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FANTASIES OF RACE AND PLACE: WHITE NATIONALIST AND ALT-RIGHT UNDERCURRENTS IN FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAMES

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FANTASIES OF RACE AND PLACE: WHITE NATIONALIST AND ALT-RIGHT
UNDERCURRENTS IN FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAMES

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THESIS
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

2022

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

FANTASIES OF RACE AND PLACE: WHITE NATIONALIST AND ALT-RIGHT
UNDERCURRENTS IN FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Representations of fantasy settings in roleplaying games often draw upon understandings of the medieval and early Renaissance world. This dynamic often extends to racial politics in such worlds. For the contemporary roleplaying game, this often means that game mechanics are built around race, species, or gender. Often, players interpret such mechanics as a means of bioessentializing race or practicing stereotypes rooted in Eurocentric morality and values.

This thesis examines the underlying rhetoric and implicit stakes by which race in fantasy worlds overlaps with the rhetoric and proposed stakes of White Nationalist and Alt-right actors. As fantasy roleplaying games, and especially analog games, have evaded scholarly attention, little has been said about the burgeoning, identitarian movements in such communities and the ways in which these communities interpret popular gaming artifacts. This work reveals ongoing issues in representing race, medievalisms, and the genre of fantasy.

KEYWORDS: Roleplaying Games, Representation, Race, White Nationalism, Fantasy

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Introduction- Whose Fantasy Is This?

Following the announcement of the third campaign of Critical Role, the most

prolific and financially successful actual play series of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the head

creative and Dungeon Master announced his chosen locale. In a blog post, Matthew

Mercer, likely the most influential living Dungeon Master, wrote that this new adventure

will be located far from the European high fantasy of previous adventures:

> Marquet is a fantasy continent, and one that (like other places in Exandria)
>
> occasionally holds nuggets of inspiration from Earth cultures and locations that I
>
> have a deep appreciation for. It is a unique place with unique people and
>
> civilizations occasionally woven with touchstones that call to our real world
>
> experiences in some ways, lending a familiarity and celebrating aspects of those
>
> same languages and cultures without appropriating them. (Mercer)

Mercer and company would later reveal that the real-world analogues to his adventure

and setting are primarily drawn from SWANA (Southwest Asia/North Africa) locales.

Indeed, previous iterations of the continent of Marquet drew heavily upon European

descriptions of Islamic art and architecture, with many naming conventions vaguely

alluding to Arabic[1]. Although Mercer's post mentioned continual inclusion and deference

to professional "cultural and sensitivity consultants," this announcement worried some

longtime fans. One notable Twitter thread from TTRPG streamer Isa argued that, "Given

CR's influence, Marquet is going to be THE setting people look to to (sic) evoke

SWANA cultures when playing DND for the foreseeable future" (@EvilCleverDog).

Considering this announcement coinciding with a Twitch data leak which revealed

Critical Role as the highest grossing streamers, fans and critics were right to be

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[1] As examples, the central city of Marquet is Ank'Harel, ruled by the bronze dragon J'mon Sa Ord.

concerned, and this concern continued to grow when a husband of a cast member led a predictable brigade of harassment against a later thread of Isa's in which the costuming choices of the season's introduction were criticized.

Contrasted from past introductions featuring animation and character cosplay, the season three *Critical Role* introduction features members of the cast adorned in khaki attire, pith helmets, and oil lanterns. These costume choices, reminiscent of movies such as *Indiana Jones* and *The Mummy*, again brought questions of colonialism, representation, identity, and play to the growing TTRPG space. The discourse surrounding the revelation of this introduction fell into familiar patterns; some argued that such clothing held charged connotations for people of color, especially SWANA peoples, while others argued that such clothing's purpose was merely aesthetic and could not be harmless (Yow). As the cast is entirely White, except for one, temporary member, some read this visual coding as yet another instance of White creators profiting off the aesthetics and narratives of colonized cultures. However, eighteen episodes into the campaign at time of writing, the campaign borrows little save for naming conventions, honorifics, and architectural and clothing aesthetics; save for some backstory details, campaign three's engagement with SWANA cultures amounts to brief cultural touchstones rather than an overarching system of worldbuilding. This example is demonstrative of ongoing issues in representation in media, but I also employ it to emphasize the underlying narratives and discourses of roleplaying games. Implicitly or explicitly, if the cast did not consider this attire offensive in context, then why did they choose it? What affects were they hoping to evoke through its use, and why might they be appropriate for a fantasy roleplaying game? Despite a resulting tendency to view this

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controversy as blown out of proportion, I seek to problematize our notions of "play" and "representation," hoping that we might use fantastic[2] media as a lens into analyzing White supremacist narratives and how such narratives might be served by White creators lazily dabbling in the aesthetics of others.

The *Critical Role* cast's decision might relate to Lisa Nakamura's concept of "identity tourism," wherein White players are able "to indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally." Trammell has argued that this dynamic allows players to "flirt with the pleasurable aspects of White Supremacy." Without experiencing the real-world persecution and racism that have shaped these cultures, what right have such creators in borrowing cultural analogues for financial gain? Then again, *Critical Role* began as a simple TTRPG game between friends, and they could not have expected the incredible financial success and cultural impact their show would eventually earn. Couldn't such play be positive? Might White players gain a modicum of empathy by engaging with the experiences of others? How can we measure the play of a financial corporation against that of stereotypical nerds in a basement?

In an attempt to reconcile some of these tensions, I take the implications of Trammell's work "Torture, Play, and the Black Experience," in expanding the connotations of "play." I further broaden our understanding of leisure to a natural conclusion in how TTRPGs set in fantastic worlds encourage a certain kind of problematic behavior. Of particular note are frequently employed rhetoric, narratives, and mechanics which uphold and reinforce logics of colonialism and race realism. That is to

---

[2] I frequently borrow Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' designation and definition for what is frequently called "speculative fiction." "The fantastic," more so than other terms, "captures the wonder of stepping into a world-that-never-was, and immersing yourself" (E.E. Thomas 8). Although this term includes superhero, science fiction, horror, fairy tales, and more, I use it mostly to refer to traditional, high fantasy.

say, I am using a broad definition of play, one which encompasses and surpasses its traditional notion as "productive of affects of pleasure" (Trammell). Trammell expands his definition to be inclusive of the experiences of BIPOC, especially those who have traditionally not held access to leisure as a privilege. Games and play can be built around harm and exclusion, even when that harm is mediated through play-acting:

> We expect our games to be safe and consensual, but in this turn we have forgotten that games are not always safe and consensual. In fact, it is a privileged position that assumes that games are safe and consensual. Play is often violent. Play forces us to contend with the truth that we must always negotiate our own experience with that of others. (Trammell).

Dungeons and Dragons can be and is often pleasurable and satisfying, but "playing" such games holds connotations beyond leisure and relaxation. Built upon the mechanical bones of strategic wargames, many TTRPGs incorporate sophisticated dynamics by which violence is enacted against imaginary monsters. Such monsters often have historical basis in tropes of sexism and racism catered to a predominantly White audience (Stang; Young).

I also consider Adrienne Shaw's problematization of "representation," as we must always consider for whom representation matters and when those circumstances might change. We know that players care deeply about avatars with which they can identify, especially when they are idealized representations of themselves in the game world (Vandenbosch; Wolfdendale; Wood). We also know that this effect can lead players to roleplay as they imagine their character is expected to act, even as such behavior reifies racial stereotypes (Yang et al.). Understanding representation in gaming will help

scholars analyze representation in other media, but TTRPGs present scholars a challenging dilemma (Shaw, *Gaming*, 4). TTRPGs represent an interestingly complicated means by which we might explore discourses of representation and their connotations, as representation can be so often obscured through fantastic racialization. Could an Orc, often characterized in ways startling similar to stereotypes of Black men, represent me, a White man? When fans are upset by Wizards of the Coast announcing moral agency for the traditionally lawful-evil Drow, for who does that representation upset and why? Without direct visual representation, what allowances should we make for our conversations about tropes, stereotypes, and rhetorical shorthand for racial representation? Representation "gives us space to imagine the world differently," and it is frustrating that the vast majority of media franchises choose to uphold and reinforce racialized narratives of domination and fear (Shaw, *Gaming*, 11). This work should provide answers to specific issues connotated by these questions, though I hope they serve as the beginning of larger conversations containing a multitude of voices and expertise.

To elucidate some of my own rhetorical choices, it should be clear that these chapters avoid psychologistic interpretations of phenomena like colonialism, racism, and bigotry. I take inspiration from Dr. Kate Manne's *Down Girl*, which differentiates "naïve" interpretations of misogyny, which are inscrutable, individualistic, and dependent on intent, in favor of more sophisticated conceptualizations, which highlight predictability and impact (Manne 48-9). While my own scholarship focuses more on themes and narratives of racial domination, colonialism, and scientific racism, Manne's underlying logic allows additional vantages from which to view complex cultural

artifacts. Though I will incorporate scholarship concerning definitions and categories of

Human and Humanness, I will also supplement my analysis with Manne's framework for

understanding the logic that underlies bigotry. Essentially, according to Manne, actions

that police or enforce underlying philosophies of inherent, immutable gender, race, or

class-based differences are occasionally performed because one believes that another is

not playing their part correctly, in addition to ingrained and learned racism and sexism

(78-9). Of course, others perform bigotry and racism for a variety of reasons, but

Manne's analysis accounts for why individuals might perform bigotry or stereotypes

against groups with which they identify.

This is all to say that although my analysis will not attempt to discern individual

intent behind crafted narratives, mechanics, and rhetoric. Rather, I will focus on likely

outcomes of such phenomena. In consideration of the collective, improvisational

storytelling that *D&D* leans on, many groups could (and do) end up challenging

problematic Eurocentric and colonial themes. However, my focus in such regards will

remain on the motifs and themes that such adventures are in dialogue with and the stories

that they are *likely* to create in the game world. In portions of my thesis which concern

rhetoric of the alt-right, the impact of individual rhetoric will far outweigh intent.

Attempting to discern whether these actors are "members" or "subscribers" to such

ideologies is a waste of time. When I describe such actions in terms of their underlying

"logic," I do not mean to suggest that there is anything logical, rational, or intelligent

about their hateful speech and practices, but rather that bigoted play is the natural

occurrence of the problematic, underlying worldview with which TTRPG communities

and artifacts are interacting.

