what fantasy is today.

Scholarship has typically positioned *D&D* as a 'lesser' form of fantasy, due to its status as a TRPG and its historical relationship to fantasy literature. I wish to first examine these previous approaches, before establishing the position I believe *D&D* holds within fantasy genre-culture. While the *D&D* game texts condense and cement fantasy into one supposedly all-encompassing mode, players bring their own definitions of fantasy to the game they play, which may not be accommodated by these manuals. What results is a transformative relationship with both *D&D's* rules and fantasy genre-culture, where players amend the *D&D* game texts and the conventions of fantasy to accommodate their individual experiences and desires, making them their own. *D&D* may propose one 'generic' definition of fantasy, but it then creates a space for generating many different modifications and reader responses to that prescribed norm. The discursive, textual, and social practices of fantasy are interrogated, and each imaginary world, however generic, becomes unique.

---

[2] José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 'Definitions of Roleplaying Games' in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.19-51 (pp.29-30).

[3] William J. White, Jonne Arjoranta, Michael Hitchens, Jon Peterson, Evan Torner, and Jonathan Walton, 'Tabletop Roleplaying Games' in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.63-86, (p.64).

This chapter lays the groundwork for my argument by introducing the main theoretical frameworks of my thesis: Helen Young's conception of 'fantasy genre-culture', Jessica Hammer's 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', and the Fan Studies theories which I will be applying to narratives generated by *D&D* players. Unlike fanfiction, *D&D* narratives are typically not a transformative response to a single text, but instead to the presumed universal that is 'fantasy', responding to conventions which are seen to prevail. When the *D&D Player's Handbook* and the *Dungeon Master's Guide* establish a singular 'definition' of fantasy within their opening pages, they give players something concrete to react against, and refute.

D&D and Fantasy Literature

D&D was developed in the early 1970s and published in 1974 by Gary E. Gygax and Dave Arneson, with Brian Blume, Rob Kuntz, James Ward, and John Kaye. Gygax and Arneson had a background in medieval wargaming, and the narrative of *D&D's* creation traditionally describes their desire to combine the structure of these existing games with the content of popular fantasy novels. Daniel Mackay boils it down to a simple 'equation': 'Fantasy Literature + Wargames = Role-Playing Games'.[4] In 1971, Arneson began to implement fantasy elements into his wargaming, many of which were inspired by the works of Tolkien: 'not only did players now have the control of an individual character […] but it became possible for that character to cast spells or wield magic swords'.[5] These were introduced as a 'Fantasy Supplement' in the rulebook for a medieval war-game authored by fellow wargamer – and fantasy fan – Gary Gygax: *Chainmail*, published in 1971. The supplement claimed to enable its players to 'refight the struggles related by J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E Howard, and other fantasy writers', as opposed to the battles of history.[6] Following two years of playtesting, this fantasy supplement was then expanded and published as the first edition of

---

[4] Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2001), p.17.

[5] Mackay, p.15.

[6] Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), p.118.

Dungeons & Dragons in 1974. The cover of *D&D* described itself as, 'Rules for Fantastical Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures'.[7]

Although Mackay's 'equation' is somewhat reductive, it is the accepted explanation for *D&D's* creation, replicated across a large amount of *D&D* scholarship. In the first academic study dedicated to *D&D* – *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* – Gary Alan Fine argued that, as 'most wargames placed great emphasis on *historicity*', the fictitious, fantastical content of *D&D* marked a new genre of game.[8] Fine noted that 'most gamers report that prior to becoming involved in fantasy roleplaying gaming, they had interests in the components of fantasy gaming', the two most prominent of which were '(1) military history/war gaming' and '(2) knowledge of fantasy literature'.[9] In his survey of *D&D's* history, *Playing at the World*, Jon Peterson states that 'growing interest in fantasy genre fiction combined with the principles of wargaming to create the new category of roleplaying games'.[10] In all of these texts, Gygax and Arneson are identified as fans of fantasy literature, enjoyers of Tolkien's works and the incipient fantasy genre that was beginning to establish popularity in the United States in the 1960s and 70s.

Gygax and Arneson's trend of incorporating elements of the books and fantastical worlds they liked into the game they had created continued beyond *D&D's* inception in 1974. Tolkien's Arda was perhaps the most high-profile example of a work from which *D&D* borrowed inspiration and material, as it resulted in a complaint from the holder of the non-literary rights to Tolkien's works in 1977 and hasty revisions to the ruleset.[11] Players to this day note the similarities between 'hobbits' and 'halflings'. However, Mackay provides a longer list of texts that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* supplements took inspiration from: Robert E. Howard's Conan adventures, Fritz Leiber, Michael Moorcock's *Elric of Melniboné*, H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu* mythos (the influence of which can still be traced in *D&D 5th Edition*), and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.[12] Mackay argues that this established a 'trend' of creating roleplaying games 'based on works of literature', and that 'the worlds of Jules Verne, J.R.R. Tolkien, or Michael Moorcock ceased to function as a generic fantasy model and became the very thing that the role-playing game intended to simulate'.[13] This early replication of 'generic' fantasy texts has often led to accusations of *D&D* being a solely derivative work. Yet it also demonstrates how central literary fantasy was to *D&D's* development, and leads us to question if the re-creation of these texts within a popular culture space increased their visibility and possibly importance within fantasy genre-culture as a whole.

---

[7] Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons Volume 1: Men & Magic* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974).

[8] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.8-9.

[9] Fine, p.49.

[10] Peterson, p.xi.

[11] Peterson, p.xiv.

[12] Mackay, p.18.

A close relationship between *D&D* and fantasy literature persists to this day. In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal argue that roleplaying games 'catered to and attracted players from wargaming and science fiction and fantasy fandom and, through their popularity, helped solidify the tropes and market of the fantasy genre'.[14] *D&D's* close relationship with fantasy, they argue, also resulted in one of the TRPG's defining features being 'the game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a mixture thereof'.[15] In his chapter within the same anthology, 'Precursors', Peterson reiterates his argument that an interest in 'immersive fantasy literature', earlier experimentations with 'dressing up and acting as characters from fantasy and sci-fi novels' and the 'use of genre fiction as the basis for wargame campaigns' led to *D&D's* creation.[16] There are many characteristics marking *D&D's* difference from preceding boardgames and wargames, defining it as the first TRPG: the control of an individual character, their linear and experiential progression through the narrative, the presence of a referee, and players' 'unlimited freedom in imagining what their characters might attempt'.[17] However, *fantasy* and the presence of the fantastic is also central to the game's definition.

D&D* and Fantasy *Scholarship

Despite *D&D's* close ties to fantasy literature from its inception, scholarship dedicated to fantasy often overlooks or deliberately dismisses *D&D* from narratives of the genre's development. Definitions cited in the previous section are taken from Game Studies scholars: meanwhile, pre-existing scholarship focused on fantasy has been performed primarily by literary academics. The dominant definitions of fantasy as genre and mode are therefore preoccupied with literary works, occasionally lacking the context of wider popular culture as well as fantasy's close, longstanding connections to fandom and its practices. The exclusion is two-fold: media or fan texts are eschewed in favour of the literary, and fantasy literature is then also stratified according to scholars' perceptions of literary and artistic merit. As Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn note, most scholarly approaches to fantasy become esoteric, tending 'include the texts that they [the individual scholar] value and exclude most of what general readers' – not to mention viewers, gamers, and fans – 'think of as fantasy'.[18]

---

[13] Mackay, p.17.

[14] Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal, 'The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.1-16, (p.5).

[15] Zagal and Deterding, 'Definitions of Roleplaying Games', p.31.

[16] Jon Peterson, 'Precursors', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.55-62 (p.61).

[17] Zagal and Deterding, 'Definitions of Roleplaying Games', p.29.

This esoteric approach can be seen in texts such as Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion.* In her discussion of what she classifies as 'fantasy' literature, Jackson elects to ignore 'the best-selling fantasies by Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin or Richard Adams', on the grounds that they 'belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature'. Jackson does not consider these texts 'progressive', arguing that they 'defuse potentially disturbing, anti-social drives and retreat from any profound confrontation' that she centres as key to the fantastic mode.[19] Her definition not only ignores several of fantasy's major authors, but does so because of her own judgements regarding what holds academic merit within a fantastic work. In an academic text which dismisses even popular fantasy, *D&D* has no hope of being mentioned. Yet Jackson's argument – that fantasy 'recombines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it' and 'cannot exist independently of that 'real' world' – seems particularly pertinent to the real-world social context in which *D&D* is played. *D&D* is a collective fantasy or playful escape, but one which is conducted and produced within a rulebound social structure connected to our own world.[20] While roleplay may improve social skills and help develop players' real-world identities, the rules of D&D itself also replicate – and can thus be used to also interrogate – certain assumptions, such as patriarchy or the colonial ideal of exploration and conquest. Fantasy, Jackson argues, 'can *tell of*, manifest, or show desire' or it can '*expel*' it: her concern with the psychology that drives us towards the fantastic is certainly applicable to scholars of *D&D* who wish to account for its educational and therapeutic applications, and may also account for the moral panic surrounding the game in the 1980s.[21]

---

[18] Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.1-4 (p.1).

[19] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p.5.

[20] Jackson, p.12.

Even Farah Mendlesohn's own work, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, which intentionally draws on more relatable popular fantasy fiction in its aim to catalogue fantasy's conventions, rhetorical devices, and structures, defines 'fantasy' only through literature. In her taxonomy of fantasy into four typical plots or thematic archetypes – 'the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal' – Mendlesohn could draw on narratives in other fantasy media as close reading examples.[22] Instead, she focuses on novelistic texts and short stories. Considering that the four modes of fantasy she describes, as well as their accompanying themes, also recur throughout fantasy film, TV, and *D&D*'s own pre-written adventure modules, this omission seems strange. However, Mendlesohn, like those before her, is approaching fantasy primarily as a literary scholar, ignoring wider transmedial examples that would further cement her argument.

Even works which address fantasy's development and acknowledge the role of popular fiction and/or fandom often do not give *D&D* much attention. Another work by Mendlesohn and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy*, claims that 'the impact of *Dungeons and Dragons* is huge' [*sic.*] – yet the book only dedicates one paragraph to it in total. Mendlesohn and James focus solely on the impact *D&D* had on fantasy gaming, noting that 'the book does not have room to list all the major games that have emerged from it', including LARPing, computer games, and MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft.* The paragraph then curiously transitions into a brief mention of fanfiction, defined as when 'amateur writers swap stories in other people's universes, often to a highly professional standard'.[23] While this thesis will aim to show the similarities *D&D* holds to other transformative works, the grouping of these three forms into one paragraph mean that the consideration of *D&D's* distinctive role within the history of genre is elided. Mendlesohn and James do not touch on how *D&D* has interacted with or impacted literature, except to denigrate it: they make a brief gesture in their discussion of 1980s fantasy to the *Dragonlance* novels, discussed in my next chapter, only to note 'the Weiss/Hickman books are very derivative, but writers also used the game formula as the context for original novels'.[24]

---

[21] Jackson, p.2.

[22] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middleton, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.xiv.

[23] Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy* (Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2009), p.108.

[24] Mendlesohn and James, *A Short History of Fantasy,* p.123.

Unfortunately, Mendlesohn and James do not discuss any other writers using the 'game formula' of *D&D* specifically, meaning that the only example they give is what they consider to be the work 'of real hacks (that is, people writing to a franchise)'.[25]

In other historical considerations of the commercial fantasy genre, such as *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* by Jamie Williamson, *D&D* is only mentioned briefly. Williamson argues that the 'coalescence of fantasy' resulted from 'a resurgence of interest in American popular 'Sword and Sorcery' in the early 1960s with the massive commercial success of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*'.[26] In his historical approach to the genre, Williamson states that Tolkien epitomised the canonical literary influences that contributed towards fantasy, while 'Sword and Sorcery' designated the commercial market forces that helped secure its cohesive, recognisable mould. Williamson makes one gesture towards *D&D* in the introduction to his work: '*fantasy*, later abetted by such extraliterary phenomena as Dungeons and Dragons, came to predominantly connote stories set in preindustrial invented worlds where magic works' [*sic.*].[27] He notes *D&D's* role in cementing the established preconception of fantasy within public consciousness.

D&D is not the focus of Williamson's text, which examines the literary antecedents to commercial fantasy and the work of Ballantine Adult Fantasy series editor, Lin Carter, who assembled and curated a literary canon – or literary market – around his own operative definition: 'a fantasy is a book or story… in which magic really works'.[28] However, Williamson states that 'by 1974 […] a discrete genre, with a definition and a canon, had demonstrably emerged'.[29] This date gestures towards the importance of acknowledging *D&D's* significant role within fantasy genre-culture going forward, as the year Williamson marks as a turning point for literary fantasy is also when *D&D* was first published. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson released the first version of *D&D* early in 1974, marking the beginning of both the franchise and TRPGs as a genre. From this date onwards, *D&D* began to amass a player community, comprised primarily of war gamers and members of pre-existing, organized science fiction fandom.[30] This community was fundamentally concerned with the consumption of 'Sword and Sorcery' narratives, as Williamson highlights in his own historical survey of fantasy's development. Love of genre either drove them to play *D&D*, or *D&D* itself inspired them to search out more works in the same mode.

---

[25] Mendlesohn and James, *A Short History of Fantasy,* p.123.

[26] Jamie Williamson, *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.1.

[27] Williamson, p.10.

[28] Lin Carter, *Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p.6-7.

[29] Williamson, p.5.

[30] William J. White, et al., 'Tabletop Roleplaying Games', p.68.

As *D&D* was published in the same year that Williamson describes fantasy fully emerging as a 'discrete genre, with a definition and a canon', it supports his argument that fantasy becomes recognisable to the public around this time. There was now a concrete concept of fantasy for game designers and players to conceptualise as its own entity, that they wished to participate in. Although the rules from *D&D* were derived from wargaming, by 1974 there was also a set of textual rules – established through the curation work of individuals such as Carter – considered legible enough to be transformed and incorporated into the logics of rubric. *D&D's* invention demonstrates that once fantasy was cemented in the literary sphere, it quickly became transmedial – going forward from the point of Williamson's focus, *D&D* could cement people's expectations of fantasy in much the same way as Carter's 1973 definition, helping to amass interest in this emergent genre.

As previously mentioned, *D&D* drew influence from many popular fantasy authors and works. These were listed and acknowledged in Gygax's 'Appendix N: Inspirational and Educational Reading' in the 1st Edition of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. In the same way that Ballantine Books established a 'canon' of fantasy, defining genre through a curated set of historical texts, Gygax presented a reading list of fantasy which informed and inspired *D&D* for his players. This could be labelled the work of an enthusiastic fan sharing his passion with others, but then, so could Carter's project with Ballantine Books. Appendix N can therefore be reframed as an attempt to condense fantasy into a discrete entity, inducting *D&D* players into one definition of genre.

Gygax's use of 'Educational' in his title assigns what Sarah Thornton terms 'subcultural capital' to these texts within the *D&D* player community, which was made up partially of existing readers of fantasy literature. 'Subcultural capital', applied to music fan cultures within Thornton's own work, denotes that which 'confers status […] in the eyes of the relevant beholder', 'just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home'.[31] She argues that subcultural capital 'has long defined itself as extra-curricular, as knowledge one cannot learn in school'.[32] In creating the 'Educational' Appendix N and its aspirational list of reading material, Gygax creates a system of subcultural capital for his players. Knowledge of these texts distinguish a player from their peers – and this works to secure a canon of literary fantasy within the fan space. Presumably, fans will wish to replicate, inhabit, or create new versions of these texts within their own gameplay, resulting in a perpetuation of this shared understanding of genre. If as Williamson states, 1974 was the moment that fantasy coalesced, Gygax and *D&D's* Appendix N are responding to the same impulse that Carter's own mission for Ballantine Books encapsulated. Gygax and Carter both create a market for fantasy that, once curated, will continue to sustain itself. They do so for personal pleasure, but also to guarantee the commercial success of their own brands. Carter himself even appears in Appendix N, alongside Ballantine-published authors such as Fletcher Pratt, Poul Anderson, L. Sprague de Camp, and others. Gygax thus endorsed Carter's definition of fantasy, even as he expanded it to include more popular and pulp works.[33] In these endeavours, both fans and readers of fantasy demonstrate a desire to taxonomise fantasy elements into a discrete genre, establish a literary canon as a template, and therefore enable the continual generation of stories within that tradition.

---

[31] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p.11.
[32] Thornton, p.13.

Williamson's discussion of both high literature and popular cultural influences on literary fantasy is also important to note, as it is one of the few places where this popular cultural or 'commodified' strand of fantasy is not treated immediately as inferior. Where *D&D*'s influence is acknowledged by fantasy scholarship, it is often dismissed as a derivative, reductive, and lesser form in comparison to literature. For example, in Brian Stableford's *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, he marks 1974 as the year 'the role-playing game of Dungeons and Dragons is launched, adding a new dimension to the commodification of fantasy' [*sic.*].[34] In his dictionary entry on 'Games', Stableford states: 'the apparatus provided for dungeon masters was plundered wholesale from sword and sorcery fiction and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, compounded into a syncretic mass whose substance was rapidly reexported into the fantasyland of commodified fantasy'.[35] Commodification and indiscriminate 'mass' production, alongside the repetition of the verb 'plundered' with its connotations of wilfully stolen or plagiarised content, characterises all Stableford's references to *D&D*: 'role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons […] plunder almost all their raw material from fantasy literature, so books based on the games are effectively recycling that material'.[36] The idea that commodified or commercial fantasy is a 'recycling' of used ideas taken from more highly-valued authors, and that *D&D* is a further intensification or even an optimisation of that practice, is in fact pervasive in fantasy scholarship, which is perhaps why it is treated as a suitably objective truth for Stableford's dictionary.

---

[33] Gary Gygax, 'Appendix N: Inspirational and Educational Reading' in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Masters Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules Games, 1979), p.224.

[34] Brian Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (Lanham, MA., Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), p.xxxi.

[35] Stableford, pp.164-5.

Yet it is also an odd argument, given that it is often contradicted by the same scholars who make it. For instance, despite using 'commodification' in a derogatory sense, Stableford also states in his introduction that 'the tendency of commodified fantasy toward formularization was always problematic; there were simply too many formulas available' [*sic.*]. 'In more adventurous examples' of commercial fantasy, Stableford argues, 'writers deliberately set out to mix different formulas together […] one of the most striking attributes of the emergent genre of commodified fantasy has been its hospitability to chimerical combinations'.[37] If Stableford admits that the 'recycling' of ideas rarely produces replicas or copies, and instead creatively remixes or produces transformations that may prove uniquely 'chimerical', why does he presume that *D&D* is incapable of this work? Stableford relegates *D&D* from what he considers to be the 'good' version of commercial fantasy, automatically assuming it is only capable of copying other works.

Another well-known example of this argument is Brian Attebery's earliest book, *Strategies of Fantasy*, the introduction of which separates fantasy into two distinct strands, 'fantasy-as-mode' and 'fantasy-as-formula'.[38] With this distinction, Attebery – like Williamson – tries to reconcile two heritages of popular fantasy and the literary fantastic within one definition. Attebery argues that both exist within fantasy's genealogy, as the two main forms by which we encounter the genre. However, the same value judgement he defends fantasy against – that many tend to view it as 'a popular storytelling formula that is restricted in scope, recent in origin, and specialised in audience and appeal' – pervades this binary, and Attebery's argument.[39] All accusations of reductive and shallow escapism levelled against fantasy are simply displaced by Attebery onto the 'bad' examples of 'fantasy-as-formula', and more implicitly onto formula as a whole. Fantasy-as-mode is characterised as 'a praise- and prize-worthy means of investigating the way we use fictions to construct reality itself', encompassing high literary usages of the fantastic, and works that Attebery considers of literary merit, such as Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin. Meanwhile, fantasy-as-formula is described as 'essentially a commercial product', 'a mass-produced supplier of wish-fulfilment' of very little literary value.[40]

---

[36] Stableford, p.405.

[37] Stableford, p.lxii-lxiii.

[38] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.2.

[39] Ibid.

Attebery's comparison may be hyperbolic, to demonstrate two extremes of the discourses at work within fantasy literature as it fights for legitimacy. However, over the course of *Strategies of Fantasy,* he seems to advocate more strongly for fantasy-as-mode. *D&D,* in particular, is immediately dismissed as unworthy of attention. An obviously 'mass-produced' manifestation of the fantastic – literally packaged and resold – Attebery uses it to represent fantasy at its worst, and most derivative. He describes the fantasy roleplaying game as: 'a do-it-yourself variation' of literature, proving how 'very predictable indeed' formula can be.[41] He cites the 'recipe' for fantasy roleplaying games and *D&D* as follows:

> Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it. […]
>
> Pour in enough mythological creatures and nonhuman races to fill out a number of secondary episodes: fighting a dragon, riding a winged horse, stopping overnight with the elves (who really should organise themselves into a bed-and-breakfast association).
>
> To the above mixture add one naïve and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesized saviour; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.
>
> Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals.[42]

In Attebery's description, *D&D* represents a stagnant form of fantasy, that preserves its stock elements and tropes in a static, unchanging narrative, within a generic 'fantasy' world that lacks context. Presumably, this argument is based on the adventures as encountered in *D&D* paratexts, not as they are played – a *D&D* game itself is experienced as dynamic, and ever-changing. It quickly becomes clear to anyone who plays, or attempts to run a predetermined narrative, how rarely even the most obvious of narrative trajectories or 'quest-lines' are followed. I also hazard that Attebery's interpretation might be informed by *D&D's* earliest incarnations, and the modules or supplements that were based on existing works, detailed in the previous section. Attebery perhaps believes that *D&D* players are attempting merely to replicate Tolkien, Moorcock, Lieber or Howard. That might not, however, have been the case – just because readers, fans, or players wish to inhabit a storyworld, does not mean they want to replicate that exact story word-for-word, as other fanworks prove. It is certainly not the case now, when *D&D 5th Edition* has graduated from emulating specific fantasy texts to synthesising many texts within a singular world. If *D&D 5th Edition* is a pastiche of many works of the fantasy genre, then it necessarily mirrors that genre, reflecting its prevailing mores and conventions. But manifold different stories exist within its space.

---

[40] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy,* pp.1-2.

[41] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.9.

[42] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.10.

Even disregarding the evidence Attebery's statement is based on, the assumption that the emergence of a 'do-it-yourself' brand of fantasy indicates creative stasis is confusing. While formulaic *D&D* storylines can indeed be played out as written, or as imagined in the above 'recipe', the fact that so many individuals are given the means to interact with and even create their own fantasy works should consequently mean that there are *more* narratives available, not less. The term 'do-it-yourself' could easily apply to any fantasy reader making the transition to writer for the first time. This is clearly how a genre progresses, develops, and grows, particularly as a new, diverse range of voices are added. In laying first claim to agency and authority, an author is finally able to react against the stock elements and boundaries of prior genre convention in which they have been immersed.

Attebery does himself admit this as he goes on to construct a defence for fantasy-as-formula. He acknowledges that fantasy-as-formula represents an important contribution to the genre because it condenses its precepts into a recognisable form:

> For some writers, narrative constraints seem to act as spurs to the imagination. Like the rules of grammar, such limitations enable invention even while restricting it […] Paradoxically, the more restricted the genre has become, the more productive it is of new texts. As the rules grow more definitive, the game becomes easier for the novice, and, at the same time, more challenging for the expert, the artist who wishes to redefine the game even as she plays it.[43]

Attebery states that formulas establish the boundaries of genre, which in turn encourage and enable creativity. Genre is a continual interplay between conformity and subversion: as convention becomes tangible and concrete, it demarcates a new set of rules and tropes for authors to react against, overstep, and subvert. However, Attebery attributes this capacity for 'invention' mainly to talented authors, arguing that 'one of the redeeming features of formula fiction is that it may serve as an apprenticeship for the literary artist'.[44] Fantasy-as-formula is only worthwhile in that one can graduate from it. He certainly does not consider fantasy TRPGs to engender this form of innovation and creativity – even as he refers to fantasy as a 'game' that is 'redefined' through iterative play.

---

[43] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.10.

However, fantasy-as-formula's creative strengths are applied here to my own treatment of *D&D,* as it demonstrates how clear, established rules encourage both creativity and play. *D&D*'s paratexts and rulesets are a set of 'narrative constraints' that superficially embody the most condensed form of fantasy's narrative formula. It is a vast intertext that responds to the most popular aspects of fantasy media, as well as its prominent canon. Its rulebooks and rubrics represent one archive of literary fantasy culture – a genre definition, filtered through the authorities of TSR and WotC. While these rulebooks act as an archive, gameplay itself encourages 'novice' participation and creative (re)invention. It may even, to borrow Attebery's terms, serve as an 'apprenticeship' for professional writers or those new to the fantasy genre, inducting players into the literary conventions of fantasy.

While Attebery views *D&D* as a means to replicate existing fantasy stories, this is not the reality of the game, nor its relationship to literature. *D&D* and TSR began participating in popular literary fantasy in the 1980s – while books inspired *D&D* campaigns, *D&D* also began inspiring books, examples of which I cover in Chapters Two and Four. Even players and DMs who do not aspire to be published authors still encounter, interact, and bump up against the static conventions represented through *D&D*'s worldbuilding taxonomies and concrete rules of play. They also have opportunities to subvert, challenge, or question these conventions, using them to fuel their own creative practices and genre innovation in a further layer of reciprocity. Innovation can take place on the level of gameplay – through the creation of characters, and the homebrewing of worlds, rules, and settings – or on the level of narrative and authorship. An author of either a written novel or enacted campaign may create a fantasy narrative that plays with, or outright subverts, the rules that the *D&D* paratext condensed and rendered seemingly inert.

---

[44] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.11.

To address this complex web of influence and intertextuality across multiple forms of media, I will be using Helen Young's term 'genre-culture' to conceptualise *D&D*'s contribution and relationship to fantasy literature. Young notes fantasy scholarship's preoccupation with 'genre as a body of texts, usually written'.[45] In her book, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness,* she instead defines fantasy as a 'genre-culture', in which 'textual practices' take place 'within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy'.[46] Young chooses to define a fantasy text as anything which is 'published with a potential mass audience in mind, and which engage with genre conventions'.[47] This includes 'films, games, and so on that are read, watched, played and created': genre is negotiated across media, with all forms contributing to how fantasy is conceived.[48]

Young encourages a reading of fantasy that incorporates its 'cultural aspect', which 'has its own conventions, notably around its racial and gender composition' of its producers, consumers, and gatekeepers. She notes that fantasy's readership and fans, as well as its authors and publishers, have contributed to the formation of the genre's tropes, and its social norms – particularly when 'the same individual [within that culture] might identify as a fan and as an author at different times'.[49] In this model, fantasy is defined not only as transmedial, but as a social network of official and fan creators, both passive and active consumers, and critical readers. These stakeholders not only produce and consume texts, but also analyse them deeply, all interacting with and affecting each other to reach a consensus of what fantasy is.

D&D is a medium and game text that actively 'engages with genre conventions': game designers surveyed prominent trends and the works of preferred authors from the perspective of enthusiasts, then selected what to preserve and privilege within *D&D's* ruleset, the primary text. *D&D*, as a site where fans can form and authorise their own definitions of fantasy, is one of the key texts through which the workings of fantasy genre-culture can be examined and understood. It enables fantasy fans to move into a more active mode of textual production, and they often wish to do so as a result of having consumed fantasy in many forms. They thus approach *D&D* having already formulated critical opinions and affective connections to other fantasy material. *D&D* provides an experimental space for articulating and exploring these personal connections to fantasy. Individuals can perform, reinforce, or challenge the tropes of fantasy, as they have been received from other media and preserved within *D&D's* official manuals. *D&D* is a space where creators begin to cultivate the skills they may later use in a professional capacity, moving across that boundary between fan and author. But it also marks a transition for many fans between reader, watcher, or consumer, to creator and participant.

---

[45] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.2.

[46] Young, p.5.

[47] Young, p.4.

[48] Young, p.5.

[49] Ibid.

Roleplaying Game Scholarship and *D&D*

Although *D&D* is not often discussed by fantasy scholars, its canonical position within the history of roleplaying games themselves means that Game Studies has provided a more comprehensive approach, including an examination of *D&D's* relationship to storytelling and narrative creation. However, Game Studies' predominant focus on digital videogames has coloured its treatment of *D&D*. Gerald A. Vorhees describes *D&D* as 'the forerunner' of digital fantasy videogames.[50] According to Brad King and John Borland, *D&D* left an indelible mark on videogames because of its close ties with their early history: 'scratch almost any game developer who worked from the 1970s to today and you're likely to find a vein of [tabletop] role-playing experience'.[51] This does at least acknowledge that *D&D* has contributed extensively to gaming culture, even for those who do not play analogue games. Because *D&D* was an inspiration for many early digital games, its tropes and mechanics permeate this facet of fantasy genre-culture, which has in turn influenced literary fantasy.

While most Game Studies scholars approach *D&D* through its impact on digital gaming, texts which analyse *D&D* directly argue that the game has fostered its own subculture, separate from video gamers and governed by a unique set of rules and social conventions. As previously mentioned, Fine was one of the first to define TRPG culture in his ethnographic work, *Shared Fantasy*. He studied *AD&D* mainly in its context as an emerging urban leisure subculture, but by documenting its conventions, social structure and accompanying social contract, as well as its unique set of folk beliefs, he inadvertently recorded its close relationship to fantasy genre-culture, as well as some of the unique aspects of *AD&D* as a narrative medium.

---

[50] Josh Call, Katie Whitlock, and Gerald Voorhees (eds.), *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.16.
[51] Brad King and John Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003), p.4.

Fine noted *AD&D*'s indebtedness to wider fantasy and speculative fiction. According to his analysis of early TRPG culture, the 'typical gamer' has read 'deeply in science fiction, fantasy, and history'.[52] Shared intertextuality was utilised at a *D&D* table to cultivate communal understanding. At Fine's time of writing, intertextuality was presumed to be common to most players: as previously argued, a canon of fantasy was created within the *D&D* subcultural community and assigned subcultural capital, with an expectation that players would induct themselves into these texts. Fine claimed that involving himself with *D&D* subculture meant he was educated in fantasy: 'I learned about the great works of fantasy through this research. J.R.R. Tolkien is first among equals, but the works of H. Beam Piper […] Robert E. Howard […] and Jack Vance […] were also inspiring'.[53]

Fine argued that books are one means by which a game of *AD&D* and its cultural system become legible to the individual:

> Each referee [the previous term for Dungeon Master, or DM] can be said to construct a cultural system, and each group of gamers reacts to this system in creating its own idioculture. Most referees' cultural systems are loosely based upon someone else's imaginative system: a game designer's world, the Tolkien mythos, a science fiction novel, or a dungeon created from a knowledge of popularised medieval mythology.[54]

D&D's gameplay and narrative is still often interpreted through a web of other pop culture references, that are often tightly connected to literature and fantasy genre affiliation. Players may piggyback their own game-worlds and cultural systems on pre-existing works, in order to quickly establish an idioculture, which Fine defines as a system of shared 'knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs' that become the basis of interactions between a group of friends and like-minded individuals, building both communal understanding and community.[55] Fine mirrors Attebery's assumption that *D&D* is derivative, but implies that derivation allows the game to establish the foundations of its own identity and emergent fan culture.

---

[52] Fine, p.47.
[53] Fine, p.xiii.
[54] Fine, p.144.

Yet Fine also approaches the relationship between fantasy literature and TRPGs from an unusual angle, conducting a direct comparison between J.R.R. Tolkien and M.A.R. Barker, creator of another early TRPG, *Empire of the Petal Throne*. While *AD&D* is made legible through its indebtedness to other works of fantasy, Fine argues that Barker's Tékumel exists as an independent imaginative subcreation, within which TRPG narratives determined by the rules take place. Fine uncovers 'striking parallels' between 'the two fantasy masters, Tolkien and Barker', representing Tékumel and Middle-earth as artistic endeavours of equal magnitude which 'shed light on how fantasy is created'.[56] Regardless of whether you agree with placing these two authorial figures on the same footing, Fine's decision to equate them demonstrates the overlap between the two mediums. Fine documents both creators' urge towards expansive worldbuilding, including language creation and mythos construction: TRPGs seemingly encourage the same level of imaginative subcreation Tolkien had in constructing the mythos of Arda. Fine's comparison across the two forms demonstrates the synergy between fantasy roleplaying games and fantasy literature. He argues that the same motivations drive both: immersion (which Fine terms '*engrossment*'), escapism, imaginative subcreation, and creative, collaborative investment in a narrative, between those who Fine sees as author and reader.[57]

Another important element of Fine's study is his notion of 'frames'. Fine argues that *D&D* and other TRPGs are structured around 'three basic frames': 'the world of common-sense knowledge grounded in one's primary framework, the world of game rules grounded in the game structure, and the knowledge of the fantasy world'.[58] These frames are nestled within each other. Players can up- and down-key as needed depending on the context: whether they are being addressed as a person in the real world, as a player wrestling with rules such as combat actions or dice rolls, or as a character. The first frame is the one in which the shared intertext of other literary and fantasy pop culture references comes to bear – players read the game narrative through the context of their personal idioculture, while also making jokes or conversation with other players. The third frame is the one most concerned with narrative, where the game's narrative is experienced and 'known only through the character', devoid of ludic and real-world context.[59]

---

[55] Fine, p.136.
[56] Fine, p.130.
[57] Fine, p.4.
[58] Fine, p.194.

While my work is less concerned with Fine's frames, and instead employs the models of authorship other scholars built around them in subsequent works, it is useful to note that while Fine argued that *D&D* is made legible through its derivative relationship to other fantasy, there is also a ludic frame and narrative frame that modifies, adapts, or transforms intertextual knowledge. An engrossed player in the frame of 'the fantasy world' may enact narrative independent of their knowledge of the game's ludic framework, but may similarly interpret choices through both their 'common-sense' understanding of how fantasy and the game itself works – a practice known as 'metagaming'. While this cannot be prevented, and players may still make decisions using these up-keyed frames, it demonstrates that there is a drive towards invention and originality built into the game: it emerges from the decisions every single individual player can make as their individual character, which always holds the capacity to subvert formula.

In *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, Daniel Mackay elaborated upon Fine's frames by emphasising the narrative context of *D&D* gameplay. Mackay argues that players within a *D&D* game can inhabit a total of five frames: '1) the social frame inhabited by the *person*; 2) the game frame inhabited by the *player*; 3) the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*; 4) the constative frame inhabited by the *addresser*; 5) the performative frame inhabited by the *character'*.[60] Players shift between the five roles and often inhabit two or more of them simultaneously. Mackay believes that *D&D* functions as a 'story-creation *system*' rather than simply a game, and his modification of Fine reflects this.[61] By expanding the in-character frame into a narrative frame, Mackay acknowledges that often in-character actions have a narrative drive: players are often thinking as authors, deciding what will improve the 'story' they are telling. The addition of the 'constative' and 'performative' frames recontextualise *D&D* as not simply a social game, but also an enacted fantasy narrative, whereby the DM and players advance the 'plot' of gameplay through narrating their actions and/or through performative 'in-character' dialogue. While the emphasis on interesting, engaging prose narration is the concern of the '*raconteur*'

---

[59] Fine, p.194.
[60] Mackay, p.56.
[61] Mackay, p.4.

– seemingly designed to enhance the role of DM and players as worldbuilders – two primary modes of story-creation are also acknowledged: narrated player action, and the performative aspect of the game expressed through in-character conversations. The emphasis on these two frames reflects Mackay's main argument: that *D&D's* value lies primarily in its facilitation of collaborative storytelling.

As Mackay advocates for *D&D* as a means of creating original fantasy fiction, his understanding of the relationship between fantasy literature and *D&D* develops in complexity. Mackay acknowledges the indebtedness early *D&D* and its players had to other manifestations of the fantasy genre, but he argues that *D&D* functions as a space where these intertexts can be (re)combined into something new. He argues that, in the act of character creation, 'players draw not only from the drama sphere of the game system […] but from the cultural sphere as well, assembling their characters from their memory'. Players take 'famous lines, quotable postures, and vivid traces from literary passages or film scenes', and use these 'self-contained, decontextualised tropes' or '"fictive blocks"' to create their characters within the game.[62] These 'fictive blocks' are derivatives of previous works within fantasy, neighbouring genres, and other popular culture. A player could simply enact them as is, in an act of homage. But the interaction of various intertextual references can also be used to create something new and original: 'a conscious manipulation of tropes and conventions or an unconscious replay'.[63] Players can use their knowledge of fantasy culture (or popular culture more generally), and their genre-savviness, to create an original character that embodies their own fantasy reading, or perhaps challenges it. *D&D* is no longer solely derivative – it is both a repository where fantasy culture is stored, and a transformative space where it is divorced from its original meaning and rearranged to create new texts.

Mackay places this creative agency mostly in the hands of the player. It is the unique and undetermined element that each individual, as a fantasy reader with their own idioculture, brings to the table that can result in the narrative of even a scripted, pre-written module becoming vastly different in the hands of every player or player group that encounters and 'reads' it. He believes that players are the ones who most often occupy the position of reader, but characterises this mode of reading as proactive. The player is the one who augments and alters the text of the DM, which is either a pre-written *D&D* text, or a narrative of the DM's devising.[64] A character's actions can take a module or a pre-written scenario away from its presumed and determined course: the DM is then required to react and respond through improvisation, and thus a new, unique and idiosyncratic narrative is created.

---

[62] Mackay, p.77.
[63] Mackay, p.79.

In-game characters can be read as a manifestation of reader responses to fantasy, communicating what most interests their players, but also what they may wish to rewrite or challenge. 'Fictive blocks' can similarly be manipulated by the DM in their own worldbuilding, either through the lore they create for their world or through the NPCs they populate it with. In this way, *D&D's* condensation of fantasy formula can become self-reflexive and self-conscious, representing a selection of rules to bend or break. What Mackay terms the 'conscious manipulation of tropes and conventions' requires a critical awareness that such things exist. It often manifests within the DM's role as the act of 'homebrewing' – essentially a modification of the original *D&D* text to fit the context of the narrative at a specific table, the unique requirements or desires of individual players, or to facilitate creation of a new, independent secondary world. The DM can alter the *D&D* text from the narrative perspective of a reader, who wishes to rewrite the lore of a world to challenge its presumptions and prejudices; or from a ludic perspective, where certain game rules are 'fudged' or ignored to create a more cohesive and enjoyable gameplay experience. These critiques can also feed back into how players then interact with literary fantasy culture. This is not something that Mackay himself acknowledges, but the 5th edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* shows an awareness of it: 'whether you invent a world, adapt a world from a favourite movie or novel, or use a published setting for the *D&D* game, you make that world your own'.[65] Even if players are recreating a world from a 'favourite movie or novel', their relationship to it is inherently transformative: they 'make that world [their] own'.

In this thesis, I examine this process of transformation and its implications for our understanding of *D&D*, its cultures, and fantasy more broadly. To do so, I utilise Jessica Hammer's 2007 framework of the multiple modes of authorship present within roleplaying texts. In 'Agency and Authority in Role-Playing 'Texts'', Hammer argues that both digital and tabletop RPGs are composed in a series of 'primary, secondary, and tertiary texts, with corresponding primary, secondary, and tertiary authors'.[66] Her notions of authorship expand upon Fine and Mackay's models to include the game designer as an authorial figure for both DM and player to react against. This differs from Fine, who was documenting very early TRPG gameplay where the game designers and player communities had little to no separation and in which the DM was considered 'God', and from Mackay, who acknowledges the game designer's presence, but is primarily concerned with how story is created by the players.[67]

---

[64] Mackay, p.51-59.

[65] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.4.

[66] Jessica Hammer, 'Agency and Authority in Role-Playing 'Texts'', in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.70).

According to Hammer's model, 'the primary text is that which outlines the rules and setting of the game in general'. In the case of my argument regarding *D&D*, this is the text which also condenses the tropes of fantasy-as-formula, which comprise another set of 'rules' by which narrative operates, alongside the game's mechanics. The 'secondary text' then 'uses this material to create a specific situation' – the episode or campaign of *D&D* that is constructed for one specific group of players, as imagined, written, or modified by the DM, who is identified as the secondary author. 'Tertiary authors' – players and their player characters – then '"write" the text of the game in play'. They 'encounter a concrete scenario […] but ultimately it is their moment-to-moment choices which determine what happens'.[68] According to Hammer, the game designer, DM, and player hold the role of 'world-builder', 'story-builder', and 'story-player' respectively.[69]

This model of authorship allots more agency to players than previous scholarship – particularly Fine's model, which even goes so far as to argue that game designers such as Barker preserve the original version of a game's world, and that every game players and referees host within that world is thus denied the status of canon.[70] According to Hammer, it is the players who ultimately decide the final narrative, modifying the text in ways that neither the primary nor secondary author can predict. Hammer's article details the struggle between secondary and tertiary authors for control over the game text, implying that players have a degree of authority that can derail a roleplaying game from its original or imagined purpose, modifying and overwriting prior authorial intention.

Hammer's model of authorship reframes the texts Attebery disparaged – the static rules of a TRPG as written down within a manual or guide – as simply one text of many, destined to become dynamic and ever-changing. WotC's rulebooks and modules are often written already anticipating secondary and tertiary author interventions. The works of primary authorship are not the final text, but a starting point: ‘the *D&D* rules help you and the other players have a good time, but the rules aren’t in charge’.[71] The *D&D* text and its relationship to fantasy thus goes through several transformations, as it is revised first by DMs and then players, to create a new story unique to their group and their experiences of the genre. Even the primary author’s status as ‘world-builder’, which is secured through code in the videogames Hammer also addresses, is up for debate within *D&D*. A secondary author can use the primary text not as a world, but as a world-building tool to create their own fantasy setting. In *D&D*, the primary author’s control over worldbuilding is only assured in the sense that they decide the rules and physical laws by which that world operates – and even these rules can be disregarded for the sake of a good story. Hammer’s model acknowledges the reclaiming of agency that DMs and players experience as they change and modify the fantasy text to suit their needs: it becomes a tool for writing one’s own fantasy, rather than simply replicating the formula as written.

---

[67] Fine, p.72.
[68] Hammer, p.70-1.
[69] Hammer, p.72.
[70] Fine, pp.123-136.

However, the assumption of a hierarchy within Hammer’s study is not entirely accurate when applied to TRPGs and to *D&D*. While the primary, secondary, and tertiary text are experienced chronologically in this order – in the sense that a player text cannot exist without the game designer and DM texts that preceded it – once the tertiary text begins to be enacted, the three texts and their modes of authorship all coexist alongside each other. A tertiary author’s character concept may precede the secondary or primary text entirely, and then modify itself to fit into these frameworks, or alter the frameworks to facilitate their own vision. A good secondary author in *D&D* will, by necessity or perhaps out of the desire to ensure everyone’s enjoyment, respond to the narratives of their tertiary authors. Players may contribute to worldbuilding through the focus their character brings to the story. They do not create the ‘final’ version of the text, but instead authorship is shared as the DM modifies their own narrative to best accommodate the interests and motivations of their players, rather than regarding their input simply as ‘derailment’. Furthermore, *D&D’s* primary text responds extensively to secondary and tertiary authorships. Playtesting new rules occurs with both DM and player input, both on the large scale of creating *D&D 5th Edition* or the smaller scale of ‘Unearthed Arcana’, where rules are released in draft form, subject to player and DM scrutiny and feedback. *D&D*’s primary text may also endorse player and DM authority: the primary text, as the traditionally published text, has a degree of status it can confer to validate secondary and tertiary texts. This was for instance demonstrated by the publication of

---

[71] *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, p.4.

Explorer's Guide to Wildemount in 2021, which validates the authority of *Critical Role*'s secondary author, Matt Mercer, as an official worldbuilder. However, *Critical Role* also represents a secondary text that may have begun to outstrip or become of equal status to the primary text, as the company's publishing arm 'Darrington Press' now disseminates Matthew Mercer's secondary text, Exandria, via the same prestige route of traditional publishing.

D&D's system of authorship, now that the game has become a fully established fantasy medium in its own right, thus functions more as an assemblage, in which authorships are not hierarchical, stable, or fixed. These texts, and the intertexts surrounding them, are capable of influencing each other. Authors can occupy multiple (or all) authorship roles at once: a DM and/or game designer may be a player in other campaigns, and their experiences in each of these roles easily influence each other. Acknowledging that these authorities are not hierarchical also aids our understanding of *D&D* subculture. In his recent book, *The Privilege of Play*, Aaron Trammell posits a move away from the veneration of Gygax and *AD&D's* initial authority figures, asking: 'what if a history of roleplaying games began with the communities that played the games as opposed to the designers who published them?'[72] Player communities were often more demographically diverse than TSR and its team, and actively disputed the rules or theorised the game through channels such as the *Alarum and Excursions* zine Trammell analyses. Acknowledging that there are many discourses and authorities at work within TRPG subculture allows us to see the different ways fantasy was negotiated or understood by each mode of authorship and each author figure.

Jennifer Grouling makes a similar assertion in her own response to Hammer, arguing that *D&D* 'is multi-vocal, but it is not just the text that must take on multiple voices. The players – including the DM – must simultaneously play the role of the reader as well as the primary, secondary and tertiary author'.[73] Roles are not fixed, nor are they necessarily competitive. Grouling states that 'another way to see this relationship would be to see the group – both players and DMs – as collaborative authors with the DM having editorial control over the final text'.[74] Even the term 'editorial control' is deceptive – the randomisation of dice rolls undermines the DM's control just as much as any of the players, and I also don't believe that this 'editorial' function is unique to the DM. Players have editorial control also: if they don’t want to do a quest, it is very likely a quest will simply not get done, with entire aspects of the secondary text cut as a result. Communication often takes place between DM and player to incorporate elements of narrative they enjoy into the story – otherwise, players can simply leave, and the DM’s text is left incomplete and unread. Perhaps instead, the DM acts as a curator of a text, which incorporates multiple responses to fantasy into one narrative fabric, and can also work to incorporate any randomising effects of the dice mechanic to weave a coherent plot.

---

[72] Aaron Trammell, *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), p.116.

[73] Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), p.147.

[74] Grouling Cover, p.146.

Grouling acknowledges in the above quotation that even primary authors are also ‘readers’: a manual or module text, even if it only contains rules and worldbuilding rather than a narrative, is still a reader response to fantasy. I would build on this further to argue that fantasy genre-culture functions as a narrative authority, which authors and texts at all levels of Hammer’s model respond to within *D&D*. Canonical fantasy texts – anything from *Lord of the Rings*, to a high-profile *D&D* game such as *Critical Role* – may inform how aspects of a *D&D* campaign narrative are interpreted by players. Primary, secondary, and tertiary authors all draw on their notions of fantasy genre-culture when creating their own narratives or interacting with texts at other authorial levels. Informally, readers’ ‘genre-savviness’ may inflect secondary and tertiary texts, as authors compose plotlines or react to actions put forward by other characters.

Both deliberately and subconsciously, these texts also take political stances on fantasy genre-culture.’. A decision to resolve a hostile situation diplomatically when battle seems inevitable is a choice that may reflect what kind of fantasy narrative a person enjoys. Having sympathy for a monstrous race, or one that has a weighted legacy within *D&D* and wider fantasy culture – such as the *D&D* ‘orc’ or ‘drow’ – is also a reaction against genre conventions of Otherness, which have often been dictated by the white, Eurocentric Self.

Not only is a tertiary author deciding whether to modify or challenge the narratives posed by *D&D*’s primary and secondary authors, they are also responding – sometimes self-consciously – to the wider tropes of the fantasy genre. These tropes are those which the primary texts have condensed in their acts of worldbuilding, and secondary texts may have already subverted in their own response, or incorporated into the narrative scenario they have constructed. All three have a transformative relationship to fantasy, in that they have each filtered fantasy genre-culture through their own set of personal interpretative lenses, and made it their own.

D&D as Transformative Fantasy and Transformative Fanwork

In *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games*, Grouling argues that 'one of the key features of the tabletop roleplaying game […] is the narrative agency experienced by players'.[75] Participants experience the fantasy story from a first-person perspective, immersed within their character and the narrative, and this focalisation gives them more tangible agency. They can react, subvert, and alter the outcome of the story in character, and do so in collaboration with others. Grouling terms this 'productive interactivity': players' actions and dice rolls affect the plot in ways that a DM or primary author cannot predict, meaning that they are capable of taking the story in directions that interest them or which give them a greater affective response, unlike in traditional modes of storytelling, which 'furnish 'correct' paths for the story being told'.[76] While Attebery saw 'do it yourself' fantasy as derivative, this paradigm identifies it as transformative: players can take ownership of the world and its narrative. This level of interactivity is why even a pre-scripted module will be different for every player group that encounters it. Part of the unique enjoyment of *D&D* is the ability to inhabit the fantasy world, but also to be able to *change* that world in a meaningful way, and in doing so reshape it.

D&D's approach to fantasy and to narrative is that of a fannish 'participatory culture'. As with Henry Jenkins' description of participatory media fandom, when a fantasy reader becomes a *D&D* player they 'cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings'.[77] *D&D* players are – generally speaking – fantasy fans or fantasy readers first, and often decide to play *D&D* as a means of intensifying their relationship to that genre-culture. In choosing to partake in a tabletop roleplaying game, their enjoyment of that genre-culture and their interactions with it are no longer passive. Rather than reading a fantasy narrative, they are its co-creator – this means they are also contributing meanings to fantasy genre-culture.

In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture,* Jenkins famously describes fans as 'frighteningly out of control, undisciplined and unrepentant, rogue readers' who reject 'aesthetic distance' – the typically prescribed detachment between a critical reader and the text that is the object of their intellectual curiosity and enjoyment.[78] The imaginative immersion that *D&D* facilitates is one extreme example of rejecting that distance: players are expected to inhabit an imaginary world fully and invest in its stakes, blurring the line between fiction and reality. An emphasis on roleplay offers a chance to lose oneself entirely in a created character. The characters that players choose or favour may also express their affective relationship to a particular text. Rather than simply expressing enjoyment or affiliation to a particular character or text, a player or DM can inhabit that perspective intentionally, which some may view as extreme. Indeed, in mainstream media and TV shows such as *The Big Bang Theory, iZombie,* and *Community*, *D&D* players are depicted dressed as their characters, or adopting parodic high fantasy voices, in an 'undisciplined and unrepentant' performance of their love for genre.[79]

---

[75] Grouling Cover, p.124.
[76] Grouling Cover, p.37.
[77] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p.24.

Regardless of whether these practices are adopted or not, *D&D* players necessarily become immersed within the fantasy narrative they consume. Those who maintain some distance and treat *D&D* as a game of strategy maintain a subversively playful relationship with the text. Meaning and pleasure are still derived from their personal positioning within the game: their ludic achievements represent the agency they hold. These players remain focused on what the narrative means to them, personalising it through their own authority and the types of agency they value within play.

Although affective reading and critical reading are typically presented as mutually exclusive, the pleasure of play within *D&D* does not exist at the detriment to any critical interrogation of narrative. Jenkins argues that the difference between a casual consumer and 'becoming a fan' lies 'in the intensity of [both] their emotional and intellectual involvement'.[80] Even for fully immersed fans, 'emotional' and 'intellectual' readings can co-exist and manifest over the process of their engrossment. Affective attachments can breed critical examinations. For instance, in *Escape from the Bloodkeep,* the example used in my introduction, players Matt Mercer, Erika Ishii, and Amy Vorphal play Leyland, Lilith, and Efink – characters that had their basis in the Witch-king of Angmar, Shelob, and Arwen from *Lord of the Rings*. While they playfully inhabit these fictional personas in a rejection of critical distance, their immersion also enables them to interrogate power, gender, and sexuality through satire. Inhabiting a first-person perspective might also allow players to express personal views on a political issue, thus subverting the consensus conventions of a fantasy text: for instance, when players in *Critical Role* encounter drow elves, typically considered evil, their personal investment in prominent NPCs rejects the racist conventions of the primary text.

---

[78] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p.18.

[79] See *iZombie*, Season 3, Episode 9, 'Twenty-Sided, Die', directed by Jason Bloom, written by Kit Boss, aired 30th May 2017. *The Big Bang Theory,* Season 5, Episode 4, 'The Wiggly Finger Catalyst', directed by Mark Cendrowski, aired 6th October 2011. *Community,* Season 2, Episode 14, 'Advanced Dungeons & Dragons', directed by Joe Russo, written by Andrew Guest, aired 3rd February 2011.

[80] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* p.56.

Furthermore, fantasy as a genre encourages immersion in imaginative worlds. Mark J.P. Wolf argues that many literary and transmedial fantasy worlds are created for 'the sheer joy of creation […] that is most often described as *play'* or 'made to be shared with others, some for the sheer pleasure of visiting them'.[81] Disregarding the affective ties between reader and fans of fantasy and the literary texts of the canon is counterproductive, particularly when fantasy is a genre that typically requests the proactive immersion and imaginative collaboration of its readers when actualising secondary worlds. The practices of *D&D* players are not separate or isolated from the practices of other readers, fans, and official creators, but exist relative to each other on a spectrum within fantasy genre-culture.

Jenkins describes 'fan reading' as 'a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers', which 'expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption'.[82] This process is literalised in a *D&D* game, in which a fantasy narrative is constructed and reconstructed through an ongoing, collaborative and social discussion between individuals who read the text, expanding and multiplying its meanings beyond the bounds of its original intention.

However, Jenkins also characterises media fandom participants as 'textual poachers' who must create a 'borrowed' identity that exists on the outskirts of official culture, '[operating] from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness'.[83] This supposed marginality has been challenged in recent years by both scholars and the realities of contemporary fandom, in which social media and digital technology have enabled fans to gain greater visibility.[84] As Matt Hills notes, 'fan-consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created, where possible, or otherwise to be courted'.[85] Jenkins' model must also be modified when addressing *D&D* players specifically. Although they are certainly fans, and they operate within a similarly unofficial space, *D&D* is itself a fan-authored product, with even those that had held the highest status (the primary text authors, and figures such as Gygax) ultimately still also positioned as fans. This means that members of its participatory culture do not exist on the 'margins' of their original source text, like the media fans Jenkins addresses. Even players who create 'artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts', as Jenkins' textual poachers do, can contribute to the subcultural community and fantasy genre-culture in a way that media fans cannot. [86] In *The Privilege of Play*, Trammell acknowledges that *D&D* players occupy a slightly different position to fans, describing them as not only 'geeks' but 'hobbyists', who interact mostly with each other in 'invisible networks of privilege' – creating their own communities, rather than interacting at the fringes of an official text, as with television or literary fandoms.[87] While hobbyists hold many similarities to fans, Trammell argues that the term – 'the hobby' – entails a prestige.[88] He also notes that these subcultural communities operate autonomously, socialising primarily amongst themselves. In the context of Young's fantasy genre-culture – in which fandom and official creators can interact more closely, and reader and author intentions both generate established convention – *D&D* is both a fan text and a canonical published product.

---

[81] Mark J.P. Wolf (ed.), 'Introduction' in *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), p.xxvi.

[82] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* p.45.

[83] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* p.26.

[84] See *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

The unstable and shifting space which *D&D's* 'unofficial' textual meanings hold within fantasy genre-culture is reflected by the shifting perceptions of *D&D* in recent years. Discourse surrounding *D&D* has begun to prioritise defining it as a storytelling medium rather than 'simply' a game system. High-profile *D&D* players such as *Dimension 20's* Brennan Lee Mulligan have begun to vocally espouse that '*Dungeons & Dragons* is collaborative storytelling, with a game expertly stitched into the fabric of how that story is told'.[89] With the advent of the actual play shows, podcasts, and livestreams which this thesis covers, more of the narratives that Hammer termed secondary and tertiary texts (belonging to the DM and players) are gaining the status of official IP. Staged and professionally produced, these new texts move player narratives from the private sphere into the public. The more official these productions become – in certain cases, even paywalled and paid for by viewers – the further they move from the 'marginal' position of fan participatory culture: they may even have extensive participatory fan communities of their own. By producing, presenting, and editing *D&D* campaigns into a serialised narrative for audience consumption, much in the manner of a television show, actual play transforms *D&D's* previously private mode of fan-generated narrative into a public text, which holds greater subcultural capital and influence beyond the subcultural community, in wider fantasy genre-culture.

---

[85] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.11.
[86] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p.3.
[87] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play*, p.4.
[88] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play*, p.2.
[89] Dimension 20, 'Storytelling As a Game Master with Peter Warren', *YouTube.com,* 4 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnXSQiR8ayU&list=PLhOoxQxz2yFN70xDSNNI8PKgxabBNvPhY&index=19&ab_channel=Dimension20, (23:49-24:00).

I believe that high-profile *D&D* shows move more towards the status of what Matt Hills terms a 'cult text' – while still existing mostly on the fringes of mainstream culture, they are extremely popular, financially lucrative, and in the context of fantasy genre-culture, they enjoy the status of an official text and authority. In his discussion of cult texts, Hills notes three 'family resemblances' between texts of this type: auteurism, endlessly deferred narrative, and hyperdiegesis.[90] These family resemblances are adopted by *D&D*: it is still a participatory fan culture, but as actual play redefines *D&D* as a storytelling medium, there is a renewed emphasis on the aspects which are not derivative, but instead result in original works of fiction. Hills claims that auteurism is 'an ideology of quality', in which fandom uses the strategies of high culture to enshrine a single author figure or 'trusted' creator, distinguishing their text from the rest of 'supposedly unauthored' mass culture.[91] The celebration of the DM as a secondary author, master worldbuilder, or storyteller within the *D&D* sphere is something which reflects this ideology: the focus is moved from the formulaic source text and critics' accusations of derivation, towards *D&D* as the enabler of individual authors and their imaginations. This ideology of auteurism, and its pitfalls when applied to a collaborative authorship model, are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

The decision by creators to stream their weekly gameplay sessions also stresses the structural aspects of *D&D* that mimic a serialised, 'endlessly deferred narrative' – defined by Hills as 'endless interpretation and speculation predicated upon a point of identity or closure at which the narrative will expire, […] a point which is endlessly warded off'.[92] A *D&D* campaign, in particular a long-running one which can potentially last years, typically adheres to an episodic structure that may escalate in narrative complexity, but will almost definitely scale to the level of its players, presenting endless problems to facilitate their continued adventures. Combined with the randomising effect of dice rolls, this structure can lead to constant speculation about how in-game decisions, the chance which governs their outcome, and the overarching plot threads are going to resolve. Hills notes that 'the collapse of endlessly deferred narrative – whether by design or by exhaustion – can signal a crisis point'. Space for speculation and creative response by fans is 'possibly the most powerful of all audience-hooking narrative forms', but the amount of speculative possibilities it generates within the fandom places extreme pressure on a satisfactory resolution.[93] However, *D&D* games are very long – with *Critical Role's* running time stacking to over 900 hours across the first and second campaigns – and very little is certain or fixed.[94] Even within the context of a concluded narrative, pivotal moments have been determined by chance. This means that multiple imagined narratives can exist within the fandom sphere, and endlessly deferred narrative – including alternate timelines – can continue to exist within the fan or player's imagination.

---

[90] Hills, p.98

[91] Hills, p.99.

[92] Hills, p.108.

Similarly, hyperdiegesis – 'the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered' – is not only a characteristic of the games which media fans now consume themselves as fiction, but also a foundational aspect of the *D&D* game system itself.[95] Because players inhabit the world as single characters with a limited focalisation, this encourages a sense that there is an expansive world they only glimpse: the imaginative subcreation of continually moving parts, presumed to be known only to the DM themselves. Furthermore, *D&D* paratexts themselves are hyperdiegetic: the many volumes of mechanics and lore are expansive enough to encourage people to invest money in collecting them to learn more about this narrative space, while also being flexible enough to be adapted, ignored, or imaginatively extrapolated outward into settings and scenarios through the act of homebrewing. This further connects out to fantasy genre-culture, which *D&D* players as fans can draw upon, and into, their *D&D* campaign. If they have questions, theories, or critical thoughts relating to other fantasy texts, *D&D* may become the space where they can explore these in further depth, as we have seen with *Escape from the Bloodkeep*.

The shift in *D&D* subculture from unofficial, private fan narratives to official, public fantasy texts is discussed extensively across this thesis. However, the applicability of these strategies – and the fact that fandom now uses them to validate the fantasy stories *D&D* generates – shows that *D&D*'s position within genre-culture is not solely marginal, at odds with literary fantasy. Although *D&D* is a participatory fan culture and many of its practices are conducted privately, within unofficial spaces – from people's homes and Discord servers to fan conventions – the narratives that are produced are no longer so neatly contained. Hills argues that 'cult status is recurrently linked to ideologies of romanticism, either through notions of 'uniqueness' and 'art' (via the figure of the *auteur*) or through endlessly deferred narrative which […] reconstructs a sense of romantic 'excess' and 'unknowability''.[96] Like cult TV and film and its fandom, *D&D* is an artefact of popular culture which is often denied the status of high art, but which lays claim to some of its qualities.

---

[93] Hills, p.102.
[94] CritRole Stats, 'Series Running Times', *Critrolestats.com*, 8 Jan 2018, https://www.critrolestats.com/stats.
[95] Hills, p.104.

Furthermore, as influential *D&D* players rise to fame and weight is placed on their storytelling ability, through their own discussions and their treatment by fans, the subcultural capital available within the *D&D* community has shifted to emphasise these artistic qualities. When characterising subcultural capital as that which 'confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder', Thornton also noted that 'media are a primary factor' governing the circulation and definition of this capital.[97] Within *D&D* subculture, as narrative-heavy games gain prominence through their broadcast on *Twitch* and *YouTube*, subcultural capital (and also what Mia Consalvo terms 'gaming capital', the specific types of status available within a gaming community) has similarly shifted to emphasise *D&D* as a mode of narrative creation.[98] While strength of storytelling has always been a marker of status, particularly for DMs as secondary authors and worldbuilders, it is now more highly valued than ever. This, in turn, is working to legitimise *D&D's* place within fantasy, and as a narrative medium in its own right.

Examining *D&D* as a participatory culture also demonstrates its capacity for creating new, unsanctioned meanings, pushing it beyond the derivative form represented by literary critics. Jenkins states that 'as fans view media socially, they demand much greater complexity, they want more difficult problems to work through and more pieces of information to explore'.[99] Utopian readings of fan culture have come under greater critique and scrutiny in recent years: Hills notes that 'work on fandom has formed a key part of the move towards valorising active audiences, and this use of the fan has resulted in an extremely partial and limited examination of fan practices'.[100] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse also highlight the biases within academic discussions of fandom, which 'have often chosen to look at transformative rather than affirmative fans', emphasising the critical, creative, and affective approach of the former group, who 'take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own', as opposed to the implied passivity of the latter.[101] However, when Jenkins' statement is applied to the collaborative and multivocal nature of a *D&D* game, it still holds true. A formulaic *D&D* source text is written in the knowledge that it will be read and reinterpreted collaboratively by many groups of readers, some who will seek this 'greater complexity', and so manuals are designed to be flexible to allow their narratives to extend beyond that source text, into the secondary and tertiary authorship sphere. *D&D* manuals are written to be extrapolated and expanded upon. Plots and settings are designed to become more complex through the numerous fannish readings the primary authors know the text will inspire. While affirmative fans of *D&D* certainly exist, the game is designed to enable the creativity of transformative fandom.

---

[96] Hills, p.109.

[97] Thornton, p.11.

[98] Mia Consalvo*, Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p.4.

[99] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* p.xxv.

According to Hellekson and Busse, while 'affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyse and critique', 'transformative fans' are 'always strongly emotionally invested'. They 'are often critical', and so 'present an active audience that not only disproves the passive-audience models […] but also creates artifacts that can be analysed and that exist to provide proof of that discontent'.[102] One of the primary artifacts that transformative fans produce is fanfiction. In *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games*, Grouling identifies key similarities between fanfiction and the narratives produced by TRPGs when discussing the relationship between *D&D* and fantasy fiction. Like Mackay, she notes that 'players sometimes base their characters on those from fantasy literature', usually ones they admire or have affective ties to.[103] Using the example of a ranger called Cuthalion, a character in one of the games she herself played, she documents the clear and self-conscious use of Tolkien intertexts within her *D&D* campaign by Cuthalion's player, Mark.