In addition, I consistently capitalize terms like "White" and "Whiteness," just as I do "Black" and "Blackness." This choice is intentional, though I do not seek to lend credence to notions of "race realism" or "scientific" bases for race. I am aware that my choice puts me in unfortunate company, as most White individuals who capitalize these terms and see themselves as raced are White nationalists. However, I believe that leaving the phenomena and identity of Whiteness uncapitalized serves to further excuse White people from their proper place in history. Leaving Whiteness uncapitalized further solidifies White people's position as supposedly neutral and apolitical in a world where that is often their assumed position (Painter). As such, capitalizing White and Whiteness is an effort at pulling White people into acknowledging responsibility for participating in activism and conversations aimed at racial justice. Finally, in capitalizing these terms, I choose to rhetorically move towards assigning responsibility for historical injustices. Racism and colonialism are not things that just passively happened to Black individuals in the global South but were rather crimes and violence often committed by White people from majority-White regimes and countries.

Finally, I will be referring to players' created persons which they use in the game world as "characters" rather than "avatars." Although "characters" is a more apt description for a curated persona through which play occurs, such as Mario, Master Chief, or Nathan Drake, I will use this term to describe how players represent themselves in *D&D* as well. In *D&D*, players are free to customize and create a character from scratch. Premade characters, on the other hand, are not always meant as a means of self-representation. Avatars, instead ask us to "reflect on how much [we] care about how [we are] represented in the game space" (Shaw, *Gaming,* 102). I choose to use "player

characters" and "non-player characters" despite this perhaps improper distinction as this is how game texts and most players refer to their imagined self-representations in *D&D* play. My choice is one to avoid confusion, but I do not wish to diminish the very real way in which players identify with and are affected by their characters and their choices.

It is my hope that this work continues laying groundwork for scholarly analysis of analog games. TTRPGs have an enormous potential for collaborative, interdisciplinary work. Even beyond my emphasis on textual analysis, rhetorical analysis, postcolonial studies, race studies, and game studies, one could imagine how contributions from performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, and communication studies (just to name a few) could deepen our understanding of this medium and its players. For better or worse, scholarship concerning analog games greatly depends on existing work on the massively popular medium of digital gaming. These are both relatively new fields, and their topics of study are both experiencing rapid growth in the consumer and cultural context of the United States. However, a more robust scholarship basis, focused solely on analog, tabletop games would allow useful collaboration between scholarly fields and disciplines. A greater understanding of TTRPGs holds positive repercussions for academia as well as popular culture and education. Considering the overlap between scholars and creators of TTRPG content, critical work into how these games function with regard to race will allow creators to create work in spaces that have shown themselves receptive to explicitly antiracist games. Moreover, the proliferation of TTRPG gaming clubs, often with objectives linked to mandated learning outcomes, in postsecondary and primary education spaces demonstrates the growing demand for this medium as means for both play and learning (Middleburg-Cresswell; Santin; Turner). It

is my humble hope that these essays contribute to this growing pool of scholarship, especially as critique of classic TTRPG tropes, analogues, and narrative shorthand.

My first chapter examines a recent *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure, *Tomb of Annihilation*. The adventure features narrative and mechanical nods to early iterations of *Dungeons and Dragons*. The chapter introduces members of the "Old School Renaissance," which prefer styles of play encouraged by older editions of *D&D*, and it juxtaposes such mechanics with themes of colonialism and White saviorism in *Tomb of* Annihilation. By examining these references alongside the culture, rhetoric, and lauded mechanics of notable alt-right members of the Old School Renaissance movement, this chapter adds needed nuance to discussions of mechanics in TTRPGs. I discuss a useful distinction between types of mechanics often found in such adventures and speculate on what steps might be taken to alleviate such problems in the future. In a cultural context which continues to feel repercussions of GamerGate, this chapter encourages designers and scholars to primarily examine game mechanics through the context in which they occur. As such, the chapter contains repercussions for discussions about gamers' perceptions of "politicization" in gaming and its relation to noticeable presences of White supremacy in gaming.

The second chapter focuses on one particular, common world mechanic in the racial politics of fantasy worldbuilding. Commonly, races or species in fantastic worlds are equated to sets of immutable physical and cultural characteristics. These characteristics are further equated to the ecology or civilization from which they sprung. The result is a set of circumstances in which racial groups in fantastic worlds are inherently, impermeably, and permanently linked to their environment, language, culture,

values, physiognomy, history, etc. One can easily recognize the resulting buildup of this trope in popular fantasy media: forest elves, mountain dwarves, brutish orcs, and so on. This chapter connects this trope to fantasies and rhetoric of White nationalism in the United States. White nationalists, especially since the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally of 2017, have repeatedly focused on defending "Western Civilization" and its supposed heritage. By equating these ideas, this chapter demonstrates how popular fantasy media, especially TTRPGs, tend to reconstruct ahistorical ideals of medievalisms in premodern eras. Drawing on race scholarship and ludological analysis, I argue that such dynamics implicitly reconstruct premodern European cultures as racially, culturally, and linguistically homogenous. This narrative has become a driving force in White nationalist circles, and both chapters evidence the further need for critical, scholarly analysis of racist themes and mechanics in popular roleplaying games.

However, many of the questions and disciplinary intersections take place beyond the purview of this thesis. I hope that scholars from a variety of disciplines might gain from engaging with these perspectives. As a growing popular medium, study of TTRPGs needs shared language and common texts for study. At the very least, TTRPGs deserve greater scholarly attention, and that is especially true for scholars of race and racism. One could argue that TTRPGs are now the premier and most accessible means by which gamers engage in acting, and the fact that that acting is taking place in improvisational and collaborative spaces holds consequences for how we consider play in racialized spaces. The fact that many such settings and narratives employ discourse which equates race to species or engages in race science should serve as an accessible point of entry for such scholars. Moreover, the stark divide between actual plays and writing staffs that see

diversity and representation as an obstacle and those that see it as a necessity seems to be

reaching a breaking point. How we analyze these discourses and artifacts holds

repercussions far beyond the fantastic worlds which they concern.

Chapter I- Old School Racism: Game Mechanics and Narrative as Symbiotic, Political

Elements in TTRPG Design

Despite the continued success of *Dungeons and Dragons* as both a financial

product and a cultural landmark, scholars remain hesitant to analyze the published

adventure modules and guides as the compelling, dynamic artifacts that they are. This

essay focuses on one such adventure module, *Tomb of Annihilation*, published in 2017.

Tomb of Annihilation takes mechanical, narrative, and setting inspiration from earlier

D&D adventures, presenting players with an adventure that is both challenging and

player-driven. However, many of these adaptations carry the remnants of colonialist

themes upon which the originals were built. In traversing the pan-African-inspired land

of Chult, player-characters encounter numerous stereotypes and racist tropes, with

mechanics and storytelling hooks that serve only to buoy the explicit role of adventurers

as foreign explorers and mercenaries. This essay examines how Wizards of the Coast,

publishers of *Dungeons and Dragons*, crafts adventures that rely and build upon such

tropes, contributing to scholarship that identifies gameplay mechanics as constructs and

vital contributors to storytelling in game worlds. Indeed, contrary to discourse which

often ascribes game mechanics neutrality or a role as "narrative architecture," I argue that

game mechanics are often co-constructive with the narratives, settings, and aesthetics

utilized in crafting stories. As such, this chapter offers lessons in designing game

mechanics that do not see "political neutrality" as a desirable goal or even a possibility.

Rather, this chapter points out criticism of *D&D*'s systems from alt-right actors as

indicative of the racial politics which audiences attach to game systems. As a result, these

patterns in criticism should encourage production and criticism that grapples with fantasy gaming's problematic history of racial essentialism and worldbuilding.

Furthermore, I hope to identify this particular adventure as a meaningful touchstone in the publishing history of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). I will transition from a discussion of the surrounding context of the adventure to the specifics by which it leads players towards telling stories that traffic in colonialist tropes. As such, the first portion of this essay will deal in the online communities that encompass players and critics of TTRPGs, most notably those that prefer the original gameplay of *D&D* in its original, 1980s, form. In aligning the discourses of such communities with corresponding political and cultural moments, most notably Gamergate and policies of the Trump administration, *Tomb of Annihilation* serves as a perfect confluence of community critique and ignorant storytelling—one which indicates the potential for a large, toxic movement within the *D&D* fanbase. Although this movement made little ground in this instance, the logics of such worlds encourage further, problematic discourse. After examining the background of the adventure, I will examine *Tomb of Annihilation* itself, the racist tropes it employs, and its emphasized gameplay mechanics.

These two components of *Tomb of Annihilation,* its colonial setting and intentionally hardcore gameplay, represent two faithful adaptations of older sorts of play, and it is the interaction between these adaptations and various *D&D* communities that initially inspired this essay. What does it say about *D&D* that a recent adventure which employs old-school mechanics and settings thematically and rhetorically overlaps with proponents of old-school play that espouse fascist rhetoric? Following this adventure, though, Wizards of the Coast would steadily embrace heroic, roleplay driven narratives

while beginning to dismantle core gameplay mechanics driven by scientific racism. In identifying the interplay between community discourse, gameplay mechanics, and explicit adventure setting and plot, I hope to draw attention to the lingering effects of Gamergate, the problem of creators in assuming a White, male, "politically neutral," audience, and how seemingly innocuous guidelines for gameplay mix with problematic settings and characters to push players towards reenacting racism and colonialism. Indeed, by distinguishing between gameplay mechanics that are inherently likely to produce racist patterns of play in any game and other, more versatile patterns of play, this essay injects nuance into scholarly discussions of play, space, and the fantastic.

Into the OSR

In response to the Trump administration's family separation policy of 2018, *Dungeons and Dragons* lead designer Jeremy Crawford tweeted, "If a kingdom in *D&D* was forcibly separating children from their parents and putting the kids in detention centers, the heroes would do everything in their power to reunite those families" (@JeremyECrawford). In response to perceived "virtue signaling" and "politicization" of the game, Kasimir Urbanski, a.k.a. The RPGPundit, compared Jeremy Crawford and others at Wizards of the Coast to the "greedy merchants" and "fanatical cultists out to destroy civilization" often found in game worlds (@KasimirUrbanski). Urbanski would continue to insinuate that Crawford's tweet reflected a systemic flaw in the culture of producing *Dungeons and Dragons* products, and he followed by asserting the need for "a #DnDGate." Urbanski is a TTRPG blogger and "defender of RPGs" whose rhetoric often mirrors that of the alt-right. As an example, one of his recent posts features him happily

declaring that speculation about an LGBTQ pride parade in the *D&D* city of Waterdeep

implies that there are, canonically, "gangs of roving homophobes in Waterdeep"

(RPGPundit). His hashtag's clear reference to Gamergate—an online campaign of

"misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, people convinced they're being manipulated by a left-

leaning and/or corrupt press, and traditionalists who just don't want their games to

change" (Dewey)—links the stated and implicit goals of that movement on to the tabletop

role-playing game (TTRPG) community. Scholars have linked Gamergate and its

believers to the burgeoning "alt-right," as young, white "gamers" increasingly radicalized

political spheres through similar rhetoric of sexism, racism, and anti-SJWs [3](Bezio,

Ferguson, Mortensen). Ultimately, Urbanski and others' attempts to capitalize on the

political and cultural capital in the wake of Gamergate fell flat, the hashtag being coopted

by popular, left-leaning members of the TTRPG community to discuss aesthetically

pleasing entrances to dungeons.

This digital altercation adds valuable context to an enlightening moment in the

cultural production of the most popular roleplaying game in the world. Urbanski, along

with many others who levy criticism at perceived over-politicization and increasing

"wokeness" of TTRPGs, subscribe to a movement in the TTRPG community known as

the "Old School Renaissance" or OSR. Beginning around the early 2000s, adherents

eschew the narrative and role-playing heavy elements of *Dungeons and Dragons Fifth*

Edition in favor of core mechanics, narratives, and aesthetics similar to older editions of

the game: gritty, hardcore, exploration-based, with the focus on players rather than

characters (Maliszewski). While early *D&D* editions heavily influence OSR games, OSR

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[3] An abbreviation of "social-justice warriors," a derogatory term used to disparage people advocates for
restorative social policies and change.

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encapsulates many TTRPGs, not just early *D&D*. An OSR TTRPG might focus on

prolonged sessions exploring a dungeon, wherein players are more challenged and

threatened by fatal traps than monsters. If they do encounter monsters, the odds will be

heavily stacked against them, encouraging player ingenuity and creativity that might

result in more intelligent play than characters would be capable. Such games inherently

encourage "metagaming," a gameplay phenomenon in which characters intentionally

cease roleplaying in favor of strategically discussing the challenge or scenario in front of

them. Metagaming, often frowned upon in *D&D* fifth edition games, emphasizes that the

adventure is artificially crafted to test the *players* rather than the *player characters*.

OSR games are not inherently synonymous with the anti-feminist, anti-liberal,

rhetoric described earlier, but a vocal minority[4] of the community has created

controversial impressions inside and outside the community. This minority shares

features and strategies with many other right-wing communities on the internet:

decentralized, dynamic, and rhetorically savvy. Although some see the style of play

employed by early players as intrinsically linked to the survival of "free speech" as they

conceptualize it, many others in the community have ostracized proponents of "anti-

political" play. Indeed, individuals who often promote such ideas, like RPGPundit, have

been largely shunned from the larger OSR community. His failure to generate steam for

#DnDGate is a testament to the degree to which individuals like him are seen as outliers,

though certainly still dangerous, as his tweets prompted intervention from Matthew

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[4] For reference, I am broadly including such figures here as Urbanski, who has promoted famous antifeminist Youtuber Sargon of Akkad. I am also including James Desborough, writer of the infamous "In Defence of Rape" article and publisher of "#GamerGate The Card Game," Venger Satanis, author of the satiric blog "Your Dungeon is Racist," Varg Vikernes, writer of the "really fucking racist" TTRPG *Myfarog* (Treppel), and Alexander Macris, former CEO of Milo Inc., with the mission statement "making the lives of journalists, professors, politicians, feminists, Black Lives Matter activists, and other professional victims a living hell" (Roy).

Mercer, famous Dungeon Master of *Critical Role* fame. On the other hand, in the words of James Desborough, Gamergate still "won, broadly…[leaving] a lot of invested and activated people though, who are now acting as watchdogs and putting on blast anything nefarious or stupid" (Ek). The focus of this essay centers on these ripples, the rhetoric and goals of Gamergate which initially suffused and were repelled by the OSR community, as well as the connection between the ideal gameplay mechanics of OSR and the ideological underpinnings of the #DnDGate crowd. Using this as an entrance point, we can develop a meaningful difference between types of mechanics that influence gameplay in race-conscious ways.

The assumption and narrative which underlies both of these movements, failed or otherwise, is that, broadly speaking, feminists, BIPOC, leftists, and "SJWs" are using censorship and propaganda to attack First Amendment rights. Such attacks, they argue, constitute a fragment of a larger movement aimed at destroying "Western Civilization" as we know it. This obviously has coded meanings rooted in race and gender, and this supposed fear draws roots from the rhetoric of conservative writers in the 1960s as they reacted to progressive and decolonial movements in the U.S. and in Africa (Curtis). This narrative further aligns with research that points out how conservative writers and Youtubers reframe progressive cultural movements as attacks against "white culture," "male culture," or other groups that have held historic power over others (Ma). As put by The Alt-Right DM, an anonymous blogger, "Lose the game, lose the culture. Lose the culture, lose western civilization" and "Strike a blow for Christendom. Run any version of *D&D* published before 1989" ("Old School"). Though many conservative commentators link cultural artifacts to the fate of "Western Civilization," it is interesting

that some in the *D&D* space argue for entire gaming systems being representative of "Western Civilization" or "Christendom," especially considering the cultural and moral panic surrounding *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1980s in the United States.

The Alt-Right DM's statement, though, is strongly indicative of the larger rhetoric at play. In the writer's syllogism, they are arguing for an "ethnosphere," in which race, culture, heritage, ethnicity, and homeland are figured synonymous and codependent (Wan-Chuan 374). In addition, this statement taken alongside Urbanski's earlier tweets lends credence to analyses of White fragility and perceived victimhood. By positioning themselves, their game, and their culture as victims of a malicious cultural or political offensive, White nationalists, "[reify] a connection between whiteness and suffering" (Whitaker 160). Indeed, open White nationalists, position their identitarian movements as neutral or reactionary, such that "any movement toward sharing status with others—must be the fault of others" (ibid). These dynamics wherein White players are assumed as the neutral audience has been directly challenged by Wizard's changes to racial worldbuilding in recent manuals. As such, in positioning racial and moral alignment changes to *Dungeons and Dragons Fifth Edition* as opposed to radical conservative ideals of "Western Civilization," the stage is set for an analysis of *Tomb of Annihilation*, an adventure which both traffics in colonial narratives and old-school game mechanics. This particular combination proves that right-wing complaints in OSR and other fandoms have much more to do with racial justice, feminism, and social-justice-minded players than they do with a specific system for ritualized play.

A Threatening Setting

After reviewing the cultural and community contexts under which *Tomb of Annihilation* was created and received, we can now focus on the plot, setting, and mechanical emphasis of the adventure itself. *Tomb of Annihilation* draws heavily from the famous *Tomb of Horrors* module, written by *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax. Authors borrowed both Gygax's penchant for grueling, enigmatic dungeon crawls and his most cunning villain, the lich Acererak. Gygax originally wrote and published *Tomb of Horrors* in 1975 for play at an official *D&D* tournament, intentionally crafting the adventure to slay several, pesky player-characters who had consistently bested his challenges (Cordell 3). As part of converting the adventure for the fourth edition of *D&D*, years before the release of *Tomb of Annihilation,* Lawrence Schick would write that the adventure represented a thought experiment for Gygax:

> If an undead sorcerer really wanted to keep his tomb from being plundered by greedy adventurers, how would he do it? The answer, of course, was to defend the crypt with tricks and traps designed not to challenge the intruders but to *kill them dead*. And furthermore, to do it in ways so horrific that all but the most determined party would give up and leave well enough alone. (Gygax and Schick, emphasis in original)

As such, many of the tricks and traps in Gygax's original adventure are indiscernible, devious, fatal, and intentionally counterintuitive. Despite its enduring legacy in the TTRPG space, this style of adventure has gradually fallen out of style in favor of fifth edition's style of heroism and clarity in description and execution of narrative.

While Gygax set *Tomb of Horrors* in his favored realm of Greyhawk, *Tomb of Annihilation* is intentionally set in the land of Chult, located in the Forgotten Realms.

Chult is located far to the South of most popular adventures in the Forgotten Realms. Indeed, players are expected to begin the adventure in the Sword Coast city of Baldur's Gate, itself the subject of numerous video game adaptations. While Chult is also adapted from previous novelizations and settings in earlier *D&D* editions (Lowder and Rabe, Lowder), those portrayals featured cringeworthy amounts of "Lost Continent" themes which modern writers wanted to retcon, albeit with some problems of their own (D'Anastasio). Unknown to the player characters in Baldur's Gate, Acererak is using an artifact known as a Soulmonger to create a "death curse" throughout the world, trapping the souls of the dead as food for an infant god of death. This secret development leads the player-characters into the service of Syndra Silvane, a wealthy patron who is slowly dying as a result of this death curse. Not only does the Soulmonger trap the souls of the recently deceased, but it is also gradually pulling the magically resurrected or revived back towards death. This narrative hook is the diegetic means by which players are introduced to the adventure's "organ grinder" setting. As opposed to fifth edition's plentiful means of survival, healing, and magical resurrection, this adventure borrows from the generally unforgiving punishment for character death in previous editions. This finality of death in *Tomb of Annihilation*, combined with its sprawling, trap-laden dungeons, enforce the concept that the *players* being tested rather than the *characters*.

With the promise of gold, magic items, and adventure, the player-characters are expected to follow Silvane. Her contacts in a spy organization have led her to believe the Soulmonger is located in Chult, and she explains that the city of Port Nyanzaru an excellent location to begin their foray. Chult broadly, but especially Port Nyanzaru, is an amorphous conglomerate of various African, Caribbean, South American, and ancient

cultures. That is to say, in playing with traditional narratives of colonialist exploration,

Tomb of Annihilation creates a setting and culture that is vaguely "Other," different, and

dangerous. This dynamic is especially evident with the frequency that words like

"tribal[5]," "exotic," and "savage" crop up throughout the module, as well as repeated

emphasis on the land's climate, denizens, and culture. Player characters being outsiders

from the more traditional, high fantasy setting of Waterdeep only contributes to this

feeling. As such, Port Nyanzaru provides both the adventurers and our examination an

ideal entrance to Chult, though our entrance will be spent discussing the culture,

civilizations, and problematic portrayals by which *Tomb of Annihilation* invites players to

partake in narratives of colonial exploration, exoticization, and bigotry.

Players are likely inundated by these themes as soon as they enter the setting.