However, Grouling does not interrogate the connections between the two characters fully. Perhaps out of a desire to move away from the condemnation of *D&D* as solely derivative – in its relationship to Tolkien's work, specifically – Grouling argues that 'Cuthalion took on a life of his own and his views quickly shifted from the Tolkien world to the [homebrew *D&D*] world of Sorpraedor', becoming an original character and no longer a work of fanfiction.[104] Grouling argues that 'fanfiction writers work more clearly from an existing text […] rather than using a text purely as inspiration', and that this is the main distinction between fannish narrative and *D&D*.[105] She believes that *D&D* always results in an original work, and cannot be considered a fanwork. Regardless of where and from what texts players and DMs draw their initial inspiration, 'the narrative told during the actual gaming session' eventually exists independently as a piece of autonomous art'.[106] While her initial discussion of Cuthalion fits with Mackay's theory of how *D&D* players use fantasy intertexts as 'fictive blocks' from which to produce narrative, she then argues that to play in a *D&D* game is to remove these elements from their original context. In her eyes, this means that a character, campaign setting, or scenario can no longer be considered as a work of fanfiction.

---

[100] Hills, p.37.

[101] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p.4.

[102] Hellekson and Busse, p.3-4.

[103] Grouling Cover, p.130.

I disagree with this assumption, which is perhaps made because Grouling's definition of fanfiction – as work which is clearly based on 'an existing text […] rather than using a text purely as inspiration', in which authors 'work to inhabit the worlds and write about the characters in the original text' – is partially inaccurate.[107] The concept of 'fanfiction as derivative amateur writing' is certainly a long-standing one, but according to Hellekson and Busse, fanfiction is a genre that has changed and expanded its definition over time.[108] Academic examinations have now taken a more nuanced approach, acknowledging that fanfiction operates under a number of guises and is produced according to numerous authorial intentions. In their compilation of academic approaches to fanfiction, Hellekson and Busse note that it is now viewed simultaneously as 'a form of collective storytelling', 'a (sometimes purposefully critical) rewriting of shared media', and 'as the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds'.[109] Fanfiction is not as simple or as self-contained as Grouling imagines it: works within any fandom may also include taking characters, settings, or small systematic aspects of worldbuilding, and moving them beyond the boundaries of the original text – into another universe, genre, or entirely separate literary/transmedial world.

---

[104] Grouling Cover, p.130.
[105]Grouling Cover, p.134.
[106] Grouling Cover, p.130.
[107] Grouling Cover, p.134.
[108] Hellekson and Busse, p.5.
[109] Hellekson and Busse, p.6.

It is these broader and more flexible, multifaceted definitions of fanfiction as transformative narrative that I hope to apply to *D&D* and its creative strengths. To varying degrees, any *D&D* game is a transformative work, whether the players are inhabiting characters based around pre-existing fictional heroes; taking ownership of a pre-written *D&D* game module through vast divergences from the pre-established plot; or transplanting the pre-written game mechanics and lore into the context of their own subcreation. To varying degrees, players take the rules and story and, through implanting their own characters into the landscape, make it unique to them.

Furthermore, *D&D* is a transformative work of *fantasy*. If examined through the lens of 'fanfiction as an interpretive gesture, […] studied to gain insight into what it says about the primary text, the characters, or both', we can begin to see how these transformative acts represent a commentary and critique of fantasy works, and of genre-culture.[110] Players are not simply taking ownership of *D&D* mechanics and lore: they are also creatively interacting with the fantasy formulas it encapsulates. As previously mentioned, transformative fans and fan creators are also critical of their own texts, and the texts of others. Shows such as *Critical Role's 4-Sided Dive* demonstrate this, as the players of this *D&D* game critique their own narrative, as well as discussing the intertexts they believe to have bought to the table. A *D&D* campaign and its various composite parts can be regarded as an artifact which demonstrates readers' affective and critical approaches to the fantasy genre. A *D&D* character created by a player, or a plot written by a DM, may intentionally interrogate tropes or archetypes found within a single work. But because of the shared archetypes and tropes that characterise fantasy genre-culture, these subversions can result in a narrative which implicitly critiques the fantasy genre as a whole.

Grouling's argument that *D&D* isn't fanfiction, designed to defend it as an original piece of art, is problematised by the fact that she only conceives of one version of the transformative work that fanfiction can do. If her friend's version of Cuthalion stays within Tolkien's Middle-earth, he is a work of fanfiction – if he is placed within a separate, original subcreation, he is not. But if we broaden the definition of fanfiction to transformative works more widely, we can see that her friend's character Cuthalion is still a work of fanfiction. His character remains intrinsically tied to Tolkien's character that was used as inspiration, but the choices made by this new tertiary author modify, interrogate, or potentially subvert that original figure and its source text. The player's personal interpretation of Tolkien likely informs his choices as the character he plays. Furthermore, Grouling notes that the player, Mark, 'continued to be influenced by other pop culture texts as he continued to develop Cuthalion'.[111] If we further broaden transformative works to include the intertextual readings of 'other cultural materials' that Jenkins claims all participatory cultures employ, then we can view Cuthalion as a transformative pastiche of fantasy genre convention, and a contribution to fantasy genre-culture. Cuthalion embodies Mark's relationship to fantasy genre-culture: the intertextualities that he as a reader of fantasy has made his own, which encompasses the conventions he has chosen to affirm as well as those he has rejected.

---

[110] Hellekson and Busse, p.8.

Claiming that *D&D* players produce or perform a work of fanfiction does not necessarily make *D&D* a derivative or lesser artform, as Grouling fears. As a result, *D&D* has a much more complex relationship to fantasy literature than just reductive replication. A player or non-player character may be created to express discontent with the source text – be that a single work, or the genre-culture from which it cannot be separated. A DM's worldbuilding may express similar dissatisfaction with either *D&D*'s own imagined settings, or with other fantasy worlds that author has encountered in their own reading.

Understanding *D&D's* value as a fanwork may also be aided by Abigail De Kosnik's notion of 'archontic production'. In *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, De Kosnik redefines transformative narratives as 'archontic production' or 'archontic literature'. Archontic literature refers to 'fictional writings based on source texts […] that have been published; the writers of archontic literature are readers-turned-authors'.[112] TRPG players are also 'readers-turned-authors', having chosen to construct their own fantasy narratives in response to the texts they consume. De Kosnik argues that archontic literature has 'potentialities for democratising, polyvocal, hybridising, multiperspectival cultural production': 'launching new ways of speaking, thinking, and believing from *within* the dominant discourse'.[113] Here, I would like to stress De Kosnik's use of 'polyvocal' and 'multiperspectival', and her decision to place these qualities in opposition to the ‘dominant discourse’. Even though the *D&D* primary text may embody fantasy’s ‘dominant’ mode, it then provides many readers with the tools to articulate their response to that discourse. This reinvests fantasy with a multiplicity of perspectives, generating a spectrum of possible meanings for fantasy genre-culture.

---

[111] Grouling Cover, p.131.

[112] Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), p.275.

[113] De Kosnik, p.298.

In closing this chapter, I also wish to refer back to Trammell’s *The Privilege of Play.* While Trammell’s book mainly concerns the hegemonic masculinity and white privilege that he believes characterises the social networks of hobbyists, I want to highlight one aspect of his discussion that is relevant to my own argument. Trammell states that, much like Jenkins’ early conceptualising of fans, hobbyists (including *D&D* players) ‘see themselves as outsiders’.[114] But Trammell argues that the ‘ability to adopt this positionality is itself a privilege’.[115] Hobbyists (including *D&D* players), Trammell argues, are often ‘empowered by white privilege yet feel excluded from the domain of hegemonic masculinity to which they feel entitled’ – a position of marginality that is mostly *imagined*, rather than actual.[116]

Trammell argues that, as a result, ‘hobbyists have been reluctant to embrace radically subversive and racially progressive narratives simply because they view the stories they are already telling as transformative’.[117] The same has arguably been true of Fan Studies academic discourse up until recent years: Fan Studies has traditionally positioned fanworks as radical, not necessarily in their content, but simply in their existence as fanworks. This is an academic tradition only recently becoming scrutinised by scholars such as Rukmini Pande, Alexis Lothian, and Mel Stanfill, who argue that the content of fanworks can often be conservative, particularly with regard to race.

While the relationship of fanworks to politics, sexuality, and race is a topic too large to be covered here, I wish to focus on the distinction Trammell draws between ‘transformative’ and ‘subversive’ fan practice. In his above quotation, hobbyists are ‘reluctant’ to be ‘subversive’, because their stories are automatically ‘transformative’. He argues that there is a difference between a ‘transformative’ narrative, or the utopian light in which fan practices have been cast, and a truly progressive narrative that challenges the white, hegemonically masculine status quo, which he terms ‘subversive’. In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, Young notes that fantasy genre-culture has often been similarly characterised by white, Eurocentric patriarchy – in particular, in its conceptualising of 'medievalism' which *D&D,* as a self-confessed 'medieval fantasy', perpetuates.[118] The distinction Trammell makes therefore remains useful when discussing *D&D's* relationship to fantasy directly, and not just its subcultural practices.

---

[114] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play,* p.5.
[115] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play,* p.11.
[116] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play,* p.5.
[117] Trammell, *The Privilege of Play*, p.9.

While all *D&D* players have a 'transformative' relationship with fantasy genre-culture, personalising their relationship to specific fantasy texts across media and to fantasy convention, this is not always radical, or countercultural. For instance, their play may reinforce a trope or a stereotype of fantasy, rather than question it. This may not even have political consequences, unless that stereotype itself happens to be harmful.

As such, I use 'transformative fantasy' liberally within this thesis when discussing *D&D*, but utilise 'subversion' only to denote a text, reader response, or act of authorship that goes against the grain. Subversion itself may not be inherently political or radical, but it certainly has the potential to be. At the very least, it creates a plurality of voices within *D&D* subculture, moving away from the singular monopoly on fantasy that the primary text, and its own relationship to fantasy, was presumed to hold. The distinction made between 'transformative' and 'subversive' does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of value, as both work to construct new relationships to fantasy genre-culture. But it seems important to me to make such a distinction clear, rather than replicate the historical position within Fan Studies that transformative works are always inherently radical or transgressive. This ignores the conservative content that can be produced within fandom, and often works to discursively erase the prevalence of whiteness within a large amount of Fan Studies academia, and fan communities themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed how *D&D's* relationship to fantasy has traditionally been glossed in academic discourse. Fantasy scholarship has often avoided talking about *D&D* in anything other than derogatory terms, particularly when discussing *D&D's* presumed derivative relationship to fantasy literature. Instead, this thesis seeks to adopt Young's model of 'fantasy genre-culture', which attempts to avoid privileging literary authors above other media creators, readers, and fans. *D&D* is itself an example of the applicability of the 'fantasy genre-culture' model, as the game encompasses both fantasy's 'textual practices' and the 'wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, [and] the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts'.[119]

---

[118] Young, pp.63-87.

While TRPG scholars have offered many means of glossing how story creation occurs within *D&D*, this thesis principally utilises Jessica Hammer's 2007 model of 'primary, secondary, and tertiary texts, with corresponding primary, secondary, and tertiary authors'.[120] Hammer's framework is particularly useful, as it diversifies the perception within fantasy academia that the *D&D* modules and paratexts are the definitive *D&D* text, rather than simply its starting point, and one text of many. The framework allows me to delineate the different relationships game designers, DMs, and players can hold to fantasy genre-culture, and show how each of these relationships is transformative and personal to that author figure. However, I do not wish to stick with Hammer's perception of a hierarchy. Instead, I characterise the relationship between primary, secondary, and tertiary authors as an assemblage of different authorships which all interact with one another. Although traditionally published, the *D&D* primary text from WotC does not hold absolute authority. Similarly, players do not necessarily have final say in the text, as a secondary author may react to them in turn. This hierarchy is particularly troubled by the advent of *D&D* actual play: the movement of texts from private to public through broadcasting and streaming means that secondary and tertiary authors now have more power than the traditionally marginalised, fannish position they used to hold. The primary text is now more subject to secondary and tertiary texts than ever before.

In characterising *D&D's* relationship with fantasy as transformative, as a result of teasing out these multiple levels of authorship, I also drew clear connections between *D&D* and existing Fan Studies discussions of both participatory cultures and transformative works. While Fan Studies scholars have typically presented fanworks as radical or conducted from a position of marginality, this is not necessarily the case for *D&D*, which is a subcultural community where even published works occupy a fannish status relative to other media. Fan meanings were encouraged by the primary text, which explicitly acknowledged that it would be subject to many different interpretations and pass through many hands. Conversely, *D&D* campaigns are now becoming viewed as official fantasy texts as a result of actual play, meaning that it is hard to see this subculture as occupying the margins of fantasy genre-culture. Instead, *D&D* is currently occupying a liminal space between official and unofficial, as it shakes off prior formulations of its content perpetuated by the literary focus of fantasy scholarship, and begins to make more meaningful, public contributions to fantasy genre-culture.

---

[119] Young, p.5.

[120] Hammer, p.70.

Finally, I acknowledged that Fan Studies has often seen transformative readings of culture as inherently subversive, simply through the fact that they exist. Utopian readings of fan culture have modified themselves in recent years when confronted by the realities of fandom's now more mainstream position in media culture and the conservative practices of the fandoms themselves. For the purpose of examining *D&D* as transformative fantasy, going forward, I wish to adopt Aaron Trammell's distinction, made in *The Privilege of Play*, between 'transformative' and 'subversive'. While all readings and texts produced within *D&D* are 'transformative', in that players and participants within *D&D* make fantasy genre-culture their own, this might not always be a subversive practice, even in the cases where it is critically minded. 'Subversive' readings of fantasy genre-culture do however exist in *D&D,* and refer to moments or texts which challenge the presumptions and conventions of fantasy genre-culture. In certain cases – for example, player texts which challenge fantasy genre-culture's traditional representations of race – these are actively progressive and may even be radical, challenging the white privilege and hegemonic masculinity which has characterised both vocal parts of fantasy fandom and the white, Westernised-US hobbyist communities from which *D&D* was conceived.

Chapter Two: Playing with the Rules of Genre – *D&D* as Literary Intertext

This chapter examines how *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) is portrayed and utilised within literary fantasy. While studies of *D&D's* relationship to literature have typically examined TRPG campaigns adapted into novelistic texts, this chapter also discusses instances in which fantasy authors either implicitly or explicitly reference *D&D*, its conventions, and its ruleset. By acknowledging *D&D* as a fantasy text, authors formulate a position for *D&D* within fantasy genre-culture. Traditional perceptions frame *D&D* as a derivative or generic response to literary fantasy. As a result, *D&D* is often utilised by authors as a means of consolidating fantasy into a conventional form: *D&D* offers a recognisable language that texts can then gesture or defer to as a shorthand, presumed to encompass what fantasy stereotypically 'is'. However, if *D&D* condenses and makes legible the presumed conventions of fantasy, this means it can also be used knowingly and self-reflexively. For both authors and characters, it is often through a confrontation with rigid conventions, solidified into rules and material game components, that a challenge to this stereotypical mould occurs. This is the closest that literary fantasy gets to embodying the secondary and tertiary texts of Hammer's model, by which generic fantasy convention becomes transformed by personal reactions towards it. In the case of literary fantasy, *D&D* encourages unique approaches to the fantasy genre by representing the rules which one can play by, and eventually break.

The *D&D* game text – the rules and associations of the primary text – become a synecdoche for a presumed universal within fantasy genre-culture. As *D&D* and fantasy are treated synonymously, the primary text can then be used self-consciously within fantasy genre-culture, to signify fantasy's presumed generic mould, especially within literary works. Once authors have an imagined universal to refer to, they can then affirm or react against it, much like secondary or tertiary authors do within the game of *D&D* itself. This chapter therefore also wishes to disprove the claim that *D&D* has not produced original fantasy literature. There is, in fact, a wealth of *D&D*-influenced fiction to pick from – it has just typically been dismissed by critics as 'lesser' or lacking artistic merit. While there are too many works of fantasy fiction which depict or utilise *D&D* as an intertext to cover within a single thesis chapter, I have selected examples that are representative of broader trends, exemplifying the manifold ways in which *D&D* can be engaged with by literary authors.

Building on the few critical attempts made by others to acknowledge *D&D's* influence on fantasy literature, I first examine novels that directly reference *D&D*. This includes the *Dragonlance Chronicles* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, one of the most-well known and successful examples of fantasy novels inspired by *D&D*. Considered emblematic of TSR's own attempts at publishing original fantasy fiction, *Dragonlance* is one of the most successful series of *D&D* tie-in novels, together with *The Legend of Drizzt,* which I discuss in Chapter Four. This chapter examines treatment of these novels, before tackling representations of *D&D* in novels that are not tied overtly to TSR or Wizards of the Coast (WotC): instances where fantasy authors either gesture to *D&D* as a component of fantasy genre-culture, or utilise the *D&D* system and its rules as a fantasy intertext. Authors outside of the franchise can still rely on its shared language, enforcing its applicability and relevance to fantasy genre-culture.

Authors can also engage with this presumed universal critically or subversively, using the perceived pinnacle of fantasy-as-formula – the *D&D* primary text – as rules designed to be broken. The second half of my chapter examines these more subversive approaches, utilising both contemporary and historical, canonical works of fantasy.

This chapter aims to show that the opposition between *D&D* and literature is often invented and then enforced by scholars and critics, but not by authors. Many works of literary fantasy embrace *D&D* whole-heartedly and unashamedly, treating it as a fantasy text in its own right, with its own unique artistic strengths and weaknesses to be reflected and drawn upon.

D&D and Literature: The Artistic Merit of Formula

As discussed in Chapter One, *D&D's* relationship to fantasy literature has often been taken for granted in discussions by scholars. The connection between fantasy literature and *D&D* has traditionally been glossed only in one direction: how literature has been adapted or condensed into *D&D's* primary text, with all the notions of reductiveness that entails. This was not helped by the accusations of plagiarism levelled against early editions of the *D&D* primary text.

However, while the realities of *D&D's* relationship to literature have now evolved beyond *D&D's* primary text simply borrowing directly from the works of existing authors, to *D&D* inspiring individual players and authors, and even publishing its own books, one aspect of *D&D's* positioning relative to literature continues to colour judgements of the form. When defining 'fantasy-as-formula', Attebery describes it as not only repetitive, but profitable: 'as a commercial product, its success depends on consistency and predictability: one expects every box of detergent to be interchangeable with every other'.[1] In her discussion of fantasy genre-culture, Young notes that literary scholars have tended to value 'works deemed to have artistic merit […] commonly framed in opposition to its market value'.[2] *D&D's* status as a franchised, commercial product thus colours both its own production of literature, and any fantasy works which engage with it as an intertext. Even when no longer relegated on the grounds of authenticity or originality, *D&D's* commercial status and associated judgements of quality persist, meaning it remains possible to ignore its sizeable impact on fantasy. For instance, when *D&D* began to make original contributions to literature through novels TSR published in the 1980s, Benjamin J. Robertson notes that these were dismissed by critics as 'extruded fantasy product'.[3] I have already mentioned Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' judgement in the previous chapter: that 'in the hands of real hacks (that is, people writing to a franchise), the quest form is easy to exhaust'.[4]

This value judgement explains why one of the few academic attempts to define *D&D's* impact on fantasy literature has been made by Game Studies scholars, as opposed to those within the literary sphere. In *Role-Playing Games Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, Jaako Stenros, and Staffan Björk argued that books which take inspiration from RPGs advertise this relationship implicitly: 'each series is long and episodic; characters resemble RPG archetypes intended to be familiar to a reader, and they 'level up' throughout the course of each book, becoming stronger, gaining powerful items, or suffering setbacks'.[5] These characteristics are legible to players of both digital and tabletop RPGs, yet

---

[1] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.2.

[2] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.3.

[3] Benjamin J. Robertson, 'From Fantasy to Franchise: *Dragonlance* and the Privatisation of Genre', *Extrapolation,* Vol.58 No.2–3, (2017), pp.129-152 (p.130).

[4] Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy* (Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2009), p.123.

[5] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, Jaako Stenros, and Staffan Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.172-187 (p.178).

MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk note that they are derived originally from the *D&D* primary text, which they term a 'core text', that 'established now familiar tropes' and influenced early videogame design, thus having a broad impact on gaming culture.[6] Gerald A Vorhees argues that many 'RPG tropes' appeared in early game texts like *AD&D*, and were then 'constructed, presented, and re-presented in multiple ways across several gaming contexts', creating a 'recognition […] rooted in reproduction'.[7] This process of reproduction then occurs across fantasy genre-culture as a whole. In their analysis, MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk argue that structural aspects of *D&D* translate easily into genre fiction because of a key overlap: 'the formulaic nature of an RPG game – a diverse party of adventurers, a series of quests and trials and the potential for individual and group heroism (or failure) lends itself well to science fiction and fantasy writing, where this structure is an established formula'. [8] Perhaps *D&D* can be easily adapted into fiction because these structures that MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk identify were in fact taken from the 'established formula[e]' of the literary sphere in the first place. This is one example where the relationship between literature and *D&D* forged a reciprocal loop, yet the repetition here of 'formula' intensifies the similarities between *D&D* and commercial fantasy that leads both to be dismissed out of hand.

MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk's definition of *D&D's* influence on literature remains somewhat nebulous: 'although it would be completely disingenuous to imply that all fantasy and science fiction media has been impacted by RPG covenants, there is certainly a familiarity in these stories […] appreciated by readers'.[9] *D&D* may not always be an explicitly cited intertext, because its narrative tropes have become embedded into fantasy genre-culture through reproduction. More commonly, it is an intertext that feels stylistically 'familiar' and is recognised through association. This 'familiarity' or perceived resemblance has bled out diffusely across different media, and is therefore determined in part via a subjective value judgement that lumps many works of fantasy together. If something 'looks like' *D&D*, or what critics dismiss *D&D* as – formulaic and unoriginal – then this can relegate it from academic study entirely. MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk's definition is useful, as it acknowledges the way that *D&D* has become synecdochally related to many tropes and stylistic approaches to fantasy, that are considered by literature academics to be formulaic or mass-produced.

---

[6] MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture', p.172.

[7] Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock (eds.), *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.12.

[8] MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture', p.178.

[9] Ibid.

This diffuseness makes *D&D's* relationship to literature hard to pin down: it is a web of associations and 'familiarities', not solely a set of direct quotations or references. When examining the intertextual relationships between *D&D* and fantasy literature, the nature of the *D&D* primary text complicates things. If intertextuality is defined as 'the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before', then *D&D's* rules literalise this interdependence: it is a game text that catalogues major tropes of fantasy, taken from other literary works.[10] Conversely, if we understand intertextuality through the notion that 'works of literature are built from systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works of literature', then the *D&D* primary text literalises this impulse as well, given that it systematises textual conventions, condensing 'codes and traditions' into explicit rubrics.[11] *D&D's* primary text might also be analysed as an intertext using Julia Kristeva's statement that a text is 'a permutation of texts' in which 'several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise each other'.[12] However, utterances are not neutralised within the *D&D* primary text: those that are preserved and archived within the game become reinforced as 'essential' to fantasy genre-culture. *D&D's* primary text is so tightly connected to the intertextualities, interrelations, and shared formulas present within fantasy genre-culture that it becomes a synecdoche for that genre-culture. *D&D's* influence on literature becomes amorphous: it's hard for MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk to catalogue a specific set of criteria which marks *D&D* as an influence on a work, as there are too many associations to name.

This also complicates my own approach to *D&D's* relationship with fantasy literature. In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on works which either have a direct link to TSR, WotC, and *D&D*, or which advertise their use of *D&D* as an intertext. An author will make this explicit by making direct references to *D&D's* primary text: its rules, phrases, and textual artefacts; or its material components, for example the use of dice or instruction manuals. Explicit references are often self-conscious, allowing these texts to acknowledge what *D&D*

---

[10] J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), p.367.

[11] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p.1.

[12] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.36.

is thought to represent within fantasy genre-culture: the pervasive formulas or textual structures which have become commonplace enough to be considered generic.

In his own definition of intertextuality, H. Porter Abbott argues that ‘the power of such work must lie in the way it recontextualises the multitude of bits [texts, references, and quotations] that have been cannibalised in this way’.[13] ‘Recontextualisation’ is of key thematic importance to this thesis, and my understanding of *D&D* as a whole. While *D&D* may be perceived as a generic text, examining how authors then use that text and respond to its perceived conventionality is the next step in understanding *D&D’s* relationship to literature. The way literary authors use *D&D* as a fantasy intertext pre-empts my future examinations of how secondary and tertiary authors may personalise and react against the primary text in their gameplay. In all cases, what authors are reacting against and potentially recontextualising is this archive of presumed ‘generic’ fantasy.

Therefore, in this chapter I look first at affirmative uses of *D&D* as an intertext: texts which use the shared language of fantasy offered by the *D&D* primary text as is, without modifying or adapting it, to show what effects authors can achieve with this composite text of fantasy genre-culture. I then examine transformative and subversive uses of the *D&D* primary text. While subversions of formula have traditionally been placed in opposition to formula fantasy by critics, in truth many of these literary responses to *D&D* also acknowledge *D&D’s* strengths as a medium. Texts examined later in this chapter, such as *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* by Dianna Wynne Jones and *The Unspoken Name* by AK Larkwood, demonstrate how an individual’s confrontations with strict rules may provide structure to idiosyncratic and transformative responses; when we then combine this with the synecdochal relationship the *D&D* primary text has with genre-culture, we can see that *D&D* provides a language with which characters and authors change, challenge, and modify these structures, providing a springboard for new and unexpected approaches to fantasy.

When given specific boundaries, conventions, or in some cases literal rules by the *D&D* primary text, authors (like players) can then choose to reinforce, elaborate upon, subvert or break them. Regardless of their choice, what results is something new and original, rather than the solely derivative or mechanical texts critics once imagined.

---

[13] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 3rd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.254.

D&D's Literary Franchises: The Case of *Dragonlance*

The most obvious contribution *D&D* has made to fantasy literature is the fiction commissioned and published by TSR and WotC. Although TSR's first published novel was *Quag Keep* by Andre Norton in 1978, in the 1980s the company began to publish book series in earnest. This thesis addresses *D&D's* two most successful novelistic series: the *Dragonlance* novels, discussed in this section, and *The Legend of Drizzt* in Chapter Four.[14]

Responding to a desire within the player base for more game content involving dragons, in 1983 TSR invited game designer Tracy Hickman to create the *Dragonlance* module and the world of Krynn. A trilogy of novels was then released concurrently in 1984-5, as a marketing effort to encourage player investment in this new world. According to Daniel Mackay, the existence of *Dragonlance* 'testifies' to the 'reciprocal relationship' *D&D* holds to fantasy literature.[15] *Dragonlance* was the first TSR product to reverse the direction of adaptation, beginning as a *D&D* game module before being adapted into literature. Rather than creating a module that capitalised on the fannish desire to immerse oneself within an existing literary world, TSR used novel publication to generate that same kind of investment in one of its own imaginary creations.

The first novel in the series, *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, takes its plot from the narrative of an *AD&D* campaign in which the authors participated, with events based on players' roleplaying choices. The book not only attempts to establish lore of the world of Krynn, to generate readers' imaginative investment in a world in which they may eventually wish to play, but also reinforces certain narrative structures of *D&D* itself. The main characters of the *Dragonlance* series represented each of the major character classes, and the moral quandaries of the quest and each character's individual moralities were structured around the nine-tiered alignment system, thus providing an illustration of the rules of the game as played.[16]

Mackay argues that TSR commissioned this series to strategically avoid drawing on existing fantasy properties – 'if TSR did not own the copyright to an established world of dragons, then it could always publish its own novels, thereby pre-establishing the world in gamers' imaginations'.[17] This attempts to circumvent the accusations of derivation, but given that this endeavour had commercial motives, adaptation into the literary format also demonstrates the perceived strengths of each fantasy medium at this time. Literature is seen to encourage the imaginative immersion that transformative impulses can then arise from. While providing a model to players of the process by which mechanical devices can be used to generate fiction, the *Dragonlance* trilogy also provides Krynn with a canonical iteration players can become affirmative fans of, which will then guide their improvised, transformative gameplay. At the point of *Dragonlance's* publication, TSR uses literature to provide an 'official' version of the world to defer to. The prestige of traditional publishing is used to establish a shared understanding of fantasy, which will then encourage different individualistic variations in play.

---

[14] Liam, 'What was the first Dungeons & Dragons novel?', *The Forgotten Realms Lyceum*, 21 June 2023, https://www.forgottenrealmsreading.com/2021/06/what-was-first-dungeons-dragons-novel.html, para.3.

[15] Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001), p.18.

[16] Mackay, p.19.

The *Dragonlance* novels show *D&D* contributing to fantasy literature, rather than simply borrowing and systematising codes from existing books. However, reception of the novels remained focused on *D&D* as derivative and driven by formula. Contemporary reviewer Dave Langford described the first novel as 'inspired by an *AD&D* campaign full of chunks ripped bleeding from Tolkien', along with 'deadly predictable questing' featuring 'stock *D&D* characters in familiar encounters'.[18] What is striking about this review is that while it notes borrowings from Tolkien, implying a lack of originality, it then highlights the new structures *D&D's* primary text contributes to literature, which are treated in the same derogatory manner. Langford utilises fantasy-as-formula terminology, gesturing to the 'stock' nature of *D&D* character tropes to damn the 'deadly predictability' of *Dragonlance.* Jason Heller, in 2014, offers an overall positive review of *Dragonlance,* but his main complaints are similarly levelled against formula: he notes 'its flagrant lack of originality' as 'the cliches keep on coming', yet his review acknowledges that 'what could have been an echo chamber of tired tropes becomes an amplification of them'.[19] Heller identifies *Dragonlance* as part of the reproduction process that renders *D&D* 'cliches' recognisable. *Dragonlance* is establishing and affirming one language of fantasy, imbuing the mechanics of the *D&D* primary text with meaning. Rather than deriding formula, it's more useful here to note that *D&D* created generic expectations pervasive enough to become formulaic. *D&D* contributes towards fantasy convention, but its tropes remain mechanistic through association, and are therefore dismissed.

---

[17] Mackay, p.18.

[18] Dave Langford, 'Critical Mass', *White Dwarf,* Vol.65, (May 1985), p.10.

[19] Jason Heller, 'The first Dragonlance novels gave Dungeons & Dragons a new dimension', *A.V. Club,* 13 June 2014, https://www.avclub.com/the-first-dragonlance-novels-gave-dungeons-dragons-a-1798269401, para. 9-10.

Dragonlance is also mired in the commercial concerns that Attebery deplores in formula fantasy, developed as a means to market Hickman's modules.[20] Rather than creating art solely for art's sake, fiction publishing was used by TSR to boost game sales. This strategy proved effective and coloured TSR's other forays into fiction, with commissioned books designed to establish and advertise game settings such as Ravenloft, the world of Dark Sun, and the Forgotten Realms. Mackay even argues that tie-in fiction was 'adopted as a paradigm throughout the roleplaying game industry'.[21] Therefore, while books derived from TRPG systems contribute towards fantasy genre-culture, they are often maligned by critics because – when operating on an imagined spectrum spanning from authentic to commercial art production – they sit explicitly at the mercenary end. This is reflected in the academic attention (or lack thereof) that the *Dragonlance* novels have received. Benjamin J. Robertson, one of the few academics to give the series consideration, notes that *Dragonlance's* circumstances of publication 'condemns it to the status of 'mere' without the need for further conversation, a *franchise* unworthy of the attention critics might pay […] to an exceptional work'.[22] With over two hundred novels in the series as of 2022, Robertson notes that it becomes very easy to dismiss these works as replicable formula, and 'utter absence of scholarship on *Dragonlance* or similar franchises implies critics' tacit agreement on this point'.[23] However, Robertson argues that this decision is often made without any examination of the texts themselves. This fiction has very rarely been analysed in depth, meaning that there is little discussion of what *Dragonlance* tells us about the relationship between *D&D* and fantasy genre-culture.

Like the *D&D* primary text, *Dragonlance's* formula affirms certain meanings and definitions present within fantasy genre-culture. For instance, Robertson notes that Krynn 'owes a great deal to the pseudo-medieval underpinnings of much fantasy since Tolkien', further reifying the neo-medievalist genre of fantasy, much as the *D&D* game text does.[24] *Dragonlance* employs recognisable quest fantasy structures: in the first trilogy, a group of adventurers eventually known as the Heroes of the Lance, led by Tanis Half-Elven and assembled in their tavern by the elderly wizard Fizban, form an unlikely fellowship. They then travel together, collecting various magical items to help them first defeat the evil Draconian lord Verminaad, then the Dark Queen and Goddess of Dragons Takhisis. *D&D* campaigns systematise quest fantasy, distilling the 'fetch' quest structures now prevalent across gaming narratives. Here, that systematisation is then fed back into literary fantasy, with exploration, combat, and eventual acquisitions of loot marking several major milestones in the heroes' journey.

---

[20] Mackay, p.19.
[21] Mackay, p.20.
[22] Robertson, p.130.
[23] Robertson, p.132.
[24] Ibid.

Dragonlance also affirms *D&D's* language of fantasy by treating race, class, and alignment as a means of defining character. Langford's review discusses 'stock characters': *Dragonlance* condenses recognisable archetypes based in *D&D's* language of characterisation –'the kender had an insatiable curiosity', 'they're barbarians from the Plains', 'the man was a Solamnic knight[…] the gallant knight helps the lady fair', 'Tanis could no more get Kitiara out of his heart than he could get his human half out of his blood'.[25] *Dragonlance* extrapolates out from the mechanistic language of the primary text, much as tertiary authors do when creating their characters: however here the structures are reinforced, rendering classes like barbarian, paladin, and rogue into recognisable stereotypes. The primary text's understanding of character as determined by racial background is a structure that *D&D* took from existing fantasy genre-culture texts and reified through reproduction. This process is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four. Here, it demonstrates how TSR's novelistic works created a feedback loop in which fantasy convention was condensed down into game rubric, and the essentialising of certain tropes then bled outwards until it became a pervasive and recognisable structure across genre-culture, which is how accusations of formula arise. *D&D* fiction often resorts to the primary text ruleset as a shorthand, meaning that Krynn and its associated worldbuilding can potentially feel shallow and inauthentic, with the language of established rulebooks performing this work on behalf of the author. Yet, as *Dragonlance* was TSR's first successful series of novels, it should be acknowledged as one means by which *D&D's* imagery was secured and enabled to function as a shared referential language for fantasy, as is discussed in the next section.

Although *Dragonlance's* plot can be termed generic, and the Heroes of the Lance act as archetypal demonstrations of *D&D's* character creation, this is only one aspect of these texts. It is also only one interpretation of *Dragonlance's* plot. While the initial trilogy is structured around the *D&D* quest, exploration, and episodic combat encounters, a reader may instead focus on the many interpersonal conflicts that *Dragonlance* also stages. While the characters present may be 'stock' archetypes, there is a complex network of relationships developed across the large cast. *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* documents the initially begrudging respect the companions gain for each other, before unravelling many romantic subplots: the Plainsmen Goldmoon and Riverwind's tragically thwarted love and ultimately happy marriage; the paladin Caramon's torn loyalty between his sickly, morally dubious brother Raistlin and new lover Tika; the knight Sturm's affection for the beautiful Alhana Starbreeze, requited only in death; and crucially, the love triangle between Tanis Half-Elven, elf Laurana, and human Kitiara, which serves as a heavy-handed allegory for his divided identity. Interpersonal relationships and romance – essentially, the tertiary text of the 'players' – make up a large portion of the initial *Dragonlance Chronicles*. In particular, Tanis' quandary transforms the conflict between good and evil from epic to inherently personal, once it is revealed that his former lover Kitiara is a 'Dragon Highlord'.[26] Personal connections deepen the story as derived from formulaic primary text mechanics, mirroring the acts of personalisation performed by the secondary and tertiary text. *D&D* players' connections to a campaign's narrative are often engineered by the DM through the inclusion of content specific to their character backstory, providing stakes that personalise and encourage emotional investment in the conflicts of even prewritten modules. *Dragonlance* provides readers with a cast of characters to become emotionally invested in, imbuing the books' episodic structures with personality in a way that reflects how each *D&D* table's composite of player characters will produce plot independent of the main quest, through their reactions to each other, and to the primary or secondary text.

---

[25] Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2000), p.22, p.29, p.28-9, p.30.

Robertson's analysis also noted *Dragonlance's* focus on character. He argues that, in its very formulaicness, *Dragonlance* generates conventions based specifically around character interaction:

> There are innumerable *Dragonlance*-specific conventions that will be familiar to and beloved by readers of the franchise. […]

---

[26] Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, *Dragons of Winter Night* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2000), p.332.

- Flint Fireforge incessantly grumbles about the antics of his secret-best-friend Tasslehoff Burrfoot;
- Tasslehoff, for his part, steals things and annoys virtually everyone;
- Caramon Majere eats and makes eyes at Tika Waylin;
- Goldmoon exists while being beautiful;
- Raistlin Majere constantly reminds everyone else about how smart he is and/or how much he is willing to do for the sake of his magic—often whilst coughing or drinking the tea that eases his cough;
- Raistlin also has numerous secret conversations with Tanis Half-Elven, during which he usually says something about being smarter than everyone else.[27]

Although Robertson is satirising the *Dragonlance* 'formula', every 'convention' that he lists details *Dragonlance's* approach to character, and the relationships or romantic possibilities between characters. The depth of these relationships, even between character archetypes seen as shallow enough to be defined with a singular tic, shapes these novels, and is one means by which readers derive pleasure from them. The focus on character and interpersonal relationships also reflects the presence of multiple tertiary narratives within a wider multiplicity of authorships: a *D&D* narrative can always be reconceptualised as a third-person narrative involving a cast of players, even if each player experiences it in first-person. *D&D's* narrative is collaborative, and never solely dedicated to a single individual. Even in the case of Tanis, who serves as *Dragonlance's* protagonist, he is not a hero in isolation: a nexus of relationships is built around him.

In my literature review, I examined *D&D's* affinities with transformative fanworks, and defined *D&D* as a transformative response to fantasy. According to Katherine Hellekson and Kristina Busse, transformative fans 'take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, […] or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take'. Hellekson and Busse also defined transformative fans as 'always strongly emotionally invested' in the works they respond to.[28] One key way emotional investment is expressed is through either an affective attachment to a single character, or to a romantic pairing. *Dragonlance* therefore reflects a transformative impulse shared by both *D&D* and fanfiction, focusing not only on character as a plot impetus, but on the romantic relationships between characters as the main means of character and plot development.

---

[27] Robertson, p.142-3.

[28] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p.4.

As a transformative response to fantasy genre-culture, I argue throughout this thesis that *D&D* ultimately encourages a subversion of formula and fantasy convention. Through the 'creative step to make worlds and characters their own', *D&D* players and DMs take ownership of the *D&D* rules and seek to change them to fit their experience, through their acts of secondary and tertiary authorship. *Dragonlance* may not fully achieve this final stage. As a series commissioned and sanctioned by TSR (and later WotC) these novels – while demonstrating how secondary and tertiary authorship operates within *D&D* – must have a necessary affinity with the primary text, adhering to and modelling the rules and structures of gameplay, such as the *D&D* questing formula and character creation. As such, subversion of *D&D's* conventions is not the aim of the text.

However, the *Dragonlance* novels also foreground tertiary narratives and their transformative approach to *D&D. Dragonlance* showcases the means by which fantasy becomes personalised, such as the roleplayed relationships within the adventuring party that exist alongside combat and travel encounters. The novels show how meaning is generated between a group of secondary and tertiary authors. A focus on romance reflects the more transformative approach individual players take to the *D&D* game-world: in *Privilege of Play*, Aaron Trammell noted that discussions of romance mechanics and rules of interpersonal relationships were not arbitrated by the game designers, and instead became the focus of fanzines and fan discussions, as players explored ways to deepen their investment and agency in this imaginative space.[29] There are also ways in which formula might be considered to be subverted in this initial trilogy. The presence of four female characters in the trilogy (five, including the goddess Takhisis) is certainly unusual, with women eventually making up one third of the Heroes of the Lance. In *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* – published in 1983, the same year in which the *Dragonlance* module was released – Gary Alan Fine stated that only '5% and 10%' of participants in 'fantasy role playing games' were women, citing the 'characteristics of women' within the game-world, the subculture's 'process of recruitment' and 'reactions of men to the presence of women and female characters' as the reasons for this degree of exclusion from *D&D* subculture.[30] *Dragonlance,* co-authored by Margaret Weis, gives voice to this female minority within the *D&D* subcultural community. This is another affinity this series shares with transformative fanworks, as Hellekson and Busse note that transformative fandom and its associated practices were historically the province of a 'primarily female fan community', often defined in opposition to the male-dominated literary science fiction space.[31]

---

[29] Aaron Trammell, 'The *Alarum & Excursions* Community and Belonging', *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), pp.109-132.

Dragonlance showcases that, even in the strictest adherence to formula, a transformative impulse shared with other fanworks is still present. Here, it manifests through an affective focus on character and character relationships, which is where the potential variation provided by tertiary authors begins to creep into an otherwise formulaic text.

The contribution *Dragonlance* and other fantasy fiction published by TSR and WotC to fantasy genre-culture has been heavily debated – or perhaps not debated at all, with many critics willing to ignore and erase these works from the literary sphere entirely. Often, this is done on the same grounds on which formula fantasy has been dismissed. For the purposes of my own argument, *Dragonlance* showcases firstly that there is reciprocal relationship between *D&D* and fantasy fiction. *Dragonlance* reproduces *D&D's* archetypes, some of its mechanistic language, and its episodic approach to fiction, modelling the structures of gameplay. However, it also models players' interactions with the world of Krynn, utilising literature's imaginative properties to generate an investment the game's mechanisms alone may not achieve. *Dragonlance* constitutes an act of Vorhees' 'recognition […] rooted in reproduction', by which *D&D* contributes its own meanings and cliches to fantasy genre-culture, cemented through their representation across fantasy media.

Dragonlance also demonstrates an affective attachment to character and an investment in interpersonal relationships, similar to the impulses often found behind other transformative fanworks. The reciprocal relationship between *D&D* and fantasy literature is therefore inflected with transformative values. While not yet producing many subversions of fantasy convention, *Dragonlance* deepens the perceived shallowness of formula through the affective tools provided by the transformative fan response. This affective response to the game text (or primary text) is often generated by secondary and tertiary authors, and the meanings and personal investment they contribute to a campaign's narrative. In *Dragonlance,* this affect is cultivated through the characters of the adventuring party, implicitly acknowledging the role *D&D* players and DMs have in embellishing and personalising the primary text.

---

[30] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.62.
[31] Hellekson and Busse, p.6.

***D&D* as Shared Language**

Matthew Sangster has argued that 'works of Fantasy deliberately take advantage of their audiences' knowledge to sketch quickly using a shared symbolic language'.[32] *Dragonlance* and other TSR publications were commissioned with the intent to establish and secure *D&D* as one of those languages: advertising *D&D* as a mode for understanding fantasy that could extend beyond the subcultural gaming community. Once this symbolic language is established, it can then be utilised by others. Books which draw on or take inspiration from *D&D* refer to the established shorthand available to them: the shared lexicon of *D&D* terminology that has bled out across gaming culture, alongside the taxonomical catalogue of *D&D*-specific textual artefacts such as Monsters, Creatures, Items, and Races. Both of these languages are identifiable, to the majority of players. They may also be recognised by wider fantasy genre-culture. But this 'shared symbolic language' operates on a different textual register even to the literary fantasy it archives, given the mechanical tendencies of *D&D's* game text. Once this language becomes established enough to have a default mode, any deviation from or subversion of it becomes legible to a reader: it thus also has the capability to be transformed.

When formulaic texts are already seen as shallow, use of *D&D's* shorthand may further contribute to this, as the ease of defaulting to an existing symbol impacts the perceived depth of the imaginary world in question. One subgenre of fantasy fiction that acknowledges its relationship to the *D&D* primary text overtly is LitRPG: 'an entire genre dedicated to writing about gaming and experiences of gaming'.[33] While LitRPG is often inspired by digital games, TRPGs' close ties to fantasy genre-culture means *D&D* is often what fantasy authors draw on. For instance, one book that directly advertises its ties to *D&D* is *NPCs* by Drew Hayes. The title establishes this novel's status as LitRPG, with the shared language of *D&D* utilised throughout. *NPCs* has a very straightforward premise: in the opening chapters, an adventuring party controlled in the real world by players of '*Spells, Swords, & Stealth'* all die in a total party kill: 'all of your characters' heads slump over, slamming into the table'.[34] However, the social frame of the game is then abandoned for its embedded, secondary world narrative, as four NPC witnesses decide to take up the dead adventurers' mantle and perform the quest these players failed to complete. The reader follows Thistle, Grumph, Gabrielle, and Eric as they move from NPCs to protagonists, eventually completing the pre-written quest successfully – although never quite glimpsing the social frame of the game, and the 'real world' beyond.

---

[32] Matthew Sangster, *An Introduction to Fantasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.102.

[33] Darshana Jayemanne and Cameron Kunzelman, '"Retellings and reversions": A conversation on writing game experience with Ruth E.J. Booth', *Science Fiction Film and Television,* Vol.14 No.2, (2021), pp.251–56 (p.251).

The worldbuilding of *NPCs* is not very extensive. In the social frame, '*Spells, Swords & Stealth'* borrows heavily from *D&D* for its logics: players are prompted to use dice and other game mechanics, 'roll me vision checks', 'you roll the die […] and add your skill bonus', and abide by the *D&D's* stereotypes, 'I'm not sure paladins are supposed to drink […] the oath of purity isn't that big a deal'.[35] Meanwhile, there is very little specificity for the imaginary world the NPCs inhabit, bar the fact that all four characters are implied to know they are in a gaming system. When attempting to persuade the others to quest with him, Thistle argues that 'experience is gained through adventure, and we still have three weeks of travelling to gain the prerequisite necessity.'[36] Presumably, he speaks this way because he knows he is inside a game-world, demonstrating the universality of TRPGs as fantasy referent.

Shared symbolic language is the basis for the plot's central conceit: 'the scroll merely requests that the team of a paladin, a barbarian, a wizard and a rogue, known as the Kobold Slayers of Bluefall, attend audience with the king to receive a quest'.[37] *D&D* classes are recognisable archetypes, so unanimously understood that the NPCs know what their performance requires and can thus believably imitate them. As stressed through the repeated use of indefinite articles – 'a paladin', 'a barbarian', 'a quest' – the interchangeability of *D&D's* formula fantasy allows this group to see protagonising themselves as a plausible option. Despite being NPCs – 'that means Non-Player Character, someone who doesn't matter' – their understanding of fantasy formula and the predictability of this game-world is enough for them to complete their mission.[38]

---

[34] Drew Hayes, *NPCs* (Austin, TX: Thunder Pear Publishing, 2014), p.10.
[35] Hayes, p.5.
[36] Hayes, p.18.
[37] Hayes, p.17.

But even this self-confessedly formulaic adherence to TRPG tropes and logics does not come without its own small acts of subversion. In the first act of the novel, the NPCs utilise their understanding of TRPG convention regarding the 'division of roles': their party requires by necessity a paladin, a barbarian, a wizard and a rogue.[39] Initially, the NPCs assign roles based on who seems ostensibly to fit with the associated stereotypes: the 'shadowy' and 'crooked' Thistle becomes the rogue, half-orc Grumph assumes the role of barbarian, humans Eric and Gabrielle become a paladin and a wizard respectively. Their decisions are based in both literary and gaming convention, justified mechanically through statistical benefits in the *D&D* game system. Gabrielle argues she has the 'more formal education', while the half-orc is assigned his role as he 'possess[es] the raw strength and boot-quaking level of intimidation to play that part well'.[40] The racialised component to this choice is taken for granted, because TRPGs have rendered race into fantasy convention: one character notes, 'who'd ever heard of a half-orc wizard?'[41]

However, over the course of their adventure, each NPC realises that they are not particularly adept at the roles that *D&D's* conventions assigned to them. Thistle is selected as a paladin by Grumble, the god of minions. Grumph shows an aptitude for wizardry, despite 'everyone expect[ing] half-orcs to be dumb'.[42] With roles reassigned and other roles relinquished, Eric becomes a rogue, and Gabrielle the barbarian.

Hayes makes this unconventional assignation of roles a source of potential subversion for Gabrielle's character, as her manifestation of the prototypical barbarian rage stems from the position women occupy within the game-world: 'so stupid. Why did he do that? Why did he feel the need to protect her? […] she didn't want to be weak; she didn't want to be kidnapped. She didn't want to be a damsel, and the fact that she'd just become one again really pissed her off.'[43] This repeated frustration at her own victimisation and the conventions within which she's been placed eventually allows her to transcend her role: 'always angry.

---

[38] Hayes, p.7.

[39] Hayes, p.20.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Hayes, p.75.

[42] Hayes, p.83.

[43] Hayes, p.138.

Unhappy with your life. Unhappy with your place in the world. Anger boils, constantly.'[44] Gabrielle's development, from enforced feminine passivity to a rage driven by a desire to fight for herself, is rendered legible through *D&D's* language of fantasy: if Gabrielle's reaction to her victimisation suddenly causes her to become bloodthirsty and violent, readers understand this through the gaming mechanics of a barbarian rage. Her dissatisfaction with the world manifests itself through the preexisting rules, earning her the class role but articulating subversion of patriarchal expectations through the shared language of *D&D*.

Even a shallow world which affirms the fantasy shorthand of *D&D* and the majority of its underlying assumptions can still produce alternatives to the stereotypes established by convention. These NPCs, while living within seemingly rigid boundaries, test or chafe against them. The logics that make it seemingly unthinkable to have a female barbarian or half-orc wizard, while appearing incredibly reductive, begin to pose the questions of 'what if?' and 'why?' In his work on TRPGs, Neal Baker terms this distinction one between 'organisational' and 'generative' worldbuilding – while some TRPG conventions are taken for granted, organising the world along particular unquestioned structures, others prompt questioning and thus participatory elaboration from players.[45] The *D&D* system itself may encourage certain combinations through mechanical benefits, but ultimately any and all combinations of race and class are interchangeable, producing unique and experimental choices that are often then justified through story, becoming narratively 'generative' for secondary and tertiary players.

In the case of Hayes' novel, generative questions work to transform characters from one-dimensional backdrop to agents in their own story. Rules are universally understood, but this universal understanding then gives meaning to the moments where they are challenged. Convention within fantasy genre-culture can be both affirmed and transformed, as authors react to, breach, and eventually overstep the boundaries presented to them.

Other formula fantasies might not advertise their connection to gaming overtly, but can still signpost their intertextuality. Nicholas Eames' *Kings of the Wyld* references *D&D's* textual artefacts to signal its affiliation: it features references to 'owlbears', the conception of

---

[44] Hayes, p.101.

[45] Neal Baker, 'Secondary World Infrastructures and Tabletop Fantasy Roleplaying Games', in *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*, ed. by Mark J.P. Wolf (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 83-95 (p.83).

‘daeva’ as beautiful angelic humanoids, and ‘Tiamax’, one of *D&D’s* dragon gods.[46] Eames’ novel also demonstrates intertextual inspiration through the structure of its story, and its imaginary world. Following former hero Clay Cooper, *Kings of the Wyld* begins with a call to adventure from his former party member, Golden Gabe, who asks to go on one final quest to save his daughter Rose. In their decision to ‘try and get the band back together’, Clay and Gabe construct for themselves a sequential quest: first, reconvene all their former party members from where they’ve become scattered across the country, then find a means of travelling and surviving the dangerous Heartwyld, and ultimately rescue Rose from the clutches of a city besieged. This scaffolding alone could be fantasy formula – demonstrating the broad overlap between different commercial strands of fantasy – but combined with direct allusions to *D&D,* it suggests borrowing from TRPGs.

Kings of the Wyld frequently mimics a ‘predictable’ *D&D* campaign: it features extensive travel and episodic scenes revolving around the individual concerns of the five-person party ensemble, who are, as with Hayes’ NPCs, responses to a generative question: in this case, what do adventurers’ lives look like once their adventure is seemingly over? Yet Eames’ integration of *D&D* into his imaginary world – what we might term his secondary text – demonstrates another form of transformative response that *D&D* can produce. This transformative aspect of the text is informed by Eames’ ‘idioculture’, which refers to the mixture of fantasy and popular culture texts he brings to the game as a reader and fan, which transform the ‘generic’ *D&D* game text into something personal and specific to him. Fine defined idioculture as the cultural system each roleplaying group develops through play at their table: the behaviour, references, and shared understandings unique to them, which exist separately from the social etiquette or mores of the subcultural community. An idioculture, Fine argued, begins with an imaginary world, typically but not exclusively based in ‘a game designer’s world, the Tolkien mythos, a science fiction novel, or a dungeon created from […] popularised medieval mythology’. Gamers then ‘construct a personal gaming culture around this ‘world’ […] blend[ing] elements of the referee’s world with their sense of what is and should be’. A table’s ‘own group culture’ often ‘expands and modifies’ the game-world.[47] The generic, imaginary world of the *D&D* primary text thus becomes personalised through the social interactions of the group and their established cultural system. *Kings of the Wyld* demonstrates how an individual idioculture, constructed from the secondary and tertiary text, can personalise and modify a 'generic' fantasy world, as Eames overlaps fantasy formula with a personal interest in music and rock culture. Reskinning adventuring parties as mercenary 'bands' – 'so you were in a band? […] you were in Saga' – Eames imagines a world where heroism is treated as entertainment, and has become increasingly performed on a stage before an audience rather than out in the world. His 'bands' chase fame, wealth, and women, much as imagined musicians on tour.[48] Eames makes his fantasy world unique by filtering it through the lexicon provided by a separate realm of popular culture, much as an individual gaming group might.

---

[46] Nicholas Eames, *Kings of the Wyld* (London: Orbit, 2017), p.73, p.222.

[47] Fine, p.144.

Throughout *Kings of the Wyld, D&D's* impetuses towards exploration, experiential gain, and accumulation of monetary wealth are upheld. According to Nicholas J. Mizer, 'character advancement in *D&D* makes literal and visible the Puritan connection between accumulation of wealth and divine favour', focusing on a linear increase in power that manifests typically as both wealth and fame.[49] This feeds into *D&D's* negative image as a commodification of fantasy, one way fantasy's ephemera are demystified, through a literal reduction from ephemeral force to mechanical object: '*A wand that shoots fireballs would be nice,* Clay thought. *Or one of those chain lightning bolts*'.[50] In *Kings of the Wyld,* the recovery of Gabe's sword is considered equal to their reunion with previous companions, and their journey develops through the acquisition of goods, wealth, and an airship, upholding this conventional trajectory. However, Eames also creatively reimagines this structural underpinning of *D&D,* by connecting the accumulation of wealth with a real-world version of this metanarrative: that of rock band fame and fortune.

Relating fantasy heroism to rock star renown, Eames not only demonstrates the means by which a *D&D* group's idioculture modifies its approach to fantasy, he also opens up a discussion of adventuring as either a mechanical or authentic artform. As an older, 'authentic' band, Clay and his friends cast judgement on the 'shallow' adventures of other bands that have followed in their footsteps: '*This […] is why the bands of today don't bother touring. This is the reason they avoid the Heartwyld. Why risk being ambushed by monsters when you can pick and choose which to fight? Why put yourself in danger […] when you can simply visit your local arena?*'[51] Gabe remarks that, '"That's how it is now, man. I told you. So much spectacle, so little substance"'.[52] Their discussions in many ways mirror Attebery's distinction between fantasy-as-mode and fantasy-as-formula: these new adventurers are treated as 'a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfilment' whose shallow replications 'tend toward triviality'.[53] In a world built around adventuring as entertainment, Saga's members themselves decry the commercialisation of fantasy, using notions of authenticity and 'risk' – movement away from the safe and the predictable – as criteria against which to value the 'art' that is being produced in this sphere.

---

[48] Eames, *Kings of the Wyld*, p.3.

[49] Nicholas J. Mizer, 'Paladin Ethic and the Spirit of Dungeoneering', *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Vol.47 No.6, (2014), pp.1296-1313 (p.1304).

[50] Eames, *Kings of the Wyld*, p.144.

[51] Eames, *Kings of the Wyld*, p.208.

Eames conceives of these value judgements as an extension of his use of rock subculture, 'wherein the mercenary bands of today try so very hard to outshine the past that feels, even to them, somehow more authentic'.[54] However, these claims are equally applicable to fantasy, often accused of replicating or proliferating imitations of the great works that have come before. *Kings of the Wyld* relies upon *D&D's* positioning as a synecdoche for wider fantasy genre-culture to produce this self-reflexive critique. In Clay and Gabe's eyes, an 'inauthentic' band tour is an episodic, constructed narrative, entirely fabricated, and determined by combat encounters that are all ultimately staged for shallow purposes. They are not considered to be a meaningful fantasy text, or a true hero's journey. These commentaries mimic discourses that have been applied to formula fantasy, *D&D*, and fantasy inspired by *D&D.*

Yet the fact that both fantasy-as-mode and fantasy-as-formula can be represented by the adventuring band confuses Attebery's spectrum of artistic value: Saga themselves represent a separate brand of *D&D* adventure, in which the 'style' of formula can also hold 'substance'. Towards the close of the novel, Gabe rouses Saga and other 'bands' to his cause through the following speech, selling a version of fantasy heroism that is rooted in Eames' conception of rock star fame and fortune:

> Today you make your name. Today your legend is born. Come tomorrow, every tale the bards tell will belong to you, because today we save the world […] this is not a choice between life and death, but life and *immortality*. Remain here and die in obscurity, or follow me now and live forever![55]

---

[52] Eames, *Kings of the Wyld*, p.50.

[53] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.1-2.

[54] Nicholas Eames, 'Interview', *Kings of the Wyld* (London: Orbit, 2017), pp.499-501 (p.500).

[55] Eames, *Kings of the Wyld*, p.450.

This speech succeeds in-world by rousing all ‘bands’ – shallow, money-grabbing, and otherwise – to the call for adventure, rallying them to a greater, ‘authentic’ cause. Through it, Eames also seeks to deepen the meaning of his own narrative. Clay and his friends cast doubt on the shallowness of the other fantasy quests playing out within their world, those that are determined simply by combat encounters but lack a motive beyond wealth. Their quest, though built along the same lines, has developed a deeper, significant meaning, through the reaffirming of personal, fraternal, and familial connections, as well as a recourse to the epic ‘legendary’ battles of old. Eames attempts to move *D&D* out of the commercial and into the realm of fantasy-as-mode. If read as advocacy for the character-driven *D&D* Eames’ story has seemingly taken inspiration from, he suggests that even these narratives can extend beyond the formula and gain ‘substance’, although his definition of ‘substance’ remains vague.

Regardless of the success of both Gabe and Eames’ argument, *Kings of the Wyld’s* use of fantasy and TRPG convention demonstrates several things about *D&D’s* relationship to literature and fantasy genre-culture. The first is that it elaborates on how the *D&D* primary text is personalised and transformed through individuals’ interactions with it. *D&D* players such as Eames personalise an imaginary world through the omnivorous use of ‘fictive blocks’ (decontextualised tropes from across fantasy that intermix and recontextualise themselves in unexpected ways). They modify this world through the introduction of their idioculture, a cultural system of beliefs, behaviours, and intertextual references which can colour every player or player group’s individualised approach to broader generic fantasy. The second is that *D&D’s* synecdochal relationship to fantasy produces self-reflexive, metafictional discussions of fantasy. Thirdly, while Eames still uses *D&D* to dismiss formulaic fantasy as trivial, predictable, and inauthentic, what Gabe’s speech demonstrates is that the players of *D&D* themselves do not experience the fantasy in which they participate *as* formulaic. Clay and his adventuring band, through their interpersonal relationships and their emotional investment in their ideals – in this case, heroic glory and a memorable ‘legend’ or story – believe themselves to be in a ‘true’ work of fantasy. This perhaps highlights again how a player’s transformative relationship to fantasy and the resultant investment in their individual tale can have value and worth, even if it is initially derived from mechanical formula.

Both books overtly advertise their relationship to *D&D*, through allusions either to its textual lore or to direct gameplay. I would also argue that neither text does anything groundbreaking with the conventions *D&D* has handed them, utilising the shared language of fantasy that *D&D* represents so as to be understood by their readership. However, shared languages can be utilised to diverse ends. Hayes uses one-dimensional, interchangeable archetypes from *D&D* – identities generated from stereotypical assumptions of the game's class system – as a springboard by which to create new, 'unconventional' characters, allowing his NPCs to transcend their one-dimensional purpose and protagonise themselves. *Kings of the Wyld*, meanwhile, transfers *D&D's* approach to worldbuilding and character motivation to the secondary world of the Wyld. In doing so, it not only demonstrates how *D&D* generates a broad range of intertextual relations, it also produces a self-conscious approach to fantasy genre-culture. It argues that *D&D* can produce 'authentic' fantasy – but this argument seems to be very personal to those experiencing it. The transformative relationships to fantasy which *D&D* generates give secondary and tertiary authors the agency to produce their own art, which may not replicate canonical works of fantasy but which reproduces its ideals, and holds equal worth for the individual participating in them.

Both books are certainly formulaic, but utilise communal understanding of formula to vastly different ends, producing unique and original results. Formula also breeds metafictional reflections: protagonists seemingly gain genre awareness through the presence of TRPG rules and structures within their world, which in turn allows them to participate in or subvert them. As a condensed form of fantasy, *D&D* encourages people to examine the 'rules', discourses, and value judgements surrounding genre more closely and to knowingly perpetuate, challenge or subvert these in their own iterations and reworkings.

Subversions of Formula: *The Colour of Magic* and *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*

D&D's consolidation of fantasy-as-formula reproduces and cements some of fantasy literature's structures and scaffolds. But creative decisions are often made in reaction to the explicit definition of limits and boundaries, and can become subversive. Subversion is not superior to transformation, but it demonstrates how flexible even a rigid formula can be. Attebery himself notes that fantasy-as-formula has this potential for innovation, noting that, 'for some writers, narrative constraints seem to act as spurs to the imagination […] such limitations enable invention even when restricting it'.[56] In *Stories About Stories,* he elaborates further, claiming that 'a good storyteller' can turn formula 'into something surprising, by choosing the lesser known among alternative formulaic elements and taking indirect paths to the inevitable outcome'.[57] Once formula is established, authors can respond to it: before there can be rulebreakers, the rules must first be legible.

However, because *D&D's* primary text represents formula in its most rigid form, once it is subverted, *D&D* is often considered to simply be 'left behind'. In accordance with the narrative of literary value, once a work takes an original or subversive approach, it transcends the shackles of formula and becomes something 'more'. To Attebery, for example, this would move a text closer into 'fantasy-as-mode', and thus make it more worthy of study. However, if we examine texts that produce subversive reactions to *D&D*, without erasing the presence of the *D&D* intertext or apologising for it, we can see that these two impulses are not mutually exclusive. *D&D's* presence, and the intensification of formula it represents, is often what breeds a creative or critical response.

This is demonstrated in Terry Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic. The Colour of Magic* is in part a self-referential evaluation of fantasy genre-culture at the time when Pratchett was writing, responding to and parodying several key fantasy intertexts. Many read this novel solely through the lens of the texts to which it refers, noting that it was 'written for fantasy fans' who will likely be able to identify on sight gestures to Fritz Leiber, H.P. Lovecraft, and Anne McCaffrey, among others.[58] According to Gideon Haberkorn, 'the Discworld is introduced as a world assembled to a large degree from textual references […] it is so central to these early novels that readers without at least a basic knowledge of the referenced texts and tropes are missing an important dimension'.[59] It is often considered the lesser of Pratchett's *Discworld* novels, in part due to this overt intertextuality. But if *The Colour of Magic* is written for fantasy fans and reliant on their knowledge of fantasy in order to function, it might instead be performing – as *D&D* is – an act of consolidation for fantasy genre-culture at a specific point in time.

---

[56] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.10.

[57] Brian Attebery, *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.97.

[58] David Langford, 'Introduction', in *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature Second Edition,* ed. by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James, and Farah Mendlesohn (Baltimore, MD: Old Earth Books, 2004), pp.3-13 (p.8).

[59] Gideon Haberkorn, 'Seriously Relevant: Parody, Pastiche and Satire in Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels' in *Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds: From Giant Turtles to Small Gods*, ed. by Marion Rana (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp.137-157 (p.139).

Amongst the many intertexts referenced and parodied, Pratchett gestures explicitly towards *D&D* and fantasy tabletop roleplay. At an early point in the novel, the narrative pulls back from its protagonists, Rincewind and Twoflower, and the reader is given a glimpse of the gods playing a game to determine the fate of the Discworld: 'the gaming board was a carefully carved map of the Discworld, overprinted with squares. A number of beautifully modelled playing pieces were now occupying some of the squares'.[60] The fates of the main characters are determined by rolls in a 'dice box': 'I know there's someone here, I just heard you playing dice!'.[61] The role of these random factors within the *D&D* system is jokingly referenced when it is noted that 'chance had been an early casualty, running her hero into a full house of armed gnolls'.[62]

Pratchett briefly imagines his secondary world as a TRPG, then mentions how gamification has solidified the fantasy conventions found therein. For instance, he notes the game requires 'more heroes and champions, of which the disc had a more than adequate supply', as the movement to *D&D's* formula necessitates an expansion of Rincewind's adventuring party.[63] Hrun the Barbarian notes the predictable nature of his own adventures: 'I expect in a minute the door will be flung back and I'll be dragged off to some sort of temple arena where I'll fight maybe a couple of giant spiders and an eight-foot slave from the jungles […] and then I'll rescue some kind of princess from the altar […] and escape with the treasure'.[64] This character is often analysed as an intertext of Conan the Barbarian, Hrun's recitation serving to deconstruct the pulp fantasy adventure novels from which he is derived.[65] However, it is also a near-perfect description of a conventional *D&D* or fantasy RPG dungeon, serving to emphasise how fantasy's tropes and structures are reproduced across multiple modes.

Many critics and fans dismiss the earliest *Discworld* novels as bad or 'lesser' texts, and so it is perhaps of note that these are where *D&D* explicitly features. If we take a straightforward reading, in Pratchett's own words that, 'Discworld started as an antidote to bad fantasy […] an awful lot of it was highly derivative, and people weren't bringing new things to it', it might be easy to quickly dismiss *D&D* as one of the 'bad fantasy' texts that needs to be mocked and remedied.[66]

---

[60] Terry Pratchett, *The Colour of Magic* (London: Penguin, 2022), p.96.
[61] Pratchett, p.125.
[62] Pratchett, *Colour of Magic*, p.96.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Pratchett, *Colour of Magic*, p.175.
[65] Haberkorn, p.140.

However, Pratchett goes on to state 'the first couple of books quite deliberately pastiched bits of other writers […] good writers, because it's the good ones most people can spot'.[67] If parody is conducted as appreciation, there are more productive ways of interpreting *The Colour of Magic* and its relationship to fantasy TRPGs. *The Colour of Magic* is highly concerned with the concept of fantasy tourism: Twoflower is a visitor from a distant part of the Discworld, eager to participate in the many conventional experiences Ankh-Morpork and its environs have to offer, from tavern brawls to dungeon crawls to dragons. While it may be a constant source of exasperation and despair for Rincewind, Twoflower's enjoyment of these experiences and his determined desire to explore the Disc are the main motivations that drives the plot forward. His wholehearted pleasure in these perilous, but ultimately recognisable, set pieces, are what organises the novel's episodic narrative – much like a *D&D* campaign (which, it seems, the gods of the Disc have placed him in). This tourist character is analogous to a TRPG player and their character: a person who is escaping into fantasy, who delights in all the experiences a fantasy narrative can offer them, and who uses genre awareness to determine how to react to particular situations. These set pieces become unique – or uniquely interesting – because it is Twoflower and Rincewind who encounter them as tertiary authors.

Examining the critical narratives that surround *The Colour of Magic* and its place within the *Discworld* series also demonstrates how *D&D* is utilised and understood within fantasy genre-culture. There is a loose consensus amongst many critics that Pratchett's novels and secondary world grow and improve in complexity across the series, flourishing after he abandons direct parody and formula for a more holistic synthesis of fantasy and real-world culture. For instance, Daniel Lüthi argues that the *Discworld* series improves when 'rather than continuing to litter his invention with parodies of the fantasy novels which had been published on the growing market, Pratchett began working on the Discworld as a self-contained and independent secondary world'.[68] Haberkorn, even once he has noted that 'as comic fantasies, Pratchett's Discworld novels […] [are often dismissed as] trivial escapism, a way of avoiding serious engagement with reality', still makes a distinction that the Discworld evolves once 'Pratchett moves beyond pastiche'.[69] He draws a distinction between the conventions which Pratchett 'merely' replicated, and those which 'are playfully imitated, criticised and ridiculed, and ultimately adapted, and changed into something new'.[70]

---

[66] Terry Pratchett, interview by Locus, 'Terry Pratchett: Discworld and Beyond', *Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, Vol.43 No.6, (December 1999), pp. 4 and 73-76, p.4.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Daniel Lüthi, 'Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels', *Mythlore*, Vol.33 No.1, (Fall/Winter 2014), pp.125-142 (pp.130-1).

While I believe both these narratives of the Discworld and its literary development are reductive, such interpretations still elucidate our understanding of *D&D's* presence within the text. The *Discworld* series is an immersive, secondary world fantasy from one of fantasy genre-culture's best-known Anglophone authors. If it began life (as Haberkorn argues) as a pastiche of many different intertexts for fans and readers operating in the same shared language of fantasy, and develops (as Lüthi argues) into an original, autonomous secondary world fantasy as these references grow in depth and complexity, can this argument not also be applied to *D&D*?

DMs and players conduct their narratives within imaginary worlds either taken from pre-written modules or of their own invention, and they either replicate fantasy intertexts directly or begin to, as Haberkorn argued, 'adapt and change them into something new', often creating autonomous secondary worlds unique to their adventuring party and player group. They also often improve as storytellers as a result. Some critics consider *The Colour of Magic* to exist on a spectrum of *Discworld* novels, from simple parody to complex imaginary creation, and denigrate it as Pratchett in his most derivative format. However, most ultimately accept that even this 'derivative' text was very popular, and developed into a critically interesting imaginary world. If this is the case, what prevents such narratives of development also being applied to fantasy TRPGs? These too, exist on a spectrum from simple/derivative to complex/original, and may also span across both, developing in intricacy over time. We should not take the glimpse we see in *The Colour of Magic* of the Discworld's gods' TRPG gameplay for granted: maybe the Disc's pantheon simply got 'better' at playing *D&D.*

Lüthi's 'defence' of Pratchett closes on the statement that 'Pratchett's continuing examination of narratology and fictionality […] is nothing less than an exploration of how stories shape and influence our thinking and behaviour. This is perhaps his most important discovery in the field of fantasy literature'.[71] *D&D* offers this same knowledge to those who wish to participate in fantasy genre-culture, self-reflexively examining how and why certain tropes have become central to fantasy, and perhaps even moving players to challenge such tropes and presumptions. In *The Colour of Magic, D&D* is used to show the reader the very constructedness of the story they are reading, exposing the logics and mechanics which govern it behind the scenes. In his interview with *Locus Magazine*, Pratchett stated: 'I was rapidly stitching together a kind of consensus fantasy universe, and the one trick was, 'Let's make people act''.[72] Primary-text mechanics encourage creativity and authorial agency in players, so perhaps showing the mechanics here invites this same call to action – either proving the characters have a game-changing agency to alter the world, or allowing readers to see the novel not as a great work, but as a game they can also actively choose to play.

---

[69] Haberkorn, p.138, p.145.

[70] Haberkorn, p.146.

[71] Lüthi, p.137-8.

D&D is not anathema to notions of originality, or even the fantasy canon: it is critics who place them at opposing poles when crafting narratives of value. While *Colour of Magic* uses *D&D* in part as a signifier for fantasy formula, gesturing towards its influential place in fantasy genre-culture, other texts have used *D&D's* own formulaic conventions as triggers for subversion. One of these is Diana Wynne Jones' *The Dark Lord of Derkholm.*

Jones tackles TRPGs across multiple works, the most notable being *Homeward Bounders*, which, like *Colour of Magic,* utilises TRPG materiality as a basis for fantasy worldbuilding. *Homeward Bounders* acknowledges the potential within TRPGs for imaginative immersion and fully realised subcreation – with each world in the multiverse that the protagonist, 'homeward bounder' Jamie, encounters constituting its own, unique wargame, including worlds which seem close to 'reality' and resemble our own. However, *Dark Lord of Derkholm* is chosen for study here as it integrates elements of both *D&D's* materiality and narrative conventions into the logic of its worldbuilding. One of *Dark Lord of Derkholm's* key observations is the ability of formula to trigger subversive, alternative readings of the fantasy mainstream, borne from the seeds of reader discontent.

In *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, Derkholm is presented as a generic fantasy setting, if only because that is what its peoples have been contracted to produce for their audience. Derkholm is co-opted and managed by the profiteer Roland Chesney to facilitate 'Pilgrim Parties'. Pilgrim Parties are scheduled quests composed of several pre-determined 'episodes', in which groups of adventuring tourists utilise Derkholm as a stage for their own power fantasy: 'now, as you'll see, in order to get the Pilgrim Parties through all their scheduled adventures, we have to route them in a number of ways, colour-coded on your map'.[73] Episodes come with their own manuals and paratexts – 'Derk sat leafing through the black book, wondering how he would ever learn all these rules' – as well as set pieces which must meet certain structural demands: 'A Dark Lord's Citadel must always be a black castle with a labyrinthine interior'.[74] Some of these conventions are underpinned by societal expectations that become encoded as literary rule: Chesney offers 'exotic eastern adventure[s]', argues that adventurers 'expect to see hovels, abject poverty, and heaps of squalor', and 'won't let women do the [role of] Dark Lord', et cetera.[75] Derkholm is a world that fantasy fans experience via a structured, scaffolded act of escapism. The Pilgrim Parties literalise the process of *D&D*, as adventurers are led through their quests by individual storytellers, armed with their relevant instructional guides. Moreover, these guides were written by an author with a circumscribed view of the world, informed by his own status of privilege. The same criticism could be levelled against the *D&D* primary text, and its initial game designers.

---

[72] Pratchett, 'Discworld and Beyond', p.4.

However, Derkholm is narrated not from the perspective of these adventurers, but those forced to facilitate their experiences. When asked to manage this year's tour and act as the requisite Dark Lord, Derk and his family – in particular, his son Blade and daughter Shona – start to chafe against the rules and roles handed to them. Derk's wife, Mara, deliberately subverts them: when handed the archetype of 'Glamorous Enchantress', iterating the gendered conventions through which Chesney views fantasy, she remakes it into one of the central destabilising forces that undermines Chesney's influence.[76] The constraints of the stereotypical, by-the-rules *D&D* narrative begin to sow seeds of sedition, as Derk himself begins to resent the performative conventions required of a 'successful' Dark Lord, and Derkholm seeks to free itself from Chesney's influence for good.

Given that formula is a tyrant overthrown in *The Dark Lord of Derkholm,* it might be simple to create another opposition: the real, fantastical world of Derkholm, and the formula which subdues it, rendering it one-dimensional. *D&D*, once again, is the perceived enemy to imaginative depth. However, TRPG players might notice a more nuanced approach than mutual exclusivity in the novel's conclusion, as pilgrims are also instrumental in earning Derkholm its freedom. When Chesney's representative hands out his instruction manuals, he states: ‘we like our customers to believe that their own tour is unique’.[77] However, Chesney only wants them to ‘believe’ that: he provides the illusion of freedom while ensuring that no adventurers stray from the bounds of predetermined formula. While this may be true of some *D&D* games and how they are structured, this process of ‘railroading’ is often frowned upon, as it denies players one of the key immersive properties of the TRPG as a fantasy medium – the ability to interact with any element of the imaginary world and impact it as a result. Chesney denies his tourists the agency of tertiary authorship, an agency which Twoflower has in *The Colour of Magic*.

---

[73] Diana Wynne Jones, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2013), p.56, p.51.

[74] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.56, p.47.

[75] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.51, p.47, p.7.

[76] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.58.

In *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, Blade’s quest as Wizard Guide – how Blade conducts himself as a secondary author, as well as what his group of ‘tourists’ want from the narrative as tertiary authors – also contributes to Derkholm’s freedom. Blade ignores his primary text: ‘Blade woke up in a panic […] he knew there was absolutely no way he was going to learn all the rules and the route in time’.[78] His elements of improvisation as a Wizard Guide, as well as his disturbance and reordering of his own story beats, disrupts his tour, presenting variations on the *D&D* text that many players would recognise as typical of any campaign.

Meanwhile, tourists Miss Ledbury and Mother Poole – from the Missing Persons department and the Inland Revenue respectively – bring their own subversive intent to the table, as tertiary authors who also wish to dismantle Chesney’s empire. Even tertiary authors without premeditated plans for sedition influence the way the tour narrative diverges. When tourist Sukey gets kidnapped, it sparks within her a desire to explore an unscheduled part of the world – ‘“I haven’t a clue […] and I want to know”’.[79] Her pursuit of a tangential narrative leads her, Blade, and thief Reville into Chesney’s mining operation, further exposing his corruption of Derkholm through what is essentially a side quest. It is not the abandonment of formula, but characters’ variations on it – their diversions and tangents taken away from Chesney’s scheduled programme – that allow them to gain a full appreciation for the world of Derkholm and begin to imagine alternative routes to freedom, as well as ways things could be better. This is precisely the work secondary and tertiary authors perform, when they elaborate and expand upon the primary text in a game of *D&D*.

---

[77] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.51.
[78] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.349.
[79] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.429.

Both *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* and *The Colour of Magic* associated the theme of tourism with the conventions of *D&D*. Building on Pratchett's appreciative audience and participatory reader in Twoflower, Jones distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' tourists. A shallow escape into the fantasy of Derkholm, according to Chesney's formula, means that Derkholm is used as disposable entertainment. A truly immersive relationship with the text is not achieved. In his final speech as he is outwitted, Chesney states the following:

> He's not real life. None of these people are. […] I turned their world into a theme park. If they didn't happen to be under contract with me, they'd be nothing – just rough types in a world that happens to have some magic in it.[80]

Chesney does not see the fantasy world his tours facilitate as 'real': it is a shallow world of 'rough', one-dimensional archetypes that he exploits. Meanwhile, the reader – but also appreciative tourists, in particular Geoffrey and Sukey, Chesney's children – have become immersed within Derkholm, thus knowing Chesney's beliefs to be false. If tourists engage with the fantasy world in good faith, proactively participating and hoping to impact the world around them rather than just passively enjoying it, then they contribute to Derkholm's own narrative, and its emancipation.

Elaborating on the power of *D&D* as transformative fantasy, both Geoffrey and Sukey also make romantic connections to characters in Derkholm: they form emotional, affective attachments with others, rather than seeing only one-dimensional NPCs, as Chesney does. There are many ways by which *D&D* players can form immersive connections with an imaginary world, and many ways that divergent narratives can form – one of these is through social roleplay and forming affective relationships to characters, as we saw with *Dragonlance*.

The Dark Lord of Derkholm thus implies that it is not *D&D*, or fantasy tabletop roleplay, which presents a bad approach to fantasy, but a deliberate mechanical distance, or a lack of engagement and imagination. If you flatten Derkholm out simply to its guides and rulebooks, as determined by Chesney, you will never appreciate the rich life that can be found there. But by truly immersing yourself in the fantasy experience – by being a 'good' tourist when engaging in the unique mode of escapism TRPGs and fantasy fiction can facilitate – you participate in and contribute to a multifaceted, original narrative.

---

[80] Jones, *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, p.498.

Conclusion: *D&D* as Formula and Formulaic Subversion

In this chapter, I have examined the manifold ways *D&D* has been utilised as an image, or drawn upon as an intertext, within fantasy literature. The relationship between the two forms is not linear, derivative, or one-way, but reciprocal and often implicit, meaning this reciprocity is dismissed or effaced. The most obvious example is TSR/WotC's own use of the publishing arm of their business, which makes direct, widely read interventions in popular fantasy literature that are derided as shallow and commercial. Once *D&D* is used as a means of securing certain assumptions about fantasy, literary authors draw upon it as a shorthand – yet this is not treated as intertextuality, but formulaic writing. When works reference *D&D* but somehow retain their canonical status, such as Pratchett and Jones, critics apologise for *D&D's* presence, or place it in opposition to the author's own literary merit. Contributions to genre-culture become focused on how *D&D's* primary text is left behind, without much consideration as to why its formulaicness was deployed in the first place, or chosen as a creative springboard.

If we push past this dismissal – based mostly in the assignations of value epitomised by Attebery's distinction between 'fantasy-as-mode' and 'fantasy-as-formula' – two other trends can be identified.[81] *D&D* often encourages transformative, affective responses in novelistic characters, much as it does in tertiary authors. In *Dragonlance,* romance governs the plot just as much as the Draconian hordes, and in novels such as *The Colour of Magic* and *The Dark Lord of Derkholm,* a 'good' tourist is someone who takes pleasure in the journey and builds meaningful relationships with the characters around them. They immerse themselves fully in the fantasy by making the world their own, but then allowing it to change them in turn.

Secondly, when a literary convention or formula is condensed down into something as inflexible as a game rubric, it often results in a desire to subvert the rules. Although *D&D's* primary text provides a seemingly shallow system for how a fantasy world can operate, it rarely results in those rules being followed to the letter. The NPCs of Hayes' novel find themselves unwilling to stay in the boxes they should be optimised for, and the citizens of Derkholm gain freedom by derailing the pre-established patterns of the Pilgrim Parties' colour-coded maps.

---

[81] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, p.2.

As this thesis progresses, I will examine more closely how transformative immersion in fantasy via *D&D* breeds genre awareness, which in turn produces a desire to challenge and deliberately subvert the expectations of fantasy genre-culture. As a prelude to this, and to conclude this chapter, I wish to isolate two contemporary literary examples in which transformative impulse and the desire to subvert formula (as embodied by *D&D*) overlap and produce subversive readings, albeit with varying degrees of success.

In the past decade, participatory fan practices no longer occupy the 'poacher' position at the margins of entertainment culture, but have become a more mainstream and acknowledged aspect of media consumption.[82] Both *D&D* and fanfiction have gained visibility in fantasy genre-culture, and this means the influence of transformative fan practice has become more recognisable in literary works. Nowhere is this more true than in Travis Baldree's *Legends & Lattes*, 'a novel of high fantasy… and low stakes', that advertises itself as 'a hot cup of fantasy slice-of-life' – essentially the published successor to the fanfiction subgenre known as the 'Coffeeshop AU' [Alternate Universe].[83] *Legends & Lattes* advertises this affinity to transformative fanworks in its title, and its intertextual connections with *D&D* are just as overt, if less immediately explicit. *Legends & Lattes* follows 'orc barbarian' Viv. After Viv and her party defeat the 'Scalvert Queen', she quits the adventuring life and decides to open a coffee shop. While the novel documents her business' rise to commercial success, the key moment where *D&D* is utilised as an intertext is in its prologue:

> After twenty-two years of adventuring, Viv had reached her limit of blood and mud and bullshit. An orc's life was strength and violence and a sudden, sharp end – but she'd be damned if she'd let hers finish that way.
>
> It was time for something new.[84]

---

[82] Henry Jenkins notes that the 'textual poachers' metaphor is no longer apt, but that 'participatory culture' might be a more useful context to take forward when analysing contemporary fannish practice. 'Textual Poachers Twenty Years Later: A Conversation between Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott', in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp.vii-l.

[83] Travis Baldree, *Legends & Lattes* (Spokane, WA: Cryptid Press, 2022), front and back cover.

[84] Baldree, p.3.

The constraints Viv feels are those of the *D&D* primary text formula, which dictates that a fantasy narrative must be an adventuring quest. *D&D's* definition of fantasy also determines the rules via which 'an orc' – marked as generic by the indefinite article – exists within a fantasy setting. Viv's belief that an orc's life is 'strength and violence' directly mirrors two of *D&D 5th Edition*'s established traits for orcs (at the time *Legends & Lattes* was published; they have since been rewritten). *Volo's Guide to Monsters* defined orcs mechanically as 'aggressive' and 'menacing', with a 'powerful build', and both traits are encoded as essential through mechanical advantages in combat.[85] Half-orcs, similarly, are considered 'menacing' and capable of 'savage attacks', perpetuating an image of what an orc is within fantasy genre-culture and rendering it into inflexible rubric.[86] The blurb's choice to identify Viv as a 'barbarian' reinforces both of these conceits, referencing *D&D* as an intertext while emphasising this supposed 'orcish' predisposition towards reckless and indiscriminate violence.

When Viv finds herself in the 'something new' – the slice-of-life story of a coffee shop's rise to success, and of a romance with her coworker Tandri – this narrative resembles the transformative impulses of *D&D* as a fanwork. It allows the author (or perhaps, Viv's imagined player) to indulge in the happily-ever-after Viv's hard work as an adventurer has earned her. However, it also serves a subversive purpose. Although the self-confessedly 'low stakes' plot of *Legends & Lattes* may not be particularly radical, Viv is a reimagining of what an orc can be within fantasy-as-formula. The formula being subverted is that which is lifted from the *D&D* primary text.

Orcs have been codified as violent and aggressive across a range of fantasy media in games, films, and literature.[87] However, *D&D* is a prescriptive archive in which all these assumptions are compiled, encoded, and perpetuated as an explicit 'rule'. Baldree establishes Viv, and preconceptions of her identity shared by herself and others, within the nexus of *D&D* terminology. Thus, the transformative impulse to create a fantasy 'Coffeeshop AU' is accompanied by a challenge to fantasy genre-culture. While the focus on a low stakes setting and romance is a recognisable practice of transformative fanworks, the subversive impact of imagining a pacifist existence for a 'violent' orc directly responds to the *D&D* intertext. *Legends & Lattes* imagines new modes of being for the Other in fantasy: this is achieved through the tools of transformative fanworks, responding directly to *D&D* rubric.

---

[85] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Volo's Guide to Monsters* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2016), p.120.

[86] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.41.

[87] See Helen Young, 'Orcs and Otherness: Monsters on Page and Screen', in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp.88-113.

Another series that utilises the imagery of *D&D,* and its composite image of the orc, is A.K. Larkwood's *The Serpent Gates* duology. The orcish protagonist Csorwe, born to be a sacrifice and Chosen Bride to a divinity called the Unspoken One, is saved instead by wizard Sethennai, who takes her away from her home and grisly fate. While Csorwe's narrative draws on many fantasy intertexts – for instance, Csorwe's initial situation echoes Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* – allusions to *D&D* are also present throughout. Although more implicit than in Baldree's text, several conventions echo *D&D's* version of fantasy. The first is the relationship multiple characters hold to their deities: Sethennai, Csorwe, and her eventual partner Shuthmili all converse with their gods as 'patrons' with their own agenda. This element of transaction closely resembles the bonds held by the cleric and warlock classes – with all the potential eldritch horror that entails. The second most prominent is the 'Gates' of the duology's title – as Csorwe moves from her sacrificial cult, her understanding of her world expands drastically as she travels through the 'maze of echoes', to discover she is part of a multiverse.[88]

This travel between planes to encompass many different fantasy settings under one umbrella mimics *D&D's* own fictional worldbuilding: Curtis D. Carbonell argues that 'D&D's widest imaginary world, the cosmology of its multiverse […] [is] flexible yet sturdy enough to contain all of its intellectual property in a harmonious whole'.[89] In the case of Larkwood, the existence of a multiverse is developed to justify the conceptualisation of race as biological difference, as perpetuated and cemented through *D&D's* rubrics. Each 'race' belongs to a different world. Although the words 'elf' and 'orc' are never used, Csorwe is marked as physically Other from the long-eared Sethennai by her grey skin and tusks, providing the reader with legible referents of fantasy convention.

Csorwe believes she has escaped a tragic fate through Sethennai. However, in Larkwood's first book, *The Unspoken Name,* a reader with an awareness of *D&D* sees another insidious fate creeping upon her. Sethennai retrains Csorwe as his mercenary and bodyguard, hoping she will be influential in a military coup he has planned: 'when Csorwe turned sixteen, Sethennai gave her a sword of folded Torosadni steel'.[90] When she is injured in the recapturing of his home city, Tlaanlothe, her injury is associated with racial Otherness, as her tusk is sheered away in an act of torture. In this moment, Csorwe reads the intertwining of orcishness and violence as intrinsic: 'if she had earned her adult tusks she had earned this too'.[91] Csorwe's 'saviour' has given her the fate of all orcs, described by Baldree in *Legends & Lattes'* prologue: a life of blood and violence. Sethennai objectifies Csorwe as a tool, optimised for a violent role dictated by fantasy convention: 'if a man breaks his sword on something it was not made to cut, he can only blame himself […] Csorwe, you are my sharpest edge. We will repair you'.[92]

---

[88] A.K. Larkwood, *The Unspoken Name* (London: Tor, 2020), p.33.

[89] Curtis D. Carbonell, *Dread Trident: Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Modern Fantastic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p.86.

As the book progresses, Csorwe starts to glimpse a life outside this violent paradigm, through a projected future with Shuthmili. She comes to the realisation of the trap she's been placed into by Sethennai – 'you made me your sword-hand, […] Your instrument' – and feels as if 'every part of her that did not serve his purpose had been cut away'.[93] It therefore may not be surprising when Sethennai, who has reshaped his orcish ward into a violent stereotype, is revealed to be the villain of the duology at the first book's close. Upon this discovery, Csorwe feels the same aggression *D&D* encoded into orcishness. However, she chooses to fight it, marking the moment in which she breaks from her guardian: 'Csorwe's anger was something close […] Still, if there was anything to gain from becoming such an instrument, it was the power to channel and divert such a feeling. She restrained herself.'[94]

In this moment, Csorwe not only breaks but *feels* the constraints of formula: it is both her strength and her weakness. She exists both inside and outside of the rules. While a rubric of orcishness has been placed upon her for her to fight and dismantle, parts of it still serve her, once she chooses to make it her own.

Both novels refer to *D&D* as an intertext. *Legends & Lattes* makes explicit use of the primary text's shorthand, and the subversion Baldree makes is playful, because it is conducted within the parameters of transformative convention. Meanwhile, Larkwood's work effaces many of the shared images it draws upon, placing *D&D* within a weave of other fantasy intertexts. However, both use *D&D's* formula to the same end. They inherit an image of orcish Otherness, which is prevalent through much of fantasy genre-culture but was rendered into two key legible traits, ‘strength’ and ‘violence’, by *D&D* itself. They then subvert this image – but it is only once the two protagonists know the rules by which they’ve been forced to operate, that they can choose to live outside them.

---

[90] Larkwood, p.47.
[91] Larkwood, p.122.
[92] Larkwood, p.121.
[93] Larkwood, p.454.
[94] Ibid.

Like *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*, both *Legends & Lattes* and *The Serpent Gates* utilise this transformative impulse to a subversive end. While *D&D* has preserved many tropes, structures, and images through iteration, certain acts of reproduction within TRPGs have greater consequences than others. As I cover in greater detail in Chapter Four, *D&D’s* treatment of race within the primary text has had political implications for fantasy genre-culture, as it compiles and condenses several assumptions regarding race as an indicator of morality and biological difference. Here, by choosing to react against the image of the orc as compiled within the *D&D* primary text, both texts demonstrate that a self-conscious use of formula can begin to dismantle the assumptions that underpin it. The *D&D* text produces creative responses which go against the fantasy genre-culture trends that it has encoded as law. Rather than placing formula and subversion in a mutually exclusive binary or a spectrum, we can see that even the most inflexible rubric can produce its undoing, in the hands of individual authors and creators. This thesis will go on to document such individual reactions produced by players working *within* the system. Here, novels such as these demonstrate that authors can use *D&D* to produce texts which may alter the political or sociological thinking of genre-culture. The *D&D* game text is essential to producing and reproducing such discourses, which means it can also be instrumental in their dismantling, and in the destabilising of fantasy’s status quo.

In acknowledging *D&D* as an active contributor to fantasy genre-culture and participant in fantasy’s discourses, new avenues open up for defining or assessing its qualities and influence. *D&D*, as a game text that condenses and solidifies definitions of fantasy, should not be dismissed for its formulaicness, but instead acknowledged for its work in helping to cement certain expectations of what is ‘universal’. Many of the novels and authors discussed in this chapter see the value of formula, but also make a case for the unique strengths *D&D* has as a fantasy medium. Not only do *D&D’s* rubrics inform characters’ understandings and awareness of fantasy, but the game itself facilitates a uniquely immersive and transformative experience where players can more fully participate in an imaginary world.

As I go forward to examine *D&D,* and *D&D 5e* campaigns specifically, I wish to highlight the powerful extent to which *D&D* breeds a transformative response to fantasy. It encourages players to ‘make something their own’, be that through an intense affective connection, or a revisionist act of protest. I also believe that, as people become familiar with the rules and rubrics of *D&D,* they become familiar with the rules of fantasy. This chapter has shown how authors often use the two interchangeably. *D&D* is treated as a shorthand for the ‘generic’ assumptions of fantasy genre-culture. As a player or reader encounters more and more rules, they gain knowledge and genre awareness, and – like the inhabitants of Derkholm – this provides them with the tools to subvert convention and break free.

Chapter Three: ‘What a Nice Story – Let’s Do It Again’ – *Critical Role*, Iterative Play, and Fantasy Genre Awareness

This chapter argues that iterative *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* gameplay increases players’ knowledge and awareness of fantasy genre-culture. As players learn *D&D’s* ruleset in greater depth, they become more confident actors within the game system and more confident readers of fantasy genre-culture, beginning to operate as authors of fantasy. Growing certainty within the established parameters of genre-culture – as embodied in the *D&D* primary text – then provides conditions for both transformative and subversive readings of fantasy. To demonstrate this development of genre awareness and authority within *D&D* players across multiple sessions and multiple campaigns, this chapter examines the development of a single player group: the *Critical Role* cast, who claim to have begun their *D&D* game as amateurs. By close reading this long-running record of a single group’s gameplay, spanning across multiple campaigns, I will show how *D&D* players develop critical awareness and become proactive contributors to and interrogators of fantasy genre-culture, through their continued engagement with *D&D’s* rules. To evidence this, I compare several aspects of the first two completed *Critical Role* campaigns: *Critical Role: Vox Machina* and *Critical Role: Mighty Nein*.

In Chapters One and Two, I examined how *D&D’s* primary text is seen to aggregate fantasy genre-culture into a singular mould, intensifying prevalent fantasy formulas into explicit rules. As argued in the previous chapter, fantasy critics and authors often present *D&D* as a stand-in for ‘generic’ fantasy. However, I also examined ways in which individual authors used this confrontation with formula to produce unique, transformative, and subversive responses to fantasy, personalising this ‘generic’ default and creating something new as a result. Secondary and tertiary authors – Dungeon Masters (DMs) and players, in accordance with Jessica Hammer’s model – do the same in *D&D* gameplay. They produce idiosyncratic responses through interactions with formulaic game rules. When applying Hammer’s framework of RPG authorship to *D&D,* the primary author is Wizards of the Coast (WotC) as game designer, the secondary author is the DM, and the tertiary author is the player.[1] Initially, DMs and players rely on the universals in the primary text (the game ruleset) to generate and develop a shared understanding of fantasy as a group, but they then begin to produce their own unique creations – such as characters, or entire imaginary worlds – which represent a transformative response to fantasy genre-culture. As players play more *D&D* and develop their gameplay skill through interactions with the primary text, they become more confident in their understanding of fantasy. I believe this changes the balance of power within Hammer's authorship model: the primary text (the ruleset) and its worldbuilding becomes less central to players' understanding of fantasy, and tertiary authors in particular become increasingly active contributors of meaning within their own games. This growing confidence, along with the authority provided to players as transformative actors – fan authors within the *D&D* system – may result in their producing subversions of formula and mounting challenges to fantasy genre-culture's established mores.

Using *Critical Role* as a case study allows me to demonstrate how actual play is altering this balance of authorships further. While secondary and tertiary authors often gain authorial confidence, agency, and authority within the private context of their game tables, actual play media franchises are now publishing these secondary and tertiary texts, making them public. While iterative *D&D* gameplay can generate multiple definitions of fantasy, some of them subversive, actual play can give these alternative definitions – as generated by secondary and tertiary authors – more weight and visibility within fantasy genre-culture.

Critical Role's popularity and success indicates an increasing need to examine *D&D* as a mode of fantasy narrative. *Critical Role* encourages audiences, readers, and transformative fan communities to become invested in the stories that *D&D* enables *other* people to tell. It is even enjoyed in forms increasingly independent of the *D&D* system itself, such as the published companion comics or animated Amazon television show. *Critical Role's* success helped to foster TRPG actual play as a media form, allowing people to consume *D&D* without ever having interacted with the game or its mechanics themselves.[2]

Critical Role is a useful case study here as it is not only successful, but also one of the longest-running actual play shows that screens its gameplay unedited (even if it is now prerecorded, as a result of changes made during the Covid-19 pandemic). While other prominent *D&D* actual play shows and podcasts, in particular *Dimension 20* and *The Adventure Zone*, edit their sessions of gameplay to emphasise narrative – cutting mechanical rule-based negotiation in favour of character roleplay and narratively important decisions – *Critical Role* still televises all aspects of its improvised, uninterrupted gameplay. This production decision is intended to foster a sense of authenticity: providing proof that the narrative has not been planned, staged, or engineered, but has been produced through improvisation, in real-time collaborative gameplay – even as accusations of scriptedness must be repeatedly denied by the cast.[3]

---

[1] Jessica Hammer, 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.70).

[2] I discuss the ways *Critical Role* and *D&D* actual play have changed the player community in my chapter "We Play Dungeons and Dragons!': How Actual Play Live Streams Have (Re)shaped the *D&D* Gaming Community', in *Real Life in Real Time: Live Streaming Culture,* ed. Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Christopher J. Persaud (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023), pp.203-216.

By documenting all decisions, successes, and failures – alongside in-depth analysis of authorial choices in paratextual shows *Talks Machina* and *4-Sided Dive* – *Critical Role* demonstrates that *D&D* is a learning process. In a narrative that has now been repeated across interviews and company promotions, *Critical Role's* cast have stated repeatedly that while they all had professional experience of performance, many of them were entirely new to *D&D* when they formed their *Vox Machina* party and began playing.[4] This makes *Critical Role* a uniquely useful text to analyse, as it documents a group of players familiarising themselves with the rules, mechanics, and practices of *D&D* across several long-form campaigns. *Critical Role* not only documents a fictional narrative throughout the process of its improvised creation, but also the nine-year development of a group of *D&D* players. Viewers can track the cast's increasing literacy as both players and authors: as they gain experience using the *D&D* system, the players grow more aware of fantasy genre-culture in turn.

In this chapter, I examine *Critical Role's* first two completed campaigns, *Critical Role: Vox Machina* and *Critical Role: Mighty Nein*, comparing aspects of their narrative structure to demonstrate the development of the cast's skills as *D&D* players, but also fantasy authors. *D&D* gameplay relies upon and fosters an awareness of fantasy genre-culture within tertiary authors that empowers them as creators. Developing genre-savviness enables players to claim greater agency in their acts of authorship, and become transformative fantasy authors in their own right. As the campaigns progress, not only do the *Critical Role* cast become more adept at gameplay, they also become more critical of the cliches of *D&D's* own formula, as well as the genre-culture that this primary text encapsulates.

---

[3] For example: Matthew Mercer (@matthewmerecer), 'Do not believe these slanderous lies.', *Twitter.com*, 2 April 2018, https://twitter.com/matthewmercer/status/980630283627069440?lang=en-GB.

[4] Emily C. Friedman, 'Is It Thursday Yet? Narrative Time in A Livestreamed Tabletop RPG', in *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age,* ed. Jennifer Grouling and Stephanie Hedge (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.187-204, (pp.188-189).

***Critical Role*: An Overview**

The words 'how do you want to do this?', used in my thesis title, have become a staple of contemporary *D&D* gameplay. This stock phrase is used typically by the DM to signify a moment of triumph for an individual player upon achieving a killing blow. Now a 'common feature of every D&D game', it allows the player 'to celebrate through storytelling agency'.[5] The DM relinquishes narrative control as a secondary author to a tertiary author, allowing them the space to narrate their own character's victory. This phrase encapsulates the collaborative authorship of *D&D* and the shift towards empowering tertiary authors as actors within the game system. It also illustrates how fantasy genre-culture is shaped not only by texts, but by social processes that become established norms. This phrase originated with a single DM, and a single *D&D* campaign: Matt Mercer, who officiates the livestream and transmedial behemoth *Critical Role*. Yet, as this phrase is echoed by audiences and fans around their own tables, it becomes a ritual passed on to those who have never even watched the show.

Critical Role is arguably the most popular *D&D* actual play livestream (see Figure 2). The *D&D* game was founded in 2012, then broadcast on the *Geek and Sundry* channel from 2015 onwards. It formed the foundation for Critical Role Productions to become a fully independent company in June 2018, and is 'one of the most famous and massive of the new wave of live-streamed TRPGs', with audience numbers and views in the millions.[6] As of February 2024, 'Arrival at Kraghammer' – the first episode of the first campaign, broadcast on *YouTube* from June 2015 – has amassed over 23 million views.[7] Following a leak of *Twitch* streamer earnings in October 2021, Critical Role was revealed to be the most successful stream on the platform, having earned '$9.6M USD over the course of three years'.[8] When the first episode of the third campaign aired on 21 October 2021, it received an average of 167,543 viewers during the live stream, and reached 3.6 million views within the first month of its broadcast.[9] The immensity of audience support was demonstrated by attendance at *D&D* live shows and conventions, but was cemented in 2018 when the company's bid to produce an animated special based on their first campaign became the most funded TV- or film-related Kickstarter, with $4.3 million reached in the first day and $11,385,449 reached in total.[10]

---

[5] Stephanie Hedge and Jennifer Grouling, *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), p.219.

[6] Friedman, 'Is It Thursday Yet?', p.187.

[7] Critical Role, 'Arrival at Kraghammer | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 1', *YouTube.com,* 24 June 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-p9lWIhcLQ&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry.

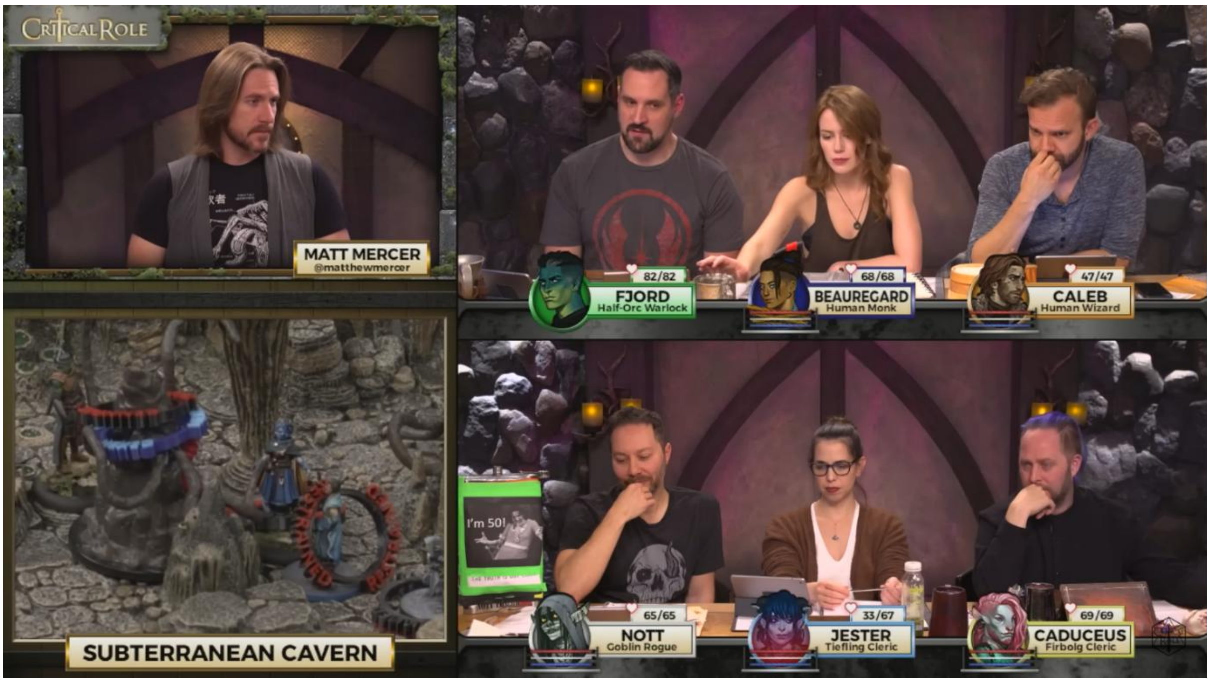

CRITICAL ROLE
MATT MERCER
@matthewmercer
82/82
FJORD
Half-Orc Warlock
68/68
BEAUREGARD
Human Monk
47/47
CALEB
Human Wizard
SUBTERRANEAN CAVERN
I'm 50!
65/65
NOTT
Goblin Rogue
33/67
JESTER
Tiefling Cleric
69/69
CADUCEUS
Firbolg Cleric

Figure 2: a typical set up for *Critical Role* Campaign 2. 'The Endless Burrows | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 50', *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRFetHZDSg4, (1:06:17). [screenshot taken by author].

The show itself features a group of self-described 'nerdy-ass voice actors': DM Matt Mercer and players Laura Bailey, Taliesin Jaffe, Ashley Johnson, Liam O'Brien, Marisha Ray, Sam Riegel, and Travis Willingham. At the point of writing, *Critical Role's* 'main campaign' cast have participated in two *D&D* campaigns to completion, and are currently broadcasting their third. Audiences follow this core group of players as they performed as three different casts of characters: three adventuring parties, questing across three continents – Tal'Dorei, Wildemount, and Marquet – of an imaginary world of Mercer's own devising, known as Exandria.

---

[8] Maya Hutchinson, 'Twitch leaks: Critical Role Twitch earns $9.6M', wepc.com, 6th October 2021, https://www.wepc.com/news/twitch-leaks-critical-role-earnings-payout/.

[9] Critical Role, *Twitchtracker.com*, https://twitchtracker.com/criticalrole/statistics.

[10] Critical Role, 'Critical Role: The Legend of Vox Machina Animated Special', Kickstarter.com, 16 November 2021, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/criticalrole/critical-role-the-legend-of-vox-machina-animated-s.

The story behind how *Critical Role* became such a successful game is one that has become an increasingly established part of the company's brand. In *The World of Critical Role: The History Behind the Epic Fantasy*, Liz Marsham recounts the widely known story behind the livestream: 'it started with Matt, offering a gift'.[11] The *Vox Machina* campaign began as a single session of *D&D*, or 'one-shot', designed to celebrate Liam O'Brien's birthday.

When *Critical Role: Vox Machina* was first aired, viewers joined the campaign *in medias res*. The cast had been playing their characters since 2012, when the Vox Machina party began as an informal and amateur *D&D* game amongst friends. While some social media clips of this early game have circulated, the campaign was broadcast from 2015, once the players had reached the middle levels of gameplay. Character moments and backstory which occurred before the stream in the 'home game' were recounted in a *YouTube* recap video, 'The Story of Vox Machina', and later commodified and committed to print in the Dark Horse comic book series *Critical Role: Vox Machina Origins*. Reflecting the experience accrued from three years of prior gameplay, the narrative of *Vox Machina* follows the barbarian Grog (Travis Willingham), druid Keyleth (Marisha Ray), gunslinger Percy (Taliesin Jaffe), cleric Pike (Ashley Johnson), bard Scanlan (Sam Riegel), rogue Vax'ildan (Liam O'Brien) and his ranger sister Vex'halia (Laura Bailey) after they have achieved a degree of fame and wealth as an adventuring party. This group of fictional characters made their name as heroes of Tal'Dorei off-screen, so the actual play campaign primarily focuses on them cementing and securing that status. They battle personal foes, the Briarwoods, before then going against opponents of increasing power, as determined by combat levelling: the Chroma Conclave, an alliance of five chromatic dragons, and finally Vecna, a high-level opponent and one that holds canonical weight in *D&D*'s primary text lore. During the Chroma Conclave arc, the party are required to collect a series of items known as Vestiges of Divergence, and their search for these items also brings them into contact with many characters from the cast's personal backstories, such as the twins' father, Grog's father Kevdak, and the inventor Ripley, newly bound to Percy's warlock patron Orthax. *Vox*

---

[11] Liz Marsham, *The World of Critical Role: The History Behind the Epic Fantasy* (London: Del Rey, 2020), p.12.

Machina closes following the party's victory over Vecna and their achievement of Level 20, the final level of linear progress available within the *D&D* primary text.

In January 2018, the cast launched their second campaign, the *Mighty Nein*. Unlike *Vox Machina*, the cast's player characters (PCs) began this adventure at Level 2. Preparation for this game – the cast's Level 1 gameplay, plus any Session 0 work or other playtesting – was not broadcast. Still, Campaign 2's audience can watch this party develop and establish itself in real time: the campaign becomes known as the *Mighty Nein* eight episodes in, only once there is a recognisable adventuring party to name. In the *Mighty Nein*, audiences watch monk Beauregard (Ray), wizard Caleb (O'Brien), warlock Fjord (Willingham), cleric Jester (Bailey), rogue Nott (Riegel), bloodhunter Mollymauk (Jaffe) and barbarian Yasha (Johnson) meet and form an uneasy alliance. The party travel across Wildemount in service of a crime lord known as the Gentleman, are bonded through the loss of Jaffe's PC Mollymauk, who Jaffe replaces with the cleric Caduceus, before tackling multiple character-related threads including the mystery of Fjord's warlock powers, Nott's involuntary entrapment within a goblin body, Yasha's possession by a demonic entity and her struggle with trauma and grief, Beauregard's troubled relationship with her family, the unknown identity of Jester's father and her relationship to the faceless god the Traveller, and Caleb's past as the prodigal student of a sadistic mage. These character backstories are all placed against the backdrop of a larger conflict between the predominantly human Dwendalian Empire and the Kryn Dynasty in Xhorhas, a country populated principally by *D&D's* 'monstrous' races. The campaign culminated in 2021 with the discovery that Mollymauk was not in fact permanently dead, but had been resurrected as a charismatic visionary called Lucien, transitioning from PC status to an NPC and antagonist controlled by the DM. The party raced to prevent Mollymauk/Lucien from reviving an ancient, sentient cityscape known as the Cognouza Ward, claiming its power and transporting it to Exandria. Once Lucien's plan was thwarted, and Lucien was both defeated then saved through divine intervention, returning as a PC under Jaffe's control, character plot lines were resolved in an eight-hour finale, and the campaign was brought to an end.

This synopsis elides certain details that will be explored later in this chapter, but highlights some differences between the *Vox Machina* and *Mighty Nein* campaigns. While *Vox Machina's* popularity was in part a happy accident, *Mighty Nein* was televised in its entirety to a large audience. This means it can be analysed and consumed as a complete narrative – unlike *Vox Machina*, parts of which must be pieced together through paratextual, transmedial sources. The second campaign was also written and knowingly performed for an audience since its very inception. Even as *Critical Role* cast members take care to stress that their game is not scripted, performed primarily for the enjoyment of those at the table, *Mighty Nein* was produced and performed on-stream in a new, custom-built studio with its own creative team, and millions of viewers and fans were an acknowledged fact of gameplay. PCs were written and performed with an audience and viewership in mind – they were, in part, treated as components for compelling storytelling, and not simply tools for gameplay. As I use *Critical Role* to develop my argument regarding how players of *D&D* gain genre awareness and confidence as fantasy authors, it must be acknowledged that *Critical Role's* audience and revenue also grew during this time, a factor that inevitably coloured the players' intentions behind their storytelling, and also informed their abilities.

In my comparison between the two campaigns, I look at three key areas. Firstly, how tertiary authors express their developing relationships to fantasy genre-culture through their PCs, meaning that their characters can be examined as evidence of their shifting understandings of fantasy. Secondly, how tertiary authors' confidence as authors grows through gameplay, meaning that they become more proactive contributors to narrative, at times even developing their own questlines independently of the secondary author. Finally, I examine both campaigns' conclusions and what they indicate about the balance of power between authorships. As campaign endings are an area which is particularly scrutinised by both players and audiences for a sense of narrative satisfaction, a campaign's conclusion provides evidence for what the player group wishes to prioritise: in this case, we can observe a movement from venerating the primary text and *D&D's* canon, to acknowledging the tertiary authors as authorities in their own right.

Beginnings: Player Characters as Expressed Relationships to Fantasy Genre-Culture

Critical Role's story of its informal beginnings as a 'home game' is often used to stress the parasocial elements of the stream and the sincerity of the cast's relationships. When interviewed, Mercer stresses that *Critical Role* 'wasn't us trying to sell a product. This was us continuing to play our game that we loved and just opening it up to the internet.'[12] Mercer's emphasis on authenticity, and the liminal space *D&D* actual play occupies between amateur fanwork and professional product, is explored in greater depth in future chapters. However, the ‘home game’ narrative of a single gift one-shot provides important context for my argument here, because it establishes that when the cast members were creating their first characters, nearly all of them did so with little, or no, prior knowledge of *D&D*.

---

[12] Matt Mercer, quoted Marsham, p.16.

One of the main ways that tertiary authors – all players, not just the *Critical Role* cast – interact with the *D&D* primary text is through their PC: the initial process of character creation, and their continual embodiment of that character. Character creation often expresses new preoccupations, and a changing relationship with fantasy genre-culture. Although to some extent familiar with aspects of fandom and fantasy given their career backgrounds as voice actors in gaming and animation, the *Vox Machina* game was described by the cast as an initiation into *D&D* and TRPG culture.

Sam Riegel is the most extreme example of this: he openly admits that ‘I created Scanlan before we knew what we were doing’, and assembled his PC based on a series of joke prompts provided by O’Brien.[13] Yet other players confess to a similar position of ignorance when creating their members of *Vox Machina*. Travis Willingham states: ‘Grog […] was me showing up to the very first game and not having prepared at all […] I just wanted to hit things’.[14] Ashley Johnson, a later addition to the ‘home game,’ also notes ‘Pike was the first D&D character that I’d ever played […] in the beginning, I didn’t know – it’s weird to say this as an actor, but I didn’t know how in-depth you could go with character creation’.[15] While roleplaying is an established aspect of *D&D* gameplay, immersion in a role or a fantasy world is not a given even for those for whom it is common practice in other areas of their lives. This level of investment in *D&D* as a narrative mode can develop over time for players: by the time Johnson was writing Yasha, her Campaign 2 character, she had ‘a bible of Yasha’s backstory […] if this is what I do as an actor creating a character, this is what I do with *D&D* now.’[16]

When other players discuss their *Vox Machina* characters as their first creations within the *D&D* game system, trends in design begin to emerge. Laura Bailey, discussing her half-elf ranger/rogue Vex’halia (or ‘Vex’) states: ‘Vex […] was kind of my go-to. That character type – snarky, sexy, sneaky, even the look of her – that’s what I create when I’m playing RPGs as far as videogames go […] I just wanted to be her'.[17] Two theories of Vex's character seem to coexist. Firstly, that she is a wish-fulfilment fantasy for Bailey herself: *D&D* and other RPGs have been conceived of as enacting power fantasies that represent what players 'want to be'.[18] Secondly, that she is a recognisable 'character type' based in established tropes encountered in other media. Both readings are possible, and both are based in fantasy genre-culture: one posits an affective relationship with that genre-culture – which parts most appeal to and resonate with Bailey – and the other is intertextual – which fantasy texts Bailey is already familiar with.

---

[13] Sam Riegel, quoted Marsham, p.92.

[14] Travis Willingham, quoted Marsham, p.104.

[15] Ashley Johnson, quoted Marsham, p.61.

[16] Johnson, quoted Marsham, p.63.

While the character of Vex may have developed into something more nuanced over time, both Bailey and Willingham repeatedly identify her initial profile as 'flirtatious' and 'sexy' in Marsham's interviews.[19] Whether Bailey's perception of Vex conforming to an established 'femme fatale' archetype relates to characters from fantasy genre-culture that she has performed, such as Lust from *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* or Serana from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard*, or female characters that she herself gravitates towards in media, is unclear. But Bailey draws a connection between media consumption and *D&D*, showing that the character she initially created and wanted to immerse herself in were partially influenced by the fantasy intertexts she herself is familiar and 'comfortable' with.[20] These intertexts are examples of what Daniel Mackay terms 'fictive blocks', 'decontextualised trope[s]' that players then use to create and perform a character. Rather than being a bricolage of several decontextualised tropes such as 'famous lines, quotable postures, and vivid traces from literary passages or film scenes', Bailey instead perceives Vex as predominantly a single archetype taken from a nexus of popular culture – the one she is most comfortable occupying, and one she enjoys performing uncritically.[21]

Not only do these 'first' characters express familiar relationships to fantasy genre-culture, they also more directly reflect tropes represented within the *D&D* primary text, as this text is a useful tool for first-time players. In the *D&D Player's Handbook*, the description of half-elves offers them two potential roles in society:

---

[17] Laura Bailey, quoted Marsham, p.44.

[18] See Sarah Lynne Bowman and Andreas Leiberoth, 'Psychology and Roleplaying Games', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.245-264.

[19] Willingham, quoted Marsham, p.12.

[20] Laura Bailey, quoted Marsham, p.44.

[21] Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001), p.77.

> Some half-elves prefer to avoid company altogether, wandering the wilds as trappers, foresters, hunters, or adventurers and visiting civilization only rarely. […] Others, in contrast, throw themselves into the thick of society, putting their charisma and social skills to great use in diplomatic roles or as swindlers.[22]

The decision as to whether primary text descriptions are treated as advisory or as a worldbuilding canon is up to the discretion of each player group – however, this is what the *D&D* primary text claims half-elves 'are'. The primary text's initial rigidity with regard to race is a textual practice currently under revision (as discussed in Chapter Four), but for much of *D&D's* publishing history, it encoded assumptions about the character types that populate fantasy genre-culture, while also replicating the tendency within fantasy to biologically essentialise specific traits. These primary text mores are replicated within *Vox Machina* somewhat uncritically: the content of this paragraph is reflected in Bailey's choice of the Beastmaster ranger class for the half-elf Vex'halia, and O'Brien's rogue assassin for her twin brother Vax'ildan. Although Vex and Vax were created using the primary text of *Pathfinder,* a separate TRPG system partially derived from 3rd edition *D&D,* this too characterises half-elves as 'itinerants, wandering the lands in search of a place they might finally call home' with a 'desire to prove oneself to the community and establish a […] legacy'. This demonstrates not only how *D&D* has influenced other TRPGs, but also how pervasive racial archetypes established in texts such as *Dragonlance,* with Tanis Half-Elven, have become. In *Pathfinder,* half-elves are also 'adaptable' outsiders who 'understand loneliness' from their position outside of two cultures, and this image has been disseminated amongst TRPGs, fantasy video games such as *The Elder Scrolls, Dragon Age,* and *Baldur's Gate* franchises, and then into literary culture.[23]

The twins develop nuance over time. However, their established backstory – that they rely solely on each other, having lost their human mother and faced stigma and emotional distance from the elven father Syldor Vessar in the traditional elven city of Syngorn – replicates the recommendations of the *D&D* primary text almost exactly. According to *D&D* lore, half-elves '[walk] in two worlds but truly [belong] to neither', and that 'many [are] unable to fit into either society' and so 'choose lives of solitary wandering or join with other misfits and outcasts in the adventuring life'.[24] While O'Brien and Bailey transformatively adapt this premise through play, developing the image of the 'solitary wanderer' or 'misfit' into a codependent bond between two siblings, it replicates the *D&D* primary text's image of half-elves as written.

---

[22] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.39.

[23] Paizo Inc., *Pathfinder: Core Rulebook* (Redmond: Paizo Inc., 2011), p.24.

Adherence to the primary text and fantasy genre-culture encoded therein is not exclusive to these two characters. Another first-time player, Willingham, produces the character Grog, a goliath barbarian whose performance and backstory similarly echo the *D&D* primary text. The *D&D Player's Companion: Elemental Evil* defines goliaths as tribal and competitive, operating on a model of 'survival of the fittest': 'a goliath would much rather die in battle, at the peak of strength and skill, than endure the slow decay of old age.'[25] Within the primary text, there is an emphasis on 'physical power', at the expense of Wisdom and Intelligence, as they 'suffer from a chronic lack of the experience offered by long-term leaders'.[26] Grog, a low Intelligence, bloodthirsty character with high Strength, echoes this. Similarly, his personal narrative, in which he must return to his goliath tribe to confront and defeat its leader, Kevdak, claiming respect and leadership through a test of might, reproduces many of the themes present in WotC's description of goliaths.

In this example, Willingham's decision to play Grog this way is incentivised by the primary text mechanics. When Grog was created, the Goliath race offered a bonus to Strength and Constitution: players then decide whether this is their intrinsic biological nature, or produced by the supposedly harsh, competitive life goliaths endure. Goliath builds are optimised for playing melee fighting and 'tank' classes such as the Barbarian. The primary text thus encodes conventions in two ways: firstly through statistics designed to optimise race from a gameplay perspective, and then through the flavour text and canonical primary worldbuilding used by WotC to elaborate and justify these conventions. I will address *D&D's* approach to race directly in Chapter Four, but as race is an aspect of the primary text which lacks flexibility, it is useful to note here that its treatment by players often demonstrates a shift in their understanding of fantasy.

Statistics determine not only strengths and weaknesses in combat but also factor into roleplay. Thus, Willingham's performance of Grog was perhaps predominantly determined by the mechanically optimised character he had created using the game system. A tension between narrative and play emerges: as a tank character's main purpose is achieved in combat, to what extent are they required to facilitate narrative? However, it is also true that very little of the worldbuilding as laid out in the primary text is subverted by either the secondary or tertiary author, who model Grog's story and character development around his love of combat, and the tribal structures described by WotC. While Willingham notes, 'I don't think anyone was more surprised than I was […] at the characteristics that he would start to show. Like loyalty, and protective qualities, and really having a sense of honour', none of these contradict or subvert the precepts of the primary text, instead adding another layer of transformative, personalised complexity similar to Bailey and O'Brien.[27] While most characters become transformative over time through player embodiment, these first characters do not subvert or question the logics of the primary text.

---

[24] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.38.

[25] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player's Companion: Elemental Evil* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2015), p.10.

[26] *Elemental Evil,* p.10-11.

When Campaign 2 (the *Mighty Nein*) began in January 2018, the cast of *Critical Role* had been playing *D&D* intermittently for just under six years. They were also aware that they were performing a narrative for their large audience from the very beginning: unlike the home game, backstories were written with formal revisions and input from Mercer as DM.[28] While this narrative consciousness might explain certain complexities present within these characters, their creators also had greater experience of *D&D* and its conventions. For an example of how increasing literacy in rules becomes expressed through character, one of the most notable features of Bailey's Campaign 2 character, Jester, is the unusual, unexpected, and overtly 'cute' ways her spells manifest, in direct contradiction to the supposed formal reverence associated with a cleric's duties. Jester's spiritual weapons are giant lollypops; her spiritual guardians are 'hamster unicorns'.[29] Bailey notes that her character's idiosyncratic and customised spellcasting was partially a result of her increasing confidence with the game. She wanted to playfully interact with the storytelling potential of *D&D's* mechanical elements: 'I am personalising spells more in this campaign […] because we are more comfortable with what we're doing, and I think I understand what spells are'.[30] A familiarity with the primary text breeds an increasingly transformative, ‘personalised’, and in this case creative response.

---

[27] Willingham, quoted Marsham, p.104.

[28] Critical Role, 'Curious Beginnings | Talks Machina | Campaign 2 Episode 1', *YouTube.com,* 3 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qyjSmkSyF0&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry, [Accessed: 01-10-21].

[29] Critical Role, 'The Open Road | Critical Role: THE MIGHTY NEIN | Episode 5', *YouTube.com*, 12 Feb 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3vPWbJoBrQ&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry, (0:38:53).

[30] Bailey, quoted Marsham, p.186.

O’Brien contrasted Vax and his *Mighty Nein* character, human wizard Caleb Widogast, directly, identifying a development of complexity in line with his gameplay experience: ‘when you first play D&D, you sort of create this bigger-than-yourself or smoother-than-yourself or more-amazing-than-yourself hero, and I guess I kind of did that initially with Vax. And with Caleb, I wanted a lot of his challenges in his story to be more intellectually- and emotionally- and character-driven [*sic.*]’.[31] He argues that, while Vax was ‘a cocky hero’, Caleb – a once fanatical magical protégé who murdered his family for his presumed cause, now recovering from the resultant mental break – doesn’t ‘fit the stereotypical cut-out of a hero'.[32]

This could certainly be contested: while Caleb is less conventionally heroic, the highly intelligent and learned wizard is an established archetype itself within *D&D* and fantasy. However, one distinction remains: Vax is a power fantasy, but Caleb is a ‘story’. His complex backstory, withheld from both audience and players until a dramatic and personal reveal in Episode 18 ‘Whispers of War’, with further details added in Episode 49 ‘A Game of Names’, is designed to be unveiled piecemeal, to elicit reactions both from those around the table and from the second audience of viewers and fans. Caleb is also designed to ‘challenge’ O’Brien – who, now he has confidence with the system, wishes to develop a more intricate response to it. The characters of *Critical Role: Vox Machina* primarily expressed an affective and transformative relationship to fantasy. Meanwhile, the characters of the Mighty Nein are designed to hold greater creative complexity.

O’Brien’s authorial choice also displays media literacy with regard to *D&D* actual play as a form, as he cultivates fan speculation about Caleb amongst both the players at the table and the live stream audience, creating a source of what Matt Hills terms ‘endlessly deferred narrative’.[33] Hills identifies this as one of the key features of cult media, saying that media designed to invoke an audience response ‘typically focuses its endlessly deferred narrative around a singular question or related set of questions’, with character often being one of the key tools which it uses to achieve this.[34] Hills notes that, ‘the most endlessly deferred narrative of all is that which will never *officially* be answered or closed down, remaining open to multiple fan productions, speculations and recreations', and the probabilistic and improvised nature of *D&D* means that many pivotal narrative moments can become nexuses of endless speculation.[35] O'Brien deliberately creates secrets and mysteries around Caleb, to be withheld and then dramatically unveiled, as well as reactions to NPCs that viewers can retrospectively identify. This shows a movement from gameplay or power fantasy to constructed narrative, one deliberately designed to provoke a response from his friends as well as his audience.

---

[31] O’Brien, quoted Marsham, p.72.
[32] O’Brien, quoted Marsham, p.70-72.
[33] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.101.
[34] Ibid.

An emphasis on Caleb's flaws may stem from a wish for a more interesting trajectory of character development for viewers to witness, but it also entails an act of subversion *against* the primary text. Several damage-dealing wizard spells within *D&D's* mechanics are based around the elements, and some of the most iconic are those based around fire, the most notable being 'Fire Bolt', 'Fireball', and 'Wall of Fire'.[36] Some even argue that Fireball, the 'wizard's best friend', is one of the most iconic spells in the game, with a long primary text history that results in atypical, scale-breaking effectiveness in combat.[37] Caleb learns and employs all three spells – later even homebrewing a more targeted version of Wall of Fire known as 'Widogast's Web of Fire'.[38] But he cannot use them without consequences. In the early episodes of the campaign, the use of fire spells to deliver killing blows triggers Wisdom saving throws, the mechanical equivalent of the trauma Caleb experiences, as he remembers immolating his parents. While O'Brien has created an archetypal wizard, he creates a hindrance whenever he is played to type, that is then implemented by Mercer as author of the secondary text. As players gain gameplay experience, they become more confident not only in their transformative response to fantasy – personalising their characters more overtly – but also in their desire to subvert the conventions of the primary text.

A trend of deliberate subversion – either against the primary text, or their own playstyle – is identified by other players in the *Mighty Nein* campaign. Johnson, discussing her angel-blooded barbarian Yasha, makes a similar argument to O'Brien – both that she 'wanted to do something kind of weird and contrast-y (*sic.)* to playing a barbarian', and that she ‘wanted a challenge with Yasha: being able to start her somewhere in a negative place so she could have an arc’.[39] Like O’Brien, she expresses more consciousness about this character serving a narrative purpose both for herself and for the audience, feeling a need for material that could be developed on screen in a meaningful and interesting way. She also wishes to create a barbarian different from the Campaign 1’s Grog, which means playing against established archetypes that were conformed to in earlier play. Yasha’s statistical weaknesses are similar to Grog’s, but low Charisma and Intelligence are portrayed as being hesitant and soft-spoken. While she too was born in a tribal society, she does not wish to return and conquer it as Grog did. Yasha is also portrayed explicitly as a gay woman, which is a subversion of expectations in its own right. The primary statistics of a Barbarian, Strength and Constitution, were and are sometimes still treated as hallmarks of hypermasculinity: in his study of *AD&D* in the 1980s, Gary Alan Fine noted that many of the male players of this early subculture made their ‘physical constitution score’ indicate ‘the number of times their characters can have sexual intercourse during a night’ – meanwhile, Strength was capped for female characters in early versions of the game.[40]

---

[35] Hills, p.103.

[36] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.210-11.

[37] Sarah King, 'Fireball 5e D&D Guide [2021]', *Nerdbear.com*, 2 January 2024, https://nerdbear.com/fireball-5e-guide/, para.1.

[38] Fandom User, 'Widogast's Web of Fire', *Critical Role Wiki.* https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Widogast%27s_Web_of_Fire.