Upon entering Port Nyanzaru, the first instance of "flavor text", or text that the Dungeon

Master is explicitly meant to read aloud to the players, highlights dinosaurs, "Minstrels in

bright clothing," and voices speaking "in an unfamiliar language filled with clicks"

(Crawford 16). Here, we begin to see how the module gestures towards vague stereotypes

of the African diaspora across space and time. This pattern elicits especially pernicious in

consideration that the likely Dungeon Master of most *Tomb of Annihilation* tables is a

White man, no Black writers or consultants worked on *Tomb of Annihilation*

(D'Anastasio), and the game's only guidance in portraying Chultans is to emphasize

"tongue clicks" and their "heavy, characteristic accent" (Perkins 12). The result is that

players around the table are forced between roleplaying harmful caricatures in a

roleplaying game and missing out on one of the key attractions of the game. Some

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[5] These phrasings, in particular, drew ire from fans, leading Wizards of the Coast to change or drop a lot of
this language in recently printed and online versions of the adventure (Zambrano).

players choose to simply change the accent used by Chultans, but this choice highlights the problem innate to the dynamic in fantastic settings—in seeking to draw on audience expectations for the sort of narrative Wizards of the Coast wants to tell, they simultaneously must pull on our own world's history of racism and colonialism, a history which many players want to escape. The result is generic fantasy, certainly, but is it also an idyllic fantasy? If so, *whom* is the assumed audience, and *what* makes that fantasy a desirable one?

After exploring Port Nyanzaru, finding a guide for the jungle, and taking on some side quests, the players are free to begin their foray into Chult. At this point, they also should have an idea that the Soulmonger is located somewhere in or beneath the "lost city" of Omu, somewhere in the jungle. Scholars have argued that this common trope in exploration narratives represents a vision of the land always centered on the perspective of the explorer or colonizer. This dynamic displaces the indigenous populations who often already live or have experience with the land (Mackenthun). When viewing colonized lands through the eyes of the would-be colonizer, there is a tendency to view the prehistoric state of the land as both "imperial desire and cultural anxiety" (Mackenthun). I argue that this phenomenon leads narratives of colonization to condense the ancient, premodern, and contemporary into one space. Indeed, medieval scholars have taken this step further, arguing that the logic of Whiteness "warps the logic of periodization: succession is not temporal but spatial, and progress is nothing other than sameness" (Wan-Chuan 377). This might explain why WoTC found dinosaurs, animistic gods, and pirates as suitable narrative companions. Additionally, Omu, not surprisingly, is not "lost" or "forgotten." The city is still populated! Although an unpopulated city

might make for an unappealing or unexciting lead into the final dungeon of the adventure, the revelation mirrors contemporary narratives of colonizers "discovering" Indigenous-inhabited lands or "civilizing" lands with plenty of non-European civilization.

Omu, however, is but the midpoint of the adventure. On the winding journey to the city, adventurers are liable to stumble upon voodoo, lost monarchs, pirates, and more encounters obviously inspired by narratives of exploration and colonization. Interestingly, the writers also decided to include a potential encounter with mercenaries charged with plundering the continent to send riches to Northern cities. Baldur's Gate, the city-state which players have originally set out from, has laid claim to large swaths of Chult, and "No one (including the merchant princes of Port Nyanzaru) has the force in Chult to dispute this claim" (Crawford 54). Others have pointed out that this reference to the rulers of Port Nyanzaru as "merchant princes" who learned the art of tradesmanship from their neighbors' mirrors real-world histories "in which Africa's empires were broken by European powers and then colonized" (D'Anastasio). Though Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* points out the numerous ways in which narratives of African economic development are grossly mischaracterized and oversimplified from a Western perspective, I merely assert that the adventure is leaning into this stereotype in presenting a correlate for Africa to a primarily White audience, false though it may be. Characters are either encouraged or intimidated by this group to buy a "charter of exploration," paperwork which allows the characters to "explore Chult and plunder its riches, but half of an expedition's proceeds and discoveries must be turned over" (Crawford 54). The adventure makes clear that this group is little above common brigands and pirates, groups with which the commander has secretly allied.

The result, then, is a tone that is either unabashedly in favor of colonial and economic domination or absurdly unaware of the tropes and stereotypes upon which the adventure is drawing. Ultimately, tables which play *Tomb of Annihilation*, unless a hardworking DM makes many changes, are likely engaging in Orientalism. This dynamic takes place on two levels: the player-characters travelling from a European-coded fantasy to a pan-African-coded fantasy, and the predominantly White audience engaging with the setting through roleplay. That is to say, players are liable to engage in "a relationship of power, of domination, [and] of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" as described in Said's opus (13). In drawing sweeping, harmful differences between the European-coded and African-coded fantasy, the players are liable to contribute to in an all-too-familiar pattern in fantasy gaming. In short, the stereotypes and narrative devices I have described in this setting are not new. Rather, I draw our attention to them so that we can more accurately observe how they intermingle with *Tomb of Annihilation*'s specified mechanics, creating a solidified gameplay experience with repercussions in how we view TTRPGs and alt-right narratives of persecution.

Rules of Play

As opposed to the narrative and setting of the adventure, gameplay mechanics can be a bit more difficult to pin down. Again, we are forced into describing tendencies and likelihoods in gameplay, and *D&D* is notorious in the TTRPG community for its litany of rules. I borrow from Sicart, who described game mechanics as "methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world." In the world of *D&D*, these mechanics are the underlying logic by which players and DMs convert speech acts, die rolls, and rule

analysis into narrative fluency. Indeed, rules in *D&D* cover everything from how to create a character to the proper way to roll dice, and these rules for proper procedure and storytelling have been elaborated on and codified since *D&D*'s earliest days as a wargame simulator. On their own, many of these mechanics are as neutral as they are in many OSR-favorite TTRPGs. Though I would argue that some mechanics of *D&D* worldbuilding and gameplay—innate racial traits, racial/moral alignment, linking race and environment, etc.—are inherently problematic, the ones I discuss here are not liable to create problematic narratives by themselves. Rather, the colonialist tone of the setting and narrative pervade these mechanics, transforming versatile yet non-threatening mechanics into problems. The result are elements of play that serve only to represent or highlight Eurocentric notions of Africa that the game is already bringing to life. So, *Tomb of Annihilation's* emphasis on hex crawls, traps, uneven odds, gold collecting, and dungeons rapidly becomes an issue when it is intermixed with the issues described above. Distinguishing between inherently problematic mechanics and salvageable mechanics will serve us importantly in analyzing the faults in common alt-right rhetoric surrounding *D&D* and other cultural artifacts, but I will first offer some deeper analysis of these examples as evidence for both of these claims.

Upon leaving Port Nyanzaru, players have the freedom to explore Chult at their leisure, all while keeping their goal of the Soulmonger in mind. Players are likely to enter the jungle by navigating rivers à la *Heart of Darkness*, but they are free to move on foot if desired. Though the players may know of various settlements throughout the region, they are liable to become lost or struggle to make a direct path for their goals. The adventure writers, desiring to simulate the experience of navigating an unfamiliar

environment, encourage DMs to employ a "hex crawl," as means for explaining how characters progress through the jungle. Despite being the premier means by which *D&D* players simulated exploration in early iterations of the game, hex crawls were scarce by even the 2nd edition of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (Alexander). Although a great deal of mechanics is needed to run a proper hex crawl, they generally feature a large map with hex-based tiles on which certain locations, objects, or encounters are coded. Players are consistently challenged to traverse the map by analyzing rumors and clues as well as hoping for fortunate dice rolls. These dice rolls come from both the players and Dungeon Master; the players must pass survival checks to correctly navigate the jungle, avoid dehydration, and stave off disease, and the DM rolls on prescribed tables to determine potential random encounters for the party in each adventuring day.

In another adventure, there would be nothing at issue with using a hex crawl adventure style. One could imagine numerous adventures in which hex crawls are just a means to allow sandbox elements into TTRPGs. However, in accord with Jenkins' thoughts on game design as "narrative architecture," I would assert that the hex crawl synthesizes with established narrative and lore to create a mechanic that only serves to heighten the player sense of colonizing the land of Chult. Consider how a majority-White player base would encounter rolling saving throws against "Mad Monkey Fever" and dehydration in a land populated by dark-skinned humanoids. Would randomly encountering cannibalistic and sadistic Batiri Goblins adorned in painted, wooden masks remind these players of Eurocentric representations of Africa, and are they likely to play into violent fantasies against such creatures? These mechanics serve to persistently reinforce a player-character psychology of being at once the invader and the invaded—a

common dynamic in colonial narratives and literature. As outsiders from another continent, the adventure positions them as both perpetually under siege by the natural and pre-modern forces of the environment, all while absolving the player characters of any violence or wrongdoing they might commit in the process of the quest. Again, my point is not that *Tomb of Annihilation's* emphasized mechanics are inherently problematic, but rather that game design can interweave with stylistic and narrative choices to create a ludonarrative harmony that further imparts on players their roles as exceptional saviors in foreign land.

To further stress this dynamic, let us turn to the role of gold and treasure in this adventure. Although a full analysis of the role of "loot" in roleplaying games is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noticing how this assumed, habitual mechanic in *D&D* is especially impactful in the greater context of the adventure. Contrary to the hex crawl, emphasis on gold, gemstones, and artifacts has been a *D&D* mainstay for much of the game's publication history. In *D&D*'s first iteration, gold had tangible uses in buying equipment and means of transportation, but it was also directly converted into experience points by which characters grew in level and strengthened. As such, gold and loot were real metrics by which a player could measure their success in the game world, and they served as the primary incentives for adventurers to keep delving into dark and dangerous dungeons. Gary Gygax also intended for these literal *tons* of gold to be useful for adventurers in buying fleets, keeps, and armies with which to wage miniature warfare, but that macro style of play never caught on in *D&D* (Hartlage). By fifth edition, gold is rarely used as experience, with most DMs preferring to level the party when they reach specific milestones or achievements in a campaign. However, the massive amounts of

treasure remain a staple of most adventure modules, with detailed notes about gold and artifacts that players will find in every location in Chult. In an ideal adventure, characters may leave the final dungeon with several-hundred-thousand gold coins worth of treasure and magical artifacts (many of which are artifacts of particular cultural or religious importance), and, considering the only place to spend the coin is Port Nyanzaru, the sensation of snatching these "rewards" appears more as grave robbing or illicit looting than standard adventuring.