Riegel, who plays a goblin rogue known ironically as ‘Nott the Brave’, registers a similar impulse towards subversion, triggered through iterative play: ‘[O’Brien] had done such a brilliant rogue and I don’t know anything about D&D but it seemed pretty archetypical […] and I was like, I can’t do that […] you just did that!’[41] Riegel thus looked for an idiosyncratic way to perform this class, a transformative way to ‘make it his own’, separating it from his castmate’s performance. Yet Riegel’s performance of Nott also showcases his continuing developing knowledge of *D&D* gameplay: namely, the narrative/gameplay function of the rogue, and of goblins as a ‘monstrous’ race. Riegel represents and develops the archetypal sneakiness of the rogue (who typically holds proficiency in Stealth and Sleight of Hand) to be the result of cowardice, not heroism. Hiding in combat, a common bonus action for rogues because of how it increases their damage, is given a very simple narrative motivation. Nott is forced to adventure, literalising the requirements of *D&D’s* established format. Riegel demonstrates the constraints of form in Nott’s name, which signifies her lack of heroic qualities – in-character, she notes that she ‘grew up being told that she was not pretty and not […] brave and not coordinated and not smart, and just… not(t)'.[42] Like Johnson and O'Brien, Riegel creates a character who starts in a negative place to provide the starting point of a narrative trajectory. But a nervous, alcoholic rogue is a transformative subversion of the 'cocky' and charismatic rogues and chancers that have come before – both Vax, but also literary examples such as Scott Lynch's confidence trickster, Locke Lamora.[43]

---

[39] Johnson, quoted Marsham, p.63-4.

[40] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.69.

[41] Critical Role, ‘Critical Role Campaign 2 Wrap-Up’, *YouTube.com,* 21 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bE2EUHzr0Fs&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (0:29:52-0:30:19).

Nott begins the campaign as a goblin PC, but this is revealed to be the product of a curse: her true form is a halfling named Veth. This is a subversion of the *D&D* primary text, in which goblins appear as a playable race in *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, but are mainly encountered as a standardised 'neutral evil' enemy within the basic rules – thus suitable fodder for facilitating combat in gameplay.[44] Riegel initially calls into question the absolute morality that dehumanises certain races within *D&D* and within wider fantasy genre-culture, dismissing them as mindless monsters – yet Nott then displays this same hatred for goblins herself. However, her alienated relationship to her own monstrous body – 'I feel like every day I'm more and more goblin. I don't like it at all. I don't like myself at all' – both conforms to then challenges the biological essentialism of *D&D's* racial categories, by showing the damage such essentialist thinking can inflict.[45] Subversive interpretations can therefore become layered, which has led to readings of Veth/Nott's monstrous dysphoria as an allegory for trans experiences amongst fans.[46] Ultimately, Nott demonstrates how primary text logics cannot accommodate all experiences and narratives tertiary authors may wish to tell. Like most tertiary authors, Riegel expresses dissatisfaction by remixing these codes in new, transformative ways.

Willingham's character, Fjord, is also caught between subverting and conforming to the primary text, as a half-orc. Fjord is closely related to another dehumanised monstrous race, but feels intense anxiety about that connection. Orcs – as discussed briefly in the previous chapter and documented extensively in Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* – have been dehumanised and Othered in *D&D's* primary text.[47] The half-orc retains aspects of this wider characterisation: half-orcs are relegated to the slums of *D&D's* primary text, treated with distrust by *D&D's* other races. The *5th Edition* primary text claims that half-orcs are 'usually evil' or 'not strongly inclined toward good', with a 'menacing' demeanour that automatically gives them proficiency in Intimidation, while racial feats such as 'relentless endurance' and 'savage attacker' encode a supposedly intrinsic violent disposition.[48] Willingham's portrayal of Fjord subverts many of these traits: he is a warlock, inclined towards diplomatic or deceptive means of resolving conflict as opposed to violence, and later a paladin, with his player identifying him as Lawful Good throughout the campaign.[49] Yet the tension of acknowledging the racist underpinnings of the primary text still remains: Fjord's interactions with other orcs or half-orcs are few and far between, and for the first sixteen episodes of the campaign, he describes filing down his tusks in order to erase his heritage. The primary text offers the player as tertiary author a difficult set of conventions to navigate, drawn from wider fantasy genre-culture. Unlike encountering a set of racist conventions preserved within a novel or media text, *D&D* players (re)negotiate this darker and established side of fantasy genre-culture in real time. Even cases like Nott and Fjord, while not fully subverting the racism present within the primary text, still mount a challenge to it, simply by performing a sympathetic reading of monstrosity that the primary text does not by default encourage. The consequences of this will be covered in greater depth in the next chapter.

---

[42] Critical Role, 'A Game of Names | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 49', *YouTube.com,* 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xmsjf8jQZWE&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (21:15-21:27).

[43] Scott Lynch, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (London: Gollancz, 2007).

[44] Wizard of the Coast, *D&D Monster Manual* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.166.

[45] Critical Role, 'A Game of Names', (0:29:04-0:29:11).

[46] 'Disasterhumans', 'Ask: How about Nott?', '*I don't want your pockets to grow too heavy',* tumblr.com, 9th April 2019, https://disasterhumans.tumblr.com/post/184068356689/how-about-nott.

In a demonstration of how certain interpretations of fantasy can gain momentum when performed within a collaborative storytelling model, the tertiary authors' challenging of *D&D's* tropes surrounding race is reflected and responded to in Mercer's secondary text. The *Mighty Nein* campaign is set on a separate Exandrian continent called Wildemount, in which the primary powers are the predominantly human Dwendalian Empire and the country of Xhorhas, home of many 'monstrous' races and ruled by the drow Kryn Dynasty. The drow are another of *D&D*'s primary-text races that suffers from what WotC has acknowledged to be problematically racialised representation, and comprise the subject of the next chapter.[50] Because the PCs and tertiary authors already hold sympathetic readings of monstrosity that counteract the primary text, alongside negative experiences of Empire, the lands of men do not automatically hold a position of moral superiority within the story. The party ends up choosing to interact and ally themselves with the monstrous Other: the Kryn drow and the monstrous races which occupy their lands.

---

[47] Helen Young, 'Orcs and Otherness: Monsters on Page and Screen', in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp.88-113.
[48] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.41.
[49] Critical Role, 'Talks Machina: Discussing C2E22 - Lost Treasures', *YouTube.com*, 12 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrFftS8jnAI&ab_channel=CriticalRole, [Accessed: 01-10-21].
[50] Wizards of the Coast, 'Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons', *Dungeons & Dragons*, 17 June 2020, https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd/, para.3.

Mercer has stated that this was a deliberate aim of this second campaign, showing his own desire to subvert primary *D&D* defaults within this new narrative: ‘I definitely wanted to pursue different themes, I wanted to find ways to tackle the intrinsic coding of monstrous races being evil and tackle ideas of relative morality and conflict and warfare’.[51] However, the audience and the players only learn of this through the tertiary authors’ own distrust of rules encoded within the primary text. The players’ journey to the Kryn Dynasty is motivated by tertiary authors, facilitated predominantly through their own decision to keep hold of an object known as the ‘Beacon’. This shows how, for tertiary authors, character creation and embodiment are the key way in which they interact with and negotiate fantasy convention and genre-culture. Meanwhile, decisions made on this tertiary level impact gameplay at all levels of narrative and authorship.

Confident tertiary authors no longer merely replicate, but transformatively engage, remake, and challenge the primary text in their main act of authorship: their character creation. *Vox Machina* presents a party of either affective responses to fantasy genre-culture – players’ favourite kinds of character archetypes, as well as their power fantasies – or characters created using the primary text as a guide to understanding fantasy. One way the *Mighty Nein* expresses the players’ development in confidence and authority is through characters which express an increasing need to challenge or develop the rules as written within the primary text. Subversive characters in turn produce a subversive narrative: it is the *Mighty Nein’s* make-up as a party that helps to facilitate the campaign’s questioning of racial coding, discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Taliesin Jaffe is one of the cast members with more extensive experience of TRPG gameplay, even before the ‘home game’.[52] When discussing character, he states the following: ‘I’d hate winning […] unless I can rephrase it and say that winning is resolving a character. I love resolving a character – asking a question with a character and getting an interesting answer.'[53]

---

[51] Matthew Mercer, quoted Dimension 20, ‘Building Your Own Campaign Setting (with Matthew Mercer) | Adventuring Academy’, *YouTube.com,* 3 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sig8X_kojco&list=PLhOoxQxz2yFN70xDSNNI8PKgxabBNvPhY&ab_channel=Dimension20, (11:16-11:29).

[52] Marsham, p.12.

Although this is merely one interpretation of the role character plays within TRPGs, Jaffe's articulation of character creation echoes the ideas of interrogation I have begun to establish across this section. As *Critical Role's* cast of tertiary authors gain more experience of *D&D* and its ruleset, their responses to that ruleset develop in complexity, and in turn they become more critical of the conventions that are encoded within, such as fantasy genre-culture's wider approach to race. They begin to question, interrogate, and challenge the primary text's understanding of fantasy, demonstrating their increasing power and agency within Hammer's model of authorship. Rather than reproducing ideas presented as canon by the primary text, their Campaign 2 characters choose to partially subvert them through their own authorial decisions. This, in turn, affects other areas of the authorship model, as while Mercer admits to wanting to challenge racial coding within his secondary authorship, this is only possible with a cast of characters who share and generate sympathetic readings which can then sustain this interpretation. As *Critical Role* develops, the 'questions', as Jaffe terms them, are becoming bigger, and the answers more interesting.

Critical Role's party make-up in Campaigns 1 and 2 demonstrates a trajectory in which players in early gameplay rely more on published resources and their existing understanding of fantasy, but gradually increase in authorial confidence. As their confidence and agency develops, they become more active within fantasy genre-culture, and generate their own meanings and understandings of fantasy through their characters. As characters develop in complexity, rules become prompts for interrogation and experimentation. Players' interpretations of fantasy shift: from solely affective or transformative, to also being critical and subversive. While subversion is not inherently more worthy, it is perhaps more complex, and more importantly produces an authorial voice that is in some respects independent of, or in direct and oppositional dialogue with, the primary text. Rather than replicating existing meanings, *D&D* facilitates and generates many readings of fantasy, empowering its players as tertiary authors.

---

[53] Taliesin Jaffe, quoted Marsham, p.263.

Middles: Players' Narrative Agency and Fantasy Literacy

While players express their increasing confidence and agency as tertiary authors through their character creation, their PCs are then actors within the world. A PC's performance is another expression of players' developing relationships to fantasy genre-culture.

D&D generates an awareness of fantasy genre-culture for secondary and tertiary authors through empowering and incentivising narrative decision-making. Jennifer Grouling argues that 'one of the primary reasons that players are drawn to TRPGs is this sense of narrative agency. They have control over the story that develops from their gameplay'.[54] In many games of *D&D*, the primary and secondary text initially holds the most authority, as DMs guide their players through either pre-written modules or campaigns of their own devising, and players grapple with the ruleset as an established boundary of play. However, as tertiary authors increase their expertise in *D&D* gameplay, they gain confidence not only with interacting with an imaginary world generated by the secondary text, but the structures of fantasy genre-culture which underpin them. For players, 'narrative agency' is also genre awareness: once they can read and understand the cues of genre, they become proactive participants in the narrative, and vice versa. We can see this in one particular point of comparison between *Vox Machina* and the *Mighty Nein*: their interactions with the Vestiges of Divergence, textual artefacts which represent not only a key aspect of Mercer's own secondary authorship, but rely upon an understanding of the tropes prevalent in fantasy genre-culture.

During a 'battle royale' one-shot between members of the two campaign parties, the following in-character exchange allows the players to draw their own joking comparison:

> **Fjord:** And let it be known, we do have a Vestige among us. I don't know if you know what that is, but it's quite powerful! If you wanted to quit now, we might understand.
>
> **Pike:** I don't know what a vestige is! (*winks at companions conspiratorially*) […] What does that do?!
>
> **Fjord:** I feel like-

---

[54] Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010), p.37.

Jester: I feel like she's lying…?[55]

This in-character discussion highlights another major difference between *Critical Role's* first and second campaign. The 'Vestige' which Fjord refers to is one of the 'Vestiges of Divergence', described by the *Tal'dorei Campaign Setting* as 'relics of the Age of Arcanum', 'mighty echoes of the last great war'. Mechanically, these 'legendary artifacts […] grow in power with the experience, force of will, and strength of character of the bearer', levelling up alongside the PC who holds them once certain conditions set by the secondary author are met.[56] Fjord is the only character in the *Mighty Nein* campaign to wield one: the reforged sword Dwueth'var, also known as the Star Razor. Meanwhile, every member of Vox Machina holds at least one Vestige: and their collection even structures a portion of the campaign, between Episodes 44-76.[57] As Fjord addresses her with a boast about his own artefact, Pike feigns ignorance while wearing her own, the Plate of the Dawnmartyr.

The lack of Vestiges within the *Mighty Nein* campaign versus *Vox Machina* has an impact on the mode of gameplay, as demonstrated by this exchange: the members of the Mighty Nein assume that Vox Machina will easily overpower them. However, it also demonstrates a change in the balance of authorships, as well as in the tone of storytelling. In terms of genre and tone, Vestiges carry a story significance within the secondary text: 'to be a bearer of a Vestige is to be considered a mighty champion'.[58] The acquisition of these items in *Vox Machina* is used to scaffold a series of encounters with enemies of mythological or personal significance, while cementing the party's status as magical, legendary heroes and 'champions'. Part of what earns them their renown is their ownership of these ancient items of myth and legend. Coupled with their fight against *D&D's* most iconic enemies – a series of chromatic dragons, and finally Thordak, the Cinder King – it signals a transition that places their story firmly into the realms of high fantasy, supported by their reaching the middle levels of play.

---

[55] Critical Role, 'Vox Machina vs. the Mighty Nein', *YouTube.com,* 20 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpBIQhWAhuM&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (11:14-11:35).

[56] Matthew Mercer and James Haeck, *Critical Role: Tal'dorei Campaign Setting* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2017), p.110.

[57] Fandom User, 'Campaign One: Vox Machina - Chapter Summaries', *Critical Role Wiki*, https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Campaign_One:_Vox_Machina.

[58] Mercer and Haeck, p.110.

Mercer, as secondary author, has discussed how his conception of Vestiges was born from his own understanding of fantasy genre-culture: more specifically, the tropes of fantasy gaming. He articulates this from the perspective of *D&D* gameplay, stating that 'switching out magic items is one of the big parts of *D&D* […] I've always been slightly frustrated or sad whenever there's a magical item that a player finds in a game that is very cool […] and then they just have to discard it'.[59] Looting and upgrading equipment in line with a party's adventures is a structural aspect of *D&D*, one that has permeated into RPG culture across digital and tabletop roleplaying games. Mercer circumvents this trope as compiled within the *D&D* primary text by creating items that evolve through three stages: *dormant, awakened*, and *exalted*.

The register of these three names signals the Vestiges' ties to fantasy convention. Mercer as a secondary author is responding to an established trope of fantasy genre-culture – the magic object and quest object – so widespread as to be satirised by Diana Wynne Jones in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*:

> MAGIC OBJECTS can be almost anything, but the important ones are usually QUEST OBJECTS too […]
>
> 1. Objects that have been bewitched or bespelled. This can be a temporary SPELL on a BUILDING or a coal scuttle or a BOOT, to make it behave in a startling way; or it can be an enchantment carefully crafted to be permanent. […]
> 2. Objects that contain their own Magic […] for instance, SCEPTRES, STONE CIRCLES, and some SWORDS are Magic because they are the shapes they are.[60]

Much like Jones' approach here, magic objects become trivialised in *D&D*: they are often interchangeably swapped for a variety of statistical benefits. Yet magic objects are also a structuring principle of *D&D's* world, with objects and loot often the reward around which storylines are built and combat encounters incentivised. Jones describes magical swords as variously 'designed only to kill DRAGONS', 'designed for some other specific victim, such as GOBLINS or UNDEAD', and possessing 'appetites […] for A) blood B) lifeforce C) souls' – all properties which *D&D* can adapt into mechanical benefits for the player, giving literary convention ludic function.[61]

---

[59] Mercer, quoted Marsham, p.174.

[60] Dianna Wynne Jones, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland: Revised and Updated Edition* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.118.

Within *Vox Machina,* Vestiges also express the interaction between secondary and tertiary authorship. Reflecting his hopes that his players' magical items will become 'part of that player's persona and personality' and 'evolve along with […] them', Mercer tailors this aspect of the secondary text – which is connected to myths that underpin his imaginary world – to the tertiary text: the PCs themselves.[62] In certain cases, this is demonstrated explicitly through the item's synergy with class abilities and its situational location: for instance, Grog's Vestige 'the Titanstone Knuckles', and the Vestige that Percy wields, 'Cabal's Ruin', have prior owners who serve as antagonists within their personal storylines. The secondary author aligns these items to his player's tertiary authorship: this allows him to guide the direction of the narrative, even while acknowledging what they have personally bought to the campaign.

Vestiges demand a response from the tertiary authors. They must accept the role of champion, buying into the tone of high fantasy, and literally taking on the mantles of heroes. Perhaps the clearest example of this is O'Brien's character Vax'ildan, who treats his Vestige as a call to action and multiclasses into paladin. His tertiary text shifts in response to the secondary text, as Vax makes a pact with his goddess, the Matron of Ravens. While Mercer proposes the campaign's genre as secondary author, it requires group consensus. Tailoring the Vestiges of Divergence to Vox Machina acknowledges the transformative effect the tertiary text can have on the secondary text, but it also incentivises tertiary author agreement, rewarding their movement towards the high fantasy mode.

Vox Machina's process of story generation reflects Hammer's conception of primary, secondary, and tertiary authorship as a chronological hierarchy. The players as tertiary authors 'encounter a concrete scenario which is consistent with the larger world of the game', and 'it is their moment-to-moment choices which determine what happens in that scenario'.[63] In this reading – which is more applicable to a static digital RPG where the secondary text is rendered less flexible through the parameters of coding – tertiary authorship offers riffs on the secondary text through variation, but the secondary author/worldbuilder ultimately has control over plot. The Vestiges are predominantly in Mercer's control, and they scaffold the plot in the lead-up to battles with the Chroma Conclave. Even though they are personalised to the tertiary authors, they are still artefacts of the secondary text.

---

[61] Jones, *Tough Guide to Fantasyland,* p.188-9.
[62] Marsham, p.174.
[63] Hammer, p.71.

However, in *D&D,* where secondary authors are more dynamic and can respond directly to their tertiary counterparts, any hierarchical relationship between secondary and tertiary authors is often the result of confidence and communication, rather than a material difference in status. Once tertiary authors are confident enough in their agency to advocate for their own narratives, they no longer solely respond to 'scenarios' and prompts from the secondary text, but begin to generate plot independently (an ability they have always had, but may not have wished to exercise). This transforms Hammer's model from a hierarchy to an assemblage, as the secondary author is required to respond to the players' own authorship.

This shift in the dynamics of power is particularly interesting when the lack of Vestiges within the *Mighty Nein* campaign is examined closely. There are many potential reasons why only one Vestige is acquired over a campaign of a comparable length to *Vox Machina*. For instance, balancing combat and campaign levelling impacts when a Vestige is considered to be suitable equipment – in the *Campaign Setting*, Mercer notes that a DM operating within his world should 'consider the intended power level of your campaign before including them, and ensure their discovery and acquisition is treated with the proper amount of weight'.[64]

However, the narrative of the one Vestige they do recover, the Star Razor, implies a different interpretation. Discovered in a 'simple' 'locked iron box' in Episode 22, 'Lost Treasures', a broken, nondescript sword hilt is picked up by the party and returned to its rightful owner, a shopkeeper called Pumat Sol.[65] Following an out-of-character aside conversation, where Bailey notes to Jaffe that, 'I mean, we should get that', Jaffe's character, Caduceus, then purchases the hilt from Sol for 300 gold despite its apparent uselessness, noting that 'I like broken things'.[66] After over twenty episodes of Caduceus carrying this hilt without purpose, its missing blade is recognised and selected by party members Beau and Caleb as a reward for completing a mission in Episode 58, 'Wood and Steel'. A further ten sessions pass until the severed hilt and blade are identified as parts of a broken Vestige, and the party must then quest to find the location of a magical forge and steal a dragon's ice breath in order to smelt and reforge the weapon. Unlike the Vestiges of Campaign One, the re-creation of the Star Razor is not a compulsory quest, but instead one to which the party opt in, multiple times. While the Star Razor is still a part of the secondary text, it is tertiary authors who make and initiate a series of choices related to this otherwise apparently useless item. The tertiary text is what assigns this Vestige enough narrative weight to pursue its repair.

---

[64] Mercer and Haeck, p.110.

[65] Critical Role, 'Lost Treasures | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 22', *YouTube.com,* 19 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQxpxWz38P8, (2:33:20-2:33:26).

[66] Critical Role, 'Commerce & Chaos | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 31', *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ25t2cM6Ws&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (50:08-50:17).

The re-creation and 'awakening' of the Star Razor is achieved in Episode 76: 'Refjorged'. The episode title is a pun that emphasises the Star Razor's relationship with the tertiary text, connecting it to Willingham's Fjord. As with Vax'ildan in Campaign One, Fjord's claiming of this artefact signals a change in direction for his character, marked by a multiclass into paladin and the discovery of new purpose. Once a warlock in service to the evil being Uk'otoa, Fjord's claiming of the Star Razor within the Kravaraad forge signifies a forsaking of this patron and a rededication to the Wildmother, a neutral but benevolent deity. The Vestige still signifies an interweaving between secondary and tertiary text, but this time mostly driven by tertiary authorship. While Kravaraad is signposted as a place of deep religious significance for another party member, Willingham chooses, unprompted, to forsake his warlock powers within this forge – leaving him incapable of magic for several episodes of the arc. It is also Willingham's choice to rededicate himself to the Wildmother when other options, such as Jester's deity the Traveller, are also available. Both actions assign further significance to Kravaraad as a location within Mercer's worldbuilding: Willingham responds to and develops the secondary text further, as a tertiary author. Unlike Vax'ildan multiclassing in response to receiving his Vestige from the Raven Queen, Fjord makes unprompted choices. The Star Razor is in fact gifted to him by another tertiary author, rather than Mercer: Jaffe as Caduceus hands Fjord the Vestige, in acknowledgement of Willingham's narrative decisions, at the same time that Mercer endorses the change in class as a secondary author, adjusting Fjord's character statistics. The tertiary text drives this narrative development, and this time requires consensus from the DM, not the other way around.

As the players watch Fjord's transformation, Bailey jokes 'oh my god, did you Captain America Fjord?', noting the convenience of this magical change. But this change is also secured through its ties to fantasy genre-culture, dictated by fantasy motifs of transformation and Fjord's new status as a goddess' Chosen One (see Figure 3).[67] The secondary author employs these tropes as shorthand, to justify altering the text to reflect Willingham's own desires for his character.

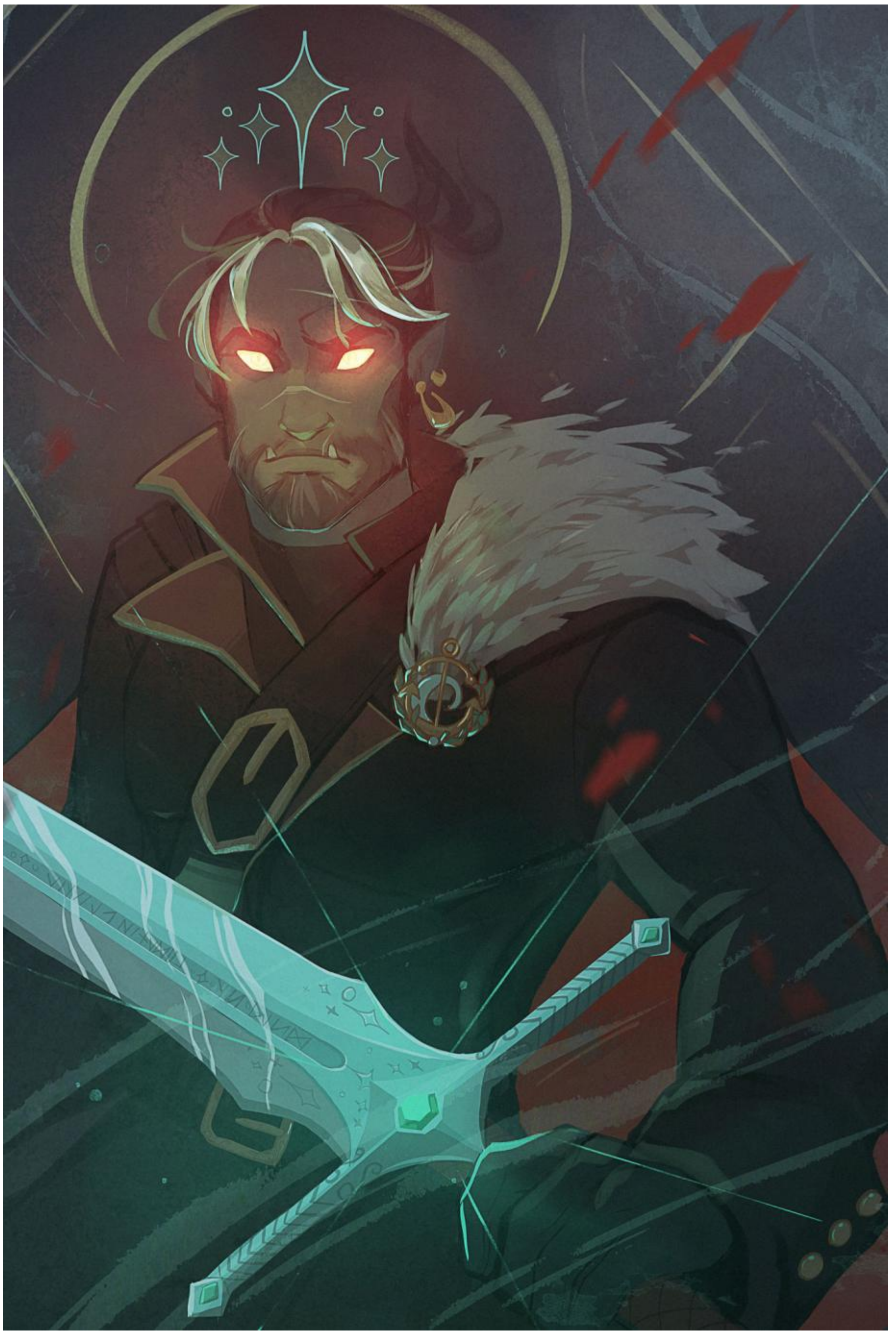


Figure 3: 'star razor exalted' by @ambikyu on twitter. *Twitter.com*, (25 October 2020), https://x.com/ambikyu/status/1320387595805876225.

---

[67] Critical Role, 'Refjorged | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 76', *YouTube.com*, 26 Aug 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzHkVh80kVQ&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (4:52:52-3).

When Fjord is gifted the reforged Star Razor, the following interaction occurs:

Nott: Fjord, do you want to hold it?
Fjord: […] Caduceus, it's your sword!
Caduceus: No, it's definitely not.
Caleb: Who else here is going to use a sword?
Jester: You do need a new sword!
Caduceus: It was waiting for you. […] This is what we're here for.
Caleb: There are no accidents, correct, Caduceus?[68]

There is no competition for who will claim this Vestige, despite it potentially being the most powerful artefact in the game. The party decision is partially dictated by mechanics – Fjord is a Hexblade Warlock: he doesn't have a hexblade, and is thus operating at a disadvantage. But it is also dictated by genre: the cast have seen Willingham's character go through a transformative sequence, and it makes sense that it be marked through material reward. Caleb's final statement alludes to the notions of narrative causality that underpin this decision: O'Brien argues that as they are in a story, there are no 'accidents', especially as their choices within the *D&D* system have become deliberate and knowing. The tertiary text is becoming less reactive and 'accidental', becoming instrumental to the creation of a coherent narrative. Caleb's comment reflects the same motivations that drove O'Brien's construction of his Campaign 2 character: an awareness that the game is now being consumed as a fantasy fiction, and so should operate according to fiction's rules. Caleb/O'Brien's statement also identifies Caduceus/Jaffe, another tertiary author, as the driving force for this particular branch of story, rather than Mercer. It is Jaffe who has expressed repeatedly the desire to claim the sword, and yet at this narrative conclusion, he doesn't wish to claim the spoils: he is aware that he is in a collaborative, rather than competitive, story.

When questioned about Caduceus' relationship to the Star Razor in the campaign wrap-up episode of *Talks Machina*, Jaffe made the following statement about his decision to keep the broken sword, and pursue its repair across over half the campaign:

---

[68] Critical Role, 'Refjorged', (4:57:40-4:58:20).

> Well, I mean, […] it's the secret gift of Caduceus Clay. He explained it to you at one point of how fate works, of the notion of watering the tree, because you know what kind of tree it is. […] Which if you actually think about it for 20 minutes, is basically Clay going, "This is a D&D game." Like, literally he's just, he's just explaining that this is a D&D game. So yeah, if you believe in that kind of fate in this world […] You know exactly that you're in a comic book. So it was like, "Oh, a broken sword. Well, clearly I need that." […] Clearly, clearly this is important, or else it wouldn't have been for sale.[69]

While Jaffe may have not known that the sword he purchased was a Vestige, he admits to employing a large degree of genre savviness. Under the guise of playing a high Wisdom cleric who believes in fate, he employs his understanding of both *D&D* and fantasy narrative – the knowledge that he is in a genre littered with 'notable broken swords' of significance – to progress this plot forward proactively.[70] Not only does Jaffe demonstrate how knowledge of fantasy genre-culture informs *D&D* gameplay, he essentially expresses a belief in the narrative agency of the player as tertiary author. Rather than players simply responding to DM prompts, Mercer's secondary authorship must similarly respond to their tertiary text, and reward their decisions with impact and consequence. As Jaffe notes, the sword wouldn't have been for sale if it wasn't important. But similarly, if players pick up a sword and decide to keep it, that assigns it importance within the narrative as well – an importance that should, ultimately, be rewarded.

The presence of a Vestige of Divergence in the *Mighty Nein* campaign does not signal a permanent shift into high fantasy and epic stakes as it does in *Vox Machina* – perhaps because the party are not choosing to each adopt one, and take on the role of 'champions'. It instead embodies a more proactive act of storytelling on the part of the players. Now in their second game – equipped with the knowledge that Vestiges exist, and a greater awareness of fantasy genre-culture – they are able to make choices using this knowledge, to drive the narrative forward. A Vestige of Divergence, within Exandria, is a motif that represents power, but also purpose: as tertiary authors, the cast now seek to define that purpose for themselves, and do so actively. Willingham wields the blade through his choice, having been rewarded not by the DM, but by another player.

---

[69] Critical Role, 'Critical Role Campaign 2 Wrap-Up', (2:40:03 -2:40:45)

[70] David Langford, 'Swords', in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy,* ed. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=swords.

Genre savviness generates *D&D* narrative – it is employed not only by the secondary author, who shaped Vestiges in accordance with his own understanding of fantasy genre-culture, but by the tertiary authors, who crafted their own quest for the Star Razor. Jaffe was the primary source of this genre awareness, but other players employ it in their co-creation of this storyline: Bailey, who notes they should keep the hilt; Ray and O'Brien, who claim the blade as loot from another unrelated mission; and most importantly Willingham, who makes an educated guess at his high chances of success in divesting himself of his previous weapon in a place of religious power. Vestige acquisition is not a compulsory quest crafted by the DM, but one that is provoked through the desires and character choices of the players. They pursue the retrieval and repair of a mysterious sword because, like Jones, they know that 'all Swords in Fantasyland are dangerously magical in some way'.[71]

Tertiary authors gain confidence in gameplay and literacy in fantasy genre-culture, through iterative play. The Vestiges examined here are an embodiment of fantasy genre culture: magical items which carry weight in the game system through their statistics, in the secondary text through their importance to Mercer's worldbuilding, and in wider fantasy genre-culture through their fetishisation as quest objects. In *Critical Role's* first campaign, Vestiges are prioritised by the secondary text. The campaign's tone is in part dictated by these objects, and Mercer's definition of genre-culture: a primarily high fantasy mode.

In comparison, the Mighty Nein collect only one Vestige, but the Star Razor's reforging is achieved collaboratively through tertiary authorship. As *D&D* produces understanding of fantasy genre-culture and develops players' authorial agency, it also diversifies the meanings present within genre-culture. Players' understanding of fantasy becomes personal, as Willingham exemplifies, and they express it more confidently, conceiving of themselves as authors, capable of contributing meaning not only to the *D&D* game itself, but also to genre-culture.

Endings: The Balance Between Primary and Tertiary Texts

While ending a *D&D* campaign causes it to be evaluated and examined as a complete narrative, in the context of recorded TRPG actual play, an ending also results in it being treated as a published text. This privilege was once reserved for the *D&D* primary text, as published by WotC – but it is a privilege which secondary and tertiary texts can now also hold. There is a shift in the balance of power within Hammer's authorship model, as I can demonstrate through a comparison of the endings of *Vox Machina* and *Mighty Nein.*

---

[71] Jones, *Tough Guide to Fantasyland,* p.188.

Compelling narrative is an aspiration of many *D&D* games. While narrative-heavy collaborative story-creation has always been part of *D&D* gameplay, it isn't always the sole goal. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding note that 'RPGs can be realised in distinct styles or desired experiences', including gamism, dramatism, narrativism, and simulationism, and therefore, 'to define RPGs as "an act of shared story-creation" implies a normative value judgment that "good" or "real" RPGs emphasize storytelling over' these other factors.[72] However, while this is certainly true, narrative storytelling has become increasingly important to the *D&D* player base and subcultural community in light of the emphasis placed on it within actual play. It is particularly valued in the fan and player communities surrounding games like *Critical Role.* Actual play shifts the importance of narrative within the *D&D* subcultural community by promoting it in gameplay: assigning it what Mia Consalvo terms 'gaming capital'. Consalvo defines gaming capital as that which confers status onto players within a particular community: adhering to and accumulating this capital in its dominant forms can prove 'quite valuable in building a reputation' within the professional and/or fannish sphere. Consalvo notes that gaming capital is not always based on gaming skill, but is in fact 'highly flexible' and 'able to adapt' to the wider subcultural context.[73] 'Although possessing gaming capital is supposed to be about game players' superior playing abilities and knowledge about games', Consalvo states that 'it is often through the consumption of paratexts – not actual games' that this capital is acquired, and that 'players are the ones who ultimately judge what counts or not as such capital'.[74] As actual play shows accumulate large audiences and become prominent *D&D* texts, they also influence gaming capital within *D&D* gameplay, as the focus of these shows shapes wider expectations of the game system and what it can be used to accomplish. Narrative, and storytelling skill, has gained gaming capital as a result of this new mode of consuming play. Viewers-turned-players typically expect a degree of emplotment. They wish to feel like the narrative, however improvised, provides rises and falls in dramatic action, that characters receive meaningful development, and that the story is leading to a satisfactory confrontation, or conclusion.

---

[72] José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, 'Definitions of Roleplaying Games', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.19-51 (pp.25-26).
[73] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p.184.
[74] Consalvo, *Cheating,* p.38, p.184.

While many of the plot points and 'arcs' crafted within *Critical Role* occur organically and are only identified by audiences and players in hindsight, one place where there is particular pressure on *Critical Role* to provide 'plot' and 'narrative' is in its endings. The conclusion of both *Vox Machina* and the *Mighty Nein* are sites where audience scrutiny and expectations of a satisfactory, 'complete' narrative culminate. A campaign's conclusion is one of the key places where *Critical Role* is evaluated as a fantasy narrative or fantasy text.

There are structural similarities in the ways both *Vox Machina* and *Mighty Nein* reach their conclusions. Aware that the fate of the world rests in their hands, the respective (now high-level) parties both travel to extraplanar cites: Vox Machina to Thar Amphala in the Shadowfell, and the Nein to the Cognouza Ward of Aeor in the Astral Plane. They then attempt to prevent those cities from being summoned to the Material Plane to wreak destruction on Exandria. Each party faces a primary villain of this final confrontation (known as the BBEG, or 'big bad evil guy'), who command the domains the parties have travelled to. Vecna was Vox Machina's final adversary, while the once-player character Lucien, having merged with the consciousness that powered Cognouza, was the Mighty Nein's. While Vox Machina failed in their first confrontation – Vecna successfully brings Thar Amphala to the material world, after defeating and killing several party members, meaning that another confrontation must be staged against him – the Mighty Nein succeeds. Lucien is defeated, the plan for Cognouza to terrorise the material plane never comes to fruition, and the Cognouza Ward is destroyed.

The Mighty Nein's success where Vox Machina initially failed evidences the cast's growing expertise within the *D&D* system. During *Vox Machina*, players did not necessarily have the TRPG literacy to understand the weight of a confrontation with Vecna – for instance, the opponent's immunity to non-magical attacks rendered certain player abilities, such as those possessed by Jaffe's gunslinger, useless. The Mighty Nein's ability to avert disaster results in part from strategic decisions that show a nuanced awareness of their own capabilities, such as the casting of the 'Immoveable Object' spell by Caleb on the components required for teleportation.[75] Lucien and the Somnovem join a long list of villains that the Mighty Nein have defeated before their planned or projected demise, including many enemies transformed into harmless beasts via the Polymorph spell, the pirate Avantika who was partially defeated by a lucky and unexpected D20, and a hag defeated before combat was initiated by a Modify Memory spell that Mercer admits meant that 'the entire encounter […] and a long like three-four episode arc that I'd planned for […] was just completely removed'.[76] The Mighty Nein's track record with what a fan terms being 'too clever by half' meant that many combat encounters were unexpectedly subverted, demonstrating a newfound competency within the game system.[77]

---

[75] Critical Role, 'Where There Is A Will… | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 138', *YouTube.com,* 17 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abczYOn1lIQ, (1:11:31-2).

This is another symptom of how tertiary authorship is empowered through iterative play. Within her model of agency and authority, Hammer identifies the concept of 'framework agency', referring to interactions with the structured elements of a game system which place parameters on player and DM authorship, exerting influence on their actions. Because it encompasses the rules of the setting, framework agency is 'often structured by the primary author', and thus one of the ways that primary authorship retains central importance to the text produced.[78] While secondary authors can amend or ignore aspects of these frameworks when crafting the storyworld, tertiary authors in particular operate within and in response to the bounded system. The Mighty Nein's ability to end combat prematurely demonstrates their increasing literacy in the context of their framework agency.

This progress is seen in fan compilations such as 'Counterspell. the best spell?', in which the use of Counterspell in combat can be traced across *Critical Role*'s first campaign and into the second, where more players have chosen classes that are able to cast it. [79] When used in *Vox Machina*, cast members figure it through their literacy in other game systems: 'that was some old-school Magic: the Gathering shit' and 'you just pulled out the wild Uno card'.[80] Yet in the second campaign, players display full understanding of its significance. When Mercer repeats the rules during its first in-game use during the second campaign, the player repeats ‘I know’ multiple times over in response to his instructions, before resolving the action independently without prompting, making the required rolls.[81]

---

[76] Matthew Mercer, quoted by The McElroy Family, 'The DMs Are Open | MaxFunDrive 2020', *YouTube.com*, 21 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csKS_YvHh9w&t=917s&ab_channel=TheMcElroyFamily, (53:24-53:31).

[77] 'u/Gutter_Shakespeare', '[Spoilers C2E123] The Mighty Nein are too clever by half.', r/CriticalRole, *reddit.com*, 29 Jan 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/criticalrole/comments/l809qg/spoilers_c2e123_the_mighty_nein_are_too_clever_by/.

[78] Hammer, pp.76-77.

[79] Dani Gee, 'Counterspell. The best spell?', *YouTube.com,* 9 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piAIv2s_txE&ab_channel=DaniGee.

[80] Critical Role, 'Race to the Tower | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 102', *YouTube.com,* 26 July 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1A-JGIF1Vc&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry, (4:20:39-4:20:47).

Hammer claims that ‘participant agency is different from character agency’, making a distinction between PC attributes, and the constraints on the player that inhibit their ability to exert those attributes in a meaningful way.[82] However, character agency can also become an expression of participant agency, as a more confident and savvy player may craft a character that is optimised to display their knowledge and enhance their participant agency to the full. This is partially why the endings of *Vox Machina* and *Mighty Nein* differ: as Mercer’s tertiary authors become adept at reading and reacting efficiently to the structural demands and intricacies of *D&D* combat, the structure of *Critical Role* changed to accommodate this increasing gameplay and genre savviness.

While I have touched on one area of its expression here, enhanced tertiary author agency is illustrated through another significant difference between these campaigns’ conclusions: the nature of each campaign’s final antagonist. *Vox Machina’s* closing antagonist, Vecna, is signposted as a significant threat partly through the weight of canonical *D&D* primary-text lore that precedes him. By comparison, the Mighty Nein’s final foe, Lucien, is a character crafted entirely through secondary and tertiary authorship, reflecting the significance of tertiary author input across the campaign. An incarnation of former PC Mollymauk, this villain’s impact is conveyed predominantly through characters’ interpersonal relationships and his importance to those playing at the table. As embodiments of endings, these villains act as sites around which the desire for satisfactory narrative have coalesced, for both players and viewers. The difference between them reflects the players’ growing reputation as fantasy authors in their own right.

Vox Machina’s adversary, Vecna, is central to the *D&D* primary text, and a reflection of the fantasy canon this text draws upon. Although refigured through Mercer’s secondary authorship as a Betrayer God known as the ‘Whispered One’, Vecna as a character dates back to the first incarnation of *D&D*, where he appeared as part of the third *OD&D* supplement, *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976). Created by one of *D&D’s* original primary authors, Brian Blume, this character is considered iconic, holding decades of primary text history.[83] Vecna's significance to the *D&D* canon is demonstrated by his name: Vecna is an anagram of Vance, a homage to the author Jack Vance, who was cited as one of the major influences behind the game's magic system.[84] His canonical status is not only enshrined through a self-referential nod to the game's own systems and mechanics, but also through an intertextual tie to a fantasy author, lending Vecna official and reverential weight. Vecna reappears in the *D&D* canon along with three items also created by Blume: the Hand and Eye of Vecna, and the Sword of Kas. Vox Machina encounter both the primary-text figure and his associated items during the first campaign's conclusion. This season of *Critical Role* therefore performs deference to the primary text through intertextual references to established lore, which affirmative fans of *D&D* will likely recognise.

---

[81] Critical Role, ‘In Hot Water | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 43’, *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyArEJYKr5U&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (0:22:10-0:22:30).
[82] Hammer, p.75.

Although Mercer offers some modifications to Vecna's character as a secondary author, and crafts mechanics for how he functions as a combat opponent, invoking these references to the primary text and Vecna's canonical legacy lends prestige to the finale of *Critical Role* Campaign 1. Presenting the god alongside his canonical items encourages Vox Machina's conclusion to be assessed using a certain kind of gaming capital, based in what Consalvo terms 'knowledge of the paratext itself', as opposed to the act of gameplay.[85] Performing key parts of the *D&D* primary text imparts an official weight to the campaign's conclusion, appealing to those in the audience who venerate or appreciate *D&D*'s own canon and history. It also displays canonical awareness on Mercer's part: his ability to perform the role of Vecna convincingly validates his authority as a secondary author and DM, while lending legitimacy to Exandria as a secondary text. This would later be demonstrated in Mercer's Vecna being referenced in both Exandria and *D&D* fandom wikis, incorporated into both primary and secondary texts. The Whispered One was further legitimised when published in *Critical Role's* first official WotC publication, *The Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (2020). *Critical Role* was allowed by WotC to continue Vecna's primary-text lore.

By comparison, *Mighty Nein* antagonist Lucien was created primarily through the collaboration of secondary and tertiary authorship. The only nod to primary text iconography is the similarities between his abilities and those of a similarly well-known and recognisable primary text monster, the Beholder, also dating back to the 1970s and the earliest iterations of *D&D*.[86] Otherwise, the character – previously Taliesin Jaffe's PC 'Mollymauk Tealeaf', killed in the early-level game, then resurrected and controlled by Mercer as secondary author – exists relatively independently of the *D&D* canon, particularly when compared with the canonical weight Vecna holds.

---

[83] Credited by Gary Gygax, 'Q&A with Gary Gygax', *ENWorld.org*, 24 July 2007, https://www.enworld.org/threads/q-a-with-gary-gygax.22566.

[84] Tim Callahan and Mordecai Knode, 'Advanced Readings in D&D: Jack Vance', *Tor.com,* 15 July 2013, https://www.tor.com/2013/07/15/advanced-readings-in-dad-jack-vance/, para.4.

[85] Consalvo, *Cheating,* p.22.

While Vox Machina's confrontation with Vecna centres his primary text status, the Mighty Nein's confrontation with Lucien instead focuses on interpersonal connections to his character that have been formed through tertiary authorship. Mercer incentivises this mechanically: in their final battle, roleplaying choices where the Mighty Nein invoke their established relationships with Mollymauk/Lucien are rewarded by the secondary text, serving to diminish Lucien's 'legendary actions' as a BBEG and weaken him.[87] Even the title of the battle episode, 'Long May He Reign', refers to words delivered by both Jaffe as Mollymauk and Ray as Beauregard at his in-game funeral. This motif emphasises tertiary authorial input and frames the stakes of the final conflict through the emotional and narrative investment of the players – a different form of gaming capital than that of the Vecna battle, though the two can certainly coexist.

Use of this motif also reflects paratextual influences on *Critical Role*'s narrative, separate to the *D&D* primary text. The phrase 'long may he reign' was also adopted by fans and viewers of the show in artwork, fanworks, and cosplays, as grief over this character paralleled the mourning enacted by the players at the table.[88] It has been widely acknowledged that fans were 'inconsolable' at the death of Mollymauk, 'a favourite subject of cosplayers and fan artists', whose prominence in the fandom continued far beyond his (first) death.[89] Therefore, positioning Lucien as the closing antagonist to the story offered closure to these fans, appealing to the audience who have become invested in *Critical Role*'s own characters and story independent of the game system and the *D&D* framework within which the story takes place. This demonstrates the increasing importance of secondary and tertiary authorship – fans of *Critical Role* become prioritised over fans of *D&D.*

---

[86] Gary Gygax and Robert Kuntz, *Dungeons & Dragons Supplement I: Greyhawk* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1976).

[87] Critical Role, 'Long May He Reign | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 140', *YouTube.com*, 31 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5O0bbA7Pn8&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

[88] CritRoleStats, 'A Tribute to Mollymauk Tealeaf, Long May He Reign', *Critrolestats.com,* 25 July 2018, https://www.critrolestats.com/blog/2018/7/25/a-tribute-to-mollymauk-tealeaf-long-may-he-reign.

[89] Tyler Wilde, 'Permadeath and D&D: The pain of losing a character, and why it can be great', *PC Gamer,* 7 September 2018, https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/critical-role-mercer-jaffe-mollymauk-interview, para.2.

The comparison between Vecna and Lucien as concluding encounters and antagonists shows how authorship can evolve through *D&D* gameplay, but also how the advent of actual play has altered Hammer's model of authorship. The show's first campaign utilises primary text canonicity to give its narrative a climactic end. By the time the second campaign concludes, four years later, the cast and Mercer's own authorships stand alone, to some extent. Beyond the obvious governance of *D&D's* mechanics, primary-text influences are less overt. In closing the *Mighty Nein's* narrative in June 2021, appeals to primary text knowledge as gaming capital become less and less necessary to maintain *Critical Role*'s status as a 'good' *D&D* game. This reflects the cast's increasing fame and status, endorsed by both viewers and by WotC themselves. It also reflects the lengths to which the company have gone in their establishment of a secondary-world canon through various paratexts, including novels, Dark Horse comics, campaign guides, and an animated TV show. Secondary and tertiary authorships are also proven to have synergy with transformative fan engagement.

Yet alongside these realities of their behemoth transmedial franchise, the actions and choices of *Critical Role*'s players at the table are also instrumental to these endings, exhibiting a growing empowerment of the tertiary and secondary authors as creators of their own narratives. As tertiary authors become more adept at crafting meaningful stories through the act of gameplay, their authorship ascends in prominence within Hammer's model.

The cast's confidence has grown, and perhaps been encouraged by, their show's increasing popularity. While tertiary authorship is the driving force of Campaign Two, acknowledged by the centrality of Lucien and the Nein's relationship in this final battle, it is also one of the primary appeals of actual play shows. Actual play shifts the focus of viewers and players from the primary text, to unique narratives produced using that primary text. Before actual play, traditional publishing and the act of dissemination was one avenue which distinguished the primary text as more 'official', in comparison to the transformative fan narratives engendered by secondary and tertiary authors. While players and DMs communicated their approaches to gameplay in zines and forums, the only widely available *D&D* text was the official, published manuals.

Actual play now also produces and publishes accessible secondary and tertiary texts within *D&D* subculture, which begins to redress the earlier imbalance of power between different authorities. In the case of *Critical Role* specifically, these texts are also becoming traditionally published: first by Green Ronin, then WotC in *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (2020) and *Critical Role: Call of the Netherdeep* (2022), and now by their own traditional publishing company, Darrington Press. Even when not using the prestige of traditional publishing, actual play shows broadcast secondary and tertiary texts. These texts gain their own audiences and followings which are independent of, and may even begin to eclipse, the centrality of the primary text. As I discussed in the chapter introduction, the phrase 'how do you want to do this' now recurs throughout *D&D* gameplay. Actual play texts have risen to considerable prominence within fantasy genre-culture, as secondary and tertiary authors rise to prominence within *D&D* subculture itself.

In the ending of the *Mighty Nein,* the growing experience and confidence in *D&D* and fantasy authorship that is cultivated in the players through iterative play is complemented by the broadcasting reality of the show: *Critical Role's* cast are acting as authors, but also being perceived as such by others. Not only do tertiary authors become more proactive contributors to fantasy genre-culture through *D&D* gameplay, actual play assigns these contributions a greater weight within genre-culture. I will discuss the implications of this in the future chapters: particularly when it leads to *D&D* players now being able to make changes to genre-culture. Here, it is important to note that the *Critical Role* cast's increasing confidence as authors is partially out of necessity: they have faced growing pressure to deliver a satisfactory narrative to their audiences. Yet this also shows a growing trust and investment in their texts from viewers. The transformative responses of *Critical Role's* secondary and tertiary texts show what *D&D* is capable of as a vehicle for fantasy narrative: audiences wish to view more of this, rather than solely a skilled performance of the primary text canon.

Conclusion

Critical Role has done a great deal to increase *D&D's* visibility in the mainstream, not least because it has paved the way for a plethora of other *D&D* actual play media. Its prominence within TRPG culture feeds its growing presence in other realms of fantasy genre-culture – with literary offerings such as the *Vox Machina: Origins* comics and the tie-in novel *Critical Role: Vox Machina–Kith & Kin* (2021), alongside the *Legend of Vox Machina* animated series, published tabletop and board games, and their publishing house. *Critical Role* has become a key text around which anxieties regarding *D&D's* relationship to wider fantasy congregate. It strives to exist in an amateur, unofficial 'home game' space, but across many years of televised play, its narratives have largely transcended the amateur, hobbyist sphere, and are received as contributions to genre-culture in their own right.

This development is reflected and paralleled in the players' own journeys as tertiary authors. *Critical Role* not only documents the definition of a new and emergent fantasy medium, it also details a group of *D&D* players' growing awareness of fantasy genre-culture through their own interactions with the game system. As they play *D&D,* the *Critical Role* cast practice and develop their skills as fantasy authors, eventually becoming authorities independent from WotC's ruleset. They come to hold greater sway within the assemblage authorship structure of the *D&D* system, and greater influence in the wider assemblage of fantasy genre-culture.

This growing confidence, genre-awareness, and authority as tertiary authors is first identifiable in the cast's construction of player characters. PCs are the aspect of the *D&D* text over which tertiary authors have most input, meaning that they can often express a player's authorial confidence and narrative intent. While the PCs of *Vox Machina* rely on the *D&D* primary text as a source for information, or reflect the players' own affective ties to fantasy genre-culture, in *Mighty Nein,* the PCs that are generated begin to interrogate and ask questions of the primary text. They also constitute more transformative responses to fantasy genre-culture. Either the players wish to create a storyline with greater narrative complexity using the techniques of transformative response, as O'Brien does with Caleb Widogast, or they begin to produce challenges to the primary text, as Riegel does with Nott the Brave and Johnson does with Yasha. When approaching the second campaign with greater *D&D* experience, tertiary authors' ideas are not only increasingly complex but also consciously subversive, reacting against tropes the primary text establishes as convention. Their newfound literacy in fantasy genre-culture triggers a desire to go against the grain, deconstructing or creating new archetypes that either transform or deliberately subvert the notion of a 'hero'. I will examine the implications this holds for wider fantasy-genre culture and its conventions in the next chapter, when examining how secondary and tertiary authorship approach an aspect of the primary text which preserves a contentious aspect of fantasy genre-culture: the concept of race, and its representation within fantasy.

The genre savviness that iterative play generates within tertiary authors is also evidenced through the cast's acts of play, and the kinds of narratives that are formed during the process of collaborative story creation across the two campaigns. Within *Vox Machina,* plots are typically put forward by Mercer as a secondary author, which players then respond to. In *Mighty Nein*, the players generate narrative more proactively, using their literacy surrounding *D&D,* fantasy genre-culture, and narrative structure, to provoke a meaningful plot. This is, arguably, also transformative, as it turns the second campaign away from the typical structures and high fantasy mode Mercer proposed as a secondary author in *Vox Machina*.

This shifting power between the primary, secondary, and tertiary texts as proposed by Hammer, is also evidenced in *Critical Role* by the importance placed on tertiary authorship as opposed to primary text canon in the finale of the second campaign. The conclusion of *Vox Machina* contextualises *Critical Role* as a work within the *D&D* canon. Mercer utilises one of the game's most prominent primary text villains, Vecna, and quality is assured through the successful performance and delivery of this primary text monument. By the time the *Mighty Nein* campaign closes, the campaign's tertiary authors have both the confidence – demonstrated, for instance, by their utilisation of framework narrative – and the audience support to hold the story as their own, without appealing to these wider canons. Lucien, as a character and plot device, is a testament to how iterative *D&D* gameplay results in the empowerment of tertiary authorship: the story has become fully the players' own.

It is also interesting to note that the character of Lucien is queer, genderfluid, and a site of much transformative fan activity such as cosplay, fanfiction, and fanart. While fan activity is one means by which *Critical Role's* secondary and tertiary authors gain greater authority within *D&D* subculture, the centrality of Mollymauk/Lucien to fandom also demonstrates a synergy between *D&D's* transformative narratives and other transformative fan interactions. The authorities and authorships of *Critical Role* do not develop in isolation, but through interactions with audiences, readers, and other actors within fantasy genre-culture. In an observation that will be unpacked in future chapters, Campaign 2's ending, and its reception, proves that *Critical Role* has begun to hold a canonical weight of its own within *D&D* subculture.

Complexity and subversion within the *Mighty Nein* campaign is produced through growing *D&D* literacy and experience. However, in the time period covered in this chapter, the *Critical Role* company moved from the amateur, fannish space that ‘home games’ typically occupy, into the professional and ‘official’ sphere of content creation. Increased production value, endorsement from official publishers, and the act of franchising – which I discuss in my final chapter – integrates *Critical Role’s* brand of transformative fantasy narrative into more ‘official’ parts of fantasy genre-culture. Actual play is so influential that it has shifted *D&D* gaming capital to prioritise narrative and storytelling, meaning that as shows like *Critical Role* grow in viewership, so too does *D&D* become more fully legitimised as a narrative medium and a ‘respectable’ contributor to fantasy genre-culture. The presence of an invested audience (sometimes literally, as they pay a subscription) further incentivises this shift towards narrative-heavy and tertiary-author-motivated modes of play, as the transformative fan investment of viewers encourages players to consciously perform narrative-heavy play.

Yet there is a question of how much either text subverts or overthrows the *D&D* primary text, despite this transformative empowerment. While the primary text may be decreasing in prominence, it is never entirely erased. As demonstrated by the characters created for the *Mighty Nein* campaign, tertiary authorship is always transformative, but it is not always *subversive.* For instance, while PC character creation may ask potentially challenging questions, these questions may never be explored in depth during play: as an example, Fjord’s status as a half-orc becomes secondary to his existence as a warlock. As another example of moments in play where subversion is not the final goal, the pursuit of the Star Razor within Campaign 2 relies upon the tertiary authors noticing and then *conforming* to the recognisable structures of fantasy texts. The cast have a transformative relationship with these structures, personalising them to their own stories, but they do not wish to subvert them.

In the next chapter, I will look at a case study in which actual play’s empowerment of secondary and tertiary authorship produces genuinely subversive consequences. Here, it is simply important to note that tertiary authors gain an understanding of fantasy genre-culture through continual, iterative gameplay, and that actual play in turn has given the transformative responses to fantasy made by secondary and tertiary authors far greater visibility within *D&D* subculture. While a multiplicity of playstyles has been a long-acknowledged aspect of the game, a multiplicity of approaches to the primary text and its mediation is not something which has always been openly displayed – nor have these transformative responses always been allowed to accrue meaning. As the primary text starts to hold less sway within *D&D* gameplay, so too can it begin to come under scrutiny. By creating a space where secondary and tertiary authors hold greater prominence, *Critical Role* and other actual play shows assign greater weight to transformative responses to fantasy genre-culture, rather than the affirmative response embodied within the primary text. Actual play opens up new possibilities for *D&D* subculture, where a multiplicity of voices can hold legitimacy not just within the collaborative authorship model, but within fantasy genre-culture as a whole.

Chapter Four: ‘You were not born with venom in your veins’ – *D&D’s* Drow Elves, and Actual Play Reinterpretations of Dark Otherness

This chapter will use the example of drow (or ‘dark elves’) as a case study through which to discuss *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*)’s representation of race, and how secondary (Dungeon Master or DM) and tertiary (player) authors renegotiate this primary text codification of fantasy convention through play. *D&D’s* primary text, which Jessica Hammer claims defines ‘the rules and setting of the game’, condensed the problematic racial representations of wider fantasy texts down into inflexible rubric, incorporating racialised logics into both setting, via flavour text, and the rules, via statistics.[1] The primary text impacts fantasy’s approach to race across genre-culture. *D&D’s* choice to conflate race and species, and to explicitly codify race with a default moral alignment, reinforced existing textual trends, and these practices then bled out into other elements of genre-culture such as digital gaming. *D&D’s* approach to race became commonplace within fantasy, to the point where its underlying implications were taken for granted.

However, these implications are now being examined more closely by readers and players – and by making fantasy’s racial politics explicit, *D&D* provides clear rules for secondary authors and tertiary authors to react against. Actual play, informed by current debates regarding diversification and decolonisation within fantasy and fandom, has produced a wealth of alternative readings of the drow which challenge racial conventions. Actual play creators have helped rewrite racial representation within the *D&D* primary text canon, demonstrating that secondary and tertiary authors now have enough power within subculture to impact *D&D’s* communal notions of fantasy: this has implications not just for the *D&D* product, but fantasy genre-culture as a whole.

Firstly, I will introduce the contemporary context of this chapter: Wizards of the Coast’s (WotC) current reckoning with *D&D’s* uniquely problematic relationship to the conceptualisation of race in fantasy. Race provides an extreme example of how *D&D’s* primary text condenses textual trends within genre-culture into inflexible rubric, and the consequences of such reductionism. I will then analyse the primary text's 'canonical' representation of drow/dark elves, including tie-in novels by R.A. Salvatore, before discussing how DMs (secondary authors) and individual players (tertiary authors) have used their transformative engagement to subvert and revise drow lore, with varying degrees of success. The multiplicity of nuanced interpretations of drow by secondary and tertiary authors resulted in successful public demands for the revision of WotC's own text. This exemplifies the critical approach players can take to fantasy convention through *D&D* gameplay, but also shows the increased agency players' voices now have within genre-culture, as a result of their broadcast in actual play media.

---

[1] Jessica Hammer, ‘Agency and Authority in Role-playing ‘Texts’’, in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.70).

Reinterpretations of drow show how *D&D* enables fantasy readers – and especially fantasy readers of colour – to challenge the conventions of genre-culture. This change within *D&D* reflects wider shifts taking place across all fantasy media and in culture more broadly, and so cannot be read in isolation. However, *D&D* is uniquely suited to exemplify this shift, as the primary text encapsulates fantasy's wider textual practices while also being subject to consumer demands, evidencing changing attitudes in fantasy readership and surrounding participatory cultures.

Diversifying and Decolonising *D&D* in 2020

In June 2020, WotC released an official statement titled 'Dungeons and Dragons and Diversity'. In this article, they apologised for sections of *D&D's* official canon and paratextual lore, what they refer to as 'legacy content that does not reflect who we are today'.[2] In particular, the company notes that:

> Throughout the 50-year history of D&D, some of the peoples in the game—orcs and drow being two of the prime examples—have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated. That's just not right, and it's not something we believe in.[3]

---

[2] Wizards of the Coast, 'Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons', *Dungeons & Dragons*, 17 June 2020, https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd/, para.4.

[3] Ibid.

WotC promise that, going forward, ‘one of the explicit design goals’ of *D&D* would be to ‘depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity’. This means renegotiating depictions of these monstrous fantasy races, as the racist undertones are self-confessedly impossible to ignore.[4]

WotC’s decision to change their primary text canon did not occur in isolation, however. In *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race,* Rukmini Pande notes that ‘multinational media conglomerates are becoming increasingly sensitive to concepts of social justice activism, often using them as buzzwords’. According to Pande, ‘the increasing visibility of diverse audience demographics for these texts’ means that ‘an increasing amount of cultural capital [is] being associated with the projection of being socially progressive’.[5] WotC’s statement is a sincere or politically-motivated response to calls for diversification and decolonisation that have taken place across fandom and fantasy genre-culture. Progressiveness is now a more desirable brand trait, for reasons discussed in this chapter: understandings of *D&D* have been altered by actual play shows, who make their own subversive story choices while encouraging a more diverse *D&D* player demographic. As Pande claims, ‘increasing visibility of diverse audience demographics’ shifts fandom cultural capital. For WotC, players and fans are also their only consumers: *D&D* must change, to capitalise on both their political interests and income.

In their article, WotC reference an ‘ongoing dialogue with the D&D community’.[6] This gestures to player/consumer advocacy, but it also highlights another major change in *D&D* subculture that contributed to their revisionist tone: the rise of actual play content. WotC’s *Critical Role* module, *Explorer’s Guide to Wildemount,* is cited as one example of how revisions to orcs and drow will be implemented.[7] A DM’s secondary text is already capable of transformatively revising the primary text. But as discussed in the previous chapter, secondary and tertiary authors in actual play have agency that alters Hammer’s authorship framework*:* the authority of these voices has extended beyond typical reach, and in this case, can permanently alter the primary text. High-profile secondary and tertiary author narratives, which I document in this chapter, were instrumental in implementing this change.

---

[4] WotC, ‘Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons’, para.3.

[5] Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), p.75.

[6] WotC, ‘Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons’, para.3.

[7] WotC, ‘Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons’, para.6.

Discussions of racial representation in fantasy are currently happening across genre-culture: negotiations of race within *D&D* do not happen in isolation, and contribute to a larger revisionist approach in transmedial fantasy. Works such as Helen Young's *Race in Popular Fantasy: Habits of Whiteness*, Maria Sachiko Cecire's *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century,* and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* have examined these wider trends in depth, while scholars like Pande have documented the structural inequalities and racial demographics of the fandoms circulating such texts. Young's central thesis that 'fantasy formed habits of Whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture, and is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, struggling to break them' is key to note here.[8] *D&D*'s own reckoning with racist convention functions as one facet, and a synecdoche, of a larger negotiation.

The attempt to dismantle problematic racial representation within *D&D* is important to the wider discussion within fantasy genre-culture for two key reasons. Firstly, *D&D* is the site where textual representations of monstrous and non-white Others, by authors such as Tolkien, were condensed down into static archetypes through the inflexibility of game rubric and statistics. For instance, while Charles W. Mills argues that 'we know the orcs [of Tolkien's mythology] are evil *because* they are black, ugly, slant-eyed, misshapen, simian, savage, etc.', *D&D* enshrined this as universal convention, by stating explicitly that orcs can only exist as 'Chaotic Evil', within the 5th Edition *Monster Manual*.[9] *D&D's* conflation of race with moral alignment was then replicated in other digital and analogue fantasy games, until 'race' itself became a trope or stereotypical archetype recognisable within gaming and fantasy genre-culture. *D&D* was also the text which solidified the interchangeability of 'race' and 'species' within fantasy's lexicon.[10] According to Antero Garcia, while 'the racial tensions between groups like elves and dwarves were established as canonical based on transmedia franchises such as *Lord of the Rings*', these prevailing themes of textual and multimedia fantasy are condensed and reinforced in *D&D*, down to the point where 'the essence of a character' – their abilities, their alignment, and their behaviour – was 'often distilled by their race'.[11] The game sits at a nexus of fantasy genre-culture's depictions of non-white and non-human Others as inherently different.

---

[8] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.10.

[9] Charles W. Mills, 'The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy,* Vol.60 No.S1, (Sept. 2022), pp.105-135 (p.129).

[10] Aaron Trammell, 'Representation and Discrimination in Roleplaying Games', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.440-447 (p.444).

However, the second reason *D&D* is an important text to study as part of this wider scrutiny of fantasy is because the initial movement away from the racist aspects of *D&D's* 'legacy content' happened in fannish spaces, driven by players and DMs. As this chapter will discuss, players' transformative responses to the representation of race as a static, unchangeable narrative convention problematise fantasy 'habits' as distilled by *D&D*'s rulebooks. Revisionist practices have always been endorsed at individual tables, but the promotion of these interpretations through livestream broadcasting (some taking place on WotC's *Twitch* channel) facilitated changes to WotC's own canon. This proves that the 'generic' fantasy of *D&D's* primary text was in fact only one definition of fantasy: many definitions exist within this game space, and counternarratives now have enough public visibility to overthrow even the game's own narrative surrounding race.

While scholarly attention has been given to orcs in *D&D*, the textual depiction of drow has gone mostly unremarked upon in academic discourses. This is despite it inciting discussion amongst fans – for instance, tabletop and live action roleplay communities have had to negotiate whether the traditional means of cosplaying as drow constitute blackface.[12] The archetype of drow or dark elves is more specific to gaming culture – similarly inspired by Tolkien, but not replicated across other fantasy texts as orcs have been. Despite their black skin colour, representations of this imagined culture do not map onto harmful racist stereotypes of black people as easily as orcish tribalism and violent characterisation – they instead reflect an Orientalist approach to the East. Yet, as an 'evil' race, who are marked as the 'destined rulers of darkness' by their skin-colour and worship of a heretical goddess, the problems of their representation and how it relates to an Orientalist worldview must be addressed when discussing the overall problem of race in both *D&D* and fantasy in general.[13]

Unlike orcs, drow also exemplify an overlap of racial and gendered Otherness: their characterisation entails a demonisation of feminine agency and desire. Examining drow exposes not only the racial inequalities compounded within *D&D's* primary text, but also the continued legacy of gendered representation within fantasy and gaming subcultures. This is particularly important when analysing the revisions performed by secondary and tertiary authors: players dismantle not only racial Othering within the figure of the drow, but the white male gaze which has traditionally dominated fantasy genre-culture, which *D&D's* authors coded into the logics of their primary text.

---

[11] Antero Garcia, '"I piss a lot of people off when I play dwarves like dwarves": Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games', *Teachers College Record*, Vol.123 No.13, (2021), pp.1-26 (p.19, p.11).

[12] See Jill Robi, 'Larping or Cosplaying Drow: Is It Blackface?', *The Geek Initiative,* 20 November 2015, https://geekinitiative.com/larping-or-cosplaying-drow-is-it-blackface/.

[13] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Monster Manual* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.126.

Race, Monstrosity, and *D&D*

Connections between race and monstrosity are one area where *D&D's* intensification of literary convention into static rubric is particularly visible. Fantasy's representation of racialised Others and its 'fear of overwhelming […] hordes' is a transmedial, genre-wide issue.[14] Young notes that the 'whiteness so central' to the worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard then 'became habit – convention – through repetition', 'first through imitation and then adaptation' in the Sword & Sorcery subgenre, which *D&D* heavily drew upon for its rules and worldbuilding.[15] While Young argues that literary fantasy repeated and cemented racist conventions as defaults, the reduction of these more varied and manifold textual representations into singular racial archetypes – and thus stereotypes – was primarily a result of *D&D's* own structural processes.

D&D makes a notable contribution to 'habits of whiteness' within fantasy, by expressing race through statistics. Aaron Trammell notes that 'the D&D rules model race as a fixed biological species with fundamental bodily and mental differences – some races are inherently stronger, smarter, more charming, etc. than others'.[16] When *D&D 5th Edition* was released in 2014, the 'choice of race' still 'establishes fundamental qualities that exist throughout your character's adventuring career'. According to the *Player's Handbook*, 'race not only affects your ability scores and traits but also provides the cues for building your character's story'. Race as written in the primary text is fundamental to the kind of character a person wishes to play, as it will influence both game mechanics and storytelling features 'including personality, physical appearance, features of society, and racial alignment tendencies' – that is, a player character (PC)'s morality.[17] While the primary text makes room for exceptions– ‘adventurers can deviate widely from the norm for their race’ – it operates on the assumption that a ‘norm’ exists and expresses this statistically.[18]

---

[14] Young, p.101.

[15] Young, p.41.

[16] Aaron Trammell, 'Representation and Discrimination in Roleplaying Games', p.444.

[17] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.17.

Racism and racial hostility is also encoded into the imaginary world the primary text assumes as its default. When describing tieflings, the *Player’s Handbook* describes ‘mutual mistrust’: ‘people tend to be suspicious of tieflings, assuming that their infernal heritage has left its mark on their personality and morality, not just their appearance’. Racial profiling is canonical practice: ‘the town watch might follow a tiefling around for a while, and demagogues blame tieflings for strange happenings’. Racism is even used to justify tiefling statistics: the primary text claims that ‘a tiefling’s bloodline doesn’t affect his or her personality to any great degree’, yet the mechanical fact is that tieflings have a statistical bonus to Charisma. It’s just argued that this reflects a world where ‘a tiefling often develops the ability to overcome prejudice through charm or intimidation’.[19]

This negotiation between traits that are socially produced but then still become biologically essentialised reflects the struggles intrinsic to encoding race as a game mechanic – even positive traits are reduced to biological predisposition, and incentivise players to conform to racial stereotyping, reflecting and replicating a totalising perspective on race. There are also consequences for racial prejudice being sanctioned and encouraged as playable by the primary text. In his observations of *D&D* games at individual tables, Garcia noted that players ‘took up the racial cues of the *D&D* world for how they explained their actions’ – from justifying personality traits to enacting bigotry.[20] Garcia argues that these choices were informed by wider themes in fantasy genre-culture, and that players’ behaviours were drawn from the primary text but also ‘from tropes, from hegemonic cultural values, and from shared geek knowledge in ways that reinforce what is understood as an epistemological truth for the players of games’.[21] This shows that the primary text reinforces assumptions already present within genre-culture, but also highlights the lens through which many of these mainstream sources were filtered: Garcia states explicitly that the players he observed in his study who uncritically replicated the racial prejudices of the primary text were all white and male.[22]

---

[18] *D&D Player’s Handbook*, p.17.
[19] *D&D Player’s Handbook,* p.43.
[20] Garcia, p.12.
[21] Garcia, p.4.
[22] Garcia, p.7.

While players may reinforce or renegotiate the boundaries of race, as we will soon discuss, their behaviour does not undo the choices of the primary text. The assignation of biological and personality traits to fantasy races creates definitive interpretations of fantasy archetypes, but also replicates eugenicist beliefs regarding inherited traits and racial determinism. While taking place within an imaginative space, this approach to race-as-species generates a 'tendency towards stereotyping and essentialism' that has clear corollaries with real-world attitudes and rhetoric that have been applied to racialised science.[23] For instance, while the assumption that 'a halfling could be a good choice for a sneaky rogue' seems mostly harmless (as halflings are predominantly coded as white, like their hobbit predecessors), the branding of an entire race as having innate criminal tendencies is not without historical significance.[24]

These aspects of *D&D's* racial representation alone should be scrutinised in fantasy's contemporary climate, but these racialised logics are then compounded by the equation the game system makes between race, morality, and monstrosity. For instance, in the 2014 *Player's Handbook,* only half-orcs are playable, while full-blooded orcs are reserved for the *Monster Manual,* positioned as antagonists with default evil alignment.[25] Applying morality to a biological definition of race presents entire peoples as irredeemable, thus sanctioning combat as the main mode of interacting with them within the *D&D* system. 'Monstrosity' deprives certain races of normative personhood – even when such races become available to players, it is via texts that reinforce their status as morally and physically deviant: *Volo's Guide to Monsters* (2016)*, Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (2018), *Mordenkainen's Monsters of the Multiverse* (2022). The textual similarities between *D&D* paratexts and Middle English bestiaries were first noted by Jon Peterson in *Playing at the World*, but Peterson does not comment on the implications of this overlap with historic sources that indiscriminately compiled imagined monsters and racial Others into one 'exotic' catalogue.[26]

Many of the 'monstrous' races of *D&D*, as WotC have admitted, display stereotypical traits traditionally placed by the West onto racial Others. In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, Young notes that *D&D* orcs are encoded with tribalism, primitivism, and violence: 'a constant and defining feature of orc society in the core rulebooks is that it is uncivilised and static, never progressing technologically or socially'.[27] The connections made between evil, violent aggression, and 'uncivilised' culture correlate to representations of black people, as well as indigenous and colonised civilisations. In the Arcanist Press zine *Ancestry and Culture*, a rewriting of racial mechanics discussed later in this chapter, the author notes: 'it's hard to ignore the fact that, when he first created miniatures for the fantasy races, Gary Gygax chose Turk minis to depict orcs and repainted Native American figures for trolls and ogres'.[28] These monstrous stereotypes had their basis in real world ethnicities.

---

[23] Trammell, 'Representation and Discrimination in RPGs', p.444.

[24] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.17.

[25] *D&D Monster Manual,* p.246.

[26] Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), pp.140-157.

N.K. Jemisin discussed the real-world ramifications of racialised thinking in her 2013 blog post 'The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing', stating that *D&D's* primary text creates:

> Creatures that look like people, but aren't really. Kinda-sorta-people [*sic*], who aren't worthy of even the most basic moral considerations, like the right to exist […] In games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, orcs are a "fun" way to bring faceless savage dark hordes into a fantasy setting and then gleefully go genocidal on them.[29]

Jemisin identifies a formal aspect of the *D&D* system that motivates this overlapping of race, moral alignment, and monstrosity: a need to continually facilitate combat. A *D&D* adventuring party is not simply composed of fictional characters, but systematised roles – fighters, spellcasters, rogues, etc. – many features of which are only utilised effectively in violent encounters. It is thus a requirement to stage combat: murder must be normalised or even encouraged, and therefore goes ethically unquestioned on the level of story. Unfortunately, TSR and WotC choose to overcome this design problem by branding entire groups of people as evil, allowing players to protagonise themselves by default regardless of their actions. While DMs might individually decide to avoid enemies that are racialised, the overlap in the primary text between 'evil' and 'non-white' is one that cannot be ignored, as some quests can resemble racially-motivated crusades.[30]

When examining how this relates back to fantasy literature and genre-culture, I believe that *D&D* gameplay literalises the concept of the Dark Other, as defined by Ebony

---

[27] Young, p.97.

[28] Eugene Marshall, *Ancestry and Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e* (St. Louis, MO: Arcanist Press, 2020), p.5.

[29] N.K. Jemisin, 'From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing', *nkjemisin.com*, 13 February 2013, https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/, paras.7-10.

[30] See modules such as *Tomb of Annihilation* (2017), *Orcs of Stonefang Pass* (2010), *Out of the Abyss* (2015).

Elizabeth Thomas. Thomas argues that ‘the Dark Other is the engine that drives the fantastic’, and ‘the Dark Other is still the obstacle to be overcome’.[31] *D&D’s* nature as a game system structurally based in combat, makes the equation between ‘Dark Other’ and ‘obstacle’ literal. ‘Dark Others’ become cannon-fodder – an unending supply of confrontational antagonists which can facilitate combative gameplay. WotC’s choice to overlap these Dark Others with racial stereotypes proves that, as Thomas notes: ‘the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of colour receive as they read these texts is that we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monsters.’[32]

D&D’s form intensifies the functionality of the ‘Dark Other’. Both racialised logics and the role of the primary author(s) in the *D&D* manuals cannot be ignored, particularly when the primary authors in question have been predominantly white, male, and US-based. *D&D’s* tapestry of fantasy and its appropriation of other cultures was filtered through a Western Imperial or Orientalist gaze of ‘appreciation and authority’ that assumes white and male as universal defaults.[33] I have chosen to look at drow here because their construction as Dark Other exemplifies not only the whiteness encoded into the *D&D* primary text, but also its gendered bias.

The Primary Text: Drow as Dark Other

Many of the scholars I referred to already in this chapter have discussed *D&D’s* racial representation in relation to orcs, as orcs’ prevalence in wider fantasy genre-culture provides a wealth of textual evidence to draw upon. However, *D&D’s* other longest-lived Dark Other, the drow, have gone mostly unaddressed by academic criticism. Like orcs, the drow are a race who have been branded – with a few notable exceptions – as uniformly evil. Their civilisation is described as ‘wrong’, ‘degraded’, ‘corrupted by evil magic or environmental degradation’, and ‘sexually perverse’ – all language that Jemisin applied to orcs in her own analysis. Drow, like orcs, can also ‘be slaughtered without conscience or apology’.[34] And here, unlike with orcs, the evil, Dark Other is explicitly black-skinned, literalising connections between race and moral alignment, even if their characterisation does not conform to antiblack stereotypes.

---

[31] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p.23-5.

[32] Thomas, p.23.

[33] Aaron Trammell, ‘How *Dungeons & Dragons* Appropriated the Orient’, *Analog Game Studies*, Vol.3 No.1, (Jan 2016), https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/how-dungeons-dragons-appropriated-the-orient/, para.7.

[34] Jemisin, para.6.

First appearing in 1977 in 'Hall of the Fire Giant King', drow are a dark-skinned elven people, available in *D&D 5e* as a playable race, and as evil-aligned enemies in the *Monster Manual* to be fought and killed. 'Descended from an earlier subrace of dark-skinned elves', the drow are characterised as dark elves whose 'exile into the Underdark [a harsh underground environment] has made them vicious and dangerous'.[35] The *Player's Handbook* describes them as black-skinned, yet their features do not correspond easily to a real world ethnic group: 'the drow have black skin that resembles polished obsidian and stark white or pale yellow hair. They commonly have very pale eyes (so pale as to be mistaken for white) in shades of lilac, silver, pink, red, and blue'.[36] Although non-white, aspects of their physical description – pale hair and eyes – infer an Anglicised or white-presenting appearance typical of other historical representations of elves, resulting in an ambivalence that is not present in the primary-text representation of orcs, who are uniformly assigned the assumed traits of non-white ethnic groups, bar their skin colour.

Ambivalence is also reflected in the fact that drow are immediately available to players in the base version of *5th Edition* (comprising the *Player's Handbook, Monster Manual,* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*) as both playable heroes and as enemies – whereas orcs only become playable when monster-specific modules are purchased. Drow occupy a liminal space in both gameplay and lore between Self and Other, which continues into the description of drow society. Although 'banished from the surface world for following the goddess Lolth down the path to evil and corruption' and thus a racial Other, it is noted that the drow have 'built their own civilisation', living in an advanced, isolationist society whose magic, wealth, and technology rival those of the 'good' races on the surface world.[37] This contrasts with the description of orcishness as primitive and tribal. To allay any anxiety generated through an entirely autonomous and self-sufficient Other, the text stresses that drow society is failing and that 'raiding the surface for captives and treasure isn't just a cultural and military tradition, but also an economic necessity'.[38]

---

[35] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.23-4.

[36] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.24.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Wizards of the Coast, *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2018), p.52.

Although ‘their society is depraved’, drow civilisation is also stratified according to strict social hierarchies that prioritise nobility, and ‘grow up believing that surface-dwelling races are inferior, worthless except as slaves’.[39] Therefore, rather than a brute racial Other operating in clear opposition to a ‘civilised’ white Self, we instead have a distorted dark mirror, with the realm of the Dark Other operating much more similarly to the white, feudal Eurocentric structures that Young notes characterise many fantasy texts. Otherness is generated by the fact that the drow take these systems and embody them to excess – through their isolationism and strict caste system, they begin to occupy the same stereotypes as the Orientalised East.

Nathaniel Poor has noted that ambivalence is often generated by elves represented in digital and analog games, as elves ‘are usually presented as almost human’, ‘near-humans’, or ‘human-like’.[40] However, Poor notes that regardless of any racial prejudice games attempt to explore, most elves remain white-presenting. Drow are further problematised because ‘Gygax designed [them] ‘‘to be the antithesis of the usual elves’’’.[41] Therefore, ambivalence is not necessarily intended, and instead generates anxiety that must be rendered into certain difference through other aspects of the primary text.

Alongside skin colour, several things mark drow as ‘depraved’ and ‘wicked’. The first is female agency and sexual desire. Dedicated to an evil female goddess, Lolth, drow societies are matriarchal and misandrist: ‘females are the top figures in drow society’ with men classified as ‘second-class citizens’ and decorative sexual objects, and High Priestesses of Lolth at the apex of the social hierarchy.[42] In texts describing the world of the Underdark and the major drow city of Menzoberranzan, female drow ascend to magical power through hedonistic rituals and intercourse with demons, committing violent sexual acts regardless of enjoyment because ‘there is a gain’ in such ‘evil union’.[43] Sexual promiscuity, female agency, and female power is used as a marker of depravity but also fascination, presumably for the imagined player base of predominantly white men.

Such perspectives further align the representation of drow with Orientalist readings of the East. Edward Said notes that exoticised sexual depravity is a major aspect of Orientalism, where the Other seems ‘to have offended sexual propriety’ as ‘everything about the Orient […] exuded dangerous sex’.[44] Players – presumed to be straight men – enjoy the double-edged ‘sexual promise (and threat)’ of ‘untiring sensuality’ and ‘unlimited [sexual] desire’.[45] Such desire becomes predatory and ‘evil’, because it solely belongs to women. The matriarchal systems and magic of female drow typically entail the emasculation of male drow, and the loss of autonomy for the white Self, either through brutal bodily transformation (such as the transformation into a hybrid drider) or acts of enslavement.

---

[39] *D&D Player’s Handbook,* p.24.

[40] Nathaniel Poor, ‘Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance’, *Games and Culture*, Vol.7 No.5, (2012), pp.375-396 (pp.376-7).

[41] Poor, p.380.

[42] *Mordenkainen’s Tome of Foes,* p.51.

[43] R.A. Salvatore, *The Legend of Drizzt: Homeland* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2004), p.197.

The other justification of the drow’s ‘innate evil’ within the *D&D* primary text is their practice of slavery, validated through their narrative of racial superiority (see Figure 4). According to *Mordenkainen’s Tome of Foes,* drow ‘invaders would sweep through […] in the dark of night, shackle the best potential slaves into long trains of chattel, kill[ing] everyone who resisted’.[46] This aspect of drow characterisation is difficult to unpick. The primary text decries slavery as a clear act of evil, the main unforgiveable crime which can justify the slaughter of drow within the imaginary space and rebrand it as self-defence. However, the divide between Self and Other is further destabilised. In the real world, turning the enslaving invaders who remove people from their homes into dark-skinned monsters can only be so effective. *D&D* shares fantasy genre-culture’s historical perspective, determined principally by ‘British or American White men who drew heavily on European myths, literature, and history for inspiration’. [47] When considering the ‘Self’ this text is attempting to secure, attributing these crimes to a black Other is arguably done to displace anxiety around the West’s own history of Imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. Slavery is uniformly understood as an evil practice, but it is not acknowledged as a white crime. A discourse of racial supremacy exists and is denounced, but it is not White Supremacy. White colonialism and Empire, which undeniably informs the logics of exploration and conquest that underpin many *D&D* campaigns, are instead displaced onto a strict feudal society deep underground – one that closely resembles the Self but remains easy and uncomplicated to oppose and defeat.

The *D&D* primary text simplifies this destabilised boundary between Self and Other through moral alignment: like orcs, drow are considered ‘evil’, and thus automatically Othered by the game text. If ‘drow are more often evil than not’, this justifies the fact that they are 'universally reviled', sanctioning any racism a party may perpetuate within a world that is written in accordance with the primary text.[48] The drow's moral evil is, as with the tiefling example, a difficult mixture of socially produced and biologically essentialised. The primary text attributes it to their evil goddess Lolth, as 'reverence for Lolth touches every aspect of drow life' and 'all dark elves constantly watch [and commit actions] for signs of her favour'.[49] It is Lolth who encourages a strict social structure, a sense of innate superiority, and the practice of slavery, as drow 'vie for money, for prestige, and more than anything else, for power over others – the surest sign of Lolth's approval'.[50]

---

[44] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.189.
[45] Said, p.210.
[46] *Mordenkainen’s Tome of Foes*, p.52.
[47] Young, p.12.

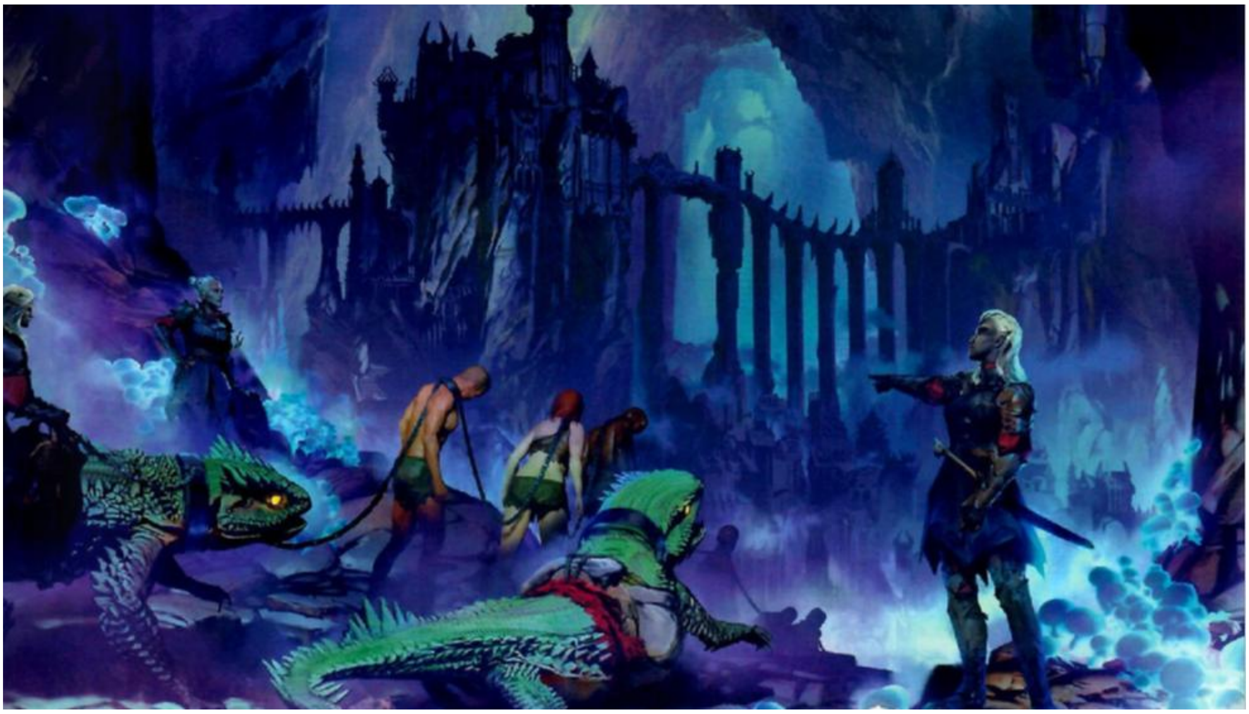


Figure 4: an illustration of drow matriarchs guiding slaves through the Underdark. *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2018), p.52.

Alignment can be partially attributed to the social practices of an evil religion and not the biology of a dark-skinned people, yet *D&D's* essentialising of both social and racial traits further entrenches its racist logic. This is seen in the primary text description, 'throughout that age of residing in the darkness, absorbing the unhealthy emanations of the Underdark

---

[48] *D&D Player's Handbook*, p.23-4.

[49] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, p.50.

[50] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, p.51.

[…] Lolth's worshipers gradually transformed into the drow: the cruel, predatory, and wicked offshoot of the elf race'.[51] While the social practice of a religious belief results in a 'choice' by the drow to become evil, this choice then changes their biology, creating the evil dark-skinned Other who is 'tainted' by their evil environment and innately changed by it. This resembles the eugenicist belief in degeneration, a dreaded 'process of biological decay' in which racial Otherness became linked to a 'whole range of social pathologies that threatened the biological substance of the European race(s)'.[52]

Lolth intensifies the Orientalist imagery discussed above, as a monstrous, sexually provocative woman, and infidel goddess. Her religious rituals are similarly Orientalist: worship is imagined primarily as sacrifice upon 'blood stained alters', with 'the screams of victims echo[ing] through Lolth's lightless temples'.[53] Lolth acts as a 'dark reflection' of the good Elven pantheon, whom she became estranged from through an act of betrayal that mimics Lilith's betrayal of Adam: in her refusal to be subservient to the god Corellon, she became a demon of the Abyss and mother to her own realm of monsters.[54] Mills notes that in *The Lord of the Rings*, 'darkness of the orcs is repeatedly stressed so as to keep emphasizing for the reader their position in the bichromatic aesthetic/moral/metaphysical order, in which white good […] white religion […] stand opposed to black evil […] black diabolism'.[55] Lolth and her dark elf worshippers serve the same purpose here, and Lolth is confirmed by the primary text as evil. The primary text presents Lolth's evil as absolute: she is 'cruel', presides over the domains of trickery and war, and demands the 'sacrifices of treasure and blood' that are made to her.[56] However, the moment we question whether this decision is arbitrary – or consider who wrote this imaginary world and inscribed such values as universal and absolute – distinctions between drow and other white or morally 'good' races begin to break down.

Rather than through their skin colour, the primary text representation of drow encodes Otherness predominantly through the practices of Orientalism, thus aligning drow and their isolationist, exotic, sexual depraved society with historical portrayals of the East, ultimately securing the white Self. *D&D* primary-text prescriptivism worsens this: traits may be socially produced, but their results are essentialised and biologically inscribed. Lolth is evil, because the primary text has confirmed her as such through her printed alignment and her assigned domains. Distrusting or fearing her worshippers is thus automatically sanctioned. Presenting these narratives as universally true lays canonical ground for in-game racism, for instance in the following:

---

[51] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, p.50.

[52] Neil MacMaster, *Racism in Europe 1870-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.32.

[53] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, p.52-3.

[54] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes,* pp.36-9.

[55] Mills, ''The Wretched of Middle-Earth', p.120.

[56] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes,* p.53.

> The surface elves might be content to overlook their hatred for their kin and leave the drow alone, as long as they never had to lay eyes on the drow or view the results of their efforts. But drow society is predicated on a foundation of terror and slavery, and the most desirable slaves live on the world's surface: humans, dwarves, and best of all, other elves.[57]

The *D&D* primary text establishes certain discursive claims surrounding evil as default and unquestioned, without acknowledging the white, male, and Western perspective through which they were written. These logics can then be used to justify acts of violence against non-white peoples within the imaginary world, without interrogation of motive or bias. Crucially, any capacity for variation is left in the hands of individual players and DMs: the norm they are reacting against remains the presumed norm.

Despite this prescriptivism – or maybe because of it – there is an extensive history within *D&D* of sympathetic interpretations of drow, which I will explore in the next part of this chapter. While these interpretations were traditionally circulated at a single table, *D&D* actual play has changed this significantly.

The Case of Drizzt Do'Urden

Hammer defines a primary text within an RPG as that which 'develops a world and a set of rules […] often referred to as 'system' and 'setting''.[58] While this refers most obviously to game manuals, WotC also has a great number of other texts contributing to the establishment of setting, including tie-in novels which contain canonical worldbuilding that may be referenced by the game text. For instance, in the 5th Edition *Player's Handbook*, it is stated:

---

[57] *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes,* pp.51-52.

[58] Jessica Hammer, 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.71).

'were it not for one renowned exception, the race of drow would be universally reviled'.[59] This 'renowned exception' refers to Drizzt Do'Urden, the drow protagonist of a series of *Dungeons & Dragons Forgotten Realms* novels: *The Legend of Drizzt* by R.A. Salvatore, consisting of 37 books as of August 2021. Salvatore's Drizzt is a rare primary text portrayal of a 'good' dark elf who is included in the primary text of the game manuals, and endorsed as part of the canon Forgotten Realms, from the *Hall of Heroes* module (published in 1989) onwards.[60] This example should first be examined, as Drizzt shows how much flexibility the primary text allows for, in discussions of race. This canonically sanctioned exception provides further context for the transformative engagement and subversive work of secondary and tertiary authors in the next section.

In the chronological first instalment of *The Legend of Drizzt*, the *Dark Elf* trilogy, Drizzt is faced with a stark choice: 'Remain in the underground cult of Lolth in which he was raised—and knows in his heart is evil—or rebel and be hunted by goddess and family alike'.[61] Drizzt chooses to abandon his people, knowing instinctively 'in his heart' that the drow are evil. This is arguably the heroic quality that marks him as exceptional – it is certainly what marks him as exceptional from other dark elves. Although this book series has over thirty novels and its publication has spanned several decades, I have chosen this first trilogy as it deals extensively with Drizzt's own negotiation of drow culture and monstrosity, and his first encounters with racism when he attempts assimilation with the 'good' races. The reader follows Drizzt as he abandons the Underdark city Menzoberranzan, and travels into the surface world for the first time.

While focalising on a sympathetic monstrous Other may destabilise the boundaries *D&D* establishes surrounding race, Drizzt's goodness does not serve to imply a variation of morality amongst the dark elves, who have been uniformly dismissed as evil. Instead, it reinforces a sense that evil pervades this society absolutely, thus marking Drizzt – or at least his bloodline – as anomalous. In *The Legend of Drizzt: Homeland*, young Drizzt's decision to rebel against the moral code of his people is considered unusual. His father, Zaknafein, upon the realisation that his child is not yet indulging in violence or cruelty, states: '"Do all drow children possess such innocence, such simple, untainted smiles that cannot survive the ugliness of our world?" […] "Or are you unique, Drizzt Do'Urden?"'[62] Zaknafein briefly wonders if drow begin good but are simply socialised to commit murder and violence, yet later 'come[s] to realise that Drizzt's temperament was indeed different from that of the average drow; Drizzt possessed a spirit of innocence and lacked any maliciousness'.[63] Drizzt is not symptomatic of a nuanced drow morality, but instead a rare exception to the existing rules. Although societal indoctrination of drow children is documented extensively in *Homeland,* Salvatore figures Drizzt's goodness as something essential to Drizzt, either a manifestation of his 'spirit' or an instinctive and visceral bodily reaction to violence that only he seems to experience. In a pattern seen across *D&D* PCs, Drizzt is presented as an unusual outlier deviating from an established norm, securing the monstrous image of an 'average drow' through his own difference.

---

[59] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.24.

[60] Scott Bowles (ed.), *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Ed.: Hall of Heroes* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989).

[61] Wizards of the Coast, 'The Legend of Drizzt', *Dungeons & Dragons,* https://dnd.wizards.com/heroes/drizzt-dourden.

Even comparisons with other drow characters who have a sense of right and wrong and know Menzoberranzan perverts it reinforce Drizzt's exceptional goodness. His father Zaknafein, who senses that the drow are 'wrong', feels powerless to stop their behaviour. Instead, Zaknafein uses the sanctioned violence of his society as a coping mechanism: '"Does it bring you pleasure?" […] "Satisfaction!" Zak corrected. "I kill. Yes, I kill." "You teach others to kill!" "To kill drow!" Zak roared.'[64] Zaknafein's murderous tendencies express evil drow morality. He has innate instincts towards violence, and his moral struggle becomes finding suitable outlets for it: '"I kill, kill drow, to serve Matron Malice – to placate the rage, the frustration, that I know in my soul"'.[65] Salvatore gestures towards innate essence: good characters feel themselves entrapped by an essential quality, 'my soul', which they must wrestle with. Zaknafein feels disgusted by himself as a monstrous Other, but cannot see a way to act differently: '"There is no other way […] such is our world. Such is our life."[66] Drow who wish to do the 'right' thing often perform acts of violent self-hatred against their own people, implying an awareness that they are the monsters who must be harmed, according to the logics of the game system.

By comparison, Drizzt initially wishes to operate outside this economy of violence: "I will not kill drow," Drizzt declared flatly. […] "You will," he assured his son. "In

---

[62] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.83.
[63] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.99.
[64] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.304.
[65] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.305.
[66] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.307.

Menzoberranzan, you will kill or be killed.'"[67] Yet he also experiences Zaknafein's feelings of self-hatred, punishing and then estranging himself from what he perceives to be the monstrous elements of his own body. In *Sojourn,* the third book in the series, Drizzt leaves the Underdark for the 'surface world', suffering more for his monstrous biology than ever before. Here, direct sunlight causes him pain, reflecting the 'sunlight sensitivity' mechanic for drow present in the primary text rules:

> I know now that my time in the sun – my daily penance – was more than mere desire to adapt to the ways of the surface world. The sun became the symbol of the difference between the Underdark and my new home. The society that I had run away from, a world of secret dealings and treacherous conspiracies, could not exist in the open spaces under the light of day.[68]

The drow's status as Dark Other is inscribed on their bodies. They only exist comfortably in darkness itself, while sunlight causes physical injury, Othering them from the surface world. The sun is the 'symbol of difference': to wilfully deny biology or try to assimilate oneself causes extreme pain. As 'daily penance' demonstrates, it also becomes Drizzt's means of self-abasement. He notes that 'the sun, for all the anguish it bought me physically, came to represent my denial of that other, darker world', enacting an estrangement from the monstrous parts of his biology that he ultimately cannot escape.[69] Although Drizzt chooses to be good, and rejects his 'evil' home, the relationship between race and monstrosity cannot be denied entirely: he must ultimately still suffer for being alien and for being drow. Although he refuses to commit violent crimes against drow, as Zaknafein did, there is a self-violence present in his attempts to assimilate, alienating himself from his own monstrous body.

Sojourn's narrative causes destabilisation, however, as the racial Other's perspective briefly confuses the Forgotten Realms' innate logic. Upon entering the surface world, Drizzt encounters a group of gnolls – another monstrous race of hyena-like people – and murders them after they attack a group of human children. In the aftermath, Drizzt experiences a crisis of conscience:

---

[67] Salvatore, *Homeland,* p.307.

[68] R.A. Salvatore, *The Legend of Drizzt: Sojourn* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2004), p.6.

[69] Ibid.

> "What have I done?" Drizzt wondered aloud. Truly, he did not know. The gnolls had spoken of slaughtering children […] but what did Drizzt know of the conflict between the gnolls and humans of the village? Might the humans, even the human children, be monsters?[70]

Salvatore expects readers' working knowledge of *D&D* to inform this scene, knowing that, like drow, gnolls default to evil alignment and can thus be murdered without guilt in the game. As with the protagonising present in most *D&D* campaigns, Drizzt's violence can be automatically excused by the privileged omniscient perspective of the reader, who knows the ruleset. However, the dramatic irony that Drizzt's guilt generates destabilises the logics that the reader takes for granted. Drizzt has no way of knowing the moral laws that constrain the imaginary world in which he resides, and thus his act of violence, as well as his automatic and instinctive dislike of another monstrous race, have no certainty behind them. He must instead examine them for what they are: a bias and a prejudice. Drizzt exists outside the totalising structure of the game system as its rules aren't yet legible to him: the anxieties that moral absolutes allay in players exist, briefly, in him. In this moment, there is insight into the perspective of those who have been Othered by such universalised assumptions. What results is Drizzt judging violence as a crime in and of itself, regardless of who it is enacted against.

This brief destabilising guilt that Drizzt feels creates a period of relative morality in *Sojourn*, in which he begins to feel as if the racism he experiences for being drow is unjust: 'Drizzt would find no acceptance here, not now and probably not ever. Was he forever to be misjudged? […] Or was he, perhaps, misjudging those around him, giving the humans and this elf more credit for fairness than they deserved?'[71] While Zaknafein felt like he deserved punishment simply for being drow, Drizzt becomes frustrated that race erases his individuality, feeling the weight of stereotype for what it is: restrictive and inaccurate. In this moment of ambivalence, the internal logics that dictate racism against drow cannot find purchase. Upon meeting a surface elf, Drizzt is told: '"I care nothing for what you are called […] you are drow. That is all I need to know!"'[72] While Salvatore no doubt expects the reader to sympathise with both perspectives – Drizzt as our exceptional hero, but the surface elf that knows drow are evil – in this moment the elf's weak justification seems arbitrary, and narrow-minded.

---

[70] Salvatore, *Sojourn*, p.19.
[71] Salvatore, *Sojourn*, p.117.
[72] Salvatore, *Sojourn*, p.116.

However, this ambivalence exists in *Sojourn* for only a hundred pages. Stewing in his guilt and exhausted by the racism he faces, Drizzt later encounters a wise mentor, Montolio 'Mooshie' Debrouchee, who at first seems to embody a sympathetic perspective on race, given his own blindness. However, despite the blindness that would imply a racially apathetic perspective –perhaps deliberately utilised in this instance to enforce the worldview as 'correct' – Mooshie instead inducts Drizzt into the racial logics that govern the Forgotten Realms:

> [Mooshie] had dedicated his life to the unending struggle between the good races – humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes and halflings being the most prominent members – and the evil goblinoids and giantkind, who lived only to destroy as a bane to the innocent. […]
> So much fell into perspective for Drizzt then. Comfort flooded through the drow, for Drizzt's instincts had proven correct and he could now, for a while and to some measure at least, be free from the guilt.[73]

Mooshie secures the distinction between good and bad, Self and Other, sanctioning Drizzt's act of murder not because of its basis in the defence of children, but because it was perpetuated against a 'monstrous' race. He even admits to enjoying killing orcs, his 'particular unfavourites', perpetuating the racism that underpins ethical concerns within *D&D.*[74] Drizzt's guilt – another act of self-hatred that alienates his monstrous Self – is allayed through the assimilation into the logics of Faerûn. His own sense of morality – the individual 'instincts' that have marked him as an exceptional drow – are thus assimilated into *D&D's* Selfhood. Drizzt is proven good because his innate sense of good and evil aligns with the 'unending struggle between good and evil races'. He does not destabilise the racialised distinctions of *D&D,* but further secures them. His perspective only feels 'correct' once it gains in-world approval, and although he is a Dark Other, he will abide by the laws of fantasy which require the slaughter of other Dark Others.

---

[73] Salvatore, *Sojourn*, p.192.

[74] Ibid.

In the initial *Dark Elf* trilogy, Drizzt's aspiration to goodness becomes defined by his desire to assimilate himself within the dominant social narrative; it is thus inflected with the perspective of the white Self. While he tires of racism he faces regardless of his own actions, Drizzt wishes that:

> If only another – particularly a surface elf – would learn of his trials and agree with his decisions, agree that he had acted properly through the course of his life in the face of such horrors […] if only he could find acceptance among those who so hated – as he himself hated – the ways of his dark people, then Drizzt Do'Urden would be at peace.[75]

Rather than seeking a rehabilitation of the Dark Other, or overriding the system that demonises them, Drizzt simply seeks safety and acceptance amongst those who he knows to be good: those on the surface, who are all predominantly white. Rather than dismantling the racial logics that underpin the Forgotten Realms, Drizzt's existence initially reinforces them, as his own goodness and exceptionalism is defined and sanctioned according to that imaginary world's terms. His 'internal code of morals', which marked him as exceptional, do not belong to him as a drow, but to him as an essentially 'good person', which is proven to be defined according to the White Self.

The Legend of Drizzt initially secures the primary text canon. In an imaginary world which abides by the logics of 'good' and 'bad' races, morality remains absolute, and Drizzt himself struggles with racially motivated self-hatred as a result. Written by a white author, Drizzt's moral code aligns with that of the presumed Self, meaning there arises a fantastical version of a double consciousness. While he finds the racism he experiences to be unfair and unjust, he also believes the racial laws upon which his world operates to be true. Throughout this trilogy, the primary-text rules of the game system persist, as both Drizzt and other drow characters such as Zaknafein encounter a sense of essential wrongness or monstrosity that they must overcome within themselves. Drizzt is eventually assimilated, but uncomfortably so: always existing on the margins as a reviled Other who experiences pain wherever he is on the surface. He is the exception that proves the rule of drow, not initially seeking the tools to liberate his people but instead the validation of the totalising worldview in which he is constructed.

---

[75] Salvatore, *Sojourn*, p.116.

Drizzt feels as if he is fighting some intrinsic part of himself that he cannot disprove. This is because *The Legend of Drizzt* ultimately conforms to the rules of the primary text, which become the logics on which his world operates. Drizzt's internal struggle proves how stifling the game's rules can be to individual enjoyment. Yet the primary text and its rules can be modified or ignored by secondary and tertiary authors, when they play at their own table. Unlike Drizzt, who must inhabit the world of the primary text, *D&D* players can create their own worlds, and imagine new realities for their drow characters to live in.

Secondary and Tertiary Authorial Agency and Race

In her model of authorship, Hammer argues that a 'primary author develops a world and a set of rules', 'the secondary author takes the work of the primary author and uses it to construct a specific situation or scenario', and 'the tertiary authors […] 'write' the text of the game in play' when 'they encounter a concrete scenario which is consistent with the larger world of the game' and then react with 'moment to moment choices'.[76] As previously discussed, these three authorships refer to the game designer, the DM, and the player respectively when applied to TTRPGs such as *D&D*. It makes sense then that *The Legend of Drizzt*, which is paratextual but still maintains continuity with the primary text, feels the weight of this 'set of rules' as a physical constraint when approaching racial Others who defy its logics.

Secondary and tertiary authors, in comparison, have affordances to be flexible. *D&D* has always encouraged localised variations on its rules. According to the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, 'the world is yours [the DM's] to change as you see fit and yours to modify as you explore'. However, this statement is made with the caveat that 'your campaign takes place in a sort of mirror universe of the official setting'.[77] A 'mirror universe' implies that the primary text still exists, as the official, canonical absolute in its entirety. It also suggests things may be distorted – or even inverted – in other people's unauthorised versions of this world. Secondary and tertiary texts occupy an unofficial space, where rules can be amended and ignored at will, with revisions performed in the knowledge that they do not interfere with the primary text.

---

[76] Hammer, p.71.

[77] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.4.

In terms of roleplaying race, secondary and tertiary flexibility has various repercussions. According to Trammel, ‘players can enact and reproduce stereotypes or subvert them and explore different representations’, but crucially, ‘this player agency is afforded and constrained by the design of the game played’.[78] While *D&D’s* endorsement of revision and variation could be argued to encourage more freedom for racial representations that avoid harmful stereotypes, all play is still articulated through the game system. For many tables, the primary text is still adhered to unquestioningly, and thus the logics of the ruleset may dominate. In the metatextual podcast *Three Black Halflings*, hosts Luyanda Unati Lewis-Nyawo and Jeremy Cobb contend that ‘this game was made by some people with some real cultural blind spots […] and is still often played by people with cultural blind spots’, particularly white people, who ‘don’t have the […] lived experience of being judged [racially] in that way’.[79] They also note that some fan depictions of drow reenact primary-text racism, either due to existing cultural preconceptions, an ignorance as to why this primary text might be offensive, or active enjoyment of racist convention.[80] As Trammell and the Three Black Halflings note, there is ultimately nothing to stop the primary text being played straight. In a private, amateurish space, it may also only be the primary text that is accountable for the racial decisions it makes.

However, flexibility offers many new possibilities. The act of ‘homebrewing’ – a term which ‘refers to any addition, module, or change that is not in an official D&D sourcebook’ – affords secondary and tertiary authors the agency to simply ignore race as written.[81] They can ignore prescribed alignments, remove and remix racial traits, and deconstruct the ties between race and biologically encoded skills, as well as potentially erasing disadvantages for certain races. For instance, a DM-as-referee could remove the drow’s ‘sunlight sensitivity’ so that a player would no longer have a penalty for attacking during a daylight, above-ground campaign, simply for wanting to play as a dark elf, or as black.[82]

Historically, these amendments were often undertaken on the micro-level of a single DM or a single group of players around a table. This has now changed, as secondary and tertiary authors increasingly disseminate their narratives and versions of their texts online. Secondary and tertiary variations on race were first made more widely available via internet forums where DMs can pool knowledge, such as *Reddit,* TTRPG-specific forums like *The Forge*, and those run by WotC. Even official platforms such as *DND Beyond* now host archives of homebrew content, so that secondary and tertiary texts can be shared beyond the reach of an individual player group. Alternatively, platforms such as *Kickstarter* and *Patreon* allow secondary authors to develop content for publication. This content still exists outside of the primary text canon, but Indie publishing allows for the wider dissemination of counternarratives.

---

[78] Trammel, ‘Representation and Discrimination in RPGs’, p.440.

[79] Luyanda Unati Lewis-Nyawo, Jasper William Cartwright, and Jeremy Cobb, ‘Dark, Edgy – the Drow’s Depiction’, *Three Black Halflings*, Headgum Podcast Studios, 16th August 2021, https://headgum.com/three-black-halflings/dark-edgy-the-drows-depiction, (19:14-19:26), (22:12-22:17).

[80] Lewis-Nyawo, Cartwright, and Cobb, ‘The Drow’s Depiction’, (15:39-16:15).

[81] Mara Franzen, ‘DnD homebrew guide’, *Wargamer,* 1 November 2023, https://www.wargamer.com/dnd/homebrew, para.4.

[82] *D&D Player’s Handbook,* p.24.

One such text, focusing explicitly on race, is the Arcanist Press zine *Ancestry and Culture*, published in 2020. Its author Amy Marshall uses their secondary authorship as a DM to attempt a rewrite of the primary-text rules, replacing the concept of 'race' with two strands: 'ancestry' ('heritable traits that a character might receive from their biological parents', such as height, lifespan, and physical appearance) and 'culture' ('an integrated system of beliefs, values, and symbolic practices shared by a particular group or community', including languages and skills).[83] This decoupling of race from specific bloodlines allows players and DMs to remix traits in new, unprescribed ways, and Marshall erases moral alignment entirely.

Interestingly, Marshall uses canonical examples from fantasy literature to justify the desire for this flexibility beyond the fact 'the very concept of race in this game we love is problematic', for instance stating that using their system would enable players to create 'a human raised by elves, like Tolkien's Aragorn'.[84] In the same way that the fantasy literary canon is drawn on during *D&D's* process of creating Dark Others, Marshall attempts to apply the legitimacy of genre to this desire for greater diversity.

Ancestry and Culture demonstrates the ability of secondary authors (DMs) to take control of aspects of the primary text. DM creativity often focuses on worldbuilding. DMs create and populate their own imaginary worlds, rather than relying on canonical settings such as Faerûn and Ravenloft – yet worldbuilding can also extend to technical mechanics, and the logics upon which that world operates. Primary text racism can be revised or erased, both narratively and mechanically.

---

[83] Marshall, *Ancestry and Culture*, p.4.

[84] Ibid.

Examples like *Ancestry and Culture* also demonstrate how *D&D* players formulate and develop their understanding of the fantasy genre through play. Enjoyment does not forego intellectual criticism: Marshall justifies their work through Critical Race Theory, noting that fantasy worlds 'are created and depicted by real people in our world, and the systems of fantasy racism and real-world racism are unavoidably linked'.[85] They cite game designer James Mendez Hodes, another secondary author who contextualises *D&D's* racism through its position within the wider network of genre-culture: '*D&D*, like Tolkien, makes race literally real […] If you find a way to scrub an explicit signifier from a racist expression, but keep the expression intact, you preserve [it].''[86] As a critical fan, Marshall argues that *D&D's* racism 'need not be in the stories we tell with our friends'.[87] For Marshall, *D&D* becomes a transformative space in which their own authorship has priority, and they identify, articulate and amend the aspects of fantasy genre-culture they find troubling. While Marshall is an example of a very proactive fan, who has constructed and published their own *D&D* content, they demonstrate how *D&D* players may become dissatisfied with the mores of fantasy genre-culture, and thus turn to gameplay to create something new, original, and potentially subversive.

The final notable aspect of *Ancestry and Culture* was the fact that its publication was promoted on social media by various actual play celebrities. Mark Hulmes, the DM of *High Rollers*, an actual play stream with over 207,000 subscribers, promoted and reviewed the zine on *Twitter*.[88] One of its authors, Hannah Rose, would go on to write and edit content for *Critical Role*, including the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount,* which extensively revised drow and will be discussed later in this chapter.[89] According to Thomas, when speaking of fantasy and children's media generally, 'today's readers are using the tools of social media to make meanings that are not just independent of authorial intent but that can also deliberately *contradict* it […] meaning itself is in the process of becoming crowdsourced and jointly imagined', thus leading to greater diversity in fiction.[90]

---

[85] Marshall, *Ancestry and Culture*, p.5.

[86] James Mendez Hodes, quoted Marshall, *Ancestry and Culture*, p.5.

[87] Marshall, *Ancestry and Culture*, p.5.

[88] 'Mark Hulmes' (@sherlock_hulmes), 'Having a quick look through this now and I *love* it. The Ancestry/Culture split is solid AF.', *Twitter.com*, 9 June 2020, https://twitter.com/sherlock_hulmes/status/1270426304404434951.

[89] Fandom User, 'Hannah Rose', *Critical Role Fandom*, https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Hannah_Rose.

[90] Thomas, pp.155-6.

The same is true of actual play, as a tool for strengthening the already communal aspects of authorship and meaning-making in *D&D*. Actual play provides a new way for the interpretations of secondary and tertiary authors to gain visibility, giving them greater status and impact within *D&D* subculture, but also in fantasy genre-culture. Because actual play is one of the main ways people now consume *D&D*, some of these interpretations, particularly those by high-profile livestreams such as *Critical Role*, have greater subcultural capital and even canonical weight. This is particularly key in discursive representations of race, as alternative interpretations begin to mount a more substantial challenge to the perceived canonicity of the primary text.

In the case of drow, several celebrity secondary and tertiary authors have attempted to dismantle the connections between monstrosity, femininity, and race present within the primary text. While *Critical Role*'s Kryn Dynasty is perhaps the most well-known example of a revisionary approach to the drow, many other shows and tertiary authors have exploited the already unstable divide between Self and Other present within the text, in attempts to erase or interrogate racial Otherness, and rehabilitate the monstrous drow.

Deconstructing Dark Otherness: *Critical Role's* Kryn Dynasty

Critical Role's second campaign, the *Mighty Nein*, was constructed to intentionally tackle themes of race and monstrosity as represented within the *D&D* game system. In interviews, DM Matthew Mercer described a desire to subvert the primary text and the conventions of fantasy encapsulated therein: 'I wanted to find ways to tackle the intrinsic coding of monstrous races being evil, and tackle ideas of relative morality and conflict and warfare'.[91]

In the *Mighty Nein*, Mercer utilises his secondary authorship as a challenge to the primary text. Much of his revisionism centres around interpretation of the drow. The continent of Wildemount, where the *Mighty Nein* campaign takes place, appears initially to be divided along the traditional lines of 'good' and 'bad' races as discussed in *Drizzt*, conforming to the logics of Dark Otherness. The campaign is staged against the backdrop of a war between the Dwendalian Empire, a predominantly human kingdom that draws inspiration from 15th-century European, Germanic, and Russian cultures, and Xhorhas, a kingdom of monstrous races ruled over by the drow Kryn Dynasty.[92] The party's narrative begins in the realms of men, seemingly plagued by 'hordes' of monstrous Others that threaten humanity's existence from the margins, as seen in countless other fantasy narratives across literature and media.

---

[91] Matthew Mercer, interviewed Dimension 20, 'Building Your Own Campaign Setting (with Matthew Mercer) | Adventuring Academy', *YouTube.com,* 3 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sig8X_kojco&list=PLhOoxQxz2yFN70xDSNNI8PKgxabBNvPhY&ab_channel=Dimension20 (11:17-11:29)

Mercer's introduction of drow initially conforms to the pattern Thomas identifies in her text *The Dark Fantastic*: that of spectacle and hesitation, in which the Dark Other's 'presence is unsettling […] wreaking havoc on the order, harmony, and happiness of all that is right and light (and White)'.[93] In Episode 12, the party witness a drow terrorist attack on the Dwendalian city of Rexxentrum, culminating in the party's first encounter with a dark elf in the sewers. This altercation utilises the traditional techniques of Dark Otherness, as the drow speaks in an unidentifiable language, and proceeds to attack. Physical difference is emphasised: 'you see a humanoid figure, […] adorned in jet black, almost insect-like leather armour that protrudes in large sweeping hooks at the joints […] it looks demonic'.[94] Players themselves Other the figure, shouting 'that was a Crick!' excitedly around the table, utilising the racial slur within the imaginary world of Exandria for Kryn drow and their insect-like appearance.[95] Yet Mercer then invokes hesitation: the party claims a drow artefact from this villain, the Luxon beacon, and this object travels with the players for over forty episodes. The beacon offers a beneficial buff to the players, allowing them to reroll a D20, and serves as a textual site of speculation and uncertainty – literally, through its mechanics, a generator of new possibilities.[96] By investigating what the beacon is, the party are eventually dragged from the heart of one Empire into another, and the logic of Dark Otherness begins to destabilise as they must reorient to the Kryn's perspective.

As the campaign progresses, the conflict between self and monstrous Other is given greater nuance. Because the PCs Caleb, Nott, and Beauregard all have negative experiences of the Dwendalian Empire and knowledge of the corruption present within its leadership, the lands of men do not retain the position of moral superiority within the story: there is no 'good race'. The beacon leads the party to Xhorhas, and returning this stolen artefact earns them positions of status as saviours of the Kryn Dynasty. They are given a base of operations known affectionately as the 'Xhorhaus', destabilising the borders between the Dark Other and the Self, what is home and what is foreign.[97] The treatment of drow as evil, animalistic 'Crick' is shown to be the product of human propaganda, politically motivated by war. Drow are not inherently evil – this rhetoric of moral alignment instead underpins an unjust military expansion. Mercer thus exposes the primary text's approach to drow as a product of discourse, no longer encoded as biological fact. In Thomas' words, 'the monster is only different from the perspective of those who have labelled the monster as monstrous'.[98]

---

[92] Matthew Mercer and James Heck, *Critical Role: Tal'dorei Campaign Setting* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2017), p.100.
[93] Thomas, p.26.
[94] Critical Role, 'Midnight Espionage | Critical Role: THE MIGHTY NEIN | Episode 12', *YouTube.com,* 2 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoZGMqCIRK8&t=14601s&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry, (4:01:42-4:01:59).
[95] Critical Role, 'Midnight Espionage', (4:03:19).
[96] Wizards of the Coast, *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2020), p.268.

Thomas identifies the Dark Other as typically operating within a cycle of violence and haunting, but in her words the Krynn drow are instead 'emancipated': meaning that their perspective and personhood is acknowledged, thus freeing them from the traditional patterns fantasy offers.[99] The party attempt to broker peace in their favour, and repatriate other stolen beacons. The party perform another act of emancipation, the redemption of the only drow NPC encountered who has a default evil alignment, Shadowhand Essek Thelyss.[100] This emancipation demonstrates how revision can also be performed by tertiary authorship, and player agency. While Mercer intended for Thelyss to retain the position of antagonist and Dark Other, aggressive befriending and eventual romance by PCs results in even the evil drow Other being accommodated into the group and rehabilitated, becoming a force for good. Although potentially fetishising (given the frequent shouts of 'hot boy' whenever Essek appears), this decision is still revisionary, considering the way the primary text encourages drow to be attacked on sight.

While this is how race is negotiated in *Critical Role's* visible play, it is only one facet of *Critical Role*'s deconstruction of drow racism and monstrosity. Another facet is the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount (2020),* published by Wizards of the Coast. In this published sourcebook, Mercer as secondary author offers an extensive counternarrative to the drow's figuring in the primary text.

---

[97] Critical Role, 'Domestic Respite | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 62', *YouTube.com,* 13 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EfuYx_YWC8&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (03:22:09).

[98] Thomas, p.21.

[99] Thomas, p.28.

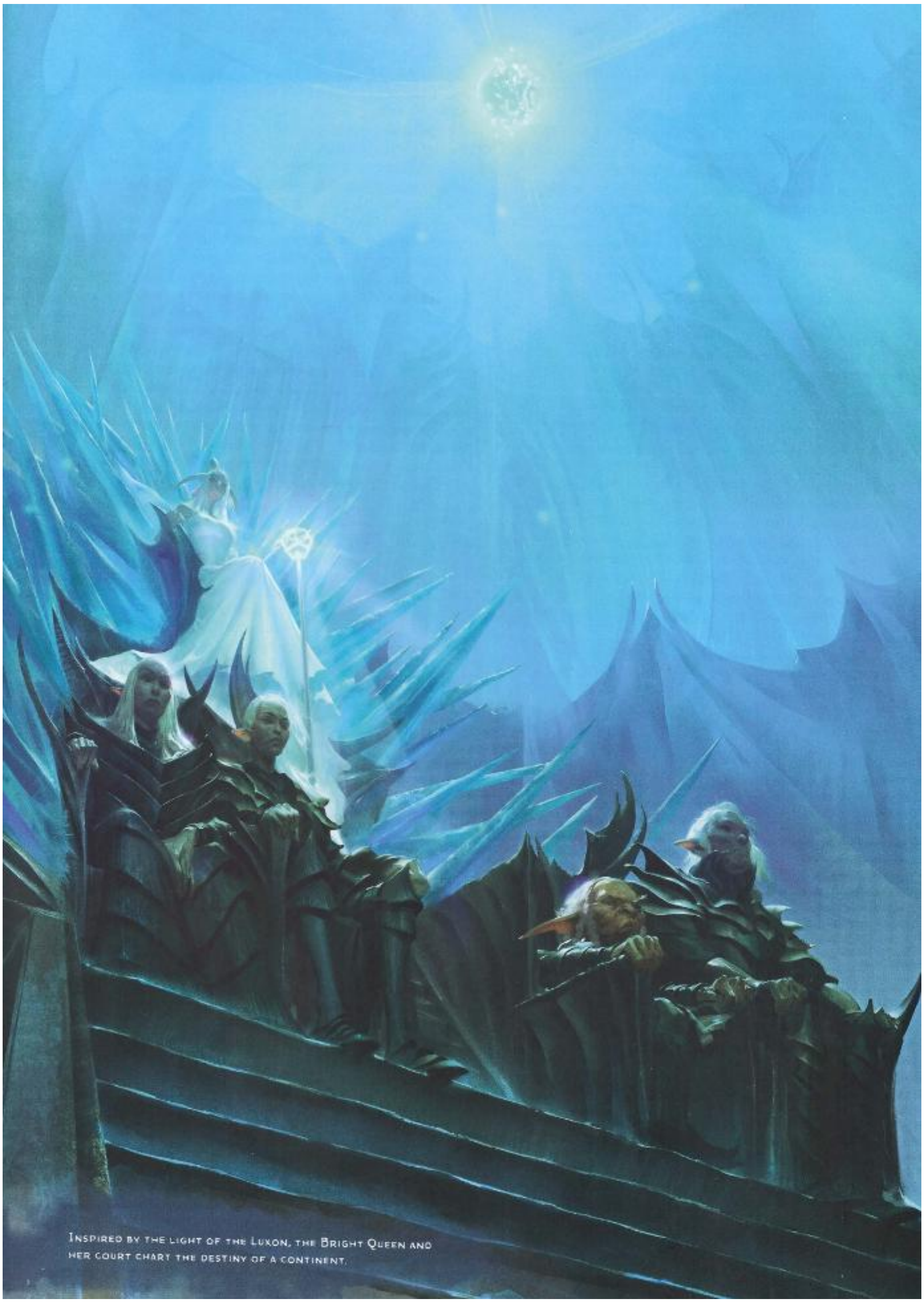
[100] *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, p.41.

Mercer’s counternarrative directly inverts logics of Dark Otherness: what if, despite skin tone, the drow worshipped light, rather than darkness? (See Figure 5). While the presence of the Luxon beacon gradually destabilises racial difference in the campaign’s narrative through its illuminating of the Kryn and drow perspective, it also facilitates a refiguring of the drow race. Mercer’s Kryn Dynasty follow the Luxon, a sentient godlike being also authored by Mercer: ‘a single Light [that] came from the dark nothingness’.[101] Mercer’s secondary text in part supplants Lolth, and produces an alternate timeline for the drow, resulting in a society very different from ‘the Lolthite history they rejected’.[102] The beacon facilitates reincarnation, which Mercer uses to deconstruct narratives of racial supremacy, as ‘the empathy to be gained by experiencing life in another body is crucial to their religion and their culture’.[103] The exercises in empathy the beacon facilitates blur the biological essentialist lines of *D&D’s* own racial categories. While light is designated as a neutral deity within the *Explorer’s Guide*, the dark elves’ worship of it allows for fantasy’s associations between evil and darkness, light and goodness to remain, without this being inscribed upon anyone’s skin.

However, while Mercer’s depiction of the Kryn dynasty is in dialogue with dark Otherness and serves to create a sympathetic narrative his players endorse, it is not without limitations, which reflect the structure of authorships underpinning *D&D*. The *Explorer’s Guide’s* approach to drow is offered as a divergent timeline, signalled here by gestures to the preexisting narratives the Kryn subvert – ‘a time before they turned from Lolth and escaped enslavement from the Betrayer Gods’.[104] Drow emancipation is achieved through a piece of worldbuilding specific to Exandria, and thus specific to this campaign guide. The Kryn Dynasty exists, without explicitly rewriting the primary text canon belonging to WotC, emphasising its status as a secondary text production of Mercer’s own design. This is perhaps the selling point of the sourcebook, but still shows deference to WotC by not dismantling the primary text, preventing potential backlash from any wholesale revision of *D&D* lore.

---

[101] *Explorer’s Guide to Wildemount*, p.33.
[102] *Explorer’s Guide to Wildemount,* p.37.
[103] *Explorer’s Guide to Wildemount*, p.163.
[104] *Explorer’s Guide to Wildemount*, p.38.



Inspired by the light of the Luxon, the Bright Queen and her court chart the destiny of a continent.

Figure 5: The Bright Queen and her Court, lit by the Luxon beacon. *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2020), p.34.

Crucially, Lolthite drow and the Underdark still exist in Mercer's Exandria. In the Darrington Press publication *Tal'Dorei: Campaign Setting Reborn* (2022), Mercer reproduces WotC's text with only a few amendments. Dark elves or *myrk'alfen* are 'a wise and beautiful folk with long silvery hair and radiant ashen or violet skin. But their underground enclaves grew decadent and cruel, and their leaders fell to the alluring whispers of the Spider Queen', as in the primary text.[105] The crucial difference which Mercer's secondary authorship seeks to emphasise is that, rather than being intrinsically evil from birth, these Underdark drow are instead 'unwitting prey' to the machinations of evil around them. The 'paranoia' of primary text Underdark societies remains, but it is produced through the malign influence of outside forces, as 'aberrations' that can take on 'any shape or form' prey on these cities from the outskirts. Those who serve Lolth only become 'truly monstrous' when they 'fall deep into the abominable thrall of the Spider Queen […] turning deathly pale as they become little more than puppets for their tormenting goddess'.[106] Here, Lolthite drow are characterised as evil, but it is somewhat against their own will, with notions of thraldom and puppetry literalising the constraints that Drizzt and his family felt on their free will in *The Legend of Drizzt.* The logic of degeneration and the Dark Otherness of the Underdark is preserved, although Mercer's text stresses that even these corrupted drow all have the capacity to be saved, emancipated, and recuperated, as opposed to being slaughtered without guilt.

Critical Role's reinterpretation of drow is one of the most extensive revisions to *D&D's* primary text, and perhaps the most official challenge via secondary authorship, accompanied with the prestige of not only traditional publishing but WotC's endorsement. The Kryn Dynasty dismantles the perception of the drow as Dark Other, while preserving fantasy's traditional juxtaposition between the forces of light and dark. While the campaign narrative promotes a view of race as nothing but politically-motivated rhetoric, Mercer falls short of overturning the primary text entirely, within the more mechanistic constraints of a *D&D* game manual.

Critical Role's Krynn dynasty demonstrates the ability of secondary and tertiary authors to transformatively rework or rewrite the lore of the primary text, and in doing so also critically evaluate textual artefacts of wider genre-culture. Mercer, as someone with an intense familiarity with the *D&D* text, deliberately tackles its problematic handling of race within his gameplay. However, his revisions are done with a lingering deference to the existing canon. The Kryn drow who live above ground are signposted as a product of secondary authorship unique to Mercer's secondary world, allowing for the primary text interpretation of drow and of Lolth to continue mostly intact. Underdark drow still exist in Exandria, trapped inside a cycle of evil monstrosity.