Indeed, one could easily imagine the adventuring party clad in stereotypical pith helmet and tan linens, a visual which is only buoyed by the Wizards team's inclusion of two new character backgrounds: archaeologist and anthropologist. Here, our gameplay mechanics begin to transition from the first type, world mechanics, into the second type, identity mechanics. As such, while the previous gameplay mechanics might be tonally neutral in most settings, this inclusion has the tendency to bring problematic play into a wide variety of adventures and settings. Character backgrounds usually function as the choice of third-most importance in creating a character (class and race being first and second, respectively), as a background usually describes their lived experience up to the point of the adventure. Again, the descriptions and suggested play styles leave little doubt that writers intended for players to envision their characters as participants in an academic adventure narrative reminiscent of *Tomb Raider*, *The Mummy*, or any Indiana Jones film.

It bears worth repeating that OSR-style games, which *Tomb of Annihilation* harkens to, don't always encourage the character-driven roleplaying that backgrounds often convey, but these backgrounds can still have tangible effects on the gaming

experience. The Archaeologist character, for example, gains bonuses to their survival and

history skills, meaning they are more likely to navigate their party through the jungles of

Chult and identify important details about the history therein. In addition, when an

archaeologist enters ruins or dungeons, they can "correctly ascertain its original purpose

and determine its builders, whether those were dwarves, elves, humans, yuan-ti, or some

other known race" (Perkins 192). Again, we see gameplay which specifically caters to

dungeon crawling and, specifically, dungeons that combine race and place. This time,

however, these encouraged mechanics are localized to the player character, encouraging

players to adopt a certain mentality or approach to the world of *Tomb of Annihilation*.

These mechanics blur our designation between world and character mechanics, but it is

apparent that such an addition in this adventure is meant to evoke images and stereotype

in the minds of players.

But That's Just How the Game Works!

     A full analysis of the problematic elements of the setting, narrative, and Chultan

culture is beyond the scope of this paper. This chapter also lacks the space to analyze the

history and use of all the gameplay and dungeon-crafting mechanics utilized in *Tomb of

Annihilation* which have been adapted from previous iterations of *D&D*. I merely desired

to disclose that, despite the Wizards of the Coast team's efforts in retconning evidence

for criticism against their product's history, they still sell a product that can easily trap

players in situations wherein they justify logics of colonialism and oppression. Here, we

are seeking to differentiate or add nuance into discussions about how game mechanics

impact narratives in the game world. In distinguishing between racial game mechanics

and world game mechanics, we are able to more aptly criticize which elements of gameplay are inherently liable to reproduce harmful histories and those which are beholden to the fantastic world around them. Although both sorts will feature various amounts of interplay with the story being told, adding flavor to how players interpret the mechanics of the game, the degree to which they are liable to do so is a worthwhile topic for scholarly concern.

This distinction also shows us that, to a certain degree, Wizards of the Coast is still producing adventures that are intimately tied to the sorts championed by the OSR community and especially those in #DnDGate camp. Through analyzing the continuing problems in representing non-White peoples in fantastic worlds—a set of problems which especially plague Wizards of the Coast—it becomes even clearer what lies at the heart of right-wing, anti-feminist, anti-social justice criticism: commonplace bigotry and a desire for greater cultural capital. *Tomb of Annihilation* sits at the center of this essay as it is the most immediate instance of long-term fan service in recent modules, owing its antagonist and emphasized gameplay to early *D&D* play. In delineating the differences between these mechanics and how they are liable to work in *Tomb of Annihilation*, it is clear that designers and scholars should devote greater attention to the interplay of narrative, setting, and mechanics. Furthermore, subcultures of gaming deserve greater scholarly attention, especially as such subcultures contain potential for racist, sexist, nationalistic rhetoric.

Vitally, then, this adventure represents a moment when Wizards' writers were playing with older world mechanics while revising the racial mechanics that accompanied early *D&D* as well. As Wizards adopts rule sets that seek to open up the

game to diverse audiences, regressive audiences are hearing that this social space and game are not created with them in mind. In recent releases, Wizards has chosen to disentangle player-character attributes and play styles from their race. While previous editions would have encouraged players to create characters based on archetypes and optimized statistics, new modules allow players more freedom in customizing their class, race, and background, such that they are freer to challenge historic portrayals of race/class combinations. Considering the differences between these mechanics and those discussed with regards to *Tomb of* Annihilation, it becomes clear that the mechanics of racial identity are those which infuriate alt-right-leaning players. Members of the OSR community (and *D&D*, broadly) with alt-right sympathies are not enraged at the lack of hex crawls and permadeath mechanics in recent modules; they are enraged that they can no longer enact beliefs of racial monoliths, racial impermeability, and racial fatalism in the game world. Indeed, it is Wizard's gradual movement towards challenging fantasies of racial hierarchies which upset these players, a hierarchy which many open White nationalists believe is "beneficial for U.S. sovereignty and a corrective roadmap for U.S. society" (Whitaker 156).

Backlash to this revelation cannot be directly voiced as opposition to inclusivity and consideration in racial worldbuilding, as that would immediately distance alt-right actors from their intended, persuadable audience. As such, these actors perform a familiar trick: veiling their criticisms behind a concern for free speech and First Amendment rights. In this way, such writers position their opponents as totalitarians, hiding their true desires for absolute power and censorship behind insincere concerns for social justice. As an example, take Venger Satanis' notable blog, "Your Dungeon is Racist," wherein he

writes articles that use familiar rhetoric to satirize feminists, progressives, and advocates

of racial justice. One article details a "White Supremacist Frog" experiencing GenCon,

the largest tabletop gaming convention in North America. The titular frog is likely a

reference to Pepe the Frog, a meme often used by White Supremacist groups to espouse

antisemitism and racism (Pepe, Neiwert). In the article, the frog is confronted by

GenCon's "woke, SJW, namby-pamby, snowflake." Obviously, according to Satanis, the

crowd isn't going to support, "free speech, freedom of expression, freedom of

association, anything humorous (including satire and parody), meritocracy,

independence, self-reliance, America, compromise, moderation, business sense,

economics, chainmail bikinis, actual justice, or really anything of value" ("White"). This

pattern isn't unique, as Satanis' imagined political opponents are often caricatured as

opposed to numerous core tenants of American conservatism and liberal democracy.

However, I want to bring this type of rhetoric and common arguments of alt-right

figures alongside these figures' criticisms of *D&D* and its mechanics. Pointing this out

allows us to focus less on where such figures directly mention their grievances

(mechanical systems and systems as a whole) and focus more the fact that such figures

actually dislike how *D&D* games are increasingly played (identity mechanics focused on

inclusivity and race as a construct). In an essay decrying the TTRPG community's

obsession with *D&D* Fifth Edition, Satanis equates playing the system with a slew of

behaviors:

> live in the pod, take the vaccine (and the boosters), wear the mask, obey the
>
> algorithm, tear down the statues, adhere to the gospel of Secular Progressivism,
>
> enjoy the censorship, vote the way the multi-national corporations, institutional

education, the media, and Big Tech want you to, and stop criticizing politicians –

they have our best interests at heart. You'll own nothing and be happy, you

fucking peasant! ("You Don't")

One could be forgiven for missing the slew of racist, sexist, and antisemitic dog whistles

which frequent Satanis' writing, but it is clear that a gaming system is carrying a great

deal of political connotations for him and other aggrieved members in the OSR

community. Satanis ends this post with a listing of approved OSR TTRPGs, and similarly

to the Alt-Right DM, playing one of these systems is as much a political act of defiance

as it is an act of leisure.

Consider, also, Satanis' title for his blog, one which he often alludes to in satiric

articles. The title "Your Dungeon is Racist" is Satanis' attempt at parodying his perceived

enemies who he imagines label everything they dislike as racist and sexist. In response to

perceived criticism that dungeon delving in TTRPGs is racist, Satanis caricatures many

of the points listed in this essay while making similar points himself—experiences like

dungeon adventures and hex crawls are dependent on the game world and narrative built

around them in order to understand their political connotations. Saying that dungeons are

unambiguously racist plays into the naïve, psychological definition of racism that I have

tried to avoid. Rather, it is upon game designers to examine the context in which their

dungeons occur and how players are likely to engage with them. A dungeon that

encourages players to loot valuable artifacts from indigenous cultures and portray those

cultures in stereotypical fashions of colonizers should lead scholars to describing such a

dungeon as problematic, from both a design and player perspective. Decrying WotC and

playing other systems due to the perceived political connotations of their game systems is merely awareness of this dynamic in a world influenced by GamerGate.

Conclusion

Although Satanis and others identified in this essay are not influential figures in the dominant production of TTRPGs, their rhetoric and criticisms serve as useful snapshots of alt-right strategies for recruitment and media manipulation. In an age of increasing White Supremacist and racist activity online and in the United States, proper understanding of how these groups utilize cultural artifacts to further their goals is paramount. In this essay, I have identified how gamers with alt-right rhetorical styles and sympathies adopt familiar strategies in criticizing Wizards of the Coast's turns towards more inclusive racial worldbuilding. I have used WotC's adventure, *Tomb of Annihilation*, as a means of differentiating between two types of game mechanics: world and identity. This distinction helped us to examine how game mechanics and encouraged methods of play may or may not take on the narrative and setting in which they are based. As such, I hope the two, main arguments of this paper serve as useful ground for future scholarship in analyzing how gameplay is constructed in TTRPGs as well as how players navigate political stakes in the worlds they imagine. While the community and Wizards of the Coast avoided a #DnDGate, the influence of GamerGate in the community is still present. In using *Tomb of Annihilation* as a lens into the rhetoric at hand, I hope to lay the groundwork for further analysis of how players draw from their lived experiences and the game world in creating collaborative, improvisational stories. As TTRPGs style of play often encourages limitless, unique narratives across thousands of iterations of the same

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campaign, this paper can serve as a useful framework in scholarly analysis of the

narratives that modules and adventures are liable to produce. The next section of this

project concerns how alt-right and White Nationalist actors' beliefs intersect with a core

trope in fantastic settings.