---

[105] Matthew Mercer, Hannah Rose, and James J. Haeck, *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (Los Angeles: Darrington Press, 2021), p.156.
[106] *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn*, p.156.

However, the coexistence of two drow societies creates a variation of alignments on a scale not present within WotC's lore. Exandrian drow are not automatically branded monstrous, and even those that are evil are not destined to remain that way, as the redemption of Essek Thelyss demonstrates. Moral alignments are flexible, as is the representation of dark-skinned peoples within the fictional world.

This also demonstrates the levels of flexibility available to the primary, secondary, and tertiary authors. When Mercer is operating under the umbrella of WotC and within the language of the primary text, his approach to race is hindered, both by the mechanics available to him and by the legacy of the canon within which he is operating. When performing an actual play show, his narrative has more freedom to become subversive, not only through the collaborative improvisations of his cast and the support of an active, progressive fandom, but because mechanics can be elided in the realities of play. Secondary and tertiary authors have freedom to break or exist outside the rules – in particular, the tertiary authors' ability to interact with an NPC outside of combat, and build transformative bonds through character interactions, move a monstrous Other from one-dimensional stat block into fully realised character. This demonstrates the power of the tertiary author's 'moment-to-moment choices' – which is instrumental in generating sympathy for the drow within this universe, as the players both choose to side with Xhorhas over the Empire, and empathise with NPCs such as Essek.[107] While the primary text encourages a hostile relationship with the monstrous Other, if the players do not ascribe to this belief, they have power to transform the text.

While Mercer's published texts preserve Wizards of the Coast's own conceits, it is up for debate how much this matters when his most public and popular text – the campaign itself – presents an entirely sympathetic representation of drow.[108] This also demonstrates the role that actual play has in elevating secondary and tertiary voices to be of equal and in some cases greater status than the canon of primary text rules. While Mercer's secondary text being published is one means by which his drow counternarrative can gain traction, *Critical Role's* performed narrative powerfully shifts perceptions of fantasy's Dark Other for the viewers who consume it. Viewers who approach *D&D* having watched *Critical Role* first can become confused as to why its textual construction of drow does not reflect the actual play game's canon, potentially generating discontent. Through making these private and personal transformative narratives public, actual play elevates secondary and tertiary authors and heightens their impact on genre-culture, even in cases where traditional publishing is not pursued.

---

[107] Hammer, p.71.

[108] Essek Thelyss, in particular, is incredibly popular within the Critical Role fandom, featured heavily in cosplays, fanart, and discussions of the *Mighty Nein* campaign, with 5000+ fanfiction works on *Archive of Our Own* citing him as a main character. His redemption demonstrates the ability of tertiary authors to rewrite drow, as the party's continued engagement with this NPC resulted in his moral alignment changing to good. It should also be noted that other publications such as *Critical Role: The Tales of Exandria - The Bright Queen* (2022) comic book demonstrate a fan interest in these drow figures of Mercer's secondary world.

Monstrous Matriarchy: Lilith in *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep*

While it detaches matriarchy from notions of perversity, *Critical Role's* secondary and tertiary reinterpretation of drow does little to address the gendered aspects of their monstrosity. In *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep*, the ties between evil and female agency are discussed explicitly in the figure of Lilith, a drow character played by Erika Ishii.

Ishii's Lilith is an intensification of the drow's monstrosity as she is not only drow but a 'drider', a 'horrid hybrid of a drow and a giant spider that serves as a living reminder of Lolth's power', found within the *D&D Monster Manual*.[109] In 'The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons'*, Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammell note that the *Monster Manual*, 'unlike the bestiary, reduces monstrosity to a quantifiable and comprehensible concept. It produces objects, not abject bodies'.[110] While Jeremy Jeffrey Cohen argues that monstrous hybridity, which the drider could potentially embody, 'threatens to smash distinctions' through 'externally incoherent bodies', the *Monster Manual* can render such incoherence legible again, keeping the monstrous body under control through its figures and statistics.[111]

---

[109] *D&D Monster Manual*, p.120.

[110] Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammell, 'The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons'*, *Games and Culture*, Vol.15 No.6, (2020), pp.730-747 (p.734).

[111] Jeremy Jeffrey Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in *The Monster Theory Reader,* ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp.37-56 (p.40).

Stang and Trammell argue that this is particularly insidious in the *Monster Manual's* depictions of female monstrosity. The illustration that accompanies the drider's statistical description in the *Monster Manual* is female, and Lolth's role in the transformation through her 'power to create these creatures' as a punishment serves to render the female body monstrous through a horrific form of female reproduction.[112] Ishii's choice to take a *Monster Manual* 'object' and give it subjectivity through tertiary authorship counteracts abjection and interrogates the interleaving of monstrosity, femininity, and perverse motherhood present within the drider, drow, and the figure of Lolth. Ishii's decision also reinstates the incoherence and 'ontological liminality' that the *Monster Manual* seeks to defuse: the boundary between subject and object, Self and Other, is ruptured once the drider is placed into the hands of a player rather than its habitual antagonist role.[113] This instability feeds into the wider narrative of *Escape from the Bloodkeep*, a *Lord of the Rings* parody whose focus on the 'evil' forces of Mordor results in the rehabilitation of the monstrous Other.

In this comedy series, Ishii's introduction of Lilith in the first session approaches the gendered monstrosity of drow with little subtlety:

> **Erika:** Lilith. The vile temptress whose shadow webs ensnared kingdoms […] you see her pale, delicate, elven features, and […] slender torso and… great rack! […] Her vile, monstrous creeping spider abdomen rears up and […] she dons her imposing crown that is wrought with darkness itself, and puts on a very *bondage-y* outfit.[114]

Lilith is introduced having eaten her lover from the night before, enacting the nightmares of predatory sexual agency depicted within the primary text and embodying it to excess (see Figure 6). Lilith parodies the primary text representation of drow women, mocking how their exotic, Orientalist monstrosity titillates the male gaze.

---

[112] *D&D Monster Manual*, p.120.

[113] Cohen, p.40.

[114] Dimension 20, 'Episode 1: Welcome to the Dark Side', *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep/season:1/videos/welcome-to-the-dark-side, (33:36-34:34).

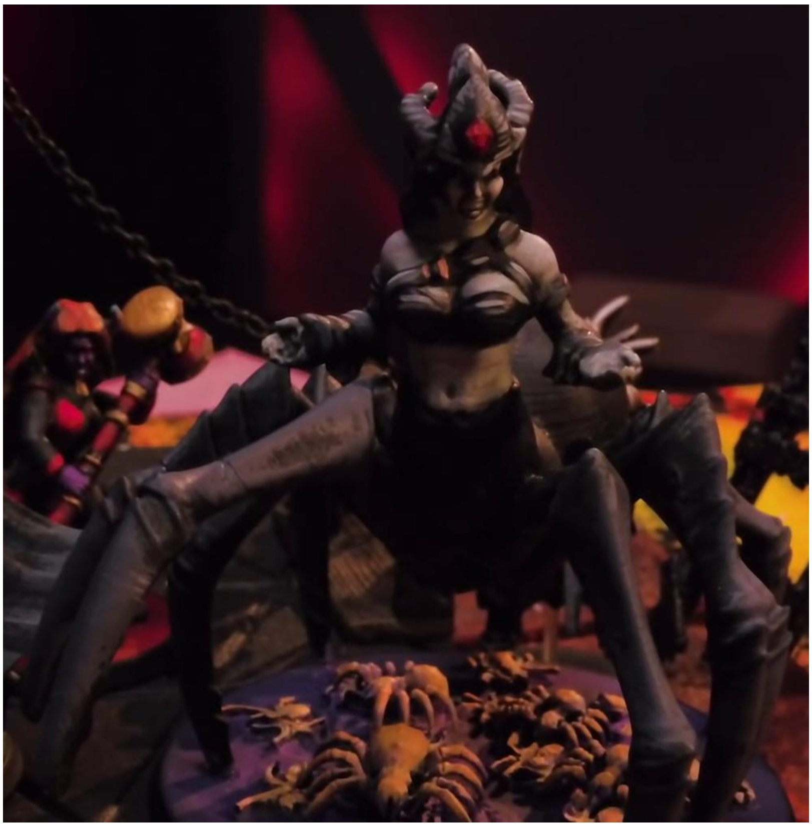


Figure 6: a screenshot of Lilith's battle mini. As a drider, Lilith is the largest player mini in the campaign. 'Lilith: Battle mini', *Dimension 20 Fandom Wiki,* https://dimension20.fandom.com/wiki/Lilith?file=Lilith_Battle_Mini.png.

While Lilith is a parody of Tolkien's Shelob, Ishii inflects their performance with a demonstration of how this novelistic text was received and adapted into the *D&D* system. The similarities between 'Lilith' and 'Lolth' stress that this is also a *D&D* primary text figure that they are reacting to, while also noting that Lolth is, as with all primary text artefacts, a condensation of Gygax's idioculture –the 'cultural system' upon which a TRPG game is based on, and the shared understanding particular players (or in this case authors) bring to the table.[115] Stang and Trammell argue that 'Gygax's privileged experience as a heterosexual and cis-gendered White male designer and his Christian background all shaped the monsters that he designed for the *MM* [*Monster Manual*]'.[116] The name Lilith makes clear the influence of Christian theology on Lolth, while Ishii's own critical eye marks Shelob as an intertext, creating an informal genealogy of demonic femininity that feeds fantasy genre-culture and informed Gygax specifically. Ishii seeks to render these biases legible, demonstrating how drow monstrosity is dependent on its counterpointing a conservative, white male Self.

---

[115] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.144.

[116] Stang and Trammell, 'The Ludic Bestiary', p.733.

Stang and Trammell note that within the *Monster Manual,* 'women are represented through tropes of monstrous motherhood, deception, violence, and an insidious sexuality', all of which apply to Lolth and her drow.[117] Ishii playfully reproduces this monstrous coding exactly, branding Lilith as a powerful mother. When speaking of the men which surround her, Lilith says: 'they're intimidated, they're intimidated by my prowess as an arch general, and my ten thousand shadowbrood'.[118] Ishii encapsulates and exaggerates the aspects of drow that are expected to generate anxiety in the male player or reader, mostly for comedic effect.

However, it is these traits that are then valorised by the campaign's 'heroic' narrative. Lilith is a 'Circle of the Shepherds' druid, a subclass that emphasises traditionally virtuous notions of protection and a vocation for safeguarding the weak and helpless: 'they focus on protecting animals and fey creatures that have difficulty defending themselves […] they ward off monsters that threaten them, rebuke hunters who kill more prey than necessary […] [and] seek knowledge and power that will help them safeguard their charges better'.[119] Ishii takes this concept and reimagines it using the flexibility of their tertiary authorship, applying primary text virtues to Lilith's desire to protect the monstrous lands she governs, as well as her many thousands of children. The demonised 'horde' of Dark Other that both Thomas and Jemisin refer to in their own criticism of fantasy's racist convention are here not only presented as allies, but as family: 'We're family. And if one of us is in danger, we're all in danger! If one of us is in trouble, we're all in trouble.'[120] Although still monstrous in its embodiment, motherhood is deemed admirable and good, subverting the abjection present within the *Monster Manual.*

Initial comedic subversion then accrues meaning beyond simple 'jokes', as this subversion is endorsed not only by Ishii but by other tertiary authors and Mulligan as DM. In *Bloodkeep*, the players and viewers are asked to sympathise with the Dark Other – the hordes which face extinction and political upheaval once the Dark Lord is defeated. The solution proposed by Lilith is to place the Dark Lord's newborn son on the throne, with the promise that 'we will create a world in which your little one is safe'.[121] However, Lilith is appointed regent in this child's place, in a potential overthrow of patriarchal agency that mimics drow matriarchy in the primary text. Yet, like motherhood, female leadership is remade into a virtue: her suggestion that the party prioritise the child transforms the final sequence of the game from a power-hungry player-versus-player struggle to a collaborative defence against an oncoming siege, as they attempt to assure collective stability through the Dark Lord's heir.

---

[117] Stang and Trammell, 'The Ludic Bestiary', p.743.

[118] 'Welcome to the Darkside', (0:36:03-0:36:11).

[119] Wizards of the Coast, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2017), p.23.

[120] Dimension 20, 'Episode 5: Bloodlines and Lifelines', *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep/season:1/videos/bloodlines-and-lifelines, (1:22:18-1:22:25).

At the closing of Ishii and Lilith's arc, DM Mulligan asks the following: '"What is the nature of evil? […] all you've ever wanted was for you and your family to survive, and in a world that sees you as gross and horrifying and hateful, what's wrong for sticking up for your family?"[122] He ties Lilith's position to the campaign's overall representation of evil as narrative necessity within fantasy genre-culture, where boundaries of morality have become arbitrary and determined by the logics of story. Given that drow Otherness is so strongly determined by fantasy as constructed through a conservative white male gaze, this arbitrary positioning is perhaps most applicable to Ishii's character. The DM supports the recasting of drow matriarchy not as wrong or perversely different, but as virtuous, sympathetic, and understandable, once approached through the right subjectivity. Mulligan's speech emulates Cohen's belief that the monstrous Other 'offers […] an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world', asking that we apply this logic to the monstrous Other itself, recognising unity and solidarity amongst the disparate forces of those at the margins.[123]

Lilith subverts the primary text descriptions of drow as power-hungry, paranoid, and competitive. This stresses the collaborative nature of the game Lilith and Ishii are participating in – once the drider is allowed to occupy the subject position of protagonist and hero, and not just antagonist, they are no longer excluded from social unity. Ishii portrays a Monstrous Other who is shown to willingly cooperate, once they are invited (literally) to the table – once they are no longer a faceless member of the horde. This reimagining draws upon the nuances Thomas offers in her own interrogation of Cohen's *Seven Theses*: 'the monster is said to refuse ordered participation, but the monster has already been excluded from the Great

---

[121] 'Bloodlines and Lifelines', (0:43:59-0:48:41).

[122] Dimension 20, 'Episode 6: The Tomb of Ultimate Evil', *Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep/season:1/videos/the-tomb-of-ultimate-evil, (1:19:37-1:19:48).

[123] Cohen, p.40.

Chain of Being'.[124] For both Mulligan and Thomas, the Dark Other's fight is one of survival that results from their marginality, rather than inherent aggression. The Shepherd subclass is said to champion unjustly victimised outsiders, which here applies to the ostracised Monstrous Other.

Although conforming to the primary-text representation of drow and embodying its monstrous femininity to excess, Ishii's representation of Lilith interrogates why femininity and motherhood have been assigned such negative meaning. In focusing on a group of fantasy genre-culture antagonists, *Escape from the Bloodkeep* already challenges the innate morality within *D&D*, cultivating sympathy through assigning subjectivity to the besieged monstrous Other. Lilith enacts such deconstruction mechanically by taking an object from the *Monster Manual*, a paratext that players typically do not access, and conferring subjectivity onto a monster traditionally perceived as object and obstacle. Through utilising heroic virtues from the druid class and applying them to the monstrous Other, Lilith offers a straightforward subversion of drow as isolationist and alienated from their environment. Similarly, the presentation of female agency as a positive force that enables the story to subvert its presumed conclusion, swapping competition for collaboration, presents matriarchy as regenerative, rather than something to be feared.

These subversions do not necessarily offer a new model for drow within *D&D*. However, they challenge whether one is needed, once you eradicate the white male perspective through which the primary text has been filtered. In the conclusion of *Escape from the Bloodkeep*, Ishii as Lilith states the following: 'I'd like to say that this is not just for me, it's for all the little horrifying girls out there'.[125] While not the most complex of feminist statements, it emphasises that what is presumed monstrous to the imagined white male player can take on alternative meanings when played by those who occupy the intersectional or marginalised identities maligned by the text. Ishii, as a queer person of colour, seeks to emphasise the strengths to be found within Lilith's position as Dark Other, whose threat to the Imperial order of 'the forces of light' stems mostly from a need to survive on the precarious margins.

In *Escape from the Bloodkeep*, Ishii – who unlike Mercer is a marginalised author who shares points of identification with their character and is familiar with experiences of

---

[124] Thomas, p.21.

[125] 'Tomb of Ultimate Evil', (2:49:15-2:49:24).

Othering – decides to tackle the primary text as written. They transform it partially through a remix of several canonical sources, demonstrating their awareness as a consumer and producer within fantasy genre-culture, but also by critically re-focalising the lens through which drow and drider women are typically viewed. Their sympathetic perspective upon drow informs and contributes to the collective intention for the campaign – a story consciously protagonising the Dark Others of fantasy. It also has ramifications for the landscape of wider fandom. Here, feminine power and sexuality is not objectified as in the *Monster Manual*, but embodied and given its own perspective. This again demonstrates the transformative power of the tertiary author, who gives voice and agency to an objectified Other that the primary text sought to pin down and rigidify within the codes of fantasy convention.

Tertiary authorship has always been transformative, as players take the primary text of *D&D* and reinterpret it in line with their own experiences and perspectives. Within *D&D*, the nature of who is making that transformative response is also important, as there is subversive potential simply in protagonising those who lie outside of the *D&D* primary text's definition of fantasy, and fantasy readership. Pande notes that 'the increasing visibility of diverse audience demographics […] that include women, non-white and queer fans' has a tangible impact on how fandom texts both market and present themselves to audiences. This 'projection of being socially progressive', as discussed in my introduction, is being performed by *Dimension 20* in this example, with the choice to cast Ishii showcasing a desire to include marginalised players at their table.[126] *Dimension 20's* decision to include Ishii in turn makes the same demand of the primary text, to acknowledge players like them within their demographics, and therefore remove any textual artefacts that may prove hostile or harmful towards them.

Dimension 20's decision to cast a group of diverse players perhaps informs the collaborative narrative decision to both sympathise with monstrous races and refocus on building community from the margins. Through practices of diverse casting, actual play promotes a multiplicity that is already present within secondary and tertiary authorships, which undermines the presumed universality of the one set of fantasy conventions presented within the primary text. The secondary and tertiary texts which provide subversive readings of WotC canon not only gain greater visibility within genre-culture, but so do their authors.

---

[126] Pande, p.75.

Actual play's liminal positioning as both published, finalised text and fanwork means that marginalised creators may gain exposure denied to them by the mainstream.

Drow as Transformative Fantasy: Tanya DePass and *The Black Dice Society*

In light of diverse casting's ability to broaden the range of voices present within TRPG subculture, B. Dave Walters' *The Black Dice Society* (*BDS*) and its depiction of drow is notable for two main reasons. Firstly, *BDS* is an official WotC stream. Hosted on the 'Dungeons & Dragons' *Twitch* and *YouTube* channels, it was based on *D&D* primary text modules such as *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (2021) and *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight* (2021), both of which were published after WotC's statement on racial representation, covered earlier in the chapter.[127] Hosted by Walters, who self-identifies as a 'revolutionary content creator' and champion of diversity within his subculture, this stream partially utilises his secondary authorship as a means of promoting the revised primary text.[128] In light of Pande's discussion of how corporations are co-opting wider social justice advocacy for the purposes of marketing, it could be argued that within this official livestream, any revisionary depictions of drow by Walters or his players would not undermine but promote the primary text. Their own readings become evidence of the canon's own revisionary process – even if these readings do not originate from that primary text.

However, if we consider Hammer's notions of hierarchy within *D&D's* collaborative framework of authorship, the fact that WotC endorses *BDS'* secondary and tertiary authors as representations of its brand could be described as subversive in and of itself. Walters and his players can leverage the primary text as validation of their own authorships. While both *Critical Role* and *Escape from the Bloodkeep* either defer to or ignore parts of the primary text, remaining in a partially liminal and unofficial space, here secondary and tertiary authors can argue that their creations are incorporated into and alter the primary text's canon.

BDS features a drow PC, Fen, performed by Tanya DePass, a black African American woman. Fen is included here as she offers a unique case study in which the monstrous overlap of femininity and blackness is negotiated and performed publicly by a player who has lived experience of both these intersections. DePass herself is likely aware of her unique position, and how this challenges the primary text. As the founder of the 'I Need Diverse Games' project, DePass' status within tabletop gaming and wider gaming subculture is earned partly through activism.[129] 'I Need Diverse Games' seeks to 'discuss, analyse and critique identity and culture in […] games through a multi-faceted lens rooted in intersectionality', and DePass' role on both *BDS* and *Rivals of Waterdeep* (2018-) extends these efforts into TRPG gaming.[130] This cause is framed as both political and personal: while subversive, it is also an individual, transformative response, as exemplified through the use of the personal pronoun 'I' in the project's title, as opposed to the 'We' of similar online movements such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks.

---

[127] Wizards of the Coast, 'The Black Dice Society: Livestream', *Dungeons & Dragons*, https://dnd.wizards.com/black-dice-society.

[128] Fandom User, 'B. Dave Walters', *Vampire: The Masquerade - L.A. By Night Fandom Wiki*, https://vampire-the-masquerade-la-by-night.fandom.com/wiki/B._Dave_Walters, para. 2.

When discussing African American fandom, Rebecca Wanzo has noted that while 'many discussions of fan theory emphasize that fans must make a case for the political importance of being fans […] it is not uncommon for people of colour to make the argument that representation is important to political progress'.[131] For DePass, fandom, play, and transformative work can all serve a political purpose. DePass' decision to portray a drow elf on this stream not only diversifies representations of drow, but reclaims them for black players specifically. DePass' desire to diversify media representation goes hand-in-hand with personalising it.

BDS has its basis in *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft*, a module designed to emulate various facets of the horror genre, making monstrosity a key concern and theme of the narrative. A drow elf woman, but also a dhampir (half-vampire) and bloodhunter, with the ability to transform into a grotesque bestial form, DePass' Fen intensifies monstrous hybridity, much like Ishii's Lilith. While Lilith restored the incoherence of hybridity to a static object of the *Monster Manual*, Fen's winged monstrous form is homebrewed, meaning that it lies beyond the primary text's delineations. In character, Fen notes that, 'if I were to show my true self […] I would shock Brother Uriah into an early grave', a seemingly knowing reference to the only white man in this particular adventuring party, played by Mark Meer, who is also the only normative, non-monstrous character within the cast.[132]

---

[129] Tanya DePass, 'All About Me!', *cypheroftyr.com*, https://cypheroftyr.com/bio/, para.1.

[130] Tanya DePass, 'About', *I Need Diverse Games,* https://ineeddiversegames.org/about/, [Accessed 03-10-22], para.3.

[131] Rebecca Wanzo, 'African American Acafandom and Other strangers: New genealogies of fan studies', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol.20, (2015), https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699/538, para 1.5.

While the white male Self is still initially held up as the default – the only non-corrupted form – Uriah is also presented as very much in the minority. Rather than being demonised or existing on the margins due to her drow or dhampir heritage, Fen is automatically accepted within the Ravenloft setting, where monstrosity and Otherness, 'misfits' and 'wandering exiles' are presented as 'hallmarks' of the setting and thus the norm.[133] Moving away from the racial hierarchies of other canonical settings – although it should be noted that Ravenloft has its own histories of racism in its depiction of the Vistani – *BDS* can utilise a genre-shift, alongside techniques of the carnivalesque, to ignore the previous importance of race and corresponding morality within the primary text canon.

When Fen reveals her true form, DePass describes her as follows: ' she has giant, draconic-like wings, her claws are out and her fangs are fully extended […] she has let her demonic vampire form out'.[134] The overtly sexual and feminine monstrosity of the primary text drow is rewritten in favour of a bestial transformation that aids Fen in combat, more in line with DePass' choice of class and dhampir 'lineage'. This distinction is important, as 'lineage' is one of the mechanics implemented by WotC In the hope of bringing nuance to the concept of race. In *Van Richten's Guide*, lineage is described as 'races that characters might gain through remarkable events. These overshadow their original race, if any, becoming their new race.'[135] Demonstrating the protracted, fraught meanings that 'race' has in the context of *D&D*, the extent to which lineages remove essentialism is debatable. Although it does to some extent muddy existing distinctions and the notion of biological determinism, as any PC has the capability of becoming one of these new categories, lineages also reinforce how race is written on the body, stemming from extreme bodily transformations which can become intrinsic to the character's existence.

---

[132] Dungeons & Dragons, 'The Banishing Grief Part 2 | Black Dice Society | Episode #3 | D&D', *YouTube.com*, 15 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eRfaInpn80&ab_channel=Dungeons%26Dragons, (1:05:25-1:05:34).

[133] Wizards of the Coast, 'The Carnival', *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2021), p.84.

[134] Dungeons & Dragons, 'Vergissmeinnicht (Forget-me-not) Part 2 | Black Dice Society | Episode #5 | D&D', *YouTube.com*, 30 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFspfIT3UL4&t=3648s&ab_channel=Dungeons%26Dragons, (0:58:32-0:58:47).

[135] *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft*, p.15.

However, in accordance with the logic of 'lineages', however flawed, Fen is a 'dhampir' first, 'drow' second (or originally). DePass' roleplay text abides by this interpretation, noting that Fen lived in the Underdark not because she is drow, but because living underground disguised her vampirism. The concept of lineage allows DePass to play as drow without assuming any of the traits of that race, including default alignment and mechanical disadvantage. Rather than having to play an essentialised 'evil' blackness, her decision to explicitly identify Fen as drow becomes an aesthetic and political choice: the ability to play recognisably as black, and to do so without any of the traditional limitations placed upon the player. Fen is described as 'a tall elf, however she is… greyish purple, [with a] side shave, her locks are white […] and when she smiles you see the hint of fangs' (See Figure 7).[136] Her drow identity and its correlation to blackness are emphasised by DePass through culturally specific language that efficiently makes her point for her – but her monstrosity is linked to her vampirism, not hair or skin colour.

DePass utilises drow as a means of playing someone within this fantasy world that looks like her, transformatively representing herself and her experience. Kristin J Warner characterises this as common practice amongst black women who participate in fandom:

> The mirror moment is doubly necessary for Black women fans. The dearth of media representations of women of color means that when one such representation appears […] fans instantly transform it into an identifiable, relatable body that reflects or refracts their own value systems. Seeing oneself on screen is a privilege that not all bodies are allowed, thus the "make do" culture that women of color […] participate in to make those identities recognizable is worthy of consideration. The ways Black women reappropriate themselves into the text through characters who look (and potentially act) like them is inherently narcissistic; yet, it serves a greater purpose of identification and visibility.[137]

---

[136] Gary Con, 'Gary Con XIII Presents - The Black Dice Society DEBUT Episode with DM B. Dave Walters!', *YouTube.com,* 27 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRnPrO04N-g&list=PLfS8QgUdeGYqAxdEg_qLKzsEeuc8JAQMD&ab_channel=GaryCon, (34:09-34:41).

[137] Kristen J. Warner, 'ABC's Scandal and Black Women's Fandom', in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp.32–50 (p.37).

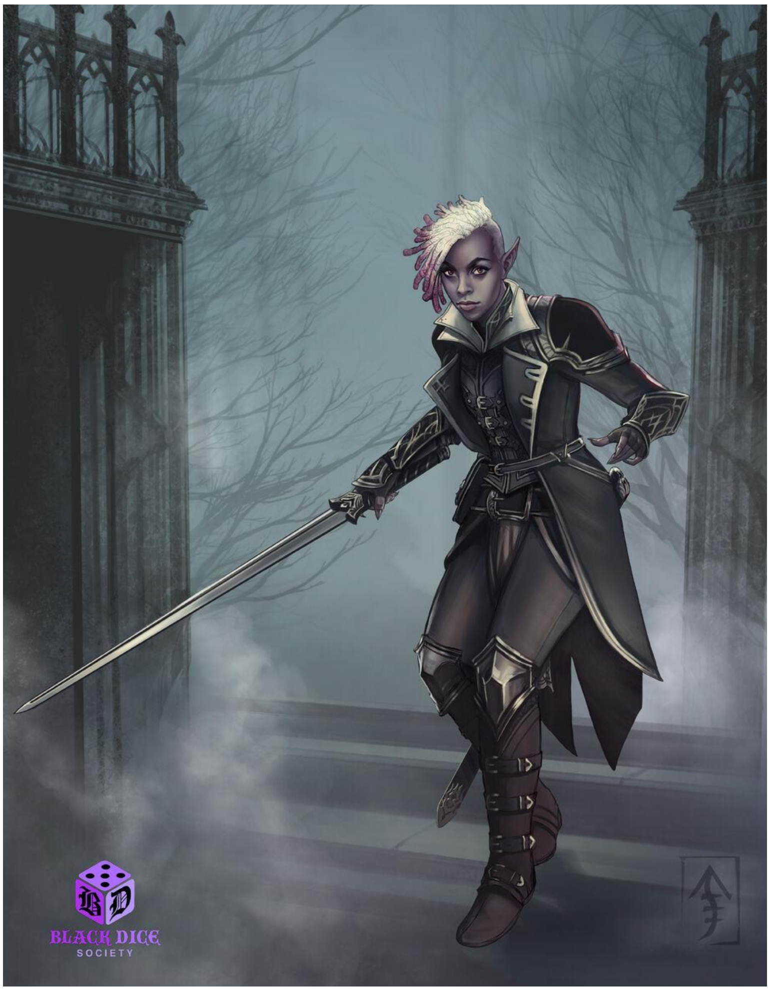


Figure 7: Official artwork of Fen from the *Black Dice Society*. 'Characters', *Black Dice Society Wiki*, https://black-dice-society.fandom.com/wiki/Characters.

In *D&D*, although there are now more textual representations of black women (an often-cited example is the default picture representing the Human race), very few aspects of the primary text accommodate or reflect that experience – not unsurprisingly, given its legacy of white authors, often male.[138] Not only is the text pared back so that it can be applicable to all (and more applicable to some), with a high capacity for customisation, the places where racial parallels are drawn by the text and not the players are often found in these negative examples. DePass, therefore, perhaps decides to 'make do', reappropriating a problematic stereotype but also transformatively eliding its obstructive elements in favour of what best aligns with her own experience. Writing and playing Fen as drow offers ‘an identifiable, relatable body that reflects or refracts [her] own value systems’.

---

[138] *D&D Player's Handbook,* p.29.

D&D’s capacity for extreme customisation means that others have done similarly – for instance, in the *D&D* podcast *Spell Check*, Elle McKinney’s high elf bard is black, a fact she introduces with the following statement ‘this is for all the people out there who think that elves can’t be black, in your face!’[139] McKinney suggests that fantasy’s stereotyping and the high elf archetype in particular has not been traditionally accommodating of black experience, but can be made so through transformative engagement. However, DePass’s decision to redeem drow specifically, as a point of identification for black players, means that not only is she able to perform black femininity, but in turn create a nuanced depiction of previously demonised blackness alongside it.

Tailoring a character’s race, gender, and appearance to mirror the player is a long-running practice, particularly at private tables where disadvantages for making such choices can be removed by mutual agreement with the DM. In *BDS*, however, DePass’ transformative actions as a tertiary author are public and endorsed by WotC. She reclaims the drow/dark elf archetype as a signifier for blackness, which is then encoded through correlation to her lived experience. She is both free from the objectifying lens of the white authorities who wrote the primary text, but also demonstrating how this primary text can be used to authorise such experiences, once certain rules have been dismantled. Playing drow does not present any obstacles for DePass: this results from her choice of lineage, her DM’s endorsement as secondary author through the homebrewed beast form, and the Ravenloft setting, which can to some extent be detached from the racial politics of the Forgotten Realms. However, DePass also does not allow for an aracial reading of dark elves. Despite the comparative indifference of her party and NPCs in Walters’ Ravenloft, Fen recalls instances and experiences of racial discrimination, for instance stating ‘I know I am a drow […] but I am *educated’* in Episode 2.[140] Although being drow is not Fen’s ‘essence’ as a character – as Garcia characterised race within *D&D* – the viewer is also not allowed to ignore the fact that Fen is drow. They also cannot forget what being drow means in the primary text, and thus avoid the weight of meaning behind DePass’ authorial choices.

---

[139] Spell Check, ‘Chapter 1: Prison Meet-Cute, Part 1’, December 2018, https://soundcloud.com/spell-check/spell-check-chapter-1-a-second-chance-part-1, (3:30-3:35).

[140] Dungeons & Dragons, ‘Dungeons & Dragons, ‘The Banishing Grief | Black Dice Society | Episode #2 | D&D’, *YouTube.com,* 8 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufCE_nZzSHM, (1:26:36-1:26:38).

DePass' portrayal of Fen also rehabilitates drow sexuality. Disconnecting it from associations with evil, her performance allows black female sexuality to be explored from the perspective of the black female subject, rather than an objectifying, Othering gaze. This is doubly significant because of the overlap within Fen's design, as both drow and dhampir. In her discussion of vampirism and black femininity, Thomas noted that black women are excluded from the sexual economy of vampirism in shows such as *The Vampire Diaries.* According to Thomas, where desirability is encoded as pale whiteness, black women 'must be neutered and kept far away' in a manner that 'uncomfortably underscores societal views of the desirability of young black Women'.[141]

Here, Fen is a vampire – preventing such distance being created – and thus the agent, rather than victim, of sexual desire. While this nature could lead to the same demonisation and fascination with drow sexuality present in the primary text, this is also avoided, as the desires DePass portrays exist outside the heterosexual economy that underpinned such representations. Fen is not 'neutered', as Thomas fears in her own readings. Instead, her primary plotline revolves around her loyalty to the Carnival, one of the Dread Domains of the Ravenloft setting, and her navigation of her established and dedicated romantic relationship with Isolde, the leader of that domain. When this relationship is introduced, it immediately overturns Fen's previously stoic demeanour, through DePass' own narration: 'What you all see when you come in [to the tent] is Isolde sprawled in her throne, for the lack of a better word […] and sprawled in her lap is Fen, chatting away and feeding her grapes'.[142] In this moment, DePass takes on the role of secondary author, describing not only her own character, but the NPC who serves as Fen's partner. This means that the other players and DM must acknowledge this demonstration of romantic affection, which is divorced of the threat (and demonic rituals) that typically characterise the sexual agency of drow women.

Warner has noted that, while a focus on romantic relationships has been deemed reductive for white female characters, black women's transformative relationships to media give romance a new significance. She states that fanworks give 'Black female fans an opportunity to make visible their own desires— something not often seen or allowed for Black women' in a landscape where 'the opportunity for the expression of Black female desire, and desirability, is scarce'.[143] Warner argues that providing black women with visible romantic lives is a revolutionary act, and also one of the main means by which fanworks confer visibility onto black characters. Fen is both black and queer, meaning that DePass' focus on her relationship with Isolde provide visibility for the kinds of relationships mainstream media and *D&D* usually exclude. Here, DePass is expressing desire through her transformative relationship to the Ravenloft text – in an act of storytelling which is also free of the exoticisation and Othering of the drow relationships described in the Drizzt novels and *Monster Manual.* Ishii gave subjectivity to a monstrous sexual object, and DePass negotiates sexuality on her own terms, rather than those encoded within the primary text.

---

[141] Thomas, p.135, p.122.

[142] Dungeons & Dragons, 'The Banishing Grief Part 2', (2:32:27-2:32:53).

[143] Warner, p.46.

Both Mercer and Ishii approached drow with subversive intent, tackling the racial coding of monstrous races as a theme within their secondary or tertiary text. DePass does not necessarily construct Fen to tackle this theme consciously, though the implicit correlations between placing a drow amongst the 'evil' monstrosities of Ravenloft demonstrates knowing awareness. However, DePass' depiction of Fen is still important and notable. Fen is a performance of a good-aligned drow on an official WotC stream, thus intervening with the original primary text canon without deferring to it, as Mercer did. The performance of a drow woman as a normative subject is important and still unusual, given the demonised status of drow femininity within the primary text. DePass' decision to unapologetically negotiate female sexuality and queerness within her roleplay means that these qualities go from also being objectified as monstrous, to providing meaningful representations of black female subjectivity and experience within *D&D* subculture.

DePass' performance demonstrates an important aspect of experiencing *D&D* through the medium of actual play, which enables gameplay to produce shifts in fantasy genre-culture. In his discussion of how narrative functions within actual play, Anthony David Franklin notes that in a *D&D* livestream, 'the audience member cannot observe the game free of the interpretation of the participant. The audience's focalisation must first pass through the participants as the audience cannot receive the narrative unaltered'.[144] This mediated storytelling informs DePass' recreational act of play: her choice to depict a black woman negotiating desire, monstrosity, and Otherness forces viewers to accommodate these experiences within their understanding of *D&D,* and incorporate her subjectivity into their understanding of fantasy. This experience is then promoted and publicised by WotC, lending it canonical validity, especially as *BDS* was a stream designed to advertise and augment viewer understanding of the new *Ravenloft* module. As Franklin states, this module is thus partially filtered through DePass, who has been given status as an authority. Via actual play, the audience experiences horror, fantasy, and its associated tropes through a subjectivity the game has previously Othered, and gains a degree of empathy for DePass' lived experience.

---

[144] Anthony David Franklin, 'Communal Narrative in Actual Play Environments: roles of participants, observers and their intersections', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.74-86 (p.82).

When discussing the *D&D* primary text earlier, I noted that the presumed universality encoded therein can often by uncritically replicated by players, particularly if their lived experience is accommodated by the text: e.g. if they are of a similarly white, male, or conservative background to the primary authors and game designers. If a player did challenge or amend these rules, this was often private. Yet in contrast to both of these positions, diverse casting within actual play means audiences may experience a narrative filtered through a set of values or lived experienced that was once alien to them. Through the promotion of secondary and tertiary voices, whose subversive readings were typically reserved for individual tables, actual play not only demonstrates but enhances *D&D*'s ability to actively diversify fantasy genre-culture, as the multiplicity of perspectives on fantasy *D&D* has always encouraged are now publicised.

Through a focus on diverse casting, WotC alters its own brand appearance to create a more inclusive and marketable product. Yet it also allows the transformative interventions of players, and marginalised players in particular, to make a meaningful impact on fantasy genre-culture at large. These players' interpretations decentralise the primary text, shifting focus away from legacy content and its outdated understandings of race. Actual play also shifts public perceptions of the default *D&D* player away from the white male subject implicitly encoded within the primary text rules. Both narrative choices and player visibility serve as meaningful interventions, which disrupt the pervasive distinctions of the Self and Other within *D&D* and within fantasy as a whole.

Conclusion

D&D's treatment of race is one extreme example of how the game text condenses down genre convention. However, my examination of how drow are represented and performed within the game system demonstrates how these rules are not always followed. Players and

DMs become increasingly critical of genre convention and produce diverse transformative responses as a result.

The *D&D* primary text encoded race as a presumed 'universal' convention of fantasy into its rubrics, reflecting the white male lens through which the game and mainstream understandings of fantasy genre-culture have been filtered. However, making what Young termed the racist 'habits' of textual fantasy legible as a 'rule' of the fantasy universe gives players something to react against. The transformative interpretations secondary and tertiary authors have of race are often subversive, because fantasy's conceptions of race are politically charged. This particularly inflexible aspect of the primary text does not accommodate variation, and is hostile to marginalised subjectivities. Even a simple transformative act of play can invert the primary text. The subversive potential of secondary and tertiary texts is evidenced in the fact that, once given visibility and prominence through actual play, they were proven capable of overturning convention, triggering revisions within the primary text itself in 2020.

D&D's expression of race as statistics intensified stereotyping already present within fantasy, and distilled it into immutable law. This understanding of race is not unique to *D&D*, but reflects characteristics of major, formative works in the fantasy canon. For instance, in the 'The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto', Mills critiqued the 'racially-structured *character* of Tolkien's universe', noting 'the evaluation of moral, aesthetic, and social worth by race'.[145] This is then perpetuated in the world of *D&D.* Racist conventions are not unique to the game, but instead reflects its cumulative relationship to the textual practices of wider fantasy genre-culture. However, the chosen requirements of *D&D's* narrative structure – such as the centrality of combat to story and game progression – means that fantasy's problematic characterisation of Thomas' 'Dark Other' as 'the obstacle to be overcome' is stripped of what little nuance it already held.[146] *D&D's* gamification of fantasy means that such obstacles *must* be present. The primary text marked several races as automatically evil to facilitate combat, and their 'evil' was often then connected to presumed savage customs, or dark skin. *D&D's* conventions fed back into gaming and literature, contributing actively to the 'habits of Whiteness' which Young states permeate fantasy genre-culture.[147]

---

[145] Mills, pp.107-111.
[146] Thomas, p.23.
[147] Young, p.10.

This intensification of genre convention into 'laws' of existence within a fantasy world can trigger revisionist, transformative responses from DMs and players, as secondary and tertiary authors. This is seen in the case of drow, whose liminal positioning in the primary text between Self and Other encouraged sympathetic readings. Despite parallels between drow dark skin and drow's supposed evil, expressed through the tropes of Orientalism and sexual perversity, multiple authors have attempted to create 'good' drow. When presented with an equation within the primary text between blackness and evil, a 'Dark Other', some players choose to critically address and rewrite these conventions, dismantling the existing web of associations or deconstructing its ties to evil. In the examples discussed within this chapter, secondary and tertiary authors have chosen to either revise the primary text entirely, shift its focalisation and thus challenge the dominant perspective within fantasy, or use these examples of dark-skinned individuals as a way of representing their own experience. Players create narratives that acknowledge rather than demonise black femininity and black female desire, representing perspectives on fantasy outside those that the primary text enshrines as normative. All three approaches demonstrate a frustration with the conventions of fantasy, and a desire to remake them into something that expresses a wider breadth of experience.

Actual play shows provide textual evidence of this phenomenon, where individual players utilise the language and imagery of fantasy to challenge canonical tradition and create new narratives. Actual play also provides a powerful platform for such narratives to achieve greater status and impact within fantasy genre-culture. While secondary and tertiary authors may have always privately created fanworks that critique and subvert the 'universal' conventions of fantasy that do not fit them personally, now these narratives are recorded, published, and publicised. In the same way the primary text mediates people's interactions with fantasy through a false 'universal', actual play mediates the experience of *D&D* through multiple, distinct secondary and tertiary author texts, returning it once again to multiplicity. As Franklin states, 'the audience's focalisation must first pass through the participants'.[148] Therefore, when *D&D* is produced and consumed in this manner, particularly with an emphasis on diverse casting, the multiple transformative perspectives on fantasy that *D&D* enables are forcibly acknowledged. This is even more true if they are assigned canonical weight, as with DePass and *BDS'* endorsement by WotC.

---

[148] Franklin, p.82.

Actual play has altered Hammer's authorship model. Secondary and tertiary voices have more authority, and the ability to sway perceptions of not just individual games but the game product as a whole. This in turn has an impact on fantasy genre-culture, which *D&D* contributes to and encapsulates. Actual play evidences that the canonical, white male authority typically represented within the primary text is not applicable to all players or consumers of fantasy. The canon must therefore change to accommodate these perspectives, as demonstrated by WotC's own statement of apology.

This new ability of empowered secondary and tertiary voices to overturn the primary text, and thus the fantasy canon, is also demonstrated by recent developments in Salvatore's *The Legend of Drizzt*. While the early novels analysed here showcased the presumed universality of a white Self, this is no longer the case for the series' most recent instalments. In 2021 – a year after WotC's own statement regarding the dismantling of racist tropes – Salvatore also announced changes to the canon in the *Drizzt* series, to be incorporated into the latest novel, *The Starlight Enclave* (2021), and the associated videogame product *Dark Alliance*. As part of a promotional event called the 'Summer of Drizzt', Salvatore and WotC announced three new 'types' of drow. The 'udadrow', the canonically evil Underdark-dwelling race, was placed upon a new spectrum alongside 'lorendrow' and 'aevendrow', creating a moral variation that did not previously exist within the Forgotten Realms' canon.[149] This revision and canonical retcon placed drow into a spectrum of morality, rather than confining them solely to the role of Dark Other. WotC's article cataloguing and confirming the changes states: 'the phrase "Forgotten Realms" has never seemed so apt, as broader drow society reveals itself from the shadows'.[150] In response to calls for diversity and multiplicity, *D&D's* embodiment of fantasy becomes 'broader', more accommodating to players of colour and other marginalised individuals they admit they have 'forgotten'.

In interviews, Salvatore himself noted the importance of secondary and tertiary voices in implementing these changes. He acknowledges the impact of *D&D* players on fantasy literature, stating:

---

[149] Wizards of the Coast, 'Beyond the Underdark: Secrets of the Drow', *Dragon+*, Issue 37, (2021), https://dnd.dragonmag.com/2021/05/21/beyond-the-underdark-secrets-of-the-drow/content.html, [Accessed: 26-03-24].

[150] 'Beyond the Underdark', para.1.

> I can't tell you how many letters I've gotten over the years, from people who have said, 'Thank you for Drizzt […] I finally have someone who looks like me.' On the one hand, you have that. But on the other hand, if the drow are being portrayed as evil, that's a trope that has to go away, be buried under the deepest pit, and never brought out again. I was unaware of that. I admit it. I was oblivious.[151]

Salvatore confesses to being 'oblivious', blinkered by the presumed universality that was encoded within *D&D's* primary text and reflected his own lived experience as a white man. However, he states that the transformative responses readers and players have had towards Drizzt and the drow must now be honoured within his own microcosm of fantasy genre-culture. Salvatore goes on to claim, 'I am not retrofitting or retconning the drow. I am expanding the drow': 'I did it because it's the right thing to do'.[152] If *D&D* acts as a means of chronicling and condensing ideas surrounding fantasy into one resource, this resource can be 'expanded'. It does not need to merely encode one dominant perspective, but can encompass the multiplicity of narratives enabled by the game system.

Secondary and tertiary authors now have a demonstrated power to challenge and alter the primary text which they are responding to, enabled in part through actual play. Changing the primary text also challenges the fantasy genre-culture that primary text emulates. The transformative responses towards *D&D*'*s* rules exposes the flaws of the conventions of fantasy encoded therein, which are actively hostile to certain readers and consumers. Even non-marginalised secondary and tertiary authors are able to critically assess these texts and see the need for revisions. As textual fantasy makes efforts towards diversity and decolonisation, *D&D* can aid in that effort by dismantling the literary conventions that were once seen as so universal that they became immutable game law.

---

[151] R.A. Salvatore, quoted Charlie Hall, 'D&D's Drizzt books were built on racist tropes. R.A. Salvatore wants to change that', *Polygon*, 3 August 2021, https://www.polygon.com/22585687/dungeons-dragons-r-a-salvatore-drizzt-black-controversy-race-interview, para.12.

[152] Salvatore, 'Drizzt books were built on racist tropes', para.3-16.

Chapter Five: 'The Summer of Aabria' – Communal Authorship and Authority in Actual Play Franchises

Previous chapters of this thesis have conducted close readings of actual play shows to evidence how *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* facilitates transformative responses to fantasy genre-culture. This chapter aims to address the effects actual play itself has had on *D&D's* positioning within that genre-culture. This chapter examines how perceptions of authorship within *D&D* reflect its growing cultural capital and its newfound value as an original artform with its own incipient canon. However, when fans and viewers attempt to distinguish *D&D* actual play through employing a model of singular authorship, auteurship, or the 'author genius', this does not accurately reflect the realities of collaborative play. Instead, actual play shows rely on multiple authors, and this fact was extended into their production format through franchising. This chapter discusses the ongoing negotiation of authority and author celebrity within *D&D* actual play. It proposes an authorship model that acknowledges the increasing status of *D&D's* secondary and tertiary texts, without sacrificing the reality that these texts are often communally created and shared. Utilising Derek Johnson's model of 'difference and deference' within media franchises, I examine what the period known as 'the Summer of Aabria' tells us about the unique affordances of a communal storytelling model such as *D&D.*[1]

Actual play media – 'the live streaming or recording of people playing roleplaying games, to be consumed by others in the form of videos and/or podcasts' – has had a positive impact on *D&D's* mainstream visibility, as well as its importance and perceived value to fantasy genre-culture. As Shelly Jones notes, 'we live in a golden age of tabletop roleplaying games'. 'No longer are players hiding away in their parents' basement' – instead, many groups broadcast their gameplay, which has also resulted in more people playing *D&D*, and more people valuing those who play it skilfully.[2] Jones' statement emphasises a move from private to public: *D&D* texts are no longer 'hidden'. With their audiences of thousands and in some cases millions, actual play texts and their authors can now attain celebrity status and cultural capital, where once this was not an aspiration held by players.

---

[1] Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), p.23.

[2] Shelly Jones, 'Introduction', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.5-18, (p.5).

The advent of actual play media, as well as the growing transmedial franchises around certain streams, means that *D&D* now has increased cultural capital, not just in terms of its popularity but its perceived artistic merit. While *D&D* may never achieve the cultural prestige of 'high art', its repackaging as official media opens it up to what Pierre Bourdieu terms 'strategies of distinction': 'which consist in asserting the power […] to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode'.[3] The secondary and tertiary texts actual play produces are seen by their growing audiences as authentic, original works in their own right, overturning previous perceptions of *D&D* as derivative, sourceless, and made to a generic 'recipe'.[4]

One way this new capital is demonstrated is through efforts by audiences and media platforms to transform players – Dungeon Masters (DMs) in particular – into author figures. A growing discourse surrounding authority reflects the game's ascendent position within fantasy genre-culture. As discussed in previous chapters, actual play shifts the balance of power between the three authorities Jessica Hammer identifies within a TRPG text. Recorded gameplay means that all three authors – primary, secondary, and tertiary – are published and publicly recognised: not just the primary text. 'Secondary authors' (DMs) and 'tertiary authors' (players) can now publish and perform their texts to wide audiences, meaning that these authorities have a greater impact upon fantasy genre-culture than was previously thought. [5] Actual play also produces a self-conscious relationship to authority within the player, as the presence of an audience requires them to conceive of their own player text as something to be read, interpreted, and consumed.

However, actual play's investment in secondary and tertiary authors extends beyond simple broadcasting: audiences and fans seek to establish a canon of 'authorities' within the *D&D* subcultural community. Audiences particularly emphasise the role of the secondary author, presenting DMs of influential streams as singular, guiding authorities or 'auteur' figures. As with historical deployments of the ‘author genius’ ideal in literature, and auteurism across film and television, this discourse reflects a desire to distinguish *D&D* as a serious artform. It exemplifies *D&D’s* increased cultural capital, and its shifting position within fantasy genre-culture – from the extreme practice of the immersed fan to a professional source of original fiction from talented, skilled creators.

---

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p.279.

[4] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.10.

[5] Jessica Hammer, 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp.67-94 (p.70).

While demonstrating that *D&D* and fantasy TRPGs have themselves gained creative legitimacy, traditional appeals to authenticity and a recourse to auteurism do not provide an accurate model through which to analyse *D&D*. While this lens secures the game’s cultural capital, it ignores the many affordances of collaborative storytelling, and thus paradoxically erases the uniqueness of *D&D’s* contribution to fantasy genre-culture. Instead of focusing on a single author as the site of creative ingenuity and ultimate artistic value, it is more productive to focus on the functions of playful, shared, communal storytelling. This chapter utilises Johnson’s concept ‘difference and deference’ and reapplies it to the context of actual play, in order to demonstrate the importance of preserving *D&D’s* communal model of authorship even as its cultural capital increases.[6]

To illustrate these overlapping concerns, this chapter examines the ‘Summer of Aabria’, a period in 2021 in which professional tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) performer Aabria Iyengar became the guest presenter of multiple high-profile *D&D* streams, including *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*. The Summer of Aabria represents a tipping point for *D&D* and actual play: both *Critical Role* and *Dimension* 20 became established enough to survive the creative decision of franchising, extending their authority beyond their core players and their typical DMs. Both shows took a risk by detaching their platform’s growing fame and canonical status from the singular figure of their secondary author: Matthew Mercer and Brennan Lee Mulligan respectively. Iyengar’s involvement in these streams initially caused disruption. Although her introduction highlighted the desire for shared authority amongst *D&D* practitioners, her reception by fans demonstrated which secondary authors were trusted and invested in by the community. The desire for an auteur figure was inflected by long-held biases in favour of white male authorities within gaming and fantasy subculture.

The Summer of Aabria stages a negotiation of authority within *D&D* actual play. I will examine firstly how auteurship is utilised by fans to reflect the more official position *D&D* now holds within fantasy genre-culture, reframing *D&D* narratives as a legitimate artform. I will then examine this discourse's shortfalls when applied to TRPGs, as practitioners advocate for communal sharing over singular and sole narrative control. Examining TRPG actual play through a collaborative model better aids in understanding the affordances of the actual play medium. I therefore examine two case studies from the Summer of Aabria – *Critical Role's Exandria Unlimited* and *Dimension 20's Misfits and Magic* – using Johnson's discussion of communal authorship in media franchises to show how shared authority reshapes and makes new meanings within fantasy genre-culture. To use Johnson's terms, actual play emphasises 'open difference' over 'hierarchical deference.'[7] The multiplicity of individual meanings TRPGs can facilitate is valued by DMs – who choose to share authority over their worlds – above a single, unitary narrative. Actual play represents a franchise model without what Johnson terms the 'containment of […] potential by binding creativity within expectations of unity and univocality'.[8] By emphasising plurality, in both authorship and those permitted to hold authority, TRPGs can continue to be a space where transformative and subversive readings of fantasy's conventions are produced, even as these games depart from the amateur sphere.

---

[6] Johnson, p.23.

Aabria Iyengar and 'The Summer of Aabria'

Aabria Iyengar is a US-based TRPG player and performer who began her streaming career in 2019 as the DM of *Pirates of Salt Bay*. The majority of her performance credits centre around 2020-2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftershocks. Following her appearance as a player in *Dimension 20: Pirates of Leviathan* in 2020, alongside Matthew Mercer as player and Brennan Lee Mulligan as DM, Iyengar then DMed campaigns for both shows in 2021: *Critical Role: Exandria Unlimited* (*EXU*) and *Dimension 20: Misfits and Magic* (*M&M*). Her sudden rise to prominence, and her unexpected management of these high-profile streams, resulted in this period becoming known as the 'Summer of Aabria', a phrase coined by *Dimension 20's* press release and used extensively in social media coverage.[9] While

---

[7] Johnson, p.23.

[8] Johnson, p.150.

[9] Dimension 20 (@dimension20show), 'Between @CriticalRole, her role as Koseh on @MotherlandsRPG, @dimension20show, and the multitude of other projects she's working on, we're officially declaring this the Summer of Aabria.' Twitter.com, 16 June 2021, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1405212381555400711.

Iyengar's actual play work is extensive, this chapter focuses the Summer of Aabria as a period of particular significance.[10]

Iyengar's appointment to the role of secondary author was a landmark moment for both actual play productions. Iyengar's introduction marked the first attempt by both shows to franchise their content. Having now developed strong audiences and substantial brand recognition, both *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* experimented with detaching their content from the secondary authors they were known for.[11] For *Dimension 20*, *M&M* was the first time a campaign or side-quest was run by someone other than Mulligan, who is often framed as the face of the show (see Figure 8). In the case of *Critical Role*, *EXU* was not only the first campaign to be managed by someone outside the core 'cast', but also the first time Exandria – Mercer's own imaginary world – was authored by someone other than Mercer himself.

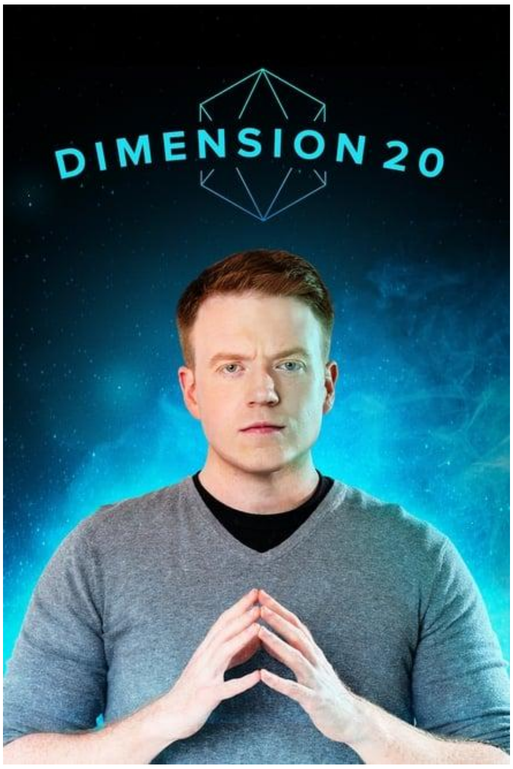


Figure 8: Promotional image of *Dimension 20.* Promotional images following 2021 have since positioned Mulligan amongst other players and GMs. *Dimension 20*, IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9646546/.

---

[10] One notable credit includes *Into the Motherlands* (2020-), a crowd-funded actual play show and game system built by exclusively by game designers of colour to imagine an 'brighter, blacker', Afrofuturist future.

[11] Motivations for this are unclear, but certainly included sustainability – both series managing growing popularity, burgeoning workloads, and pandemic burnout, as well as testing longer term business models, as these media products begin to expand beyond their pre-existing format.

Roles within TRPGs are structured as theoretically interchangeable, with anyone capable of being a secondary author at any table, managing any imaginary world. However, actual play up until this point functioned slightly differently, with both *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* often relying on the subcultural capital of Mulligan and Mercer to guarantee audience enjoyment. Investment in individual authors is inflected with a parasocial element: audiences' interest in these two men and their relationships to others at the table was encouraged. Julia J.C. Blau notes that in actual play, 'the personalities of the *players* are nearly as important as the personalities of the *characters* when it comes to viewer enjoyment'.[12]

A celebrity DM's status conflates several kinds of capital. A celebrity DM holds a large amount of 'subcultural capital', as defined by Sarah Thornton, determined in part by their media exposure as some of *D&D's* most visible practitioners, who then set trends in what players expect, respect, or aspire to within a *D&D* game.[13] They hold 'fan social capital' as defined by Matt Hills: they hold more professional connections – literalised through their being supported by media companies such as dropout.tv and Amazon (in the case of *Critical Role*) – and are also most well-known by other fans.[14] They also embody the pinnacle of 'gaming capital' as defined by Mia Consalvo: these players' perceived skill and knowledge of paratextual lore is used to validate the high amounts of other capital they hold.[15] This has now become overlaid with ideals surrounding creative and authorial genius, appealing to traditional notions of cultural capital as well. The Summer of Aabria disrupted viewers' understanding of authorship, removing two high-profile author figures from their habitual position. The choice of Iyengar as their replacement also made a potentially disruptive statement about authority, by investing a marginalised female and relatively unknown creator with the same authority as the show's established male hosts.

This contest of authority and power was literalised on screen: while Iyengar took her place as secondary author/DM, Mercer and Mulligan did not relinquish authorship entirely. They instead moved into the role of player/tertiary author: Mercer as Dariax in *EXU*, and Mulligan as Evan Kelmp in *M&M*. Their presence at the table ensured marketability, while both securing and complicating the legitimacy of Iyengar's text. Although Iyengar was given a position of authority, the show's original 'authors' were also there. Iyengar's authorship earned visibly enthusiastic support from both of them, but this endorsement was particularly valued because of how they are framed as the main authorities on these shows. While both men visibly approve, endorse, and defend Iyengar's work, their presence enforced the sense that they were benchmarks against which she should be measured.

---

[12] Julia J.C. Blau, 'Birth of a New Medium or Just Bad TV? Framing and Fractality of Actual Play', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.32-54 (p.34).

[13] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p.11.

[14] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.30.

[15] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p.3.

While the Summer of Aabria succeeded in securing Iyengar's position within *D&D* subculture, this period is important as it was one of the first instances where this new field of media experimented with format, making key choices about how to develop actual play going forward. It is an important case study for understanding how authority and authorship function within the TRPG space, as this was openly negotiated and disputed by both viewers and practitioners, not simply taken for granted. As an act of franchising, the experimental aspect of the Summer of Aabria implies a new stability in actual play that makes such risky creative decisions possible. The Summer of Aabria is a moment of discomfort that arises from attempts to define authority within TRPGs and actual play. Crucially, it demonstrates which features and unique affordances of *D&D* hold value for practitioners when it becomes an official part of fantasy genre-culture.

***D&D*, Authorship, and Authority**

Fantasy TRPGs' position and value relative to fantasy genre-culture is partially determined through their relationship to authority and authorship. In Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy,* which defined the fantasy genre as a 'fuzzy set', with a singular author – J.R.R. Tolkien – at the perceived centre, authorship (and lack thereof) is one measure for fantasy's artistic merit, which leaves fantasy TRPGs on the outskirts.[16]

Attebery states that 'fantasy-as-formula […] is essentially a commercial product, with particular authors or publishers' lines serving as brand names for the consumer'.[17] While I will later discuss how DM names do serve as branding for actual play, Attebery's statement divorces the majority of formula fantasy from 'true' authorship, which is associated with originality, authenticity, and artistry. Attebery claims the 'redeeming feature' of formula fantasy is ‘it may serve as an apprenticeship for the literary artist’.[18] To Attebery, formula fantasy is otherwise authorless, producing brands rather than canonical authors, proving ‘predictable’ enough that anyone could write it. This profitable, commercially-driven authorship is then juxtaposed against the traditional qualities of a true author genius signified by Tolkien. Attebery treats Tolkien as the pinnacle of fantasy, centred within the ‘fuzzy set’ as the definitive example of quality and form.

---

[16] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy,* p.14.

[17] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy,* p.2.

When discussing the authorlessness of fantasy-as-formula, Attebery perceives TRPGs to be one of its worst extremes. He notes that ‘formula fantasy can be very predictable indeed. It has even spun off a do-it-yourself variation in the fantasy roleplaying game’. According to Attebery, ‘in such games, players follow a sort of recipe for collaboratively ‘writing’ fantasy stories’ – literary authorship is applied then dismissed in the same breath through the use of quotation marks to qualify what he considers to be ‘writing’.[19] A ‘recipe’ for fiction implies inauthenticity and replicability, suggesting TRPGs will produce the same results each time. As proven in the previous chapters, this is untrue: even when working collaboratively, all authors play as individuals, bringing their own unique contexts to the table. Attebery uses ‘variation’ to mean ‘derivative’ or ‘replicant’, not considering that ‘variation’ also implies difference being produced in this subcultural space. Attebery views fantasy TTRPG texts or primary texts as sourceless, not produced by authors but derived from ‘formula’, comprising the popular consensus of what genre means. The focus on formula – and collaboration as a manifestation of the mindless popular majority, not an ongoing negotiation of multiple meanings – trumps the potential authorial agency ‘do-it-yourself’ might impart for any individual consumer. Attebery admits that roleplaying games constitute an act of writing, but does not treat them as an act of authorship.

Attebery defines TRPGs through their amateur, collaborative nature, and use of rubrics as instructional prompts. Neither is inherently antithetical to creativity, but both contradict the ideals of authorship which *Strategies of Fantasy,* as a work aiming to impart literary merit to fantasy, is invested in. When advocating for fantasy as a worthy field of study, Attebery appeals to the aesthetics of ‘serious’ literature, including the author as an individual, and individuated figure of genius. Roland Barthes described this ideal as the Author or Author God: ‘a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as […] it discovered the prestige of the individual’, ‘the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author'.[20] In his dismantling of this construct, Barthes hypothesises its value in academic fields: 'such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author […] when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic'.[21] While Barthes argues against this critical approach generally, here I wish to note his use of the definite article. Author-led criticism valorises 'the Author' in the singular: one individual artist who controls meaning, and functions as a solitary source of creativity. In contrast, fantasy TRPG campaigns and their source texts are typically communal projects, collaboratively authored and thus lying outside of the framework criticism has assigned value.

---

[18] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy,* p.11.
[19] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy,* p.9-10.

Strategies of Fantasy advocates for fantasy as a genre and seeks to establish it as a field of study: TRPGs which democratise authorship and are to some extent 'authorless' do not serve Attebery's purpose. They aren't perceived as 'good' fantasy, because they are antithetical to Attebery's intent in this academic work: the defence of fantasy as serious literature worthy of study. Attebery's act of distinction is formulated within the traditional parameters of literary merit, which invest value and canonical weight in the figure of the author.

In 'What Is An Author?', Michel Foucault similarly addresses how 'the author's' representation 'as a genius' is deployed to inflect a literary work and its analysis with worth and meaning: 'critics doubtless try to give this being of reason a realistic status, by discerning, in the individual, a 'deep' motive, a 'creative' power, or a 'design', the milieu in which writing originates'.[22] When applied to *D&D* and other TRPGs, this pre-existing conception of individuated authorship results in dismissal – TRPG texts are communal endeavours, but also improvised and thus might lack 'a deep motive' or 'design'. Even when players hold pre-established intent for their character, or a DM has designed story-beats for their campaign, the extent to which this is visible within the collaborative weave of narrative is always in part dictated by momentary impulse and chance. Where outcomes are determined by dice rolls, multiple possibilities exist and must be prepared for at once, undermining the logical design that underpins the author-as-genius.

---

[20] Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.142-148 (pp.142-143).
[21] Barthes, p.147.
[22] Michel Foucault, 'What Is An Author', in *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology,* ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp.205-222 (p.221, p.213).

Foucault also argues that ‘the author is […] the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning’.[23] The authority of a singular author provides a work with ‘deep’ meaning and creative worth. However, in the case of TRPGs, this automatically comes at the expense of the ‘proliferation of meaning[s]’ produced by every player at the table and every member of the subcultural community. Attempting to fit TRPGs into a single-author model erases the textual variations produced by different combinations of secondary and tertiary authors even when they are creating the same text, and is thus a hierarchical act that diminishes the work and worth of other authors at the table.

In the reception of Aabria Iyengar during the Summer of Aabria, assumptions of value were disrupted when these high-profile shows were detached from the model of a singular author genius. Reactions from audiences also reflected the degree to which viewers ‘fear[ed] the proliferation of meaning’. Not only was Iyengar’s secondary text a deviation from what had come before, her identity as a queer woman of colour challenged traditional assignations of subcultural capital within TRPGs and actual play.

No Longer ‘Secondary’ Authors: DMs as Auteurs

Authorship in *D&D* is inherently collaborative. Secondary and tertiary authors collectively mediate a narrative and an imaginary world, abiding by and/or reacting to its establishment within the primary text. As discussed in previous chapters, subversive readings of the primary text can be generated by any player at the table regardless of their role, but meaning is only sustained if it has the buy-in of other authors at the table and across Hammer’s hierarchy. Certain authors may have more power than others, based on their positioning, how much they exercise authorial agency, and what Hammer terms their ‘implicit authority’ – the power determined by ‘social relations’ and interpersonal dynamics at the table.[24] However, no singular author can dictate all the events of a TRPG narrative independently. If a tertiary author wishes to subvert a scenario proposed by the secondary author or the primary text, this often requires the approval of the DM, who must be willing to accommodate resistant readings. Similarly, if a DM wishes the narrative to unfold in a particular direction, they can only do so with the proactive endorsement of tertiary authors and their characters; otherwise, they open themselves up to accusations of 'railroading'.[25] Hammer noted that 'narratively speaking, authority is constantly shared among game participants in various ways at different moments in play'.[26] She also stated that players 'found inspiration in responsiveness rather than in agentic control', implying that many players enjoy moments where authority is a dialogue negotiated between multiple people, rather than an act of dictation by any lone individual.[27]

---

[23] Foucault, p.222.

[24] Hammer, p.84.

However, actual play audiences' wish to both reflect and secure *D&D's* increased cultural capital has warped this reality, as the more passive act of viewing reframes TRPG narratives as fixed texts to be consumed, rather than dynamic narratives actively negotiated in real time. In *Strategies of Fantasy,* Attebery was dismissive of 'authorless' collaborative texts. Mark J.P. Wolf has noted the same tendency amongst fans and more recreational enthusiasts. Wolf states that, despite imaginary worlds often being 'not only transmedial and transnarrative, but transauthorial as well', audiences often seek to ground that world within a single creator. He believes this impulse arises out of a 'desire for authenticity from the point of view of the audience', in which 'the author is considered the true source of world material, the creative vision that makes it a unified experience'.[28]

Singular authorship is deployed as a defence of quality, but may also legitimise an emotive response, and operate as a means for understanding a text in its entirety. Audiences of imaginary worlds mimic the assumptions of models present within the academy, demonstrating what Matt Hills terms the presumed 'morality' of cultural capital: 'the assumption that cultural capital is unquestionably 'good', and that more is unquestionably socially and culturally better'.[29] Securing cultural capital through traditional interpretive models – not just an observance of aesthetic distance, but the application of interpretative models that carry notions of prestige – can reframe the object of a fan's interest as worthy, and their means of understanding and explaining it as correct.

---

[25] 'railroading', *urbandictionary.com,* (10 March 2013), https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=railroading.

[26] Hammer, p.82.

[27] Hammer, p.79.

[28] Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp.269-271.

[29] Hills, p.23.

Reflecting the perception of fantasy TRPGs' increased artistic merit, audiences have now begun to distinguish singular author figures within the sphere of TRPG actual play. Most of this interest congregates around the secondary author, or DM. During the Summer of Aabria, feelings of disruption illustrated how audiences treated the DM as the source of a campaign's 'creative vision', its leading authority, and its auteur. Such assignations of prestige are also felt as a pressure by practitioners, when they become treated as the 'true source' and sole subcreator within an imaginary world.

I have chosen to term DMs 'auteurs' when discussing this phenomenon, as auteur theory emphasises the role of the creator as 'an artist whose personality or personal creative vision could be read, thematically and stylistically, across their body of work'.[30] Auteurship acknowledges the role of personality within a DM's secondary authorship, as well as DMing's overlap with certain directorial functions, including the logistical management of multiple stakeholders in the social frame, and the facilitation of plot, setting, tone, and NPCs, leaving the DM with arguably the most 'complete' – although not total – understanding of an imaginary world. Auteurship carries the implications of increased cultural capital present in the author genius, but using this term emphasises its detrimental function within a collaborative medium, in which the canonisation of an individual creator ignores or elides the collaborative process of creation present within TV and film. Similarly, assigning authority to the DM/GM within *D&D's* authorship model is done to the detriment of the tertiary authors.

Fan discussions often attempt to reframe the DM as a singular author. When discussing *Critical Role's* impact on *D&D* subculture, for instance, audiences often use the term 'The Mercer Effect', named after DM Matthew Mercer. The Mercer Effect describes unrealistic expectations placed on recreational *D&D* to 'have the same level of quality as the famous D&D stream' with *Critical Role's* 'level of immersive roleplay, fleshed-out world-building, drama, set design, etc'.[31] It reflects anxieties around the professionalisation of a previously amateur hobby, but the phrase demonstrates how audiences perceive Mercer as the show's sole authority. The term implies *Critical Role's* quality results solely from Mercer, rather than from a combination of the entire cast and the efforts of the production team. While terming these standards 'unrealistic', fan discourse still frames the DM as auteur, situating Mercer as one of the first canonical figures of this subcultural community. Fans' use of Mercer's name to signify quality within actual play mimics Attebery's use of Tolkien as the centre of fantasy's fuzzy set in *Strategies of Fantasy*.

---

[30] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, 'authorship (auteur theory, *la politique des auteurs*)', *A Dictionary of Film Studies,* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[31] Dylan Beckbessinger, 'Surviving the Mercer effect', *The DnD Geek,* 4 August 2021, https://thedndgeek.co.uk/surviving-the-mercer-effect, para.2.

Critical Role: Exandria Unlimited (EXU) was thus a unique disruption of authority. The 'Exandria' of its title refers to Mercer's imaginary world – meaning that authority over both the game and his secondary text was being shared with another. In a retrospective discussion of *EXU*, one question put to Iyengar summarises the issue: 'What was it like playing in the sandbox that is Exandria, and […] having the person who created it at the table with you?', to which she replies, 'exciting and horrifying'.[32] In the opening of *EXU,* Iyengar jokingly states: 'Hey Matt, look at me, I'm in your chair!', implying that within actual play, the secondary author role was not yet easily detachable from the person who traditionally carried it.[33]

The new prestige assigned to the secondary author role was also discussed by Mulligan and Iyengar in their own retrospective look at the Summer of Aabria. In Mulligan's discussion show, *Adventuring Academy*, they stated the following:

> **Iyengar**: I think that was my biggest fear [during this period] was like all of the pressure of it was you have to get it right so that people know you care enough about it to be in this space too […] Once you pass the threshold of like they know you know the world enough and now you can like, do something new and say something interesting in the space. It took me a long time to like get there and get to that point of […] hey, you got it, you're here for a reason […]
>
> **Mulligan:** […] I can't tell you how much I empathise with that because… you make the first couple of seasons of *Dimension 20*, you make *Fantasy High*, and when you're making *Fantasy High* you're just some fucking guy making *Fantasy High* and then you get to a year or two later and now it's like 'oh I have to make a season of *Dimension 20*' because in the interim it became something. [*sic.*][34]

---

[32] Critical Role, 'Exandria Unlimited Wrap-Up', *YouTube.com,* 30 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFSO0IuBrnw&list=PL1tiwbzkOjQzSnYHVT8X4pyMIbSX3i4gz&index=11&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (11:43-12:00).

[33] Critical Role, 'The Nameless Ones | Exandria Unlimited | Episode 1', *YouTube.com,* 28 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ijPD6yNdMs&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (0:57-0:59).

[34] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy: Blight, Plants, Birds, and Almonds (with Aabria Iyengar)', dropout.tv, 22 Feb 2023, https://www.dropout.tv/adventuring-academy/season:4/videos/blight-plants-birds-and-almonds-with-aabria-iyengar, (3:16-4:36).

While both DMs identify new ‘pressure’ on the secondary author as an artistic and creative figure in actual play media, their positioning relative to this new form of cultural capital is different. For Mulligan, the new value of secondary authorship is felt as the pressure of an established auteur, whose name and works have earned him recognition: ‘in the interim, it became something’. He is no longer ‘just some fucking guy’, but holds canonical prestige as the figurehead of *Dimension 20.* Mulligan experiences a growing pressure to deliver on the prestige he has been assigned. Meanwhile, Iyengar’s relationship with authority is gatekept and contested: for her, the pressure is that of stepping into a secondary author role that seemingly belongs to someone else. She describes the feeling of being tested – a conviction that she needs to ‘get it right’ and ‘know […] enough’ in order to prove her worth. Unlike Mulligan – who transitioned from amateur to professional while barely noticing – she first needs to be considered an author, before she can ‘do something new’ or ‘say something interesting’.

This distinction, and the gendered lines upon which it is drawn, has been observed in female experiences of fan spaces, but also throughout female negotiations with authority. In their literary analysis of female writers, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that ‘the “anxiety of influence” that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary “anxiety of authorship” – a radical fear that she cannot create’. This anxiety is ‘exacerbated by her fear that […] [she cannot] fight a male precursor on ‘his’ terms and win’.[35] Iyengar articulates a similar pressure when taking over both *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20.* The TRPG sphere is now established enough to generate both types of ‘anxiety’ Gilbert and Gubar identified in the literary field. These anxieties mimic the differentials in subcultural capital that secondary authors are beginning to operate on, although these distinctions are determined by viewers and audiences, not the authors themselves. By allotting prestige of authorship and/or auteurship to the DM, viewers exacerbate existing power differentials between different author figures – resulting in a perceived pressure for practitioners, and the sense of an incipient canon amongst fans.

Both the marketing of the ‘Summer of Aabria’ – which itself invests significance in the secondary author by placing Iyengar front and centre – and the reactions by fans against it demonstrated the degree to which DMs are now treated as ‘auteurs’. Discussions of this period demonstrate how viewers attempt to articulate the change in format as a statement on authorship, and in some cases justify their discomfort using the lens of auteurism and authority.

---

[35] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p.48-49.

Some fans noted that an invitation to both *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* distinguished Iyengar as an author, lending her the cultural capital these shows had attained: 'the fact that two of the biggest DND shows if not THE biggest DND shows both decided to have @quiddie dm for them […] If there were any worries about aabria dming. Let's squash those now' [*sic*].[36] If authority is tied to branding, the detachment of each show from the singular auteur DM is successful, conferring authority onto Iyengar by proxy. Others see these shows' capital as a means of canon formation: 'y'all are building a pantheon of great dm's' [*sic.*].[37] The image of a 'pantheon', mimicking a literary canon of author gods, shows that the DM is the figure whose skill accumulates renown. Another fan presents an image of a 'Summer of Aabria' tome with the statement: 'Tales from the #SummerOfAabria to be passed down from table to table, found family to found family', mimicking the construction of a literary lineage of singular author figures (see Figure 9).[38]

Meanwhile, backlash against Iyengar's stewardship was often justified as an interpretive position through discussions of actual play's newfound capital, articulated through notions of auteurship. One viewer stated, 'I started out not enjoying it [*EXU*] and I realized it's just because of how "set in stone" I was being about who the dm was on critical role'.[39] While the attachment described might be parasocial investment rather than an artistic critique, it centres on the secondary author as an authority, holding them responsible for the quality of the campaign. In a direct reply to Iyengar's discussion of *EXU*, user '@GoblinBridge' argued, 'I think since it's entertainment you [are] giving money [to] it's fair to voice critiques about pacing and such. […] It's not just someone's home game anymore this is a product.'[40] It is interesting that '@GoblinBridge' mentions the increase in literal capital alongside cultural capital. Unlike Attebery, who treated the profit-motive as inversely proportionate to authenticity in his discussion of fantasy-as-formula, here actual play's profitability and status as a 'product' facilitates its movement from the amateur to professional space, and thus justifies critical analysis by fans. This is perhaps why '@GoblinBridge' critiques the show as 'entertainment', rather than building a canon with those who appealed to literary imagery.

---

[36] 'NoShameNinja' (@NoNameNinja), 'I think the fact that two of the biggest DND shows if not THE biggest DND shows both decided to have @quiddie dm for them and also the fact these shows were announced within a week of one another...If there were any worries about aabria dming. Let's squash those now.', *Twitter.com,* 17 June 2021, https://twitter.com/NoNameNinjaa/status/1405311306597601282.

[37] 'Alphabet Mafioso' (@Coolrazberry), 'Yassss y'all are building a pantheon of great dm's. #SummerOfAabria @quiddie @BrennanLM, *Twitter.com*, 16 June 2021, https://twitter.com/Coolrazberry/status/1405247120999956485.

[38] 'Sam/LotusFlair #BLM (She/Her)' (@darling_sammy), 'Tales from the #SummerOfAabria to be passed down from table to table, found family to found family', *Twitter.com,* 1 July 2021, https://twitter.com/darling_sammy/status/1410681432893050880.

[39] 'Kanta~ (to the top)' (@KantaKuyaTTV), 'I started out not enjoying it and I realized it's just because of how "set in stone" I was being about who the dm was on critical role. I was wrong. You are amazing and bring something new to the table that I didn't even realize I wanted. From a hater turned fan, keep it up.', *Twitter.com*, 14 August 2021, https://twitter.com/KantaKuyaTTV/status/1426640932816949249.

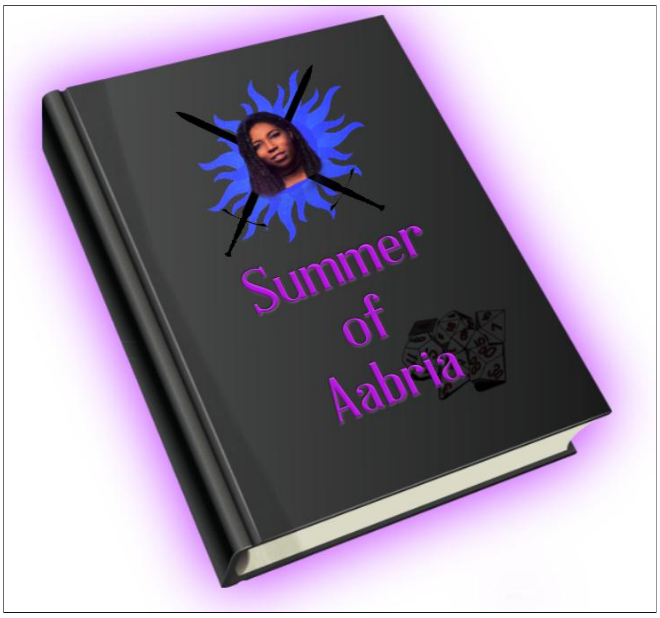


Figure 9: Photoshopped mock-up of *Summer of Aabria* 'Tome' by 'Sam/LotusFlair' (@darling_sammy), https://twitter.com/darling_sammy/status/1410681432893050880.

In a *Reddit* thread critiquing *EXU* – where Iyengar earned a much more hostile reception when compared to her work on *Dimension 20* – another fan deploys a similar tactic:

> Producer: So you have a Critical Role mini campaign for me?
>
> Writer: Yes sir, I do! […]

---

[40] 'Dunkmaster Gabby' (@GoblinBridge), 'I think since it's entertainment you can be giving money it's fair to voice critiques about pacing and such. Like it's not just someone's home game anymore this is a product. But ofc be respectful', *Twitter.com*, 14 August 2021, https://twitter.com/GoblinBridge/status/1426637839513567234.

> Producer: Well it sounds like there may be some unresolved plotlines that were included for no reason, but we can address those in a season 2.
>
> Writer: Oh you think there will be a season 2?
>
> Producer: Of course […] We have an audience so starved for content.[41]

This user reimagines *EXU* as a television show, employing the logic of auteurism by placing all the responsibility for the campaign on a single individual – Iyengar as 'Writer' – even in an imagined dialogue. They both elide the collaborative process of media production, and transform *D&D's* authorship model into a hierarchy. The 'unresolved plotlines included for no reason', rather than being viewed as a natural consequence of TRPG narrative, are the 'Writer's' responsibility. Where collaboration remains, it becomes a commercial force that exerts a pressure to continue the work regardless of its quality, in a manner that is mirrors Attebery's argument that shared authorship is antithetical to authentic art production. This viewer is antagonistic towards Iyengar, and so like Attebery they deploy the profit motive as a negative value judgement. While imagining *Critical Role* as a scripted media product seemingly confers the cultural capital of professionalism, elevating Iyengar to author and 'Writer', this interpretive work is done at the expense of the collaborative elements of storytelling within TRPGs. Any collaboration present holds derogatory, commercially-motivated implications for this particular viewer.

Viewers of actual play seek to frame the secondary author as the guiding creative vision of a TRPG campaign to aid their critique of the text, much as both Barthes and Foucault argue the literary establishment does with the Author God. Viewers build on the perceived prestige of an authentic auteur by articulating the DM's role through references to other established artistic fields – literature, and networked television which, while holding differing relationships to authenticity, both possess more cultural capital than TRPGs. The desire to isolate and distinguish individuals as creative forerunners occurs alongside the establishment of TRPG narratives as a legitimate contributor to fantasy genre-culture.

Iyengar herself also links Mercer and Mulligan's distinction as auteurs with actual play's growing profile. In conversation with Mulligan, she states that he and Mercer 'put [pressure] on yourselves to continue to iterate and make cool things in the space […] and this very new artform': '[you] are storytellers who are like 'I'm going to do what I can in the form and then push the form''.[42] Iyengar's use of 'iteration' gestures to the unique affordances of the TRPG medium, rather than borrowing from other media – as discussed in Chapter Three, TRPGs achieve originality through repetitive gameplay. But she still associates the secondary author with authority and creative vision, not merely in reference to a single game but also when shaping the subcultural community. Experimental auteurism is a mark of actual play's legitimacy, fuelling its transformation into an 'artform'.

---

[41] 'u/Boffleslop', 'Exandria Unlimited Post-Episode Discussion Threads', r/CriticalRole, *reddit.com,* 12 August 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/criticalrole/comments/p3hy0h/comment/h8sne8f/.

Iyengar does not identify herself as one of these innovative auteurs, until Mulligan, her interviewer, corrects her: '[these developments are] not something you are a part of, it is something you have *led'*.[43] He argues that the choice to share authority with Iyengar was an equally defining moment for *Dimension 20*, and that Iyengar is in large part responsible for 'the degree to which this show has improved', for instance 'we constantly reference the first time we deviated from *D&D* 5E, which was *Misfits and Magic*', [as a result]'.[44] When Iyengar acknowledges Mercer and Mulligan as definitive authorities in their field, Mulligan emphasises the value of sharing that authority, and of 'deviation' within and from any incipient actual play canon.

In fact, while viewers deploy auteurism as a way of distinguishing actual play as an artform, the 'Summer of Aabria' demonstrated how practitioners themselves value collaboration and shared authority. By detaching each show from its flagship DM, *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* made a statement about how authority should be treated within the actual play space. Firstly, that it is not only the province of white male creators: the choice to invest Iyengar with creative power demonstrates a deliberate intent regarding the shaping of fantasy and actual play's identity going forward. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett have noted that 'male authors are disproportionately represented in the geek canonical texts' across literature, film, and television – actual play, as not only a new media but a new type of 'geek text', chooses to defy this trend at the point where Mercer and Mulligan became invested with canonical meaning.[45] Secondly, the 'Summer of Aabria' reinforces that authority and authorship within TRPGs and TRPG actual play does not belong to any singular individual. To treat it as such would limit ‘the proliferation of meaning’ identified by Foucault.

---

[42] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar', (6:10-6:39).

[43] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar', (7:00-7:03).

[44] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar', (7:07-7:21).

[45] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p.159.

When discussing the motivations behind launching *EXU*, Mercer stated the following:

> I despise the auteur theory of world building and creation, in film in general, but you know, in this instance. The idea of one person is the author of a space and kind of domineers over what is right and what’s wrong with that. This was, once again, all created kind of out of accident and the necessity for it to build and as it kind of took on a life of its own, nothing has been more fun and more exciting than watching it grow beyond me. [46]

Mercer refuses the label of auteur. His acknowledgement of auteur theory (aside from signalling his professional background) demonstrates an awareness that fans have subjected *D&D* and his own praxis to this theoretical lens. He raises objections to the conceptualisation of canonical authority, terming it the will to ‘domineer’ a creative space and/or imaginary world and decide ‘what is right and what’s wrong’ within it. Instead, Mercer emphasises the improvisational, ‘accidental’ nature of his own worldbuilding and narrative creation within *D&D,* stressing Exandria’s roots in an amateur ‘home game’ space. It seems that he rejects the associations of ‘deep meaning’ and ‘creative vision’ that are being used to advocate for *Critical Role* as a canon text.

There are many motivations for this stance: it should be acknowledged that this roundtable was hosted in part to promote *Critical Role’s* Darrington Press publication *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (2021), a sourcebook designed to enable viewers/consumers/players to run their own games within Exandria. This commercial approach to his own world would perhaps be undermined by a singular authorship model – it would certainly prove counterproductive to enforce his own authority as he makes aspects of his creative work available for others to use.

But beyond these mercenary realities, Mercer does not seem to value the isolated parts of his practice that most closely reflect notions of auteurism. During this roundtable, he notes: ‘so much of my life […] is just by myself in my room […] Getting to collaborate with people […] is so awesome and so freeing’ – he enjoys having ‘someone to bounce this off of’.[47]

---

[46] Critical Role, ‘Game Masters of Exandria Roundtable’, *Youtube.com,* 29 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmZSWKPXhZ4&t=1751s&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (28:43-29:12).

[47] Critical Role, ‘Game Masters of Exandria Roundtable’, (35:39-36:01).

Mercer first paints an ideal image of author genius, creating alone and in isolation, but this is seemingly not what he enjoys or views as artistically productive. In the same way that a secondary author reacts and responds to tertiary authors to build the final text of a *D&D* campaign, Mercer feels that as a worldbuilder and creator, he works best with people to 'bounce [..] off of'. The inherently collaborative nature of *D&D* gameplay informs Mercer's understanding of his own authority: he prefers the parts of his authorship that are shared. Like Mulligan's own advocacy for sharing control with Iyengar, Mercer welcomes moments where the TRPG narrative extends beyond his singular control, and goes in unexpected directions as a result.

Collaborative Authority: Difference and Deference

Although reframing TRPG actual play through a discourse of authorial prestige might potentially secure its cultural capital, the solitary author genius model does not reflect how authors themselves view their practice. Similarly, while commercialism is still treated as antithetical to cultural capital and perceived artistic worth, within actual play the relationship is more complex. The shift from amateur hobby to paid professional play is part of what has begun to distinguish TRPGs as legitimate contributors to fantasy genre-culture. Rather than treating the collaborative and commercial as antithetical to value and artistic merit, it is more useful to find interpretive models that acknowledge how both of these factors make TRPGs uniquely valuable to fantasy genre-culture.

In *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, Derek Johnson argues that the 'tension between difference and deference in [fictional] world-sharing demonstrates that franchised production has been neither homogenous, nor devoid of creativity, nor a site of authorial unity'.[48] Johnson's states that 'franchises do not replicate themselves: they are produced in negotiated social and cultural contexts that demand exploration'.[49] His work juxtaposes Attebery's understanding of fantasy-as-formula and the fantasy roleplaying game 'recipe'. When Johnson examines replication, he denies that it always results in homogeneity. In his framework, 'authorlessness', or the profitability of a franchise product, does not preclude authenticity. Instead, collaboration and worldsharing occur ‘within negotiated social and cultural contexts’: there is potential for variation, posed as a creative decision which may or may not be taken.

---

[48] Johnson, p.113.
[49] Johnson, p.3.

Johnson analyses collaborative creativity as a tension between ‘open difference’ and ‘hierarchical deference’: while individual authors or creators within a media franchise might create something new, others might instead choose ‘deference to a more canonical and legitimate original’ – often a corporately determined entity – which is often designed to ‘[ensure] its compatibility with someone else’s use’.[50] Johnson examines how authorities and individual authors articulate themselves within this collaborative, industrial reality: ‘tension between open difference and hierarchical deference suggests that while many subjective claims to creativity have been made […] [they] remain structured by power’.[51]

While Johnson analyses industrial relations within media franchises, many aspects of his argument are pertinent to how authority is negotiated within TRPGs, and TRPG actual play in particular. In fact, Benjamin J. Robertson utilised Johnson’s theory in his analysis of *The Dragonlance Chronicles* cited in Chapter Two, demonstrating its synergy with Wizards of the Coast (WotC) products and properties.[52] Johnson’s binary of ‘difference’ and ‘deference’ within the ‘contested grounds of collaborative creativity’, where many creators use the same ‘shared cultural resources’, is applicable to the nexus of authorship within TRPG narratives.[53] Each TRPG narrative requires a negotiation between individual creative labourers and corporate entities.

In the case of *D&D*, the primary text is itself a franchise seeking to profit from replication and reiteration – requiring itself to be compatible with others’ use. A secondary or tertiary author then has a choice between ‘difference’ or ‘deference’: in their acts of worldsharing with the primary author, e.g. WotC, they choose whether to defer to the ‘official’ primary text – the published product, with its established capital – or create a different variation on it. Johnson’s description of media franchise production ‘as a site where the autonomy and freedom of individuals […] might be imagined, organised, and contested’ is transferable to the production of the TRPG text.[54] Authors operate within a system whose rules and parameters determine their textual agency, but the system allows for originality and creative 'risks'. Individual creators are now gaining subcultural and literal capital, meaning that their properties, and authorial choices are now a part of this contest. This can be seen in the ways in which Mercer and Mulligan's praxis inflects gaming capital throughout the subcultural community.

---

[50] Johnson, p.149.
[51] Johnson, p.23.
[52] Benjamin J. Robertson, ‘From Fantasy to Franchise: *Dragonlance* and the Privatisation of Genre’, *Extrapolation,* Vol.58 No. 2–3, (2017), pp.129-152 (p.139).
[53] Johnson, p.7.
[54] Johnson, p.14.

When examining actual play, it must also be acknowledged that the shows themselves are media franchises. The relevance of Johnson's model is increasingly underscored as commercial forces and new hierarchies of power come into play. The primary text and primary author remain a stakeholder, especially in the case of actual play shows hosted by WotC, or those which earn WotC's sponsorship. Actual play is now one of the main sources of advertising for primary texts, and game products often wish to capitalise on this.[55] In the case of *Misfits and Magic,* while the primary text (Indie-press produced *Kids on Brooms*) might not constitute a corporate entity – although it still benefits from advertisement – the fantasy fiction property that inspired it, the *Harry Potter* transmedial franchise, is mediated by several large corporate entities. This media franchise and its content must still be negotiated by the player in gameplay.

Secondary texts are now also potential corporate entities: as previously discussed, the 'Summer of Aabria' franchised the intellectual property of secondary authors. Both *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* utilised Iyengar as a way to extend their brands beyond single creators and ensure 'replication of these media properties over time' – essentially, attempting to share the burden of content creation beyond the single author figure. [56] While shared authority dismantles the 'DM as auteur', it also secures financial and commercial longevity for these properties. Franchising and authorship explicitly overlap: *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20's* ability to produce more content relies on other author figures gaining the same status as their figureheads.

However, actual play media production then starts diverging from Johnson's model. Johnson argued that 'franchises, like episodic television, generate stability by modulating the production of the familiar'.[57] While both *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* attempted to create content that was recognisable to what came before, the choice of Iyengar and her style as an author resulted in something that was not 'familiar'. In this incipient moment of enfranchisement and expansion, TRPG actual play chose not to enforce 'deference', but 'difference'. Mercer and Mulligan vocally dismissed the 'deference' allotted to them as auteurs, and chose to share that power with someone who produces innovation through variation, within their space.

---

[55] Shelly Jones (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.5-18, (p.6).

[56] Johnson, p.2.

[57] Johnson, p.72.

It may make sense that deference is a less valued in the TRPG subcultural community, where even corporate entities do not demand total fidelity. The *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the main canonical text, encourages difference and transformative variation on its very first page: 'you make that world your own over the course of a campaign', 'the world is yours to change as you see fit and yours to modify'.[58] Deference is rarely promoted – though it is occasionally policed – within the TRPG community, where different iterations of narratives are celebrated. By choosing to promote these ideals within actual play, stressing collaboration and worldsharing as a productive source of creativity, Mercer and Mulligan further reinforced the value of 'difference' at a critical moment in actual play's development.

This stress on 'difference' means that TRPG actual play holds promising potential as an innovative contributor to fantasy genre-culture. While certain TRPG narratives now hold the official status of established media franchises, their origin in an unofficial fan space continues to encourage transformative, individualised approaches to creativity. 'Deference' is a personal choice, not a demand. Within the traditional industrial franchises he investigates, Johnson describes deference as stifling: 'creativity' becomes '[contained] within expectations of unity and univocality'.[59] In promoting 'difference', the subversive potential of TRPGs as transformative fantasy is not smothered by its transition into an official medium.

'Difference and Deference in Worldsharing': *Critical Role: Exandria Unlimited*

In 'The Summer of Aabria' and *Critical Role: EXU,* Johnson's notion of 'difference and deference in worldsharing' is literal. Iyengar acts a secondary author on the franchised *Critical Role* platform, but also stewards a narrative within Exandria, Mercer's secondary world. A perceived canon is present for her to defer towards: she is subject to the same demands of continuity as the televisual and transmedial franchises Johnson studies, with the added pressure of being the first to extend Exandria beyond its original creator.

---

[58] Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014), p.4.
[59] Johnson, p.150.

When describing her experience on *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*, Iyengar said, ‘it’s […] stepping into a machine that is shaped like your friend […] and seeing the like system that’s been built around them’.[60] The use of ‘machine’ and ‘system’ mirrors the interchangeable aspects of *D&D’s* authorship that lead to perceptions of authorlessness, yet the author and the medium itself are also equated. Unlike the media properties Johnson studies, the handover between multiple authors in TRPGs is never seamless and invisible, nor deliberately elided. A secondary author’s personality, performance, and storytelling is all part of the ‘more canonical and legitimate original’ – inevitably, these authorities will never be fungible or truly interchangeable. Iyengar also articulates the pressure to defer through the image of a system built for and around a white man. This gestures back to the ‘anxieties of authorship’ covered in the previous sections, and therefore colours potential perceptions of difference between stakeholders.

When examining *EXU’s* initial run of eight episodes in 2021, ‘deference’ between the network of tertiary authors – Matthew Mercer, Ashley Johnson, Aimee Carrero, Robbie Daymond, Anjali Bhimani, and Liam O’Brien – and the two secondary authors – Mercer and Iyengar – manifests in numerous ways. The most obvious is that, by hosting a game within Mercer’s world, Iyengar was required to defer to the established canon and continuity of Exandria, abiding by Mercer’s secondary authorship during her use of his imaginary world. Her campaign used pre-established locations, such as the city of Emon, as well as artefacts from Mercer’s secondary text, including the ‘Circlet of Barbed Vision’ – a Vestige of Divergence written by Mercer and published in the *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting* (2017) and *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (2021). She also reprised NPC Sean Gilmore and his shop ‘Gilmore’s Glorious Goods’, first performed by Mercer in *Vox Machina*, and a fan favourite aspect of his text. In utilising established parts of Mercer’s secondary text, Iyengar demonstrates hierarchical deference, reinforcing the campaign’s branding as a world extension exercise. Her reprisal of Gilmore is the clearest example of this, as this character’s ‘canonical and legitimate original’ is extensive, and fans have strong parasocial ties to it. When discussing her decision to play this NPC in Episode 3, the name of which (‘A Glorious Return’) demonstrates Gilmore’s significance, Iyengar expresses hierarchical deference to

---

[60] Dimension 20, ‘Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar’, (5:50-6:03).

Mercer, which in turn produces an anxiety of authorship: ‘the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done in a game in my entire life was be Gilmore to you. […] I didn’t sleep the night before […] [I told myself] this is your favourite NPC, and it’s everyone else’s, and it’s Matt’s’.[61] Iyengar sees Gilmore as belonging to Mercer’s text before her own, transforming her version into a test of accuracy: she admits she rewatched episodes of *Critical Role* to ensure she performed ‘correctly’.[62] A hierarchy is in place: it is also presumed that her own text and authorship will fall short.

However, deference between authors is also shown in the opposite direction: as tertiary author and player at this table, Mercer defers to Iyengar’s judgement and her secondary text. His character, the dwarf Dariax, has low statistics in both Wisdom and Intelligence, resulting in particularly low rolls in checks on secondary text lore: for instance, ‘hell yeah, [a] four’ on a History check to understand the nature of his own secondary text invention, Residuum, in Episode 2.[63] It was speculated by other players that this choice was deliberate, preventing Mercer from metagaming: ‘Dariax works great, because you could kind of play dumb in your own world’.[64] Aware of a hierarchy that might be assembled with his authorship at the pinnacle, Mercer takes steps to diminish his own subcultural capital, as well as his ability to gatekeep in his own subcreation.

This example of Mercer’s deference remains relatively intangible. However, another example is his endorsement of Iyengar’s narrative and her interpretation of Exandria through the material publication of her secondary text material in the *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn.* Utilising one of the manifestations of his greater subcultural capital – his access to traditional publishing, not to mention co-ownership of the Darrington Press publishing house that facilitates it – Mercer endorses Iyengar’s secondary text, legitimising her authorship and confirming it as ‘canonical’. The publication of the city ‘Niirdal-Poc’ (which was added to canonical maps – see Figure 10), as well as the ‘Tetrarchy of Qoniira’, taken from Iyengar’s secondary text and appearing in *EXU* Episodes 7-9, endorse Iyengar’s authority. Iyengar commented on its addition to Mercer’s text in 2021, stating: ‘It’s right there. […] It’s there on the map. Niirdal-Poc is real, and in *Tal’dorei Reborn’*.[65] Her language suggests that her secondary text only becomes legitimate and 'real' once it becomes part of Mercer's secondary authorship, demonstrating hierarchical deference. In her own view, her secondary text did not have the legitimacy, at least in 2021, to stand alone.

---

[61] Critical Role, ‘Exandria Unlimited Wrap Up’, (12:21-12:36).

[62] Critical Role, ‘Exandria Unlimited Wrap Up’, (12:53-13:00).

[63] Critical Role, ‘The Oh No Plateau | Exandria Unlimited | Episode 2’, *YouTube.com,* 5 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjucx2vz5Mg&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (57:11-57:14).

[64] Critical Role, ‘Exandria Unlimited Wrap Up’, (14:03-14:08).

[65] ‘Aabria Iyengar’ (@quiddie), ‘It’s right there. The place I made. The place you’ve now seen. It’s there on the map. Niirdal-Poc is real, and in Tal’dorei Reborn, and when I tell you how hard I’m sobbing right now —

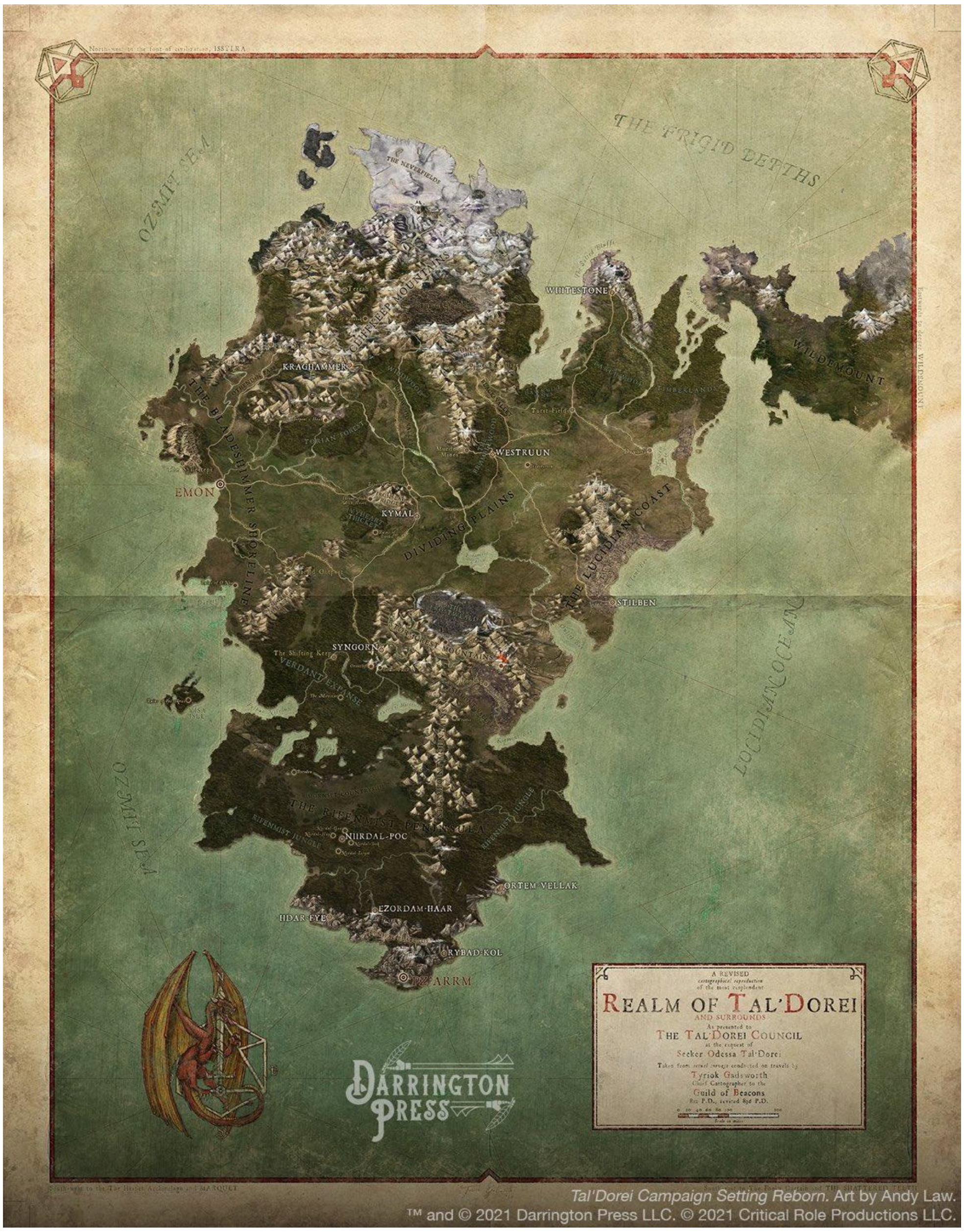

THE FRIGID DEPTHS
OZMIT SEA
THE NEVERFIELDS
CLIFFKEEP MOUNTAINS
WHITESTONE
KRAGHAMMER
WILDEMOUNT
THE BLADESHIMMER SHORELINE
WESTRUUN
EMON
KYMAL
DIVIDING PLAINS
THE LUCIDIAN COAST
STILBEN
SYNGORN
The Shifting Keep
VERDANT EXPANSE
FORGOTTEN MOUNTAINS
LUCIDIAN OCEAN
NIIRDAL-POC
ORTEM-VELLAK
EZORDAM-BAAR
HDAR FYE
RYBAD-KOL
ARRM
A REVISED cartographical reproduction of the most resplendent
REALM OF TAL'DOREI
AND SURROUNDS
As presented to
THE TAL'DOREI COUNCIL
at the request of
Seeker Odessa Tal'Dorei
Taken from actual surveys conducted on travels by
Tyriok Gadsworth
Chief Cartographer to the
Guild of Beacons
Scale in miles
DARRINGTON PRESS
Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn. Art by Andy Law.
™ and © 2021 Darrington Press LLC. © 2021 Critical Role Productions LLC.

Figure 10: Published map of Tal'Dorei, updated in 2021 to include Iyengar's creation 'Niirdal-Poc'. *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (Los Angeles: Darrington Press, 2021), p.282.

There are no words for what this means to me', *Twitter.com,* 5 August 2021, https://twitter.com/quiddie/status/1423398485282353155.

Deference occurs in both directions – Iyengar acknowledges Mercer's larger subcultural capital, but his sharing of capital is both a generosity and an endorsement, deferring to Iyengar's interventions in his text and honouring them. A hierarchy is in place: Mercer holds ultimate ownership of the world, as well as the resources with which to publish it and further legitimise its existence. He retains some of the functions of author or authority: while he has not 'invented' these parts of his world, he still 'determines its [that worlds] bounds', and governs what Wolf terms the 'levels of canonicity'.[66]

However, Mercer's hierarchical interventions do not reinforce his control, but dismantle it, deferring to Iyengar and elevating her secondary text. This was demonstrated by his reply to Iyengar's delight at publication, stating: 'So very proud to keep building [this] world with incredible people like you'.[67] Deference on his part ensures the success of extending Exandria beyond himself and *Critical Role's* decision to franchise, while also counteracting the negative reactions to Iyengar from viewers.

While canonical pressure in *EXU* causes Iyengar to feel the presence of a hierarchy and perform deference, examples of 'open difference' – being advocated for, and actively supported – are also present throughout. The transformative properties of *D&D* narrative, by which 'something extant' is turned into 'something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression' manifests in Iyengar's approach to Mercer's secondary text through her own acts of secondary authorship.[68] For instance, Iyengar's creation of the 'Taste of Tal'dorei Buffet', as well as her reimagining of the town of Byroden in Episode 4, 'By The Road', transformatively alter Mercer's existing secondary text. Iyengar dismantles some of the weight of canonicity and prestige Mercer has accumulated – either jokingly, by reducing large plot events to the banal, or by bringing them closer to something in our primary world reality. In reimagining the town of Byroden, a significant location for other characters in *Vox Machina*, Iyengar demonstrated a mixture of difference and deference. As 'a place w[ith] little established canon but big ties to Vox Machina's history', Byroden could be personalised, adhering to continuity while allowing Iyengar to experiment with her own secondary authorship. Byroden became 'the Exandrian equivalent of Loredo, TX' – a transformative authorial choice that personalised this text to this group of players, and especially tertiary author Aimee Carrero.[69] Iyengar acknowledges this directly: ‘I think the Byroden that raised Opal [an *EXU* character] is meaningfully different than the one that raised Vex & Vax’.[70] These additions, and differences, were also published in the *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting* – both the ‘Gem of Byroden pageant’ and the ‘Peachiest Pie’ baking competition of Iyengar’s invention feature in the lore for this Exandrian city.[71]

---

[66] Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds,* p.273.

[67] 'Matthew Mercer' (@matthewmercer), 'So very proud to keep building with world with incredible people like you. <3', *Twitter.com,* 6th August 2021, https://twitter.com/matthewmercer/status/1423434692116631554.

[68] Organisation for Transformative Works, 'What Do You Mean By A Transformative Work?', *FAQs,* 8th August 2016, https://www.transformativeworks.org/faq/what-do-you-mean-by-a-transformative-work/.

Perhaps the greatest example of difference in Iyengar’s *EXU* text, however, is her treatment of the Spider Queen, Exandria’s equivalent to Lolth. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mercer has actively revised the drow in response to the racism encoded within their primary text incarnation. In using the Spider Queen as a character, Iyengar therefore continues this tradition, but also has both primary and secondary text originals to potentially defer to. She does not defer to either, and thus her embodiment of Lolth is the most prominent example of her own ‘difference’.

When remaking the *D&D* primary text figure of Lolth into ‘the Spider Queen’, Mercer did not alter or rewrite this deity in the same way he did the drow race associated with her. The Spider Queen remained an evil-aligned goddess, a ‘Betrayer God’ associated with ‘deceit, shadows, […] and treachery’ and who wishes ‘death to all the elves who live under the sun’.[72] Iyengar, however, is the first *Critical Role* GM to portray the Spider Queen in actual gameplay, allowing her to expand upon Mercer’s subcreation in a markedly personal way. Although her introduction of the ‘Circlet of Barbed Vision’ utilises Mercer’s secondary text, this artefact becomes the main site for transformative responses to Exandria in the *EXU* campaign. The campaign itself revolves around several party members’ interactions with the Circlet – earning their official party name, ‘the Crown Keepers’. Interactions between players and this object, and its eventual claiming by Opal (played by Carrero) literalise the kinds of transformative responses to fantasy *D&D* as a system facilitates. The party and Iyengar take this object and repeatedly remake it as their own, giving it new meaning. Through these discussions and interactions, the Spider Queen becomes an uneasy ally of the party. While still apparently 'evil', Iyengar's portrayal features moments of nuanced characterisation that undo the Othering present in the D&D primary text. These transformative secondary and tertiary author decisions culminate in *EXU: Kymal*, when Carrero as Opal proposes 'a little bit of a PR shift for you [the Spider Queen], because I feel like you're a really good person'. This individualised, affective response by Carrero, shown in 'I feel', changes and recontextualises the canon. Opal states 'you could be worshipped for good things or… neutral things!', to which Iyengar as the Spider Queen replies: 'this is going differently than I expected', acknowledging how this character is being rewritten in real time.[73]

---

[69] ‘Aabria Iyengar’ (@quiddie), "Alright #ExUSpoilers fam, let’s talk a little bit abt Byroden. First thing’s first: once @aimeecarrero and I had talked about Opal coming from Byroden, I knew I wanted to build them a path to go visit. A place w/ little established canon but big ties to VM’s history is a TREAT.", *Twitter.com,* 19 July 2021, https://twitter.com/quiddie/status/1417361925508198402.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Matthew Mercer, Hannah Rose, and James J. Haeck, *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (Los Angeles: Darrington Press, 2021), p.115.

[72] *Tal’Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn,* p.35-6.

This conversation showcases Iyengar's characteristic shift away from the high fantasy register towards bathos and the quotidian, while having larger implications for the overall narrative of Exandria. Rejecting the absolutist morality of the primary text, that was then preserved in Mercer's secondary text, Iyengar opens up possibilities for Lolth's redemption. This instance of difference has larger implications for fantasy genre-culture, as it dismantles the moral dualism that permeates the *D&D* text, as well as its underpinnings of racial and gendered Othering in the specific case of Lolth. Although a transformative response facilitated by many of the players, Iyengar's own flexible attitude towards the canon and her decision not to defer enables subversion. In fact, this manifestation of difference is potentially so disruptive to the logics of Mercer's world that in *Critical Role Campaign 3: Bell's Hells* it is reported that Carrero's Opal is 'getting a little dark', as Lolth's default alignment reasserts itself. [74] During this exchange, both Opal and the character reporting such developments were controlled by Mercer as secondary author, not Iyengar or Opal's player. While it cannot be examined in depth here for its wider implications for worldsharing, this interlude is worth mentioning, as it demonstrates how Iyengar's decision to not defer produces variation to the point of potentially destabilising Mercer's existing world.

The difference Iyengar's voice and authorship introduced into Exandria seems especially marked when compared even briefly to the other *EXU* text currently in existence, *EXU: Calamity* (2022). Following successful enfranchisement through Iyengar, this *EXU* text was DM'ed by Mulligan (of *Dimension 20*). Unlike Iyengar's work, this narrative demonstrated many preservative traits of affirmative fandom in its approach to Mercer's

---

[73] Critical Role, 'Exandria Unlimited: Kymal | Part 2', *Youtube.com*, 5 April 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-0bSdoPj5o&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (1:14:27-1:16:29).
[74] Critical Role, 'The Aurora Grows | Critical Role | Campaign 3, Episode 49', *YouTube.com,* 20 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_NVdZp8haA&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (1:23:18-1:23:23).

Exandria. As a prequel, *EXU: Calamity* expanded upon Exandria by performing and preserving aspects of this subcreation's pre-defined history. Mulligan extensively defers to Mercer's existing canon: referencing in the first episode his 'own lore document' that allows him to maintain continuity with Mercer's secondary text, preserving the legitimate original.[75] Documentation and metrics of accuracy align Mulligan's authorship with 'information hunting and gathering that has generated male interest around transmedia', utilising this as a form of subcultural capital by which to verify authorship.[76] As with Iyengar's demonstrations of deference, Mulligan makes extensive use of established Exandrian characters such as Vespin Chloras and Purvan Suul, both taken from Mercer's own campaigns or published paratexts. Unlike Iyengar, he doesn't playfully remix, but maintains the high fantasy register and takes it to extremes: the opening tragic sequence of *Calamity* Episode 1 leads one of the players, Travis Willingham, to nervously joke, 'I think I'm in the wrong class'.[77]

Like Iyengar, in *Calamity* Mulligan builds a relationship between one of Exandria's Gods, an embodiment of Mercer's existing canon, and a player character – in this case, he chooses the Lord of the Hells, although Mulligan also utilises the god's primary text name, Asmodeus. Unlike Iyengar, Mulligan does not allow the narrative to result in a transformative change to the *D&D* canon. When a player attempts a transformative rewriting of Asmodeus, similar to that of Opal's player in *EXU*, it has no effect: 'you're trying to atone me, and *I didn't do anything wrong.*'[78]

It may seem counterintuitive that Mulligan, a secondary author with more subcultural capital than Iyengar at the point of his *EXU* debut, demonstrates more hierarchical deference towards Mercer. However, this can perhaps be explained through Iyengar's own anxieties and her articulation of the discomfort she feels within a 'system' that is not built for her. This system – if it is built in Mercer's image – may better suit Mulligan. While Iyengar's *EXU* text, and its experimental nature, was met with audience doubt, Mulligan's established status meant he was automatically trusted to handle Exandria well. Responses to the announcement termed him 'the great Brennan Lee Mulligan', and referred to *Calamity* as an 'Avengers

---

[75] Critical Role, 'Excelsior | Exandria Unlimited: Calamity | Episode 1', *YouTube.com,* 30 May 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlIkkeWmVvA&t=2s&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (43:44).

[76] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p.xxvi.

[77] Critical Role, 'Excelsior', (26:43).

[78] Critical Role, 'Fire and Ruin | Exandria Unlimited: Calamity | Episode 4', *YouTube.com,* 20 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrtoyB2fcMI&list=PL1tiwbzkOjQwzhdskYekmjr0h2tsbKaZw&index=4&ab_channel=CriticalRole, (58:42-58:47).

Endgame level crossover' project.[79] *Calamity* was also marketed as an 'opportunity for people to see a master class in […] *D&D*'.[80] Mulligan's subcultural capital within the TRPG actual play sphere meant that his accuracy and skill was immediately trusted, without the same 'threshold of legitimacy' that Iyengar was subject to.

Meanwhile, Iyengar perhaps knew that she was unable to meet the same audience expectations for reasons entirely outside of her control, such as her lesser capital at the time of production, and her marginalised position that excludes her from gatekept models of authorship. 'Open difference' thus becomes her best option, as she herself admits: 'am I going to sit here and do […] epic 100 episode high fantasy? Like , no, Matt's got that on fucking lock, we're good', '[I've] got to pull from something else'.[81] While Mulligan can fit into the hierarchy of deference easily, Iyengar is excluded from it: difference is the resource upon which her own capital must be built.

While defining affirmative and transformative fan practice – deference and difference – solely according to gender is reductive, maintaining that distinction is useful in this case. Iyengar's reception at the *Critical Role* table was inflected by her status as a marginalised female creator, whose authorship was less established. Iyengar articulates this as an exclusion from fantasy genre-culture more generally in interviews, comparing Mulligan and Mercer's extensive subcultural capital, not only in TRPGs but also in fantasy fandom, with her own:

> I don't have decades of like emotional […] tethers to this […] you [Mulligan] make 100,000 Lord of the Rings references every time we hang out, and my guy, I still have not seen the third one yet! […] So much of the Frankenstein-ness of the things I try to build and pull from is just because I have incomplete datasets in high fantasy.[82]

Deference may be expected of Iyengar, fitting in with wider practices of policing and gatekeeping female participation within geek culture as a whole. Yet she knows this is likely to be a losing game. Consalvo has articulated how policing manifests as a pre-established bias against female authorities: ‘boundaries are enforced where authentic game culture is considered masculine and women involved in gaming are considered casuals’.[83]

---

[79] Replies to 'Critical Role' (@CriticalRole), 'Step into the past with a new set of heroes as they race towards a world-altering finish line with Exandria Unlimited: Calamity. Catch the premiere of this epic four-part mini-series Thursday, May 26th at 7pm Pacific on Twitch and YouTube!', *Twitter.com*, 12 May 2022, https://twitter.com/CriticalRole/status/1524781933070196739.

[80] Michael Rancic, 'Critical Role's newest DM changes the game', *Polygon,* 26 May 2022, https://www.polygon.com/23139785/critical-role-exandria-unlimited-calamity-brennan-lee-mulligan-interview-dm-dimension-20, para.9.

[81] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar', (10:09-10:18), (8:40).

[82] Dimension 20, 'Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar', (8:12-8:58).

Because Iyengar’s ability to meet the criteria for deference is doomed by the hostile nature of the ‘system’ that arbitrates it, she opts instead for ‘open difference’. Where her perceived ‘shortcomings’ as a woman and as a fantasy fan could be utilised against her within the masculine economy of affirmative fandom, she produces a ‘Frankenstein’ text that advocates for the unique strengths of her own authority, which lie in difference, not deference. Her exclusion from the hierarchy informs her choice, but her interviewer, Mulligan, also identifies this as her major strength, using the language of difference in his reply: ‘people have really responded to the *deviations* more than anything else’.[84]

Iyengar’s choices and style mirror Abigail De Kosnik’s discussions of female authorship in transformative fanworks. De Kosnik argues that ‘female fan authorship’ is often ‘a response by women and girls to a media culture in which they rarely see their own narrative priorities and preferences play out’.[85] De Kosnik states that:

> As media fans, women and children and queer-identifying people and people of colour […] and others who have not always been guaranteed enfranchisement, politically or culturally, feel drawn to take liberties, to see what they can do with what they are given […] realizing the potential for multicoloredness and variability in common cultural texts.[86]

When reading TRPGs as both fanwork and new media within fantasy genre-culture, collaborative authorship opens up ‘potential for multicoloredness and variability’, taking Johnson’s ideals of difference and deference to a new extreme. An irreverent approach towards the corporately defined original has always been encouraged. It then makes sense for actual play’s replication in franchises to focus not on producing a single, homogenous response, but instead to create a stage for many different texts.

---

[83] Mia Consalvo, ‘Why We Need Feminist Game Studies’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism,* ed. Tasha Oren & Andrea Press (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), pp.206-217, (p.211).

[84] Dimension 20, ‘Adventuring Academy w. Aabria Iyengar’, (9:37: 9:42), emphasis mine.

[85] Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), p.142.

[86] De Kosnik, p.312.

In *EXU*, Iyengar's experiment with difference was incredibly successful, if met with initial hostility. As a woman of colour with a disenfranchised perspective on fantasy genre-culture, Iyengar ultimately deems deference to be counterproductive, and her moments of greatest variation defined her *EXU* text. However, it must be acknowledged that Mercer's deference towards her secondary authorship, and his conscious subversion of the expected hierarchy, also aided legitimisation. Both drives are present within TRPG authorship and actual play narratives. Deference does not enforce hierarchy here, but instead ensures authority is shared. Individual voices remain distinct even when operating in collaboration with one another.

Difference and Deference as a Response to Fantasy Literature: *Dimension 20: Misfits and Magic*

The model of difference and deference – along with the choice to emphasise 'difference' – also has implications for actual play's relationship to fantasy literature. If the stress is placed on polyvocality – 'open difference' over 'hierarchical deference' – then even when it becomes 'official', actual play media offers another space through which fans' transformative responses can diversify fantasy genre-culture. These are official texts, but they are born from an unofficial and amateur fantasy space. They reflect reader and fan responses to fantasy, but lend such narratives legitimacy through their wide reach and professional platforms.

Iyengar's *Dimension 20* debut, *Misfits and Magic (M&M)* demonstrates this transformative potential. *M&M* was an actual play miniseries that responded to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise as a hypotext, using the system of the fantasy TRPG *Kids on Brooms* (2020). Released in 2021, *M&M* aired at a point when criticism of Rowling and her political views was extremely vocal. Offering a counternarrative to Rowling's hypotext, *M&M* shows how an emphasis on difference over deference in actual play media can also extend to the relationship with the primary text and the genre-culture that inspired it.

As the 'first time' *Dimension 20* 'deviated from *D&D 5e*', and a series for which numerous production effects were developed at Iyengar's request, *M&M* is a showcase of many aspects of Iyengar's authorial 'difference' within the actual play space. Yet this choice of the new *Kids on Brooms* system was not only notable for its being the first time *Dimension 20* showcased TRPGs other than *D&D*. This primary text, published by Renegade Studios, does not encompass all of mainstream fantasy as *D&D* does, but instead one specific, popular strand: the works of J.K. Rowling. *Kids on Brooms* allows players to 'take on the roles of witches and wizards that belong, one way or another, at the magical school you all attend'. [87] However, fan immersion in *Harry Potter* is no longer an uncomplicated pleasure: Iyengar's use of *Kids on Brooms* acknowledges this, and becomes a unique and knowing example of TRPGs' relationship to literary fantasy, illustrating how players might use TRPGs to critique the texts they've consumed.

In their appointment of Iyengar as secondary author, and other projects since, *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role* have emphasised inclusive casting and world-sharing. This reshapes perceptions of what an 'authority' within this space might look like, and 'difference' becomes inflected with a secondary meaning, informed by wider discourses surrounding identity within fantasy and fan subculture. Rukmini Pande argues that within popular culture and fandom 'an increasing amount of cultural capital being associated with the projection of being socially progressive'.[88] As a fannish and 'unofficial' transformative practice, actual play's relationship to fan identities is overt. Awareness of an increasingly liberal audience informs what actual play shows prioritise, particularly in their approach to canonical fantasy such as *Harry Potter*.

Iyengar's choice not to defer when approaching *Harry Potter* is loaded for many reasons. Authority within the *Harry Potter* franchise, its fandom, and their transformative works is complicated. Marianne Martens notes that, even after the *Harry Potter* universe extended beyond J.K. Rowling's literary texts into films, theatre shows, amusement parks and other platforms such as the *Pottermore* website, Rowling was 'able to wield unusual and impressive control'.[89] Writing in 2019, Martens argued that 'authorship in the *Harry Potter* series is completely associated with J.K. Rowling, and not with Warner Bros., […] in part because of the prestige, the branding, and subsequent marketability' of her name.[90] Valentina Anania describes Rowling's relationship to her transmedial universe as one of ultimate hierarchical deference, with film directors and other stakeholders, such as playwright Jack Thorne, all positioning her 'as catalyst of meaning, not just for the novels, but for the universe as a whole': 'her word was law'.[91] Martens examines how this authorial control also extended into fanworks – while fanfiction of her world remains mostly untouched on third party platforms, Rowling was able to renegotiate boundaries in interactive fansites such as *Pottermore*, as well as legitimise certain fansites like *Leaky Cauldron* and *Muggle.net* through active endorsements.[92]

---

[87] Jonathan Gilmour, Doug Levandowski and Spenser Starke, *Kids on Brooms* (San Diego: Renegade Game Studios, 2020), p.1.

[88] Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), p.75.

[89] Marianne Martens, *The Forever Fandom of Harry Potter: Balancing Fan Agency and Corporate Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.43.

[90] Martens, p.22.

This level of authorial control over the *Harry Potter* franchise, as well as Rowling's once-prestigious authorial persona, has since been problematised by the author's outspoken personal and political views, in particular her extensive associations with conservative anti-trans groups. Rowling's strong association with her imaginary world is now an obstacle for fans and, to a lesser extent, the corporations she works with. Anania states, 'members of the public who condemned her words as damaging and exclusionary called for Rowling's "cancellation"'. While such efforts have varying degrees of success, any choice made by fans 'to ignore Rowling's voice means to refute her [self-made] role as catalyst of meaning for the franchise'.[93]

Transformative works which still respond to the *Harry Potter* universe must now navigate their relationship with the looming, ever-present figure of the author, as well as how this colours the works with which they have an affective tie. As Sarah Park Dahlan and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas note, 'some fans and scholars are conflicted' as 'the wizarding world of our young adulthood is now under siege because the author who created it chooses not to see everybody as whole persons'. [94] Even when the author's voice is ignored, inherent biases resulting from her perspective may still provoke a response from readers who feel excluded by her, fostering a desire for counternarratives.

Opening the social frame of its first episode with the exclamation, 'fuck TERFs' – a clip that was then reused extensively in social media advertising – *M&M* reflects this contemporary fan desire to both review and revise the conservative, 'problematic' elements of the *Harry Potter* franchise.[95] Its Wikipedia page lists *M&M*'s genre as a '*Harry Potter* ripoff but it's hella inclusive' (*sic.*), framing itself as a counternarrative from its inception.[96] The four episode mini-series follows a group of American students in the 'Pilot Programme' of Gowpenny Academy, a privileged British magical school which is debating opening its doors to those outside their elite cohort. These four exchange students, played by Erika Ishii, Lou Wilson, Danielle Radford, and *Dimension 20's* DM Brennan Lee Mulligan, feel pressured to be exemplary so that the Pilot Programme may succeed, even as they encounter resistance from conservative elements of the school, in particular the Academy's headmistress Boudicca Philtrum.

---

[91] Valentina Anania, 'The Author is Cancelled, Long Live the Author(s): Alternative Authorial Authorities and Fluid Authorship in the Wizarding World', *Makings,* Vol.2 No.1, (2021), pp.1-17 (p.4-5).

[92] Martens, p.37.

[93] Anania, p.11.

[94] Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *Harry Potter and the Other: Race, Justice, and Difference in the Wizarding World* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), p.4-5.

[95] 'Dimension 20' (@Dimension20), 'Reminder: Fuck TERFs', *Twitter.com,* 7 July 2021, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1412599020850139138.

M&M preserves certain structural scaffolds that *Kids on Brooms* defines as quintessential to magical school stories (wand selection, pet purchase, house sorting on Gowpenny's satirically named 'Confirmation Dais'). Yet the show also interrogates racial and gendered inequalities within the *Harry Potter* text. As one player notes in the first episode, 'it's kind of unfair to take some people from a certain group and then hold them up as examples of all the entirety of who they are representing'.[97] While the Pilot Programme are acting as exemplary representations of 'non-magical people' (here known as 'namps'), several of the players are people of colour, and bring this personal experience to bear on the challenge set for their characters by the narrative.

Certain criticisms made of *Harry Potter* in *M&M* are playful, reusing pop cultural and fan commentaries as satire. For instance, in Episode 2 it is noted that house-sorting is a practice of 'tracking' and 'predetermining a student's ability', 'plus it's got to be classist, right?'.[98] However, the narrative that unfolds features several moments of postcolonial critique, highlighting implicit instances of Anglocentrism and imperialism present within Rowling's work, and the genre-culture it helped shape. The Pilot Programme encounter NPC Khan Nguyen, who refers to herself by her 'wizard' name, 'Cleopatra St. Oppolie': 'no one here knows how to say it so I had to come up with a stupid wizard name'.[99] Her 'wizard' name is comedically exaggerated, gesturing to criticisms Rowling has received for the naming conventions of minorities within her works. Meanwhile, Khan and players discuss the process of ‘assimilat[ing] into wizard culture’: ‘“any dominant culture doesn’t care about-” “yeah, that’s imperialism and it’s fucked up!”’[100]

---

[96] Fandom User, 'Misfits and Magic', *Dimension 20 Fandom Wiki,* 16th June 2021, https://dimension20.fandom.com/wiki/Misfits_and_Magic.

[97] Dimension 20, 'Episode 1: The Chosen Ones', *Misfits and Magic,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/videos/the-chosen-ones, (1:45:55-1:46:10).

[98] Dimension 20, 'Episode 2: Class Conflict', *Misfits and Magic,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-misfits-and-magic/season:1/videos/class-conflict, (16:43-17:52).

[99] *Misfits and Magic,* 'Class Conflict', (2:01:58-2:02:03).