Chapter II- Stats and Soil: Race and Homeland in Fantastic Worlds

In this chapter, I focus on a persistent trope of racial worldbuilding in fantastic worlds. Nominally, such worlds operate on the premise that vastly different possibilities from our current world exist and are commonplace. However, in reality, such settings often traffic in pseudoscientific race "realism." Built upon ahistorical notions of medieval cultures, in which nascent nation-states were racially and ethnically homogenous, racial segregation in fantastic worlds is a common and oft-neglected trope. From Middle Earth, to Skyrim, to the Forgotten Realms, fantasy settings tend to define a people by the land they occupy and the borders over which they control. Elves, Dwarves, Humans, and Orcs are associated with various topographies, blurring the line between land and people. Indeed, this trope often aligns with White supremacist ideologies which link race, place, homeland, culture, language[6], and civilization as synonymous and interlinked. Many worldbuilders of fantastic settings would have us believe that land and soil are deterministic and impermeable factors in the reproduction of race, language, and culture. Most contemporary audiences will associate this trope with Tolkien's Elves, Dwarves, and Halflings, and I will briefly touch on its reproduction over time. However, in addition to the print and media in which fantasy races are correspondingly linked to the ecosystems in which they live, virtual and analog roleplaying games embolden and further the trope in a way that scholarship hasn't fully appreciated. This essay analyzes this narrative shorthand across various artforms before examining its unique permutation in *Dungeons and Dragons* worlds. Then, the trope of racial bioessentialism in nation or

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[6] Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that this trope often overlaps with a similar trope in racial worlds in which language is identified through race. For example, characters in *Dungeons and Dragons* innately receive the language with which they racially identify, regardless of upbringing.

statecraft will be compared to the rhetoric of White nationalists, especially in the context of comparisons to medievalisms, accurate or not.

Historical Context of Race and Land

Creators of fantastic settings have often used ecologies and environments as metaphors for the stewardship and personalities of the peoples who govern over them. These metaphors are easily taken as indications of a specific group's culture and morals. Most scholars identify contemporary fantasy works as borrowing heavily from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, and his extensive written works present us with an opportunity to begin analyzing this trope. In a 1941 letter to his son, Michael, Tolkien wrote that his frustrations with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler included, according to Tolkien, "Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making forever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light." Tolkien took great inspiration from fables, fairy tales, legends, and myths from cultures around Europe, many of which related to narratives of founding and nationality. Christine Chism argues that this quote, in the context of Tolkien's rabid interest in medievalisms, represents a growing concern over fantasy worldbuilding:

> he had before him a parallel spectacle of world-creation gone wrong—in National
> Socialist Germany. Tolkien's wartime investigation of the uses of fantasy is
> driven by the realization that mythmaking is not innocent, that it can become a
> killing tool: most dramatically in the National Socialist politicization of art,
> fetishization of symbols, and cannibalization of medieval narratives and histories
> into pseudo-historical racialist mythologies. (Chism 63-4)

One particular notion that might have contributed to this sense is the way that races in Tolkien's worlds are immutably linked to the lands in which they live. Establishing the norms by which many other worlds would be built, Tolkien set his Elves in the forests, Dwarves in the mountains, Halflings in farmland, and Humans wherever they could colonize.

Of special interest are Tolkien's Orcs, portrayed in Jackson's film adaptations as "nameless, anonymous, animalistic monsters," harvested from mud and set upon the strongholds of men like insects or rodents (S. Kim). Explanations of Orcish origins in Middle Earth are sometimes contradictory, with Tolkien writing in some stories that they were created of slimes while in *The Silmarillion* and films they are corrupted Elves that have been tainted by demonic powers. Regardless, Orcs are associated with Mordor, a hazardous, unforgiving wasteland filled with volcanic ash and rock. Mordor has been captured in film and game form, most notably by Jackson's series and the *Shadow of Mordor* game franchise. As contrasted to the fertility, lushness, and productivity symbolized by Halfling farmlands, Elven forest-cities, and Dwarven mountain-kingdoms, Mordor strikes the reader or audience as a land where nothing should be expected to survive. Frequently employed in text and film is the "Blackness" of Mordor, metaphoric for both its unknown qualities, dark architecture, and the evil of its lord, Sauron.

The same sorts of metaphors have long been used to characterize Africa and often for similar reasons (Jarosz). The implication is that such a homeland both characterizes and justifies the behavior of Orcs; Mordor is both symbolic and upholds the logic of the world. Even if a reader was ignorant to the supposed origins of Orcs, one could imagine that reader retroactively attempting to justify their brutal, cannibalistic behavior. Indeed,

Helen Young argues that, in Tolkien's world, "race and all that stems from it is fundamentally a matter of biological descent and is a strong predictor, even if it does not always entirely determine an individual character's physical, mental, and moral capacities, as well as culture" ("Racial Logics). I take this point a step further—the land itself is both outcome and rationale of a race's moral standing in predominantly Eurocentric framework. Essentially, the land is indicative of any particular race's power, health, and status, and the typography of the land could also be inferred by the qualities of the race which inhabits it.

Despite Tolkien's frustrations with how worldbuilding and fantasy could be misconstrued, his own constructions would come to hold repercussions for how players are able to see and identify the races of Middle Earth, far beyond just one world and the medium of novels. Indeed, there is a strong parallel between Tolkien's characterizations of the races of Middle Earth's respective homelands and later fantasy works which were inspired by *Lord of the Rings*. In terms of video games, this occurs most notably in the worlds of Azeroth and Tamriel, settings of the *Warcraft* and *Elder Scrolls* series. In *Warcraft*, races are consigned to environments similarly to those of Middle Earth, and those environments serve as metaphors for the general culture and personalities of those respective races. Most scholarly work on *Warcraft* focuses on how the game privileges Whiteness, centering Whiteness as Human (Higgin) and framing race as an immutable trait of all player characters (Galloway). In step with Tolkien's metaphoric equating of land to morality, the *Warcraft* universe is also guilty of characterizing the settings of races in accordance with the race's supposedly innate racial traits. For example, the Orcish starting area of Durotar is a rocky land of crags and valleys. Though the Orc's are

from another planet, their founded territory in Azeroth reminds them of their previous

home and aligns with audience expectations for the "warrior," "shamanistic" people

(Blizzard). Lacking vegetation in this "harsh wasteland" (ibid), players are led to believe

that Orcs are only able to raise large boars for sustenance. Orcish buildings are built of

material one might identify as being prevalent in Durotar: bones, rocks, and leathers.

Interestingly, Orcish buildings are uniformly in these styles regardless of where they are

in Azeroth; even in densely forested areas or areas without rocks and pigs, Orcish

architecture looks the same. Perhaps a limit of the game's graphical or creative forces, the

result seems to suggest that Orcish architecture is inherently linked to the land from

which they originate. As pointed out by Monson, it would be quite difficult for players to

confuse one race for another: "Within larger capital cities, ethnic enclaves accommodate

cultural diversity while maintaining tight ethnic boundaries…Wander outside these

sections, and a player is instantly back within the city's dominant culture." With clear

cultural analogues[7], races in *Warcraft* contain unique gameplay mechanics and abilities to

perform roles, meaning that race is intentionally linked to ability, playstyle, home,

culture, art, and language.

In addition, *Warcraft* helped popularize and mainstream a trope in which fantasy

races are also unified political factions. Choosing a race in *Warcraft* also chooses one's

political allies and potential player-versus-player enemies. This dynamic is escalated in

The Elder Scrolls series, and this escalation serves as a useful segue into examining the

parallels between this trope and White Nationalist rhetoric. Races in Tamriel are similarly

related to their homelands, but the game series often emphasizes the role of race in

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[7] As an example, the *Warcraft* Troll is an offensive conglomerate of African and Caribbean ethnic traditions, often referencing voodoo and cannibalism with a stereotypical Jamaican accent.

national identity. Unlike *Warcraft*, the territories of Tamriel are generally carved out by at least one race, and the boundaries between those regions are much more defined. In *Warcraft*, individual cities are usually the only place where enemies would be slain on sight, but in *The Elder Scrolls*, raced nation-states have controlled, ancestrally relevant homelands. In particular, the most recent entry in the mainline series, *Skyrim*, features a tense political standoff between the colonizing Imperials and the nationalistic Nords. White Nationalists on the forum Stormfront have used the story and setting as an analogue in their own imagined struggles against racial oppression (Bjørkelo). With the Imperials representing a multicultural and multiethnic coalition under the banner of one race, White Nationalists interpret *Skyrim* as representative of their antisemitic theories behind immigration and statecraft (ibid). With the Nords being clear equivalents of Viking or Scandanavian cultures, many White Nationalists see the Nord's political struggle as historically relevant, and Viking symbols have been popularly used by many White Nationalists in Europe and the U.S. (Kieser). *Skyrim* employs many of the same tropes around environment and race as previous materials. For example, due to their homeland in the province of Skyrim, Nords are innately hardier and have a resistance to cold damage. However, *Skyrim* also demonstrates that players read ethnic and cultural metaphors into fantastic worlds, even if developers and writers did not intend for those parallels to exist.

Considering the cultural power and easy applicability of this racial model to gaming, it shouldn't be surprising that most material for *Dungeons and Dragons* has mirrored these ideas of racial uniformity, segregation, and difference. Additionally, *Dungeons and Dragons* gameplay mechanics attach functional differences to how races

are likely to be played. Imagine the Nords of *Skyrim's* resistance to cold, except players are now encouraged to roleplay these differences as immutably connected to their race and homeland. The result is stereotypes and race/class tropes which are justifiable by the logic of the game. For example, due to differences in attributes, skills, ability scores, and racial traits, players who want to play a strong Barbarian are more likely to play a Half-Orc than a Halfling. While some players interpret these choices more about strategic choice rather than an issue of representation, scholars should still pay attention to why certain racial analogues are treated as likely to fall into certain racial stereotypes (Shaw, *Gaming*, 184). These mechanics seem to suggest that not only are certain races symbolic of certain environments, but that those environments are also deterministic of the cultures of such races. Obviously, cultures have taken meaning from their environments throughout time, but racial traits like "Dwarven Resilience," or the Halfling's "Brave" derive mechanical and gameplay outcomes from these relationships. Many of these characterizations are riffs or slight deviations on Tolkien's framework, but the result is the same. Races in *Dungeons and Dragons* and other fantasy TTRPGs are intrinsically linked to a biome. This biome influences their culture, playstyle, physical appearance, and depictions of their language. Especially in a game medium which relies upon collective imagination and improvisational storytelling, narrative shorthand like accents and referents to other characters allow players to more easily share a vision of their player character. Few players would be faulted for referring to their Dwarf fighter as likened to Gimli from *Lord of the Rings*, and this dynamic perpetuates monolithic iterations of fantasy races which interlink physicality, culture, and land.

Overlap with White Nationalist Rhetoric

In the *postmedieval* editors' introduction to the "stakes of the field," written in late 2020, authors identify the lingering problems of a field in which the dominant, public-facing sphere of criticism "reifies a white, predominately cisgender and male, Middle Ages" (Rambaran-Olm, et al.). Dorothy Kim recognizes this problem as a dangerously unrecognized issue in university classrooms: "The medieval western European Christian past is being weaponized by white supremacist/white nationalist/KKK/nazi extremist groups who also frequently happen to be college students. Don't think western European medieval studies is exceptional." Indeed, as medieval symbology, rhetoric, and representations of various mediavslisms are coopted by White Nationalist and Identarian movements in the United States, historians and creatives must reckon with the long unspoken (and incorrect) assumption that Europe was historically a land of racial, linguistic, and ethnic homogeneity. In the wake of the September 11 Terrorist Attacks, American rhetoric increasingly took on medieval, Crusade-like tones when discussing war and violence (Bosworth). Ignorance and dismissal of this assumption has brought us to a cultural moment wherein White Nationalists in the United States adopt Nazi and crusader slogans on college campuses advocating White Christo-nationalism. These slogans and symbols harken to the tropes discussed above which posit race as an immutable quality linked to land, culture, and history. One of the challenges facing scholars of medievalisms is that we must often contend with ahistorical and fantastic representations of the age which traffic in explicitly racist ideologies, laundering heinous views by packaging them in desirable genres (Blake). Though touched on in my previous chapter, it is worth focusing on how rhetorical and narrative symbols are

interlinked in the rhetoric of White Nationalists. Doing so allows us to better understand such group's complicated relationship to modern roleplaying games which represent fantasy worlds, and they might lend us clues into creating speculative worlds that appeal less to the underlying logic of White Supremacists.

The stakes of this rhetorical move and Identitarian movement in the United States became known to many in the United States following the Charlottesville riots of 2017. In defense of a statue of Robert E. Lee, the "Unite the Right" rally featured racist, antisemitic, and Islamophobic chants and flags. After the rally was declared an unlawful assembly, an avowed White Supremacist rammed his car into a group of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring many others. The rally was seen a watershed moment for many, with wide denunciation of the open White Supremacism at an iconic U.S. university. this moment demonstrates the most apparent intersection between White Nationalists' historic and popular symbolic interests, however, and this intersection begins with the figure of Robert E. Lee. Scholars have pointed out how Lee's image in the minds of "Lost Cause" proponents is that of an unwilling warrior—one who holds to a warrior's code rooted in religion and masculinity (Strawbridge 20-22). Indeed, the word "chivalry" seems to follow Lee's reputation, even dating back to a New York Time's article from 1864 ("Times"). Evoking knighthood, duty, and honor, the word corresponds to a trend in which defenders or deniers of the United States' history of racial violence and slavery equate a medieval-like order and hierarchy to the heritage of White Southerners. That is to say, there is often an overlap between the medieval and the plantation era in such rhetoric, and this rhetoric most overlaps with regards to the desirability of clear and unambiguous social standings. Wan-Chuan deftly points out how

Teddy Roosevelt cemented Lee's legacy and the larger legacy of the Civil War as "the Golden Age of American manhood" (377). Use of such figurative language allows White nationalists in the United States to partake in the racial dynamics of their imagined medievalisms, and it also elucidates the degree to which such actors are able to bypass the lack of modern nation-states in the medieval era.

In analyzing Richard Spencer and Steve Bannon in the wake of the Charlottesville riots, Cord Whitaker reads White Nationalist fantasies of the medieval as a form of "semantic closure," wherein "rather than the symbols calling forth the conditions, the conditions now call forth the symbol as well" (157). This phenomenon encloses and flattens historical differences, and it erases those at the margins of concretized racial identities. After semantic closure has occurred, it is easy for someone to infer intelligence, culture, language, history, and values based solely on how hot or cold their homeland is imagined to be. In the same way, a statue of Robert E. Lee comes to symbolize far more than a mere human, but an entire, philosophical tradition, worldview, culture, and homeland which White Nationalists feel is threatened. To know the Tolkien Elf is to know them all, and this is why this dynamic holds especially pernicious repercussions in fantasy worlds. Often, fantastic representations of race boil down to analogues which are flat, mostly due to the fact that they only exist as an assemblage of referents to real-world cultures. Consider the people of Chult in *Tomb of Annihilation;* rather than a complex civilization borne from realized historical circumstances, the people are only an amalgamation of pan-African signs. This tool for narrative shorthand invites players to stereotype this imagined land, equating the cultural signifiers to a flattened, homogenized representation of African cultures. Just as Chult is meant to exist

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as a binary opposite to the European-medieval Sword Coast, this semantic closure affords the White Nationalist simple comparisons by which to rhetorically argue for an ethnostate. To upset or problematize any signifier in the stereotypical series is to upset them all, directly challenging the supposed "natural order" symbolized by the medieval world.

Medieval scholars have also touched on appropriated chants of "blood and soil" by attendees explicitly link one's life and power to the homeland. As one would expect, Nazi and Confederate flags flew next to those of Identity Evropa—an Identitarian movement focused on promoting "race realism" ("Deconstructing"). In addition, attendees noted usage of the Old Norse Sonnerad and Valknot alongside "Deus Vult[8]" Crusader slogans and flags with the symbol of the Punisher. With all of the connotations of racialized violence in tow, this event demonstrated that medievalisms amongst American White Nationalists are vital to the movement despite the United States being excluded from representations of the medieval. Such iconography was also present at the 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol Building, with Kristina Olson pointing out the presence of "Deus Vult" shirts alongside Jake Angeli's Viking or indigenous regalia, all of which blends space and time (Olson). This assortment of symbols represents that American White Nationalists are quite content to assemble cultural signifiers from across time, intermingling European and American history with popular culture. This insight aligns with research into the "memeification" of White Supremacist ideology, especially in the wake of GamerGate and the election of Donald Trump (Al-Rawi; Daniels). This dynamic demonstrates that the transatlantic White Identitarian movements draw from

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[8] This phrase has become somewhat palatable in mainstream *D&D* circles, evidenced by casual discussions of the term with regards to playing a Paladin character *(*"Deus"*)*.

common, cultural icons, linking history and popular culture. The repercussions of this intersection demonstrate the need for interdisciplinary perspectives on White Nationalism in the United States and media studies.

Fantasies, Myths, and Histories

While *D&D* largely pulls its aesthetic and narrative inspirations from medievalisms across Europe, it is vital to understand that the game has historically blended vastly different genres across space and time. From *Curse of Strahd's* Gothic horror to the Steampunk setting of *Eberron, D&D* largely maintains cohesion through a perceived versatility in its system and market dominance. This dynamic also means that medievalisms are consistently being perpetuated, challenged, and twisted in campaigns around the world. Importantly, the connection between race, land, culture, and history stays the same. While *D&D* or larger fantasy symbology is rarely present at White Nationalist rallies, the logic which underlies both worldviews is consistently at play. Considering Wizards of the Coast's changes to racial attributes and lore, the game is increasingly seen by alt-right actors as being for everyone "except straight white males" ("D&D 6E). However, these interests in history and pop culture dovetail in another interesting way, one which I argue poses difficult challenges for practices of revisionist histories and representation in fantastic worlds. With recent scholarly interest in counter-histories, historical revisionism, and historical, scholarly fiction[9], understanding the means by which medieval TTRPGs reconstruct homogenous, ahistorical medievalisms

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[9] In this rather large categorization, I am especially including Lisa Brooks' *Our Beloved Kin*, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, and Nikole Hannah-Jones' *The 1619 Project*. More broadly, in consideration of recent rhetoric concerning "Critical Race Theory" in the United States, I am considering works which reconstruct and critique dominant historical narratives which assuage White guilt and erase marginalized resistance to colonialism and occupation.

holds great potential. Shaw has demonstrated the issues with aiming for verisimilitude or historical accuracy in gaming through her analysis of *Assassin's Creed III*:

> AC3 never lives up to the promise of critiquing history, because the game never critiques the rhetoric involved in creating other forms of oppression outside of slavery (like sharecropping or indentured labor). Moreover, throughout the game's historical critique is almost always undercut by gameplay or maladroit humor. (Shaw, "Tyranny")

Essentially, the perceived audience of a game can tinge or subvert the representation of race and narratives around race being told. Because *Assassin's Creed III* frames young, White men as its target demographic, inappropriate humor and surface-level injustice override systemic critique of power in the game world (ibid).

This is the same machination which undergirds worlds in *Dungeons and Dragons*, and this is why the logic of race science and racial innateness becomes palatable in the game world. The TTRPG world is still vastly dominated by White players and creators, leaving problematic mechanics unchallenged. In addition, the historical focus of such games forces players to relive and retroactively justify worldviews which resulted in racial persecution. In the United States, our founding mythologies are just as susceptible to this dynamic as those which are explicitly medieval, as such worlds share their underlying emphasis on rugged individualism, expansionism, and innate racial morality. Indeed, this dynamic increasingly becomes an issue when one considers that racial relations to extraplanar or religious forces explains their immutable characteristics. Framed in a different way, Orc subservience to the violent Gruumsh or Goblin domination by Maglubiyet appears quite alike religious justifications for colonialism, and

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it immediately casts the player characters as righteous and correct in their violence. These racial connections in *D&D* mirror the connection between Orcs, Sauron, and Mordor discussed earlier, and both serve the function by which to absolve audience guilt for excessive violence and genocide by the heroes. When combined with Whitaker's semantic closure, it is easy to see the appeal of fantastic worlds for White Supremacists.

A medieval age conceived of this way, historical or fantastic, is a fantasy, however. Whitaker powerfully points this reality out:

> For the alt-right, the European Middle Ages is a golden age of white racial homogeny. It is an age to whose mores the movement regularly argues U.S. and European societies ought to return. It is also a fantasy era organized around the notion of white innocence…an entire historical period has been coopted into the mirages of white innocence and black criminality that comprise the mirage of racial difference. (Whitaker 10)

It is to this binary construction I want to turn next, as semantic closure constructs a powerful binary of environment: good, White, civilized, fertile land, as opposed to evil, Black, savage, inhospitable land. Through this dynamic, the precolonial, medieval era is one in which our modern conception of race was still present and believed. In keeping with this, the White Nationalist fantasy of the medieval erases the degree to which various racial groups lived outside of their original territories. To the degree to which we can apply our contemporary understanding of race to the medieval world, it is still true that European areas included dark-skinned individuals and vice versa.