This postcolonial reading of *Harry Potter* is conducted alongside a critique and refutation of Rowling’s transphobia. The character Dream/Karen/K, played by Ishii, is constructed through intertextual references not just to *Harry Potter* but also its associated fanworks, with Dream mimicking the mannerisms of the protagonist of infamous *Harry Potter* fanfiction ‘My Immortal’.[101] Ishii, a non-binary actor, has Dream finish the series as K, identifying with ‘they/them’ pronouns. While this affirms the presence of trans individuals in Rowling’s world, Ishii’s character – an immersed fan, based in well-known transformative works – is also an exercise in negotiating fannish attachment to the franchise, considering the author’s political views. In K’s epilogue, Ishii narrates: ‘it’s still a struggle to figure out what feels good’, ‘to find the things that were fun and that they liked about their old self […] and this new self’.[102] This refers to their fluctuating gender identity, but also, perhaps, to their relationship with the fiction they consume. The desire to forge an identity out of the ‘fun’ things ‘old’ and ‘new’ reflects the same conundrum that Dahlen and Thomas argue faces many *Harry Potter* fans from marginalised backgrounds: the desire to preserve the ‘old’ fictional world they love so much, even as its author casts it in a ‘new’ light.[103]

As the Pilot Programme learn more of Gowpenny Academy, their focus shifts away from proving why the wizarding world should accept outsiders, to dismantling the philosophies upon which the wizarding world is based. The players and their characters argue that ‘instead of following a rote, inherited institution, actually understanding why certain things work […] leads to a deeper knowledge’, claiming that wizard ‘culture is ruled by shame, and a lot of you are conforming to some really unhealthy things […] the four of us are fed up with it already’.[104] Increasing frustration with the restrictive conventions of genre – informed by players’ pre-existing animosity towards Rowling – means the players seek not only to open up the wizarding world, but to challenge and change it: ‘if we get into the system and then beat them, then that's how you really win'.[105] *M&M's* epilogue focuses not on the success of the Pilot Programme, which happens six months into their school year, but on what comes after, with players seeking ways to further 'educate' both the magical and non-magical world. Lou Wilson's character, Whitney Jammer, claims that his focus becomes, 'how can we use magic to take care of the people in the communities that we come from?'.[106]

---

[100] *Misfits and Magic,* ‘Class Conflict’, (2:02:23-2:02:39).

[101] Anonymous, ‘My Immortal (Harry Potter Story)”, *Fanlore.org,* https://fanlore.org/wiki/My_Immortal_(Harry_Potter_story).

[102] *Misfits and Magic,* ‘Episode 4: We’re the Heroes’, *Misfits and Magic,* dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-misfits-and-magic/season:1/videos/we-re-the-heroes, (2:48:19-2:48:44).

[103] Dahlen and Thomas, *Harry Potter and the Other,* p.11.

[104] *Misfits and Magics,* ‘Class Conflict’, (1:50:29-1:50:37), (2:04:59-2:05:06).

These wider concerns are then endorsed by Iyengar as secondary author, who concludes *M&M* stating: 'the things that you have done here will ripple out in both this world and the one you came from, and create something new and better'.[107] Her conclusion blurs the lines between the in-game world and the reality that informs it. It also further secures *M&M* as a critique of Rowling's world, implying that *M&M* is 'something new and better' than its hypotext.

Overt critique of Rowling is not prompted by the game system itself, but instead a deliberate intention of Iyengar's secondary text. *Kids on Brooms* features a section entitled 'Systems of Power in Your World' that warns against 'fantasy oppression' – 'these forms of oppression may seem safer to work with […] but sometimes they're even riskier'.[108] It also features discussions of 'race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality' within character creation, noting that 'certain magical practices are traditionally associated with specific identities'.[109] While there is an emphasis on inclusion, and thus indirect criticism of Rowling's actions, it never explicitly states a position on Rowling as an author figure, as *M&M* does. Arguably, this is not the aim of the primary text: in the same way *D&D* condenses fantasy genre-culture down into a rubric, *Kids on Brooms* catalogues features of a singular aspect of fantasy genre-culture, going so far as to label all character archetypes in its appendix as 'Tropes'.[110] While instructions on inclusivity gesture to the wider issues of engaging with Rowling's world, even this is written under the caveat 'unless your group decides otherwise during creation': as with *D&D,* there is nothing preventing secondary and tertiary authors from affirmatively replicating Rowling's world exactly.[111] *Kids on Brooms* still ultimately defers to Rowling's authority. It is Iyengar's authorial choice – and a wider marketing decision on *Dimension 20's* part, once more choosing to emphasise 'difference' in this act of franchising – to use

---

[105] *Misfits and Magic,* 'Class Conflict', (20:17-20:24).
[106] *Misfits and Magic*, 'We're the Heroes' (2:53:09-2:53-13).
[107] *Misfits and Magic,* 'We're the Heroes', (2:54:24-2:54:32).
[108] *Kids on Brooms,* p.8.
[109] *Kids on Brooms,* p.19.
[110] *Kids on Brooms,* p.82.
[111] *Kids on Brooms,* p.19.

Kids on Brooms to create a narrative that overtly critiques Rowling and reevaluates the morals of the *Harry Potter* franchise through a postcolonial lens.

In her discussion of fan archives, de Kosnik redefines narrative fanworks as ‘archontic production’. Archontic literature is ‘fictional writings based on source texts […] that have been published; the writers of archontic literature are readers-turned-authors’ – which also, by the definitions of this thesis, encompasses the transformative narratives produced through TRPGs.[112] De Kosnik argues that archontic production is not ‘necessarily or essentially minoritarian’, but holds ‘potentialities for democratising, polyvocal, hybridising, multiperspectival cultural production’: ‘launching new ways of speaking, thinking, and believing from *within* the dominant discourse’.[113]

M&M is ‘multiperspectival cultural production’: its narrative relies upon a collaborative authorship model, and its political positioning in genre-culture is furthered by its decision to cast diversely at its table. While *Kids on Brooms* does not necessarily encourage a subversive approach to the *Harry Potter* franchise, *M&M* utilises this framework to create a critical archontic work. Iyengar’s emphasis on the ‘difference’ in her own authorial style is furthered by *Dimension 20’s* production choices to select players from minority backgrounds who are happy to be overtly critical of Rowling. This decision, while subversive, is still informed by the commercial concerns of franchising: an awareness of fandom’s current opinion on Rowling informs the preference for ‘open difference’ over ‘hierarchical deference’.

Iyengar’s ‘open difference’, while subversive, is still operating within the decision to franchise *Dimension 20’s* content, and in fact became emblematic of how this production team approached franchising. When *M&M* was critiqued by audiences for still centring Mulligan, and protagonising his character within what was supposed to be a communal narrative, *Dimension 20’s* creative director Orion Black stated:

> You are 100% correct […] it was a combined (myself included) act of subconscious white supremacy. […] we noticed a social issue unfold that is baked into most of the media we consume, and so it is easy to replicate without noticing. […]

---

[112] De Kosnik, p.275.

[113] De Kosnik, p.298.

> We will continue to redefine these situations by arming our GMs and writers and cast with these counter-systems, and continue to expand our cast and crew's growth into more diverse backgrounds.[114]

Black's apology, and the controversy surrounding Mulligan's treatment within this first attempt to decentralise his authorship, serves as a moment that further defined a preference for 'open difference' within actual play. Mulligan's accidental spotlighting was criticised by fans, showing that they supported a movement away from a single author figure. Black's apology also illustrates that the decision to display difference is still commercially driven. Black displays awareness that a season focusing on a controversial fantasy text, led by Iyengar, should present as progressive for fans to feel satisfied. This knowledge of contemporary fantasy genre-culture and fan attitudes towards diversity has gone on to inform other *Dimension 20* 'Side Quests', *Shriek Week* and *Coffin Run,* which feature secondary authors of colour, make use of alternative game systems or hacked versions of *D&D*, and, crucially, do not feature Mulligan at all.

De Kosnik argues that, while archontic production marks the moment where 'media consumer' becomes 'media user', this intervention is often private, or at least, made without expectation of interfering with the dominant discourse or mass-produced culture.[115] Archontic producers 'never expect their variations to be incorporated into later versions of the mass media texts': 'fans do not require or desire their innovations […] to be incorporated into the source, and they do not view themselves as developers contributing to the improvement of the source'.[116]

While the players of *M&M* might not imagine that their *Kids on Brooms* campaign will interfere with Rowling's behemoth franchise, the production and staging of this transformative work alters its status within fantasy genre-culture, and thus de Kosnik's understanding of archontic production. While obviously still not of equal status to *Harry Potter's* cultural capital, *M&M* does have more capital as a transformative work than other private TRPG games or even public fanfictions, given that it was a paid, professional work and publicly broadcast by Dropout, with the first episode accruing over 2 million views on YouTube.[117] As discussed throughout this thesis, actual play makes secondary and tertiary authors' private readings and responses into public texts. Actual play elevates TRPG narratives into legitimate contributions to fantasy, and so 'improvements' to genre-culture may still be an explicit aim.

---

[114] While the *Reddit* threat and Orion Black's response has since been deleted, these quotes were recovered from a tumblr reposting. 'Swarmkeepers', 'A nagging critique (Spoilers up until episode 3)', '*Hivehearted',* tumblr.com*,* 18 July 2021, https://swarmkeepers.tumblr.com/post/657100355289612288/a-nagging-critique-spoilers-up-until-episode-3, paras. 7-15.

[115] De Kosnik, p.300.

[116] De Kosnik, p.290.

In this case, *M&M* gives voice to mounting fan discontent surrounding Rowling, her political views, and her treatment of 'people of color [as] not essential, even in a fantasy world built in the imagination'.[118] Given the dominant structures of white supremacy that academics such as Rebecca Wanzo, Rukmini Pande, Mel Stanfill, and Alexis Lothian have all argued characterise fandom and transformative works, an archontic narrative that privileges marginalised perspectives reaching a large audience is also an intervention in the social practices of fantasy genre-culture. *M&M* generates consensus and momentum for resistant readings, thus interfering with the dominant discourse.

While it may not interfere with perceptions of Rowling's world on a vast scale, *M&M* influences perceptions of the *Kids on Brooms* system, being the most high-profile actual play show to use this primary text. Its performance here encourages others to use the system in a critical manner. It makes a further impact in fantasy genre-culture by serving as a pivotal and shaping moment for the incipient canon and growing industry of actual play.

Iyengar's authorial style remained one of 'open difference' over 'hierarchical deference'. The choice of *Kids on Brooms* as a TRPG system was a marked change from the style of *Dimension 20's* original author. Her approach to the *Harry Potter* franchise as a hypotext is resistant and subversive. Although some elements of popular culture now regard Rowling as a controversial and 'cancelled' figure, Iyengar's counternarrative is notable, given the history within this transmedial fantasy franchise of deferring to Rowling's judgement and authority as the 'catalyst of meaning'. Furthermore, *Dimension 20* as a production chose to support, endorse, and advertise this critique of a major fantasy work, demonstrating an awareness that a diverse, 'inclusive' approach was required, for this fan production to be successful. When viewed as part of a media franchising effort using

---

[117] Dimension 20, 'The Chosen Ones (Ep. 1) | Misfits and Magic [Full Episode]', *YouTube.com,* 27 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1VffF1Z5-Y&ab_channel=Dimension20.
[118] Dahlen and Thomas, p.6.

Johnson's framework, *M&M* represents another decision to share and diversify notions of authority. This is then utilised as a commercial selling point to define this artistic medium.

It is particularly useful to explore the ideas of 'open difference' and 'hierarchical deference' within *D&D* actual play when inflected by this secondary concern of inclusivity. *M&M's* approach to this text and its choice of casting reflect wider issues that have been increasingly discussed in fantasy genre-culture since 2009's RaceFail debate – definitions of social justice, inclusivity, and diversity, as well as an intensifying critique of the white privilege and exclusionary actions of individual authors.[119] Because actual play media is still closely linked to the fan subcultures TRPGs are a part of, the choice to share authority with those from marginalised backgrounds is both a political and a commercial statement. Given events such as Gamergate in 2014-15, which highlighted patterns of misogyny within gamer culture, and exemplified the backlash that arises when that culture is seen to no longer be prioritising whiteness and maleness within the consumer base, works that privilege marginalised perspectives and even profit from them may produce seismic shifts in wider subculture.[120]

Texts such as *M&M* may also act as a more 'legitimate' way to create subversive counternarratives to conservative elements of fantasy genre-culture. Actual play chooses to function differently from the media franchises Johnson examines, by not reverting back to the hegemony he believed productions ultimately defer to. By sharing their perceived canonical authority with Iyengar in 2021 and then proving this to be successful, Mercer and Mulligan set a precedent for the kind of creative decisions that might be made in actual play going forward. Certainly, in the cases of *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20,* sharing authority and presenting a progressive front has furthered the commercial success of their media brands, which will likely influence the practices of other shows.[121]

---

[119] Helen Young, 'Breaking Habits and Digital Communication', in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp.167-189.

[120] Mia Consalvo, 'Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars', *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology,* Vol.1, (2012), pp.1-7 (p.1).

[121] See G.L van Os, 'Diversity and Audience Interaction in Critical Role and The Adventure Zone', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,* ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.88-117.

Conclusion

Fantasy TRPGs' perceived 'authorlessness' – as a commercial product which enables anyone to create a fantasy story built to certain specifications – has been used to brand them as a 'lesser' form of fantasy narrative. Yet as celebrity, fame, and cultural capital begin to amass around narratives produced within these systems, there has been a corresponding desire to define and defend their authority and authorship. Audiences chose to venerate and canonise secondary authors (DMs) as Author-Gods or auteurs, in order to secure actual play's growing cultural capital.

This belief informed a minor backlash against TRPG creator Aabria Iyengar in 2021, when she took over the stewardship of two major actual play franchises, *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*. The choice to replace the secondary author on both high-profile shows was controversial: it disrupted growing perceptions of what defined authority and prestige within this space, and handed that power directly over to a woman of colour, whose voice was markedly different from her predecessors. Although ultimately inaccurate, fan discussion of actual play during this period is still fruitful to examine, as it exemplifies fantasy TRPGs' increased cultural capital and perceived artistic merit relative to fantasy genre-culture. While some viewers sought to ostracise Iyengar based on her race or gender, others felt that there was a 'pantheon' of artists and creators to protect, or add to. In fact, secondary authors are simply one of many participants within any given TRPG narrative. Both *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* profited from this moment of shared authorship, and went on to introduce further secondary authors to their tables.

It is therefore not useful to define the success and artistic merit of *D&D* and TRPG actual play through existing single-authorship models of authority and prestige. Instead, I utilised Johnson's distinction of 'difference and deference', developed to characterise the nature of collaborative authorship within media franchises. This model accounts for the presence of multiple, sometimes simultaneous, authorities within a singular media product or imaginary world, finding the value of individual voices when they operate amongst many. It also acknowledges the role commercial concerns and corporate stakeholders have in such negotiations. This is useful when discussing *D&D* actual play, as actual play productions are increasingly corporate ventures. It feels particularly pertinent to use this framework here when examining 'The Summer of Aabria', given that the act of sharing authorship with Iyengar was also both shows' first step to franchising their own actual play content, extending it beyond a single secondary author so that their artistic work became replicable and thus commercially sustainable going forward.

Iyengar’s appointment as DM marks a moment where both actual play media franchises placed value in the ‘difference’ a new author can bring to the table, rather than how she can defer to existing authorities. Reflecting Mercer, Mulligan, and Iyengar’s own views of TRPG gameplay, where value is seemingly found in ‘getting to collaborate with people […] [and] have someone to bounce […] off of’, both of Iyengar’s shows, *EXU* and *M&M,* focused primarily on the novel and different perspective she could bring, rather than trying to simply replicate what had come before. Although Iyengar expressed an ‘anxiety of authorship’ during this experimental period, she notes that it was ultimately better ‘to be less afraid to make new choices in this space’. Both Mercer and Mulligan take pains to emphasise the role her alternative choices have played in driving innovation not only in their media brands, but in TRPG actual play and TRPG subculture as a whole.

Within *Critical Role: EXU,* Iyengar negotiated the tensions between ‘open difference’ and ‘hierarchical deference’ through stewarding not only the *Critical Role* platform, but taking control of Matthew Mercer’s own secondary world, Exandria. While Iyengar was required to show a level of deference to Mercer as the original subcreator to ensure *EXU’s* success as a world-extending exercise, deference was also shown to her by Mercer himself. He shared hallmarks of his authority and subcultural capital – such as his access to traditional publishing – with Iyengar to ensure viewers were unable to deny her narrative’s canonicity. Amongst these attempts to dismantle existing hierarchies and place secondary authors on an equal footing, examples of Iyengar’s ‘difference’ in authorial style also shone through: her use of bathos, and her revisions to canonically Othered figures such as Lolth characterise her treatment of Mercer’s world. These characteristics are thrown into relief when compared with the second instalment of *EXU*, Mulligan’s *EXU: Calamity,* a prequel which utilises affirmative fan aesthetics and whose canonicity was never questioned. *Critical Role: EXU* was ultimately a success for both *Critical Role* and Iyengar despite initial backlash, establishing Iyengar as a respected secondary author and paving the way for further commercial extensions of *Critical Role’s* increasingly transmedial brand.

Meanwhile, in *Dimension 20: M&M,* Iyengar’s choice of difference over deference has wider reaching implications. Not only did an emphasis on the ‘different’ elements of her secondary authorship innovate Mulligan’s show – moving it away from its traditional *D&D*

format – it also responded to its intertext, the *Harry Potter* transmedial franchise, directly in a subversive way. *M&M* chose to focus on the different perspectives Iyengar and her cast of primarily minority players could bring to Rowling's wizarding world. Although many transformative counternarratives to the *Harry Potter* franchise exist, this high-production value show is a public instance of breaking away from the hierarchical deference that has historically characterised approaches to Rowling's authority.

Furthermore, *Dimension 20* was invested in highlighting the subversive challenge this campaign posed in its framing, editing, and advertising, emphasising the role that marginalised creators can play in diversifying the perspectives present in fantasy genre-culture. Iyengar's time on *Dimension 20* was a defining moment for this media platform*:* her project and its reception by audiences (in particular, the arguments fans generated when white authorities were still deferred to, despite best efforts) have gone on to define subsequent 'Side Quest' ventures. *Dimension 20: Side Quests* such as *Shriek Week*, *Coffin Run*, and *A Court of Fey and Flowers* have also gone on to utilise new and different, often homebrewed, TRPG systems. Both *Shriek Week* and *Coffin Run* also spotlighted secondary authors of colour, and in fact chose to remove Mulligan from the table entirely to avoid their authority becoming contested.

In the 'Summer of Aabria', major actual play practitioners sought to redefine – or perhaps reinforce – the value of authority and authorship within fantasy TRPGs as polyvocal and collaborative. It also seems that audiences are now accepting these new parameters of value. For instance, in February 2023, *Dimension 20* announced a new, then-unnamed series, with the only detail in the trailer being that it was DM'ed by Matthew Mercer. This trailer was arguably playing into, or at least capitalising upon, the prestige of the secondary author as auteur.[122] However, comments and reactions to the trailer by fans focused less on the figure of the DM, and more on which other voices would be heard at his hypothetical table. Such comments included: 'YES!!!! Brennan & Aabria better be players or so help me', 'desperately hoping this is OOPS ALL DMs [*sic.*] and that Brennan, Aabria and [Brian] Murph[y] are at that table', 'I DESPERATELY need Aabria, Brandon and Emily to be players in this game', and 'I wanna see matt deal with [Emily] axford and [Ally] beardsley shenanigans so much' [*sic.*].[123] TRPG narratives – as well as these high-profile acts of worldsharing – are now being discussed and evaluated based on the potential combinations of authors that might contribute to them. Authorship is now being imagined by audiences as collaborative and communal. While the secondary author still retains their celebrity, excitement seems to amass around which other voices and tertiary authors their texts will incorporate.

---

[122] Dimension 20, 'Dimension 20 New Season Trailer', *YouTube.com,* 27 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM0CfvUbVNE&ab_channel=Dimension20.

[123] All replies to 'Dimension 20' (@dimension20show), '✨ 🎲 COMING MAY 2023 🎲 ✨ 📺 Only on

Critical Role and *Dimension 20* also vocally advocate for generating 'difference' – different responses, different styles, different perspectives – rather than 'deferring' to the authorities already in place. As a result, actual play may become a space where multiplicity is treated as its defining feature. This is seen in metatextual discussions such as the 'Game Masters of Exandria' roundtable, and the ultimate success of the 'Summer of Aabria' for both the shows and for Iyengar herself. While Iyengar faced initial audience backlash for assuming the role of secondary author and proving it to be interchangeable, it launched her career as a TRPG author and creator. She has been invited back to both *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* multiple times as a secondary and tertiary author, not to mention playing roles in many other leading actual play productions such as *The Adventure Zone* (2021), *Not Another D&D Podcast* (2022), and *Vampire the Masquerade: New York by Night* (2022).

Pande has maligned media conglomerates' attempts to 'project' a diverse and inclusive front, noting that while virtue signalling is utilised to build cultural capital, 'there is considerably less care being taken in terms of any follow-through on these promises'.[124] However, *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* – as forerunners in the actual play field – have at least attempted to practice what they preached. By continuing to share authority, this space may find its value in the diverse (as in, many) perspectives it offers. Meanwhile, each company's advocacy for these values also proves such perspectives to be profitable, contributing to a larger trend within fantasy genre-culture to demand the acknowledgement of marginalised authorities that previous canonical models have often excluded.

Although I am inflecting Johnson's terms 'open difference' and 'hierarchical deference' with new meaning here, I believe that these are the values which *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20's* management and production teams have also assigned to them, in their deliberate choice of who to share authorship with. Marketing efforts for TRPG actual play have continued to emphasise the strength to be found in the player community's diversity,

---

@dropout ⚔️ #Dimension20', *Twitter.com,* 27 February 2023, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1630274064924155910.

[124] Pande, p.75.

stressing actual play as a space in which subversive narratives and new approaches to fantasy can be found. For instance, in an interview discussing actual play as a genre, practitioner Persephone Valentine argued, 'high fantasy and fantasy in general [are] stagnant […] Our stories and ideas have been kept out, and that creates a very stagnant culture where things repeat. Let us have our voices [here] because it'll be much more entertaining on the whole.'[125]

Valentine's argument runs counter to Attebery's: she believes that the 'repetition' and congealed 'stagnation' he saw as characteristic of fantasy TRPGs is found instead within the dominant culture of literature, television, and film. She believes the fantasy genre has solidified into a 'stagnant culture where things repeat'. I have argued that iterative repetition in TRPGs often produces the opposite: diverse multiplicities, through the many different responses readers can have even to the same source text. Contrary to what Attebery argued in *Strategies of Fantasy*, it is perhaps not the act of repetition, but whose voices are allowed to dominate and thus prolifically reproduce themselves, that can result in perceptions of 'stagnation': a deference to pre-existing authorities, rather than an openness to anything new.

Valentine overlaps collaborative authorship with the need to preserve multiple, diverse, and marginalised perspectives on fantasy. Given that TRPG actual play is derived from and informed by fandom subculture, a space that is increasingly assigning cultural capital to social progressiveness, it perhaps makes sense – both ideologically, and commercially – to advocate for both the elevation of marginalised voices and the medium's own potential for creating a harmonious chorus of many perspectives.

By defining authority as multiple and many, by making sure to share it with those outside the dominant order, and by ensuring that originality and 'difference' are the core principles by which this new narrative form is valued, actual play can continue to offer a space in genre-culture that makes room for counternarratives and experimentation, even as these experiments become public, 'legitimate' works of art. It can also offer a space where transformative responses or critiques of existing media are given greater officiality, if only because the critical challenges posed within them are demonstratively built and shared amongst many, rather than the resistant opinion of a sole individual.

---

[125] Kam Burns and Kayla Sharpe, 'Live Dungeons & Dragons Shows Are Inviting More Players to the Table', *Wired*, 21 October 2022, https://www.wired.com/story/live-dungeons-and-dragons-actual-play-shows-inclusive-diversity/, para.16.

Conclusion

Brennan Lee Mulligan (Dungeon Master): Why do we tell stories? To try to make sense of a world that can be terrifying and enormous. In Exandria, I don't know that your story will long be known. I don't know who will remain to tell it. But it did happen, and it *did* matter.

‘Episode 4 – Fire and Ruin’, *EXU: Calamity,* (6:05:41 – 6:06:07).

As I begin the daunting prospect of concluding this thesis, I’ve decided to borrow the ending from one of my favourite pieces of actual play media: Brennan Lee Mulligan’s final lines in *EXU: Calamity,* which sees only one of its player characters surviving the tragedy that has taken place. Mulligan’s closing speech is very knowing: not only does he term the game they have all just finished playing a ‘story’, he has certain proof that it *does* matter. Not only will the cast carry the memory of this game – and the vigorous emotional journey it very visibly sent several of them through – away from this table, an audience of thousands have also sat with them and hung onto their every word throughout even this six-hour finale. The story has accrued meaning: it has extended beyond the single table to impact fantasy genre-culture in numerous ways, from proving *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* capable of sustaining a story in the high literary tragic mode, to demonstrating the level of immersion and investment players can hold for an imaginary world, even when they know it is doomed to fail. Not that any of this is strictly necessary, for the story itself to be impactful. Even if it had remained private, a story such as *Calamity* – any *D&D* narrative constructed by any group of players – can hold extreme personal worth to those playing it, as a fantasy story that is transformatively and uniquely their own.

In the nearly four-year process of writing this thesis, *D&D* has undergone many sudden landmark developments and unexpected changes – at times, it was difficult to keep up to date with recent developments, although I have managed to cover some of them here! From the 2020 announcement of the game’s attempt to dismantle its racial representations, at the same time *Critical Role* founded their TRPG publishing company Darrington Press; to the 2021 Summer of Aabria and the changes this wrought in the texts I was attempting to study;

to the 2022 release of the *Critical Role: Legend of Vox Machina* TV show via the Amazon Prime platform, which attempted to remove *D&D* mechanics from the narrative of a *D&D* campaign almost entirely; to the 2023 release of *Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves,* the *D&D*-inspired videogame *Baldur's Gate 3,* and *Critical Role* selling out the OVO Wembley Arena in London, in their first live show since the Covid-19 pandemic; to the announcement that my submission year (2024) – also *D&D's* 50th anniversary – would see the launch of an entirely new edition of the game known as *One D&D.* My period of PhD study has proven to be the perfect time to analyse the growing impact of such a dynamic and ever-changing text. Like the players of *EXU: Calamity,* I have perhaps just told a single 'story' within this thesis, to try to make sense of a shifting landscape that seems to be going through a sudden series of potentially seismic changes. I believe they will hold consequences for the future of fantasy which I can only begin to guess at.

This thesis has attempted to prove that, although often overlooked by fantasy scholars, *D&D* has been a valuable contributor to fantasy genre-culture from its inception. In its primary text form, *D&D* archived the many annals of fantasy into one mainstream, 'generic' mould. While this primary text has been treated by authors and academics as the epitome of 'formula' fantasy, it is in fact simply one of many transformative responses to fantasy genre-culture. The primary text was the transformative response of principally white, male, US-based authors and game designers at TSR and Wizards of the Coast, who were able to replicate their already dominant position within mainstream fantasy in their construction of their own game text, cementing its perception as a 'universal' mode. Once placed into the hands of players and DMs, *D&D's* definition of fantasy reverts to being polyvocal. Secondary and tertiary authors bring their many and various understandings of fantasy to the tables at which they play, to produce transformative responses to fantasy that may run counter to the game designers, and which remain unique to that individual regardless.

Chapter One tackled the treatment of *D&D* by fantasy scholars, showing how it has typically been excluded or dismissed from narratives of the genre's development, which have tended to prioritise the literary mode. It demonstrated the applicability of both Helen Young's notion of 'fantasy genre-culture' and Jessica Hammer's model of 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'' to understanding how *D&D* operates in relation to fantasy, providing both game designers and players with the tools to respond proactively to the texts and media they consume. They may choose to reenact a fantasy text as written, embodying an affective attachment to fantasy genre-culture, or they may overtly critique, remix, or rewrite that text: both of these approaches are transformative.

Through the borrowing of various discourses from Fan Studies, I therefore defined *D&D* as transformative fantasy, demonstrating the merits of its status as a fanwork for both facilitating reader responses to the fantasy genre and producing potentially subversive narratives within this unofficial space. As a singular text in which the 'textual practices' and 'social processes' of fantasy, 'fantasy conventions' and 'the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts' all coalesce, *D&D* offers a unique space to facilitate readers of fantasy becoming participants and authors in fantasy genre-culture.[1] Through character and world creation, a player or a DM may highlight the areas of fantasy where they feel some dissatisfaction: what they think is missing, what they wish they could change, or what elements of genre convention they perhaps feel excluded by and thus believe should be rewritten.

Chapter Two explored *D&D's* positioning in fantasy genre-culture, relative to fantasy literature. *D&D* has often been seen as a lesser, derivative response to literature – however, its treatment by fantasy authors often acknowledges its capacity for creative reinvention or subversion. In literature, *D&D* is commonly treated as a synecdoche for the expectations, conventions, and mores of fantasy, that have become literalised as rules through rubric. It is through encounters with this rubric that characters see the possibilities and potentials that lie beyond the boundaries of formula. They often become frustrated by what the 'generic' ideas of fantasy prevent or exclude, and seek to find loopholes in the rules presented to them, or break them entirely. Fantasy authors also place value on the immersive participation in fantasy that *D&D* and other TRPGs encourage, especially when this leads to transformative relationships to individual characters. Characters who become active participants in the worlds they are in are typically valorised within fantasy texts that use *D&D* as an intertext, acknowledging *D&D's* own merits as a participatory fan practice.

Chapter Three used the long-running actual play series *Critical Role* as a case study to examine how *D&D* players gain greater awareness of fantasy genre-culture through iterative *D&D* gameplay. While some secondary and tertiary authors may use the primary text as a springboard from which to launch their own understandings of fantasy, as players learn the rules of the game and thus the fantasy conventions on which this game relies, they gain confidence as fantasy authors. They begin to produce their own unique and subversive responses to the set of conventions which they have been given. This confidence manifests through creating characters which playfully or critically subvert the primary text, through tertiary authors making more proactive game choices that utilise the full extent of their agency within the game system and authorial framework, and in a decentralisation of the primary text. The primary text is no longer considered a canon the players need to rely on, once the imaginary world they share with the DM grows and becomes autonomous from the rubrics that were used to create it.

---

[1] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.5.

Chapter Four examined the *D&D* textual artefact of drow or dark elves to provide an in-depth example of the subversive counternarratives secondary and tertiary authors can create in response to the primary text. Because the treatment of race within *D&D* condenses and solidifies one of the most problematic trends within wider fantasy genre-culture, this is one area of the game text that many modern creators have taken issue with, thus leading to many politically-charged attempts to redefine or counteract it. Secondary and tertiary authors have critically approached and revised the demonisation of the gendered and racial Other in the figure of drow, attempting to reclaim the various facets of femininity, blackness, and the exotic Orientalised Other encoded therein. This chapter also highlighted how actual play has altered Hammer's hierarchy of authorship, assigning greater status and meaning to these secondary and tertiary counternarratives. By broadcasting *D&D* games and disseminating subversive player texts – moving them from the private space of amateur, fannish narrative to the public space of official, published text – actual play gives individual authors the power to not only begin rewriting the rules of the game, but to contribute to a genre-wide effort to diversify and decolonise fantasy.

Chapter Five discussed actual play's alterations to Hammer's hierarchy in greater depth, through an analysis of the 2021 'Summer of Aabria'. It demonstrated how secondary authors (DMs) are now accumulating status and capital, which gives them not only the power to subvert the primary text, but also to make a case for actual play and *D&D* as a legitimate artform and key part of fantasy genre-culture. However, distinguishing the secondary author as an auteur or author-genius, as fans and audiences have attempted, fails to understand the unique affordances this medium has when contributing to genre. Instead, I argued for use of Derek Johnson's notions of 'difference' and 'deference' as a means of interpretation within a collaborative authorship model. By choosing to focus on 'difference', and thus promote many authors in this new kind of media franchise, creators of high-profile actual play shows are attempting to preserve a multiplicity of perspectives on fantasy, rather than defaulting to any new canon that could replace the primary text and be perceived as a singular, monolithic or 'generic' definition of fantasy. In also choosing to elevate marginalised perspectives, actual play shows demonstrate a preference for the subversive counternarratives that were discussed and explored in Chapter Four. *D&D* actual play attempts to create a sustainable media franchise that does not seamlessly replicate itself but instead showcases the differences between its numerous, diverse, innovative narratives and plethora of author figures. Even as it becomes commercialised, actual play will hopefully remain a space where many authors can produce many different definitions of fantasy, all coexisting alongside each other. Many forms of *D&D* gameplay can exist, contradicting the presumed universal presented within fantasy's dominant discourse and the primary text.

Throughout this thesis, I hope I have proven that *D&D* and our understandings of fantasy are deeply intertwined, with *D&D* often becoming the stand-in or representative of what different stakeholders think fantasy is, or is perceived as. While I struggled to find academics who addressed *D&D* directly in their overviews of fantasy's development, the game's fifty-year long history overlaps heavily with the cementation of ideas and expectations within literary fantasy. The *D&D* primary text attempted to encompass and archive one singular mainstream definition of fantasy, which in turn contributed to this mode being seen as the universal, generic, popular consensus of what genre is. *D&D*, like literary fantasy, was initially dominated by white, male voices, and the version of fantasy they chose to preserve was merely a transformative response made in their image. To assume this text is the embodiment of universal, 'generic' formula is to take for granted the voices that have been given precedence within fantasy genre-culture in the past. By decentralising this dominant discourse of fantasy and repositioning it so that it exists amongst many individualised definitions facilitated at individual tables, some of which are increasing in visibility and thus gaining traction, this thesis argues that fantasy has always contained multiplicities and diverse voices. It was just the case that only some of them had access to publication and dissemination, and thus mainstream exposure.

Actual play has been instrumental in altering this balance of power. While offering me a new body of evidence to draw upon while analysing *D&D* gameplay – particularly games that prioritise narrative and wish to be seen as fantasy fiction – the impact of actual play on *D&D's* positioning within fantasy genre-culture has also been of key importance to this thesis. Actual play invites viewers to analyse *D&D* games as fantasy texts, but it also enables secondary and tertiary authors to amass a following and their own subcultural capital, meaning that their secondary and tertiary texts have greater weight within fantasy genre-culture. Creators' own texts may now even outweigh the primary text, once more decentring that white, male canon. When coupled with a desire to cast players from a range of diverse and marginalised backgrounds, this means that actual play becomes a fruitful space in which to decolonise assumptions about both fantasy and geek identity. As covered in Chapter Four, secondary and tertiary narratives have always navigated and negotiated issues such as race, with many individual tables often ignoring or amending rules that placed limitations on women and people of colour – but they did this work only in the privacy of their own homes or play spaces. Actual play makes such texts, as well as their players, visible, contributing to a seismic shift in *D&D* player demographics that in turn contributes to calls for revisions to exclusionary rules.

By casting LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals, actual play leads to a dismantling of assumptions around not only who can play *D&D*, but who fantasy can serve, and whose stories have value and can be told within this space. Showing what immense variety *D&D* is capable of, actual play has opened *D&D* up to a new group of consumers, who previously felt excluded from the space – which *D&D* has then chosen to capitalise on, by undoing certain aspects of its legacy content. Even if this work is only performed for mercenary motives, actual play has contributed to fantasy genre-culture's wider and ongoing efforts to decolonise and interrogate its dominant discourses, and its own whiteness. It has also acted as a space where readers, players, and authors alike can articulate and come into awareness of such issues.

Actual play still currently holds a liminal position between official and unofficial that proves to be a rich space for counternarratives to dominant discourses within fantasy. Actual play can therefore be examined as one area in which transformative narratives have begun to gain 'official' traction, which is particularly interesting when considering the bleed of transformative narratives into literary fantasy, for example in subgenres such as 'cosy fantasy', romantasy, LitRPG, or *isekai*. I do not want to fall into the trap of hailing all transformative narratives as inherently subversive through their mere existence. However, because the rules which configure the *D&D* player's default experience of the imaginary world are so openly hostile to Otherness, often secondary and tertiary authors' attempts to break, amend, or rewrite them produce unique responses that are tackling not just the rules at hand, but wider political issues in genre-culture. As I stated in my introduction and in Chapter One, I do not see subversion as inherently more ‘worthy’ than a transformative response, as both have value for demonstrating how readers feel and react to the fantasy they consume. However, given that *D&D* has a history of being an exclusionary, gatekept space, and has also been treated by scholars as a hallmark of fantasy’s presumed homogeneity, I find it particularly worthwhile to focus on the way players have outright rejected the rules and rewritten fantasy in their own image, particularly when that image is antithetical to the imagined player the primary text encoded within its pages. Subversive narratives merely provide more proof of the variety of stories *D&D* can facilitate and produce, and the immense value of inviting many voices to a table, when other official avenues of publication may still be barred to them.

As previously stated, this thesis has been written during a period of great change within *D&D* and *D&D* actual play. Alongside the developments already listed above, I also wish to gesture to the developing academic interest in TRPGs and actual play as an area of study. Several texts specific to *D&D* not as a game but a broadcasted and performative experience, such as *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom* (2021), *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance* (2021), and Aaron Trammell’s discussion of the actual play gig economy in *The Privilege of Play* (2023), demonstrate the need to address how *D&D* subculture has profoundly changed within the past decade. This thesis is therefore contributing to a growing body of research that wishes to address this new phenomenon in popular culture, which is only growing in significance as the game product begins to alter itself in line with the image actual play presents.

While this thesis is primarily concerned with how *D&D* synthesises fantasy, fantasy literary convention, and issues within fantasy genre-culture, I have made brief gestures to other phenomena which warrant further study: the growing presence of transformative narratives within ‘official’ culture – both in literature and in media; the diversifying of geek identity through the players selected to participate at high-profile tables; the assignation of cultural capital to DMs as authors; and the increasing commercialisation of a previously amateur hobby, which may have ramifications not only for the gaming product but also geek practices across a variety of different subcultures. I have also analysed actual play shows as narrative texts in their own right, highlighting their often-knowing intertextuality, as well as their self-reflexive treatment of recurrent themes and motifs within fantasy. I therefore hope that this thesis and the growing body of related secondary criticism allows academics to critically analyse the stories and works they love, regardless of what medium they happen to be told in. I do this while acknowledging that some work may still need to be done to find an interpretative framework that avoids assigning the bulk of authorial intent to any singular individual, and which also recognises all the affordances of the TRPG medium and particularly the higher production value of actual play, combining practices from many preexisting fields of study.

Alternatively, while it lies outside the scope of this thesis, it might be particularly worthwhile to conduct similar analysis of fantasy genre-culture's treatment at personal and private tables. While actual play casts are aware that they are performing a story for others' entertainment and this informs the narrative complexity of their gameplay, as well as their political stances on issues such as representation, it would be interesting to survey how individual tables tackle fantasy genre convention either subconsciously, or with this specific thematic goal in mind.

This thesis was borne initially out of frustration with what I perceived at the time to be genre snobbery – fantasy's worth and literary merit was often defended, at the expense of the parts of fantasy genre-culture I most enjoyed. Now that we are supposedly beyond the need for the 'fantasy apology' in academic criticism, I hope we might soon also reach the point where a mutually exclusive binary between 'serious' and 'fun' is no longer employed to distinguish which parts of fantasy contribute the most meaning or worth to the field.[2] While this thesis has often involved me advocating for *D&D* as an impactful, meaningful, previously-overlooked and yet 'serious' text, I also wish to preserve the fact that, at its heart, *D&D* is a game, designed to be whole-heartedly enjoyed by people who love fantasy. This is perhaps what unsettles academics when they approach it as a text to be studied. Ultimately, any deep, meaningful message or grandiose authorial intent is subject to the same eventual demand: '…but did you and your players have fun?' Allowing people the space and agency to be playful with the conventions of fantasy is partly what encourages experimentation, and produces these many different, unique, and subversive transformative responses. Similarly, certain critiques of racial or gendered representation in fantasy are often not made with any deliberate revisionist agenda in mind: the simple fact of the matter is that playing with rules that are exclusionary or harmful to you also precludes any ability to enjoy yourself.

---

[2] Diane Parkin-Speer, 'Strategies of Fantasy by Brian Attebery (review)', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 46 No. 4, 1992, pp.223-224, (p.224).

Therefore, while I have spent many words advocating for *D&D* as a very serious and important area of study within fantasy genre-culture, and fantasy academia specifically, I wanted to end by saying that this doesn't change the fact that some of the fantasy narratives I've most enjoyed are the ones I have participated in, as a viewer, as a player, or as a DM. This enjoyment underlies much of my academic thinking about fantasy, and my critical approach to *D&D* throughout this thesis.

Bibliography

‘Aabria Iyengar’ (@quiddie), *Twitter.com*, 5 August 2021, https://twitter.com/quiddie/status/1423398485282353155.

-------, *Twitter.com*, 19 July 2021, https://twitter.com/quiddie/status/1417361925508198402.

Abbott, H. Porter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 3rd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Allen, Graham, *Intertextuality*, 2nd Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

‘Alphabet Mafioso’ (@Coolrazberry), *Twitter.com*, 16 June 2021, https://twitter.com/Coolrazberry/status/1405247120999956485.

Anania, Valentina, ‘The Author is Cancelled, Long Live the Author(s): Alternative Authorial Authorities and Fluid Authorship in the Wizarding World’, *Makings*, Vol.2 No.1, (2021), pp.1-17.

Anonymous, ‘My Immortal (*Harry Potter* Story)”, *Fanlore.org*, https://fanlore.org/wiki/My_Immortal_(Harry_Potter_story).

Attebery, Brian, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

-------, *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Baker, Neal, ‘Secondary World Infrastructures and Tabletop Fantasy Roleplaying Games’, in *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*, ed. by Mark J.P. Wolf (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 83-95.

Baldree, Travis, *Legends & Lattes* (Spokane, WA: Cryptid Press, 2022).

Barthes, Roland, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image Music Text,* translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).

Beckbessinger, Dylan, ‘Surviving the Mercer effect’, *The DnD Geek*, 4 August 2021, https://thedndgeek.co.uk/surviving-the-mercer-effect.

Blau, Julia J.C., ‘Birth of a New Medium or Just Bad TV? Framing and Fractality of Actual Play’, in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.32-54.

Booth, Paul (ed.), *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

Bowles, Scott (ed.), *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Ed.: Hall of Heroes* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989).

Bowman, Sarah Lynne, and Andreas Leiberoth, ‘Psychology and Roleplaying Games’, in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.245-264.

Boyd, Eric L., *Demihuman Deities*, ed. Julia Martin (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1998).

Burns, Kam, and Kayla Sharpe, ‘Live Dungeons & Dragons Shows Are Inviting More Players to the Table’, *Wired*, 21 October 2022, https://www.wired.com/story/live-dungeons-and-dragons-actual-play-shows-inclusive-diversity/.

Butler, Andrew M., Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature Second Edition* (Baltimore, MD: Old Earth Books, 2004).

Callahan, Tim, and Mordecai Knode, ‘Advanced Readings in D&D: Jack Vance’, *Tor.com*, 15 July 2013, https://www.tor.com/2013/07/15/advanced-readings-in-dad-jack-vance/.

Carbonell, Curtis D., *Dread Trident: Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Modern Fantastic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

Carter, Lin, *Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

Consalvo, Mia, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

-------, ‘Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars’, *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, Vol.1, (2012), pp.1-7.

-------, ‘Why We Need Feminist Game Studies’, *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*, ed. Tasha Oren & Andrea Press (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), pp.206-217.

‘Critical Role’, ‘Critical Role: The Legend of Vox Machina Animated Special’, *Kickstarter.com*, 16 November 2021, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/criticalrole/critical-role-the-legend-of-vox-machina-animated-s.

‘Critical Role’ (@CriticalRole), *Twitter.com*, 12 May 2022, https://twitter.com/CriticalRole/status/1524781933070196739.

Critical Role, ‘Arrival at Kraghammer | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 1’, *YouTube.com*, 24 June 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-p9lWIhcLQ&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry.

-------, ‘Race to the Tower | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 102’, *YouTube.com*, 26 July 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1A-JGIF1Vc&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry.

-------, ‘Curious Beginnings | Talks Machina | Campaign 2 Episode 1’, *YouTube.com*, 3 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qyjSmkSyF0&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry, [Accessed: 01-10-21].

-------, ‘The Open Road | Critical Role: THE MIGHTY NEIN | Episode 5’, *YouTube.com*, 12 Feb 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3vPWbJoBrQ&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry.

-------, ‘Midnight Espionage | Critical Role: THE MIGHTY NEIN | Episode 12’, *YouTube.com*, 2 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoZGMqCIRK8&t=14601s&ab_channel=Geek%26Sundry.

-------, ‘Lost Treasures | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 22’, *YouTube.com*, 19 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQxpxWz38P8.

-------, ‘Talks Machina: Discussing C2E22 - Lost Treasures’, *YouTube.com*, 12 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrFftS8jnAI&ab_channel=CriticalRole, [Accessed: 01-10-21].

-------, ‘Domestic Respite | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 62’, *YouTube.com*, 13 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EfuYx_YWC8&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Refjorged | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 76’, *YouTube.com*, 26 Aug 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzHkVh80kVQ&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Commerce & Chaos | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 31’, *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ25t2cM6Ws&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘In Hot Water | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 43’, *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyArEJYKr5U&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘A Game of Names | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 49’, *YouTube.com*, 20 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xmsjf8jQZWE&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Where There Is A Will... | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 138’, *YouTube.com*, 17 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abczYOn1lIQ.

-------, ‘Long May He Reign | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 140’, *YouTube.com*, 31 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5O0bbA7Pn8&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Vox Machina vs. the Mighty Nein’, *YouTube.com*, 20 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpBIQhWAhuM&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Critical Role Campaign 2 Wrap-Up’, *YouTube.com*, 21 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bE2EUHzr0Fs&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘The Nameless Ones | Exandria Unlimited | Episode 1’, *YouTube.com*, 28 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ijPD6yNdMs&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘The Oh No Plateau | Exandria Unlimited | Episode 2’, *YouTube.com*, 5 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjucx2vz5Mg&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Exandria Unlimited Wrap-Up’, *YouTube.com*, 30 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFSO0IuBrnw&list=PL1tiwbzkOjQzSnYHVT8X4pyMIbSX3i4gz&index=11&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Exandria Unlimited: Kymal | Part 2’, *YouTube.com*, 5 April 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-0bSdoPj5o&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Excelsior | Exandria Unlimited: Calamity | Episode 1’, *YouTube.com*, 30 May 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlIkkeWmVvA&t=2s&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Fire and Ruin | Exandria Unlimited: Calamity | Episode 4’, *YouTube.com*, 20 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrtoyB2fcMI&list=PL1tiwbzkOjQwzhdskYekmjr0h2tsbKaZw&index=4&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

-------, ‘Game Masters of Exandria Roundtable’, *YouTube.com*, 29 June 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmZSWKPXhZ4.

-------, ‘The Aurora Grows | Critical Role | Campaign 3, Episode 49’, *YouTube.com*, 20 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_NVdZp8haA&ab_channel=CriticalRole.

CritRole Stats, ‘Series Running Times’, *Critrolestats.com*, 8 Jan 2018, https://www.critrolestats.com/stats.

-------, ‘A Tribute to Mollymauk Tealeaf, Long May He Reign’, *Critrolestats.com*, 25 July 2018, https://www.critrolestats.com/blog/2018/7/25/a-tribute-to-mollymauk-tealeaf-long-may-he-reign.

Cuddon, J.A., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

Dahlen, Sarah Park and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *Harry Potter and the Other: Race, Justice, and Difference in the Wizarding World* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2022).

‘Dani Gee’, ‘Counterspell. The best spell?’, *YouTube.com*, 9 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piAIv2s_txE&ab_channel=DaniGee.

De Kosnik, Abigail, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

DePass, Tanya, ‘All About Me!’, *cypheroftyr.com*, https://cypheroftyr.com/bio/.

-------, ‘About’, *I Need Diverse Games*, https://ineeddiversegames.org/about/. [Accessed 03-10-22].

Deterding, Sebastian and José P. Zagal, ‘The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies’, in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.1-16.

Dimension 20: Escape from the Bloodkeep, created by Brennan Lee Mulligan et al., dropout.tv, (30 Apr 2019 - 4 Jun 2019), https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-escape-from-the-bloodkeep.

Dimension 20: Misfits and Magic, created by Aabria Iyengar et al., dropout.tv, (30 Jun 2021 - 21 Jul 2021), https://www.dropout.tv/dimension-20-misfits-and-magic.

Dimension 20, ‘Escape from the Bloodkeep: Behind the Scenes’, dropout.tv, https://www.dropout.tv/videos/escape-from-the-bloodkeep-behind-the-scenes.

-------, ‘Building Your Own Campaign Setting (with Matthew Mercer) | Adventuring Academy’, *YouTube.com*, 3 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sig8X_kojco&list=PLhOoxQxz2yFN70xDSNNI8PKgxabBNvPhY&ab_channel=Dimension20.

-------, ‘Storytelling As a Game Master with Peter Warren’, *YouTube.com*, 4 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnXSQiR8ayU&list=PLhOoxQxz2yFN70xDSNNI8PKgxabBNvPhY&index=19&ab_channel=Dimension20.

-------, ‘The Chosen Ones (Ep. 1) | Misfits and Magic [Full Episode]’, *YouTube.com*, 27 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1VffF1Z5-Y&ab_channel=Dimension20.

-------, ‘Adventuring Academy: Blight, Plants, Birds, and Almonds (with Aabria Iyengar)’, dropout.tv, 22 Feb 2023, https://www.dropout.tv/adventuring-academy/season:4/videos/blight-plants-birds-and-almonds-with-aabria-iyengar.

------- ‘Dimension 20 New Season Trailer’, *YouTube.com*, 27 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM0CfvUbVNE&ab_channel=Dimension20.

‘Dimension 20’ (@dimension20show), *Twitter.com*, 16 June 2021, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1405212381555400711.

-------, *Twitter.com*, 7 July 2021, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1412599020850139138.

-------, *Twitter.com*, 27 February 2023, https://twitter.com/dimension20show/status/1630274064924155910.

‘Disasterhumans’, ‘Ask: How about Nott?’, ‘*I don’t want your pockets to grow too heavy’,* tumblr.com, 9th April 2019, https://disasterhumans.tumblr.com/post/184068356689/how-about-nott.

Dungeons & Dragons, ‘The Banishing Grief | Black Dice Society | Episode #2 | D&D’, *YouTube.com*, 8 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufCE_nZzSHM

-------, ‘The Banishing Grief Part 2 | Black Dice Society | Episode #3 | D&D’, *YouTube.com*, 15 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eRfaInpn80&ab_channel=Dungeons%26Dragons.

-------, ‘Vergissmeinnicht (Forget-me-not) Part 2 | Black Dice Society | Episode #5 | D&D’, *YouTube.com*, 30 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFspfIT3UL4&t=3648s&ab_channel=Dungeons%26Dragons.

'Dunkmaster Gabby' (@GoblinBridge), *Twitter.com*, 14 August 2021, https://twitter.com/GoblinBridge/status/1426637839513567234.

Eames, Nicholas, *Kings of the Wyld* (London: Orbit, 2017).

'Fandom User', 'Widogast's Web of Fire', *Critical Role Wiki*, https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Widogast%27s_Web_of_Fire.

-------, Campaign One: Vox Machina - Chapter Summaries', *Critical Role Wiki*, https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Campaign_One:_Vox_Machina.

-------, *Critical Role Wiki*, https://criticalrole.fandom.com/wiki/Hannah_Rose.

'Fandom User', 'B. Dave Walters', *Vampire: The Masquerade - L.A. By Night Fandom Wiki*, https://vampire-the-masquerade-la-by-night.fandom.com/wiki/B._Dave_Walters.

-------, 'Misfits and Magic', *Dimension 20 Fandom Wiki*, 16 June 2021, https://dimension20.fandom.com/wiki/Misfits_and_Magic.

Fine, Gary Alan, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

Franklin, Anthony David, 'Communal Narrative in Actual Play Environments: roles of participants, observers and their intersections', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.74-86.

Franzen, Mara, 'DnD homebrew guide', *Wargamer*, 1 November 2023, https://www.wargamer.com/dnd/homebrew.

French, Emma, ''We Play Dungeons and Dragons!': How Actual Play Live Streams Have (Re)shaped the *D&D* Gaming Community', in *Real Life in Real Time: Live Streaming Culture*, eds. Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen and Christopher J. Persaud (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023), pp.203-216.

Friedman, Emily C., 'Is It Thursday Yet? Narrative Time in A Livestreamed Tabletop RPG', in *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age*, ed. Jennifer Grouling and Stephanie Hedge (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.187-204.

Foucault, Michel, 'What Is An Author', in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998).

Garcia, Antero, '"I piss a lot of people off when I play dwarves like dwarves": Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games', *Teachers College Record*, Vol.123 No.13, (2021), pp.1-26.

Gary Con, 'Gary Con XIII Presents - The Black Dice Society DEBUT Episode with DM B. Dave Walters!', *YouTube.com*, 27 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRnPrO04N-g&list=PLfS8QgUdeGYqAxdEg_qLKzsEeuc8JAQMD&ab_channel=GaryCon.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

Gilmour, Jonathan, Doug Levandowski and Spenser Starke, *Kids on Brooms* (San Diego: Renegade Game Studios, 2020).

Grouling Cover, Jennifer, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).

Gygax, Gary, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Masters Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules Games, 1979).

-------, 'Q&A with Gary Gygax', *ENWorld.org*, 24 July 2007, https://www.enworld.org/threads/q-a-with-gary-gygax.22566.

Gygax, Gary and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons Volume 1: Men & Magic* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974).

Gygax, Gary, and Robert Kuntz, *Dungeons & Dragons Supplement I: Greyhawk* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1976).

Haberkorn, Gideon, 'Seriously Relevant: Parody, Pastiche and Satire in Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels' in *Terry Pratchett's Narrative Worlds: From Giant Turtles to Small Gods*, ed. by Marion Rana (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp.137-157.

Hall, Charlie, 'D&D's Drizzt books were built on racist tropes. R.A. Salvatore wants to change that', *Polygon*, 3 August 2021, https://www.polygon.com/22585687/dungeons-dragons-r-a-salvatore-drizzt-black-controversy-race-interview.

Hammer, Jessica, 'Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts'', in *A New Literacies Sampler*, eds. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007).

Hayes, Drew, *NPCs* (Austin, TX: Thunder Pear Publishing, 2014).

Hedge, Stephanie and Jennifer Grouling (eds.), *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021).

Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse (eds.), *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

Heller, Jason, 'The first Dragonlance novels gave Dungeons & Dragons a new dimension', *A.V. Club*, 13 June 2014, https://www.avclub.com/the-first-dragonlance-novels-gave-dungeons-dragons-a-1798269401.

Hills, Matt, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Hutchinson, Maya, 'Twitch leaks: Critical Role Twitch earns $9.6M', wepc.com (6th October 2021), https://www.wepc.com/news/twitch-leaks-critical-role-earnings-payout/.

Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981).

James, Edward and Farah Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Jayemanne, Darshana, and Cameron Kunzelman, '"Retellings and reversions": A conversation on writing game experience with Ruth E.J. Booth', *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Vol.14 No.2, (2021), pp.251–56.

Jemisin, N.K., 'From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing', *nkjemisin.com*, 13 February 2013, https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/.

Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

Johnson, Derek, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013).

Jones, Shelly (ed.), *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021).

Jones, Diana Wynne, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2013).

-------, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland: Revised and Updated Edition* (London: Penguin, 2006).

'Kanta~ (to the top)' (@KantaKuyaTTV), *Twitter.com*, 14 August 2021, https://twitter.com/KantaKuyaTTV/status/1426640932816949249.

King, Brad and John Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003).

King, Sarah, 'Fireball 5e D&D Guide [2021]', *Nerdbear.com*, 2 Jan 2024, https://nerdbear.com/fireball-5e-guide/.

Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

Kuhn, Annette and Guy Westwell, 'authorship (auteur theory, la politique des auteurs)', *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Langford, Dave, 'Critical Mass', *White Dwarf*, Vol.65, (May 1985).

-------, 'Swords', *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=swords.

Larkwood, A.K., *The Unspoken Name* (London: Tor, 2020).

Lewis-Nyawo, Luyanda Unati, Jasper William Cartwright, and Jeremy Cobb, 'Dark, Edgy – the Drow's Depiction', *Three Black Halflings*, Headgum Podcast Studios, 16th

August 2021, https://headgum.com/three-black-halflings/dark-edgy-the-drows-depiction.

Liam, 'What was the first Dungeons & Dragons novel?', *The Forgotten Realms Lyceum*, 21 June 2023, https://www.forgottenrealmsreading.com/2021/06/what-was-first-dungeons-dragons-novel.html.

Lüthi, Daniel, 'Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels', *Mythlore*, Vol.33 No.1, (Fall/Winter 2014), pp.125-142.

Lynch, Scott, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (London: Gollancz, 2007).

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, '"Kill her, kill her! Oh God, I'm sorry" – Spectating *Dungeons & Dragons*' in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy*, ed. Christopher Robichaud, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp.175-188.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, Jaako Stenros, and Staffan Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.172-187.

Mackay, Daniel, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001).

MacMaster, Neil, *Racism in Europe 1870-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

'Mark Hulmes' (@sherlock_hulmes), *Twitter.com*, 9 June 2020, https://twitter.com/sherlock_hulmes/status/1270426304404434951.

Marshall, Eugene, *Ancestry and Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e* (St. Louis, MO: Arcanist Press, 2020).

Marsham, Liz, *The World of Critical Role: The History Behind the Epic Fantasy* (London: Del Rey, 2020).

Martens, Marianne, *The Forever Fandom of Harry Potter: Balancing Fan Agency and Corporate Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

'Matthew Mercer' (@matthewmercer), *Twitter.com*, 2 April 2018, https://twitter.com/matthewmercer/status/980630283627069440?lang=en-GB.

-------, *Twitter.com*, 6th August 2021, https://twitter.com/matthewmercer/status/1423434692116631554.

Mendlesohn, Farah, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middleton, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

Mendlesohn, Farah, and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy* (Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2009).

Mercer, Matthew and James Haeck, *Critical Role: Tal'dorei Campaign Setting* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2017).

Mercer, Matthew, Hannah Rose, and James J. Haeck, *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting Reborn* (Los Angeles: Darrington Press, 2021).

Mills, Charles W., 'The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.60 No.S1, (Sept. 2022), pp.105-135.

Mizer, Nicholas J., 'Paladin Ethic and the Spirit of Dungeoneering', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol.47 No.6, (2014), pp.1296-1313.

'NoShameNinja' (@NoNameNinja), *Twitter.com*, 17 June 2021, https://twitter.com/NoNameNinjaa/status/1405311306597601282.

Organisation for Transformative Works, 'What Do You Mean By A Transformative Work?', *FAQs*, 8th August 2016, https://www.transformativeworks.org/faq/what-do-you-mean-by-a-transformative-work/.

Paizo Inc., *Pathfinder: Core Rulebook* (Redmond: Paizo Inc., 2011).

Pande, Rukmini, *Squee from the Margins* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

Parkin-Speer, Diane, 'Strategies of Fantasy by Brian Attebery (review)', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 46 No. 4, 1992, pp.223-224.

Peterson, Jon, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012).

-------, 'Precursors', in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.55-62.

Pratchett, Terry, *The Colour of Magic* (London: Penguin, 2022).

-------, 'Terry Pratchett: Discworld and Beyond', *Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, Vol.43 No.6, (December 1999), pp. 4, 73-76.

Poor, Nathaniel, 'Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance', *Games and Culture*, Vol.7 No.5, (2012), pp.375-396.

Rancic, Michael, 'Critical Role's newest DM changes the game', *Polygon*, 26 May 2022, https://www.polygon.com/23139785/critical-role-exandria-unlimited-calamity-brennan-lee-mulligan-interview-dm-dimension-20.

Robertson, Benjamin J., 'From Fantasy to Franchise: Dragonlance and the Privatisation of Genre', *Extrapolation*, Vol.58 No. 2–3, (2017), pp.129-152.

Robi, Jill, 'Larping or Cosplaying Drow: Is It Blackface?', *The Geek Initiative*, 20 November 2015, https://geekinitiative.com/larping-or-cosplaying-drow-is-it-blackface/.

Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Salter, Anastasia, and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Salvatore, R.A., *The Legend of Drizzt: Homeland* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2004).

-------, *The Legend of Drizzt: Sojourn* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2004).

‘Sam/LotusFlair #BLM (She/Her)’ (@darling_sammy), *Twitter.com*, 1 July 2021, https://twitter.com/darling_sammy/status/1410681432893050880.

Sangster, Matthew, *An Introduction to Fantasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Spell Check, ‘Chapter 1: Prison Meet-Cute, Part 1’, December 2018, https://soundcloud.com/spell-check/spell-check-chapter-1-a-second-chance-part-1.

Stableford, Brian, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (Lanham, MA., Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2005).

Stang, Sarah, and Aaron Trammell, ‘The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons’, *Games and Culture*, Vol.15 No.6, (2020), pp.730-747.

‘Swarmkeepers’, ‘A nagging critique (Spoilers up until episode 3)’, ‘*Hivehearted’,* tumblr.com, 18 July 2021, https://swarmkeepers.tumblr.com/post/657100355289612288/a-nagging-critique-spoilers-up-until-episode-3.

The McElroy Family, ‘The DMs Are Open | MaxFunDrive 2020’, *Youtube.com*, 21 July 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csKS_YvHh9w&t=917s&ab_channel=TheMcElroyFamily.

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Thornton, Sarah, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Torner, Evan, ‘Actual Play Reports: Forge Theory and the Forums’, in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.20-31.

Trammell, Aaron, ‘How *Dungeons & Dragons* Appropriated the Orient’, *Analog Game Studies*, Vol.3 No.1, (Jan 2016), https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/how-dungeons-dragons-appropriated-the-orient/.

-------, ‘Representation and Discrimination in Roleplaying Games’, in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.440-447.

-------, *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

TwitchTracker, ‘Critical Role’, Twitchtracker.com, https://twitchtracker.com/criticalrole/statistics.

‘u/Gutter_Shakespeare’, ‘[Spoilers C2E123] The Mighty Nein are too clever by half.’, r/CriticalRole, *reddit.com*, 29 Jan 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/criticalrole/comments/l809qg/spoilers_c2e123_the_mighty_nein_are_too_clever_by/.

u/Boffleslop', 'Exandria Unlimited Post-Episode Discussion Threads', r/CriticalRole, *reddit.com*, 12 August 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/criticalrole/comments/p3hy0h/comment/h8sne8f/.

Van Os, G.L, 'Diversity and Audience Interaction in Critical Role and The Adventure Zone', in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,* ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021), pp.88-117.

Voorhees, Gerald, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock (eds.), *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (London: Continuum, 2012).

Wanzo, Rebecca, 'African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol.20, (2015), https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699/538.

Warner, Kristen J., 'ABC's Scandal and Black Women's Fandom', in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp.32–50.

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew (ed.) *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman, *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2000).

-------, *Dragons of Winter Night* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2000).

White, William J., Jonne Arjoranta, Michael Hitchens, Jon Peterson, Evan Torner, and Jonathan Walton, 'Tabletop Roleplaying Games' in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.63-86.

Wilde, Tyler, 'Permadeath and D&D: The pain of losing a character, and why it can be great', *PC Gamer*, 7 September 2018, https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/critical-role-mercer-jaffe-mollymauk-interview/.

Williamson, Jamie, *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Wizards of the Coast, *D&D Dungeon Master's Guide* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014).

-------, *D&D Monster Manual* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014)

-------, *D&D Player's Companion: Elemental Evil* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2015).

-------, *D&D Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2014).

-------, *D&D Volo's Guide to Monsters,* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2016).

-------, *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2017)

-------, *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2018).

-------, *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2020).

-------, *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC., 2021).

-------, 'The Legend of Drizzt', *Dungeons & Dragons,* https://dnd.wizards.com/heroes/drizzt-dourden.

-------, 'The Black Dice Society: Livestream', *Dungeons & Dragons*, https://dnd.wizards.com/black-dice-society.

-------, 'Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons', *Dungeons & Dragons*, 17 June 2020, https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd/.

-------, 'Beyond the Underdark: Secrets of the Drow', *Dragon+*, Issue 37, (2021), https://dnd.dragonmag.com/2021/05/21/beyond-the-underdark-secrets-of-the-drow/content.html, [Accessed: 26-03-24].

Wolf, Mark J. P., *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

Wolf, Mark J.P (ed.), *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

Young, Helen, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

Zagal, José P., and Sebastian Deterding, 'Definitions of Roleplaying Games' in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations,* ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp.19-51.