Rhetorically, aligning race with nation or environment serves for a powerful amount of shorthand which serves the interests of White Nationalists. As an example,

conservative commentator Ben Shapiro's widely criticized tweet, ""Israelis like to build. Arabs like to bomb crap and live in open sewage. This is not a difficult issue. #settlementsrock" demonstrates a powerful connection between these ideals. Moreover, it demonstrates semantic closure of race and land as a means by which colonialism and racial violence are likely and justified. Other than the gross racism on display, Shapiro is describing behaviors in a way that is reductive and posits such behavior as racially immutable. Implied in Shapiro's tweet is the idea that the land of Palestine *could* be tamed by Israel or that the supposedly bad behavior of Palestinians *could* be curbed if their land were under new ownership. Again, such rhetoric also allows White Nationalist actors to impose our contemporary conception of nation-states into an era in which they did not exist. The primary function of this dynamic, to be discussed in the next section, is that White people would further become protected by the security of the nation state while allowed the freedom to enact racial violence as non-state, vigilante actors.

The Necropolitics of Immutable Environments

The example of the previous tweet points to an obvious endpoint in the semantic closure of land and race, and this dynamic also arises in many TTRPGs set in fantasy settings. Whitaker rightly points out that activists with roots in White Supremacist ideology, namely Richard Spencer and Steve Bannon, employ the idea of "White guilt" as being proof that White identitarian movements are just and necessary (156). Therefore, reclaiming the ideals of an era wherein Whiteness was equated to "purity" and

"innocence" is a desirable goal, even and especially with vigilante violence[10] as a

necessary evil to achieving such goals: "Through archeofuturism, white nationalists

become medievalized non-state actors. The universalizing white political order is more

accurately post-national, if not transnational" (Wan-Chuan 381). The state, then, is a

convenient and necessary step towards racial domination, but it is also perceived as a

detriment in that the nation might prevent the sorts of necessary violence which would

bring about an ethnostate. As such, White Nationalists rationalize the necessity for

vigilante, extrajudicial violence, the sort of violence which is often depicted and

rationalized in fantasy roleplaying games.

　　　　To elucidate the vast, interlocking, and shifting means by which this dynamic

serves to uphold a racial hierarchy governed by Whiteness, I turn to Mbembe's

Necropolitics. Broadly speaking, Mbembe's work speaks to the violent, colonialist

undercurrents which still plague nominally pro-democracy, pro-egalitarian societies.

Using it allows us to understand why the racial enmity and violence sparked by fantastic

worlds and territories might be considered desirable or ideal, even to individuals who are

philosophically opposed to such hatred. An early point of Mbembe assists in clarifying

the hypocrisies of "law and order" communities, symbolized in fantasy by the castle

walls which are opposed by the untamed wilderness. This demarcation points to

Mbembe's mirrored orders: "a *community of fellow creatures* governed, at least in

principle, by the law of equality, and a *category of nonfellows*, or even of those without

part, that is also established by law" (17). In essence, this separation allows for

supposedly fair and equal societies to employ racism as a means by which to exclude and

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[10] This dynamic is certainly in line with Pierce's (pseudonym Andrew Macdonald) depiction of a violent
overthrow of the U.S. government in *The Turner Diaries*. This text also reveals the extent to which White
Nationalists see "White guilt" as a major reason for the failure of the nation-state.

punish those who are not allowed full participation in such societies. In terms of fantastic worlds, this includes even those who do not desire or who are unaware that such walled-off towns and cities exist, often Black-coded Orcs, Goblins, Demons, and dark-skinned races of all sorts. These relationships are justified in the game world by bioessentialism, and players are often able to acquire lawful writs, contracts, and quests which apply the supposed order and logic of civilization to the soon-to-be-colonized forests and mountains. Indeed, such logics neatly overlap with Mbembe's assertion that political narratives in the "War on Terror" justify violence for the sake of the victim's location: "Does he really want to know what they say and what they do, or does he need only *their being there*, armed or not…at the wrong place and time" (31). In combination with rhetoric which encourages semantic closure, it becomes all too easy to retroactively justify hate, harm, and exclusion based solely on one characteristic which is meant to stand for all.

Naturally, the distinction that needs to be drawn for TTRPGs which employ such means is that the means by which this logic and these kinds of narratives are upheld are entirely contrived. Mbembe's summation of his core concept rests at the heart of this issue:

> The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes. To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power. (66)

In the most popular TTRPG dynamic, Game Masters or Dungeon Masters hold the tools

and power by which representations of racial caricatures speak, act, and battle. In

fantastic worlds especially, this means that players and Dungeon Masters are free to

represent real-world racial caricatures and settings under the guise of mediation, thus

granting them a modicum of deniability for racial stereotyping and problematic play.

Playing upon the genre's history and tropes across hundreds of popular iterations, DMs

can easily clue players in to a Necropolitical frame of mind merely by describing the

threats hidden in the shadows of woods or the shuffle of feet in a cave.

Finally, Mbembe points to a troubling dynamic at the heart of his concern,

wherein "knowledge is increasingly defined as knowledge for the market" (109). Much in

the same way, what drives my own concerns is that knowledge of fantastic worlds for the

pleasure of TTRPGs exists *only* for communal pleasure. That is to say, I concur with

Trammell that we must focus on "play" as a form and means of subjugation.

Rationalizing our interest in speculative works, worlds, and games only as means to

achieve the maximum amount of pleasure, happiness, or relaxation strictly limits the

degree to which (mostly White) audiences will challenge the dominant narratives which

drive their lives. If knowledge of the game world and its mechanics and settings exists

solely for these purposes, then (mostly White) audiences will cease to consider why it is

pleasurable to enact imaginary violence based solely on racial traits and the environments

to which they correspond. If living outside the boundaries of the castle wall emboldens us

to commit heinous yet pleasurable acts of violence, then we must consider what ends

those serve and why we achieve this gratification. Finally, if the perpetuation of this trope

which links land and life sparks something within speculative worlds with which we

resonate, it is worth interrogating why that is and from where it derives. Mbembe assists us in examining the ways in which the White Nationalist's dream is already here and happening, but his work also assists in explaining why simulations and imaginations of such a world might be desirable and evocative for millions of players.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the universal tendency of fantastic worlds to equate immutable racial characteristics with the land upon which such groups live. This equivalency extends to the group's history, culture, and ideal playstyles. As such, these game worlds perform semantic closure, which serves a narrative shorthand for players. A person familiar with such worlds immediately knows the danger of "Orcs!" or the safety of a Halfling village. However, this chapter demonstrates this trope's compelling overlap with White Nationalist fantasies of the medieval period to which many such worlds reference and draw upon. White Nationalists have increasingly found the medieval era or medievalisms functional for their popular rhetoric and a familiar end goal for their supporters. The outcome of this dynamic is worlds in which we can see the ideal outcome of White Nationalist worldviews, worlds in which White-coded characters have open license to perform indiscriminate and extrajudicial violence against Black-coded races. This trope is such commonplace in fantasy roleplaying games that justifications and ahistorical medievalisms are trafficked to players who would largely disagree with the worldview of White Nationalists, and this point underlies the reason that many such games are the staging grounds for White Supremacist recruitment efforts. Although the team behind *Dungeons and Dragons* increasingly works to distance their product from its

problematic history and tropes, potential remains within the broader community and numerous other TTRPGs in an increasingly broad market.

The potential now exists for scholars to more deeply examine these relationships. It should be clear that greater work is needed into the narratives and logics which perpetually underlie fantastic games, especially when such games seem to launder ideologies with which the creators disagree. This work would greatly benefit from qualitative research based in interviews, and it is my hope that this work points to the need of interdisciplinary analysis of this ascendent form of play. Moreover, greater analysis from race scholars, performance scholars, and medieval scholars would lend much-needed scholarly work to the field. In particular, analysis of player awareness of such problematic patterns of play could be learned and analyzed as a gauge for player interpretations of the game world, their avatars, and their ability to distinguish ideology and identity when it is mediated.

Coda

In the Spring of 2021, my beloved Goblin wizard, Sizz Fizziks, set off with some adventuring friends in search of the Forge of Fury. In retrospect, I created Sizz with a lot of the issues outline in this project in mind. Wanting a high intelligence score, I petitioned my Dungeon Master to allow me to move the innate racial bonus for Goblins from dexterity to the more appropriate attribute. Once I had permission, I was able to create a character which defied both in-world and real-world conventions about Goblin mental acuity and spellcasting prowess. Sizz might have been my unknowing foray into a kind of digital "identity tourism," as I ended up encountering a great deal of vicarious racism. Sizz would often turn these moments into chances to prove himself different, or he would turn that hatred towards a common foe, usually Orcs. Through Sizz, I was finding ways to explore player interactions regarding "realistic" portrayals of racism and discrimination in the game world.

When Sizz and company made it to the dungeon, they encountered ecosystems and signs of Troglodytes, a race of brutal, reptilian-like humanoids who delight in torture and savage violence. Sizz, being the smart one in the group, was granted a useful bit of knowledge from the Dungeon Master—Troglodytes are intelligent, but they can only speak their racial language. Sizz relayed this information to his comrades: "It's okay to fight them, guys! They aren't smart enough to know our languages, so we don't even need to feel guilty about it!" After we successfully defeated the Troglodytes in their lair, we were treated to a classic *D&D* twist. At the back of the cave rested a small group of Troglodyte children, huddling and shivering with fear. Alas, these poor creatures struck us as simple byproducts of violence, and it made for little fun to dwell over simply

"playing the game." I do not recall if we interacted with these children or what we might have said, a lack of memory which strikes me as extremely pertinent. We collected our loot, slew a few more creatures, and continued on our way.

I echo Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' assessment that contemporary industries working in fantastic media are perpetuating an "imagination gap" (5-6). As the result of a lack of representation in media for non-White, non-straight, non-male characters, this imagination gap results in youngsters having little to gain from speculative works—works that spark the imagination and inspire further learning. Even when BIPOC or Queer characters are placed in fantastic settings, their roles are often reductive and flattening. I take Thomas' call for diverse media a step further. Not only must creators aspire to represent depth and diversity in all aspects of their characters, but the world in which creators of the fantastic perpetuate must abide by restorative and just principles. Indeed, I call for a new generation of fantastic games, one with mechanics grounded outside essentialist understandings of race and biology. I call for settings and systems of play which embrace the unknown, the ambiguous, and the Other. For too long, the entire onus for creating games of restorative play has been placed on BIPOC and Queer creators. In consideration of the ongoing discrepancies and discrimination in fantasy media companies, White creators and audiences must exercise what consumer and creative control they have to elevate the voices of others and interrogate the rules by which we have played for far too long. With the undercurrents of a growing genre perpetuating "habits of Whiteness," and with many countries in Europe and the Americas facing fascist, ethnonationalist movements, there is a deep urgency to our ability to question what we consider possible.

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